

CHRISTIANS IN PRACTICE

CONNECTING DISCIPLESHIP
AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

SALTLEY FAITH & LEARNING SERIES: 3

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Introduction

Christians in Practice is a research project exploring how Christians connect their discipleship to their engagement in communities and neighbourhoods. Based on research with over 1000 worshippers and 32 Anglican congregations in the Dioceses of Birmingham and Lichfield, it seeks to understand:

- What Christians do to help others in their communities;
- What motivates them to become involved and what the barriers to involvement are;
- What connections they make between these activities and their faith;
- In what ways community involvement helps them grow and learn;
- In what ways they feel supported by their local church in this work, and how churches might support this better.

Christians in Practice is a snapshot of the experience of Church of England worshippers in two Midlands dioceses. It contains things that surprised us and other things that confirmed existing expectations. Some questions generated rich learning; others demonstrated how difficult practical empirical enquiry is in this field.

Our thanks first and foremost go to the individuals and congregations who participated in the research. We are grateful for the support and involvement of the Dioceses of Birmingham and Lichfield, who allowed us to survey a sample of congregations, and also the Church of England Research and Statistics Team, who advised on some of the statistical aspects of the research.

Thanks are also due to St Peter's Saltley Trust and Church Urban Fund for grants towards the project.

Summary of findings

Christians are active in their communities: 98% of participants in the research have undertaken some sort of community activity during their lives and 63% are currently doing so.

Informal community activity, such as helping neighbours or offering personal support to someone in need, is the most common type of involvement. 90% of respondents have been involved in this way at some time in their lives.

Short-term community involvement is also commonplace (e.g. support for charity fundraisers or community events): 29% of respondents said they were currently involved in this way; 84% had been at some point in their lives.

Participation in organised volunteering is widespread. Over two-thirds of respondents have been involved in some form of formal volunteering and almost one-third are currently involved in this way. A significant proportion of this volunteering is not connected with the local church.

Respondents often saw community engagement through church and beyond church as part of the same package, rather than making clear distinctions between their 'church' and 'community' activity. Moreover, half were inclined to regard their involvement in congregational activity as the primary way in which they served their community.

Christian faith was frequently cited amongst a variety of motivations for helping others in the local community. **Two-thirds began their community activity partly as a way of putting their faith into practice.**

Respondents perceived a broad connection between their community activity and their faith. More than two-thirds said they sought to represent Christ through their actions when engaged in community activity.

Respondents were more evenly divided over other ways of connecting faith and community activity: just over half prayed about their community involvement at least every couple of weeks; just less than half said they looked for opportunities to share faith with others during their involvement.

Respondents were largely happy with the ways they engaged in their communities: over 80% felt their activity was a good reflection of what they cared

about; almost two-thirds felt their activity was a good fit with what God was calling them to be and do.

However, a significant minority expressed some dissatisfaction with their current level of community activity: just over half of respondents were happy with the amount of time spent on community activity, whilst three quarters either agreed or tended to agree that they would like to be doing more, but could not at present.

Personal circumstances (such as health, family or work commitments) were most frequently cited as barriers to community involvement, although around a third of respondents also cited confidence as an issue.

A majority of respondents agreed that community engagement had helped them grow or learn in their faith: 78% said it had helped them grow as a Christian; 65% said it had helped them understand their faith better.

Interviewees most commonly cited **growth in confidence and character, and understanding and compassion for others**, as the main ways in which they had grown through engaging in their community.

However, interviewees **frequently found it difficult to articulate how they had grown, and only a minority routinely used explicitly Christian language to reflect on their community activity.** This begs an important question of how Christians may be equipped to do this more deeply.

Just over half of respondents felt supported by their church in their community activity, and around 70% had heard teaching in church which helped them connect their faith to their community involvement. The role of local church leaders in encouraging or limiting a culture of community engagement by the congregation was often noted by interviewees.

When asked what their church could do to help them with their community activity, the options receiving most agreement were: **'help me to work out what God might be calling me to do' (44%)** and **'provide organised church activities which engage with the community' (38%)**. Respondents were more likely to want to explore or reflect upon community activity through prayer and discussion spaces than through a one-to-one or group conversation with their church leader.

About the Research

Underlying Assumptions and Questions

The research began with three key sets of convictions, hypotheses and questions broadly shared amongst the project steering group:

Helping others in our communities is inherently part of Christian discipleship and mission¹

But how do churchgoing Christians more generally understand the relationship between discipleship and community engagement? So far we know comparatively little about this.

How we understand our calling as disciples shapes what we actually do in our communities, yet equally our community involvement can shape our growth as Christians.

There is a growing consensus that discipleship development happens through a range of activities and experiences; not just traditional, formal learning opportunities such as sermons or small groups.² Can we understand better how that two-way process works?

There is, nevertheless, a frequent disconnection between Christian discipleship and involvement in community.

Churches frequently report lack of volunteers as a key barrier to doing more for their communities.³ But local church leaders may also know little about the wide variety of community activities church members are already engaged in beyond the congregation, and may vary markedly in how far they support this.

Do Christians generally reflect on the connections between their faith and their wider community involvement? Evidence suggests that whilst some do, others do not.⁴ So how might churches be equipped to help people connect their discipleship and their community involvement more strongly?

Can we understand more about what helps and hinders people in moving from concern to action?

These three sets of assumptions, hypotheses and questions led to the creation of the Christians in Practice research project. This report is offered as an aid to knowledge and practical reflection for those wanting to think more about how our community activity and our growth in Christian discipleship are connected.

Challenges and Definitions

Defining community engagement

'Community engagement' may mean a variety of things, and may not even be geographically local. We opted for a relatively generous definition of 'community activity' as anything which:

- People choose to do in their own time;
- Helps other people or the community;
- Is organised by church, charities or groups, or is done informally to help neighbours or strangers.

However we excluded activities that:

- People are paid to do;
- Mainly benefit family/friends;
- Only support the individual's church congregation or worship.

Whilst how we engage in family life, friendship groups, the workplace, and the fellowship of a local church are all important, these were not the primary focus of this research. At the same time, we tried to ensure our research questionnaire and interviews valued the commitments of those whose engagement was mainly in those settings.

Hearing from a diverse sample of churchgoers

We are grateful to the Church of England's Research and Statistics team for helping to identify a random sample of Anglican churches stratified by size and with an appropriate balance of urban and rural churches for our questionnaire survey.

Within the interviews, a related challenge lay in how to ensure we heard from a range of voices and not just those who were heavily involved in community activity. We are grateful to clergy from participating churches for connecting us to interviewees with a range of experiences.

The language of discipleship

We sought to listen carefully to how our interviewees spoke about their own faith and identity as Christians using their own vocabulary during interviews, rather than expecting them to work with our language.

This was particularly because we were exploring themes around discipleship. The language of 'discipleship' is used in a variety of different ways and for some people, the reflections we were inviting were new or at least rarely articulated.

Method

Christians in Practice was carried out with Church of England churches in two dioceses in the West Midlands: Lichfield, and Birmingham. It took the form of:

- five preparatory discussion groups and several pilot interviews;
- 1082 congregational questionnaires completed at 32 churches;
- 30 interviews (with 5 adults at each of 6 churches).

The research targeted adults in these churches.

Questionnaire survey

Congregational questionnaires were usually completed during worship in a collective exercise led by a church leader. Typically the questionnaire, which took respondents around 12 minutes to complete, replaced the sermon. Most often churches took the questionnaire to their main Sunday service; some also used other services such as 8am and mid-week services, too. Responses were anonymous.

Churches were selected by a stratified random sample, to give an appropriate balance of rural and urban churches and to provide for a range of church sizes.

The adult USA (Usual Sunday Attendance) of participating churches ranged from 4 to 162. The number of responses per church ranged from 2 to 123. Although we do not have data on the number of people in attendance when the surveys were conducted, calculating the number of responses as a proportion of USA provides a valuable proxy for the response rate: this figure ranged from 37% to 115%, the median being 74%.

More information about the research may be seen at www.saltleytrust.org.uk/cip. Further details about our respondents are found in Appendix One.

Interviews

Recognising that quantitative data would only tell us so much about how people interpreted the connection between their faith and community activity, we also carried out interviews in six churches. In each of these six churches, four interviews were with members of the congregation and one was with the church leader. We asked the church leader to nominate people who were engaged in community activity in different ways or to different degrees. The aim of the interviews was not to be representative in any statistical sense but to build up a more detailed picture of the way in which individuals in a variety of churches and with a variety of experiences made connections between their faith and community activities.

Interviews lasted up to an hour and were semi-structured. Questions were asked about activities, motivation, and connection with faith. These questions can be seen at www.saltleytrust.org.uk/cip but full transcripts are not available.

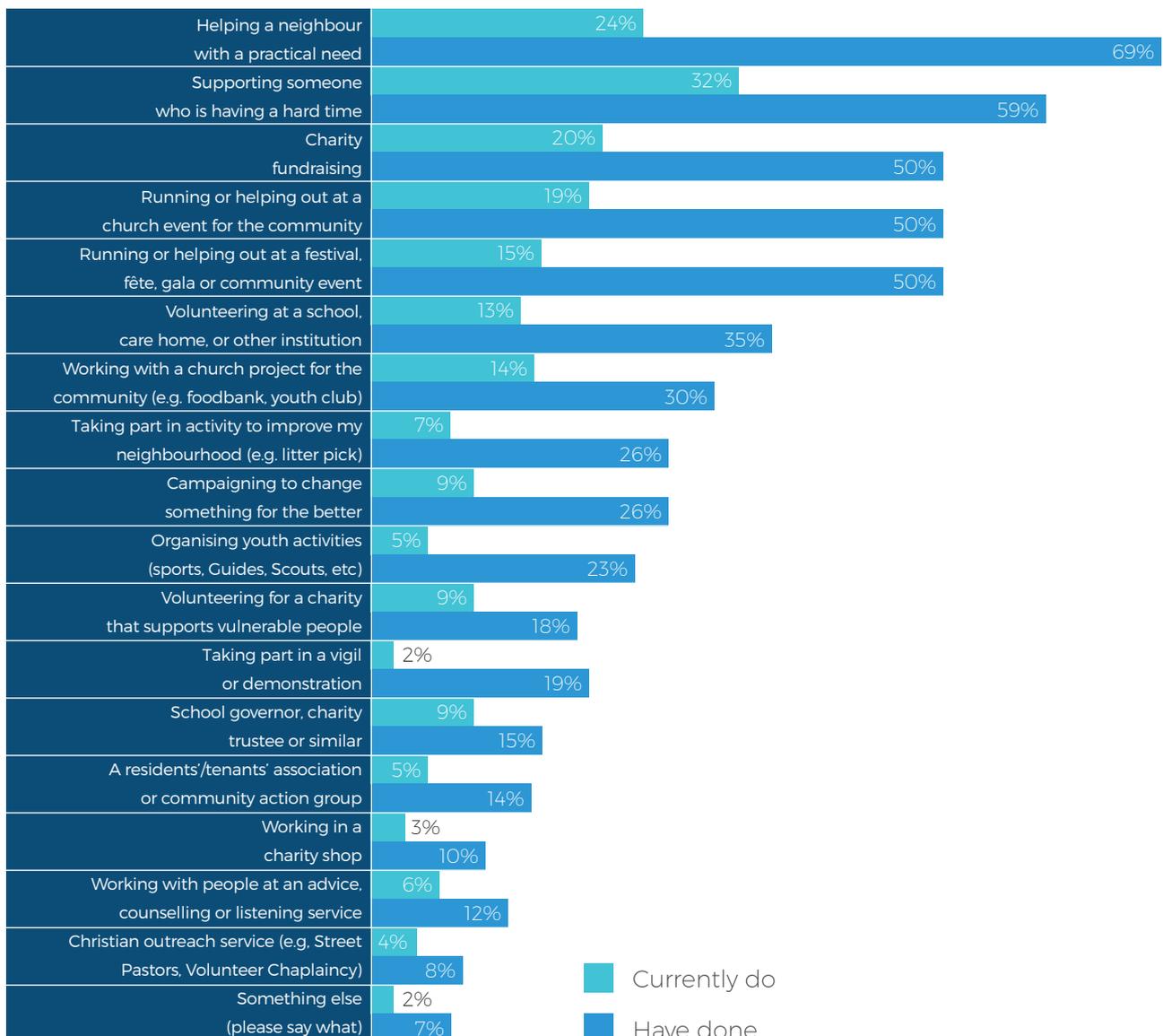
Interviews were conducted by one of three members of the research team, usually face-to-face. Interviews are identified by their code: a letter identifies the church and a number, the interviewee.

1. Complex journey: confident disciples?

‘After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.’ **Luke 10.1**

In order to establish the context for our research, we asked both questionnaire and interview respondents to identify what types of activities they had done to help others in the community, and what types they currently do.

Chart 1: What activities have you taken part in?



98% of questionnaire respondents either were currently or had previously engaged in at least one of the areas of activity listed. On average, respondents had engaged with five types of activities (past and present) and were currently engaged in two. This does not necessarily mean that respondents were doing less than they used to; simply that current activity constitutes only a proportion of all the community activity undertaken over a lifetime.

Types of activity: informal, short-term, and formal volunteering

The two most often selected activities in Chart 1 were informal:

- helping a neighbour with a practical need;
- supporting someone who is having a hard time.

Over 90% of respondents indicated that they had undertaken both of these activities at some point in their lives.

Although informal, our interviews showed that these types of community activity can include significant caring responsibilities:

We discovered she'd had a stroke... I did all the meals for her and the washing and everything, and the shopping. (B4)

In some cases, openness to informal activity was actively encouraged by church leadership:

[Our church leader] has encouraged us all to think about this: just smiles, just acknowledging people just being caring towards people. (A3)

After informal activities, the third, fourth and fifth most frequently selected forms of engagement were short-term or occasional activities: 'charity fundraising', 'running or helping out at a church event for the community', and 'running or helping out at a festival, fête, gala or community event'. These activities are generally intermittent and may be one-off. 84% of respondents had taken part in at least one of these at some point in their life. Those who had engaged in short-term activities were somewhat less likely to be new to their church (i.e. had attended more than five years).

Informal and short-term activities were widely undertaken (representing the five most frequently engaged in activities), but some outcomes are only

achieved through more co-ordinated effort. At least six of the activities listed are likely to indicate volunteering as participation in structured activity:

- Volunteering at a school, care home, or other institution
- Working with people at an advice, counselling or listening service
- Working with a church project for the community (e.g. foodbank, youth club)
- Volunteering for a charity that supports vulnerable people
- School governor, charity trustee or similar
- Christian outreach service (e.g. Street Pastors, Volunteer Chaplaincy)

71% of respondents said they had been involved with one or more of these activities at some point in their lives. 31% said they were currently engaged in one or more. Where they were involved in this kind of activity, interviewees often spoke at length about their roles leading or participating in the activity, and especially where the work involved direct connection with others it could be described as rewarding or enjoyable.

Summary

Almost every respondent had undertaken some sort of community activity during their lives and almost two-thirds were currently doing so. Informal community activity was the most common type of involvement: 90% of respondents have been involved in this way at some time in their lives. Short-term community involvement is also commonplace: 84% had been involved at some point in their lives. Participation in organised volunteering is widespread with over two-thirds of respondents having been involved in some form of formal volunteering and almost one-third being currently involved in this way.

For reflection:

- **How do these findings help us notice and celebrate volume and range of community activity done by church members?**
- **Are some forms of community activity undertaken by church members more visible to churches than others? How can we increase the church's understanding of the range of ways people help others in the community?**
- **Should churches have a role in helping people take part in informal, formal and casual helping? How might that happen?**

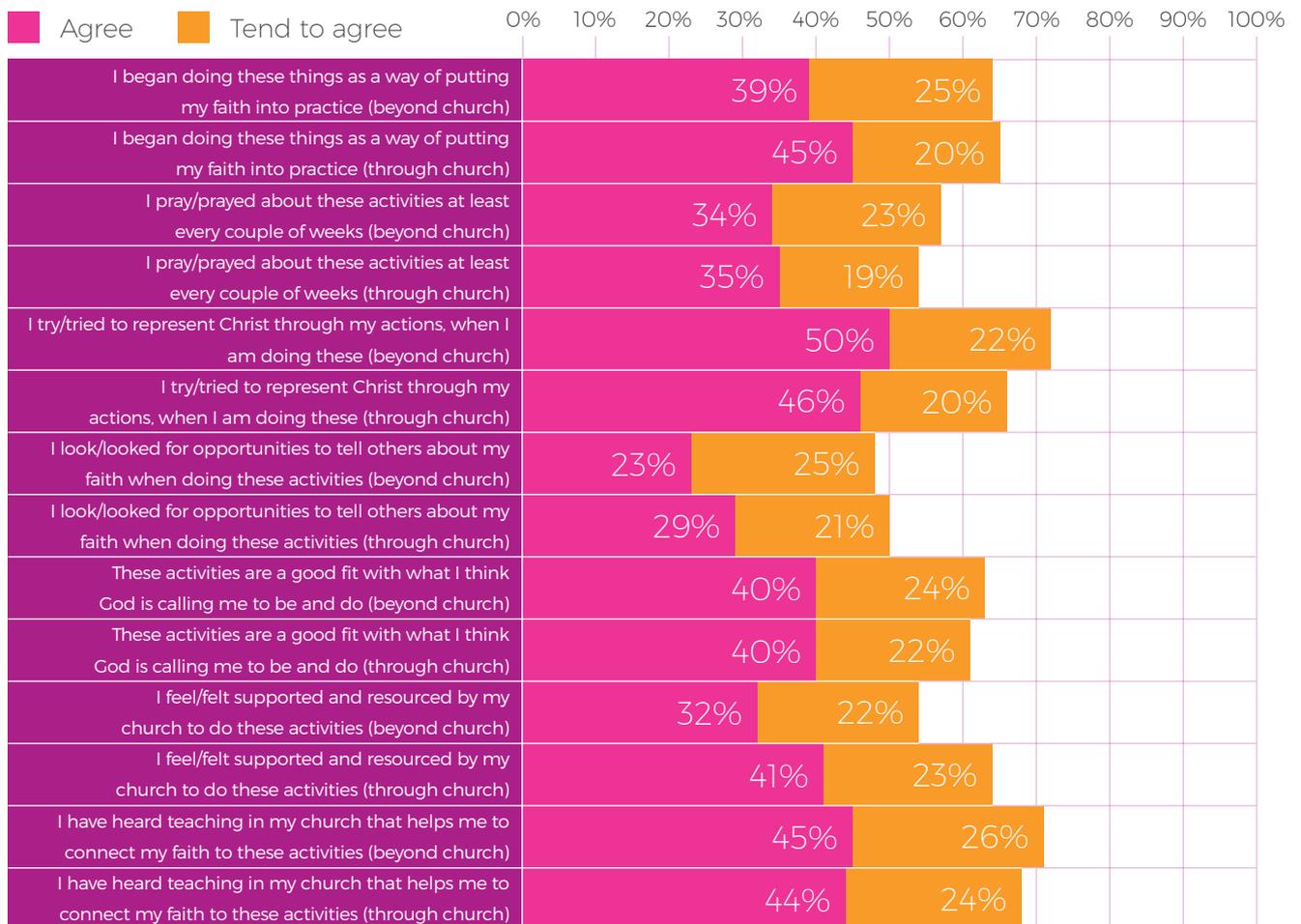
2. Making Connections

'I by my works will show you my faith' James 2.18

In order to explore how far, and in what way, Christians connect their community activity to their faith, the research questionnaire posed two identical sets of questions about the activities the respondent had done beyond church, and those done through church. These were questions about how the individual felt the activities were connected to certain aspects of their life of faith.

In interviews, participants were asked what motivated them to take part in the activities they'd undertaken, followed by the question: 'how do you connect the activities you do in the community to your faith?'

Chart 2: Making connections, for activities beyond and through church



With regard to the following statements, more than half of respondents agreed or tended to agree with each.

- I began doing these things as a way of putting my faith into practice
- I pray/prayed about these activities at least every couple of weeks
- I try/tried to represent Christ through my actions, when I am doing these activities
- These activities are a good fit with what I think God is calling me to be and do

95% of respondents agreed with at least one of these statements, suggesting that most respondents made some connection between activity and faith. There was little difference between responses given for activities done through church, and those done beyond

church, except that slightly more respondents (8%) felt supported/resourced by their church to engage in community activity done through church, compared with activities beyond church.

Faith as a Motivation to Community Action

'I began doing these things as a way of putting my faith into practice' is a question of faith motivation. Around two-thirds agreed or tended to agree. In response to the question 'what would you say the reason for your doing those activities is', just over half of interviewees made a connection between motivation and faith (rather than church or broader cultural values). What light did our interviews shed on faith as a motivation?

First, identifiable faith motivations themselves were expressed in diverse ways. Respondents variously spoke of their motivation in terms of duty, commitment, obedience, or service to God; or of fulfilling a moral code based on Christianity, entering a living relationship with God, sharing faith, or following the guidance of scripture:

I made a commitment... to help God. (A1)

I think it's what God wants me to do. (B4)

Because God did it for everybody else. Jesus looked after the poor, the needy, because he did it. And that's what must have come through to me to make me do for others. (D4)

Some spoke of their activity as the response to what they spontaneously described as a 'calling' (see next section).

Secondly, an explicit faith motivation could be expressed individually or corporately: some interviewees saw themselves acting as part of their church, rather than individual disciples. One of them had been inspired to set up and lead a church community café in order to fulfil this motivation; another led a walking group; a third distributed a parish newsletter around their village.

Calling and Community Activity

40% of survey respondents agreed (and around 20% tended to agree) that the community activities they were doing were a good fit with their calling.⁵ As noted above, calling was by no means the only way in which interviewees described their community work in relation to God in a variety of ways. Community work could be understood as their calling:

I feel like my calling was outside of church, to be honest, in terms of my volunteering. (B1)

I believe that's what God's called me to. (A3)

or as a response to a calling:

Thirdly, those who expressed identifiable faith motivations did not necessarily do so exclusively: one woman spoke extensively about calling, faith, and a personal relationship with God, but still identified upbringing, role-models, helping others, and a desire to try something new as motivations too. For another, bereavement, calling, helping others, finding life structure, and enjoying the activity were all given as parts of a single, coherent motivation. Interviewees often listed a range of motivations that seemed complementary, with a complex interplay between them:

I think it is a joy... I suppose I am that type of person. I believe that community is important and I believe that it's nice to be involved but I guess, ultimately, I'm a Christian and that's what the Bible tells us to do but as I've said to you before, I'm not so much a reader and a thinker, I am more of a doer. So, I know that's what it tells me to do but I think I do it because I want to do it and I like to be involved. (D1)

Fourthly, while interviewees often described a faith motivation, when they mentioned how they came to start a specific activity the immediate trigger was often different from the general motivation. Several gave straightforward accounts of an invitation or a challenge to get involved coming from another person, sometimes at a time of loss, change or difficulty. Such invitations did not necessarily come from people they already knew well or at all.

Fifthly, and similarly, motivation can change over time. One respondent had begun an initiative with an evangelistic purpose but had come to value the social and pastoral character it had subsequently developed.

Well, I'll explain that. I, in 2012, decided to retire, and I'd always had this little voice that kept saying, "It's not enough. It's not enough, you need to do something else". (E1)

Others used equivalent language ('God prompting me'; 'sense of vocation'), while some expressed uncertainty about the challenge of discerning a vocation:

I find it really hard to know how much of it is me and how much of it is God's will. Lots of people know, don't they? They pray about something, it kind of happens and they go and do it. (D1)

When we return to questions of calling again in a later section (p.19), we will see that almost half of our

questionnaire respondents wanted help working out how God might be calling them.

Sharing Faith

Two statements in this question (Chart 2) explored whether and how people try to share their faith through the community activities they do:

- I try/tried to represent Christ through my actions, when I am doing these activities;
- I look/looked for opportunities to tell others about my faith when doing these activities.

Of any statement in this question, respondents were most likely to agree or tend to agree that 'I try/tried to represent Christ through my actions, when doing these activities.' (72% for activities outside church, 66% for activities through church). The statement least agreed with was 'I look/looked for opportunities to tell others about my faith when doing these activities' (48% outside church; 50% through church). Amongst survey respondents, then, when engaged in community activity, seeking to demonstrate faith through action appears more widespread than seeking to share faith through words.

However, interviewees showed considerable concern for the task of sharing their faith. Ten of twenty-four interviewees talked in some way about sharing faith as part of their motivation. Five further interviewees made a connection between their faith and their community activity in terms of sharing their faith, meaning that more than half spoke about it altogether.

For some, sharing faith was a core motivation in their community engagement:

[I was happy] because there was always that opportunity to speak about my faith. I used to say, "Have you thought about God? Do you believe in God?" (A4)

Sharing faith was usually mentioned in the context of less formal community activity. One man spoke of organising a regular community walk as a space which was part evangelistic, part social, part pastoral.

It doesn't have anything like a directly evangelistic outlook. But, at the same time, it gives you a chance to chat to people informally and things like that. (D2)

Reflections on sharing faith in community activity were diverse and often people's comments either demonstrated how they had found a means of sharing faith that suited their character; or else we saw them wrestling with a sense that they should be sharing their faith, but did not know how to do so in a way that felt appropriate. For some though, sharing faith could itself be seen as a form of loving service, so that representing Christ and speaking about faith become united in one activity:

I want the children and families of [town] to know Jesus. To know about the Bible and to know that the church that we have in [town] is there for them... I want them to know that people care about them and are there for them. If they need us we're there because the church used to be like the hub of the community. (D1)

Summary

Respondents were broadly willing to align their activity with their faith; this applied to activity beyond the church community as much as to activity through it. Many appeared comfortable with ideas of calling, with over half agreeing or tending to agree that the activities they did were a good fit with their calling. Interviewees described the connection between faith and activity in a wide range of ways, of which calling was just one.

Speaking about faith was the area fewest questionnaire respondents affirmed, but finding ways of sharing faith was mentioned by more than half of our interviewees, often as an area people that felt important but required careful reflection.

For reflection:

- **Connections between community activity and faith seem to be widespread but far from universal. How can churches help people strengthen their sense of connection between the two?**
- **How can churches help people to speak about what motivates them to get involved in the community?**
- **How can churches help people fulfil their desire to share their faith appropriately and sensitively in their community activity?**

3. Learning and Growing

‘As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.’ **Colossians 2.6-7**

The research began with a hypothesis (page 6) that Christians’ community involvement can shape their growth in faith. To investigate what that might look like, the Christians in Practice questionnaire explored eight statements around Christian growth. Interviewees were asked two linked questions: ‘how do you feel you have learnt?’, and ‘how do you feel you have grown?’

Chart 3: Helping others in the community has...

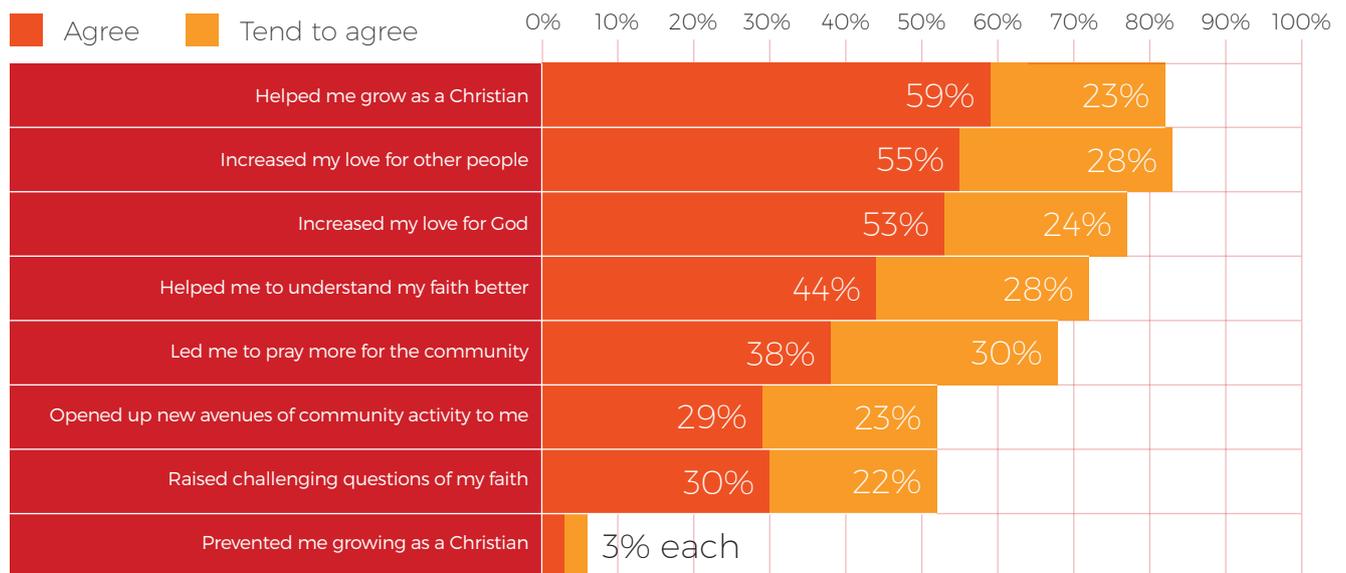


Chart 3 shows that 56% of respondents felt that helping others in the community has helped them to grow as a Christian; a further 22% tended to agree. Respondents also were likely to agree that helping others in the community had increased their love for others (52% agreed; 26% tended to agree) and increased their love for God (49% agreed; 22% tended to agree). Somewhat fewer felt that they understood their faith better (40% agreed; 25% tended to agree). For these questions, most of the remaining responses were either ‘don’t know’ or blank.

Women were slightly more likely than men to say that helping others in the community had increased their love for God (56% and 45% respectively) but there were few other notable differences. People who had been 10 years or less at their current church were more likely to say that the activity had opened up new avenues of community activity (35% vs. 25%). Those under 65 were more likely to agree that helping others in the community had ‘raised challenging questions for my faith’.

Community Activity as Formation

Interviews also suggested several different ways in which learning and growth had taken place through helping others. Not all found it easy to articulate exactly how they had learnt or grown. The invitation to reflect could be a challenge at first:

I don't really know. What have I learned? Not a clue. I really haven't got a clue. (F1)

However, almost every interviewee provided some positive reflection on this area. By far the most common theme was that community engagement led to increased general insight into the lives of others, and specifically a growth of awareness of the needs of others. As one commented:

Perhaps it has made me a bit more sympathetic to people and made me realise where they are coming from. (F2).

Some specifically reflected on the way community involvement had broadened their mind, for example concerning the reasons why people had become trapped in difficult situations. Several also commented on how community engagement had expanded their comfort zone. One interviewee who had volunteered with a homelessness charity remembered:

Well, as I said earlier, things that at first appear a bit daunting, then when you get into them you get more comfortable, is a growing experience, isn't it? (D2).

Two interviewees specifically expressed the view that involvement in community had made them a better person, and several commented more specifically on how they had grown in character. Some also expressed gratitude for the good things about their own lives, or drew strength from the seeing the lives of others changed for the better.

Interviewees also frequently felt they had grown in faith in some way. For some, the very act of putting faith into practice was significant; for others, growth as a Christian came as a result of responding to a sense of calling:

I feel that my relationship with our good Lord has really strengthened from doing it. Because of that sense of calling to do it, it's felt like my relationship with him has grown because I'm doing what he wants me to do. It's not anything that anyone's told me to do, anything that I just felt like, "Yes, it will be fine, it'll be nice to do a bit of volunteering." I really felt that he needed me to do it. In that, I really feel a closeness to him, and that's given me a great deal of comfort. (B1).

Did our research reveal anything about what particular moments or aspects of their community engagement helped Christians learn and grow as disciples? This was beyond the capacity of a questionnaire survey to address and even in an interview scenario direct questions about learning and growth tended not to result in more than surface-level impressions. However, as interviewees told their stories, several relevant themes emerged:

- Interaction with other people seemed to be a key source of learning and growth. For some interviewees, this was primarily through increased appreciation of the needs and predicaments of others. Interviewees also frequently told stories in which encounters with others taught them more about themselves and their own patterns of behaviour – particularly in conflict situations. However, learning and growth could also come through witnessing others work act in inspiring ways.
- Moments of learning or growth could come where interviewees had stepped out in faith, taken a risk, and seen resulting good fruit or positive outcomes. This often generated greater confidence to step out in faith once more. Reflecting on the varying successes of different church and community children's activities, one respondent felt that she was now more willing to say 'I have this idea, I'm going to go with it, and if it's the right thing to happen and if that's what God wants to happen it will be a success' (D1).
- The very act of putting faith into practice could be a source of growth in itself. This was not so much growth in quantity (of community engagement, or alternatively of closeness to God), but of alignment of belief and practice. One interviewee commented: 'it's just given me strength in my faith because I'm actually walking some of the steps that Jesus has walked' (B2). In this particular sense, growth had already resulted from beginning community engagement, quite apart from any subsequent benefits. For many interviewees, this in itself was a source of joy and satisfaction.
- Community engagement often seemed to help interviewees recognise or identify a latent calling which sometimes was only discerned in retrospect. One interviewee related how after a traumatic life event they had begun helping maintain a garden as a way of finding some personal peace. However, this then progressively developed into wider and deeper involvement in several more organised community initiatives, which the interviewee came quite explicitly to see as their primary missional

calling (B1). Sometimes, although not always, a word of encouragement or challenge from others could help clarify this calling.

Though it is difficult to draw firm conclusions from a relatively small sample, the interview testimony therefore seemed to suggest that learning or growth

from community engagement occurred through encounter with others, through steps of faith, through alignment of beliefs and practice, through enhancing the capacity to see and respond to need, and through reflection on an emerging pattern to community involvement, to develop an emergent sense of calling.

Christian Reflection on Community Activity

Whilst many interview comments echoed the general findings of the survey in suggesting that community activity increased growth as a Christian in some way, interviewees varied widely in the degree to which they reflected on their community activity using explicitly Christian language.

Over two-thirds of interviewees referred to God at some point in their interview, over a half to prayer, and over a third to Jesus or the Bible. Six of the twenty-four interviewees used explicitly Christian language routinely in their interviews, while four used no explicitly Christian language at all. A number of interviewees used concepts such as 'justice' or 'compassion' which have both Christian and wider resonance. No interviews contained reflection on well-known stories or figures from Christian history after biblical times and before the present day.

At first glance the lack of explicit use of Christian terminology in reflections of community activity may seem surprising. However, the results require careful qualification, for at least four reasons. First, it would be risky to draw more general conclusions from one comparatively small interview sample. Second, interviews were typically the first time researcher and church member had met, and as a result, interviewees may naturally have been cautious

in sharing the full extent of their thoughts, as they might in a group of people they knew and trusted well. Third, using more Christian terminology should not necessarily be taken to imply that a speaker was making deeper connections between their faith and their community activity than those who did not use Christian language in their interviews. Indeed there was no obvious correlation between frequency of Christian language and level of community activity amongst in the interview sample. Finally, absence of Christian terminology should not necessarily be taken to imply the absence of theological reflection per se; it may simply be that some interviewees were more comfortable articulating those connections aloud than others. Indeed it was notable that most of the interviewees who routinely used Christian language to reflect on their community activity were drawn from evangelical churches, or had an evangelical background. In this sense, the contrasts between the interviews may say as much about the use of language in different church cultures as about the degree of theological reflection taking place.

This observation could indicate an area for further research, but for churches and church leaders, may invite the question 'how do we encourage reflection on community activity in a way that draws on and feeds the faith of those involved?'

Summary

Respondents are largely positive about the role of community activity in forming them as Christians. Our interviews suggest that such growth is understood mainly in terms of character and Christian disposition. Interviewees described having grown through stepping out in faith and encountering others, often in new situations. Community activity appears to be a potent way of helping Christians find new ways to develop and practice faith.

How far community activity ignites faith imagination or literacy seems less certain. In conversations about putting faith into practice most interviewees did not refer to the Bible in connection with their motivation or understanding of faithful activity. There may be scope to explore this further either in church communities or in research.

For reflection:

- **How can churches hear and understand the experience of many in the congregation who will have felt their faith grow through putting it into practice?**
- **Interviewees sometimes gained from 'stepping out in faith' - trying something new for God. How can churches help people do that?**
- **How could churches help people connect and articulate their lived experience in community engagement with the language of Christian scripture and tradition?**

4. Being Involved in the Community

‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Matthew 25.40

With churches widely reporting a need for more volunteers, this research sought to explore how satisfied respondents were about the range and level of their community activity, and barriers to it, through a questionnaire question with a range of statement options. There was no directly corresponding question in the interviews, but when people appeared not to have been able to engage in the community as fully as they desired, we asked what they felt the barriers had been.

Chart 4: I would say that...



60% agreed, and 22% tended to agree, that the way they helped others in the community was a good reflection of what they cared about. Only 29% definitively agreed that they were happy with the amount of time they spent engaged in helping others, and that fell to 22% for those under 65 years of age. Many said they would like to do more if personal circumstances or commitments did not prevent them.

Existing personal commitments appear to be the main barrier, whilst only 20% felt that bad habits or laziness prevented them engaging in the community. Interviewees speaking about barriers reinforced this, frequently describing how their community activity was limited by work, illness, caring responsibilities, grandchildren, pets, other community activities and friendships. The challenge for churches may be helping people to work with the grain of their existing circumstances.

Church Activities and Community Activities

The statement 'I serve my community primarily through serving others in my church congregation' was intended to recognise that some might feel excluded from an investigation of community activity, and because churches are often made up of people who are themselves part of the local community in which the church is located. 28% agreed and a further 22% tended to agree with this statement. Those who agreed or tended to agree that they served their community primarily through serving their church congregation were likely to be older and slightly more likely to be female.

Our interviews helped to fill out this picture. Even though we explicitly asked for examples of 'activities to help others in the community' in interviews, as well as the questionnaire, two-thirds of all activities offered by interviewees were associated with church. These could include outreach into the community but we were often offered examples of congregational pastoral

care, management of building and resources, and preparation for or delivery of worship.

For respondents there may not always be a clear distinction between church life and community life. For example, interviewees spoke of the importance of making the church available or beautiful for the others (including the worshipping community); distributing the local parish magazine as a service to the community; and visiting isolated older people from their congregation interchangeably with older people who were neighbours. In this sense, helping the church is helping the community, and for someone with a passion for the community, church may offer a further expression of this:

It was just, being here in the village [the church was] a good way of getting into the community really. (A2)

Summary

Respondents were generally happy with the way that they were involved. Many appeared to see scope for doing more but felt that existing personal commitments or reasons prevented that. A significant number served the community primarily through serving their church congregation, perhaps because to some extent they regard church itself as an activity to help others in the community.

For reflection:

- **If most people are happy with the ways they engage, should churches give them a platform to share what they are doing, to encourage others?**
- **Most people say they would like to do more: how can churches can help Christians to meet that aspiration?**
- **Personal commitments are reported as the main barrier to further activity. Is there any way in which churches can help to acknowledge, mitigate or remove that barrier?**

5. What Could my Church do to Help?

‘And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works...’ Hebrews 10.24

In order to understand what churchgoers thought their churches might do to strengthen the two-way connection between community activity and faith, we asked, ‘could your church do anything else to help you deepen the relationship between your Christian faith and your involvement in the community?’ Respondents could select as many options as they wished.

Chart 5: What could my church do to help?

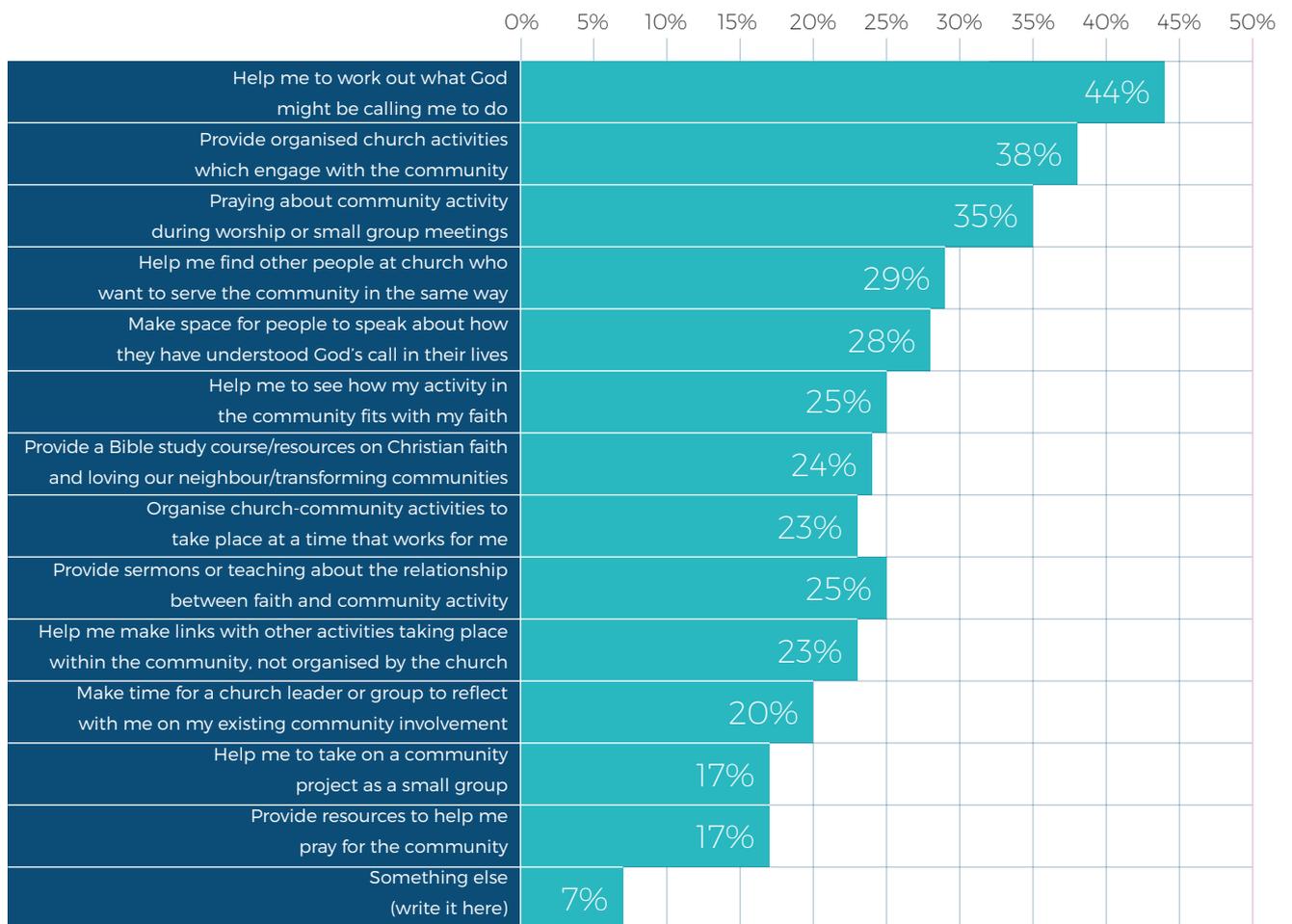


Chart 5 shows a broad spread across a range of activities, with seven items selected by a quarter or more of our respondents. The average number of responses selected was 3.5. 19% of respondents offered no response. The most often selected option was 'help me to work out what God might be calling me to do' (44%).

While a broad response like this can be used to open up further conversation with congregations about local needs, churches might hope for a clearer priority. One indicator of priority could be to look at those who selected just one or two responses (n=290). For them, 'help me work out what God might be calling me to do' was more clearly ranked first, selected by 33% – almost twice as many as any other option, with the second ranked response ('provide organised church activities') at 17%, suggesting that help working out God's calling may indeed be a stronger priority than others.

How Churches Currently Help

Churches already have an active role in supporting community activity. Chart 2 showed that, for activities through or beyond church, around 70% of questionnaire respondents agreed or tended to agree that they had heard teaching in their church that helped them connect the activities to their faith. However, it also showed the proportion of those who feel supported by their church to do these activities is at best, less than two-thirds.

Interviewees were asked, 'How far do you feel supported in doing those activities by the church you attend?' Those who led or coordinated some of the activity they reported (roughly half of the interviewees) frequently commented on the enabling or disabling role local church leadership could play in encouraging or discouraging a culture of congregational involvement in the community. Some also commented on the community's sense of fellowship or willingness to pull together. Some of the comments on church and local church leadership culture were positive; others more negative or ambivalent:

I feel as if I'm supported, to a degree, with the vicar, but [they don't like] consultation. So, if I say anything, it sort of goes in one ear and out the other. (E2)

If you want to do something here, you ask and usually the answer is, "Okay, we'll support you"... In my last parish, that would never have

Those selecting 'help me work out what God might be calling me to do' were more likely to be in the 55–65 age bracket; more likely to feel that personal circumstances prevented them from engaging more in the community, and also more likely to say they looked to represent Christ in their actions, and to tell others about faith through their activities.

Effective discernment can facilitate community engagement and was sometimes reported as an important connection between interviewee and their church:

[My previous church] never saw that I've got a pastoral heart or they never encouraged it. [But at this church] I felt I was being encouraged to bring the gifts that I didn't even realise I had forward. (B2)

That ability to discern gifts is just one of the ways in which church culture does – or does not – empower people to act.

happened. It would have been "we can't afford it". It's not just money. It's an attitude, here. The attitude here is, "If we can help you to do something, we will support you all the way, and we will find a way to do it". That has been a big thing for me, the support I've got from everybody who works here. The workers and the congregation, as well. They've been very, very supportive. (C3)

Some, especially those involved away from church, interpreted that support in terms of the spiritual sustenance of worship or even simply the church building.

Yes, so I do. I do feel supported, but not supported in the sense of being able to unload everything because the unloading happens before I walk through them doors really by myself. It's a spiritual thing, I would say. (F1)

Those less involved or not leading activities tended to reflect on individual personal support through times of difficulty. Examples of practical support such as lifts or listening were often seen as indicators of inclusion in church:

I don't drive, you see, so if I need to go anywhere, I don't ask, mind, but they always say, "Do you want to go?" Yes. Always ask me if I want to come. (F3)

This question was perhaps hardest of all for those whose community activity was mainly outside of the church's collective mission. While the opportunity to have vicar and congregation understand their work, some could feel themselves responsible for a disconnect:

I have said that I'm sorry that I haven't done more for church, because there are lots of things that [the church] do that I could have got involved in the community, but I just felt that I was called to do something else broader than that. (B1)

Summary

Our respondents felt a broad range of help could be helpful in linking faith and community activity. Help discerning calling was the most often mentioned, and was prioritised by those who only mentioned one or two factors. Interviewees often spoke of the congregational or leadership culture as factors when asked to reflect on how their church supported them in their community activities.

For reflection:

- **How do churches help people discern their calling? How can it respond further?**
- **Beyond discerning calling, there seems to be a wide range of ways in which churches could help people deepen the relationship between faith and community activity. How could churches wisely choose one or two priorities?**
- **Looking back to Chart 2, should churches be concerned about the proportion of respondents saying they felt supported by their church to do community activities?**

Conclusion and Further Reflections

‘When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick’ **Luke 9.1-2**

These concluding reflections speak to themes central to the work of our two participating dioceses, with the expectation that they have wider application.

Discipleship

Respondents are largely positive about the way in which community activity helps them grow as Christians. Such growth is frequently reported in terms of character and Christian disposition, and in enabling people to practice the faith they profess. Interviewees described having grown through stepping out in faith to leave their comfort zone and encounter others.

There is scope to explore how individuals can be helped to explore the connections between their faith and their community engagement through Christian stories, images and language, given that most reflections of this kind in the interviews were of a relatively general nature.

- **How can churches hear and understand the experience of those in their congregations who have felt their faith grow through putting it into practice?**
- **How can churches help people to step out in faith to connect with others?**
- **How could churches help people connect their experience of community activity with the riches of Christian scripture and tradition?**

Vocation

In *Christians in Practice*, respondents seem ready to recognise and respond to the language of vocation and calling, although interviewees only sometimes used it spontaneously, and often described their relationship with God in a range of other ways. The finding that many of our respondents wanted help in discerning their calling in relation to community activity may help church leaders imagine next steps. Given that many respondents were happy with the ways they engage in the community, there is scope for their testimony to be shared to encourage others.

- **How do churches help people discern their calling to involvement in their community, as well as to other aspects of life?**
- **How can churches share the stories of others, to encourage people to explore their own calling?**

Evangelism

An encouraging finding for some will be our respondents' keenness to demonstrate the Christian faith through activity and word, and our interviewees' awareness of the complexities and sensitivities involved in doing so.

- **How can churches enable and encourage different ways of sharing faith?**
- **How can churches help people share faith appropriately and sensitively in their community activity?**

Missional Leadership

Leaders of church communities have much to build with in this report. Three particular challenges are: (a) a hunger for help discerning calling in community activity; (b) a desire to do more, set against the restrictions of the commitments of daily life; (c) a broad sense that learning faith and enacting it go together. Leaders of churches and Christian communities might explore the following:

- **How can church leaders help discernment of calling in community activity? How far should this be a joint discernment of a community's calling? How far is it a matter of individuals' personal call?**
- **What can church leadership helpfully say to people who are constrained by their life circumstances, yet would like to offer more? How might that challenge link to discernment of calling?**
- **How can our own leadership best give individuals the chance to reflect on their practice as part of God's mission in the world and help people move from concern to action?**

Notes

¹ David Primrose (lead author), Visible Discipleship: Reimagining Social Responsibility for Today's World (Social Responsibility Network, February 2017), p.3.

² Simon Foster, What Helps Disciples Grow? (St Peter's Saltley Trust, 2016), pp. 8–10.

³ Bethany Eckley and Tom Sefton, Church in Action: A National Survey of Church-Based Social Action (Church Urban Fund, February 2015), p.18.

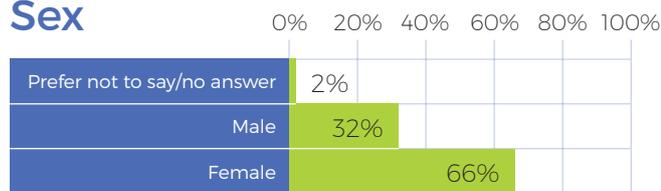
⁴ Archbishops' Council, Released for Mission: Growing the Rural Church (Archbishops' Council, 2015), p.13; Primrose, Visible Discipleship, p.23.

⁵ By contrast, in What Helps Disciples Grow, 80% of respondents agreed with the statement 'God calls everyone was called to a particular place, role, or task'; 56% agreed that 'I'm more or less on the journey that God wants me to be on.' (Foster, 2016).

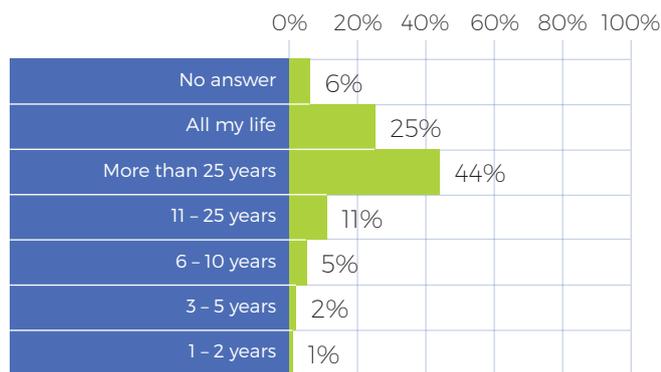
Appendix: About our Respondents

Our respondents were from 20 churches in Lichfield and 12 in Birmingham. 1079 people completed the questionnaire.

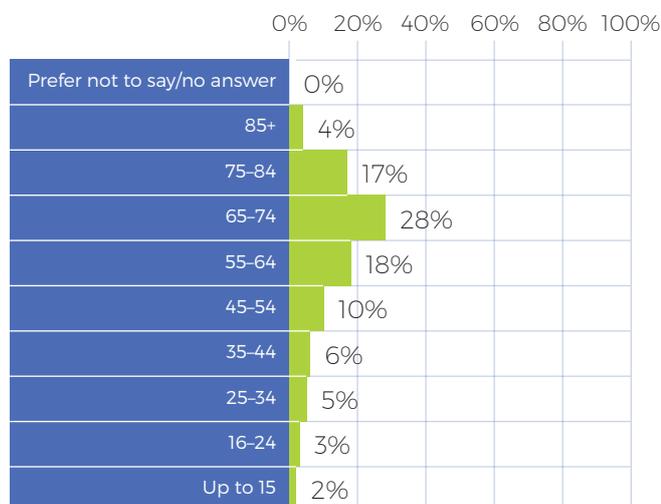
Sex



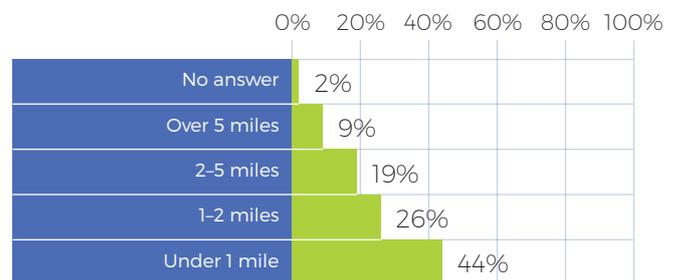
How long would you say you've been a Christian?



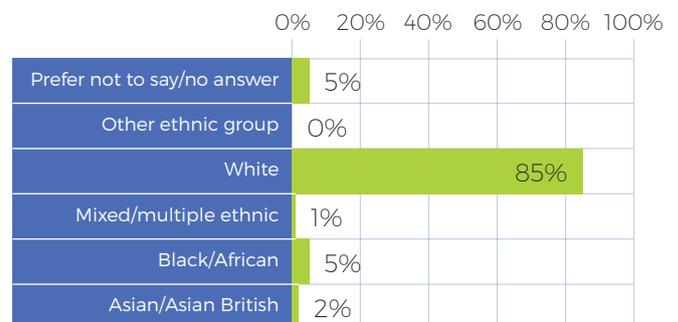
Age group



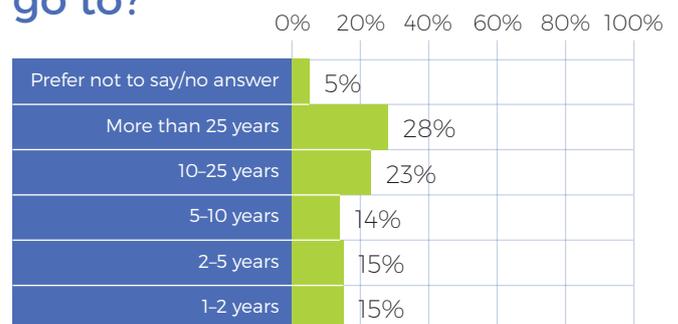
How far do you live from your church?



Ethnic origin



How long have you attended the church you currently go to?



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