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Building a Relational Culture and Empirical Theology: Exploring the Impact of Congregational Bonding Social Capital on Perceived Faith Development and Perceived Church Growth

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ABSTRACT

Building on recent interest to assess and encourage a relational culture within the Church of England and drawing on the *Signs of Growth* survey conducted within the Diocese of Southwark, this study examines the association between congregational bonding social capital and both perceived faith development and perceived church growth among 7,924 weekly churchgoers between the ages of 20 and 69 who had been established in their church for at least three years. The data confirmed that a relational culture goes hand-in-hand with personal faith development and with potential for church growth.

KEYWORDS

Empirical theology; congregation survey; church growth; faith development; social capital

Introduction

The present study draws into conversation four bodies of research in order to frame a research question concerning the associations among a relational culture, faith development, and church growth, specifically within the context of the Church of England. The first and most recent body of knowledge concerns an intentional focus on the notion of relational culture by an informal working group of Anglicans called Relation Church UK (see Norwood, Davies, McCoulough, Richards, & Grundy, 2022). Although not consciously connected with the body of work on Relational-Cultural Therapy, as summarised by Jordan (2018), the construct of relationality is approached in a similar way, but nuanced by theological and biblical insights. Relational-Cultural Therapy posits that relationships are central to flourishing human lives. Relation Church UK posits that relationships are central to flourishing churches. Both see the issue of individualism as the enemy, antithetical to community.

The second, and somewhat more established body of knowledge concerns a methodological approach to researching issues relevant to theology and ecclesiology, known as

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empirical theology. In essence empirical theology, with twin roots in the Netherlands and in England and Wales (see Cartledge, 1999), argues that it is appropriate for theologians to adopt research tools engineered by the social sciences in order to test the validity and authenticity of theological claims. Working within this broad tradition, Francis and Village (2015) ground their approach to empirical theology within the dominical invitation to ‘Go and observe the sower’ (Mark 4: 1–20) where the activity of the sower was subjected to scientific scrutiny, employing both qualitative methods (distinguishing different kinds of soil) and quantitative methods (counting the yield). The relational church thesis is now ripe for empirical investigation.

The third body of knowledge concerns the science of congregation studies. Within a range of approaches to congregation studies, the Australian National Church Life Survey has established a robust model of quantitative surveys conducted in 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021 (see for example Kaldor, Bellamy, et al., 1992; Kaldor, Dixon, et al., 1999; Pepper, Powell, Sterland, & Hancock, 2018). Working within a similar tradition, but focusing much more tightly on one denomination and one geographical area, Francis and Lankshear (2021a) reported on a detailed study of congregations in the Anglican Diocese of Southwark (South London) where 97% of the churches participated and 31,521 completed surveys were processed. One of the strengths of this study concerns the way in which it was informed by sociological theory (Francis & Lankshear, 2015) and by psychological theory (Francis & Lankshear, 2021b). There is potential for investigating the relational church thesis by interrogating this specific dataset.

The fourth body of knowledge concerns the integration of social capital theory within the science of congregation studies and the development of scales designed specifically to measure social capital generation within this context. Since the core construct operationalised by the present study is grounded in social capital theory, closer attention will be given to this fourth body of knowledge.

Social capital theory

Hall (1999) defined social capital succinctly as ‘the propensity of individuals to be associated together on a regular basis, to trust one another, and to engage in community affairs’ (p. 417). In a similar vein Putnam (2000) defined social capital as ‘connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (p. 19). Social capital theory has then distinguished between bonding social capital and bridging social capital, as rehearsed by Putnam (2000), and linking social capital as developed by Woolcock (2001). According to Putnam (2000, p. 25) bonding social capital acts as a ‘kind of sociological super-glue’ in maintaining strong in-group loyalty and promoting robust identity, while bridging social capital acts as a ‘kind of sociological WD40’ when individuals in groups form linkages with others different from themselves. Linking social capital addresses power differentials within society and allows marginal groups to link with more powerful groups.

Baker and Miles-Watson (2010) provided an insightful and analytic overview of the application of social capital theory within faith communities. Faith communities contribute to the development of: social networks and social wellbeing among their members (bonding social capital); social life and interpersonal networks extending into local and wider communities (bridging social capital); and connections among individuals

and groups operating within different strata of society (linking social capital). However, faith groups may need to be confident in their own bonding social capital before they can offer strong bridging and linking social capital to others.

Four pioneering attempts to develop measures of social capital appropriate for application within the science of congregation studies were advanced by Walker (2011), Williams (2008), Muskett (2014), and Robbins, Francis, and Powell (2012). In the first of these studies, Walker (2011) developed a 4-item index of congregational social capital, using the following statements: 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 feel at home in the community. Walker argued that the first three items lean strongly towards measuring bonding social capital, whilst the fourth contains elements of bridging social capital. Among a sample of 1,185 rural churchgoers, this instrument generated an alpha coefficient of .68 and demonstrated that higher levels of congregational social capital were associated with being female, with being older, with greater frequency of attendance, and with greater frequency of personal prayer.

Williams (2008) developed a 12-item index of congregational social capital, combining three items concerned with bonding social capital, three items concerned with bridging social capital, three items concerned with linking social capital, and three items concerned with the notion of social trust underpinning social capitals. Among a sample of 720 cathedral attenders, this instrument generated an alpha coefficient of .83, and demonstrated that higher levels of congregational social capital were associated with greater frequency of attendance.

Muskett (2014) developed a modified version of William's instrument adapted for use among members of cathedral friends' associations. Among a sample of 923 cathedral friends, this instrument generated an alpha coefficient of .93 and demonstrated that higher levels of social capital were associated with greater levels of activity within the friends' associations.

Robbins et al. (2012) developed a 5-item index that concentrated specifically on congregational bonding social capital. Among a sample of 2,065 Australian churchgoers, this instrument generated an alpha coefficient of .91 and demonstrated significant associations between levels of congregational bonding social capital and the individual psychological type profile of the participants. Higher levels of congregational bonding social capital were found among extraverts (compared with introverts), among intuitive types (compared with sensing types), and among feeling types (compared with thinking types).

Informed by these earlier measures, Francis and Lankshear (2015) designed a 7-item index of congregational bonding social capital, embracing a wider range of items, to include within the *Signs of Growth* research project commissioned by the Anglican Diocese of Southwark. Tested among a sample of 23,884 adult churchgoers and named the Congregational Bonding Social Capital Scale (CBSCS), this new instrument generated an alpha coefficient of .75 and demonstrated that levels of congregational bonding social capital increased in step with frequency of attendance.

The 7-item Congregational Bonding Social Capital Scale (CBSCS) developed by Francis and Lankshear (2015) was subsequently deployed in two in-depth analyses of the *Signs of Growth* dataset. In the first analysis, Francis and Lankshear (2021c) examined

the association between congregational bonding social capital and a range of individual differences. In terms of sex, no significant difference was found between women and men. In terms of frequency of attendance, high levels of bonding social capital were nurtured by weekly attendance, and to a lesser extent by fortnightly attendance. Those who attended less frequently than once a month were much less connected with congregational bonding social capital generation. In terms of membership status, congregational bonding social capital was stronger among those who had displayed their commitment to membership in one way or another, whether by registering on the electoral role, being confirmed, or being a communicant.

In terms of age, congregational bonding social capital was strongest among those in their fifties and beyond. In terms of marital status, congregational bonding social capital was strongest among those who were married, widowed, separated or divorced, and lowest among those in a civil partnership or living with a partner. In terms of ethnicity, congregational bonding social capital was strongest among black Africans, and lowest among those classifying themselves as non-British white or as of mixed ethnic backgrounds. In terms of employment status, congregational bonding social capital was strongest among the retired, and lowest among those in full-time work, unemployed, and students. In terms of time taken to travel to church, congregational bonding social capital was strongest among those who lived within 20 minutes of their church. As time taken to travel to church increased beyond 20 minutes, congregational bonding social capital decreased, with the lowest levels among those who travelled for an hour or more.

In the second analysis, Village (2021) explored two contrasting hypotheses concerning belonging, ethnicity, and homophily in local congregations. The first hypothesis was that religious organisations may inhibit social cohesion because of the tendency for ethnic groups to worship in their own homogeneous congregations. The second hypothesis was that where congregations are ethnically mixed they may promote integration rather than isolation. These two contrasting hypotheses were tested by examining the individual-level and congregational-level factors that promoted congregational bonding social capital. While the homophily principle predicts that congregational bonding social capital would be highest in the most ethnically homogeneous congregations, there was little evidence from the data to suggest that ethnically diverse congregations generated lower levels of congregational bonding social capital.

Shaping the research question

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to revisit the data generated by the *Signs of Growth* project within the Diocese of Southwark (Francis & Lankshear, 2021a) in order to test the associations between levels of congregational bonding social capital, as conceptualised and operationalised by Francis and Lankshear (2015), and perception of personal faith development and perception of church growth.

In order to focus this research question within the pre-existing database, the research question has been clarified and sharpened by attempting to identify the core group of congregation members with whom the longer-term future of the congregation may rest and whose consistent presence may both model the extent to which their church exemplifies congregational bonding social capital and set the policies and practices that may facilitate or inhibit opportunities for faith development and church growth.

The three criteria on which this core group was identified were specified as concerning age profile (between the ages of 20 and 69), length of time within the congregation (at least three years), and frequency of attendance (at least weekly).

Two of these three delimiting factors were grounded in findings from earlier research reported on the Southwark data. In terms of age, two analyses provided by Jewell, Francis, and Lankshear (2021) and by Rolph, Rolph, and Francis (2021) drew attention to the growing sense of marginalisation among churchgoers in their eighties that was already emerging among churchgoers in their seventies. In terms of frequency of attendance, Francis and Lankshear (2015) drew attention to the way in which congregational bonding social capital was better established among weekly attenders than among those who attend less frequently. In terms of time within the congregation, it seemed unrealistic to expect newly joining members to have had time to experience and to evaluate properly the networks that shape and inform bonding social capital.

Method

Procedure

Each of the three Episcopal Areas within the Diocese of Southwark identified a Sunday and the following weekdays during which everyone who attended an Anglican ‘act of worship’ within that Episcopal Area would be invited to complete the *Signs of Growth* questionnaire. Of the 360 Anglican churches within the three Episcopal Areas, 348 agreed to participate in the project. All told 31,521 questionnaires were completed. This represents a good response rate when set against the average Sunday attendance reported for the diocese in 2008 as 43,450.

Measures

Congregational bonding social capital was assessed by the Congregational Bonding Social Capital Scale (CBSCS; Francis & Lankshear, 2015), a seven-item instrument rated on a five-point Likert scale: agree strongly (5), agree (4), not certain (3), disagree (2), and disagree strongly (1). As well as a direct question about a sense of belonging, the measure contained items concerning the importance of the church for social life and social support, involvement in decision-making, and perceptions of depth of relationships and caring in the congregation generally.

Perception of faith development and of church growth were each assessed by single item measures (‘I am growing in my Christian faith’ and ‘The membership of my church will grow in the next 12 months’), rated on a five-point Likert scale: agree strongly (5), agree (4), not certain (3), disagree (2), and disagree strongly (1).

Frequency of church attendance was assessed by the question ‘How often do you attend church apart from weddings and funerals?’ rated on a nine-point scale from less than once a year (1) to at least three times a week (9).

Duration in the congregation was assessed by the question ‘How long have you regarded this as your church?’ rated on a five-point scale: just visiting (1), one year or less (2), one to three years (3), three to five years (4), and more than five years (5).

Age of adults was categorised in decades from 20 to 29 (5) to 80 or over (11) and regarded as a continuous variable for analyses.

Sex was coded male (1) and female (2) and regarded as a dummy variable for analyses.

Participants

The present analyses are based on a subset of participants selected to concentrate attention on a specific group of adult churchgoers: those aged 20 or over and under 70, who have been part of the same congregation for at least three years, and who attend church at least once a week. This subgroup comprised a total of 7,924 participants: 2,748 (35%) men and 5,176 (65%) women. In terms of age: 326 (4%) were in their twenties, 747 (9%) in their thirties, 1,871 (24%) in their forties, 2,271 (29%) in their fifties, and 2,709 (34%) in their sixties. In terms of duration in the congregation: 1,083 (14%) had been there for between three and five years, and 6,841 (86%) had been there for more than five years.

Analysis

The data were analysed by the SPSS package, using the frequency, reliability, correlation, and regression routines.

Results and discussion

The first step in data analysis examines the core variables employed in the study. [Table 1](#) presents the scale properties for the Congregational Bonding Social Capital Scale among the present subgroup of churchgoers between the ages of 20 and 69 years who have been members of their congregation for at least three years and who attend services weekly. The data confirm that the seven items work well together to generate a scale with alpha internal consistency reliability (Cronbach, 1951) of .72. The items also show good variability in discrimination and level of endorsement. Overall, the findings show a good level of bonding social capital among core congregational members. In terms

Table 1. Congregational Bonding Social Capital Scale: Scale properties.

	<i>r</i> CICT	Endorsement %		
		Yes	?	No
I feel a strong sense of belonging to my church	.50	94	5	1
My church is important for my social life	.41	74	16	10
My relationships are fairly superficial in my church*	.37	17	20	64
I feel part of my church's decision making	.52	56	26	18
I turn to fellow members of my church when I need help	.46	64	21	15
I am not involved in the running of my church*	.41	24	17	59
Members of my church care deeply for one another	.43	79	17	4
alpha	.72			

Note: N = 7,924.

CICT = Corrected Item Total Correlation.

Yes = sum of agree and agree strongly responses.

? = the uncertain responses.

No = sum of disagree and disagree strongly responses.

* = these items were reverse coded for CICT but not for item endorsement (%).

of the five positively voiced items: 94% feel a strong sense of belonging to their church; 79% feel that members of their church care deeply for one another; 74% regard their church as important for their social life; 64% turn to fellow members of their church when they need help; and 56% feel part of their church's decision making. In terms of the two negatively voiced items: 24% feel that they are not involved in the running of their church; and 17% feel that their relationships are fairly superficial in their church.

Table 2 presents the perceptions of faith development and church growth among the present subgroup of churchgoers between the age of 20 and 69 years who have been members of their congregation for at least three years and who attend services weekly. The data show that the majority (80%) of these core congregation members feel that they are growing in their Christian faith. Although there is less confidence in church growth than in personal faith development, half (49%) of these core congregation members feel that their church will grow in the next 12 months.

Table 3 presents the second step in data analysis, namely the bivariate correlations between the five variables of scientific interest in the present study: congregational bonding social capital, perception of faith development, perception of church growth, sex and age. Three aspects of this correlation matrix merit commentary. First, sex differences are not strong. Women report a slightly (but significantly) higher level of confidence concerning their growth in faith, compared with men, but there are no sex differences in respect of perceptions of congregational growth or in respect of levels of congregational bonding social capital. Second, age differences are not strong. Younger members report a slightly (but significantly) higher level of confidence both in their faith development and in the growth of their church, compared with older members, but there is no age difference in respect of levels of congregational bonding social capital. Third, there is a stronger (and highly significant) correlation between levels of congregational bonding social capital and both perceptions of personal growth in faith and perceptions of congregational growth. As a cross-sectional study these data are not able to demonstrate causation, but they are able to confirm association. In other words, the data do not demonstrate that congregational bonding social capital *promotes* either personal faith development or congregational growth, but that good levels of congregational bonding social capital, perceptions of faith development, and perceptions of church growth all develop hand-in-hand.

The correlation matrix has demonstrated both clear bivariate associations between the main variables of interest (congregational bonding social capital, perception of faith development, and perception of church growth) and only weak associations with the two control variables (age and sex). The analysis could stop there. For completeness, however, Table 4 presents the fourth and final step in data analysis, namely the two

Table 2. Perceptions of faith development and church growth.

	Endorsement %		
	Yes	?	No
I am growing in my Christian faith	80	17	3
The membership of my church will grow in the next 12 months	49	43	8

Note: N = 7,924.

Yes = sum of agree and agree strongly responses.

? = the uncertain responses.

No = sum of disagree and disagree strongly responses.

Table 3. Correlation matrix.

	CBSCS	Sex	Age	GF
Congregational growth (CG)	.29***	.00	-.06***	.31***
Growing in faith (GF)	.30***	.07***	-.05***	
Age	.02	.02		
Sex	-.02			

Note: N = 7,924.

CBSCS = Congregational Bonding Social Capital Scale.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Regression models.

	Cong growth			Faith growth		
	Beta	<i>t</i>		Beta	<i>t</i>	
Sex	.00	0.3	ns	.07	6.7	.001
Age	-.07	-6.3	.001	-.06	-5.2	.001
CBSCS	.30	27.5	.001	.31	28.7	.001

Note: N = 7,924.

CBSCS = Congregational Bonding Social Capital Scale.

Cong growth = the membership of my church will grow in the next 12 months.

Faith growth = I am growing in my Christian faith.

regression models that explore the effect on the two dependent variables (perception of faith development and perception of church growth) of individual differences in levels of congregational bonding social capital after controlling for the effects of sex and age. The data demonstrate that the findings from the correlation matrix remain robust.

Conclusion

Against a wider background of interest in assessing and building a relational culture within the Church of England (see Norwood et al., 2022), the present study revisited the data generated by the *Signs of Growth* project within the Diocese of Southwark (Francis & Lankshear, 2021a) in order to test the associations between levels of congregational bonding social capital, as conceptualised and operationalised by Francis and Lankshear (2015) and perception of personal faith development and perception of church growth. Employing this database the research question was clarified and sharpened by attempting to identify the core group of congregation members with whom the longer-term future of the congregation may rest and whose consistent presence may both model the extent to which their church exemplifies congregational bonding social capital and set the policies and practices that may facilitate or inhibit opportunities for faith development and church growth.

The main conclusion from the data presented by this study is that the three phenomena conceptualised as congregational bonding social capital, perceived growth in faith, and perceived potential for church growth go hand-in-hand. While the present research design is unable to disentangle a causal sequence among these three constructs, it is reasonable to hypothesise that church growth *per se* is unlikely to be the cause of churches developing stronger congregational bonding social capital among members who have been stable in the congregation for more than three years. It is also reasonable to hypothesise that individuals perceiving themselves to be growing in faith is unlikely to

be the cause of *other* congregational members projecting a more relational culture. On the other hand, it is reasonable to hypothesise that a church community responding to the Gospel invitation to join Jesus' school of discipleship learning, may result in a core membership that exemplifies a warm relational culture. Like the original 12 disciples who responded to Jesus' initial call (Mark 3: 13–19), such a membership may well come to experience a deepening perception of who it is who is calling them (Mark 8: 27–30). Like the original 12 disciples who found themselves feeding the five thousand (Mark 6: 34–44), such a membership may well come to experience the clamour of others desirous to follow in the discipleship path with them (see further Francis, 2022).

Limitations

There are several clear limitations with the present study. The data were collected a decade ago within one diocese of the Church of England (Southwark) that cannot claim to be representative of the Church of England as a whole. Whilst congregational bonding social capital was assessed by an established instrument, perceptions both of faith development and of church growth were assessed by single item measure. Faith development and church growth were both assessed by subjective measures rather than by objective measures, such as change in numbers attending these congregations. Only a small number of control variables was included in the present analyses (sex and age). Each of these shortcomings could be addressed by future research were the Church of England to decide that investing in such research may help to assist and to develop sound strategy. For the time being, however, the pioneering venture into congregational research by the Diocese of Southwark provides the strongest source of data on which we can currently draw.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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