

Original citation:

Walker, David Stuart. (2011) Personal prayer, church attendance and social capital among rural churchgoers : quantitative empirical methods as a tool for mission and ministry. *Rural Theology*, 9 (1). pp. 39-47.

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Publisher's statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Rural Theology* on 21 April 2011, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1558/ruth.v9i1.39>

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Personal prayer, church attendance and social capital among rural churchgoers: quantitative empirical methods as a tool for mission and ministry.

Abstract

This study set out to explore the relationship between social capital, church attendance and prayer among a sample of 1185 adults who attended rural harvest festival services in a Church of England diocese in 2007. A measure of social capital was constructed and tested. Multivariate models controlling for age and sex demonstrated that higher frequency of church attendance predicted greater levels of social capital. Controlling further for church attendance it was demonstrated that greater frequency of private prayer was also associated with increased social capital. The implications for rural mission strategies are discussed and suggestions for further study, using a more substantial index for social capital and surveying populations in urban and suburban locations, are made.

Introduction

Social Capital

The language of social capital, popularised by Putnam (2000), has received considerable attention in church circles. It provides an account of how church engagement in local communities can be of positive benefit. Beyond this it acts as a spur to those within the church who call for greater levels of local engagement and those who see a distinctive role exercised by the church in communities where there are high levels of deprivation (see for example: Commission on Urban Life and Faith, 2006).

Putnam's development of the theory has drawn a distinction between "binding" and "bridging" social capital. The first of these describes the social capital built up when individuals develop close knit ties between one another in areas of common interest: the mother and toddler group; the village cricket club; the church choir. Bridging social capital is that built up when individuals are enabled to transcend their obvious ties and form new ties across the boundaries of difference (Putnam, 2000). An example would be members of several local bodies bringing their organisations together to make common cause against the potential loss of the village green. To this earlier theory has been added the concept of "linking" social capital (Woolcock, 2001) which describes the capital built up through links between individuals and organisations operating at different levels; for example, between the local church and a major supermarket where the members of the former may be able to persuade the latter to improve its range of fairly-traded goods. Williams (2008), in a survey of six cathedral congregations, has more recently developed and tested a Religious Social Capital Index which allows measurement of the different dimensions as they relate to Religious social capital.

Prayer

Prayer lies at the heart of religious practice. Jesus' disciples made it clear (Luke 11.1) that they expected him to teach them to pray; he himself (Matthew 6.6) emphasised the importance of private prayer. Books for use in personal devotions remain one of the main

surviving examples of medieval manuscripts and their modern, printed successors continue to grace the catalogues of booksellers. More recently internet sites such as www.oremus.org, devoted to assisting those praying at home, have been set up.

After some early and fascinating empirical studies, beginning with Galton (1872) and spreading from the latter half of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth, research into prayer emerged again in the 1980s. This renaissance was signalled by the production of the reader *Psychological Perspectives on Prayer* (Francis & Astley, 2001) and by Brown's (1994) study *The Human Side of Prayer*. Ap Sion and Francis (2009) review recent empirical research into prayer, while Francis and Robbins (2009) provide the introduction to a study among younger teenagers of the associations between prayer and two other factors: purpose in life and attitudes towards substances. They conclude in both cases that higher frequency of personal prayer is associated with beneficial consequences for the person praying.

Francis and Robbins's (2009) method, of using multivariate analysis to control for factors such as age and sex, is applicable more widely and their conclusions provoke the question as to what other variables might be associated with praying. The attention paid to Social Capital in recent times makes it a good candidate for such study. Moreover there is arguably a significant divide at present in mainstream English Christianity between those who see the church as primarily focussed on individual and internal goals and those who see it as directed towards the service of the community. Within any such division the building up of individuals would fall into the former category whilst the creation of social capital is more commonly associated with the latter.

Research question

This paper set out to test the hypothesis that whilst the frequencies of church attendance and private prayer are strongly associated (Walker, in press) their respective relationships with social capital would reflect the division noted above: churchgoers would either be drawn to express their faith through engagement in the external world of neighbourhood and parish or through the inner spiritual life of private prayer. More specifically, after age and sex have been taken into account, do more frequent churchgoing and more frequent prayer lead to greater or lower levels of social capital and, apart from frequency of church attendance, does frequency of personal prayer make a distinctive contribution to social capital, in either a positive or negative direction.

Method

Instrument

Church attendance frequency was measured by inviting respondents to select one response to the statement, "I attend public worship in church" from a five-point scale: nearly every week; at least once a month; at least six times a year; at least once a year; never.

Personal prayer frequency was measured by the answer to the question, "How often do you pray on your own?" Respondents were given a five-point scale: nearly every day, at least once a week, sometimes, occasionally, never.

Age was measured in decades with the final point on the scale being “70 or over”. *Social capital* was measured through the use of a five-point Likert scale with responses: agree strongly; agree; not certain; disagree; disagree strongly. Four statements were put to respondents: I have friends in this congregation; I come to church to be with other people; there are people here who help me cope with things; being part of the church helps me to feel at home in the community. The first three of these statements, which invite responses about the relationships built up within the church community, lean strongly towards measuring binding capital. The final statement contains bridging elements; inviting respondents to consider how their church membership might relate to the wider community, and so implicitly to their involvements with other local organisations.

Sample

A total of 1185 individuals returned thoroughly completed questionnaires filled in during their attendance at rural Harvest Festival services in the Church of England Diocese of Worcester in 2007. Some 952 respondents lived within the community associated with the church where they filled in the questionnaire; 233 had their home elsewhere. Of those who took part in the survey, 410 were male and 775 female. The sample was strongly weighted towards the older age ranges: 66 were under 20; 26 between 20 and 29; 84 between 30 and 39; 139 between 40 and 49; 184 between 50 and 59; 327 between 60 and 69; 359 were aged 70 or older.

Analysis

The answers from individual respondents to the four questions listed above were added to create a new Social Capital Indicator variable (SCI) whose reliability was checked. The correlations between the variables: SCI age; sex; frequency of church attendance; frequency of personal prayer were calculated. A regression model was used in order to identify the specific contribution that frequency of personal prayer made to respondents’ scores for the SCI variable.

Results

Table 1 presents the scale properties of the new Social Capital Index in terms of the correlation between each item and the sum total of the other three items. The alpha coefficient (Chronbach 1951) and the “item rest of test” correlations (r) are calculated. In table 1 the “agree” and “agree strongly” responses have been combined for the column headed “yes%”.

---Insert table 1 around here---

The alpha coefficient of .68 is in excess of DeVellis’ (2003) suggested threshold of .65 and the item rest of test correlations are all above 0.3. These results demonstrate good internal consistency and reliability for a scale of this length.

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix for church attendance, prayer and social capital. In addition two other variables are considered, age and sex, as it is likely that these could have a significant impact on the variables being studied.

---Insert table 2 around here---

Table 2 demonstrates correlations with significance at the $p < .001$ level at each point in the table for the variables representing social capital and prayer.

Unsurprisingly church attendance has a positive correlation with age; an earlier paper (Walker 2010) identified that the occasional churchgoers in the sample were significantly younger than the frequent churchgoers. Older people and women are seen both to pray more and to have higher scores for the Social Capital Index. This demonstrates the importance of bringing these two variables into the analysis, so that any apparent associations between church attendance, prayer and social capital are not simply reflections of age and sex.

Turning to the three factors on which this paper is focussed, Table 2 shows a very strong positive correlation of .47 between the respective frequencies of churchgoing and private prayer. There is also a good correlation of .28 between frequency of churchgoing and social capital. The positive correlation of .25 between prayer and social capital could simply be a reflection of this association. Regression analysis was therefore necessary in order to separate out the impacts of age, sex and church attendance in order to establish the actual impact of prayer on the SCI variable.

---Insert table 3 around here---

Table 3 presents a complete regression model for age, sex, church attendance and prayer (in that order) in relation to the SCI measure for social capital. Two clear results emerge from Table 3, which yield the central results of this paper; both with a significance level of $p < .001$, the highest level of confidence generally used in such studies. Firstly, as anticipated in the hypothesis, after taking account of age and sex, frequency of church attendance has a positive association with social capital; more specifically it contributes +.20 to the scale scores for SCI of the respondents. Secondly, and contrary to the original hypothesis, after the effect of frequency of church attendance has been allowed for, there is a further contribution of prayer to the mean of the scale scores for SCI of +.14. Notwithstanding heuristic notions that churchgoers would divide into those who pray and those who “do good”, for people of the same age, sex and frequency of churchgoing, greater social capital is associated with more frequent prayer.

Discussion and conclusions

Social capital, church attendance and prayer.

Previous research, using various measures of social capital, has already explored the association between social capital and church attendance. These are divided by Williams (2008) into two families. The first group of studies, for example Yeung (2004) sampling

1038 adults in Finland, explores and finds positive associations between church attendance and volunteering. The second set of studies explores the association between churchgoing and the relationships developed within a community; for example Wucknow (2002) takes a sample of 5603 American respondents and finds evidence of enhanced status-bridging social capital (in particular friendships with public officials) among those who go to church.

The present survey confirms that church attendance in rural Church of England parishes is associated with stronger levels of social capital and extends the earlier results by using a very different measure of social capital

There is no equivalent to the literature on social capital and church attendance when attention is turned to study of the association between social capital and prayer. However, analysis of the present data set has demonstrated that within rural Church of England parishes frequent personal prayer has a significant positive impact on a measure of social capital after the effects of sex, age and church attendance have been accounted for.

Statistical associations of this nature do not demonstrate causality in either direction. Indeed, in the absence of any obvious causal relationship between the three factors, it is important to consider that increased levels of church attendance and of prayer may lead to higher levels of social capital and that increased levels of social capital may lead individuals to attend church and to pray more frequently.

Churches are pulled in a variety of different ways as they seek to grow in faith and mission. Church leaders may seek to encourage congregations to attend Sunday worship more frequently, to deepen their spiritual life or to strengthen their social bonds. Within the Church of England these tensions can emerge during the production of Parish Profiles as part of the process of identifying the ministerial and mission priorities that a benefice wishes to set before prospective candidates for the post of their incumbent. They can also emerge within diocesan strategies.

The results of this paper suggest that church initiatives and programmes directed at deepening the prayer life of the congregation may, if effective, also increase the frequency with which individuals attend worship and the strength of the links within the congregation that enhance social capital. Furthermore even where attendance at public worship does not increase in frequency, encouraging people to pray more often seems to build social capital. Again, church programmes that emphasise the place of the congregation in serving the wider community may find that increased levels of social capital are also reflected in more frequent church attendance and personal prayer. And thirdly, local churches that effectively increase the frequency at which congregation members attend public worship may also expect to see greater levels of engagement in the community and increased private prayer. What has been found here is that these three possible focal areas for church energies are not pursued at the expense of each other. People who pray more do not withdraw from their community involvements or churchgoing; people who go to church more do not neglect their spiritual lives or

neighbourhoods; people who get involved more in the life of the community do not diminish their churchgoing or their prayer lives.

A major limitation of the present study concerns the limited way in which social capital was measured. Within the restrictions of a larger survey it was possible to ask only four questions that related directly to social capital. The answers to only one of these, “being part of the church helps me to feel at home in the community”, provided a measure of bridging capital; the other three measured binding within the congregation; no statement explored linking capital. To that extent SCI presents a very simple measure of social capital. And, whilst both it and the substantially larger Williams Religious Social Capital Index (Williams 2008) are useful vehicles for testing broad theory, what is now needed is a focussed family of instruments, clearly differentiating the different forms of social capital. Such instruments could usefully develop the present results by investigating whether private prayer largely binds people to others who pray regularly or bridges from them into the wider community and its organisations. Further studies in urban and suburban areas would identify the extent, if any, to which the associations that have been observed are distinctive features of rural society.

Finally, the *Five Marks of Mission* of the Anglican Communion (Anglican Communion Office) set out a holistic model which incorporates both the nurture of the present congregation and engagement in service of the wider community. Walker (2010) used the same survey as here to explore the use of the Marks in a rural context and as a means of engaging infrequent churchgoers as well as regular ones. The results of the present paper underscore the value of using such a wide model of mission so that personal devotion, church attendance and public service can be addressed simultaneously. They suggest that further studies might usefully explore the extent to which engagement with each of the five marks is associated with engagement with the others. It may be that study of the relationships between these aspects of church life can contribute to the development of the concept of the “Big Society” which lies at the heart of the thinking of the present UK government and its endeavours to engage churches and other faith institutions. Indeed the recent invitation to Puttnam to address a meeting at 10 Downing Street gives a strong indication that the study of social capital in a religious context is of significance well beyond the institutions of the church.

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Tables

Table 1: Reliability test for construction of combined variable “SCI”

Statement	<i>r</i>	<i>yes %</i>
I have friends in this congregation	.36	91
I come to church to be with other people	.47	56
There are people here who help me cope with things	.56	56
Being part of the church helps me to feel at home in the community	.48	76
Chronbach’s Alpha	.68	

Table 2: Correlation matrix for age, sex, church attendance, prayer and social capital

Variable	SCI	prayer	attendance	age
sex	.10***	.12***	.04	-.05
age	.12***	.29***	.28***	
attendance	.28***	.47***		
prayer	.25***			

*** = $p < .001$

Table 3: Regression model for age, sex, church attendance and prayer in relation to social capital (SCI)

	r^2	increase in			Beta	t	p<
		r^2	F	p<			
sex	.01	.01	11.6	.001	+.08	2.7	.01
age	.03	.02	18.8	.001	+.03	.9	ns
attendance	.09	.06	81.5	.001	+.20	6.4	.001
prayer	.10	.02	19.5	.001	+.14	4.4	.001