



BENEFACT  
TRUST

Research report

# Growing lives

How can churches overcome the barriers to connecting with children and young people in their communities?





**“The church can offer young people a powerful anchor in an era where growing up is more difficult and confusing than at any other time in our culture’s history... Families can, and are by definition capable of being, the lifeblood of their parishes. Enabling and encouraging families would lead to increased worship among young people, invigoration of parish activities, and increased community links.”**

Helena Ramecker, St Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church, Kilmarnock

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**Emma Smith**  
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May 2018 - Feb 2021  
Benefact Trust



## Introduction to our Growing Lives research

# How effective are churches at connecting with young people and what help do they need to do it better?

**It's a question we wanted to ask before we decided whether to forge ahead with introducing a grants programme aimed at providing enhanced support to churches to build lasting links with families in their local area.**

The team at Benefact Trust have had the privilege of visiting some truly inspirational beneficiary projects; with churches throughout the UK and Ireland running projects taking an innovative approach to tackling social issues affecting young people and helping them to reach their potential. The impact of these projects is far-reaching and, sometimes, life-changing.

However, we hear from many more churches across a range of denominations who are struggling to attract even a handful of children into their worshipping community and lack the confidence to deliver activities and support that is relevant and attractive to young people today. But what is the scale of the problem and how could we help?

We carried out an online survey of more than 800 churches in 2019 who had previously received a grant from Benefact Trust to gain an insight into the work churches are currently engaged in with 0 to 18-year-olds.

We wanted to explore a number of areas, from the amount of activities and frequency of engagement right through to perceived quality, benefits and barriers.

While some of the findings give cause for concern, what also came across loud and clear was the desire and determination of the majority of churches to meet the challenge head on. With the right skills and resources in place, almost all of them would love to provide more support and activities for the next generation.





Funding is, of course, only one of the challenges, but we're proud that the grants programme we introduced in May 2019 in response to the findings of this research, Growing Lives, is already going some way to helping churches to achieve this ambition to do more. While we anticipated a good response to the new funding stream, even we were surprised with the volume of applications that flooded in during the first few months, and the diversity of the projects those applications represented.

By January 2020, we'd already exceeded our original £1 million budget for Growing Lives grants, and we were delighted to add another million to the funding pot for the programme to meet continued high demand.

More than 140 grants had been awarded by June 2020, supporting church-led projects throughout the UK and Ireland focused on everything from homework cafes and outdoor play areas to soft play social enterprises. Other churches are using their grant to create spaces that will help young people to access support with finding employment and accessing training, and with substance misuse and mental health support.

We're enjoying supporting beneficiaries to share their stories and learnings, helping them to potentially attract additional funding, but also community buy-in and new volunteers. We hope that these stories, along with the case studies in this report and the advice blogs and resources we're continuing to add to on our website, will inspire other churches and charities and help them feel better equipped as they begin or enhance their own work with young people.

It's clear from our report that many churches lack confidence in getting this work off the ground and fear there are too many hurdles to overcome, but these case studies should give confidence that it's possible to engage with local families and grow your church community, even if young people and volunteers are currently in short supply.

**A Growing Lives grant of £14,500 will help Primetime at the Vine in Bradford, a charity helping churches to engage with young people aged 13 to 18, to enhance the support and resources they provide to churches in disadvantaged communities and to replicate their Young Leaders Network across the UK.**

In the pages that follow, we summarise our headline findings and explore some of the key synergies and differences among churches of different sizes, but also those in rural and urban areas and with differing level of disadvantage in their communities. We hope you find it an interesting read.

# What we found, the headlines



Two thirds of churches have five or fewer young people in their worshipping community; but most would love to change that if they had the right skills and resources in place to enhance their support for them.

**“Unfortunately, our congregation is an ageing congregation. Young people seem to be attracted to the churches which are more like a concert... It is trying to find something to entice them through the doors. We are trying and hopefully we will make a difference.”**



Churches of all sizes and types feel much more confident about the quality and range of activities and support they provide for children under 10 than for teenagers.

**“Due to the small numbers, there tends to be a focus on ‘little’ people. In this, we run the very real risk of our young adults losing interest and/or seeing the church through the lens of an infantile pursuit.”**



While the vast majority of churches believe they offer a welcoming environment for children and young people, few have asked local families what they want from their church.

**“[We need] a more welcoming and inclusive environment, especially for children and their parents; a forum for families’ voices to be heard; less reliance on obsolete ideas and more effective and relevant lay leadership.”**



Most churches see real benefits - to themselves and their communities – in stepping up their engagement with young people and building community partnerships, and they are just as aware of the risks of not engaging.

**“We are in a very deprived area. Children are disengaging at school from Year 6 upwards. There is concern about young people joining gangs and the prevalence of knife crime. Our minister is talking to other faith and community groups.”**



The biggest barrier that churches face in offering activities to children and young people is a lack of people to run them, but they also lack funding and buildings and facilities that are fit-for purpose.

**“The building, being old, is an alien environment for children. The majority of the congregation will say we welcome children but will then tut at too much noise.”**





**“We have no children attending weekly worship, but have a monthly all-age worship which has been attended by an average of 15 children/young people for the last couple of months. This shows growth from an average of around 10.**

**I have recently been employed as the church’s part-time children and families’ worker and I am starting to engage with the groups involving children and families meeting in the building, and with a local primary school.**

**As a church, we are starting the process of planning new groups which I would be involved in running, and which would enable us to share the Good News.”**

# Key finding

Two thirds of churches have five or fewer young people in their worshipping community; but most would love to change that if they had the right skills and resources in place to enhance their support for them

**Some 67% of churches have five or fewer 11 to 18-year-olds in their worshipping community,** although the

picture is more positive when it comes to younger children engaging with the church, with 55% welcoming more than five 0 to 10-year-olds

**A third of churches have actually seen an increase in the number of 0 to 18-year-olds attending church**

in the last three years, although a quarter have experienced a decrease

**More than half of churches expect to run more activities for both children and teenagers** in the next three

years, and 96% would run more if they had all of the necessary resources and skills

# Worshipping community

## In the survey, we asked churches about the number of children and young people they currently have in their worshipping community.

Churches who considered themselves to serve a community with a high level of deprivation (18% of respondents) had the highest percentage of both 0 to 10-year-olds (73% had five or more) and 11 to 18-year-olds (43% had five or more) in their worshipping community. However, it is worth noting that these churches were also more likely to have a larger overall worshipping community of 50 people or more.

Some 74% of churches who considered themselves to be serving a community with a low level of deprivation (49% of our sample) had five or fewer 11 to 18-year-olds in their worshipping community, and 51% had five or fewer children under 10. Again though, 39% of these churches had a worshipping community of 24 or less people in total.

Urban churches (42% of sample) also fared much better than rural churches in attracting young people, with 75% having five or more children aged 10 and under and half having five or more children aged 11 to 18 in their worshipping communities. However, 80% of those churches with the biggest worshipping communities (150 or more) are situated in urban areas, while 91% of those churches with a worshipping community of 0 to 24 people are in rural areas.

It is unsurprising then that only 41% of rural churches have a worshipping community including more than five children and only 20% have five or more of the older age group attending worship at their church.

Number of children and young people in worshipping community

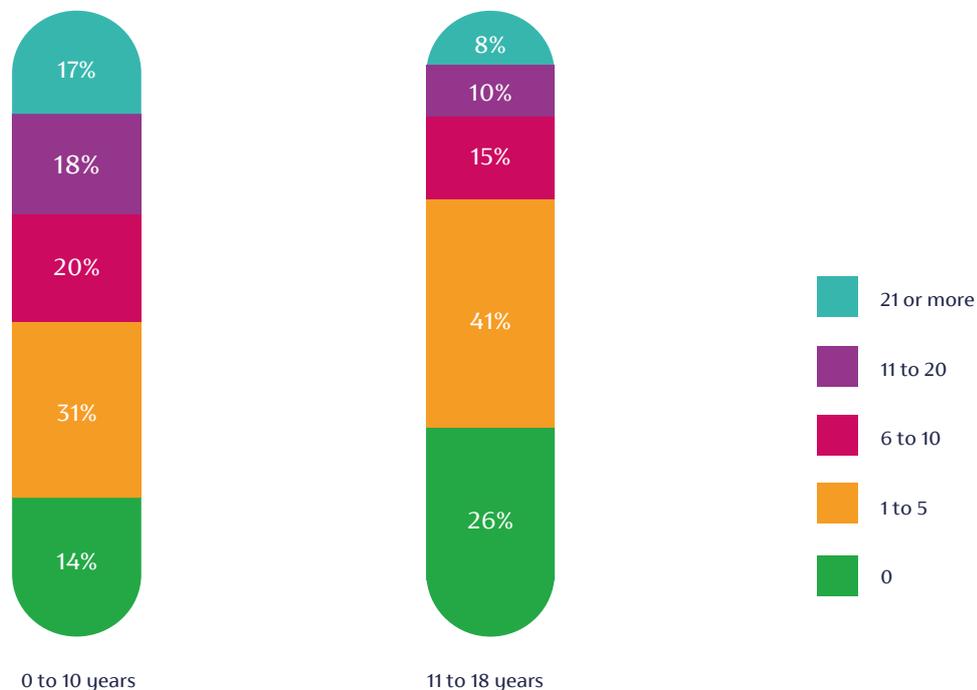


Figure 1.1  
Sample base: 788 (0-10)  
787 (11-18) respondents

# Changes in numbers

We also asked churches about whether numbers of 0 to 18-year-olds attending had changed in the last three years.

While 42% had seen no change, a third had experienced an uplift.

This increase was most marked in churches serving a community with a high level of deprivation, at 49%, although 22% had experienced a decrease in numbers. And while 39% of urban churches had seen the number of children and young people attending their church grow, only 28% of rural churches reported the same.

Again, churches with the largest worshipping communities had experienced the most significant growth in this area, with 44% confirming they had seen an increase.

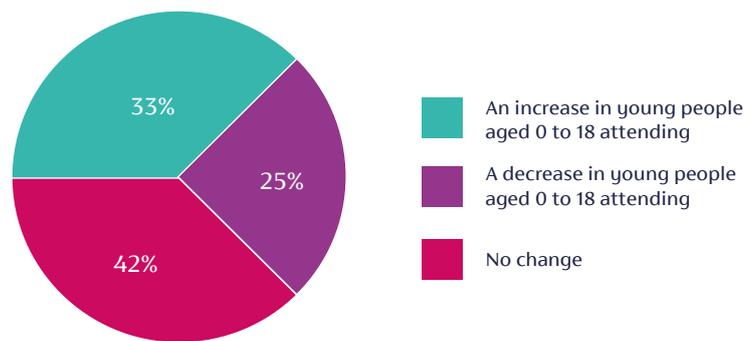


Figure 1.2  
Sample base: 783 respondents

In the next three years, do you think your church will run more or less activities for children and young people?

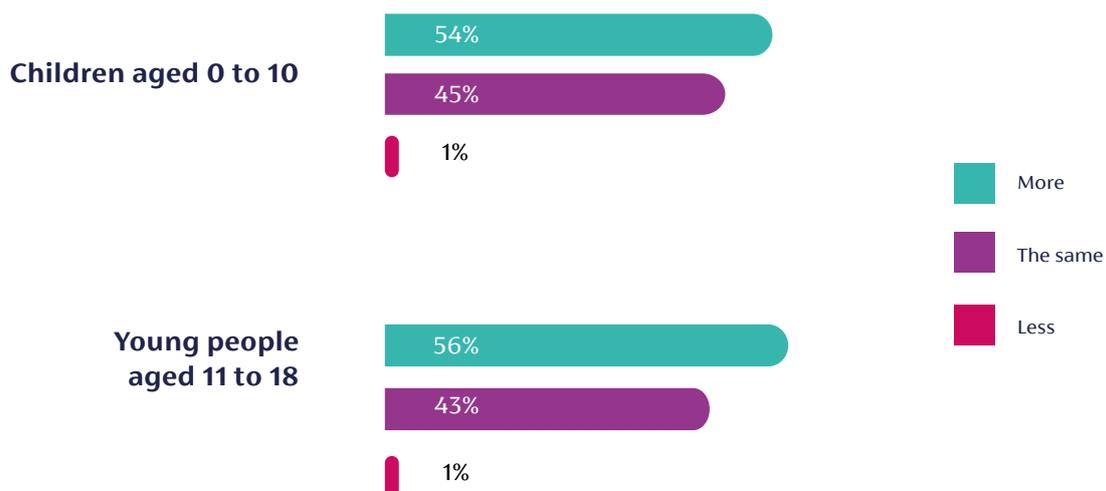


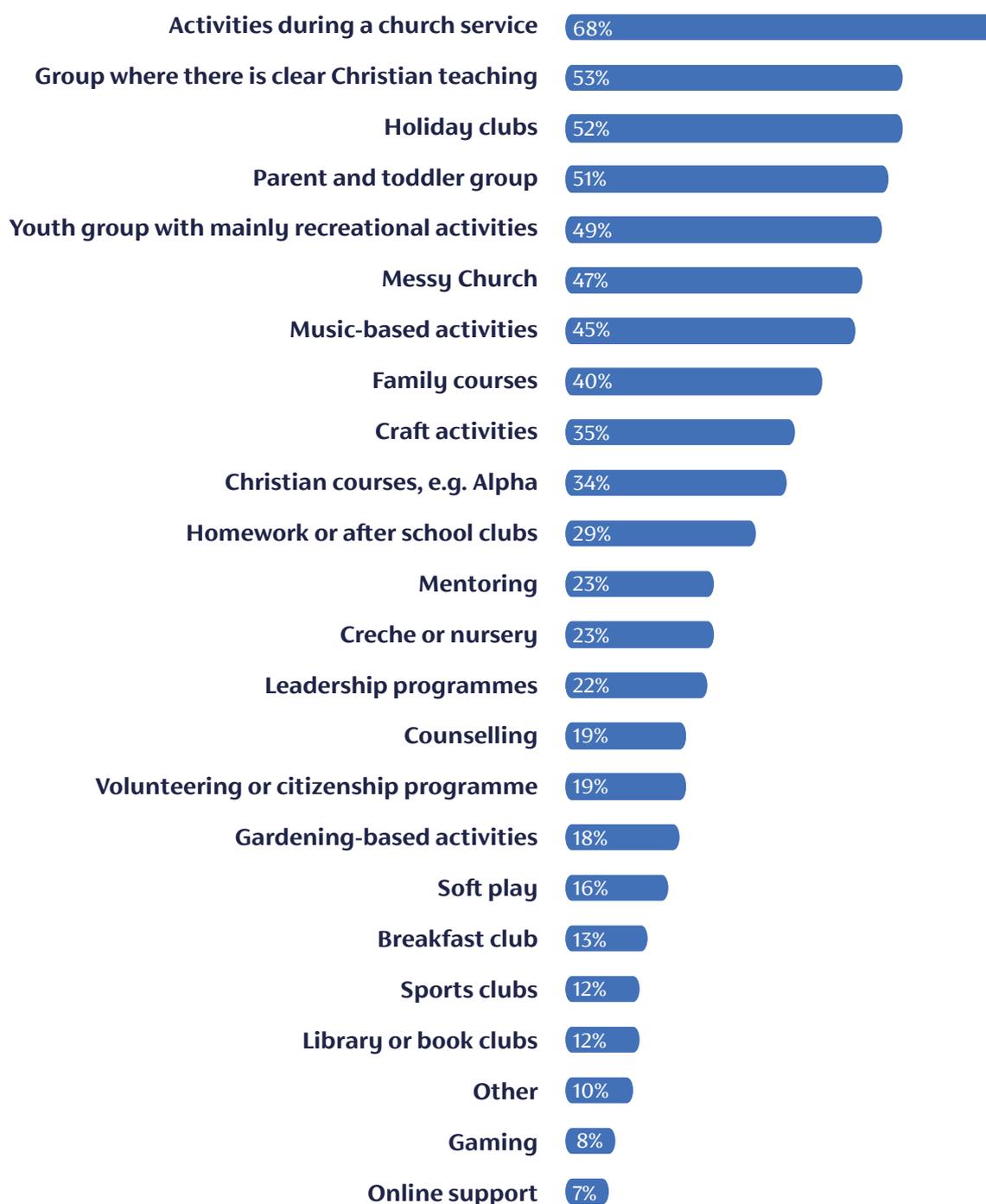
Figure 1.3  
Sample base: 706 (children)  
629 (young people) respondents

# Activities

Despite the fact that a quarter of churches have seen a downturn in young people attending and the majority have experienced static numbers, there is optimism for the future, with only 1% of respondents saying that they plan to run less activities for children and young people in the next three years.

More than half plan to do more, and 96% would like to run more if they had all of the necessary resources and skills in place.

The below chart shows the activities that churches would like to run if they could call upon all of the necessary resources and skills:





# Activities

Here, the differences between churches in different demographics are particularly interesting.

While all churches would most like to run activities during a church service, urban churches and churches serving a community with a high level of deprivation have a greater appetite for providing more practical support for families, such as holiday clubs and parent and toddler groups; reflecting the fact that the need is most likely greater in these communities.

More than half of churches serving the most disadvantaged communities said they would like to run family courses.

The below tables show the top five activities churches would like to run, depending on the level of need in the community they serve and whether they are in an urban or rural location.

## High level of deprivation



## Rural churches



## Medium level of deprivation



## Urban churches



## Low level of deprivation





**“We have suffered a decline in children and young people but we are fighting back...**

**We are working in a group of rural churches to begin setting up activities for youth aged 11 to 17...**

**There is strength if small churches can work together and the congregations look at what we need to do and stop looking inward; changing to accommodate changing lifestyles.”**

*Youthscape - an Benefact Trust beneficiary improving the lives of children and young people in Luton and equipping churches to carry out youth work.*

*Credit: Paul Grundy*

# Key finding

Two thirds of churches have five or fewer young people in their worshipping community; but most would love to change that if they had the right skills and resources in place to enhance their support for them

**A high proportion of churches (82%) currently provide activities for children aged 0 to 10** but that figure drops to 58% of churches providing activities for older children aged 11 to 18

While 58% of churches rate the support and activities they provide for children aged 0 to 10 as good or excellent, only 37% rate their provision for 11 to 18-year-olds as good or excellent. **In fact, 41% rate support and activities for young people aged 11 to 18 as inadequate**

The vast majority of churches run these activities themselves through unpaid volunteers, **although churches are more likely to employ paid workers to run activities for young people aged 11 to 18** than for 0 to 10-year-olds

More than three quarters of churches deliver activities for children and young people during a church service, and **48% are now running parent and toddler groups**

# Provision of activities

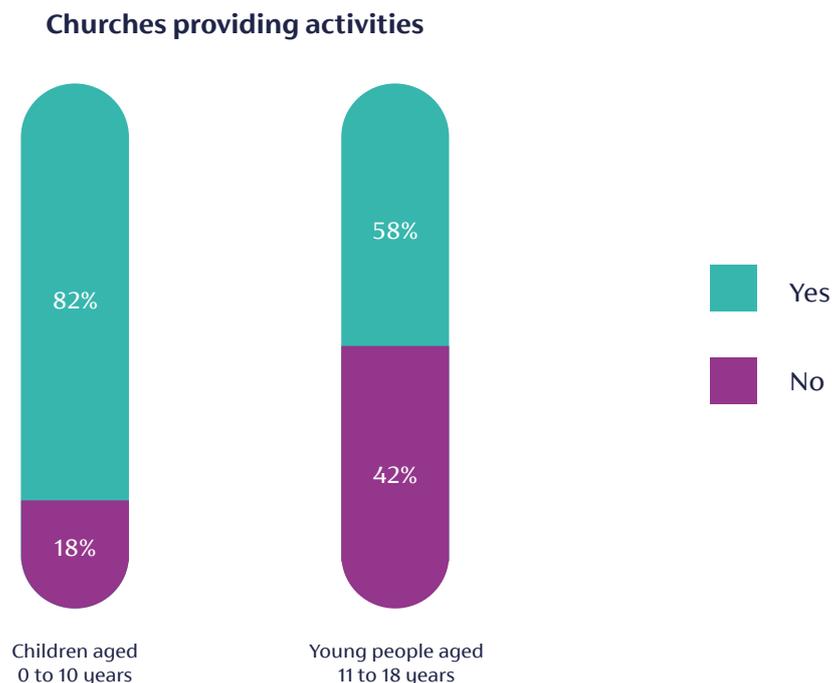
Given the lower numbers of 11 to 18-year-olds in worshipping communities generally, it is hardly surprising that our poll reveals that churches are more likely to run activities for 0 to 10-year-olds than for the older age group, but the low number of churches (only 42%) providing activities and support for 11 to 18-year-olds is clearly a cause for concern.

This percentage is lowest among rural churches, with only 41% providing this age group with activities, compared to 79% of urban churches.

It would have been interesting to differentiate whether these activities are provided to children and young people within the worshipping community only, or the wider community. While the responses around type of activities provided (see page 12) give some indication as to who might be accessing them, with more than three quarters of churches running activities during a service, this specific question was not asked. We do not, therefore, have a clear picture of the balance of activities being provided to children

and young people who attend church as compared to those using the building who are not part of the worshipping community.

Only those churches which responded that they do provide activities for either children or young people or both were asked a series of follow-up questions related to that activity. These explored a range of areas, including who is responsible for running and delivering those activities - people and organisations; how often; what activities they currently run in their church or church buildings and how they rate the quality of their provision for the different age groups. While some of these findings are included here, the rest feature in the appendix at the back of this report.

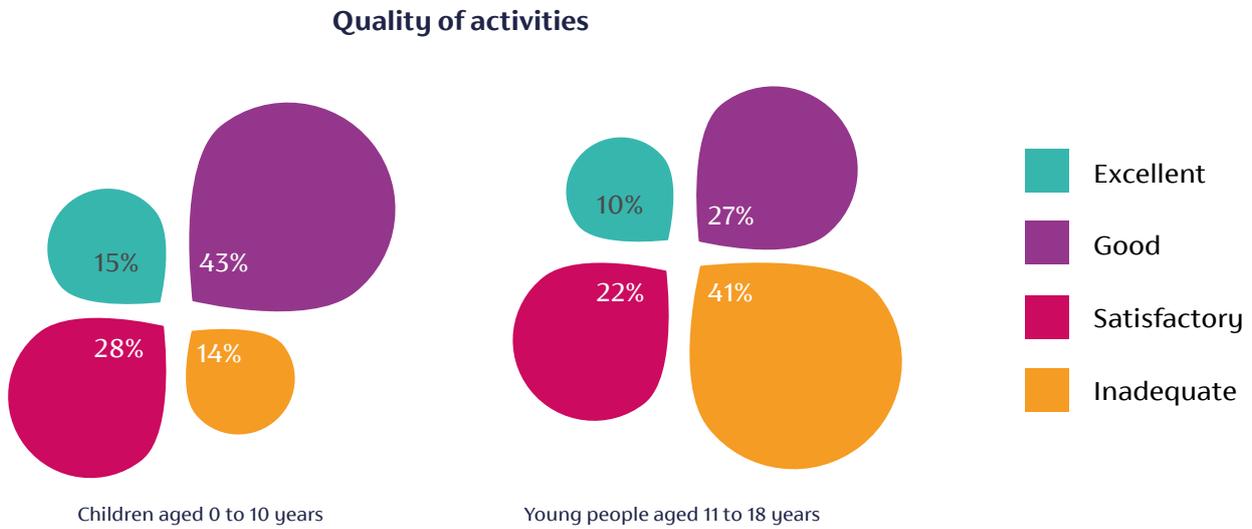


**Figure 2.1**  
Sample base: 783 (children)  
691 (young people) respondents

The fact that far fewer churches are running activities for the older age group was reflected in the responses we received when we asked churches how they rate the support and activities they provide for children and young people. It was evident that the majority of churches feel much more confident about the quality of their provision for 0 to 10-year-olds than for teenagers.

Encouragingly, 58% rate the activities and support they provide for the younger age group as good or excellent, but confidence in providing meaningful activities for 11 to 18-year-olds is much lower.

# Provision of activities



**Figure 2.2**  
 Sample base: 645 (children)  
 582 (young people) respondents

Rural churches and churches with the smallest worshipping communities of up to 24 people are the most likely to rate their support for 11 to 18-year-olds as inadequate, with 54% and 59% of these churches respectively feeling like they are failing in this area.

Churches operating in communities with the highest level of deprivation are the most confident in the quality of their provision for this age group, with 74% providing activities for them and 44% rating this aspect of their delivery as good or excellent.

Interestingly, they are also the most likely to employ paid youth workers (9%) and to use a combination of paid workers and unpaid volunteers (42%) to deliver these activities. The survey results clearly show, however, that for churches across all demographics, unpaid volunteers are crucial to the delivery of children's and youth work.

## Who are the activities for children and young people at your church delivered by?



**Figure 2.3**  
 Sample base: 632 (children)  
 396 (young people) respondents

# Activities currently provided

We also asked churches about the activities and support they currently provide. Perhaps the most interesting statistic to emerge here is that only 39% of churches are running groups for children and young people that have clear Christian content.

Urban churches are more likely to run groups with a Christian focus (47% compared to 32% of rural churches), as are churches serving communities with the greatest level of need (43% of churches in a community with high or medium deprivation compared to 36% of churches in areas with a lower level of deprivation).

Figure 1.4 (page 12) highlights the fact that churches would like to offer more groups with Christian content to local families if they had the right resources and skills in place.



Figure 2.4  
Sample base: 636 respondents



**“The activities which run successfully are dependent on very dedicated volunteers or enthusiastic professionals. We need to consult young people to seek out other activities which would be welcomed and recruit enthusiasts in those activities.”**

# Key finding

While the vast majority of churches believe they offer a welcoming environment for children and young people, few have asked local families what they want from their church

**An encouraging 88% of churches believe they offer a welcoming environment for children and young people,**

but more detailed commentary provided by respondents shows that many are struggling to connect with local families and feel out of step with modern family life.

**Only 32% of churches have ever asked or surveyed young people locally about the activities they would enjoy.**

This figure is highest among churches serving a community with a high level of deprivation (44%), who are also the most likely to rate the services and activities they provide to children and young people as good or excellent.

**Even when churches have made an effort to consult, many have experienced a limited response,**

with most having sent surveys to the wider community, rather than connecting directly with local families.

# Church welcome and consultation

**Given the lack of confidence among a significant number of churches about the quality of their offer for children and young people, we thought it would be interesting to ask churches if they feel that they offer a welcoming environment to 0 to 18-year-olds.**

An encouraging 88% answered yes, with confidence even higher among churches serving a community with a high level of deprivation (91%) and highest among those churches in urban areas (94%) and with the largest worshipping communities (96%).

Those church groups are also the most likely to have asked or surveyed young people in their area about the kind of activities they would enjoy and like their local church to provide.

Some churches did indicate that while their community is welcoming, their buildings and facilities present significant challenges to engaging with children and young people, and many others admit that a reluctance to embrace the changing lifestyles of modern families is proving an obstacle to their ambitions in this area.

Only 29% of rural churches had carried out consultation with young people, compared to 40% of urban churches, although this can also be partly attributed to the fact they have lower numbers of children and young people in their communities. Some 44% of churches with the largest congregation size have surveyed local families on this subject.

It is important to note, however, that of those churches who told us they had consulted, it is likely that most had only spoken to those children and young people already attending their church, rather than the wider community. This was clear from the additional commentary provided by churches which took part in the research, which also highlighted the fact that churches who had surveyed their community had often received a very limited response.

## 88%

of all churches feel they offer a welcoming environment to

**0 to 18-year-olds**

## 94%

of urban churches feel they offer a welcoming environment to

**young people**





**“We really are at a “crossroads” now. We serve a community with lots of young people and families, but few come to church, apart from once or twice per year. We need to increase this number; otherwise we won’t have a congregation left in a few years’ time.”**

*Photo: Activities ran by PSALMS at Stonehouse Methodist church in Gloucestershire*

# Key finding

Most churches see real benefits - to themselves and their communities – in stepping up their engagement with young people and building community partnerships, and they are just as aware of the risks of not engaging

More than two thirds of churches think that the **biggest benefit of running more activities for children and young people would be the potential for church growth.**

Some **69% of churches** think the main benefit to their community of stepping up this activity would be to **embed Christian values in the younger generation.**

A high proportion (**61%**) of churches think they could have a bigger role to play in **providing more pastoral support for children and young people in their area.**



# Benefits to church

Given that 96% of churches told us they would provide more activities and support for young people if they had the right skills and resources in place, our next area of questioning focused on the benefits that churches perceive in increasing their engagement with families – both to the church itself and to the wider community.

In completing the survey, many churches took the opportunity to express their concern about declining worshipping communities, and more particularly, the lack of younger people among their numbers. Unsurprising then that the biggest benefit churches perceive in running more youth-focused activities is the potential for church growth. A significant 60% also feel that increasing this engagement would make their church more relevant to their community and more than a third feel that it would help to break down barriers between their worshipping community and young people.

More than half of churches (51%) serving communities with the highest level of deprivation felt that the biggest benefit to their church would be in providing activities for families and young people not being provided elsewhere.

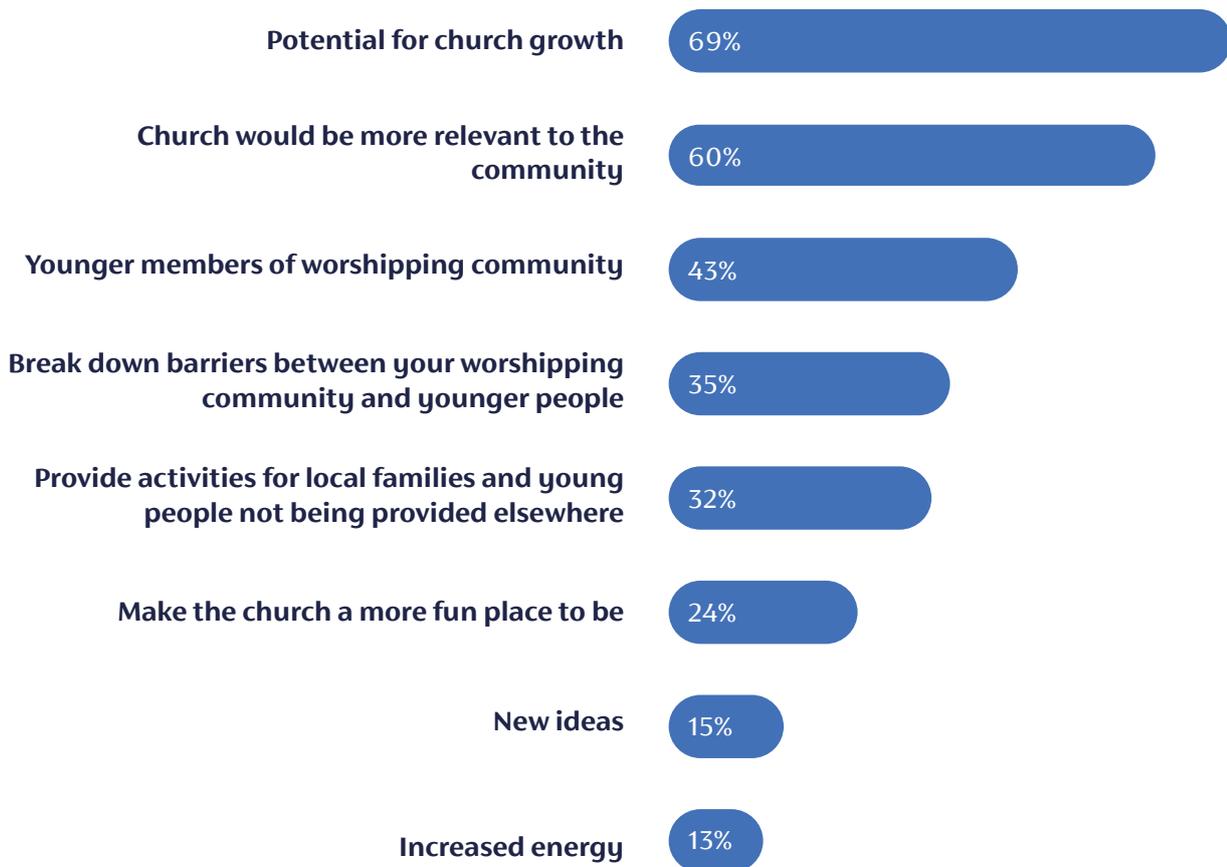


Figure 4.1  
Sample base: 736 respondents

# Benefits to community

We also asked churches what they felt would be the biggest benefit to their community of their church running more activities for children and young people.

While 68% of churches put 'embedding Christian values in the younger generation' at the top of their list, the second most popular response (61%) was the opportunity to increase pastoral support and 43% of churches feel they could have a bigger role to play in improving community wellbeing by reaching out to local families.

Again, churches serving communities in the greatest need are generally the most outward-looking here, with increased pastoral support coming out as the top benefit (61%) if they increased their provision for young people, embedding Christian values in second (57%) and providing vital support for families and children and young people in need seen as the third biggest benefit (43%). The survey also showed that churches with larger worshipping communities are more likely to rate benefits such as filling gaps in local service provision and helping families in need as among the most significant.

What do you think would be the main benefits to your community of your church running more activities for children and young people?

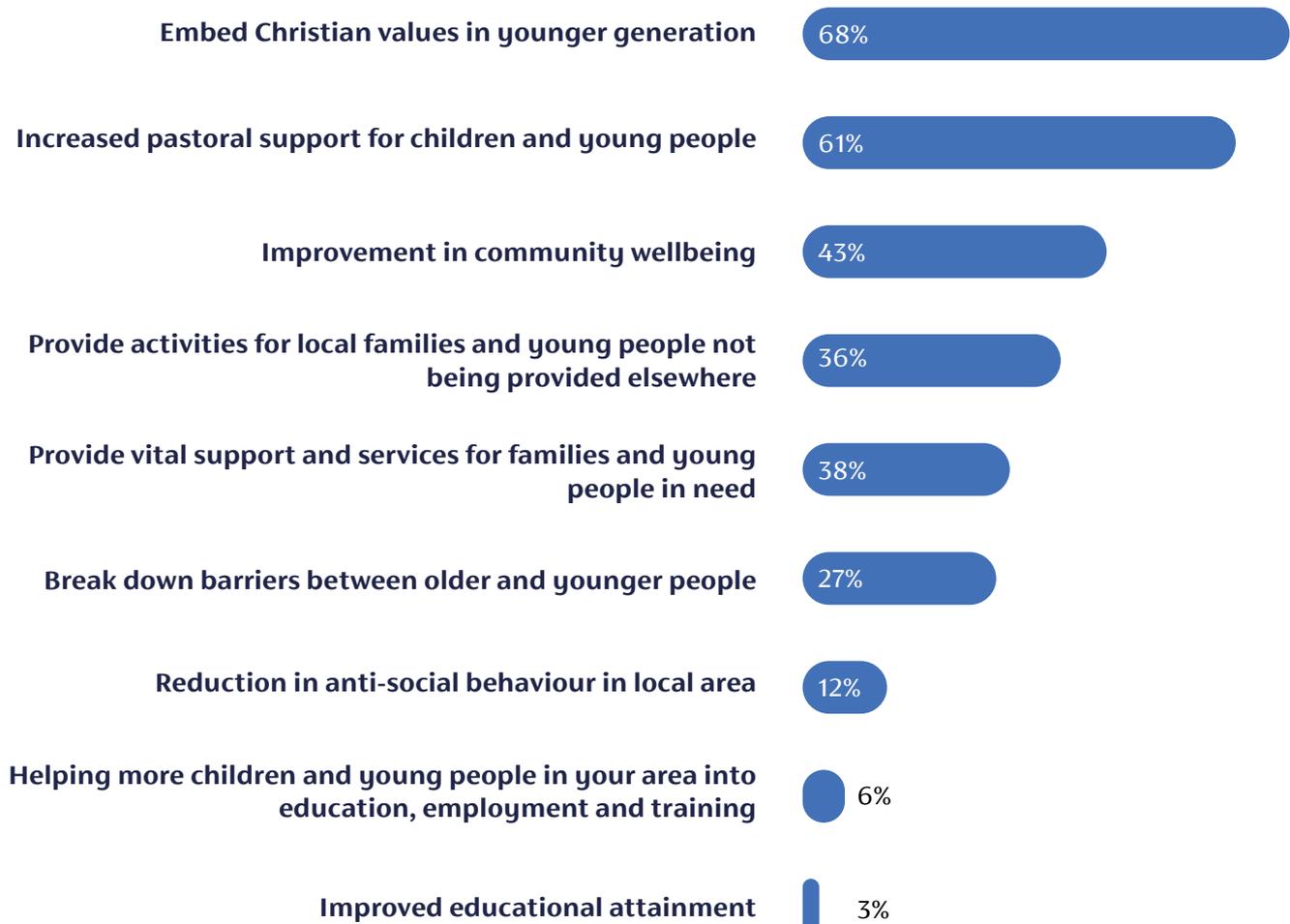


Figure 4.2  
Sample base: 732 respondents



**“We need help, and this must be professional and well organised and aimed at the younger generation. Although we try to do this, we fail badly.”**

# Key finding

The biggest barrier that churches face in offering activities to children and young people is a lack of people to run them, but they also lack funding and buildings and facilities that are fit for purpose

Three quarters of churches said that the biggest challenge they face in running high quality activities is a lack of volunteers, **although more than half are hampered by a lack of children and young people attending church**

Almost half of churches told us that **lack of funding is presenting a hurdle to engaging with young people, while almost a third said they lack age appropriate facilities**

According to the survey, the biggest help to churches in **providing more support to the next generation would be younger and more active volunteers (62%)** but changes to make their buildings more accessible and more electronic equipment are also high up the list.

# Main barriers to running activities

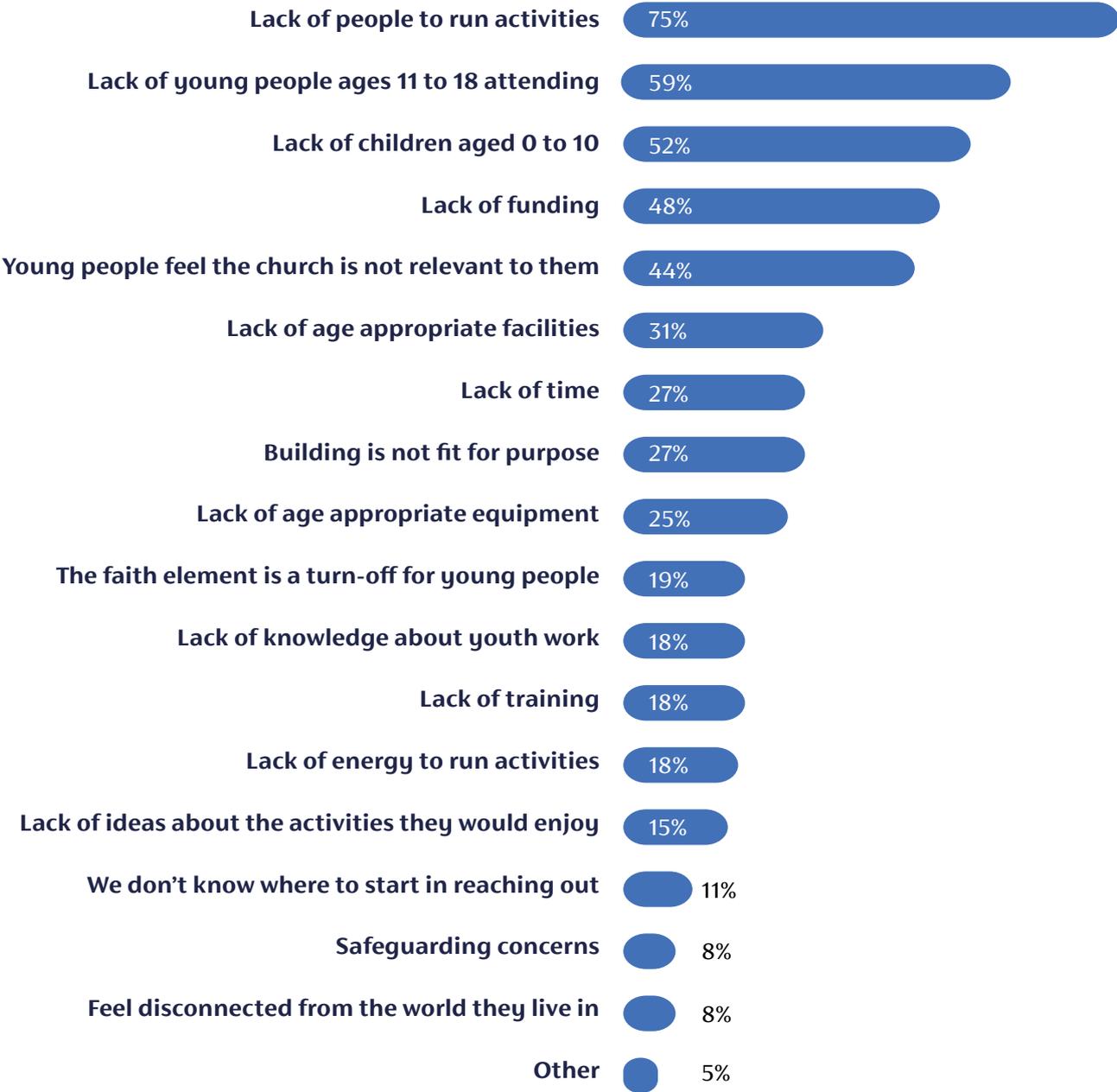


Figure 5.1  
Sample base: 730 respondents

It is clear from the survey findings that while the majority of churches would love to provide more support and activities for local families, many are also struggling to find volunteers to run them. Unsurprisingly, churches with the fewest people in their worshipping community struggle most in this area. And, while a significant number of churches cite lack of volunteer time as a problem in their comments, others feel that the lack of younger members in their worshipping community is hampering their efforts in this area.

For churches serving the most disadvantage communities, lack of funding (73%) is the biggest barrier to enhancing their provision for young people, although the lack of people to run activities and the low number of children and young people in their worshipping community still features in the top five. More than a third of churches in this demographic say that their current building is not fit for purpose (35%).

# Biggest help

We also flipped this question, asking churches what would be the biggest help to them in enabling increased engagement with families.

While 62% said that they need younger, more active volunteers, the next biggest help would be improvements to their buildings to make them more accessible to children and young people.

Churches serving communities with the highest level of need put building improvements at the top of their list (56%) and half said they would benefit from improved electronic equipment. Urban churches placed greater emphasis on forming partnerships with local schools (43%), although this still only emerged as the second biggest help behind younger volunteers (60%).



Figure 5.2  
Sample base: 724 respondents

Lucie Shuker  
Director of Research  
at Youthscape



## Comment

# It's fantastic to see this research from Benefact Trust.

**It's been four years since Youthscape published *Losing Heart*, a survey of over 2000 churches that explored the shape of youth and children's work across the UK. The data in 'Growing Lives' confirms some of our findings, deepens our understanding and sheds new light as well.**

We know that the number of children and young people engaging with churches has been falling for a number of years; here we see that 67% of the churches surveyed had five or fewer 11 to 18 year olds in their worshipping community, and a quarter (26%) had none. Although three quarters of survey respondents were Anglican, this reflects the experience of many other denominations as well. *Losing Heart* showed us that churches feel more confident about their children's work than youth work,

and that is confirmed in this survey with 43% of churches rating their children's work as good while only 27% described their youth work in the same way. While 82% of churches reported providing activities for 0 to 10 year olds, this falls to 58% for 11 to 18s.

It's clear that one-size-fits-all approaches are not going to work when it comes to supporting churches to work with children and young people. The statistics here show us that churches reporting that they are in urban areas, in areas of high deprivation and those with larger congregations are more likely to say that their numbers of children and young people have increased over the last three years and more likely to rate their children/youth work as good or excellent. They also have higher numbers of children and young people in their community compared to rural churches and those serving areas of lower deprivation. The survey highlighted a range of other differences between these types of churches: the types of activities they run and would like to run, confidence in how welcoming they are, and even how likely they are to consult with the local community. This is an encouragement to think carefully about how we support churches in different environments, and the report provides some great case studies of how different types of congregation can support children and young people.





We instinctively know that volunteers are crucial for youth ministry, and a lack of volunteers is reported here to be the main barrier to churches' engagement with children and young people. But this new data shows just how important they are, with the majority of children and youth work provided by these churches being delivered by unpaid volunteers (71% and 60% respectively). The Growing Lives survey reveals that churches recognise the need for working in partnership with other churches. This is a really practical way for smaller churches in rural areas to engage with children/youth work, especially when they struggle to find volunteers.

It is fascinating to see what the survey revealed about the types of activities churches currently run or would like to run if they had the resources/skills. In Losing Heart we found that of churches with young people attending, only 57% 'often' discussed the basic beliefs of the Christian faith with them. This survey shows that only 39% of churches run groups for children and young people with clear Christian teaching. What is heartening is that there is appetite amongst churches to address this, with 53% saying they would like to run such groups. All churches, regardless of their type, want to offer activities during a church service (68%), suggesting that this is still perceived as the standard model of church-based children/youth work. Those now entering youth groups were born after the launch of the iPhone and the majority are shaped significantly by smart-phone technology, so it is interesting that only 7% of churches would offer online support if they had the resources and skills to do so. Face to face relationships are undoubtedly crucial, but this suggests a culture gap between survey respondents and young people.

Despite some challenges it is genuinely encouraging to read that churches want to run activities for children and young people, that they can see the benefits of doing so, and that the majority plan to do more over the next three years. There is a clear opportunity here, for churches to directly ask young people how they would like to engage with church, and churches to be fully supported to participate in God's mission to children and young people, whatever their circumstances.

In 2015, **Youthscape** carried out its own research that revealed the scale and scope of church youth work, with more than 2000 churches responding to the survey. The leading youth work charity has its own Centre for Research.



# Polwarth Parish Church and people know how

## All Aboard: Navigating life together

### The project

**Polwarth Parish Church sits on the banks of the Union Canal in Edinburgh and is warmly known as the Kirk on the Canal. Over the past decade, it has maximised the value of two of its most important resources – its unique landscape and its remarkable ability to build relationships with others.**

Benefact Trust awarded a grant to support a new partnership between Polwarth Parish Church and social innovation charity, People Know How (PKH). They are jointly purchasing and renovating a pre-loved canal boat to be moored at the church's pontoon for community use. It will also be a significant new focus for PKH's programmes that support children and young people across Edinburgh to build self-esteem, social skills, stronger school relationships and increased confidence; particularly those transitioning into secondary school while experiencing complex family situations. The charity also partners with six universities and colleges and is highly regarded for its volunteer programme.

### The story so far

In 2012, Kirk on the Canal reached an agreement with the Scottish Waterways Trust to adopt the canal bank adjacent to the church to create gardens for the community. In 2017, the first Canal Shed was established. Open to all, the Canal Shed also receives referrals from social services and GPs, and is a thriving place where crafts, skills and the heritage of the canal is explored and shared. In 2018, the Polwarth Pontoon was built, reinstating a boatshed and landing, and the church began fundraising to purchase its own canal boat. At the same time, PKH was considering a way to enhance its Positive Transitions Service for young people by developing its access to the Union Canal. PKH had already experienced the canal's therapeutic potential for children and young people with complex family situations, living in urban environments with little or no contact with nature.

In June 2019, the church and PKH undertook a pilot with a hired canal boat and subsequently committed to a five-year plan - 'All Aboard: Navigating life together' was launched. Here, the partners talk about their journey.

### The challenges

We have never been under any illusions about the scale of our undertaking. As a partnership with a core project team, we have needed to communicate our shared vision and plan with our respective Kirk Session and Board of Trustees – keeping our shared goals front of mind while working through the details of delivering services and activities on a canal boat and working with vulnerable groups.

The project certainly seemed too big at times, but by breaking it down into stages and working together in an organised way, it became manageable and achievable. Piloting the project and stress-testing the partnership was vital.



## The best bits

As part of the pilot, using a hired canal boat, we held floating science workshops for secondary school students from across Edinburgh (none of the students had been on a canal boat, or heard of the Union Canal, or been in a church before!). We hosted a pop-up café on board for the Canal Shedders and held a congregational boat trip. Running a successful pilot was a huge milestone and gave us the strength to move to the next stage.

As part of the pilot, we encouraged volunteers to commit more formally to participating in particular roles to put a committed team in place. We signed up “Pilots” (to source a canal boat); “Engineers” (to develop a network of skilled people in the canal community who would help refurbish and maintain our vessel); “Captains” (to train as crew or helmsmen/women); “Admirals” (Representatives of All Aboard to present the project on management groups and at local community groups); “Wireless operators” (to publicise the project); “Fishermen/women” (to plan outreach); “Stewards” (people trained in Safeguarding and Health & Safety, to advise, review policies and train volunteers); and “Chaplains” (to pray for the project).

## The learnings

Part of what has made this project already a success, even as we only start out on the five-year plan, is that the journey has engaged the imagination and faith of so many people. We’ve learnt that ‘everybody loves mucking about with boats’. Initially, there were quite a few people in our congregation who thought it would never happen. But they remained open, took part in the consultation and then joined us on our first boat trip, when their scepticism was replaced by excited chatter and huge smiles.

There is something about a boat that brings people to a new depth of friendship and cooperation across generations. Telling the story of our project is so important to its success. Our Reverend, Jack Holt, believes that a vision becomes a reality when it is talked into existence; and certainly all our journey has formed the basis of many of his sermons. Telling our story has also attracted volunteers, interest from the media, more funding and support, and made us proud of all that we have achieved already. The mistakes and hard times are part of our story, and have been important as challenges we have learnt to overcome together.



# Oakworth Methodist Church, West Yorkshire

## Mission Possible: Drama takes a leading role

### The project

Oakworth Methodist Church is in a small rural village in West Yorkshire and its 'Mission Possible' began a decade ago after discussions between the congregation and community. The church was wanting to increase its use of drama in worship, and a number of community groups (including theatre and dance groups) were looking for fit for purpose premises.

Mission Possible is a building programme to support the current and future mission of the church, including its increasing use of drama in worship, to provide capacity to host concurrent groups every day of the week, to increase space, storage and access, and to bring the resident pre-school space up to Ofsted standards. Over ten years, the church and community have raised nearly half a million pounds and the works are close to completion.

Three years ago, a Circuit funded Youth, Children and Family Worker was assigned to Oakworth for 10 hours each week, and has also taken on the role of Panto Chaplain. Church Treasurer, David Howarth has been involved in the productions for many years and here reflects on how Oakworth Methodist's annual pantomime is central to its successful inclusion and support of families and how it ultimately led to the collective endeavour that became Mission Possible.

### The story so far

The church's first Sunday School pantomime was staged in 1979. We repeated it every year until 1989, but by then, the number of children attending Sunday School had fallen too far to continue. After refurbishing the church building and improving our drama facilities, in 1998, the pantomime was revived and children from the wider community were invited to take part alongside those from the Sunday School. I've just finished adapting my 34th pantomime script. At 68, I still have a great passion for working with young people and the whole pantomime team has, over the years, built up all the skills needed to put on a brilliant annual production involving 40 performers aged between 8 and 18.

Next February, more than 1200 people will watch the eight performances of our latest production. Then the Panto Chaplain and panto team will lead a Panto Praise Service with the Minister. Each annual production raises around £7,000 after costs. Each year the challenge starts early to make the next show even better and funnier than the last!

### The challenges

The biggest challenge has been overcoming the concerns of those who didn't believe it would be possible to raise such a large amount of money to make Mission Possible possible! It has taken 10 years of planning and fundraising and the facilities are still not finished, but by taking one step at a time and keeping faith and prayer at the centre of the process, we have achieved so much together.



## The best bits

The involvement of so many children and young people means we all get to know each other so much more, and it gives us all the chance to rejoice when each individual achieves something special in any part of their life. Similarly, there has been more than one sad situation of a parent dying during the rehearsal season and we can be alongside those children when a life crisis hits. In these times, drama has been the release, and the pantomime family their support, which has helped them to cope and stay connected.

It is so rewarding to watch young people grow in confidence and increase their life skills. They work very well together and the process of pantomime – from learning the script, rehearsing and then finally performing to an enthusiastic audience - teaches much about life, determination, commitment, teamwork and how to be proud of, and share, your achievements and the gifts of others. We watch young performers grow and develop, and there are always a few who go on to perform elsewhere or take their passions further. We are so proud of them all.

## The learnings

We are all involved in drama because we enjoy it and it brings us together regardless of our age, income, faith or background. The church setting and presence of a pantomime chaplain have provided a context in which young people are free to ask questions about life and faith in a natural and trusted setting – and they do. The fellowship we share with young people throughout the pantomime process is just as important as teachings we offer on Sundays. In fact, most of our work with young people no longer happens on a Sunday, but we play an important role in their daily life, as they do in all of ours. And now we're on the verge of a major project that will help us meet increasing community demand and strengthen the role of drama in our mission. While there is still much to do, already Mission Possible is well on the way to success!



# St Alban's, Fulham, London

## Removing the walls between church and community

### The project

Located within the Fulham Reach Ward, where one third of children are living in poverty, St Alban's Church knows its neighbours well, understands the issues they face, and actively takes responsibility, in partnership with others, for the welfare, cohesion and future of the community, especially the young people at its heart.

Weekly youth clubs, an annual camping trip, sports training and informal activities are the mainstay of this support, but the church also fundraises and partners with local charities, sports clubs and other providers to run a summer holiday scheme that provides free activities for young people, such as paddle-boarding, kayaking, laser tag and circus skills training.

The activities offered for free by the church are not merely meant to entertain. All volunteers are trained and mentored to creatively build purposeful and authentic relationships with young people in all settings and to be positive role models. They also work hard to 'join up the dots' between the Council, London Sports Trust, local housing associations, local sports and water sports clubs, the Safer Neighbourhood panel, the Youth Offending Service, schools and the police.

Here, the team at St Alban's, describe some of the ways that their youth work has evolved over the past decade:

### The story so far

We had tried to attract people into our church hall for nearly six months with little success and finally decided instead to simply take a football out into a local park. Most football clubs have membership fees and games that involve travel. We learnt that our young people, like many people in disadvantaged communities, simply cannot access these clubs because of the cost, travel and commitment required.

For more than five years, willing volunteers from St Alban's Fulham set up and ran a football project. Every week, we engaged with over 50 young men aged between 8 and 18 (and sometimes their Dads). It became a place of fitness, competitiveness, encouragement, and signposting!

These weekly games had a significant impact on both the young men that played with us and our church community. Many young people, as a result, have been mentored and supported through challenging times in their life. Others have integrated into parts of our youth work. We saw the ability of sport to engage local un-churched young people in a powerful way. However, there came a time when many of the original boys (and original volunteers) had moved on – with part-time jobs, college, adult lives to pursue – and it was time to find a new direction.

Like many communities, we have professional sports teams, sports clubs and amazing charities who are keen to partner up with local churches to make their own programmes more sustainable. We provide a youth worker and volunteers to chat to kids on the sidelines of their sports coaching sessions – and they provide sports activities for us.

### The challenges

As with a lot of youth work, much of the difference we know we are making to the young people we work with is hard to evidence at the time. It can be difficult to collect evidence that is useful to us in planning and shaping our youth work and that helps us with fundraising and to prove our impact.

But without local organisations supporting young people, and those who provide grants for us to do so, there would be a decline of aspirations and resilience in young people in this area, and likely an increase in anti-social behaviour and problems of youth violence, gangs and addiction – all of which seem easier to evidence and report.

That said, we have created some pretty fun surveys (mostly short tick-box types) that even young people, who are exhausted at the end of a session, manage to complete. Their insight is really important to us.

## The best bits

We find that working together with other organisations (or churches) is better for our young people and for us. We're always exploring new ways that we can expand what we do to reach more people and build on the strong links we have already made with these kids.

We share Christian values among the young people we work with and the community we are part of, and over the years, we have really broken down the walls and barriers that surround perceptions of 'church'.

## The learnings

Often, with youth work, a project will attract a certain group of friends at a certain time and they may well fuel the project for a number of years. But as they grow, their own lives develop and part-time jobs, homework or other commitments become a natural part of their life.

Some activities work well for a period of time and then come to a natural pause or end. This was the case with our Sunday football project – the boys simply outgrew us! But it proved the start of our partnerships with so many other organisations and led to us rejuvenating a number of derelict parks in the area. We now have an excellent local park with a 3-G pitch and outdoor gym equipment for the whole community and church to use, and we now work with others to collectively provide more opportunities, activities and faith-filled support for young people in Fulham.



# St Francis Church, Bramley

## Opening up to learning and change

### The project

**It's not always easy to make change, but as St Francis Church in Bramley, Rotherham, discovered, it is worth it.**

In 2015, the Church of England provided St Francis with three-year funding for a youth worker. The results were so good that, in 2018, the church committed to continue the program, raising funds to maintain the employed youth worker; and taking ownership of working with young people in the parish, with a focus on outreach to families and young people with no connection to church. Benefact Trust provided funding for a PA and sound equipment in support of the church's decision to create a new youth programme for teenagers. David Bowser from St Francis shares their experiences.

### The story so far

We established a programme of youth nights, gigs, sports and games – using food and activities to bring young people into our church in a safe space to meet friends and have fun. Being indoors wasn't always helpful, with so little space to burn off energy, so we reclaimed some over-grown allotments in the churchyard to create a large grassed area for sports, activities and BBQs.

### The challenges

Initially it was difficult. Some young people attending events have highly stressed or disrupted lives. This was a shock and eye-opener for many in our church; to find such unexpected aspects of life on our doorstep. In the first weeks, behaviour was, at times, out of control and some of our volunteers decided not to continue. We quickly realised our mistakes. We had not agreed on ground rules before we began and our volunteers needed some support.

Young people developed their own set of rules and, after that, it wasn't long before an air of mutual respect began to grow. Some of our volunteers have since trained in counselling to support some very hurt young people who are becoming more a part of our church.

An ongoing challenge is delivering activities and events that young people want. We found that by handing over ownership of that problem to young people themselves, it disappeared and our activities are now well attended and successful. We do the actual delivery ... and there are regular discussions about what is actually possible ... but this approach works, and has now become part of the long term vision that we have for our church.

### The best bits

It was a surprise to learn that young people were really keen to fundraise for their own events and activities. We have watched their sense of ownership and responsibility grow, which has increased self-esteem, respect, and had all sorts of other benefits.

We have become much more aware that we really need a loyal team which 'owns' youth ministry in our church; and that this includes our youth worker, volunteers, local organisations, our congregation ... and, of course, young people themselves.

### The learnings

We underestimated the scale and impact of social and behavioural issues affecting the young people in our community. However, it has also been rewarding to become aware of and learn how to talk about issues such as drug abuse, self-harm, illiteracy and gang violence and our understanding has certainly deepened. We know that the youth work we are doing cannot be a short-term or a one-off fix ... we need to continue.

We now know that in order for a youth project to be successful, you can't just throw money into the pot. It is very much about building and developing relationships with young people, and our church has to be about 'the personal touch' that cuts through so many of the challenges young people in our community experience.



**“An ongoing challenge is delivering activities and events that young people want. We found that by handing over ownership of that problem to young people themselves, it disappeared”**

# Appendix

## Methodology:

During April 2019, an electronic survey was e-mailed via the Qualtrics platform to churches from a range of Christian denominations who had benefited from an Benefact Trust grant in 2016, 2017 and 2018. A total of 810 surveys were completed, although not all respondents answered every question.

The aim of the survey was to learn more about churches' current activities and needs in working with children and young people and to use this insight to help shape a new grants programme aimed at supporting churches and Christian organisations to connect with families in their communities and forge lasting links with them. This programme, Growing Lives, launched on May 20, 2019, and survey respondents were e-mailed to inform them about this new funding opportunity.

Survey respondents were also informed that Benefact Trust planned to use the research findings to tell stories about the great work churches are already engaged in with children and young people, supporting them to flourish and encouraging church growth, but also the challenges that churches face in this area.

## The sample:

The vast majority of churches in the survey sample are located in England (88%) with representation across all regions, although representation was lowest in the North East and London. More than half of the churches which responded to the survey serve a rural population. We also asked churches about the level of deprivation in their community. The graphs below provide more information on the survey demographic, although breakdowns for each of the data splits, i.e. urban v rural, smallest v largest worshipping community, were also available for analysis. Verbatim commentary from many of the respondents also helped to give context to the findings.

## Where is your church located?

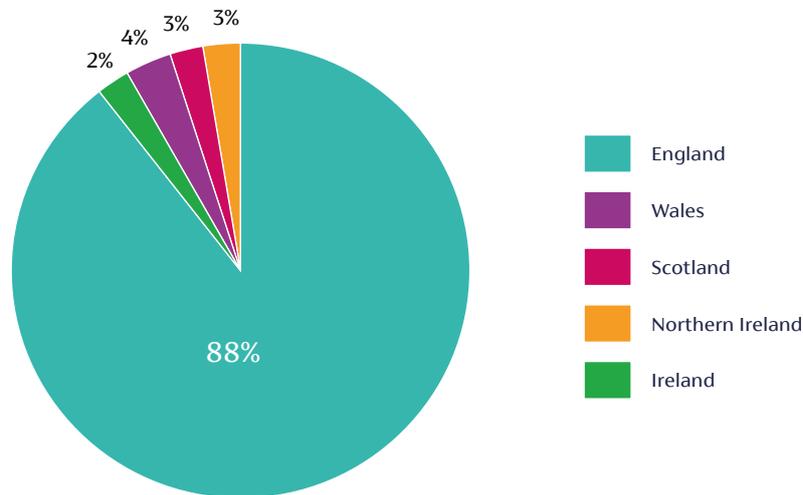


Figure A.1  
Sample base: 792 respondents

## What region is your church located in?

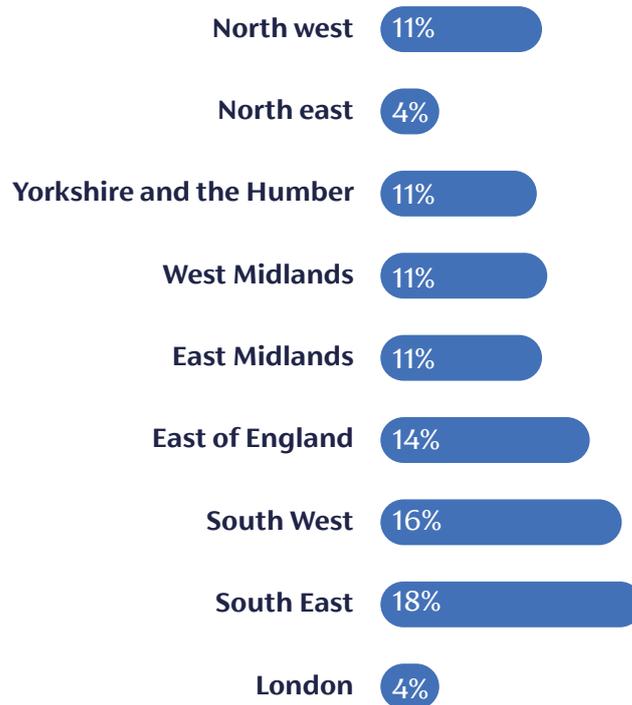


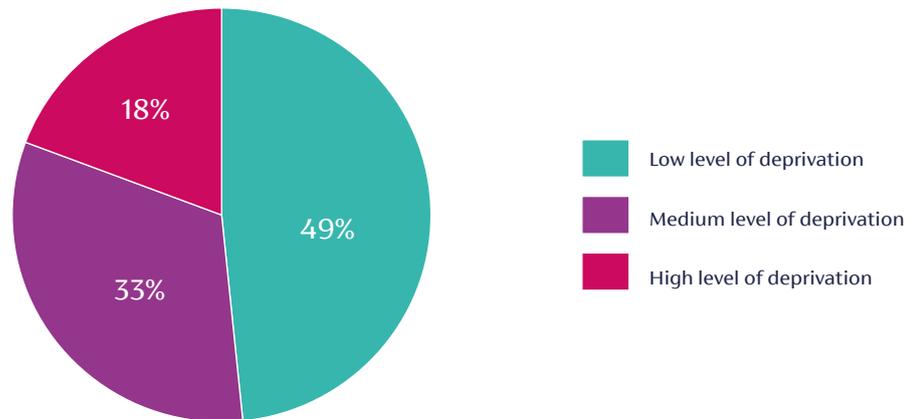
Figure A.2  
Sample base: 792 respondents

## Does your church serve mainly an urban or rural population?



Figure A.3  
Sample base: 792 respondents

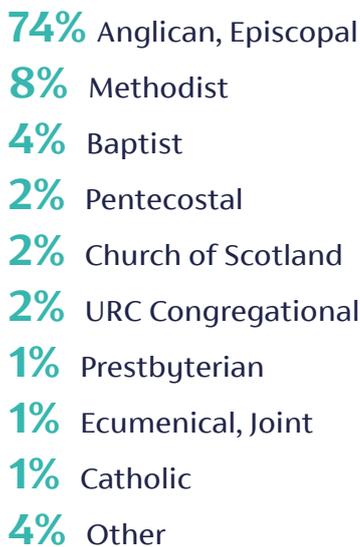
## What would you consider to be the level of deprivation in the community your church serves?



**Figure A.4**  
Sample base: 792 respondents

Denominationally, the survey results are skewed towards Anglican/Episcopal churches, which made up almost three quarters of respondents. The next biggest representation was from Methodist churches (8%), so it is fair to say that the findings can only be considered truly representative of the Anglican Church from a statistical point of view. More than half of the churches that responded to the survey have a worshipping community of less than 50 people, while just 11% have a worshipping community of 150 or more. More details on the breakdown of the sample can be seen in the graphs below.

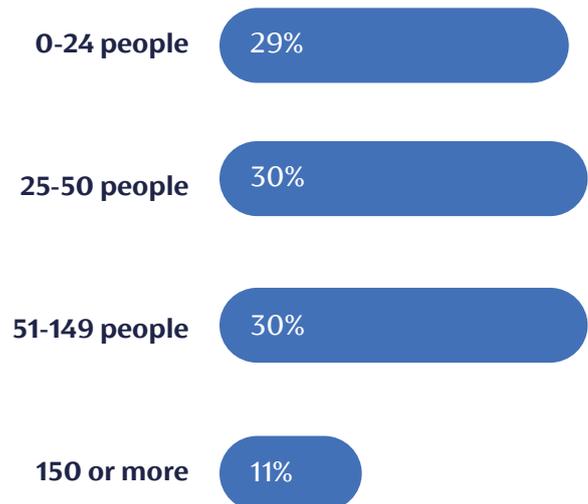
## What denomination does your church belong to?



Assemblies of God  
Independent Methodist Churches  
Both Presbyterian and URC  
Vineyard  
Charismatic

**Figure A.5**  
Sample base: 790 respondents

## Approximately, how large is your regular worshipping community?



**Figure A.6**  
Sample base: 790 respondents

## Additional survey information

In addition to the information presented in the research report, a number of additional questions were asked as part of the survey. We have included these results here to give the fullest possible picture of activities being undertaken by churches with children and young people.

### Who is responsible for running the activities for children and young people in your church?

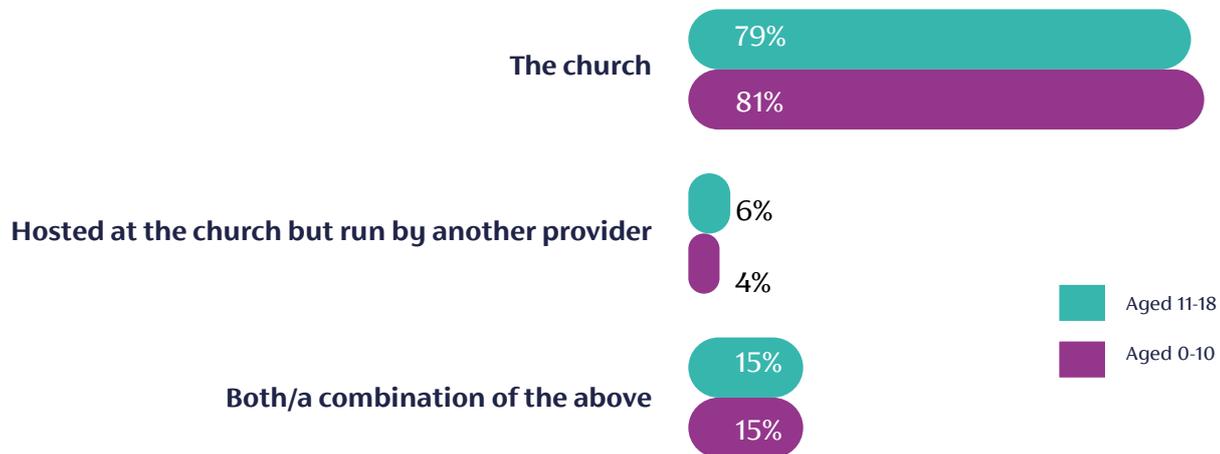


Figure A.7  
Sample base: 641/397 respondents

### How often does your church run activities for children and young people?

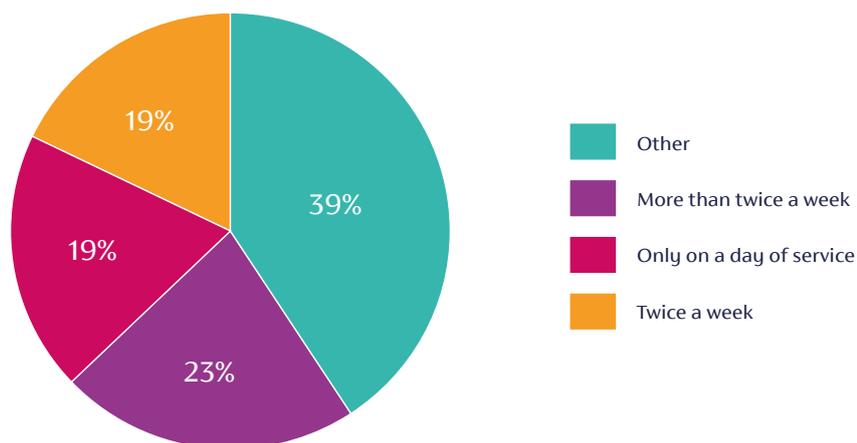


Figure A.8  
Sample base: 644 respondents

Note: This graph was not included in the main research report as the majority of churches that completed the survey responded 'other' and the responses around frequency were so varied. On reflection, this question should have included more/alternative response options. Many churches, for example, ran activities on a fortnightly basis or once a month.



## A big thank you...

**Finally, a big thank you to all of those churches who took the time to complete the survey, providing us with their experience and insights and helping us to develop our own approach. Despite the very real challenges you face, you are doing a wonderful job of sharing God's love and making a real difference to people's lives, and we look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you.**

A particularly big thank you goes to those churches and charities who gave their time so generously to supply case studies for the report, namely Polwarth Parish Church and People Know How, Oakworth Methodist Church, St Alban's Church and St Francis Church.

We would also like to thank CEO, Chris Curtis, and Director of Research, Dr Lucie Shuker, from Youthscape – a charity that has been supporting young people with their emotional, social and spiritual development in Luton since 1993, and whose own research has national reach and significance.

Our own Growing Lives research builds on the findings of Youthscape's Losing Heart research in 2015. Youthscape commissioned a survey of 2054 churches that revealed a lack of confidence and resources in providing youth work compared to children's work. We are grateful to Youthscape for providing a critical eye and comment on our research; a perspective grounded in the charity's own extensive experience of working with churches and children and young people.

**To find out more, visit [www.youthscape.co.uk](http://www.youthscape.co.uk)**

# About Benefact Trust

**At the heart of Benefact Trust's grant-giving is transforming people's lives and communities for the better, funding projects run by churches and Christian charities that put God's love and care at the heart of what they do.**

In 2019, Benefact gave a record £17.8 million, with funding for its grants coming from its ownership of Ecclesiastical Insurance Group. The Trust welcomes applications from all parts of the UK and Ireland, but particularly from areas of social and economic deprivation.

Benefact supports the repair, restoration and re-ordering of churches and cathedrals of many denominations, especially where these changes support wider community use and help those in need. The Trust also supports schools, colleges and others with projects that help children and young people to reach their potential, and is passionate about preserving the UK and Ireland's rich history through funding for heritage buildings and skills.

In 2019, Benefact Trust launched its Growing Lives grants programme, making £1 million available to support churches and Christian organisations to connect with children and young people and forge lasting links with families in their area. Another £1 million was added to the funding pot in 2020

**You can find out more, visit [www.Benefact.co.uk](http://www.Benefact.co.uk)**





**“We fight very hard to retain children at Sunday morning worship but have, in the last three years, supplemented the weekly routine with five “Messy Church” events focused on young families (several unconnected to the church).**

**We attract around 100 participants with around 50 of these being children. Our most recent Messy Church took place in the heart of a very deprived area and we were thrilled to find several local families taking part.**

**We feel we must reach out rather than wait for children to come to us. The message of God’s Love is too important not to.”**



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*Cover photo: Holy Trinity Church in Sunderland  
(Churches Conservation Trust)*