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PREFERENTIAL PLACES IN THE MANCHESTER AND STOCKPORT METHODIST DISTRICT DURING THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

MICHAEL HIRST



ABSTRACT

Methodism has always placed concern for the poor at the heart of its identity and purpose, yet its local presence and reach is declining. This article examines recent trends in the location of manses and churches against area variations in socio-economic deprivation in one conurbation. Manses are often found in less-deprived neighbourhoods than the churches for which ministers hold responsibility. As churches contract and close, manses are becoming distanced from the most deprived church catchments. These findings raise questions about stationing and ministers' contribution to a national strategy for evangelism and growth that is focused on engaging marginalized communities.

Keywords: solidarity with the poor, ministry of presence, neighbourhood deprivation, locational discernment, Methodist Church in Britain

The Methodist Church in Britain is declining. According to one measure of commitment to local congregations and their sustainability, membership has fallen by 3 per cent annually since the turn of the century (Figure 1).¹ In the

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1. 'Statistics for Mission', The Methodist Church, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/statistics-for-mission>. All online sources used in this article were last accessed 1 February 2021.

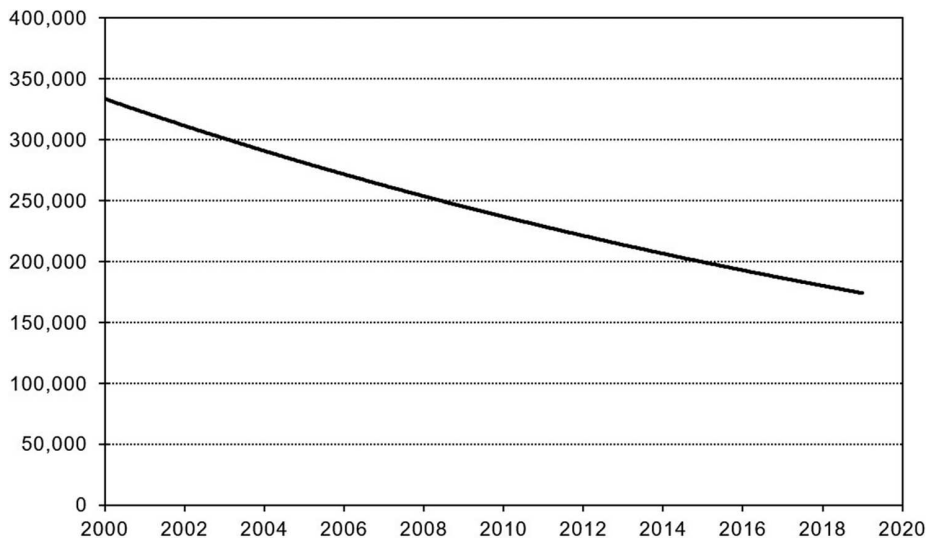


FIGURE 1 Local Methodist church membership in Britain, 2000–19

general population, 1 per cent of adults aged eighteen or over identified as Methodist in 2018, down from 4 per cent in 1983 and 2 per cent in 2008.²

There are pockets of growth reflecting the reach of local churches beyond public worship services. These include cafés and luncheon clubs, children's activities, support groups, social projects, and fellowship groups around a shared ethnicity or language. Additionally, the Church promotes pioneer ministry, city centre ministry, fresh expressions of church, chaplaincy, and work with children, young people, and families; plus regional networks resourcing churches and equipping individuals for mission, pastoral care, Bible study, and vocational exploration.³

It is difficult to gauge involvement in these activities. They are poorly covered in Church statistics and their purpose is often exploring discipleship and spirituality and building relationships and community rather than membership.⁴ However, churches' engagement with local communities as measured by weekly attendance, pastoral outreach, baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals has also declined.⁵

2. John Curtice et al., eds, *British Social Attitudes: The 36th Report* (London: National Centre for Social Research, 2019), 21.

3. 'Our Work', The Methodist Church, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/>.

4. Hamish Leese and Graham Horsley, *Methodism's Hidden Harvest? The Story of the First Fifteen Years of Methodist Involvement in Fresh Expressions* (London: The Methodist Church, 2019), <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/14851/3307-fx-research-report-methodism-s-hidden-harvest.pdf>.

5. 'Statistics for Mission', The Methodist Church (2017), <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2017-42-Statistics-for-Mission.pdf>.

Contraction and decline will inevitably reshape the presence and reach of Methodism at the local level. The question thus arises: which communities are affected? Is decline impacting some communities more than others? A relevant metric for evaluating Methodist ministry, pastoral care, and witness is nearness to poor and socially marginalized communities.

From the outset, Methodism placed concern for the poorest in society at the heart of its mission, and historians often highlight a bias toward people experiencing poverty and social marginalization in the ministry and writings of its founder John Wesley.⁶ An ‘option for the poor’ is integral to his understanding of Christian discipleship. Roger Walton uses Wesley’s theology and practice to demonstrate that how Christians respond to issues of poverty and injustice—acts of mercy—is intimately connected with how they meet with God and support one another—acts of piety. Acts of mercy and piety, he argues, are inseparable expressions of love and means of grace that follow each other in a ‘holy dance.’⁷

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, Methodists in Britain renewed their vision for the Church—*Our Calling*—which includes, among its aims, ‘to be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice.’⁸ This is the only priority in *Our Calling* to stem directly from the second greatest commandment ‘to love your neighbour as yourself’ (Mark 12:28–34) and was explained as ‘Supporting community development and action for justice, especially among the most deprived and poor—in Britain and worldwide.’⁹ Recalling the Church’s Wesleyan heritage, a 2004 report further noted that this priority ‘sustains something fundamental to Methodist identity.’¹⁰ Against a background of continuing decline, *Our Calling* was reaffirmed in 2018 as ‘the primary strategic driver for the whole Church.’¹¹ Subsequently, the Church adopted a programme for evangelism and growth, which includes ‘a particular

6. Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley: The Patterns and Practices of a Movement Maker* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2014).

7. Roger Walton, ‘Social Holiness and Social Justice’, *Holiness: The Journal of Wesley House, Cambridge*, 5/1 (2019), 25–36.

8. ‘Our Calling’, The Methodist Church (2000), 1, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-our-calling-2000.pdf>.

9. ‘Priorities for the Methodist Church’, The Methodist Church (2004), 1, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-priorities-for-the-MC-2004.pdf>. Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

10. *Ibid.* 8.

11. ‘Reaffirming *Our Calling*: The Future Call of the Methodist Church’, The Methodist Church (2018), 3, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/8876/conf-reaffirming-our-calling-discussion-paper-2018.docx>.

focus on [engaging with] communities experiencing marginalization' called 'Church at the Margins'.¹²

Community engagement recognizes that mission with people on the margins of society must be based around shared experience of a place and its influence on the lives of those who live there. Contextualizing mission in this way, argue Paul Cloke and Mike Pears, centres not only on being a good neighbour—the one who draws 'near' (Luke 10:33)—but also on 'the recovery or development of places which are humanizing', including residential neighbourhoods and public spaces where individuals can experience connections to themselves and others in the context of their everyday lives and routines.¹³ Indeed, committed personal encounters and genuine social engagement happen in particular places, face to face: nearness and presence are key.¹⁴ Being intentionally present in marginalized communities creates opportunities for social interaction, practical and emotional support, and community action, which contribute to both a personal and a collective sense of connectedness, inclusion, and engagement, as Paul Keeble and Judith Jessop show through sustained presence in deprived areas of Manchester and Sheffield respectively.¹⁵ Choosing to remain in or move into marginalized communities then becomes an authentic expression of discipleship and solidarity with people experiencing poverty, a response commended to clergy by Pope Francis.¹⁶

Locational discernment concerning the Church's ministry and presence has become urgent since the turn of the century as inequalities in income, health, and wealth have widened.¹⁷ Individuals and households in deprived areas are especially vulnerable to structural inequalities, including public sector austerity, race

12. 'God for All: The Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth', The Methodist Church (2020), 43, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/17287/conf-2020-4-god-for-all.pdf>. 'Church at the Margins' is the largest budget stream: 38 per cent of £22.7 million over five years.

13. Paul Cloke and Mike Pears, eds, *Mission in Marginal Places: The Theory* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2016), 9.

14. Andrew Rumsey, 'The Misplaced Priest?', *Theology*, 104/818 (2001), 102–14.

15. Paul Keeble, *Mission-With: Something Out of the Ordinary* (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2017); Judith Jessop, 'Church in the Margins', Open House Sheffield (2019), <https://openhousesheffield.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/church-in-the-margins.docx>.

16. Pope Francis, 'Chrism Mass Homily in St. Peter's Basilica', The Holy See (28 March 2013), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale_en.html.

17. Danny Dorling, *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Still Persists* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015); Danny Dorling, *Peak Inequality: Britain's Ticking Time Bomb* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2018); Suzanne Fitzpatrick et al., *Destitution in the UK 2020* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2020); Michael Marmot et al., *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On* (London: Institute of Health Equity, 2020); UK2070 Commission, *Make No Little Plans: Acting at Scale for a Fairer and Stronger Future* (Sheffield: UK2070 Commission, 2020).

discrimination, coronavirus-related deaths, and food insecurity, as well as adverse impacts on children's life chances.¹⁸ Moreover, widening inequalities are fuelling social polarization as households in affluent and poor areas lead increasingly separate lives.¹⁹ Geographical exclusion and social exclusion together constitute and reconstitute marginal places and marginalized communities.²⁰ Nearness to and presence within poor and socially marginalized communities, therefore, would provide strong evidence of Methodism's theological sensibilities; assessing area variations in deprivation would further identify preferential places to intentionally contextualize the Church's experiences of injustice and its priority for being alongside the poorest in society.

This article examines the distribution of Methodist churches and manses in one region: the Manchester and Stockport (M&S) District. The aim is to assess trends and changes in their location against widely accepted measures of neighbourhood deprivation. The extent to which churches and manses are based in or near deprived areas reflects opportunities for identifying with people experiencing poverty, exercising a ministry of presence, and developing local partnerships in social and community projects. A sustained, disproportionate presence in deprived areas would be consistent with a priority for being alongside people experiencing poverty and social marginalization.

The next section describes the study design, followed by presentation of findings. A further section discusses implications for the Methodist Church, the meaning and significance of solidarity within marginalized communities, and a depiction of how that understanding is shared among Methodist congregations. Directions for further research are also outlined.

18. Centre for Cities, *Cities Outlook 2019* (London: Centre for Cities, 2019); Stephen Jivraj and Omar Khan, 'How Likely Are People from Minority Ethnic Groups to Live in Deprived Neighbourhoods?', in Stephen Jivraj and Ludi Simpson, eds, *Ethnic Identity and Inequalities in Britain: The Dynamics of Diversity* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 199–213; 'Deaths Involving Covid-19 by Local Area and Socioeconomic Deprivation: Deaths Occurring between 1 March and 31 July 2020', Office for National Statistics (28 August 2020), <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvingcovid19bylocalareasanddeprivation/deathsoccurringbetween1marchand31july2020>; Dianna Smith et al., 'Identifying Populations and Areas at Greatest Risk of Household Food Insecurity in England', *Applied Geography*, 91 (2018), 21–31; Pedro Carneiro et al., *The Long Shadow of Deprivation: Differences in Opportunities across England* (London: Social Mobility Commission, 2020).

19. Dorling, *Injustice*, 200–04.

20. Mike Pears, 'Place and Marginality: The Formation of Redemptive Places', in Cloke and Pears, eds, *Mission in Marginal Places: The Theory*, 33–56.

Methods

The findings are based on quantitative data describing levels of socio-economic deprivation in the neighbourhoods where ministers live and churches are located. Although there are various strands of Methodism in Britain, this article is concerned with the Church formed by union of the three largest Methodist denominations in 1932.²¹

Local Methodist churches are grouped into ‘circuits’, which are grouped into ‘districts’. Districts support circuits in advancing national priorities, ‘enabling them to engage with the wider society of the region as a whole and address its concerns.’²² Circuit responsibilities include the deployment of ministers, lay preachers, and paid workers; the purchase and maintenance of manses; the establishment and closure of churches; and arrangements for public worship, local mission initiatives, and participation in the life of the communities served.²³

Although ministers may lead worship in every church in their circuit, they are usually appointed to exercise pastoral charge of particular churches; such appointments tend to concentrate their duties.²⁴ As well as oversight of pastoral care, worship, and mission, ministers in pastoral charge have responsibilities for leadership, management—including property and governance—and chairing church councils. Additionally, presbyters and deacons promise to uphold ‘God’s commitment to human community, to our neighbourhoods and all who live within them’ during their service of welcome into each circuit appointment.²⁵ Linking ministers to the churches where they exercise pastoral charge may shape their ministry in local communities; hence this relationship is explored in this study rather than ministers’ somewhat looser association with all churches in their circuit.

Ministers usually take up residence in their appointed circuit, which is expected to follow connexional guidance on the provision of adequate accommodation.²⁶ Additionally, manses should be ‘close or not too far away

21. Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 186–90.

22. The Methodist Church, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2020), II:420, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/18420/conf-2020-cpd-vol-2.pdf>.

23. *Ibid.* 464–514.

24. Neil Cockling, ‘Has the Stationing of Methodist Presbyters within Circuits Become a Legal Fiction?’, *Theology and Ministry*, 5 (2018), 4.1–4.19, https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/theologyandministry/TheologyandMinistry5_4.pdf.

25. Methodist Church, *Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 1999), 359, 361.

26. Methodist Church, *Constitutional Practice*, II:775.

from the main church over which the occupant will have pastoral charge (within 1.5 miles or 15 minutes' walk)' and 'shops, schools, buses, doctors' surgeries, and other facilities within a reasonable distance'.²⁷ Circuits are expected to 'review at intervals of not more than four years whether the buildings [including manses] are in the right places'.²⁸ However, housing of the size and type required may be limited in some localities.

Data

This analysis uses an index of multiple deprivation representing the experiences of people living in small neighbourhoods in 2004, 2007, 2010, 2015, and 2019.²⁹ Each index combines measures of income poverty, educational disadvantage, poor health, housing barriers, crime, and other indicators of unmet needs due to limited resources, lack of opportunity, and limited choice. These indicators and the resulting deprivation index are calculated for Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in England, as shown on the Church's webmap.³⁰ LSOAs divide the country into small neighbourhoods of similar population size, approximately 1,500 residents or 650 households.³¹

Data for LSOAs are liable to blunt extremes of poverty and affluence but the distribution of deprivation at neighbourhood levels is broadly consistent over time.³² Following the 2011 census, the number of LSOAs increased and some boundaries were modified. The indicators forming each index have also changed as new ones were added and others dropped or revised, so fluctuations in relative deprivation in the vicinity of some churches or manses may not represent real changes or trends.

Although some disadvantaged people live in the least deprived areas, and not everyone in a deprived area is disadvantaged, the index of multiple deprivation identifies localities where poverty of resources, poverty of relationships, and poverty of identity accumulate, and where disadvantaged

27. 'Property Handbook: Guidelines for Manses', The Methodist Church (September 2018), 4, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/9346/2018-guidelines-for-manses.pdf>.

28. Methodist Church, *Constitutional Practice*, II:955.

29. 'English Indices of Deprivation', Ministry of Housing, Communities, & Local Government (last updated 10 December 2020), <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/english-indices-of-deprivation>.

30. 'Advanced Version of the Methodist Webmap: Deprivation Indices', The Methodist Church, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/statistics-for-mission/methodist-church-advanced-map/>.

31. Output Areas were defined for the 2001 census; the indices of multiple deprivation for 2004 were the first to use this geography.

32. Tom Smith et al., *The English Indices of Deprivation 2015: Research Report* (London: Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015), 49–50.

groups are concentrated.³³ Such localities might be considered preferential places for mission, discipleship, and ministry with people in poor and socially marginalized communities.

Datasets were compiled identifying churches and ministers in pastoral charge. These data were drawn from directories produced by the M&S District. Details were checked online and with individual ministers where records were uncertain. Membership figures were included to represent the scale and perhaps the vitality and resilience of Methodism's presence. Churches and manses were then linked to their LSOA and its deprivation index score via their postcodes, which represent mail delivery addresses in a street or part of a street. LSOAs within half a mile of each church were designated catchments entailing no more than a short walking distance. Postcodes were also used to calculate travel distances between manses and churches.³⁴

In 2010, midway through the study period, fourteen out of twenty circuits (70 per cent) in the M&S District comprised between five and eight churches (range 3–21), and 70 per cent of ministers typically held pastoral responsibility for two or three churches (range 1–8). A few churches reported two ministers in pastoral charge. In circuits with one ministerial appointment, the minister exercised pastoral charge of all churches. Ministers retired from active service, known as supernumeraries, occasionally took pastoral charge to support a minister during a probationary year or a period of ill health, or to cover an interregnum between ministers. All ministers and supernumeraries in pastoral charge of at least one church were included in the analysis. Ministers without any pastoral charge were excluded: some served as hospital chaplains, worked in education, or held district posts; most, however, were supernumeraries. Ministers of other denominations in ecumenical projects, including those with pastoral oversight of Methodist members, were excluded because their housing needs would not be within the remit of the Methodist Church.

Analysis

The findings are presented as basic descriptive statistics for quintiles of the national distribution of multiple deprivation, each quintile containing 20 per cent of LSOAs in England and a similar proportion of the population. These

33. 'The Web of Poverty: Area-Based Poverty and Exclusion in England', Church Urban Fund (2011), https://cuf.org.uk/uploads/resources/Area-Based-Poverty-Full-Report_2011.pdf; Darren McGarvey, *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass* (London: Picador, 2018); Lisa McKenzie, *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015).

34. 'Mileage Calculator', Automobile Association, <https://www.theaa.com/driving/mileage-calculator.jsp>.

findings show the extent to which churches and manses were located in the most deprived and least deprived neighbourhoods nationally.

The findings are also compared with the distribution of area deprivation within the M&S District. This profile is based on LSOAs considered to lie within the district's sphere of responsibility. Its boundary was interpolated because districts and circuits are not precisely defined and their extent is often unrelated to local authority or other formally defined areas (see appendix). Hence the set of LSOAs, so identified, approximates the M&S District. Its usefulness is twofold: first, the distribution of deprivation across these LSOAs provides local context for the study; secondly, it specifies the null hypothesis. If the location of churches and manses were unrelated to area deprivation then, all else being equal, their distribution would reflect the district's deprivation profile. Statistical methods were used to test whether observed distributions were skewed toward the most or least deprived areas. If the distribution of churches or manses had a less than 5 per cent probability of occurring by chance (significance level $p < 0.05$), this would indicate a disparity associated with deprivation or something associated with deprivation. The findings that show a significant bias toward deprived areas would be consistent with a priority for being alongside people in poor and socially marginalized communities.

Results

The M&S District covers much of Greater Manchester, a mostly built-up metropolitan area, plus adjoining rural parts of Cheshire and Derbyshire. With predominantly inner city and suburban churches, the district is more representative of Methodism in other conurbations than in the country as a whole (Table 1).³⁵ However, membership in the district has paralleled the national trend, declining 3 per cent a year on average since 2000 (Figure 2).

The M&S District is well placed to investigate recent changes in the presence and reach of Methodism because it encompasses extremes of income, poverty, and health.³⁶ The district contains a disproportionate share of deprived areas with around a third of its neighbourhoods among the most deprived fifth of areas in England, compared with around 15 per cent among the least deprived fifth of areas nationally (Table 2). As noted above, the distribution of churches and manses in the M&S District would be expected to

35. 'Statistics for Mission,' The Methodist Church (2014), Table 4, 13, <https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-2014-37-statistics-for-mission.pdf>.

36. Kit Codling and Jessica Allen, *Health Equity in Greater Manchester: The Marmot Review 2020* (London: Institute of Health Equity, 2020).

match Table 2 if their locations were unrelated to area deprivation. During the study period, the district apparently had its share of ministers according to current stationing criteria, so in practice they might be deployed to serve local communities according to area differences in socio-economic and material living conditions.³⁷

TABLE 1 Local Methodist churches by neighbourhood type, 2013 (per cent)

	Methodist Connexion*	M&S District
City Centre	2	1
Inner City	6	15
Council Estate	5	8
Suburban	24	39
Small Town	21	16
Village Rural	43	20
Number of churches (= 100 per cent)	4,812	145

* England, Scotland, Wales, Channel Islands, and Isle of Man

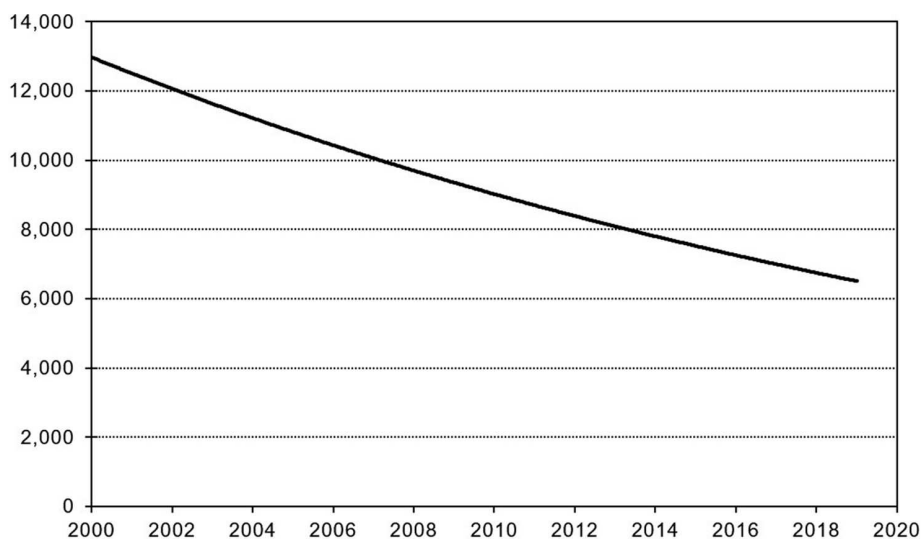


FIGURE 2 Local Methodist church membership in the M&S District, 2000–19

37. Cockling, 'Stationing of Methodist Presbyters', 4.12.

TABLE 2 M&S District: Lower-level super output areas by area deprivation, 2004–19 (per cent)[†]

	2004	2007	2010	2015	2019
Fifth most deprived areas	35	32	32	31	34
2nd quintile	22	21	21	21	21
3rd quintile	17	17	17	16	15
4th quintile	14	16	15	16	16
Fifth least deprived areas	12	14	15	15	14
Number of LSOAs (= 100 per cent)	1,295	1,295	1,295	1,321	1,321

[†] See Appendix for definition of M&S District.

Methodist Churches

Churches were well represented in deprived neighbourhoods with nearly half located in the most deprived two-fifths of areas nationally at each time point (Table 3). Statistically speaking, this disparity was no more than would be expected given the prevalence of deprived areas in the M&S District. For example, thirty-seven churches (28 per cent) were located in the most deprived fifth of areas in 2019, whereas forty-five (34 per cent) would be expected by chance alone; considerably more than this would be required to indicate a bias toward areas of high socio-economic deprivation. In contrast, there were more churches than expected in less deprived areas across the study period, but apart from 2007, this bias toward less deprived areas did not reach acceptable levels of statistical significance.

Comparable results were found when considering wider church catchments, including areas up to half a mile distant (Table 4). Although more than half the

TABLE 3 M&S District: Churches by area deprivation, 2004–19

	2004 No. (%)	2007 No. (%)	2010 No. (%)	2015 No. (%)	2019 No. (%)
Fifth most deprived areas	51 (31)	41 (25)	33 (22)	35 (25)	37 (28)
2nd quintile	28 (17)	33 (20)	30 (20)	31 (22)	25 (19)
3rd quintile	27 (16)	22 (14)	26 (18)	19 (13)	18 (14)
4th quintile	34 (21)	36 (22)	29 (20)	33 (23)	31 (23)
Fifth least deprived areas	25 (15)	29 (18)	30 (20)	24 (17)	22 (17)
Number of churches	165 (100)	161 (100)	148 (100)	142 (100)	133 (100)
Chi-square test*	ns	p < 0.05	ns	ns	ns

* Expected values estimated from the proportions in Table 2 (ns = not significant, p > 0.05).

TABLE 4 M&S District: Church catchments by area deprivation, 2004–19[†]

	2004 No. (%)	2007 No. (%)	2010 No. (%)	2015 No. (%)	2019 No. (%)
Fifth most deprived areas	231 (35)	196 (31)	175 (30)	175 (29)	187 (33)
2nd quintile	164 (25)	160 (25)	146 (25)	144 (24)	132 (23)
3rd quintile	115 (18)	117 (18)	98 (17)	107 (18)	92 (16)
4th quintile	72 (11)	81 (13)	82 (14)	78 (13)	70 (12)
Fifth least deprived areas	72 (11)	85 (13)	92 (16)	90 (15)	84 (15)
Number of LSOAs	654 (100)	639 (100)	593 (100)	594 (100)	565 (100)
Chi-square test*	ns	p < 0.05	ns	ns	ns

[†] See Appendix for definition of church catchments.

* Expected values estimated from the proportions in Table 2 (ns=not significant, p>0.05).

LSOAs in church catchments were among the most deprived areas nationally, this was no more than would be expected in the M&S District. In particular, there were more churches than expected in the second most deprived quintile but apart from 2007, church locations were not skewed significantly toward deprived catchments.

Almost one in five churches closed during the study period, and areas across the deprivation spectrum lost churches. The number of churches in each quintile fluctuated somewhat, partly reflecting changes in the measurement of relative deprivation. There was no firm evidence, however, that church closures were systematically associated with levels of deprivation in their immediate neighbourhoods or their wider catchments.

Church Membership

Across the study period, there were fewer members than expected at churches in the most deprived areas and more members than expected at churches in least deprived areas (Table 5). These differences were not statistically significant, however: church membership was not skewed disproportionately toward areas of lesser deprivation. Membership declined by over 40 per cent between 2004 and 2019 in the district as a whole; all areas were affected and decline did not vary systematically with neighbourhood deprivation.

Although small churches were found across the deprivation spectrum, churches with the largest membership were often found in less deprived areas, especially toward the end of the study period (Table 6). Overall, however, differences in typical (median) church sizes and their variability were not associated with neighbourhood deprivation.

TABLE 5 M&S District: Number of members by church area deprivation, 2004–19[†]

	2004 No. (%)	2007 No. (%)	2010 No. (%)	2015 No. (%)	2019 No. (%)
Fifth most deprived areas	2,996 (26)	2,005 (20)	1,834 (20)	1,708 (23)	1,639 (26)
2nd quintile	1,725 (15)	1,806 (18)	1,655 (18)	1,369 (19)	900 (14)
3rd quintile	1,944 (17)	1,626 (16)	1,284 (14)	829 (11)	853 (13)
4th quintile	2,569 (23)	2,008 (20)	1,739 (19)	1,604 (22)	1,235 (19)
Fifth least deprived areas	2,097 (19)	2,426 (25)	2,519 (28)	1,888 (26)	1,781 (28)
Total	11,331 (100)	9,871 (100)	9,031 (100)	7,398 (100)	6,408 (100)

[†] Ratio of observed to expected members, estimated from the proportions in Table 2, all lie within their 95 per cent confidence intervals.

TABLE 6 M&S District: Church membership by church area deprivation, 2004–19

	2004 Median (range)	2007 Median (range)	2010 Median (range)	2015 Median (range)	2019 Median (range)
Fifth most deprived areas	41.0 (8–213)	34.0 (7–172)	47.0 (5–168)	43.0 (3–150)	43.5 (3–123)
2nd quintile	61.0 (12–167)	50.0 (8–152)	49.5 (16–144)	36.0 (7–180)	25.0 (4–138)
3rd quintile	45.0 (6–210)	40.0 (6–323)	31.0 (6–182)	29.0 (4–133)	40.0 (4–119)
4th quintile	54.0 (10–314)	47.5 (11–189)	43.0 (12–320)	36.0 (7–297)	34.0 (4–304)
Fifth least deprived areas	41.0 (6–360)	52.0 (6–363)	45.0 (7–389)	57.0 (4–419)	69.0 (8–380)
All	48.0 (6–360)	46.0 (6–363)	45.0 (5–389)	37.0 (3–419)	38.0 (3–380)
Medians test*	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Kruskal-Wallis (variance) test*	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns

* ns = not significant ($p > 0.05$)

TABLE 7 M&S District: Ministers in pastoral charge by manse area deprivation, 2004–19

	2004 No. (%)	2007 No. (%)	2010 No. (%)	2015 No. (%)	2019 No. (%)
Fifth most deprived areas	11 (15)	8 (12)	4 (7)	6 (12)	7 (18)
2nd quintile	11 (15)	14 (22)	10 (16)	8 (15)	6 (15)
3rd quintile	17 (24)	11 (17)	10 (16)	5 (10)	5 (13)
4th quintile	15 (21)	16 (25)	19 (31)	15 (29)	8 (21)
Fifth least deprived areas	18 (25)	16 (25)	18 (30)	18 (35)	13 (33)
Number of ministers	72 (100)	65 (100)	61 (100)	52 (100)	39 (100)
Chi-square test*	$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.005$	$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.01$

* Expected values estimated from the proportions in Table 2.

Methodist Manses

Table 7 shows the distribution of manses occupied by ministers with pastoral charge of at least one church. For each year for which area deprivation is measured, more manses than expected were found in the least deprived neighbourhoods. Overall, half or more of manses were found in the least deprived two-fifths of areas nationally, significantly more than the 30 per cent or so that would have occurred by chance in the M&S District. The number of ministers in pastoral charge of a church almost halved across the study period. Manses closed in all areas, but their significant under-representation in deprived neighbourhoods continued throughout.

Pastoral Charges

Comparison of Tables 3 and 7 shows that the number of ministers in pastoral charge declined faster than the number of churches requiring pastoral oversight. Road distances between ministers' manses and their designated churches increased as a result. The vast majority of such distances in 2004, 81 per cent, were under three miles compared with 55 per cent in 2019, and distances of three or more miles separating churches and manses increased accordingly (Table 8). Churches in the middle of the deprivation spectrum were most affected by lengthening distances from their minister's manse, followed by those in the most deprived areas. There was no evidence that manses were closer to pastoral churches in the most deprived areas, or more likely to be within the 1.5 mile guideline, than those in less deprived areas.

Comparison of Tables 3 and 7 further suggests that ministers' manses and the churches for which they held pastoral charge were often found in areas

that differed markedly in socio-economic terms. Across the study period, most churches were in areas more deprived than that of the manse where their pastoral minister lived (Figure 3). Around a third of church neighbourhoods were at least 20 per cent more deprived, on the national deprivation scale, than the neighbourhoods of their pastoral ministers' manses. In contrast, fewer than one in ten church neighbourhoods were 20 per cent less deprived than that of the manse where their pastoral minister lived. The social distance between church and manse neighbourhoods remained fairly constant over time and there was no clear trend toward closer socio-economic alignment.

TABLE 8 M&S District: Distances under three miles between church and manse by church area deprivation, 2004–19

	2004 No. (%)	2007 No. (%)	2010 No. (%)	2015 No. (%)	2019 No. (%)
Fifth most deprived areas	39 (75)	27 (69)	26 (87)	19 (54)	17 (46)
2nd quintile	21 (72)	31 (84)	27 (84)	22 (73)	16 (62)
3rd quintile	24 (86)	16 (70)	15 (58)	10 (56)	8 (47)
4th quintile	28 (85)	26 (72)	24 (80)	23 (68)	17 (55)
Fifth least deprived areas	23 (92)	23 (82)	22 (76)	22 (85)	15 (68)
All under three miles	135 (81)	123 (75)	114 (78)	96 (67)	73 (55)
All three miles or more	32 (19)	40 (25)	33 (22)	47 (33)	60 (45)
No. of pastoral charges	167 (100)	163 (100)	147 (100)	143 (100)	133 (100)

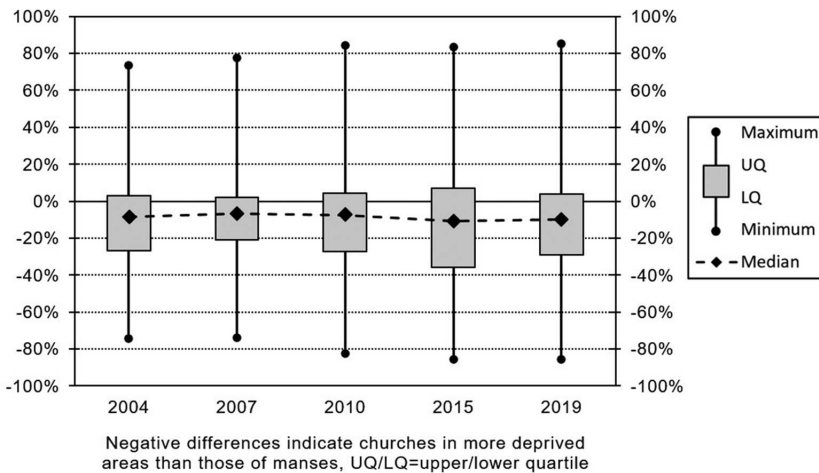


FIGURE 3 M&S District: Percentage differences between church and manse area deprivation, 2004–19

Discussion

The hypothesis under investigation was that the distribution of churches and manses in the M&S District would be skewed toward the most deprived neighbourhoods to reflect Methodism's theological sensibilities and priority for engaging with poor and marginalized communities. The study covered a period of church closures and falling membership, and a further aim was to investigate whether contraction and decline varied with neighbourhood deprivation.

Methodist churches were well represented in deprived areas in the M&S District, and declining membership did not lead to systematic changes in the size and distribution of churches across areas that differed according to socio-economic deprivation. Churches closed and contracted in all areas, largely irrespective of differences in deprivation, resulting in a reduced presence throughout the district. However, the findings did not support the hypothesis that priority for marginalized communities would translate into a sustained and disproportionate number of churches in deprived neighbourhoods. Churches were no more likely to be found in deprived areas than would be expected given the prevalence of area deprivation in the M&S District, and churches in or near the most deprived areas were no more protected from closure than churches in less deprived areas.

The findings show further that manses were not aligned with the Church's priority toward marginalized communities. Manses were located predominantly in the least deprived areas, and most ministers lived in neighbourhoods less deprived than those of the churches for which they held pastoral responsibility. As churches closed, journeys between those that remained open for worship and their pastoral minister's manse lengthened, and there was no move toward ministers living nearer churches in more deprived areas.

These findings broadly replicate those at the national level, which show Methodist churches distributed across the deprivation spectrum with no clear bias toward the most deprived areas, and manses found predominantly in least deprived areas.³⁸ Lack of association between the distribution of churches and area deprivation may reflect the fact that many churches in the M&S District date from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when patterns of church attendance during a period of growth were quite different. Jessop observes that 'church trends relating to decline and cultural change often impact first in areas of poverty and socio-economic challenges.'³⁹ That may have been case when

38. Michael Hirst, 'Poverty, Place and Presence: Positioning Methodism in England, 2001 to 2011', *Theology and Ministry*, 4 (2016), 4.1–4.25, https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/theologyandministry/TheologyandMinistry4_4.pdf.

39. Jessop, 'Church in the Margins', 1.

British Methodism began to decline in the latter half of the twentieth century,⁴⁰ but there was no firm, systematic evidence from this analysis that church closures and membership losses during the study period were concentrated in areas of greatest socio-economic deprivation. Nonetheless, recent decisions to maintain, close, or relocate churches and manses did not reflect a preference for sustaining a disproportionate presence in present-day marginalized communities, or for maintaining manses that were nearest churches in deprived areas.

This is not to imply any intention to move a Methodist presence away from deprived areas. Circuit decisions regarding churches and manses are likely subject to a variety of factors considered on a case-by-case basis. They illustrate, however, the challenge of aligning local decision-making with the Church's self-proclaimed priorities, and the difficulties of fostering an understanding that circuits and churches are 'in connexion' with each other, mutually accountable and committed to sharing resources.⁴¹ Implementing these priorities in the context of declining resources, fewer ministers, struggling churches, and 'creeping congregationalism' remains one of the most significant challenges facing the Methodist Church in Britain.⁴²

That most Methodist manses were located in less deprived neighbourhoods is consistent with David Hempton's argument that the decline of Christianity in Western Europe reflects a gradual drift toward social acceptance and respectability: toward centres of power, cultural influence, and social forces that bring about decline.⁴³ This repositioning, he suggests, can be examined at the neighbourhood level by mapping their local presence. Thus Hempton notes that the 'conspicuous under-provision [of clergy] in working-class neighbourhoods compared with middle class districts' is indicative of a Church that has lost its zeal 'to recruit members and effectively disseminate its message . . . a pattern that is obviously unsustainable over the long haul'.⁴⁴

The arguments advanced by Jessop and Hempton suggest that decisions on the location of manses are often shaped by socio-cultural changes rather than ecclesial or missional priorities, which raises questions about implementing

40. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 214.

41. Martyn Atkins, *Discipleship and the People Called Methodists* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing, 2010).

42. 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, 1999), 148–56.

43. Hempton, *Methodism*, 178–201.

44. *Ibid.* 199–200.

the Methodist priority toward marginalized communities. Separate evidence indicates that deployment of clergy may be shaped by ‘market forces’, including the financial resources of congregations, leading to fewer clergy in the most deprived districts of the country.⁴⁵ Social and physical distancing between churches and manses may hinder community-based approaches to mission and ministry in disadvantaged church neighbourhoods.⁴⁶ Living socially distanced in less deprived areas than their church neighbourhood may constrain ministers’ capabilities and opportunities to identify with people in marginalized communities. Living several miles away may also mean that journeys within church neighbourhoods are more often by car than on foot, further reducing ministers’ opportunities to encounter everyday realities of life and engage with local concerns in the communities they serve.

An emphasis on physical nearness and presence might seem inconsequential when developing district and circuit strategies for mission and ministry; however, incarnational principles point to shared experiences of everyday life in particular places as underpinning community relationships and identity—key constituents of ‘solidarity’ at the local level.⁴⁷ Although there is no word in the Hebrew Bible or the Christian New Testament for solidarity, its meaning and significance permeate both scriptures where it is expressed in residential terms that emphasize nearness and presence.⁴⁸ In the Hebrew Bible, God’s covenant with Israel is described as God placing a dwelling in our midst and walking among us (Lev. 26:11–12). Christians saw this promise fulfilled when ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us’ or, as *The Message Bible* paraphrase puts it, ‘moved into the neighbourhood’ (John 1:14).

Samuel Wells argues that God being with us not only defines the nature, scope, and purpose of Jesus’s life and ministry, but fulfils the fundamental purpose of creation, salvation, and redemption.⁴⁹ Human solidarity is made possible through God’s solidarity with humanity, as Jesus shows in his relationships with God and with people.⁵⁰ Solidarity with God and solidarity with people are inseparable in Christian ministry and discipleship. The Church’s calling is to embody those relationships, and each year British Methodists are encouraged

45. Michael Hirst, ‘Clergy in Place in England: Bias to the Poor or Inverse Care Law?’, *Population, Space and Place*, 23/8 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2068>.

46. Ann Morisy, *Beyond the Good Samaritan: Community Ministry and Mission* (London: Continuum, 1997).

47. Keeble, *Mission-With*, 206–25.

48. Gerald Beyer, ‘The Meaning of Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching’, *Political Theology*, 15/1 (2014), 7–25.

49. Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Chichester: Wiley, 2015), 24.

50. Beyer, ‘The Meaning of Solidarity’; Wells, *Nazareth Manifesto*, 78.

to gather for a Covenant Service in which they renew a commitment to live within the loving relationship that God offers in Jesus Christ, in unity with all humanity—commitments that may lead to encounters and places contrary to ‘natural inclinations and material interests.’⁵¹

Writers from various traditions have considered what it might mean to be present in marginalized communities and build genuine solidarity. Wells describes being with others as enjoying and valuing people for their own sake—for who they are—bringing ‘a profound sense of connectedness and fellow-feeling, based on mutual assistance, reciprocal compassion, and eternal companionship.’⁵² Mark Votava’s personal experiences in downtown Tacoma, Washington, embody this vision and lead him to conclude that ‘practice-based theology [lies] within the context of shared life, proximity, living into the ordinary, seeing the sacredness of life and a commitment to a particular place where the body of Christ can practice their faith as a way of life together.’⁵³ Al Barrett considers further the scope of such ‘radical receptivity,’ especially in racialized societies.⁵⁴ In a comparable vein, Ann Morisy argues the significance of encountering ‘those who are different from us,’ a point echoed by Cloke and Pears, who emphasize ‘hospitable dialogue’ that welcomes ‘otherness.’⁵⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer highlights the fundamental role of listening attentively to empathize and identify with the other person and honour him or her, while Miroslav Volf emphasizes vulnerability, dependency, and social relationships in developing theologies of ‘embrace.’⁵⁶

A common thread running through these diverse voices is that solidarity with people in marginalized communities is not primarily about social activism but is rooted in the ordinariness of everyday encounters and relationships in a particular place.⁵⁷ Although ministries of presence may lead to

51. Methodist Church, *Worship Book*, 289.

52. Wells, *Nazareth Manifesto*, 197, part III, *passim*.

53. Mark Votava, *The Communal Imagination: Finding a Way to Share Life Together* (Portland, OR: Urban Loft, 2014), 50.

54. Al Barrett, ‘What Is Radical Receptivity?’, BAME Anglican (3 September 2018), <https://bameanglican.wordpress.com/2018/09/22/what-is-radical-receptivity/>.

55. Ann Morisy, *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission* (London: Continuum, 2004), 148; Cloke and Pears, eds, *Mission in Marginal Places: The Theory*, 9–11; Paul Cloke and Mike Pears, eds, *Mission in Marginal Places: The Praxis* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2016), 3–6.

56. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, tr. John W. Doberstein (London: SCM Press, 1954), 75; Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

57. Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, and Dwight Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighbourhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

involvement in social or community projects, as Cloke and Pears illustrate, simply being with people on the margins of society transforms the lives of those involved.⁵⁸ Indeed, Henri Nouwen cautions against the ‘desire to be useful, to do something significant, or to be part of some impressive project . . . working directly for social progress.’⁵⁹ Wells appeals to an allegorical interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) when concluding that receiving from the despised, rejected, and oppressed Samaritan is an encounter with Jesus.⁶⁰ Methodists glimpse this truth each time they sing ‘Where can we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?’ and are answered from the key Bible passage underpinning liberation theology (Matt. 25:31–46): that Jesus is found among the vulnerable and the poor—the hungry, the homeless, and the outcast.⁶¹ So Wells concludes: ‘The Christian relationship to poverty is thus not fundamentally working on behalf of the poor but developing reciprocal relationships and expecting to receive from the poor.’⁶² Hence Pope Francis’s challenge to clergy and laity alike to become ‘a Church which is poor and for the poor . . . to let ourselves be evangelized by them.’⁶³

Limitations

The scope of this analysis is restricted in two important ways. First, there is no readily available data on the socio-economic profile or residential location of Methodist members and adherents. Nationally representative surveys show that churchgoers are drawn disproportionately from well-educated, middle-income, middle-class sections of society.⁶⁴ Such backgrounds risk reinforcing social power and privilege, and limiting the scope for mixing across status and cultural boundaries within congregations, as well as social engagement in deprived areas where churches are situated. Additionally, lay roles in preaching, church administration, and finance are often filled by people from middle-

58. Cloke and Pears, eds, *Mission in Marginal Places: The Praxis*; Morisy, *Beyond the Good Samaritan*, 6–10; Votava, *Communal Imagination*; Walton, ‘Social Holiness’, 32–3.

59. Henri Nouwen, *Gracias: A Latin American Journal* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 147–8.

60. Wells, *Nazareth Manifesto*, 86–97.

61. Allan Charles Dickinson, ‘Where Can We Find You, Lord Jesus Our Master?’, in *Singing the Faith* (London: Published on behalf of the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes by Hymns Ancient & Modern, 2011), hymn 672.

62. Wells, *Nazareth Manifesto*, 65.

63. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2013), 156, http://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.pdf.

64. John Sawkins, Paul Seaman, and Hector Williams, ‘Church Attendance in Great Britain: An Ordered Logit Approach’, *Applied Economics*, 29/2 (1997), 125–34.

class backgrounds because they are likely to have the required skills from their secular occupations or to meet the educational criteria to undertake formal training.⁶⁵

The preponderance of manse in less deprived areas, several miles from ministers' churches in deprived neighbourhoods, may reflect the residential preferences of lay leaders, some of whom will have been directly involved in deciding where to maintain or buy a manse. It would be useful, therefore, to document the socio-economic profiles of lay leaders and church members in the M&S District to evaluate further the presence and reach of Methodism at the community level.

Second, there is no systematic or complete record of mission or social projects in deprived areas of the district. Some projects are widely publicized: a town centre restaurant and resource project; a church plant in an overspill estate; a charity shop offering employment training; a city centre homelessness project; a church officially closed now repurposed for use by community groups and independent congregations. But much else, including provision of emergency food aid, debt advice, luncheon clubs, and school holiday meals for children at risk, is largely unknown beyond local circles.⁶⁶ In addition, several language or ethnically configured Methodist congregations related to national or cultural groupings gather for worship on Methodist premises, often in more deprived areas, but so far they have not been integrated into the Connexion or the M&S District.

The analysis reported here has focused on traditional forms of being church—local congregations with clergy—but it may be that inherited, institutional models are less relevant in marginal places.⁶⁷ It would be instructive, therefore, to chart the scope, purpose, and reach of how different forms of church engage with people in marginalized communities, and equally important to consider the opportunity costs of not doing so.

65. Nicholas Paterson, Ian Paterson, and John Sawkins, 'A Demographic, Educational and Occupational Analysis of Methodist Local Preachers in England', Department of Economics, Discussion Paper 98/6 (Edinburgh: School of Management, Heriot-Watt University, 1998).

66. See, for example, The Salt Cellar restaurant, Oldham (<http://www.saltcellar.org.uk/>); The Welcome, Longridge (<https://www.thewelcome.org.uk/>); Methodist Helping Hand, Hyde (<https://methodisthelpinghandshyde.wordpress.com/about/>); 'Responding to the Housing and Homelessness Crisis: Report Spring Synods 2019', The Methodist Church (2019), <https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/11408/responding-to-the-housing-and-homelessness-crisis-report-to-spring-synods-2019.pdf>; Gorse Hill Methodist Church Café (<http://www.stretfordandurmstonmethodistchurches.org.uk/churches/gorse-hill.html>).

67. Tim Chester, *Unreached: Growing Churches in Working-Class and Deprived Areas* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012); Cloke and Pears, eds, *Mission in Marginal Places: The Theory*; Jessop, 'Church in the Margins'.

Conclusion

Religious organizations often identify priorities for mission and ministry. The challenge is to understand the extent to which these priorities are achieved and in what ways. This article investigates the Methodist Church's long-held priority for being alongside people experiencing poverty and social marginalization. In the absence of evaluative approaches proposed by the Church to examine its priorities, and lacking ethnographic accounts of personal encounters and social engagement in marginalized communities, this article explores trends and changes in the distribution of churches and manses. The expectation was that a sustained, disproportionate presence in or near areas of socio-economic deprivation would be consistent with the Church's self-proclaimed priority for community, social justice, and mission alongside people experiencing poverty and social marginalization.

The findings show that the distribution of churches in the M&S District did not reflect the Methodist priority toward the poorest and most deprived communities, and the distribution of manses was significantly skewed toward less deprived neighbourhoods. The study covered a period of decline in church membership that affected all areas irrespective of socio-economic deprivation. Evidently, there was no sustained strategy for maintaining a disproportionate presence or reach within deprived neighbourhoods.

How the location of manses allows or constrains ministerial roles and activities merits further investigation. Further inquiries might explore ministers' experiences of identity, injustice, and community, as well as how the Church's presence is perceived within local neighbourhoods. Concentrating manses in less deprived areas may indicate that Methodism accords little value or virtue in sustaining a physical presence in marginalized places, and risks signalling lack of solidarity with the communities living there, including those minority ethnic groups that predominate in some deprived areas. By comparison, maintaining a credible presence in deprived neighbourhoods could strengthen the Church in speaking prophetically and acting politically alongside people living in marginalized communities.

To bring about a preferential bias toward a sustained presence within marginalized communities, consideration might need to be given to stationing criteria. One criterion currently takes into account the number of church members a minister is expected to serve, but Neil Cockling speculates that stationing might more appropriately be based on 'the number of potential members.'⁶⁸ Taking into account area variations in poverty and deprivation would

68. Cockling, 'Stationing of Methodist Presbyters', 4.11–4.14.

further concentrate attention on engaging with marginalized communities. Privileging ministerial stationing in more deprived districts and circuits would resource churches to develop community ministry in poorer communities and might lead to relocation of manses and a stronger Methodist presence.

Although there were fewer churches than expected in the most deprived areas, according to the research hypothesis, a substantial minority were located in or near such neighbourhoods, providing everyday opportunities for engaging with people experiencing poverty and social marginalization. These churches could form part of the Connexional Strategy for Evangelism and Growth alongside additional resources for planting and pioneering new church formations 'at—and from—the margins'.⁶⁹ The deprivation measures used in this analysis could inform district and circuit decisions on identifying preferential places for such initiatives. These types of considerations may guide decisions on relocating manses, and on winding up activities and sidestepping opportunities that are not central to Church priorities. Continued monitoring of Methodism's presence and reach within deprived areas would also inform progress toward the vision of a 'faithful and preferential bias for people and communities experiencing marginalization'.⁷⁰

Appendix

The M&S District was defined as including LSOAs whose centroids lay within two miles, straight-line distance, of the centroid of a LSOA containing a Methodist church. All Methodist churches in the district open for public worship in 2004 were covered, plus a church that joined the district in 2013/14. Two miles was a pragmatic choice but comparisons with a one-mile or three-mile radius showed no marked differences in the resulting deprivation profiles. Although some LSOAs lay within two miles of more than one church, they were counted only once.

Churches were typically one mile from their nearest neighbouring church (median = 0.9, range 0.3 to 2.8). LSOAs containing a Methodist church represented their immediate vicinity; wider neighbourhoods were defined as including LSOAs whose centroids lay within half a mile of LSOAs containing a church. The aim was to designate catchments entailing no more than short walking distances to a Methodist church.

69. 'God for All', Methodist Church, 64–7.

70. *Ibid.* 64.

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