



# Faith, Hope and the Charity Sector

Developing a better understanding of the faith sector in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

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# INTRODUCTION

## Overview and objectives

The [2021 census](#) revealed not only a drop in the numbers of those identifying within a faith but also in those classifying themselves as 'Christian'. At the same time there was a rise in those identifying with other key faiths, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. Whilst faith communities may be declining in some places or areas of society, the faith sector is still a significant part of our community, as diverse as any other part of the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector.

Partners within [Support Cambridgeshire](#) have some links with faith groups and networks, though from a VCSE perspective faith groups appear to work primarily within their own (largely) place-based communities, rather than through or across the wider non-profit sector. As a result, we think much of the work of faith organisations goes under the radar, remains unrecognised or is misunderstood by wider partners in the VCSE and statutory sectors.

As such, this research exercise sought to gain:

1. a **better understanding of the faith sector** in Cambridgeshire<sup>1</sup>;
2. insights into **how best to communicate** with faith groups to offer support, guidance, and links with statutory services such as health;
3. guidance on **how to serve faith groups in a way that benefits all stakeholders**, creating meaningful support networks across local grassroots groups, faith communities, VCSE infrastructure and the statutory sector.

The results are intended to help Support Cambridgeshire and their partners to better-serve and champion faith-based work as part of their VCS infrastructure roles, and to be able reach out to and collaborate with them more effectively at times of acute community need.

## Methodology

The project ran in two phases from January to April 2024. The first phase was a desk-based data gathering exercise seeking to map faith-based organisations across the county; the second was a series of direct, qualitative engagement encounters with a sample of faith groups, seeking deeper insights into their work and the best ways in which to communicate and collaborate with them in the future.

### Phase 1: Data gathering

Desktop research used census, social media, and publicly available online information on local networks to map the faith sector across the region, including:

- numbers of faith groups across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough;
- those offering 'open' community activities (available to all, regardless of faith);
- the common types of 'open' support offered to these communities;
- their connections and relationships with other VCSE, faith-based or wider groups, networks or other types of infrastructure;
- contact details to support direct engagement in phase two.

<sup>1</sup> Including six distinct geographies: Huntingdonshire, South Cambs, East Cambs, Fenland, Cambridge City and Peterborough.

## Phase 2: Making contact

Given certain limitations (including available time and resource) we identified a diverse sample of 64 groups as priorities for interview from within the phase 1 data set of 644 faith organisations. We identified these 64 using three key filters – faith, geography and the presence of open activities within their community offers:

- **Faith:** the majority of those targeted came from the Christian faith, reflecting Christianity's status as by far the largest religious grouping within both census data and our own phase 1 results. Other faiths were prioritised according to their prevalence across the six different geographic regions within the county;
- **Geography:** we attempted to weight engagement to balance out the uneven distribution of faith communities across the county's six areas. This included focused attempts to target groups in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, for which Phase 1 revealed comparatively low levels of active groups overall and in Cambridge City and Peterborough, where some of the very few examples of non-Christian groups are based;
- **Open activities:** a focus on groups offering 'open' activities (meaning open and free to members of the local community, beyond their congregations) was agreed on the assumption that such groups would be more likely to engage and place a higher value on collaboration with others in non-profit sectors.

All 64 target organisations were contacted and invited to interview, using a pre-engagement briefing<sup>2</sup> outlining our purpose project governance and terms of engagement. A self-selecting sample of 19 groups emerged with whom we secured direct encounters – mainly online interviews but including a number of face-to-face encounters and observations of their work in practice. A full list of these groups is included in the appendices.

## Governance and Authors

This report was commissioned by [Support Cambridgeshire](#), a partnership of registered charities and voluntary sector umbrella bodies the Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations ([Hunts Forum](#)) and [Cambridge Council for Voluntary Services](#), whom together collaborate with to deliver better outcomes for local VCSE organisations across the county. The work was funded by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Integrated Care System.

Direction and delivery of the research was managed by The Hunts Forum on behalf of Support Cambridgeshire. Independent consultants were engaged to deliver Phases 1 and 2: Phase 1 data gathering was completed by [Dr Hannah Griffin-James](#), held separately as an excel spreadsheet data set and accompanying PowerPoint overview. Her quantitative work also helped to develop some of the assumptions and insights on which Phase 2 encounters were based. Phase 2 design, and the qualitative engagement to which it led, was delivered by [Gethyn Williams](#), who also wrote and compiled this report.

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<sup>2</sup> See appendix

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this section we seek to summarise key findings across our three principal lines of enquiry – to better understand the faith sector, how best to communicate with faith groups and to serve them in ways that create meaningful support networks.

## A better understanding of the faith sector

There is good reason to assume we have gained an increased understanding of the faith sector, as a result of this exercise. A total of 644 groups were identified across the county which, given our data gathering was undertaken almost entirely online, may be a conservative estimate. Within this sample we have been able to segment by faith, geography and groups offering ‘open activities’ – lenses through which we examine our findings across the three main sections of this report.

The final lens – open activities - particularly supports our understanding of groups that balance their energies between a focus on worship (often referred to as ‘thin’ groups) and wider community outreach ('thick' groups) - whether this focus is ‘always on’ or temporarily catalysed by a particularly public event or civic crisis. This lens is explored primarily in **Part 1 – An overview of the Faith Sector in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough**.

Beyond what faith groups do, we were also able to capture something of a picture relating to the wider infrastructure and networks they access, an instructive point of comparison for front-line and second-tier groups in the VCSE sector. These findings, together with practical examples of how faith groups relate to and work with VCSE and statutory, can be found in **Part 2 – How Engagement and Collaboration Happens**.

And finally, through these explorations we were able to build a picture of how and in what circumstances faith groups might welcome collaboration – the tactics and approaches best suited to good engagement, as well as insights and instincts on which agendas might offer the most fertile soil. Readers interested in this aspect will find more in **Part 3 – Creating Inclusive, Meaningful Networks**.

Our key limitations in delivering this enquiry have been a finite level of time and resource, which in turn impacts on our ability to engage groups qualitatively. This has contributed to something of a focus in favour of evidence relating to Christian groups, though to some degree the prevalence of such groups within the data supports this focus. We discuss this further and its implications for our findings, in **Part 1**.

## Key insights into groups grounded in Christianity

At this point, it may be useful to give readers a clearer sense of some of the pertinent characteristics of Christian groups, upon which this report draws heavily.

To begin, we note that ‘Christianity’ is a **broad umbrella term encompassing a range of different denominations and approaches**. This leads to a plurality of different missions and different ways of interpreting those missions, which cautions us against making strong assumptions about open activities offered.

When considering Church of England groups – by far the largest cohort of Christian groups in our data set, we recall that as the national religion of state Churches carry **a legal duty to have ‘a worshipping faith in every community’**, meaning those living in a Parish, or having been Baptised there, are entitled to baptisms, weddings and similar. This dynamic often precedes a greater will to proactively serve the whole community, including the provision of activities for which a lack of faith is no barrier. ‘Open activities’ may therefore be something of a false distinction. As one local leader put it, the Church of England is “*a club run for the benefit of non-members*”.

This ‘open by default’ approach is by no means restricted to the Church of England. **Many ‘free’ or Evangelical Churches also share this ethos**, even if for them it is not enshrined in a legal duty. All of the groups engaged sat somewhere on a spectrum between a focus on congregational support/growth at one end and wider community outreach/objectives at the other. Even where their focus appeared to be more on the former, this appeared to reflect a (conscious) lack of knowledge about community needs more than a reluctance to address them.

In such cases groups generally had ambitions to improve their understanding of local communities, described by some as a process of “moving from an inward to an outward focus.” Conversely, where activities were most visible these were usually strongly supported or delivered by worshipers, demonstrating again how the balance between congregation and community is **more likely to represent a spectrum than a binary set of positions**.

In many areas we were also able to observe **a high degree of collaboration between Churches**. Some of these were formalised through faith-based networks (as explored in Part 2) whilst others remained organic and led by a shared interest in place (different denominations working together for their town or village). Other collaborations appeared to be led by a passion for a cause or social issue (we encountered some individuals volunteering through other churches – not necessarily the ones at which they worshipped).

**Congregational growth did not generally present as a primary motivation for open activities or community outreach**, though Church sustainability was clearly a concern for some with ageing congregations. The Church of England sometimes refers to itself as ‘the biggest voluntary organisation in the country’, whilst acknowledging that congregation levels are down since Covid. Some were quite matter of fact about this, suggesting failing Churches should be allowed to fail, noting that new groups with younger congregations do pop up regularly.

These insights provide but a brief introduction to some of the practical aspects and implications of open activities observed with Christian groups interviewed. We build on all in greater depths in Parts 1, 2 and 3.

## How best to communicate with faith groups

In Part 2 we summarise the range of methods used by faith groups interviewed in collaborating and engaging with others – both within faith networks and beyond. These include:

- An **appreciation of the role played by geography** (where the group is based), which may have implications on groups' ability to engage communities, particularly in rural areas, or may prompt a natural interest in some social issues more likely to present on their doorsteps (such as homelessness in more urban areas);
- An **understanding of faith-based infrastructure vehicles, groups and networks**, whether born of necessity (such as Local Ecumenical Partnerships), social themes in more populated areas (the Gather movement) or forays into services complementing state provision (Parish Nurses). Infrastructure also plays a bearing on how different denominations take forward their mission (see the 'relational mission' of some evangelical churches) and the phenomenon of 'planting' new churches;
- **How groups collaborate with each other** – foodbanks serving a shared area is a typical example, and reveals a range of different fulfilment roles played by faith actors;
- **How groups collaborate with VCSEs** – for example as hosts for the activities of others (leveraging the value of their buildings) or playing prominent place-based co-ordinating roles (not unlike community anchor organisations);
- **How groups collaborate with statutory services** – we observed a number of practical examples across 5 of the 6 areas of place, within the county;
- And finally, we conclude with insights into groups' **preferences for infrastructure support**, much of which is comparable to those offered by Councils for Voluntary Services for their members. We were also able to identify some **thematic social issues on which faith groups might be looking to collaborate** with others – the mental health and wellbeing of local communities being perhaps the most notable.

## How best to create meaningful, sustainable relationships with faith groups

And in Part 3 we distil insights from across the report into a series of broad recommendations supporting stakeholders' attempts to engage faith groups meaningfully and sustainably. These include:

- **Recognising the importance of place** – the needs of their local area as a starting point for collaborations;
- Whilst highlighting **the transient nature of the range of issues on which faith groups typically work**, perhaps due to their highly reactive nature and lower reliance on external funding cycles, offering them the ability to pivot quickly;
- As for many in the VCSE sector, recognising and building on the **Covid-19 pandemic as something of a watershed moment**, particularly in how others saw faith groups and reappraised the value of their work;
- **Practical tips on best to reach out to faith groups**, including using common CoE structures as routes to engagement and collaboration;
- To conclude, we summarise **insights based on historic or current relationships with VCSEs and statutory partners**, in order to help stakeholders plan future approaches.

## Emerging Conclusions

Whilst this report is not designed to make formal recommendations, it is possible to draw some broad conclusions about the nature of faith groups in Cambridgeshire, as well as to synthesise some of insights most likely to serve stakeholders seeking to engage them.

Whilst noting our relatively small sample size of interviewees we might still conclude, in general terms, that faith groups in the county delivering open activities appear to be **highly responsive and reactive** to their needs of their communities. We might therefore consider them hyper local and 'front line' – a considerable strength in relation to their effectiveness in outreach and community intelligence, though a possible barrier to their wider development if such focus reduces their capacity to capture their own impact, to promote their credentials or to engage strategically with others. To the extent to which this is true of groups in the county it may leave much of their activity, as our enquiry assumed at its outset, 'under the radar'.

What we have observed with greater certainty are **three key factors** likely to be pivotal to stakeholders' attempts to successfully engage them. Firstly, the **role of place** in dictating their spheres of focus, secondly their **buildings as key assets** and vehicles for practical partnership working, and thirdly **their people, for whom faith as a motivator offers a particular angle** for their open activities, as well as on their individual nature as volunteers

Beyond these factors groups demonstrated active engagement in a vast range of social issues and signalled a general openness to learning from others and a willingness to collaborate. The potential for greater cross-sector working is therefore real and significant. Faith groups may make strong and valuable partners thanks to the **intelligence they hold on their communities** and **levels of trust enjoyed** with them (assets they share with many VCSE groups) or because of the particular **flexibility they enjoy to put their focus where they wish, and to do so at pace** (perhaps because they are not generally entrenched in external funding cycles or tied to fixed strategic agendas - a possible point of contrast with some in the VCSE sector).

These insights are all working assumptions, born from our phase 1 instincts and built on from phase 2's qualitative engagement. They should therefore not be taken as gospel truth. Our Phase 1 data gathering encouraged us not to assume that groups without visible open activities are inactive in their communities. We also suspect, from the turnover in groups glimpsed during phase 1, that the county's faith sector may be very fluid (sometimes referred to as 'faith in motion'). Ultimately authors are conscious that our data and the qualitative insights offered here may only offer a snapshot at a particular point in time.

We hope however that this snapshot proves valuable to readers at what appears to be a particularly challenging time for many of the county's most isolated and vulnerable communities. Many of the faith groups engaged talked about their Covid-era activity being an awakening moment for local partners, alerting them to the scope and value of faith-based activity in their areas. Perhaps in a small way this report can fulfil a similar catalytic purpose, shining an instructive light upon a rich cross-section of faith-based community activity in Cambridgeshire, catalysing a fresh wave of cross-sector engagement and collaboration.

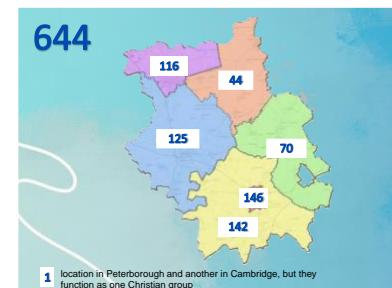
# AN OVERVIEW OF THE FAITH SECTOR IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE & PETERBOROUGH

## Numbers of Faith Groups

Our research identified **644 faith groups across the six distinct areas of the county**. However, we estimate a further 10% without any online presence making a more reliable estimate closer to 700 groups.

### Geographic distribution of identified groups

- Peterborough – 18% (116 groups)
- Fenland – 7% (44 groups)
- East Cambridgeshire – 11% (70 groups)
- Cambridge (city) – 23% (146 groups)
- South Cambridgeshire - 22% (142 groups)
- Huntingdonshire – 19% (125 groups)



## Distribution of groups by faith

Faith groups grounded in Christianity account for 498 (77%) of all those mapped in Phase 1, comprising Church of England, other Christian and Methodist organisations. Other Christian' includes Non-denominational Christian Churches, Lutherans, Diaspora groups (e.g. French Evangelical) and Fellowships of Independent Evangelical Churches. Further details are available in the full breakdown of the Phase 1 data.

FAITH	%	Count
Church of England	62%	398
Other Christian	9%	61
Methodist	6%	39
Islam	4%	26
Catholic	3%	22
Ecumenical partnership of Methodist with the United Reformed Church, or Methodist with Anglicans, or Christian with Jews	3%	21
United Reformed	2%	15
Buddhist	2%	13
American Protestant and Pentecostal	2%	12
Orthodox	1%	8
Quakers	1%	8
Hindu	1%	6
Jewish	1%	6
Gurdwara (Sikh, Hindu, Punjabi) and Hindi with Malayalam	0.62%	4
Sikh	0.31%	2
Bahá'í Faith	0.31%	2
Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains	0.16%	1

## Distribution of faith groups by geographic area

A comparison of the largest numbers of faith groups across the six areas reveals Church of England to be the largest cohort in each area, comprising a clear majority in all areas bar Cambridge and Peterborough. Likewise, it is only in the two cities that we find prominent numbers of non-Christian faith groups.



## The lens of 'open' community activities

A key aim of this enquiry is to help the region's VCSE sector and its partners (henceforth referred to as 'stakeholders') to better understand, engage with and serve faith communities. As such, a segmentation of groups offering '**open activities**' – **those available free of cost to the community and not restricted to those of faith alone** – is a valuable filter; our working assumption is that those offering such activities would be more likely to welcome closer engagement with wider sectors. Of the 644 groups recorded in phase 1 we were able to identify **233 groups (36%) as offering at least one open activity**, based on information they shared online.

By far the largest cohort offering at least one open activity was **Church of England**, accounting for 147 groups (63% of all such groups) followed by **Other Christian** (10%) and **Methodist** groups (9%). Above we noted how these three cohorts dominate the data set, accounting for 77% of all faith groups recorded. This dominance is also reflected when considering just groups offering open activities - 82% of these are CofE, Other Christian and Methodist.

### Church of England, Other Christian and Methodist groups in our data set

Total number of such groups in Cambridgeshire	498
As a % of all faith groups in Cambridgeshire	77%

Total number of such groups offering open activities	193
As a % of all faith groups offering open activities	82%

## Implications of the dominance of Christianity-based groups

Perhaps because of the dominance of these three Christian groups within the data set, as well as the self-selecting nature of those choosing to engage with us in Phase 2, much of the evidence in this and following sections draws on practices within this broad Christian community.

## Examples of Open Community Activities

Many of the open activities explored in Phase 2 were **grounded in 'listening practices' and 'relational' activities**. As one Church leader described this, "*Faith is the bedrock of relational activity, the Church is a relational organisation*" with open activities designed to

*“maintain and sustain...we’re not a service provider, we’re seeking to build community with people”.*

As such, most open activities discussed **did not consider themselves ‘clinical’ or ‘professional’** (though some examples of these were evident, particularly within Evangelical churches). Generally such services remained free of cost to those accessing them and where charges applied (for example, in a very well-used counselling service) these were based on ability to pay and priced substantially below market rates.

Typically such activities were **volunteer-led** (often by active members of the congregation, although some groups had paid staff (such as a Children and Families Worker) **funded mainly by faith groups themselves**. Examples of staff funded through other sources (such trusts and foundations) were rare in this sample, though **capital funding applications were much more common**, especially through locally available schemes, typically used for developing or maintain buildings or for the purchase of equipment.

Some activities were **delivered in partnership with others** – most commonly foodbanks – where the faith group usually provided the venue and often their own volunteers, enabling foodbank staff (usually Trussell Trust) and sometimes additional partners taking the opportunity to deliver wider outreach (for example, staff from local Citizens Advice Bureaux). The following taxonomy may provide a helpful understanding of such activities, with examples included under each. The table on pages 23 and 24 also makes use of this.

#### **Categorising Open Community Activities within faith-based groups in Cambridgeshire**

Place-based activities	Identity-based activities	Interest-based activities
Defined by geographic boundaries	Defined by the shared identity of participants	Defined by common interests or shared interactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Work in or with local schools</li><li>• Homelessness health support and emergency accommodation</li><li>• Warm spaces</li><li>• Outreach within Care homes</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bereavement support groups</li><li>• Carer support groups</li><li>• Childrens' reading groups</li><li>• Youth work / clubs</li><li>• Mens Sheds</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Playgroups / Parent and Toddler activities</li><li>• Art Therapy</li><li>• ‘Knit and Natter’</li><li>• Foodbanks</li><li>• Debt and money advice</li><li>• Counselling Services</li><li>• Credit Union</li></ul>

#### **Where open activities are informed by faith**

*“Everyone is welcome - and also on Sunday!”*

Naturally, given such activities are usually delivered by faith groups on their own premises, some activities meeting our definition of ‘open’ were also informed by faith or contained elements of faith in their delivery. However, where this occurred this report found nothing to suggest participation in faith-led elements was compulsory, with activities still very much open to those without a faith conviction. Examples of this include work in schools where content draws on Biblical passages, or time towards end of activities for joint prayer or quiet personal reflection.

Faith leaders interviewed were unapologetic about these elements, drawing explicitly on their faith as inspiration for delivering such activities, and were also able to demonstrate strong, consistent and openly-inclusive approaches. Many examples of participating individuals who had no faith, or even different faiths were evident or, to put it another way, a lack of faith appeared to be no barrier to such participation. As one Evangelical Church Leader put it, *“Everyone is welcome, and also on Sunday!”*

### **How faith groups identify and respond to need in their communities**

When asked how community activities were instigated, several groups told us they were prompted by **members of their congregations**. Examples ranged from simple, positive participatory activities (an art therapy class run by the instigating volunteer) to what might be considered critical public services (emergency accommodation for children and young people, where a congregation member alerted their Church to the need). Volunteers within groups appeared to be a consistent source of inspiration for such activities.

At other times **individuals in the wider community** had approached faith groups seeking support in areas they had previously received elsewhere but were no longer able to, such as managing their mental health after the withdrawal of a public health service. In such cases this prompted deliberations within faith groups as to what might be developed.

Many groups reported the identification and development of new open activities **through feedback received through existing open activities**. One group told us their warm space wasn't necessarily used by those in fuel poverty but experiencing loneliness, or suffering from the withdrawal of wider services and seeking mainly empathy and human contact. Another told us that their weekly youth group served as a constant source of new ideas, or a vehicle to reveal additional needs.

Some groups had undertaken **more formal means of community engagement** to assess need, as might be done in the wider non-profit sector. Examples included use of local grants (requiring demonstrable community consultation), regular consultation with Heads of local schools and even through a Community Outreach Manager - a role funded through Church funds and congregational donations. Many groups were conscious of the need to engage with communities in this way, sensing how needs can change rapidly. Some were planning to undertake their own 'community audits' in the coming months.

Overall, the most common element driving the identification of new open activities appeared to be **conscious, regular listening practice within the group itself**. All interviewees considered this level of 'active listening' and engagement to be core to their leadership roles, both with their congregations and the wider community. Some described this practice as "*community listening*" or as "*a listening service*".

Some then use their faith to sit with and reflect on what they hear, remaining open to opportunities to act on it where possible. One Evangelical Church even described how they support and train their congregation to approach people in the street who may need help, relating to them and signposting into support where available, extending this listening practice beyond the group's formal leadership.

## Key assets of faith groups in delivering open activities

The most common assets cited in the delivery of open activities were the **buildings and premises** of faith groups themselves. Many owned or operated flexible, multi-use spaces in accessible community locations, seeing these assets as key to their ability to work in partnership with others. In addition to using these to deliver their own activities, many hired out spaces or made them freely available to other voluntary groups or statutory services.

A prominent example of the role the building as key asset was the 'Bar Hill Hub', operated by the Bar Hill Church, as part of an Ecumenical Partnership in South Cambridgeshire. A legacy from a community support initiative set up during Covid-19, the 'hub' now operates weekly accommodating a wide range of Church-led activities (carers club, food hub, bereavement group, Knit and Natter, Men's Sheds, a wellbeing café and others) as well as hosting wider partners providing drop in and outreach (social prescribers from the local Primary Care Network, Citizens Advice Bureaux volunteers, elected Parish Councillors). Organisers describe it as "effectively *the* Village Hall" and report individuals of faith and non-faith coming from several neighbouring towns and villages travelling to use it.

Faith groups also consistently described **their human networks – their 'people'** – as key assets in their community outreach and activity. Such individuals usually engaged as volunteers, in relational roles (as described above), but also at times through their professional skills or backgrounds, contributing to management and governance structures where such activities demand it (such as helping to fulfil elements of statutory compliance or regulated activities, such as in counselling or debt advice). In such circumstances these volunteers fulfilled accountability roles, akin to Trustees in a registered charity. Several groups also demonstrated a strong grasp of good practice in volunteer engagement, working with a range of different volunteer ages, types and personas, with systems in place manage quality assurance, ensure service fulfilment and avoid volunteer burnout.

Finally, many groups also cited their **faith-based mission and community location** as key to their ability to serve the community, described in terms such as being "*focal point for community life*" or "*the heartbeat of community life at the grassroots*". Examples included being a natural place for food distributions (hosting foodbank activity) or a key source of community intelligence for wider partners.

## National Comparisons and Impact

The examples cited in this opening section (and indeed, within much of the two sections that follow) are obviously dominated by the perspectives and experiences of faith groups grounded in Christianity. To some degree the data justifies this, and within a time-limited project there is only so much resource we were able to devote to in attempts to engage wider voices.

2021 census data tells us that an average of 45.4% of Cambridgeshire residents consider themselves Christian, slightly below the national average of 46.2%. The highest proportion of identifying Christians in the county is 58% (one community in Fenland). Elsewhere in Cambridgeshire, 4.5% identify as Muslim, 0.2% as Jewish, 0.3% as Sikh, 1.2% as Hindu and 0.5% as Buddhist. This broad non-Christian cohort accounts for 6.7% of the population,

which is below the numbers of faith groups representing these individuals that we were able to identify (closer to 10% of our sample).

Despite such disparities the lens of open activities still demonstrates how much value to the wider community faith organisations offer and generate, beyond worship. Speaking at the time of release of the census data, The Most Reverend Stephen Cottrell said “*This winter – perhaps more so than for a long time – people right across the country, some in desperate need, will be turning to their local church, not only for spiritual hope but practical help.*”<sup>3</sup>

Quantifying public or ‘social’ value is largely a subjective exercise and beyond the scope of this enquiry, though some national evidence does shine a light the contribution of faith in this context. In 2021 The **National Churches Trust** commissioned and published **The House of Good**<sup>4</sup>, concluding that:

*‘From foodbanks to credit unions, churches across the UK provide a growing list of essential services for people in urgent need. We’ve long seen the power of churches to bring communities together and help them thrive, but we’ve never been able to measure it. For the very first time, our House of Good report quantifies the economic and social value of all church buildings to the UK. Not just the bricks and mortar but the welfare and wellbeing they create in our communities.*

*In 2020, our ground-breaking report demonstrated that the total **economic and social value that church buildings generate** in the UK is at least **£12.4 billion per year** which averages around £300,000 per church. That is roughly equal to the total NHS spending on mental health in England in 2018. But our latest 2021 research now shows that the **annual social and economic value of church buildings to the UK is worth around £55 billion**. This sum, calculated using the latest HM Treasury Green Book guidance, includes the contribution churches make to wellbeing and to local economies.’*

The House of Good echoes the findings of **The Cinnamon Trust’s Faith Action Audit** (2015 – online source not available), surveying 2,110 local churches and other faith groups who said they were actively working to support their local community (67% of which did so in collaboration with other organisations). Collectively, the audit found:

- *Groups mobilised 139,600 volunteers (over 21m hours) and 9,177 paid staff*
- *Supporting 3,494,634 beneficiaries each year*
- *And that the time given (by churches and other faith groups) alone was worth over £200 million, which when social action projects are included rises to over £3 billion a year nationally.*

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<sup>3</sup> [Cambridge Live \(Dec 22\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [The House of Good \(NCT, 2021\)](#)

# HOW ENGAGEMENT & COLLABORATION HAPPENS

*"We're a key local partner – we've been here for over 1000 years"*

Parish Church, Fenland

**This section is designed to alert stakeholders to important factors they may encounter when seeking to engage faith groups.**

We begin by exploring some of the factors cited by faith groups as influencing their ability to engage with others, particularly through their open activities or wider community outreach. These insights are organised under two natural groupings that emerged through conversations with them; **firstly, the role of geography** (in particular, the differences observed between groups based in urban and rural areas) and **secondly under the various faith-based infrastructure** models and networks already open to them.

Beyond this we summarise some of the notable examples of faith-based collaboration across the region as revealed by groups themselves, including activities between faith groups, with VCSE organisations and with statutory partners. Finally, we conclude with a summary of emerging areas of need – aspects of engagement and collaboration in which faith groups might welcome further support or intervention.

## GEOGRAPHY

### Faith-based collaboration in urban areas

Many faith groups based in urban areas spoke about the **strength of their congregational life and activity**, which they attributed (at least in part) to the natural advantages of reach and accessibility to those of faith offered by their urban locations. Representatives at Diocese level contrasted the general health of stronger Church of England congregations in more densely populated areas (like Ely) with more struggling ones in rural parishes. Evangelical churches in town centres (such as St Ives and St Neots) also reported active and vibrant congregations.

More active Church life in urban areas also appears to support **collaboration between Churches**. In St Ives (Huntingdonshire) a group of leaders from the Methodist, Church of England, United Reformed and other Churches in the town have a long-established weekly 'Green Table' meeting. Principally a vehicle to collaborate on environmental issues (the group led work to make St Ives a 'Fairtrade' town) the group is also a valuable source of information and peer support, connecting a raft of diverse projects from supporting local asylum seekers to running an independent foodbank (one not affiliated to The Trussell Trust, or similar). Church Leaders use this network in fluid and organic ways to stimulate or extend open activities as well as bring their congregations together for joint worship at major holidays.

**Geography may also act as an indicator** of the kinds of social issues that faith groups seek to tackle. Homelessness is one example - an area of activity cited more commonly by groups based in urban locations, perhaps for understandable reasons. The more likely presence of statutory services in such areas also enables **operational partnerships with service providers**. In Peterborough a leading Christian group's 'Street Chaplain' project supporting the homeless links into seven (statutory) emergency units across four city sites. The faith group delivers the project's infrastructure, brokering these partnerships and using their faith to help them "lead with love".

These operational partnerships may also provide a springboard for more strategic ones. The work of Peterborough's The Light Project in supporting the homeless (cited above) has helped them to develop sophisticated strategic relationships with the police (as members of the Safer Peterborough Partnership Board) as well as health and care systems leaders.

Such advantages in scale and proximity may also make **the presence of inter-faith and multi-faith networks more likely**. For example, Peterborough Christians for Social Action is a network of faith-based activists in the city. The Mayor and other local leaders also host annual Civic Prayer Breakfasts with leaders of several faiths.

### Faith-based collaboration in rural areas

In more rural areas we observe almost the reverse of some of the insights described above. Groups interviewed in rural areas were **more likely to report challenges in maintaining or growing their congregations**.

Parish Churches discussed the impact of natural population churn, as well as simple physical isolation, as barriers for ageing congregations in getting to Church or associated open activities such as warm spaces or foodbanks. It was suggested that even more dispersed 'community hub' models (active across several sites) presented challenges for parishioners unable to travel or walk more than short distances. A lack of transport (public and private) was also cited as a structural factor pertinent to this issue.

Several rural Parish Churches also reflected on **a lack of wider faith-based infrastructure in more rural areas**. For example, the Gather movement typically uses a city-wide area, or other workable shared geography, as a basis for effective collaborations.

None of this is to suggest there are not common issues on which rural groups would like to collaborate. One cited frequently (in connection with transport and health issues for ageing populations) was **loneliness and social isolation**. This could be an underpinning intersectional social challenge, very much on the radar of faith groups in more rural areas, comparable to the prevalence of homelessness as a focus for faith groups in urban areas.

## FAITH-BASED INFRASTRUCTURE

As within the wider non-profit sector, faith groups grounded in Christianity have access to a variety of infrastructure organisations and networks to enable collaboration, access services or simply to access peer support. Many groups interviewed had strong points of connection or active relationships with such structures. A deeper appreciation of these may provide

stakeholders with insights on how to best engage with faith groups efficiently. This section seeks to provide an overview of such structures.

## Active collaborations

**Churches Together in England**<sup>5</sup> is ‘the national ecumenical instrument supporting and encouraging churches from a wide range of traditions to work together in unity’, involving churches drawn from the Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Orthodox and Lutheran traditions, as well as Free Churches, Quakers and others, at local and county as well as national levels. Their vision is ‘to create the space in which fruitful collaboration and mutual understanding can grow, so that we as churches work more closely together in our great task of sharing in God’s mission and making the gospel of Christ known in our nation.’

Many of the groups interviewed for this enquiry were active members of a Churches Together network, enabling collaboration on activities as diverse as debt counselling (a Christians Against Poverty group in Ely, serving up to 60 clients a year), running a weekly hot food space (through a Methodist Church in St Neots) or simply as a peer network for mutual support and to better-understand their areas (as cited by a Baptist Church in Huntingdonshire). Churches Together in Cambridgeshire<sup>6</sup> is the county-wide partner best-placed to advise on CT networks in the county.

Another national vehicle for local collaborations is the **Gather Movement**<sup>7</sup> - instigating local networks for people of faith working together to see their local places improved ‘socially, culturally, environmentally and spiritually’. Gather brings Christians together in more than 150 cities and towns. In Lincoln for example, an area with high mental health needs and suicide rates, Gather has helped to co-ordinate collaborations across several denominations, working together to field crisis calls from individuals at risk of harm, on a rotational basis.

In Cambridgeshire the movement has already served as a vehicle to bring faith communities together with the Combined Authority Mayor on areas of mutual interest, including transport links and mental health. Cambridgeshire’s local ‘unity movement’ (the name for a local Gather network) is co-ordinated through a project in Fenland. Gather’s national co-ordinator reflected on the potential to use the data on faith groups gathered for this enquiry to support those engagement efforts further in the future.

At a national level Gather has a close working relationship with Churches Together, though the latter works primarily across County-level bureaucracies, whereas Gather’s unity movements are more city and town focused. As such they have working relationships with several Metro Mayors. They host an annual summit<sup>8</sup> for Church Unity and City Transformation Leaders, this year taking place in Derby on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18th June.

An example of a more specific collaborative structure is found within **Parish Nursing Ministries UK**<sup>9</sup> - a national charity that trains, equips and supports registered nurses to work through a local church or Christian organisation as a ‘Parish Nurse’. These individuals work

<sup>5</sup> <https://cte.org.uk/about/whos-who/member-churches/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ctcambs.org.uk/>. Rev'd Mark Burleigh is the County Ecumenical Officer - [countyofficer@ctcambs.org.uk](mailto:countyofficer@ctcambs.org.uk).

<sup>7</sup> <https://gathermovement.org/about/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://gathermovement.org/event/gather-movement-summit-2024/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.parishnursing.org.uk/>

alongside clergy and pastoral teams, using their knowledge, skills and expertise as registered nurses to identify health needs, adopt a plan for service users and help to navigate the healthcare system where needed. Engaging a Parish Nurse is one way in which a local church might create a ‘health ministry’ – a way of ‘intentionally caring for the body, mind, and spirit of an individual or community’. Partners estimate there to be 250-300 Parish Nurses across the country.

In Cambridgeshire, St Peter and St Paul Church (Chatteris) employ a Parish Nurse, funded through the Diocese of Ely, providing a valuable interface between the Church and local GP Surgery, who between them have a depth of understanding of local needs and issues. The Nurse was previously employed by the surgery but came over to work with the Church, allowing the surgery to employ social prescribers, who now connect local people into health services via the Church’s community café. Additional Parish Nurses in the Ely Diocese and another in Peterborough were also reported as active within the county.

### **Church growth and sustainability**

The infrastructure described above might be said to share an outward-facing, community-serving character, well-aligned with our definition of ‘open activities’. Other elements of Christian infrastructure, whilst sharing some of this ethos, appear to be designed more immediately from the need to grow or sustain the Church itself.

One such vehicle is the **Local Ecumenical Partnership** – a self-selecting grouping of different churches in the same geographic area coming together to use a shared asset, typically a building, a relationship usually formalised through a covenant or similar. The presence of an LEP typically denotes a strong fellowship between two or more congregations.

Sometimes an LEP is formed to help Churches consolidate, managing declines in congregations by sharing a building (multiple congregations worshiping in the same space) or to share back-end infrastructure (much as voluntary sector organisations might through partnership or merger). However there may also be other drivers - one LEP based in Cambridge city was started as Ecumenical Partnership, not to solve a challenge but a simple recognition that they would do better together than they might alone.

Many different denominations might be involved in LEPs. Methodist churches are common but not exclusive. In Cambridge one LEP involves the Church of England and United Reform Church. Sometimes three or even more Churches are involved. In other parts of the country there are even examples of multi-faith LEPs; such as in Rochdale, home of the co-op movement, which brings Churches and Mosques together for multi-faith dialogue.

LEPs interviewed for this enquiry include a ten-year-old partnership led by **St Leonard's in Little Downham**, partnering with a local Methodist chapel that closed for worship but whose building is still used as a community space, managed by the Parish Church.

And notably also in **Bar Hill**, a long standing LEP dating back to 1989 and involving CofE, Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic and United Reformed Church partners, whose governing article states '*We give thanks for all that we have in common; but we recognise that our division is a hindrance to the mission that we share.*' Working ecumenically in this way was an original intention when the Church was founded around 50 years ago, in what was then a new town. Today this legacy continues - the LEP working with housing developers in other new towns, such as Northstowe, who don't yet have their own buildings for worship.

Other forms of infrastructure are even more overtly connected to objectives of church growth and sustainability. The '**relational mission**' movement has its roots in the Baptist denomination and engages many of free or evangelical churches, such as The Bridge in St Ives. The movement is international, incorporating over 2,000 churches around the world. As well as providing opportunity for collaboration or exchange, it also provides access to start-up funding or seed capital for new social ventures.

Evangelical churches are also commonly involved in the creation of new Churches, or '**planting**', as the process is known. Support provided might include anything from fundraising for the new building to helping local partners to develop and establish their Church's own individual mission. They have also inspired wider movements such as the **Catalyst Network**<sup>10</sup>, an apostolic movement which aims to help churches grow through their leading disciples. This was cited as central to the work of one participating evangelical church in Huntingdonshire.

Other examples were also forthcoming, each with a particular tone or audience focus. In many ways the range of infrastructure, networks and movements active within faith communities appears just as diverse as those found in the wider non-profit sector.

## EXAMPLES OF COLLABORATION

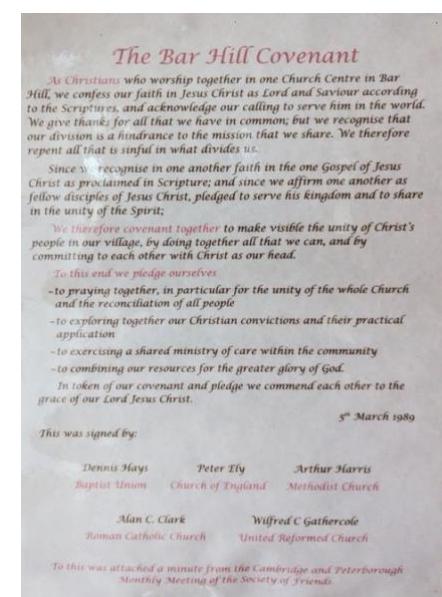
Further practical examples of active collaboration between faith groups and others across the Country, revealed as part of this enquiry, are listed below to help illustrate the range of issues on which faith groups currently collaborate.

### Collaborations between faith groups themselves

- A debt advice service in Wisbech, Fenland;
- The joint undertaking of safeguarding training and other training<sup>11</sup> to support making churches accessible and inclusive for adults with learning disabilities in Fenland;

<sup>10</sup> <https://catalystnetwork.org/about/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.counteveronein.org.uk/about/>



- Peterborough Christians for Social Action – the largest inter-denominational network in the city with around 100 individuals, meeting quarterly. Achievements include the successful securing of funds enabling twelve local churches to become community hubs, conduits between statutory and faith sectors;
- A Church in Peterborough and another in Huntingdonshire reported partnering with the national faith-led charity Hope Into Action to support the homeless; and finally
- Multiple examples of churches collaborating through Foodbanks were also cited – acting as distribution networks and storage centres as well as hosts.

## Collaborations with the VCSE/non-profit sector

- Several relationships with local **Citizens Advice Bureaux** were cited, typically CAB staff or volunteers engaging with the public at community hubs (in Bar Hill) or at Foodbanks (Godmanchester, March). Comparable examples were observed with housing support charities (in Peterborough) and even local branches of Healthwatch (in St Ives);
- A church in St Neots signposts regularly into a local **Money Advice** service;
- Chapters of **Brownies and Guides** meet weekly at a church in South Cambs;
- At a more celebratory level, several parish churches in more rural areas took active roles in the organising or hosting of **local food and community festivals**;
- Some rural parishes even operate their own charities, distributing small grants supporting young people's tuition, individual cases of financial hardship and similar. Funds are raised through income raised through agricultural rents on Church lands, arrangements dating back to medieval times.

Generally, there appeared to be **low awareness of common VCSE infrastructure organisations** amongst those interviewed. Whilst some churches did report personal connections with Cambridge CVS staff or membership of The Hunts Forum, most were unfamiliar with these types of bodies and their collaborative structures in the region (though they did recognise and value the roles played by these groups when informed).

Despite this, many Churches expressed a keen interest in this enquiry and a desire to both see the final report and be involved in future discussions. Some offered support in **setting up a Churches network to engage with this work further**, which they described as a 'Forum for helping churches to work together and do joined up work'. Others simply wished to have better connections with other faith groups in their area, asking if access to the mapping data might be granted at a future point.

## Strategic and operational relationships with statutory partners

### East Cambs

The '**Growth Movement for Recovery Project**' at **St Mary's, Ely** – an example of a 'unity movement' (see above) explores how churches can collaborate with civic and health sectors to multiply impact in transforming communities. They reported working with the Integrated Care System, related discussions with the Combined Authority Mayor, Nik Johnson and aspirations to work further with the Integrated Neighbourhood Network. St Marys are also involved in the **Nightlight scheme** – an emergency service picking up those at risk of suicide, for emergency support within churches, until statutory services open in the morning.

### **Fenland**

Social Prescribers are a key partner at **St Peter and Paul, Chatteris**, making cross-referrals with the Church (and Parish Nurse example cited earlier) as gateway to statutory services; and the **Centenary Baptist church in March** stepped in to take over the running of a warm space when the previous host, a local library, was unable to continue.

### **Peterborough**

We have already cited several statutory relationships held by **Peterborough's Light Project** at the 'Garden House' - a multi-agency homeless hub open 7 days a week, including a mobile health unit, serving around 600-700 people a year since 2018. This experience has led to them chairing the Peterborough Homeless Health Board and hosting other projects initiated by the police. The Lighthouse (the host) is a registered supplier of the city Council and has received central government funding in the past. Taking a leadership and/or hosting role within multi-agency work is common to their approach.

### **Huntingdonshire**

At **Berkley St Methodist** in St Neots, local health workers had some input into the creation of a Toddler Group. They also help connect those homeless into local housing services, as do the **Open Door** (French evangelical) church, also in St Neots.

**Godmanchester Baptist Church** works with 50-60 different agencies, two-way referral arrangements connecting through the Trussell Trust Foodbank that they host. They also have recent experience of using Home Office funding (Community Sponsorship scheme) to support two migrant families, identified as in extreme need by the UN, to resettle. Two years on the first family now live independently, run their own business. This experience supported their engagement with Huntingdonshire District Council when HDC later decided to participate in the Afghan resettlement scheme, who ultimately supported four families.

**The Bridge, St Ives** is a 'new frontiers' evangelical church with an array of complex community support services, some of which operate in regulated environments, including counselling services and a credit union. Their **debt advice service** can present real challenges for partnership working with housing associations, who can express low patience for tenants in debt failing to take care of their properties. Perhaps more conscious of the underlying issues leading to debt, the advice service takes a more supportive or enabling approach.

### **South Cambs**

The ecumenical partnership at Bar Hill Church was probably the most well-developed and partnership-enabled 'community hub' model observed as part of this enquiry. Statutory partners taking part in weekly hub gathering included social prescribers from the local Primary Care Network and Parish Councillors using it for drop-in surgeries with residents. The hub connects to a local hotel (operated by Serco, under Home Office scheme) which provided temporary accommodation for lorry drivers testing positive for Covid-19 during the pandemic but now serves local migrant and asylum-seeking communities.

## EMERGING AREAS OF SUPPORT

In this table we summarise faith groups' feedback and insights, alerting stakeholders to aspects of support or collaboration that might be welcomed in the future, as well as those areas such groups already appear to have well-covered through their own provisions. This section focuses on the content of *what* faith groups might want from engagement, complementing the section that follows (Creating inclusive, meaningful networks) which focuses on *how* groups prefer to be engaged.

Area of need	Feedback, insights
Networking and Peer support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offer or tap into existing networks of Local Leaders – Peterborough CVS' Chief Executives Network was cited as one positive example.</li> <li>Groups also welcome <b>support to create their own relationships with others</b>, across different sectors, as well as general advice on routes to local influence, information on decision-making forums etc.</li> </ul>
Funding and fundraising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advice on fundraising and <b>routes to access</b> funding sources is welcomed, though many are wary of the bureaucracy involved (applications for capital funds were cited more often than project funding, for this reason) and for some to acknowledge that Lottery-based funding is not a viable option.</li> <li>Some groups may have a dedicated fundraiser though (within our relatively small sample size) this is rare. As suggested, capital applications are not uncommon and several groups would welcome more information on locally available funding opportunities connected to the Police and Crime Commissioner, as well as the Integrated Care Board.</li> </ul>
Volunteering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several groups expressed a desire for support and learning around recruiting volunteers and good practice in <b>volunteer engagement</b>, including wanting to learn more about the Volunteer Cambs platform.</li> <li>Some groups wished to improve their ability to recruit volunteers of family age and also skilled volunteers, overlapping with CSR objectives (one group was seeking architects for support and discounts on a building renovation; another was in the process of purchasing a new building and would benefit from legal advice).</li> </ul>
Policy guidance and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As noted earlier, some groups with specific areas of focus (such as homelessness) already seek policy advice and guidance <b>through their own dedicated thematic national infrastructure bodies</b>.</li> <li>However, others would welcome <b>easy-read briefings on new national support schemes</b> when they first come out – for example, Home Office guidance on support available for those working with Ukrainian or Afghan refugees.</li> <li>Groups would also welcome <b>access to more data on their local area</b>. For example, one mentioned wanting to <b>know more about the take up of free school meals on their patch</b>, to support their fundraising objectives and wider targeting of services.</li> </ul>
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whilst there did not appear to be a strong consistent pattern of common training needs, several groups did talk about the increasing complexity</li> </ul>

	<p>of needs presented to them and reporting wanting to undertake mental health first aid training to better cope with this (Kintsugi Hope<sup>12</sup> was the model often cited).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elsewhere, some groups expressed a desire to learn more about <b>how to undertake community engagement or complete a community engagement audit</b>, and separately were seeking advice on how to making spaces (buildings, services) <b>more inclusive</b> for adults with learning difficulties.</li> </ul>
<b>Compliance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most groups said they already had their own faith-based networks or providers to access essential compliance aspects such as <b>safeguarding training</b> and support.</li> </ul>
<b>Language</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On seeking collaborations with faith groups, readers might wish to note that the word 'services' is more often likely to be interpreted as 'singing' than the delivery of activities.</li> </ul>
<b>Agendas of shared interest</b>	<p>A wider variety of potential thematic agendas appropriate for collaboration with faith groups emerged in discussions.</p> <p><b>Identity-based issues</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Support for families</b> struggling in the current financial climate, as well as issues particular to their children. Many mentioned seeing increases in needs around SEND (special educational needs and disability) and a fear that their growing awareness of this "feels like we only just scratched the surface".</li> <li><b>Support for young people</b> – youth ministry (faith-informed youth work) was a prominent 'open activity' of many faith groups, even where faith elements are a part of provision. One Pastor said young people (of faith and of not) often said to him that the youth club was "the only time during my week where people don't judge me". Several groups were seeking to extend their youth ministry ("with more funding we'd hire a youth worker immediately") or develop apprenticeships.</li> </ul> <p><b>Interest-based issues</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A concern for the <b>mental health and wellbeing</b> of local communities was probably the most common single issue cited, regardless of geography or other factors. Faith groups predominantly saw their roles as providing wraparound support, rather than anything clinical, though some groups provided targeted services in related areas such as counselling or debt advice (some of which appeared very challenging to sustain and were at risk of closure, despite huge demand).</li> <li>Nationally the Gather Movement have created a <b>framework for a faith-based Mental Health Strategy</b> as part of post-Covid recovery efforts and as a response to the cost-of-living crisis. This strategy focuses on eradicating stigma, providing training, and developing a theology of mental health.</li> <li>Related to mental health, several groups talked about <b>loneliness and isolation</b> as an underpinning issue for many they supported, connecting to the premium many place on simple listening and relating, which in</li> </ul>

<sup>12</sup> <https://kintsugihope.com/>

	<p>turn explains and supports the many 'drop in' type open activities provided (cafes, lunch clubs, support groups).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some groups talked about <b>loneliness and a lack of social contact</b> as a geographic factor (for example for those on new housing estates without much social infrastructure, or for those in more rural areas unable to get to church or church buildings) whereas others spoke about it in more general terms as a condition of modern life, regardless of where they lived.</li> </ul> <p><b>Place-based issues</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As noted already, a <b>lack of access to private or public transport</b> (especially in rural areas) was cited as a key access barrier for many of those served by faith groups. This challenge was not unique to faith groups – social prescribers in Fenland made a similar comment on barriers to support included in their signposting. Being able to <b>increase the provision of volunteer drivers</b> was one solution offered.</li> <li>Church of England colleagues also noted the Church's commitment to environment protection and restoration nationally and felt <b>green issues</b> could be a good platform for wider collaborations. Parish Churches, especially in more rural areas, have practical interests as well as moral/ethical ones, relating to the management use of church lands.</li> </ul>
<b>Following up this enquiry</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Several groups made a request for us to <b>share phase 1 data</b> if possible – giving them details of other faith groups in their area, supporting their own efforts to collaborate.</li> <li>Others were interested in developing approaches to evidencing a <b>social return on investment</b>, suggesting an exercise to calculate the ROI / SROI of the faith sector in Cambridgeshire would be a natural next step.</li> <li>Others encouraged authors to <b>consider the work of the All Party Parliamentary Group</b> (UK Parliament) and their Faith Covenant, led by Stephen Timms MP and (as reported) already well received by a number of Metro Mayors across England.</li> </ul>

# CREATING INCLUSIVE, MEANINGFUL NETWORKS

This final section is designed to help stakeholders to plan their approaches to engaging faith groups, providing further context on their operating environments and crystallising their own advice and suggestions for those seeking to engage them. Each section heading represents a particular lesson or insight.

## Talk to us about our place

*“Ask us – it should be a yes.”*

Evangelical Church, Huntingdonshire

The Groups engaged for this report were broadly open to being engaged further by those in the VCSE or wider sectors sharing their community objectives. Generally, they responded very positively to the nature of our enquiries, welcoming fresh, genuine attempts to better understand them and their community work.

*“I may not come to a meeting about what’s going on in the Voluntary Sector across the other side of the county, but I definitely want to know about anything you might be doing in my area.”*

Christian group, Peterborough

Faith groups tend to be strongly informed by their local place, meaning they are generally open to place-based collaborations and appreciate being included in wider conversations affecting their areas. However, they may also be active across a wider area if needs dictate; one Church in Huntingdonshire opens its counselling services up to several neighbouring towns without their own provision. Most of the open activities considered in this report were funded through Church finances, rather than statutory or trust/foundation routes. This may give faith groups greater flexibility of where and how they provide services, meaning that despite predominately taking local, place-based approaches, faith groups may not restrict their activities by hard geographic boundaries in the ways that, say, a Local Authority might.

## But be aware, our focus may be constantly shifting

Groups cautioned stakeholders not to make too many assumptions about the nature or focus of their work in advance, with several suggesting how quickly agendas can change or move on. This appears to be a consequence of their highly reactive nature, meaning their work is very sensitive to changes in community need or wider environment.

Several remarked how much their programme of open activities had changed since the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, one Methodist Church in Huntingdonshire has refocused its play group activities around more of a pastoral and befriending model, in response to their observation that children born in that era were in need of support to help them socialise and were presenting with delayed speech. This in turn was causing considerable stress and anxiety amongst their parents, whose needs are also considered in the delivery model.

Another Evangelical church commented on a similar, post-Covid phenomenon they were encountering, describing an increasing complex range of social and emotional pressures

presenting in their congregation as increased anger, intolerance and fear. “People are just tired” said the Pastor, their ‘base levels’ of resilience and mental health under increasingly considerable strain.

### Covid was a pivotal moment for many faith groups

It was notable how many faith groups discussed the impact of the Covid era on the direction and scale of their community activities. Just as many voluntary organisations have testified nationally, **St Mary's (Ely)** described this time as one where the local state noticed afresh the variety of significant ways in which churches were serving their community. St Mary's used this moment and experience to instigate a local unity (Gather) movement, focusing on community recovery.

Likewise, **St Peter and St Paul (Chatteris)** described Covid as a ‘wake up moment’ for local partners - an awakening to everything the church was doing. This may also have had a galvanising effect on congregations. Since the Covid era, 40 local families have opened their homes to Ukrainian refugees and, following this, similar support has been offered to those of other nations and for wider reasons - Nigerian migrants coming to work in the care sector was one example cited.

**The Bar Hill Church Hub**<sup>13</sup> was born from the needs witnessed during the Covid era, supporting the town’s 4,000 residents with prescriptions, food and various forms of mutual aid. Locals were very keen for the model to continue, so the Church used it as a catalyst for expansion into the weekly, multi-service model it operates today. Like many churches interviewed, The Hub’s core ethos is to act as a ‘listening service’, meeting local people where they are and ensuring services and interventions continue to be responsive.

### How to reach out

If **approaching a Parish Church**, the senior Minister, Pastor or Reverend is often the best first port of call. They may well be the only employed official and are likely to be the main point of contact with any local Churches Together or Unity Movements. Church elders taking lead responsibilities for areas of church life are not uncommon, however most of these appear to do so on a voluntary basis. The Minister will often field initial enquiries and engage elders as appropriate.

Again, not unlike a small charity Chief Executive, this makes the Minister’s time and bandwidth a precious commodity. To help manage this they suggested:

- **Making specific requests for engagement** – a request to approach them with a specific ask, a role stakeholders would like to Church to play. Several noted that they often work on issues where demand and supply (or resources) do not match – for example donations or offers of volunteer support not matching what is needed. Managing such challenges are typically where most of their energy is taken;
- One Pastor suggested stakeholders might adopt their Church’s own policy of **single-subject emails** – one item per email, rather than a long round up of multiple issues or questions. This makes them easy to scan quickly and distribute to the relevant

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<sup>13</sup> See pages 12 and 21 for a more detailed description of the Bar Hill Hub and its activities

elders, as well as (in their experience with their congregation) significantly raising open and click through rates;

- Generally, faith leaders said they **would rather have more contact/information than less**. The primary lens of their interest is their local areas, which may help stakeholders to filter approaches appropriately. Beyond this, leaders were happy to take direct approaches and, whilst always happy to welcome visitors face to face, had a slight preference for online meetings for the sake of efficiency.

### Church of England structures may offer natural entry points

Stakeholders should be aware that **maintaining a fit-for-purpose clerical bureaucratic structure is a perennial challenge**, particularly in rural areas. One interviewee described this as the Church of England often suffering from having “vicars in the wrong place” – with reference to older villages with vicars but declining congregations, whilst new towns with growing spiritual needs going largely unserved.

A brief understanding of the Church of England parish structures may support stakeholders in navigating these challenges. **Parishes are usually organised in Deaneries** - a form of infrastructure which can support active collaborations. A Dean’s role is to bring together all Parishes in their Deanery. One rural dean interviewed was one of fifteen in his Diocese (Ely), overseeing 16 individual parishes and personally serving as the Vicar of 11 of them. This provides a good insight into their day-to-day challenges – very much like the Chief Executive of a Small Charity, their responsibilities may vary enormously, pivoting from a regular schedule of school assemblies, weddings and funerals to overseeing all staff supervision and leading governance within each Parish Council on their patch.

Approaches at the **Diocesan level may offer collaborators opportunity to meet with multiple clergy** in each area. Some meet every few months (a Deanery Synod) and often invite a guest speaker. However, several Churches cautioned stakeholders that **decision-making can be slow**, with some Church councils only meeting every two months, most of those involved being volunteers, with any quicker decisions requiring extraordinary meetings. Major new initiatives may require the engagement of a Bishop, who has powers to create **‘Mission Orders’** – vehicles that transcend the historical language of church structures and bypass the usual bureaucracy, ‘busting through the history’ as one interviewee put it.

Stakeholders should also be aware that **many areas of the Church of England works within historic geographic boundaries** (Dioceses, Deaneries, Arch Deaneries, Parishes) that may not relate easily to modern administrative or political entities. Occasionally parishes combine legally in a ‘benefice’ or go through a pastoral re-organisation (where responsibilities for Parish oversight is shuffled). For example, **St Leonard’s (Little Downham)** is currently developing a new Deanery plan, joining up with ten churches in neighbouring villages, with the hope that greater co-ordination of community activities will follow.

### Additional feedback and insights for VCSE stakeholders

During interviews, several wider themes emerged which VCSE partners are invited to note in planning their approaches to faith-based groups:

- Many of those interviewed were **curious to learn more about Councils for Voluntary Service and their membership offers**. A follow up campaign circulating such information would be welcomed;
- Where some awareness of the work of CVS/Support Cambridgeshire existed, groups requested **clarity on the strategic relationships held by such bodies**. For example, some groups wished to know who engaged with the region's Integrated Care Board and the extent of their remit to represent the non-profit sector. Others in Peterborough asked why the city's CVS was not a partner in this initiative;
- Whilst most groups were keen to learn about **new routes to funding** their work, many expressed **strong reservations about the bureaucracy typically involved** and how this often put them off seeking such funding, especially for projects (applications for capital projects appeared to be more common). Others said some common funding routes, such as Lottery funding, were not open to them on ethical grounds;
- Generally there was a **high level of interest** in this enquiry and **gratitude for making proactive approaches** to reach out and learn more about the community work of faith groups. Several groups reflected that the faith sector is not generally very good at 'blowing its own trumpet', meaning they may be less likely to try to tell their own story for external stakeholders. Interestingly, some linked a lack of recognition for faith-based activity to the concept of **recognition and reward** within volunteering programmes, which can be off-putting for faith-based volunteers not motivated by such extrinsic factors, which for them miss the point of their engagement and may mean they are less likely to take part in opportunities such as the Hunts Forum's annual volunteer awards.

### Additional feedback and insights for statutory stakeholders

During interviews, several wider themes emerged which statutory partners are invited to note in planning their approaches to faith-based groups:

- **Recognising the distinctiveness of approaches taken by faith groups**, including a preference for leading with compassion, empathy and person-centered approaches. However, as this enquiry also found on multiple occasions, such groups are equally capable of working in professional (and even regulated) environments;
- **Examples of this include hosting Foodbanks** – many Churches interviewed had some involvement, alone or in partnership with other Churches, usually through a Trussell Trust franchise model. One arrangement in Huntingdonshire operated their own independent foodbank, choosing not to affiliate with The Trussell Trust (or similar) so as to avoid setup fees and imposed restrictions on who they could serve. Foodbank activity often attracted the presence of other services (such as Citizens Advice Bureaux), giving these services the air of an informal multi-agency hub;
- This enquiry's working assumption that much **faith-based community activity went 'under the radar' seemed to resonate strongly**. Some event suggested that to strip away the faith sector would lead to communities in many areas 'falling apart';
- This is important to stress because faith groups sometimes feel statutory partners hold a **sub-conscious bias, perceived as a belief in a lack of professionalism within faith groups**, perhaps connected to a wider suspicion about the dominance of faith as the key driver of their activities';
- Groups did not try to refute this, instead **recasting faith as driving their purpose and essential to their methodology**. Groups encouraged statutory partners to consider their

faith as a complement to their own work, an aspect of person-centered love and care - something statutory services, in their uniform nature, might struggle to replicate;

- **Examples of positive collaborations with statutory partners** often involve use of Church buildings. Godmanchester Baptist Church for hosted Cambridge County Council's youth workers conference for the past two years, during which time they have noticed an increasing consideration and appreciation for role faith plays in their work;
- Groups pointed out that they were already working to shared objectives of many statutory partners, though often **on an informal and unfunded basis, making arrangements somewhat precarious**. For example, several were involved in Warm Spaces schemes but had chosen not to access statutory funding due to the level of bureaucracy involved.

## APPENDIX A: STAKEHOLDERS ENGAGED

Group	Faith	Area	Date / Nature of encounter
The Light Project	Christian	Peterborough	27/2/24, online interview
Centenary Baptist Church	Baptist	Fenland	29/2/24, online interview
Diocese of Ely	Church of England/ Ecumenical Partnership	East Cambs	29/2/24, online interview
Berkley St Methodist Church	Methodist	Huntingdonshire	1/3/24, online interview
St Peter & St Paul, Chatteris	Church of England	Fenland	4/3/24, online interview
St John's with Emmanuel, Werrington	Church of England	Peterborough	5/3/24, online interview
St Leonard, Little Downham	Church of England / Ecumenical Partner with Methodist	East Cambs	7/3/24, online interview
Godmanchester Baptist Church	Baptist / Evangelical	Huntingdonshire	8/3/24, in person interview
Bar Hill Church	Christian Ecumenical Partnership w/ Methodist, URC, Baptist and Catholic	South Cambs	11/3/24, in person visit to open activities
St Marys, Ely	Church of England	East Cambs	12/3/24, online interview
Open Door Church St Neots	French Evangelical	Huntingdonshire	14/3/24, online interview
Gather Movement – Co-ordinator	Christian	National	14/3/24, online interview
The Bridge, St Ives	New Frontiers Evangelical	Huntingdonshire	20/3/24, in person interview
St Andrews	United Reformed Church	Peterborough	20/3/24, online interview
Green Group, St Ives (Methodist, CoE, United Reformed Church)	Meeting of multiple churches in town – TBC	Huntingdonshire	28/3/24, in person group meeting

## APPENDIX B: PRE-ENGAGEMENT BRIEFING

### Learning more about the Faith Sector

#### Helping to better-understand your work, your needs and ambitions

January 2024

#### Why we're contacting you

We're conducting some research to help us understand more about the faith sector in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough. We think much of the work of organisations like yours goes under the radar or is misunderstood. To redress this, we'd like to speak with you so that:

- We know **how best to communicate** with you in the future;
- We understand **which of our functions and services are most relevant** to you;
- We can **better-appreciate how your work complements other activity** in the voluntary and community, health, care and wider social sectors; and
- So that we can **effectively advocate for you**, as part of our role championing local voluntary and community sector organisations.

#### Who we are

We're the Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations ([Hunts Forum](#)) – a registered charity and membership organisation that strengthens and champions social action across Cambridgeshire. Our purpose is to encourage, support and develop voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations (VCSEs) and individuals to have a real influence over the places and communities in which they live.

We're undertaking this work as partners in [Support Cambridgeshire](#), through which we collaborate with [Cambridge Council for Voluntary Services](#) to deliver better outcomes for local VCSE organisations across the county.

#### Our Objectives

In speaking with faith-based organisations like yours we hope to accomplish three things:

1. Firstly, **we want to gain a better understanding of the faith sector** – who you are, what you do and what you care about most;
2. Secondly, **we want to do better by faith communities** – we have a remit to champion voluntary action, but we think a lot of your work goes unreported or unrecognised. We also want to ensure you have access to networks and routes to influence, through us or other partners with whom we work.
3. And finally, **we want to stay in touch so that collectively we're well-prepared, whatever the future brings**. Recent years have shown us how vital strong community collaboration is, whether in a public health crisis such as Covid-19 or a humanitarian one such as welcoming refugees from Ukraine into our communities.

## What we'd like to ask you about

We've kept our objectives deliberately broad because we want this conversation to be led by what you think is important for us to know. But as a guide, we would like to ask you more about:

- **Your organisation and its work**, perhaps covering your vision, mission and values, the communities you support and their needs, the geography you cover and any other organisations or services with whom you collaborate;
- **How you serve your communities**, for example through 'open' activities (free and/or accessible to anyone) or others targeted to specific communities;
- **The challenges you face and the areas in which you would welcome more support from us** – perhaps including funding and resources, your staff or volunteer workforce, your infrastructure (including digital), training, networking, partnership working, or simply in helping to address wider gaps in provision as you see them.

## How and when would we meet?

We can suggest a range of options and are open to whatever works best for you, for example:

- We could arrange to meet directly, or we could join you and your colleagues at one of your regular meetings or networks;
- We're happy to meet online or face-to-face (if time allows);
- And if you're pressed for time but would still like to engage, we have a short online survey that you can complete and/or share with your wider contacts.

Our consultant is based in Huntingdonshire and can offer a lot of flexibility in meeting times, especially if you're able to meet us online. This includes evenings or weekends, where possible. We would like to schedule this **before the end of February** ideally, or by Friday 8<sup>th</sup> March at the very latest. Our consultant's name is Gethyn Williams, and you can read more about him [here](#) if you wish.

## Confidentiality and Data Protection

We do not intend to record our meetings but will take notes to inform our final report and wider understanding of you and your environment. Whatever you choose to tell us or share with us we promise to use respectfully and confidentially, wherever appropriate. Any data we record will be held in line with our data policy, [which you can read here](#), and is fully compliant with GDPR.

## Contact details

If you have questions about this work please contact Gethyn directly in the first instance, or if you prefer you are welcome to contact us at Hunts Forum.

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