“With one accord?” – A case study in twenty-first century rural ecumenism

An exploration of existing and possible ecumenical collaboration in a Wiltshire village, as perceived by the community

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Abstract

This dissertation describes an investigative case study, conducted within a large Wiltshire village at the request of an ecumenical working group established by the Anglican and Methodist churches in the village.

Its objective was to understand how the shared/united activities of the churches were perceived – by both churchgoers and non-members. This will, it is hoped, help lead to more effective future ministry and mission, within this particular community and beyond. The work thus brings together rural ministry, ecumenism and church/community interaction within a congregational case study.

The investigation was undertaken by means of a questionnaire, supported by documentary evidence from church records. Focus groups were used, first to compile the list of activities to be included in the questionnaire, and then to assist with purposive sampling. Three types of question were used. One set established the demographic parameters of the respondents and their religious affiliations and involvement. The second category provided an assessment of the levels of awareness and approval of united church activities (grouped as "community", "young people", "groups and courses" and "worship and prayer"). Finally, a section of open-ended questions added a more qualitative aspect to the responses.

Responses were obtained from 10% of the adult population of the village (144 respondents). Recurrent topics of interest included:

- Acting as a focus for community cohesion;
- Expressing Christian values through pastoral care and concern;
- Building up faith in ways that are widely accessible and meaningful (including a range of worship styles);
- Support and nurture of families and children within a Christian ethical context;
- Outreach and witness to the Gospel.

Areas of concern included examples of poor communication between churches and community, exemplified by some apparent mismatches between their respective priorities.

Some conclusions are drawn, using the metaphor of the Body of Christ, as to how these matters might be addressed in order to promote and celebrate unity within diversity.

[314 words]

Dedication

To Mike, the Anglican-ised Methodist who keeps me thinking and asking questions

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1 Introduction

The project described here arose directly from questions posed by church members seeking to understand and fulfil their shared ministry in a particular context. The parish in question is one in which I am currently serving as Assistant Curate, and the case study reported below comprises the next step in the process of – together – seeking some answers.

1.1 The setting

The study's setting is a rural Wiltshire village where a Local Covenant has been in place since 1991; see Chapter 2. In 2007 the Methodist and Anglican Church Councils appointed a joint Working Group (now known as the ACCORD Group) specifically to explore ways of expanding their united worship. The Group believes that shared *worship* needs to be rooted within a sense of shared *community*, and is seeking ways to promote this. As a first step, reliable information is needed on how the wider community perceives the presence, role, mission and witness of the Churches, to provide a basis for reflection on and (hopefully) insight into the underlying needs and the future potential.

It was considered that a comprehensive "snapshot", taken across the community, of current perceptions of shared church activities and future possibilities would be a helpful starting-point. The project described in this dissertation aims to provide that information.

1.2 The wider background

The work may also yield a knowledge resource for other communities wishing to undertake similar enquiries and/or collaboration. Since the signing of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant in 2003, many local arrangements have come into being. While considerable material is available in

the literature on rural ministry and on more formal Local Ecumenical Partnerships, comparatively little detailed information is available on how less-formal local covenantal arrangements actually work in practice, particularly in rural contexts. The background reading for the project therefore comprises a synthesis of material on rural ministry, congregational studies, ecumenism and church/community relations (see Section 2.1 and Chapter 3).

1.3 Methodology

As outlined in Chapter 4, conducting an investigative case study seemed the most appropriate course to follow (Gilham, 2000; Yin, 2003). However, practical cost and time constraints militated against a purely qualitative approach such as, say, participant observation. The investigation therefore used an appropriate synthesis (described in detail in Chapter 4) of carefully targeted quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. Accordingly, focus groups – supported by documentary evidence from church records – were used both to help to formulate, and then to distribute and collect, a questionnaire containing both closed and open-ended questions.

1.4 Results

The results are analyzed in Chapter 5. The demographic information obtained about the respondents is compared with the 2001 census figures for the village, and with national church attendance and membership trends. Next, the awareness and approval of the full range of ecumenical church activities are tabulated and assessed. The importance ascribed to the various activities by, respectively, the respondents and the focus groups are compared. Finally, comments made in response to the open-ended questions are analysed and the main topics of interest are highlighted. (The information has also been carefully archived so that further analyses can be undertaken if necessary in the future; at this stage, a satisfactory balance has been achieved between what was possible and what was appropriate and feasible.)

Reflecting on this information (see Chapter 6) has made it possible both to analyze and to assess the effectiveness of current programmes in the above areas, and will facilitate future planning (see Chapter 7). The findings will also, it is hoped, have relevance for other communities facing similar challenges, and should thus have both immediate practical implications, and potential long-term usefulness. The conclusions drawn have also given rise to a reflective process – using, for instance, the metaphor of the Body of Christ – that aims to ground these practical outcomes in a better understanding of the underlying theology (again, see Chapter 6).

1.5 Theological context

The project thus falls squarely within the field of "practical theology", whereby theological reflection on "real-world" practices, systems and beliefs can inform and enhance our understanding of inherited scriptures and tradition in a two-way conversation that can serve the mission and ministry of the Kingdom. This understanding of the process of "doing theology" acts as a strong motivation to find ways of investigating – as here – exactly what the practices "out there in the real world" actually are (in other words the so-called "operant theology"), as distinct from the assumed or hypothetical understanding (so-called "espoused" theology). It is a matter of exploring how people understand or perceive their beliefs and practices, and the faith and values that underlie them, with the aim of provoking reflection and – hopefully – better practice and understanding.

Graham (2005, p. 10) identifies three major practical tasks that theological reflection should serve, and which are of clear relevance to this study:

- the introduction and nurture of members;
- building and sustaining the community of faith;
- communicating the faith to a wider culture.

John Reader (1994) similarly talks of “church and community in dialogue” in the context of “local theology” that can “identify ways of relating the symbols and insights of the faith community to the experiences and ideas of … other groups” in “a ‘situated understanding’ of the Christian tradition” (*ibid*., p. 3).

In this way, theology of the head, heart and hands can operate as an integrated whole. Accordingly, we now consider the “culture” within which the study is set, involving both current perceptions of rural ministry generally, and the particular village within which the survey was conducted.

Chapter 2 The project's context and setting

2.1 The context: rural ministry and mission

In terms of providing an underlying understanding of the rural setting for this study of ecumenical activities, the seminal report, *Faith in the Countryside* (The Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, 1990), which triggered a renewed interest in rural ministry and mission, provided a useful starting-point. In some instances, rural ecumenism has been driven by necessity as membership has dropped and ministerial resources have become scarcer, but the picture is far more complex than that. *Faith in the Countryside* (*ibid.,* p. 22) speaks of a "theology of community", where rural communities may look very different from the traditional picture, but where community links are nonetheless strong. (This is certainly the case in the village in question; there is an astonishing plethora of clubs and organisations, and community spirit is vibrant.) The report also speaks (*ibid.,* p. 309) of "an interpretation of person which transcends the individual and offers hope for a Christian view of corporate interdependence and activity". This is in direct contrast to the view of Heelas and Woodhead (2005) on the overriding prevalence of a "turn to subjectivity"; indeed, the community studied here provides an interesting mix of individualism and community spirit. The recommendations of the Report (*ibid*., p. p. 313 ff.) focus heavily on statutory/governmental and diocesan actions to be taken, but there is also a strong emphasis on greater involvement of the laity, and sharing of resources – between parishes, between dioceses and between church and secular organisations, in promoting community and wellbeing in rural areas.

This highlights a particularly "Anglican" characteristic – that the Church is there for everyone, and not just for the benefit of its adherents. In an analysis of Anglican and Methodist ministers' responses to the Foot and Mouth crisis, Burton (2003) shows a difference whereby the Anglican clergy generally felt both a responsibility and a right to minister to anyone who was affected, whereas the Methodist ministers were much more hesitant to approach non-members, and much

of the pastoral ministry came about through personal contacts by lay members. (It could be argued, of course, that lay involvement is a typically "Methodist" scenario, in one of the fundamental differences highlighted below. Nevertheless, it demonstrates a deep-seated Anglican attitude of being "chaplains to the nation" that is not shared by other denominations; this is borne out by the results reported in Chapter 5.

Francis (1996), in a text written at about the same time as *Faith in the Countryside* and expanding the categorisation used by Russell (1986), distinguishes between seven types of rural community which, he claims, have identifiable differences. He reports a set of observations of rural churches (*ibid*., pp. 17, ff.), and flags up four pertinent errors to which such studies could give rise (*ibid*., pp. 238, ff.). Nevertheless, he claims validity for his conclusions (which are also reflected in our findings), namely, that:

- the associational links are weakening, except among the older members, and that the "associational" vs. "gathered" distinction now carries less weight,
- small rural churches are decreasingly able to attract new members because of diminishing resources,
- this is exacerbated by the historical denominational distinctions, and
- patterns of services are frequently unhelpful.

More positively, he considers that increased lay ministry offers hope for the future. He leaves open the question of whether urban/suburban parishes should stop subsidising faltering rural churches, or should consider them as missional opportunities; the main hope for the future lies, he says, in ecumenical mission and ministry. Fifteen years on, the pitfalls remain valid; it is a moot point whether the prognosis is as gloomy as he perhaps suggests.

Conversely, van der Weyer (1991) speaks of many villagers as having a type of "folk religion"; what he calls an "Old Testament" attitude to church: that simply by virtue of belonging to the community, one participates in rural festivals such as harvest. Twenty years later, this may be on

the wane (although the work of Barley (2006a) would suggest not), but it is interesting to see just how strong this attitude actually is in our village. (Again, we refer to the work of Heelas and Woodhead (2005) – is it just that rural areas are lagging behind the market town environment of their study, or is there a fundamental difference?)

The work of Martineau *et al*. (2004) builds on the earlier texts. The authors suggest that a Trinitarian faith must inherently lead to life in community; in particular, Smith (2004) sees the church community (*koinonia*) as adding to social capital in the countryside, by providing leadership and a focus for spirituality. They list its desirable characteristics (*ibid*., pp. 37, ff.) as being:

- incarnational,
- unifying,
- fuzzy-edged or open-doored,
- celebratory, and
- "light on structures".

They suggest that buildings should be a means rather than an end, whereby a "culture of nurture and growth" will give rise to "spiritually growing people". In this way the church can be enabled to speak with a prophetic voice, and can respond to challenges.

The chapter by Smith (2004) makes a strong case for empirical studies of rural churches, echoing the more general plea made by Guest *et al*. (2005), referred to in the next chapter. He refers to Johnston and Jowell's (2001) survey of social capital in Britain, which was the basis for a study in the Diocese of Lichfield, on the contribution of church members to social capital; this concluded that "belonging to a church is associated with a distinctive set of values and attitudes, which result in practical caring and community involvement, and which builds social capital" (Smith, 2004, p. 210).

Lings (2007a) categorises “the farming community”, “traditional village people”, and “the incomers”. He notes that despite earlier gloomy prognostications, the church is facing up to the loss of unrealistic expectations of a rural idyll by turning to collaborative ministry (see also (Greenwood, 1997)). He applauds a move away from artificial groupings to a focus on *local* church, and identifies a re-thinking on team ministries and multi-parish benefices, where he sees increasing lay leadership and involvement as crucial, as is the promotion of better use of church buildings.

Finally, Bell *et al.* (2009) return to the theme of the rural church as participant in the *missio Dei*. They usefully broaden the categorisation of rural dwellers to include:

- “established residents”,
- “commuters”,
- “privacy seekers”,
- “trophy home-owners”,
- “lifestyle shifters”,
- “full-time dwellers”,
- the “missing vulnerable” and the “arriving vulnerable”,
- “travellers and gypsies”,
- “absent friends” (also called “extended parishioners”),
- “tourists and visitors”,
- “migrant workers”, and finally
- “the great British public”.

They distinguish between (inward-looking) *bonding*, (outward-looking) *bridging*, and *linking* social capital, and highlight the role of the church in bringing about social cohesion and the breaking-down of barriers. Additionally, they consider the issue of rural poverty (not only financial, but

also in terms of access to transport and services, and so-called "network poverty", reflected in lack of contact and support).

Like Smith (2000), they highlight the importance of the "occasional offices", and the problems involved in maintaining good and diverse patterns of worship – and even of keeping buildings open outside service times to offer quiet spaces for reflection and prayer. "Diversity" and "service of others" are constantly recurring themes (see Section 5.7). There is considerable material on issues of effective and collaborative leadership that is appropriate to the context, and that broadens the perception of "vocation" to include the ministry of all baptized people (Sanders, 2009), giving full recognition to the role of the laity (Richards & Cox, 2009), which is perhaps of particular importance in multi-church benefices and circuits such as those of interest here.

Sometimes, however, rural ministry is disparagingly seen as merely "maintenance" rather than "mission". Percy (2009a) nevertheless claims that "Good maintenance is likely to be *de facto*, good mission". Resources such as the material and courses emanating from the Arthur Rank Centre (http://www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk/) help to provide ongoing support and information.

Thus we see that ministry and mission are (and, indeed, must be) inextricably intertwined with community, and that this is particularly evident in a rural context. We turn now to a more explicit consideration of the particular village community within which this project is set.

2.2 The setting: Aldbourne village in Wiltshire

The village of Aldbourne (population 1782 at the 2001 census) lies in a fold of the Wiltshire Downs, almost equidistant from Swindon, Marlborough and Hungerford. Bus services run to all three towns; the nearest rail links run through Swindon and Hungerford. In Russell's (1986) categorization (see above), the village would rate as "large".

The area is predominantly rural, though many people commute further afield. There is a mix of types of housing and family income, including two former council estates. In terms of types of inhabitant, I would suggest that one would find most of the categories suggested by Bell *et al.* (2009), listed above, although tourism tends to be incidental and there are notably few migrant workers or foreign immigrants. Unusually, perhaps, for a village with such a sense of rooted identity, however, incomers are made welcome and are gladly assimilated if they wish it – although one is very aware of the strong claim to belonging felt by "Dabchicks" (those born in the village).

It is a very community-minded village, with many clubs and activities, both Church-based and otherwise (the "Churches Together" Welcome Pack given to new arrivals carries details of an astonishing number of clubs and societies for the population size). Traditions such the annual Carnival and Feast are held dear; the Parish Bounds are ceremoniously walked each year, with beribboned medallions for the participants.

The community is served by a CE-Aided Primary School of about 125 children, a Preschool and day-care facilities at an "Out of School Club" and a Day Nursery. There are a Post Office/Shop, a convenience store, two garages, a hairdresser, a small library, two pubs and a social club. The Memorial Hall, Old School Room and Chapel Hall provide venues for various activities ranging from a thriving amateur dramatic society to ballet classes, Pilates and the WI. The parish church is the largest building in the village and is regularly used for concerts and occasionally for drama. Sports facilities include a football pitch, rugby field, tennis courts and BMX track; a recent innovation is an award-winning internet café, established by the vibrant Youth Council. At the other end of the age spectrum, "Meals on Wheels" and a Nursing Home go some way towards catering for the elderly. A bimonthly magazine, the *Dabchick*, greatly adds to community cohesion, as does the village website, http://aldbourne.net/. Further demographic details can be found in Section 5.3.

Currently, only two denominations – Methodists and Anglicans – have premises and services in the village, though others (including Baptists and the Salvation Army) have operated there in the past.

2.2.1 The Methodist Church

The history of Dissent in the village goes back a long way: in 1669 about 300 Dissenters used to meet in the open to hear sermons. Later, "about one thousand people" attended a Primitive Methodist meeting in 1829 (Kilby, 1986). There was considerable opposition locally to such evangelisation of the area, but the Primitive Methodist Chapel was built in 1840, and the Wesleyan Chapel in 1844 (Lee & Shuttleworth, 2000).

Following the connexional union in 1932, united services were held, but the two congregations did not really merge completely until constrained to do so by the physical collapse of the Wesleyan building in 1969. The second site was then used for a flourishing youth centre until eventually money was raised for a single Chapel, a Hall, meeting rooms and a kitchen, all concentrated on one site and opened in 1986.

These facilities are currently well used by the village organisations and for para-church activities from the Women's Fellowship to "Singles lunches" for the large number of elderly singletons in the village, as well as for services. Chapel membership continues to decline in numbers and increase in age, although there is a nucleus of energetic and committed members. Numbers are now low enough (under 30) for the entire membership to constitute the Church Council; this – together with the ever-increasing load on the Circuit Ministers – has perhaps served to reinforce the "congregational" ethos of their Primitive Methodist inheritance; see (Bebbington, 1999, pp. 49, ff.).

In 2008, Aldbourne moved from the Newbury & Hungerford Circuit to join the Marlborough Circuit (four ministers and 17 Chapels); there is still generally a weekly Sunday morning service,

supported by the ministers and lay preachers of the Circuit; Holy Communion is celebrated monthly.

2.2.2 The Anglican Church

The Parish of Aldbourne St Michael is one of the five parishes (six churches) that make up the Whitton Team Benefice, situated at the Northern tip of the Diocese of Salisbury. Aldbourne is one of the two larger churches in the benefice, with an Electoral Roll of 101, and a committed congregation, plus a substantial number of "fringe members"; the results given in Chapter 5 illustrate this very clearly.

Parts of the current church date back to the 12th century. The parish was on the "Royalist" side in the Civil War, so the considerable unhappy history in relationships with Dissenters predates the rise of Methodism. A major restoration and rebuilding, both physical and spiritual, occurred around 1867. A toilet and kitchenette have recently been installed at the back of the church, funded by a charitable Trust set up to care for the fabric of the building; there is considerable support for this Trust among non-churchgoers.

The Whitton Team was constituted about thirty years ago. A new Team Rector was appointed in April 2010; he is supported by a non-Stipendiary Curate (the researcher for this study), two retired clergy and two Licensed Lay Ministers. A half-time Team Vicar will also be joining the ministry team in June 2011, acting as Deanery Mission Officer for the other 50%. There will thus soon be two Anglican ministers living in the village, after a nine-year gap with none (the previous incumbents were a married couple who lived in the next village). However, both Vicar and Curate will actually be licensed to the Team, and cross-Deanery working (four benefices) is also envisaged as expanding in future. Cross-Team co-ordination and lay empowerment are being encouraged within the five parishes that comprise the benefice.

The churchmanship of the parish is generally "upper end of middle", with a substantial number of "BCP or nothing" members but also some more charismatically inclined – as a village church, St Michael's caters for a wide spectrum, including extensive use of *Common Worship*. There are normally at least six services each month. Use of hymn and service books/sheets is the norm, except at the monthly Family Services, where PowerPoint prevails. In addition, "Informal"/Taizé services have recently re-commenced after a three-year hiatus.

2.2.3 "Churches Together"

Despite the unhappy earlier history, the two Churches had more recently worked and worshipped together harmoniously, even before the signing of a formal Local Covenant in 1991, although the varying level of clergy commitment was generally a strong determinant of the degree of collaboration. United services (about six a year) and joint efforts such as the village fete were organised by the "Aldbourne Churches Together" (ACT) committee; there is some co-operation, but to a lesser degree, elsewhere in the Benefice.

One focus of shared activity has been in the area of work with children and families. The earlier glory days of extensive church-sponsored youth work in the village are, sadly, long gone (see work by Thompson, Briggs, & Turner (2007, p. 39) for a wider view), and the small, nominally "shared" Sunday Club collapsed in 2007. So in January 2008 a weekday toddler service was initiated in the new children's corner at the front of the church. This, together with a very successful summer Holiday Club, generated a nucleus of committed parents and enthusiastic children, and the Sunday Club ("The Zone") was re-started in September 2008. After about two years this became unsustainable because of the loss of key personnel; it was replaced by an after-school club and (more recently) by "Messy Church" sessions (Moore, 2006). There is currently no specific provision for teenagers.

The churches also send out biannual joint newsletters in village-wide "drops", and advertise together in the village magazine and website. A fuller list of activities appears in our questionnaire; these would seem to cover the full spectrum suggested by Ward (1996, pp. 73, ff.):

1. United church activities for the congregations (including services, Lent Groups, etc.),
2. Direct services (singles lunches, Messy Church, etc.),
3. Indirect services (e.g., a toddler group in the Chapel Hall),
4. Partnerships (e.g. the after-school club), and
5. Passive involvement (simply providing facilities, for instance, for concerts or meetings).

Participation in many activities (such as Home Groups, children's groups and services such as Remembrance Sunday, Christingle or the (fairly new) Crib Service) is effectively "denomination blind" – participants belong to either congregation or none, and some activities draw on a far wider range of participants than those who might consider themselves "members" (Daymond, 2000; McLaren, 2004).

The Methodist Minister and the Rector are keen to collaborate, but both are coping with huge workloads that sometimes make liaison difficult; the organisation of united services is now co-ordinated by the Clergy, Wardens and Stewards.

In 2006 an informal "outreach group" started considering new ways in which the two churches could jointly serve the village and disseminate the Gospel message more widely. As a result, the two Church Councils appointed a joint Working Party to explore ways of expanding and affirming united worship. The Working Party, now re-named the ACCORD group, with four members from each church, works well as a unit, bringing together a range of skills and insights. Relations are occasionally complicated by the need to refer back to the PCC for ratification, whereas the four Methodist members are empowered to take decisions on behalf of their congregation. This is where the disparity between the more "congregational" (possibly more empowering) Methodist style of governance and the more structured, hierarchical style of the Anglicans can make for

difficulties. Matters are further complicated by the need to co-ordinate with the rest of the Methodist Circuit (17 chapels) and with the Anglican Team (six churches) and Deanery (four benefices) – a logistical nightmare!

A recurrent request to the ACCORD Group articulates a desire for a clergy presence that belongs to *both* congregations; Cole et al (2009) report the benefits and pitfalls of one such arrangement. Thus, there may still be further work to be done on setting boundaries, both for responsibility and for power, between clergy and laity, and among the latter also; we hear echoes here of some of the concerns raised in the references cited earlier in this chapter.

The Group soon concluded that shared *worship* would need to be grounded in a sense of shared *community* – that a desire for united worship would grow best within a sense of a diverse yet united embodiment of the Christian faith, engendered by fellowship and shared objectives, so that work and worship could together provide powerful witness.

It was found that sharing worship could actually be divisive – people have preferred ways of worshipping (especially, for instance, regarding Holy Communion, hymns, levels of formality or the use of "set "liturgies); they would need to *want* to worship together if prejudices (sometimes deeply held) were to be overcome (see the references below to the work of Welch & Winfield (2004 [1995])). (In contrast, Cole *et al.* (2009, p. 45) suggest that the united worship is what leads to a sense of community, though they concede the difficulties caused by church polity regarding worship.) The irony is that in many ways the spread of preferences is mirrored across both congregations; see also (Tabraham, 1995, p. 89).

However, Church members are very happy to *work* together (as evidenced by the long-standing joint fete and the Christmas Fayre, as well as annual Christian Aid collections, Hunger Lunches, etc., as well as a more recent charitable Harvest Appeal, making a joint approach to the whole village for support). Additionally, the churches aspire to speak with one voice in matters such as

the need for local sheltered housing for the elderly. The hope is that the village community (including church members) will increasingly think of a single Christian community that happens to have two (overlapping!) branches.

2.2.4 Looking to the future

The vision of the ACCORD Group has therefore broadened from focusing on worship into a desire "to nurture a serving, witnessing, worshipping and transforming Christian community in Aldbourne, celebrating both our diversity and our unity in Christ". (See Appendix A for a full vision statement, including Biblical references; the group aims to balance long-term "blue skies" thinking with practical projects that promote these objectives.)

However, the Group needs better information on how the *community* considers that the Churches could – together – best serve the village as a Christian presence and witness. This should include:

- feedback on the perceived relevance and/or effectiveness of current shared activities in the areas of worship, outreach and community service, and
- suggested changes or innovations that could improve their Christian service and witness,

providing opportunities for reflection on and insight into the underlying needs and future possibilities.

The Group therefore wished to undertake an enquiry that would be as broadly based as possible. The brief for the study described here was thus to capture, categorize and analyze the views of a representative sample of villagers, to assess how effectively the churches are representing the united Body of Christ in *this* place at *this* time.

The research was undertaken during 2010-2011. As mentioned above, I am the Non-Stipendiary Assistant Curate (having lived in the parish for a number of years, and having also been a member of the ACCORD Group since its inception). The study focused on describing and analyzing

perceptions, by adults across the whole village (not just churchgoers), of the full range of current and projected joint activities of the churches, including worship/prayer, work with families & children, church-based groups, and community-related activities.

The next chapter describes some of the background material available in the literature, providing a fuller understanding of congregational studies within the linked fields of ecumenism and church/community interaction within the broader context of rural ministry and mission described above.

Chapter 3 Background material and survey of the literature

This project bridges across a number of different fields, so the relevant areas of the literature (Hart, 2006 [1998]) vary in source, discipline and style.

3.1 Introduction and background

I had previously undertaken a "Modern Church History" portfolio on "Methodism – Ministry and Mission" (see Appendix B). Coming from an Anglican background, I felt a need to have a clearer understanding of the history and ethos of Methodism, particularly in the setting in which I would be working – not only during the research investigation described here, but also in the longer term. The extensive bibliographic material used for this earlier study has helped provide a basis for the reading described here.

I have subsequently expanded my reading in fields such as

- congregational studies

and the related areas of

- ecumenical theory, practice and theology;
- rural ministry and mission (as described in the previous chapter); and
- church/community interaction.

Clearly, there is sometimes considerable overlap and – as already seen in the discussion of rural ministry and mission – the categorisation is not always tidy, but this list indicates the scope of the relevant material.

3.2 Congregational studies

Despite extensive library and Internet searches, I found little research-based information on the combination of areas addressed by this project. The closest match is an unpublished research

report (2009), commissioned by the Joint Implementation Commission (JIC) and received by the second meeting of the JIC2. This involved a pilot research project into Deanery-Circuit partnerships (rather than a single parish, as here), using a grounded theory approach, based mainly on documents, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires (Cole, *et al.*, 2009), with the objective of discerning what enables or inhibits effective covenant partnership (*ibid.*, p. 3). The project described here, comprising a case study on a micro scale, should complement that study. I have been unable to identify any other work addressing the specific type of situation considered here, as confirmed by Cole *et al*. (*ibid*., p. 4), whose work will be extensively referenced below.

Guest *et al.* (2004) attribute the general dearth of congregational studies in the UK, particularly as compared with the USA, partly to their generally intrinsic nature ("studying congregations purely for the sake of understanding them as socio-religious phenomena" (*ibid.,* p. xi)), as against extrinsic studies that "relate such understanding to and place it at the service of, broader issues and agendas" (*ibid*., p. xii). Woodhead *et al.* (2004) also contrast extrinsic studies with intrinsic ones, though I would suggest that we should be wary of treating these descriptions as mutually exclusive.

Funding for such studies thus comes mainly from academic sources; this affects their topics and scope (Guest *et al.,* 2004, p. xv). My study is a case in point. As stated in the Introduction, broader implications may arise, but its primary purpose is to understand the particular instance; also, the need for it has arisen in a practical context, but an academic impetus has provided the resources to undertake it.

However, Martin Stringer (2004) suggests ways of bridging between academically interesting studies and congregationally useful ones. This has clear implications for the study described here – for instance, if the findings are used later as the basis for future action research.

The second reason advanced by Guest *et al*. (*ibid*., p. xiii) for the paucity of such studies in the UK lies, they claim, in the "associational" or "community" (rather than "gathered") nature of churches that operate within a parochial system (Ecclestone, 1988), which also implies (their third reason) the limited autonomy that comes from being part of a much larger denomination, unlike the many autonomous (and frequently numerically competitive) individual churches in the US. Additionally, "success" is increasingly seen in broader terms than just membership numbers. This attitude is perhaps borne out by the current thrust of material on "healthy" churches; see, for instance, (Warren, 1994; Campbell, 2000; Richardson, 1996; Worsley, 2004) and other similar texts, as well as some of the references cited in the final section of this chapter.

The current material on "Fresh Expressions of Church" also seems to tread a fine line between focusing on the unchurched, and efforts to make the experience of church relevant and meaningful for those who already attend (Nelstrop & Percy, 2008). Nonetheless, unless there remains a critical mass of core membership to sustain and subsidise denominational activities, wider outreach and service could eventually become impossible. Here we see a trade-off between efforts to understand the present for its own sake, and a focus on sustaining ministry and mission in the future that is relevant for this enquiry.

The more general literature on congregational studies[1] provides insights into previous studies and the methods employed. Ballard and Pritchard (2006), for instance, provide helpful pointers to relevant questions to be asked in congregational surveys such as this, and work by Barley (2006a; 2006b; 2007) gives useful overviews of trends and good practice, as well as statistics derived from a wide range of sources.

Campbell (2000) suggests using "systems thinking" to study congregations (see also (Greenwood, 1997, pp. 96, ff.)); he provides useful routes to identifying underlying assumptions that may give

[1] See, for instance, work by Pattison (2007), Cameron (2010), Cameron *et al.* (2005; 2010), Woodward & Pattison (2000) and Guest (2005)

rise to unconscious patterns of behaviour that may affect how the work, worship and attitudes of the church are perceived from outside. The work of Gray-King (2002), describing perceptions of "church" held by non-believers, is also of relevance here, where we are interested in perceptions across the wider village community. She speaks of a "gap in understanding" between "Church" and those "Outside Church" that may largely result from failures of communication.

In similar vein, Francis and Richter (2007) identify fifteen categories of reasons for giving up church membership (see the further discussion in Section 5.7.3). Relevantly, the highly regarded study of spirituality in Kendal by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) postulates a 21st century "subjective turn" that leads people to seek individual spiritual fulfilment in subjective ways rather than through established religions; these authors appear to regard spirituality as only marginally overlapping with institutionalised religious expression. (This seems in contrast with their earlier work (Woodhead & Heelas, 2003), which describes both modern secularization but also sacralisation; their later work seems heavily biased in favour of the secularization theory. I would contend, however, that religion (certainly, the Christian religion) claims that true fulfilment for the individual is to be found through, and not despite, religious belief and practice. Both views appear in the responses described in Chapter 5.)

3.3 Ecumenical theory, practice and theology

Richter (2004) highlights the paucity of studies of denominational cultures; he attributes this to a loss of denominational loyalties as Christian identity increasingly becomes "counter-cultural" in a secular age. This tallies with anecdotal evidence in the village studied here, where reasons for attending one of the two churches seem multifarious, and not necessarily dependent on previous denominational affiliations. Richter usefully distinguishes between the culture, the ethos and the identity of denominations (*ibid.*, pp. 173, ff.), and reports a study into perceptions of denominational identity that has relevance for our case study.

Daymond (2000) studied groups of comparable congregations, one in a Local Ecumenical Partnership (now part of the same Methodist Circuit as the village studied here) and some in a single-denominational setting; she discovered that her original hypothesis that members would be more denominationally aware in the former than in latter was completely overturned by her findings. She suggests that there is a danger in ecumenical situations that the distinctiveness of each denomination can be lost in achieving a "lowest common multiple", and proposes a helpful model of "reconciled diversity", in which difference is offered as a gift to the other, as a better way forward.

Allen (2004) considers interactions between Methodist and Anglicans in six rural villages, and finds that these flourish best in an atmosphere of supportive collaborative leadership, a readiness to allow churches to act independently without feeling threatened, and – tellingly – an absence of "patriarchal influences". This bears out anecdotal evidence that the type of leadership (or lack thereof) is critical, and that a relatively small number of committed and collaborative ecumenists can make a surprising amount of difference in maintaining the momentum. This is certainly the case in the village in question. William Robertson (2002) does identify a sense of denominational loyalty – to the *local* church, however, rather than to the overarching denomination (see also Cole et al. (2009, p. 52)). This finding echoes those of Daymond (2000, p. 70): among reasons for belonging to a particular Methodist church (where more than one could be selected) she cites 40% due to "family connections", 40% due to proximity (17.5% both), 25% "style of worship", 30% "friendly atmosphere", and only 2.5% explicitly "because I am a Methodist"; she concludes that there is surprisingly little denominational bias concerning choice of church. I would suggest that in the case of an Anglican parish church, the figures might well be very similar, particularly in rural environments where the choice of denominations is limited, as is the case here.

Other recent texts include *In the Spirit of the Covenant* (Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2005), the interim report of the Joint Implementation Commission under the Covenant signed

between the Methodist and Anglican churches in 2003 (The Archbishops' Council and the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2001). Here, we find "a guide to good covenanting" and a discussion of the issues that still militate against full unity. These primarily include (in addition to local historical "baggage"):

- the theology and practical administration of the Eucharist;
- the issue of presidency at the Eucharist and
- the related topics of ministerial ordination and Episcopal authority.

Pickard (2009), however, suggests that the divisions with regard to issues of leadership and authority are not insurmountable; he usefully distinguishes "episcopacy" from "*episcope",* where the former can be seen as a particular formal implementation of the latter, which embodies a vision of leadership that is common to both denominations. Burton (2005) nevertheless identifies – among clergy – large differences in the understanding of the nature of priesthood, the threefold order of ministry, episcopacy and confession, and lesser differences on the Methodist doctrines of Arminianism, assurance and Christian perfection; I would suspect that the latter topics would be unlikely to feature explicitly in the thinking of most lay people.

Certainly, past experience in our village has shown shared Eucharistic worship to be a deterrent rather than a joy; this is an area that will repay deeper investigation and careful thought – indeed, as is suggested by Welch & Winfield (2004 [1995]). In a seminal text on setting up Local Ecumenical Partnerships, they discuss the advantages and challenges and list (*ibid*., pp. 69, ff.) some questions to be asked when reviewing progress. Many of the issues related to setting up an LEP remain relevant throughout its life, ranging from practical issues such as single chalice or many cups, or the type of wine, to over-arching matters such as leadership, team working and decision-making, reflecting the concerns raised by the JIC above. These factors will be seen to be of relevance in the analysis given in Chapter 5. John Cole (2007), working in the context of Deanery/Circuit partnerships, likewise offers useful pointers as to issues that also need addressing

on the smaller scale being considered here – both Parish and Chapel are, after all, members of the larger groupings.

Nunn's text *This Growing Unity* (1995) is of similar vintage to the first issue of Welch & Winfield's work, and similarly contains much practical wisdom, though some of it has perhaps been overtaken by events. *Called to be One* (Churches Together in England, 2002), in an expanded reprint of the 1996 edition, lays out many questions that need to asked by those seeking to meet in unity, as does *Together in Christ* (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2009). These texts act as a warning, too, that unity is an ongoing process that requires constant affirmation – as exemplified in the motivation for this study.

Paul Avis (2010b, p. 32) makes the important point that "the opposite of unity is not diversity but division", and maintains that "being in communion" should be the ultimate objective; Christians should aim to live in relationship, following the model of the Trinity (Avis, 2004), and Communion is the epitome of this. He, too, speaks of offering difference as a gift, given and received with respect. So even though the great surge of enthusiasm for ecumenism of the 80's and 90's may seem to have waned, we appear to be arriving at new – and perhaps more sustainable – models. This ties in with Brian McLaren's (2004, p. 28)definition of "generous orthodoxy" that is not "a simple merging, mixing or conflating of two schools of thought"; he urges different sorts of Christians actively to draw on each other's strengths.

There is also always, of course, a danger in joining two unwilling groups, of ending up with three – the combined forces, plus disaffected wings (Daymond, 2000, p. 70). Indeed, Bainbridge (2004, p. 68) goes so far as to suggest that more flexible "ecumenical networks", in which a particular church is not definitively either "in" or "out", may offer greater possibilities for "more fluid ways of working".

Hinton's *Changing Churches: Building Bridges in Local Mission* (Hinton, 2002), written in the context of the Association of Building Bridges Churches (2009), picks up another of Avis's themes: that unity and mission go hand in hand (Avis, 2010a); see also (Cameron, 2010). This has clear implications for united Christian witness in a village context such as ours.

Cardinal Walter Kasper's book on spiritual ecumenism (Kasper, 2006) usefully highlights the underpinning spirituality that is needed for right praxis to have a firm grounding – a useful reminder not to let the sociology overwhelm the theology! Perhaps simply working together is the easier option, and we may have to "make haste slowly", to provide spaces in which spiritual meetings can happen; this has certainly been the case here. Looking further back, the collection of essays edited by Pickering (1961) helps to provide a perspective on how far we have travelled: in some ways, a fair distance; in others, perhaps not as far as might be wished.

Experience to date would suggest that the issue of ministerial and supervisory authority is less contentious in the context under examination than Eucharistic practice – as evidenced by the desire within our village for a "shared pastor". We need to distinguish between matters that largely trouble only the denominational hierarchies, and those that are of real concern to local congregations.

Dean (2007), however, talks with concern of a "collective amnesia" of the past that leads to an emphasis on style rather than substance in a non-denominational world; he maintains that it is only by knowing the past that we can tackle present problems[2]. Useful older material germane to this includes *Reflections: How Churches View their Life and Mission* (The Inter-Church Process: Not Strangers But Pilgrims, 1986), which provides a useful overview of the basic beliefs of many churches, and *Views from the Pews* (The Inter-Church Process, Not Strangers But Pilgrims, 1986), which summarises a nation-wide ecumenical consultation at local level.

[2] See also (Percy, 2010; Percy, 2009b; Chapman, 2006; Bartlett, 2007) and (Sheir-Jones, 2005; Tabraham, 1995; Watkin-Jones, 1946; Wells, 1994; Klaiber, 1999) for analyses of, respectively, Anglican and Methodist theology and identity.

Thus, in Flora Winfield's telling metaphor, we need to think about *who* we are and *what* we believe if our ecumenical efforts are to resemble a lavish banquet of many flavoursome dishes, rather than an amorphous porridgy gloop!

We turn now to a more explicit consideration of the relationship between Church and community.

3.4 Church and community

I have already mentioned, in Section 2.1, some of the ways in which the churches can promote so-called "social capital" in a village setting. The work of Barley (2007, pp. 7, ff.) is useful and relevant here too; she extends the idea to "faithful capital".

Morisy's work (1997; 2004; 2009) is also particularly relevant; her earlier work speaks of "community ministry" and how it can be used to inform and enliven faith by uniting practical social responsibility and active Christian mission across denominational boundaries. In *Journeying Out* (2004, p. Chapter 3), she defines social capital as being "essentially about the trust and the willingness to cross boundaries between strangers" (*ibid*., p. 45), and describes the "cascades of grace" that can follow from increased levels of social capital. She offers practical pointers (*ibid*, Chapter 9) to ways of facilitating church community centres as a means of providing "holistic ministry" that serves God through serving communities and individuals (see the reference above to Cole's work (2005) for a similar idea). Finally, in *Bothered and Bewildered* (2009) she explores how these themes can be extended to the "dystopian times" of the postmodern twenty-first century. The work of Reader (1994; 2005), referred to in the introductory chapter, presents a further study of how church/community interaction can provide a basis for both practical mission and theological reflection that can help meet the intellectual challenges posed by "post-modern despisers of religion".

Gibson (2010), however, would claim that the crucial factor is to see the Church as a Eucharistic community that values community for its own sake as a reflection of Trinitarian unity; he is critical

of the notion of social capital, claiming that this is predicated on enlightened self-interest and therefore not really "Christian" at all. I would venture to suggest, however, that while the Eucharistic basis for *Ecclesia* is fundamental (see the work of Cole (2005) and Avis (2010a) in particular), there are many faithful Christians (particularly, perhaps, in rural settings) for whom the Eucharist is not necessarily their primary source of spiritual sustenance; I am thinking of those who faithfully attend Matins or Family Services, for instances – or the new congregations at Taizé services or Messy Church or, indeed, most Methodists. This seems to be a classic case of "espoused theology" (Cameron, *et al.*, 2010) overriding the theology that actually motivates what is taking place (the "operant theology"). I would suggest that to write off the idea of social capital as purely self-interested is perhaps disingenuous; a desire for community is what drives many people to relocate to the countryside, but many then make a contribution that goes far beyond the bounds of even the most enlightened self-interest. People may not speak explicitly of "vocation" or "ministry", but both are clearly observable.

The view of social capital taken by Martineau *et al*. (2004), referred to in the discussion of the rural context in Section 2.1, seems wider-ranging and thus more useful; certainly, I would suggest that Morisy, Reader and some of the authors referred to below would take this wider view. Certainly, Gibson's vision of the relational nature of Christian belonging and community ties in with themes raised by these writers.

Burton (2007) revisits a participant observation study of rural churches in the 1970s and also reflects on the provision of social capital. He identifies various types of networks within the communities, and he concludes that church members can cross the boundaries of all these networks, giving rise to both bonding and bridging social capital. Likewise, van der Weyer (1991) usefully identifies "bridge-building groups" in rural communities: as we shall see, the church is viewed as an important such group in our village. Similarly, Ward (1996, pp. 73, ff.) lists possible

types of community activity by churches; I give local examples in Section 2.2.3 of each of his categories.

Drawing on the work of others, Ward also highlights a possible distinction between direct "Church work" and "Community Work" such as tenants' associations, or between so-called "ulterior" and "disinterested" service (reflected, for instance, in the motivation and the ethos of a youth group). He analyses the community involvement of ministers – for instance, as school governors – and concludes that "adopting community work values would help them [i.e., churches] regain a New Testament perspective as well as making their work more effective and relevant" (*ibid*., p. 89). His constructive recommendations include:

- Affirmation of the value of each individual,
- Combating the labelling of communities and a sense of stigma,
- Servant/enabling leadership,
- Empowering individuals, both within and outside the Church,
- Dealing with real issues,
- Awareness of context, including the community profile,
- Giving voice to those who are "afraid or constrained",
- Sharing these tasks, and not just assuming they are only for the clergy.

Ward's work was undertaken in an urban setting. Farnell (2007) studied five rural communities and found clear evidence of the involvement of church members in both voluntary and community activities; he concluded that while their level of explicit Christian motivation varied, their contribution was huge. This has particular resonance now, when the Government of the day is placing great stress on "the Big Society" and on the role of faith communities in helping bring this about.

3.5 Conclusion

Bringing together the background material on congregational studies, ecumenism and community, within the rural context, we find constantly recurring themes of community, membership, faith, belief and service; these aspects of church life are explored in the local context in the chapters that follow.

Went (2004, p. 227) makes the point that "There is great strength in such a cross-denominational community of Christians serving the needs of the local community in the name of Christ", within "the ministry of the whole people of God". Here we see the coming-together of all the strands. Perhaps the title of Greenwood's book (1997) sums it all up: *Practising Community: The Task of the Local Church.* Went refers to the five "marks of mission" (The Archbishops' Council, 2004):

- To proclaim the good news of the kingdom;
- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers;
- To respond to human needs by loving service;
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society;
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

These, surely, are the ultimate benchmarks for the activities that this case study is designed to assess. In the following chapter, I provide details of the methodology and methods used in doing so.

Chapter 4 Methodology, methods and ethical considerations

4.1 Introduction

The methods employed for this project were selected as appropriate for the proposed practical theology case study, which draws together social action theory of the sociologists and opportunities for long-term theological reflection.

Working in a subjectivist/interpretivist paradigm (Cameron, *et al.*, 2005, p. 22) that seeks to understand the world as perceived by those within it (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 35, ff.; Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 60), my intention was to undertake a case study (Blaxter, *et al.*, 2001, pp. 71, ff.; Robson, 2002, pp. 178, ff.) that would accurately describe "the subtleties and intricacies" (Denscombe, 2007, p. 45) of local perceptions of the shared ministry of the churches, understood in the broadest possible terms. This accords well with the tasks of Practical Theology as described by Swinton & Mowat (2006, pp. 25, ff.):

- To seek truth, and to develop and maintain faithful and transformative practices;
- To mediate the relation between the Christian tradition and specific contemporary challenges;
- To examine underlying theories and assumptions, and to develop and re-shape new ones;
- To interpret, clarify, formulate and construct new insights in light of fresh questions and situations;
- To "stay close to experience";
- To work missiologically, not only by understanding the world, but also by changing it through a process of critical discernment.

I was thus seeking to move beyond objectivity and explanation as in the natural sciences, in a search for "*meaning* and a deeper *understanding* of situations" (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 37).

Thus in addition to replicable, falsifiable and generalisable "nomothetic" knowledge that is likely to find explicit correlations between variables, I sought the "ideographic" knowledge that is discoverable in unique, non-replicable experiences, and in which subjectivity is valued (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 41, ff.). Additionally, rather than attempting to prove or disprove some specific hypothesis, I was starting with a question: "How do those who live in the village perceive the current ecumenical activities and future role of the churches in serving the village community?" Hypotheses (in both the short and longer terms) might, however, emerge from the answers (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 53, ff.).

My hope was that the proposed mix of methods would yield material amenable to theological heuristic interpretation that could promote a better use of resources and a clearer understanding of the ministry of the church in this particular community at this particular time. To that extent, the work can perhaps be thought of as a first stage in a longer-term Action Research project (Denscombe, 2007, pp. 122, ff.; Blaxter, *et al.*, 2001, pp. 67, ff.; Cameron, *et al.*, 2010), where the effects of any changes could be assessed over a period of time. However, for the time being the work has been limited to a "snapshot" of the current situation plus possible ways forward, in order to stay within achievable bounds.

It was also hoped that any conclusions drawn would have implications for other churches operating in similar contexts. This work is being undertaken concurrently with a larger national project on a related topic (Cole, *et al.*, 2009); it is possible that the results obtained here may assist the heuristic development of a deeper understanding of ecumenical relations (almost as the beginnings of a "grounded theory" scenario (Denscombe, 2007, p. 88). That, however, lies further down the road (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 46, ff.; Denscombe, 2007, pp. 42, ff.; Maxwell, 2005, pp. 70, 115, ff.; Robson, 2002, p. xvi); the objective of the current case study is first and foremost to understand the prevailing situation in a very specific instance.

4.2 Methods

The methods adopted were selected to maximise the opportunities for obtaining the required information in the local setting, within the selected methodology (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 74).

The sometimes perceived incompatibility between qualitative and quantitative methods of data-collection ("flexible" versus "fixed" designs) seems invidious here (Denscombe, 2007, p. 248; Robson, 2002, pp. 4, ff.). Certainly, the conceptual chasm between nomothetic and ideographic knowledge seems to be being widely abandoned in favour of something more akin to a continuum, where the most appropriate methods are selected for any given enquiry (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 44, ff.; Blaxter, *et al.*, 2001, pp. 65, 85). (See, however, the contrast drawn in (Silverman, 2006, p. 35) between a "soft/flexible/subjective/political/speculative/grounded" case study and a "hard/fixed/objective/value-free/hypothesis-testing and abstract" survey.)

My intention was to employ a multilevel mixed approach that sought to capitalise on the strengths of complementary methods of data-collection (Denscombe, 2007, pp. 107, ff.; Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 132; Robson, 2002, pp. 370, ff.), and to minimise the effects of their shortcomings by providing opportunities for triangulation (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 50, ff.; Silverman, 2006, pp. 48, 291, ff.; Denscombe, 2007, pp. 118, 134, ff.; Maxwell, 2005, p. 93).

I therefore planned to work flexibly, within the following overall framework:

1. Documentary research (census records, PCC minutes, etc.), to establish the demographics, and to confirm exactly what had taken place (specifically, over the previous five years) in this particular area of activity;
2. Wider reading and a literature survey to explore related work elsewhere, as cues to future possibilities, for inclusion in the focus group discussions and questionnaires;
3. Interviews with small focus groups, drawn from those already involved in delivering and/or promoting joint activities, to establish what was already taking place, to gain

insight into what else might be planned or possible, and to pilot questionnaires for use in the project;

4. Distribution and collection of questionnaires (to respondents including Anglicans, Methodists, non-denominational attendees, the indifferent, the antagonistic, and those positive but uninvolved; also covering as wide an age range as possible, and both genders);
5. Semi-structured interviews with a limited number of respondents, if appropriate;
6. An ongoing personal journal.

Each of these topics is explored in greater depth below.

4.3 Documentary research and literature survey

While it is possible to read documentary sources purely for factual information, and to regard them as explicating "what actually is", rather than merely "what is perceived" (Silverman, 2006, pp. 153, ff.), my plan was to use documents for both these purposes. Accordingly, census and other demographic records (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2001, p. 169) were consulted in order to help provide a "thick description" of the village, and to ensure that the sampling methods used were adequately representative (see the more detailed discussion in Sections 4.5.1 and 5.3). Documents such as PCC minutes provided records of actual activities undertaken (for instance, the shared worship services); see (Cameron, *et al.*, 2005, p. 22; Robson, 2002).

The latter type of source also gave some indication of their estimated "success" or otherwise. Background reading, as referenced in the literature survey, gave further pointers. This all helped to provide a suitable starting-point for focus group discussions and the selection of suitable group members.

That said, no *detailed* qualitative analyses of any of the texts was undertaken. The main thrust of the investigation lay in the focus groups and the questionnaires; the documentary material was used simply to underpin and validate those.

4.4 Focus groups

The use of interviews is surely a classic technique for pursuing qualitative research in this type of context; the format can range from the complete open-endedness of participant observation such as that undertaken in ethnographic enquiries, right through to highly structured interviews that closely resemble the (surrogate) filling-in of questionnaires (Denscombe, 2007, pp. 173, ff).

Clearly, the more open-ended the format, the more complex and time-costly are the information-gathering, codification and analysis (Bell, 2005, p. 187). However, interviews do provide a means of accessing both broader and deeper data than is generally available if total reliance is placed on questionnaires. The use of either structured or semi-structured interviews offers the potential to achieve a reasonable compromise, particularly if some of the more straightforward information is obtained by means of questionnaires (Silverman, 2006).

Focus groups provide a means of obtaining such information from a number of subjects simultaneously; additionally, they can yield deeper or richer information than individual interviews. Also, it has been suggested that (provided that the interviewer acts as a facilitator rather than a participant) interviewer bias is less likely to affect focus groups, which are less prone to "try to please" the interviewer than an individual might be.

I therefore decided to use focus groups (Denscombe, 2007, pp. 178, ff.; Bell, 2005, p. 162) at the start of the project, to ensure that the subsequent stages of the investigation were grounded on a range of inputs, both as to what had been or was taking place, and as to what might be desirable in the future. The capacity of focus groups for "response cascades" whereby ideas build up cumulatively was notably relevant here; see work by Robson (2002, pp. 282 - 284) and Marshall &

Rossman (1999, pp. 114 - 115) for a more detailed analysis of the advantages and disadvantages. The use of these groups also assisted in avoiding some of the dangers of interviewer bias – I have been involved in many of the programmes being discussed, and while I believe that this gives me considerable insight into the people and processes involved (in some sense operating as a participant observer; see the work by Swinton & Mowat (2006, p. 137)), I was aware of the need to stand back from the discussions in order to obtain true reflections of the perceptions (cognitive and affective) of the participants (Denscombe, 2007, p. 184). My background knowledge of the village circumvented the drawback of being dependent on someone else as a single "gatekeeper".

Involvement of the focus groups also helped promote "buy in" by members of the church communities, and played a crucial role in sample selection (see below). These groups will also provide a mechanism for feeding back the findings of the case study after the end of the project.

A number of groups in the village had already demonstrated a commitment to and an interest in ecumenical working; these provided the basis for focus group membership. Group members already knew one another and were accustomed to working together (which helped to ensure that a range of opinions was offered). The groups were:

- The ACCORD Group (at whose request this investigation was undertaken: three Anglicans, four Methodists, plus the researcher);
- Six members of the PCC (joint sponsors, with the Methodist Council, of ACCORD);
- Four members of the Methodist Council;
- Members of two ecumenical Bible Study Groups (five members each) with a proven commitment to outreach.

Each group met with the researcher for an open-ended discussion that aimed to identify (and to some extent to rank, using "post-its") the shared activities of the churches. Records were kept by audio recordings, photographically and by means of note-taking. The ACCORD Group was additionally used to help pilot and hone an initial version of the questionnaire.

These discussions yielded important information at various levels – not only in terms of accurately reported factual content, but also as a basis for reflection on the implicit theology, and the associated implications for future ecumenical practice. Better understanding and greater trust and openness will also, it is hoped, lead to better relationships.

4.5 Questionnaires

The use of questionnaires is usually regarded as falling at the quantitative end of the enquiry spectrum; it is certainly possible to structure the questions in such a way as to provide carefully sampled material, obtained from a wide range of respondents, that will give data that is amenable to highly structured coding, and detailed statistical analysis and quantification; see (Denscombe, 2007, pp. 153, ff.). This can be seen to satisfy a need for replicable, verifiable studies that confirm or disprove already existing theories in a so-called "scientific" manner.

However, it is also possible to use questionnaires as a method of obtaining – in a cost- and time-efficient manner – information in support of a broadly qualitative investigation. The use of carefully chosen questions, including open-ended ones that allow a wider range of responses, fits well with the ethos of interpretive investigations, and provides a supplementary source of information that can help verify and validate data obtained from more obviously qualitative techniques such as interviews (so-called "triangulation"). (Clearly, as soon as we generalise or categorise any qualitative findings, even as broadly as "most of" or "a few", we are using quantitative measures in some sense, so it is likely that *any* practical theology enquiry will need to use quantification to at least some extent, appropriate to the requirements of the project.)

The questionnaires used (see Appendix C) were carefully formulated on the basis of information gained from the initial focus group work. A numbered front page contained a clear explanation of the context, purpose and scope of the project, and a promise of anonymity for respondents. A

variety of types of question was used (Denscombe, 2007, pp. 165, ff.), to avoid respondents either "working on autopilot" or trying to second-guess what responses were being sought:

- Yes/no answers, as simple agree/disagree statements;
- Choice from a list of options (sometimes with a "please specify" option, so as to broaden the scope as widely as possible);
- Rankings;
- Open-ended questions and space for "any comments?"

Items also comprised a mix of factual and affective statements (the so-called *affective differential*).

The questionnaires were structured as so to elicit three main types of data.

- The first was demographic information about the respondents, designed to give a basis on which to evaluate both the breadth of the sampling, and the actual responses. Following advice on best practice, this was actually placed at the end of the questionnaire. It included questions on age, gender, number (and ages) in household, religious affiliation and attendance at worship.
- The second type comprised lists of church-related activities, selected and ordered on the basis of the rankings given by the focus groups. For each activity, respondents were asked to rate their awareness of the activity, its contribution to the life of the village, and the effectiveness with which it was carried out, with space for other comments.
- Finally, a set of four open-ended questions gave space for suggestions, criticisms and other remarks. Interviewing would have been impracticable for this number of respondents with the resources available, so this provided a compromise solution.

4.5.1 Sampling

In terms of selecting the sample for distribution of the questionnaire, I was anxious not to limit the sample to church members, but to reflect the wider demographics of the village. Simply

distributing forms to every house in the village, using the church "street stewards" (as had originally been envisaged when the idea of running a survey of some sort was initially mooted) was unlikely to elicit responses from a significant number of non-members in a cost- and time-efficient manner. A recent survey undertaken on behalf of the Parish Council, aimed at formulating a Parish Plan for the village, elicited a 30% response, but I would suspect that figures for a church survey would be lower, probably introducing an inherent bias in favour of committed church members (Denscombe, 2007, p. 23). (This thinking was also partly behind the move from the initially envisaged quantitative survey to a broader case study as described here.)

I thus considered that purposive sampling (Silverman, 2006, p. 306; Denscombe, 2007, pp. 17, ff.) was likely to be more productive, particularly if respondents were directly approached by someone known to them, as they would be more likely to respond to this personalised type of approach than to a general request for help. Therefore, "snowball sampling" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 78) was used, spreading outwards from the members of the focus groups (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88; Robson, 2002, pp. 265 - 266). Group members were asked to try as far as possible to tap into the full range of ages and church affiliations (or not), across both sexes.

The sampling method used is thus indicative rather than fully statistically valid as a larger survey might need to be, but I believe it to be appropriate. It certainly offered more promise than so-called "convenience sampling", which just uses the respondents who are most easily accessible (Robson, 2002, p. 265) – as might have been the case if we had simply targeted core church members. The initial target was to collect at least 100 responses; 150 was regarded as a "best case" target (just over 10% of the age group involved).

Group members were given, on average, eight forms each and asked to try to collect at least five or six completed forms, from a range of respondents, over a period of about a month. In order to avoid duplication, respondents were specifically asked NOT to complete more than one form.

To allow anonymity, each form was numbered so that the batches could be tracked, but the collectors were asked to retain their own lists of who had which form, without divulging the names/numbers to the researcher. This worked well; only one form was returned in a way that pointedly by-passed the collector, and four were returned without the numbered sheet.

Additionally, an unnumbered PDF version of the form was uploaded on the village website. Collection boxes were placed in the local Post Office, and in both churches. Forms were also available in the Anglican Church, which is open during the day, and the survey was publicized in the weekly pew-sheets in both churches.

However, following receipt of an indignant (anonymous) note about the supposedly "exclusive" nature of the survey, the distribution methods were immediately broadened even further. Posters were put up at strategic points in the village, asking for responses and indicating that (in addition to the website) hard copies of the form were also available in the Library, Post Office and churches. The deadline was extended by a month.

With hindsight, it is clear that this should have been done from the start as a matter of principle to ensure a perception of openness and accessibility. In the event, however, the number of additional responses gained was minimal (less than 3% of the total received). This confirms the original assumptions about the most effective means of dissemination.

4.5.2 Analysis

The coding system for the replies was designed simultaneously with the questionnaire, to ensure that the responses could be accurately categorised (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 98, ff.; Bell, 2005, pp. 150, 214, ff.; Robson, 2002). The level of analysis required, and the search for overall themes, were amenable to the use of straightforward spreadsheets and a word-processing package. As with the documentary analysis, there was no need for dedicated analytical software at this stage, although more complex analyses (such as detailed comparisons of responses between, say, regular

churchgoers and the uninvolved, gender differences, or age groups) would be feasible in the future, if appropriate (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2001, pp. 196, ff.; Robson, 2002, pp. 391, ff.).

The responses to the open-ended questions, plus any other comments, were entered in one table against the questionnaire number (see Section 5.7). The rest of the responses were coded into an Excel table, again with the questionnaire number so that they could be cross-referenced as necessary.

Thus, to some extent, I did not make use of the full analytical potential of survey material; however, I consider that these procedures achieved a satisfactory balance between what was possible and what was appropriate and feasible, in terms of reliability and validity (Silverman, 2006, pp. 282, ff.; Marshall & Rossman, 1999, pp. 150, ff., 192; Maxwell, 2005, p. 108; Bell J. , 2005, p. 117). Some of the findings are presented graphically in the next chapter, together with a discussion of the results.

4.6 Interviews

Following the questionnaire distribution, my initial intention had been to select a limited number of respondents for following-up with semi-structured interviews (including so-called "elite interviewing" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 113), as interviews can include both mainstream responses and interesting "outliers" that may be disregarded by purely statistical analyses.

However, after discussions with the sponsoring group I decided that providing anonymity for the respondents was likely to improve both response rates and veracity. This would heavily outweigh the advantages to be gained by adding interviews to an already complex information-gathering structure. The inclusion of open-ended questions in the questionnaires (see below and Appendix C) helped compensate for this omission.

4.7 Journalling

A journal of the project provided a means of tracking progress and noting any necessary modifications or amendments to the procedures, as described above (Silverman, 2006, p. 45; Maxwell, 2005; Bell J. , 2005, pp. 180, ff.; Robson, 2002, pp. 1 - 2).

Also, because I was working in the parish throughout, I was operating as a type of participant observer. The resulting sensitivity to nuance aided the ongoing process of theological reflection throughout the project (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 59, ff.)

4.8 Ethical considerations

This project was undertaken in response to an expressed need within the churches; clergy and church councils were informed in advance and were fully supportive throughout. Before work started, the whole process and its intentions were outlined in detail to the PCC and the Chapel Council (representing the key stakeholders), with an opportunity to raise objections or ask questions as appropriate. All necessary permissions were in place before work started.

The intentions, terms of reference and projected uses of the information were made clear at every focus group meeting and on the questionnaires (see Appendix C). In terms of confidentiality, no-one is identifiable by name in either the raw data or the presented results. No confidential information was involved.

The requirements of the Data Protection Act were adhered to. No-one under the age of 16 was approached without their parents' permission, and the churches' Child Protection policy was adhered to.

Both my Training Incumbent (our Team Rector) and the Diocesan Director of Ordinands were aware of and supported this proposal. Our churches are committed to this type of ecumenical activity; the existing level of co-operation is unusual outside formal Local Ecumenical

Partnerships, and is also an area in which I am already known in the village to have an interest. This tallies with Swinton & Mowat's (2006, p. 35) description of the interpretative researcher "not as a distant observer, but as an active participant and co-creator of the interpretive experience". Being aware of possible issues of power, vulnerability and role boundaries in conducting interviews, I took care to avoid problems, not least because I am continuing to live and work in the village after the project ends (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 64, ff.; Silverman, 2006, pp. 315, ff.; Marshall & Rossman, 1999, pp. 79, ff.; Maxwell, 2005, pp. 82, ff.); see also (Blaxter, *et al*, 2001, p. 21).

4.9 Conclusion

I believe that the mixture of methods selected brings together the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative enquiry, in order to provide an accurate "snapshot" of current perceptions of relevant ecumenical activity in the village in question. Interestingly, the methods independently chosen by Cole *et al.* (2009, pp. 8-9, 16, ff.) illustrate very similar thinking; starting with documentary evidence, they moved on to semi-structured interviews (paralleling our focus groups) and questionnaires. The detailed implementations differ, but the principles converge, and they affirm the validity of the methods used.

I also believe that the sampling methods and sample sizes chosen make best use of the chosen enquiry techniques, within the constraints of time and resources. For instance, the commitment of focus group members (other than the ACCORD Group itself) involved attendance at one group meeting of less than 90 minutes, plus distribution and collection of, on average, eight questionnaires – a commitment that was usually readily and generously given (see Section 5.2 and Appendix D. This contrasts with the experience of Cole *et al.* (*ibid.,* pp. 8-9), who encountered some resistance, occasionally bordering on antagonism. I suggest that the difference lies between an externally generated enquiry, and one that had emerged organically

from within the community itself and was thus independent of local “gatekeepers”. This may have major implications for future studies (*ibid.*, pp. 16-19).

My next chapter outlines the results of the survey.

Chapter 5 Results and data

5.1 Nature of the data

General demographic information for this study has been obtained from the 2001 Census statistics (http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/census2001.asp) and other Internet sources, including http://www.upmystreet.com/local/sn8.html, www.neigbourhoodstatistics.gov.uk and www.auditcommission.gov.uk. The minutes of the Parochial Church Council and the Chapel Council yielded information on shared worship and other joint activities (see Appendix C for a full list), as have the notes of meetings of "Aldbourne Christians Together" and the informal ecumenical "Outreach Group" (both now superseded by ACCORD). These sources have all contributed to the "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) given above, as well as providing a basis for the comparisons between overall village demographics and our survey sample.

The questionnaires (see Appendix C) elicited three main types of data:

- Demographic information, including age, gender, number (and age groups) in household, religious affiliation and attendance at worship,
- Ratings of church activities in terms of their "visibility", their contribution to the life of the village and the effectiveness with which they were carried out, and
- Open-ended questions.

5.2 Response rates

At the 2001 census, the area covered by the parish boundaries had a total population of 1782 (see http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/census2001.asp); this number is unlikely to have changed significantly, although the 2011 Census figures will clearly be of interest. Of the total population, 380 are listed in the census figures as dependent children under 18, giving an adult

population of 1402. The initial target was to collect at least 100 responses (7%) to give an adequately representative sample; 150 was regarded as a "best case" target (just over 10%).

Eventually, 218 forms were given out via group members, plus additional, unallocated forms at the collection points and on the website. Inevitably, the commitment of the various focus group members to the project varied. Some requested more, and 16 of the 26 collectors met or exceeded their target of at least five completed forms. Six focus group members did not participate in distribution and collection; however, the return rate from the twenty active collectors was 130 forms out of 177, or just over 73%. Appendix D shows the response rates.

A pleasing total of 140 completed forms were received; three of these had clearly been filled in by two or more people, so the final number of responses was taken as 144, very close to the "best case" target.

5.3 Demographics

Of the total population of 1782 at the 2001 census, 348 are listed as aged 0 – 16. Our sample of 144 respondents thus represents precisely 10% of the population of the village and surrounding hamlets (1434) over 16. The age distribution for the respondent age range is compared with that given in the census in Figure 1. Clearly, those older than 60 are heavily over-represented, while the under-45's are radically under-represented.

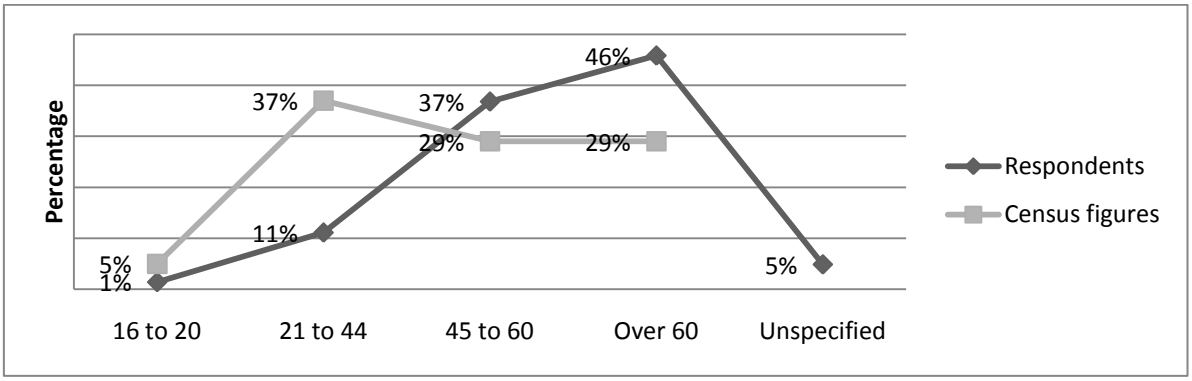


Figure 1: Age distribution - census figures compared with survey respondents

The male/female split in the census figures for these age groups is approximately 50:50 (873:909). However, female respondents to our survey outnumbered men by just over 2:1; see Figure 2.

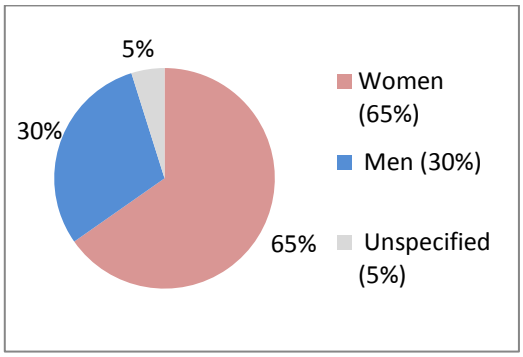


Figure 2: Respondents, gender distribution

Both these disproportions can be assumed to arise partly from the age and gender profiles of the focus groups (6 men and 20 women, generally aged 50+), which were – by and large – representative of the congregations as a whole; Cole *et al*. (2009, p. 53) found similar profiles in their samples. Although collectors were asked to seek a wide spread of respondents, it seems probable that they would approach people they knew well, who might well fit the same patterns. This also mirrors wider Church of England findings (see http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/facts-stats.aspx) that the average age of worshippers in 2008 was 61 (indeed, even as high as 65 in some rural areas), with a larger proportion of women than men in the congregations. It is also possible, however, that, of the potential respondents approached, the elderly and/or retired (and, possibly, women?) might have more time and/or motivation to complete the forms (as was seen in responses to a village-wide survey carried out on behalf of the Parish Council a year earlier).

Thus, only 78 of the 393 under-19's in the village according to the census live within the families surveyed (22% of the 352 family members included); fully two thirds of the families surveyed have no children at all (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). These age and gender profiles will have a definite bearing on the responses, as I shall show below.

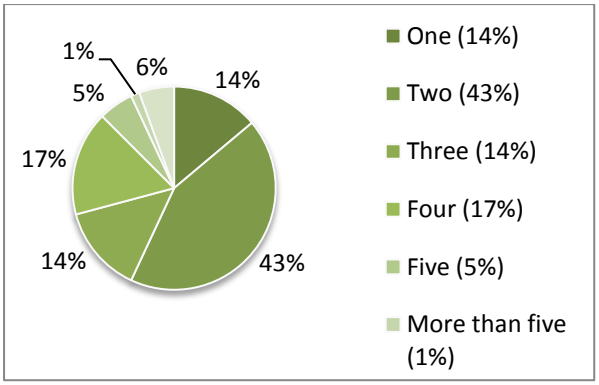


Figure 3: Respondents, Number in household

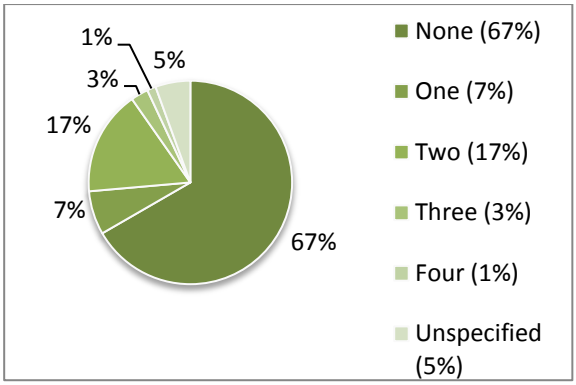


Figure 4: Respondents - no of children in household

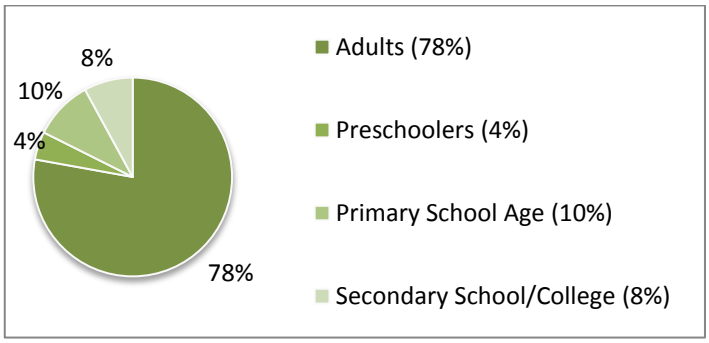


Figure 5: Respondents - adults and children in families surveyed

5.4 Religious affiliations

The 2001 census offered respondents a choice between "Christian", various other faiths, and "of no religion".

Voas (2003) addresses "what it means to have a religion", and how reliable so-called "self-ascribed affiliation" may be, particularly in the context of "believing without belonging", as described in Davie's (1994) seminal work. These ideas had a direct bearing on the formulation of the survey questions in which respondents were asked to describe their own religious affiliations.

Additional categories were therefore introduced: "Anglican", "Methodist, "Another denomination" and "Spiritual but not religious". The non-Christian faiths were included as a single category, although respondents were asked to specify which one (as they were for other

denominations). The results were complicated by the extent to which respondents chose a mix of categories rather than just one, but this has added to the richness of the data (see Figure 6).

In fact, a third – the largest single group – were content with simply "Christian", 87 respondents (60%) specified "Christian" within their mix of categories, and a further 24 specified a combination including "Methodist", "Anglican" or "other denomination", giving a total of 111 who included at least one of the Christian indicators (77%, as against 78% replying "Christian" at the census).

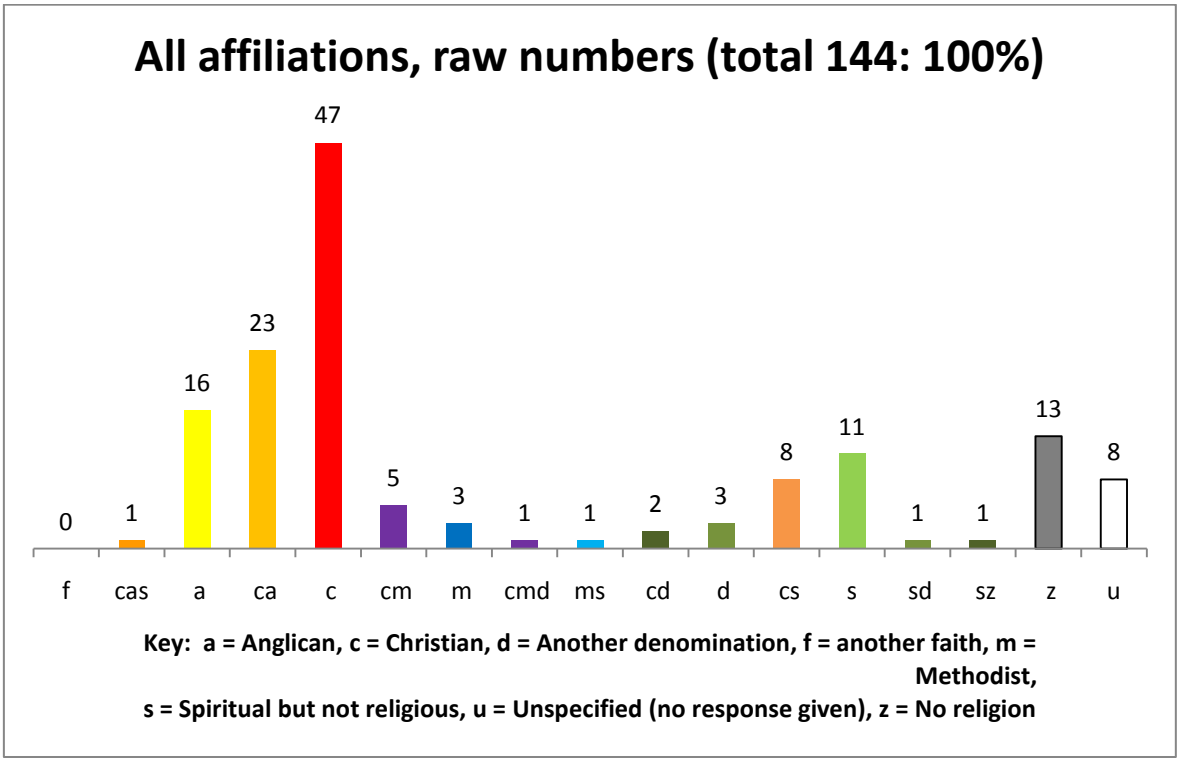


Figure 6: All affiliations, raw numbers (total 144)

Other denominations listed (7 respondents) comprise four Roman Catholics, one "non-conformist", and one member each of the Church of Scotland and the Society of Friends. It was interesting that more people described themselves as "Christian + Anglican" or "Christian + Methodist", rather than simply using the denomination alone – one might speculate that this reflects a growing move away from narrow denominationalism, apparently confirming claims made – among others – by Avis (2010b) and McLaren (2004).

One might wonder whether the results would have been any different had "C of E" been offered, rather than "Anglican", but in light of the results obtained, I would suggest not.

In contrast to the above, 6% said they had no religion (compared with 13% at the census), and there was no-one of another faith (less than 1% in the census).

The category "Spiritual but not religious" (9%) seems to have offered a middle ground to agnostics that could account for the missing numbers in "of no religion"; additional comments written on the forms indicated that for many it equated to "non-practising" (typified by the "Christian and Spiritual" classification chosen by 6%). This would appear to echo the distinction between "spirituality" and "religion" postulated by Heelas and Woodhead (2005), referred to earlier in the literature survey. A total of 6% did not complete this section (close to the 8% of the census).

The percentages for religious affiliation thus correspond well to the census figures; see Table 1. See Appendix E for additional tables of affiliation groupings.

Table 1: Affiliations, comparing the census figures with number of respondents

Affiliation	**2001 census**	**Survey respondents**
Christian	78%	77%
Of another faith	1%	0%
Of no religion	13%	9%
Spiritual but not religious		8%
No response	8%	6%

Barley (2006a, p. 5) cites figures obtained for the BBC in 2000, in which nearly a third (31%) of those surveyed described themselves as "a spiritual person", in contrast to only 7% who chose "not a spiritual person". Notably, the figures for "a religious person" and "not a religious person" were closer: 27% and 21%. The numbers for "agnostic" (10%) and "a convinced atheist" (8%) perhaps bear comparison, respectively, to our "spiritual but not religious" (8%) and "of no

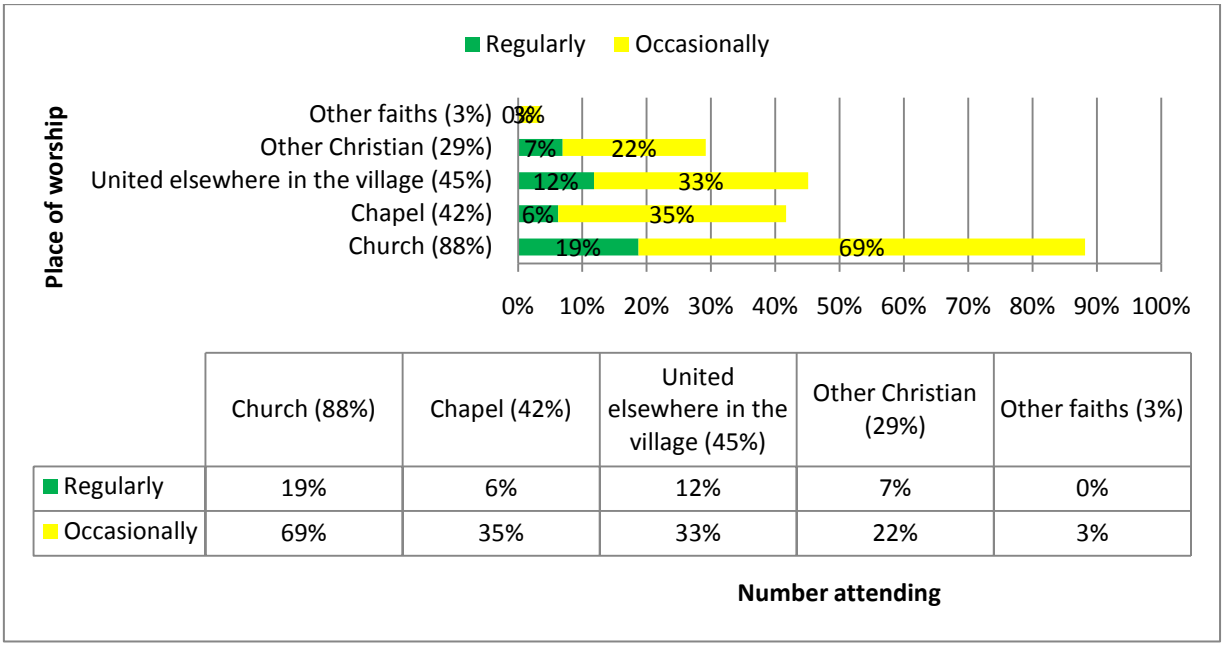
religion" (9%). Barley also claims that spiritual awareness is increasing (she cites a figure of 76% admitting to having had "a religious or spiritual experience"). Nevertheless, she agrees (*ibid*., pp. 6 ff.) with Heelas and Woodhead that people are now much more prepared to "pick and mix" in selecting their own vehicles for expressing the spirituality they are increasingly prepared to acknowledge. What all this does indicate in terms of our figures, however, is that the belief system of someone describing themselves as "Christian" can fall anywhere within a huge range, and their connection with "church" may be extremely tenuous.

5.5 Attendance at services

Here, respondents were offered a choice of five types of venue: "Church", "Chapel", "United worship elsewhere in the village", "Another Christian church" and "Worship of another faith". They were asked to rate the frequency and types of services attended at each.

5.5.1 Frequency

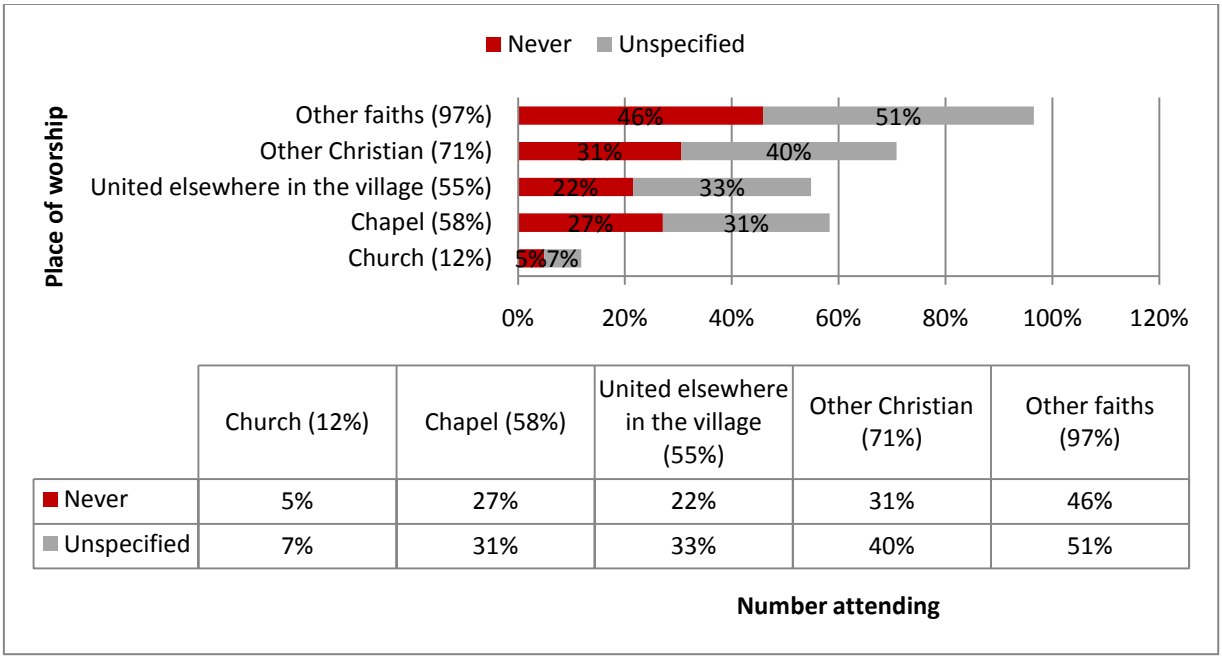
The "Frequency" category included: "Regularly", "Occasionally" or "Never". For purposes of analysis, the first two were considered together (see Figure 7), while the "Never" responses were counted together with the large number of blanks (see the complementary Figure 8), as it was assumed that in the main, any level of attendance would have been noted. The figures indicate that the survey net had indeed been cast wide – the low numbers for "regular" attendance at "normal" Sunday services are well below the equivalent attendance at both Church (47) and Chapel (24), indicating a large number of respondents from outside the main church communities, as requested. Seven respondents did not complete this section. The national figure in 2005 was just over 30% of the population attending at least one "normal Sunday service" in the previous year (Barley, 2006b, p. 11); "regular" attendance is now widely accepted as being at least monthly (*ibid.*).



	Church (88%)	Chapel (42%)	United elsewhere in the village (45%)	Other Christian (29%)	Other faiths (3%)
Regularly	19%	6%	12%	7%	0%
Occasionally	69%	35%	33%	22%	3%

Number attending

Figure 7: Attendance at worship



	Church (12%)	Chapel (58%)	United elsewhere in the village (55%)	Other Christian (71%)	Other faiths (97%)
Never	5%	27%	22%	31%	46%
Unspecified	7%	31%	33%	40%	51%

Number attending

Figure 8: Non-attendance at worship

The figures of 88% attending the Anglican Church at some point during the year tallies with the national figure of 85% (http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/facts-stats.aspx); it is encouraging that nearly half the respondents attend united worship in the village, such as the annual services for Remembrance, the village fete and the Carnival.

The figures for “Other Christian” would also include Methodist and Anglican venues in other places, explaining the relatively high figures compared with the “Other denomination” figures given under “Affiliations”. This would cover holidays, second homes and family celebrations, as well as Deanery, Diocesan and Circuit events.

Attendance at worship “of another faith” is somewhat ambiguous – there seemed to be some confusion in at least one of the responses as to whether Roman Catholicism is another denomination or another faith!

Of the 138 responses, six (4%) answered “Never” to all venues. This may be an under-reading, however, as many respondents merely ticked the actual venues attended, leaving the rest blank. The maximum “Never anywhere” number can nevertheless not be more than 13 (i.e., 7%), including seven respondents who did not complete this section.

5.5.2 Type of worship

The “Type of worship attended” categories distinguished between “Normal Sunday services”, “United services”, “Festivals” (Christmas, Easter, Harvest, etc.), “Baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.” and “Other special services” (such as Remembrance).

Figures for attendance at the Chapel are remarkably consistent, ranging from 20% to 28% across all five categories. People who included more than one “Regular” tick were mostly “Chapel” plus “United”. The four people who ticked three “Regulars” all added “Festivals” to these two, although none of them ticked types of service elsewhere than the Chapel.

The high figures for “Festival” and “Occasional office” attendances at the Church were to be expected, and are in line with register entries, particularly for Christmas (including the Carol service, which is regarded as a village occasion, as are Christingle and the – fairly new – Crib service) ; see the attendance figures of festivals given in Table 2. Large weddings and funerals

tend to be held in the Church, which is bigger than the Chapel. Barley (2006a, p. 15) cites the ORB 2000 figures for those who consider it important to hold a religious service to mark birth, marriage and death at, respectively, 53%, 69% and 79%.

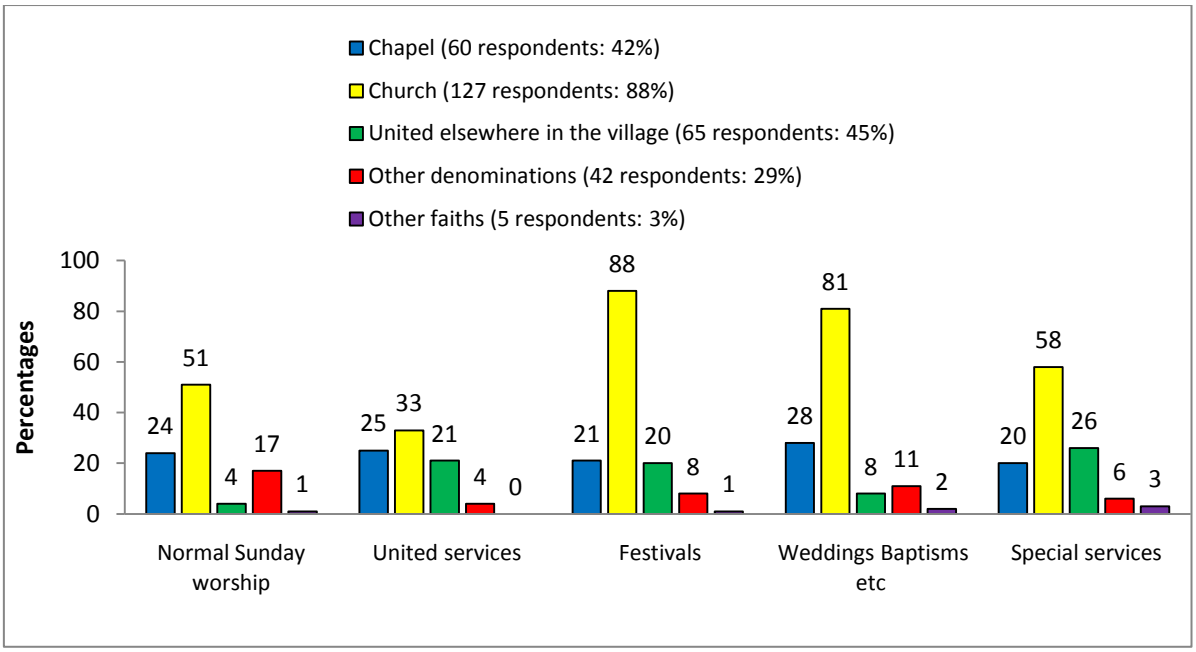


Figure 9: Attendance patterns (126 respondents out of 144)

Table 2: Anglican Church attendance at festivals in 2010

Mothering Sunday	Easter Day (8 & 11am)	Harvest Service	Christingle	Carols by Candlelight	Crib service	Christmas Eve (Midnight)	Christmas Day (8 & 11am)
55	101	48	105	152	161	103	184

All those attending "United worship elsewhere in the village" were also worshippers at either Chapel or Church, and only one person rated their worship at such services as more frequent than their attendance at a dedicated place of worship. Clearly, these services are not drawing in the unchurched.

Again, the figures for "Other Christian" would include Methodist and Anglican venues in other places.

Of the five people who ticked “Worship of another faith”, two did not specify the type, two ticked only “Special services” and the fifth seemed to be talking about Roman Catholic worship (an annotation was added). It certainly seems very clear that interfaith interactions are just not happening here, even though there are strong minority ethnic communities less than ten miles away in Swindon.

5.6 Evaluation of united activities

The lists of united activities obtained from the focus groups were split into four categories:

- Community (19 in all),
- Young people (6),
- Groups and courses (8),
- Worship and prayer (20).

5.6.1 Participation and awareness

Respondents were asked to rate their participation in and awareness of each activity, ranging from “Involved in”, through “Attended or benefited from” and “Aware”, to “Unaware”. Any lines left blank were assumed generally to represent “Unaware”.

One respondent added a thoughtful rider to his responses:

> I have found the “attended/benefited from” column very difficult to answer. My spouse is a very active church attender and therefore I am aware of many things about church life that the average non-attender would not. If my wife has been involved in something have I also benefited by its effect? If I take her and materials to a function, am I really taking an active part? I have tried to make my answers realistic for you.

Nevertheless, the responses generally appear coherent; if someone was confused, the default ploy seemed to be to leave the line blank.

Figure 10 – Figure 13 show the responses for the four groups of activities, each ranked in descending order of awareness (the total of the first three categories). The line that indicates this

is that between the green ("Aware") and yellow ("Unaware") bars. Among the "community" activities, this figure ranges from 98% awareness for the annual village fete run by the churches, to 6% for "Ride and Stride" (although it should be acknowledged that even church members did not generally recognise that name – clearly illustrating the dangers of "in-group" jargon!). The median and mean for each category are shown in the captions.

In the "Community activities" category, events regarded as "traditional village events" (such as the fete and the carnival, or contributions to the popular village magazine, the *Dabchick*) clearly tend to score high. There is a noticeable step down in involvement and attendance for activities seen as targeting specific groups ("Coffee mornings" downwards), including "Welcome packs" for newcomers, or school governors, for instance.

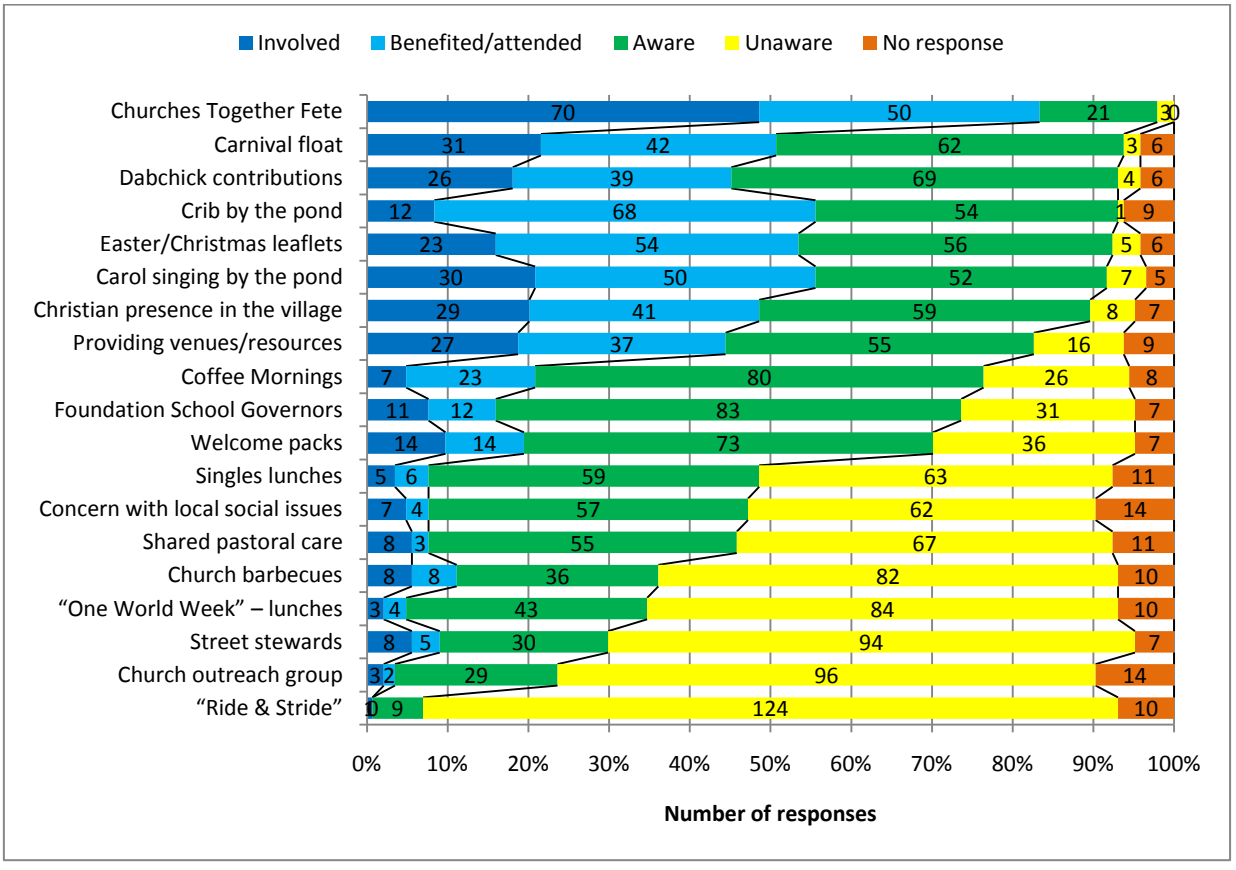


Figure 10: Awareness - Community Activities (median 74%, mean 65%)

Activities for young people (Figure 11) show far less of a spread; the "involved"/"attended" numbers are very low – as might be expected, given the age profile of the respondents. It seems likely that many were remembering times when their own children were involved – "Rock Solid" ceased about two years ago, and the "Elastic Band" even further back! At the time of the survey, only one "Messy Church" session had been held; the numbers now might be quite different. Nevertheless, just over half the respondents seem to be aware of what is going on. It might be interesting to run a similar questionnaire specifically among parents of children at the local school, and compare the results.

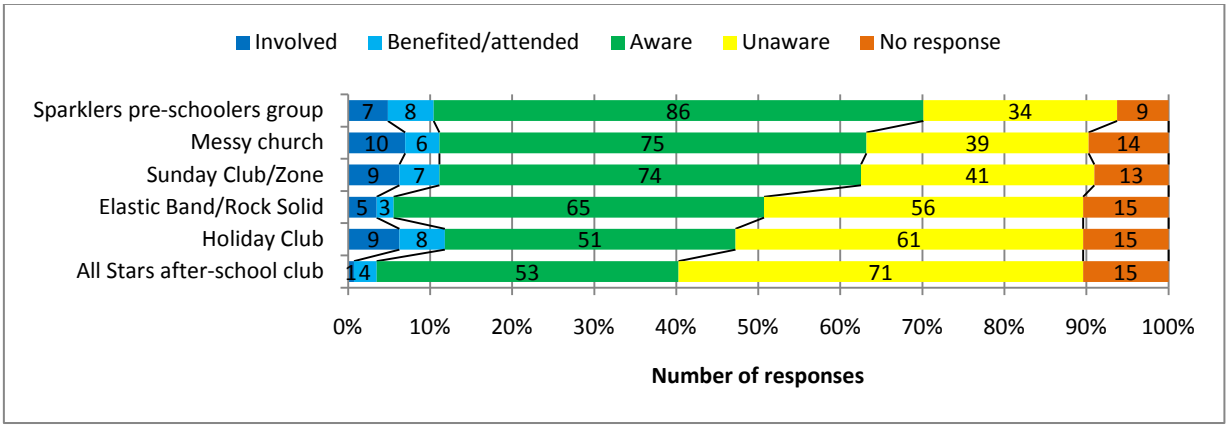


Figure 11: Awareness - activities for young people (median 57%, mean 56%)

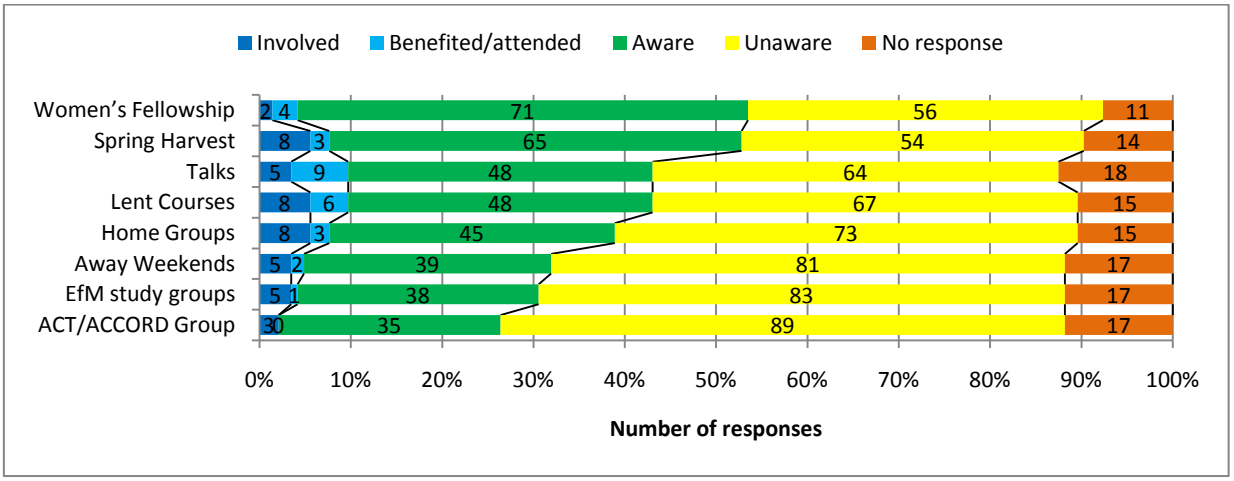


Figure 12: Awareness - Groups and courses (median 41%, mean 40%)

Involvement in groups and courses (Figure 12) is also extremely low; perhaps expectedly, as they do mostly involve committed (rather than fringe) church members. What is both disappointing and noteworthy, however, is the low level of awareness – clearly, the message is not getting out as to what is on offer.

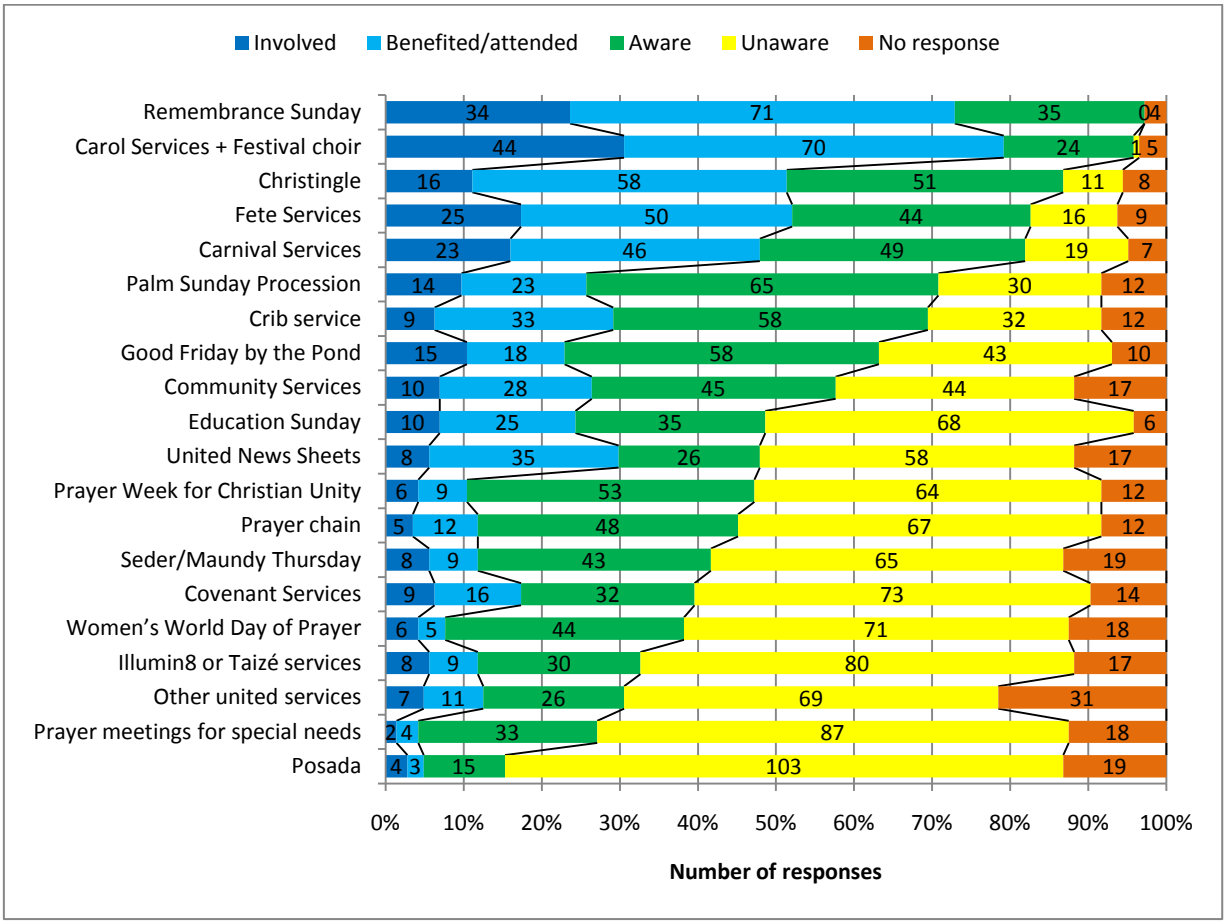


Figure 13: Awareness - Worship and Prayer (median 48%, mean 56%)

Finally, in the "Worship and prayer" category (Figure 13), the pattern is similar to that of Figure 10, though the median awareness (48%) is substantially lower. Again, I suppose this might have been expected – by definition, worship activities are more likely to involve the committed, and the services that have become part of the pattern of community life (such as Remembrance Sunday and the services at Christmas) therefore score highest. This perhaps bears out van der Weyer's (1991) conclusions regarding the "folk religion" element in rural churchgoing. Barley (2006a) picks up a similar theme: in the Colchester area, an average of 11% of the rural

population attended church over the Christmas 24 hours (*ibid.*, p. 23); our figures are not directly comparable, but show a similar peak.

However, a worrying swathe of yellow spreads across the graph of Figure 13 – yet again, people do not seem to be aware of what services are available, and this should provide serious food for thought; I shall refer to this again in the final section of this chapter. One respondent noted:

> My responses are based on the fact that I am unaware of many of the activities listed. Possibly many of the activities are highlighted in the Church magazines, which are not readily available to non-attenders.

5.6.2 Approval rating – "Value added to village life"

Respondents were asked simply to tick if they felt that an activity added to the life of the village, to put a cross if not, and to leave the line blank if unsure. These assessments tie into the whole notion of the provision of social capital, as considered by Bell *et al.* (2009), Martineau *et al*. (2004), Morisy (1997; 2004; 2009), Reader (2005) and others, as discussed in Sections 2.1 and 3.4.

The first respondent quoted above (who described himself as a "Spiritual" occasional attender of the Church for occasional offices and special services) had again been giving serious thought to his responses:

> "Church" and "village" are specifically separated here. I am not aware of any of these being publicised for non-church attendees to take part, so while they may benefit the church, I can't say they benefit the village, unless by participating, the church members' behaviour is changed so as to enhance village life.

Here, surely, he has put his finger on the nub of the matter.

Figure 14 – Figure 17 show the numbers, again ordered according to positive responses; the critical line again lies between green and yellow. The number of definitely negative responses is tiny (34, across all 53 activities); it is hard to suppose, however, that this implies universal approval! The implication would seem to be that that positive or negative responses were given only where someone felt strongly. Otherwise, either a lack of knowledge or apathy (or perhaps

the respondents' politeness or reserve) meant that the box would be left blank. Barley (2007, p. 11) reports a national figure of 58% agreeing in 2005 that "places of worship make our neighbourhoods a better place to live", and 72% that "a place of worship is an important part of the local community".

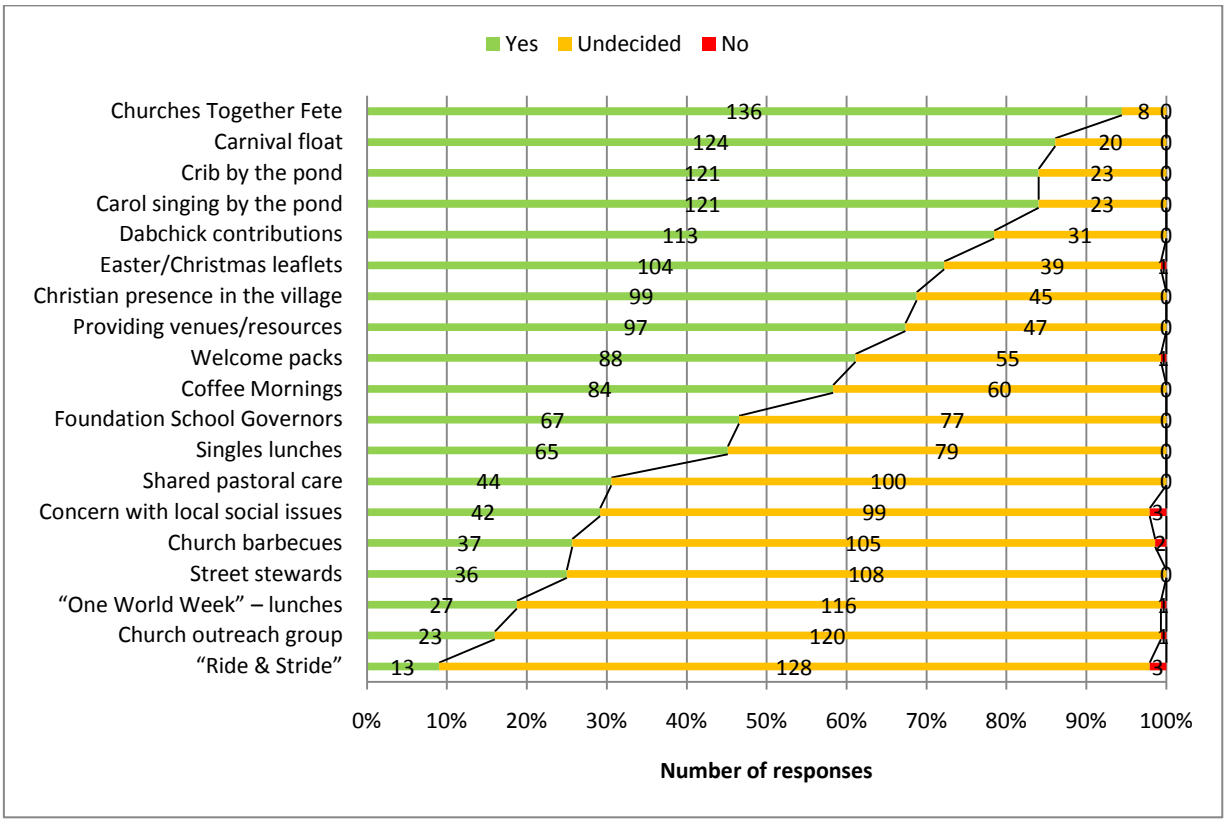


Figure 14: Approval rates: Adding to Village Life – Community activities (median 58%, mean 52%)

For that reason, however, actively negative responses warrant careful consideration. It is interesting (in light of some of the comments that follow in the last section of this chapter) that the highest disapproval for a community activity is "Concern for local social issues" – there seems to be a disjunction between the widespread desire for pastoral care and support and the feeling here that the church ought to keep out of involvement in social issues.

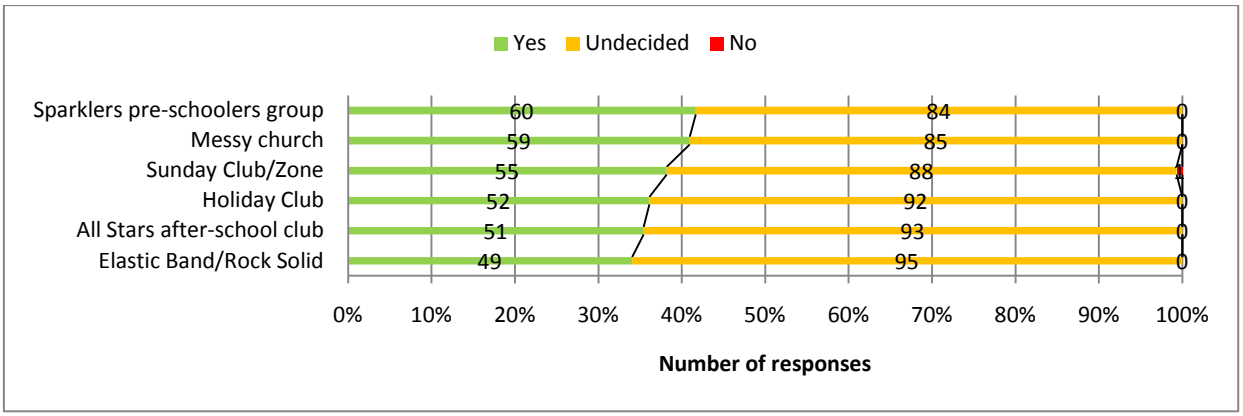


Figure 15: Approval rates: Adding to Village Life – activities for young people (median 53%, mean 38%)

Similarly, the children's activities (Figure 15) are seen by only about 40% as adding to the life of the village – and yet in the replies to the open-ended questions in the final section of this chapter, the need for work among children is a constant preoccupation. Perhaps the very low rating in the next section on how effectively the activities are run, has a bearing on this – in which case, it is a criticism that needs to be taken on board.

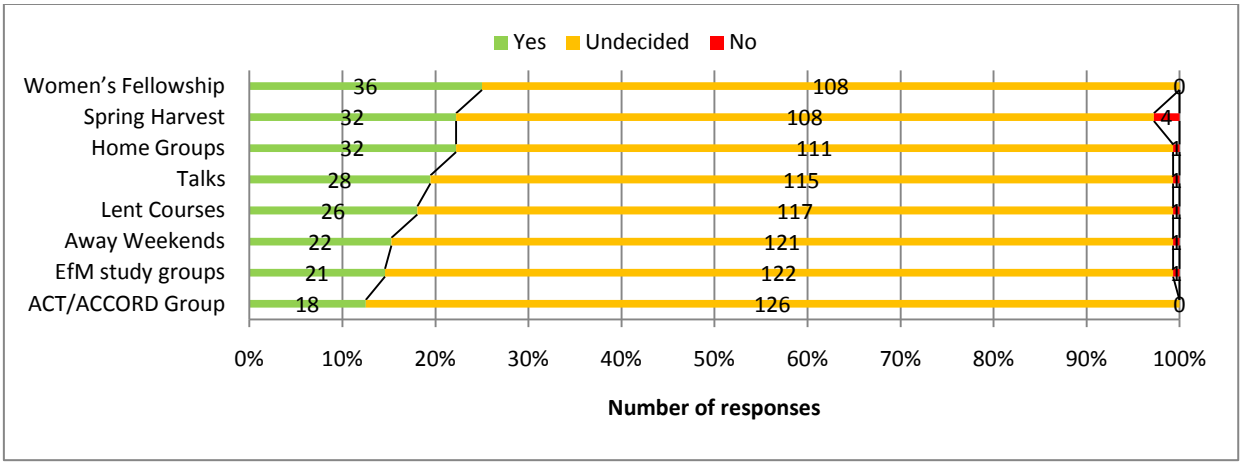


Figure 16: Approval rates: Adding to Village Life - Groups and Courses (median 26%, mean 18%)

Otherwise, no activity has more than two negative ratings. Community activities tend to have higher ratings than those for other categories, adding weight to the arguments of Barley (2007), Morisy (1997) and other proponents of the value of social capital.

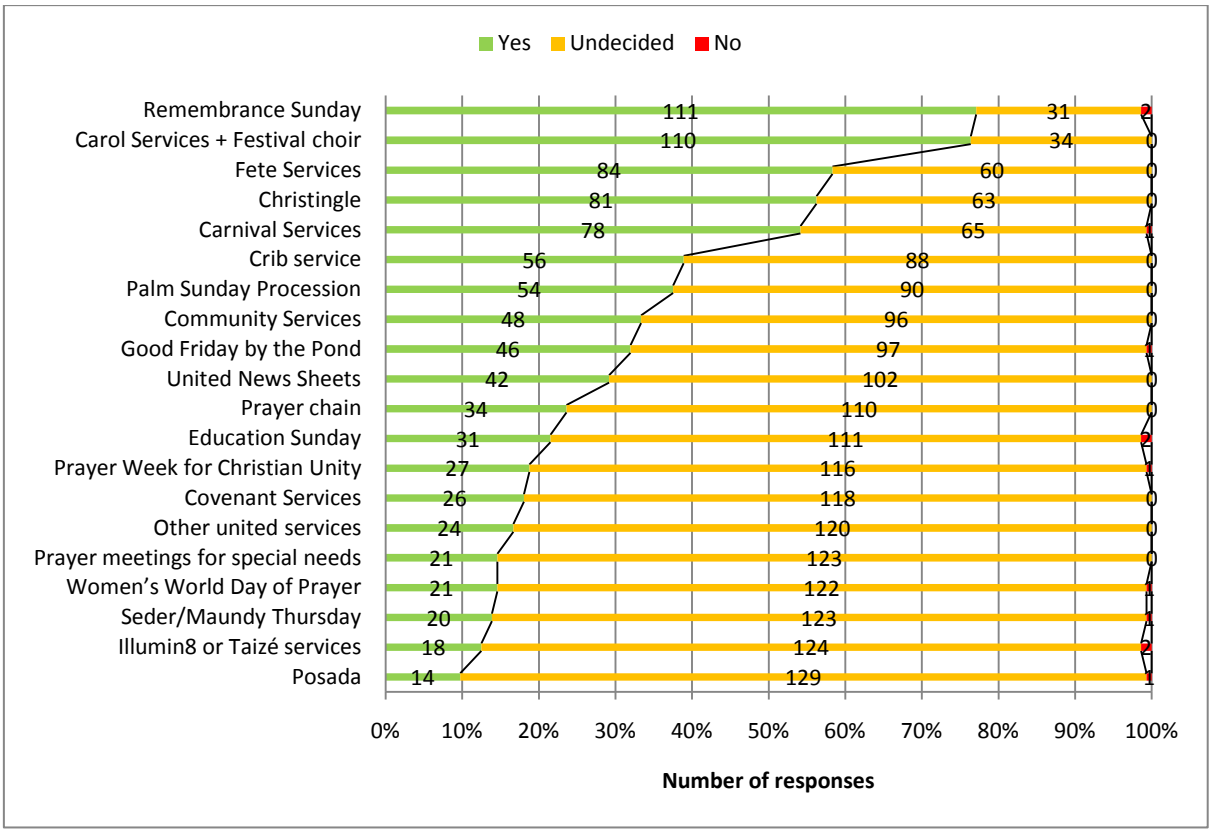


Figure 17: Approval rates: Adding to Village Life – Worship and prayer (median 38%, mean 32%)

5.6.3 Approval rating – "Effectively done"

Respondents were asked to consider the previous 12 months and to tick, cross or leave blank as in the previous section to indicate whether they considered that the various activities were being effectively run. The results are given in Figure 18 to Figure 21. Ratings here are much lower – ticks tend to occur next to activities that respondents have actually been involved in, and there seems to be a general reluctance to comment either positively or negatively. One typical respondent commented: "Unaware because not a regular churchgoer – difficult to rate if not involved." Some of the highest negative scores, understandably, relate to activities that did not take place in the past year (notably the carnival float, church barbecues, the Sunday Club, Elastic Band/Rock Solid and Away weekends).

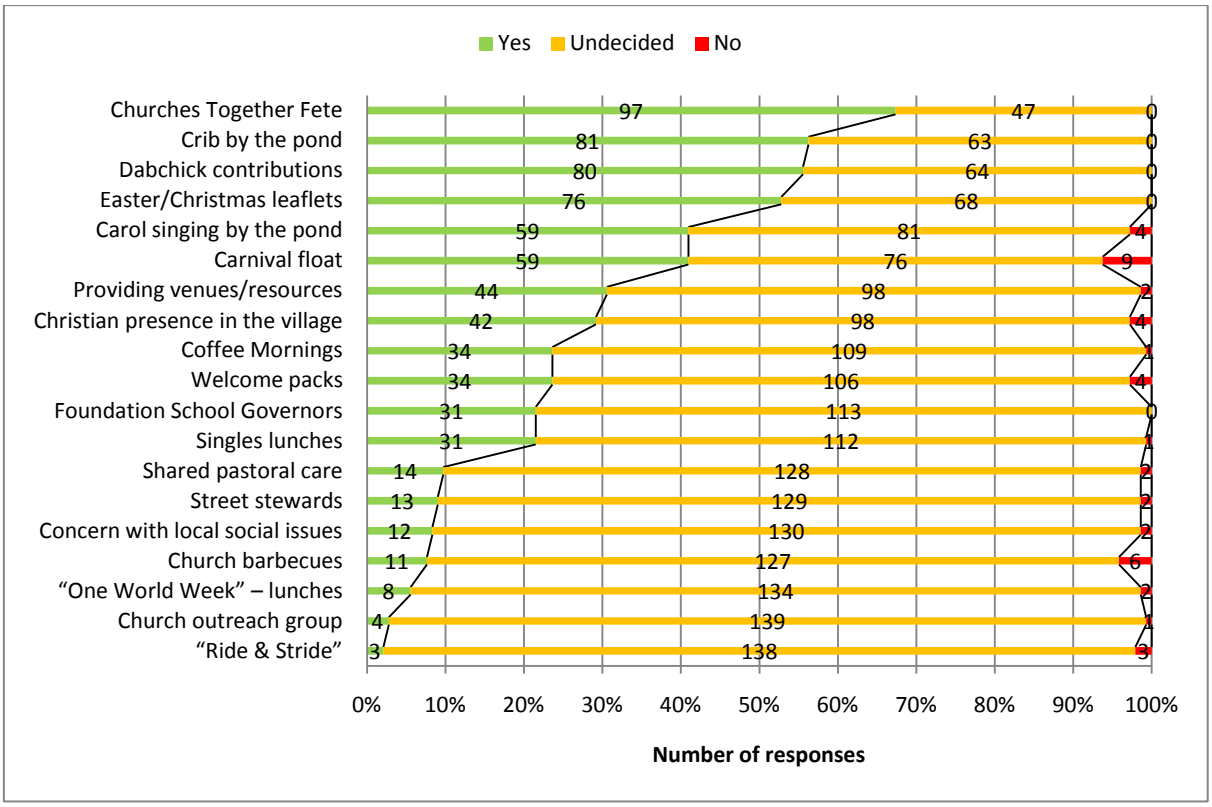


Figure 18: Approval Rates: "Effectively done" - Community Activities (median 31, mean 25%)

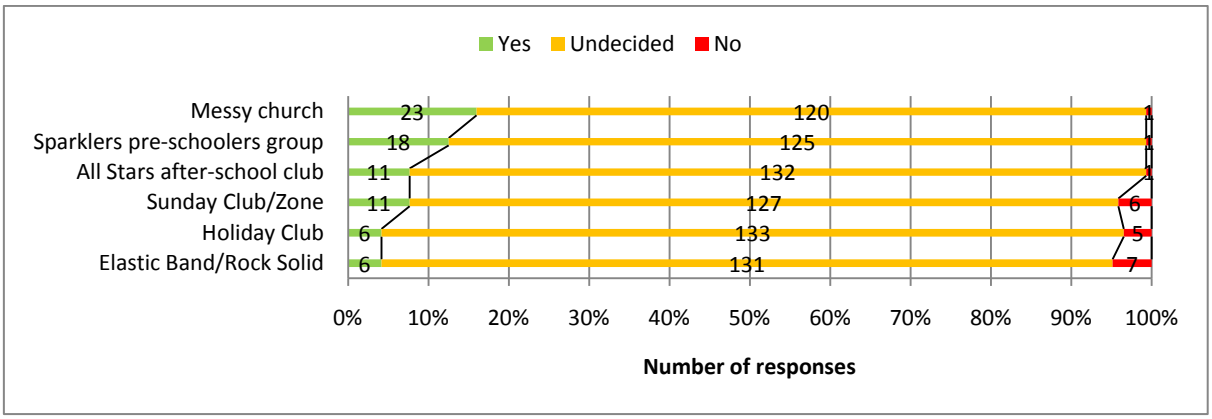


Figure 19: Approval Rates: "Effectively done" - Activities for Young People (median 8%, mean 6%)

Nevertheless, there are some important pointers to activities that could be better run (and/or publicised). The low scores for Children's activities, as indicated above, reflect a widespread understanding that more needs to be provided for children and families (but may also reflect the respondents' age profile); however, the even lower scores for Groups and Courses seems to imply that a lot more effort needs to be applied in improving, expanding and publicising this area also.

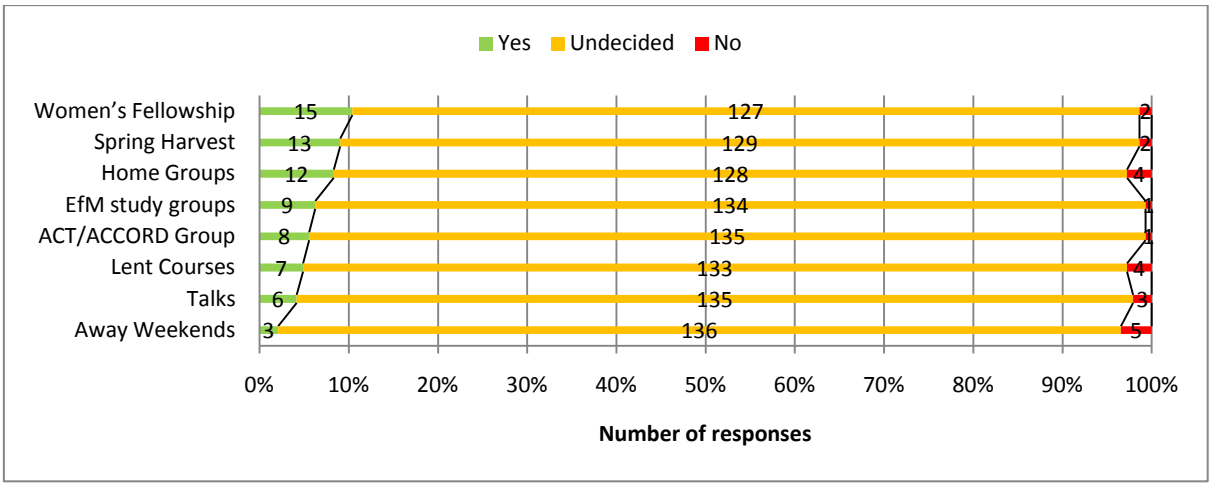


Figure 20: Approval Rates: "Effectively done" - Groups and Courses (median 6%, mean 4%)

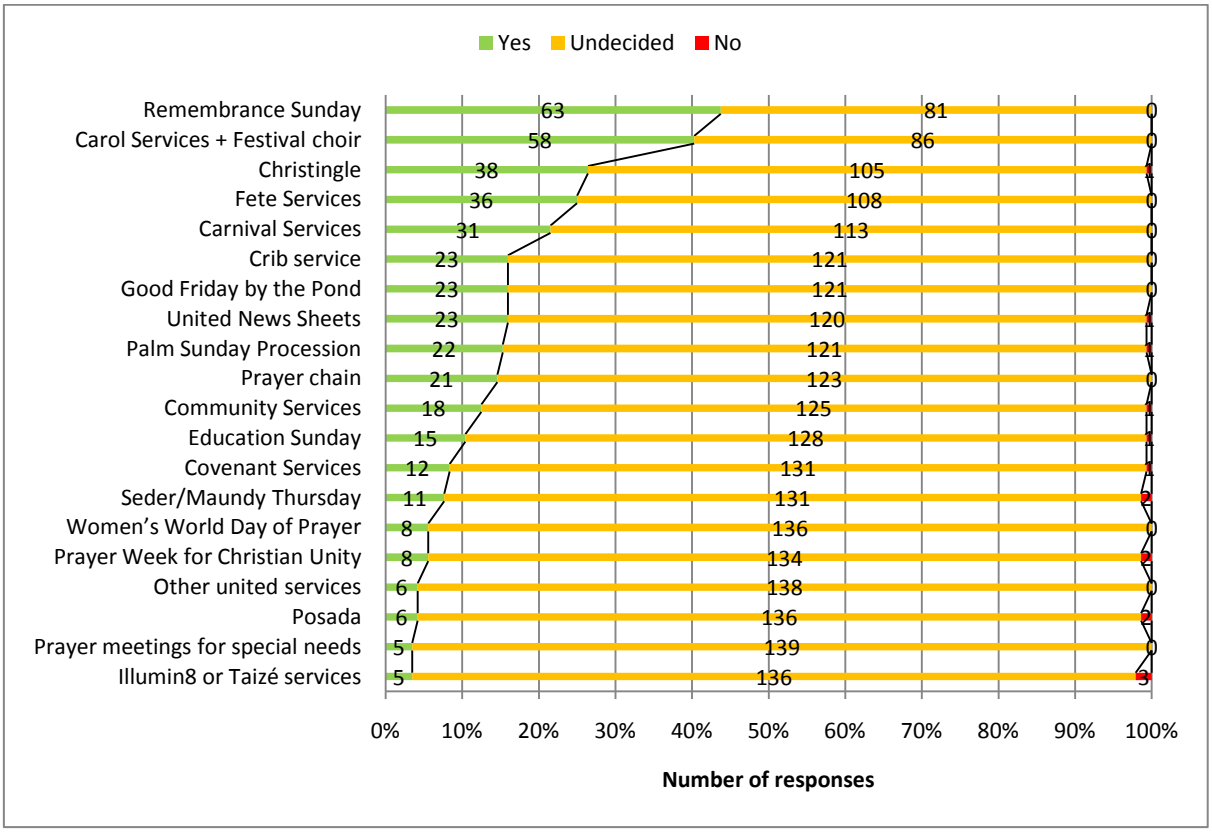


Figure 21: Approval Rates: "Effectively done" - Worship and Prayer (median 7%, mean 14%)

The scores for Worship and prayer activities show a similar trend to the Community activities; the Churches Together Fete and Remembrance Sunday are runaway winners in all three ratings, for instance.

5.6.4 Correlations

In fact, there is a notable correlation between awareness and the two approval ratings (see Figure 22 - Figure 25). In each case, the red line indicates the **inverse** of the ranking for recognition. (So a score of 19 indicates the best recognised Community activity and 1 the least, reading from top left to bottom right. Similarly, a rating of 6 shows the highest for young people's activities, 8 for groups and 20 for worship/prayer.) The green and yellow lines (indicating the two approval ratings, ranked similarly) closely track the red one. The blue line, in each case, shows the order given in the questionnaire, which was roughly derived from the emphasis given to the various activities in the discussions of the focus groups.

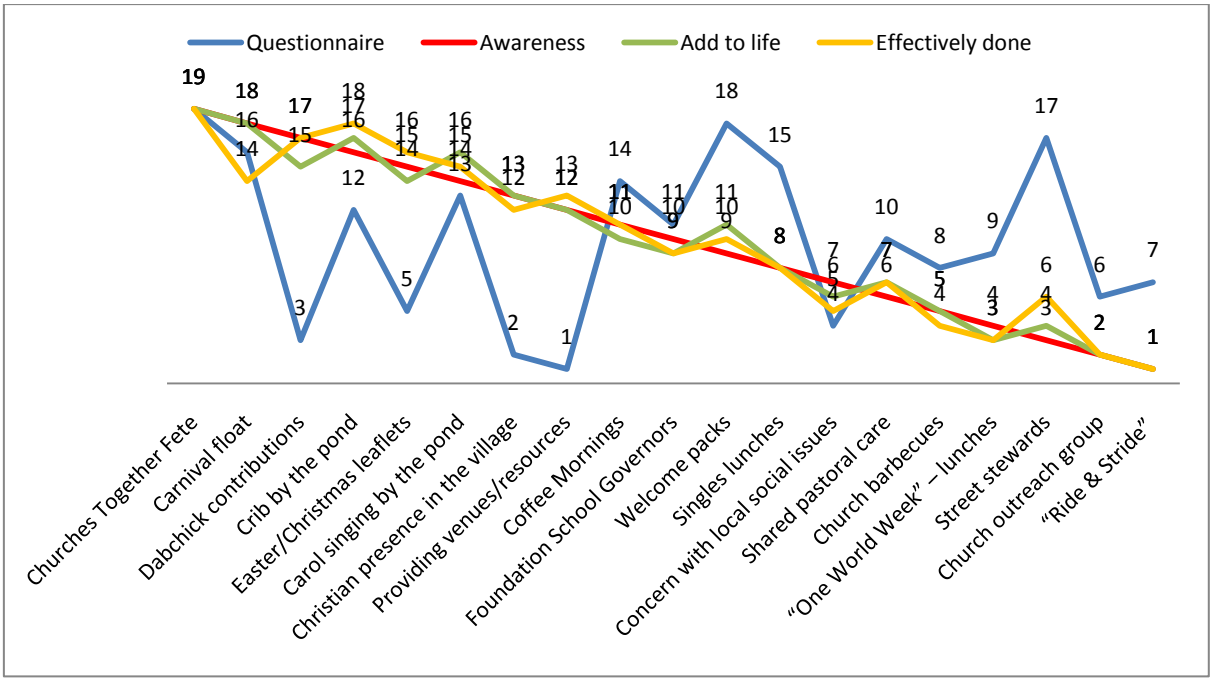


Figure 22: Awareness/approval rates - Community activities (19 in all)

The discrepancies in the two smaller groupings are inevitably smaller, but the ranking in Figure 22, in particular, shows a serious mismatch between the prominence given to various activities by the "in group" and by those "outside", confirming the work of Gray-King (2002). This may have important implications for future targets for particular effort and information dissemination, particularly in light of the findings discussed in the next section.

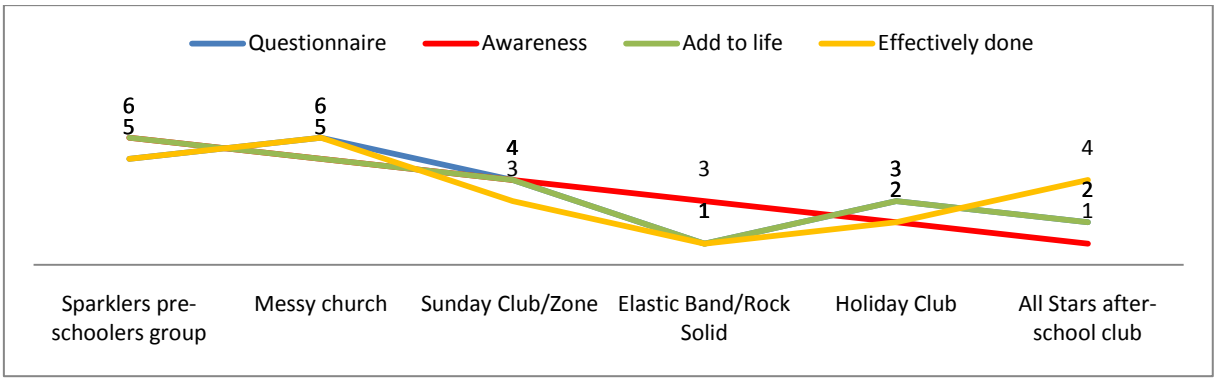


Figure 23: Awareness/approval rates – activities for young people (total 6l)

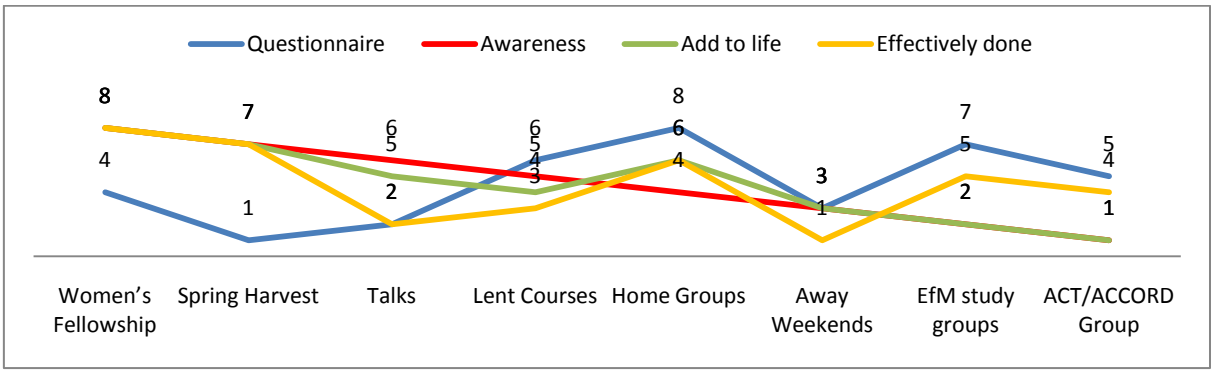


Figure 24: Awareness/approval rates - Groups and courses (total 8)

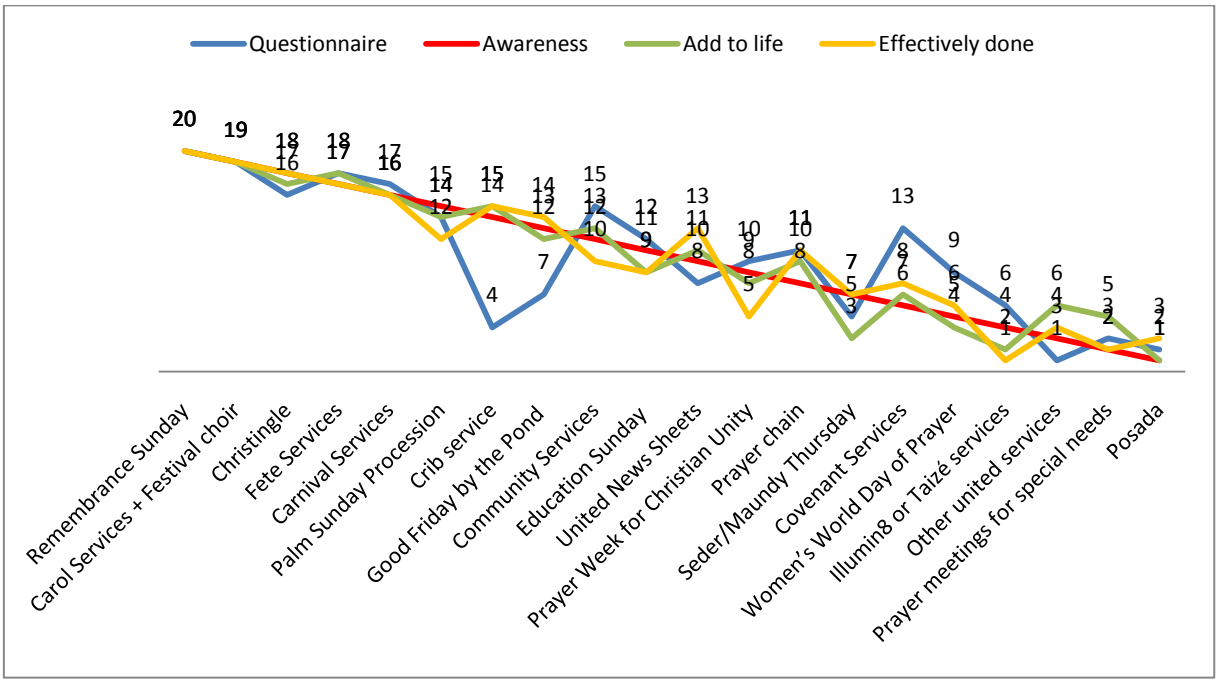


Figure 25: Awareness/approval rates - Worship and prayer (total 20)

5.7 Open-ended questions

Finally, perhaps the most interesting information from the survey came from the open-ended questions. Only 83 of the 144 respondents (58%) filled in this page, a few fairly superficially, but a substantial number of people had clearly thought carefully about their answers, and some useful insights emerged. The questions covered:

- the churches' shared role (if any?) in the village,
- current activities that would be better done separately, and
- suggestions as to additional activities that could/should be undertaken.

5.7.1 The shared role (if any) of the churches in the village

Those who replied to this question (67: i.e., 47%) all answered in the affirmative, though there was a spectrum of opinion – from those who felt that the presence of the churches was a necessity, to those who entered the caveat "for those who want it" (with sometimes an implication that for most people it was an irrelevance). Nevertheless, even non-churchgoers seemed positive that the churches had a role to play, and no-one answered "none". It might be argued that those who are actively antagonistic would not have responded to requests to complete questionnaires, but the collectors were specifically asked to approach such people if possible, and it was my hope that they might take the opportunity to make their views felt. (This was one of the prime reasons for ensuring anonymity.)

There is considerable emphasis, among the responses, on the need for inclusiveness and openness to all. (Barley's equivalent national figure is 69%.) Some respondents laid stress on life according to Christian principles and care for neighbour, rather than church attendance, as a benchmark. This echoes trends elsewhere: Barley quotes (2006a, p. 15): "... participation in church life is not seen as crucial for the practice of Christianity, and it is the practice of Christianity that British people think important. This is what makes a person a Christian, not churchgoing."

The role/purpose is seen mainly as falling within the following broad categories (although there is, clearly, considerable overlap).

1. The churches are seen as focal points for community cohesion (the words "heart" and "glue" cropped up frequently) and the marking of life's milestones "as part of the fabric and backdrop to a traditional village" and "[it] helps with making the village special and looking out for each other". One respondent took this further: "to see what God is doing in the community and join in, to look outwards rather than inwards" – perhaps unconsciously echoing theologians who remind us that the mission is God's and not ours, and our task is to join in the *Missio Dei*.

   The provision of support, social cohesion and social wellbeing is frequently emphasised. Clear resonances in the work of Greenwood (1997), Morisy (1997), Farnell (2007) and Reader (1994; 2005) are noticeable. One way of doing this could be to break down the perceived divide between the "religious" and the "secular".
2. Specifically, this is related to the expression of community in pastoral care: "a voice for practical compassion" and "as Christians we are ONE in Christ. The Church (the body – its people) should be there for all to minister to all"; again, the work of Morisy (1997), whereby discipleship is expressed as "venturesome love", is relevant in this connection.
3. Thirdly, there is an emphasis on worship, building up faith, and a "safe place" for meditation and quiet. There is a predictable divergence of views as to whether traditional service patterns (i.e., "that are not plain embarrassing") should be maintained, or whether the churches should try to "offer <u>meaningful</u> [sic] worship to all who attend" – with an implication that changes are needed. (See several of the "reasons for leaving" suggested by Francis & Richter (2007) and the plea by Lings (2007b) for "diversity across unity" in styles of worship both within and across denominations.) The fuzzy area in which "spirituality" is seen as good, but "religion" is bad, highlights the classic dilemma in reconciling one's own inherited tradition and integrity, with respect for the beliefs of

worshippers who may be starting from very different places, in “a place that all levels and types of religion or spirituality could prosper”, as requested by one respondent. (In a wider context, of those surveyed for the British Social Attitudes survey of 1998 cited by Barley, 66% said that they prayed – 38% of them every month, and a quarter every week – so there is clearly both a widespread hunger for and reliance on spiritual resources; nevertheless, says Barley: “people don’t so much want to be told what to believe as to be shown how”.)

4. Ethical/moral concerns are emphasised, particularly related to the young: “It is important to have a Christian ethos across the whole community; a presence to be seen by all.” In a survey conducted for Tearfund and the Church of England in 2005 (Barley, 2006a, p. 17), half of all under-25s were found to have no experience of church or Sunday School. We are fortunate to have a church primary school that brings the children into church, but very few of them feature among the regular congregations.
5. Finally, there is a stated need for “an expression of faith and sharing the ‘Good News’” and for outreach and witness by “offering Christ’s love to the community, and practical help” and providing “a role model for working with difference” in a united Christian presence that can “be Christ’s body of love to the world”; see the work of Avis (2010b) and Welch & Winfield (2004 [1995]).

5.7.2 Current activities that might be better done separately

There were 32 responses here (22%), 19 of them (13%) simply said “none” or “not sure”. The few areas of concern highlighted are mainly concerned with dogma, services or logistics. The overwhelming impression is that there is no general desire to retreat from increasing co-operation: “together we are stronger”, was a typical comment. Perhaps in an increasingly non-denominational world, those “on the inside” may see ecumenical action as problematic, whereas it is a non-issue for the wider community, who may not carry the same accumulated historical

baggage (Avis, 2010b; McLaren, 2004). Only one respondent voiced a concern that "merger" might actually mean "takeover", and there is only a single suggestion that all services should be kept separate. This is interesting, given the extent to which congregations tend to "vote with their feet" in practice, often apparently regarding united services as optional, and the widespread anecdotal perception that the congregations are happier working together than worshipping together on a regular basis! This appears to bear out the findings of the Joint Implementation Commission on hindrances to unity; see (The Archbishops' Council and the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2001) and the comments in Section 3.3 on the work of Pickard (2009).

5.7.3 Suggestions for future activities and/or new approaches

These comments (from 60 respondents in all: 42%) range from the very general to the highly specific; one recurring theme is that this is a village in which many of the traditional "caring" roles of the Church are being undertaken by the wider community (clearly, involving – but not exclusively – church members, thereby echoing the findings of Burton (2007) and the various other comments on the provision of social capital, referred to earlier). This echoes the emphasis on community and pastoral aspects highlighted in the perceived role/purpose of the churches.

Some people seem to find it hard to pin down just what might make Christians "different" in this regard; there are some very blurred lines here! Alan Smith (2004, p. 198) cites Robin Gill's conclusions from the British Social Attitudes Surveys:

> "The mass of new data shows that churchgoers are indeed distinctive in their attitudes and behaviour ... there are broad patterns of Christian beliefs, teleology and altruism which distinguish churchgoers as a whole from non-churchgoers. ... They are, for example, more likely than others to be involved in voluntary service."

Nevertheless, Gill (1999, p. 197) concludes that:

> "None of these differences is absolute. The values, virtues, moral attitudes and behaviour of churchgoers are shared by other people as well. The distinctiveness of churchgoers is real but relative."

So perhaps we need to work a lot harder at promoting a far more holistic understanding (both within and outside the "churchgoing community") of what it really means to be "a committed Christian". There are also echoes of an attitude of "spirituality good, religion bad" (referred to above) in some of the comments, especially in the context of the remarks in the previous section.

Many respondents were surprised at the number of current activities; an immediate implication is the need for better communication that reaches beyond the "holy huddle", and an avoidance of jargon and exclusive vocabulary – even service listings on notice boards may be incomprehensible to the uninitiated (Barley, 2007, p. 46). (This is exemplified by a suggestion that "the bike ride around the local churches was very good" – this activity is actually on the list as "Ride and Stride", which had clearly meant nothing to the respondent.)

It is evident that the churches are neither informing the wider community adequately of what is going on and what is available, nor explaining (or maybe understanding?) what being a Christian really implies. One might counter this charge with accusations of "selective listening", but there is clearly work to be done on improving communications. Misconceptions abound, but some practical suggestions were offered as to how communication might be improved – by better use of the *Dabchick* (the village magazine) and the village website, for example. (This bears out the conclusions drawn by Gray-King (2002), and reinforces her call for further investigations into the whole issue of communication.) The disparity between the priorities given to the various activities by the focus groups and the respondents (see Section 0) illustrate the need all too graphically.

Conversely, it is suggested that a tighter focus on doing fewer things well is better than too diversified an approach. (Interestingly, this one of the seven "Marks of a Healthy Church" (Warren, 1994), but it represents a classic dilemma for a rural church trying to serve a very diverse community. Perhaps this is where having two venues and different styles can actually be a positive benefit.)

There are some specific comments about worship and services, with a perhaps predictable divide between those who cling to tradition and those with a desire for breadth and inclusiveness.

The concern with young people (particularly older teenagers) and families is widespread; again, some suggestions – of varying practicability – are made. There are several requests for the Holiday Club to be revived, for instance.

Understandably, given the emphasis laid on the role of the churches as a focus for community, there are many suggestions about widening the use of the buildings and the provision of social activities, particularly those related to music, or for talks. For instance: "open the doors more – shared suppers, cinema nights, sleepovers in the church for youth groups to raise money for charity," and "activities which bring people together without a service as the main focus" – echoing some of the suggestions made by Martineau *et al.* (2004) and Lings (2007a) on similar themes. This repeats the call for "fuzzy boundaries", but also suggests very strongly that more adventurous thinking is needed, even if this requires uncomfortable decisions and a willingness to accommodate changes –in layout or furnishings, for instance (Redfern, 2004). Do pews qualify as "baby" or "bathwater"?

There are also requests for a return to Alpha Courses, Away Weekends, Interfaith talks, a Churches Together float in the village Carnival, and/or an adult Nativity Play.

Likewise, in the context of the emphasis on the pastoral care in the perceived role of the churches, many suggestions (nearly 20) are made in the area also: "practising more of what Christ taught and ... making a difference to the poor and needy".

Even in some of the positive comments, however, we find echoes of the "reasons for leaving" cited by Francis and Richter (2007), who identify fifteen categories of reasons for giving up church membership, ranging from "Matters of belief and unbelief", "Growing up and changing", "Life transitions and life changes", "Alternative lives and alternative meanings", "Incompatible life-

styles", "Not belonging and not fitting in", "Costs and benefits", "Disillusionment with the church", "Being let down by the church", through to "Problems with relevance/change/worship/ leadership/conservatism/liberalism"; see also results reported by Barley (2006b, p. 6).

The full table of comments is available but is not included here; the reflection in the next chapter attempts to draw them together.

Chapter 6 Reflection: Building up the Body of Christ

Certainly, the churches do seem to be operating together within all the categories of networks (worship, leadership, kinship, friendship and neighbourhood) envisaged by Burton (2007) in promoting social capital. These are respectively exemplified, for instance, by united services such as the Community Service and Remembrance Day, taking the lead in pastoral and social care, family worship such as Messy Church, social events and groups, and the Street Stewards.

This all serves as an affirmation of the ACCORD Group's vision statement (see Appendix A), building on the metaphor so memorably coined by St Paul:

> *For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members, one of another.* I Cor. 12:12

Avis's (2010b) celebration of diversity (as contrasted with division) is relevant here, as is Daymond's (2000) model of "reconciled diversity", in which "difference is offered as a gift to the other".

What is very clear, however, is a fairly wide perception (by both members and those on the outside) that "being a church member" consists mainly in being seen in a particular building on a Sunday morning. Again, the work of Heelas and Woodhead (2005) comes to mind – "religion" is frequently seen as a bar to "spirituality". Barley (2006a, pp. 40, ff.) suggests, indeed, that churches need to be seen as *more* spiritual and less preoccupied with order and organisation.

Perhaps this definition arises from too narrow a perception of "the Body of Christ" as being "hard-edged", whereas in this village setting there are certainly some very fuzzy boundaries. Both Bainbridge (2004), as cited in Section 3.3, and Smith (2004) – see Section 2.1 – would see a lack of hard edges as laudable.

Thus, if the churches are to be the "heart" of the community, as our respondents suggest, there is a need to build up the services and activities that act as focal points for the community. This includes accepting that many will have a "folk religion" (van der Weyer, 1991) that brings them to church for Harvest and Christmas, and for major rites of passage like wedding and funerals; see the earlier comments on the perceived importance of the "occasional offices" as reflected in the work of Barley (2006a; 2006b; 2007). The recent introduction of a shared, village-wide, Harvest Appeal in aid of the Swindon Food Bank, culminating at a Community Service to which many clubs and organisations brought contributions, provides an example of how so-called "folk religion" and community spirit can, together, be focused on achieving really positive Christian objectives.

Celebrating a shared enterprise also gives good reason for people to *want* to worship together, and downplays differences. Barley (2006a, pp. 50, ff.) further suggests focusing on so-called "family specials"; she proposes twelve focal points (including Mothering Sunday, Harvest and Christmas, but also the start of the new year in January, "Changes and new Beginnings" in September, and "Remembrance" in November, among others). She also suggests services to celebrate special events as a way of providing openings for worship (*ibid*., pp. 26, ff.). Making the widest possible use of the churches' buildings in ways that intersect with the community's preoccupations also helps to overcome a reluctance to cross the threshold, and could lead to an increased perception that this is a sanctuary that is available to all.

The shared harvest appeal also addresses another factor that keeps appearing in the questionnaire answers: the perception that for churches to be seen to have a role and purpose, they also need to be seen to be "serving the poor and needy" and "looking outwards rather than inwards" as "a voice for practical compassion" to "minister to all". In an era where ordained clergy are increasingly scarce, pastoral care (for those both near and far) must be seen as the shared responsibility of all Christians. The role of the churches then is to provide, support and encourage (and *sometimes* to organise), as appropriate. In a community-minded village such as

this one, it is still possible to be very lonely (what Bell *et al.* (2009) refer to as "network poverty"); shared lay pastoral workers and/or "street stewards" might increasingly help to bridge such gaps. The body needs not only a healthily-beating heart, but also a sound cardio-vascular system that nourishes and oxygenates every part.

This concern for pastoral care is also reflected in a widespread anxiety that the young are inadequately supported by the churches. The local churches are actively aware of this, and steps are being taken to address the problem. It is, however, a downward spiral that is hard to reverse; the comments above about the age profile of our respondents illustrate the problem all too graphically. Nevertheless, the church body needs to stay young at heart despite its venerable age!

The work with families and children illustrates another dilemma. At present this is – very properly – supported (and subsidised) by the churches. Therefore, the body needs a strong "bone structure" that can support the muscles as they develop; without that firm core, the outreach will falter. So while this work is intended primarily to build up discipleship (and needs to be wary of the trap of focusing on "bums on seats"), that ultimately needs to find ways of feeding back into the system if the serving and the witnessing are to continue. I suspect that this is partly an issue of ownership; there is a need to help people to move from "cherry-picking" to commitment, from being "guests" to becoming "hosts" (Cameron, *et al.*, 2010), from consuming to ministry. Given the age profiles of the congregations, focus group members and respondents, the claim by Mark Griffiths (2009) that the church is "one generation from extinction" should give food for thought here.

The challenge, then, becomes one of reconciling openness and flexibility with maintaining the integrity of one's faith. This is of particular relevance when we consider activities such as "Messy Church" and other Fresh Expressions – and the need to find ways of helping both those fringe congregations and the more traditional groupings feel that they are part of the same body.

Thereby the interrelatedness of limbs and organs can be understood and celebrated. Here, we need to strengthen the tendons and ligaments in fulfilling their connective role, so that the body acts as a single organism and not a disconnected batch of parts (see Ephesians 4:16).

The three aspects mentioned above – community, pastoral care and Fresh Expressions – are all related to "meeting people where they're at", and ministering to them appropriately. This exemplifies the classic conundrum faced by rural churches: addressing the needs of a population that is very diverse in terms of maturity, status, expectations, needs and priorities – socially, intellectually and spiritually. Here, the existence of two churches can actually be seen as a bonus: operating in a complementary way might help with the classic rural problem of over-complicated service schedules (Barley, 2006b, p. 17). The trade-off here is to provide breadth without dissipating too much energy in trying to be "all things to all people" (Warren, 1994). Perhaps the analogy here is a fitness drive that builds up muscle where it is needed and loses the excess flab that comes (as one respondent remarked) from too much "sitting complacently around and navel-gazing"...

This implies a need both to know what is required, and – conversely – good information provision. It is clear from the survey that there is a widespread lack of comprehension of what discipleship (as distinguished, perhaps, from mere "membership") implies, but also a lack of information about what is actually on offer, in terms of activities (see Section 5.6.1). The churches exist to build up and sustain faith – but they also need to listen to the needs and concerns of the community. Thus, the body's nervous system needs to function adequately, carrying information out to every component, but also registering the messages coming from all the sensory receptors.

Finally, of course, none of these systems is of any use whatsoever if the body ceases breathing! One danger of this sort of analytical exercise might be a resulting over-reliance on human resources. We need to remember that this body – like each of us individually – is (or ought to be)

involved in carrying out *God's* mission in the world, and without the "Holy Breath" of the Spirit (*ruach*), that will just not happen.

Bringing all these thoughts together, the final chapter draws some conclusions and attempts to point the way forward.

Chapter 7 Conclusions

This dissertation provides some useful information that will enable the churches and the village to find constructive ways of moving forward, and may also be of use to other communities wrestling with similar problems. The biases introduced by the age and gender balances must be taken into account, but I am satisfied that the cross-section of affiliations and commitment provide a sound basis for drawing useful conclusions.

The responses to the survey generally indicate a positive attitude towards the presence and activities of the churches; perhaps this should act as an encouragement that prevents Christians from being apologetic (in the self-deprecatory sense) about their presence and their beliefs. This village is almost certainly not representative of Britain as a whole – it is culturally and ethnically far too homogeneous – but both the numbers and the comments generated by this survey indicate a general consensus that the contribution of the churches is seen as constructive. Antagonism does not appear to be a major problem – although indifference or apathy may well be!

There is also no suggestion that the increasing co-operation between the churches is regarded as anything other than "a good thing". The few caveats are related largely to styles of worship, and this bears out the anecdotal evidence (and, indeed, the findings of the work on rural ministry cited earlier[3]). I suggest that here, again, communication is the key to tolerance and the avoidance of misunderstanding; see (Cole, Price, & Rolph, 2009, p. 29).

Within the context of Spirit-led ministry and mission, the results and reflections given above imply that the churches need to be clear-eyed about how well they are seen to be living out their Christian missional vocation of being the Body of Christ in the village.

[3] See, for instance, the work of Allen (2004), Barley (2006b), Bell *et al.* (2009), Francis (1996), Gaze (2006), Martineau *et al.* (2004), Russell (1996) and the *Faith in the Countryside* Report (The Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, 1990).

The areas of concern to members of the community (see Section 5.7.1) can be summarised as:

1. Working at the heart of the community to foster a sense of "belonging" and worth, in an inclusive and welcoming manner (formally, through services, but also in generous sharing of talents and resources);
2. Expressing this sense of Christian community and ministry in service and pastoral care for others, particularly those in especial need;
3. Providing meaningful channels for spirituality that cater for a wide range of needs and methods of expression, that are nevertheless understood as being part of an interdependent *koinonia*, and that relate back to a core structure that is faithful to its roots;
4. Providing appropriate care, guidance and nurture for the young and their families.
5. Building up – within all age groups – faith and belief, together with a truer understanding of ministry, discipleship and Christian ethics and commitment, that goes beyond mere church attendance.

These bring us full circle back to the five "Marks of Mission" referred to at the start of this document: "Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform and Treasure" (The Archbishops' Council, 2004; Gaze, 2006). The key to meeting all these needs, however, lies in communication – "tell" and "teach" seem to imply communication outwards, but we will neither fulfil those tasks effectively, nor "tend or "treasure" with love, unless we listen first—to God, and to other people (Cole, *et al.*, 2009, p. 36). Only then can all these actions work together to "transform" – both ourselves and our surroundings, as we seek to be an incarnational church serving an incarnational God.

So we may need to challenge both our own perceptions of who we are, as well as the preconceptions of others. Just as the early Christians were challenged by St Paul to embrace those who came to Christian faith from other cultures, we may need to recognise and confront any hidden fear of outsiders and our own self-protectiveness. Nevertheless, I believe, rising to

these challenges may be truly transformative: in seeking to express their faith in ways that are relevant to those around them, Christians may actually find that it becomes more relevant in their own lives also.

7.1 Looking to the future

Current and planned activities will therefore need to be carefully assessed:

- Are they part of what the churches *ought* to be doing, or are there other things that they should be focusing on instead?
- Secondly, is it practicable (within resource constraints) to do them well?
- To what extent are they actually being done already?
- Are there ways of "doing them better"?
- Is it possible to make people better aware of what is actually available?

The results given here have already been discussed with the ACCORD Group, and will be taken in summary form to the Anglican PCC and the Methodist Council. A parish "away weekend" (to which both Methodists and members from other churches in the benefice are invited) is to be held later in the year, and the survey will be available to help with future planning.

In addition, as already mentioned, it would be possible to build on the survey results, either by expanding the sample (for instance, to include younger age groups and/or parents of children) or by subjecting the existing responses to more detailed analysis and cross-correlation using, perhaps, software such as NVivo 8, as was done in the JIC survey (Cole, *et al.*, 2009). Consulting the Local Strategic Partnership and undertaking a skills audit (Chalke, 2006) or "Healthy Churches" assessment (Warren, 1994) might also help provide supplementary information. The Church Urban Fund also provides a toolkit for assessing a church's contribution to local social capital (http://www.cuf.org.uk/act/resources-projects/community-value-toolkit); there seems no reason why these tools could not be used jointly by both churches.

In many ways, however, the underlying questions are not really about ecumenism at all – they are really concerned with dealing with difference. Perhaps the comment of one respondent, that the churches should be providing "a role model for working with difference" in a united Christian presence that can "be Christ's body of love to the world" goes to the heart of the problem (Cole, *et al.*, 2009, pp. 30, 31). We thus return, better informed, to address the task with which we started – namely, the ACCORD Group's vision of its mission:

> *To nurture a serving, witnessing, worshipping and transforming Christian community in Aldbourne, celebrating both our diversity and our unity in Christ.*

In this way we can fulfil Christ's commission:

> *"As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, … that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."* John 17: 21,23

It is thus my hope that the work described here will help in some small way in reaching the objectives of practical theology referred to at the start of this document (Graham, 1996, p. 10). Then unified diversity (Avis, 2010b) can be true cause for celebration.

Thus it is perhaps fitting to end this study of ecumenical action with the words of a Roman Catholic poet-priest:

> GLORY be to God for dappled things—
> For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
> For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
> Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
> Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
> And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.
> All things counter, original, spare, strange;
> Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
> With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
> He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
> Praise him.
>
> *Gerard Manley Hopkins*
> (Hopkins, 1953)

[21,839 words]

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Appendix A: ACCORD Group Vision Statement December 2009

"As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, …that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." John 17: 21,23

"For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members, one of another." I Cor. 12:12

Our Vision:

- To nurture a serving, witnessing, worshipping and transforming Christian community in Aldbourne, celebrating both our diversity and our unity in Christ.

Our Objectives:

- To explore new ideas and to encourage "blue skies" thinking;
- To identify and facilitate or implement actions and projects that will allow both the present congregations and others to share more widely in Christian worship and ministry;
- To explore the possibility of having a "community pastor" for the village.

Appendix B: Methodism, Ministry and Mission

In this study for a College portfolio, I attempted to trace the interrelationship between Anglicanism and Methodism, both in a historical context and in my local setting. I also considered my own faith history and churchmanship in light of these findings, and endeavoured to discover how I might be able to play a part in healing the wounds in the body of Christ caused by divisions between different groups of his followers in my home village. This Appendix contains a summary of my findings.

Brian McLaren (McLaren, 2004, pp. 242-243) talks of one of the strengths of Methodism as lying in their reliance on closely knit "classes", like a group of people climbing a mountain, where there is always someone one step higher to give a hand, and someone one step below, needing a hand up too, on the journey on which they are all engaged. Perhaps, he says, we need to re-discover this ethos of emphasising the value of

> "...small groups, spiritual friends who will meet for mutual encouragement and support... it will empower 'lay' people, realizing that baptism itself is a kind of ordination to ministry and the purpose of discipleship is to train and deploy everyday apostles... it will see discipleship as the process of reaching ahead with one hand to find the hand of a mentor a few steps up the hill, while reaching back with the other to help the next brother or sister in line who is also on the upward path of discipleship" (McLaren, 2004, pp. 246-247).

He (*ibid.*, p. 234 ff.) sees the strength of Anglicanism as lying in the constant search for a balanced view (the *via media*), in light of the four "pillars" of scripture, tradition, experience and reason, with a resulting capacity to live with dynamic tension and compromise/tolerance (what Alan Bartlett (2007) calls "a passionate balance"). Some recent controversies may seem to give the lie to this; nevertheless, one of the glories of the Anglican Church is the richness of its diversity. As we have seen above, Wesley too, as an Anglican himself, gave due respect to all four of the pillars

(Tabraham, 1995, pp. 16, ff.), so a shared process of discernment should enrich us all. McLaren also mentions the value that Anglicans place on liturgy (of whatever churchmanship), so this is perhaps something that they have to contribute to any shared worship – without, of course, assuming that they have all the answers.

I believe that there are actually very few doctrinal issues that could cause problems in the local context (whatever may be the case in the larger inter-denominational negotiations). The theology of the Episcopate (with implications for ordained ministry generally) seems to be the main sticking-point in current negotiations The practical realities of types and styles of worship are far more likely to be points of difficulty.

Avis (2004, p. 5) asks: "How can we bear true witness to the good news of a God who accepts us unless we can accept one another?" Evans (1996, p. 228) attempts to provide an answer: "We have to abandon adversariality for convergence. We have to be ready both to change, and to respect others as they are. We have to see that we may have been wrong and acknowledge that others have been right. We have to trust one another and take risks with our own ecclesial identities. We may have to be open to the Holy Spirit's prompting, which may take us anywhere, and at the same time work patiently with the existing structures so as to learn how to share them."

The Wesleys originally envisaged a kind of synergy whereby both Methodist and Anglicans could – together – preach the Gospel of Christ in appropriate ways, and serve all those to whom they are called to minister. The churches today have to strive to provide care and worship opportunities that meet the needs of the people "in this generation", just as John and Charles Wesley (both ordained Anglican clergy) sought to do in their own day.

Appendix C: Questionnaire

Ripon College Cuddesdon

MA Dissertation Project:

Survey of the shared activities of the Churches Together in Aldbourne, undertaken in conjunction with the ACCORD Group of the Aldbourne Churches Together

This survey is being undertaken as part of an MA project at Oxford Brookes University, by Sue Rodd, the Assistant Curate in the Whitton Team Benefice (which includes Aldbourne). The questions have been triggered by the ACCORD Group, which works on behalf of the Anglican and Methodist churches in promoting ecumenical (united) Christian activity in the village. **Please note that the questions relate to activities that the churches undertake together – they are thus not concerned with aspects like services or pastoral care that that are undertaken separately, within either the Anglican parish or the Chapel congregation.**

Thank you for agreeing to take part!

- The information will also be used in the preparation of an academic dissertation. It will also be made available to the churches in Aldbourne, and within the Whitton Team Benefice and the Marlborough Section of the Swindon Methodist Circuit. Feedback to the village will be provided via the *Dabchick* and the Aldbourne website.
- No confidential information will be included in any reports, and **no-one** will be identifiable by name in the presented results. Anyone who might be identifiable by role (for example, Stewards or Churchwardens) will have this made clear to them.
- The requirements of the Data Protection Act will be adhered to. No-one under the age of 16 will be approached. The churches' Child Protection policy (approved by the Diocese of Salisbury) will be adhered to.
- By completing the questionnaire, you agree that the information that you provide may be used in the final products of the research, including written and oral presentations. However, you are free to decide not to submit a completed questionnaire without needing to justify that decision and without prejudice.

Thank you for your help!

The Revd Sue Rodd

Assistant Curate, Whitton Team

1. **We need to know how aware people are of the various shared activities of the churches over the past five years. We also need to know whether they are valued, and whether they are regarded as being currently effectively done.**

   (a) Church activities in the community

Activity	Please rate your awareness of, and/or involvement in, the following shared activities of the churches in the village in the past five years. (T*ick the most appropriate box for each*)				Please also rate their contribution to the life of the village. *(Tick for "yes", cross for "no", or leave blank if unsure.)*			Any particular comments? *(Please add specific comments if you wish to)*
	I have been actively involved	I have attended/ benefited from	I am aware of	I am not aware of	Does this add to the life of the village?	&	Is it currently being effective-ly done (say, in the past year)?	
Churches Together Fete								
Welcome packs								
Street stewards								
Carnival float								
Singles lunches								
Coffee Mornings								
Carol singing by the pond								
Crib by the pond								
Foundation (School) Governors								
Shared pastoral care								
"One World Week" – lunches								
Church barbecues								
"Ride & Stride"								
Church outreach group								
Easter/Christmas leaflets								
Concern with local social issues (e.g., sheltered housing)								
Dabchick contributions								
Christian presence in the village								
Providing venues/resources for non-church activities								

(b) Church activities for young people

Activity	Please rate your awareness of, and/or involvement in, the following shared activities of the churches in the village in the past five years. (T*ick the most appropriate box for each*)				Please also rate their contribution to the life of the village. *(Tick for "yes", cross for "no", or leave blank if unsure.)*			Any particular comments? *(Please add specific comments if you wish to)*
	I have been actively involved	I have attended/ benefited from	I am aware of	I am not aware of	Does this add to the life of the village?	&	Is it currently being effective-ly done (say, in the past year)?	
Messy church								
Sparklers pre-schoolers group								
Sunday Club/Zone								
Holiday Club								
All Stars after-school club								
Elastic Band/Rock Solid								

(c) Church courses and groups

Activity	Please rate your awareness of, and/or involvement in, the following shared activities of the churches in the village in the past five years. (T*ick the most appropriate box for each*)				Please also rate their contribution to the life of the village. *(Tick for "yes", cross for "no", or leave blank if unsure.)*			Any particular comments? *(Please add specific comments if you wish to)*
	I have been actively involved	I have attended/ benefited from	I am aware of	I am not aware of	Does this add to the life of the village?	&	Is it currently being effective-ly done (say, in the past year)?	
Home Groups								
EfM study groups								
Lent Courses								
ACT/ACCORD Group								
Women's Fellowship								
Away Weekends								
Talks								
Spring Harvest								

(d) Worship and prayer

Activity	Please rate your awareness of, and/or involvement in, the following shared activities of the churches in the village in the past five years. (T*ick the most appropriate box for each*)				Please also rate their contribution to the life of the village. *(Tick for "yes", cross for "no", or leave blank if unsure.)*			Any particular comments? *(Please add specific comments if you wish to)*
	I have been actively involved	I have attended/ benefited from	I am aware of	I am not aware of	Does this add to the life of the village?	&	Is it currently being effective-ly done (say, in the past year)?	
Remembrance Sunday								
Carol Services + Festival choir								
Fete Services								
Carnival Services								
Christingle								
Community Services								
Palm Sunday Procession								
Covenant Services								
Education Sunday								
Prayer chain								
Prayer Week for Christian Unity								
Women's World Day of Prayer								
United News Sheets								
Good Friday by the Pond								
Illumin8 or Taizé services								
Seder/Maundy Thursday								
Crib service								
Prayer meetings for special needs								
Posada								
Other united services								

2. **What other activities could/should the churches be undertaking together? (This could include things that have happened in the past, that no longer take place.)***

3. **Are there activities that are currently being done together that might be better done separately? Why?***

4. **Do the churches have a role to play in the village? If yes, what do you see as their shared role and purpose?***

5. **Any other comments or suggestions as to how the churches could respond to local needs?***

**** Please write on the back of the page or add extra paper if you need more space, clearly numbering the responses to the different questions.***

6. In order to help us get the views of a balanced sample of the village community, it would help if you could provide us with the following information.
(*Please tick all appropriate categories on this page*)

(a) Gender:

Male	Female

(b) Age:

16 – 20	21 – 39	40 – 59	60+

(c) Number in household:

1	2	3	4	5	>5

(d) Number in household under 18: :

Preschool					Primary School					Secondary School/College				
0	1	2	3	>3	0	1	2	3	>3	0	1	2	3	>3

(e) Attendance over the past year:

(i) *(Tick one box per line)*

	Regularly	Occasion-ally	Never
The Methodist Chapel			
St Michael's Church			
United worship elsewhere in the village (e.g., the Green)			
Another Christian Church			
Worship of another faith			

(ii) *(Tick all that apply)*

For normal Sunday Services	For united services	For festivals (e.g., Easter, Christmas, harvest, ...)	For baptisms, weddings or funerals	For other special services, e.g., Remembrance

I would describe myself as follows *(Tick all that apply)*:

Christian	Anglican	Methodist	A member of another denomination ***(please specify***	A member of another faith ***(please specify)***	Spiritual but not religious	I have no religion

Thank you so much!! Please return this form to the Aldbourne Post Office/Methodist Chapel/St Michael's Church by noon on the 6th December *(Number: PDF)*

Appendix D: Questionnaire distribution and collection

Collector	Forms taken	Forms returned
A	16	15
B	13	8
C	8	6
D	12	10
E	8	0 (illness)
F	8	7
G	8	7
H	8	7
I	8	5
J	8	0
K	8	8
L	8	0 (illness)
M	8	2 (bereavement)
N	8	7
O	8	5
P	8	4
Q	8	6
R	8	7
S	8	3
T	8	3
U	8	4
V	8	8
W	8	0
X	1	0
Y	8	5
Z	8	5
Chapel (unallocated)	10	4
Church (unallocated)	20	2
PO (unallocated)	6	0
Library (unallocated)	6	1
Website	Unlimited	1
Subtotals	**218 allocated** **42 unallocated** **website**	**136 (132 + 4 multiple entries: 62%)** **7 (16.5%)** **1**
Totals	**260 + website**	**144 (55%)**

Appendix E: Further affiliation tables

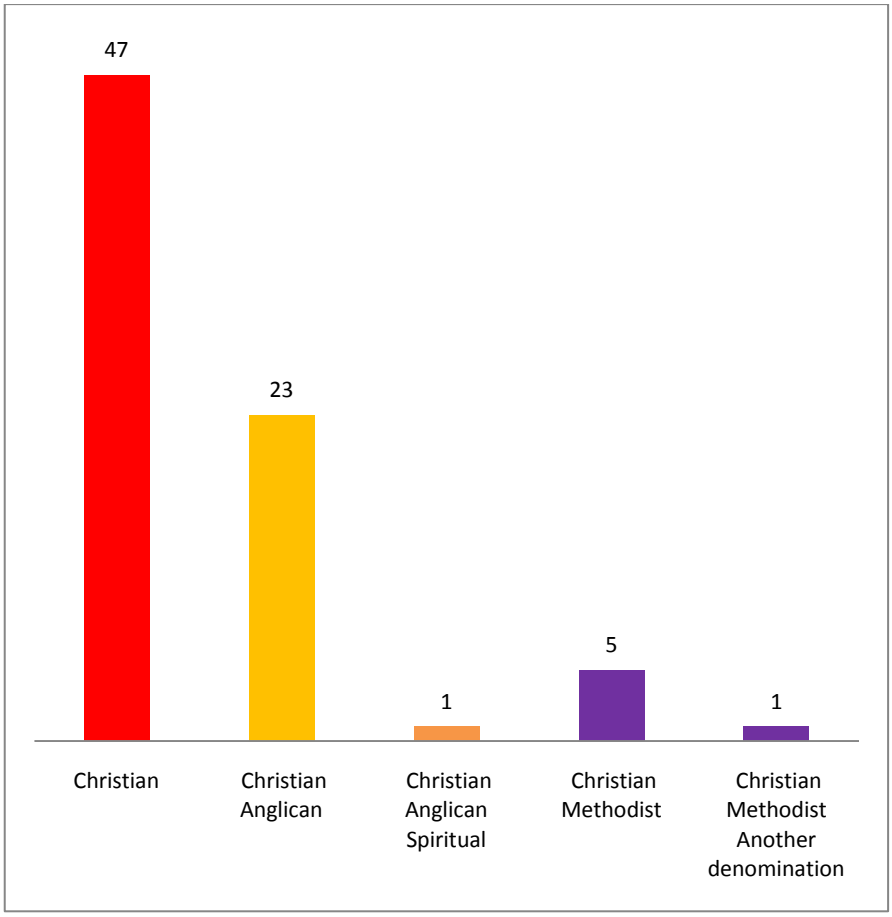

Figure 26: Affiliation "Christian" (total 77, i.e., 50%)

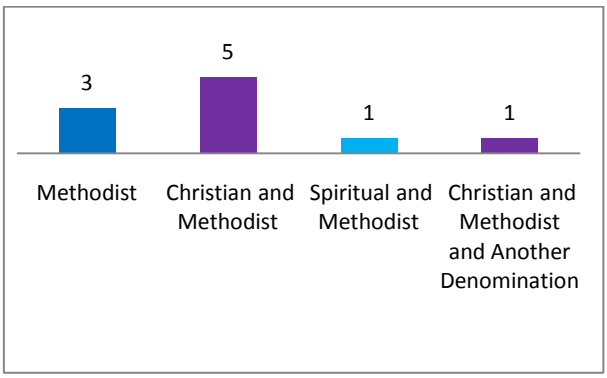

Figure 27: Affiliation "Methodist" (total 10, i.e., 7%)

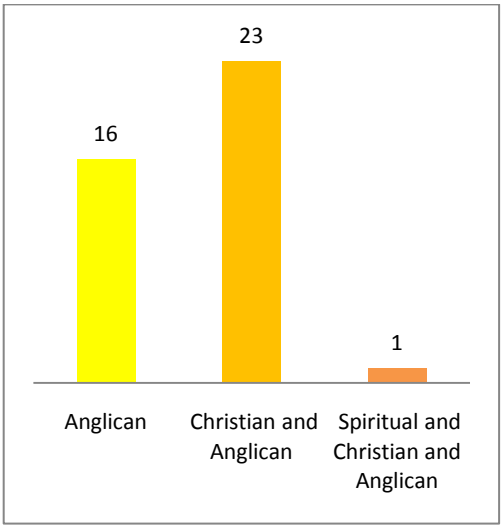

Figure 28: Affiliation "Anglican" (total 40, i.e., 28%)

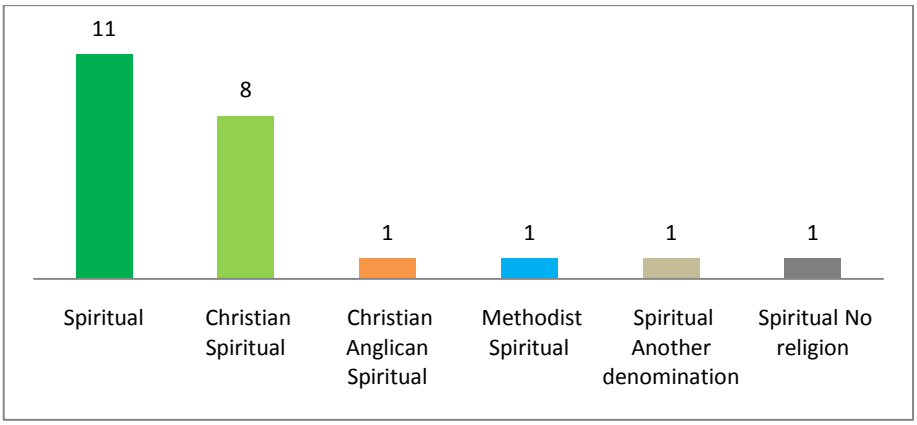

Figure 29: Affiliation "Spiritual" (total 23, i.e., 16%)