



**CADBURY CENTRE
POLICY BRIEFING 2**

OCTOBER 2016

**UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM**



**Arts & Humanities
Research Council**

MEGACHURCHES & SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN LONDON

Policy Options & Opportunities

The *Megachurches and Social Engagement in London* project team has spent the last three years investigating the nature of social engagement among London's very largest churches (those with over 2,000 regular attenders). Our project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and based at the University of Birmingham, has been fundamentally a work of public theology (considering how theology addresses issues of broader public concern outside the community of the church) that nevertheless built upon theoretical insights from sociology, cultural studies and social policy in developing five substantial case studies. We interpreted the qualitative data we gathered from interviews, focus groups and participant observation in the light of current thinking on transnationalism, globalization, urbanization and religious social capital in the hope of better understanding the activities that the churches engage in and their theological motivations, and will publish our comprehensive findings in *Transforming the City: Megachurches and Social Engagement in London* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

The data gathered shows us that the variety of activities these churches engage in is simply staggering, including work with children and young people, the elderly, the homeless, refugees, families, couples and young singles, people with physical and mental health needs, and the widowed and bereaved, as well as community development and educational projects and social campaigning, for example against human trafficking or in favour of local and community needs. These interventions positively impact the life of our capital city and its citizens, and it is clear that it is not only the faith communities themselves that benefit. Whilst, naturally, the megachurches on their own do not have all the answers to London's practical social needs, it is also evident that they have a part to play in galvanising civic engagement and working for real change in the communities they seek to serve.

This briefing note highlights some of the most important practical insights emerging from our research that, we believe, will have particular resonance for policymakers and social innovators. Greater mutual understanding between the churches and wider civic society can only result in positive collaborative engagement between the two and contribute to social mobility, cohesion and wellbeing. Our insights here are drawn from the empirical data gathered and are comprehensively evidenced in the forthcoming monograph. In each case below we support our key findings with observations on the implications of the data gathered, and offer brief recommendations for policy interventions as a result.

A. FOR THESE AND MANY OTHER LARGE AND GROWING BRITISH CHURCHES, CHRISTIANITY IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND IS NOT REDUCIBLE TO A SET OF BELIEFS, RITUALS OR VALUES OR TO A HISTORIC INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE

Beliefs and values are important aspects of lived Christianity, but they are by no means the most important priority for these churches. Megachurch leaders and members believe wholeheartedly in the existence of a God who wishes to engage with the world and see their reason for existence as being to testify to that world of God's existence by representing his presence. In the light of the general, well-evidenced decline in church attendance at the UK, the megachurches are often prospering despite – they would probably say, because of – their deep and passionate commitment to prioritising what they see as a universal need for relationship with God above all other concerns. People do not go to megachurches because they represent a link with historic Christianity but because they claim an engagement with a living Christ. It is impossible to understand the social concern priorities of megachurches without appreciating this underpinning, cardinal assumption of the possibility of relationship with God.

This conceptualisation of divine engagement with humanity may be challenging in any secular context which is broadly uncomfortable with public expressions of faith. However, for policymakers to appreciate and adequately understand the goals and motivation of megachurch social engagement, they must appreciate that in these communities, civic service is viewed as a fundamentally spiritual act – part of appropriate Christian worship, even – and not just as good citizenship. It is not necessary for policymakers to accept this worldview themselves for collaborative partnerships to be profitable, but there must be a mutual recognition and explicit acknowledgement of the different motivations which drive us forward, as well as a desire to harness together these commitments for the common good in the pursuit of wider human flourishing.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Scholars of religion often point to a lack of religious literacy in the policy community. Our research suggests that the problem is more fundamentally a failure to appreciate how passionately and deeply religion serves as a motivation for action, and, sometimes, to take this view seriously even when disagreeing with it in the strongest terms (as many will).

1. Religious literacy training in government circles would therefore profit greatly from shunning a 'fact'-oriented approach to religion, but seek instead to engage with real people of faith and seek to understand their goals, lifestyle and motivation, drawing on the insights of 'ordinary' believers more than 'official' religious leaders and building sustainable, trust-based relationships with members of faith communities.

We note therefore the importance of religious literacy for informing engagement with faith groups and people of faith in all aspects of public life, and assert that this must involve developing an awareness of the relational and ontological (worldview) aspects of religions, not just values, traditions and beliefs, and, furthermore, that the most informative and constructive learning takes place in relationships and through experience rather than through traditional classroom experiences. It should be noted, however, how difficult it can be for people of faith to share openly about their beliefs and practices in public events for fear of ridicule, prejudice and misunderstanding. Policy communities need to develop a greater appreciation of just how much religion matters to people of faith. Though our research focussed exclusively on Christianity, this recommendation carries weight for all faith groups and, indeed, for those expressing a similar commitment to the absence of religion or belief.

2. Expressing or upholding a religious belief (or the absence of a belief) even with deep personal conviction must not in itself be viewed as a reason to exclude a person or organisation from public life.

In a small number of cases, it was clear that individual church members felt that their incredibly important social engagement activities had to be undertaken in isolation from statutory services, because engagement with such services (and particularly receipt of any statutory financial aid) would inevitably mean the churches could (in their understanding) not be open about their religious motivation. This is in our estimation a misunderstanding, which local and national government could profitably seek to correct, whilst emphasising of course that using state funds for evangelisation is of course inappropriate.

3. Some churches may prefer not to receive statutory funding in order to retain their autonomy, vision and distinctive approaches. This should not preclude them from other forms of collaboration, such as providing befriending services that statutory organisations can signpost to, supporting community events, or advising or campaigning on local issues.

B. CHURCHES' SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES PLACE A FAR STRONGER EMPHASIS ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS THAN ON PROSELYTIZATION OR EVANGELISM

God's love for the world and its people was repeatedly highlighted by our correspondents as the primary motivation behind their social engagement activity. However, crucially, this did not mean that social engagement work always involved explicitly Christian practices or conversations about God or Jesus. Some activities we observed did include a more explicitly religious element, from a simple blessing or prayer to an invitation to attend a worship service, but in at least the vast majority of cases, this religious element was distinct from the social support offered and was presented and understood as an additional optional offer and not a prerequisite for any other support or service. Simply, megachurches do not run social concern activities just to add to their congregations. In some ways they do not need to, if their buildings are already overflowing. Rather, they do what they do in the hope of showing God's love to the world through the ways they serve, welcome or chat with people. God, and not membership of the church, is seen as a key agent in the transformation of individual lives, communities and nations. At the same time, relationships are seen as the means through which it is possible to show people that they are valued and loved, through which belonging and community is nurtured, through which people can share burdens, and through which wisdom, experiences and resources are circulated. And though it is not always possible (even the largest churches sometimes struggle to identify as many volunteers as they might like), the need for extra capacity to develop relationships was often taken into consideration in relation to volunteer numbers, ensuring that people were available to talk, rather than having just enough to provide a service (e.g. serving food).

It is striking, however, that considering the size of some of the churches we studied (all numbering over 2,000 regular attenders), some of their social engagement activities do not appear to reach that many people. This reinforces the observation that the activity is not all about proselytization in the churches' thinking. Comparatively small numbers does not in any way imply, however, that the work is not worthwhile. Some needs are rather specialist and more require intensive or focussed support. And with the emphasis on relational ministry being so evident in many churches, sometimes smaller is actually seen as potentially more effective. Certainly we noted one activity that deliberately sought to reduce the number of participants it attracted in the hope of improving the quality of interactions.

The relational element to these churches' social engagement is at least as important to them as the quest for conversion, and often the two are explicitly separated in the churches' thinking and indeed their activities. Of course the hope that those who are supported by the church will come to faith in future is frequently present, but those coming to the church for help and support are seen as people who, in the church's view, need to experience God's love more than they need to join a congregation. This is perhaps a significant move away from the earlier practice of much of the Evangelical movement and is itself largely theologically motivated. Megachurch social engagement sits within a worldview or ontology in which individual and community wellbeing is conceptualised holistically (encompassing relationships, material resources, physical and mental health, justice, etc.) and as having present as well as eternal dimensions. Furthermore, the teachings of these churches include theological principles which themselves have policy relevance, for example, exploration in their preaching and campaigning of the extent to which our public services and welfare system might be more explicitly ordered and resourced in a way that reflects the importance of human relationships in the giving and receipt of assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

4. Statutory services could profitably engage more with the holistic approach of megachurches to social engagement, and appreciate more explicitly in their practices the interconnectedness of modern life crises (for example, redundancy leading to fuel poverty, leading to ill health, leading to family conflict and breakdown, leading to homelessness) and the holistic nature of coherent solutions to troubled families and communities.

We view the 'connectedness' of many of the church-based activities as constituent elements of a broader portfolio of services at the hub of a network of emerging relationships as one of the great advantages that megachurches can bring to the table.

5. Churches should continue to ensure the equity of their social engagement provision and might profitably ensure their equalities and vulnerable persons policies actively discourage any activity which might exclude certain groups or individuals from support or in any way risk taking advantage of those in need of the Church's assistance.

We emphasise, however, that we did not encounter any examples of inappropriate religious pressure or religious tests being applied, and, on the contrary, when an explicitly religious activity ran alongside social engagement as an additional service, it was usually available as something that people could opt into, and those who participated appeared in most cases to appreciate it. Sometimes the religious element was indeed more tolerated than cherished, and now and then we saw cases where it was rejected, but on the whole the existence of parallel religious activity does not appear to be a major hindrance to access to social engagement provision. Furthermore, the activities offered by churches were not always exclusively outward facing anyway, as highlighted below.

6. The possibility of identifying common goals and areas where churches' social engagement can complement statutory services, as well as areas of distinctiveness and difference, requires mutual openness and honesty, the ability to speak a common yet sufficiently precise language, and discuss details frankly without fear of offence or exclusion.

Churches should be frank about their priorities, as should statutory services, and both should also consider carefully their capacity for engagement. There is inevitably a need to acknowledge the limits of what all parties can offer, in terms of resources, duration of commitment, level of expertise. Nurturing relationships over time is an important means of building trust and embedding accountability, particularly if services are to be contracted out to faith groups or if statutory organisations are referring clients to faith-based provision.

C. THE CHURCHES' SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT SHOULD NOT BE CONCEIVED OF ONLY IN TERMS OF SERVICES OR ACTIVITIES THEY OFFER FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT PART OF THEIR CONGREGATIONS.

Undoubtedly in some cases, church attenders benefit from services provided by their church for the wider community. There is nothing to suggest any preferential treatment, but churches do include their own needy members in the provision of food parcels, in home visitation and in youth, children's and seniors' activities. One of the biggest contributions megachurches are able to make to the lives of their own members, perhaps, is relational, in terms of the supportive networks of friendship they provide, helping people to connect with others in what was often described as an otherwise 'isolating' city. This relational support was said to be of value for all, including students, parents, professionals and older people, as well as new arrivals to the city. The 'whole life' approach to Christianity that these churches sought to foster meant that the social influence of their ministries extended beyond their organised activities to areas such as the way people chose careers, developed friendships, related to their neighbours, relationships and families, looked after their health, used their money, or got involved in politics, charity work or campaigning, locally, nationally and globally. In particular, the role of the church in supporting the integration of immigrant communities should not be underestimated. One of the reasons for the success of the African-dominated megachurches appears to be the support they offer for newcomers to the UK by giving them a taste of home and a promise of a new community.

The other primary benefit of megachurch social provision for their members, perhaps, is in the field of training and personal development. Most of our churches offered a variety of teaching or training options to their members, with for example classes on parenting, budgeting, relationships including marriage, employment and jobseeking, etc., all being common. In some of the churches we studied, the amount and level of training offered to people who volunteer in the church is quite significant. The churches offer not only training in leadership, group dynamics and team work, public speaking and more obviously religious activities, but also in areas such as food hygiene, how to connect people in need with the relevant public services, working with children, how to support people who hoard, how to be a good listener, and a variety of other much more specialist areas of provision. This training is generally to professional standard, often delivered by professionals within the church, and is generally provided free of charge to volunteers, even when the acquired learning can be used not only in the church but within the public sphere or at work as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

7. Statutory services can profitably attend to the capacity of megachurches to serve as a tool for community cohesion and integration and for representing a strong voice for the community in engaging with the wider world.

Whilst seeking to use any faith community as a means to engage a wider ethnic community is a problematic strategy if ineffectively approached, not least because it risks sociocultural homogenization and oversimplification of the issues facing the communities, the capacity of churches (especially large, multicultural congregations with a strong transnational element) to draw together and integrate community out of diversity should not be underestimated. The role of the church and its leadership in conflict resolution can sometimes be crucial.

8. The importance of the professional and lifeskills training and development provided free of charge by many larger churches cannot be overestimated. Statutory services could perhaps learn from the approach adopted by the churches here and draw some of the provided resources forward into mainstream provision.

Much of the training provided by churches is not only relevant in church contexts, and a constructive dialogue could take place around how churches and further education or adult education networks might collaborate in increasing the reach and effectiveness of each other's activity. Attention might profitably be given to validation or accreditation of some of this learning, which would underpin its quality and value.

D. THE MEGACHURCHES DIFFERED GREATLY IN WHAT THEY CONSIDERED SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT TO BE AND HOW THEY WENT ABOUT DOING IT

Some had extensive programmes covering homelessness, youth work, anti-trafficking, mental health, family life and other areas. One congregation we studied had approximately 40 discrete activities which could be considered 'social engagement'. Others focussed mainly on the more traditionally-religious preaching and teaching activities, with only comparative small-scale provision for social needs. The choice of activities at times were undertaken due to the convictions and priorities of key leaders, but often originated as initiatives of congregation members who had a passion for supporting people in a particular situation. The histories of the churches and the period of time over which their social engagement work had developed were also factors in the variety and extent of their social engagement; longer-established churches tended to be more active in this respect. Denominational affiliation appears to be a factor too, with the two Anglican churches in our study demonstrating perhaps the most sophisticated and nuanced approach to social engagement (perhaps at least partially because of the historic implications of the parish system). Either way, the diversity of approach and intention is striking, and the extent to which social engagement features as a priority in the church's vision varies widely.

RECOMMENDATION:

9. Diversity in churches' capacity and experience in social engagement suggests the need for caution in a one-size fits all approach to communication or collaboration with them (for statutory institutions as well as third sector organisations, explicitly faith-based or otherwise). Experience in collaboration with one church might well not be replicated elsewhere (for good or ill).

E. MOST ACTIVITIES ARE RESOURCED PRIMARILY BY VOLUNTEERS AND VOLUNTARY GIVING, ALTHOUGH IN MANY CASES PAID STAFF PLAY AN IMPORTANT PART IN LEADING AND OVERSEEING THEM.

The substantial numbers of volunteers and the huge amount of time they invest into the church is a sign of how seriously they take their service to God, the church and the wider community. Both volunteers and paid staff report being motivated by their faith to pursue the social engagement activity in which they participate, for instance citing experiences of personal experience of overcoming difficulty; reading Bible passages that they saw as guidance, instruction or commission; hearing sermons, what they understood as ‘prophetic words’ or instructions on lifestyle and values from a pastor as reasons for getting involved in social engagement activities. The level of expertise entailed in providing different services varied: many focussed on offering hospitality and friendship, with some drawing more on professional skills, for example in finance or psychology. This depended to some extent on the composition of the congregation and whether their leadership and administrative structures were set up to encourage congregation members to use their skills in this way.

People’s availability to volunteer depended on their own employment, family and financial situations. But it is significant that in many cases, even when programmes were inspired and motivated by the vision and culture of the church, they often started as grassroots initiatives, which then found support and extraordinary resource within the church. We noted many instances where Ideas from individual congregation members with a particular concern about how to help a specific group (e.g., people with eating disorders, people in debt, people sleeping rough) were taken into the church infrastructures and given supporting personnel (paid administrators and volunteers), a venue, website publicity, etc. Furthermore, these approaches and activities can then be packaged up to form resources for other churches to use within their social engagement activities. Therefore, the potential impact arising from one congregation member’s particular concern could be huge and change the lives of hundreds.

RECOMMENDATION:

10. Churches and civic leaders both might be thought to have a responsibility to encourage and enhance a widespread commitment to social as well as economic entrepreneurship and do their best to create an environment in which caring practically for fellow human beings and supporting their flourishing is cherished, facilitated and rewarded.

This responsibility does not remain with the church and the state alone, however.

11. Businesses, and London’s many great global businesses in particular, might further their commitment to corporate social responsibility by encouraging and supporting faith-based social engagement, including through the provision of relevant training programmes, by project sponsorship and by developing volunteering schemes which recognise the valuable contribution to be made by faith communities to building a thriving society. Furthermore they might also positively benefit their own organisation whilst enhancing its diversity by recruiting experienced and well-trained ‘graduates’ of the megachurch system.

Finally, we would encourage churches and indeed whole communities, where they can, to think bigger and more comprehensively about the systemic social challenges our society faces. Transformation for the churches we studied comes principally from changing the lives of individuals one by one, not so much by overturning inherently evil and repressive systems such as those of racial prejudice and economic

injustice. The aspiration that provides the ladder out of poverty and oppression is preached prominently, a hand is held down to help lift up the lowly, but there's little talk of breaking down the walls of partition and restriction. At the moment, the priority is social welfare more than social justice. So whilst the churches rightly reject the suggestion that their work is in any way a half-hearted 'sticking plaster' seeking only to sustain people in their need, but see it as being fundamentally transformative in its aim, we would want to suggest there is rather more to be done systemically in their wider quest to make the world a better place.

This prompts one final recommendation.

12. Business, the third sector, politicians and policymakers and faith communities together must work collaboratively and systematically to tackle issues of social injustice, and try not to impugn each other's motives.

If statutory authorities, third sector organisations and churches can find ways to collaborate effectively in these areas, then the comprehensive contribution of the Christian megachurches to London's social as well as spiritual wellbeing might be more effectively recognised and sustained.

Briefing Authors:

Dr Heather Buckingham and Dr Andrew Davies (University of Birmingham)

Megachurches and Social Engagement in London Research Team:

Professor Mark J. Cartledge (Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA); Dr Sophie Bremner, Dr Heather Buckingham, Dr Andrew Davies, Dr Sarah Dunlop (University of Birmingham)

The Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion works with faith communities to promote innovative, interdisciplinary research at the junction of Theology and the Social Sciences in the fields of global politics, public policy and civic life.

Department of Theology & Religion, University of Birmingham
Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT

www.birmingham.ac.uk/cadburycentre
cadburycentre@contacts.bham.ac.uk
[@cadburycentre](https://twitter.com/cadburycentre)