

Church on the Margins

Is the Church losing faith in low-income communities
in Greater Manchester?



**BRENDAN
RESEARCH**

**Sarah Purcell and Fiona Tweedie
February 2023**

Acknowledgements

This report was published by Church Action on Poverty in February 2023.

Church Action on Poverty is a national ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. We work in partnership with churches and with people in poverty themselves to find solutions to poverty, locally, nationally and globally.

The 'Church on the Margins' programme was funded by the Sir Halley Stewart Trust, Methodist Action for Peace and Justice, the MB Reckitt Trust, and the Society of Jesus.

Sarah Purcell is Church Action on Poverty's Research and Information Officer.

Dr Fiona Tweedie of Brendan Research is a statistical researcher based in Edinburgh who is committed to making numbers mean something – investigating and communicating what is going on.

This report is published under a Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC-ND. This means that you are free to share (copy, distribute and transmit) the report, under the following conditions:

Attribution. The report should be cited as: '*Church on the Margins: A study of church closures in Greater Manchester between 2010 and 2020*'. Church Action on Poverty. Available for download from www.church-poverty.org.uk/cotm. (This does not suggest that the authors or Church Action on Poverty endorse you or your use of the material).

Non-commercial. You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

No derivative works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon the material. For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.

Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from Church Action on Poverty. Nothing in this licence impairs or restricts the author's moral rights. Your fair dealing and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

This is a human-readable summary of the Creative Commons Legal Code (see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/legalcode>).

Church Action on Poverty, 28 Sandpiper Court, Water's Edge Business Park, Modwen Road, Salford M5 3EZ

Registered charity number 1079986. Company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales, number 3780243.

Contents

- 3** Executive summary
- 4** Introduction
- 6** The Church Action on Poverty study
- 7** Results
- 12** Findings
- 22** Conclusions
- 23** Appendix: limitations and difficulties with the research
- 24** References
- 25** Endnotes

Executive summary

- Do the main UK Christian denominations adhere to the gospel priority to work with, and alongside, the poorest and most marginalised people in society? Is this reflected in the allocation of church resources (e.g. church buildings, allocation of ministers/clergy, money)?
 - Launched in 2020, our Church on the Margins programme has involved qualitative and quantitative research into church closures over the last 10 years, alongside peer learning with church communities in low-income areas in Greater Manchester.
 - We were inspired by the Church of Scotland's model of 'Priority Areas' which gives precedence to churches in communities where deprivation falls within the 5% most deprived according to the Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation.
 - This report outlines our quantitative research findings, based on statistical research on patterns of church closures across Greater Manchester over the last 10 years, case studies and the wider denominational context.
 - We wanted to find out whether low-income areas in the UK have been disproportionately affected by the closure of church buildings over recent years. To do this, we mapped the pattern of church closures in relation to the indices of deprivation, across five Christian denominations (Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist and United Reformed Churches) within Greater Manchester.
 - Our key finding is that significantly more churches have closed in low-income areas than in more affluent areas in Greater Manchester. Most church closures within the Church of England, Catholic, Methodist and Baptist denominations were in the most deprived areas. Only the United Reformed Church had more closures in affluent areas than in low-income areas.
 - Reasons for church closures included: declining numbers attending church services; buildings falling into disrepair, coupled with churches being unable to afford their upkeep; and fewer priests and ministers to serve the churches. However, this in itself does not explain why many more churches have closed in 'deprived' areas, in comparison to more affluent areas.
- This points towards wider questions about denominational priorities and decisions to close churches in 'deprived' areas. Are denominations retreating from low-income areas rather than adhering to the gospel priority to stand with, and alongside, the poor?
 - This in turn raises questions about how churches are structured and allocate resources. Despite many projects and programmes designed to work with and alongside communities affected by poverty, our research found that church closures have been concentrated in low-income areas.
 - If people in low-income areas are not engaging with church, we need to ask why. Are churches out of touch with the people and context of low-income areas?
 - Set against this are examples demonstrating that reflection and openness to change are crucial to the long-term sustainability of churches in low-income areas. The research highlights particular examples where local churches have adapted to their changing situation and found ways to continue, whether by moving to a new community location or by developing a new image and way of being church.
 - Churches are all too often accused of being white, middle-class spaces. In order to reach more people, churches need to reflect the diversity of the UK, including working-class people, communities facing racial injustice, people with disabilities, LBGTQ+ people and many more.
 - Churches need to welcome more trainees from working-class and Global Majority Heritage backgrounds. Training for both ordained and lay ministry should include exploration of issues affecting low-income communities, including inequality, poverty, social and racial justice.
- This report is accompanied by a separate publication, *What Does It Mean to be a Church on the Margins?*, which features stories and qualitative findings from churches we have worked with in marginalised communities across Greater Manchester. Both reports are available for download from www.church-poverty.org.uk/cotm.**

Introduction

*“If our Church is not marked by caring for the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, we are guilty of heresy.”
Saint Ignatius of Loyola*

Church Action on Poverty has been working on the theme of Church on the Margins for a number of years; we have explored what it means to be a ‘Church of the poor’¹; we have considered the language associated with this theme and, at times, struggled to find appropriate language to describe this area of work. We have had many conversations with church members, clergy, our supporters and people who understand church in alternative ways to the ‘traditional’. Our qualitative research report (available at www.church-poverty.org.uk/cotm) explores this in more detail.

Our Church on the Margins (COTM) programme, which was launched in 2020, involved a number of strands:

- qualitative and quantitative research into church closures across Greater Manchester over the last ten years;
- peer-learning work with church communities in low-income areas in Greater Manchester;
- theological reflection;
- sharing our findings;
- challenging the churches.

This report outlines our quantitative research findings, which includes information about churches that have closed over the last ten years across Greater Manchester, case studies and the wider denominational context.

Why did we undertake the research?

Following the publication of research by Michael Hirst (2016) which found that Methodist church presence was increasingly becoming skewed towards affluent rather than low-income areas, and Pope Francis’ call for churches to be ‘churches of and for the poor’ (2013), we spent some time exploring what the theme of Church on the Margins / Church of the Poor meant to people from different denominations (2018). We wanted to find out whether low-income areas in the UK have been disproportionately affected by the closure of church buildings over recent years. We wanted to know whether the main denominations adhere to the Gospel priority to work with, and alongside, the poorest and most marginalised people in society, and whether this is reflected in the allocation of church resources (e.g. the placement of ministers/clergy, money and other resources)?

What happens when a church building closes?

Following on from Hirst’s research (2016) which found that the closure of Methodist churches in the

UK were increasingly taking place in low-income areas, we wanted to find out whether this was true of the other main denominations, and when a church building in a low-income area closes, what effect does it have on the church members and the wider community? Often the former congregation (officially or unofficially) merge with another nearby church (the various denominations have different parish and deanery structures that accommodate this). Sometimes the congregation move to a new building (e.g. a school, church hall or community centre), or cease to exist as the church community they once were. How does this impact church members? Do they lose their church community and sense of belonging? Can they travel further afield to churches in other neighbourhoods, or do they face barriers such as the cost of travel, lack of time, disability, etc. Losing the church community, the minister and support they once had can have a profound effect on people who are already struggling with poverty and marginalisation.

A recent study found that churches play a vital role in the community, particularly in times of need. The research by the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture found that churches can act as vital community hubs, as well as places of comfort and refuge in times of crisis (Dyas and Giles, 2021).

“They offer a lifeline to many and provide an almost invisible infrastructure of care, support and socialisation for people of all faiths and none across the whole country. It wasn’t until much of this disappeared overnight, because of enforced church closures, that its full importance to individuals and communities was realised.”

The report found that both church members and non-church-goers had been affected by the closure of church buildings during the pandemic; 75% of non-church-goers reported that they wanted to access churches as places of reflection and comfort. The report highlights the role that churches play as social hubs, offering practical support and companionship

Losing a local church can have a detrimental impact on the wider community. This may be the loss of a community meeting space, or the loss of spiritual, physical and economic support previously offered by the church (e.g. food banks, community meeting rooms). Low-income communities often suffer from a lack of resources and investment (e.g. food deserts, healthcare, community services), therefore when a church building closes it is another loss for a community that is already struggling.

The English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)

The Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) is a measure of relative deprivation at local levels across

An example from the Church of Scotland

We were inspired by the Church of Scotland's model of 'Priority Areas' which gives precedence to churches in communities where deprivation falls within the 5% most deprived according to the Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) (Church of Scotland). There are currently around 64 priority areas in the Church of Scotland's region. In addition, a further 112 parishes have part of their population in the 5% most deprived areas; all of these parishes receive support from the Priority Areas team².

Congregations in these areas have access to a wide range of programmes run by the Church of Scotland Priority Areas team. Such programmes aim to identify the causes and tackle the effects of poverty, the programmes are designed to support local people who are working to alleviate poverty, deprivation and isolation in the community. The aim is for churches in Priority Areas to be indivisible from their communities; to recognise local people as gifted, creative, resilient leaders; to reach out and stand with people in difficult situations; to live the Gospel in all ways possible; to establish a family of church communities and embrace a wide range of theology. To be intolerant of, and prophetic about, injustice.

The Priority Areas team delivers a range of activities including learning programme (talks, workshops, events) for people living in Priority Areas who want to work towards transformation and positive impact in their communities.

Programmes include: Learning Communities (discipleship, leadership, mission and collaboration), helping the church to become more effective and sustainable, learning grants, a young adults programme, mentorship, worship teams that build the confidence of church members to plan and lead worship that is contextual, participative and sustainable, Challenge Poverty Week activities, and Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). In addition to these activities the PA team organise an annual conference, The Big Conversation, where congregations can network, share learning and give direction to the committee. Weekly Zoom meetings (Wee Conversations) provide the opportunity for PA congregations to gather for support and to share knowledge (Church of Scotland).

England. The most recent IMD release in 2019 provides a set of measures of deprivation based on seven 'indicators' which provide an overall picture of deprivation for neighbourhoods across England:

- income
- employment
- education, skills and training
- health and disability
- crime
- barriers to housing and services
- living environment

Local neighbourhoods are divided into lower super output areas (LSOAs) and middle super output areas (MSOAs). Each indicator (e.g. education, employment, housing) is assessed and given a score, scores are then combined to produce an overall rank for each small geographical area, from 1 (most deprived), to 32,844 (least deprived).

LSOAs contain an average of 1,500 people, MSOAs are made up of 4–5 LSOAs and contain an average of 7,500 people. Although there are changes in IMD scores from one release to the next (e.g. 2011–2015–2019), these changes are usually subtle with little movement between indicators, with socio-economic circumstances becoming entrenched in geographical areas (Hirst, 2018).

People living in neighbourhoods that are considered to be 'deprived' may experience any number of these indicators to various degrees, for example, housing insecurity may be a factor for one person, while unemployment or low wages may be a factor for another, somebody else may be experiencing homelessness, unemployment and difficulty accessing services. Not everyone in a particular locality will experience deprivation, and for those who do, the

level of deprivation will vary. IMD statistics highlight local areas where numerous indicators of deprivation are present; they provide useful information about the socioeconomic situations of a particular neighbourhood (Hirst, 2016).

The Greater Manchester context

45% of districts ranked in the 10% most deprived areas (in England) are in the North West. Greater Manchester has a higher than average proportion of areas that are classed as highly deprived. The local authority area of Manchester has the sixth highest level of deprivation (out of 326 Local Authorities in England) (IMD, 2019).

In terms of our research it is important to be aware that compared to other areas of England, the North-West has a high proportion of LSOAs with high deprivation scores. Having a greater number of 'deprived areas' in the geographical area of our study meant that there was a higher number of churches located in such areas, compared to if our study had been on a more affluent region.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) describes such areas as having a "more income deprived profile"; these areas include Greater London, areas around Birmingham, the North East and Greater Manchester (ONS, 2022). Local Authorities that have the highest income deprivation often have the greatest disparities between wealth and poverty. Local Authorities with the largest deprivation gaps in the North-West include Bury, Blackburn with Darwen, Oldham and Rochdale (ONS, 2022), all of which are areas covered by our study.

The Church Action on Poverty study

Research method

Our Church on the Margins programme began early in 2020 with plans to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. Data was sourced:

- directly from denominations (e.g. data officers, diocesan contacts);
- online (e.g. publicly available church directories, maps, historical records);
- in print (e.g. diocesan year books).

Data was collected on the location of churches within the boundaries of the Local Authority area of Greater Manchester (e.g. for the Church of England this constituted Manchester Diocese, and small areas of adjoining dioceses – Chester and Blackburn).

Information was collected for five denominations: Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist, United Reformed Church and the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Church postcodes were obtained for churches in these denominations (within Greater Manchester) for dates inclusive of 2010 and 2020.

In each of the denominations, the location of each church was checked that it was within Greater Manchester, then the corresponding IMD statistics, the Lower- and Middle-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs, MSOAs) were found from look-up tables provided by the Office of National Statistics (ONS, 2020)³.

Qualitative data was sourced online (newspaper articles, diocesan news, church websites, etc.) and in-person (e.g. personal accounts from church members, ministers, etc.), to try to uncover the whole story surrounding church closures. We searched for information about each church that had closed in Greater Manchester in 2010–20.

Difficulties with data

A complete set of data (for the time period of the study) was not publicly available for all the denominations. However, every effort was taken to source data online and in print, and complete datasets were obtained where possible.

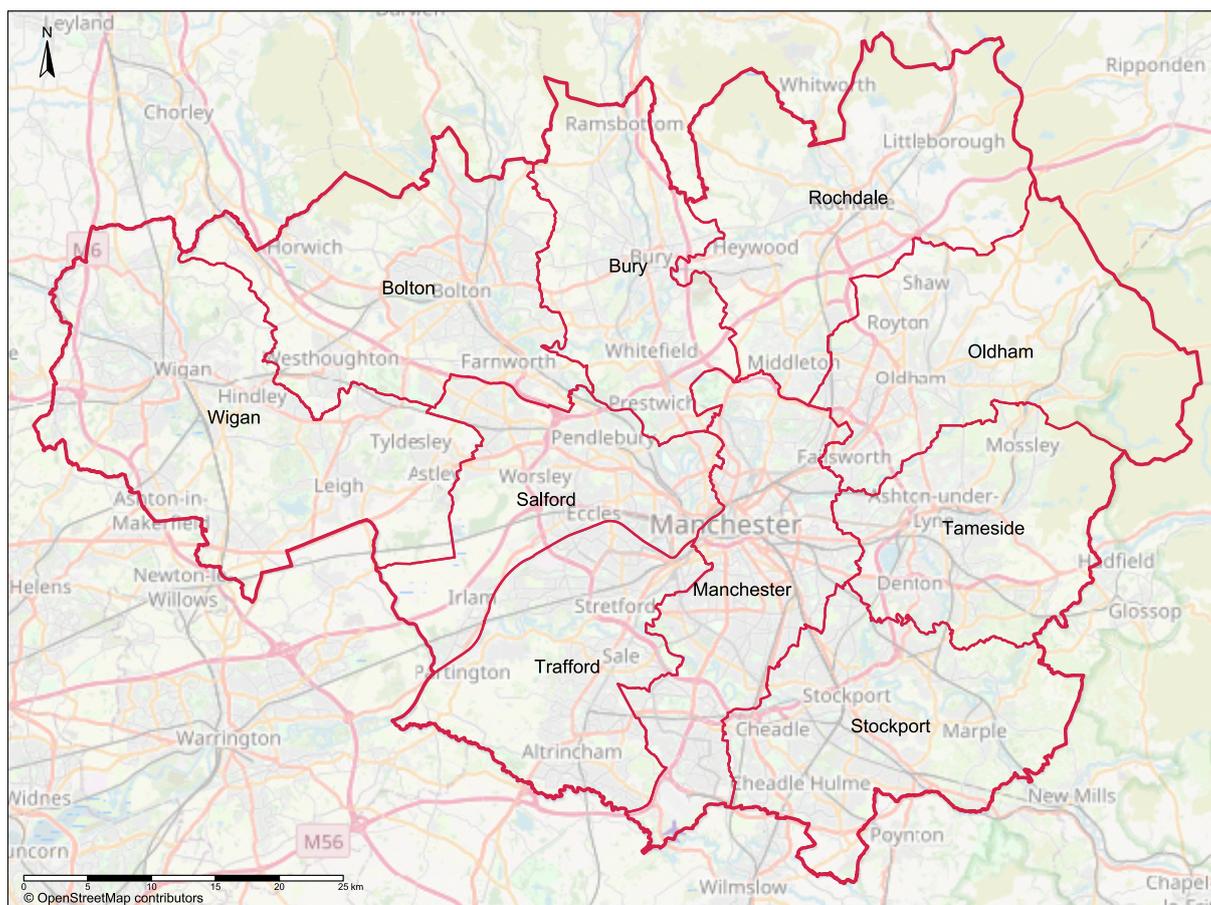
We did approach the relevant dioceses, circuits and synods to obtain the required data, however some of these were unable to share the data with us. Others were happy to share databases containing church postcodes and other relevant information (e.g. dates of church closures).

Results

The Greater Manchester area

Greater Manchester is a Combined Authority in north west England, made up of ten metropolitan boroughs: Manchester and Salford, Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, and Wigan.

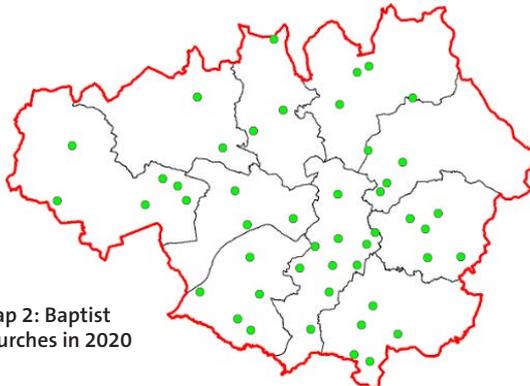
It sits at the historical boundary of Cheshire, Lancashire, Derbyshire, and Yorkshire and this can be seen in the ecclesiastical boundaries today. Many denominational boundaries run through the area – four Anglican and four Roman Catholic Dioceses are represented, as well as three Methodist circuits and two URC Synods.



Map 1: The Greater Manchester Combined Authority Area showing the ten Local Authorities

The Baptist Church

There are 47 Baptist churches in the Greater Manchester area (BUGB). The Greater Manchester area intersects with the North Western Baptist Association.

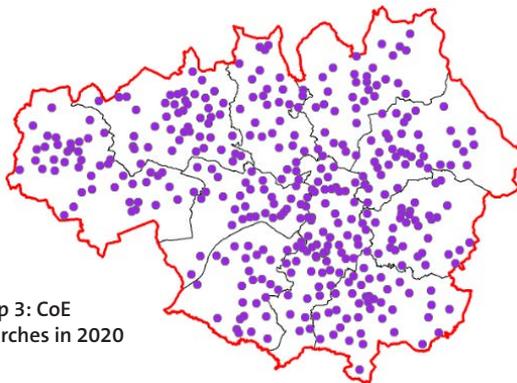


Map 2: Baptist churches in 2020

The Church of England

There are 395 Church of England Churches in the Greater Manchester area. The Greater Manchester area intersects with four Church of England dioceses:

Blackburn – 3 churches
 Chester – 62 churches
 Liverpool – 32 churches
 Manchester – 298 churches

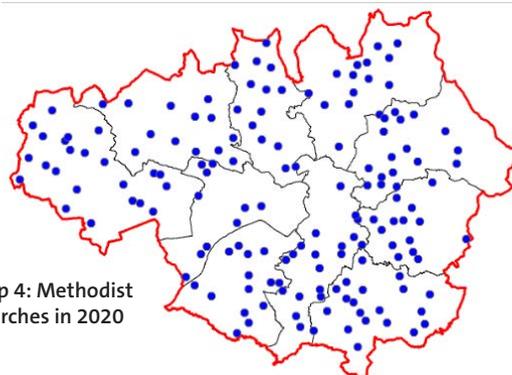


Map 3: CoE churches in 2020

The Methodist Church

There are 160 Methodist churches in the Greater Manchester area. The Greater Manchester area intersects with three Methodist circuits:

Manchester and Stockport – 92 churches
 Bolton and Rochdale – 66 churches
 Liverpool – 2 churches

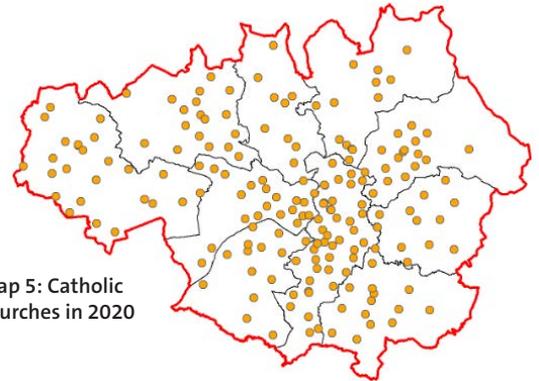


Map 4: Methodist churches in 2020

The Roman Catholic Church

There are 192 Roman Catholic churches in the Greater Manchester area. The Greater Manchester area intersects with four Roman Catholic dioceses:

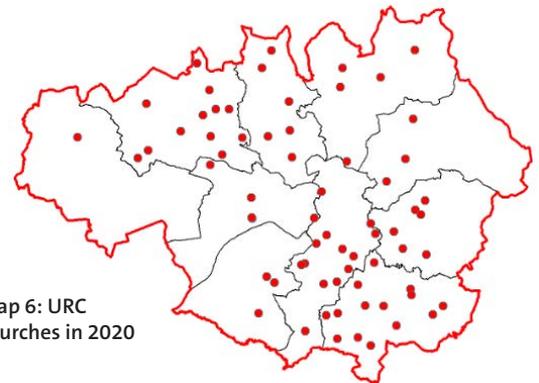
Salford – 142 churches
 Shrewsbury – 28 churches
 Leeds – 1 church
 Archdiocese of Liverpool – 24 churches



Map 5: Catholic churches in 2020

The United Reformed Church

There are 71 URC churches in the Greater Manchester area. All but one are in the North Western synod – the URC church in Wigan is in the Mersey synod.



Map 6: URC churches in 2020

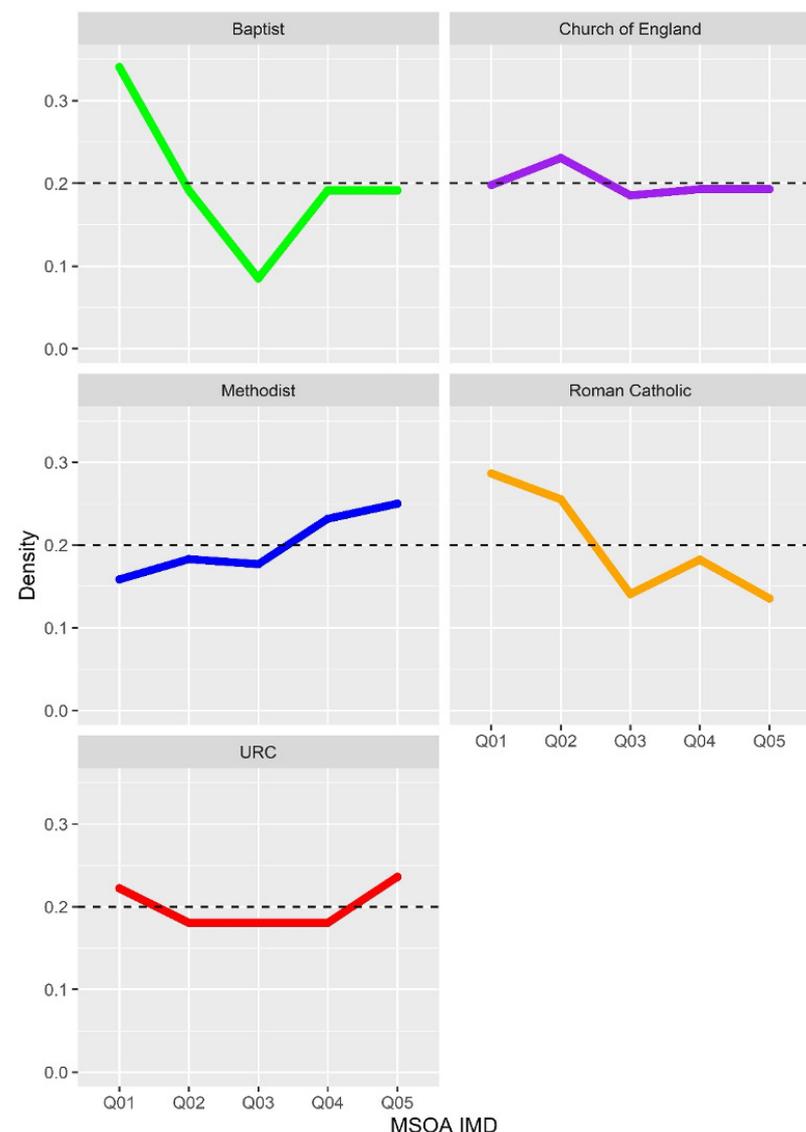
IMD data

In previous work of a similar nature to this study, Hirst (2018) uses an MSOA level measure, an area of around 7,500 people. This allows for people attending the church from the surrounding area and doesn't restrict the level of deprivation measure to the area immediately surrounding the church. While Hirst uses the median index score for the LSOAs which make up the MSOA, further work has produced better summary measures, population-weighted averages, for the MSOA, and these are what have been used in this study (My society, 2020).

Table 1: Number and percentage of churches by IMD quintile 2020 (Q1 most deprived / Q5 least deprived)

Denomination	Q1		Q2		Q3		Q4		Q5	
Baptist	16	34.0%	9	19.1%	4	8.5%	9	19.1%	9	19.1%
Church of England	79	19.8%	92	23.1%	74	18.5%	77	19.3%	77	19.3%
Methodist	26	15.9%	30	18.5%	29	17.7%	38	23.2%	41	25.0%
Roman Catholic	55	28.6%	49	25.5%	27	14.1%	35	18.2%	26	13.5%
United Reformed	16	22.2%	13	18.1%	13	18.1%	13	18.1%	17	23.6%
TOTAL	192	22.0%	193	22.1%	147	16.8%	172	19.7%	170	19.5%

Figure 1: Levels of deprivation of locations of churches in Greater Manchester (2020)



While the Index of Multiple Deprivation covers the whole of England, Greater Manchester has a higher proportion of areas of deprivation than most of England. Almost a quarter (24%) of Greater Manchester lies within the 10% most deprived areas in England. To deal with this, we constructed quintiles of the IMD within Greater Manchester, hence Quintile 1 (Q1) contains the churches within the most deprived 20% of Greater Manchester, which is a smaller category than the most deprived 20% of England.

Figure 1 shows the relative densities of locations of churches for each denomination. The dashed horizontal line is the 20% mark. If a denomination's churches were spread evenly across the quintiles of the IMD within Greater Manchester, their line would match this one.

We can see that the Church of England has closest to an equal spread across the quintiles of the IMD, with between 18.7% and 23% in each category. The Methodist church has fewer churches in deprived areas, while the Roman Catholic church has fewer churches in affluent areas. Over a third of Baptist churches are within the most deprived 20% of Greater Manchester.

While there are considerable differences between the denominations, it does not quite reach statistical significance⁴.

Changes since 2010

Locating present-day church buildings is one thing; tracking down those that have closed since 2010 is a more complex matter. We are grateful to those church staff who were so helpful with enquiries. We also made use of denominational reviews, directories, newspaper reports and maps to attempt to find churches for each denomination that have closed between 2010 and 2020.

The results show that 50% of Baptist churches which closed were in the most deprived 20% of Manchester (Q1), while only 16.7% of the closed URC churches were in the same areas.

Table 2 lists the number and percentage of churches that closed between 2010 and 2020 by denomination and by deprivation level. While 22% of churches open in 2020 were in the most deprived areas (Q1), 31.1% of churches that closed between 2010 and 2020 were in those areas. In contrast, 19.5% of churches were located in the least deprived areas (Q5), yet only 12.2% of churches that closed were in these areas.

Considering the most deprived 40% of Greater Manchester (Q1 and Q2), from Table 1 we see that in 2020, 44.1% of churches were in those areas, but Table 2 shows that 59.5% of closed churches are in the same areas.

Table 2: Number and percentage of closed churches, 2010–20 by denomination

Denomination	Q1		Q2		Q3		Q4		Q5	
Baptist	3	50.0%	1	16.7%	2	33.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Church of England	5	23.8%	8	38.1%	1	4.8%	6	28.6%	1	4.8%
Methodist	8	30.8%	5	19.2%	6	23.1%	1	3.8%	6	23.1%
Roman Catholic	6	40.0%	7	46.7%	2	13.3%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
United Reformed	1	16.7%	0	0.0%	2	13.3%	1	16.7%	2	33.3%
TOTAL	23	31.1%	21	28.4%	13	17.6%	8	10.8%	9	12.2%

What does this tell us?

Adding these data to Figure 1, and showing how the density would appear with the churches in 2010 in a dotted line, we can see on figure 2 that Baptist churches and Roman Catholic churches were closed more frequently in deprived areas, however both of those denominations had a large presence in those areas to begin with. It is also worth noting here that only six Baptist churches were closed overall. The Catholics and Baptists remain the denominations with the largest percentage of their churches in the most deprived areas.

A X² test comparing the number of churches closed in each deprivation quintile with the distribution of the open churches in 2020 is statistically significant⁵.

Checking the residuals shows that there are many more churches being closed in deprived areas in comparison with affluent areas.

If church closures were equally distributed across each quintile we would expect to see a fairly equal number in each section, for example if 26 Methodist churches had closed we would expect to see roughly 5 churches in each quintile. Our findings in fact show that most church closures (Church of England, Catholic, Methodist and Baptist) were in the first and second quintiles (the 20% and 40% most deprived locations). In contrast the URC had more closures in affluent areas than in low-income areas.

There are many more churches being closed in deprived areas in comparison with affluent areas

Figure 2: Density of churches in 2010 (dashed line) and 2020 (solid line), by denomination

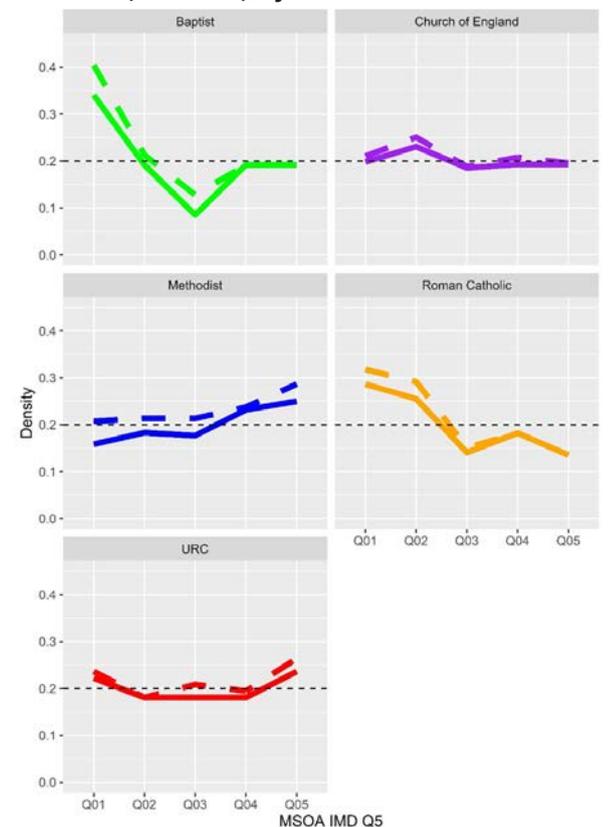


Figure 3: Percentage of closed churches 2010–20 by IMD quintile

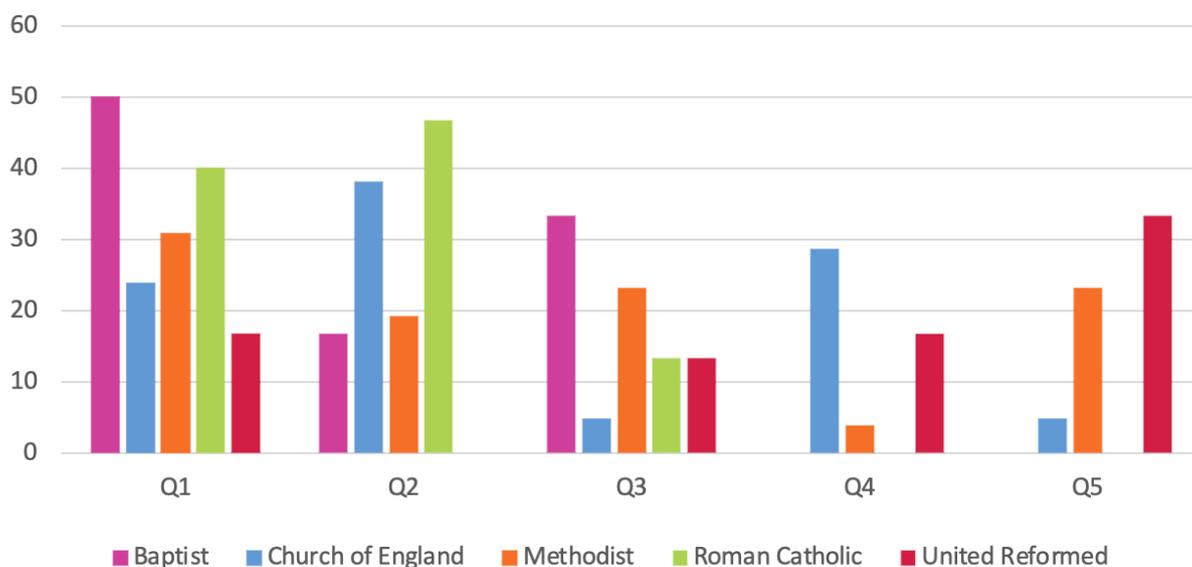
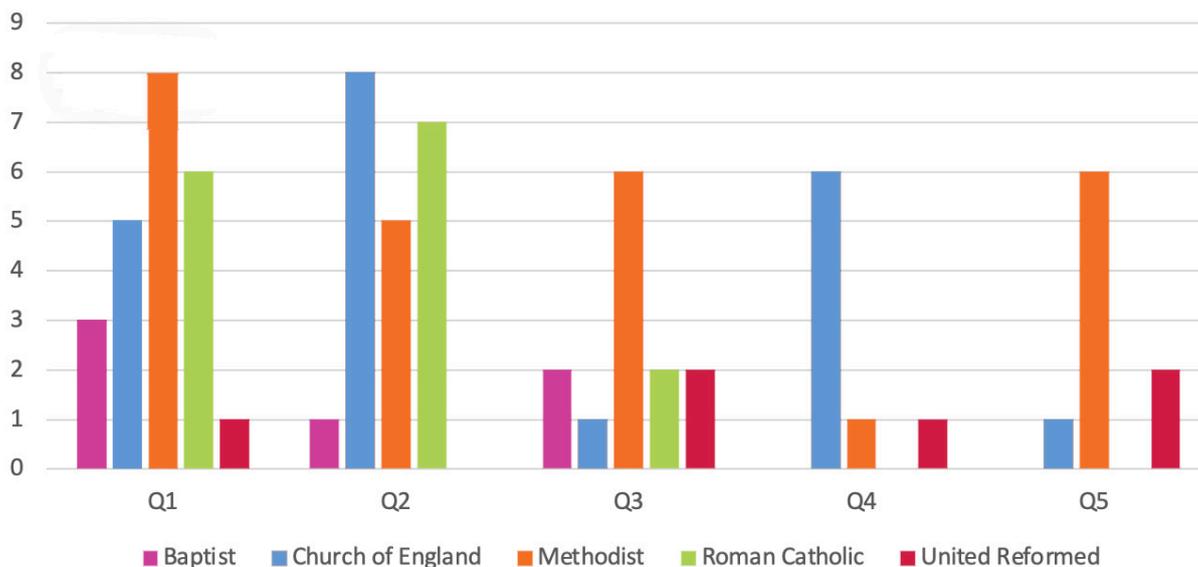


Figure 4: Number of closed churches 2010–20 by IMD quintile



Qualitative research

There are many reasons why churches close; this study was primarily quantitative in its methods (collating data on churches that had closed by location and cross-referencing with IMD statistics). However, statistics alone do not provide the whole picture; they do not tell us why a church closed or what happened to the congregation afterwards. Therefore we have also undertaken qualitative research to look at the circumstances surrounding church closures and to ensure our data was as reliable as possible.⁶

Table 3: Total number of churches closed

	Number of churches closed (2010–20)	Percentage of denomination's churches closed in Greater Manchester (2010–20)
Church of England	21	5%
Roman Catholic	15	7%
Methodist	26	14%
URC	6	8%
Baptist	6	11%

Findings

We found that in Greater Manchester, significantly more churches are closing in low-income areas, than in more affluent areas. Our qualitative research found that the reasons for church closures included: a declining number of people attending church services; buildings falling into disrepair (coupled with churches being unable to afford their upkeep); and in some cases, fewer priests and ministers to serve the churches (H2, 2017; Church Buildings Committee, 2020; Strengthening our Presence as Church, 2017).

However, this does not explain why many more churches have closed in low-income areas, in comparison to average and more affluent areas. This points towards wider questions about the denominations' decisions to close churches in 'deprived' areas. Are the major denominations retreating from low-income areas rather than

adhering to the gospel priority to stand with, and alongside, the poor? There are many questions raised by this research, some of which were beyond the scope of the study to answer:

- What effect do closures have on the church community?
- When closures or mergers take place, are people in low-income areas adversely affected compared to people in affluent areas? E.g. due to the time and expense of travelling further to another church.
- If people can no longer attend church, due to a closure, do they lose their church community, support networks, friendships and spiritual fulfilment?
- Have churches and their ministers adapted to today's context, or are they perpetuating an outdated model of church and ministry that does not speak to people, particularly in low-income communities?

The Church of England

Church of England church closures 2010–20

Our research found that 21 Anglican churches had closed in Greater Manchester between 2010–20. 23.8% in quintile 1 and 38.1% in quintile 2.

The Church of England had the closest to an even spread of churches across the IMD quintiles (a fairly equal amount of churches located in each quintile) to begin with. However, of the churches that did close, more than 60% were in the most deprived areas.

Church closures

In the Church of England, proposals for church closure are usually initiated by a Parochial Church Council (PCC) resolution which is passed on to the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee, and a recommendation is then made to the bishop. The Church Buildings Council (CBC) is required to prepare a 'Church Buildings Report' and create a survey report which informs discussions about the future of churches (Davies, 2021). The CBC produces around 37 reports a year (mostly Church Buildings Reports); out of these, just under half close within 5 years. A recent report by the Church Buildings Council (2020) states that the Church of England is currently going through a major rationalisation of its church-building stock: the biggest reduction in its building stock since the 16th century (CBC, 2020).

The CBC report (2020) found that many parishes have a high degree of resilience that enables them to withstand significant changes and extended periods of decline, with some churches undergoing periods of resurgence. However, the council's research indicates 'a major structural change taking place in slow motion'. The report found that

struggling churches are more likely to be found in the north of England and London, with actual closures following the same pattern (research pertaining to 2004–18). The research found that struggling churches are more likely to be urban (with 70% of those proposed for closure in parishes classed as more than 90% urban).

Significantly for our research, in terms of the national picture, the CBC found that churches in the most deprived areas were more likely to close. Nationally, 40% of closures were located in the 10% most deprived parishes in the country (CBC, 2020). 33% of churches that were considering closure were in the 10% most deprived areas of England; 17% were in the next deprivation decile. Therefore, half of the churches considering closure were in the 20% most deprived areas of the country (CBC, 2020). Conversely, only 8% of churches considering closure (for which data was available) were in the 20% least deprived areas in England (CBC, 2020). Of the churches that did close (136 closures), 40% were in the 10% most deprived areas of the country; 15% were in the next decile.

Findings from the CBC report support the findings from our own study: churches in the most deprived parishes are more likely to struggle than those in less deprived areas, and even more likely to close (CBC, 2020).

The CBC report also highlighted that it is not always appropriate to oppose church closures, reinvigoration of a declining church is not always the most appropriate response. It might set unrealistic expectations for resurgence and growth that are not helpful in some cases.

Case study – St Peter’s, Bryn – ‘A Church Without Walls’

St Peter’s, Bryn, church building closed in 2016 due to damage and the cost of maintenance and repairs. The congregation had initially planned to move to the local Boys’ and Girls’ Brigade Hall and refurbishments were planned for this building. The congregation held their church services in St Peter’s school hall while they waited for the hall to be ready. This arrangement was supposed to be for six weeks, but the work on the hall took much longer than expected. The congregation were determined to stay together and never thought that they would not be able to continue as a church.

During the pandemic, the church continued to meet online and provide telephone contact for people who were not online. The congregation returned to the Brigade hall after lockdown and have continued to meet as a church, with 35–40 regulars. They had to temporarily move out of the hall again while repairs were done, and attended another local church for 16 weeks while this happened.

The local deanery underwent a restructure in 2015 as part of Transforming Wigan, a 7-year project to work on the missional and financial strength of the deanery (funded by the Strategic Development Fund). St Peter’s is part of a wider church hub which is comprised of six churches (under the new structure). The local vicar leads a communion service at St Peter’s once a month. Worship on the remaining Sundays is organised by St Peter’s worship group which was established when they did not have a regular priest. This includes a Boys’/Girls’ Brigade Parade service and a Café Church.

“The phrase – the church is not the building – was a bit patronising at the time, but it turned out to be true.”

Church member from St Peter’s



The congregation held their services in local community spaces

The CBC report found that 41 reports were produced for Manchester Diocese which constituted just over 10% of its total stock of consecrated churches. Manchester Diocese also had the highest number of closures (25) amounting to 6.4% of its total stock between 2004-2018 (CBC, 2020).

Research into reasons for church closures found that fewer people using church buildings and a lack of volunteers was a significant factor, causing the church to struggle. Most dioceses also said that costly maintenance and repairs were a leading factor (CBC report, 2020).

The CBC report draws attention to the reactive nature of decisions to close church buildings, rather than proactive, noting a lack of strategic planning (the CBC report noted that many dioceses are still not planning to implement such a strategy in the near future). This leads to questions regarding what a strategic approach should be based on, e.g. what is the appropriate number and distribution of churches, what does the diocese prioritise in this regard? The CBC suggest that if the current rate of closure continues (or increases) over another generation, then “a challenge of a different order will be faced”, potentially changes of historical significance to the Church of England.

The CBC report states that there seems to be a concentration of struggling churches in areas of

marked deprivation, “... the very places which may be missional priorities”. Commenting on the report, Right Revd Philip North said:

“...urban areas have suffered from 10 years of austerity, with countless services withdrawn and places of assembly closed, and it is dispiriting that the Church appears to have been part of this pattern of slow abandonment.

“Church buildings play a vital role in urban areas as oases of prayer, as physical signs of the presence of Christ, and as places where people can gather for a wide range of activities. Yet the challenges of maintaining such buildings, a responsibility often falling to small congregations, are vast... I hope that we can bring some real imagination to bear in the way we manage and sustain urban church buildings.”

Revd Philip North (Davies, 2020)

A spokesperson for the Church of England said the report offered “...just one side of the story, and does not include churches that have been built and planted during this time. The Church of England remains committed to ensuring there is a church and worshipping community in every community, and the Church Buildings Council provides tools

to support deaneries and dioceses with strategic reviews of church buildings.” (Davies, 2021)

Work in low-income areas

The Church of England has a number of strands to its work in low-income areas, including the Estates Evangelism Task Group, the Low-Income Communities fund and the Church Urban Fund. More recently it also announced further investment for social action projects and ministry (see below).

In 2019 the Church of England approved a national estates network strategy and funding to train 50 ministers.

“Our estates projects are working toward a thriving, growing, loving church on every significant social housing estate in the country – through new patterns of ministry, sharing good practice and encouraging leaders.”

Church of England, Estates

“The Estates Evangelism Task Group is a strand within the Renewal and Reform programme which takes very seriously the words of Jesus in Luke Chapter 4, ‘I have come to proclaim good news to the poor.’ We contend that, unless we renew church life amongst deprived communities and most especially on our nation’s outer estates, we are not being faithful to the words of Jesus and the renewal we long for will never come.”

Church of England, Estates

The commitment to ensure there is a church community on every significant estate in England entails enhanced support for existing estate churches as well as exploring ways to plant churches back on to estates where they are missing (Church of England, Estates). The strategy for this programme will include raising up leaders from, and for, estates churches and creating resources appropriate to the context. An Estates Theology Project recently brought together practitioners and theologians to ask ‘What is the good news from the estates?’; the results of this project were reported through podcasts and will be published in 2023 (*Finding the Treasure: Good News from the Estates*).

Strategic Development Funding and Lowest Income Communities Fund

The Strategic Development Funding (SDF) and Lowest Income Communities Fund (LInC) are used to provide financial support to dioceses in some of the poorest parts of the country, to help them to

sustain ministry and foster mission and growth in local communities. Low-income communities funding is distributed to dioceses that have the greatest number of people living in low-income communities; currently 26 dioceses receive LInC funding (*Church Times*, 2022). The SDF fund can be applied for by dioceses to fund church growth and ministry projects (*Church Times*, 2022). Around 530 new ordained posts have been funded by SDF and LInC, as well as strategic reforms within diocese and other projects. A recent review found that the distribution of funds, and the tradition of the churches that have benefited from the funds, has been a contentious issue within the Church of England (Wyatt, 2022).

The SDF/LInC review found that Covid-19 significantly disrupted both schemes and some dioceses had less capacity to apply for and deliver projects during this time. Both schemes were found to be valuable, however their effectiveness will continue to depend on other areas of work within the church such as training for missional leaders. The review recommended the continuation of both funds, with a further review to take place in two years’ time.

Increased investment for low-income areas

The Church of England recently announced increased funding for its social action projects. Over the next 3 years the Church of England will invest a further 30% to support and develop ministry, especially with young people and disadvantaged communities (CofE, 2022). The Church of England will distribute £388 million between 2023 and 2025 (a 30% increase on previous spending) and will seek to maintain this level of funding for the subsequent six years. The funding will be divided between a number of key areas including:

- People and Partnerships funding – increasing the number of clergy in frontline ministry, with the intention that the Church’s clergy better reflect the diversity of the nation it serves.
- Racial justice work – targeted interventions to make a step change within the church.
- Net zero – work to help the Church of England significantly reduce its carbon footprint.
- Lowest Income Communities Funding and Transition funding (£99 million).
- £9m additional funding for the Social Impact Investment Fund.

Church of England, 2022

The Roman Catholic Church

Catholic dioceses in Greater Manchester

The current boundaries of Salford Diocese include the majority of Greater Manchester, the boundaries run from the River Mersey and the River Ribble, as well as a few parishes north of the Ribble and Todmorden, West Yorkshire. A number of Catholic parishes in Greater Manchester are part of the Archdiocese of Liverpool.

Catholic church closures in Greater Manchester 2010–20

Our research found that 15 Catholic churches were closed within Greater Manchester (2010–20). 40% of closures were in the 20% most deprived areas (quintile 1), and 46.7% were in the 40% most deprived areas (quintile 2). 13.3% of closures were in ‘average’ areas (in terms of deprivation). There were no closures in the least deprived categories.

Church closures were heavily skewed towards low-income areas. However, it is important to note that the Catholic Church had more churches in deprived areas and fewer in affluent areas to begin with, which explains, to some extent, why a large percentage of church closures were in these areas.

Salford Diocese went through a restructure in 2017, under which a number of churches were identified to be closed or merged with other nearby parishes. Restructure proposals were circulated around the diocese, including suggestions for which church buildings should close and which churches/parishes should amalgamate.

“I am using the biblical image of ‘pruning for growth’ as a way of understanding what we are doing – ensuring we take required measures now, so our parishes continue to be of a sufficient size to facilitate and sustain a dynamic and life-giving community.”

Bishop John Arnold

(Strengthening Our Presence As Church, 2017)

The diocese encouraged people to take part in the consultation and promised to carefully consider all responses.

“...we need to look at how we can serve our parishes with fewer priests while acknowledging that there are fewer people regularly attending church... In these times of political, economic and social uncertainty, we must ensure the church continues to be missionary and outward facing, spreading the Gospel message of God’s love.”

Strengthening Our Presence As Church, 2017

The consultation on the restructure gathered 2000+ responses which were recorded and considered as part of the final decision-making process. The diocese outlined their aim to develop ‘outward looking, missionary parishes’.

“We cannot simply choose those parishes with the biggest congregations, or those which are financially sound... we must have a care for areas where there is social deprivation.”

Bishop John Arnold



Map 7: Salford Diocese

At the beginning of the consultation there were 150 parishes and 185 churches. The diocese planned to include 100 parishes in amalgamations (18 of which were already working together at the time). 18 churches were to be permanently closed (3 of which were not in use), with the possibility that other churches would be identified for closure in the future, when the newly formed parishes had had time to assess their resource need.

The amalgamation of 100 parishes limited the number of churches that had to permanently close, but it meant that parishes became larger and priests had many more people to serve in the larger parishes.

“The plan allows the Diocese of Salford to look forward, creating outward facing parishes, responding to the call from Pope Francis to develop ‘missionary parishes’ ... I understand that where churches are closing this will be met with initial sadness from parishioners. But I am sure that these feelings can be overcome as our new communities come together in prayer and to welcome one another.”

Strengthening Our Presence As Church, 2017

The Bishop of Salford urged the laity to take up “the many and diverse ministries open to them” to enable priests to focus on pastoral duties. The diocese denied that the closures were due to a shortage of priests, rather the changes would better reflect the number of people attending church; the reasons for closure usually relate to geography and the close proximity of another church. The new diocesan strategy aims to focus on rural areas and areas of social deprivation.

However, closures within the Archdiocese of Liverpool were said to be related to a decline in the

Example of amalgamated church: St Oscar Romero parish, Blackburn

The parish of St Oscar Romero, Blackburn was created at the end of 2018 when the three former parishes of St Peter in Chains, St John Vianney and Our Lady and St John the Baptist (known as Pleasington Priory) ceased to exist as individual parishes and the three churches were incorporated into the new parish (St Oscar Romero parish church, 2022). Masses are still held at each of the three churches each week as well as a mid-week service at a local school, during term time. One priest serves the parish and a retired priest assists with one of the churches on Sundays.



addressed. It can't just be clerics and we need to take the need for lay leadership seriously and actually do something to bring it about."

Fr Joe Wheat, The Tablet, 2022

A Synodal Church

The current synodal process in the Catholic Church (2021–24) may provide the opportunity for the Catholic Church to consider how to manage and implement change to ensure the sustainability of the church in the future. The overall theme is 'For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission'. Pope Francis envisages change for the Catholic Church and the synodal process presents opportunities as well as challenges for the Church.

"I would say that celebrating a Synod is always a good and important thing, but it proves truly beneficial if it becomes a living expression of 'being Church', of a way of acting marked by true participation."

Pope Francis, 2022

Parishes have taken part in conversations, organised by dioceses, to listen to 'the people of God', to gather their thoughts, reflections and hopes for the Catholic Church.

"They spoke of how, after decades of churchgoing, they had been asked to speak for the first time. In listening, people experienced new closeness to others; in being listened to, many discovered they belonged. The synod meetings 'opened up deep reflection, longing, and for some a range of complex emotions from anger to hurt'."

CBEW, National Synthesis Document, 2022

The initial report from the synodal process in England and Wales revealed that "...the Church is significantly wounded in its ability to act according to its own mission... There is a real sense that the Church requires healing and conversion to live out its own nature and purpose to the full."

Many people who took part referred to Pope Francis as an inspiration who brings new hope and energy to the church and hope that parishes may be able to become 'environments of living communion and participation' and 'completely mission-oriented'.

There was a strong call for churches to be places of closeness, entailing welcome and inclusiveness, especially for groups that may be marginalised. It is hoped that the synod will provide the opportunity

number of priests. Father Paul Seddon (Liverpool Archdiocese) said:

"This is a heartbreaking experience for both of these faith communities... But it is an acknowledgement of a stark reality that we have too many churches in the archdiocese for those coming to Mass and not enough priests."

The Leigh Journal, 2019

"With the deanery having four more parishes to serve and only the same number of priests as before, a review of church usage and Mass times was carried out."

The Leigh Journal, 2019

After a reorganisation by the Archdiocese of Liverpool, two churches, the Twelve Apostles Church and Our Lady of the Rosary Church (both within the boundaries of Greater Manchester) were closed.

Issues in the Roman Catholic Church

Our findings are echoed in other areas of the country where many dioceses are facing similar issues. In Nottinghamshire and Northampton Dioceses churches have recently closed due to fewer people attending church and a declining number of priests; Portsmouth Diocese has also recently announced a 10-year plan to drastically reduce its number of parishes (*The Tablet*, 2022).

"The numbers of people living out their Catholic faith by coming to Sunday Mass have been falling. The number of priests we have available for active ministry is also falling."

Bishop Oakley, Diocese of Northampton, The Tablet, 2022

In a homily given to his east Nottingham parish, Joseph Wheat (Vicar General and Cathedral Canon in Nottingham Diocese) said only two thirds of congregations had returned to Mass since the pandemic.

"The situation calls for a fundamental shift in how the Church lives and works ... the removal of compulsory celibacy would be long overdue. ... [as would] the priesthood no longer being restricted to men. "The issue of who leads the Church at different levels needs to be

for the Church to listen, to break out of its routine; to become a Church with attitudes of compassion and love.

“A Church that does not stand aloof from life, but immerses herself in today’s problems and needs, bandaging wounds and healing broken hearts with the balm of God. Let us not forget

God’s style, which must help us: closeness, compassion and tender love.”

Pope Francis, 2022

The synod process will continue, culminating in two final meetings of Bishops at Synod Gatherings in October 2023 and 2024.

The Methodist Church

Closure of Methodist Churches 2010–20

26 Methodist churches were closed in Greater Manchester between 2010 and 2020. A large proportion of the closed churches were in areas of high deprivation: 50% were in the 40% most deprived neighbourhoods (quintiles 1 and 2).

Challenges facing the Methodist Church

In a 2017 *Statistics for Mission* report the Methodist Church outlined a number of challenges it was facing, these included:

- 100,000 membership and worship attendance lost in 12 years (3.5% decline).
- Ordained ministry being spread thinner and thinner.
- Viability of smaller churches and circuits in question.
- Age profile of membership and public worship attendance is heavily skewed towards an older demographic with relatively large numbers above seventy years. There is a missing age group of about 20 to 45 years in the congregations.
- Too many church properties that are underused, old and in a poor state of repair.
- Growing secularisation of Britain (rising numbers of people say they do not believe in God while fewer say they are Christian).
- The difficulty in finding and keeping volunteers to serve the church at various levels including lay leadership, committees and stewardship roles.

Regionally Methodist churches are organised in districts which are sub-divided into local circuits. Our research focussed on the Manchester and Stockport circuit and the Bolton and Rochdale circuit. The structure of the Methodist Church of Great Britain is based on the principle of ‘connexionalism’: mutual support of one local congregation for another, in terms of ministry, mission and finance. This means that no single church community has ever been in isolation from its neighbouring churches, or from the centralised, national, organisation (*Issues of Connexionalism in the 21st Century*, 2017).

Recent developments in the Methodist Church

During the course of our research programme the Methodist Church launched a new mission priority (similarly named to Church Action on Poverty’s programme) ‘Church at the Margins’, which aims to nurture and build new Christian communities amongst economically marginalised people, as

well as supporting community development and action for justice. The Methodists in Great Britain have invested £8.6 million into this programme.

Church at the Margins is:

“A distinct, crucial, and inextricably connected part of the Methodist Churches’ vision for ‘New Places For New People’ is a commitment to be Church at, and from the economic margins. The potential for transformation, new life, and new leaders exists in all marginalised communities. The Church must

The Bridge Community Church, Bury – case study

The former Bridge Methodist Church in Radcliffe, Bury, was a declining church; the number of church members was consistently going down. (Radcliffe is an area that is classed as highly deprived on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.) The church recognised the need for a change and decided on a new way forward in conjunction with the Circuit Superintendent Minister and other ministers connected to the church.

When the serving minister moved to another church, The Bridge decided not to recruit another minister through the usual Methodist structures; instead they advertised for a pastor. The appointed pastor (Tom King) is employed by the Methodist Church but is not formally trained by the Methodists. The church worked with the new pastor to change their approach; the church was renamed The Bridge Community Church (although they are still legally a Methodist church). It was hoped that the more informal nature of the church would be more appealing to local people who did not connect with traditional church. The Bridge aimed to go to people in the community rather than waiting for people to come to the church.

As well as their Sunday services, the church started ‘Church on Tuesday’; evening services that were very popular and well attended. The church has a band at their services with modern music as well as space for more traditional hymns. The Bridge Community Church has steadily grown over the years since it was redeveloped, previously there were around 20 church members, now there are 60–70.

The church runs a food club where people can access affordable food, and there is a community café that provides free meals once a week. There is a strong sense of community at the church, and church members help out others who are in need. Overall there is a strong sense that the change in approach helped the church to reach out to the local community and grow in the process.

learn from and be led by our indigenous leaders, who already have deep knowledge and wisdom about their communities. From that leadership, people across socio-economic classes can imagine new ways of being Church and community together.”

Eunice Attwood, Church at the Margins Officer

The Church at the Margins strategic area of *God For All* is focused on equipping the Methodist Church to steward the majority of planting and pioneering resources with a faithful and preferential bias for people and communities experiencing marginalisation. It aims to:

- Start a movement of new Christian communities led by those at the economic margins.
- Work alongside people experiencing poverty to deepen community engagement.
- Build on the biblical connection between evangelism and social justice.

Bolton case study

Four churches were closed down as part of a merger in Bolton.

- **Astley Bridge Methodist Church** was located in an area ranked in the 30% most deprived neighbourhoods (IMD, 2019).
- **Chorley Old Road Methodist Church** was ranked in the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods (IMD, 2019). It was home to the North Bolton Methodist Mission for many years.
- **Harvey Street Methodist Church**, Halliwell, was located in the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods (IMD, 2019).
- **Delph Hill Methodist Church** was ranked in the 40% least deprived neighbourhoods (IMD, 2019). This location was allocated to be the site of a new church building.

In 2014 the Bolton Methodist circuit produced a report called *Births, Deaths and Marriages*, which highlighted the declining congregations of a number of churches in the area. It was recommended that the four churches (as above) would close and a new church be created (this was a recommendation rather than a directive). Following decision-making processes in Methodism, each church then went through a process of discernment regarding the future of their church. After a period of consultation through which church members were able to submit their responses, although there was some disagreement, each church passed a resolution to close and join with the other churches.

There were some church members who were not happy about the proposed changes and sadly around 20 of these members were lost as a result of the decision; however, decisions were made with the majority of people in agreement with the change.



Map 8: The locations of the four Methodist churches now merged into one church – The Triangle

Harvey Street Church and Astley Bridge (the ‘theatre church’) were large Victorian buildings, one of which was a listed building and one was in a conservation area; the other two church buildings (Delph Hill and Chorley Old Road) did not have any restrictions in terms of renovations or rebuilding. The existing church at Delph Hill was not fit-for-purpose, therefore the decision was taken to demolish this church and create a new building to accommodate people from all four churches.

In 2012 church members from Astley Bridge, Harvey Street and Delph Hill were invited to form a new congregation at Chorley Old Road Church while the new church building was under construction. Revd Paul Martin, district chairman, said: “From understandable early misgivings, this project has grown in strength so there is now a tremendous groundswell of support.”

“We realise moving to Chorley Old Road is only a stepping stone towards our ultimate goal of a new church at Delph Hill, but it will provide an important period of consolidation before the North Bolton Methodist Mission moves on to its new home.”

(Bolton News, April 2012)

When the churches came together at Chorley Old Road a new church council was formed, comprising members from all four previous church councils, and task groups were established to work on the new church initiatives (e.g. redevelopment, building, worship and social events). The new congregation moved to the new Triangle Methodist church building in 2014 (The Triangle Church, 2021). The new church is located in a residential area close to the city centre, which falls in an area ranked in the 40% least deprived neighbourhoods (IMD, 2019).

“It is wonderful to have memories of how things used to be but times and circumstances change and we have now moved into our wonderful new church at *The Triangle*. People I know who have been in our new church,

whether attending the classes, coffee lounge or services have all said how welcoming everyone has been.

“The welcome that Trevor and I experienced when we first started attending Astley Bridge all those years ago has obviously transferred to *The Triangle*. Long may it continue.”

(Ann, *The Triangle*, 2021).

The Triangle seeks to be an outward-looking church and is involved with a number of community initiatives in the local area. The church is involved with a local organisation (Urban Outreach) which provides food to families in need. The church itself runs a ‘Knit and Natter’ group and a community café that runs every weekday. A local authority run after-school club also uses the church building.

The Triangle does have an ageing congregation and has sadly lost members over the seven years since the new church was formed. However, the church has recently gained new church members including a number of families. The church has also lived through the pandemic and still holds Zoom services in the winter for people who find it hard to get out in the cold weather.

The four churches, particularly the smallest congregations, had previously been struggling with pastoral visiting as they did not have enough people to cover the number of visits needed. Coming together as a new congregation has increased the church’s capacity and each church member has a ‘pastoral friend’ who can visit them in times of need.

The Triangle is considered a successful church merger; the decision-making process was handled well and enabled all church members to have input into the final decision. Other churches have consulted The Triangle when they have gone through the difficult process of closing down their church.

The United Reformed Church

The North Western URC Synod cover a wide area from the Scottish borders, down to parts of Derbyshire (these areas are divided into four pastoral and administrative areas: Cumbria, Lancashire, Central and South). 124 URC churches make up the North West Synod (URC, 2022).

Closure of URC churches 2010–20

Six URC churches were closed in Greater Manchester between 2010 and 2020. The closures were spread across the quintiles, with **more closures in affluent areas and fewer in deprived areas.**

- Q1: 1 church
- Q2: 0 churches
- Q3: 2 churches
- Q4: 1 church
- Q5: 2 churches

The wider URC context

Like many other Christian denominations, the URC has considered how to address the declining number of church members and ministers. In 2017, a paper was produced which explored ‘funding other ministries’ within the URC (H2, Ministries Committee, 2017). It was suggested that funds be released from the Ministry and Mission fund in order to support additional local expressions of ministry, including lay ministries. It was recognised that by 2025 there will be around 30 fewer stipendiary ministers to serve the United Reformed Church in the UK.

The number of stipends available to the church (funded through the Ministry and Mission Council) had declined since 2012. The necessary reduction in the number of supported stipends had been managed by maintaining a ‘Normal Retirement Age’ for stipendiary ministers, the ordination of

Salford Central URC – case study

The former Salford Central URC Church, in Ordsall, was demolished in 2011. Although attempts were made to save the historical building and incorporate it into a new school building on the same site, it was later decided to create a new church space within the new school building (*Manchester Evening News*, 2011).

The URC church entered into talks with the Oasis Trust, a Christian foundation that had been chosen by Salford City Council to run the new school. The URC and Oasis Trust established a partnership to create a new church and community hub.

The Oasis Trust and the URC came together to serve local people by delivering education, community services and church. The Media City Church (pictured below) is located in the new school building which serves hundreds of young people

and families. The hub delivers a wide variety of community projects and a partnership church.

“We work to help people of all ages and situations feel included, to know that they can contribute and realise a deep sense of belonging, and to feel connected and supported and happy and proud to live there.”

Oasis Hub, Media City

Their mission is to be an example of what an inclusive community, living Christ’s way, looks and acts like. Recognising the diversity of the local community the hub aims to offer church that is relevant and accessible to the local community, supporting people’s immediate needs, as well as their spiritual needs, by providing a holistic environment where they can belong.

“Our ethos is that of inclusion, that anyone is welcome regardless of difference, opinion or background.”

Oasis Hub, Media City



The demolition of Salford Central URC church. Photo reproduced from *Manchester Evening News*.



‘home-grown’ ministers’ and receiving ministers from other traditions. However, in the years before the H2 report, the number of retirements had increased and it had become more difficult to maintain the balance between ministers joining and leaving stipendiary ministry (H2, Funding Additional Ministry, 2017).

Previous Ministries Committee reports to the General Assembly had encouraged synods to consider alternative ministries. Such activity was often limited by a lack of resources or volunteers. Some synods had been able to support local ministry and leadership with funds from legacies, investments or a synod levy, but not all synods were able to provide such funding.

The paper suggested that extra funding for the synods to support lay ministry would enable ministry to take place in settings where it would otherwise be impossible. Encouraging and developing alternative ministries could aid the creation of multi-skilled teams and new leaders (H2, 2017). In 2017 the Mission Council agreed to fund additional ministries that Synods could bid for in order to aid the training and development of lay ministry. However, the pandemic interfered

with the roll out of such programmes and any of evaluation of the work was prevented. Following this, in 2018, the Mission Committee reported that the Fresh Expressions Future Strategy would focus on training lay people to engage in Fresh Expressions and the creation of a ‘pioneer pathway’ in ordination training.

“Pioneering is making a significant mark on today’s UK church landscape and we have benefited from some of our number who have taken that route.”

Paul Whittle, Moderator of the National Synod of Scotland, URC, 2022

The ministry of Pioneers is different to traditional ministry within the URC, and there had been a call for the denomination to formally recognise this new form of ministry (URC meeting 2022).

“All are called. All are called to discipleship; all are called to ministry; all are called to mission... not all are called to the same expression of discipleship, the same form of ministry, the same field of mission. In an age of decline, the challenge to the church in

responding to God's call is to open eyes, hearts and wills to the gifts of ministry that God gives his people, and to release and nurture those gifts."

Paper B/D/M 1, URC, 2022

Paper B/D/M 1 (2022) discusses the need to be inclusive, which will entail reshaping church life to include a wider variety and understanding of 'church', rather than reshaping new members to fit into existing church structures. The paper acknowledges that 'all are called' but not to the same form of ministry. Therefore, the church needs to be creative in the formation of newly accredited

ministries, where the need and opportunity presents.

The aim of the B/D/M 1 paper (2022) was to invite the URC to recognise a new ministry of Assembly Accredited Lay Pioneers and to train them through the new Newbigin Pioneering Hub (a joint venture between the URC, Congregational Federation, Church Mission Society, and the Seedbeds organisation), and for General Assembly to adopt marks of ministry for Lay Pioneers. This motion was passed at the URC General Assembly in 2022, with some amendments for further work and detailed plans to be completed (URC, General Assembly, 2022).

The Baptist Church

Six Baptist churches (Baptist Union of Great Britain) were closed in Greater Manchester between 2010 and 2020:

- 50% in quintile 1,
- 16.7% in quintile 2,
- 33.3% in quintile 3.
- No church closures occurred in quintiles 4 and 5.

The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) established a working group in 2020 to examine the challenge of funding and training of future Baptist ministers. The Baptist Union council was concerned that some churches were facing difficulties finding suitable ministers, alongside the fact that the number of ministers being trained was not keeping pace with the number retiring (BUGB, 2020).

BUGB had already implemented recommendations from a previous report, *Ignite*, concerning the future of accredited ministry, but the Council also recognised that financial support for trainee ministers was limited.

Issues in the Baptist Church

It was noted at the 2022 Baptist Union Council that the denomination is losing young adults three times faster than older members; participation had

fallen by 2,000 between 2015 and 2019, and since the pandemic a further 2,000 had left the church, leaving 6,662 active young adult church members. If this pattern continues there would only be around 100 young adults left in the church by 2030 (BUGB, 2022).

"If we change nothing, then nothing changes. So a change of course is necessary."

The Young Adults Round Table (YART) hope that churches can be places where young adults thrive, however many young adults' experience of Baptist churches is isolating. YART believe that churches need to be deliberate and intentional in the way they engage with young adults, otherwise they can feel ignored which leads them to seek alternative models of church (BUGB, 2022). It was suggested that the Baptist church needs to involve young adults in decision-making processes around how the church works. A number of examples of good practice were highlighted in the recent YART update, around 50 interns were due to start working in Baptist churches (from September 2022), in order to engage with young adults in the churches and wider community (BUGB, 2022).

**"All are called.
All are called to discipleship;
all are called to ministry;
all are called to mission"**

Conclusions

The research raises questions about how churches set up their structures and allocate resources, e.g. location of churches, deployment of ministers/clergy and their residential location, as well as the location of activities and projects. Despite many projects and programmes designed to work with and alongside communities affected by poverty, our research found that church closures are concentrated in low-income areas.

If people in low-income areas are not engaging with church, we need to ask why. Are churches out of touch with the people and context of low-income areas? There are many great examples of churches in low-income areas that are engaging effectively in the local area; the denominations could learn from these settings (see examples from the National Estate Churches Network, *In the Thick of It*, Church of Scotland Priority Areas).

The churches are all too often accused of being white, middle-class spaces (Davies, 2021). In order to reach more people the churches need to reflect the diversity of the UK, including working-class people and communities facing racial injustice / people from Global Majority Heritage, people with disabilities, LGBT+ and many more. The churches need to welcome more trainees from

working-class backgrounds, and people from Global Majority Heritage. Training for ministry should include exploration of issues affecting low-income communities, including inequality, poverty, social and racial justice.

The pandemic had a drastic impact on church, since the lifting of social distancing restrictions, many people still regularly join church online, which raises questions for the denominations on what constitutes 'church' and further considerations around how to make church accessible for people who cannot physically attend church services. When churches went online in early 2020, many people with disabilities were able to access church in a way that had not previously been possible (Lawson Jacobs, 2020).

Promising examples from our research demonstrate that reflection and openness to change are crucial in the long-term sustainability of churches. In particular, the examples from St Peter's, Wigan and The Bridge, Bury where churches adapted to their changing situation and found ways to continue, whether that was moving to a new community location or developing a new image and way of being church.

Recommendations

- Follow the Church of Scotland's example of **Priority Areas** to meet the gospel imperative to stand with, and alongside, people facing poverty and inequality.
- We would like to invite church leaders, clergy/ministers and church members to **comment on our research findings**. We would like to hear their response to the research and how it relates to their own denomination and experience of church. Are there any changes that might be inspired by the research?
- **Learn from churches** that have established effective, sustainable, church-related work and activities in low-income communities.
- **Engage with and address issues of exclusion** of working class, global majority heritage, LGBT+ and people with disabilities, to make church more inclusive for both church members and potential trainees for ministry.



Appendix: limitations and difficulties with the research

What is church?

This research study used a narrow definition of 'church', in order to locate church buildings, we had to limit our search to church buildings located by postcode (usually church buildings that were listed in church directories).

However, as we found in our initial focus groups (in 2018), and through our peer-group research (the qualitative element of this research study), church is much more than the congregation who comes to church on Sunday. It is the community café run by church members in the week, it is the informal service on a Thursday evening, the shared meal that brings everyone together, Messy Church, outreach to people in the community, street pastors, etc. Church is the church community and their activity in the local area, not just within the church building.

Measuring all of the church-related groups and activities that take place from churches across Greater Manchester would be an enormous task; many such groups run on an informal basis and may not have records of their activities.

Difficulty obtaining data

From the outset it proved difficult to obtain all of the data required for the study. We approached national and regional church contacts to ask for the data, e.g. the postcodes of that denomination's churches within Greater Manchester for 2010 and 2020. While some denominations were happy to share with us, others were not. Some cited GDPR regulations as the reason why they could not share the information, however, as the location of churches is publicly available, this would not have breached GDPR. Other denominations were cautious but did share the required data after establishing a data sharing agreement.

This meant that we had to search for much of the data in other ways, e.g. through sourcing old church directories, online records, maps (including google streetview) and diocesan publications and newsletters, etc. The Covid-19 pandemic also hampered efforts to obtain data, e.g. archives and in-print records.

References

- Barret, A (2023) *Finding the Treasure: Good News from the Estates*. SPCK.
- BUGB (2022) Baptist Union Council. www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/645846/Baptist_Union_Council.aspx
- BUGB (2020) www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/565069/Group_formed_to.aspx
- *Bolton News* (2012) 'Congregations unite after church buildings are closed.' 8 April 2012. www.theboltonnews.co.uk/news/9637647.congregations-unite-after-church-buildings-are-closed/
- *Bolton News* (2013) 'Theatre church in Astley Bridge to be demolished.' 13 August 2013. www.theboltonnews.co.uk/news/11404787.theatre-church-in-astley-bridge-to-be-demolished-and-replaced-with-9-houses/
- *Bury Times* (2019) 'Historic Stand United Reformed Church sale.' 5 April 2019. www.burytimes.co.uk/news/17552032.historic-stand-united-reformed-church-sale-painful-decision/
- Church of Scotland – how do we identify priority areas? www.churchofscotland.org.uk/connect/priority-areas
- Church of Scotland – Priority Areas: <https://churchofscotland.org.uk/connect/priority-areas/what-we-offer>
- The English Indices of Deprivation 2019, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/835115/IoD2019_Statistical_Release.pdf
- CBEW, 2022. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, National Synthesis Document, A Synodal Church, 22 June 2022: <https://www.cbew.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2022/06/synod-national-synthesis-england-wales.pdf>
- Church Buildings Council (2020) 'Struggling, Closed and Closing Churches Research Project.' www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Struggling_closed_and_closing_churches_report.pdf
- Church of England (2022) 'Church of England national funding to increase 30% to support and develop ministry especially with young people and disadvantaged communities.' 11 May 2022. [accessed: 05/09/22] www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/church-england-national-funding-increase-30-support-and-develop?mc_cid=93aea2e634&mc_eid=b7e3b17d82
- Church of England, Estates (2021) www.churchofengland.org/about/renewal-reform/estates
- Davies, M. (2020) 'Huge cuts to church building stocks.' *The Church Times*, 14 February 2020. www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/14-february/news/uk/huge-cuts-to-church-building-stock
- Davies, M. (2021) 'Is the C of E still a class-riddled act?' *The Church Times*. 25 June 2021. www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/25-june/features/features/is-the-c-of-e-still-a-class-riddled-act
- Giles, K, & Dyas, D (2021). *COVID-19, Churches & Communities: A Church for the Nation; A Church for the Future*. University of York. <https://churchesandcovid.org/sites/churchesandcovid.org/files/2021-08/church-formation-community-report.pdf>
- Goswami, C. (2016) Three facts to know about 'church decline'. www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/459748/Three_facts_to.aspx
- Hirst, M. (2016) 'Poverty, place and presence: positioning Methodism in England, 2001 to 2011', *Theology and Ministry*, 4, 4.1-4.25.
- Hirst, M. (2018) 'Solidarity with the Poor?: Positioning the Church of the Nazarene in England in 2003 and 2013.' *Wesley and Methodist Studies*. pp. 66–84. <https://doi.org/10.5325/weslmethstud.10.1.0066>
- In the Thick of It (2020). https://urc.org.uk/images/Church-and-Society/Documents/In_the_Thick_of_it_book.pdf
- Issues of Connexionalism in the 21st Century. (2017) www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2015-14-Issues-of-Connexionalism.pdf
- Lawson Jacobs, N. (2020) 'Church Online and Disabled People: Locked Down or Opened Up?' <http://naomilawsonjacobs.com/church-online-and-disabled-people-locked-down-or-opened-up/>
- Leeds Diocese (2022) 'Your Parish Share Explained.' www.leeds.anglican.org/finance/parish-share-explained
- MEN (2013) 'Church could be saved from bulldozers.' *Manchester Evening News*, 26 January 2013. www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/church-could-be-saved-from-the-bulldozers-981740
- MEN (2011) 'The end of city's iconic mission.' *Manchester Evening News*, 3 March 2011. www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/local-news/the-end-of-citys-iconic-mission-855438

- Mutch, J. (2019) 'Year of change for Catholic places of worship after closure of two churches.' *The Leigh Journal*, 26 October 2019. www.leighjournal.co.uk/news/17992151-year-change-catholic-places-worship-closure-two-churches/
- NECN (National Estates Church Network). <https://estatechurches.org/>
- My Society, MSOA data. <https://research.mysociety.org/sites/imd2019/about/>
- Oasis Community Hub, Oasis Hub Media City. www.oasishubmediacityuk.org/contact
- Office for National Statistics (2022) www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc1371/#/E07000223
- Office for National Statistics (2020) <https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/postcode-to-output-area-hierarchy-with-classifications-may-2020-lookup-in-the-uk>.
- Oscar Romero Parish Church: www.saintoscarronero.org.uk
- Our Calling (2018) – The Future Call of the Methodist Church [discussion paper]. www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/our-calling/
- Pope Francis (2022) Pope on Synod: The participation of everyone, guided by the Holy Spirit. www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-10/pope-francis-discourse-moment-reflection-eve-inauguration-synod.html
- Salford Diocese (2017) 'Strengthening our Presence as Church: A journey in Hope.' www.dioceseofsalford.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Parish-Re-structuring-Proposal-January-2017-Final-.pdf
- *Statistics for Mission* (2017) Methodist Church. MC/17/51. www.methodist.org.uk/media/1096/counc-mc17-51-statistics-for-mission-april-2017.pdf
- *The Tablet* (2017) 'Bishop of Salford calls for greater role for the laity as details of 22 parish church closures are announced.' 17 January 2017. www.thetablet.co.uk/news/6616/bishop-of-salford-calls-for-greater-role-for-the-laity-as-details-of-22-parish-church-closures-are-announced
- *The Tablet* (2022) 'Declining priests and congregations lead to church closures.' 30 August 2022 www.thetablet.co.uk/news/15814/declining-priests-and-congregations-lead-to-church-closures
- The Triangle (2021) The Triangle Church website: www.thetrianglechurch.org/about-us/reflections/232-reflections-of-astley-bridge-methodist-theatre-church
- URC (2022) General Assembly. <https://urc.org.uk/general-assembly-round-up-8-11-july-2022/>
- URC (2017) H2, Ministries Committee, Funding Additional Ministry. <https://urc.org.uk/images/MissionCouncil/Nov2017/H2-Ministries--Funding-additional-ministry-MCNov2017.pdf>
- URC (2022) Paper B/D/M 1 – Assembly Accredited Lay Pioneers and the Newbigin Pioneering Hub, URC. <https://urc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/GA2022-BDM-1-Lay-Pioneering-and-Hub.pdf>
- Wyatt, T (2022) 'General Synod digest: Strategic Development Funding results to be reviewed for 2024.' *The Church Times*. 15 July 2022. www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/15-july/news/uk/general-synod-digest-low-income-and-strategic-funding-results-to-be-reviewed-for-2024

Endnotes

- 1 The term 'church of the poor' came from Pope Francis in 2013 – see our 2016 report *Church of the Poor: a call to action for churches in the UK*: <http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Church-of-the-Poor-report-web.pdf>
- 2 The Priority Areas committee use data on income, education, employment, health, crime, housing and access to services/amenities to identify the 5% of parishes with the highest levels of deprivation.
- 3 MSOAs were adjusted. Greater Manchester only quintiles were used (rather than the whole of England): the 20% most deprived areas within Greater Manchester.
- 4 X^2 test, $X^2=25.33$, $df = 16$, $p=0.064$
- 5 X^2 test, $X^2=10.7$, $df = 4$, $p=0.030$
- 6 We did experience difficulties obtaining some of the data required for the study. Although church locations are publicly available, some denominations were reluctant to share complete lists of churches in their region (both closed and those that remain open). Gaining qualitative information was also hampered by limited information being available online.

Church on the Margins

Is the Church losing faith in low-income communities in Greater Manchester?

Do the main UK Christian denominations adhere to the gospel priority to work with, and alongside, the poorest and most marginalised people in society? Is this reflected in the allocation of church resources and church buildings?

- Have low-income areas in the UK been disproportionately affected by the closure of church buildings over recent years?
- If people in low-income areas are not engaging with church, we need to ask why. Are churches out of touch with the people and context of low-income areas?
- This report outlines our quantitative research findings, based on in depth statistical research, case studies and the wider denominational context.

It presents a challenge to church leaders and decision makers in all the major denominations across the UK: Are our denominations retreating from low-income areas rather than adhering to the gospel priority to stand with, and alongside poor and marginalised communities?