



GOSPEL  
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# Experiences and perceptions of Presbyterian church attenders in engaging with the vulnerable and disadvantaged within the local church and wider community

**Gospel, Society and Culture Committee**

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## Abstract

### Introduction

People of faith consistently engage in monetary and non-monetary acts of service, within the church and the wider community. However, these acts of service, particularly informal acts are often not recorded or articulated. The aim of this study was to gain an understanding of experiences and perceptions of Presbyterian church attenders on giving help, particularly to those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged within the church and the wider community.

Research questions focused on acts of service and support that attenders and their churches are currently involved in, including informal acts of service, and the perceived enablers and challenges of providing these acts of service and support.

### Methods

A qualitative approach was used to design the study with data collected through focus groups with participants from Presbyterian congregations across NSW and ACT. A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit focus group participants. For maximum diversity, churches were recruited from metropolitan and regional/rural geographic locations with differing socio-economic status, to give a diverse range of insights into activities across churches. Data were de-identified and analysed thematically.

### Results

Five focus groups were held with a total of 22 participants (12 male and 10 female) from eight Presbyterian churches across NSW and the ACT (4 metropolitan congregations and 4 regional/rural). Three broad themes along with their subthemes were identified in the qualitative analysis: Enablers to providing acts of service and support including technology and use of existing resources and training; Barriers and challenges to providing acts of service and support including, resource and capacity challenges, financial constraints, challenges of helping people with complex needs, structural challenges and regulatory barriers; Outcomes of providing acts of service and support, including belonging and acceptance, spiritual support and sharing the gospel, meeting practical needs and building hope and resilience.

### Conclusion

A diverse range of structured activities and support as well as informal acts of service within the church and the community are evidenced to have far-reaching community-wide benefits. Participants described positive outcomes in terms of spiritual growth as well as meeting physical, social and emotional needs of individuals and community.

## Introduction

In Australia, most charities have historically been faith-based, with the Benevolent Society, Australia's oldest existing charity, established in 1813. The Presbyterian Church, along with other denominations have been prominent in philanthropic ventures since colonial times (Cooper, 2015; Piggitt & Linder, 2019). Faith-based services remain primary in helping the disadvantaged or vulnerable in society and continue to play a significant role, accounting for approximately 25% of services established in the last 25 years (Knight and Gilchrist, 2015; Scaife et al., 2015). According to the Australian Charities and Not-for Profits Commission (ACNC) in 2021, several faith-based charities including World Vision, Salvation Army and Compassion were included in the top ten charities in terms of highest donations (ACNC, 2023).

People of faith regularly make financial contributions to philanthropy and are more likely to engage in various acts of service, including non-monetary, within the church and the wider community (Shepherd et al., 2019). A 2022 survey conducted by National Church Life Survey Research with 3,385 churches, reported that 78% of churches in Australia provided or ran social services and activities in the past 12 months: visiting prisons, hospitals (49%); emergency relief or material assistance (47%); chaplaincy (24%) counselling services (22%) (NCLSR, 2022). People of faith are more likely to volunteer to religious and non-religious causes than non-religious people (Agape Economics, 2021). A study on the impact of religion on volunteering behaviour in Australia estimated that those who attend religious services on a regular basis are associated with 30.5 million hours in volunteering time, the equivalent of \$339 million in monetary value (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). Church attenders are also heavily involved in offering informal help to those in need, such as sharing resources, visiting the sick or elderly and connecting with those who are socially isolated (Baptist Financial Services, 2019). Contrary to the Productivity Commission, these acts of service within church life do not have the sole purpose of what the Charities Act calls "advancing religion" (Productivity Commission, 2024) but are all significant contributions to the common good and wider society.

"To love your neighbour as yourself" (Mark 12:31) will always be a core tenet of the Christian faith. Christians care for one another and the community at large, including providing tangible sustenance to those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged (James 2:15-16). Acts of service by church attenders benefit the church and wider community, however these acts, particularly informal acts, are often not recorded or articulated. The aim of this Gospel, Society and Culture

(GS&C) research project was to gain an understanding of experiences and perceptions of Presbyterian church attenders in NSW and the ACT in giving help to those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged within the Presbyterian church and the wider community.

## Method

### Study design

A qualitative study design was used to collect and analyse focus group data to answer the research questions. Focus group questions were based on acts of service in the church and local community. Demographic data such as gender and postcode were also collected. Ethics approval was granted by the Australian College of Theology Ethics Committee (approval number: EC2408-09).

### Study setting

Participants in the study are all members of the Presbyterian Church in New South Wales and ACT (PCNSW/ACT), including those in leadership roles.

### Recruitment

Invitations to participate in the study were sent to Presbyterian congregations in NSW and the ACT via email. Inclusion criteria included being over 18 years old and in attendance at a Presbyterian church for over 12 months. Participants were given information about the study and returned a consent form. Participants were then contacted via email for available times for a focus group.

### Data Collection

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit focus group participants. For maximum diversity, churches were contacted from a range of geographical locations across NSW and ACT. All participants consented to participate in a focus group and to have the discussion recorded. Focus groups were conducted over Zoom by the same researcher between November 2024 and June 2025. Each focus group was approximately 90 minutes in length and was transcribed verbatim. There was no reimbursement for participation.

## Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps: familiarisation, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and writing the report. Analysing the data thematically allowed patterns to be identified across the data set.

## Results

### Participant sample

Five focus groups were held with a total of 22 participants (12 male and 10 female). Focus group participants came from eight Presbyterian churches across NSW and the ACT (4 metropolitan congregations and 4 regional/rural).

### Services and support

Focus group participants identified various activities they were involved with as a congregation or as individuals within their local church and wider community. Refer to Appendix 1 for a summary of these activities. Participants perceived a blurring of lines between what were considered structured, formal services and informal acts of service:

*Bible study groups, so that's the kind of the formal arrangement but then the care that happens within the bible study group, they pray for each other and so they help each other in an informal way. We've got a formal setup in that we've got a foodbank and we encourage people to contribute to that and we remind people when it's getting low. But the actual use of the foodbank is very informal people can just help themselves to it and give it to anybody. It can be someone from church. It can be a neighbour. It can be anyone in the community that they are aware is going through a hard time and so there's you know this formality and informality. (FG2 Participant 5)*

Participants also described reasons why they were motivated to intentionally engage in formal and informal acts of service and support:

*It has to do with the spirit that lives in us. It's not that we are so good that we do all these acts. It's also not that we have to earn salvation through what we do right? So I think that when we are involved in a community or want to do more outreach, that we want to*

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*make sure that people know that it flows out of our love for God and for our neighbour. I think if we just all learn to look at our communities more with the love of Christ and through his eyes I think we would see a lot more...people first need to sense that community and that will help them grow closer or be more open to the gospel... My prayer is that some of the people that have started coming to our church will come to faith. (FG3 Participant 2)*

Three broad themes along with their subthemes, were identified in the qualitative analysis: Enablers to providing formal and informal services; Barriers and challenges to providing formal and informal services; Outcomes of providing informal and formal services and supports. Each theme and related subthemes are described below with illustrative quotes.

## Enablers to providing acts of service and support

### Use of technology: a communication enabler

Across all focus groups, participants gave examples of technology being an enabler to providing various services within the church and the community. Online communication forums were one such use of technology. An online women's group chat was seen to be a prompt and convenient way to communicate with each other:

*...we can message on that group chat and go "I've got this prayer need. Can you, ladies pray?" And you know that every single one of those ladies is praying for you when you ask for it...I had a tricky meeting at work one day so I could put in there "I've got a meeting at 10, can you, ladies, please pray", or someone's got a doctor's appointment, or whatever's going on It's a really quick, easy way to just kind of reach out to your support network. (FG4 Participant 4)*

The Facebook platform was perceived as being useful to advertise individual and community needs and special events. A participant described a church Facebook page where individuals posted about needs and practical help:

*Sometimes people will post you know, I have this to give away, or someone needs this like in terms of practical items... Yeah, today someone was offering up different furniture items. (FG3 Participant 5)*

Another participant described helping to set up Facebook groups of local street communities during Covid, which have continued to function:

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*We letterboxed our streets and set up Facebook groups for our streets and set up street communities. That's not a church activity, but it was started by Christians and all of those Facebook groups and street groups have kept going. (FG4 Participant 2)*

Livestreamed services are another example of a service that provided access for church attenders that were unable to attend in person. This technology became common practice during Covid and for some congregations is still running to a certain extent, particularly for members of the congregation who are shut-in.

Technology was also seen to be an enabler in terms of food provision. A participant described how members of his congregation are using Uber Eats to provide food to those in need:

*...with Uber Eats, we actually have single men donating food through Uber Eats just sending a whole Chinese banquet for dinner which you know it's a great avenue and everyone now can participate in this support system. (FG3 Participant 3)*

## Use of existing resources and training as an enabler to providing services

Participants have found that using existing resources without needing to 'reinvent the wheel' was helpful. This included utilising resources from within the denomination such as Jericho Road, the social services arm of the PCNSW/ACT, as well as from other denominations:

*We have connected with Jason [from Jericho Road]. He's preached twice at church and we have someone in our church who's done or doing a PhD on disability advocacy, around that area. So we have quite a few people who that's their passion as well. (FG1 Participant 1)*

*I've actually tapped into Christ Church [Anglican] in St. Ives. They've got some fantastic visiting ministry resources. (FG2 Participant 1)*

Resources were also sourced through external bodies such as material from Hammond Care for people with dementia:

*Well, people with dementia. I've found Hammond Care have got a wonderful range of resources with simplified bible verses and hymns, and a short sort of little devotion, or a couple of sentences based on the bible verse, a hymn that is appropriate for that bible verse and a beautiful picture, a photo of something. (FG2 Participant 1)*

One participant described that attenders from their congregation have undertaken pastoral care training that a local Baptist church offered for free:

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*...one of the things that we've been provided quite a bit from the Baptists in town, probably because they've been Baptist nursing homes has been pastoral care training for people. Ideally, they are seeking people who will visit people in their homes and do pastoral care, but they give the training for free whether or not you sign up to visit their people, and people have always found that training very good. (FG2 Participant 5)*

It was recommended that having a centralised place to access resources across all Presbyterian congregations would be ideal:

*Instead of reinventing the wheel which I think we tend to do is if we had a centralised place with resources that were available for other churches just to grab and use, it would be brilliant. (FG2 Participant 1)*

Participants requested easily accessible, free resources covering discipleship for people with disabilities, evangelism and practical guides on how to connect with the specific needs of local communities.

## Partnering with existing services as an enabler

Participants gave many examples of individuals and congregations engaging with existing external services. This was particularly the case for smaller congregations and those with limited capacity:

*I think our church is still quite small but we have people involved in ESL in other churches' ministry. (FG3 Participant 2)*

*I go help out at another church with ESL and it's just a marvellous opportunity for outreach to people who want to learn everyday English... through the Anglican system Anglicare provides all the resources so as far as something very well resourced that is something that's just ready to get up and go. (FG1 Participant 5)*

One participant gave the example of an external organisation coming to speak to their congregation, resulting in several people signing up to volunteer:

*Mission Australia came, the guy from Mission Australia [name], and spoke and asked for volunteers to help over at Mission Australia and there were quite a few people signed up, so there's not an unwillingness to do it. (FG1 Participant 3)*

Participants described being interested in looking into developing further partnerships with external services:

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*How can we start partnering more with existing other groups like for one example is this organisation in our area called Fusion that do like food support, food bank, I think and other services and so some people are involved with that. (FG3 Participant 2)*

However, knowing what was happening in the local community first before developing new types of services was deemed important:

*I think it's very important to find out what is happening in your area. Can you join them? Why start up the same service? Or why start something that has failed in the past. Try to learn from what others have done or are doing. (FG3 Participant 1)*

One participant explained that a nearby Uniting Church provided lunch for homeless people so that would not be an area their congregation would likely focus on:

*The Uniting Church down the road they're running lunch for homeless people three or four days a week and we don't do anything like that now... (FG1 Participant 3)*

Across all focus groups, participants gave examples of their church building and premises being made available for community groups to meet, for example AA, craft groups and karate. For some, this is seen as an opportunity to facilitate connections and help serve the wider community. One participant who engages with a weekly 'external' group that uses the church space, where none of the group members attend church, described his involvement:

*For me personally, we have one particular group that I'm involved with, a group that have been renting the church for quite a number of years, but I've sort of infiltrated that just on a Tuesday serving them coffee and so just engaging with that group. It's a craft group... so it's a bit of fun, and it functions as a group to I guess encourage people who are lonely. I think that's the need it meets. So that's been a fun group just to connect with and build relationships with. My goal is to you know, connect with them in such a way that they hear about Jesus. That's the goal. (FG1 Participant 1)*

## Informal acts of service

Participants gave examples of informal acts of service, such as growing a culture of welcoming that helps to create community and connection. These acts of kindness are based on attitudes and being intentional rather than on recognised programs:

*I think in our church I guess we're placing more emphasis on the culture and having a culture of welcoming and hospitality and kindness that people actually feel they're*

welcome as they are. They don't have to keep up face, or they don't have to have it all together, and I think that's another way of I guess, sharing God's love with the world, like in how you relate to people. And then it's not visible as like we run this program, or we do that outreach, but actually, I think it's been very powerful, and we've seen that people have come to our church and have stayed. (FG3 Participant 2)

I know that our senior pastor, that was one of the first things that became apparent with him when he came here. He was very focused on making sure he met every new person that came into the church, and he encouraged the church to make sure that they connected and I think that does make a huge difference. People have said what a welcoming church it is, but I think it actually started off as an intentional thing. But now it's just part of what the church is and does. (FG2 Participant 2)

I think one of the most significant things that happens is when people hear about something that's going on to be able to say, listen, I'm praying about that ... I hear about a minuscule amount of what happens and I'm fairly connected. Those conversations and those things happen all the time and nobody even knows about it. (FG4 Participant 2)

## Barriers and challenges to providing acts of service and support

### Resource and capacity challenges

Major challenges to providing services across the focus groups were seen to be a lack of time and human resources. Participants spoke about how many people in their congregations were time poor, particularly workers and those with young families:

*I think life in Sydney tends to be very busy. Everybody's busy, busy all the time and so if we would have more time that would be great yeah, I don't know. Resources always an issue (FG3 Participant 2)*

*We're right in the heart of Sydney, and it's a prosperous professional area. People are busy...They're busy trying to keep up a certain image. (FG3 Participant 1)*

*Often both parents working and yes, they've got busy lives with growing children and I think that therefore they think they're too time poor to be involved. (FG2 Participant 1)*

*But you need a mindset, and you need resources, and you need commitment. And I think probably a lot of people would feel we as a church already are very busy. And so I think there'd be a reluctance to take on anything more. (FG1 Participant 3)*

Participants noted a decline in voluntarism in their congregations which made it a challenge to sustain existing services that were offered:

*There's been a demonstrable decline, I think, over the years in people who either have time available or have an appetite to commit to volunteering. So I think that's a considerable challenge in our region, and I think it's not just in our region (FG3 Participant 4)*

*... we've also run a kids program, which is like a holiday kids program in the middle of the year for the last couple of years. One of the interesting challenges with that is, it's intended to be a community outreach. It's intended to kind of serve the needs of our community and draw, I guess, unchurched children in and introduce them to Jesus in a church setting and I guess one of the challenges with that is just logistically making that work with getting enough people willing to volunteer. (FG3 Participant 5)*

Challenges with running ESL ministry were also due to human resources as well as unpredictability in student attendance:

*Regarding the ESL ministry, I think it's probably ebbed and flowed in terms of the mentors, like the teachers that have been able to be involved. I think you know there's been kind of some recruitment with that, but it often comes down to how many people are willing to mentor the students. It's unpredictable in terms of numbers, in terms of how many students will turn up on any given night. So during blueberry picking season, you might have lots of students coming along and then it might kind of drop off as they move to a different area for different job opportunities. So it's sort of a little bit unpredictable because you can have enough mentors, but then not have enough students, or you can have lots and lots of students and lack the numbers with the mentors. So I think matching with the numbers that has been one challenge. (FG3 Participant 5)*

Participants noted a loss of momentum and enthusiasm for some services, which also led to a decline in active support:

*...one of the issues we face in the community pantry ministry is that the start of it about two years ago everyone's very enthusiastic and we have a lot of volunteers. But more importantly, we had a lot of donations. Our cupboards were full. We had like six to eight cupboards they're all filled with things. But over time people forget and whether or not we remind them it's just no longer front of mind. It's no longer hot off the press kind of*

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*thing and yeah, I just find it I guess sobering to some degree, but at the same time not really disappointed. We create this ministry and it's working but the congregation kind of like lost its interest. (FG3 Participant 3)*

One participant noted that some church volunteers had experienced burn out, particularly when the same people have repeatedly been the ones to help out:

*...something that I've noticed we come up against is people burn out or they're too busy. So getting the people you know like we run a holiday kids club in the July holidays every year and it takes a lot of people and a lot of work, but you get people who are just too busy, or they're too burnt out from helping too often, so a lot of the times having the people to resource the activity can be quite challenging. (FG4 Participant 4)*

## Financial Constraints as a barrier

Across all focus groups, participants noted financial constraints as a barrier to service provision:

*I guess funds doesn't matter where you are. Funding is always limited and you know, we're in the process of like collecting funds to expand our church. I would hope that maybe we could spare a corner where if people do need to come in and have a shower from the street, maybe we could facilitate that. You know we're moving in the right direction with the food once a month. Maybe we could do a little bit more. I don't know. (FG3 Participant 3)*

*If you don't have enough income coming in you can't really operate and if you have a church full of people who are troubled it needs to be supported...Sometimes, if you're working in difficult areas with challenging people, you're gonna find it hard to do the kind of things that the Presbyterian Church wants you to do, which is to have a working budget and so you know your target audience is normally the employed and the educated, which is what our churches are, and they're great and my observation would be that when somebody in trouble comes in I think people will respond very kindly and generously towards them, but how do you work out that balance? (FG1 Participant 3)*

Some participants were from congregations located in higher socio-economic areas, yet budgets remained tight with mortgages and costs of living.

*We're right in the heart of Sydney, and it's a prosperous professional area. People are busy. If they've got problems they didn't talk about them in many cases. They're busy trying to keep up a certain image and cope with the big financial commitments. So although we're in a prosperous area, our budget is really tight. And so the money is perhaps going into mortgages and private schools, but not necessarily into the church.*  
(FG3 Participant 1)

## Challenges of helping support people with complex needs

A resource gap noted by participants was the lack of training in how to engage with people with disabilities and how to best support them:

*We have a few people with some disabilities. Yeah, different degrees of being on the spectrum and there's a school close by so that's sort of there's the connection there and some families yeah, with kids. But I think the biggest challenge for us in that is actually training our people in how to converse with them. It's not about trying to help them fit. They're fine. They're absolutely fine, and they're quite happy to tell us the same thing every week but it's the people who come to church that need to be willing to listen. I think that's the harder part. But yeah, those of us who are able are having more trouble than those who are not able.* (FG1 Participant 1)

*Well, you've got to be accepting of some of their quirky behaviours. I don't know if it's the right way to express it, but some of them are very shy and retiring, others volatile and repetitive, and you learn to cope with it, and it's probably a shock to visitors occasionally*  
(FG1 Participant 2)

Similarly, participants noted a lack of accessible resources for discipleship specifically targeted for people with a disability.

*So we're not doing anything specific at the moment for those people within the church, but it has been a question as we think about you know, professions of faith, baptism, like what does that look like to sit down with those people and talk about where they're at in their relationship with Jesus? That has to be different to what we're doing with other people. I've been looking for material like that, but I haven't found anything that useful. No, I can't find anything that's sort of I can go "Oh, yeah, that will work" and I think that's the difficulty, because the range of who we're dealing with is quite different person to person, not just a category.* (FG1 Participant 1)

Another resource gap noted by participants was the lack of training in how to engage with the vulnerable or disadvantaged, especially those affected by alcohol or drugs and those experiencing homelessness:

*I think one of the problems in that area is that yes, we're not necessarily trained especially when there's very problematic and aggressive behaviour from people that are drug affected that can come to our door. That's a big challenge and we've often had to get out our big bookend blokes and ex policeman and to go and have a little gentle chat, urge people to move on or behave. (FG2 Participant 1)*

*I sometimes feel like we all need to be social workers and maybe some form of social work, like training might help. Not to be a counsellor necessarily, but to be better linked with the social connections and the support services so we can actually look after those physical needs or the mental health needs. Now, I've had some very wild and wacky conversations with people passing by and yeah, I'm not sure what drug they're taking, but they've got some amazing stories to tell me and I don't really know how to react. I'm not trained in that at all. So yeah. I don't know what my job and my role is, and I don't know what would help me do that better, but something to help reduce the sense of a barrier. (FG2 Participant 6)*

*So there's a number of individuals who help people. But we had a guy who was a Sudanese refugee. He'd come to an ESL class for a while. He came to church for a bit, but he's largely dropped out. He smokes like a chimney. He's an alcoholic he doesn't have a lot of money. He will prioritise his tobacco over food and just not eat. He's a victim of incredible trauma as well... There were two or three of us helping him. He's had a falling out with a couple of them, because when he's been drunk he's been abusive which is the problem. (FG4 Participant 1)*

*I don't know that we do it particularly well and I don't know that we're particularly well equipped to do it, and that is to respond to those people who are drug affected, alcohol affected, living rough on the streets, walking past our building and needing food. We recently had a visit from the chaplain of Mission Australia and there's this overwhelming need for, I guess, support, for I think he said something in the order of 1,500 Housing Commission homes in our region. So there's a huge number of people who are on struggle street. He said you know, like the pastoral care team is him, one person, and he's got scope for 1,500 family units who are struggling with life and needing their support. And so I don't know that as a church we're very equipped with that. I think we*

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*see ourselves as biblically sound high quality teachers of God's Word. I'm not sure it's matched with a social needs agenda in that same level, especially for that cohort of people who are really struggling. I know we try but there's a sense of almost fear for some people in dealing with those people that are walking past and really not fitting into our church stereotype. (FG2 Participant 6)*

Participants also noted the challenge of balancing social justice needs with gospel ministry and discipleship building:

*Also I think how do we prioritise what we do with our time? Is there enough? Yeah. Is social justice what we're on about as a church? Or are we on about being disciple makers sharing the gospel, and then building disciples of Jesus? (FG2 Participant 1)*

## Structural challenges

For congregations that do not have their own premises or have a lack of facilities, the ability to provide various services is hampered. For example, a participant explained that not having access to a kitchen or adequate space prevents them from running ESL classes or a community kitchen program:

*I think not having our own building is probably one of the top main challenges because you don't have a kitchen you can access, for example to feed people. You don't have a space where you can run programs that are helping people, that sort of thing. It's certainly on our list if once we get a building and we do have an intention to do it that way, and we have a list of things that we would like to do. Once we get that, including a community kitchen type thing, some level of helping get services to people which may be either helping people in need or helping people access things that they couldn't access, they can't afford, like maybe learning an instrument for their kids or something like that through to counselling through to, maybe parenting. (FG4 Participant 1)*

## Regulatory barriers

Regulatory requirements for specific services, for example setting up food services, were seen as barriers to providing a service:

*But when it comes to things like the food kitchens and helping the homeless and there seem to be all these regulations around stainless steel worktops and you know, you've*

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*got to have this environment and what you've got to do with food preparation and sometimes it just seems too big to even contemplate. (FG2 Participant 5)*

It was suggested that help from PCNSW General Office for congregations to work through these regulations would be beneficial:

*I think if churches did want to pursue that, it would be helpful if there was someone at the head office who could help them navigate all those you know whether it just be a checklist but they could even say we've found this to be the best place to source your stainless steel worktops from, or you know the cheapest place, and you can set up something small. It only needs to be this, this and this, and you know such and such a church has been able to do it for \$2,000 or whatever... just if there was some help. (FG2 Participant 5)*

Participants also perceived child regulation compliance to be a barrier for some services, in terms of tasks people needed to complete to be compliant:

*Even the regulatory impost on child protection, for example, although I think we've made probably the Church's version of it is worse than the government's in terms of the regulatory aspect of it. But these things just get in the way of being able to help. Now I'm not trying to resist them entirely, either. I understand why we're here, and a lot of that's due to failed church government. (FG4 Participant 1)*

*One of the challenges to one of the ministries was having people do "Breaking the Silence", having them do all the training, get their working with children checks, all the stuff, and it can feel at times like there are so many barriers, it's not worth doing stuff. (FG2 Participant 5)*

One participant described regulatory barriers his church has faced in terms of applying for land to build a church building on. The government had rejected their church application for land, claiming that it lacked sufficient community access, despite the church's intention to provide community services.

*Despite recently putting an application in for land from the ACT government they rejected it on the basis that it didn't provide enough community access or use which is interesting... Government policy I kind of think that's the second biggest issue that we face. Now in terms of the building space perhaps easier zoning changes would be useful. They're not necessarily about buying land and building a building. We're also looking at what might be available. So it's just some more flexibility in government*

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*regulation generally about Christian ministry or presence would be useful in the ACT. We have a government that's relatively hostile to churches. (FG4 Participant 1)*

The response by government was seen as a lack of acceptance and appreciation for the value of Christian ministry and service:

*But you get an impression these days that the government doesn't appreciate the underpinning value of morality that Christian worldview has brought to community - it is being thrown away... the thing I'd like to have most is, apart from the building, would be sort of a level of government acceptance of Christianity... I think the government just doesn't appreciate the contributing value of Christian ministry in the community and I'm not asking for anything from government except a little bit of recognition of that, and a little bit more freedom to actually to do it. (FG4 Participant 1)*

## Outcomes of acts of service and support

### Belonging and acceptance

A positive outcome of various acts of service and support within the church and wider community is a sense of belonging and acceptance. This sense of community has significant impact particularly for the vulnerable or disadvantaged. Participants observed that people with disabilities in their congregation “feel they belong”:

*These people feel they belong. How many groups might some of these challenged people belong to? But they feel part of our group and that's important. (FG3 Participant 1)*

*There's been a quite a substantial increase in the number of people who have some sort of mental difficulty and so they integrate fairly well with the congregation. The congregation's accepting of them and I think we think of ourselves as trying to be as welcoming as we can and inclusive of people with those sorts of difficulties. (FG1 Participant 2)*

Acts of kindness and an intentional welcoming culture were perceived to result in individuals feeling supported and accepted. This was seen to occur both within the church and in interacting with the community:

*I think one of the most significant things that happens is when people hear about something that's going on to be able to say, “Listen, I'm praying about that” but then to*

*message them a couple of days later and say, “How are you going?” just basically say, “I’ve been praying about that thing. How is it going?” So that’s immeasurable, you can’t measure that. I find it hard to imagine trying to quantify... I hear about I’m sure a minuscule amount of what happens and I’m fairly connected. Those conversations and those things happen all the time and nobody even knows about it. (FG4 Participant 2)*

*One of our team members were doing door knocking and then one of the questions was “are you affiliated to a church, have you heard about a church?” and they’re like, “Yeah, I go to a church on Saturday around that corner”. It’s like that’s our church. Never seen you before. Turns out that they come to the Community Pantry. That’s been really encouraging. (FG3 Participant 3)*

There were many examples given of a deliberate focus on hospitality and acceptance. A craft group was noted that “it functions as a group to I guess encourage people who are lonely. I think that’s the need it meets”. (FG1 Participant 1). A new youth group in a regional area has been able to engage with and support disadvantaged youth:

*The other thing we’ve just recently started up a youth group in this new suburb and it’s tended to attract a lot of non-Christian couch surfing kids who get a meal as well. They obviously have a bit of a rough background but been coming along. I mean, it’s fairly new to say they’re going to be super regular, but at the moment they’ve been coming along and I guess the meal helps a lot. It gives them something to do, when perhaps there’s nothing. (FG4 Participant 1)*

## Spiritual support and sharing the gospel

Prayer support through growth groups, prayer chains and online group chats were described as being very positive and supportive for church members, particularly when faced with difficult circumstances:

*It’s been very positive. And those who ask for prayer, that’s the purpose of it. Those who ask for prayer are thankful for it and keep in touch, so that we hear of answered prayer and it binds people together well. (FG3 Participant 1)*

*It is really helpful for many of us. I think like also women that maybe are in difficult situations, or there’s illness or parents passing away. Or, yeah, it can be all kinds of things but we keep one another updated. So I think it provides some kind of emotional*

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*support for people and I think the women are more connected maybe through that. (FG3 Participant 2)*

*You know that every single one of those ladies is praying for you when you ask for it. (FG4 Participant 4)*

Structured activities like Scripture (SRE) teaching in public schools were noted as outreach activities that were often the only opportunity for children from non-church families to hear the gospel:

*One of our outreaches is that we teach Scripture SRE each week and we've done that for a few years, and it's just been a wonderful experience... many or most of these kids don't come from church families so this is their only opportunity to hear the gospel and the teachers and the helpers and others as well. It's a great outreach and so the gospel goes out and it's just amazing to see some of the kids' reactions to the bible stories... they listen to what you say, so it's just a great opportunity. (FG2 Participant 3)*

Low fee-paying Christian schools were perceived as another opportunity to share the gospel while providing high-quality education:

*I guess there are three churches in the regions up here and the respective Presbyterian churches in those regions set up schools, Christian schools as a ministry of each of those churches and I think that's a very significant community impact that's been achieved by those churches stepping out and creating an educational environment, a Christian educational environment across the region. They're low fee-paying schools, which is very important when you consider the demographic that they're reaching, and it's an opportunity to not only provide high quality education, but most importantly, to be able to share the gospel message as well to their families, who are attending those schools as well. (FG3 Participant 4)*

English as a Second Language (ESL) programs provide a structured way to connect with and to serve the community, particularly those who are culturally and linguistically diverse and are often socially isolated:

*It's just a marvellous opportunity for outreach to people who want to learn everyday English. (FG1 Participant 5)*

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*I guess it goes beyond just teaching the language and then introducing people into the church programs. (FG2 Participant 6)*

There were many examples of spiritual growth as a result of the outreach activities that participants were involved in:

*I do know that people have come from ESL to do Christianity explored course and are also coming to church because of relationships that they've built up with people. (FG 2 Participant 1)*

*We have I think four people that I know of that come regularly from that interaction [Community Pantry Program] for about a year and a half, two years, for as long as that program's been on. We have two elderly ladies that's been participating in the church, and they've been bringing their granddaughters for Sunday School every now and then, and then there's a younger couple that's been attending. (FG3 Participant 3)*

## Meeting practical needs

Many of the formal and informal services described by participants involved physical needs of vulnerable or disadvantaged people being met. A structured ministry supporting vulnerable mothers was noted to have “very positive” outcomes:

*It's been very, very positive, I guess and there's been quite a lot of mums who have attended the clinic, intending to terminate their pregnancies, but have been able to be offered different alternatives. And lives have literally been saved because women have chosen to continue with their pregnancies and the program has been able to offer these mums, even the support person, to come to their birth and they visit them at home for quite some time, and they provide things like nappies and so it's a very comprehensive service. (FG4 Participant 2)*

Likewise, the community pantry initiative in one congregation has helped support many people in the community to access food and resources:

*So that has been really working really well and so I think they have 30 to 50 people once a month. It's run on the last Saturday and it encourages the people within the church to participate. Kids you know, we encourage our children to “hey use your pocket money, buy, put that in the box” and at the same time it reaches out to the community. (FG3 Participant 3)*

Morning teas were observed to be a positive way to reach out to the community after church on a Sunday, including those who don't attend the church service:

*On Sunday morning yeah, they put on a really good morning tea. The words got out...but it's more a case of actually dealing favourably with the ones that actually come along. And I think they do that you know they do that well, they try to treat people kindly and help them out where they can. (FG1 Participant 3)*

## Building hope and resilience

Participants noted how being part of a caring growth group within their congregation helped them through challenging times:

*When you're a part of a growth group like the group that [name] and I attend everybody's faith in that group has a huge impact on how they approach and handle a health crisis. Or you know, I had a blow up at my boss because this went wrong. So their faith, we see it every week when we're talking to each other at bible study. We see how that impacts, how we face and go through the challenges that are put in front of us every day. (FG4 Participant 4)*

*Knowing that you're part of a community and that you've got help wherever you are, and you know that you've shared a faith with people has been just a phenomenal encouragement... as Christians, we have hope. We know that even death can't separate us from the eternal hope that we have. (FG2 Participant 5)*

An example was given of a very ill woman who was given support and care from her congregation, which along with her faith was seen to be a source of encouragement and hope:

*A complete lack of worry and a complete readiness to die. She had prayer networks. She had people who would take her to the doctors even when her kids couldn't take her and who were there with her right through it and you know, we moved bible study to her house so she didn't have to travel out and could still be a part of it and we had the live streams so that even when she was too sick she was still at church, she could attend from home. And yeah, I think all of that just has a direct impact on how you face each and every day with hope and even joy, even when you're struggling and dying. (FG2 Participant 5)*

Likewise, it was perceived that having joy in Christ enabled resilience in older church members, who despite health issues, continued to serve one another:

*But our mums and our grandmas are out there cooking up a storm to share with people and you know, they're not complaining about ailments, I mean, they might have ailments, but that became secondary to their joy in Christ, and that joy that is part of a Christian family as they serve one another. (FG 3 Participant 3)*

## Discussion

This research project highlights the important contribution that individuals and congregations within PCNSW/ACT make in terms of acts of service and support within the church and wider community. Our findings demonstrate that these acts of service and support are evidenced to have far-reaching community-wide benefits with positive outcomes in terms of spiritual growth as well as meeting physical, social and emotional needs of individuals, including those that are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Churches are places for social interaction and community engagement and connecting with people is an integral part of the mission of the church. Christians are to seek justice and show mercy and to make Jesus known; "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Participants described many activities they were engaged in, such as programs for children, youth groups, growth groups, ESL classes, support for vulnerable mums, community meal provision as well as informal acts of service. These acts of service and support provide social connection and help to address physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs of individuals and communities.

Research shows that children and adolescents are at particular risk of loneliness and social isolation (Loades et al. 2020; Munasinghe et al. 2020). In Australia, the highest loneliness scores are in young adults and particularly those living in regional and remote areas (AIHW 2023). Likewise, people with disability have fewer friends and social supports and are more socially isolated than those without disability (Emerson et al. 2021). According to the AIHW, 29% of people with disability experience loneliness compared to 17% of people without disability. This figure increases to 38% for people with intellectual disabilities (AIHW 2022). Research also shows that 20% of older Australians are socially isolated, increasing up to 60% for older adults who live in residential aged care (ARIIA 2022). Those that are homeless are also vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness with studies indicating that they are twice as likely to feel lonely than mainstream communities (Bower et al. 2017).

Acts of service and support described by participants in this research project are shown to target each of these vulnerable groups. A welcoming culture that fosters a sense of belonging, was reported to provide a supportive environment and connection, including for those who have intellectual difficulties or come from diverse backgrounds. Informal acts are not easily measured yet they are part of a valuable justice and mercy ministry and create community for people that lack connection. Jericho Road has worked with many churches to help them become more inclusive for those with intellectual and physical disabilities as well as accommodating people with neurodiversity. Informal acts of service such as acts of kindness, visiting the sick, providing meals, offering transport and checking in on those struggling with loneliness were reported to occur frequently as part of everyday life for people of faith.

Although gospel outreach was not the main focus of the research project, it was captured in the results that participants were invested in making Jesus known. Engaging in activities like SRE were perceived as opportunities for children from non-church families to hear the gospel. Participants perceived that serving the community may enable people to be more open to the gospel and were actively praying that people they connected with would come to faith. Prayer groups and growth groups where members give spiritual and emotional support were perceived to provide informal pastoral care. Participants reported on faith and a supportive church family fostering hope and resilience in church attenders. Similarly, studies have reported on the correlation between religion and health which can impact individuals and communities in positive ways. It is evidenced that the practice of religion increases physical health, life expectancy and mental health (Weber and Pargament, 2014; Williams and Sternthal, 2007).

Studies show that church attendance is associated with higher levels of social integration and social support and lower levels of social isolation and loneliness (Rote et al. 2013). Our research demonstrated that activities for church attenders and the wider community encourage social connection, interaction and friendship. Regular social interaction and acts of kindness toward others is evidenced to produce meaningful relationships that help to ward off loneliness and have the potential for a positive impact on health (McFadden 2024). The ordinary patterns of church life — meeting with people and actively caring for them, which is largely informal, is itself a positive contribution to the common good. The person who goes to a Bible study group or stays for morning tea after church has a social network which meets social needs and is able to meet other needs when they arise, contributing to the persons good and reducing load on formal community services.

Participants described constraints on time and a lack of resources and training as barriers and challenges to providing services within the church and wider community. It was noted how some people are busy just trying to survive, however, sometimes people are busy with things that are not necessary or that get in the way of being able to serve well. Acknowledging being time poor may lead to creative social interactions with individuals and communities that do not require large amounts of time. The use of existing services and resources was perceived as one way to overcome challenges of limited resources and training.

Engaging with Jericho Road was perceived beneficial for churches in providing services and support for people living with disability and for their families. Jericho Road is able to help churches access targeted resources and can develop resources where there is a gap. Jericho Road has ESL resources and information on how to set up various justice and mercy ministries on their website. It can also help congregations with applying for local grants. Participants suggested that a training module for engaging with vulnerable and disadvantaged people would be useful. It was also suggested that a central resource hub be established along with the development of further resources, including adaptive materials for baptism preparation, profession of faith discussions and ongoing discipleship for those with cognitive and developmental differences.

## Conclusion

The Christian faith affirms the need for and value of human relationships. People of faith contribute to caring for vulnerable and disadvantaged people, showing justice and mercy through a diverse range of structured services as well as informal acts of service and support. Our study demonstrated that the many acts of service within PCNSW/ACT church life, which the Charities Act calls "advancing religion", are significant contributions to the common good - serving spiritual needs, but also social, physical and emotional well-being of those within the church and in the wider community.

## Recommendations

The findings of this report highlight the significant contribution to the common good of PCNSW/ACT churches. As a denomination we should not underestimate the church as a hospitable place that is engaged in giving support to the vulnerable and disadvantaged within the church as well as in the wider community. It is evidenced that even small sized

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congregations are able to contribute significantly. From the findings we recommend the following:

- Churches to take an inventory of the acts of service within their own congregations. This study demonstrates that church life is rich in acts of service which are often hidden from the leadership and the wider congregation. The spontaneous, organic nature of such service is part of what makes it so powerful. Churches generally do not seek to document what is already happening in church life, however there is value in doing so in order to support and encourage such acts of service. It may also be possible to identify gaps where greater care could be provided.
- PCNSW/ACT to publicise WHS regulation compliance documentation more widely e.g. for food handling <https://pcnsw.org.au/work-health-and-safety/>
- Churches should be encouraged to provide access to resources and training in areas where there is a perceived need. Where possible existing services and resources should be used (e.g. Jesus Club Ministry for people with disabilities; the Sydney Refugee Team partnership; and PCNSW/ACT Jericho Road resources).
- With many capable people being “time poor” churches should think of creative ways in which care can be offered which does not require large amounts of time (e.g. a collection of food items that is taken regularly to the local Neighbourhood Centre or a refuge; donating to Jericho Road’s rice and oil drive; or donating to Jericho Road to provide counselling).
- Churches should continue to consider how to provide for people with disabilities and vulnerabilities including the aged – people who have a wide variety of needs. Churches could access the Jericho Road Disability Advocate and other Christian ministries e.g. Jesus Club Ministries for adults with intellectual disabilities.
- Churches should liaise with Jericho Road in how to connect better with disadvantaged people. Jericho Road could be approached to develop resources where there may be a gap e.g. adaptive resources for people with cognitive and developmental differences; a training module to help congregations engage with the vulnerable and disadvantaged.
- Churches should make fuller use of the present Jericho Road resources e.g. Jericho Road has launched “Prayermate” as a way for congregations and individuals to pray for each other as well as for Jericho Road; congregations can seek help from Jericho Road when applying for local grants for community projects.

- Findings from the study highlighted that a centralised resource hub would be useful for churches to access community engagement resources. This could be developed by liaising with Jericho Road e.g. ESL resources and information sheets on how to set up justice and mercy ministries are currently accessible online through the Jericho Road site.

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## Appendix 1. List of activities

Type of Service	Description
Pastoral care for church attenders	<i>e.g. growth groups, prayer groups, meal provision for sick, visitation ministry</i>
Structured church programs for church attenders and wider community	<i>e.g. kids clubs, youth groups, PCYC</i>
Meal provision and resources for wider community	<i>e.g. Community Pantry Program, street pantry, food parcels</i>
Emergency assistance for church attenders and wider community	<i>e.g. providing emergency financial and physical support</i>
Outreach activities and community events	<i>e.g. evangelistic courses, Elvis gospel service during the Elvis festival, men's motor ministry, vulnerable mums group, cooking classes, bush dances, craft groups</i>
Informal acts of kindness	<i>e.g. being intentionally welcoming, connecting with others socially, showing hospitality and kindness</i>
Christian Education	<i>Christian schools, teaching SRE in public schools</i>
English as a Second Language (ESL) Classes	<i>English classes for those from non-English speaking backgrounds</i>
Community groups using church facilities	<i>e.g. AA meetings, cultural groups using church facilities</i>
Training for service provision	<i>e.g. training to be able to serve those with disabilities, those with alcohol or drug problems or experiencing grief or dying</i>

Note: This is not an exhaustive list of acts of service and support