

# Why Churches Should Consider the Formation of Social Capital in the Design of their Welfare Programs

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Fleur Creed has recently completed a PhD on the topic, 'Australian churches building social capital in their local communities'. The below article draws heavily on this thesis. She has worked and volunteered as a counsellor and support worker with marginalised groups for a number of years in both church and community settings. Fleur is currently attached to the University of Divinity through St Francis College in Brisbane.

## **Abstract**

Christian churches have been known for their works of charity in the community over the centuries, and while government and

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non-government organisations now perform many of these tasks, the local church still has a vital role to play in the well-being of the communities in which they exist. The framework of social capital is one which would be useful for churches to adopt in the planning of their activities, from the perspective that it measures the benefits: building trust and communities of mutual support, while not diminishing the recipient in the ways that either the distribution of charity or the provision of professional services can do. In research conducted in churches of several denominations, characteristics which were evident in the building of social capital included passionate leaders who were facilitators rather than doing everything themselves, encouraging others to become involved. These leaders (who may not formal leaders) need to have a vision for making a difference, and also, along with the church community, for creating something sustainable. A key factor is that both the leader and the volunteers involved should have a respect for all people, not just church members, as equals, made in the image of God, and a sense of trust in the community. Programs developed should bring people together and encourage people each other and promote an atmosphere of trust.

**Key Words:** Social capital, social welfare, communities, trust, congregations

### **Introduction**

Many churches do valuable work in their local communities in the form of social welfare, alongside their core functions of worship, prayer, teaching and other spiritual activities. The change in perspective that is required from a short-term model of delivering charity to a longer-term view of holistic transformation, empowering individuals, families and communities to live fulfilling and meaningful lives supporting each other, is congruent with Christian beliefs and values. The concept of social capital can be a useful tool to change this perspective as churches seek to move from working in isolation to achieve their goals to developing networks of trust in their communities.

While it is also recognised that churches typically build social capital within congregations, this study focuses on the social capital built between congregations and their local communities.

### **Social Welfare**

Churches are uniquely placed to deliver services in a distinctive fashion as they are informed by the teachings of Jesus Christ to be caring and compassionate to the disadvantaged and vulnerable (Ayton, Carey, Keleher & Smith, 2012; Davies-Kildea, 2007; Hugen & Venema, 2009; Judd, Robinson & Errington, 2012; Winkworth & Camilleri, 2004).

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The Christian faith teaches the dignity and worth of every person, as well as creating a sense of community and belonging (Ayton et al, 2012; Mendes, 2003; Jeavons, 1992). Father Peter Norden, of Jesuit Social Services, gave expression to the distinctive characteristics of church-related welfare organisations when he stated:

We are not just a welfare service; we are also a Christian ministry. So, we choose the young people we work with on the basis that they're most likely to fail, the most in need. You don't measure your success on numbers but what you're actually communicating to this person, a sense of care, respect and belonging (Norden 1993, cited in Howe & Howe, 2012, p.330; Gallet, 2016, p.27).

These same beliefs also inspire Christians to advocate for a fair and just society, including challenging social structures and political systems that disempower the poor and marginalised (Begent, 2014; Berthon & Hatfield Dodds 2004; Bouma, 2012; Cleary, 2012; Howe, 2002).

The traditional role of churches in creating a sense of belonging and building community has contributed to the development of social capital (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Cleary, 2012; Howe,

2002; Howe & Howe, 2012; Putnam, 2000b; Schneider, 2006).

This involves subscribing to values and norms that separate them from business and the market (Cleary, 2012; Howe, 2002). (Gallet, 2016, p.28). In government-funded church programs, distinguishing features may include providing services that extend beyond the specific dictates of government or contract requirements to meet the particular needs of vulnerable individuals (Davies-Kildea 2007; Winkworth & Camilleri 2004). While businesses and governments acknowledge the role of social capital in healthy communities, and strive to create environments where it will flourish, churches have long provided a base for community involvement.

### **Social Capital**

Several social commentators have pointed to the role of churches in creating a sense of belonging and building community that has contributed to the development of what is known as social capital (Howe, 2002; Putnam, 2000b; Schneider, 2006; Smidt, 2003). One of the experts in the field of social capital, Robert Putnam, (2000b, p.19) proposed that “the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value”. In his Saguaro Seminar speech, Putnam (2000a) stated that:

Houses of worship build and sustain more  
social capital - and social capital of more

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varied forms - than any other type of institution.... Faith gives meaning to community service and good will, forging a spiritual connection between individual impulses and great public issues. That is, religion helps people to internalise an orientation to the public good. Because faith has such power to transform lives, faith-based programs can enjoy success where secular programs have failed.

Unruh and Sider argued that “congregational social capital can contribute to civic benefits in three main ways: i) by empowering corporate social action; ii) by encouraging social engagement by individual members; and iii) by facilitating the sharing of resources within and beyond the congregation’s relational network” (Unruh & Sider, 2005, p.219).

American political scientist, Corwin Smidt, concluded that the social capital generated by people in religious organisations may be distinguished from other forms of social capital in light of its:

1. Quantity: Social capital generated through religious means may exceed levels of social capital generated through other means in society;

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2. Durability: Religious motivation based on values and commitment sustain efforts;
3. Range: Religiously inspired social capital reaches people across a wide variety of backgrounds, particularly including the marginalised and the voiceless;
4. Capacity to nourish social capital: Through its transcendent values they have an ability to foster norms of reciprocity more than secular sources (Smidt, 2003, pp.217-218).

While Smidt's conclusions are based on observations in the United States, where religion plays very different roles in relation to national identity and social welfare compared with religion in Australia, his suggestions form useful hypotheses when examining social capital in the Australian context.

### **What Is Social Capital?**

While various theorists have developed their own models of social capital, a clear definition of the concept is that provided by Alejandro Portes in 1998, "Whereas economic capital is in people's bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships. To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it

is these others, not him (or her) self, who are the actual source of his or her advantage” (Portes, 1998, p.7).

A definition that may be useful for churches is that of Janine Nahapiet and Sumantra Ghoshal (1998). “The sum of the current and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit. Social capital thus comprises both the network and the assets that may be mobilised through that network.”

Whichever definition is used, it should be recognised that the basic pre-requisite for social capital to occur is for social interaction to take place. Falk and Kilpatrick (2000, pp.20-21) concluded that:

... a precondition to building social capital is the existence of *sufficient numbers of interactions of a particular quality*. Both quantity and quality of interactions therefore have a role in the development of social capital.

### ***Characteristics of Social Capital***

Recognised characteristics of social capital are trust, reciprocity, networks, shared norms, and social agency (Onyx & Bullen, 2000).



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It is therefore both structural (social networks) and cultural (social norms and trust) (Hooghe & Stolle, 2003, pp.1-18; Coffe & Geys, 2006, pp.1053-1072). The first, and most essential characteristic of social capital, however, is *social exchange*. For social capital to be created, social exchange must occur.

**Social Exchange or Reciprocity.** Social exchange is a concept recognised in the disciplines of anthropology (Firth, 1967; Sahlins, [1972] 2017), social psychology (Gouldner, 1960; Homans, 1958; Thibault & Kelley, 1959) and sociology (Blau, 1964a). Theorists have agreed that social exchange involves a series of interactions that generate obligations (Emerson, 1976). It is simplified in Blau's definition, "Social exchange as here conceived is limited to actions that are contingent on rewarding reactions from others" (Blau, 1964b). Social Exchange Theory proposes that relationships evolve over time into "trusting, loyal, mutual commitments" when participants follow certain "rules of exchange" (Emerson, 1976, p.351).

The norm of reciprocity, relating to the balanced exchange of giving and taking, exists in all cultures (Leonard & Onyx, 2003, pp.5-6), and some evolutionary anthropologists have suggested that it may have very early origins, bred into the nature of human behaviour as necessary for the survival of the species (Klein, 2014, pp.73-92). Taylor (1982) described reciprocity as a combination of short-term altruism and long-term self-interest,

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while Alexis de Toqueville (1835) called it “self-interest rightly understood”. In longer-lasting, closer relationships, these exchanges may be based on duty, whereas with weaker ties they may be based on empathy (Degenne, Lebaux & Lemel, 2004, p.47).

Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (2017, pp.170-171) emphasised that reciprocity implied “action and reaction” between two parties, noting that reciprocity does not necessarily suggest balance, as in an “unconditional one-for-one exchange”, but rather encompasses a whole range of exchanges. *Generalised* reciprocity refers to the altruistic concern for others in which it is expected that if one does good to others, then others will do good to you, whereas *negative* reciprocity is the breakdown of effective exchange, including those characterised by the self-interest of those with greater power (Sahlins, 2017, pp.173, 175). *Balanced* reciprocity implies fair and equitable exchange and mutuality, including the currency of “everyday kinship, friendship and neighbourly relations” (Sahlins, 2017, pp.175-177; Reohr, 1991, p.50).

Political theorist Romand Coles rejected traditional Christian forms of generosity, suggesting that, when separated from reciprocity, they tend to lead “one-sidedly toward paternalism, arrogance, and varieties of imperialism” (Scott, 2017, p.127). Coles rather proposed an ethics of ‘receptive generosity’, motivated as much

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by giving to others as by receiving from them (Coles, 1997, p.105). Thus, he suggested that the giver resist the notion of being a giver only, but be prepared to actively receive from the vulnerable other. Coles also proposed that receptive generosity “is a matter of actively cultivating the uncomfortable openness to the ways and thinking of others, cultivating receptivity to unlearning the privileges of historical power and the knowledge presumptions that go with it” (Scott, 2017, pp.127-128). Whatever the form of reciprocity, it is a characteristic of the social exchanges which constitute social capital.

**Trust.** A ‘general level of trustworthiness’ is necessary for all social capital networks. Putnam (2021), in fact, stated that the key component necessary for the creation of social capital is trustworthiness. Faith is required in the honesty and reliability of others to help overcome perceived risks (Buskens, 1999; Paxton, 1999, p.98). Sabel (1992, p.225) defined trust as “the mutual confidence that the other party to an exchange will not exploit one’s vulnerabilities”.

Trust is considered by some, including Coleman, to be a source of social capital, while theorists including Putnam, Fukuyama, and Narayan and Cassidy (2001), view it as a dimension. Uslaner distinguished between two forms of trust, that of generalised trust, relating more to morals and faith in others, and

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particularised trust, based on specific information and experience of individuals (Uslaner, 1999, 2002; Patulny, 2004).

Putnam (2000b, pp.136-137) used the descriptors of 'thick' and 'thin' trust. Thick trust is the form embedded in dense networks of close personal family and friendship ties, known as bonding social capital, while thin trust exists in the loose ties of occasional contacts, and professional and acquaintance networks, generally referred to as bridging social capital (Williams, 1988, p.8). The thick trust found in bonding social capital is often generated by people of the same class or ethnic background, where the community is more homogeneous and exclusive, and able to exercise sanctions (Coleman, 1988, pp.105-108). Thin trust is evident in bridging social capital.

Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992, 1998) proposed that in pre-modern societies, trust resided in families, community, and religion built through personal interactions, whereas in modern societies, people often do not personally know the people with whom they interact, and they must place their trust in science and in expert systems. As he explained (1990, p.22), individuals may trust a friend to help out in times of difficulty based on past experience, but may also exhibit trust in those with technical accomplishments or professional expertise that the individual may lack. The Australian population has shown a marked lack of confidence in churches and religious organisations since

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revelations of the extent of abuse of children in their care has been made public through the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2015-2017), and similarly with the Forgotten Australians Report (Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2004), which focused on those who received institutional or out-of-home care as children, with many of the institutions in question having been run by religious organisations (Hughes, 2023).

**Shared Norms.** Both Putnam (1993) and Coleman (1988) referred to shared social norms as a characteristic of social capital. Social norms provide a form of informal social control whereby shared understandings exist for patterns of behaviour in a given social context. Serageldin and Grootaert (1997, p.13) proposed that social capital derives from “the social and political environment that enables norms to develop and shape’s social structure”. Shared values and norms develop over time, along with trust. Leonard and Onyx (2003, p.7) stated that “Shared norms may be assumed in bonding social capital. However, the wider the social distance bridged the greater the likelihood of a clash of norms”. In groups and organisations, shared values and norms serve a structural purpose, alleviating the need for more formal methods of control.

### ***Types of Social Capital***

Bridging capital creates relationships across social divisions, including those based on race, class, or religion. This bridging capital is essential in addressing social disadvantage, as it is rare that one bonding network can resolve the multiple needs that people may experience (Wuthnow, 2004, pp.57-61). Bridging capital requires a range of less dense networks than that of bonding capital (Lockhart, 2005, pp.46-47). Bridging social capital is less intense than bonding capital, with weaker ties and thinner trust, mostly occurring between those who come together for a common purpose for business, study, or common social interests. They may include friendships between work colleagues, in clubs and schools, and with casual acquaintances. Bridging relationships may develop into bonding relationships if enough trust and reciprocity develops (Hughes, Black, Kaldor, Bellamy & Castle, 2007, pp.64-65). In the words of Granovetter, “those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own” (1973, p.1371). Some of the thinnest forms of social capital are in those acquaintances you occasionally see in public places such as shops, in professionals who provide a service, and in friends of friends who have areas of expertise. Putnam (2001, p.2) saw value in these ‘nodding acquaintances’, believing that they are more likely to assist in an emergency than a total stranger, therefore showing that social capital does exist.

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Moreover, these networks provide a wide range of services and assistance as required.

Social capital also has a vertical dimension, as individuals are given opportunities to 'reach out' and be 'scaled up' (Uvin, 1995, pp.495-512). This vertical dimension is referred to as linkages. The capacity to leverage resources and information from formal institutions beyond the community is a key function of *linking* social capital, a concept developed by Woolcock (1998). Linkages are the relationships between people and the organisations and structures within the community. These organisations and structures provide both information on, and access to, products and services in the community. All individuals, but particularly disadvantaged members of the community and those in crisis, need access to these resources and may need assistance to form these linkages (Hughes et al, 2007, pp.83-84).

Different combinations of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital help people obtain the resources they need to succeed in life. What is effective in one community may be less effective in another situation or geographical location. Ethnic and religious groups, and members of poor communities may have strong bonding capital (De Souza Briggs, 1998, pp.177-221), but less access to bridging capital (Barr, 1998; Narayan, 1999). These groups may have little linking capital to enable them to negotiate access to institutions such as courts, banks, and insurance

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agencies (Woolcock, 2001, pp.11-17). Newcomers to an area may have bridging capital, with many acquaintances, but poor bonding capital, often consisting of immediate family only.

Churches are facilitators of the three main types of social capital: bonding in the form of close networks based on strong or 'thick' ties such as family and friends, and in the case of churches, home groups, cell groups or teams who meet regularly; bridging in the form of inclusive networks based on weaker, 'thinner' ties with those either inside or outside the church, those of other denominations, religions, cultures, ages, social groups; and institutional or linking, in the form of collaborative networks between other churches, public institutions, and community groups (Putnam, 2000b; Grix, 2001; Patulny & Svendsen, 2007; Durston, 2008). Churches are therefore generators of all three types of social capital. It therefore follows that they cannot build this *full-scale* social capital without effective partnerships with other organisations in the local area (Cart, 2008).

### **Benefits Resulting from Increased Social Capital**

Social capital is a concept that has been noted to have an impact in the following areas,

- public health (Coulthard, Walker & Morgan, 2001; Subramanian, Lochner & Kawachi, 2003),



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- reduction in experiences of loneliness (Charles & Wolfer, 2018)
- improvements in mental health (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001)
- benefits to physical health (Song, Joonmo & Lin, 2010)
- improvements the social wellbeing and educational attainment of children and young people (Aldridge, Halpern & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Israel, Beaulieu & Hartless, 2001),
- increased employment opportunities and job progression (McDonald & Elder, 2006),
- reduced levels of crime (Halpern, 2001),
- improved government functioning (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993),
- social and economic prosperity (Kawachi, Kennedy & Glass, 1999; Putnam, 1993), and
- more resilient communities in times of disaster (Nakagawa & Shaw, 2004).

Social capital is therefore of potential interest to churches as they seek to have an impact on the wellbeing of their communities.

### **Methodology**

My recent PhD research investigated the social capital built in communities by local churches through their activities in those communities. In this qualitative research project, ten case study congregations were selected across several Christian denominations, including Anglican, Uniting, Baptist, Salvation Army, Churches of Christ, and Pentecostal churches of varying sizes, in urban and regional locations, across the three eastern states, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. These congregations were also chosen because they had differing forms of engagement with the wider community beyond their spiritual activities. Congregations were selected as a representation for generalisability, and also to ascertain the differences between the engagement of various faith traditions in different contexts.

Most of the activities conducted fell broadly within the definition of 'social welfare', including meals and services for the homeless, services for those experiencing family violence, food and meal provision for those living in hostels, drug and alcohol recovery groups, and support for families of those experiencing hospitalisation. Other activities included craft groups, community gardens, mentoring programs, and various other groups and classes. In each case, semi-structured interviews were conducted with paid staff, volunteers/church members, and, in some cases, users/guests. Observations were also recorded.

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Data was transcribed, and through a process of reduction was encoded into themes which were then related to either the presence, or absence, of, the characteristics and types of social capital. This was a qualitative study, and while social capital was not measured, evidence of different types of social capital; bonding, bridging and linking, was noted.

This study was limited by the small number of congregations in the study, and by the absence of rural, Catholic and Orthodox churches. This research is also limited by the fact that it was a point-in-time study, so is not able to measure the long-term effects of the social capital created.

### **Findings**

Church social welfare programs bring church members in contact with community members where bridging social capital may be built, as do many other formal and informal volunteering opportunities. The following activities were utilised in the case study congregations, and showed evidence of social capital, with the development of social exchange, levels of trust, some shared norms, and forms of civil participation.

**Mentoring** was one of the programs used by some churches, as a way of relating to individuals and/or families, building bridging social capital over time, with connections formed by regular

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personal interaction between the mentor and mentee over an extended period of time. While there is an imbalance of power in the relationship, the nature of discipleship is such that it provides for ongoing reciprocity, whereby those who have been mentored may in turn, at some point, help or mentor others.

**Missional Communities** were common to several of the case studies, although in different forms. Each consisted of a core group of church members with a specific focus in the wider community, who prayed for, and organised the program or activities for that group. Examples included: families of children with additional needs, families of adoptive and foster children, home-schooling families, families of patients in Intensive Care, surfers, the lonely, and numerous others. These missional communities supported those in the wider community with a particular need, often provoked by those in the church with a similar need. In my research I found that each of the missional communities that I visited had been started because someone in the church had that need, and realised that others in the community would benefit from mutual support. This, therefore, met the criteria for building social capital, as there was much social exchange and reciprocity, in sharing experiences and mutual support, plus trust was built over regular meetings and sharing of experiences.

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**Small Groups and Courses** were often used by the churches, some short-term, others ongoing. While short-term courses may provide opportunities for making contacts and learning new skills, such as budgeting or parenting, and sometimes leveraging linking capital, longer-term groups allow for bridging and potentially bonding capital to be created. An example of this was the craft group in one of the congregations, that had been meeting for several years. While new members continued to join, some had been present from the beginning. This group consisted of church and community members, people from Australia and other countries, able-bodied and disabled. It was welcoming to all. It was advertised as a craft group, so people could either bring their own craft, or the group worked on either items for a homelessness service at a nearby church, or items for indigenous children in out-of-home care. The members enjoyed a bring-and-share morning tea, and more conversation was often had than craft was done, according to the members. Members offered each other lifts to the group, met each other for coffee at other times, and supported each other outside group times. There was therefore evidence of social exchange and reciprocity, mutual trust and shared norms.

**Shared Meals** were a part of many, if not most of the activities, whether just refreshments at morning or afternoon tea, or a full meal. Churches are known for their fellowship, even just over a

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cup of tea and a biscuit, and it cannot be underestimated how important this is for building connections. All of the case studies had some form of food involved in their activities. One of the Pentecostal churches had built a café onsite, which was not only used for social activities after church services and during the week, allowing church and community members to connect, but also as a place of training in hospitality for young people in the area. All of these are opportunities for building bridging social capital across the generations and across church and community, which was obviously occurring. This church also had a food mart, where locals with limited means could purchase cheap groceries. This also gave the opportunity for church volunteers to interact with members of the community whom they otherwise may not, such as those recently released from jail, those who have lost children to Child Services, or those experiencing severe mental illness. These are real experiences of building bridging social capital with others unlike ourselves.

Similarly, two of the case studies, located in different states, had homelessness services, both offering hot meals during the day. One also offered a take-away sandwich and a piece of fruit for the evening meal. For the homeless, these meals were more than just food, as they made comments regarding being pleased to see the familiar faces of the volunteers. Social capital was present in these places as it was not uncommon for those who did find

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accommodation to come back and help out as volunteers. One of the churches made extra efforts to treat the people well, calling them 'guests' rather than clients, and this was reciprocated, as these guests ensured there was never any swearing or trouble, and they also helped to clean up.

**Leadership**, whether formal or informal, was key to the formation of social capital in each of the churches. In each place or activity, one person was identified as a motivator, or broker of social capital, and this was not necessarily the team leader or ordained person, but a person whose personality or connections enabled bridging capital to be built. In the craft group mentioned above, it was revealed that one woman, a retired clergy wife, had invited most of the members of the group, including those from the church, some from her exercise class, her neighbours, and anyone else that she thought might need a friend.

In another case, at one of the homeless centres that had been running for 30+ years, one woman had been a volunteer from the church when they first started providing hot meals for the homeless. She continued to volunteer, but as the congregation aged, and church volunteers dwindled, she started inviting her friends from outside the church to help, and now many of the volunteers participate as a result of her invitation.

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The missional communities epitomise this concept, with someone experiencing a need, and having the passion to act and bring others on board to help others with the same need.

Sometimes the person may be the ordained leader who has the vision, the motivation and the individual social capital to enact successful activities and programs connecting others with resources, and the leadership skills to encourage others to participate. One of the ordained leaders in the study was also an Emergency Services chaplain, and when severe flooding was experienced in the area, he was able to coordinate goods for those who needed them due to his connections.

Another leader of one of the case study congregations was passionate about the marginalised and provided meals to hostels in the inner-city area, with a weekly meal and clothing give-away in his church. He also offered addiction-recovery and domestic violence courses, and offered a street outreach into a local park with a barbecue on a weekly basis. This pastor also regularly spoke on Christian radio, so had connections to support with courses and related professionals where necessary. This pastor was able to use his own social capital for the benefit of his extended congregation.

**Facilities** are something that many churches have in communities, and they are often located centrally, especially in



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regional areas. In the past they may have been the hub of social life, with parish halls hosting debutante balls, fêtes, flower shows, and many other occasions. They may still be used by the local community when rented out by community groups. This can be a way of building social capital with the wider community. In other cases, these halls have been remodelled to be used by the church as cafés, counselling centres, op-shops or homeless day centres. All of these options provide opportunities for the church to build social capital with members of the wider community.

### **Discussion**

The research found that themes in the study of congregations used by Carroll, Dudley and McKinney (1986) of programs, processes, social context and identity were significant in the creation of social capital.

### **Programs**

When congregation members see their mission to relate equitably to others, rather than offering charity or doing good works, connecting with others and learning about their lives, they offer the foundation for social capital to be created. Social welfare in its many and varied forms is usually productive of bridging social capital, or sometimes linking capital, as community or church

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members are assisted in their linkages with professionals to achieve their needs and goals.

Some activities appear to be particularly beneficial in the building of social capital, especially those which included the sharing of meals or refreshments. Longer-term programs which enabled relationships to be built were also more likely to result in the formation of social capital, as trust was formed over time in same interest small groups, or in on-going services.

### **Processes**

Certain factors relating to processes were relevant to the creation of social capital. Churches are voluntary communities comprised of people of different ages and backgrounds, with varying knowledge and skills, who come together regularly and have a common reason to help others.

An important aspect of churches is that they are predominantly a voluntary community who assemble regularly, and are able to adapt to the needs of their local community. Many have skills and knowledge from past or present employment, or other life-skills they can utilise for the benefit of the community. The church community comprises people of different ages, genders, educational backgrounds and often ethnicities, who may work, socialise or study in the local community. The church is one of the

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few organisations that is comprised of this diversity, and it is also a self-replenishing organisation, with many of the churches in this study (and their programs) having existed for decades in their present location.

Leadership, both formal and informal, is an important aspect for churches creating social capital in their local communities. If leadership is averse to the idea of building connections and meaningful relationships with individuals and organisations in the wider community, they will not create opportunities for the congregation to do so, nor will they preach with this attitude in their messages. Leaders who themselves have social capital, as in the case of the clergyperson who was an Emergency Services Chaplain, or the former clergy wife who invited neighbours and others to the craft group, are well-placed to assist others as brokers in building social capital. These leaders needed to have passion for people and for seeing lives changed and transformed.

Other factors related to the frequency and duration of interactions. For social capital to be built, the ideal situation appears to be multiple, dense, regular interactions. People who meet occasionally, for short periods of time will likely have much weaker ties than those who meet frequently, for longer periods of time, and in differing situations, known as multiplexity, giving greater opportunity for trust to be built, and occasions of reciprocity to occur.

### **Social Context**

Many local churches have existed in Australia for decades in their current locations, providing an anchor for their local communities. The one feature which is true of all the case study churches, and all congregations is that they are uniquely self-replenishing. Churches have a sustainability and longevity that other community organisations do not. Some churches have existed in their current locations in Australia for 100 years, some for 150, and many for several decades. Where other organisations may change with government funding cycles, churches can maintain their programs with their volunteers sourced from their members. Many churches also welcome community volunteers to assist in their programs, providing greater opportunities for sustainability of activities, and increased opportunities for developing bridging capital across diverse groups.

Churches are unusual in their intergenerational nature, often providing activities for specific groups, alongside communal services where all ages interact. Many churches are involved in providing programs for the aged and for young children, and in some cases encourage interaction between the two, which has been found to be beneficial to both. This situation also applies to people from different racial educational and socio-economic backgrounds. While it could be said that most churches cater for a specific racial and social demographic, this does not apply to all

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congregations, and many enjoy interactions with people very different from themselves. One volunteer suggested that she enjoyed meeting and talking to people from other cultures to learn about other places and ways of life that she had not experienced.

### **Identity**

Those with shared beliefs such as Christians in church congregations may build social capital in their church activities, but they also share common norms and beliefs about life and other issues with people in the wider community which provides common ground for social capital. Church volunteers may volunteer because of their belief that it is right to “Love your neighbour”, or because they believe that “If you help the least of these, you will help me”, or because of the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

Community volunteers may have different motivations, including maintaining or learning new skills, wanting to help the less fortunate now they are retired, or even to fulfil obligations to receive government payments.

Whatever the reason, when church and community volunteers work alongside each other, they also build social capital, bridging the differences of faith and perhaps lack thereof, forming a

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greater understanding of each other's perspective. As long as the mission of the organisation is clearly articulated to prospective volunteers, and to those seeking assistance, every opportunity for connection between the church and members of the community can be a chance to build social capital and thus strengthen the community.

### **Conclusion**

While churches may differ in their theology and programs, common factors that pertain to success in creating social capital have been identified as:

- A vision for making a difference to the community in the founding leaders or those initiating programs and activities,
- A desire among the leaders and the church community to create something that was sustainable rather than simply provide some immediate solutions to a present problem,
- A sense that leaders should be facilitators and not do it all themselves, especially utilising lay members of the congregation to facilitate the work, and some effective ways of engaging other people to work with them in their programs and activities,
- A deep respect for all people as equals, not just a regard for other church members.

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- A sense of trust in the community; that they could ultimately serve each other and together begin to address the needs that the church was trying to address,
- Programs in which people are brought together and encouraged to help each other such as those described above, and
- An atmosphere in which trust is encouraged for volunteers with guests and among the guests themselves.

These then are the significant factors in the effective creation of social capital by churches identified in this study. While some of the factors are structural: having effective leadership that is visionary and facilitative, and which creates ways of engaging other people in appropriate programs and activities, other factors have to do with the ways people see others and seek to relate to them: the presence of trust in the church and beyond the church to people in the community, and a trust that people will begin to reciprocate with each other.

It is important that churches have a theology that respects and trusts people beyond the churches, believing that people can support each other and address their own needs. This is important as the role of the church is not to meet every need itself, nor does it have the capacity to do so. These churches facilitate the community to develop those capacities and also trust the capabilities of other organisations within the community. This

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comes out of a theology that believes God is present in the world beyond the church and which seeks to recognise the presence of God in the world. In conclusion, I suggest that churches have a substantial capacity to make an impact on their local communities through the social capital they generate. They are able to bring people together across social and cultural boundaries in ways that other organisations cannot. Unlike schools, for example, they include people of all ages. Unlike sporting clubs, they include both younger and older people, those in good health and those in poor health. Unlike many organisations, they include people across the social and educational spectrums. As organisations with a deep commitment to 'love their neighbours' churches are well-placed to create social capital. The case studies in this research have demonstrated how successful churches can be at this, confirming Putnam's insight. Churches not only provide spiritual care and necessary welfare programs in addition to those provided by government, community and private services, but also offer a relatively stable network of connections with an organisation offering opportunities for bonding capital for sharing, including close interpersonal trust and support, bridging capital with others who are different and can help access information and resources, and linking capital to meet others in positions of power who can help achieve goals and improve life circumstances.



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Most churches are resilient, sustainable organisations, located in local communities, knowledgeable about those communities as their members are also part of those communities, living, working, studying, shopping and attending recreational activities in them. When community members use the resources of local churches, attending parenting or budgeting courses, craft groups, men's sheds or community gardens, they not only learn new skills or help teach others and make new friends, but also build social capital within the local community. Similarly, volunteering at, or attending a church homelessness centre, is more than the act of cooking, serving, or, for the homeless, eating a meal. The regular interactions between volunteers from the church, members of the wider community and those who come for a meal guard against loneliness and provide positive outcomes for all involved. The value of these reciprocal interactions of sharing time cannot be underestimated as contributors to social capital in today's society.

Local churches have the greatest resource of all in congregations of people motivated by their Christian faith, recognised by some as spiritual capital, to reach out to others, especially those who are in need, or who are in some way marginalised by society. While some faith traditions are in high tension with the world, in reality leaders of individual churches are guided by their own Christian faith. Many choose to be active in the world, following the example of the Good Samaritan, offering compassion and care

for people in their communities irrespective of race, social status or creed, and encouraging their congregations to do the same. Using the insights of research on social capital can enhance the capacity of churches to have a positive impact on changing the world around them for the better, starting with their local communities.

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