

# Minority congregations' use of Anglican Church spaces in the Birmingham Diocese

*Dr Demelza Jones, Dr Andrew Smith*



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## Introduction

This brief summary report communicates initial findings of an online survey administered to clergy across the Church of England's Anglican Diocese of Birmingham between November 2014 and January 2015. The survey was designed to provide a snapshot 'map' of the ethno-linguistic minority congregations currently operating in Anglican church spaces across the city-region. The survey also collected data on the characteristics of these congregations (such as members' nationality or nationalities, main language(s) of worship, size of congregation and frequency of meeting), the congregations' activities (e.g. services for the community), and the nature of their relationship with the 'mainstream' Anglican church and the main congregation(s) in their host church setting. The survey attracted responses from 100 clergy with responsibility for parishes across the Birmingham city-region.

Of these 100, a fifth (20) reported that congregation(s) other than their main congregation(s) were currently using Anglican places of worship or church buildings within their parish(es). Of these 20, 11 had multiple minority congregations currently operating within their church spaces. As such the survey identified a total of 38 ethno-linguistic minority-focused congregations operating in Anglican spaces across the city-region.

The Anglican Diocese of Birmingham's geographic domain of responsibility covers not only the city of Birmingham itself, but parts of the surrounding counties and metropolitan boroughs of Solihull, Sandwell, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. As such the Diocese incorporates a variety of geographic contexts – from the densely urbanised inner-city, to the suburban, to rural towns and villages – and consequently a wide range of contexts of ethno-linguistic diversity, migration histories and socio-economic profiles. While the majority of minority congregations meet in the city of Birmingham, a few congregations are also in operation in more suburban or semi-rural locations. Most minority congregations are meeting in ethnically diverse inner-city areas such as Aston, Handsworth, Hockley and Ladywood. However, there are also some congregations meeting in more outlying areas of the city such as King's Heath and Kingstanding.

## Characteristics of congregations

### Nationality/ethnicity and language

Of the 38 minority congregations identified by clergy responding to the survey, the majority are focused around a particular national or ethno-linguistic identity. A breakdown of those ethno-linguistic and national identities on which data was provided in the survey is shown in Figure 1. The

most common ethno-linguistic or national identity was Jamaican / Caribbean (n=6), followed by Indian / South Asian (n=5), then Eritrean (n=4) and Zimbabwean (n=4).

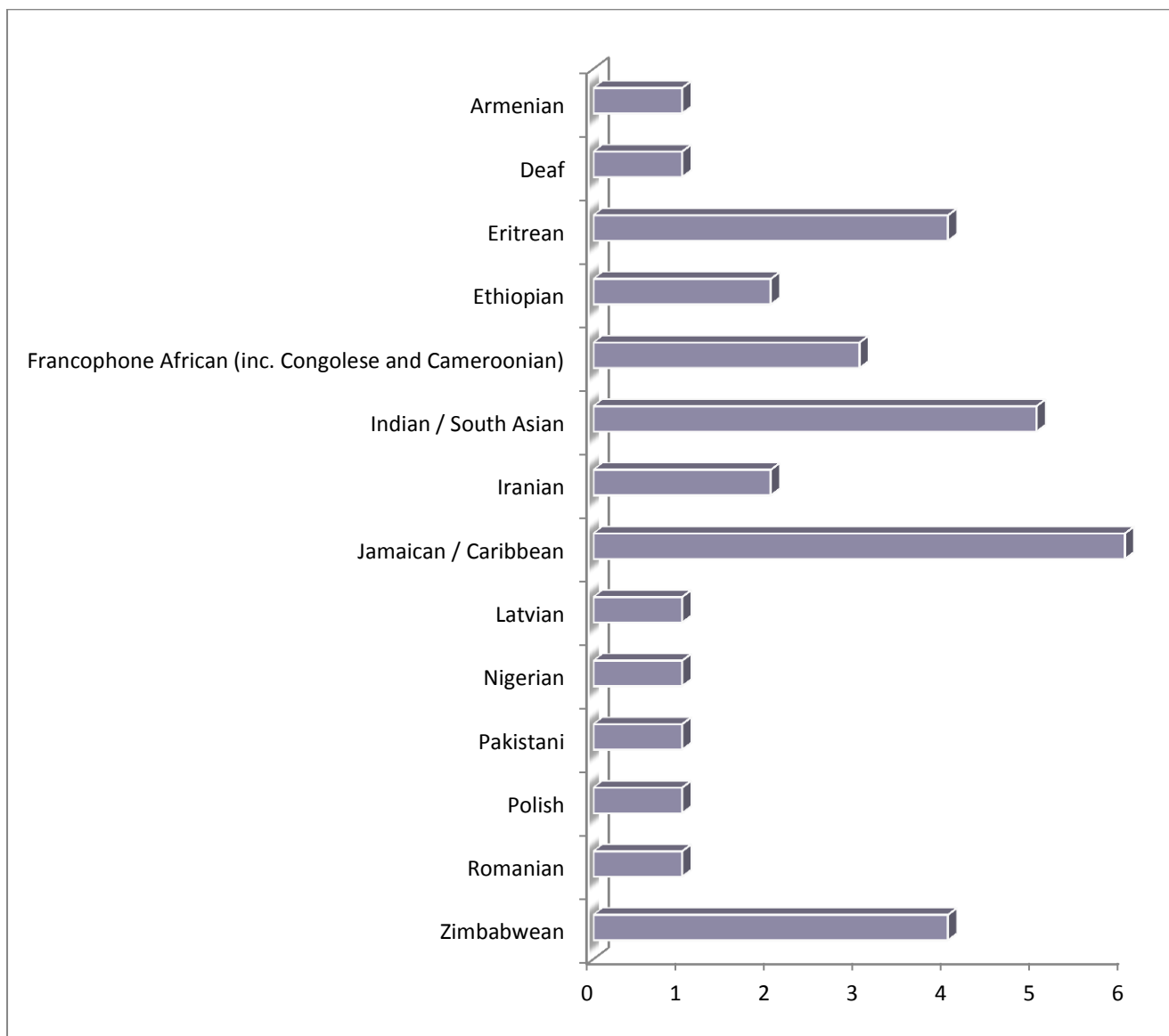


Figure 1: Congregations focused around national / ethno-linguistic groups

Clergy reported that 25 of the 38 congregations identified in the survey have a main language of worship other than English. In a few cases clergy were uncertain what the non-English language used by the congregation was, but, the responses where this information was known identify at least 14 different world languages being used as the main language of worship within Anglican spaces in the Birmingham Diocese (plus British Sign Language). A breakdown of these languages of worship is shown in Figure 2, along with the country with which this language is associated. The most common non-English language in use is Shona – a language spoken in Zimbabwe (n=4), followed by French (n=3). The use of French as a main language of worship reflects the reporting of Francophone African congregations (e.g. Congolese) within the survey, rather than European French congregations.

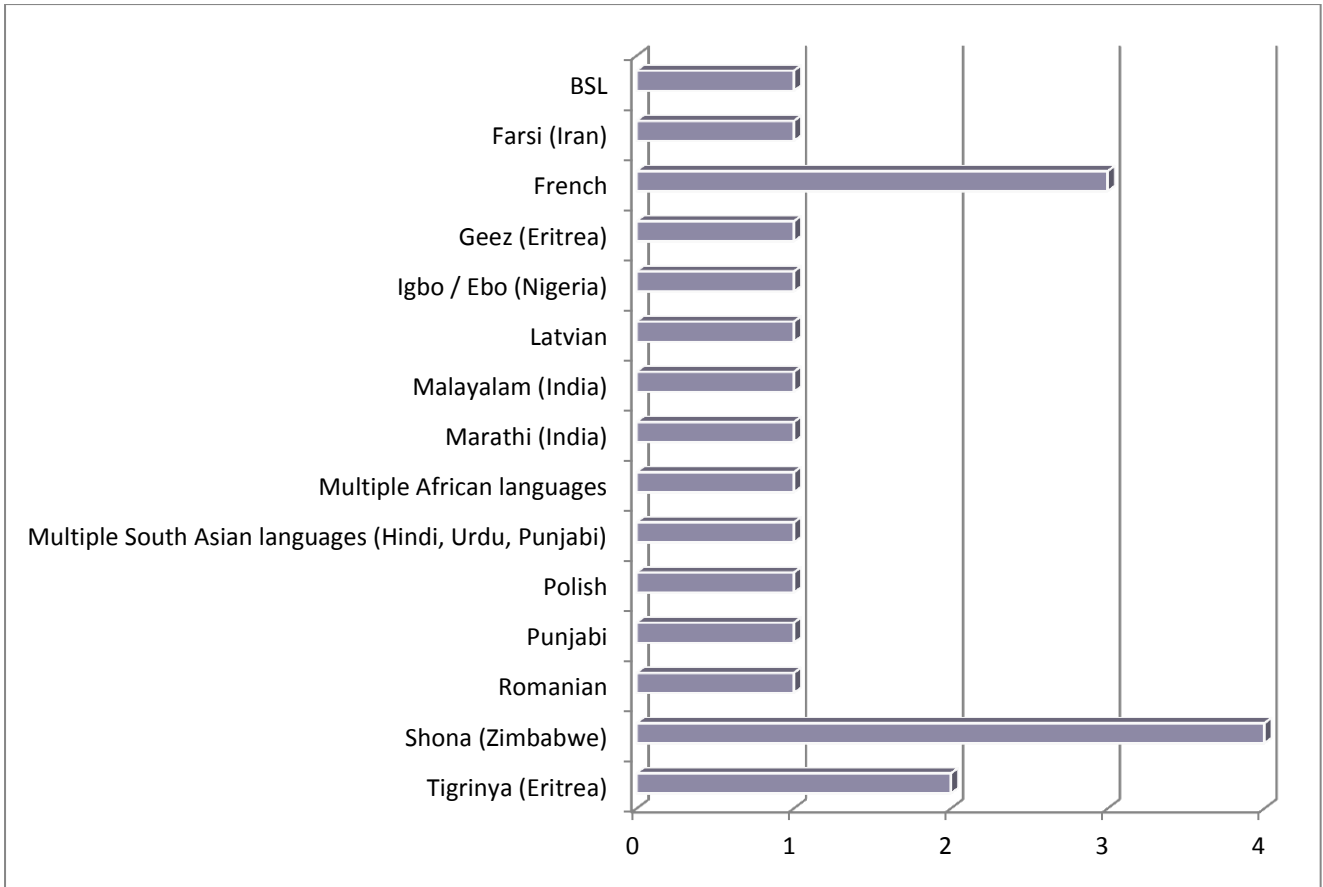


Figure 2: Main languages of worship (non-English)

### Congregations' size, frequency of meeting and members' residence patterns

Where this information was provided (for 30 of the 38 congregations), the survey revealed that the size of minority congregations varied widely – with the smallest reported congregation having just 8 regular members and the largest around 150.

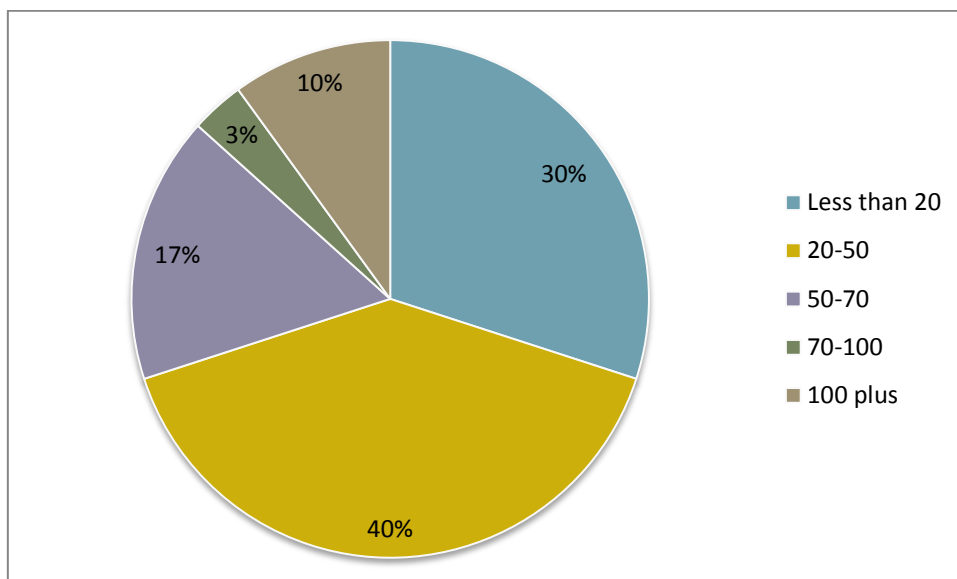


Figure 3: Size of congregations

Almost 3/4 of the congregations for whom information was supplied (33 out of 38) meet at least weekly, with just over a fifth meeting more frequently.

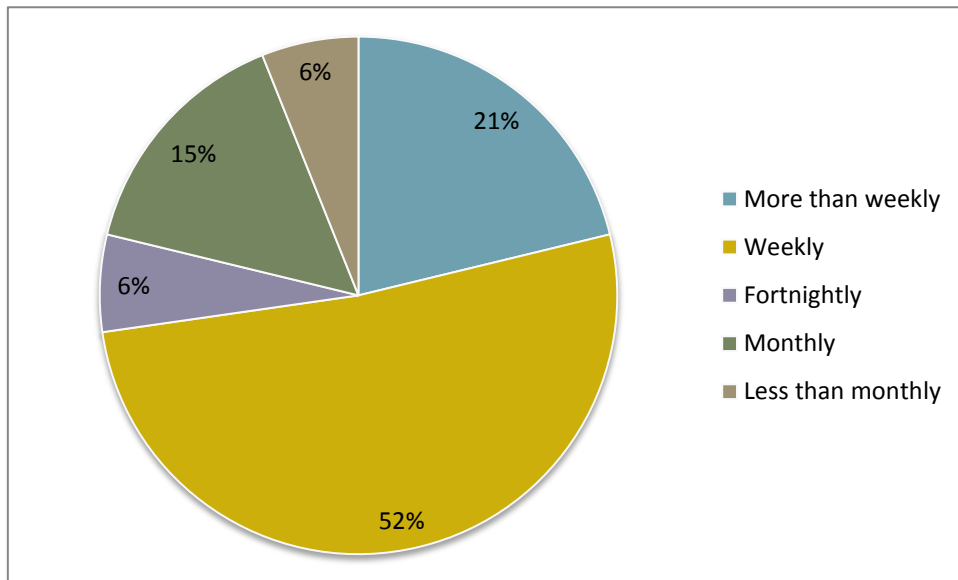


Figure 4: Frequency of congregations' meetings

Nearly 60% of minority congregations' members live outside of the Anglican parish(es) where their congregation meets, while less than a fifth live within the parish(es). However, over a fifth of responses recorded a 'don't know' answer to this question, meaning one or both percentages are actually significantly higher.

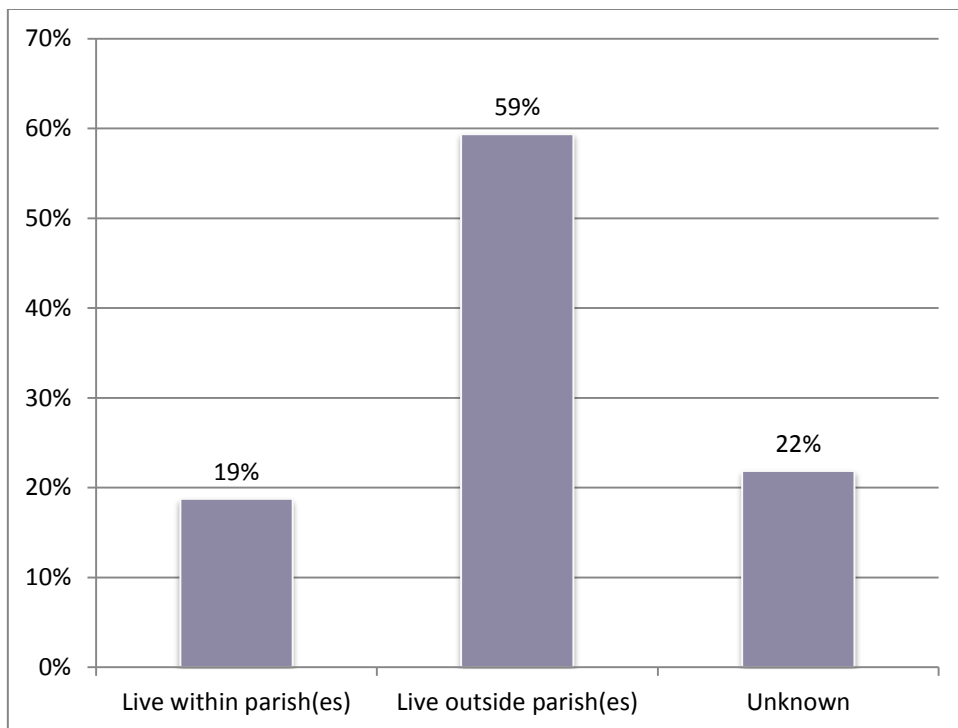


Figure 5: Congregation members' place of residence

## Years of operation and use of Church spaces

The majority (60%) of the congregations for whom information was supplied had been operating in their current Anglican Church space for between 1 and 5 years. The second largest category (20%) consisted of congregations who had been operating for between 5 and 10 years.

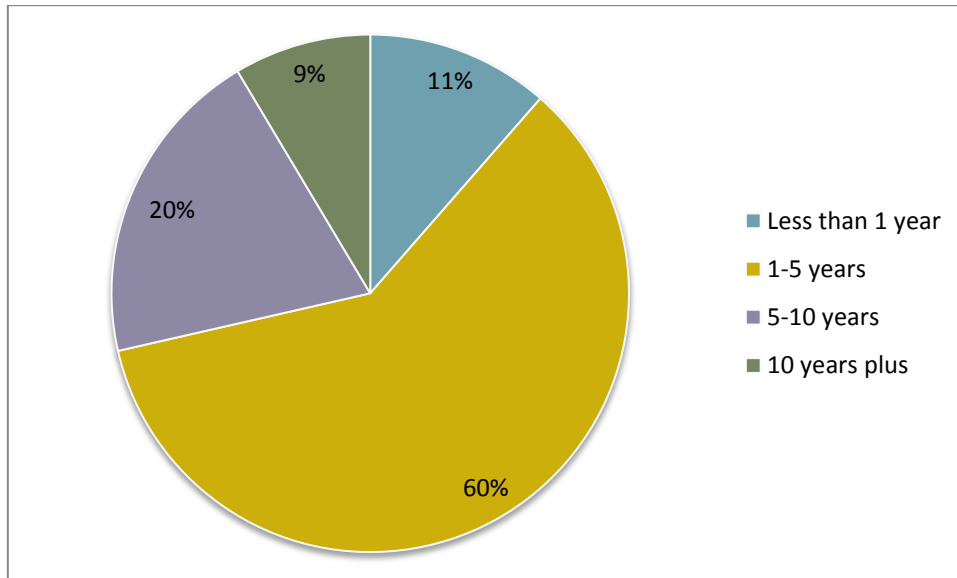


Figure 6: Congregations' years of operation

The survey asked which church space the congregations used for their meeting place (or if they used multiple church spaces, which did they use most frequently?). The majority of the congregations (59%) meet in the Church's church hall, while 50% meet in the main worship space. Other spaces used by smaller numbers of the congregations identified in the survey are meeting rooms, side chapels or prayer rooms, and church-run sports and community centres.

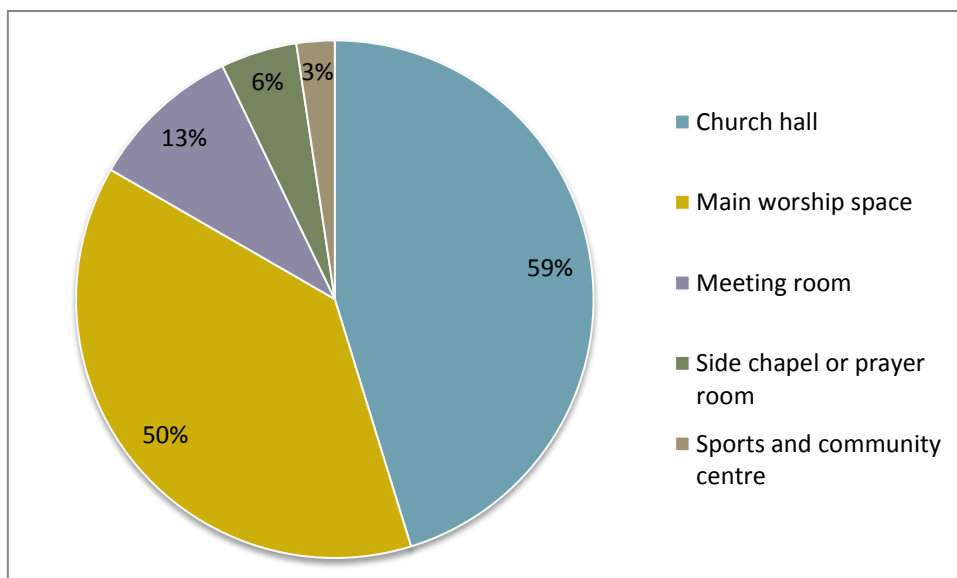


Figure 7: Church spaces used by congregations

## Congregations' relationship with 'main' congregation(s) and church leaders in their meeting place

Clergy were asked whether they or a colleague from the Birmingham Anglican Diocese usually led worship for minority congregations meeting in their church spaces, or whether worship was led by another church leader. The vast majority of congregations (89%) were led by another church leader, with only 3 congregations being led by the clergy member completing the survey, and only 1 led by a colleague of the clergy member from within the Birmingham Anglican Diocese.

For those congregations which are not led by the clergy completing the survey or a colleague from the Birmingham Diocese, there was still a degree of interaction with the main Anglican church leader (or their colleagues), although the frequency of and reasons for this contact varied. The vast majority of clergy (91%) had some form of contact with the leader(s) of the minority congregation(s) who currently use their church spaces, with almost a third saying they had contact with them regularly, and just over a third saying that they had contact sometimes (Figure 8). The survey went on to ask those clergy who indicated that they had contact with leader(s) of minority congregation(s) (be it frequently, sometimes, or rarely) what were the reasons behind those meetings. The answer options offered in the survey were: Practical issues (e.g. hire charges), Practical support (e.g. borrowing equipment), Pastoral issues, and Ecumenical issues (e.g. planning joint worship). The reason which attracted the highest number of positive responses was practical issues, followed by practical support and pastoral support. Ecumenical issues were the least common reason for clergy to have contact with minority congregation leaders (Figure 9).

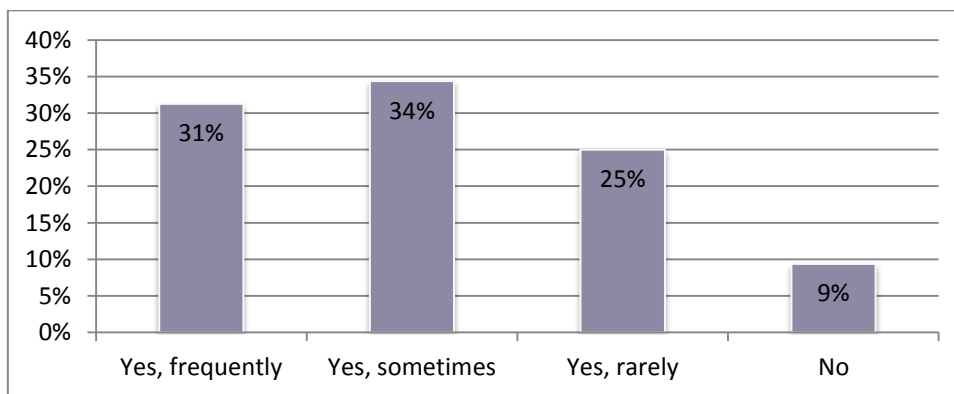


Figure 8: Response to Q: Do you, a colleague, or church representative meet with the minority congregation's leader(s)?

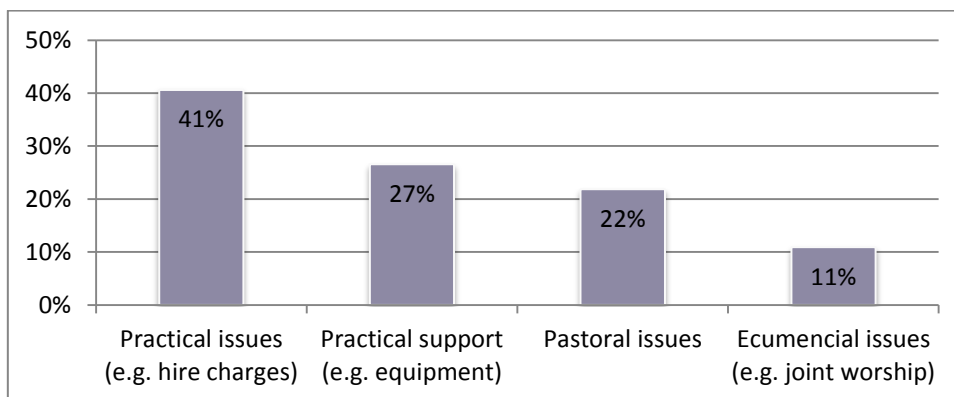


Figure 9: Reasons for meetings between clergy and minority congregation leaders

Clergy were also asked about interaction between any minority congregation(s) using their church spaces and their 'main' congregation(s). They were asked whether in the past year or so, there had been interaction between minority congregation(s) and their main congregation(s) in one or more of the following areas: shared worship, shared projects/events, socialising outside of worship time, or informal care and support, and how frequently this interaction occurred. The results show that there is little in the way of **frequent** contact between minority congregations and main congregations. Only 3% of responses indicated frequent interaction, and this was only in the areas of shared projects/events and informal support and care. However, more than half (56%) of the responses indicate that there is **sometimes** interaction between minority and main congregations in the area of informal support and care. 38% of responses indicated that members of minority and main congregations sometimes socialise outside of worship time, while shared worship sometimes occurs amongst just over a fifth.

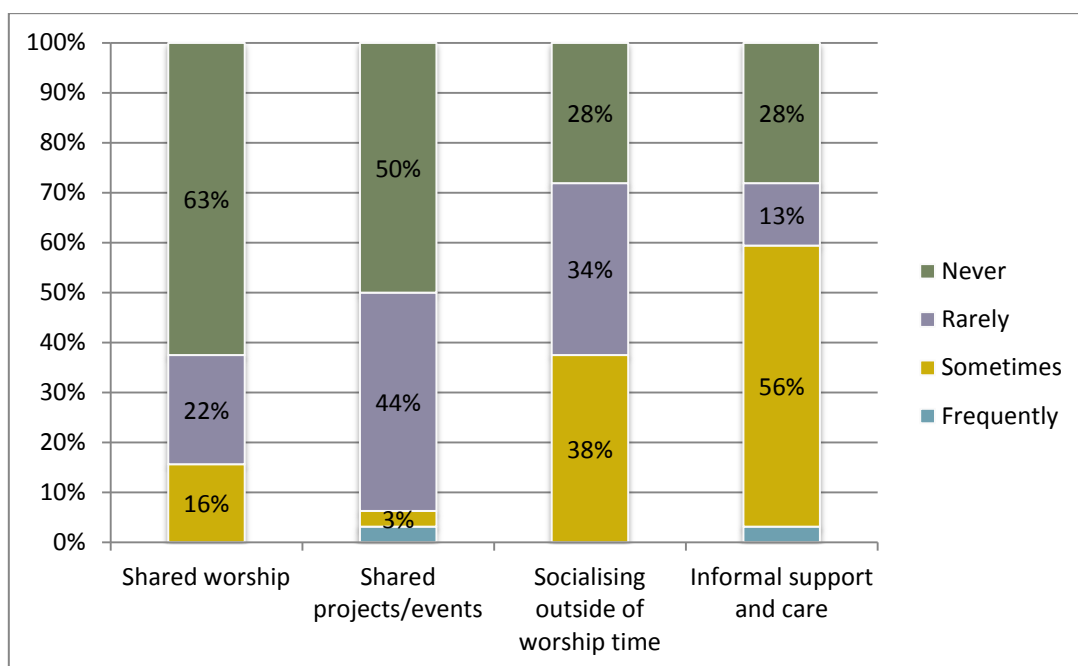


Figure 10: Frequency and nature of interaction between minority and 'main' congregations

Clergy were also invited to use a 'free-text' box to add information about any other forms of interaction between minority and 'main' congregations which were not captured by the survey's answer options. This information was provided by 7 clergy in relation to 13 minority congregations, with examples including shared care of church buildings and facilities, joint youth events, training events, and sharing of worship on special occasions such as Christmas day and baptism services.

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



independent Pentecostal Church. A few links to non-Christian religions were also reported – for example Zoroastrianism in the case of an Iranian congregation.

## **Minority congregations' activities in the community**

The final section of the survey concerned with minority congregations currently using Anglican Church spaces asked whether clergy were aware of these congregations providing any services or resources to support their wider community. An answer to this question was provided for 35 out of the 38 minority congregations identified through the survey. Of these, clergy were aware of community support services and resources being provided by 34% of minority congregations. Again clergy answering yes were provided with a 'free text' box and invited to elaborate on their response, with 12 such responses provided. These responses identified pastoral support for fellow ethno-nationals – particularly newly arrived asylum seekers, food for needy households, practical advice around immigration and integration, health and family advice, assistance with funeral repatriation, work with children and young people, and work with LGBT members of the community as some of the services that minority congregations were providing.

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

Of the total 100 responses to the survey, just over a fifth of clergy (23) reported that a minority congregation has used an Anglican church space within their parish(es) in the past, but no longer did so. Of these, there was an around 50% split between those parish(es) which currently have a minority congregation(s) using their space(s), and parish(es) which do not.

Where information was provided it shows a large degree of diversity amongst the church leaders/worshippers of congregations using Anglican Church spaces in the past. Ethnicities or nationalities mentioned several times in these responses are: Caribbean, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Zimbabwean. Others that are mentioned included Russian, Ukrainian, Indian/South Asian, Filipino, Spanish, South African and Nigerian. The responses also indicate a number of affiliations between these congregations and other Churches and denominations. These include: Orthodox Churches (Russian, Ukrainian and Ethiopian), the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Coptic Church, and various Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches.

Where the information is given, we can see a number of reasons why the arrangement for the congregation to use the responding clergy's church space(s) ended. Common reasons include the congregation outgrowing the space and subsequently either moving into a larger space elsewhere (perhaps more geographically convenient for the majority of its worshippers) or securing their own space. Conversely some congregations folded as numbers dwindled, or merged with other congregations. In a few cases, a congregation ended after a leader or key organiser moved overseas. There were a few cases where the clergy had had to ask the congregation to leave, either because they needed the space for main congregation activities, or due to disputes over use of the space (for example, failing to clean up, damage to furniture and equipment, erratic rent payments, failing to finish on time, disputes over use of storage space, and tensions between majority and minority clergy and congregation members).

## Diversity within 'main' congregations

The survey asked all clergy whether any ethno-linguistic minorities were part of their main congregation(s). Of the 91 clergy who were able to answer this question, more than a third (36%) answered yes. Those who were able to provide further details on the characteristics of these congregations members tell us that there is significant diversity not only between minority congregations, but within 'main' congregations within Birmingham Anglican Diocese. Again, this presence of ethno-linguistic diversity within main congregations was fairly evenly distributed between those parish(es) which hosted minority congregations and those which didn't.

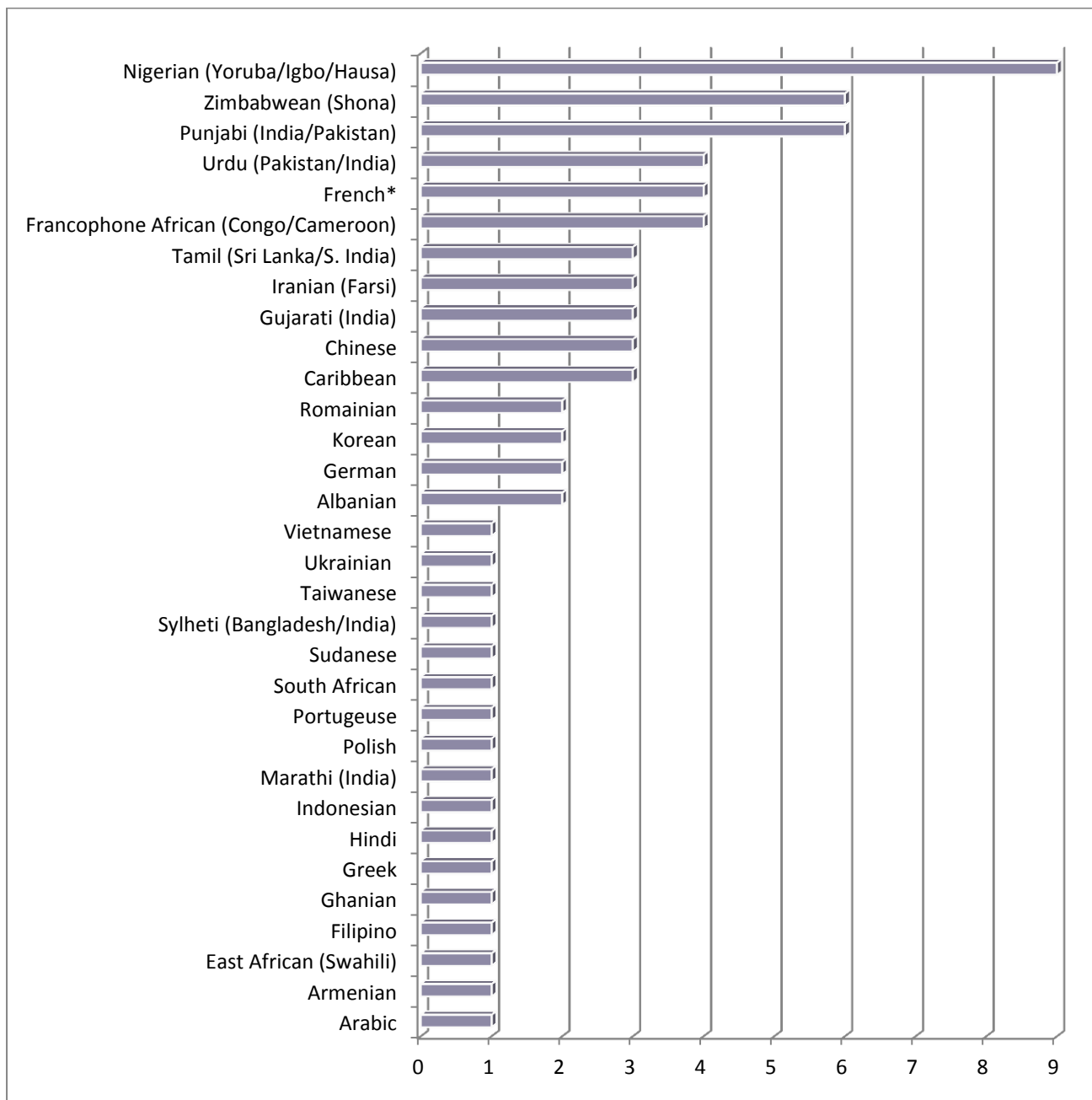


Figure 11: Frequency of ethno-linguistic minority identities within 'main' congregations<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is unclear whether 'French' (starred in the table) refers to Europeans or Francophone Africans.

## Minority congregations who have asked to, but been unable to, use Anglican Church spaces

23 of the 100 clergy who completed the survey reported that a congregation has asked to use their Church space(s) but been turned down. The most common reasons for this were practical – for example a time clash with an existing church activity, a lack of space to accommodate the congregations' numbers (either within the church building itself, or in relation to concerns the strain excess demand for parking would place on relations with neighbouring residents). However, a number of clergy reported that they had declined the request as they were concerned about doctrinal issue (for example, 'ultra conservatism'), or policies around public liability insurance and child protection. Others felt that they were unable to access sufficient information about the congregation and its connections to make an informed decision about their suitability to use the church, or had received information that the group was involved in inappropriate fundraising – for armed rebel groups in Congo for example. A few clergy cited 'bad experiences' with groups in the past (for example, rudeness, damage or carelessness with space/equipment, late rent payments) as a reason they and their PCC now generally decline such requests.

## Reflections on minority congregations' use of Church spaces

The final part of the survey invited clergy who currently have a minority congregation(s) using their Church space(s) to reflect on what positive benefits this brought to the church, as well as any challenges it posed. This was an optional free text box and 21 clergy chose to respond.

Positive comments tended to focus on the building of connections and understanding between diverse Christian communities, making the Church buildings appear busy and active to the wider community, and increased income for the church. Some of the challenges identified were practical issues such as cleaning and maintenance of the church building and equipment. A selection of comments from clergy (anonymised where necessary) are included below:

*"Their historic perspective as an ancient church, perhaps traceable to the first century, humble us. They warmly invite us to special occasions. Their all night Eucharist humbles our complaining if our service goes over an hour and a quarter. While we are active in supporting asylum seekers and refugees, these neighbours remind us that it is not a badge of credibility to be worn proudly, but a matter of life and death for them"*

*"The relationship between church leaders is good and has a respectful mutuality about it. Interaction between members is more limited but when it does take place is positive. On the whole the presence of these other congregations is positive."*

*"Adds positively - the buildings are used for Christian worship enabling the community to see a "living building" at other times than when we worship"*

*"Challenges / issues - different cultural assumptions regarding punctuality and what ""clean"" means; storage of equipment; financial issues - many of their congregation members are poor and so the churches have limited ability to contribute to the costs of the buildings"*

*“Yes helps us recognise breath of Christian worship, there are sometimes small issues of things not being put back in place for our main service.”*

*“The relationship has been one of tenancy for most of the time but since their pastor left has developed a deeper relationship, with them potentially becoming a third congregation in the parish unless they find a replacement for me! It is difficult to build the relationship further as many live outside the parish and travel in, but there is potential”*

*“The relationship is good from a Kingdom prospective but does not add 'bums on seats' from a parish church prospective as their style of worship and fellowship is different and they have their own leaders and hierarchy.”*

*“It is good the building is being used to encourage other Christian groups in the area*

*“This is a real ecumenical activity, with a visible impact. This is Christian presence that we would otherwise find difficult to maintain. It is an excellent, imaginative and valued partnership”*

*“Brings young people on site in large numbers, brings more lively style of worship, brings different community together, and adds income”*

*“Can be difficult with timekeeping and looking after the building especially when damage is done Also care of children while on site is sometimes an issue”*

*“We are a very ethnically diverse church and our support for these two congregations is received very positively and is part of what we are about. I would love to see further integration”*

*“Yes I think it does positively contribute to life and ministry of our church. We hope one day to hold joint meetings and worship sessions or activities”*

*“It is a positive development. We hope that in time it will play a part in the life of the 'main' congregation”*



**The authors:** Dr Demelza Jones is Lecturer in Sociology at Aston University, Birmingham. Canon Dr Andrew Smith is Director of Inter-Faith Relations for the Anglican Diocese of Birmingham.

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