

Finding new churches via social media

Anthony-Paul Cooper

New Churches in the North East: A Day Conference 2015

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CENTRE FOR CHURCH
GROWTH RESEARCH



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Overview

- The research described in this presentation is part of the *London Church Attendance Baseline* study.
- End result of the *London Church Attendance Baseline* study will be a tagged map of all known churches in London, from a range of sources (These data will also be available in list format!).
- This presentation focuses on a small-scale qualitative thematic analysis of the content of church-related Tweets from one London borough – the London Borough of Camden.
- The aim of this research was to understand the topics being discussed in church related Tweets posted from an area of church growth.



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London Church Attendance Baseline Study

- Initial baseline will be formed using data from a range of sources:
 - Provided by denominations
 - Published in the literature
 - Available online
- Tweets believed to have been posted from churches within London will then be analysed, and geo data will be used to try and identify the locations of churches which are not present in the initial baseline.
- If successful, this will demonstrate that social media can be a useful way of identifying previously undocumented churches.
- Further work could consider the role of social media platforms in social research studies focussed on church growth.



Why use Twitter?

- Twitter is widely used: ~288 million monthly active users worldwide (believed to be >15 million active users in the UK).
- Twitter is a rich source of data – each tweet comes with useful metadata (e.g. location of tweet, username of tweeter, etc.).
- Samples of Twitter data can be obtained freely.
- The use of Twitter enables an unanswered research question (or series of questions) to be addressed – “*Can Twitter data be used to...*”.



The research question

- What topics are discussed in church related Tweets posted from an area of church growth?
- The answer to this question will help to understand whether or not church tweeters post about being **at** church – a requirement of the London Church Attendance Baseline Study.
- The answer to this question will also be interesting more generally (what **do** people say about church on Twitter?!).



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Research approach

- The London Borough of Camden was selected, as an example area of church growth - 6% growth in the number of church attenders between 2005 and 2012 (Brierley, 2013, p66)*.
- Sample of Twitter data were collected which contained Tweets posted on Sundays over a 10 week period (commencing 20th April 2014), which:
 - Contained the word “church”
 - Were posted within the London area
- The sample of tweets were collected using the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API).
- The MapIt API was used to identify which tweets were posted from within the London Borough of Camden.



*Brierley, P. (2013). “Capital Growth”. ADBC Publishers, Kent, UK.



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Research approach (continued)

- In total, 108 Tweets were analysed.
- Each tweet was qualitatively coded to reflect its content.
- The results of this process were reviewed, and similar labels were grouped together into new labels which accurately described groups of tweets.
- Where a tweet was deemed to contain multiple themes, it was coded using as many labels as necessary.



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Results

- 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.

Discussion about church attendance

- The data illustrated in figure 1 indicate 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 is encouraging for the London Church Attendance Baseline Study – hopefully there will be tweets posted from churches containing geo data!



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General church discussion

- Approximately 37% of tweets in the sample fell within this category of general church discussion.
- 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, 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)



Discussion about theology, the Bible or belief

- Tweets coded as discussion about theology, the Bible or belief were considered to be more focussed on beliefs than those coded as 'general church discussion'.

One example tweet directly quoted the Old Testament (Isaiah 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, for example:

``@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)`



Miscellaneous

- 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)



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Unknown theme and non-church discussion

- In total, only 10 tweets (<10% of the sample) were not able to be coded using the labels in figure 1.
- Only 4 tweets within the sample (approximately 4%) were considered to be unrelated to church.



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Limitations

- Sample size: Only 1 borough over a 10 week period.
- Day of posting: Only tweets posted on Sundays were analysed.
- Search term: Only tweets containing the word “church” were analysed.



What does all this mean?

- Twitter is a rich source of data for social researchers interested in studying the church.
- Discussion of church attendance on Twitter means that social media research might enable previously undetected churches to be identified.
- Other analyses of social media data might enable other religious sociology questions to be answered (for example: is there a relationship between online and offline activity?).
- But... not all geographic areas are the same. In the North East of England, for example, there are less freely available church related tweets for analysis.



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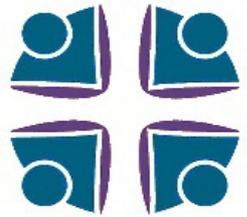
For more information

- The findings of this research have been published as a chapter in an eBook on social media research:

Cooper, A. P. (2014). "Unwrapping Camden's church tweeters: A small-scale thematic study of Twitter data". In K. Woodfield (Ed.), "Social Media in Social Research: Blogs on Blurring the Boundaries". eBook, NatCen Social Research, London, UK.



Any Questions?



For any questions following the conference, please email: anthony-paul.cooper@durham.ac.uk