

# CHURCH TIMES

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## Church closures ‘disproportionately higher’ in low-income areas, research finds

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15 FEBRUARY 2023



CREATIVE COMMONS



CHURCHES are more likely to close in low-income areas than wealthier ones, a new report from Church Action on Poverty suggests.

To reach more people in these communities, churches — which are “often accused of being white, middle-

class spaces” — need to reflect the diversity of the UK, including [Global Majority Heritage](#) and [LGBT](#) people, the charity says.

The report [Is the Church losing faith in low-income communities in Greater Manchester?](#), published on Tuesday, is the culmination of a research programme, Church on the Margins, which was started in 2020 with seed funding from Church Action on Poverty.

The programme has involved qualitative and quantitative research into church closures in Greater Manchester over ten years, from 2010, across five denominations: Church of England, [Roman Catholic](#), [Methodist](#), [Baptist](#), and



[United Reformed Church](#). The city was chosen because it has a higher proportion of deprived areas than most of England.

Church closures were disproportionately higher in low-income areas than in more affluent areas, the research found.

Of the 395 Church of England churches included in the research, 21 closed between 2010 and 2020. Despite the C of E having the most even spread of churches across the boroughs, compared with other denominations, most closures (60 per cent) were in deprived areas.

The report, which also quotes statistics from a 2020 Church Buildings Council report, says: “Research into reasons for church closures found that fewer people using church buildings and a lack of volunteers was a significant factor, causing the church to struggle. Most dioceses also said that costly maintenance and repairs were a leading factor.”

It points to work being done by the C of E in these areas, including through the Estates Evangelism Task Group, the Low-Income Communities fund, and the Church Urban Fund.

“The research raises questions about how churches set up their structures and allocate resources, e.g. location of churches, deployment of ministers/clergy and their residential location, as well as the location of activities and projects.

“Despite many projects and programmes designed to work with and alongside communities affected by poverty, our research found that church closures are concentrated in low-income areas.”

Of the 15 Roman Catholic churches (out of 192) which closed in the same period, 40 per cent were in the most deprived areas. Of the 26 Methodist churches (out of 160) which closed, 50 per cent were in the most deprived areas, as was the case with the six Baptist churches (out of 47) which closed.

This was not the case for the six United Reformed Churches (out of 71) which closed — most of which were in affluent areas.

The report recommendations take inspiration from similar projects in the denominations, beginning with [Pope Francis](#)’s vision of a “poor church for the poor” to similar reports and programmes. A key recommendation is to follow the

example of the Church of Scotland, which has committed substantial resources to mission and ministry in “priority areas” in deprived communities for the past 15 years.

The report also recommends the Methodist’s own “Church at the Margins” programme, which, it says, has put more than £6 million into missional activities “led by people and churches on the margins”, over five years.

A press release accompanying the Church Action on Poverty report adds: “While the Church of England has committed substantial funding via its ‘Low Income Areas Fund’, we call for greater transparency on how dioceses spend the funds, and the extent to which funding decisions are accountable to the communities it is intended to benefit.”

More generally, it says, “churches are all too often accused of being white, middle-class spaces. In order to reach more people the churches need to reflect the diversity of the UK, including working-class people and communities facing racial injustice/people from Global Majority Heritage, people with disabilities, LGBT+ and many more.

“The churches need to welcome more trainees from working-class backgrounds, and people from Global Majority Heritage. Training for ministry should include exploration of issues affecting low-income communities, including inequality, poverty, social and racial justice.”

It concludes: “Promising examples from our research demonstrate that reflection and openness to change are crucial in the long-term sustainability of churches.”

Church Action on Poverty invites church leaders, clergy and ministers, and churchgoers to comment on its research findings.

The main figures are based on statistics directly from denominations (e.g. data officers, diocesan contacts), online church directories, maps, and historical records, and diocesan year books.

A second report, *What does it mean to be a church on the margins?*, was published simultaneously on Tuesday, based on “in-depth conversations” with church communities in low-income areas in Greater Manchester over the past two years. It documents frustrations with barriers around disability, literacy, class, language, leadership, and power within mainstream churches.

“At times moving, at times frustrating, the voices and stories shared were powerful and insightful,” the authors write.

The director of Church Action on Poverty, Niall Cooper, said: “That low-income communities are being disproportionately affected by church closures . . . has ramifications for Christians and entire neighbourhoods — but, if national church leaders reinvest instead of retreating, then churches can help whole communities to thrive and build better futures.”

