

Poverty, Place and Presence: Positioning Methodism in England, 2001 to 2011

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Abstract

The Methodist Church in Britain has a long-standing commitment to mission alongside the poor. That priority, informed by an understanding of how churches commit to social action through encounter and engagement, might be expected to align its presence with disadvantaged areas: to enter into solidarity with the poorest in society. This paper investigates how far the Methodist priority for the poor intersects with the everyday geographies of its local presence. Cross-sectional and longitudinal data on the distribution of Methodist personnel and agencies are evaluated against neighbourhood variations in social and economic deprivation. There was no evidence of a Methodist presence skewed towards the most deprived communities in England. Findings raise questions about how church structures and roles can be arranged to fulfil beliefs, values and expectations, and have implications for the deployment of ministers and the location of activities in response to unmet needs in the population due to lack of resources and opportunities.

Keywords: Deprivation; Inequality; Mission; Neighbourhood; Solidarity.

Introduction

Places feature strongly in mainstream religions and other forms of religiosity and spirituality. One important thread recognises the role and significance of places in religious experience and tradition, whether as metaphor and story, or as centres of pilgrimage, healing, meditation and retreat.² A separate theme, and the focus of this paper, examines the location of religious ministry, pastoral care and witness, and considers whether that presence reflects institutional expectations and theological sensibilities.

When evaluating their geographical reach and effectiveness, religious institutions face the task of setting priorities and matching needs and resources at the local or community level. The challenges are comparable to those facing public

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² John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003); Chris Park, 'Religion and Geography', in John Hinnells (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2005), pp.439-455.

authorities responsible for the delivery of health, social care and education services.³ Equity, territorial justice and fairness concerning physical access and quality of provision may guide the location of public services and the evaluation of outcomes for users.⁴ In religious institutions, doctrine, scriptures and tradition may inform priorities and shape the geography of their ministry and mission.

A well-established principle in Methodism dating from 1753 has been to ‘go always, not only to those who want you but to those who want you most’.⁵ The definition of those most in ‘want’ has been understood in different ways, often referring to the ‘unchurched’ – people not connected to any church – and sometimes ‘backsliders’ – adherents who may have lapsed into bad ways or error.⁶ Additionally, concern for the poorest in society has been a recurring response to scriptural emphasis on social justice and the scandal of poverty. Following widespread consultation and reflection on its foundational principles the Methodist Church in Britain recently affirmed its commitment to ‘being alongside the poor’ and adopted as one of its priorities: ‘Supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor – in Britain and worldwide’.⁷ Similar sentiments highlighting the Church’s bias toward the poor and socially marginalised are frequently expressed by leading Methodists.⁸

Other Christian denominations have pursued similar priorities by targeting the poorest communities. The Church of England and the Church of Scotland for example have identified disadvantaged urban areas as priorities for mission and have developed policies to focus ministerial and financial resources accordingly.⁹ Both Churches operate parish systems that encompass local networks, buildings and a responsibility for the whole population in a locality. A parish system covering the entire country provides, in turn, a framework for the deployment of resources to poor communities.

Non-conformist churches in Britain do not have a comparable framework for targeting resources. Local Methodist churches, for example, are grouped into Circuits that are arranged in Districts. These units are not primarily territorial entities with discrete boundaries but relational structures for mutual support, sharing resources and devolved responsibilities.¹⁰ That may explain why localities where Methodist resources might be focused have never been identified. There are no formal procedures to direct ministerial assignments and lay appointments alongside poorer communities; none of the Districts in a survey of local funding

³ Bleddyn Davies, *Social Needs and Resources in Local Services* (London: Michael Joseph, 1968).

⁴ Alan Hay, ‘Concepts of Equity, Fairness and Justice in Geographical Studies’, *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers* 20 (1995), pp.500-508.

⁵ Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Volume 1* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 7th ed. 2005), p.69.

⁶ David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁷ Methodist Church, *Priorities for the Methodist Church* (London: Methodist Conference Report, 2004), p.12.

⁸ E.g, Daleep Mukarji, *New Vice-President Urges Methodists to Fight Poverty* (London: Methodist Church, 2013).

⁹ Commission on Urban Life and Faith, *Faithful Cities: A Call for Celebration, Vision and Justice* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006); Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985); Church of Scotland, *Priority Areas Action Plan, January 2010* (Glasgow: Church of Scotland Ministries Council, 2010).

¹⁰ Methodist Church, *Structure* (London: Methodist Church, 2013).

arrangements had formal policies or criteria to privilege grants to poorer areas; and disadvantaged communities have not been the focus of recent efforts to develop new church formations.¹¹ Although there are grants for projects that show ‘evidence of relative poverty whether in an urban or rural setting’, the funding committee does not engage proactively with churches in poorer communities or play a strategic role in the deployment of ministers; moreover, the funds available have diminished considerably in recent years.¹² A recent commitment to establish schools in areas of ‘significant socio-economic deprivation’ – because the ‘Methodist imperative [is] to go to those who need us most’ – was not accompanied by systematic analysis of existing school provision or local education authorities that might be targeted.¹³ In these circumstances, it is difficult to establish whether Methodist agencies have a sustained presence in deprived communities to support the Church’s mission alongside the poor.

This paper investigates how far the Methodist priority for the poor intersects with the everyday geographies of its local presence. More specifically the distribution of Methodist personnel, churches and schools in England is assessed against a widely accepted measure of neighbourhood deprivation. The extent to which such agencies are skewed towards deprived areas is considered to reflect a ministry of presence alongside the poor. The study design is described in the next section: outlining sources of data, the measurement of deprivation and analytical techniques. The paper then moves on to present key findings. A final section discusses implications for the Methodist Church and comparable faith groups.

Methods

Findings are based on quantitative data describing levels of socio-economic deprivation in the neighbourhoods in which Methodist ministers, supernumeraries and lay people live, and where Methodist churches and schools are located. Historically there have been various strands of Methodism; this paper is concerned with the denomination formed by a union of the three largest Methodist Churches in 1932.¹⁴ The study period relates to England during the early years of the twenty-first century.

Data

The analysis uses an index of deprivation experienced by people living in small neighbourhoods.¹⁵ This index combines 38 measures of income poverty, educational disadvantage, poor health, housing barriers, crime and other indicators of unmet needs due to limited resources and lack of opportunity. People may be considered deprived in one or more of these domains depending on the number of types of

¹¹ Methodist Church, *The Big Society* (London: Methodist Conference Report, 2011), 150-152; Vicky Cosstick, *Venture FX Scheme Review* (London: Methodist Church, 2011).

¹² Methodist Church, *Review of the Mission Alongside the Poor Programme* (London: Methodist Council, 2014), p.3.

¹³ Methodist Church, *Education Commission Report* (London: Methodist Conference Report, 2012), p.314.

¹⁴ Rupert Davies, *Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 2nd ed. 1982).

¹⁵ David McLennan, et al., *The English Indices of Deprivation 2010* (London: Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011).

deprivation they experience. The index provides an aggregate measure of relative deprivation across all its domains. Although some disadvantaged people live in the least deprived areas and not everyone in a deprived area is disadvantaged, the index identifies localities where multiple deprivations accumulate. Such socio-economic profiles of small areas in Britain are shown to be good predictors of individuals' health, financial position, educational attainment, life expectancy and lifestyle, and are widely used to determine insurance premiums, credit ratings and annuity rates.¹⁶

The index of deprivation has been calculated for 32,482 Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in England. LSOAs divide the country into small neighbourhoods of similar size, each containing approximately 1,500 people. Houses, churches, workplaces and other buildings can be linked to a LSOA by their postcode. LSOAs are the primary unit of analysis; findings are also presented for Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs). These units comprise larger areas that might influence access to public facilities, such as schools or churches. Most MSOAs (78 per cent) comprise four or five contiguous LSOAs (mean 4.8 standard deviation 0.9) and contain around 7,200 people. The level of deprivation in each MSOA is denoted by the median index value of its constituent LSOAs. Hence, MSOAs may produce a different association between area deprivation and Methodist agencies where adjacent LSOAs present markedly different levels of socio-economic disadvantage.¹⁷

Most indicators in the index of deprivation relate to 2008 although the analysis focuses on changes in the location of Methodist agencies between 2001 and 2011. Ideally, changes in area deprivation should be taken into account but comparable indices across the study period were not available. They would probably not have altered the conclusions drawn here: geographical patterns of relative deprivation and other socio-economic inequalities are remarkably persistent.¹⁸

Five datasets were compiled containing the postcodes of: ordained ministers in 2001; ordained ministers and supernumerary ministers in 2011; lay officers, chaplains and members of committees appointed by the Methodist Church in 2001 and 2011; churches in 2011; and schools in 2011. Linking ministers identified in both 2001 and 2011 formed a longitudinal dataset. The schools dataset included year of opening, identifying those established since 2001. It was not possible to monitor the distribution of churches across the study period because usable data for 2001 were not available and the record of church closures is incomplete. These data were

¹⁶ Mark Corver and Danny Dorling, 'Little Progress towards a Fairer Education System' (Sheffield: Social and Spatial Inequalities Group, University of Sheffield, 2005); Office for National Statistics, *Pension Trends 2012: Life Expectancy and Healthy Ageing* (London: Office for National Statistics, 2012), p.37; Office for National Statistics, *Inequality in Healthy Life Expectancy at Birth by National Deciles of Area Deprivation: England, 2011 to 2013* (London: Office for National Statistics, 2015); National Children's Bureau, *Greater Expectations: Raising Aspirations for Our Children* (London: National Children's Bureau, 2013).

¹⁷ Robin Flowerdew, 'How Serious is the Modifiable Areal Unit Problem for Analysis of English Census Data?', *Population Trends* 145 (2011), p.113.

¹⁸ Department for Communities and Local Government, *The English Indices of Deprivation 2010* (London: Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011), p.7; Danny Dorling and John Pritchard, 'The Geography of Poverty, Inequality and Wealth in the UK and Abroad: Because Enough is Never Enough', *Applied Spatial Analysis* 3 (2010), pp.81-106.

drawn from online and print sources.¹⁹ Additionally, information on eligibility for free school meals was used to validate the extent of socio-economic disadvantage in school catchments.²⁰

Ministers' postcodes usually referred to their place of residence. Fewer than five per cent reported only the postcode of a place of work, usually a city centre church or organisational setting such as a hospital or military barracks; excluding these individuals did not alter the conclusions and they have been retained in the analysis. Information was also compiled on ministers' gender, order of ministry (presbyter or deacon), year of entry to the particular order of ministry, and number of years in their current appointment. These factors were examined for their influence on variations in the distribution of ministers according to level of deprivation in the areas where they lived.

Analysis

Findings are presented as basic descriptive statistics for quintiles of the national distribution of multiple deprivation, each level containing 20 per cent of LSOAs or MSOAs in England and a similar proportion of the population. If the Methodist agencies examined here were distributed evenly across the deprivation spectrum, around 20 per cent or one-fifth would be found in each quintile. The extent to which that was not the case is an indication of disparity in the distribution of such phenomena associated with neighbourhood deprivation. Findings are also reported for the most and least deprived half of the country as defined by the median of the national distribution of LSOAs or MSOAs. Factors that might influence the distribution of ministers across the five levels of deprivation were investigated using statistical measures of association for contingency tables and logistic regression.

Results

Each aspect of a Methodist presence is examined in turn starting with the distribution of churches.

Churches

Methodist churches in England recorded almost a quarter of a million members in 2011 but varied considerably in size, from under ten to over 700 members (mean 54, median 34). Membership was defined as being a member of the Methodist Church or a member of a different denomination sharing buildings and activities in a Local Ecumenical Partnership. Activity levels were also examined including weekly attendance and annual counts of baptisms, weddings, and funerals; these analyses did not add any information to the findings based on membership alone and the results are not shown here.

Table 1 (below) shows that churches were typically situated towards the middle of the deprivation spectrum with around two out of three members

¹⁹ Methodist Church, *Minutes of the Annual Conference and Directory* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2001); Methodist Church, *Minutes of the Annual Conference and Directory* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2011); Methodist Church, *Education Commission*; Methodist Church, *Statistics for Mission 2011/12* (London: Methodist Church, 2012).

²⁰ Department for Education, *Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics: January 2011* (London: Department for Education, 2011).

attending churches in the three central quintiles. One in eight churches were located in the most deprived areas. Disparities in church location were reduced somewhat when membership was taken into account because larger churches were found disproportionately in the most deprived and the least deprived areas. There was a slight bias towards less deprived areas: 54 per cent of churches, accounting for 52 per cent of members, were in the less deprived half of LSOAs (56 per cent and 55 per cent respectively in MSOAs).

Table 1

Methodist churches and membership in England 2011 by area deprivation (per cent)

	LSOAs		MSOAs	
	Churches	Membership	Churches	Membership
Fifth most deprived areas	13	15	13	15
2nd quintile	20	21	18	19
3rd quintile	27	23	25	23
4th quintile	25	22	25	21
Fifth least deprived areas	16	19	18	22
<i>Base (=100 per cent)</i>	<i>4,441</i>	<i>241,151</i>	<i>4,441</i>	<i>241,151</i>

Schools

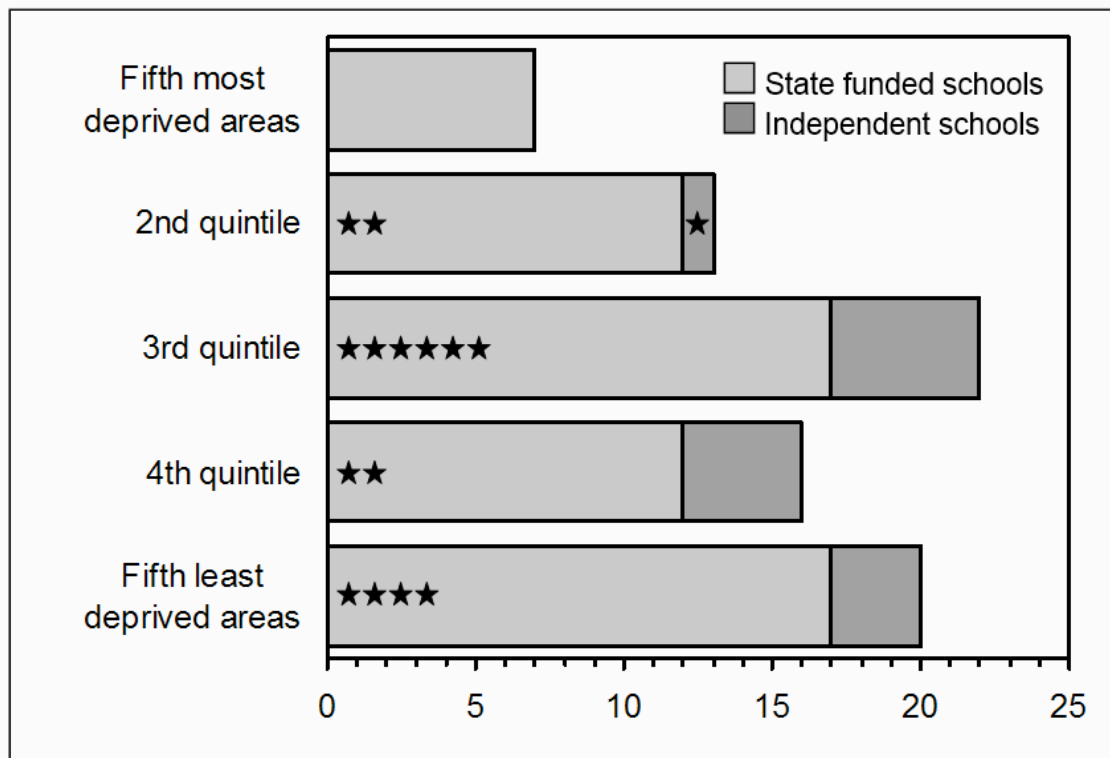
There were 64 state funded primary schools and one middle school in England affiliated to the Methodist Church. Most were ecumenical establishments in association with the Church of England. In addition, thirteen independent schools, though receiving no financial support from the Methodist Church, were supported through the provision of chaplains paid by the schools and the appointment of governors.²¹

Although school catchments are not precisely known, neighbourhoods defined by MSOAs provide a first approximation, at least for state funded primary schools that usually have a local intake of pupils. Independent schools in contrast often draw pupils from a wide area – at regional or national level – but information on the socio-economic profile of their pupils' home neighbourhoods is not available. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, in state funded schools only, provides an additional assessment of their socio-economic background because eligibility depends on parents' receipt of means-tested state benefits and tax credits.

Figure 1 shows that Methodist schools were more often located in less deprived areas, independent schools more so than state funded schools. Likewise, more pupils attended schools in less deprived areas, boosted by the presence of independent schools that were generally larger than state funded schools, reflecting differences in size between secondary and primary schools respectively. Altogether 47 schools (60 per cent) catering for 64 per cent of the children and young people attending Methodist schools in England were located in the less deprived half of the country (according to MSOAs).

²¹ Methodist Church, *Education Commission*, p.294.

Figure 1
Number of Methodist schools in England 2011 by MSOA deprivation
(15 schools established since 2001 are shown by asterisks)



If schools were evenly distributed across the deprivation spectrum around 40 per cent each would be found in the two least deprived and the two most deprived quintiles. In fact 36 schools (46 per cent, 53 per cent of pupils) including seven independent schools were located in the two least deprived fifths of MSOAs (Table 2). By comparison 20 schools (26 per cent, 20 per cent of pupils) including one independent school were found in the most deprived two-fifths of areas. None of the schools established since the turn of the century were located in the most deprived areas (Figure 1).

Table 2
Methodist school enrolments in England 2011 by area deprivation (per cent)

	LSOAs			MSOAs		
	State schools	Independent schools	All	State schools	Independent schools	All
Fifth most deprived areas	10	–	6	10	–	6
2nd quintile	9	24	15	20	4	14
3rd quintile	28	12	22	20	38	27
4th quintile	25	26	25	16	34	23
Fifth least deprived areas	28	38	32	34	24	30
<i>Base (=100 per cent)</i>	<i>13,430</i>	<i>9,131</i>	<i>22,561</i>	<i>13,430</i>	<i>9,131</i>	<i>22,561</i>

Eligibility for free school meals confirmed that state funded schools were skewed towards less deprived areas. The proportion of eligible pupils varied from less than 10 per cent in the least deprived fifth of areas to over 30 per cent in the most deprived fifth (Table 3). Overall, 14 per cent of pupils in state funded Methodist schools (with or without taking account of the one middle school) were eligible for free school meals compared with 18 per cent in primary schools in England as a whole.²² Twelve schools (18 per cent) recorded a quarter or more of their pupils eligible for free school meals including one school with more than half its pupils eligible. In contrast, 48 schools (74 per cent) reported fewer pupils eligible for free school meals than the national average, including 29 schools (45 per cent) with fewer than 10 per cent of pupils eligible.

Table 3

Number of pupils and proportion eligible for free school meals in state funded Methodist schools in England 2011 by area deprivation

	LSOAs		MSOAs	
	Number on roll	Pupils eligible for free school meals (%)	Number on roll	Pupils eligible for free school meals (%)
Fifth most deprived areas	1,318	33	1,311	31
2nd quintile	1,238	18	2,736	23
3rd quintile	3,766	16	2,652	12
4th quintile	3,369	10	2,117	7
Fifth least deprived areas	3,739	7	4,614	8
<i>All</i>	<i>13,430</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>13,430</i>	<i>14</i>

It can be argued that schools are best geared to tackling educational disadvantage rather than socio-economic deprivation in general. One domain of the index measures deprivation in education, training and skills using indicators of children's and young people's attainment levels, participation in school education and beyond, and a measure of working age adults with no or low qualifications.²³ Although these indicators do not focus solely on the school years but partly represent post-school outcomes, it was decided to reassess the distribution of schools against educational deprivation alone. The detailed results, available from the author, do not contradict the conclusion that Methodist schools were more often located in less deprived areas. At MSOA level, 36 schools (46 per cent, 55 per cent of pupils) including ten independent schools were in the least educationally deprived two-fifths of areas. In contrast, 22 schools (28 per cent, 23 per cent of pupils) including one independent school were in the most educationally deprived two-fifths of neighbourhoods.

²² Department for Education, *Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics*, Table 3a.

²³ McLennan et al., *English Indices of Deprivation*, pp.31-37.

Lay appointments

Each year the Church's governing body confirms the appointment of over 300 lay people whose roles include training, chaplaincy and serving on national committees responsible for oversight of strategy, resources, finance and audit. Most appointments rarely extend beyond ten years; it was decided, therefore, to compare lay appointees in 2001 and 2011 rather than investigate change longitudinally. Most appointees provided their services on a voluntary basis and gave their residential address. On both occasions, around 20 lay officers employed by the Church recorded a workplace address although their role may take them around the country; they usually gave the Church's London office that lies in the central fifth of LSOAs on the index of deprivation.

Table 4 shows that lay appointees predominantly gave an address in less deprived areas and the more deprived an area the less likely individuals were to live there. Changing the scale of analysis between LSOAs and MSOAs hardly altered the findings and differences over time were negligible. In 2011, 73 per cent of addresses were in the least deprived half of LSOAs compared with 71 per cent ten years earlier; comparable figures for MSOAs were 66 per cent on both occasions.

Table 4

Methodist lay appointments in England 2001 and 2011 by area deprivation (per cent)

	LSOAs		MSOAs	
	2001	2011	2001	2011
Fifth most deprived areas	5	5	10	8
2nd quintile	15	14	15	14
3rd quintile	25	22	17	22
4th quintile	22	21	28	27
Fifth least deprived areas	34	38	30	30
<i>Base (=100 per cent)</i>	<i>346</i>	<i>331</i>	<i>346</i>	<i>331</i>

Ministers

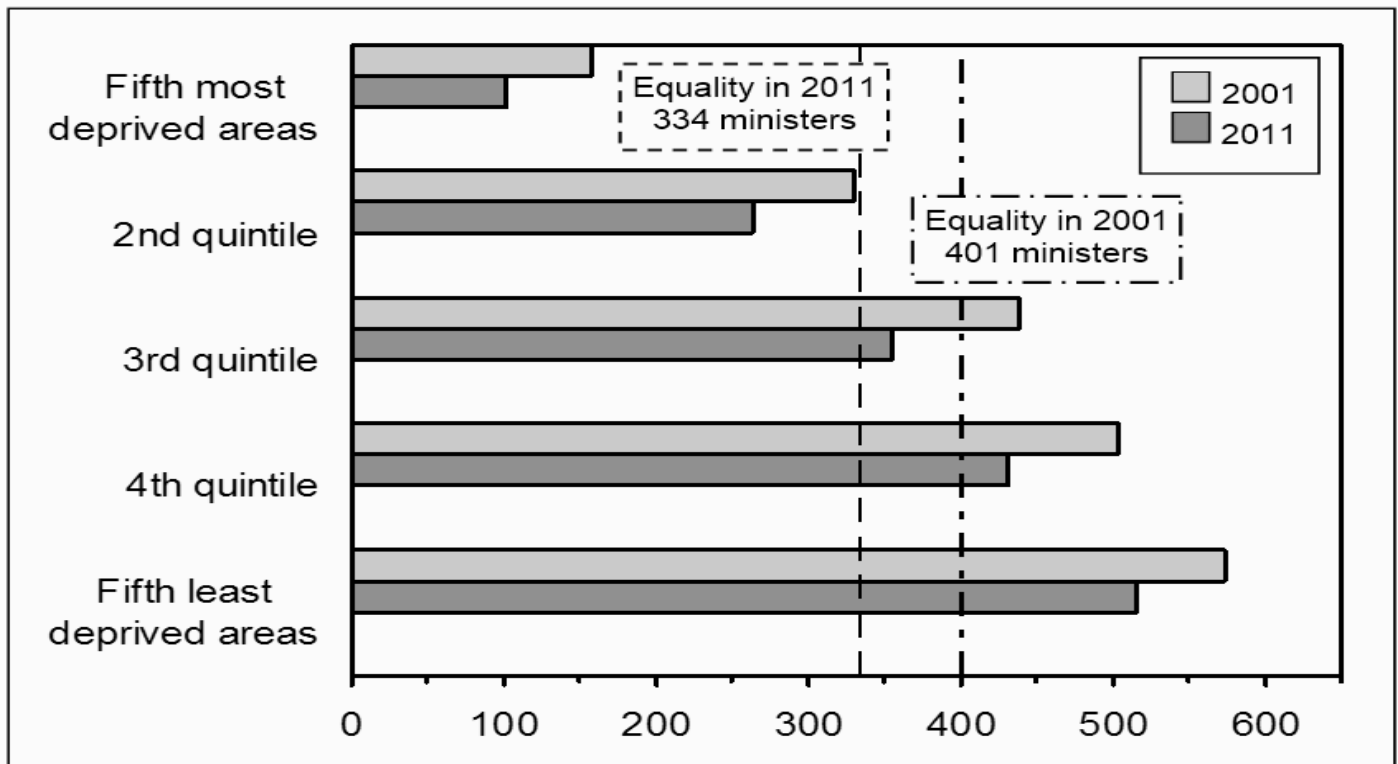
The vast majority of ordained ministers receive a stipend from the Church and live in a church-owned property or manse, which is also deemed to be a place of work. Some ministers live in other forms of tied housing or in their own house. They include ministers not paid by the Church who work as chaplains in the armed forces or health service for example, or as teachers, lecturers or other professionals while also contributing to church life and ministry in their local Circuit and District.

Figure 2 shows the number of Methodist ministers according to level of deprivation in the neighbourhoods identified by their postcodes, and provides estimates of how many would be found if they were distributed evenly across the deprivation spectrum. Two-thirds of ministers lived in the less deprived half of LSOAs: 65 per cent and 68 per cent in 2001 and 2011 respectively. The more deprived an area the less likely ministers were to live there. If ministers were to be evenly distributed across the deprivation spectrum in 2011, at least 303 (18 per cent) would have to move to a manse in the most deprived two-fifths of LSOAs; over a third (583, 35 per cent) would have to move to such neighbourhoods to reverse the current bias

towards less deprived areas. Comparable estimates to produce an equal distribution or reverse the bias across MSOAs are 225 (13 per cent) and 399 (24 per cent) respectively.

Figure 2

Number of Methodist ministers in England 2001 and 2011 by LSOA deprivation



It might be hypothesised that particular attributes of an individual's calling would influence their appointment. More experienced ministers for example might be best equipped to serve in deprived communities. Some Deacons claim a particular role working with those considered to be poor and marginalised, highlighting their presence in communities beyond or on the edge of church life.²⁴ There was limited scope for exploring such propositions; however, data on ministers' gender, order of ministry, number of years in ministry and number of years in their current appointment were readily available and examined opportunistically.

Findings indicate that such attributes had little influence on the distribution of ministers across the deprivation spectrum (Table 5). They were as likely to be found in each level of deprivation more or less as predicted from their overall distribution irrespective of gender and other attributes (likelihood-ratio chi-square tests, $P > 0.10$). Logistic regression analysis examining two or more attributes at a time confirmed that there were no statistically significant associations between level of deprivation and ministers' characteristics. Inspection of residuals, however, indicated that Deacons were disproportionately likely to live in the most deprived fifth of LSOAs. Although statistically significant ($P < 0.02$) the difference was small:

²⁴ Andrew Orton and Todd Stockdale, *Making Connections: Exploring Methodist Deacons' Perspectives on Contemporary Diaconal Ministry* (Durham: Sacristy Press, 2014).

101 ministers lived in such areas including 13 Deacons – six more than would be expected if order of ministry was not associated with ministerial appointments in the most deprived areas.

Table 5

Characteristics of Methodist ministers in England 2011 by LSOA deprivation (per cent)^a

	Fifth most deprived areas	2nd quintile	3rd quintile	4th quintile	Fifth least deprived areas	All
<i>Gender</i>						
Men	64	58	62	63	62	62
Women	36	42	38	38	38	38
<i>Order of ministry</i>						
Presbyteral	87	93	93	93	95	93
Diaconal	13	7	7	7	5	7
<i>Year of first appointment</i>						
Before 1990	27	25	22	26	26	25
1990/97	27	26	28	26	26	26
1998/2003	25	25	22	23	24	24
2004/11	22	24	28	24	23	25
<i>Years in current appointment</i>						
Less than 4 years	38	35	35	30	30	32
4 to 6 years	29	34	31	34	34	33
7 or more years	34	31	35	36	35	35
<i>Base for each characteristic (=100 per cent)</i>	101	264	356	432	516	1669

^a Percentages within characteristics may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

There were over 300 fewer ministers in 2011 than ten years earlier (Table 6). The rate of decline varied linearly by deprivation: from 36 per cent in the fifth most deprived LSOAs to a 10 per cent decrease in the fifth least deprived LSOAs. As a result, ministers' residences became more concentrated in less deprived neighbourhoods. In 2001, there were three or four ministers in the least deprived fifth of LSOAs to every minister in the most deprived fifth of LSOAs. Ten years later, ministers in the least deprived LSOAs outnumbered those in the most deprived LSOAs by five to one.

Table 6

Methodist ministers in England 2001 and 2011 and percentage change by area deprivation

	LSOAs				MSOAs			
	2001 (%)	2011 (%)	Change	Per cent change	2001 (%)	2011 (%)	Change	Per cent change
Fifth most deprived areas	158 (8)	101 (6)	-57	-36	233 (12)	153 (9)	-80	-34
2nd quintile	330 (16)	264 (16)	-66	-20	347 (17)	290 (17)	-57	-16
3rd quintile	439 (22)	356 (21)	-83	-19	456 (23)	384 (23)	-72	-16
4th quintile	504 (25)	432 (26)	-72	-14	441 (22)	398 (24)	-43	-10
Fifth least deprived areas	574 (29)	516 (31)	-58	-10	528 (26)	444 (27)	-84	-16
<i>All</i>	2,005 (100)	1,669 (100)	-336	-17	2,005 (100)	1,669 (100)	-336	-17

Table 7 shows how the main components of change – new entrants, reassignments, and retirements – shaped the distribution of ministers across the deprivation spectrum. Between 2001 and 2011, 775 ministers retired, some to places outside England: they were as likely to be drawn from the most deprived as the least deprived fifth of areas. By comparison, 638 new entrants to ministry in England, mostly probationers (535), were more likely to have taken up appointments in less deprived areas: 197 entered appointments in the least deprived fifth of areas compared with 43 appointments in the most deprived fifth.

Ministers who were in post in 2001 and subsequently changed address, usually to take up a new appointment, also contributed to a net shift towards less deprived areas. Of the 900 ministers who changed address between 2001 and 2011, 33 per cent had moved to a more deprived area (quintile) while 41 per cent had moved to a less deprived area. The remaining 26 per cent had moved between areas in the same quintile; they were more likely to do that if they were already living in a less deprived area. Altogether these moves resulted in the loss of 46 appointments from the most deprived two-fifths of areas and a gain of 51 appointments in the least deprived two-fifths of areas. Some ministers (131) did not change address between 2011 and 2001: most lived in their own houses which were located predominantly in less deprived areas.

Table 7

Components of change in number of Methodist ministers in England 2001 to 2011 by LSOA deprivation^a

	Fifth most deprived areas (% change)	2nd quintile (% change)	3rd quintile (% change)	4th quintile (% change)	Fifth least deprived areas (% change)	All (% change)
Number of ministers in 2001	158	330	439	504	574	2,005
Leavers from 2001 onwards						
Lost to follow-up ^b	-14 (-9)	-19 (-6)	-28 (-6)	-30 (-6)	-46 (-8)	-137 (-7)
Retired	-56 (-35)	-121 (-37)	-182 (-41)	-204 (-40)	-212 (-37)	-775 (-39)
Moved from England to minister	-7 (-4)	-7 (-2)	-10 (-2)	-18 (-4)	-20 (-3)	-62 (-3)
Difference 2001 to 2011	-77 (-49)	-147 (-45)	-220 (-50)	-252 (-50)	-278 (-48)	-974 (-49)
Ministers in 2001 and 2011						
Address unchanged	6 (4)	16 (5)	28 (6)	35 (7)	46 (8)	131 (7)
Left 2001 address	-75 (-47)	-167 (-51)	-191 (-44)	-217 (-43)	-250 (-44)	-900 (-45)
Moved to 2011 address	52 (33)	144 (44)	186 (42)	245 (49)	273 (48)	900 (45)
Difference 2001 to 2011	-23 (-15)	-23 (-7)	-5 (-1)	28 (6)	23 (4)	0 (0)
Entrants since 2001						
Moved into England to minister	14 (9)	17 (5)	19 (4)	17 (3)	36 (6)	103 (5)
Probationer ministers	29 (18)	87 (26)	123 (28)	135 (27)	161 (28)	535 (27)
Difference 2001 to 2011	43 (27)	104 (32)	142 (32)	152 (30)	197 (34)	638 (32)
Number of ministers in 2011	101	264	356	432	516	1669
Difference 2001 to 2011	-57 (-36)	-66 (-20)	-83 (-19)	-72 (-14)	-58 (-10)	-336 (-17)

^a Individual percentages may not sum to overall difference due to rounding.

^b Includes those who had died (45), ceased to be Methodist ministers (64), and those not traced (28).

Retirement

Table 8 shows the distribution across the deprivation spectrum of ministers who retired within England between 2001 and 2011. The 639 ministers who changed address were more likely to live in less deprived areas following retirement: 30 per cent had moved to a more deprived area (quintile) while 42 per cent had moved to a

less deprived area. As a result, 32 per cent lived in the fifth least deprived areas in 2011 compared with 26 per cent ten years earlier. Ministers who moved on retirement between neighbourhoods with similar levels of deprivation and retiring ministers who remained at the same address (75) were likely to live in less deprived areas on both occasions.

Table 8

Supernumerary Methodist ministers in England 2001 to 2011 by LSOA deprivation (per cent)

	Fifth most deprived areas	2nd quintile	3rd quintile	4th quintile	Fifth least deprived areas	Base (=100 per cent)
Retired within England after 2001						
Address unchanged	3	16	23	21	37	75
Left 2001 address	8	15	23	28	26	639
Moved to 2011 address	5	11	21	31	32	639
Other supernumeraries in 2011 ^a	4	12	24	26	34	994
All supernumeraries in 2011	4	12	23	28	33	1,708

^a Most had retired by 2001 and were living in England at that time; this category also includes ministers who moved into England after 2001, either before or after retirement.

Discussion

Faith-based action on persistent social problems such as poverty and social exclusion has become more visible in the UK since the late 1980s, and shows diverse responses at the individual, community and national level. Faith groups have long provided services for disadvantaged or vulnerable groups including drug and alcohol rehabilitation, support for homeless people and food aid.²⁵ More recently, successive governments have invited faith groups to be partners in promoting urban regeneration and fostering social cohesion.²⁶ Some faith groups have taken an overtly political approach alongside civil society organisations to act on social issues such as campaigning for a living wage.²⁷ The increased role of faith-based organisations in the public domain and their influence on social policy, education and medical practice has prompted debate on the dynamic between religion, society

²⁵ Jonathan Birdwell, *Faithful Providers* (London: Demos, 2013); Sarah Johnsen, with Suzanne Fitzpatrick, *The Role of Faith-Based Organisations in the Provision of Services for Homeless People* (York: Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, 2009); Hannah Lambie-Mumford, et al., *Household Food Security in the UK: A Review of Food Aid* (London: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2014).

²⁶ Richard Farnell, et al., *'Faith' in Urban Regeneration? Engaging Faith Communities in Urban Regeneration* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2003).

²⁷ Lina Jamoul and Jane Wills, 'Faith in Politics', *Urban Studies* 45 (2008), 2035-2056; Angus Ritchie, 'Child Poverty and Vocation of Government', in Angus Ritchie (ed.), *The Heart of the Kingdom: Christian Theology and Children who live in Poverty* (London: The Children's Society, 2013), pp.37-40.

and the state and the challenges for humanistic approaches to policy and practice.²⁸ The role and contribution of more traditional forms of ‘being church’ – local congregations with clergy – have attracted less attention although a recent survey of the Church of England has increased knowledge of how parish churches engage with local communities and support people in need.²⁹ This paper offers another perspective by evaluating the positioning of the Methodist Church through its local presence to engage with the poor and socially marginalised.

There are practical and theological reasons why a Methodist presence might intersect with the geography of neighbourhood deprivation. At the practical level, maintaining a presence in deprived neighbourhoods positions the Church as a stakeholder with an authentic voice in what happens there. Proximity also facilitates interaction between local churches and poor households; however, nearness enables more than physical access. Living and working alongside people builds mutual understanding and meaningful relationships especially when based on shared experience of a place and its influence on the lives of those who live there. Social anthropologists and ethnographers have long recognised that one way to appreciate and relate to a culture is to move into it and live it, engaging with its social forms and meanings from the point of view of local participants.³⁰ Similarly, listening to individuals’ experiences, understanding that their needs are linked to those of communities and engaging with the social system in a locality are key components of the social action approach to community development and community-based social work.³¹

In the Christian tradition theological perspectives on encounter and engagement are shaped by beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth and the emergence of a doctrine of incarnation, whether understood as literally true or interpreted metaphorically or mystically to describe his life and ministry.³² For some commentators the incarnational principle incorporates several strands: Jesus himself became poor, focused his ministry on the poor and the socially rejected, and demonstrated the significance and meaning of what he was doing through the poor.³³ This understanding has informed a ministry of presence around building ‘faithful capital’ in deprived areas – the contribution of individuals and organisations acting out their faith together in practical and transformative ways.³⁴ Such ideas are associated with liberation theologians who sought to understand the Christian faith from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed, and to engage

²⁸ Justin Beaumont, ‘Faith Action on Urban Social Issues’, *Urban Studies* 45 (2008), pp.2019-2038.

²⁹ Church Urban Fund, *The Church in Action: A National Survey of Church-led Social Action* (London: Church Urban Fund, 2013); Church Urban Fund, *Faith in Action: A Survey of Christian Social Action around Middlesbrough* (London: Church Urban Fund, 2013).

³⁰ Martin Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 3rd edition, 2007).

³¹ Peter Somerville, *Understanding Community: Politics, Policy and Practice* (Bristol: Policy Press, (2011); Barbara Teater and Mark Baldwin, *Social Work in the Community: Making a Difference* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012).

³² Andrew Rumsey, ‘The Misplaced Priest?’, *Theology* 104 (2001), pp.102-114.

³³ Michael Ippgrave, ‘The Gospel, Poverty and the “Lordship of the Poor”’, in Angus Ritchie (ed.), *The Heart of the Kingdom: Christian Theology and Children who live in Poverty* (London: The Children’s Society, 2013), pp.25-27; David Sheppard, *Bias to the Poor* (London: Hodder, 1983).

³⁴ Commission on Urban Life and Faith, *Faithful Cities*, 24.

with them in bringing about social justice from within.³⁵ Similar threads of understanding informed early Methodist doctrine and practice through the teaching, ministry and example of its founder John Wesley.³⁶ This consistent bias toward the poor and marginalised, rehearsed in Methodist reports and pronouncements, provides a context for the findings reported here.

There was no evidence from this analysis that Methodist personnel and organisations were skewed towards deprived areas. Churches were widely distributed across the deprivation spectrum though found predominantly in middle ranking neighbourhoods. The location of many Methodist churches dates from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when their immediate vicinities would likely have presented quite different socio-economic profiles. Currently, the distribution of churches might indicate that they are broadly accessible to individuals and households irrespective of area variations in deprivation. No firm conclusions, however, can be drawn about the socio-economic background of church members and adherents. Although some churches may cater for people from similar backgrounds, shaped in part by their immediate neighbourhoods, anecdotal evidence suggests that church attendance also reflects historic and family ties as well as access to private transport. Those links may produce diverse congregations, providing opportunities for social interaction across status and cultural boundaries. Indeed, larger churches were found disproportionately in some of the most and least deprived areas indicating that such churches may gather people from different backgrounds.

Beyond its church-based ministry, engaging with the education sector has long been regarded as a vital part of the Church's mission.³⁷ Involvement includes individuals associated with local churches serving as governors, teachers and other staff as well as lay and ordained chaplains. However, it is through the establishment of 'faith schools' that the Church sustains a commitment to particular communities although on a much reduced scale since their peak in the late nineteenth century.³⁸ The findings indicate that state funded Methodist schools were moderately skewed towards less deprived areas and generally supported fewer pupils eligible for free school meals than the national average. None of the schools established since 2001 were located in the most deprived areas. Although independent school catchments usually extend beyond their immediate vicinity, which typically encompass less deprived areas, pupils' socio-economic background would likely reflect their parents' ability to afford school fees and expenses.

Methodist ministers, supernumeraries and lay people who guide policy and practice at the national level lived predominantly in the least deprived neighbourhoods. Cross-sectional and longitudinal findings were broadly consistent in describing a linear association between residential location and neighbourhood deprivation: the more deprived an area the less likely were such individuals to live there. Moreover, there was no firm evidence from the limited information available

³⁵ Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Liberation Theology: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973).

³⁶ Methodist Church, *Of Equal Value: Poverty and Inequality in the United Kingdom* (London: Methodist Conference Report, 2011), pp.162-167.

³⁷ Methodist Church, *Education Commission*.

³⁸ Davies, *Methodism*, p.150ff.

that ministers with particular attributes or experience were likely to live in the most deprived areas. Following a new appointment or retirement, ministers and supernumeraries generally moved to less deprived areas, and new entrants to ordained ministry were most likely to spend their probationary years in less deprived neighbourhoods.

The increasing concentration of Methodist ministers in less deprived areas coincided with a decline in church membership and attendance.³⁹ Further enquiry is required to explain how those trends might reflect indifference to, or rejection of, mainstream Christianity in British society. Surveying the decline of European State Churches, Hempton suggests that the ‘conspicuous under-provision [of priests] in working-class neighbourhoods compared with middle-class districts’ is symptomatic of a Church that has achieved ‘respectability and cultural acceptance’ but lost its zeal ‘to recruit members and effectively disseminate its message’.⁴⁰

A similar pattern of decline might be anticipated for some mainstream Churches in Britain. Methodism may have started as a populist religious movement of and for the poor yet increasingly occupied a more central position in British society – culturally, economically and politically – as it moved from revivalist sect to formally established denomination towards the end of the nineteenth century.⁴¹ Strikingly the findings provide continuing evidence of such a trend during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Methodist ministers lived increasingly at some social and economic remove from the most deprived areas and the churches they served. By 2011, fewer ministers were contributing directly to building faithful capital in deprived areas by living there and fewer were learning from the experience of living alongside the poor. Some ministers who travelled to work in deprived areas crossed noticeable socio-economic gradients. Supernumeraries who continued their lifelong calling beyond retirement often did so after moving to a less deprived area, while lay officials who advised on the Church’s needs and priorities generally had little current experience of living in deprived communities. Further investigation might consider whether British Methodism and other Christian churches that have experienced decline were not simply engulfed by religious indifference but aligned themselves with the centres of power, cultural influence and social forces that brought about decline.⁴² The changing geography of Methodism and the places it occupies may in turn influence its beliefs, spiritualities and religious practices.⁴³

It might be argued that any correspondence between neighbourhood deprivation and a Methodist presence may reflect nothing more than that all individuals, households, and organisations are located somewhere. If the characteristics of places have no bearing on the residential location of ministers, say, they might be variously distributed across the deprivation spectrum, signifying little about the effectiveness, acceptability or reach of the Church’s response to disadvantaged communities. Even if Methodist personnel and organisations were

³⁹ Methodist Church, *Statistics for Mission* (London: Methodist Conference Report, 2014).

⁴⁰ Hempton, *Methodism*, pp.195-201.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.181ff.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.199.

⁴³ Peter Hopkins, et al. (eds.), *Religion and Place: Landscape, Policy and Piety* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013); cf. Ali Dorey, et al., ‘Rediscovering Lament as a Practice of the Church – Especially on Deprived Housing Estates’, *Theology and Ministry* 1 (2012), 8.111.

found predominantly in the most deprived neighbourhoods it could not be concluded – without further investigation – that the Church was fulfilling its mission alongside the poor or responding appropriately. Indeed, detailed histories of Methodism describe diverse responses across church communities in similar localities, reflecting the everyday social dynamics of members, local preachers, lay officials and ministers who often varied in their beliefs and commitment.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, places differ and the differences they embody matter – not least because poor people and wealthy people are concentrated in separate areas.⁴⁵ Although explanations linking individual circumstances and neighbourhood characteristics are underdeveloped, area profiles reflect standard of living and way of life.⁴⁶ These, in turn, shape the resources and capabilities that allow or constrain choice and aspiration.⁴⁷ Thus, a Methodist presence skewed towards less deprived areas may point to a ‘substantive inequality’ – meaning that communities are differently served according to differences in their socio-economic and material living conditions.⁴⁸ That may be an unintended consequence of many different, largely unconnected decisions; however, the observed inequality questions the Church’s commitment to the poor and socially marginalised at the community level.⁴⁹

The material spaces people occupy further shape how they see themselves and how others see them, contributing to the social construction of identity, belonging and community.⁵⁰ Faithful capital nurtured through local ministry, pastoral care and witness may influence that process.⁵¹ A Methodist presence at some distance from deprived neighbourhoods, however, risks diminishing the visibility of those on the margins of society and challenges the claim for mutuality and interdependence in human relationships.⁵²

Limitations

As far as is known, this is the first attempt towards evaluating aspects of the Methodist presence in England against area variations in social and economic deprivation, and it is important to acknowledge its limitations and point to the potential for further enquiry. Readily available data defined a local Methodist presence in terms of ordained ministers and lay officials, and the location of schools and churches. A wider focus would include members, adherents and elected

⁴⁴ Catherine Brace, et al., ‘Religion, Place and Space: A Framework for Investigating Historical Geographies of Religious Identities and Communities’, *Progress in Human Geography* 30, no. 1 (2006), pp.28-43.

⁴⁵ E. Fahmy, et al., ‘Poverty, Wealth and Place in Britain, 1968-2005’, *Radical Statistics* 97 (2008), pp.10-29.

⁴⁶ Danny Dorling, ‘How much does place matter?’, *Environment and Planning A* 33 (2001), pp.1335-1340.

⁴⁷ Church Urban Fund, *The Web of Poverty: Area-based Poverty and Exclusion in England* (London: Church Urban Fund, 2011).

⁴⁸ Hay, ‘Equity, Fairness and Justice’, p.504.

⁴⁹ Cf. Adam Dinham, ‘From Faith in the City to Faithful Cities: the “Third Way”, the Church of England and Urban Regeneration’, *Urban Studies* 45 (2008), pp.2163-2174.

⁵⁰ YiFu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

⁵¹ Rumsey, ‘Misplaced Priest?’.

⁵² Ipgrave, “Lordship of the Poor”.

representatives as well as local preachers and lay people engaged in family support, chaplaincy and pastoral care. The aim would be to describe more fully the changing geography of the Methodist Church in light of its mission alongside the poor: to understand the processes at work and to explain trends and changes. Replicating the analysis using measures of poverty and wealth would test findings and conclusions based on multiple deprivations. Further quantitative assessment might examine the financial resources expended by the Church on activities to meet its priorities although accounts are not currently compiled in a way that would support such an approach.

Qualitative research would make a valuable contribution by exploring ministers' and church members' attitudes towards poverty and inequality, and the potential for local partnerships with public services, other faith groups, community organisations and the independent sector.⁵³ Comparative analysis would show whether the positioning of Methodism was more socio-economically regressive than that of other denominations and help identify issues peculiar to Methodist Church organisation that make this question particularly relevant. Detailed investigations in deprived areas with individuals and community organisations, including those reached by the church as well as those who have rejected church-based religion, would help Methodists and comparable faith groups reflect further on their ministry and mission.⁵⁴ The aim would be to discover how churches best engage in social action in deprived communities, identify specific local factors or barriers, and disseminate good practice.⁵⁵

Practical implications

Upholding institutional norms and expectations is a shared task although fostering mutual responsibility and accountability may be especially difficult in a protestant non-conformist religious movement facing 'creeping congregationalism'.⁵⁶ Individual churches and circuits may respond to agreed priorities in different ways. Core values are easily diluted or overlooked across separate organisations with different roles and administrative layers, dependent on voluntary association and generosity of time and money. A dispersed network of loosely associated decision-making bodies reliant on widespread consultation may be the preferred arrangement in British Methodism but there also needs to be an appropriate institutional environment. Fostering that environment requires attention to the processes that give rise to norms and expectations as well as pragmatic measures to

⁵³ Richard Farnell, 'Faith Communities, Regeneration and Social Exclusion: Developing a Research Agenda', *Community Development Journal* 36 (2001), pp.263-272.

⁵⁴ E.g. Bob Holman, *Faith in the Poor: Britain's Poor Reveal What It's Really Like To Be 'Socially Excluded'* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1998); Jamoul and Wills, 'Faith in Politics'; Giselle Vincett and Elizabeth Olson, 'The Religiosity of Young People Growing Up in Poverty', in Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto (eds.), *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp.196-202.

⁵⁵ Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw, 'Measurement as Reflection in Faith-based Social Action', *Community Development Journal* 47 (2012), pp.126-141.

⁵⁶ Martin Wellings, "'A Time to be Born and a Time to Die'? A Historian's Perspective on the Future of Methodism', in Jane Craske and Clive Marsh (eds.), *Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge* (London: Cassell, London, 1999), p.156.

maintain progress towards agreed goals and a supportive approach to bring about change.⁵⁷

Although the findings reported here require further investigation and evaluation, the broad patterns observed are sufficiently strong to suggest implications for policy and practice. Findings alert Church leaders to the challenge of developing a comprehensive strategy for deploying resources that takes into account the Church's commitment to the poor. Socio-economic differences could receive greater consideration when deciding ministerial and other assignments as well as the location of manses, schools, projects and grant funding for community engagement. The same criteria could be used to evaluate the impact of such decisions. A focus on outcomes and counterfactual evidence may become more relevant as church membership continues to shrink and dwindling resources need to be carefully targeted.

For ministers and those exploring ordained ministry, findings suggest that reflection on their lifelong calling and the Church's commitment to the poor might include where they live, and how that allows or constrains their ministerial role and continuing development. Such considerations may lead to a review of the contexts in which ministerial formation takes place and the requirements for training, learning and theological education. The location of some appointments may place particular demands on ministers and their families, especially during probationary years, and give rise to additional needs for support and development – something that supernumeraries might be well placed to offer. For Circuit and District officers, local church officials and members, variations in a Methodist presence associated with neighbourhood deprivation suggest that they may need practical help and guidance balancing needs and resources across the nation when deciding where to maintain, close or establish churches and manses. Opening church buildings for wider use, to be at the disposal of local communities, could make a vital contribution to social and faithful capital and help ensure that deprived areas are not differently served.

Conclusions

There was no evidence of a Methodist presence skewed towards the most deprived communities in England. The immediate surroundings of most churches typified areas in the middle of the deprivation spectrum while few schools served areas of significant socio-economic deprivation. Ministers and lay officials lived predominantly in the least deprived neighbourhoods and recent trends point to a reduced presence in the most deprived areas. These findings raise questions for the Methodist Church: in particular, whether failure to maintain an adequate or continuing presence in deprived areas hinders the Church entering into solidarity with the poor, and limits its ability to act pastorally, prophetically and politically on their behalf.

The Methodist Church is not alone among faith groups in Britain in proclaiming a preferential option for the poor, and their ministry, witness and pastoral care are likely to be judged on the consequences for the poorest in society. Systematic evidence of such activities and their impact, to gauge progress towards

⁵⁷ Gary Bouma, 'Distinguishing Institutions and Organisations in Social Change', *Sociological Review* 34 (1998), pp.232-245.

core beliefs, values and expectations, would strengthen the role and contribution of faith groups in speaking out against poverty and inequality.

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