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## Unwrapping Camden's church tweeters: A small-scale thematic study of Twitter data

### Anthony-Paul Cooper

In response to the well documented phenomenon of church decline (e.g. Bruce, 2002), academics have begun to examine the less well reported trend of church growth (e.g. Brierley, 2013; Goodhew, 2012). Such studies consider church growth alongside decline, acknowledging that while both the number of churches and the number of church attendees are declining in some parts of the UK, pockets of church growth are also present. One such location is the London Borough of Camden (referred to hereafter as Camden), which has reported a 6% growth in the number of church attenders between 2005 and 2012 (Brierley, 2013, p66). While religious sociologists are interested in understanding the social factors which may influence the growth of a church, little attention has been paid to lessons which may, or may not, be learned from data freely available on Twitter – a microblogging site which allows users to post 140-character entries.

This chapter informally presents a concise example of social media research which was conducted using freely available Twitter data. The study was conducted to better understand the topics being discussed in church tweets posted from an area of church growth. The study used a sample of Twitter data which was posted on Sundays from Camden and contained the word 'church'. The data was collected over a 10 week period, commencing 20th April 2014. The tweets were collected using the Twitter Application Programming Interface (see: <https://dev.twitter.com/>), more commonly referred to as an API. APIs are a series of instructions which allow data scientists and researchers to interact with datasets held by applications. The Twitter API allows a sample of tweets posted from within a radius around a specified centre point to be obtained. Following data collection, the MapIt API (see: <http://mapit.mysociety.org/>) was used to identify which tweets were posted from Camden.

In total, the Twitter API returned 108 tweets posted from Camden which contained the word 'church' during the data collection period. This number does not reflect all tweets posted from Camden during the period, but represents a sample of tweets which Twitter allow free access to. A full dataset containing all relevant tweets could have been purchased from an approved Twitter data reseller (for example: Gnip, see: <http://www.gnip.com>), however a sample size of 108 was considered to be sufficient for this small-scale proof of concept study, which sought to demonstrate the type of research possible using freely available Twitter data. Future studies requiring a larger sample size using freely available data could increase the time period for which data is collected, or select a larger sample area – for example by considering a number of different London boroughs.

To better understand the topics being discussed by Camden's church tweeters within the sample data, each tweet was qualitatively coded to reflect its content. In practice, this meant manually labelling the tweets with a descriptor (e.g. 'discussion about being at church' or 'discussion about going to church'). The results of this process were reviewed, and similar labels were grouped together into new labels which accurately described groups of tweets (e.g. the example labels 'discussion about being at church' and 'discussion about going to church' were merged to form the label 'discussion about church attendance'). Where a tweet was deemed to contain multiple themes, it was coded using as many labels as necessary. Following several iterations of this process, it was possible to code all tweets in the sample using the seven labels shown in figure 1.

Qualitative coding label	No. of tweets captured by code
Discussion about church attendance	59
Discussion about church service content	5
Discussion about theology, the Bible or belief	15
General church discussion	40
Miscellaneous	5
Non-church discussion	4
Unknown theme	10

**Figure 1: Thematic coding labels used to categorise tweets within the sample, along with the volume of tweets captured by each label.**

The data illustrated in figure 1 indicates that the majority of tweets in the sample (approximately 55%) related to church attendance. The majority of such tweets contained general discussion related to being at church, for example:

*'Good to be in church @ Hillsong London / Central London'* (Posted at 12:05 on 22nd June 2014)

This capturing of church attendance locations in clear text format helps to paint a picture of church attendance within the borough. More than this however, this ability to gather church attendance data from a freely available data source opens up interesting possibilities to researchers who wish to investigate patterns of church attendance. Future studies may be able to harvest this information to build a picture of church locations, or conduct analyses of church tweets based on the church from which they were posted.

Another prominent theme identified through the coding exercise was that of general church discussion. Approximately 37% of tweets fell within this category. Some of these tweets contained very general discussion of the role of church within the life of the tweeter, for example:

*'Having faith doesn't always mean going to church. Likewise, going to church doesn't always mean you have faith'* (Posted at 13:24 on 22nd June 2014)

Other tweets within this category contained only passing reference to church, but nevertheless they

were considered relevant to this analysis, since they were posted within Camden and related to church activity. For example:

*'Switch my phone on to a barrage of texts from @anonymised, drunk on church wine'*(Posted at 17:39 on 20th April 2014)

Such tweets may be of interest to religious sociologists in future, as they could enable researchers to gain a clearer understanding of the types of church-related discussion which take place online, and on other topics commonly discussed alongside church.

The tweets analysed contained 15 entries (approximately 14% of the sample) which were coded as 'discussion about theology, the Bible or belief'. These tweets were considered to be more focussed on beliefs than those tweets coded as 'general church discussion'. One example tweet directly quoted the Old Testament (Isiah ch 53 vs 5):

*'Church Today : "But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the...'* (Posted at 21:13 on 20th April 2014)

Interestingly, of the 15 tweets coded within this label, 12 were related to gay marriage and equality issues within the church. Some such tweets stated beliefs around the subject, and some pointed readers in the direction of other literature around the subject, while others engaged in debate. One example tweet from the sample which addressed this subject stated an opinion targeted at other Twitter users:

*'@anonymised @anonymised @anonymised @anonymised @anonymised – that's the issue, \*anonymised\* Being gay isn't a sin. It is God given'* (Posted at 07:25 on 27th April 2014)

A small number of tweets contained discussion specific to church services, while others still were coded as 'miscellaneous'. Such miscellaneous tweets were varied in nature, and included discussion of church architecture, and irritation at the noise created by church bells:

*'Do people still need church bells to tell them what time it is? #JustAsking'* (Posted at 21:02 on 20th April 2014)

Future studies with larger sample sizes might consider such tweets more closely – it may well be possible to identify additional coding labels, to help improve our understanding of the topics discussed by church tweeters.

In total only 10 tweets (< 10% of the sample) were not able to be coded using the labels in figure 1. These tweets were difficult to understand in isolation, and are likely to have been responses to wider conversations taking place on Twitter. A further interesting finding of this study was that only 4 tweets within the sample (approximately 4%) were considered to be unrelated to church. This may indicate that the word 'church' was a sensible search term for this study, though additional search terms, for example 'cathedral' may have added further relevant tweets to the sample.

During the coding process, it became apparent that a large number of tweets in the sample were about Hillsong Church which meets in the Dominion Theatre in London. In response to this finding, an additional coding exercise was conducted to determine how many of the tweets within the sample

appeared to relate to this church. In total, at least 38 of the 108 tweets (approximately 35%) within the sample appeared to be related to Hillsong church. It is possible that this number could be an underestimate, as coding was only able to identify tweets which were explicitly about Hillsong church – other more generic tweets may also relate to the same church, but not have been counted, for example:

*'What a glorious day! Uplifting afternoon at Church now off to grab a bit of lunch in the sun! #HappyGlossy'*  
(Posted at 14:52 on 8th June 2014)

This chapter has described a small-scale qualitative study of tweets posted from the London Borough of Camden during a 10 week period which contained the word 'church'. Whilst a full qualitative thematic analysis was not possible, due to the small sample size, a simple thematic coding exercise was conducted to try to identify the topics being discussed by Camden's church tweeters. Discussion of church attendance emerged as a common theme, as did general church discussion. Additionally, it was apparent during the coding exercise that a considerable proportion of the tweets within the sample related to one particular church in Camden – Hillsong Church. Furthermore, this chapter outlined some weaknesses of this approach, and also highlighted some potential avenues for future research, including repeat studies designed to increase the sample size and further consideration of the types of topics often discussed on Twitter alongside church.

## References

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## Author Biography

Anthony-Paul Cooper is a Junior Research Fellow at the Centre for Church Growth Research at Cranmer Hall, St John's College in Durham. Anthony-Paul has a background in social research and is interested in church growth, new use of 'secular' and 'sacred' space, and social research methods using social media. Correspondence: [anthony-paul.cooper@durham.ac.uk](mailto:anthony-paul.cooper@durham.ac.uk)