

MEN & THE CHURCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Several important findings emerge from this study which deserve further exploration.

A. *Belonging*

Perhaps the most significant is:

belonging works differently in church for men than for women.

For most women, belonging in church is important, and they can articulate clearly what they want to happen as part of belonging:

- be known by name
- be valued as an individual
- be accepted (warts and all)
- be involved.

The men in these Focus Groups could not articulate clearly what belonging meant to them and it did not seem to be of any great importance to them as individuals. Married men appeared to see belonging in relation to the family - their wife (and children if they had any) belonged, therefore *ipso facto* they did also. Single men, however, were uncomfortable with the concept.

In recent years there has been considerable emphasis on believing before belonging (as well as believing without belonging¹). But if belonging is not a suitable 'way in' to church for men as it is for women, this may be one reason why most churches have a much higher proportion of women than men. Alternatively it may be that the way churches function socially is more feminine than masculine.

Is the way belonging occurs in church communities more suited to women's needs than to men's? Are men therefore less comfortable with the expectation of 'belonging' in church? Could this be a reason why many churches are dominated by women, and men seem less willing to start attending? Might this be a factor in why there are far fewer single men in church than single women?

B. *Attitudes to work*

Both studies uncovered considerable frustration related to people's work and roles.

For men, and possibly also for women who are employed outside the home, there is frustration that their **working lives are neither understood nor valued** by the church. What¹ would

¹ See especially the work of Dr Grace Davie in books such as *Religion in Britain since 1945*, Blackwell, 1994

churches have to do for this not to be true?

For women there is frustration that in many churches they are **limited in what they can do in the church**, and want to be free to contribute in whatever areas they are gifted.

C. Reasons for taking on roles in the church

This also is approached differently by men and women.

Men appear to take on roles in the church for one of three **reasons which are predominantly functional**:

- a) *the job needs to be done*. This is to do with the structure of church life and how the church functions
- b) transference of, or contrast to, *skills from their working life* eg an accountant may be willing to be treasurer. However, some prefer to do something different in church
- c) the *status it will afford them*, which may be linked to their need to have a clear identity in the church. This identity may fulfil the same function for men as belonging does for women.

Women take on roles in the church **primarily for relational reasons**:

- *who they will do it for* eg concern for children leads to a willingness to teach Sunday School (or its equivalent)
- *who they will do it with* eg "Mary leads that group and I would like to work with her"
- *who asked them to do it* eg the Vicar approached her and encouraged her that she was the right person for the job.

For women it is secondary rather than primary, as it is for men, whether or not they have the ability to do the job, or can learn to do it. This is why telling a woman she cannot, say, lead a home group, feels like a rejection of her as a person rather than a statement about the church's theological position.

D. The reasons for choosing / staying in a church

For men these are **primarily related to the spiritual life of the church** eg whether the teaching is relevant, if the worship is appreciated, whether they can grow in faith, opportunities to use their spiritual gifts. Practical considerations such as how friendly it is, the range of activities or whether it is easy to get to are definitely secondary.

For women, the **spiritual and practical aspects have to go hand in hand**. A woman tends to see church as a network of relationships, of which the relationship with God is central and the one which makes it church as against other groups to which they belong. Thus friendship, belonging, and growing in faith are intertwined and if one suffers, so does the other.

There are a number of other interesting findings. Conclusions drawn from each question or group of questions have been put in text boxes throughout the report.

INTRODUCTION

When the Women and the Church project was begun in 1997 the intention was to find out the attitudes, needs and expectations of women churchgoers. The steering committee quickly decided that it was important not only to find out those dimensions of churchgoing for *women* but also to explore in what ways they differed for *men*. In order to do that, it would be necessary to look also at how men experienced church. Unfortunately it was not possible to include the male dimension in the original project, due to lack of funding.

The findings of the Women and the Church project were published in *Eve's Glue*², but even before the book's publication the question was already being asked, "But are men different?" From discussions with those who asked the question, as well as other men, it appeared there were some areas where men experienced church in a different way to women.

During June 2002 Heather Wraight had a one month sabbatical from Christian Research and undertook to explore the differences as her main sabbatical project.

Denomination attended

_____ In response to this question all attenders gave a brief 'life history' of their churchgoing. A surprisingly high number had attended more than one denomination over the years, some had attended three or four, so their past and current attendance are both given here. The majority of attenders either had been or currently were either Baptist or Church of England (13 of each). Independent or New church accounted for seven past or present attenders, five each for Catholic, Methodist and Pentecostal and fewer for several other smaller denominations.

This was not a random sample, but it is interesting to note that more people had left the Church of England and Methodist Church than had joined it, while the opposite was true of Baptist and Pentecostal churches!

Length of attendance

_____ Fifteen had attended church consistently all their lives, five had stopped attending while a child or in their teens and subsequently returned, while the remaining six had started attending for the first time as adults. This gave a good picture of the variety of experiences. For those who had changed church, the average length of time they had been attending their present church was eight years, while those who described themselves as new attenders had started attending between 18 months and 20 years ago!

These men were not 'church hoppers', having found a church they liked, they settled there.

Reason for change of church or denomination

There was a mixture of spiritual and practical reasons. Spiritual reasons included being converted and then moving to the church where they found faith, or becoming unhappy theologically and looking for better teaching. Practical reasons were: wanting to go somewhere different from parents, young people looking for a church with others their own age, the needs of children, or moving to a new area.

²Heather Wraight, *Christian Research and Paternoster Lifestyle*, 2001

There were no significant differences between the reasons for changing church and changing denomination. It would appear that the fact that they also happened to change denomination was irrelevant for most, though one or two had moved for theological reasons.

Important factors when looking for a new church

Attendees were asked to list all the factors they could think of which mattered in any way when they had chosen a new church, or would matter if they were to change church. For the Catholics present, this was an eye-opener - they automatically went to the nearest Catholic church, there usually being only one in a town³. It had clearly not occurred to them that Protestants 'choose' a church! It would be interesting to know to what extent, if at all, Catholics in general travel to attend a church outside their parish, and if any do so, what their reasons are.

Having created a list on a flip chart, the men were then asked to give two votes to each of the three things they thought were most important, and one vote to the next three things, leaving the remainder without a vote. Once the voting had been completed, the men were asked to reflect on the priority of items thus created. Some of the Catholics did vote on the basis of what they would want to find in a new church even if they did not as such 'choose' it.

The most important spiritual reason was the desire to sense the presence of God, while the top practical reason was a good mix of ages and races.

Although almost the same number of spiritual and practical items were listed the spiritual factors were deemed to be more important. This is in contrast to the women, where the practical, especially the relational factors were more important, as was provision for children (for those who had them).

ATTENDANCE

Having considered what they might look for when choosing a church, the discussion now moved to what they get out of attending - in effect considering whether their actual experience matched what they had named as important in a choice of church.

Change in attendance

Eighteen of the 26 men attended their church weekly and most were attending about the same as a year previously. Those who did not attend weekly now gave their reason for not doing so: all had very young children which made regular attendance hard work! Two volunteered that although they were now attending about as often as a year previously, their attendance pattern had changed considerably when they had come to a personal faith in Christ - they had previously attended 'on and off', or 'occasionally', but now went regularly.

This had also been noticed among attendees of Focus Groups looking at why people join a growing church. Those churches had been asked to invite people who had started to attend the church in the last two years. However several in those groups considered themselves to have been attending for much longer than that, but had only started to attend regularly since a new or

³This does happen among Catholics in Malta. See *Quadrant*, September 2002, p1.

fresh faith commitment.

People may consider a church to be *their* church even if they rarely attend. The move to regular attendance appears to coincide with a change in their commitment to faith, described by evangelicals and some others as conversion or becoming a Christian.

Reasons for attendance

The groups were next asked why they go to church, and a similar process of listing the factors and voting was carried out. Again there was a marked distinction between 'spiritual' and 'practical'. It has been observed in various series of Focus Groups facilitated by Christian Research that the reasons for choosing a church and the reasons for continuing to attend are not the same⁴. The most important spiritual reason was to worship, whereas the most important practical reason was fellowship or belonging.

It is worth noting that the men who attended New Churches gave noticeably different answers eg 'to be part of what God is doing', and 'leader of the family' specifically in preference to 'set an example to my children'.

Although the specific answers are different, this is a similar pattern to what these men were looking for when choosing a church: the spiritual dimension is far more significant to them than the more practical aspects, again a contrast to the women.

Stopping attending church

Several of these men had stopped attending church at some time, or stopped attending a particular church. Reasons given were all to do with the church - its teaching or theological position, their 'enjoyment' of it, or the other people who attended. Some had considered leaving their present church, though none had done so ("yet", said one or two!) but for slightly different reasons such as dissatisfaction with the worship or being bored by what went on. However, the reasons for attending less regularly were much more likely to be practical ones.

There is a significant difference between the reasons given for not attending as regularly - almost exclusively due to the pressure of having young children, and the reasons for leaving church. This suggests that at least some of people whose frequency of attendance has declined still think of themselves as part of the church. If other people from the church keep in touch with them, they are likely to return to regular attendance when their circumstances change. However those who have left because they are dissatisfied with the church would seem less likely to be open to returning in the future unless - as had happened to some in these groups - they experienced a fresh faith commitment.

The reasons why those who had thought of leaving but had stayed, at least for the time being included, "my wife and children like it so I shall stay", being involved in and committed to responsibilities in the church, and believing that it is "not what God wants".

⁴ eg Study of Large Churches by Dr Peter Brierley, internal research, 2001; Why Churches Grow, study for the Salvation Army Central North Division by Heather Wraight, 2002; Women and the Church by Heather Wraight, 1998.

These responses show that for these men at least, the decision to leave is not taken lightly. They retain their commitment and that holds them in church. This is not so true for women who are likely to leave if a relationship breaks down. The reasons for going for these men were both spiritual and practical. This finding backs up the research into why people join a growing church which found that people are unlikely to switch to a different church until they have already decided to leave their present church.

Comparison of men and women stopping church

The attenders were asked whether they think it is easier for a man or a woman to stop going to church. The single men did not really have an opinion - in contrast to single women! Married men were divided, with several feeling it was harder for women because they would lose relationships or because they would be more concerned about the impact on any children, while others thought it was harder for men because "Women can come up with more excuses!"

Some married men thought it would be harder for their wives to leave church than for them. However, several others suggested that the difference was not gender but lifestyle or personal priorities: people who were working full-time in demanding jobs, whether male or female, were more likely to leave church because of the difficulty of balancing commitments to work *and* church.

The benefits of church attendance

Finally in this section the groups were asked what they *get out* of going to church.

Again, a flip chart was used, but they were not asked to prioritise these items, partly due to lack of time. Most of the answers were positive: there were two mentions of encouragement, feel uplifted, satisfaction, spiritual enrichment. The following were mentioned once, although there is clear similarity between several of them: a calling to account, a sense I have met with God, a reminder that I am not alone, better balance on what life is about, challenge, enjoyment of worshipping with others, fellowship with others, having supported others, help for applying faith at work, ideas on how to move forward, insight into what God has done, inspiration, intimacy with God, joy, knowing God has heard my prayers, learned something, new perspective on life, peace of mind and a sense of space, power to live the rest of the week, reinforced ideas and beliefs, renewed sense of vision, rightness about having been, sense of worth, social contact.

There were however a few negative answers also: "sometimes nothing" (mentioned in all three groups), anger about the way the world is, frustration that we just go through the motions, frustration at unhelpful behaviour on the part of others, not what I wanted, worry about whether I have fulfilled my role.

There was overall a general feeling that going to church is a positive experience, mainly in providing a spiritual perspective to life. However it is not *always* positive! Relationships with the people one meets at church were only mentioned in the context of fellowship or encouragement rather than friendship, again a contrast to women.

RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARD THE CHURCH

The Focus Group attenders felt they had various responsibilities to the church which were a mix of the organisational/structural side of church and the people who make up the church community.

Use of gifts

The men were then given a sheet of paper asking about the kinds of experience and abilities they have which could be used in a church. They were asked to tick whether these experiences and abilities were used in their church as fully as they wished them to be, used sometimes, used only a little or not used at all. There was also the option to tick that they did not believe they had the particular gift.

The 'Fully used' responses were a surprise, with Hospitality being fully used for the most people, followed by Caring for people and Leadership. Perhaps the most telling factor was the skills which were being under used in church: adding together 'Used a little' and 'Not used' gave the following totals:

Organising	17	Preaching	12
Providing ideas	15	Teaching	12
Hospitality	14	Providing resources	11
Outreach / evangelism	14	Leadership	11
Managing	13	Caring for people	11
Practical	12		

Of 11 gifts listed, six were not used in significant numbers and six were only used a little. Is this a reason why men might leave?

The question sheet also asked "If your experience and abilities are not being fully used, why do you think this is?", and to comment on how they felt about this. The replies fell into several groups:

1. The presence of other gifted people.

In churches where there are plenty of gifted people, some are quite happy for their gifts not to be used but others are frustrated and wish there were opportunities to be involved. Church leaders should be on the look out for those who would like to contribute. Not only would this help church life, but also help the individuals to feel more part of the church

2. Family commitments and other life stage factors.

Lives change - because someone cannot get involved now does not rule them out for ever. Churches should regularly think about who in their church is in a transition period in life and therefore should either be relieved of responsibilities or asked to consider taking on new ones.

3. New in the church.

How, and how soon, can new people get involved? In growing churches, new people mostly were given opportunities to get involved quite quickly.

4. *Gifts used elsewhere.*

The sense of belonging to a local church means one wants to contribute something to it and even for someone who is perceived by their church to be 'set apart' to minister elsewhere, there is still a desire to be involved in some way locally.

5. *Weaknesses within the church.*

These are signs of churches that are either disorganised or thoughtless of the gifts of their congregation and are therefore missing out on contributions from which they could benefit. How could such churches be helped to plan and organise better?

Understanding and valuing people's working lives

This question raised more emotion than anything else in the Focus Groups. For most of the time on all three evenings, the groups discussed matters in a fairly detached and objective way - but not this issue. A few of the men felt their church did understand their working life but most did not. Answers fell into three types:

1. *The church knew about their working life, what job they did, where they worked etc, but neither understood nor valued it.*
2. *A 'gap' between church and working life, so that they felt like two unconnected worlds.*
3. *A 'selfish' perspective by the church giving the impression that churches are only interested in a person's working life if it can be of benefit to the church.*

There was quite a bit of discussion about why this issue was still such a problem when it had been talked about for years and the following reasons were offered.

1. *Churches were in 'another world' and ran things the way they had always done, whether or not that was appropriate to the lives of the people in their present congregation.*
2. *Church leaders were often unaware of the real lives of their congregation - they did not seem concerned about the pressures on them, or understand the demands of their jobs.*
3. *There was an unspoken criticism of them for not being 'spiritual' enough to give more time and effort to the church which showed a lack of understanding or awareness of their desires and motivations.*
4. *Church leaders were afraid of losing control and did not know how to manage the church in any other way.*

There was noticeable anger and frustration about this issue. For employed men (and women), work takes up the major portion of their life and yet it is virtually ignored at church. How can church leaders be encouraged to recognise the importance of this issue? Can they be helped to understand the impact work has on the lives of employed men in their congregation? Is this lack of understanding one of the reasons why men leave church - if there is conflict between the worlds of church and work, one cannot easily stop working but can stop going to church?

Roles in church for men or women

After the emotive discussion of the previous question, this one was rather a damp squib! However, it had been emotive for the women, who generally felt they should have more freedom in what roles they could or could not do.

It is very interesting to note that work raises strong emotions for both genders. For men it is the work they do *outside* the church and the lack of understanding of it which causes frustrations. Whereas for women it is the work they may not be allowed to do *inside* the church which causes frustration.

GROWING IN FAITH

Being part of a church has two sides to it, the spiritual and the social dimensions.

What it means to be a Christian

A card was used which had four possible answers and there was overwhelming support for 'a relationship with God'.

Faith growth in the last year

Slightly more than half agreed that their faith had grown in the last year. They described that growth, or evidence of it, in two types of answers:

1. Related to *personal experience*, such as having only recently become a Christian or facing various challenges in which God had helped them.
2. *Responsibilities* had required it, such as leadership of a youth group or commitment to a discipleship group.

These responses are similar to women's: faith had grown either because of personal experience of God at work in one's life or situation, or because it is 'driven' by an outside factor which virtually requires growth in faith. There is often a relational element in the second dimension.

Faith which has not grown

For those who felt their faith had not grown there were three factors:

1. *Family demands*, especially of small children. These people said having time and space would help their faith to start growing again.
2. *Personal factors*: one had questions and doubts, another had been spending more time with friends outside the church. These people did not know what would help their faith grow.
3. *The church itself*: for one, the teaching and preaching were unhelpful making growth in faith more difficult, while another was unhappy in his (liturgical) church where he was not made to think about his faith. These people felt they were likely to look for another church where their faith would grow.

Interestingly, in spite of the emotion raised by the discussion about work and church, no one mentioned the demands of work as a reason why their faith had not grown!

Lack of growth in faith may be a significant contributory factor in some people's decision to change church. However, more relevant and helpful teaching could forestall this, at least for some people.

Sensing the presence of God

Over half the men said they sensed the presence of God in their church either every Sunday or fairly regularly. However, four felt unable to answer this question, the facilitator felt they were uncomfortable with the concept, and perhaps did not quite know what the question meant! It is worth noting that three of these were young people: are young people not taught to experience the presence of God, or is what they are expecting different? These same young people said they experienced the presence of God elsewhere (especially Christian rock concerts), so it is not the *experience* they lack, but not recognising it in a church context. Asked where else they experienced God's presence it was clear that it can be felt virtually anywhere by those who are alert to it.

How the presence of God is experienced

This was described in a range of different ways, some in more 'spiritual' language, others more practically in the sense of the effect of feeling God's presence.

The effect of experiencing God's presence on the relationship with him

All agreed that experiencing God's presence did have a direct effect on their relationship with him. Some were able to put it into words such as knowing God is speaking into your situation.

Differences between men and woman in sensing God's presence

The men in these Focus Groups felt women did experience God differently, in a more emotional way because their sensory perception is different to men's. However they did not want to be 'pigeon-holed' into specific gender differences, and one group agreed with a contributor who said that because we are all different, we all experience God differently in a way that is personal to and appropriate for us.

Learning about God

The reverse of the question sheet used earlier about gifts had a list of ways in which people might learn about God.

The responses were fascinating and revealed a number of interesting things:

1. The *highest scores* were for 'Reading the Bible alone' and 'Attending a small group'.
2. Only three of these items were *relevant to all attenders*: 'Attending church services', 'Praying alone', and 'Christian service outside church'.
3. The items with the *lowest scores* - 'Listening to tapes / watching videos of sermons' etc and 'Listening to Christian music' - were also those undertaken by the fewest number of people, suggesting that these were of subsidiary help in learning about God and not key factors.

4. That *everyone* undertook 'Christian service outside the church' is amazing, and in retrospect it would have been very interesting to know what kind of service these people undertook. There were actually more people undertaking Christian service *outside* church than *in* it!
5. It is also worth noting the number of people - 24 out of 25 - who said that 'Talking with other people about God' helped them to learn about God, even though the score was lower.
6. Christian service scored the same, whether inside or outside church.
7. Spring Harvest and other such Christian conferences are anecdotally thought to be of great value to those who go. For these people at least, they were not very significant in learning about God, though they may have been of value to them in other respects.
8. The average score by and large reflects the number of people who said each item helped them to learn about God. This presumably means that the value for churchgoers of a given item affects whether or not a person finds that activity worth undertaking.
9. Two of the top four items are things men do on their own, suggesting solitary activities are important to them.

This list suggests that churches should encourage men more to read the Bible alone and to attend a small group, because both activities help them to learn more about God even than attending church services.

BELONGING

The final section of the evening dealt with the matter of 'belonging' to church. It is worth recalling that a sense of belonging had already come up twice: in choosing a new church it was almost at the bottom of the list of priorities, but in *why* men attend church it was the most important practical factor - fourth on the list below three spiritual factors.

Most of the men stated that they would say they 'belong' in their church, but they found it difficult to explain *why*. There were only a few answers and there was a general air of hesitancy about the answers which were given. For almost everyone it did matter whether or not they felt they belonged, but no one could explain *why* it mattered - there were only vague explanations such as "It's helpful", "It's nice". It seemed that none of them had thought about it before.

Women could explain exactly what belonging meant, but for these men it seemed a concept that they had given little if any thought to. Could this be a factor in why men are leaving church? Women were found to be likely to leave if they felt they no longer belonged. With the emphasis these days on 'belonging before believing', could men be dropping out because belonging is not really working for them? Is perhaps the way belonging works in church more appropriate to women than to men? Men do belong elsewhere eg to a football supporters club, golf club, working men's club etc. Is that belonging more about *what* they do together rather than *who* they do it with? This area seems very important and deserves further study.

Asking them how long it took before they 'belonged' to their present church also brought fairly vague answers, especially for those who had been attending for quite a long time. It

obviously was a factor they could not really remember, and therefore had been of little real significance to them. The people who had started attending their current church fairly recently were able to give a time to it, though often still rather vague.

In the Focus Groups in growing churches, everyone - men included - could define how soon they felt they belonged. Does this indicate that belonging becomes less important for men the longer they remain in a church? Whereas for women, it appears to become more important, in that a feeling that they no longer belong is one of the key reasons why women leave church.

Factors which create belonging

A device called a 'slideometer' was used in each group to find out not only the factors which create a sense of belonging in church, but how important these were for the men. As in other such lists, the responses were a mix of practical and spiritual items. Many of the factors were similar to those posed by the women, but there were noticeably more 'spiritual' issues.

It seems likely that spiritual factors are more significant in a sense of belonging for men, rather than the social factors which apply for women.

One of the reasons for using a 'slideometer' is to listen to the discussion which takes place while the participants are trying to agree a score for particular items. In these groups there was very little discussion. It seemed to the facilitator that they were humouring her and did not really feel this was an issue worth bothering to discuss much!

The discussion throughout responses to this section on belonging suggested that the single men found belonging difficult, and the married men belonged because their wife or family belonged rather than it being a personal thing. It is known that in many families only the wife attends church, the husband feeling that she attends on behalf of him. It seems that belonging may be similar - the wife belongs and includes in that her husband rather than he belonging for himself.

CONCLUSION

Two concluding questions were asked to help the attenders summarise what they had been discussing during the evening.

Things least liked about being a man in church

The men had only a few answers to this question and only one occurred in all groups in one way or another, being outnumbered by women. However, several of them had "not even thought about it."

The main dislike of these male churchgoers was being outnumbered by women, presumably not only because it is an almost universal experience in British churches, but also because it is much less likely to be true in other parts of their lives outside their home.

Things best liked about being a man in church

No one could contribute anything in response to this question!

Again, gender seemed to be an area of churchgoing which most of these men had given little or no thought to previously. They do not appear to reflect on their experience of church life in the way women do, but to be more objective in their churchgoing, perhaps seeing it as something they *do*, rather than something they *are*.

Additional comments

Finally, the men were asked whether they wished to add anything else. Several fresh factors emerged:

1. The *difficulty experienced by single men in the church* - I think this was raised by each of the few single men in the groups. Could this be because they have no route into belonging, the way married men do through their wives and family? It would be interesting to know whether larger churches have a higher proportion of single men, because there are enough of them to create a group.
2. That *church is not a 'macho' thing to do*⁵. So it is difficult to admit outside that one goes to church, and this somehow diminishes the possibility of church being a holistic part of life.
3. Men find it *difficult* in any context to *make real friendships*. Relationships are more likely to be built around doing things together, but in church life, while the whole church community worships together, there is not a sense of 'mateyness' about that.
4. Some churches expect men to be leaders, but *not all men are leaders* and it is not easy to be expected to lead when it is not appropriate for you.

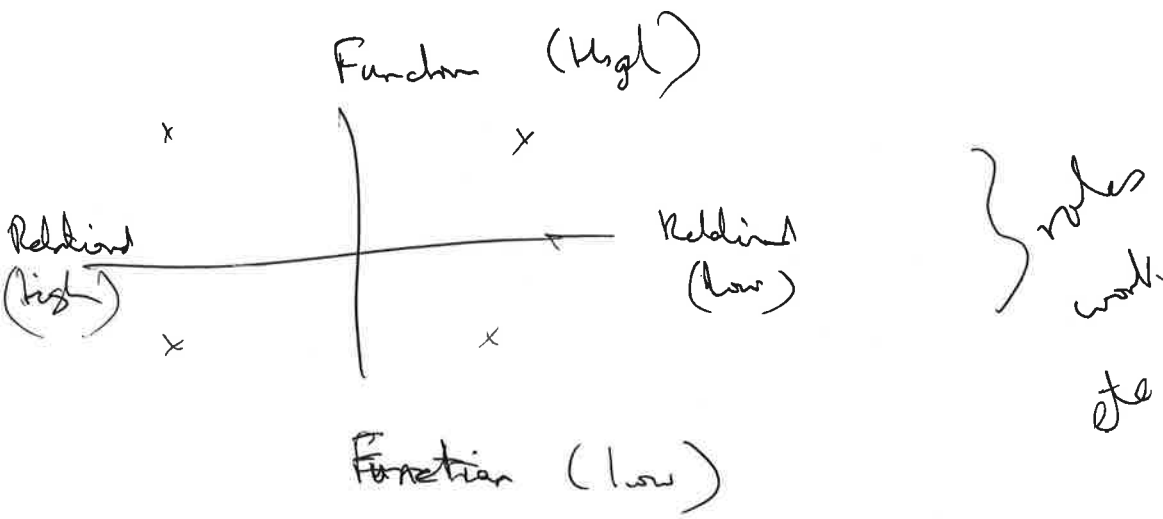
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* See A.Kirk's son's thesis.

That a range of "ways of belonging" emerged?

Would it be possible to draw on your data and suggest that men can be described according to certain typologies? according to role - ~~an~~ identification matrix aspect of functional - relational. is "status" or function of or relation?

⁵The Reaching and Keeping Tweenagers research also noted that going to church is not 'cool'. *Reaching & Keeping Tweenagers*, Peter Brierley, Christian Research, 2003.



Men: Status provides identity

Women: Involvement builds community.

Did you expect there to be a difference?

"While men may build the ^{of church} institution, women grow the community which holds the institution together."