

Research Notes

This is a new section to this journal. The articles in this section are not peer-reviewed as are the other articles. They are, however, reviewed by the editor and it is expected that these articles will be written in an academic form and at a level of quality similar to other articles.

'Research notes', however, are shorter pieces, usually between 2,000 and 3,000 words in length, making them about half the length of a full article. They provide an opportunity for students, scholars and researchers to share information about projects that are underway or about information that has been released that will be of interest to others, before the projects or analysis has been completed. Hence, these Research Notes encourage feedback which can contribute to the on-going project.

Abstracts are not required for Research Notes.

The criteria by which materials will be accepted for Research Notes will be:

1. The article contributes new information or theories that will be useful to other scholars and professionals working in ministry.
2. The article is written in an appropriate academic form for publication in the *Journal*.

Rev Dr Philip Hughes will be the editor of Research Notes. However, please submit materials through the usual channel of the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* website.

The following article provides an example of what might be expected for an article for Research Notes.

Religion and Volunteering Through Groups and Organisations

Rev Dr Philip Hughes

DTheol(South East Asia Graduate School of Theology), MA(University of Melbourne),
MEd(University of Melbourne), BD(Hons)(Melbourne College of Divinity)

Research Fellow, Alphacrucis College

Contact: philip.hughes@ac.edu.au

Many Australians and people in other parts of the Western world have become critical of the Christian faith in general and the churches in particular, as demonstrated by the decline in levels of confidence in the churches and religious organisations (Hughes and Fraser 2014, p.116). In the past, the churches had a privileged place in society. They were often seen as the guardians of morality and as underpinning the wellbeing of community life. They provided the motivations to care for one's neighbours and to work for the common good.

Do churches today contribute to community life? Part of the debate has focused on the role of religious organisations encouraging people to become involved in voluntary work. Several surveys in Australia have pointed to the fact that church attenders generally have higher rates of volunteering. However, some commentators have suggested that these higher rates reflect, in fact, involvement in religious organisations, not for the common good, but just for the sake of those organisations (Lyons and Nivison-Smith 2006; ACOSS 2005, p.32).

At one level, it is hard to distinguish which voluntary activities are done for the common good and which are done for the benefit of the members of religious organisations. Certainly, most religious activities would be seen as being available for all people who wish to participate. It is hoped that religious services, religious teaching, and other religious activities contribute to people living meaningful lives committed to the wellbeing of others. Is such voluntary work done within the religious group, such as teaching children the tenets of the religious faith, any different to a volunteer in a sporting organisation which teaches the children how to play the sport? Apart from those explicitly religious activities, there are many others which churches do for the sake of the wider community without expecting any benefits in return such as providing day care for people with a disability, refugee support and the provision of material aid.

This article will explore recent data on whether those who identify and attend churches are more active than other Australians in the community in voluntary activities which contribute to the common good of the community.

Methodology

There are two recent sources of information that shed light on the relation between religion and volunteering. The first is the Census and the second a large national survey known as the SEIROS survey. The 2016 Australian Census asked one simple question about voluntary work: whether Australians 15 years of age or older spent time doing unpaid voluntary work through an organisation or group in the twelve months prior to Census night. Explicitly excluded was volunteering done as part of paid employment, or if the main reason was to qualify for a government benefit or obtain an educational qualification or was due to a community work order. It also excluded unpaid work in a family business.

The great advantage of the Census data was that the same question was asked of every adult Australian enabling analysis by religious identification. The weakness of the Census data is that it does not provide details of this voluntary involvement, such as what organisations people are involved in, or the extent of their volunteering. The Census data does not indicate whether the person who identifies with a particular religious group is doing voluntary work for that religious group or for the common good.

For information about the extent that this volunteering by people associated with religious groups is done for the religious groups themselves or for the same of the wider society, one must turn to sources of data other than the Census such as a survey of the Australian population conducted by the Christian Research Association in 2016 for the Study of the Economic Impact of Religions on Society (SEIROS).

In order to get as close as possible to a random sample of the Australian adult population, a survey was conducted using as large a 'random' sample base as could be achieved. A total of 7,754 people responded to the survey. Analysis of the characteristics of the responders showed that, in most respects, it provided an adequate representation of the adult Australian population.

In relation to volunteering through organisations, the SEIROS survey asked in what types of organisations people had volunteered and how many hours per month, on average, they spent in volunteering through those organisations. The survey also tackled the issue of the nature of volunteering through religious organisations. The survey asked the following question:

- On average, how many hours per month do you estimate you have spent doing unpaid work for religious organisations? (*Leave blank if you have not done any unpaid work for a religious organisation.*)
- What proportion of the work you did for the religious organisation was for the benefit of the wider community, such as providing material help for people in need or running a play group for the wider community? Please exclude time spent with the intention of teaching others about religious beliefs and practices. (*We want to distinguish this sort of work from activities for the religious organisation, such as leading in worship services or organising social activities for the members.*)

Three major factors have been identified in previous research as affecting the levels of volunteering which can be examined in relation to religious groups.

1. Northern Europe and Anglophone countries, that is English speaking countries

such as United States, Canada and New Zealand, have had a much stronger tradition of volunteering through organisations and groups than most other countries around the world. A study of countries across Europe noted the strength of volunteering through organisations in northern Europe, but its comparative weakness in southern European countries such as Italy and Greece. In southern Europe, much more emphasis has been placed on the informal assistance that is given within extended families to care for those who have particular needs such as young children, the sick, those who are disabled, and the elderly. Those family ties and responsibilities are also strong in most countries in the Middle East and through Asia. Thus, one would expect those religious groups with high proportions of people born in Australia, in other Anglophone countries and in northern Europe to have higher levels of volunteering (Beckman 2006).

2. The strength of religious influence varies according to the extent to which people are involved in the religious community and participate in activities in which religious teaching is conducted. Hence, those religious groups where many people are rarely, if ever, involved are unlikely to have as much influence on those who identify with them as those religious groups where high proportions are frequently involved. From other surveys, some calculations have been done in relation to the proportion of people who are involved monthly or more often (Black and Hughes 2001). Using data from the Survey of Social Attitudes over a number of years, levels of participation in the larger religious groups have been calculated and are used in this study (Hughes, Reid and Fraser 2012).
3. One of the other factors which has been identified as commonly associated with volunteering has been education. People who volunteer are generally people who feel confident that they have something to contribute to the organisation or group. The proportion of people with degrees, for example, is available for each group from the Census (Black and Hughes 2001).

Results

The Census showed that the extent of volunteering in different religious groups varied considerably as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number and proportion of people identifying with different religious groups who had volunteered in the past 12 months, and percentage of group with university degrees, born in Australia, northern Europe or Anglophone countries, and percentage involved in religious activities monthly or more often in 2016.

| Religious Group / Denomination | Number who had Volunteered in Past 12 Months | Percentage who had Volunteered in Past 12 Months | Percentage of Group with University Degrees (%) | Percent Born in Australia , Northern Europe and Anglophone Countries | Percent Involved in Religious Activities Monthly or More Often |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|--|--|
| Anglican | 580,728 | 21.6% | 16.1% | 96.9% | 21.3% |
| Baptist | 94,482 | 33.8% | 25.7% | 77.9% | 56.3% |
| Brethren | 8,305 | 62.1% | 5.0% | 94.5% | |
| Catholic | 796,748 | 18.8% | 20.6% | 82.0% | 30.6% |
| Churches of Christ | 14,456 | 42.4% | 24.5% | 86.9% | 46.1% |
| Jehovah's Witnesses | 39,146 | 56.2% | 6.7% | 82.8% | 59.3% |
| Latter-day Saints | 20,838 | 46.2% | 15.5% | 85.5% | 32.0% |
| Lutheran | 41,920 | 28.7% | 18.6% | 95.3% | 31.7% |
| Oriental Orthodox | 8,549 | 21.6% | 43.1% | 35.6% | |
| Assyrian Apostolic | 777 | 7.0% | 12.0% | 31.8% | |
| Eastern Orthodox | 44,789 | 10.7% | 18.9% | 62.1% | 16.9% |
| Pentecostal | 94,487 | 46.9% | 27.4% | 74.3% | 73.1% |
| Presbyterian and Reformed | 108,027 | 22.6% | 17.5% | 88.3% | 53.1% |
| Salvation Army | 14,533 | 33.7% | 11.6% | 97.3% | 54.2% |
| Seventh-day Adventist | 17,760 | 35.1% | 23.5% | 73.0% | 60.0% |
| Uniting Church | 217,637 | 28.5% | 18.6% | 94.2% | 26.2% |
| All Christians* | 2,271,116 | 22.4% | | | |
| Baha'i | 3,589 | 30.2% | 35.2% | 40.9% | 12.0% |
| Buddhist | 71,855 | 14.7% | 30.1% | 31.7% | 14.4% |
| Hindu | 50,341 | 14.6% | 56.8% | 20.9% | 27.2% |
| Islam | 48,790 | 11.4% | 27.5% | 39.9% | 32.9% |
| Judaism | 22,730 | 30.6% | 47.8% | 64.6% | 23.3% |
| Nature Religions | 6,448 | 26.6% | 20.6% | 95.9% | |
| Sikhism | 10,232 | 10.4% | 38.0% | 22.5% | 42.1% |

| | | | | | |
|--------------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Spiritualism | 2,547 | 27.1% | 24.8% | 87.7% | |
| No Religion | 966,487 | 17.8% | 26.9% | 87.4% | 1.0% |
| Not stated | 110,684 | 6.2% | 8.2% | 93.0% | |
| Total* | 3,620,726 | 18.7% | 22.0% | 82.6% | 16.9% |

* Total includes some small religious groups and people who did not adequately describe their religion to allow it to be categorised which were not included in this table.

Source: Australian Census 2016. The table was developed using Table Builder. The rates of nominalism were derived from a combination of the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes over several years. Rates were not available for some smaller groups.

As shown in Table 1, religious groups varied considerably in the extent to which those who identified with them reported volunteering through organisations or groups, from 7 per cent to 62 per cent. Of the three factors examined in this study, two of them had high correlations with the level of volunteering in the group: percentage of the religious group born in Australia, northern Europe and Anglophone countries, and percentage of the group involved monthly or more often in religious activities as shown in Table 2. The percentage with university degrees in the religious group did not correlate positively with volunteering.

Table 2. Correlations with volunteering in different religious groups with the proportion of people with university education, the percentage of the group born in Australia, northern Europe or an Anglophone country, and the percentage involved monthly in the activities of the group monthly or more often.

| Factor | Correlation |
|---|-------------|
| Education - percentage in group with a university degree | -0.18 |
| Birthplace - percentage in group born in Australia, northern Europe or Anglophone country | 0.44 |
| Active in group - percentage involved in activities in a group or monthly or more often | 0.59 |

According to the SEIROS survey, 8 per cent of the adult Australian population reported that they did some voluntary work for a religious organisation. Of those who reported doing such work, on average they reported that 61 per cent of that work was done for the wider community. Table 3 shows the total hours volunteered per month and

the hours volunteered for religious organisations. It shows the percentage of that work done in religious organisations which was done for the sake of the wider community, not including organising religious activities or social activities for the members of the religious group.

Table 3. The Total Number of Hours Volunteered Per Month and the Number of Hours Volunteered in Religious Organisations and Percentage of Those Hours Volunteered for the Sake of the Local Community by Religious Group

| Categories of Religious Groups | Numbers in Sample | Average Hours Volunteered Per Month | Average Hours Volunteered for Religious Organisations Per Month | Percentage of Hours Volunteering in Religious Organisations for Wider Community | Total Average Hours Volunteered for the Wider Community Per Month |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Asian and South European Religions | 425 | 8.9 | 1.3 | 67% | 8.5 |
| Mainstream religions | 1762 | 8.6 | 1.5 | 60% | 8.0 |
| Evangelical and Charismatic | 625 | 11.8 | 5.0 | 70% | 10.3 |
| No Religion Identified | 3252 | 6.1 | 0.2 | 26% | 6.0 |

Source: SEIROS Survey 2016.

Note: The survey sample was divided into groups because sample sizes for individual religious groups would not be reliable. The total hours of work done for the community was calculated by subtracting from the total hours of volunteer work that proportion of hours done in religious organisations which was not done for the wider community.

In Table 3, the total hours volunteered for the sake of the wider community was calculated by subtracting the hours volunteered for religious organisations, but then adding the percentage of those hours reportedly done for the sake of the wider community. It shows that the mean total number of hours of volunteered for the wider community was greater in all religious categories than that done by people of no religion.

Discussion

The Census shows that people's levels of volunteering varies according to whether or not they identify with a religious group and which religious group that they identify with. Four groups can be identified from the Census data. We can compare each of these groups with the 18 per cent of people who describe themselves as having 'no religion' who volunteer in an organisation.

1. Groups where many attenders come from non-northern European or other non-Anglophone backgrounds which do not have a long tradition of volunteering through organisations. These have levels of volunteering under 15 per cent and include the Hindus and Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Assyrian Apostolic and Eastern Orthodox Christians. These groups have lower levels of volunteering than the 'no-religion' group according to the 2016 Census. However, lower levels of volunteering among these groups was not supported by the SEIROS survey. It is possible that the difference between the SEIROS survey and the Census was that the SEIROS survey only included people who spoke English well, and did not include the many overseas-born students and others who are in Australia on a temporary basis.
2. Mainstream Christian groups including Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Uniting Church. We could add into these groups other religious groups such as the Jews and Baha'i. All these groups have volunteering rates of under 33 per cent, but all have higher rates than the non-religion group. These groups all have relatively low rates of religious involvement: less than one-third of those who identify are involved in the activities of the group monthly or more often. These low rates of involvement probably mean a lower level of influence from the religious community and religious teaching. The high correlation between religious groups with a high level of religious involvement and high levels of volunteering probably means that part of the reason for the lower levels of volunteering in these groups is associated with the lower levels of religious involvement.
3. Evangelical and other Christian groups. These groups tend to have high levels of religious involvement, with more than 50 per cent of those who identify with them involved monthly or more often. They also have higher levels of volunteering. Among those who identified as Baptists, 34 per cent volunteered, and among Pentecostals, 47 per cent.

The data from the Census and the SEIROS survey support the following hypotheses that:

1. People identifying with religious groups have higher rates of volunteering than people with no religion, and this is especially true of those religious groups with high levels of involvement, such as Evangelical and charismatic groups.
2. A significant proportion of the volunteer work done within religious groups is seen by the volunteers as done for the sake of the wider community. It is to be expected that people volunteer through organisations which are important to their sense of identity and sense of community. In the case of religious groups, this often means that people are engaged through their religious groups for the sake of the wider community.

Conclusions

The higher levels of volunteering by people identifying with religious groups, as shown by the Census, is consonant with the contention that religious groups encourage people to volunteer through groups and organisations. However, this data does not explain how this encouragement takes place.

One possibility is that churches motivate people to be more involved in their communities. However, if it is primarily a matter of motivation, one would expect that people in churches would also do more informal volunteering among their neighbours. However, the SEIROS survey does not provide support for that (Hughes 2018).

Another explanation is that churches engage people or provide an opportunity for engagement, as attenders at religious activities invite their fellow attenders to be involved in voluntary groups and organisations. It was suggested in the discussion of informal volunteering that the 'engagement factor' is a major factor in volunteering. People respond when they are confronted with a specific need they feel that they can address (Hughes 2018). It is possible that the engagement factor is a major factor for people's involvement in volunteering through religious organisations. When churches actually organise volunteer activities, they are often able to engage people who are involved in the churches to be involved in these volunteer activities. The specific invitations to be involved probably count more than all the sermons seeking to inspire people to be 'involved citizens'.

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