

MINORITY CONGREGATIONS' USE OF  
ANGLICAN CHURCH SPACES ACROSS  
THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND IN  
BIRMINGHAM

*Dr Demelza Jones and Canon Dr Andrew Smith, 2018*



THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND  
BIRMINGHAM



UNIVERSITY OF  
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

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## Foreword: The Rt. Reverend David Urquhart, Bishop of Birmingham

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*Hosting minority congregations has, for many years, been a significant gift that the Church of England in Birmingham offers to our Christian brothers and sisters from different traditions and cultures.*

*It is an area of church life that has often been overlooked or carried on with little understanding or support. This research has provided detailed information about the nature and scope of these arrangements and highlighted both the joys and challenges hosting a congregation can hold for a church.*

*I commend this report and its practical outcomes and look forward to its use in supporting this ministry of the Church of England both in Birmingham and across the country.*



## Executive summary

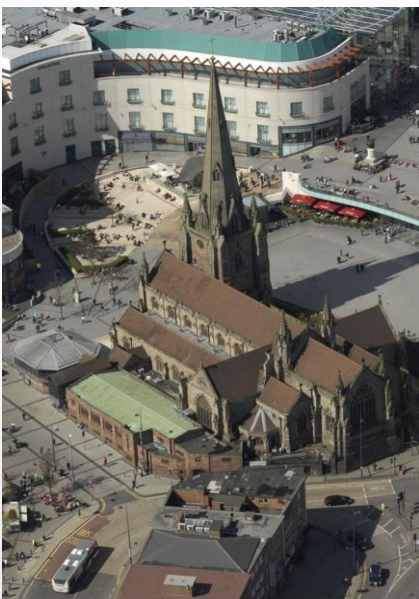
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- This report shares findings of research conducted by Dr Demelza Jones (University of Gloucestershire) and Canon Dr Andrew Smith (The Church of England in Birmingham) into minority congregations' use of Anglican church spaces in the Birmingham region.
- It defines minority congregations as congregations meeting outside 'main' Anglican worship, and focused around a particular ethnic, national or linguistic identity.
- The research had two parts – an online survey of all Anglican clergy in Birmingham which 'mapped' minority congregations' use of church spaces, and follow-up in-depth interviews with ten clergy whose churches hosted such congregations.
- The survey identified thirty-eight minority congregations using Anglican church spaces across the Church of England, Birmingham at the time of the research.
- There was great diversity amongst these congregations in terms of national and ethnic backgrounds and language of worship, and a mix of Anglican-affiliated and non-Anglican denominations with an array of transnational connections.
- Relationships between 'main' churches and minority congregations can be grouped into three categories: landlord/tenant, host/guest, or partner.
- In interviews, clergy identified a number of benefits to minority congregations' use of church spaces: the provision of rental income; the appearance of a busy, vibrant church; the continuing relevance of the church in highly diverse neighbourhoods where other faith communities are the local majority; and supporting social cohesion by encouraging meaningful interaction between diverse Christians.
- Clergy also identified challenges. These included practical issues around timekeeping, and use of the church space and equipment, but also more profound issues around theological and liturgical difference, uncertainties over whether it was appropriate or not for some groups to use church spaces, and serious concerns around issues such as safeguarding.
- Despite this, clergy felt that these were challenges worth meeting, and that hosting, and developing positive relationships with minority congregations was central to church mission and sustaining the church's relevance in a religiously diverse region such as Birmingham.
- Clergy's tips for success in building positive relationships with minority congregations included open and honest communication, understanding the theological basis of congregations' practices, fostering mutual respect and understanding, and avoiding "empire-building" and paternalism.
- The Church of England in Birmingham and more broadly could support clergy in developing these positive relationships by producing advice for churches who host (or are thinking of hosting) a minority congregation; providing occasional training for clergy involved in hosting minority congregations or new clergy who are set to work in ethnically and religiously diverse diocese where these kinds of requests around use of church space are more likely to arise; producing information for minority congregations thinking of using an Anglican church space for worship; and signposting other resources from the Church of England that would be of use to clergy when hosting minority congregations.

## Introduction

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*Responding effectively to diversity or 'superdiversity' is an important challenge facing the modern Church of England – particularly in larger urban centres*



Responding effectively to diversity or 'superdiversity'<sup>1</sup> is an important challenge facing the modern Church of England [henceforth CofE] - particularly in larger urban centres. This response may take the form of attempts at meaningful engagement with other faith communities, as exemplified through the Church's Presence and Engagement programme, which '*focus[es] on the importance of the Church both remaining present in multi religious areas and engaging positively with communities of other faiths*' (Presence and Engagement 2013), and the work of the network of Inter-Faith Relations Advisors working across the nation at the diocesan level.

However, as well as this engagement across faiths, the Church must also respond (and arguably adapt) to significant diversity within Christianity, and indeed within Anglicanism. Comparison of 2001 and 2011 England and Wales census data shows that amongst the White British population, the number of people professing to be Christians is falling, but meanwhile the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic [BAME] Christian population is growing. As the CofE has acknowledged; '*historic churches are challenged to reach out in support and welcome... creat[ing] new ecumenical pastoral and missional challenges to all churches who are trying to provide for all people*' (Church of England 2014).

Working in a context of intra-Christian, and indeed intra-Anglican, superdiversity is a reality for many clergy in the Diocese of Birmingham – among England's most diverse cities. The focus of this project was the use of Anglican church spaces in the Church of England, Birmingham by 'minority congregations' - broadly defined as congregations meeting outside of the services led by CofE clergy or lay leaders, and focused around a particular minority national, ethnic or

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<sup>1</sup> The recognition that in some (particularly metropolitan) settings, understanding diversity in terms of ethnicity alone does not adequately capture population dynamics and community interactions. As Professor Steven Vertovec, the social scientist who coined the term in 2007, elaborates: '*in order to understand and more fully address the complex nature of contemporary, migration-driven diversity, additional variables need to be better recognized...these include: differential legal statuses and their concomitant conditions, divergent labour market experiences, discrete configurations of gender and age, patterns of spatial distribution, and mixed local area responses by service providers and residents. The dynamic interaction of these variables is what is meant by 'super-diversity'*' (Vertovec 2007: 1025)



linguistic identity. This separation between the 'main' congregation led by CofE clergy or lay-leaders is important to the project's definition of a 'minority congregation', given that in the Birmingham context, some 'main' CofE congregations may comprise a majority of worshippers from BAME communities.

Beginning in the winter of 2014/15, the first phase of the project – an online survey of all Anglican clergy in the Birmingham city-region – produced a snapshot of minority congregations' use of Anglican spaces across the Birmingham, as well as providing initial descriptive detail of these congregations. The survey questions were designed with the input of a working group of key diocesan employees and stakeholders, and the survey was sent to all Anglican clergy in the Birmingham with the endorsement of the Bishop of Birmingham.

One hundred survey returns were received. These responses identified thirty-eight minority congregations; revealing a wide variety of ethnicities and nationalities leading and attending these congregations, a range of languages of worship, and an array of transnational connections both within and outside global Anglicanism. One of the most interesting findings from the survey was the variance in the nature of relationships between the 'mainstream' Anglican 'host' church and clergy, and the minority congregation(s). This could be placed on a continuum from a landlord-tenant relationship at one end of the scale, through to closer relationships incorporating, for example, shared worship, at the other.

It was these relationships which formed the focus of the second, qualitative phase of the project – in-depth one-to-one interviews with a sample of ten clergy who host minority congregations in Anglican churches or church spaces within their area of responsibility. The goal of these interviews was to discover what challenges and opportunities were offered by these encounters between diverse Christians. As Rev. Dr Susanna Snyder (2016: 35) highlights in her work on faith-based organisations and migration: *'while an 'encounter' can remain simply that – a point of connection at two entities' edges – it can also develop into deeper relationship'*, and the research went on to investigate whether close relationships between 'main' and minority congregations were desired; and if so, how

*'while an 'encounter' can remain simply that – a point of connection at two entities' edges – it can also develop into deeper relationship'*  
(Susanna Snyder, 2016)

could these relationships be established and nurtured, either through the individual actions of clergy and congregations, or as part of broader diocesan or Church initiatives.

This report extrapolates on findings presented to the annual national conference for Diocesan Inter-Faith Relations Advisors organised by Presence and Engagement at Lambeth Palace in March 2017. It outlines findings from both phases of the research (survey and interviews), highlights key links between the research findings and diocesan and national Church initiatives, and concludes with recommendations both for clergy hosting minority congregations, and for the Church of England in how to enable and support these clergy. While our research focuses on Birmingham, the issues encountered are likely to have commonalities with the experiences of clergy and Inter-Faith Advisors working in other diverse or superdiverse diocese across the nation. It is our hope that the report will prove of interest and value to them too.



## Key findings from the survey

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The survey was designed to provide a snapshot 'map' of the minority congregations who were meeting in Anglican church spaces across Birmingham at the time of the research. The survey also collected data (when this information was known by clergy) on the characteristics of these congregations, including: leaders' and worshippers' nationality or nationalities; main language(s) of worship; size of congregation and frequency of meeting; the congregations' 'outside' activities (for example, support services for the community); and the nature of their relationship with the 'mainstream' Anglican church and the main congregation(s) in their host church setting. We received responses from a hundred clergy with responsibility for parishes across the Birmingham city-region.

*A fifth of clergy hosted minority congregations*

Of the hundred clergy who responded to the survey, a fifth reported that at least one minority congregation used their Anglican church or other church spaces. Of these, eleven hosted multiple minority congregations. In total, the survey identified thirty-eight minority congregations meeting in Anglican spaces across the city-region.

The Church of England in Birmingham's domain of responsibility covers not only the city of Birmingham itself, but parts of the surrounding counties of Warwickshire and Worcestershire, and the metropolitan boroughs of Solihull and Sandwell. As such, the Church of England in Birmingham incorporates a variety of geographic contexts – from the densely urbanised inner-city, to the suburban, to semi-rural and rural towns and villages – with differing levels of ethno-linguistic diversity. Unsurprisingly, many of the minority congregations identified in the survey met in churches and church spaces in ethnically diverse inner-neighbourhoods of Birmingham such as Aston, Nechells, Handsworth, Hockley and Ladywood. However, the survey also highlighted a few congregations meeting in less obviously diverse suburban or semi-rural locations.

### Ethnicity, nationality and language

The majority of the thirty-eight congregations were focused around a national or ethno-linguistic identity. The most common identified in the survey were Caribbean (n=6), followed by Indian (n=5)<sup>2</sup>, then Eritrean (n=4) and Zimbabwean (n=4). The survey also identified, in smaller numbers, congregations focused around the following ethnic or national identities: Armenian, Cameroonian, Congolese, Ethiopian, Iranian, Latvian, Nigerian, Pakistani, Polish and Romanian. One survey return identified a Deaf congregation who use British Sign Language for worship. Disability diversity within the Church may be a further fruitful avenue for research.

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<sup>2</sup> India is a hugely diverse country of multiple ethnicities and linguistic communities. This category, therefore, comprises more than one distinct ethno-linguistic population, for example Marathi, Gujarati and Malayali worshippers. The decision was taken to group these responses for the purpose of consistency in analysis, as while some clergy's responses to the survey used the names of specific ethnic and linguistic communities of India, others used 'Indian' or 'Indian language'.



Clergy reported that twenty-five of the thirty-eight congregations identified in the survey had a main language of worship other than English. In a few cases, clergy were uncertain what the non-English language used by the congregation was, but, the responses where this information was known identified at least fourteen world languages being used as the main language of worship within Anglican spaces (plus British Sign Language).

The most common non-English language in use was Shona – a language of Zimbabwe (n=4 congregations), followed by French (n=3). The use of French as a main language of worship reflects the presence of Francophone African congregations (for example Congolese and Cameroonian), rather than European French congregations. Other languages identified included those spoken by South Asian congregations (Hindu, Urdu, Punjabi, Marathi, Malayalam), Tigrinya and Ge'ez (used by Eritrean and Ethiopian congregations), Igbo (a Nigerian language), Farsi (Iranian language), Polish, Romanian and Latvian. The Caribbean congregations identified in the survey worshipped in English.

### Other characteristics of congregations

The survey revealed that the size of minority congregations varied widely – with the smallest reported congregation having just eight regular members and the largest around one hundred and fifty. Almost three quarters of the congregations for whom information was supplied met at least weekly, with just over a fifth meeting more frequently. Nearly 60% of minority congregations' members live outside of the Anglican parish(es) where their congregation meets, while less than a fifth live within the parish(es). However, over a fifth of responses recorded a 'don't know' answer to this question, meaning one or both percentages are actually significantly higher. The majority (60%) of the congregations for whom information was supplied had been operating in their current Anglican church space for between one and five years. The second largest category (20%) consisted of congregations who had been operating for between five and ten years.

The survey also asked which church space the congregations used for their meeting place (or if they used multiple church

*The congregations' languages of worship included Shona, French, Hindu, Urdu, Punjabi, Marathi, Malayalam, Tigrinya, Ge'ez, Igbo, Farsi, Polish, Romanian & Latvian*

*The smallest reported congregation had 8 members, the largest had around 150*

*Almost 60% of the congregations had a membership who mostly lived outside of the Parish where the congregation met*

spaces, which did they use most frequently?). The majority of the congregations (59%) met in a church hall, while 50% met in the main worship space of the church itself. Other spaces used by the congregations identified in the survey were meeting rooms, side chapels or prayer rooms, and church-run sports and community centres.

## Congregations’ relationships with host clergy and congregations

The survey responses showed a range of relationships between Anglican clergy and congregations, and the minority congregations who worshipped in their church spaces. In the survey, clergy were asked whether they or a colleague usually led worship for minority congregations meeting in their church spaces, or whether worship was led by another leader from outside the CofE. The majority of congregations (89%) were led by another church leader, with only three congregations being led by the clergy member completing the survey, and only one led by a colleague from within the CofE.

For those congregations which were not led by a CofE colleague, there was still a degree of interaction with the main Anglican church leader (or their colleagues), although the frequency of and reasons for this contact varied. The vast majority of clergy (91%) had some form of contact with the leader(s) of the minority congregation(s) who used their church spaces, with almost a third saying they had contact with them regularly, and just over a third saying that they had contact sometimes. Those clergy who indicated that they had contact with leader(s) of minority congregation(s) were asked about the reasons for those meetings, with ‘practical issues’ being the most commonly selected response, followed by ‘practical support’ and ‘pastoral support’. ‘Ecumenical issues’ were the least common reason for clergy to have contact with minority congregation leaders.

Clergy were also asked about interaction between any minority congregation(s) using their church spaces and their ‘main’ congregation(s). They were asked whether in the past year or so, there had been interaction between minority congregation(s) and their main congregation(s) in one or more of the following areas: shared worship, shared projects or events, socialising outside of worship time, or informal care and support, and how frequently this interaction occurred (Figure 1).

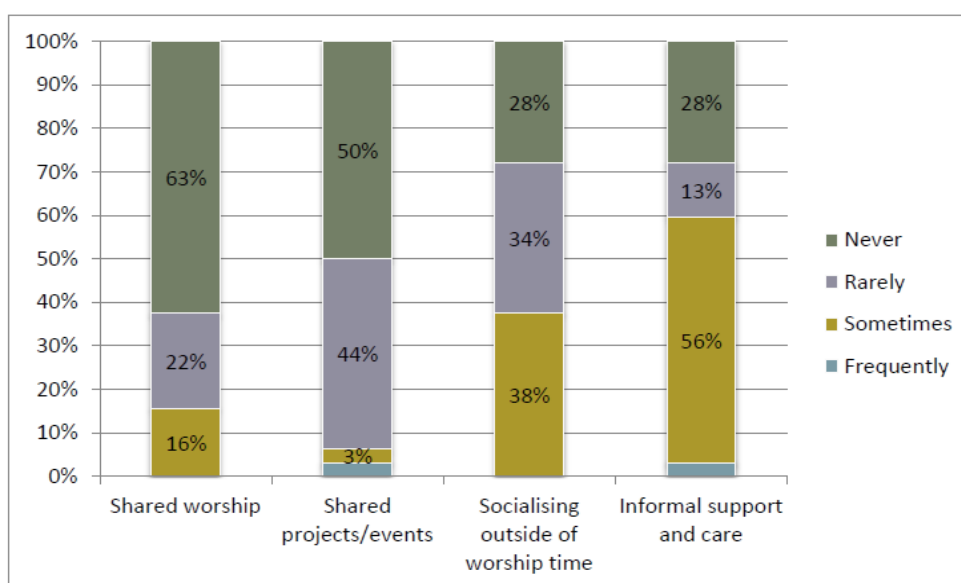


Figure 1: Interaction between minority & host congregations

*Few clergy reported frequent contact between their main congregation(s) & the minority congregation(s) who used the church*



The results show that there is little in the way of **frequent** contact between minority congregations and main congregations. Only 3% of responses indicated frequent interaction, and this was only in the areas of shared projects/events and informal support and care. However, more than half (56%) of the responses indicate that there is **sometimes** interaction between minority and main congregations in the area of informal support and care. 38% of responses indicated that members of minority and main congregations **sometimes** socialise outside of worship time, while shared worship **sometimes** occurs amongst just over a fifth.

Clergy were additionally invited to use a 'free-text' box to add information about any other forms of interaction which were not captured by the survey's answer options. This information was provided by seven clergy in relation to thirteen minority congregations, with examples including shared care of church buildings and facilities, joint youth events, training events, and sharing of worship on special occasions such as Christmas day.

Turning to relationships between minority congregations and the Anglican Church or other denominations more broadly; the survey asked clergy whether the minority congregation(s) operating within their church spaces had, to their knowledge, links or affiliations with other denominations or Churches. The clergy who were able to answer this question indicated that 56% of congregations have such a link or affiliation, while 44% do not. Within this 56%, clergy identified a range of affiliated churches and denominations: including the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches, Latvian and Polish Lutheran Churches, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the National Zimbabwean Anglican Fellowship, God's Glory Ministries International, and other globalised Pentecostal churches.

### **Minority congregations' use of Anglican church spaces in the recent past**

Aware that the data collected would capture only a snapshot of a moment in time, the survey also asked whether clergy had hosted any other minority congregations in the recent past. In response to this question, just over a fifth of clergy reported that a minority congregation has used an Anglican church space within their area of responsibility in the past, but no longer did

so. Those congregations who had used an Anglican church space in the recent past, but no longer did so, included Caribbean, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Zimbabwean, Russian, Ukrainian, Indian, Filipino, Spanish, South African and Nigerian congregations. The responses also indicate a number of affiliations between these congregations and other Churches and denominations. These included Orthodox Churches (Russian, Ukrainian and Ethiopian), the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Coptic Church, and various Pentecostal Churches.

There were a number of reasons why the arrangement for these congregations to use the church space had ended. Common reasons include the congregation outgrowing the space and subsequently either moving into a larger space elsewhere (often within another Anglican church and in some cases, in a more convenient location for its worshippers) or securing their own space. Conversely some congregations folded or merged with other congregations as numbers dwindled, or after a leader or key organiser moved away. There were a few cases where the clergy had asked the congregation to leave because they needed the space for main congregation activities, or due to disputes over use of the space (examples cited included failing to clean up the space after use, damage to furniture and equipment, erratic rent payments, failing to finish on time, and rudeness).

## Congregations unable to use Anglican church spaces

Just over a fifth of clergy reported that a congregation has asked to use their church space(s) but been turned down. The most common reasons for this were practical – for example, a time clash with an existing church activity, or a lack of space to accommodate the congregations' numbers either within the church building itself, or in relation to parking. However, a number of clergy reported they had declined a request as they were concerned about doctrinal issue (for example, 'ultra conservatism' around LGBTQ+ issues), or due to concerns about public liability insurance or child protection. Others felt that they were unable to access sufficient information about the congregation and its connections to make an informed decision about their suitability to use the church, while a few had found out information about a congregation that meant they felt they were unsuitable 'tenants' on ethical grounds and posed a reputational risk to the church – one congregation for example, was reportedly involved in fundraising for an armed rebel group in their country of origin. A few clergy cited 'bad experiences' with congregations in the past (for example, rudeness, damage to the church space or equipment, or late rent payments) as a reason they and their PCC now generally declined such requests.

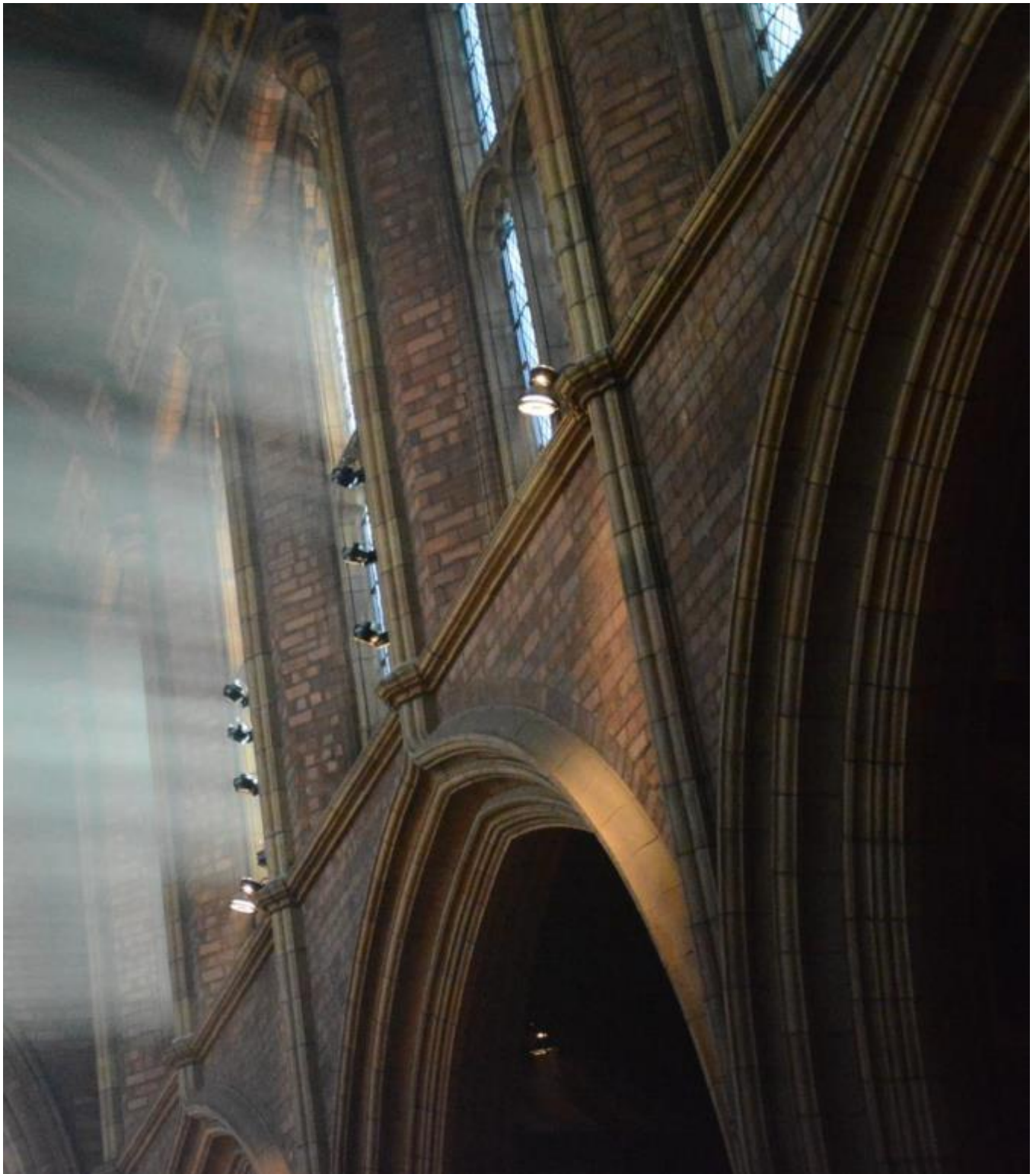
*Some clergy felt ill-equipped to make an informed decision about whether it was appropriate for certain congregations to use the church space*

## Diversity within 'main' Anglican congregations

Before concluding this discussion of the survey results, it is important to note that 'main' Anglican congregations may themselves be highly diverse – particularly in a area such as Birmingham.



The survey asked all clergy whether worshippers from BAME backgrounds were part of their main congregation(s). Of the ninety-one clergy who answered this question, more than a third (36%) answered yes. This presence of ethno-linguistic diversity within main congregations was evenly distributed between those settings that hosted minority congregations and those that did not – suggesting that there was no correlation within this sample between a church having an ethnically diverse congregation or a high number of BAME worshippers, and hosting minority congregations.



## Interviews with Anglican clergy

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After the analysis of the survey data, we conducted follow-up interviews with a sample of ten Anglican clergy whose church spaces hosted one or more minority congregation. The interviews were conducted independently by the authors, and took place in churches or church spaces (for example church halls), or at the interviewee's home. Interviews were semi-structured, focusing on the background to the church's relationship with the minority congregation(s) currently using their space(s); the nature of the relationship between minority congregation(s) and the main clergy and congregation(s); interviewees' reflections on the opportunities and challenges emerging from this relationship; what interviewees had learnt from hosting minority congregations; and what tips that would give to other clergy in a similar situation.

This was a self-selecting sample of clergy who, in their response to the online survey, indicated that they would be interested in participating in an interview. All of the clergy we interviewed were male and the majority were from White British backgrounds. Most worked in inner city areas which tended to have relatively high deprivation levels and high BAME populations, while others administered to more outlying neighbourhoods of the city which were (relatively) more affluent or socio-economically mixed.

Reflecting the survey findings, the minority congregations who used our interviewees' church spaces were focused around a range of national, ethnic and linguistic identities, including congregations whose leaders' and worshippers' origins or heritage lay in the Caribbean, South Asia, West Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, Eastern and Central Europe and the Middle East,<sup>3</sup> and who had links with globalised religious networks within and outside Anglicanism.

*Minority congregations had links with globalised religious communities, within and outside Anglicanism*

Again reflecting the wider survey findings, clergy described some congregations whose membership was drawn largely from the local neighbourhood, while others attracted worshippers from further afield in the city or wider Midlands region. In more than one case, clergy told us that a congregation had been attracted to their church space as it was close to motorway links or had a large car park to accommodate worshippers travelling to attend. Clergy also told us that congregations were made up of worshippers with a variety of socio-economic statuses. While some congregations consisted largely of people seeking asylum or others with precarious immigration status or low incomes, others largely comprised higher earning professionals such as doctors.

The following section of the report summarises key findings from the interviews, organised around the key themes of types of relationship with minority congregations; challenges; opportunities; and 'tips' for developing successful relationships with minority congregations.

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<sup>3</sup> Exact nationalities and ethnicities are not detailed here in order to protect interviewees' confidentiality.

## Relationships with minority congregations

The relationship between the host church and minority congregations described in the interviews could be grouped into three broad headings:

- **Landlord / Tenant**
- **Host / Guest**
- **Partners**

### Landlords and tenants

For some churches, the relationship was clearly one of a **landlord** renting out space for a congregation to worship in. In many instances, this had been the starting relationship and for some this remained the basis on which the host church and minority congregation negotiated space, payment, terms and conditions and so on. Typically, in the landlord / tenant relationship there existed little engagement beyond initial meetings to agree terms, and follow-up meetings to deal with payment or any issues arising from the use of the space. Often the only contact was between the incumbent or church office staff and the leader of the congregation.

For some host churches, this relationship worked extremely well as it provided a regular funding stream which might make a building viable, for little extra work and with a group who broadly shared the vision and aims of the host church. It also provided a valuable service to a congregation who might not be looking for a deeper relationship with a host church, but really were just looking for a space to rent. This was often the case for minority congregations which were gathered from a wide geographical spread and where few, if any, lived in the parish of the host church. However, even when the relationship was viewed in terms of landlord / tenant, some clergy spoke of having other links with the congregation; some occasionally were invited to a service, or to '*say a few words on high days and holidays*'. Others invited members of the minority congregation to special events such as a patronal service or autumn fair.

*Relationships between a host church and minority congregation(s) could be described as **landlord/tenant; host/guest; or partners***

*For some host churches, this relationship worked extremely well as it provided a regular funding stream which might make a building viable; for little extra work and with a group who broadly shared the vision and aims of the host church*

*"I wanted to provide a home for these Christian brothers and sisters who were looking for a place to be based that worked for them in the West Midlands" (vicar)*



## Hosts and guests

The second type of relationship identified was that of **host / guest**. In these instances, the clergy viewed themselves and their church as being more than a landlord, and wanted to be good hosts to the members of the minority congregation who they saw as guests in their building. Sometimes this developed from the landlord / tenant relationship as people got to know one another and built friendships that were deeper than a purely transactional relationship.

One vicar described how his church was intentionally looking to deepen their relationship with an East African congregation who used their spaces, and could clearly identify how this was shifting their relationship from seeing them as a funding stream through rental payments, to a group they can engage with ecumenically. For some churches, being host meant re-thinking the amount charged for the hire of the building, and some had a clear desire to make their building available at a much-reduced rate for the congregations they had deeper relationships with. One vicar reflected this by saying:

*'we're flexible with people who are giving us long term bookings - we would give a lower rate anyway. But we also felt, or I felt, as we negotiated with them, that I wanted to provide a home for these Christian brothers and sisters who were looking for a place to be based that worked for them in the West Midlands, where there was a nice church space they could use and adapt and where there was safe parking.'*

Others hosted congregations they saw as being in need and who they recognised would be unable to pay any sort of reasonable rent. Their hosting of this congregation became part of their intentional care for an immigrant community, many of whom were impoverished or had precarious immigration statuses as asylum seekers or undocumented migrants. Research by Rev. Dr Susanna Snyder explores the *'substantial, valuable contributions to asylum seeker support in the UK by Christian communities'* (2011: 567; see also 2012),<sup>4</sup> and care for a congregation consisting of asylum seekers and

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<sup>4</sup> Although, as Snyder cautions, 'Christian support for those seeking asylum cannot be assumed', citing examples of receiving a hostile or ill-informed response when discussing asylum issues in some Christian settings, and the presence of prominent Anglicans among the leadership of the anti-immigration think-tank Migration Watch (2016: 47).



*"...[there are] fairly long and quite energetic sermons which are obviously in [congregation's language], so I don't understand. If I am standing there, then anybody standing near me will just come and quietly whisper a brief translation in my ear of what's being said, which is quite touching"*  
(vicar)

refugees enacted though free use (or 'peppercorn' rental) of a church space for worship, was situated by clergy as central to the church's mission within their local community. Several clergy who talked about their relationship with a minority congregation in these terms also sought to enact fellowship and solidarity by attending the congregation's services (at Christmas or Easter for instance), sometimes with members of their main congregation, as well as inviting members of the minority congregation to attend their services or events at different times.

## Partners

The third and smallest category, were those who sought to be partners with the minority congregation(s) using their church space(s). In practice, this could include regular meetings between the vicar and leader(s) of the host congregation(s) for prayer and support, joint initiatives such as social meetings and finding ways to worship together beyond visits on special occasions. In some cases, a partnership relationship had emerged by 'accident'. One vicar for example, recounted how a minority congregation using his church had asked him to take services while their regular church leader was overseas for an extended period.

Whilst several vicars expressed a desire to move towards either, a host / guest or partnership model, they identified a number of factors that made this difficult. Perhaps the main, and most intractable, one is language. For several of the minority congregations a significant aspect of their service is the space to worship in their mother tongue, which, inevitably, makes it difficult for others to participate, although some clergy told us that minority congregation(s) did make an effort to include English-speaking guests:

*'...[there are] fairly long and quite energetic sermons which are obviously in [congregation's language], so I don't understand. If I am standing there, then anybody standing near me will just come and quietly whisper a brief translation in my ear of what's being said, which is quite touching'.*

Another vicar mentioned that a minority congregation hold a service in their own language but then a meal afterwards where English is commonly used, and that they often invite

the host congregation to the meal, especially during their festivals.

Some clergy recognised that, whilst they wanted a deeper relationship with the congregation, that aspiration wasn't always reciprocated by the leadership or members of the minority congregation. This was especially true for those congregations who gathered from a wide geographic area and met infrequently. For these congregations, meeting together was paramount, and any sharing with the host congregation limited their opportunity for fellowship. As one vicar commented: *'what would we be uniting for? Their [minority congregation's] vision isn't for mission to this area; it's for providing a service in a language for a particular community'*. In other words, for many minority congregations, their focus of wider effort and activity was not the local Anglican parish, but rather national, translocal and transnational diasporic networks. There was sometimes also a lack of enthusiasm for a deeper relationship from within the local host congregation who, we were informed, sometimes viewed the idea as a distraction or just another 'pet project' of the vicar.

## The 'joyful challenge' of minority congregations' use of church spaces

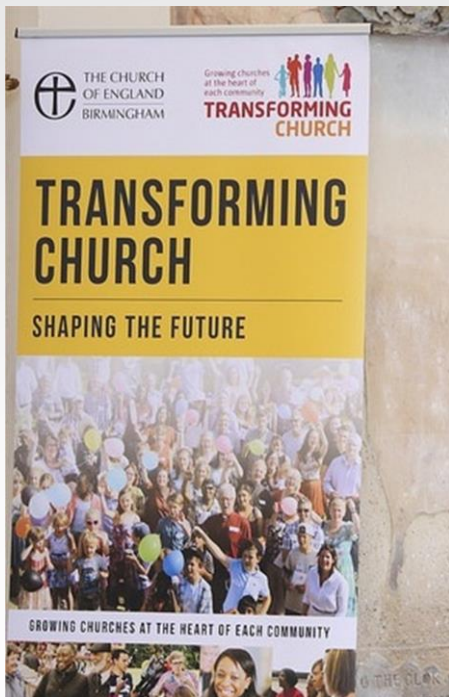
One vicar, when asked what his experience had been of hosting numerous minority congregations in his church space over a number of years, answered: *'it can be challenging ... that sounds a bit too negative ... it is, I suppose... a joyful challenge'*. His words title this section, as they provide an apt summary of the perspective of many of the clergy we interviewed.

### Benefits and opportunities

Clergy identified clear benefits to minority congregations using their church space(s). At one level, there was a financial advantage to having groups paying to use church spaces at times when they would otherwise have stood empty, with, in some cases this rental income proving vital to the financial viability of the church through secured income from the minority congregation: *'...[it] makes possible the viability of us doing things here in terms of paying the bills. We could not pay the bills without their input really'*. At another level, clergy spoke about the importance of the church building appearing a busy, 'alive' and relevant presence within the local neighbourhood, rather than a space *'only used for an hour and a half on a Sunday'*.

*"I would like to think, that where there is interaction in the community, where people are living in this area and say, "Well, I go to [church's name]", then that gives them a common bond" (vicar)*

As discussed above, for some clergy, hosting congregations of, particularly, low income migrants and asylum seekers was framed as a form of Christian service. This idea of interaction with minority congregations as a form of mission was also expressed through some interviewees' reflections on the potential of these relationships to encourage and foster social cohesion – in particular in ethnically and religiously diverse neighbourhoods or neighbourhoods where population demographics had undergone rapid change. Clergy spoke about how minority congregations' use of church space led



*"There is sense in which it's quite easy for the church to despair and just say, "we can't do it here, we can't find people who will respond, we can't build a diverse, you know, multi-ethnic congregation", and you almost throw the towel in. Whereas this little group of people [minority congregation] are saying very different things and that's absolutely brilliant" (vicar)*

to encounters between diverse Christians, which, even when these interactions were quite fleeting, held potential to foster understanding across difference: *'I would like to think, that where there is interaction in the community, where people are living in this area and say, "Well, I go to [church's name]", then that gives them a common bond'*. Another vicar said he perceived changing attitudes among his main congregation because of their contact with members of the minority congregation:

*'At a prayer meeting I was at this morning, one person talked about how it is one of the great temptations of Christians that we are individualistic or focused on our own, rather than being wide and open. So, I would see the positive effect of having them [a minority congregation] as being actually a blessing to members of our congregation who would struggle with this stuff. Any who may struggle... may have a bit of racism, may struggle with welcoming Asian people. Therefore, to welcome Asian Christian people, although very different, is good for them. I suppose there's a teaching element'*.

Clergy also reflected on their engagement with minority congregations in terms of the challenge of 'growing church' in religiously diverse areas - a key focus of both diocesan-level Transforming Church (The Church of England Birmingham 2013) initiatives and the nationwide Presence and Engagement programme. As one vicar who worked in a neighbourhood where the majority of the local population belong to another faith community explained:

*'There is sense in which it's quite easy for the church to despair and just say, "we can't do it here, we can't find people who will respond, we can't build a diverse, you know, multi-ethnic congregation", and you almost throw the towel in. Whereas this little group of people [minority congregation] are saying very different things and that's absolutely brilliant'*.

## Challenges

As well as these positive aspects of the relationship with minority congregations, clergy also identified a number of challenges. Inevitably, there are practical challenges when hosting a regular group in the church, and the fact that

they are a worshipping congregation does not diminish these. Differing attitudes towards timing and punctuality came up as a tension between main and minority congregations and leaders. This could lead to frustration with people not turning up to collect keys at the time agreed, meetings overrunning, or people feeling their services were being curtailed when the main congregation wanted them to finish at an agreed time and weren't able or willing to be flexible. We also heard a lot from clergy about issues with how tidily spaces were left, the care and storage of equipment, parking issues and so on. However, there are other challenges that are presented by the different requirements for worship and, in some case, cultural differences (or perceived differences) between the main and minority congregation leaders and members.

One vicar identified that the frustrations his congregation had with the way the building was used by a minority congregations did not stem from carelessness or lack of respect on the part of the minority congregation, but by the different cultural ways that people use buildings:

*'One of their [main congregation] moans is about how they [minority congregation] leave the place, because they've got lots of new people arriving and their cultural understanding of how you leave places, even how you use a western-style kitchen are very different from ours. That's caused quite a lot of tension. So, amongst a list of grievances from some of the people here was how the toilets are left. Again, you're just talking very different initial standards of what's acceptable'.*

It is important to note here, that concerns around cleanliness and orderliness of church spaces were not a 'one-way' complaint by main congregations against minority congregations. One vicar for example, told us that the use of the church hall for children's activities meant the space was sometimes left in a state that was not acceptable to their minority congregation tenants:

*'play and stay groups and nursery use it during the week. So, it has much more of a 'children running around' level of tidiness and cleanliness, which when a group wants to come and use it as a sacred space for worship, their standards and our standards are different. And we regularly fail to attain their standards in terms of how we leave the place'.*

Aside from these practical issues, the way that some minority congregations viewed and used church buildings also related to the way they wanted the spatial arrangement and appearance of the church to enable worship with authenticity and integrity. Whilst some, particularly Pentecostal, congregations were happy with the plainer context of a church hall, others such as certain Orthodox congregations required furnishings and artefacts for use during their service. Orthodox worship requires a screen, the Iconostasis, to separate the nave from the sanctuary. One church that was hosting an Orthodox congregation had a rood screen and were happy for the Orthodox congregation to drape curtains on it and then use that for hanging pictures and icons for their worship. However, in another church, that did not have an existing screen, one was erected in the chancel by the Orthodox minority congregation, which caused some problems. On a practical note it damaged stone and plaster in a grade 2 listed church. On a theological note, it symbolised separation and the privilege of the clergy in a way that, the vicar felt, contradicted the teaching of the host congregation in a deeply problematic way:

*'I didn't quite blow a fuse, but I was very robust about how inappropriate that was and an abuse of our space. This kind of, liturgical theological abuse of a building which we have set up, which says everyone is welcome into this place'.*

Theological and liturgical challenges also emerged in relation to how comfortable a church was with letting a congregation use their spaces(s) for worship that had significant differences to their own. As



well as the aforementioned unease with the use of an iconostasis, which for some churches sits uncomfortably with their theology of everyone being able to enter into God's presence equally, other vicars expressed discomfort with, what they saw as, 'heavy-handed' evangelism undertaken by some minority congregations in the local area. They were concerned that residents would assume this was being undertaken by, or with the approval of the church, and that this could cause friction with members of the local community who objected to being evangelised to in this way. Some also expressed concern about the 'gospel of prosperity' expounded by some Pentecostal churches, as well as the more 'supernatural' aspects of some of these church's style of worship, which could lead to concerns about the exploitation of vulnerable people, such as people with mental health issues who may engage in exorcism practices rather than seeking professional medical help.<sup>5</sup> As one vicar pointed out, aside from these concerns, even the more 'exuberant' aspects of some Pentecostal worship could appear disturbing or unsettling to main Anglican congregation members or church officers who may not have prior knowledge of this kind of Christian expression:

*'If you've had no experience at all about contemporary African Pentecostal worship, you could be quite taken aback by the noise, by the shouted prayers, by the emotional eruptions that you might hear going on or see going on if you are around the building when they are worshipping. Now that could be disconcerting to some church leaders and to some PCCs. You know, I heard someone was standing on a chair in floods of tears. Now, to me, that's quite normal because I'm used to Pentecostal worship. But to some people, that could sound awful - as if somebody's being emotionally manipulated or coerced into behaving like that'.*

There were also concerns about hosting congregations with very different (usually more conservative) attitudes towards the role of women in the church, the rights of LGBT+ people, or members of other faith communities. When a minority congregation derived social values about these issues from a country with much more conservative views than would be generally acceptable (or legal under equalities legislation) in the UK, this could be a real challenge. Does hosting a

*For some clergy, hosting minority congregations raised questions about the ability of their church to be inclusive, and about what inclusivity really means in practice*

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<sup>5</sup> This reflects concerns highlighted in a 2017 report on mental health by the Christian think-tank Theos (Ryan 2017: 22-24)

*For one vicar, maintaining the integrity of his church's liberal worldview while being a welcoming host to the minority congregation was a balancing act between the principles of inclusiveness, and of hospitality and care for those in need.*



congregation who hold those views risk implying endorsement of these views, or implicate the main church in attitudes which members of the main congregation, the local community, or society at large might find objectionable?

For some clergy, this raised questions about the ability of their church to be inclusive, and about what inclusivity really means in practice. One vicar for example, told us that his church had a very clear aim to be inclusive of women in leadership, the LGBT+ community and people of other faiths. They were also very keen to be hosts to a minority congregation drawn from a very low income migrant community. Returning to the categories of relationship outlines earlier, the church wanted, not to be a landlord to these tenants, but to host them as guests - as fellow Christians, of very limited means, in need of somewhere to worship. Yet the theology of the minority congregation did not allow for women in leadership, was very conservative about LGBT+ rights, and had negative views towards Muslims. For this vicar, maintaining the integrity of his church's liberal worldview while being a welcoming host to the minority congregation was a balancing act between the principles of inclusiveness and of hospitality and care for those in need:

*'we think, "yes, well we must be 'right on' because we welcome asylum seekers" ... Well, are they teaching a gospel that actually resonates with the statement of values by the church door that we have carefully crafted that talks about inclusivity and talks about a none patriarchal kind of faith and so on? I think there could well be a tension there ... We haven't had much of an in-depth dialogue. I think we are more pleased that we can host a congregation, the majority of whom are asylum seekers. We are more pleased with that than we would be cross about any preaching that we didn't feel comfortable with in their services, I think'.*

As outlined earlier, many of the minority congregations described to us by clergy retained close links with churches in their countries of origin/heritage or with diasporic religious networks. For some this meant they were under episcopal authority and would, on occasion, have a visiting Bishop at their services. This provided some reassurance for the host church when the initial booking was made that they were a legitimate group with some level of accountability,

but also meant they were less likely to look for a deep level of partnership with the host church as they had links with other congregations either in the UK or overseas.

Other congregations though, did not have this level of 'official' recognition or oversight, and clergy told us that they had sometimes struggled to access background information on smaller, unaffiliated churches who approached them about using their church space(s). Perhaps more challenging were the links that sometimes existed between congregations and political movements in the country of origin/heritage – particularly when political schisms affected relationships within the minority congregation in Birmingham. In one case, a minority congregation faced a very turbulent split relating to political events in their country of origin, with each faction approaching the host church to try to secure the venue for themselves over and against the others, leaving the vicar in a very difficult position. One outcome of this was that when the congregation did formally split, the vicar was able to put the ousted faction in touch with other churches who might be able to host them, and provided references so that the split did not result in some having nowhere to worship.

We also heard from clergy that challenges could arise in relationships with minority congregations around safeguarding. For some migrant communities, understanding, agreeing and complying with current safeguarding legislation had proved a challenge – due, for example, to a lack of awareness of requirements to vet volunteers working with children, or a

*Some concerns emerged around safeguarding, and the extent to which some minority congregations integrated safeguarding into their practice, or just paid 'lip service'*

tendency towards corporal punishment of children. This can become an issue for a host church, who might find themselves in a relationship with a group that they want to support but who are unable, or unwilling to comply with safeguarding laws. As one vicar pointed out, while the Anglican Church have policies on the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults which are shared with all users of the church space (and who must agree to abide by them), it was impossible for him to then 'police' this, and monitor the extent to which *'they [are] really integrated into a different culture? Or is it just lip service?'* In one instance, after many meetings and involving outside support the host church decided to terminate the rental agreement as they did not wish to host a group that didn't comply with safeguarding rules. This led to conflict with some of the leadership of the congregation, and also meant the vicar had to be part of trying to reconcile groups within the minority congregation - some of whom agreed with the stance the host church took.

The final key challenge identified by clergy concerned hostility towards minority congregations – either from elements within the church's main congregation, or amongst the wider local community. While, as noted above, clergy felt that relationships with minority congregations held potential to support community cohesion, we also heard about instances of prejudice and racism. This did not solely emanate from white British congregation and community members. We heard from one vicar for example, that there was a 'distinction' in his parish between longer established Black communities who regarded themselves as *'more deserving, more entitled'* than newer migrant populations. We also heard about cynicism towards some Middle Eastern Christians, who other congregation members suspected of posing as Christians in order to facilitate asylum claims. A striking example of hostility towards a

*"The early church was a group of very disparate and diverse people and one of its outrageous claims is that it can hold people of very different cultures. And if we, kind of, just say, "well, we're too different, we can't", then I think we're going to second best" (vicar)*

*"We've got all these dynamic, energised African, Caribbean or other ethnic minority congregations coming in ... I can't believe God isn't saying something to us here. We [white British Anglicans] are getting older and there are less of us. And they are young and dynamic and there are more of them ... I would say God is providing us with an opportunity to think seriously about Christianity" (vicar)*

minority congregation from members of a wider local community was provided by a vicar whose church hosts an East African Orthodox congregation. He described how the congregation had requested permission to conduct a traditional festival ceremony involving the lighting of a bonfire in the open space outside the church. He agreed, and attended the ceremony – explaining to curious passers-by that this was *'a very special occasion and we [were] very proud to host it'*. He was therefore stunned to hear that the local police were investigating public complaints about a gathering of Muslims burning a cross outside the church: *'nobody was burning a cross ... it was clearly a joyful occasion, every sound was joyful. But my goodness - it just shows what is just beneath the surface'*.

### A challenge worth meeting?

Despite these identified tensions, we came away from all of the interviews with a sense that clergy wanted to do their best to meet positively the challenges they experienced in hosting minority congregations. For some clergy, the desire to respond positively to these challenges stemmed from a theological imperative. As one vicar put it:

*'The early church was a group of very disparate and diverse people and one of its outrageous claims is that it can hold people of very different cultures. And if we, kind of, just say, "well, we're too different, we can't", then I think we're going to second best'*.

Some felt that hosting minority congregations was a central part of their mission – in terms of either providing hospitality and welcome to migrant communities or through encouraging social cohesion – while others expressed a view that nurturing and strengthening relationships with minority congregations was crucial in ensuring the church's survival in modern Britain:

*'It's fairly commonly understood now that the Anglican Church is decreasing in membership ... the general trend is decreasing numbers and they are elderly. We've got all these dynamic, energised African, Caribbean or other ethnic group minority congregations coming in ... I can't*

*believe God isn't saying something to us here. We are getting older and there are less of us. And they are young and dynamic and there are more of them ... I would say God is providing us with an opportunity to think seriously about Christianity... I can't believe - given some time and effort, learning some new skills about interacting - we can't grow our identity into a bigger one than just the Anglican identity. So I think that is a challenge and if we could find ways of doing that locally and contextualise it, it could be a model for others'.*

## Tips from clergy

Our interviews ended by asking clergy to reflect on their experience of hosting minority congregation, and what advice or 'tips' they would give to other clergy in this situation:

- When a congregation approaches you, spend time (before agreeing to use of church space(s)), finding out who they are and whether they are linked to a denomination or a theological standpoint. For some groups this will be easier information to find out than for others. Asking colleagues or doing a quick internet search are possible starting points.
- Have in place a clear set of terms and conditions for using your premises that the congregation read, understand and sign before starting to use church space(s). This makes it easier to speak productively about and deal with any disagreements over the use of the space(s) as there are clear expectations (that everyone has agreed to in advance) as to how both parties should operate.
- Think through what relationship you would like to have with the congregation – do you want to be a **landlord**, a **host** or a **partner**? Do not assume that minority congregations want the same kind of relationship – ask them what their expectations are. It is tricky to try and become a partner if they see you only as a landlord. Also think about how your relationship with the congregation will impact on your expectations of them, the amount of rent you charge them, and so on.
- Build a relationship with the leadership of the congregation. If possible, this relationship should not just be between the vicar and the minority congregation leaders but also between Churchwardens and PCC members.
- Celebrate the opportunity to host Christians from a different tradition, and seek to be enriched through each other's traditions. Avoid 'empire building' by seeking to co-opt them into your way of 'doing church', or a wider Church of England, agenda: *'one of the lessons for the wider church is how do we embrace these people as Christian brothers and sisters but allow them to be who they are rather than trying to turn them into British Anglicans'*.
- If you are not familiar with a minority congregation's theology or worship style, seek to educate yourself and other key stakeholders about it. In turn, take opportunities to educate



congregation leaders who might not be familiar with Anglican worship styles – explain what you are doing and why, and open channels for learning and mutual enrichment.

- Recognise that different approaches to timekeeping, use of the building and so on might be about cultural norms and not about lack of respect or carelessness.
- Be prepared to 'take a stance' where necessary. This might relate to behaviour in or use of the building, issues such as safeguarding or health and safety, teachings of the minority congregation, or attitudes and actions of members of your main congregation towards them.



## Key recommendations for the Church of England

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- Produce national and local resources for clergy with advice, FAQs and contact details of those within the Church who can support them in their work with minority congregations, including signposting to other useful guidance from the Church of England – examples might include such Presence and Engagement guidance on the use of Church Buildings:  
<http://presenceandengagement.org.uk/pe-guidelines-use-church-buildings>
- Offer occasional training to clergy and lay-leaders in working with minority congregations, with input from clergy who are already experienced in this area and who can share their insights.
- Produce a leaflet for minority congregations, to help congregations understand the possibilities but also restrictions when using Church of England buildings. Ensure this leaflet is available in the main community languages locally.
- Promote and make all of these resources readily available to clergy and lay-leaders through national Anglican networks, and online.



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## The authors

**Dr Demelza Jones** is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Gloucestershire. *Contact: [djones28@glos.ac.uk](mailto:djones28@glos.ac.uk)*

**Canon Dr Andrew Smith** is Director of Interfaith Relations for the Bishop of Birmingham, Honorary Fellow of the Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion at the University of Birmingham, and founder of The Feast - a charity working to promote community cohesion between young people of different faiths. *Contact: [andrews@cofebirmingham.com](mailto:andrews@cofebirmingham.com)*

