

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. Introduction

This research is concerned with two influences on English society: the internet and religion. The internet is increasing its reach into daily lives. Traditional religious participation is declining. How the former affects the latter, and how the Christian church is responding, is the interaction under investigation.

Access to the internet is increasingly an indispensable part of daily life. Websites, blogs and email are now mainstream communication tools. The 2010 General Election in the UK demonstrated how journalists used social media as a legitimate source of news, and where political parties had social media strategies for voter engagement and participation (Newman 2011). The London 2012 Olympics were branded the 'digital Olympics' (O'Riordan 2012) and marked a point where new forms of media blended with established broadcasts. The BBC's television coverage reached 51.9 million people overall. In the same period the broadcaster recorded over 12 million requests for mobile video coverage, strongly suggesting that for the duration of the Games many people stayed connected to the coverage wherever they were (O'Riordan 2012).

2.18 billion people – a third of the population worldwide – are Christian (Hackett and Grim 2011, p9). In the United Kingdom, Christianity is still the religion that the majority identify with, even if regular Sunday attendances are in decline (National Centre for Social Research 2008, np). Recent statistics from the Church of England show that each year 70% of the population of England and Wales attend a church wedding, funeral or baptism, and 19% of primary school children are educated in church schools. As Church House points out in the report:

In a pluralistic society, Christian denominations continue to play a significant role in the life of the nation. (Archbishops' Council 2012, p1)

There are 15,919 Anglican churches in 12,500 parishes in England (Archbishops' Council 2012, p11). There are other Christian denominations, too, reflecting both the effect of earlier schisms and disagreements and also continued tolerance of dissent within a broader faith framework. Baptist, Methodist and Catholic churches together with the Church of England, make up 75% of English churches (Evangelical Alliance 2005).

That society has changed radically in the past generation is not in doubt. As far as the church is concerned, changes have included the decline in regular churchgoing, from 11.7% of the population in 1979 to 6.3% in 2005 (Brierly 2006, p12). The relatively recent ordination of women affected the composition of full-time leaders; and ongoing debates about the acceptability of women Bishops illustrates how the church is still regularly dealing with change and internal disagreement.

In the context of changes in the church and the popularity of online activities, this research sets out to investigate how more quotidian aspects of English churchgoing have been affected by expectations of organisations and individuals used to using the internet for reference information and interaction. In 2001, churches needed good advice on website design, publishing and communication (e.g. Blackmore, 2001). Parish churches may have a dominant physical presence in a community but it does not necessarily follow that their internet presence is, a decade later, of an equivalent standing. How have English Christian Churches risen to the challenges posed by a society moving online? (Lomborg and Ess 2012) indicate that since 2005, social media allowing consumption and contribution of content has become the most popular use of the internet, marking a change from static websites and

heralding the rise of the ‘produser’ – producer and user of content. Church communication may need to address this change and meet the needs of people who expect to be able to interact with, not just refer to, websites. Understanding how – or if – churches see themselves as information providers or communication facilitators – needs to be established. Do their websites give information that visitors need? Are the sites inviting contact from visitors? Or are churches ignoring the possibilities and challenges? In addition, it has been suggested that flatter, non-hierarchical communication methods could threaten the authority of institutions and faith leaders (Campbell 2007) as leaders no longer act as gatekeepers of content. So is there a balance to be found for church leaders? The role of vicar is one that comes with a number of stereotypes – male, elderly, tea-drinking and with comic potential (Saunders 2010) and a contrast is often drawn between technology and the institution of the church as incompatible (Dembosky 2012). Have church leaders ignored or embraced new technology as part of their role as priest?

There are other, wider questions that research into the church and websites can address. The current Government’s Big Society initiatives encourage provision via voluntary organisations of community services previously provided by the State – which is not universally seen as a positive change. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was quoted describing the Big Society as ‘aspirational waffle’ (Helm and Coman 2012). What challenges does reliance on volunteers present for an organisation hoping to get online? How do small organisations create and maintain their websites? The church has been involved in charitable support for education, health, homelessness and families for decades. Do they have a volunteer base that is able to grasp new technology and its challenges as well as these social provisions? This research will provide support for answers to these questions. The research is concerned therefore with how one part of English society is adapting to

change. Given that the church is not normally portrayed as progressive, or involved in cutting-edge technology, understanding the extent to which the internet has affected this institution will allow for the development of guidance and policy for individual churches and leaders, which will be relevant for national organisations both religious and secular.

The project will use parts of three studies reported in the literature review to help inform the study. The replication is of the interactivity (McMillen 2008) and hyperlink research (Scheitle 2005), and Sturgill's (2004) classification of purpose of websites will also be used within the UK sample. Testing these previous findings with an English sample will help extend the academic research into religious use of the internet.

1.1 Scope

The research project is concerned with the information content of English church websites, nationally and specifically in the area described by the Diocese of Chelmsford. Although broadly relevant to the whole UK, it focuses on the Church of England and its organisation. It is also concerned with the opinions and practices of church leaders and webmasters, and will take input from other related interested parties where appropriate. The study focuses on information and decision making, not the theology of communication.

It is outside of the scope of the project to consider the usability or accessibility of websites. It is also not concerned with in-depth technical aspects of production (such as who uses which platform to build sites or which commercial companies are employed). Data such as Google Analytics which show website visit rates, duration, and geographical location of visitors will also not be considered.

The research questions, aims and objectives have thus been formulated as follows.

1.2 Research questions

To what extent have English Christian churches established a distinct individual web presence?

To what extent do churches and church leaders use email, websites and social media tools to find and publish information?

Is there evidence that traditional notions of hierarchy and authority been affected by online sources of information and communication?

1.3 Aims and objectives

Aim 1: This study aims to establish the extent to which English churches are using websites and collaborative (Web 2.0) online tools, and to what purposes.

Related objectives are to:

1. Establish a baseline measure of the number of parishes or churches in England with a purpose-built website

From a smaller sample, investigate key aspects of website production, publication and content choice to establish:

2. Whether websites are part of a planned information and communication strategy
3. How content is presented and created
4. Whether there are variations in the choice of different information topics across denominations

5. Whether content includes information which explains or highlights the congregation's faith, traditions or community
6. If any differentiation is made between church members and the wider community as audiences for local church websites.

From the same sample, investigate the extent to which churches place themselves in the wider community via their websites, including whether:

7. Churches use interactive tools including allowing user-generated content or place restrictions on content creation
8. Churches use hyperlinks to locate themselves in local, national or global online communities.

Aim 2: To explore church leaders' adoption and perceptions of online tools as information and communication media in relation to their ministry duties and everyday life.

Objectives are to:

9. Explore whether leaders have experiences of challenges to authority led or encouraged by online media
10. Explore the ways in which church leaders use the internet for vocational and personal tasks
11. Explore the use of social media by churches and their leaders as a tool for sharing information.

1.4 Outline of thesis

This thesis consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 explains the background to the project and why it has been undertaken, giving an outline of the context of the

research. Chapter 2 presents a survey of the related academic literature, providing more in-depth background and serving to locate the current project in the landscape of existing research. Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach that has been taken to the research, aligning the project with existing methods and explaining how they were implemented for three lines of enquiry. Research findings are presented in chapters 4 to 7, integrating the results from the different lines of enquiry. In chapter 8 the implications of these findings for research into internet use in both religious and secular fields are discussed. Chapter 9 presents final conclusions, recommendations and identifies possible limitations to the research. The bibliography and appendices are contained in the final two sections.