

# The Role of Church of Scotland Congregations in Community Development

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Commentators have reported the declining significance of established religion within Scottish society, evident in terms of falling church membership and a reduced moral and political influence on the population. The churches' contribution to wider societal cohesiveness and inclusion is also subject to controversy, particularly in relation to the continuing debate about sectarianism in Scotland.

The Church of Scotland's recent strategic vision document *Church without Walls* both emphasises the importance of the 'local' and 'relational' processes which are the foundations of social capital, and acknowledges that building a 'church without walls' requires a renewal of the relevance of the Church within local communities and a strengthening of relations with other faiths. Pertaining to this aim, this chapter presents the findings from a national study of local Church of Scotland congregations. It assesses the extent to which the activities of congregations contribute to social capital in Scottish communities. The chapter identifies the challenges that congregations face in developing such a role and discusses the implications of the findings for the Church and policy-makers in Scotland.

## Churches, Social Capital and Community Development

It is argued that Scottish churches now struggle to be relevant to the majority of the population (Reid 2002; Walker 2002) due to increasing disengagement from traditional religious participation, demonstrated in both declining church membership and attendance (Park 2002; Paterson 2002).

Within this context, the Church of Scotland published its *Church without Walls* report, setting out the Church's wider strategic vision (Church of Scotland 2001). The document explicitly argues that the Church works most effectively where congregations build relationships with the wider communities to which they belong, emphasising the importance of both *the local* and *the relational* in church work. This focus on local relations has a striking resonance with the Scottish Executive's recent policy emphasis upon achieving community renewal through ensuring that: 'Individuals and communities have the social capital – the skills, confidence and support networks to take advantage of, and increase the opportunities open to them' (Scottish Executive 2002).

The centrality of social capital to achieving governmental goals reflects a wider policy focus on strengthening local social processes as the central element of sustainable neighbourhood renewal, based on the understanding that successful policy outcomes are more likely to be achieved in civically engaged communities (SEU 2001; Putnam 1995: 19). This forms part of the 'Third Way' politics which seeks policy solutions located between the state and the market (Giddens 1998). Social capital refers to the value of cooperation and networking existent in social relations between residents and between organisations in local communities. Its most prominent advocate, the US scholar Robert Putnam (2000), defines social capital as: 'The

features of social organisation such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit.'

It is important to distinguish between two forms of social capital. *Bonding* social capital may be defined as thick social networks between like individuals (e.g., families), which enable people to 'get by', whereas *bridging* social capital comprises weaker, but wider linkages between heterogeneous individuals which provide opportunities to 'get on'. Thus strong internal social networks within deprived communities do not necessarily equate to the presence of beneficial linkages between local residents and wider social networks which embrace job markets or policy-making processes. The distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is also essential in studying the nature of relations *between* communities. This involves the recognition that strengthening social ties within groups can be a divisive process through which strong internal community bonds may be formed around perceived differences to, and the exclusion of, others (Portes and Landolt 1996). Such concerns are particularly relevant to discussions of the influence of religious sectarianism on community relations in parts of Scotland (Devine 2000; Walker 2002). In this context, the contribution, or otherwise, that churches make towards social cohesion and tolerance within a more diverse and multi-cultural society is under severe scrutiny. Distinguishing bonding from bridging social capital is also important in evaluating the extent to which the benefits of congregational activities are internalised or bring benefits to the wider community.

While social capital exists in relationships between individuals, it also defines the ability of people to work together more formally in groups and organisations (Fukuyama, 1995). Thus, the extent to which informal trust and cooperation in local communities is translated into strong institutional infrastructures, through organisations

including churches, is crucial to the capacity of communities to generate both bonding and, particularly, bridging social capital (Temkin and Rohe 1998).

William Storrar has written about the potential for religious traditions in Scotland to be utilised in creating a democratic culture of active citizenship in civil society, reflecting a wider recognition that churches constitute a central element of many nations' civic orders (Storrar 1999; Ammerman 1996). The particular importance of churches as civic institutions is emphasised by Robert Putnam, who claims that congregations generate both what he terms *civically relevant values* such as public duty, compassion and concern for the excluded and *civic skills* such as those of association and organisation (Putnam 2000). Additionally, it is argued that churches provide a distinctive function in creating a sense of spiritual wellbeing, self-esteem and identity for individuals and communities (Ahmed 2001; Sweeney, Hannah and McMahon 2001).

The renewed interest in the role that faith communities may play in policy delivery and community development in the UK is illustrated in recent research identifying the importance of congregations within community regeneration strategies (Musgrove et al. 1999; Allen Hays 2001; Lewis and Randolph-Horn 2001; Sweeney, Hannah and McMahon 2001; Shaftesbury Society 2001). This interest is based upon a growing recognition of the synergy between faith groups' activities and government policy objectives relating to neighbourhood renewal, reinvigorating civic engagement and tackling social exclusion: 'Faith communities have a significant contribution to make to neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion' (DETR 1997).

This advocacy of a role for faith communities is based on their perceived strengths, including: the fact they are relatively well resourced; their strong links to their localities; their particular engagement in the most deprived and declining neighbourhoods; their ability to reach and

support marginalised and excluded individuals; and their wider contribution to the cohesiveness and identity of local communities (CSM 2001; DETR 1997; Inner Cities Religious Council 2001; Ahmed 2001). The potential role of faith groups is seen as comprising both informal community activities as well as contributing to the delivery of local welfare services on a more formal basis.

However, there are concerns about the capacity of congregations to undertake a greater service delivery function. Churches have also raised concerns that, despite supportive political rhetoric, they continue to be discriminated against in community and voluntary sector funding mechanisms and excluded from partnership formation processes (Faithworks 2001; Shaftesbury Society 2001). There are also contrasts between the political support given to churches in England and Scotland. While south of the border policy documents contain explicit recognition of a distinct role for faith communities and provide mechanisms for facilitating their involvement (DETR 1997; SEU 2001), such supportive statements are less prevalent in Scotland. For example, the Scottish Executive's recent Community Regeneration Statement makes no explicit reference to churches.

The new devolutionary order in Scotland poses a challenge to the Church of Scotland (and other organised religions) to stake its claim to be heard (Walker 2002). Church of Scotland congregations' contribution to building social capital in Scottish communities represents one element in evaluating the basis on which such claims for ensuring a continuing role for the Church within local and national policy processes may be made. This chapter contributes to this debate by reporting findings from a national study of Church of Scotland congregations and discussing the implications of these findings for both the Church and policy-makers.

## The Research

The study, funded by the Church of Scotland Board of Social Responsibility, was conducted between August 2001 and June 2002. It comprised a literature review, interviews with national church officers and policy-makers and a national questionnaire of ministerial charges, which achieved a 40 per cent response rate, representing 454 (one-third) of Church of Scotland congregations; including responses from every presbytery area in Scotland. In addition a series of nineteen case studies was conducted focusing on specific local church initiatives and individual congregations. A further four detailed congregation case studies involved focus groups with ministers and Church elders; postal surveys of congregation members and local residents who were not Church members (the total survey sample sizes for the four detailed case studies were 336 for congregation members and 148 for non-Church local residents). The full research findings are presented in Flint, Kearns and Atkinson (2002).

### *The Contexts of Congregational Activity*

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

reported all three of these activities as being equally important).

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

### *Congregations' Contribution to Social Capital*

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

*Local Activities:* including provision of services and facilities, disseminating information, assisting integration and resolving conflicts within local communities

*Community Development:* including advocacy, involvement in local campaigns and empowering local people

*Community Relations:* including relationships with other organisations, facilitating partnerships, building networks and establishing new community groups

*Pride, Safety and Belonging:* the extent of the congregation's involvement in activities that generate any of these elements of social capital in local communities.

TABLE 1 *Average Social Capital Scores (All Congregations, N = 454)*

	Max. Pos.	Average
Local Activities	8	3.6
Community Development	6	1.8
Community Relations	8	3.8
Pride, Safety and Belonging	4	1.7
Social Capital Score	26	10.9

The results shown in Table 1 indicate that on average, congregations were engaged in just under half of the identified social capital generating activities, although they are relatively less likely to be involved in community development processes. This indicates the scope for congregations to be more heavily involved in these activities. Alternatively, given the institutional size of the Church of Scotland, it can be claimed that these levels of involvement represent a very substantial contribution to social capital in Scottish communities.

The findings reveal that congregations in urban and deprived areas were, on average, involved in a greater number of social capital-generating activities than congregations in rural or affluent communities. These findings are consistent with previous research and support the current policy focus upon churches as crucial institutions in regenerating deprived communities. Neither the size of a congregation, nor the presbytery it was located in, were found to be significant factors in levels of community involvement.

### *Congregations and Community Institutional Infrastructure*

A key finding of the research was that much of the contribution that congregations make to local social capital is generated through their members participating in other

(non-church) community organisations. A central issue here is whether members of congregations have a greater propensity for involvement in community organisations, and the extent to which the Church itself contributes to such involvement. Our survey of congregation members in three case studies ( $N = 296$ ) found that 30 per cent were members of other local organisations (most commonly charitable or voluntary groups). These figures reflect the estimates given by ministers in the national postal survey.

Comparing these results to recent estimates of levels of volunteering in Scotland (Paterson 2002) suggests that congregation members appear to be proportionately more likely to be involved in volunteering than the general population. Coupled with the fact that four in ten congregation members reported being office bearers in community groups, this indicates that members of congregations play a prominent role in the institutional infrastructure of their local communities.

How far is this involvement facilitated by membership of a congregation? Seven in ten congregations indicated that individuals in the church had gone on to be involved in other community organisations. These individuals may have joined the church because they were already predisposed to participation in community groups. However, the congregation membership surveys indicated that an individual's faith and the encouragement of the Church were important factors in their wider community involvement, suggesting that congregations do make a specific contribution here.

Table 2 shows that a significant number of congregations provide support to a range of other local organisations, and voluntary sector organisations in particular. The most common form of support was the provision of meeting places (64 per cent of congregations), providing staff or volunteers (44 per cent) and offering financial assistance (39 per cent).

TABLE 2 *Local Organisations Supported by Congregations*

Types of organisation	Number	Per cent
Voluntary sector organisation	268	59.0
Religious organisation	193	42.5
Community council/forum	187	41.2
Other community group	155	34.1
Residents or tenants association	70	15.4
Other	45	9.9
(N = 454)		

The degree to which congregations are involved with local political and policy networks appears limited. Table 3 shows that congregations were most likely to be involved in partnerships with other churches or with charities and care organisations. Only a small proportion of congregations were involved in partnerships with community councils and even fewer with local authorities. Political and policy issues such as political campaigning and local regeneration are not commonly the focus of partnerships in which congregations are involved.

TABLE 3 *Congregation's Involvement in Local Partnerships*

Partner organisation	Number	Per cent
Other church	195	43.0
Local charities	108	23.8
Local care organisations	86	18.9
Community council	76	16.7
Local authorities	47	10.4
Other organisation	28	6.2

## Purpose of the partnership

Community events	126	27.8
Community development	115	25.3
Local care services	111	24.4
Regeneration	56	12.3
Campaigning activity	36	7.9
Other	52	11.5
(N = 454)		

*A Direct Provision Role for Congregations*

Much of the recent debate about the role of congregations in community development has focused upon them providing direct services and facilities to local people. The extent to which congregations are engaged in this is illustrated in Table 4. Two-thirds (65 per cent) of congregations directly provided educational, cultural or health services to local people, with children's clubs being the most frequent service, followed by creches, cultural events, transport services and day care clubs for the elderly. However, only a quarter (27 per cent) of congregations provided self-help and personal growth services. The most common services were pre-school clubs, followed by addiction and parent support groups. Very few congregations provided employment or training services. A similar proportion of congregations (26 per cent) provided direct services to local people in immediate need, most frequently support to the homeless, with smaller numbers providing food, housing or shelter to local people.

Although these findings suggest a modest role for congregations in direct service provision they also reveal an important finding in the context of the earlier discussion about bonding or bridging social capital. One criticism of

TABLE 4 *Congregations Directly Providing Services and Facilities*

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

congregations is that the gains from their activities accrue to their membership, but may not generate external benefits for wider local communities. However, the fact that over seven in ten service-providing congregations reported providing these services to a majority of non-church members suggests that this is not the case.

Reflecting the earlier findings about congregations' institutional networks, congregations have established very limited access routes to funding sources for these and other activities. While one in five congregations received funding from the Church of Scotland for a specific initiative, only 13 per cent received grants from local or national government, and less than one in ten received support from a religious or secular charity.

Table 5 shows that congregations are in general supportive of a greater role for the church in providing local services, and that a third would be interested in applying for government funding to facilitate this. Similarly, surveys

TABLE 5 *Congregation's Attitudes to Funding and Service Provision*

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

of the membership of case study congregations showed that a majority (53 per cent) across the four case studies ( $N = 355$ ) wished to see more involvement in community development activities, with the remaining 47 per cent wishing to maintain their present levels of engagement. Some of the local (non-church member) residents in these areas provided indicative evidence that non-church members were receptive to a greater role for congregations in service provision. Other local community organisations in the main were also positive about the actual and potential contribution that congregations make.

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

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

### *Congregations and Social Cohesion*

A key element of the recent debate about the role for churches and other faith groups is the extent to which they are a socially cohesive or divisive presence in local communities, particularly in relation to sectarianism in some areas of Scotland. This study reveals a very strong commitment among Church of Scotland congregations to working in partnership with other faith organisations. Of congregations, 88 per cent were involved in work with other faith groups in their local area, most frequently through joint services and worship and informal meetings, but in some instances through more formal partnerships.

This collaboration is often on an ecumenical basis, with many congregations reporting attempts to reduce religious divisions in local communities through working closely with Roman Catholic congregations in joint services, public solidarity events and anti-sectarian education in local schools. The picture that emerges is of a strong ethos of inter-faith working, rather than isolated and divisive local institutions. Sectarianism, where it exists, appears to be largely perpetuated outwith congregations.

The case studies revealed that congregations often have strong links with other non-Christian faiths. In areas of Glasgow and Edinburgh, local congregations have been heavily involved in partnership working with Islamic and Sikh groups and assisting asylum seekers, including facilitating the religious practices of other faiths. Many congregations also play a role in seeking to support and integrate marginalised groups within local communities. A third (34 per cent) of congregations reported supporting young people, while a quarter of congregations reported

supporting vulnerable older people, people with physical and mental disabilities, and homeless individuals. One in ten congregations had actively attempted to resolve conflicts between sections of their local community.

Beyond this, many congregations also play a role in building a sense of community identity, through involvement in community events, gala days, history projects, etc. Church premises themselves serve an important function here. Symbolically, they may represent a sign of community and continuity (particularly in declining communities); in times of community conflict church premises are viewed as neutral sites of arbitration, but also practically they offer a site for associational activity which is essential in generating interaction (both formal and informal) within communities. A majority of congregations reported making a hall or meeting rooms available to local people, suggesting that church premises are far more than 'street furniture'.

### *Congregations and Community Development*

This paper indicates that congregations make important contributions to the institutional infrastructure and social cohesion of many Scottish communities. However, their contribution to wider community development appears more tenuous and fragile.

Table 6 shows that less than half of congregations had been approached to become involved in a local issue, and only a third had acted as advocates for the community or been involved in local community campaigns.

A number of factors appear to explain this. First, as we have already identified, many congregations do not envisage such activities as being central to their role and function and this perception is also shared by many non-church organisations and individuals so that a church congregation may be 'off-radar' locally in relation to these issues. Second, these activities are inherently controversial or divisive. Congregations, attempting to appeal to all sections of their

TABLE 6 *Congregation's Involvement in Community Development Activities*

In the last two years has your church ...	Congregations	
	Number	Per cent
Been involved in activities that help local people define their needs?	79	17.7
Helped local people to find a solution to a local problem?	95	21.6
Been involved in any local community campaigns?	135	35.6
Represented or spoken on behalf of the community to external bodies?	144	32.5
Been approached to become involved in any local issues?	206	46.5

local community, find it difficult to simultaneously become involved in issues such as new housing developments which may divide local residents. Third, the issue of human, financial and knowledge resources is central. Many congregations expressed a desire to be more fully engaged in such community development issues, but did not believe they had the capacity to do so against competing priorities. Finally, such involvement may require both a redefining of the congregations' remit and the development of partnership working with new organisations, many of which will have little understanding of Church priorities and working processes.

However, widening and deepening congregations' engagement in community development may be crucial to the realignment of the Church's role within local communities. Involvement in community development activities often provides the most visible indication to non-church members of a congregation's secular as well as spiritual local importance. In a dynamic process, this is likely to lead

to other organisations perceiving a role for congregations in local networks. Involvement in community development can also enable congregations to evolve into new areas of activity that reflect the changing needs of their local communities. This research found congregations involved in local economic development, promoting tourism and establishing credit unions. Engagement in these 'non-traditional' activities renews congregations' wider relevance to local communities.

### Conclusions

Potentially the activities of congregations can be more effectively aligned with policy aims of strengthening local communities. However, facilitating a greater role for congregations in governance processes involves reconceptualising their role, in which diversity and religious priorities need to be regarded as integral to, rather than in opposition to, wider policy aims of fostering social inclusion and cohesion. This requires an understanding that the spiritual and secular dimensions of congregational activity are inherently complimentary components of the ability of congregations to contribute to local stocks of social capital. In other words, it is not possible to harness the benefits of congregational activities without recognising that these cannot be divorced from the religious priorities and practices of the Church.

For both policy-makers and congregations, this involves retaining the unique identity of the Church while recognising that it represents one voice among many. This plurality suggests a reconfiguration of how the roles of congregations are conceived within policy processes. First, it needs to be accepted that congregations pursuing greater levels of engagement within communities are generally viewed positively by both church members and non-church organisations and residents. Thus fears

among policy-makers about a widespread hostility to faith groups' involvement in community development may be unfounded. Related to this issue, this research found that congregations acted as forces of social cohesion rather than exclusion, including facilitating the integration of the most marginalised groups in society. This finding indicates that the reluctance of policy-makers to engage with congregations because of their potentially divisive impact within local communities should also be reassessed.

We would recommend that churches be identified as potential partners or significant actors in a wider range of local and national policy initiatives than is presently the case. Practically, policy-makers should support the maintenance and renovation of church buildings as important sites of community interaction and activity for church and non-church residents. Further, they could facilitate funding mechanisms that enable congregations to access more readily funds to support community development activities, recognising that the centrality of faith to congregations' activities should not present insurmountable barriers to applications. The Church can provide organisational support to such activities by ensuring that there is sufficient flexibility and autonomy among congregations to engage in innovative (therefore risky) initiatives, combined with mechanisms to enable resources to be shared between congregations.

It is clear that the limited resources of local congregations necessitate their involvement in partnerships with others to secure the most effective contribution to local social capital. While partnership inevitably involves compromise, successful partnerships can be entered into without a diminution of the Church's strengths, identity and priorities. In fact, our research found that the most successful partnerships had involved an explicit declaration and understanding of the priorities and values of the partner organisations at the outset.

A related issue for the Church and policy-makers is whether congregations should become more firmly embedded in the wider voluntary sector or continue to be regarded as a unique form of organisation. We would argue that a closer alignment with the voluntary sector would enable congregations to plug into existing circuits of support, funding mechanisms and communication channels to policy-makers, from which congregations are presently relatively isolated.

Congregations' contribution to social capital is more often likely to be through the activities of individual members, and informally supporting other community organisations, rather than through formal 'church-labelled' activities. Congregations should be supported in this facilitating and enabling role as well as in any involvement in direct service delivery.

However, we would also argue that the Church itself should be aware that more formal partnerships should not be neglected. Similarly the continuing involvement of congregations in traditional community support activities should be coupled with a willingness to widen the engagement of congregations to other areas of community development such as community campaigning and advocacy. Such engagement is most likely both to empower local people and to provide the most visible demonstration of the commitment and relevance of congregations to local communities. This is crucial because a current lack of awareness of congregations' activities, among both policy-makers and local communities contributes, more than anything else, to limiting the engagement of congregations in local community development strategies.

Churches face the task of redefining their identity in ways compatible with a highly diverse and unpredictable society (Walker 2002). Similarly policy-makers face the challenge of reassessing some of the assumptions about congregations that have limited the full recognition and

understanding of their contributions to social capital in Scottish communities.

In the words of one interviewee, the Church of Scotland needs to 'move from being the heart of the community to being at the heart of the community'. The implications of such a change need to be more fully thought through if the contribution of congregations to social capital and wider community development is to be maximised.

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