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Scripture Union
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Faith in our Schools

Evaluating the role of Christian churches and organisations in Northern Ireland schools

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Executive Summary

Context and Research Questions

This research study, commissioned by Scripture Union Northern Ireland, and carried out by the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU) at Stranmillis University College, Belfast, critically evaluates the role of Christian churches and organisations in schools across Northern Ireland, exploring both the nature of their engagement and the perceived value of their involvement. The study is set against a backdrop of increasing religious diversity, a rise in the proportion of the population identifying as having no religious affiliation (NISRA, 2022), concerns raised by parents through a 2022 judicial review and the Parents for Inclusive Education (2024) report. Data collection was conducted between March and June 2025 and the findings analysed from June to September 2025, several months before the UK Supreme Court ruling of November 2025 in relation to JR87 and the subsequent establishment of the review of the Religious Education (RE) Core Syllabus in Northern Ireland and issuing of guidance for withdrawal from RE and collective worship, announced on 3 February 2026.

The research set out to address two central research questions:

1. What is the nature, extent and purpose of school engagement by Christian churches and organisations in Northern Ireland?
2. What is the perceived value of that engagement from the perspective of the school community (e.g., governors, school leaders, staff, pupils, parents)?

The study was commissioned to provide timely, evidence-based insights into the nature of church engagement in schools, in order to inform future policy and practice.

Methodology

The project adopted a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. In Phase One of the project, four online surveys were designed and distributed to different stakeholder groups: school leaders, church and Christian organisation leaders, parents, and pupils. The surveys were open from 5 March to 28 April 2025. The Christian organisations that completed a survey were also invited to provide details of their school engagement through an Excel spreadsheet, from which the data was combined with school-level information and mapped to illustrate patterns of engagement across Northern Ireland. Phase Two of the project involved six case studies conducted between April and June 2025 with schools across Northern Ireland. These were purposively sampled to represent a range of school management types (controlled, Catholic maintained, and integrated), geographical locations, mainstream/special, and age ranges. Each case study involved a range of semi-structured interviews or focus groups with school-based stakeholders, including the school leader, school governors, parents, pupils, teachers and representatives of the local churches or Christian organisations currently engaged with the school. A separate focus group was conducted with members of Parents for Inclusive Education (PIE) to ensure that the perspectives of parents who may have concerns about church-school engagement were fully represented.

Key Findings

This study provides clear evidence that Christian engagement in schools across Northern Ireland remains both widespread and valued, while also revealing points of tension in an increasingly diverse and contested educational landscape. Drawing on the four stakeholder surveys, six in-depth school case studies and the PIE focus group, the findings demonstrate the

breadth of involvement of churches and Christian organisations, the ways in which this is perceived and the challenges that arise.

The Nature of Engagement

Christian engagement with schools in Northern Ireland remains widespread, though uneven across sectors and geography. Almost all principals (94%) reported links with at least one local church, while nearly three quarters (73%) reported partnerships with Christian organisations. The most common activities included assemblies and worship (95%), charity or community programmes (51%), extra-curricular activities (50%) and support for curriculum delivery (45%). The mapping exercise also revealed a particular intensity of engagement by Christian organisations in urban areas and especially along the ‘Jordanstown-Belfast-Portadown-Armagh-Dungannon’ and ‘Belfast-Bangor’ corridors with lower levels of engagement further west and in rural areas of Northern Ireland.

The case studies revealed striking differences in how this engagement is expressed. In the Catholic maintained primary school, Christianity was embedded seamlessly in daily life, with prayer, sacramental preparation and the liturgical calendar shaping the rhythm of teaching and learning. *“Our ethos isn’t something extra – it’s who we are,”* explained one teacher, while a parent noted, *“They grow up through the school with it and it’s the core of who we are.”*

In the special school, which serves pupils from across the community, Christianity was described as *“the heart of the school”*. Teachers spoke of adapting worship and sacramental preparation for pupils with learning difficulties, while parents valued the long-running Christian youth club: *“It’s fine saying there shouldn’t be a Christian influence in schools, but they’re the only ones offering this support. If they didn’t, no one would.”*

By contrast, the controlled and integrated schools adopted a more cautious stance. Leaders in controlled primaries sought balance between denominational traditions, but were alert to parental sensitivities. One minister explained the need to frame messages carefully by saying *“Christians believe”* or *“this is a Christian position and so it allows space in the room for them to say, well, that’s what a Christian believes but I don’t identify as a Christian, so I can have a different viewpoint to you.”* In the integrated school the caution was even more apparent. While teachers and pupils themselves reported minimal Christian presence across the school, and strong opposition to religious involvement by some parents, the principal explained that he had recently begun to very tentatively build supportive relationships with local clergy. He argued that the previous *“brand of integration”* meant *“leaving religion out”* and *“excluding those with religious views”*.

Alongside faith activities, churches also provided practical support: halls and car parks, governors’ expertise, volunteer maintenance, mentoring projects, and pastoral help in times of crisis. As one controlled school principal put it, *“[The church is] showing an outpouring of practical love that came from wanting to serve God... and it really did back up our ethos.”*

The Perceived Value of Engagement

The findings confirm that Christian involvement is overwhelmingly valued by principals, teachers, governors, parents and pupils in terms of its spiritual, moral, pastoral and practical importance. Nearly all principals who responded to the survey judged it “very valuable” (84%) or “somewhat valuable” (14%). Benefits cited included increased community involvement

(86%), moral and spiritual development (77%), pupil enjoyment (72%), and improved wellbeing (67%). Pupils also reported high levels of enjoyment, with over half saying *“I enjoy [the activities] a lot.”*

This was echoed across the case studies. Parents particularly valued the transmission of spiritual and moral values such as *“kindness, honesty, forgiveness, compassion, respect, inclusion and love.”* One parent reflected on the importance of instilling Christian values as a preparation for the challenges of adult life: *“Faith isn’t forced onto you... we’re just hoping that you’re kind, compassionate, caring... and that you can cope with life’s difficulties when they come your way.”* For ministry leaders, the Christian message was framed as offering hope: *“Life is not pointless... there is hope, and that hope is to be found in the Christian message.”*

Pastoral reassurance was also emphasised, with parents noting the comfort of familiar ministers in times of crisis. In the special school, staff stressed that children with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties were able to experience connection through worship: *“Even if they don’t understand the words, they’re getting the feeling.”*

Practical support was equally valued: churches painting classrooms, cleaning playgrounds, funding mentoring, and providing halls when schools’ own facilities were unavailable. *“It’s really, really lovely,”* explained one principal, describing the generosity of a local church that opened its hall when theirs was unusable.

Concerns and Tensions

Despite widespread appreciation, a minority of parents and governors raised concerns. Some questioned the motivation of churches, describing school-based activities as proselytising: *“We’ll give you this support which we know you need, but the reason they’re there is to proselytise.”* Others worried about children being excluded from opportunities, such as choirs requiring pupils to sing overtly Christian songs.

Limited adaptation to diversity was also noted. While most churches and organisations reported awareness of growing diversity, 55% admitted making no adaptations, and only 15% modified content to be more inclusive. Parents echoed this, with 15% saying activities were “not respectful” of other beliefs.

Communication was another weakness. Almost all principals claimed they informed parents of their right to withdraw children, but only 79% of parents were aware of this right, and just 38% felt sufficiently informed about activities. As one PIE parent remarked, *“There’s been zero proactive communication about what’s going on... you wouldn’t know unless your children told you.”*

Awareness among pupils was lower still: only a third knew they could opt out, while many feared stigma if they did. One pupil admitted, *“It would be awkward... everyone would be wondering, ‘Why did you come to this school if you don’t want to hear anything Christian?’”*

Finally, evaluation was minimal. Only 3% of churches and 47% of Christian organisations reported having formal evaluation processes. Most relied on anecdotal evidence, with one ministry leader stating: *“We don’t look for feedback or need feedback.”*

Limitations

The surveys were limited by small samples, especially from pupils and the Catholic maintained sector, meaning findings are illustrative rather than representative. However, the qualitative data from case studies were rich and offered deep insights across school types. The PIE focus group ensured critical perspectives were represented. Some principals were reluctant to participate due to the sensitivity of the issue, which may also have constrained the range of views captured.

Conclusions

Christian engagement remains highly significant in Northern Ireland's schools. It is valued for its contribution to ethos, community, moral development, pastoral care and practical support. At the same time, the study highlights minority but significant concerns: limited adaptation to diversity, weak communication and transparency, lack of evaluation, and the social awkwardness of withdrawal. These issues are amplified by the contested policy climate, including the JR87 case and increasing demographic change. The challenge is to ensure that engagement remains appropriate, inclusive, and responsive to today's realities.

Recommendations

1. ***Recognise and communicate the enduring contribution of churches and Christian organisations.*** The value of that engagement, spiritual, moral, pastoral and practical, should be more widely acknowledged, with providers encouraged to better articulate the contribution they offer.
2. ***Strengthen transparency and parental communication.*** Develop an agreed engagement protocol to ensure proactive information-sharing and avoid misunderstandings.
3. ***Respect choice and minimise stigma.*** Manage pupil withdrawal rights sensitively to protect inclusion while upholding legislation.
4. ***Develop training for all those engaging with schools.*** Equip clergy, ministry leaders and volunteers with cultural awareness and practical guidance.
5. ***Evaluate impact.*** Encourage both churches and Christian organisations to adopt more systematic evaluation, and support schools in assessing external provision.
6. ***Ensure clarity of ethos.*** Schools should review and articulate their ethos clearly to reduce ambiguity.
7. ***Support school leaders.*** The Department of Education and the different sectoral bodies should provide clear policy guidance and professional development for principals as they seek to maintain a Christian ethos while also accommodating the beliefs and expectations of an increasingly diverse school population.
8. ***Commission further research.*** Larger-scale surveys, independent evaluations and longitudinal studies are needed to provide more robust evidence.

Final Reflection

Taken together, these recommendations reflect both the strong appreciation and the minority concerns identified in this study, underlining the nuances and complexity of Christian engagement in schools. The challenge is to ensure that such engagement is appropriate,

inclusive and responsive to the realities of contemporary Northern Ireland. This calls for schools, churches, parents and children and young people to work together in open communication and transparency, finding approaches that allow those who wish to engage to do so meaningfully, while also providing space and respect for those who do not.

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Contents

Executive Summary	1
Acknowledgements	6
Contents	7
List of Figures	11
List of Tables	12
Chapter 1: Context and Background	13
1.1 Introduction	13
1.2 Historical Background	13
1.3 Governance and Ethos	14
1.4 Legal Challenges and Parental Rights	16
1.5 Demographic and Cultural Shifts	17
1.6 External Religious Visitors	19
Chapter 2: Methodology	22
2.1 Advisory Group	22
2.2 Research Design and Methodology	22
2.3 Ethical Considerations	23
2.4 Case Study Participants	24
2.5 Analysis	24
Chapter 3: Pupil, Parent and Principal Survey Results	25
3.1. Pupil Survey Results	25
3.1.1. Demographic Information	25
3.1.2. Has anyone from a church or Christian organisation visited your school this year?	25
3.1.3. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement	26
3.1.4. Your thoughts about churches and Christian organisations	26
3.1.5. Value and Importance	27
3.1.6. Respecting Different Beliefs	28
3.1.7. Your thoughts	30

3.2. Parental Survey Results	31
3.2.1. Demographic Information	31
3.2.2. Are you aware of any Church/Christian organisations involvement in your child's school?	32
3.2.3. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement	32
3.2.4. Perceptions and Experiences of Church/Christian Organisation Engagement.....	33
3.2.5. Right to Withdraw and Inclusivity	35
3.2.6. Impact and Evaluation.....	36
3.2.7. Future Engagement and Concerns.....	37
3.3. Principal Survey Results.....	39
3.3.1. Demographic Information	39
3.3.2. Does your school engage with a local Christian church/Christian organisation?	39
3.3.3. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement	40
3.3.4. Perceived Value of Church Engagement	41
3.3.5. Diversity and Inclusivity	41
3.3.6. Continuation.....	43
Chapter 4: Church / Christian Organisation Survey Results.....	44
4.1. Demographic Information	44
4.1.1. Organisation-Specific Questions.....	44
4.1.2. Church-Specific Questions.....	44
4.2. Nature and Purpose of Engagement with Schools.....	45
4.3. Evaluation of Engagement.....	47
4.4. Response to Religious and Cultural Diversity.....	48
4.5. Future Engagement.....	51
Chapter 5: Mapping of Christian Ministry Organisation School Engagement	52
5.1. Distribution of Engagement.....	52
5.2. Multiple Christian Ministry Organisation Engagement with Individual Schools.....	55
5.3. Christian Ministry Organisation Engagement by Organisation.....	57
5.4. Mapping Features	64

Chapter 6: Case Studies	65
6.1 Catholic Maintained Primary School Case Study.....	65
Engagement with churches/Christian organisations.....	65
Ethos.....	67
Value of Engagement	68
Inclusivity, Diversity and Respect.....	70
Conclusion.....	72
6.2 Rural Controlled Primary School Case Study	73
Engagement with churches/Christian organisations.....	73
Ethos.....	76
Value of Engagement	78
Inclusivity, Diversity, and Respect.....	84
Conclusion.....	87
6.3 Urban Controlled Primary School Case Study	88
Engagement with churches/Christian organisations.....	88
Ethos.....	89
Value of Engagement	90
Inclusivity, Diversity, and Respect.....	92
Conclusion.....	94
6.4 Rural Controlled Post-Primary School Case Study	95
Engagement with churches/Christian organisations.....	95
Ethos.....	97
Value of Engagement	98
Inclusivity, Diversity, and Respect.....	100
Conclusion.....	102
6.5 Integrated Post-Primary School Case Study.....	104
Engagement with churches/Christian organisations.....	104
Ethos.....	106
Value of Engagement	107

Inclusivity, Diversity, and Respect	108
Conclusion.....	111
6.6 Special School Case Study	112
Engagement with churches/Christian organisations.....	112
Ethos.....	113
Value of Engagement	114
Inclusivity, Diversity, and Respect	116
Conclusion.....	118
6.7 Case Study Summary.....	119
Value of Engagement for Pupils, Families, and the Wider Community.....	119
Ethos as a Defining Feature	119
Format of Engagement	119
Inclusivity, Diversity and Respect.....	120
Tensions and Future Challenges.....	120
Conclusion.....	120
Chapter 7: Focus Group with Parents for Inclusive Education.....	121
Chapter 8: Conclusion and Recommendations	126
8.1 Introduction	126
8.2 The nature of engagement	126
8.3 The perceived value of engagement	129
8.4 Concerns and tensions	130
8.5 Limitations.....	133
8.6 Conclusions	133
8.7 Recommendations	134
References.....	138

List of Figures

Figure 1.1. Percentage of the population by current religion (1861 – 2021) (NISRA).

Figure 1.2. Changes in pupil numbers by religion of pupils and school type between 2000/01 and 2021/22 for primary and post-primary schools (Gallagher, 2024, p.36).

Figure 5.1a. All schools in Northern Ireland engaging with Christian Ministry organisations in database.

Figure 5.1b. Schools engaging with organisations summarised by localised count.

Figure 5.1c. Counts of Ministry organisation school's enrolment in main section of corridor.

Figure 5.1d. Heat map of Christian Ministry organisation schools by weight of enrolment of schools.

Figure 5.1e. Enhanced heat map of weight of school enrolments primarily in the 'Jordanstown – Belfast – Portadown – Armagh' and 'Belfast – Bangor' corridors.

Figure 5.2a. Number of different organisations engaging with each individual school.

Figure 5.2b. Number of different organisations engaging with each individual school in the 'Jordanstown – Belfast – Portadown – Armagh -Dungannon' and 'Belfast – Bangor' corridors.

Figure 5.2c. Number of different organisations engaging with individual schools heat map.

Figure 5.3a. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (1).

Figure 5.3b. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (2).

Figure 5.3c. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (3).

Figure 5.3d. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (4).

Figure 5.3e. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (5).

Figure 5.3f. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (6).

Figure 5.3g. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (7).

Figure 5.3h. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (8).

Figure 5.3i. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (9).

Figure 5.3j. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (10).

Figure 5.3k. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (11).

Figure 5.3l. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (12).

Figure 5.3m. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in NI by Organisation (13).

Figure 5.4. School information and Christian Ministry organisation engagement details.

List of Tables

- Table 2.1. Case study participants.
- Table 3.1. Demographic information.
- Table 3.2. Has anyone from a church or Christian organisation visited your school this year?
- Table 3.3. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement.
- Table 3.4. Your thoughts about churches and Christian organisations.
- Table 3.5. Value and Importance.
- Table 3.6. Respecting Different Beliefs.
- Table 3.7. Your thoughts.
- Table 3.8. Demographic Information.
- Table 3.9. Are you aware of any Church/Christian organisations involvement in your child's school?
- Table 3.10. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement.
- Table 3.11. Perceptions and Experiences of Church/Christian Organisation Engagement.
- Table 3.12. Right to Withdraw and Inclusivity.
- Table 3.13. Impact and Evaluation.
- Table 3.14. Future Engagement and Concerns.
- Table 3.15. Demographic Information.
- Table 3.16. Does your school engage with a local Christian church/Christian organisation?
- Table 3.17. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement.
- Table 3.18. Perceived Value of Church Engagement.
- Table 3.19. Diversity and Inclusivity.
- Table 3.20. Continuation.
- Table 4.1. Demographic information; sample composition.
- Table 4.2. Demographic information; organisation-specific questions.
- Table 4.3. Demographic information; church-specific questions.
- Table 4.4. Nature and purpose of engagement with schools.
- Table 4.5a. Perceived value of church engagement.
- Table 4.5b. 11 churches/organisations with an evaluation process.
- Table 4.6a. Diversity and inclusivity.
- Table 4.6b. Awareness of increasing religious and cultural diversity in schools by church/organisation type.
- Table 4.6c. How church/organisation adapts activities to be more inclusive by church/organisation type.
- Table 4.6d. Schools should offer more flexibility regarding students' participation in religious activities by church/organisation type.
- Table 4.7. Future engagement.
- Table 5.1. Number of schools engaging with the 13 different organisations.

Chapter 1: Context and Background

1.1 Introduction

In Northern Ireland, churches have played a significant role in shaping education, both historically and in contemporary society (Lundy, 2000; Walsh & Purdy, 2024). This influence extends beyond governance structures for as Lundy (2005, p.346) notes, “there are few areas where the private and public dimensions of family life converge to such an extent as when a parent sends his or her child to be educated in state school.” The school environment becomes an interface for public policy and private belief, which can give rise to tensions, especially when curriculum content and the school ethos do not align with parental convictions.

1.2 Historical Background

The current system of education in Northern Ireland remains heavily influenced by the reorganisation of education during the 1920s following the partition of Ireland in 1921. The educational reforms of the period formed part of the efforts of the Protestant/Unionist majority to consolidate a strong British identity through the development of a single education system under state control. The fractious history of educational wrangling throughout the 1920s (see, for instance, Akenson, 1973; Farren, 1995; McGrath, 2000; Walsh & Purdy, 2024) is dominated by the unsuccessful efforts of the first Minister of Education, Lord Londonderry, to create a non-denominational but Christian education system. Those efforts, embodied in Londonderry’s 1923 Education Act, were thwarted on the one hand by the resistance of the Catholic authorities to cede control of their schools to the new state, and on the other hand by the resistance of the Protestant churches to any perceived diminution of their religious influence through insisting on the provision of ‘simple Bible instruction’.

The result was a bi-partite education system where most schools that had been previously owned and managed by the main Protestant churches transferred control to the state (in return for full state funding), while the Catholic church, despite receiving only partial state funding as a consequence, refused to transfer its schools to the state, fearing that such a move would reduce clerical influence. Over a century later, Northern Ireland’s education system is still dominated by those two main management types: Catholic maintained schools which have an explicit Catholic ethos, and controlled schools where the Protestant church influence was effectively ceded to the state in return for the right to nominate governors to their schools and to inspect the teaching of Religious Education (Armstrong, 2009). Despite the more recent development of the integrated sector in Northern Ireland following the opening of Lagan College in 1981, this sector has remained small, serving only 8% of the school population in Northern Ireland (Department of Education for Northern Ireland [DENI], 2025).

Within the Catholic maintained school sector, Christian values are clearly and unapologetically emphasized (McGrath, 2000). For example, the Vision of Lumen Christi College, one of the top Catholic grammar schools in Northern Ireland, is explicitly Christian:

The name Lumen Christi shows our abiding faith in the power of Christ to inspire. His Spirit is to be the inspiration underlying all the life and work of the school. Faith in God expressing itself in practice will be central to our community. (Lumen Christi, 2024).

In recent years however, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and Catholic Schools Trustees Service (CSTS) have both also stressed that “Catholic maintained schools are open to all faiths and none – Catholic education is naturally inclusive and provides the opportunity for holistic growth, academic excellence, and achievement for all” (CCMS, 2022, p.2).

In contrast, the influence of Protestant churches and the place of the Christian faith within the controlled sector is arguably less defined. As Armstrong (2009, p. 298) points out, "Although Catholic schools are faith-based and unapologetically confessional, it is moot whether the same can be said of the schools populated largely by Protestants."

1.3 Governance and Ethos

It has been reported that Boards of Governors in controlled, maintained and integrated schools enjoy considerable autonomy over admissions, budgeting, and staffing, and almost all include clergy representatives, reinforcing ecclesiastical presence in education in Northern Ireland (Lundy, 2000). In return for transferring their schools into state control in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s following the partition of Ireland, the three main Protestant denominations (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, and Methodist) were afforded statutory rights of representation, as outlined in Schedule 4 of the *Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986*. To coordinate this representation and to ensure their continued influence in the governance of controlled schools, the denominations established the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC), which works at a policy level to maintain the connection between church and school. Not only does the Department of Education formally recognise the TRC as the representative body of the transferor churches, but the *Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2014* also grants denominations the right of representation on the Board of the Education Authority. Both of these provisions help to preserve a Christian ethos within controlled schools.

However, despite this framework, the large and diverse controlled school sector in Northern Ireland has struggled to establish a consistent faith-based ethos. Although these schools are predominantly Protestant in practice, they are legally non-denominational state-managed schools, where religious education has reportedly become more educational and less confessional over the years (Armstrong, 2009). Since the establishment of the Controlled

Schools' Support Council (CSSC) in 2016 as a publicly funded advocacy body for all controlled schools following the *Education Act (NI) 2014*, there has been a move to create a unifying ethos, supported by the development of an ethos toolkit. Here, despite affirming that their schools are "open to all", there also remains a clear emphasis on the Christian ethos underpinning the schools:

'The Controlled Schools' Support Council supports controlled schools, which are open to all faiths and none, in providing high quality education for children and young people to enable them to learn, develop and grow together, within the ethos of non-denominational Christian values and principles' (CSSC, 2020, p.1).

In response to concerns about equity and effectiveness of support which had been highlighted in the final report of the Independent Review of Education (December 2023), the Education Minister, Paul Givan MLA, convened a Taskforce in September 2024 to explore solutions for strengthening the governance and management of the controlled sector. The Taskforce's report (DE, 2025b), recommended a two-phase approach: initially, the establishment of a dedicated Controlled Schools Unit within the Education Authority by September 2025, and, subject to primary legislation, the creation of a separate Managing Authority for controlled schools. The Minister welcomed these recommendations as a step toward improving consistency and support for the controlled sector (NI Executive, 2025). This development signifies an increasing acknowledgement of the unique needs and identity of the controlled sector, which is an important shift, particularly in light of the Department of Education's earlier characterisation of controlled schools in notably dismissive terms:

"Controlled schools are not a recognised sector as such. They are the schools that do not fit into any other category and are owned and managed by government. They lack the sense of shared identity and ownership that is evident in other sectors" (DENI, 2007, p.2).

While Protestant churches have had representation on the boards of governors of controlled schools since their inception, the influence of the church and the presence of a Christian ethos often depend on individual school leaders rather than sector-wide guidance from any sectoral body or from the churches. Additionally, although Protestant churches retain the right by law to inspect the teaching of Religious Education within controlled schools, this right is rarely exercised in practice. Furthermore, Northern Ireland's statutory curriculum (CCEA, 2025) holds the development of 'spiritual awareness' as one of five key elements of the first objective of the curriculum relating to individual development, where the curriculum aims to provide opportunities for the individual to "achieve personal fulfilment and individual well-being through living a successful life" (CCEA, 2025). This is protected by the *Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order* (1986, Article 21(2)), and preserves a Christian influence across the entire school curriculum (Lundy, 2005). All publicly funded schools must provide religious education (RE) and daily collective worship (*Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, Article 11*). This most commonly takes the form of participation in assemblies, where

passages from religious texts are discussed and hymns are sung (McCarthy, 2018). Parents have the absolute right to remove their child from both the religious education classes and from the daily worship (*Education and Libraries Order (Northern Ireland)*, 1986 article 21(5)). However, research indicates that the right to opt-out is not always understood, particularly among minority groups, and can cause social stigmatisation (Mawhinney et al., 2010).

1.4 Legal Challenges and Parental Rights

In 2022 a judicial review was granted at the High Court in Belfast following an application by the parents of a child attending primary school in Belfast, challenging the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, the Education (NI) Order 2006 and the Education (Core Syllabus for Religious Education) Order (NI) 2007 which provides for mandatory religious education and collective worship in controlled primary schools in Northern Ireland. The child's humanist parents brought an application for judicial review, challenging the legislation on the basis that it contravened their rights to freedom of religion under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and under Article 2 of Protocol 1 ECHR (A2P1) which prohibits the denial of a person's right to education and requires states providing public education to respect the rights of parents to ensure same conforms with their own religious and philosophical convictions. The High Court found for the applicants, deciding that religious education and collective worship were not being conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralist manner in line with the "objectivity test" endorsed by the European Court of Human Rights in *Folgerø v. Norway* (2008) 46 EHRR 47 and so the legislation breached the applicants' ECHR rights. The High Court granted a declaration to that effect.

A further legal challenge concerning religious education and collective worship in Northern Ireland advanced to the UK Supreme Court (*JR87 & G v Department of Education for Northern Ireland*). The appellant, the non-religious father (anonymised as "G") of a child (anonymised as "JR87") attending a controlled primary school, argued that the mandatory provision of Bible-based religious education and collective worship breached their rights under Article 9 and Article 2 of the First Protocol (A2P1) of the European Convention on Human Rights. Although the school offered an opt-out, the parents contended that the system failed to provide education in conformity with their philosophical convictions and lacked the necessary mechanisms to ensure balance and objectivity. They raised concerns that their daughter was influenced by school practices to adopt beliefs that were not held at home, and that the school's practices were therefore infringing the family's freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The High Court agreed, holding that the legislation breached both the child's and the parents' rights under A2P1, read with Article 9.

However, in 2025 the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal overturned this decision following an appeal brought by the Department of Education, with the family (JR87 and her father) as respondents. The Court concluded that the statutory framework, in particular the scope and clarity of the parental right of withdrawal from religious education and collective worship, provided a sufficient safeguard for Convention rights. It reasoned that the opt-out mechanism

ensured that the state had not exceeded the margin of appreciation afforded in curriculum design and that the family's Article 2 of Protocol 1 and Article 9 rights were therefore adequately protected. The judgment thus reframed the issue as one of procedural accommodation rather than curricular incompatibility, setting the stage for the subsequent appeal by the family to the UK Supreme Court.

Following the 2025 appeal decision overturning the High Court's earlier finding, the case then proceeded to the UK Supreme Court on appeal by the pupil (JR87) and her father (G) against the Department of Education. The original judicial review had challenged the compatibility of the statutory arrangements for religious education and collective worship in controlled schools with rights under Article 2 of Protocol 1 and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. While the High Court had found that the curriculum and associated practices were not sufficiently objective, critical and pluralistic, the Court of Appeal reversed that conclusion. The appellants subsequently secured permission to appeal to the Supreme Court, while the Department advanced a cross-appeal.

In November 2025 the Supreme Court unanimously allowed the family's appeal and dismissed the Department's cross-appeal, restoring the core substance of the High Court's position. The Court held that the RE framework in Northern Ireland did not satisfy the required standard of objectivity and pluralism, and that reliance on parental withdrawal could not remedy the structural deficiency. The ruling therefore constituted a significant constitutional intervention in curriculum governance and human rights compliance in Northern Ireland schooling.

Most recently, in February 2026, the Minister of Education, Paul Givan MLA, announced policy responses following the Supreme Court ruling, including the establishment of an independent review of the RE syllabus and the publication of revised guidance clarifying parental withdrawal procedures. The review panel is tasked with developing a syllabus compliant with the judgment, while maintaining Christianity as the "central focus" (DE, 2026, §20) and introducing inspection arrangements for RE provision. Alongside this, updated departmental guidance sought to clarify schools' handling of withdrawal from RE and collective worship, addressing rights and processes in light of the Court's findings.

1.5 Demographic and Cultural Shifts

Since the post-partition establishment of the education system in Northern Ireland in the 1920s (see Akenson, 1973; Farren, 1995; McGrath, 2000; Walsh & Purdy, 2024) during which the Protestant and Catholic churches vehemently defended their right to exert an influence over the education of their children, and brought significant amendments to Lord Londonderry's original plans to create a non-denominational educational system in Northern Ireland, it is incontrovertibly true that Northern Ireland has become more culturally and religiously diverse. The 2021 census asked respondents to state their religion from a list which included Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland, Methodist, Other or None. The results (see NISRA, 2022) were as follows: Catholic (42.3%); Presbyterian Church in Ireland (16.6%); Church of

Ireland (11.5%); Methodist (2.4%); Other Christian denominations (6.9%); Other non-Christian Religions (1.3%); None (19.0%); Religion not stated (1.6%).

These results show a continuation of the steady rise in the number of respondents with no religion over the past 60 years, as reflected in the NISRA figure below. However, the census also shows that almost four in five (79.7%) of respondents do still claim a Christian religious affiliation in Northern Ireland.

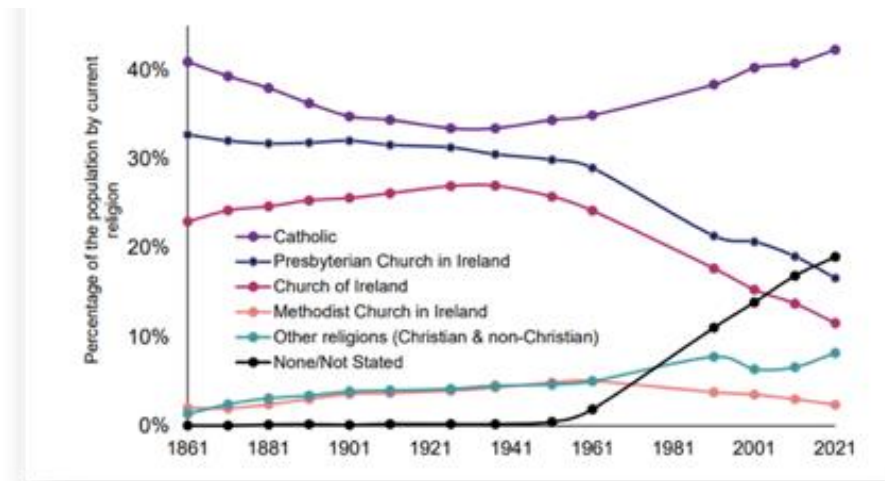


Figure 1.1. Percentage of the population by current religion (1861 – 2021) (NISRA, 2022, p.4).

Gallagher’s report on ‘Religion and Diversity in Schools in Northern Ireland’ (January, 2024) examines the changing profile of the pupil population in Northern Ireland from 2000/2001 to 2021/2022. Within the Catholic Maintained sector, there has been a slight fall in the proportion of children identifying as Catholic and a slight rise in those identifying as Other. The most striking change however is within the controlled sector where there has been a significant fall in enrolment overall, but also notably a large decline in the percentage of children identifying as Protestant and a significant rise in the number of children identifying as Other (neither Protestant nor Catholic). See Figure 1.2 below. Gallagher also notes that 25 years after the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, the proportion of Catholic children in controlled schools and the proportion of Protestant children in Catholic schools remains very low, despite the claims by sectoral bodies that they are open to children of all faiths and none. He questions the extent to which schools match their stated aspiration for a diverse enrolment with pro-active efforts to welcome children from other communities, and makes a number of recommendations for change as follows:

- “The teaching of Religious Education could be timetabled at the beginning or end of the school day to facilitate parents who would like their children to opt out of those classes. Or Religious Education could be reformed altogether so that it is less directly or indirectly denominational in character.
- Schools could remove any direct or indirect use of religion, or inferred use of religion, in their admissions criteria.

- Schools could pro-actively recruit a more diverse workforce among their teachers or other staff, and they could agree to monitor the religious identity of staff even where this is not a legal requirement due to the size of the school.
- Schools could try to identify any cultural, religious or other barriers to participation by non-traditional pupils or staff and pro-actively identify strategies to address these in favour of a more consciously inclusive approach.
- Schools could support staff working in key areas of the curriculum, such as Religious Education, Citizenship or History, to adopt more inclusive approaches that engage positively with division.
- Schools could develop or strengthen their engagement with a greater diversity of organisations in their community.” (Gallagher, 2024, p.36)

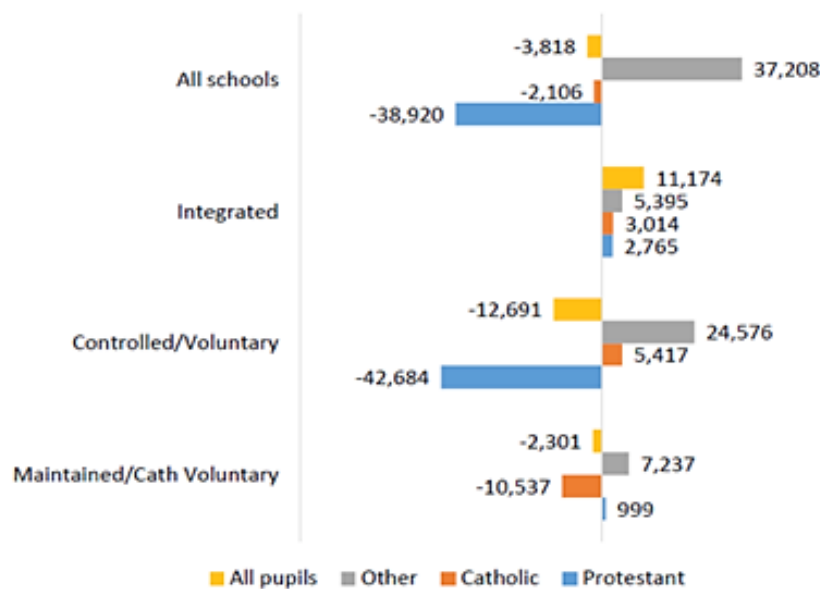


Figure 1.2. Changes in pupil numbers by religion of pupils and school type between 2000/01 and 2021/22 for primary and post-primary schools (Gallagher, 2024, p.36).

1.6 External Religious Visitors

In May 2024, a “grassroots organisation of NI primary school parents”, published a report entitled *On a Mission: Religious Practices in NI Primary Schools: external visitors, transparency and your rights* (Parents for Inclusive Education, 2024). This followed a Freedom of Information request to complete an online survey sent to every publicly funded primary school in Northern Ireland (n=772), with a response rate of 98% (n=756). The study found that there were 11,522 annual visits to Northern Ireland primary schools from churches and religious organisations, with 99.9% from Christian churches or organisations and just n=13 from representatives of all other religions or non-religious worldviews. Furthermore, 77% of

primary schools had no recorded process to determine which religious visitors are given access to pupils, and 53% only make parents aware of religious visitors if parents request the information. A sizeable minority (38%) of schools were not meeting the legal obligation to publish the withdrawal procedure in their prospectus. Just 1.2% of pupils are currently withdrawn from religious education and/or collective worship across Northern Ireland. The report notes that churches and other religious organisations “play an important role in the lives of many people and communities, offering pastoral, spiritual and material support” (p.19) but express concerns about the “capacity of the organisations that are visiting schools to be respectful and inclusive of other faiths, worldviews and identities of all children, particularly when those groups state an explicit aim to evangelise and convert” (p.19). Extracts from evangelistic mission statements of a number of Christian organisations are then cited, including the Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF), Scripture Union (SU), Crown Jesus Ministries, Youth for Christ, Coaching for Christ and Stand by Me. The report notes that many parents “may feel” that such an emphasis is “inappropriate” and further suggests that exposure to “uncompromising views based on a literal interpretation of the Bible...could cause children distress” (p.26). It is acknowledged that “many important questions remain” and that “we lack detail on the actual content being presented to children and the mode of delivery of content by teachers, clergy and other visitors” (p.27).

By contrast, there have been few studies which have sought to explore directly or indirectly the positive impact and contribution of Christian churches and organisations in education in Northern Ireland. Notable exceptions are Purdy and Meneely’s case study of one inner-city school/church collaboration to address educational disadvantage (Purdy & Meneely, 2015) which reported instances of practical support from the local church, and the 2022 ‘Beyond the Stereotype’ report (Purdy et al., 2025) across 4 clusters of schools in Northern Ireland where the positive contribution of the local church was acknowledged by many participants, despite a small minority of sceptical voices, and where the potential for further collaboration was recommended.

Internationally, a growing body of research aligns with Northern Ireland’s emerging findings. In the United States, Horwitz (2020) conducted a study using sibling comparisons in order to observe the influence of adolescent religiosity. The study demonstrated that the young people who identified as religious were more likely to have positive academic outcomes, with regards to their GPA scores and their educational aspirations. This suggests a causal relationship between individual religious commitment and academic success. Similarly, in Australia, Aldridge and McLure (2024) examined how the school climate of two church-based secondary schools influenced student wellbeing. Using data from 1,080 students, they found that young people who attended a school with a Christian ethos were more likely to display positive morals and higher levels of hopefulness, which reinforced the students’ overall wellbeing. This moral and emotional wellbeing, in turn, contributes to academic resilience.

Together, the Northern Ireland findings and international evidence suggest that partnerships between schools and Christian communities can yield benefits for students’ academic

performance and moral development. However, the evolving landscape underscores the need for clear, inclusive frameworks for church-school engagement that balance legal rights, faith identity and the lived realities of diverse school communities.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This research study critically evaluates the role of Christian churches and organisations in schools across Northern Ireland, exploring both the nature of their engagement and the perceived value of their involvement. The study is set against a backdrop of increasing religious diversity, a rise in the proportion of the population identifying as having no religious affiliation (NISRA, 2022), and concerns raised by parents through a 2022 judicial review and the Parents for Inclusive Education (2024) report (N.B. data collection predated the November 2025 JR87 Supreme Court judgement). The study set out to address two central research questions:

1. What is the nature, extent and purpose of school engagement by Christian churches and organisations in Northern Ireland?
2. What is the perceived value of that engagement from the perspective of the school community (e.g., governors, school leaders, staff, pupils, parents)?

The study was commissioned to provide timely, evidence-based insights into the nature of church engagement in schools, in order to inform future policy and practice.

2.1 Advisory Group

An Advisory Group of sectoral body representatives was convened to support the design of the study. The group met at the start of the project to review the draft survey and interview schedules.

2.2 Research Design and Methodology

The project adopted a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The methodology, which was divided into two phases, was designed to capture both the breadth of engagement through surveys and the depth of experience through case study interviews and focus groups, enabling triangulation of findings.

In Phase One of the project, four online surveys were designed and distributed to different stakeholder groups: school leaders, church and Christian organisation leaders, parents, and pupils. The survey for school leaders collected data on the demographic profile of their school, including management type, size, location, and religious affiliation. It also explored the nature, extent, and purpose of engagement with local churches and Christian organisations, how such engagement is formally evaluated, and the extent to which school leaders are aware of, and responsive to, increasing diversity of their school population.

The survey for church and Christian ministry leaders sought to establish which schools they engage with, the methods and frequency of this engagement, and the rationale underpinning their involvement. It also examined how they perceive the value of their engagement and the processes they use to evaluate it, as well as their awareness of changing patterns of religious affiliation within school communities. In addition, and as a follow-up to the main survey, Christian ministry organisations (only) were invited to complete an Excel spreadsheet, accessed via a link at the end of the survey, providing detailed information about their engagement with schools. A total of 19 Christian organisations completed the survey, of which 13 (68%) also completed and returned the Excel spreadsheet. The spreadsheet contained a comprehensive list of all state-funded schools (with their postcodes) in Northern Ireland, categorised by educational phase. Participating organisations were asked to identify the schools with which they engaged and, where possible, to provide details regarding the nature of this engagement, although not all organisations supplied this granular level of information. The data provided by the 13 organisations were combined with contextual information on the

identified schools, including enrolment figures obtained from the Northern Ireland Schools Database. The resulting dataset was then mapped using the ZeeMaps platform to illustrate patterns of engagement across Northern Ireland. Data are presented as a whole and per individual Christian organisation (see chapter 5).

The parent survey focused on assessing awareness of the nature and extent of church engagement in their child's school, including whether parents are informed of their right to withdraw their child from such activities. It also invited parents to indicate whether they would wish to exercise that right, and to reflect on whether they consider church or Christian organisation engagement in their child's school to be valuable, and in what ways.

Finally, the pupil survey was designed for children in Key Stage 2 (P6–P7) and Key Stage 3 (Years 9–10). It asked pupils to describe their experiences of church representatives or Christian organisations visiting their school within the current school term or year. Pupils were invited to share their views on the extent to which they found this engagement enjoyable and valuable.

All four surveys were drafted by the research team, reviewed by the project's Advisory Group, and piloted with a small sample of respondents before full distribution. The surveys, which were open from 5 March 2025 to 28 April 2025, were hosted on SurveyLab and distributed through multiple channels, including school communication systems, church and Christian organisation networks, and social media platforms.

Building on Phase One, Phase Two of the project involved six case studies between April and June 2025 with schools across Northern Ireland. These were purposively sampled to represent a range of school management types (controlled, Catholic maintained, and integrated), geographical locations, mainstream/special, and age ranges involved. Each case study involved a range of semi-structured interviews or focus groups with school-based stakeholders, including the school leader, school governors, parents, pupils, teachers with responsibilities regarding Christian engagement in the school, and representatives of the local churches or Christian organisations currently engaged with the school.

A separate focus group was conducted with members of Parents for Inclusive Education to ensure that the perspectives of parents who may have concerns about church-school engagement were fully represented.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2024) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* and the Stranmillis University College *Code of Ethics in Research* (2024). Ethical approval for the project was secured through the College's Research and Scholarship Committee prior to the commencement of data collection.

All participants were fully informed of the purpose, scope, and nature of the research prior to taking part. They were provided with information sheets outlining the aims of the project, the voluntary nature of participation, and the intended use of the data collected. Consent was obtained from all participants, and both parental consent and child consent were required for pupils to participate in the project. All data were handled and stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018) and institutional data protection policies

2.4 Case Study Participants

Details of the case study participants are presented below:

Table 2.1. Case study participants.

School Description	Participant Breakdown
Catholic Maintained Primary School	1 principal, 2 governors, 5 teachers, 7 parents, and 9 pupils (P5-P7)
Rural Controlled Primary School	1 principal, 2 governors, 3 teachers, 3 parents, 9 pupils (P5 + P7), 3 ministers and 4 representatives from Christian organisations
Controlled Post-Primary School	1 principal, 2 parents, 2 ministers, and 4 pupils (Year 8 + 9), 2 ministers
Urban Controlled Primary School	1 principal, 2 governors, 4 pupils
Special School	1 principal, 1 vice-principal, 1 governor, 3 teachers, 12 parents, and 10 pupils
Integrated Post-Primary School	1 principal, 2 teachers, 18 pupils (Year 8-10)

2.5 Analysis

Quantitative data from the surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to identify patterns by school type, region, and stakeholder group. The interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically. Coding frameworks were derived from the research questions but iteratively refined as themes emerged. Findings from the surveys and qualitative case studies were triangulated to provide a comprehensive and robust evidence base for the report's conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 3: Pupil, Parent and Principal Survey Results

Chapter 3 details the results of the pupil, parent and school principal surveys. The results include summary statistics, and weighted mean calculations using for example, weighted scoring in the ranges of -2 to +2, -1 to +1, 0 to +3, etc. depending on the nature of the question.

3.1. Pupil Survey Results







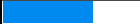


A very small sample of N=73 participants completed the pupil survey.

3.1.1. Demographic Information

The demographic information summary results are shown in Table 3.1.

The most common type of school in the survey sample is, 'Post-Primary School' with 78% (n=57). 82% (n=60) of participants responded that they were religious, with the most common religion across the sample reported to be 'Protestant' (61%, n=37), followed by 'Catholic' (25%, n=15).




Table 3.1. Demographic information.

What type of school do you attend?			
	n	%	% bar
Primary School	16	22%	
Post-Primary School	57	78%	
Totals	73	100%	100%
Are you religious?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes	60	82%	
No	6	8%	
Not sure	7	10%	
Totals	73	100%	100%
Which religion do you belong to?			
	n	%	% bar
Catholic	15	25%	
Protestant	37	61%	
Other religion	4	7%	
Prefer not to say	4	7%	
Totals	60	100%	100%

3.1.2. Has anyone from a church or Christian organisation visited your school this year?

As conveyed in Table 3.2, 48% (n=35) of participants stated that someone from a church or Christian organisation had visited their school during the school year.

Table 3.2. Has anyone from a church or Christian organisation visited your school this year?

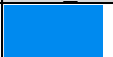





Has anyone from a church or a Christian organisation visited your school this year?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes	35	48%	
No	21	29%	
Not sure	17	23%	
Totals	73	100%	100%



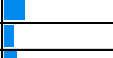



3.1.3. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement

When asked about church and Christian organisation engagement, as summarised in Table 3.3, participants responded that the kind of things the church/Christian organisation do in their schools include, ‘Leading some kind of worship’ (66%, n=23), followed by for example, ‘supporting classes in your school, like teaching RE lessons or talking about relationships’ (51%, n=18), with lower responses for ‘Helping the community, like running charity events or organising a uniform/food bank’ (26%, n=9) and ‘Helping at lunch/break/afterschool, like running an after school club or visiting you in the playground’ (23%, n=8).

In addition, when asked about how often people from churches or Christian organisations come to their school, the most common responses were ‘once a month’ (43%, n=15) and ‘once a week’ (23%, n=8). (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement.

What kind of things did the church/Christian organisation do in your school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Leading some kind of worship, like taking assemblies, preparing for sacraments, or leading carol services	23	66%	
Supporting classes in your school, like teaching RE lessons or talking about relationships	18	51%	
Helping the community, like running charity events or organising a uniform/food banks	9	26%	
Helping at lunch/break/afterschool, like running an after school club or visiting you in the playground	8	23%	
Pastoral Support, like counselling or mentoring	3	9%	
Other	2	6%	
Totals	35	100%	100%

How often do people from churches or Christian organisations come to your school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Once a week	8	23%	
More than once a week	2	6%	
Once a month	15	43%	
Once a term	5	14%	
Once a year	2	6%	
Other	3	8%	
Totals	35	100%	100%

3.1.4. Your thoughts about churches and Christian organisations

Participants’ perceptions of the engagement by churches and Christian organisations are summarised in Table 3.4 (using a Likert-scaled, and weighted scoring system).

As shown, when asked if they enjoy the activities, there was a positive mean score (-2 to +2) of 1.29. The most common response was ‘Yes, I enjoy them a lot’ (54%, n=19) followed by ‘Yes, I enjoy them sometimes’ (23%, n=8). Only one pupil reported that they did not enjoy the visits.



Likewise, when participants were asked if they find the activities interesting, there was also a positive mean score (-2 to +2) of 1.31. The most common response was ‘Yes, very interesting’ (46%, n=16), followed by ‘Yes, quite interesting’ (34%, n=12). Only two pupils (6%) reported that the activities were not very interesting.



When asked if they think the activities are fun, there was another positive mean score (-2 to +2) of 1.34. As above, the most common response was ‘Yes, very fun’ (46%, n=16), followed



by ‘Yes, quite fun’ (40%, n=14). Only three pupils (9%) reported that the activities were not fun.



Furthermore, when asked how much they learn, there was a positive mean score (0 to +3) of 2.26. The most common response was, ‘A lot’ (46%, n=16), followed by ‘A little’ (40%, n=14). Only two pupils (6%) reported that they did not learn anything at all.

Table 3.4. *Your thoughts about churches and Christian organisations.*

When churches or Christian organisations visit your school, do you enjoy the activities?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes, I enjoy them a lot (+2)	19	54%	
Yes, I enjoy them sometimes (+1)	8	23%	
It depends / not sure (0)	7	20%	
No, I don't enjoy them much (-1)	0	0%	
No, I don't enjoy them at all (-2)	1	3%	
Totals	35	100%	100%
Mean_x (-2 to +2)	1.29		

Generally, do you find the activities led by church or Christian organisation representatives interesting?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes, very interesting (+2)	16	46%	
Yes, quite interesting (+1)	12	34%	
Not sure (0)	5	14%	
No, not very interesting (-1)	2	6%	
No, not interesting at all (-2)	0	0%	
Totals	35	100%	100%
Mean_x (-2 to +2)	1.31		

Do you think that the activities are fun?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes, very fun (+2)	16	46%	
Yes, quite fun (+1)	14	40%	
Not sure (0)	2	5%	
No, not very fun (-1)	2	6%	
No, not fun at all (-2)	1	3%	
Totals	35	100%	100%
Mean_x (-2 to +2)	1.34		

How much do you learn from church or Christian organisation visits to your school?			
	n	%	%_bar
A lot (+3)	16	46%	
A little (+2)	14	40%	
Not much (+1)	3	8%	
Nothing at all (0)	2	6%	
Totals	35	100%	100%
Mean_x (0 to +3)	2.26		

3.1.5. Value and Importance



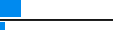
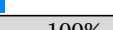



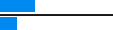
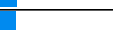
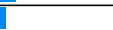
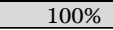



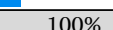
As summarised in Table 3.5, participants were asked about the value and importance of the engagement by churches and Christian organisations.

When asked if they think it is important for church or Christian organisations to come to their school, there was a positive mean score (-2 to +2) of 1.10. The most common response was ‘Yes, it’s very important’ (45%, n=33) followed by ‘Yes, it’s quite important’ (38%, n=28). Only a small minority responded that it was ‘not that important’ (14%, n=10) or ‘not important at all’ (3%, n=2).

Also, when asked what do they think they get out of the visits, almost three-quarters of participants responded, ‘I learn more about Christianity’ (74%, n=54), followed by ‘I enjoy them coming in / I find it fun’ (48%, n=35), and ‘I get to ask questions or talk about religion’ (42%, n=31). There were lower responses for ‘I like getting to do things in my community’ (23%, n=17) while 11% (n=8) stated that they ‘get help with personal problems’. One in ten (10%, n=7) stated that they ‘don’t get anything from it’.

When asked if they would like church or Christian organisations to visit their schools more often, less often, or stay the same, participant responses resulted in a mean score (-1 to +1) of 0.54. The most common response was ‘more often’ (49%, n=36), with a further 34% (n=25) stating the number of visits should stay the same. Only two pupils (3%) felt that the visits should be less frequent.

Table 3.5. Value and Importance.

Do you think it's important for church or Christian organisations to come to your school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes, it's very important (+2)	33	45%	
Yes, it's quite important (+1)	28	38%	
No, it's not that important (-1)	10	14%	
No, it's not important at all (-2)	2	3%	
Totals	73	100%	100%
Mean_x (-2 to +2)	1.10		
What do you think you get out of the visits from church or Christian organisations?			
	n	%	%_bar
I learn more about Christianity	54	74%	
I enjoy them coming in / I find it fun	35	48%	
I get to ask questions or talk about religion	31	42%	
I like getting to do things in my community	17	23%	
I get help with personal problems	8	11%	
I don't get anything from it	7	10%	
Other	3	4%	
Totals	73	100%	100%
Would you like church or Christian organisations to visit your school more often, less often, or stay the same?			
	n	%	%_bar
More often (+1)	36	49%	
Stay the same (0)	25	34%	
Less often (-1)	2	3%	
I don't mind	10	14%	
Totals	73 (63)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)	0.54		

3.1.6. Respecting Different Beliefs

Participants were then asked about respecting different beliefs, with the results summarised in Table 3.6.

When participants were asked if they think that the church or Christian organisation activities delivered in school respect the beliefs of pupils who are not Christian, there was a high mean score (-1 to +1) of 0.81. The most common response was ‘Yes’ (71%, n=52) followed by ‘Sometimes they are respectful’ (11%, n=8). Only two pupils (3%) felt that they were not respectful.

When asked if enough is being done to make sure such pupils feel included, there is a moderately high mean score (-1 to +1) of 0.65. The most common response (62%, n=45) was ‘Yes, they do enough’, while almost 1 in 5 (19%, n=14) felt that ‘They do some, but they could do more’. Just four pupils (5%) felt that they do not do enough.

When asked if they would feel comfortable asking for help from the church of Christian organisation if they were having a problem, there was a positive mean score (-2 to +2) of 0.64. The most common response was ‘Yes, maybe’ (40%, n=29) followed by 31% (n=23) who responded ‘Yes, definitely’. Almost a third said that they would probably (19%, n=14) or definitely (10%, n=7) not ask for help from a church or Christian organisation if they were having a problem.

When asked about whether they had ever been told that they can choose not to join in with religious activities at school, like praying or singing Christian songs, only a third (33%, n=24) said ‘Yes’ with a further 40% (n=29) saying ‘No’ and more than a quarter (27%, n=20) unsure.




The next question asked whether the pupils would choose to participate in fewer religious activities at school, if they had the option. In response, only 8% (n=6) said that they would choose to participate in fewer religious activities, while a majority said ‘No’ (55%, n=40) and 37% (n=27) were unsure.




Table 3.6. Respecting Different Beliefs.

Do you think that church or Christian organisation activities respect the beliefs of pupils who are not Christian?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes, they are respectful (+1)	52	71%	
Sometimes they are respectful (0)	8	11%	
No, they are not respectful (-1)	2	3%	
Not sure	11	15%	
Totals	73 (62)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)	0.81		

Do you think your school does enough to make sure that pupils from different beliefs or religions feel included in these activities?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes, they do enough (+1)	45	62%	
They do some, but they could do more (0)	14	19%	
No, they do not do enough (-1)	4	5%	
Not sure	10	14%	
Totals	73 (63)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)	0.65		

Would you feel comfortable asking someone from the church or Christian organisation for help if you were having a problem?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes, definitely (+2)	23	31%	
Yes, maybe (+1)	29	40%	
No, probably not (-1)	14	19%	
No, definitely not (-2)	7	10%	
Totals	73	100%	100%
Mean_x (-2 to +2)	0.64		





Have you ever been told that you can choose not to join in with religious activities at school, like praying or singing Christian songs?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes	24	33%	
No	29	40%	
Not sure	20	27%	
Totals	73	100%	100%

If you had the option, would you choose to participate in fewer religious activities at school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes	6	8%	
No	40	55%	
Not sure	27	37%	
Totals	73	100%	100%

3.1.7. Your thoughts

Finally, when asked how they felt overall about church or Christian organisation involvement in their school (Table 3.7), participant responses gave a high mean score (-1 to +1) of 0.70. Almost two-thirds of the pupil respondents felt that it was ‘a good thing’ (66%, n=48), while one in five (22%, n=16) felt that ‘I think it’s okay, but I don’t mind if it changes’. Just two pupils (3%) responded that they felt it was ‘a bad thing’.

Table 3.7. Your thoughts.

Overall, how do you feel about church or Christian organisation involvement in your school?			
	n	%	%_bar
I think it's a good thing (+1)	48	66%	
I think it's okay, but I don't mind if it changes (0)	16	22%	
I think it's a bad thing (-1)	2	3%	
I'm not sure	7	9%	
Totals	73 (66)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)	0.70		

3.2. Parental Survey Results

A total of N=412 participants completed the parent survey.

3.2.1. Demographic Information

A summary of the demographic information for the parent survey is shown in Table 3.8.




The most common type of school attended by the respondents' child was 'Primary School' (67%, n=274), followed by 'Post-Primary School' (29%, n=120). Furthermore, the mean year group for primary school children was 4.2 (i.e., P4), with a wide distribution of sample across all year groups.








The mean year group for post-primary school children was 3.29 (i.e., year 10), with a wide distribution of sample across most year groups, with sixth form year groups (years 13 and 14) being least represented in the survey sample.








100% (n=412) of the parent sample reported that their child's school is English medium, and most parents' children were 'Protestant' (66%, n=274), followed by 'None' (21%, n=86). Very few of the parents' children were Catholic (3%, n=11).


75% (n=308) reported that their children go to a 'controlled' school, 12% (n=49) went to a Catholic Maintained school and 10% (n=43) went to an integrated school.







Table 3.8. Demographic Information.

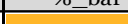



What type of school does your child attend?			
	n	%	%_bar
Nursery School	16	4%	
Primary School	274	67%	
Post-Primary School	120	29%	
Special School	2	0%	
Totals	412	100%	100%

What year group is your child in?			
	n	%	%_bar
P1	32	12%	
P2	32	12%	
P3	37	14%	
P4	40	15%	
P5	44	16%	
P6	49	18%	
P7	36	13%	
Totals	270	100%	100%
Mean_x year group		4.20	

What year group is your child in?			
	n	%	%_bar
Year 8	20	17%	
Year 9	29	24%	
Year 10	19	16%	
Year 11	22	18%	
Year 12	13	11%	
Year 13	9	8%	
Year 14	7	6%	
Totals	119	100%	100%
Mean_x year group		3.29	

Is your child's school English Medium or Irish Medium?			
	n	%	%_bar
English Medium	412	100%	
Irish Medium	0	0%	
Totals	412	100%	100%

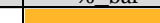

What is your child's religious affiliation, if any?			
	n	%	%_bar
Protestant	274	66%	
None	86	21%	
Other Christian denomination	30	7%	
Catholic	11	3%	
Prefer not to say	7	2%	
Other religion	4	1%	
Totals	412	100%	100%

What is your school's sector?			
	n	%	%_bar
Controlled	308	75%	
Maintained	49	12%	
Integrated	43	10%	
Other	12	3%	
Totals	412	100%	100%

3.2.2. Are you aware of any Church/Christian organisations involvement in your child's school?

As shown in Table 3.9, a large majority of parents responded 'Yes' (82%, n=338), that they are aware of church/Christian organisations involvement in their child's school.

Table 3.9. Are you aware of any Church/Christian organisations involvement in your child's school?

Are you aware of any Church/Christian organisations involvement in your child's school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes	338	82%	
No	74	18%	
Totals	412	100%	100%

3.2.3. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement

Parents were then asked in more detail about the nature of church and Christian organisation engagement, with the results summarised in Table 3.10.

The most common types of activities that the church/organisation provides include, ‘collective worship/assemblies/carol services’ (86%, n=292) followed by ‘supporting the delivery of the NI Curriculum e.g. religious education, RSE etc.’ (53%, n=180), ‘extra-curricular activities e.g. after school clubs, detached breaktime support etc.’ (49%, n=167), and ‘community-based programmes e.g. charity events, uniform/food banks etc.’ (38%, n=129). The provision of ‘pastoral support i.e. counselling, mentoring’ is the least common activity type reported (21%, n=71).

Parents most commonly reported that these engagements occur ‘weekly’ (46%, n=154), followed by ‘monthly’ (21%, n=72) and ‘more than weekly’ (21%, n=49).

Most parents find out about the involvement in their child’s school via ‘school newsletters, messaging, or emails’ (72%, n=243), followed by ‘Other’ (26%, n=87), ‘notices on school bulletin boards’ (22%, n=75), ‘information sent directly from the church/Christian organisation’ (12%, n=23) and ‘parent/teacher meetings’ (7%, n=23).

Table 3.10. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement.

What types of activities does the church/organisation provide with your school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Collective worship/assemblies/carol services	292	86%	
Supporting the delivery of the NI Curriculum (e.g. religious education, RSE, etc.)	180	53%	
Extra-curricular activities (i.e. after school clubs, detached breaktime support, etc.)	167	49%	
Community-based programmes (e.g., charity events, uniform/food banks etc.)	129	38%	
Pastoral Support (i.e. counselling, mentoring, etc.)	71	21%	
Other	26	8%	
Totals	338	100%	100%
How frequently do these engagements occur with any church/Christian organisation?			
	n	%	%_bar
Weekly	154	46%	
More than weekly	49	14%	
Monthly	72	21%	
Termly	28	8%	
Annually	12	4%	
Other	23	7%	
Totals	338	100%	100%
How do you find out about a Church's/Christian organisation's involvement in your child's school?			
	n	%	%_bar
School newsletters, messaging, or emails	243	72%	
Other	87	26%	
Notices on school bulletin boards	75	22%	
Information sent directly from the Church/Christian organisation	41	12%	
Parent/teacher meetings	23	7%	
Totals	338	100%	100%

3.2.4. Perceptions and Experiences of Church/Christian Organisation Engagement

Parents were also asked about their perceptions and experiences of church/Christian organisation engagement, with results summarised in Table 3.11.

When asked about how valuable they think such involvement is, there is a mean score (-2 to +2) of 1.07, tending towards ‘somewhat valuable’. More than three quarters of the respondents

felt that the involvement was either ‘very valuable’ (67%, n=228) or ‘somewhat valuable’ (9%, n=29). Around one in five parents felt that the involvement was either ‘not very valuable’ (5%, n=16) or ‘not valuable at all’ (16%, n=53).






In addition, when asked what they believe is the main purpose of such involvement in school, most parents responded, ‘to support the teaching of Christian values or religious education’ (82%, n=278), followed by for example, ‘to enhance the community involvement / outreach of the church / organisation’ (55%, n=186) and ‘to provide support for pupils’ (49%, n=164), ‘to provide support for staff’ (26%, n=89) and ‘to provide support for parents’ (20%, n=69).





Furthermore, when asked how comfortable they are with their child’s participation in activities led by churches or Christian organisations, there was a positive mean score (-2 to +2) of 1.10. Three-quarters of the parents surveyed were either ‘very comfortable’ (71%, n=241) or ‘somewhat comfortable’ (4%, n=12) with their child’s participation, however again, around one in five parents were either ‘somewhat uncomfortable’ (7%, n=25) or ‘very uncomfortable’ (14%, n=48) with their participation.

A majority of parents (59%, n=201) who responded to the survey felt that the involvement of the church / Christian organisation in their child’s school respects the diverse beliefs of the pupils. However, almost a quarter (23%, n=76) responded ‘No’ to this question. The mean score (-1 to +1) was still positive (+0.41) but the score was less positive than for the other items in this section.

Table 3.11. Perceptions and Experiences of Church/Christian Organisation Engagement.

To what extent do you feel that the involvement of churches or Christian organisations in your child’s school is valuable?			
	n	%	%_bar
Very valuable (+2)	228	67%	
Somewhat valuable (+1)	29	9%	
Neither valuable nor not valuable (0)	12	3%	
Not very valuable (-1)	16	5%	
Not valuable at all (-2)	53	16%	
Totals	338	100%	100%
Mean_x (-2 to +2)		1.07	
What do you believe is the main purpose of church or Christian organisation involvement in your child’s school?			
	n	%	%_bar
To support the teaching of Christian values or religious education	278	82%	
To enhance the community involvement/outreach of the church/organisation	186	55%	
To provide support for pupils	164	49%	
To provide support for staff	89	26%	
To provide support for parents	69	20%	
To collaborate on specific academic or welfare initiatives	49	14%	
Other	44	13%	
Unsure	16	5%	
To offer preparation for sacraments	11	3%	
Totals	338	100%	100%

How comfortable are you with your child participating in activities led by Churches or Christian organisations at school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Very comfortable (+2)	241	71%	
Somewhat comfortable (+1)	12	4%	
Neutral (0)	12	4%	
Somewhat uncomfortable (-1)	25	7%	
Very uncomfortable (-2)	48	14%	
Totals	338	100%	100%
Mean_x (-2 to +2)	1.10		

Do you think that the church or Christian organisation involvement in your child's school respects the diverse beliefs of the pupils?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes (+1)	201	59%	
Somewhat (0)	31	9%	
No (-1)	76	23%	
Not sure	30	9%	
Totals	338 (308)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)	0.41		

3.2.5. Right to Withdraw and Inclusivity

Parents were next asked about their right to withdraw and inclusivity, with the results shown in Table 3.12.

A large majority (79%, n=325) of parents were aware of their right to withdraw their child from religious education and collective worship activities in school but 15% (n=63) were not aware.

Only 9% (n=30) have ever exercised their right to withdraw their child from religious activities at school.

When asked if they felt that the religious activities their child participated in were respectful of pupils who do not share the same religious beliefs, almost two-thirds of parents did feel that they were either 'respectful' (58%, n=238) or 'somewhat respectful' (6%, n=24). A minority (15%, n=62) felt that the activities were 'not respectful', while a larger number were 'unsure' (21%, n=88).

When parents were asked if they think that their child's school does enough to accommodate students from diverse religious or non-religious backgrounds in relation to the activities, there was once again a positive mean score (-1 to +1) of 0.42, with just over half responding that 'Yes, they do enough' (53%, n=218). Almost 1 in 10 felt that the schools 'do some but could do more' (9%, n=37) and almost 1 in 5 felt that the schools 'do not do enough' (19%, n=79).

Table 3.12. Right to Withdraw and Inclusivity.

Are you aware that you have the right to withdraw your child from religious education and collective worship activities in school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes	325	79%	
No	63	15%	
Not sure	24	6%	
Totals	412	100%	100%

Have you ever used your right to withdraw your child from religious activities at school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes, I have used the right to withdraw	30	9%	
No, I have not used this right	291	90%	
Not sure	4	1%	
Totals	325	100%	100%

If your child has participated in religious activities, do you feel that these activities were respectful of pupils who do not share the same religious beliefs?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes, they were respectful (+1)	238	58%	
Somewhat respectful (0)	24	6%	
No, they were not respectful (-1)	62	15%	
Not sure	88	21%	
Totals	412 (324)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)		0.54	

Do you think that your child's school does enough to accommodate students from diverse religious or non-religious backgrounds in relation to church or Christian organisation visits?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes, they do enough (+1)	218	53%	
They do some, but they could do more (0)	37	9%	
No, they do not do enough (-1)	79	19%	
Not sure	78	19%	
Totals	412 (334)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)		0.42	

3.2.6. Impact and Evaluation

Parents were also asked about impact and evaluation, with results summarised in Table 3.13.

Parents reported a wide range of benefits of the church/Christian organisation engagement in their child's school, for example, 'pupil enjoyment' (52%, n=214), 'enhanced moral / spiritual development' (51%, n=212), 'improved pupil wellbeing / enjoyment' (49%, n=201), 'increased community involvement' (39%, n=161), and 'greater understanding of different faiths and world views' (32%, n=130). A quarter of parental respondents felt however that there were 'no benefits' (25%, n=101). The benefit of a 'positive impact on pupils' academic performance' was less common (19%, n=79).

When asked if the school provides enough information about the content and purpose of church/ Christian organisation visits, opinions were very divided with 38% (n=158) saying 'Yes', 18% (n=74) saying 'Somewhat' and 33% (n=136) saying 'No'. This resulted in a very low positive mean score (-1 to +1) of 0.06.

Also, when asked if they would like to see more or less involvement, there is a mean score (-1 to +1) of 0.28. Over half of parents (53%, n=218) would like to see 'more involvement', and a further 17% (n=69) would like 'no change', but around a quarter (26%, n=109) would like to see 'less involvement'.

Table 3.13. Impact and Evaluation.

In your opinion, what benefits (if any) have you observed from church/Christian organisation engagement in your child's school?			
	n	%	% bar
Pupil enjoyment	214	52%	
Enhanced moral/spiritual development	212	51%	
Improved pupil wellbeing/enjoyment	201	49%	
Increased community involvement	161	39%	
Greater understanding of different faiths and worldviews	130	32%	
No benefits	101	25%	
Improved teacher wellbeing	81	20%	
Positive impact on pupils' academic performance	79	19%	
Improved parent wellbeing	66	16%	
Other	25	6%	
Totals	412	100%	100%

Do you feel that the school provides enough information about the content and purpose of church or Christian organisation visits?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes (+1)	158	38%	
Somewhat (0)	74	18%	
No (-1)	136	33%	
Not sure	44	11%	
Totals	412 (368)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)		0.06	

Would you like to see more or less involvement from Churches and Christian organisations in your child's school?			
	n	%	% bar
More involvement (+1)	218	53%	
No change (0)	69	17%	
Less involvement (-1)	109	26%	
Not sure	16	4%	
Totals	412 (396)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)		0.28	

3.2.7. Future Engagement and Concerns

Finally, parents were asked about future engagement and concerns, with results conveyed in Table 3.14.

When asked about their concerns about the potential for church or Christian organisation visits to conflict with their child’s personal beliefs or values, there was a mean score (-1 to +1) of -0.51. More than a quarter of parents were either ‘very concerned’ (19%, n=76) or ‘somewhat concerned’ (10%, n=42) while more than two thirds (68%, n=280) were ‘not concerned’.

Also, when asked if they would support a policy that ensures more transparency, including parental consent and communication about activities, more than two-thirds of parents stated, ‘Yes’ (69%, n=283).

In addition, when asked if they believe that schools should ensure that religious education and activities are presented in a way that is objective, critical, and inclusive of all beliefs, again most parents stated, ‘Yes’ (59%, n=243); however, more than a quarter (28%, n=114) responded, ‘No’.

Finally, parents were asked if they think that churches and Christian organisations should continue to play a role in the education system in Northern Ireland, and more than two-thirds responded, ‘Yes’ (70%, n=287) with 27% (n=110) responding ‘No’.

Table 3.14. Future Engagement and Concerns.

How concerned are you about the potential for church or Christian organisation visits to conflict with your child's personal beliefs or values?			
	n	%	% bar
Very concerned (+1)	76	19%	
Somewhat concerned (0)	42	10%	
Not concerned (-1)	280	68%	
Not sure	14	3%	
Totals	412 (398)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)		-0.51	

Would you support a policy that ensures more transparency in how church or Christian organisations engage with schools, including parental consent and communication about activities?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes	283	69%	
No	60	14%	
Not sure	69	17%	
Totals	412	100%	100%

Do you believe that schools should ensure that religious education and activities are presented in a way that is objective, critical, and inclusive of all beliefs (e.g., Christian, non-religious, or other faiths)?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes	243	59%	
No	114	28%	
Not sure	55	13%	
Totals	412	100%	100%

In your opinion, do you think churches and Christian organisations should continue to play a role in the education system in Northern Ireland?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes	287	70%	
No	110	27%	
Not sure	15	3%	
Totals	412	100%	100%


















3.3. Principal Survey Results

N=81 participants completed the principal survey

3.3.1. Demographic Information

The demographic information results for the principal survey are provided in Table 3.15. As summarised, the most common school type in the sample is 'Primary School' with 69% (n=56) followed by post-primary school with 21% (n=17). Schools represented in the sample are 100% (n=81) English medium. The mean number of pupils in the sample of schools is 357.88, and 56% (n=45) are 'Urban' and 44% (n=36) are 'Rural'. A large majority of the schools in the sample are 'controlled' schools (84%, n=68).




Table 3.15. Demographic Information.

What type of school do you lead?			
	n	%	%_bar
Nursery School	3	4%	
Primary School	56	69%	
Post-Primary School	17	21%	
Special School	5	6%	
Totals	81	100%	100%
Is your school English Medium or Irish Medium?			
	n	%	%_bar
English Medium	81	100%	
Irish Medium	0	0%	
Totals	81	100%	100%
What is the size of your school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Less than 50 pupils	3	4%	
Between 51 and 100 pupils	7	9%	
Between 101 and 250 pupils	28	34%	
Between 251 and 500 pupils	25	31%	
Between 501 and 1000 pupils	16	20%	
More than 1000 pupils	2	2%	
Totals	81	100%	100%
Mean_x size of school		357.88	
How would you define the location of your school?			
	n	%	%_bar
Urban	45	56%	
Rural	36	44%	
Totals	81	100%	100%
What is your school's sector?			
	n	%	%_bar
Controlled	68	84%	
Maintained	5	6%	
Integrated	4	5%	
Other	4	5%	
Totals	81	100%	100%

3.3.2. Does your school engage with a local Christian church/Christian organisation?

As shown in Table 3.16, 94% (n=76) of the schools in the principals' survey 'engage with at least one Christian Church', and 73% (n=59) of schools in the sample 'engage with at least one Christian Organisation'. Only 4% (n=3) said 'No', that they do not engage with either.







Table 3.16. Does your school engage with a local Christian church/Christian organisation?







Does your school engage with a local Christian church/Christian organisation?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes - we engage with at least one Christian Church	76	94%	
Yes - we engage with at least one Christian Organisation	59	73%	
No	3	4%	
Totals	81	100%	100%









3.3.3. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement









Results on school church and Christian organisation engagement are shown in Table 3.17. Most schools engage ‘Weekly’ with church/Christian organisations (49%, n=38). Also, the most common type of activity is, ‘Collective worship/assemblies/carol services’ (95%, n=74). As conveyed, there is a wide range of motivations for such engagement, with the most common being, ‘To support the teaching of Christian values or religious education’ (92%, n=72). When asked how they determine which churches/Christian organisations to engage with, schools mostly said, ‘Based on an established relationship’ (92%, n=72).

Table 3.17. Church and Christian Organisation Engagement.

How frequently do these engagements occur with any church/Christian organisation?			
	n	%	% bar
Weekly	38	49%	
More than weekly	8	10%	
Monthly	18	23%	
Termly	7	9%	
Annually	2	3%	
Other	5	6%	
Totals	78	100%	100%

What types of activities does the church/organisation provide with your school?			
	n	%	% bar
Collective worship/assemblies/carol services	74	95%	
Community-based programmes (e.g., charity events, uniform/food)	40	51%	
Extra-curricular activities (i.e. after school clubs, detached breaktime)	39	50%	
Supporting the delivery of the NI Curriculum (e.g. religious education,	35	45%	
Pastoral Support (i.e. counselling, mentoring, etc.)	20	26%	
Other	7	9%	
Totals	78	100%	100%

What is your motivation for engaging with Christian churches and organisations?			
	n	%	% bar
To support the teaching of Christian values or religious education	72	92%	
To enhance the community involvement/outreach of the	56	72%	
To provide support for students	47	60%	
To provide support for staff	28	36%	
To collaborate on specific academic or welfare initiatives	25	32%	
To provide support for parents	22	28%	
To offer preparation for sacraments	12	15%	
Other	2	3%	
Totals	78	100%	100%

How do you determine which churches/Christian organisations engage with your school?			
	n	%	% bar
Based on an established relationship	72	92%	
Based on the reputation of the Church/Christian organisation	46	59%	
Based on which churches approach and offer support	46	59%	
Based on the needs of the school	44	56%	
Based on the recommendation of staff/governors in your school	41	53%	
Based on a recommendation from another school	22	28%	
Based on the denominational background of the Church/Christian	20	26%	
Other	3	4%	
Totals	78	100%	100%

3.3.4. Perceived Value of Church Engagement

In terms of perceived value of church/Christian organisation involvement in their school (see Table 3.18), a large majority of school principals in the sample responded, ‘Very valuable’ (84%, n=65), and there was a mean score of 1.77, leaning towards ‘Very valuable’. A wide range of benefits are reported, with the most common being, ‘increased community involvement’ (86%, n=67), followed by ‘enhanced moral/spiritual development’ (77%, n=60), pupil enjoyment (72%, n=56), and ‘improved pupil wellbeing’ (67%, n=52).

91% (n=71) of schools responded that they do not have a formal process for evaluating the impact or effectiveness of church and Christian organisation engagement. For those who do have such a formal process (8%, n=6), the most common method of evaluation is via ‘Survey/feedback from students’ (50%, n=3), followed by ‘feedback from parents/carers’ (33%, n=2) and ‘feedback from staff’ (17%, n=1).

Table 3.18. Perceived Value of Church Engagement.

How would you rate the value of church/Christian organisation involvement in your school?			
	n	%	% bar
Very valuable (+2)	65	84%	
Somewhat valuable (+1)	11	14%	
Neither valuable nor not valuable (0)	0	0%	
Not very valuable (-1)	1	1%	
Not valuable at all (-2)	1	1%	
Totals	78	100%	100%
Mean_x (-2 to +2)		1.77	

What benefits (if any) have you observed from church/Christian organisation engagement in your school?			
	n	%	% bar
Increased community involvement	67	86%	
Enhanced moral/spiritual development	60	77%	
Pupil enjoyment	56	72%	
Improved pupil wellbeing/enjoyment	52	67%	
Greater understanding of different faiths and worldviews	28	36%	
Improved teacher wellbeing	27	35%	
Improved parent wellbeing	13	17%	
Positive impact on pupils' academic performance	11	14%	
No benefits	0	0%	
Other	0	0%	
Totals	78	100%	100%

Does your school have a formal process for evaluating the impact or effectiveness of church and Christian organisation engagement?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes	6	8%	
No	71	91%	
Not sure	1	1%	
Totals	78	100%	100%

How is this evaluation typically carried out?			
	n	%	% bar
Survey/feedback from students	3	50%	
Feedback from parents/carers	2	33%	
Feedback from staff	1	17%	
Reports from the Church/Christian organisation	0	0%	
Other	0	0%	
Totals	6	100%	100%

3.3.5. Diversity and Inclusivity

Diversity and inclusivity results for schools, are shown in Table 3.19. When asked, ‘To what extent has your school community diversified over the past ten years’, more than four out of

five school principals reported that their school community was either ‘much more’ (44%, n=34) or ‘a little more culturally/religiously diverse’. Only 18% (n=14) reported that their school community was ‘neither more nor less culturally/religiously diverse’, while no principals at all reported that their school community had become less diverse over the past ten years.

Similarly, when asked, ‘In your opinion to what extent are the activities provided by churches/Christian organisations inclusive of pupils from diverse religious and/or non-religious backgrounds’, almost three-quarters of respondents felt that the activities were either ‘very inclusive’ (33%, n=26) or ‘somewhat inclusive’ (41%, n=32). A minority of principals felt that the activities were either ‘not very inclusive’ (8%, n=6) or ‘not inclusive at all’ (4%, n=3). The mean score was 0.92.

Furthermore, school participants were asked, ‘Are parents informed about the option to withdraw their children from activities provided by the church/Christian organisation?’, the vast majority (97%, n=76) reported ‘Yes’, with the most common methods reported to be ‘through the school prospectus’ (49%, n=38), followed by ‘upon their request’ (42%, n=33) and via letter/notice home (38%, n=30).



Table 3.19. Diversity and Inclusivity.

To what extent has your school community diversified over the past ten years?			
	n	%	% bar
My school community is now much more culturally/religiously diverse (+2)	34	44%	
My school community is now a little more culturally/religiously diverse (+1)	30	38%	
My school community is neither more nor less culturally/religiously diverse (0)	14	18%	
My school community is now a little less culturally/religiously diverse (-1)	0	0%	
My school community is now much less culturally/religiously diverse (-2)	0	0%	
Totals	78	100%	100%
Mean x (-2 to +2)		1.26	
In your opinion to what extent are the activities provided by churches/Christian organisations inclusive of pupils from diverse religious and/or non-religious backgrounds?			
	n	%	% bar
Very inclusive (+2)	26	33%	
Somewhat inclusive (+1)	32	41%	
Neither inclusive nor not inclusive (0)	11	14%	
Not very inclusive (-1)	6	8%	
Not inclusive at all (-2)	3	4%	
Totals	78	100%	100%
Mean x (-2 to +2)		0.92	
Are parents informed about the option to withdraw their children from activities provided by the church/Christian organisation? If so, how?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes - parents are informed through the school prospectus	38	49%	
Yes - parents are informed upon their request	33	42%	
Yes - parents are informed via a letter or notice home	30	38%	
Yes - parents are informed on the school's website	11	14%	
Other	8	10%	
No - parents are not informed about the option to withdraw their children from activities provided by the church/Christian organisation	2	3%	
Totals	78	100%	100%

3.3.6. Continuation

Finally, as represented in Table 3.20, a large majority of the school principals in this sample think that church and Christian organisations should continue to play a role in schools in Northern Ireland (89%, n=72).

Table 3.20. Continuation.



In your opinion, do you think churches and Christian organisations should continue to play a role in schools in Northern Ireland?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes	72	89%	
No	5	6%	
Not sure	4	5%	
Totals	81	100%	100%

Chapter 4: Church / Christian Organisation Survey Results

4.1. Demographic Information

N=91 participants completed the church / organisation survey, with the sample comprising 79% (n=72) church leaders and 21% (n=19) representatives of Christian organisations. See Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1. Demographic information; sample composition.





Are you from a church or a Christian organisation			
	n	%	% bar
Church	72	79%	
Christian Organisation	19	21%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

4.1.1. Organisation-Specific Questions

The demographic information for the subset of Christian organisations is provided in Table 4.2.

As summarised, the most common number of staff in the sub-sample of Christian organisations is ‘more than 10 people’ with 53% (n=10), with a mean number of staff of 7.39. The minimum number of schools the organisations in the sub-sample engage with is n=10, while the maximum is n=498, with a mean of 85.68 schools.

Table 4.2. Demographic information; organisation-specific questions.

How many staff work for your organisation?			
	n	%	% bar
Just me	1	5%	
1-2 people	0	0%	
3-5 people	6	32%	
6-10 people	2	10%	
More than 10 people	10	53%	
Totals	19	100%	100%
Mean_x staff		7.39	
How many schools do you engage with?			
	Min	Max	Mean_x
Totals	10	498	85.68
		19	












4.1.2. Church-Specific Questions

The demographic information for the subset of churches in the sample is provided in Table 4.3. The most common Christian denomination among church leader respondents is ‘Church of Ireland’ with 54% (n=39), followed by Presbyterian (15%, n=11), Other (15%, n=11), Baptist (9%, n=6) and Methodist (7%, n=5). There were no Roman Catholic church leaders who responded to the survey.

There was a wide range of size of church congregation represented across the sample with the most common size being ‘between 101 and 200 members’ (39%, n=28) and ‘between 51 and 100 members’ (21%, n=15).

When asked how many schools they engage with, the mean was 3.1 schools with a range between 0 and 21.

Table 4.3. Demographic information; church-specific questions.

Which Christian denomination does your church belong to?			
	n	%	% bar
Church of Ireland	39	54%	
Presbyterian	11	15%	
Other	11	15%	
Baptist	6	9%	
Methodist	5	7%	
Roman Catholic	0	0%	
Totals	72	100%	100%
What is the size of your congregation?			
	n	%	% bar
Less than 50 members	3	4%	
Between 51-100 members	15	21%	
Between 101 and 200 members	28	39%	
Between 201 and 300 members	6	8%	
Between 301 and 500 members	10	14%	
More than 500 members	10	14%	
Totals	72	100%	100%
Mean_x	221.24		
How many schools do you engage with?			
	Min	Max	Mean_x
	0	21	3.10
Totals	72		

4.2. Nature and Purpose of Engagement with Schools

As conveyed in Table 4.4, there was a range of frequency of engagement by churches / Christian organisations. Most commonly they engage with schools ‘monthly’ (40%, n=36), ‘more than weekly’ (22%, n=20) or ‘weekly’ (16%, n=15).

When asked to detail the types of activities or services they offer to schools, there was a wide variety of response. Almost all respondents (90%, n=82) responded that they engaged with schools through ‘collective worship/assemblies/carol services’ and this was by far the most common response. However, around a third of the respondents stated that they provided ‘pastoral support i.e. counselling, mentoring etc.’ (38%, n=35), ‘support for the delivery of the NI curriculum e.g. religious education, RSE etc.’ (32%, n=29), and ‘extra-curricular activities (i.e. after school clubs, detached breaktime support etc.’ (32%, n=29).

A wide range of motivations for engaging with schools are highlighted in Table 4.4, with ‘to support the teaching of Christian values or religious education’, the most commonly reported motivation (95%, n=86), followed by, for example, ‘to enhance the community involvement/outreach of the church/organisation’ (77%, n=70), ‘to provide support for pupils’ (69%, n=63) and ‘to provide support for staff’ (65%, n=59).

Most churches / organisations replied that an ‘established relationship’ (84%, n=76), ‘invitation from the school’ (75%, n=68), and ‘proximity to our church or organisation’ (67%, n=61), are the key means for determining which schools they work with.

When asked what benefits (if any) they had observed from their engagement with schools, a wide range of benefits was highlighted, as shown in Table 4.4. The most commonly reported benefits were ‘improved relationship with the school’ (87%, n=79), ‘increased community involvement’ (68%, n=62), ‘enhanced moral/spiritual development’ (64%, n=58), ‘improved pupil wellbeing/enjoyment’ (62%, n=56), ‘pupil enjoyment’ (62%, n=56) and ‘improved teacher wellbeing’ (43%, n=39). Fewer respondents cited the benefits of ‘positive impact on

pupils' academic performance' (18%, n=16) and 'greater understanding of different faiths and world views' (16%, n=15).

Table 4.4. Nature and purpose of engagement with schools.

How often does your church or Christian organisation engage with schools?			
	n	%	% bar
Weekly	15	16%	
More than weekly	20	22%	
Monthly	36	40%	
Termly	12	13%	
Annually	0	0%	
Other	8	9%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

What types of activities or services do you offer to schools?			
	n	%	% bar
Collective worship/assemblies/carol services	82	90%	
Pastoral Support (i.e. counselling, mentoring, etc.)	35	38%	
Supporting the delivery of the NI Curriculum (e.g. religious education, RSE, etc.)	29	32%	
Extra-curricular activities (i.e. after school clubs, detached breaktime support, etc.)	29	32%	
Other	27	30%	
Community-based programmes (e.g., charity events, uniform/food banks etc.)	16	18%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

What is your motivation for engaging with schools?			
	n	%	% bar
To support the teaching of Christian values or religious education	86	95%	
To enhance the community involvement/outreach of the church/organisation	70	77%	
To provide support for pupils	63	69%	
To provide support for staff	59	65%	
To provide support for parents	23	25%	
To collaborate on specific academic or welfare initiatives	13	14%	
Other	7	8%	
To offer preparation for sacraments	3	3%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

How do you determine which schools to engage with?			
	n	%	% bar
Based on an established relationship	76	84%	
Invitation from the school	68	75%	
Proximity to our church or organisation	61	67%	
Based on the needs of the school/community	35	38%	
Based on the school's religious or denominational affiliation	12	13%	
Other	2	2%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

What benefits (if any) have you observed from your engagement with schools?			
	n	%	% bar
Improved relationship with the school	79	87%	
Increased community involvement	62	68%	
Enhanced moral/spiritual development	58	64%	
Improved pupil wellbeing/enjoyment	56	62%	
Pupil enjoyment	56	62%	
Improved teacher wellbeing	39	43%	
Improved parent wellbeing	16	18%	
Positive impact on pupils' academic performance	16	18%	
Greater understanding of different faiths and worldviews	15	16%	
Other	5	5%	
No benefits	2	2%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

4.3. Evaluation of Engagement

In Table 4.5, only 12% (n=11) churches / organisations stated that they ‘have a formal process of evaluating the impact or effectiveness of their engagement with schools’. Table 4.5b provides more detail and highlights that formal evaluation processes are significantly more common among visiting Christian organisations than among local church representatives/ ministers. For instance, 9 of the 11 respondents who stated that they had a formal evaluation process were Christian organisations (only 2 were churches). This represents 47% of the 19 Christian organisations in the sample, whereas just 3% (n=2/72) of the churches had a formal evaluation process.









Of those 11 respondents who do have such a process for evaluation, most utilise ‘feedback from staff’ (37%, n=4). with small numbers reporting that they use ‘survey/feedback from pupils’ (18%, n=2), ‘feedback from parents’ (18%, n=2), and ‘your own data collection/organisational reports (18%, n=2).

Respondents were then asked if they felt that schools provide them with enough feedback about the impact of their activities in the school. Over two thirds answered either ‘Yes’ (29%, n=26) or ‘Somewhat’ (41%, n=37) but over a quarter (27%, n=25) said ‘No’, suggesting that they would welcome more feedback from the schools they engage with.

When asked if their church/organisation had faced any resistance when engaging with schools, a large majority (81%, n=74) of respondents stated that they have faced ‘no resistance’, with smaller number claiming that they had faced resistance from parents/carers (12%, n=11) and school staff or leadership (9%, n=9). Only one respondent reported that they had received resistance from students.

Participants were then asked about any other challenges they had faced when engaging with schools. The most commonly cited challenges were ‘lack of time or resources’ (41%, n=37), ‘schools’ increasing diversity and potential conflicts with different belief systems’ (23%, n=21), ‘concerns about the religious content being taught’ (16%, n=15), ‘schools’ reluctance to engage with religious organisations’ (14%, n=13) and ‘concerns about the potential for indoctrination’ (7%, n=6). Just over a third of respondents reported that they had faced ‘no challenges’ (34%, n=31).

Table 4.5a. Perceived value of church engagement.

Do you have a formal process of evaluating the impact or effectiveness of your engagement with schools?			
	n	%	% bar
No	78	86%	
Yes	11	12%	
Not sure	2	2%	
Totals	91	100%	100%
How is this evaluation typically carried out?			
	n	%	% bar
Feedback from staff	4	37%	
Survey/feedback from pupils	2	18%	
Feedback from parents/carers	2	18%	
Your own data collection/organisational reports	2	18%	
Other	1	9%	
Totals	11	100%	100%

In your opinion, do schools you work with provide enough feedback about the impact of your church or organisation's activities?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes (+1)	26	29%	
Somewhat (0)	37	41%	
No (-1)	25	27%	
Not sure	3	3%	
Totals	91 (88)	100%	100%
Mean_x (-1 to +1)		0.01	

Has your organisation faced any resistance when engaging with schools?			
	n	%	%_bar
No - no resistance	74	81%	
Yes - resistance from parents/carers	11	12%	
Yes - resistance from school staff or leadership	9	9%	
Yes - resistance from governors	4	4%	
Yes - resistance from another source (please specify)	2	2%	
Yes - resistance from students (e.g. lack of interest, low attendance, etc.)	1	1%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

What other challenges have you faced when engaging with schools?			
	n	%	%_bar
Lack of time or resources	37	41%	
No challenges faced	31	34%	
Schools' increasing diversity and potential conflicts with different belief systems	21	23%	
Concerns about the religious content being taught	15	16%	
Schools' reluctance to engage with religious organisations	13	14%	
Concerns about the potential for indoctrination	6	7%	
Other	6	7%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

Table 4.5b. 11 churches/organisations with an evaluation process.

11 churches/organisations with an evaluation process					
Type	n	%	%_bar	In sub-sample / % of sub-sample	
Christian Organisation	9	82%		19	47%
Church	2	18%		72	3%
Totals	11	100%	100%	91	50%

4.4. Response to Religious and Cultural Diversity

Most churches / organisations are either ‘very aware’ (52%, n=47), or ‘somewhat aware’ (43%, n=39) of the ‘increasing religious and cultural diversity within schools’. There is also a mean result of 1.40 on a -2 (not aware at all) to +1 (very aware) 4-point Likert scale, indicating a positive swing towards ‘very aware’ (see Table 4.6a). When this was analysed further (see Table 4.6b below), respondents from Christian organisations (84% ‘very aware’, 16% ‘aware’) were much more aware of the increasing religious and cultural diversity than respondents from churches (43% ‘very aware’, 50% ‘aware’, 6% ‘not very aware’, 1% ‘not aware at all’).

However, when asked how they adapt their activities to be more inclusive of students from diverse religious or non-religious backgrounds, a majority of churches / organisations state that they ‘make no specific adaptations’ (55%, n=50). Smaller numbers of respondents reported that they ‘focus on moral or ethical themes that transcend religious belief’ (26%, n=24), or ‘engage with pupils and staff to understand their beliefs and backgrounds’ (20%, n=18). Just 15% (n=14) modify their content to be more inclusive.

However, survey respondents from churches were much more likely to make ‘no specific adaptations’ (61%, n=44) than respondents from Christian organisations (32%, n=6). See Table 4.6c below.

Despite the lack of modification of content or approach, a large majority (86%, n=78) of churches / Christian organisations felt that the activities they offer in schools ‘respect the rights of students to opt-out of religious practices or teachings if they choose to do so’. One in ten were unsure (10%, n=9) while 4 respondents (4%) felt that the activities they offer in schools did not ‘respect the rights of students to opt-out of religious practices or teachings if they choose to do so.’

When asked if they ‘think schools should offer more flexibility regarding students’ participation in religious activities (e.g., the ability to opt out without repercussions)’, there was an almost equal distribution of responses between ‘yes’ (30%, n=27), ‘no’ (33%, n=30) and ‘not sure’ (37%, n=34). However, as Table 4.6d illustrates, church representatives (39%) were much more likely than Christian organisations (11%) to disagree that schools should offer more flexibility.

Table 4.6a. Diversity and inclusivity.

How aware is your church or Christian organisation of the increasing religious and cultural diversity within schools?			
	n	%	%_bar
Very aware (+2)	47	52%	
Somewhat aware (+1)	39	43%	
Not very aware (-1)	4	4%	
Not aware at all (-2)	1	1%	
Totals	91	100%	100%
Mean_x (-2 to +2)		1.40	

How does your church or Christian organisation adapt its activities to be more inclusive of students from diverse religious or non-religious backgrounds?			
	n	%	%_bar
We make no specific adaptations	50	55%	
We focus on moral or ethical themes that transcend religious belief	24	26%	
We engage with pupils and staff to understand their beliefs and backgrounds	18	20%	
Other	16	18%	
We modify religious content to be more inclusive	14	15%	
We provide alternative activities for non-Christian pupils	3	3%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

Do you feel that the activities you offer in schools respect the rights of students to opt-out of religious practices or teachings if they choose to do so?			
	n	%	%_bar
Yes	78	86%	
Not sure	9	10%	
No	4	4%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

Do you think schools should offer more flexibility regarding students’ participation in religious activities (e.g., the ability to opt out without repercussions)?			
	n	%	%_bar
Not sure	34	37%	
No	30	33%	
Yes	27	30%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

Table 4.6b. Awareness of increasing religious and cultural diversity in schools by church/organisation type.









Awareness of increasing religious and cultural diversity in schools	Church			Organisation		
	n	%	%_bar	n	%	%_bar
Not aware at all (0)	1	1%		0	0%	
Not very aware (+1)	4	6%		0	0%	
Somewhat aware (+2)	36	50%		3	16%	
Very aware (+3)	31	43%		16	84%	
Totals	72	100%	100%	19	100%	100%
Means (0 to +3)	2.35			2.84		

Table 4.6c. How church/organisation adapts activities to be more inclusive by church/organisation type.

















How church/Christian organisation adapts activities to be more inclusive	Church			Organisation		
	n	%_sub-sample (n=72)	%_bar	n	%_sub-sample (n=19)	%_bar
We provide alternative activities for non-Christian pupils	3	4%		0	0%	
We engage with pupils and staff to understand their beliefs and backgrounds	10	14%		8	42%	
We modify religious content to be more inclusive	12	17%		2	11%	
We focus on moral or ethical themes that transcend religious belief	17	24%		7	37%	
We make no specific adaptations	44	61%		6	32%	




Table 4.6d. Schools should offer more flexibility regarding students' participation in religious activities by church/organisation type.

Do you feel that schools should offer more flexibility regarding students' participation in religious activities?	Church			Organisation		
	n	%	%_bar	n	%	%_bar
No (-1)	28	39%		2	11%	
Not sure (0)	23	32%		11	58%	
Yes (+1)	21	29%		6	32%	
Totals	72	100%	100%	19	100%	100%
Means (-1 to +1)	-0.10			0.21		

4.5. Future Engagement

Finally, as shown in Table 4.7, almost all representatives of churches / Christian organisations felt that they should continue to play a role in schools across Northern Ireland ('yes', 97%, n=88), with just one participant (a church leader) responding 'no'.

Table 4.7. Future engagement.

In your opinion, do you think churches and Christian organisations should continue to play a role in schools in Northern Ireland?			
	n	%	% bar
Yes	88	97%	
Not sure	2	2%	
No	1	1%	
Totals	91	100%	100%

Chapter 5: Mapping of Christian Ministry Organisation School Engagement

5.1. Distribution of Engagement

Christian Ministry organisations were also asked to complete and provide an Excel spreadsheet detailing their school engagement. Responses were received from 57% (n=13) of the 23 Christian Ministry organisations that were invited to participate. The data provided by the 13 Christian Ministry organisations on their engagement with schools was merged with data on the individual schools they work with, such as school enrolment (obtained from Northern Ireland Schools Database) and then mapped using the ZeeMaps platform.

Table 5.1 below shows the number of schools engaged with by the 13 Christian Ministry organisations who responded to the survey. Collectively the organisations engage on average with 116 schools, but the scale of the 13 organisations and their respective reach varies considerably (from just 12 schools through to 495, the latter representing 49% of the 1,011 primary, post-primary and special schools in Northern Ireland¹).

Table 5.1. Number of schools engaging with the 13 different organisations.

Organisation	Number of Schools
1	57
2	44
3	25
4	107
5	33
6	37
7	12
8	44
9	24
10	171
11	347
12	495
13	24
Total school engagements	1420
Total unique schools	731

All schools in Northern Ireland engaging with these 13 Christian Ministry organisations are plotted in Figure 5.1a and summarised by localised count in Figure 5.1b., with enrolment counts within the most densely served ‘corridor’ shown in Figure 5.1c , and a heat map showing the weight of enrolment of these schools shown in Figure 5.1d. As indicated, there is a wide distribution of engagement across all population centres in Northern Ireland, with particularly high levels of engagement in main population centres such as the ‘Jordanstown – Belfast – Portadown – Armagh - Dungannon’ and ‘Belfast – Bangor’ corridors (enhanced in Figure 5.1e). As conveyed in Figure 5.1c and the heat map in Figure 5.1d, corresponding to the engagement centres discussed above, there is a higher weight of enrolment being served through the

¹ See DE/NISRA statistics available at <https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/DEstatistics/annual-enrolments-schools-and-funded-pre-school-education-northern-ireland-202425-revised.html>

engagement along the ‘Jordanstown – Belfast – Portadown – Armagh - Dungannon’ and ‘Belfast – Bangor’ corridors. There is, consequently, less dense engagement with rural schools, as most (but not all) engagement appears to be focused on schools within urban centres, and especially, along the aforementioned geographic corridors. This also reflects the lower population density and lower number of schools in rural areas.

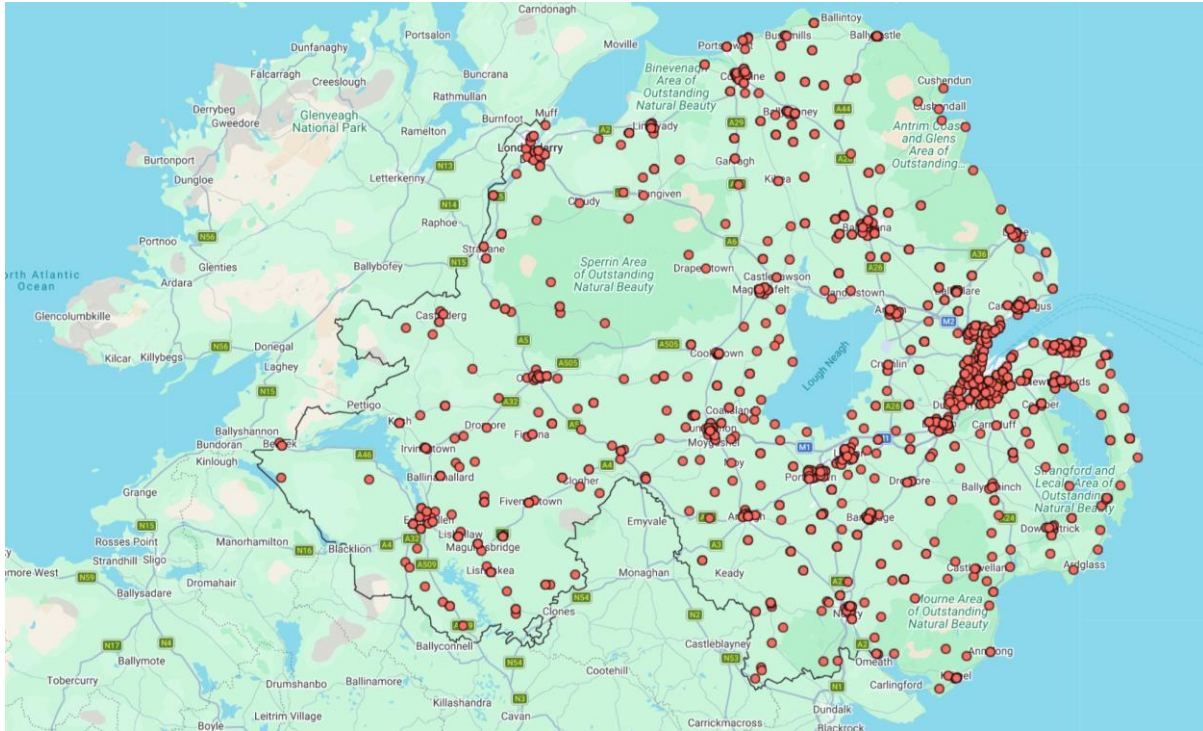


Figure 5.1a. All schools in Northern Ireland engaging with Christian Ministry organisations in database.

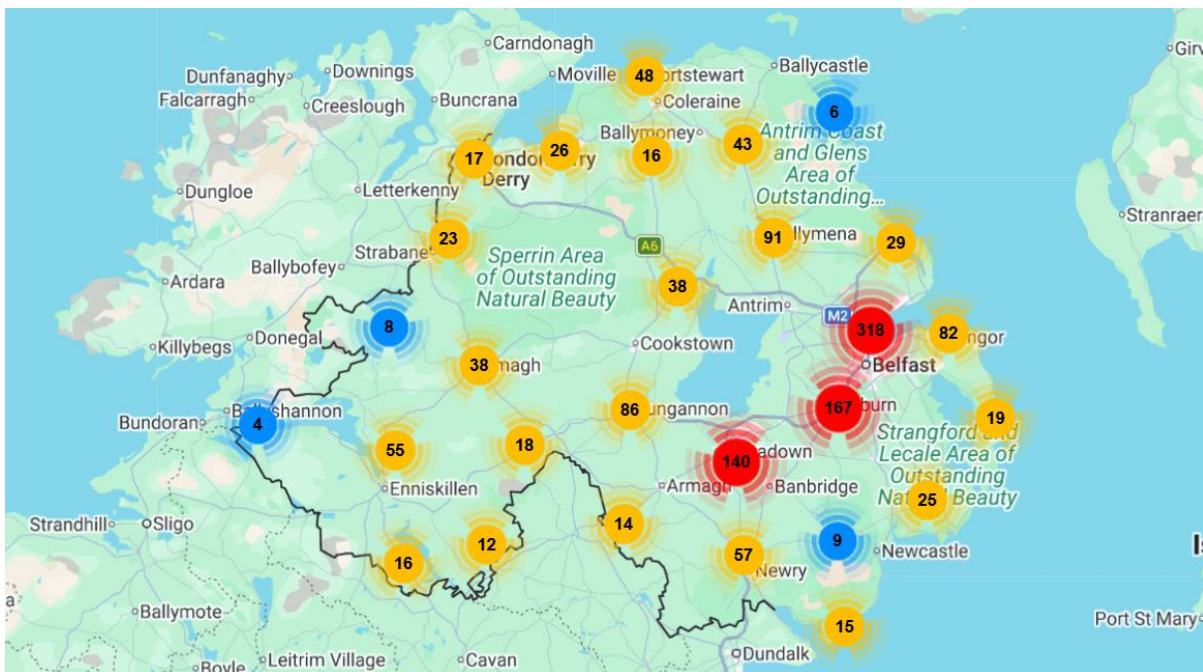


Figure 5.1b. Schools engaging with organisations summarised by localised count.

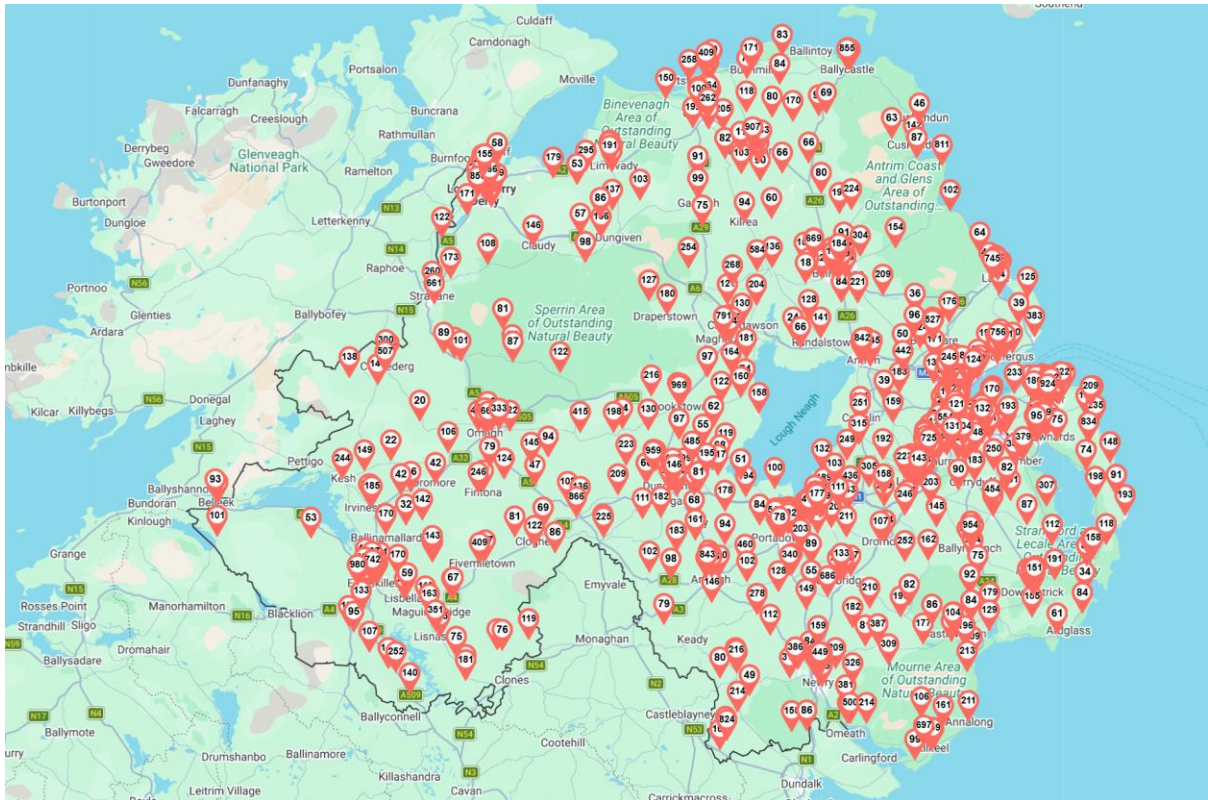


Figure 5.1c. Counts of Ministry organisation school's enrolment in main section of corridor.

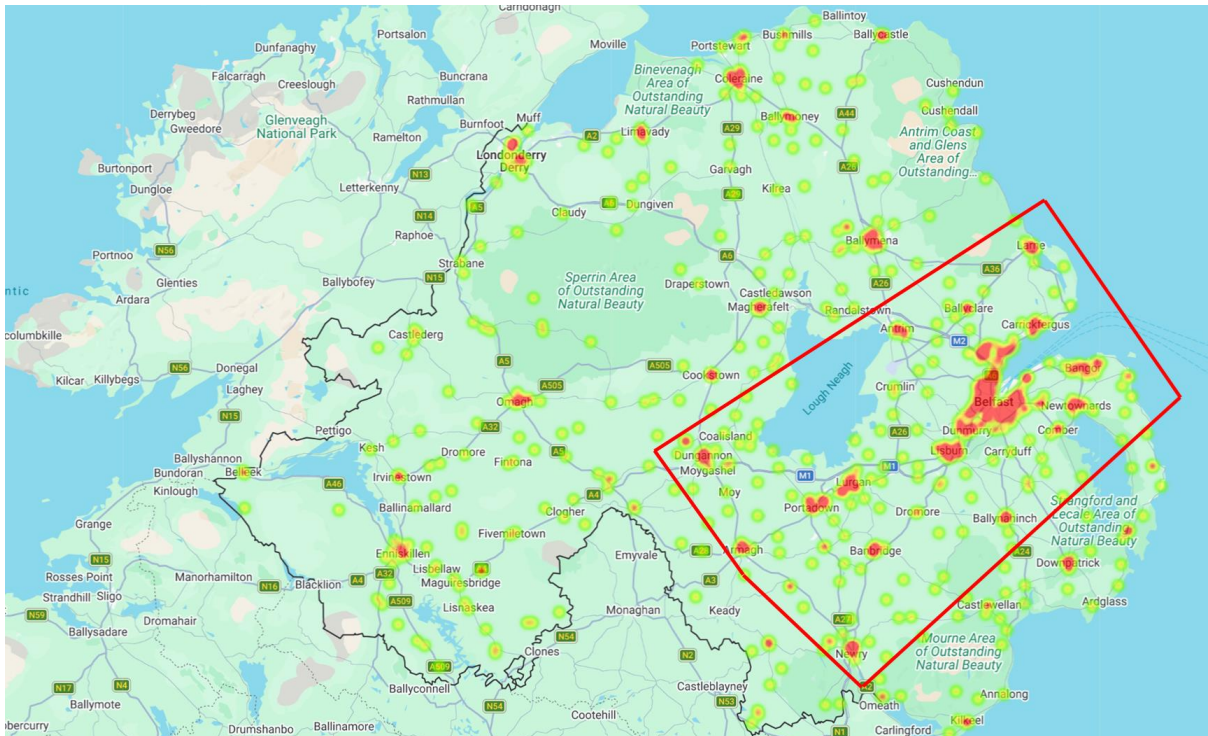


Figure 5.1d. Heat map of Christian Ministry organisation schools by weight of enrolment of schools.

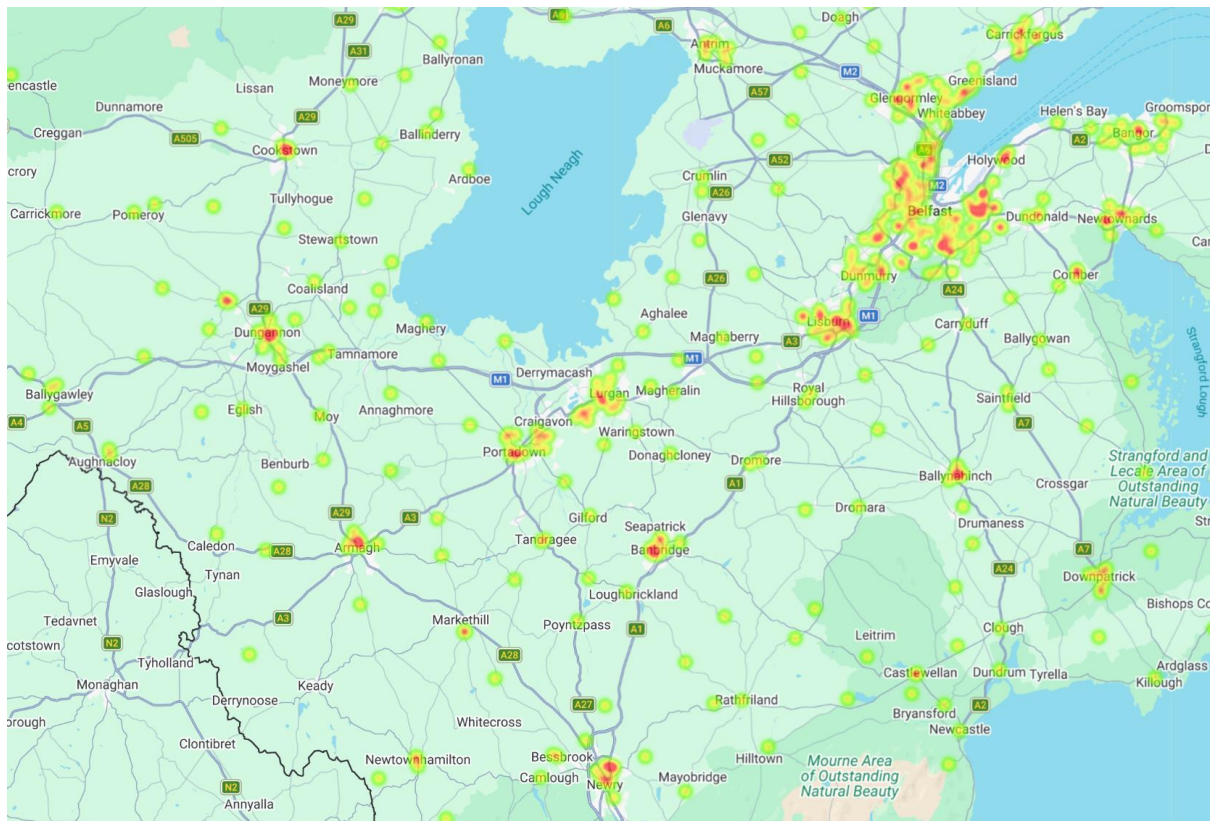


Figure 5.1e. Enhanced heat map of weight of school enrolments primarily in the ‘Jordanstown – Belfast – Portadown – Armagh’ and ‘Belfast – Bangor’ corridors.

5.2. Multiple Christian Ministry Organisation Engagement with Individual Schools

The number (frequencies) of different ‘unique’ Christian Ministry organisations engaging with each individual school was also plotted using ZeeMaps. Figure 5.2a highlights the frequencies of different Christian Ministry organisations engaging with each individual school.

The maximum number of different organisations for any individual school in this sample is $n=6$, and the minimum is $n=1$ (based on the 13 organisations that responded). Again, higher levels of multiple organisation engagement, are occurring in key population centres, especially along the ‘Jordanstown – Belfast – Portadown – Armagh - Dungannon’ and ‘Belfast – Bangor’ corridors (enhanced in Figure 5.2b), but also in areas such as the Antrim and Carrickfergus areas.

In addition, a heat map of multiple Christian Ministry organisation engagement, across schools in the database, is shown in Figure 5.2c. The heat map further illustrates the ‘hot spots’ of multiple organisation engagement in key urban population centres/corridors, and a lack of multiple engagement in most rural areas.

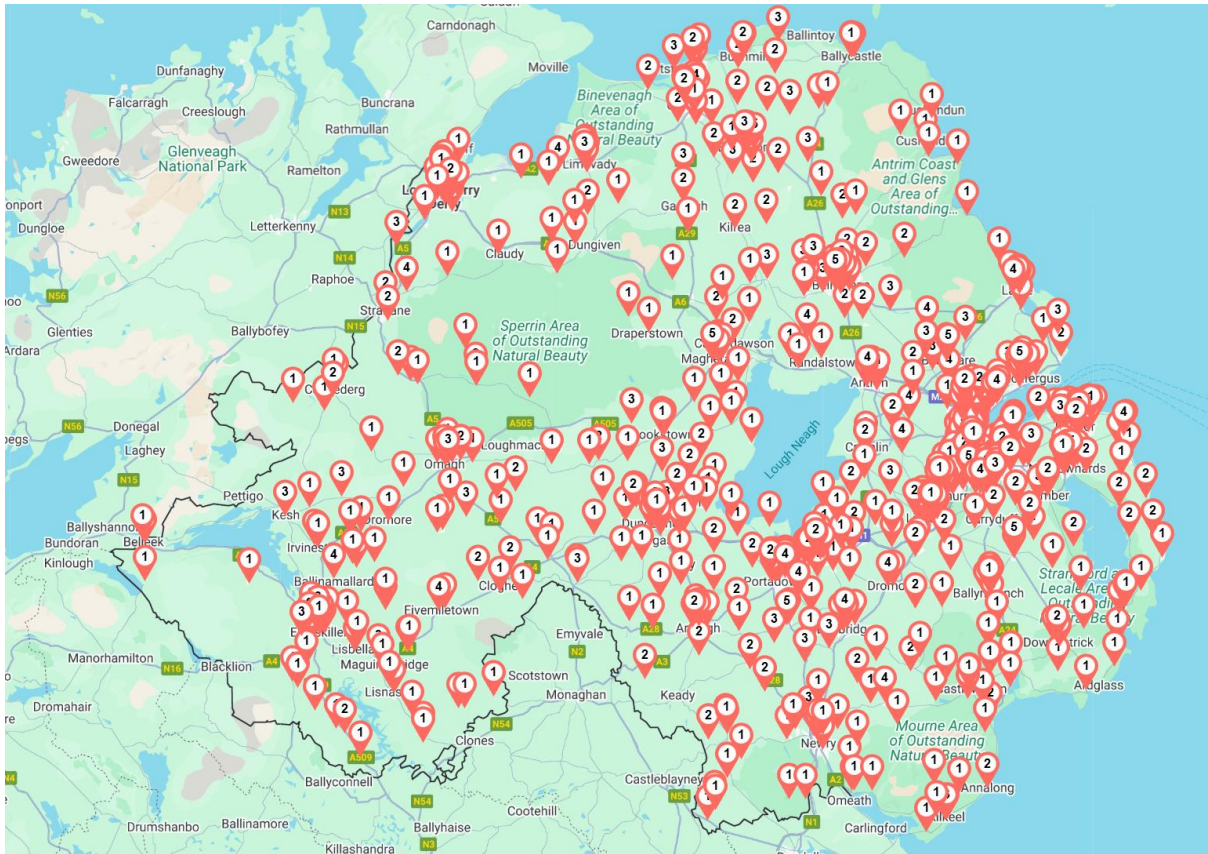


Figure 5.2a. Number of different organisations engaging with each individual school.

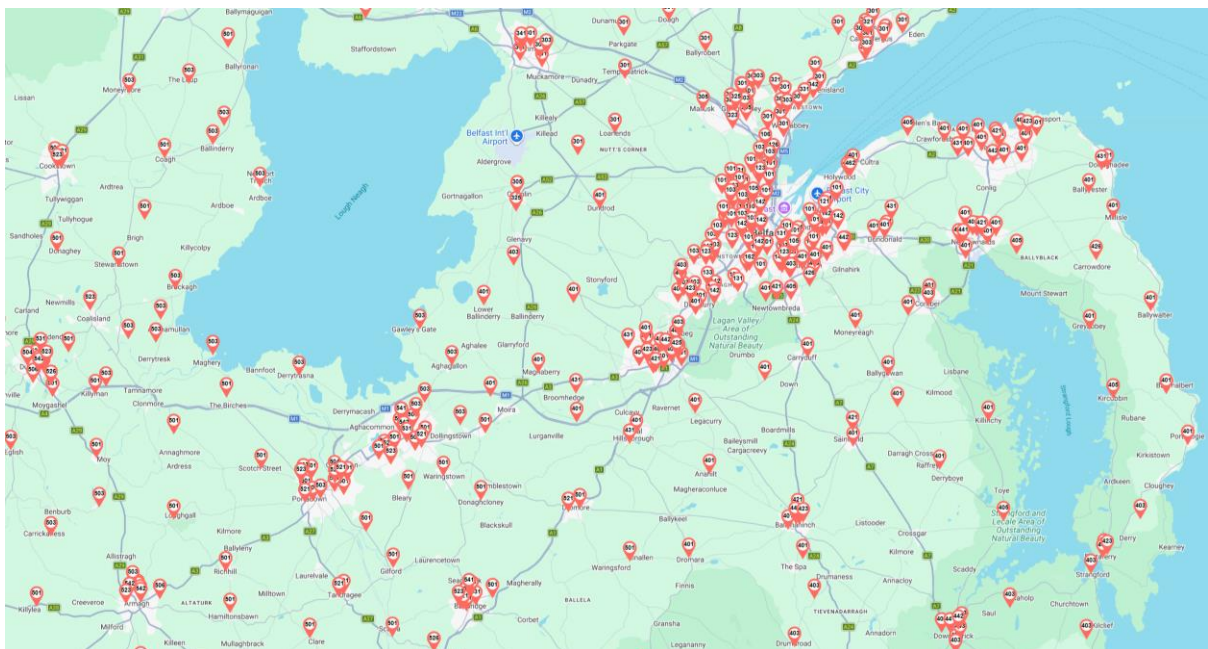


Figure 5.2b. Number of different organisations engaging with each individual school in the 'Jordanstown – Belfast – Portadown – Armagh -Dungannon' and 'Belfast – Bangor' corridors.

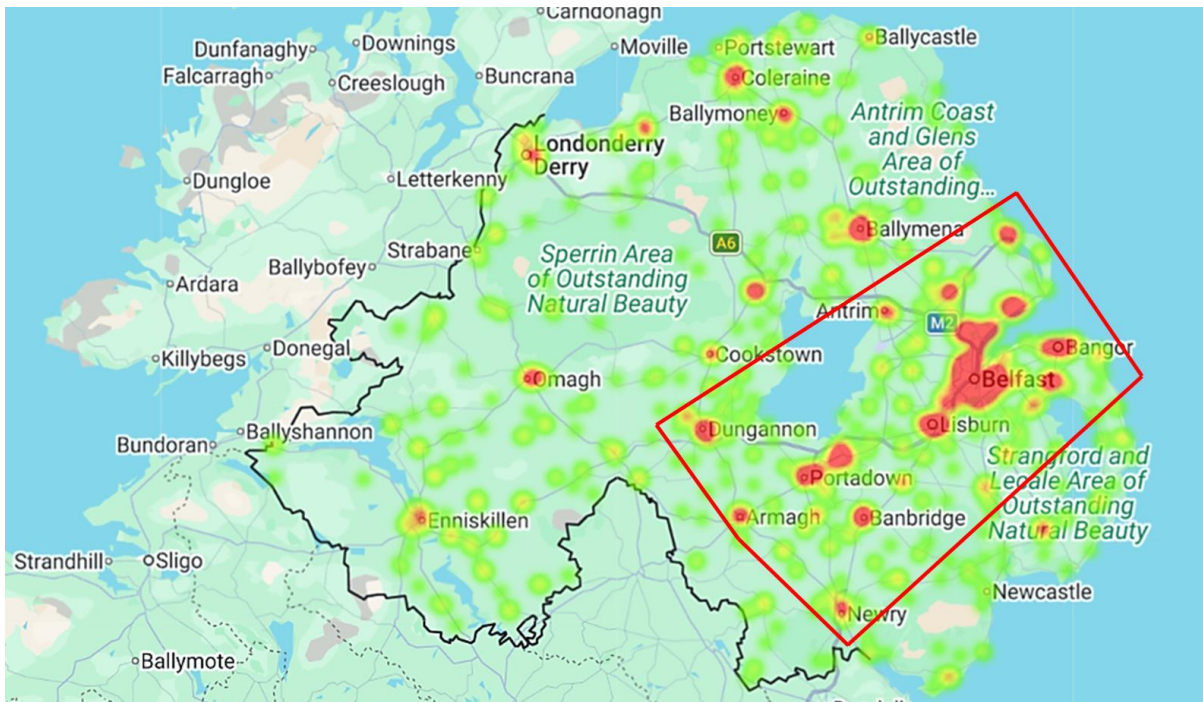


Figure 5.2c. Number of different organisations engaging with individual schools heat map.

5.3. Christian Ministry Organisation Engagement by Organisation

Furthermore, as conveyed in Figures 5.3a – m, the Christian Ministry organisation engagement with individual schools across Northern Ireland (with respect to the database / 13 organisations), was broken down by each of the 13 individual organisations (colour-coded).

As shown, some organisations are spread very widely across Northern Ireland, such as Organisation 1 (Figure 5.3a), 4 (Figure 5.3d), 8 (Figure 5.3h), 10 (Figure 5.3j), 11 (Figure 5.3k), 12 (Figure 5.3l) and 13 (Figure 5.3m). Organisations 10, 11 and 12 also engage with a very large number of schools (Table 5.1).

Other organisations are however much more highly focused geographically, such as Organisation 2 (Figure 5.3b), 3 (Figure 5.3c), 5 (Figure 5.3e) and 7 (Figure 5.3g).

In addition, some organisations appear to be more regional e.g., Northern, North-Eastern, Eastern, or South-Eastern focused, such as Organisations 3 (Figure 5.3c), 6 (Figure 5.3f), and 9 (Figure 5.3i).

Organisation 5 (Figure 5.3e) appears to be highly geographically focused around the ‘Jordanstown – Belfast – Portadown – Armagh - Dungannon’ and ‘Belfast – Bangor’ corridors, and Carrickfergus areas.

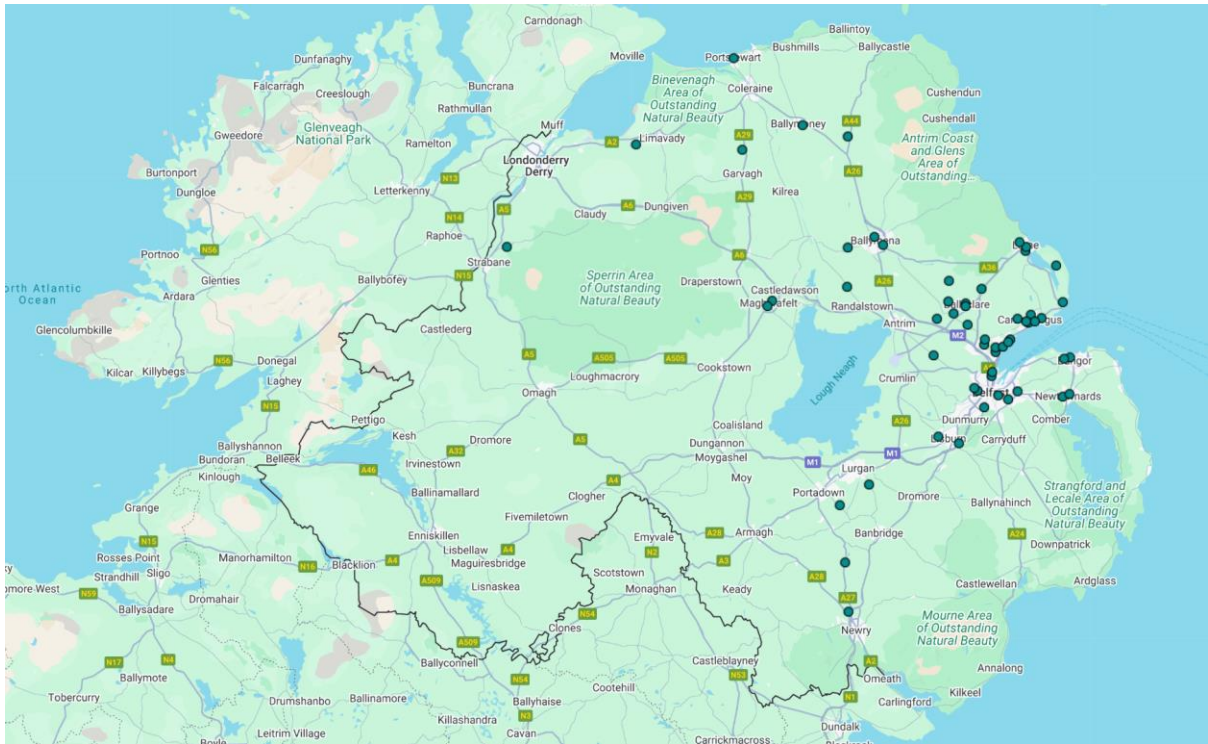


Figure 5.3a. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (1).

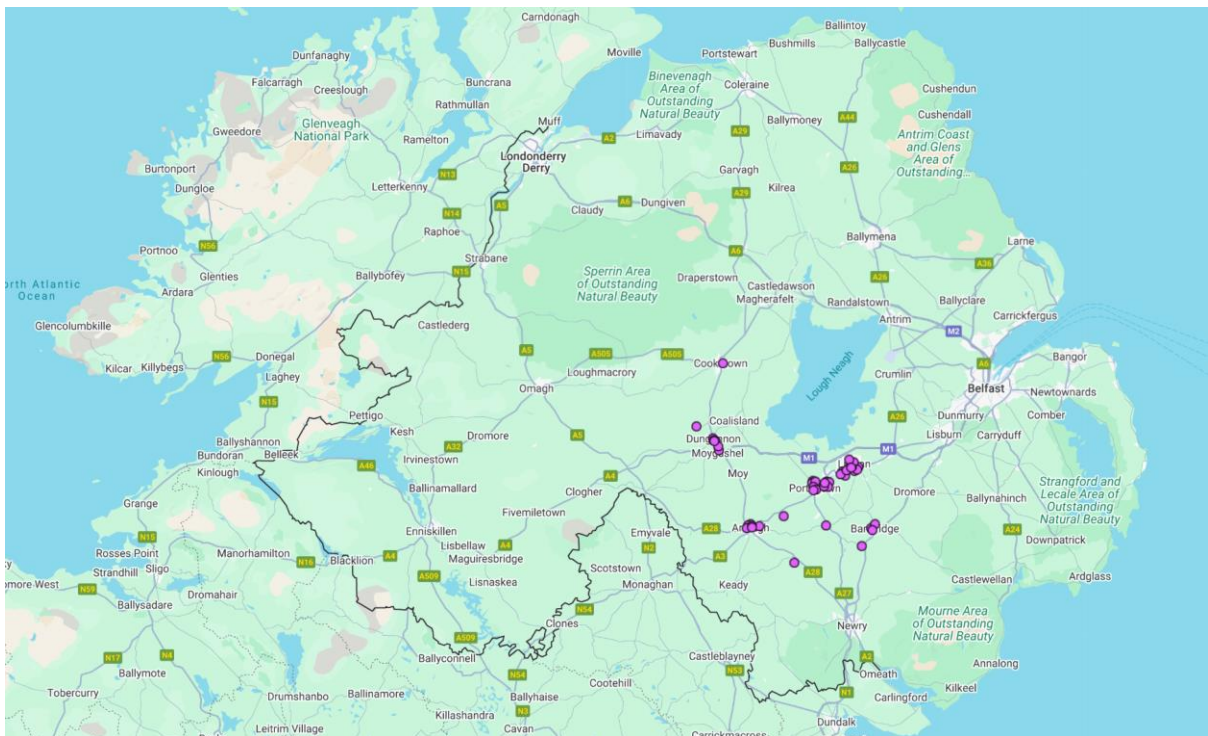


Figure 5.3b. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (2).

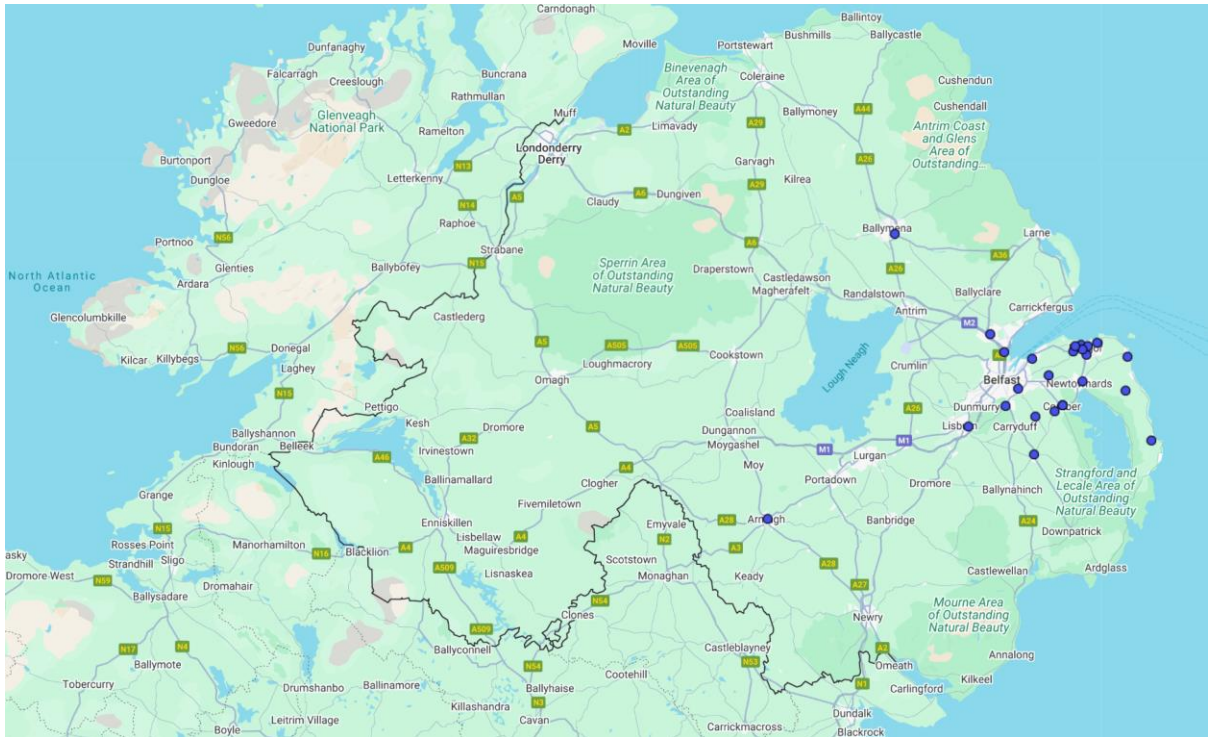


Figure 5.3c. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (3).

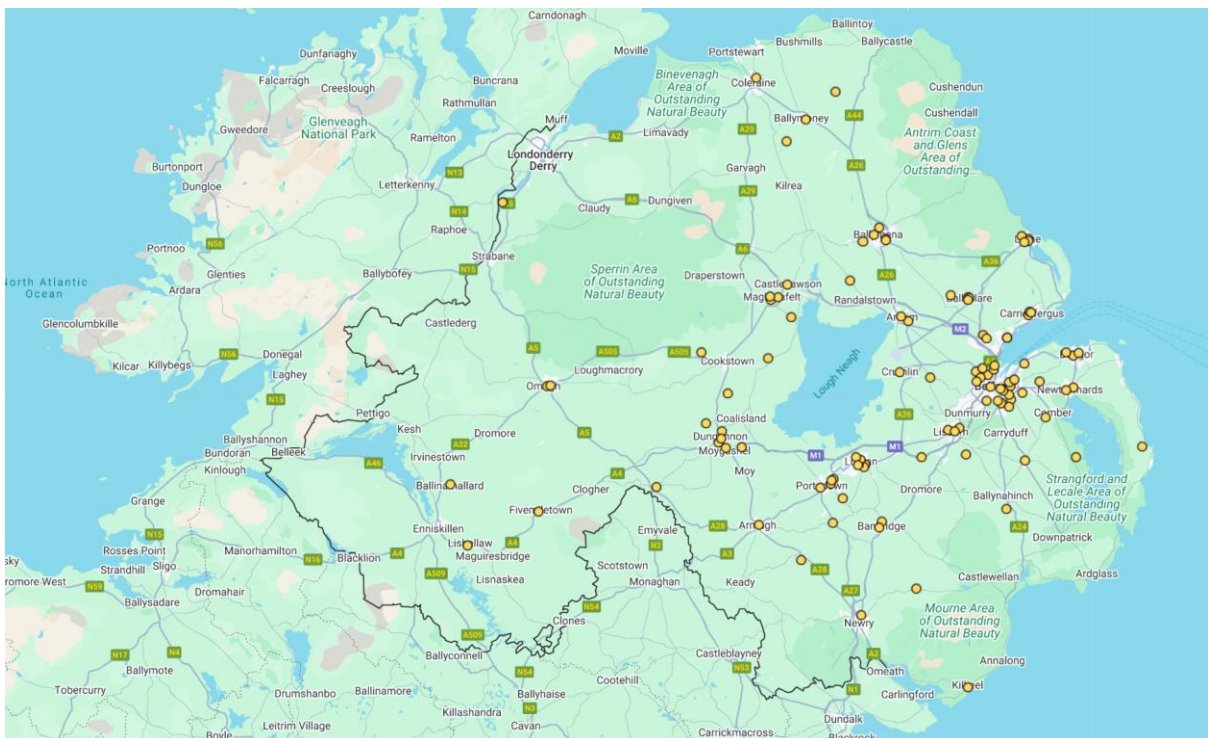


Figure 5.3d. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (4).



Figure 5.3e. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (5).

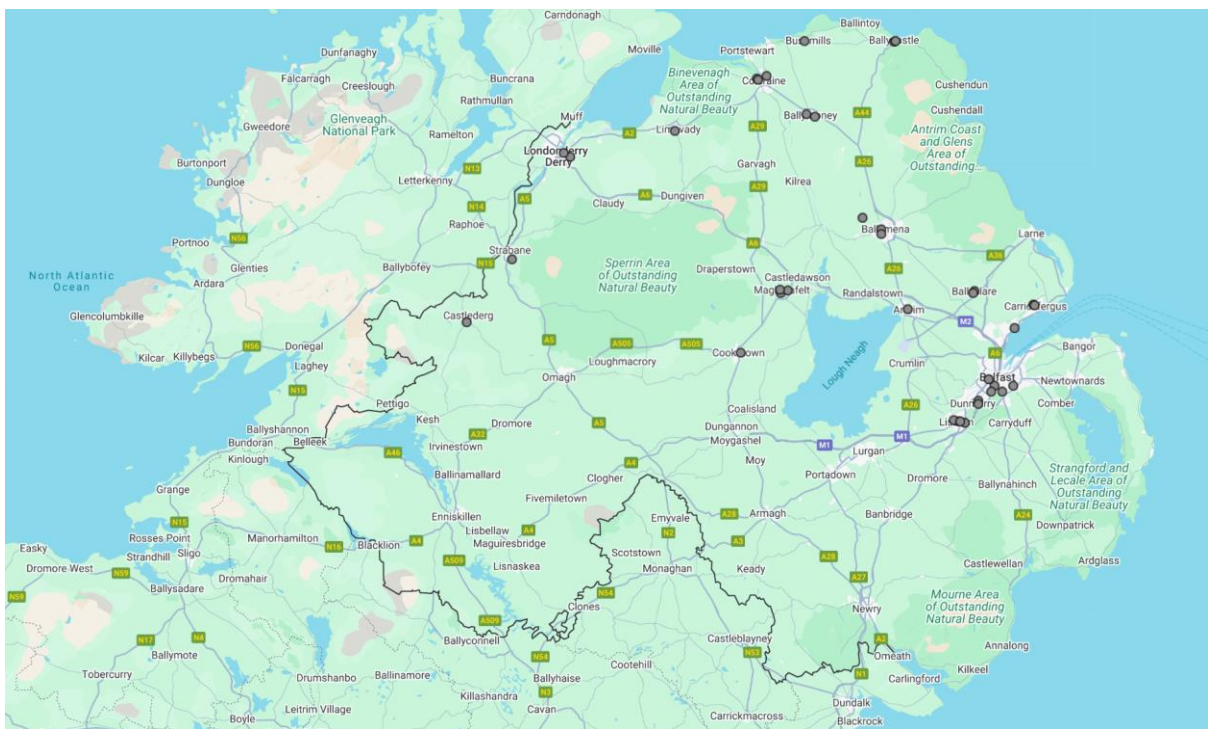


Figure 5.3f. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (6).

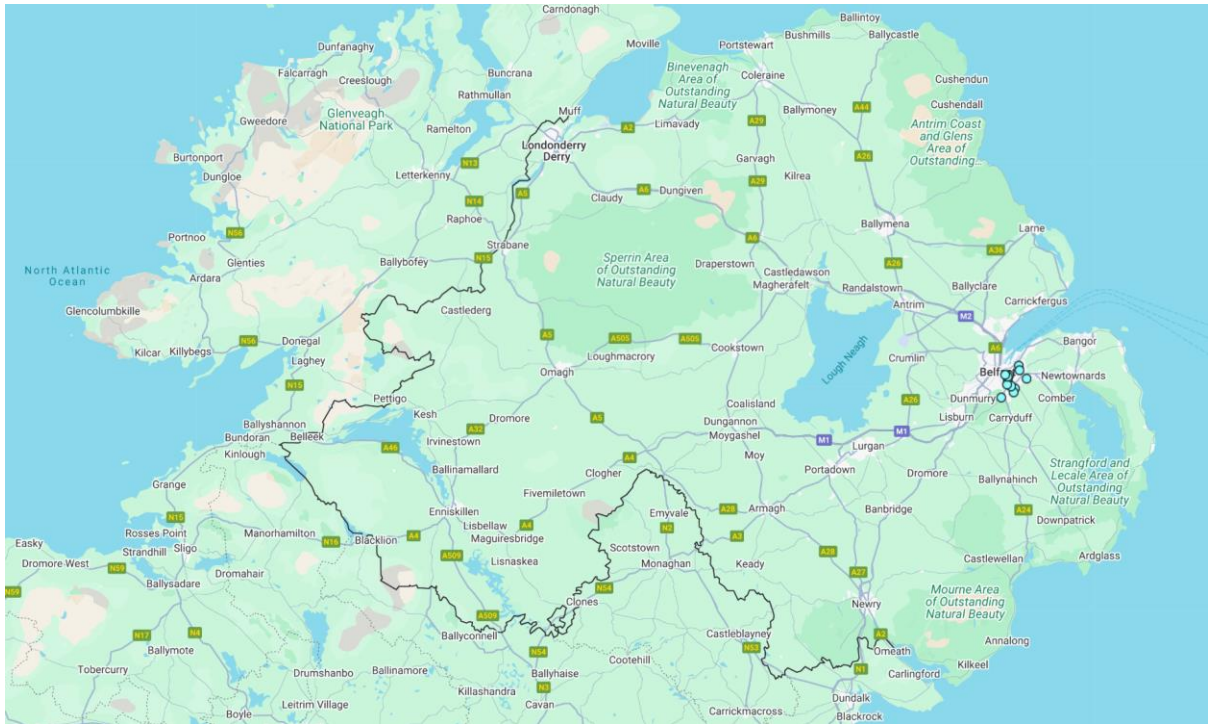


Figure 5.3g. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (7).

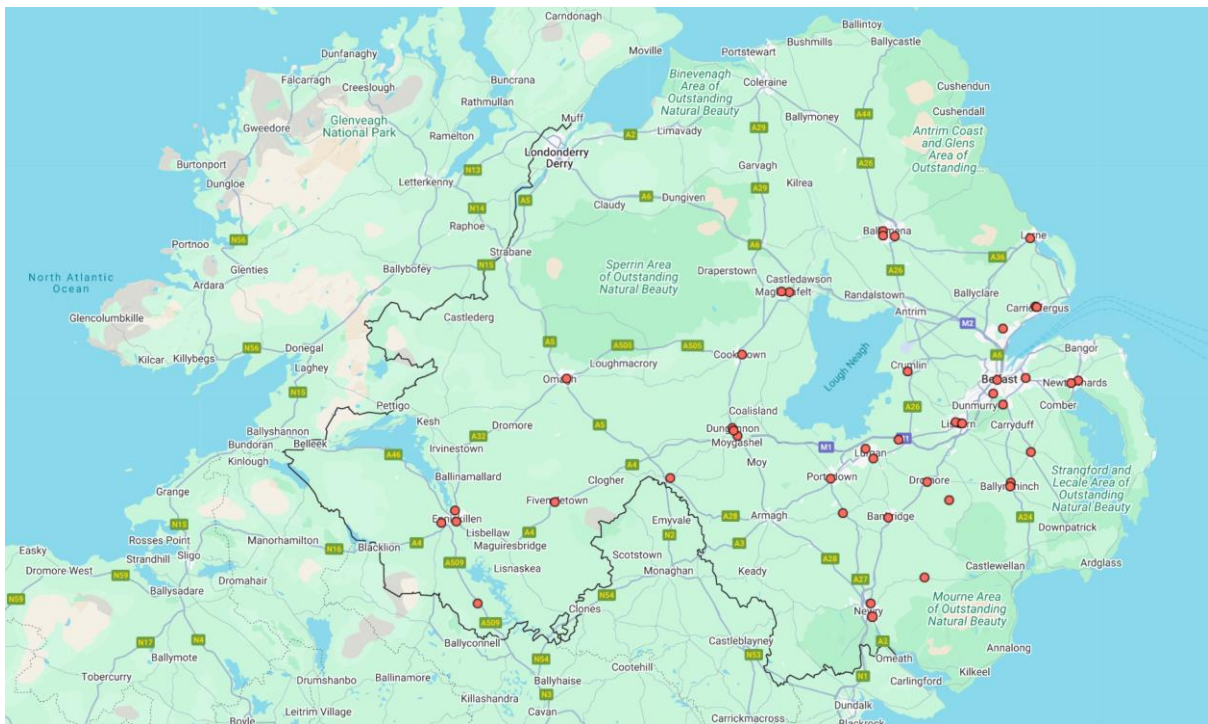


Figure 5.3h. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (8).

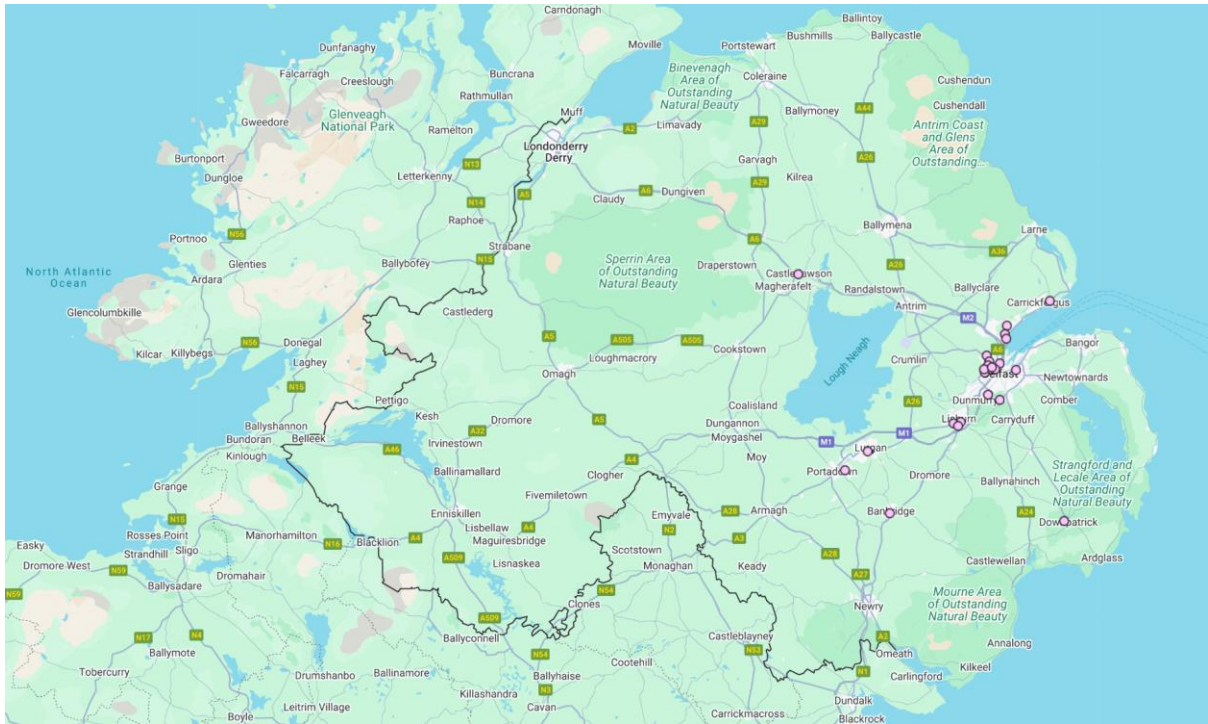


Figure 5.3i. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (9).

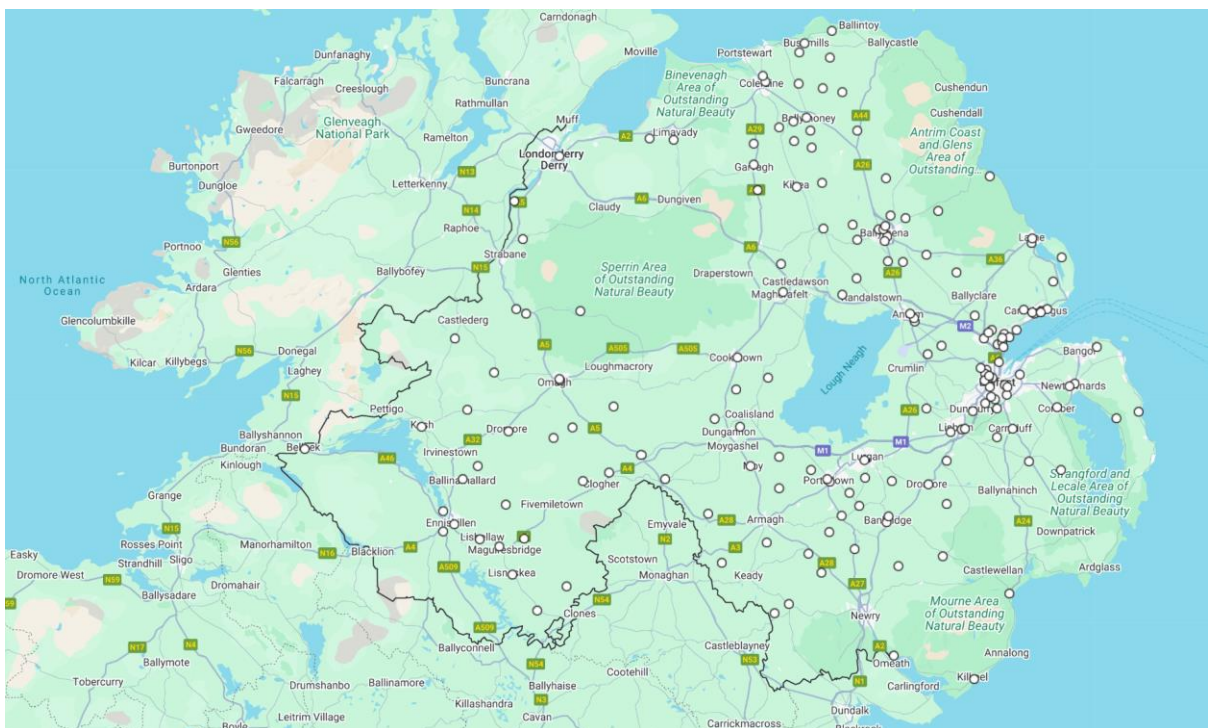


Figure 5.3j. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (10).

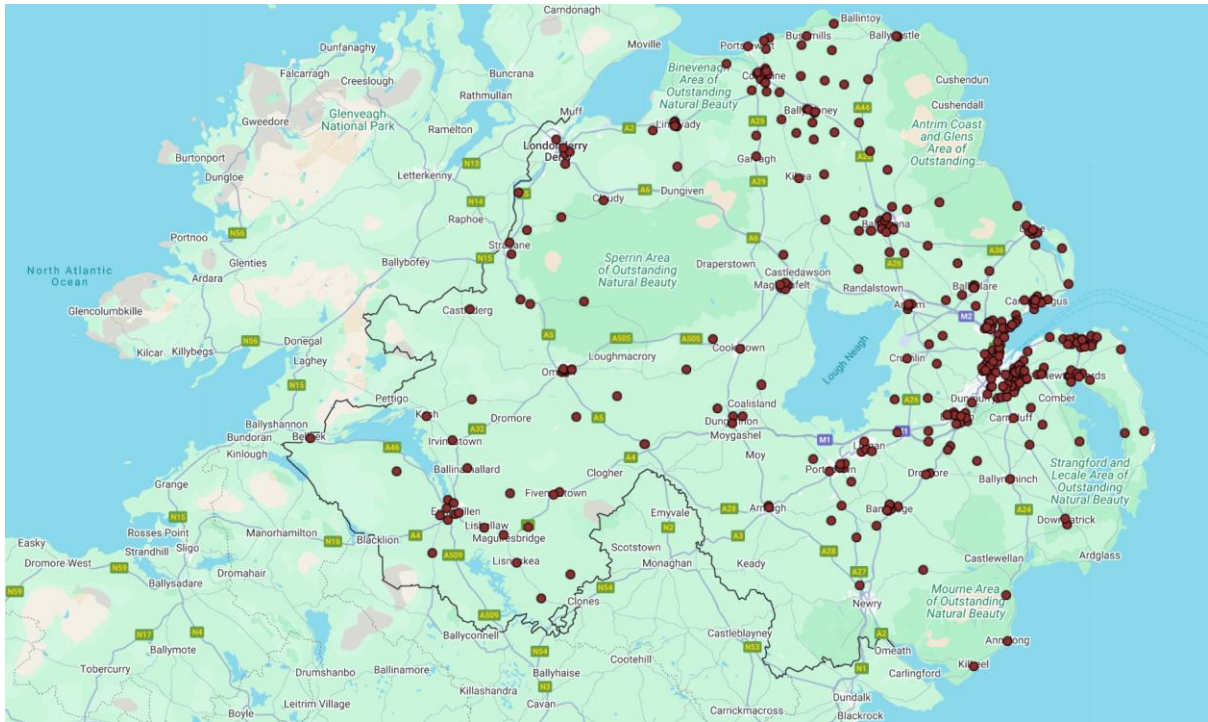


Figure 5.3k. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (11).

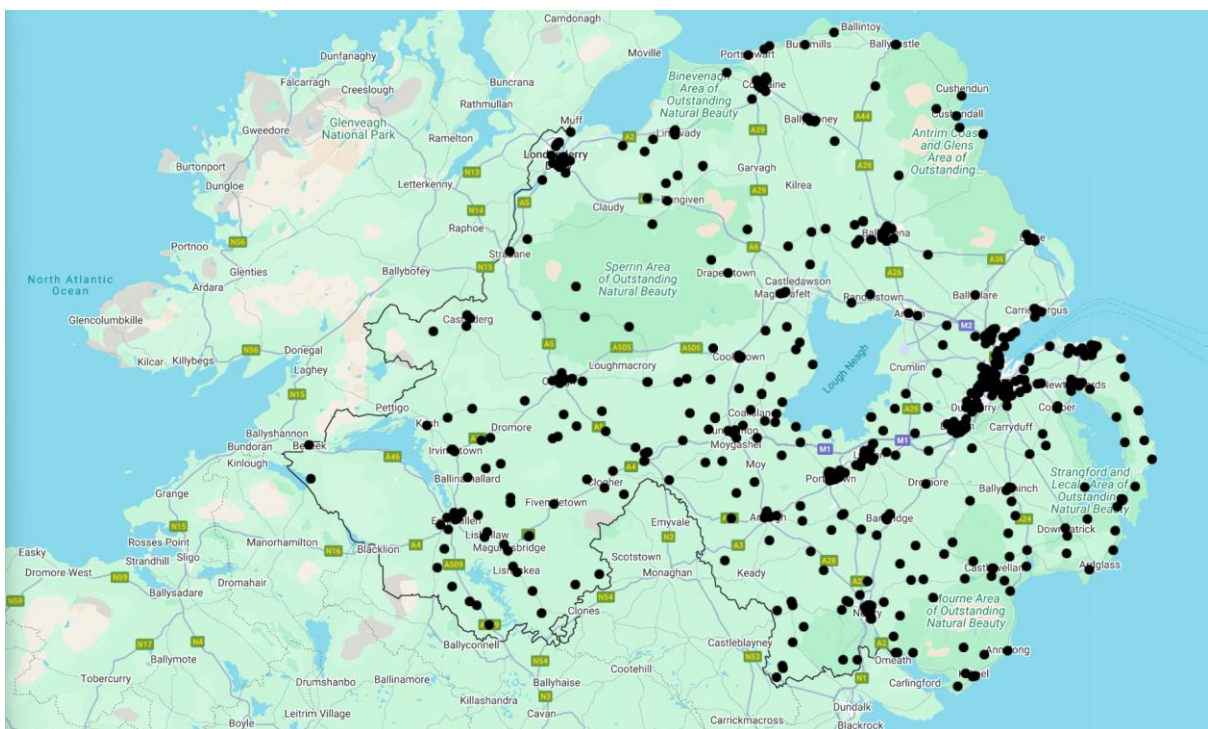


Figure 5.3l. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (12).

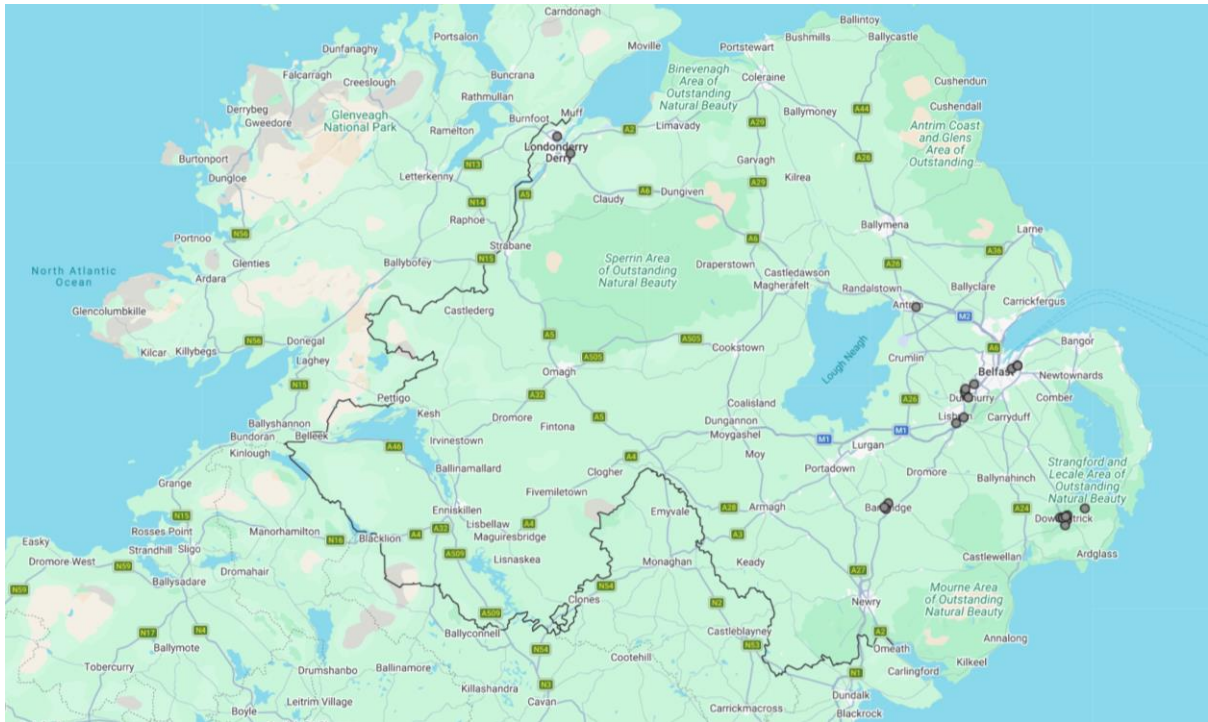


Figure 5.3m. Christian Ministry organisation engagement with schools in Northern Ireland by Organisation (13).

5.4. Mapping Features

ZeeMaps also enabled specific school information and Christian Ministry organisation engagement details from the database to be included in the map via interactive pop-ups, activated when hovering over each individual school (Figure 5.4).

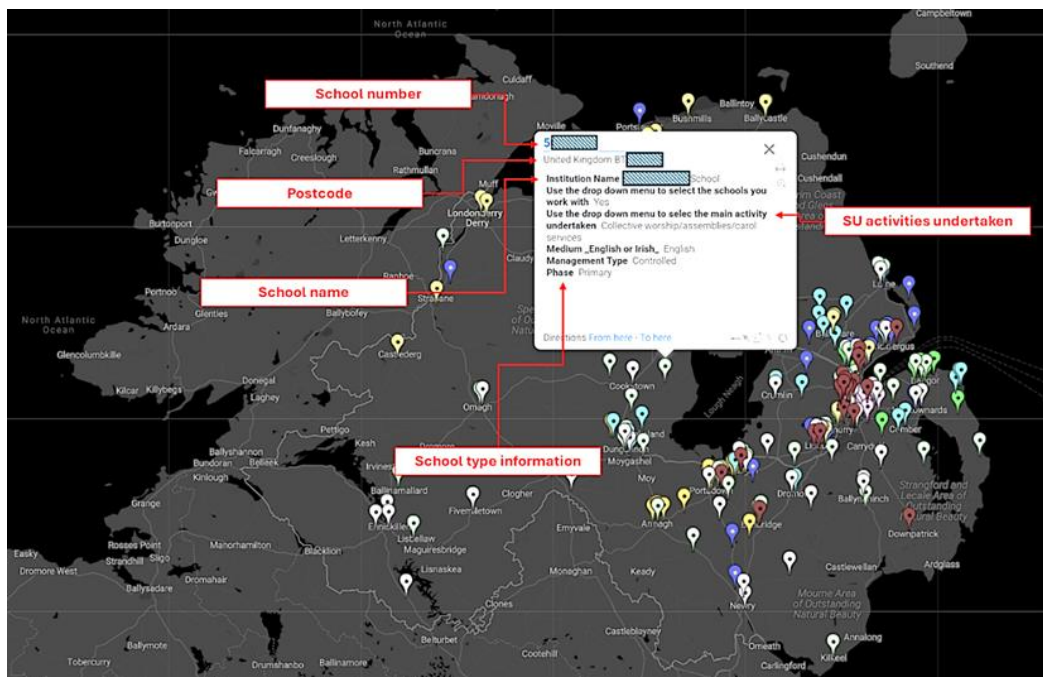


Figure 5.4. School information and Christian Ministry organisation engagement details.

Chapter 6: Case Studies

Following the completion of the survey, several schools volunteered to participate in the qualitative strand of this study through in-depth case studies. These case studies were designed to complement the survey findings by providing insights into the lived experiences, practices, and perspectives of school communities. Six schools were selected as case studies to provide a representative cross-section of the education sector in Northern Ireland. These included a Catholic Maintained primary school, two controlled primary schools (one rural and one urban), a controlled post-primary school, a Special school, and an integrated post-primary school. This purposive sampling aimed to capture diversity in ethos, location, and sectoral identity, while also ensuring that recurring themes and distinct differences could be explored. Each case study offers a holistic view of school life, drawing out how ethos, inclusivity, and engagement with churches and Christian organisations shape the educational, pastoral, and community dimensions of schooling.

6.1 Catholic Maintained Primary School Case Study

This case study explores the ethos, practices, and community engagement of a Catholic maintained primary school in Northern Ireland. Drawing on the perspectives of seven parents, two governors, five teachers, and the school principal, alongside the voices of eight pupils (five girls and three boys in P5 to P7), it examines how faith, inclusivity, and whole-child development are lived out in daily school life.

Engagement with churches/Christian organisations

Participants described a strong connection between the school and the local chapel, which shares the same site and is central to school identity and daily life. This proximity enabled frequent and seamless engagement with faith-based activities.

“You can’t think of the primary school without thinking about the chapel. I mean they’re literally on the same grounds.” (Parent)

“We’re in a lovely position, because our school sits on the grounds of the chapel, and it’s interconnected. So the kids get to go to Mass. They get to go to all the Celebrate events, they sing in the choir and families are invited in. We do our nativities there. It’s, you know, it is the core of our school.” (Parent)

“I have two girls, and we were all christened in the [name] chapel. And then obviously, we all came here as well too, we all went to Mass and it’s just down attached to the other side of the school. So it’s so close that... the kids will go to Mass every week with school.” (Parent)

“We go to Mass once a week, at the local chapel, which is in the grounds of the school. So we go to Mass every Friday, if there’s no funeral.” (Governor)

Both pupils and parents described regular involvement in religious observance. Weekly Mass attendance, feast day celebrations, singing in the choir, and preparation for sacraments were all mentioned as common features of school life.

“The children are always in the chapel, on like holy days and stuff like that, and there’s always a Mass.” (Parent)

“We go to chapel once every week. But sometimes when there’s a funeral on, we can’t go.” (Pupil)

“I like going to chapel. I like when we’re singing the songs.” (Pupil)

“I don’t like when we have to be quiet [in chapel].” (Pupil)

“I like eating communion. That’s like the body of Christ. Someone says something and then you grab it with your right hand, and then you eat it, and then when you eat it you have to pray.” (Pupil)

“The children here are very respectful, even the younger wee ones, and I know it can be difficult for them to sit, you know? But they are generally very, very respectful... [The school] are always taking them over to get them used to being in a chapel.” (Parent)

“We do the ‘Do this in Memory’ programme with the parish. So one Sunday in the month, the children are invited to the Mass, and they take part.” (Governor)

In addition to the chapel attendance and observance of holy celebrations, the pupils also experience spiritual practices and religious teaching in their classroom setting. The pupils interviewed were positive about the Christian involvement in their school, and all indicated that they would like to have more engagement with the local church and Christian groups if possible.

“People come in and we pray and sing songs and stuff, and the best thing is we get five minutes just to close our eyes and all... It makes me feel calm. Everyone likes it when they come in.” (Pupil)

“The Priest comes into our school and teaches us about God and tells us stories about like God, so then we can believe in our faith and stuff.” (Pupil)

Parents and staff spoke about how this embedded faith identity fostered a strong sense of community and belonging.

“Our priests are very involved in community. So, you know, faith is very embedded into everything in the community.” (Parent)

“It’s all the more important that the chapel and the priests are linking in with the school and supporting the school and its endeavours to, you know, to take the children to mass, to have assemblies in the school, to have Christmas shows.” (Governor)

The participants described a consistent and valued presence of local clergy in the life of the school. This included formal roles on governance structures, as well as an active involvement in pastoral care and spiritual teaching.

“We have a very good Chaplain, Father [Name]. He assists us and facilitates us. But, you know, we do a lot of the preparation.” (Teacher)

“The priest, you know, would even be on the Board of Governors of the school... He’s a fantastic support, like to the school.” (Parent)

While the school primarily partnered with their local parish, the principal expressed an openness to engage with groups from other denominations and traditions. However, the principal highlighted that there would need to be appropriate safeguarding checks and parental consultation in place before any such groups were able to partner with the school. The principal emphasised that clear communication with parents was an integral aspect of their engagement with Christian groups.

“We’ve had representatives from other denominations and traditions... If I think it’ll benefit our children, they’re very welcome, but I need to do my homework and see who they are. What’s the background, you know?” (Principal)

“Nobody gets talking to children unless parents are made aware of that.” (Principal)

“Communication is key... Parents need to feel that they can come and ask questions. They need the information... Kickback comes from parents that don’t know what you’re doing.” (Principal)

Ethos

Participants consistently described the ethos of the school as one deeply rooted in faith. While overt expressions of religion were present in daily routines, the parents emphasised that this was integrated respectfully.

“It’s not shoved down your throat. It’s very much part of their learning. They grow up through the school with it and it’s the core of who we are. I mean they’d be saying their morning prayers, do you know what I mean? So it’s the first thing they do in school.” (Parent)

Having a rhythm of prayer throughout the day was described by the governors as being a way of sharing faith, and was highlighted as an integral part of the school culture.

“I believe that prayer is at the centre of all we do. We begin in the morning with prayer. We have prayer before we go for lunch. We have prayer of thanksgiving after lunch, and we gather together to pray, as a class group, before we leave, before we part.” (Governor)

“It’s very important that children are immersed in prayer on a daily basis, and young children love Bible stories, and that needs to sort of permeate through the teachers in the school and from the Governors to the principal right down to the caretaker.” (Governor)

One parent linked the strength of the school’s ethos to the personal faith of the principal, observing the influence of leadership on the overall culture of the school. However, the consistency of the school ethos over time was highlighted, with parents noting that although the leadership of the school had changed, the values of the school had remained the same.

“The faith that the principal has is so obvious, it’s like you can feel it, like faith and religion is really important to her, and I think that there’s such a trickle-down effect, like it extends beyond bringing the children to Mass. It’s a way of life.” (Parent)

“There's been different principals in this school but I'd say the core values of the school are still there.” (Parent)

“Faith has always been integral part of this school.” (Parent)

The staff also reflected on the importance of modelling values such as respect, kindness, and inclusivity in their daily interactions with pupils.

“Faith just permeates everything that we do. But it is about respect, and respect is probably the biggest word that runs through the whole thing.” (Teacher)

“As a staff, we have to be role models. And there's no point in us saying you know, you be respectful, and I'm not being respectful in me shouting at you?! You know?” (Teacher)

“We are a Catholic school. We're very inclusive of other faiths, you know?” (Teacher)

Value of Engagement

Participants described the school's engagement with faith and Christian practice as deeply valuable, both spiritually and socially, particularly in a context where some children may have limited exposure to faith at home. Engagement with faith was seen as offering not just religious knowledge, but emotional support, moral development, and a sense of belonging. The school's faith-based approach was described as holistic, nurturing the whole child and aiming to offer them “life to the full.” This scriptural framing, from the Bible verse John 10:10, was central to the school's ethos and its practical outworking.

“We are rooted in our Catholic faith, and our quote from scripture for our school is, “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full.” Every child, that's what we want for them: to have life, to know Jesus, and to live their life, to the full.” (Governor)

Therefore, faith formation is required to go beyond solely spiritual knowledge, and instead provide practical examples of living out biblical principles in daily life.

“The point of assembly is for us to come together as a school community, to pray and to learn about Jesus, and then how we can put the words of Jesus into action in our daily lives. And that could include anything from road safety, taking care on the roads, being kind to others in the playground, anti-bullying week.” (Governor)

“We want our children to be kind. And one of the ways we can be kind is when we look at story, Bible stories, you know? Where Jesus was kind.” (Teacher)

Another participant described how the school, rooted in faith and community values, offered vital support to families, including those affected by addiction or negative experiences of education.

“The difficulties that some parents face, where maybe they're addicted to drugs or drink or whatever, but you know, the support mechanism that the school can provide is vitally important... I think, if you walk into a school and you're made to feel welcome, that breaks down huge barriers straight away.” (Governor)

Beyond the impact on children, the value of engagement extended to parents and carers. One governor recalled a personal encounter in which faith engagement at school led to a parent returning to church after a period of not attending.

“I have a mammy came to me... and she says, “my mother sent me up to say thank you, to you”. I looked at her, I says, “what for?” she says “I’m back going to Mass”. She says, and at that time, I was training altar servers as well, and her child was an altar server, and she said, “I’m back going to Mass. That’s when I bring him to mass” you know? And I just, I was amazed, I really was.” (Governor)

Several participants raised concerns about the declining transmission of faith within families and emphasised the school’s role in filling this gap.

“I think it’s so important that the school works very hard at promoting religion and the practice, because the children are not getting the same exposure at home. I mean, I remember 10 years prior to that, wee children, you kind of saw the shift in generations where maybe if mammy and daddy didn’t practise, Granny would have taken the children to mass or taught them their prayers, you know? and it’s, you wonder if, if the school wasn’t doing so much, would the children learn anything at all in some homes?” (Governor)

“Some of the children don’t experience that at home, don’t experience that nurturing atmosphere and environment.” (Governor)

“Faith is a big part of my life, and it’s something I’m very passionate about passing on to the children. But I’m very aware that, you know, there are children and to their parents, [First Communion] maybe more about the big day than it was the actual you know sacrament itself.” (Teacher)

This commitment to supporting children’s spiritual development extended to ensuring that all pupils, regardless of background, were given opportunities to encounter and experience faith during their time at school. While recognising that belief is ultimately a personal decision, staff emphasised their role in providing a foundation from which pupils could make informed choices in the future. This was seen as particularly important in the context of declining religious practice among both families and, in some cases, staff.

“We feel it’s like a moral responsibility to pass on the faith. A lot of our children come to school and they there would be no religion, even though they would, you know, the majority of our children would be Catholic, but a lot of our children are not, come from non-practising families. But more and more, we’re seeing staff who are non-practising as well. So, there’s a shift.” (Teacher)

“We found that less and less, the children are not being, they’re not practising their faith outside of school. So, it’s our duty and our job, and something that I enjoy doing is developing their faith, you know, and then they can make their decisions when they’re older.” (Teacher)

“I do believe, and I attend mass, and so I always believe, give children that opportunity, and they can either take it or leave it, and they might leave it now, but they might come back to it later. And so at least, if you offer, they can make decisions when they’re ready to make decisions.” (Teacher)

“We’ve had children as well, too, who although their parents were born into the Catholic tradition, they weren’t practising... But I always say, you know, you had the choice to keep your faith on or let it be. Why would you not let them have the choice,

let them come in and see for themselves... Let them experience it and decide for themselves what they believe?" (Principal)

Inclusivity, Diversity and Respect

Although the participants repeatedly emphasised the school's Catholic ethos, they also frequently highlighted its integrated principles of inclusion and respect. The school's Catholic ethos was not perceived as exclusionary, but as foundational for a culture of shared values and mutual respect.

"We are a Catholic school, but we have lots and lots, you know, we've got different religions and no religions, so we're very aware of those, and very respectful of those as well." (Principal)

"Our school is a religious school, but of all faiths by the way. So, so, you know, it respects other faiths. You know, we have a lot of Muslim and, you know, parents that come here as well, and they respect those faiths, but they also celebrate those faiths as well." (Parent)

"It's a Christian school, but we're still very much encompassing of other religions, you know?" (Parent)

"Everyone and every religion can come to this school and they are welcome." (Pupil)

Both staff and parents described how children from other faith backgrounds, or with no religious affiliation, were fully welcomed into school life. Inclusivity was demonstrated not only through openness to diversity, but also through practical adjustments that respected individual beliefs, such as providing supervised alternatives for children whose parents did not want them to attend Mass.

"No one's left out, as such. If their parents don't want them exposed to Mass, they'll sit out in another classroom for that particular time. But they'll always be welcome and they'll have an activity set for them so that they're not left out." (Parent)

"Some people don't take communion because that's not their religion so they can either come to Mass and just not go up and get it or they don't have to go to Mass if they don't want to. They can stay up in the top school and go on laptops. But I would rather go to Mass." (Pupil)

"Sometimes parents don't want their children to go to Mass. They're more inclined to let them take part if it's in school, but sometimes they don't want them to go to chapel. And so therefore, then there will be staff who'll stay back, and they'll do computer work with them. Like, nothing that looks like a punishment. I mean, you can't sort of sit and say, right, these-uns will do maths, you know?" (Teacher)

Parents shared examples of how diversity was celebrated within the school, providing opportunities for children to learn from the traditions of their peers.

"My daughter got picked to go with her friend to her own, I wouldn't say chapel, but wherever she goes to show her faith. Well, my daughter was picked, she got to go with the school to her friend's chapel. So, it's showing them, you're not left out, we'll actually bring you to where you would go to worship and let your friends see what it's all about." (Parent)

“My daughter is in P3 and one of her best friends is a member of the Muslim community, and the way they chat... They don't, they don't see differences. They just see, ‘that's my friend, and she'll not make her First Communion, but her mammy is going to buy her a nice dress anyway’.” (Parent)

“At the fun day the last couple of years, my daughter's friend's mum has made her own cuisine that they would have... You could see the children going, “what's this?” and it makes them and the wee girl, in particular; whose mammy's doing it, she's just standing, she's beaming beside the table, like, this is my mum, and everybody's around her mammy, and she's so lovely.” (Parent)

The school maintains open communication around religious elements in school life and provides the opportunity for parents and carers to opt their child out of religious activities if desired, although the participants highlighted that this was rarely taken up.

“We would always approach our non-faith parents first and say, look, the children are involved in an assembly. This is what we're doing. Are you comfortable with that? And if they're not, they can say no, but we've never had anyone say no... We say to them, we will be celebrating our faith, we will be praying, we will be saying a blessing, and you child can be a part of it, but if you would rather they were kept back, then they can be.” (Principal)

“Parents know they're bringing their child to a school that is a Christian school, and they're, they're very aware of that... All of the people that I've ever had any dealings with, was like, it's fine for them to stay in the class when you're saying your prayers, and we want them to stand and show respect, but as for Mass, some parents don't want their kids going to a Mass. That's 100% fine also, you know.” (Parent)

“I am aware that there's some parents that are not Christians but I've never heard any complaints.” (Parent)

“Everybody knows that, the school's known for being a Christian school... But it's not thrown in your face... The chapel is just a part of the school, and a person can choose maybe not to go to Mass outside of school and that wouldn't be frowned upon. It's down to your own choice.” (Parent)

“We have children of other faiths. So, we have children of other Christian faiths and of Muslim, the Muslim faith... They don't attend maybe the prayer, prayer services. But assemblies, they come to assemblies.” (Governor)

In addition to fostering respect for other faiths, the staff emphasised the importance of valuing and understanding different Christian traditions. Cross-community engagement was viewed as a natural and accepted part of school life, contributing to the development of pupils who can navigate diversity with openness and respect.

“Parents are not alarmed by [cross community work]. It's just part of the everyday here. Parents accept it, you know, and they all give their permission. No one's ever said no.” (Teacher)

“There might be one God, but there's not one church, you know? And I just think we need to remember that. And who's to say that we are right and you're wrong, and we need to get that and that mindset into children, you know?” (Teacher)

“We're living in a shared land and we need to embrace that, instead of looking for reasons not to embrace it, you know? So we're a more diverse society than ever, and we want them to grow up in a society that is and is inclusive and is respectful for everybody, you know?” (Teacher)

Participants also highlighted the expectation that all pupils, regardless of their background or beliefs, should show respect for the Catholic faith that underpins the school ethos. This was seen as essential to maintaining an inclusive environment where differences are acknowledged without diminishing the school's religious identity. Staff, parents and pupils alike described practical ways this respect is fostered, from standing quietly during prayers to learning about religious practices that are not their own.

“It's about being respectful. We've a boy who's from a Muslim home and I say, how will you be respectful of our faith? And he stands with us when we pray. He doesn't have to join in, he just stands, and there's never been an issue with that.” (Teacher)

“It's about teaching kids that, you know, religion is something you can learn about, even if it's not yours. It's something they respect, it's a respect thing.” (Parent)

“Even if it's not your religion, you should still respect it. This is a Catholic school, you're welcome in this school no matter what you believe, but you need to respect it.” (Pupil)

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how a school can integrate a strong Christian faith identity alongside a commitment to inclusivity, community engagement and whole-child development. The close relationship with the local Catholic chapel provides regular opportunities for worship, sacramental preparation and pastoral care, while the school's ethos ensures that these practices are embedded respectfully within daily life. Staff, governors, parents and pupils alike valued the moral and social benefits of this engagement, particularly in supporting children who may have limited exposure to faith at home. Inclusivity was demonstrated through intentional adjustments for pupils from different faith backgrounds, the celebration of cultural diversity and an emphasis on mutual respect across religious traditions. The school's approach reflects a belief that all children should be given the opportunity to encounter faith, not as a compulsory imposition, but as a formative experience from which they can make their own informed decisions in later life.

6.2 Rural Controlled Primary School Case Study

This case study examines a controlled primary school located in a rural area of Northern Ireland, with a particular focus on its engagement with churches and Christian organisations. Data were collected from a diverse group of participants representing different dimensions of the school community. The participant sample comprised seven ministry leaders, including three local church ministers (one of whom also served on the Board of Governors) and four leaders of Christian organisations who regularly contribute to school life. Governance perspectives were represented by the Chair of the Board of Governors, as well as one parent participant who also held a governor role. Three teachers took part, including the member of staff responsible for coordinating the assembly rota. The school principal was interviewed separately and was also present for a number of the other interviews. Parental perspectives were gathered from three parents with children in P1–P7 in the school. Finally, the voices of pupils were incorporated through interviews with nine children (three boys and six girls) in P5 to P7.

Engagement with churches/Christian organisations

Participants described a wide variety of engagement, ranging from RE lessons to practical help with facilities. Pupils demonstrated a clear awareness of this breadth, naming numerous of ministry leaders, both ordained and working within a Christian organisation, who came to the school *“to teach people about God... and about the Bible.”* Assemblies were the most frequently cited form of engagement. Usually, the ministry leaders were approached by the school and invited to speak in an assembly.

“I have been invited on a number of occasions, to come in and to take assemblies here in the school” (Ministry Leader)

“We were approached by the school... to come in and do assemblies.” (Ministry Leader)

“We were asked if we could come in and cover to do assemblies once a month... Schools ministry is a big part of what we do at the moment.” (Ministry Leader)

“It was [Principal] that reached out to me and asked if I would come and do assemblies in school.” (Ministry Leader)

The school staff described clear processes for inviting ministry leaders to contribute to assemblies, often emphasising inclusivity across denominations and the importance of keeping contributions short, accessible, and consistent with the school’s Christian ethos.

“We look at the children that we have at our school and what denominations they come from. So that would mainly guide it, and then we would ask the local churches from those denominations to come.” (Teacher)

“When you're picking ministers, you don't pick one particular type, you know, you're inclusive of every, every faction or section of the Christian faith, of which there are many denominations. So, there's no one denomination that is favoured. Everyone is given equal rights to ability to participate” (Principal)

“Initially it would be a phone call to invite them into our school... To do a short wee talk, a Christian short, Christian talk, followed by a wee word of prayer. And I would just sort of say, look, normally lasts 15 or so minutes for for that, you know, so just a very quick and brief outline of our school. And, you know, I would say we do have

several of our children do go to your church, and we are a Christian ethos school. So just a wee short Christian message.” (Teacher)

The teachers emphasised that they were pleased to have the involvement from the local ministers and Christian organisations, and echoed that the children “*always enjoyed*” the assemblies which were led by the ministry leaders.

“Every Friday, there's a different minister from a different denomination comes in to take the assembly.” (Teacher)

“It's nice for somebody else to do [Assemblies] because you're teaching all day, so it's nice for the children also to have a different person.” (Teacher)

Beyond assemblies, the ministry leaders were involved frequently with RE lessons. Occasionally, they spoke at the school's afterschool Scripture Union (SU) group, but generally this was led by teachers within the school.

“Our involvement is three-fold: assemblies, RE lessons and SU group support.” (Ministry Leader)

“We would have a teacher that does SU in our school after school... We have a large number of children that stay for that. Parents are very, I think, supportive of that kind of thing in this school.” (Teacher)

Prayer was also highlighted as a significant form of support, with principals noting that local churches and parents prayed on a weekly basis for the school community.

“The local churches support us via prayer meetings. There's a group of parents who email me regularly to ask, is there anything I would like prayer for or for the school? And they would pray every Monday for us.” (Principal)

Engagement was not limited to spiritual input but often extended into practical support. Participants referred to local churches offering their halls and car parks for school use, or congregational volunteers supporting with reading.

“We have some older members of the congregation who volunteer and come in and help with reading and things.” (Principal)

“This school is our neighbour. I mean, even if, even if [nameof school] didn't have the ties historically, I would be wanting to show love to my neighbouring school. And practically in that that's as simple as sharing a car park extending to, you know, using the hall for events, using the church for the nativity.” (Ministry Leader)

Parents noticed the pastoral relevance of church involvement, particularly around transition or personal challenges.

“Every week there will be some sort of life support... So like, this year, because [child] is moving on in transition, they had a Reverend come in with a very specific programme to do with, you know, you know, post-primary things... Just to prepare them.” (Parent)

For most of the ministry leaders, the use of Scripture was described as central to their role, both as a theological mandate to pass faith on to the next generation and as a non-negotiable element of their school engagement. Only one of the leaders indicated that they would be willing to speak in an assembly context without referencing the Bible.

“I’m always struck by this, you know, how often the Israelites were told, teach this to your children, teach this to your children... I feel there's this very strong emphasising in the Bible and in Scripture and in Christianity on passing on to the new generation what Scripture has to say. And I think that that's what I see my role, when I come in and I take assembly, or when I'm addressing the kids.” (Ministry Leader)

“We will always use the Bible. I've been invited to do assemblies and not use the Bible, and I just decline the invitation because that's not, that's not who we are.” (Ministry Leader)

“If I can get into a school with the addiction prevention programme, I'll go in, even if I have to adapt slightly... You're still making an impact in the child's life even if you aren't giving them that gospel part of the message.” (Ministry Leader)

When asked for the purpose of the church engagement, the pupils suggested that it was partially evangelistic. This sense of mission was affirmed by several of the ministry leaders.

“They teach you about the Bible... and if you're not a Christian, they can maybe help you become one.” (Pupils)

“I work with an organisation... and the purpose is the evangelising of children, teaching them God's word.” (Ministry Leader)

“One of the key things we do as an organisation is evangelism... Evangelising children is our key focus, is our key purpose, no matter what ministry we do.” (Ministry Leader)

“We're preaching God's love, like we're telling them that there's a God out there that loves them unconditionally, no matter what the world tells us about anything else and how scary the world is now.” (Ministry Leader)

“We are for reaching young people who don't know Jesus or don't have any faith in Jesus... It's about reaching those young people who've never thought about Jesus and why he might be important in their lives. And that's the kind of young people that we're trying to aim at.” (Ministry Leader)

“I always start off telling the children that they are fearfully and wonderfully made... Then I will teach the subject [of drugs prevention] but at the end of it, I always ask the question, “Is there a better way”? And yes, God has already made that way, and I will point them, the way of salvation, the way of living according to the Scriptures.” (Ministry Leader)

Other ministry leaders described the purpose of their engagement alongside broader moral and social goals.

“It's not just an evangelistic outreach, because it's much more than that, because we teach moral and moral structures and moral subjects. We do that through the lessons that we teach through the Bible.” (Ministry Leader)

“All of the Bible lessons you would teach, there's lessons... You're instilling values into children, and these come through the teaching of the Bible. But you're not going to tell them that they have to believe it.” (Ministry Leader)

“It's not really the place for altar calls, but you do want to unpack it and help them to understand what it might mean for them to follow Jesus and talk about your faith in a more open, honest way.” (Ministry Leader)

“[Schools work] is not a moment for ‘let’s come to Jesus’ moments, do you know what I mean? We would say the Assembly Hall and the RE classroom are not places for that, an SU group is a bit different, because if children have opted in, principals have permitted that group to run, parents have committed to their children opting in, then we can, we can unpack what it looks like for you to follow Jesus. But again, that has to be cautious and careful.” (Ministry Leader)

The school staff and leadership team emphasised that although the school assemblies had clear Christian content, in line with the school’s ethos, they rarely generated controversy or complaints.

“There’s never been anything [in assemblies] I haven’t agreed with. You know, I could agree with everything that they’re saying.” (Teacher)

“We’ve never had any problems of ministers you know, talking too much about, you know, evangelist, evangelising, too much of talking about heaven and hell and salvation and damnation. You know, we’ve never had an issue with that. So, we’ve never had to ask a minister to tone it down.” (Teacher)

“We’ve had no parental complaints about our assemblies... Maybe if a child has a broken family or, you know, I would maybe just say to the minister, if it’s coming up to Mother’s Day just to tread lightly, to tread carefully. But that’s more regarding topics like that, maybe pastoral care as opposed to Christianity.” (Teacher)

“While some of the Board of Governors, you know, mightn’t necessarily be Christian, you know, they have no objection, you know, we talked about this happening in the school, they have no objection to any of that.” (Governor)

The relationship between churches and schools was also framed in terms of responsibility and collaboration. Ministry leaders emphasised both the expectation that clergy should take an active interest in local schools, and the practical reality that partnerships often depend on external support given the pressures faced by both teachers and church leaders.

“Any minister that takes a call is supposed to be actively interested in their local churches or their local schools.” (Ministry Leader)

“I feel for churches and schools sometimes. To be able to collaborate when everybody’s got lots of other things going on, they’re already doing full time jobs, teaching our children and teaching our churches and and that’s where we come in.” (Ministry Leader)

Ultimately, the strongest affirmation of this engagement came from the pupils themselves, who spoke with enthusiasm about their experiences and expressed a clear desire for even greater involvement: *“They make it so fun... They tell the stories in such a fun way.”*

Ethos

The ministry leaders frequently emphasised the centrality of Christian ethos within the life of the school. This was described as both a defining characteristic of the school community, and a vital mandate for all schools across Northern Ireland.

“We are very, privileged in Northern Ireland that there still is this conservative, and deep conservative evangelical seam really in our society.” (Ministry Leader)

“Not all schools are as welcoming as this school, but for me, a lot of our controlled schools like this school have a clear, a clear principle of being a Christian ethos-based

school, and if we lose that, we lose a massive impact that we can have on the children... It's not only a God-given responsibility it is a society responsibility, because it impacts society in every way.” (Ministry Leader)

The other participants affirmed this ethos, with parents in particular describing it as being a highly valuable and ingrained aspect of the school structure.

“The majority of parents ... clearly support the Christian ethos. We've had no opposition to it at all.” (Principal)

“We are a country school and there is a strong Christian ethos within the school.” (Governor)

“I think it's great, I would definitely support the Christian ethos.” (Parent)

“The ethos of this school is clearly reflected on an everyday basis in this school. And I mean I, as a parent, 100% endorse it. I mean, I would probably question my children's attendance at the school, if it didn't have those values... I deeply believe that the Christian values enrich a child and help them to, you know, think deeply, be more compassionate.” (Parent)

“[Having a Christian ethos in the school] is vital for my family... I think it's something that should definitely hold firm in the school and in the [school mission] statement and everything in school life really.” (Parent)

However, they emphasised that this ethos was less about enforcing religious beliefs and more about instilling clear, moral values such as kindness, love, and respect.

“The morals that you know it gives the children, and just the influence it has on their attitudes and their life, I think it's definitely whether they go to church or not, I think it's so important those values. You know, you're not forcing Christianity on them, but you're, you know, you're sort of saying, you're making clear the right way and the wrong way. And you know how they should treat others, love, kindness, you know, all that aspect of it. For me, I think it's really, really important.” (Parent)

“People think it's evangelistic when you say there's a Christian ethos, that it's very much preaching... But people are living their lives day and daily, with biblical principles, but they don't actually know they're biblical.” (Parent)

One parent reflected on how the school's ethos had deepened over time, moving from something more superficial to a value that was embedded across daily school life. They indicated that this change was largely initiated and influenced by the current principal.

“I do think our Christian ethos has got stronger, even over recent years. I definitely think since [the Principal] has come on board, it's got stronger and it's more kind of ingrained. It might have previously been a, bit more, wishy washy kind of sentiment, but I think it's a lot more ingrained in the everyday life of the school, as opposed to a tokenistic thing where there's somebody who comes in, does assembly, do you know what I mean, it's more, yea, h ingrained in all aspects of the school.” (Parent)

Participants emphasised the importance of clarity and transparency in communicating the school's Christian ethos. They described how this ethos was made visible through school life, leadership, and formal documentation, ensuring that families were fully aware of the values they were choosing into when joining the school.

“If you look at anything like on the website or anything, you'll clearly see that this school is, you know, the Christian ethos is in it, and it's definitely displayed in all aspects of school life.” (Parent)

“[The principal] clearly set out his stand from the outset, you know, and I suppose that's one of the things, from the very outset of [their] role, it was very clear maybe because of the ethos, but [they are] very transparent.” (Parent)

“It would be quite clear in our school prospectus that, you know, parents have a right to withdraw their child, and also whenever we've our open night or our induction day, particularly that's mentioned, you know, if you have any objections, you know, you don't have to, you can, you can tell the school if you don't want your child to be part of a Christian assembly. But as you've mentioned... we have a very clear Christian ethos that parents sign up to, and they're aware of from our open nights, that this is what our school values are. And if you join our school, we will be trying to teach these values, so parents know before they come here, what we aim to teach the children and our standards.” (Principal)

“As a staff we're very conscious of being transparent, of making sure it's in our newsletters every month, making sure it's very clear, and on the website, on our school app, in our policies you know about our Christian ethos and about how we even teach RE and who comes in and who speaks to the children. So we're trying to be transparent.” (Principal)

Christian engagement within the school was therefore framed as a natural outworking of its ethos, with assemblies, RE lessons, and visiting ministry leaders seen as ways of reinforcing and embodying the school's stated values. Both principals and ministry leaders stressed that this involvement flowed from, and supported, the Christian foundation of the school, while also being carefully aligned with agreed parameters and expectations.

“We obviously see assemblies as unpacking ethos, you know? So, the school will have a Christian ethos or at least have biblical principles.” (Ministry Leader)

“For any church leader going into a school, it'd be important to ensure that a chat to the principal to clarify the school ethos and exactly the parameters as what they're, you know, expecting the Minister to talk about? And also just in terms of their language, to be very clear in assembly, you know, just what they can and can't say.” (Principal)

“We are more cautious and certain that all stakeholders are fully aware of any religious activity in our school... [But] it's a Christian ethos school where there will be assemblies and RE. Your child can opt out if they wish, but it is something that the rest of the children will be doing.” (Principal)

“You're drawing alongside your school, you're helping to make the children aware of the values of the school, the ethos of the school, by teaching the children.” (Ministry Leader)

“It's really fantastic to be able to back [the school's] Christian ethos and show the kids why the school believes this. Like, why is this so important? and how, even outside of school life, this could be really valuable to them.” (Ministry Leader)

Value of Engagement

Participants described the value of church engagement not only in terms of moral formation, but also practical, financial, and spiritual support. Ministry leaders emphasised that their role

extended beyond evangelism to include teaching children how to live well and respect authority. Assemblies and lessons were framed as opportunities to model and reinforce positive behaviours.

“There is the evangelistic part, but it's also the cultural, the moral side as well... Like behavioural principles, and how they should behave, how they should interact with their teachers. It's about the authority as well... They should respect the principal. They should respect the rules, and they should obey those.” (Ministry Leader)

“It would be... Bible based, always teaching Scripture and in that sense, obviously sharing the gospel. But the gospel is, in its broadest sense, you know, where it touches on life and the challenges that brings to kids.” (Ministry Leader)

“The values in the Bible and the morals in our Bible really stretch beyond just being a Christian, but being a well-rounded person in life. And I think it's difficult to see parents pull their children from wanting to hear those morals and or to even to even consider them. I'm like, we're never telling children they have to believe something like this.” (Ministry Leader)

“The Bible is such a good solid bedrock on which to build our education system... If you're pulling out the things you want our children to like, you know, like, again, a topic, respect for self, respect for others, you know what I mean? Respect for community and society and the world around, all those things are biblical principles.” (Ministry Leader)

Participants emphasised that Christian engagement supports the moral development of children, by equipping them with values such as kindness, honesty, and compassion. Such values were depicted as essential for navigating adulthood and contributing positively to society.

“I think [church involvement in schools] is extremely important, because it teaches a lot of those Christian values that you want people to grow up with in this day and this society. It teaches kindness, honesty, forgiveness, compassion, respect towards one another, inclusion and love. And they're the the values that we want children to grow up in, and that will help them make better and more informed decisions as they get older in life, you know, and hopefully make good choices, as opposed to the many bad choices that people do make, harmful choices you know. And ultimately, yes, it will make a better society.” (Teacher)

“Faith isn't forced onto you. It's not like when you finish [school] you have to be a Christian. We're just hoping that you're kind, compassionate, caring, yes, you've got to be well educated too, but also that you can cope with life's difficulties when they come your way.” (Parent)

“The children here have been exposed to like giving at harvest time... Take Christianity out of it, even as a human, you know, surely that's a value that a lot of people will want to endorse.” (Parent)

“You want to have children who are well rounded, who are kind, who can share, who are forgiving, who have all the Christian attributes... Those principles would make a big impact on the society in general, never mind the local community and their families and their own well-being and their confidence.” (Principal)

“I think the values you know that the Christian faith teaches is very important in the real world. If everyone followed the Christian values, we would have a much nicer society to live in, you know? kindness, honesty, forgiveness, all of those things.” (Teacher)

The school staff described the visible effect of Christian moral teaching on children’s behaviour, wellbeing, and sense of community within the school.

“I highly value the Christian ethos, having taught in integrated and various other schools, I am 100% clear that children in a Christian ethos school are happier... They're part of a community. There's a certain, definite community feel, children know who they can talk to. Their well-being is definitely improved. There's a genuine care in a Christian ethos school, as opposed to just on paper.” (Principal)

“Even if the children aren't from a Christian home, or don't follow anything like that, there's an awful lot of values that they're picking up from assemblies.” (Teacher)

“Our children are very well behaved; their values are very good... The children here generally, are very grounded, very sensible. And their values as people, how they treat each other, seems to be very good. And just the backing up of that, if that was taken away, I feel that our children would change in this area.” (Teacher)

In addition to moral development, participants highlighted the tangible ways that churches and Christian organisations supported the school, through practical work and financial contributions. Examples ranged from maintenance of the school property, to providing financial support.

“You [the neighbouring church congregation] painted our new outdoor classroom. You painted all our benches. You painted our playhouse for the young ones. You tidied up. You cleaned up, but not only in our school, but you also went out into the whole community. So, it spread from the Christian ethos practically that you're mentioning, not just in our school, but throughout all the town... The impact on the staff who saw what the church was doing for free, that would have cost me, as a principal, a lot of money to pay people to do... [The church is] showing an outpouring of practical love that came from wanting to serve God. And it started a lot of conversations, and it really did back up our ethos.” (Principal)

“As a staff, we certainly appreciate it and I know that the parents respect it and it's valued too. And obviously, keeping the school looking good and the environment a pleasant place to be is, is very helpful and conducive to helping create a nice learning environment for the children.” (Teacher)

“When budgets are tight, the amount of financial resources that churches bring the schools for free... It helps the school budget... Having the support from Churches is... it's great practically, financially, just having that support for the staff too, that emotional support.” (Principal)

Several of the ministry leaders described their school engagement as an expression of their calling to serve their local community, facilitated through practical investments and voluntary initiatives.

“How can you best show your love to your neighbour? Well, practically, we found ways that we could help here in the school, as well as other neighbours.” (Ministry Leader)

“I hear lots of really positive stories of church involvement in schools above and beyond what I would think it would be, you know, like good practice... So, if you’re going to stop church involvement in schools, does that mean all uniform banks and homework clubs and transition lessons and things like breakfast clubs and all those things there, are they all then pulled out? How would society cope?” (Ministry Leader)

“The church is often willing to invest in the school and get nothing back in return. They’re just fulfilling their call to be part of the community.” (Ministry Leader)

Beyond the practical and financial benefits, participants placed strong emphasis on the emotional and spiritual support that Christian engagement offered to pupils and families. Teachers, principals, and parents alike described faith as a resource for coping with stress, anxiety, and life’s challenges, with prayer, assemblies, and Scripture Union materials all viewed as valuable supports for pupil wellbeing.

“I remember after COVID... One of the supports for young people was their good Christian belief. They know that their God, their Creator, was listening to them, was looking out for them... We do not want to be responsible for taking that, you know, potential, potential support away from people you know?” (Teacher)

“Whenever families were going through difficulties or whatever, you didn't have to name them, you just prayed for them... and I strongly believe in the power of prayer, and I can see how God has answered a lot of those prayers, and helped families and helped individual pupils who were having difficulties.” (Principal)

“If church attendance and everything goes down, I think lots of things, nasty things in the world go up. And I think if [Christian influence in schools] was to stop, I think you would get more children depressed. You would get more children looking elsewhere, whether that be drugs, alcohol, whatever. I think it would be extremely detrimental to our children's health and well-being if it was to stop.” (Parent)

“[The SU resources] are very good... There's a lot of it links in with their well-being. So then you see some of those things helping for their well-being move into that, the emotions that they're feeling at that time, and how, how that relates to things like the Bible or Christian values, and how they can, sort of how they can deal with it.” (Teacher)

Participants also noted that church involvement eased the burden on schools, meeting needs that might otherwise stretch staff capacity and resources. These interventions both reduced the pressure on school staff, whilst also directly benefitting pupils.

“Yeah I think it would be hugely detrimental to stop church involvement, even in relation to the support we get from the churches, even in the facilities we get, it would be detrimental to the kids, it would put more pressure even on the teaching staff as well. Because even, you know, for somebody to come in and do an assembly, for somebody to come in and do the transition for the P7s, like, that's a really valuable piece of work, and I think parents value that as well.” (Governor)

“Schools have needs, and churches often have the means to meet those needs, and [Christian organisations] can often put those two things together, so the value of a church being involved in the life of a school can just be like everything from pastoral care for staff through to just fulfilling the requirements of the curriculum, RE lessons or assemblies, or unpacking ethos.” (Ministry Leader)

Another recurring theme across participants was the idea of **hope** as one of the central contributions of Christian engagement in schools. Both ministry leaders and principals described how the Christian message was understood to offer children stability, security, and a sense of meaning, particularly in times of stress or family difficulty. This hope was framed not as coercion into belief, but as an opportunity for children to explore faith, experience community, and draw on values that could sustain them through life's challenges

“From a Christian perspective, we are offering to children and indeed to their families and homes, something that is not found anywhere else. So that is the whole business of hope. I think that by our sharing of God's Word and and and our application of that, really to life and to the challenges of life. We are, we are saying to the kids, both explicitly and implicitly you know, there is hope. Life is not pointless, life is not ultimately unfair, life is not ultimately cruel. There is hope, and that hope is to be found in the Christian message.” (Ministry Leader)

“Our aim really is to prepare children for the future, to equip them so that whenever they do face stress, and they all will, but they know the support that they can come to, that they're not on their own, as so many people feel, and they feel hopeless, but the Christian faith, for me very much, is one of hope. That's a positive message, and it's something that you know all children deserve. They know there is hope and there's community, and you're not on your own.” (Principal)

“Christianity in schools gives children an opportunity to explore faith themselves. We don't shove it down their throats, but the whole Christian faith is something that gives hope. And whenever some children are coming from broken homes and difficult situations and are a bit confused to what's happening in life, now hearing stories of God's love and the Bible characters and what they learn from that, and the Christian values that can give a good grounding and a good sense of security and a good sense of being part of a community, and all these things are very important for the well-being of the child... We're not prescribing for anyone to necessarily make a decision to firmly believe in God or whatever. But we do want to instil the values and give them an opportunity to explore faith, and hopefully they will understand the Christian viewpoint and the hope that that can give them through the love that Jesus has demonstrated.” (Principal)

The idea of schools providing the opportunity for pupils to explore faith in a safe space was mentioned frequently by participants. Ministry leaders, parents, and school staff alike argued that church engagement can play a crucial role in children's spiritual development, especially in contexts where such guidance is not provided at home.

“People respect the school here. They respect [the Principal]. They value what's being done. And I haven't in all my journeys heard negative comments, you know? In what goes on in terms of the school here... I think it is so important these days when, if you like, the humanist pressure is building... But we need to be developing children in terms of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. The education that we give to kids must touch all of those, it must feed into all of those things.” (Ministry Leader)

“The responsibility to teach children spiritually is in the home, but the problem is for so many of our kids, that's not being done. It's not being done, not because parents are anti but because parents feel inadequate, not equipped to actually do that. And I think that's makes it doubly important that the school that they input the spiritual input of a school into a child's education is emphasised and carried on. I think it's most important that schools do that.” (Ministry Leader)

“Children have really big questions... But how can they even broach those topics or how do they understand any of these issues if they're not offered space where spirituality can be looked at?” (Parent)

“I think [Church involvement in schools] is absolutely vital. Absolutely vital. Because children are inquisitive. They're growing up. Their minds are wee sponges and we have so much of the worldly aspect of things on the internet, on television, everything. And if we leave it, that's the only thing that they can get, which is destructive, and that's been proven its destructive. But if we bring in the Christian gospel and the biblical, scriptural way of living that gives them the option, that gives them the choice. A lot of teachers have said to me, “you give them the facts and you encourage them to make the right choice”. But it's important that children have this knowledge, that they have this choice, if we don't come in and do that children are left without a choice.” (Ministry Leader)

“I think the parents will be disappointed if I didn't [bring a Christian influence], because you can't, you can't leave that vacuum. Whenever you take these things away, and that's what you want to do, take the attraction of these things away. You can't leave the children with a vacuum. You must fill that vacuum with the gospel. Otherwise they're going to revert back to what the world offers, which is destructive.” (Ministry Leader)

“[SU] gives them such an opportunity for them to talk and them to speak, to learn from each other, to learn from the teacher in respect. And it's been very valuable and so important for them to be able to worship together and even to pray together, because, obviously that's hard because, you know, not all kids are, you know, come from a Christian home in a Christian environment and upbringing so for them to be able to do that in a safe space, you may say, is so important.” (Parent)

“This secular culture that's been really forced onto children nowadays... Christian teaching has been sort of pushed down and suppressed, so I think then for them to be able to [worship in school] and enjoy that in a free space, it's very important.” (Parent)

Finally, participants were invited to reflect on how they evaluated the value of church engagement in the school. Ministry leaders described how appreciation for their input was often measured informally, through the responses of children and teachers. Positive reactions, continued invitations, and small gestures of thanks were seen as indicators that their contribution was valued.

“How do we gauge the appreciation? By the attention of the children, and the children listen intently. Also by the response of the teachers. So when you've teachers coming up and said, “Listen, that was great. Really enjoyed it. Thank you for sharing that... And if we're invited back, I suppose.” (Ministry Leader)

“If the children never enjoyed it or didn't appreciate it, or the teachers either, they would just say, the Bible Club doesn't suit this year, and you would know, but it's welcomed every year into the school, or anytime you phone up for an assembly, they will always accommodate, because they know it's good for the children.” (Ministry Leader)

“Quite often, a school might write you a note and give you a card as a way of a presentation, and in the card, it would say, “we really appreciate you coming to our school. The children have learned a lot, and please contact us next year” or they might take time to send an email. But they're always positive... We don't look for feedback or

need feedback, because it's not something we need for our own endorsement.” (Ministry Leader)

In addition to informal signs of appreciation, schools also engaged in more structured forms of feedback and evaluation. This included evaluations from the Christian organisations, completed by both parents and teachers.

“We ask teachers to send evaluations in. So we give them an online form like and they cannot all of them do it, but essentially... we give them a letter at the start to say this, what they are, who we are, this is what our approaches, lessons are and then we give, now this year, we've given some wording for parents, if parents wish to have some wording about who we are, what we do. And then we give an online link to evaluate the lessons if they want to give any comments about the appropriateness or otherwise.” (Ministry Leader)

Inclusivity, Diversity, and Respect

The ministry leaders all stressed that their engagement in the school was not intended to be exclusionary, but rather to offer a message relevant to all. They emphasised that the Bible's message is for everyone, regardless of background or belief.

“It is cross cultural. It's for everyone, because we take our picture from Christ. Christ didn't reject anyone, and it was for everyone. The message of the Bible is for everyone, and it doesn't exclude anybody in society.” (Ministry Leader)

“All our lessons are designed to be inclusive, so that any child, whether their a child of faith or not, can, can engage with the lessons, because the principles are true, you know what I mean? Choose to do right when you could do wrong. Be hopeful about the future. Be true to who you are, you know, and so on. So, yeah, they're good, so we deliver them in at least 125 schools.” (Ministry Leader)

“I also do assemblies in other schools as well. There's only one school where there is two Muslim children, and whenever I go in to do assemblies, they're taken out of that assembly. And then whenever the principal comes to do her announcements and the rewards for the week, those wee Muslim children come back in, I always give them sweets. Those children get their sweets just like every other child. So, there's no difference made, but we respect that they're of a different culture, of a different faith.” (Ministry Leader)

Ministry leaders also described the careful ways in which they communicated the Christian message, emphasising sensitivity, respect, and avoiding pressure on children. Several of the ministry leaders described methods of accountability employed by their organisations to ensure they were appropriate in the language choices they were using.

“The problem is that at times, there are folk who are not wise, and it's not, it isn't wise to put unnecessary pressure on children, particularly young children.” (Ministry Leader)

“We're actually trained how not to do that, but to still share the Gospel, you know? So we could take a passage of scripture ‘Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners’, okay, but we, would never use the word ‘you’... It's not personalising it, in a context where you're in a school, you have to be responsible. You have to be careful what you say, because you are always conscious of people who don't think the same as you, and you're careful about that.” (Ministry Leader)

“When it comes to assemblies, we’re aware that children are in that hall not necessarily by choice. Just because they're there doesn't mean to say that they've opted in, they just haven't opted out. And so we kind of try and say, “okay, that's you're here. You deserve to come to your school and not feel got at” or not feel proselytised or not even feel condemned. You're here to, you're here to as a school community, to learn something together based on your ethos.” (Ministry Leader)

“I like to think we are always cautious in our approach, because, again, children deserve that. They deserve us to really think through really carefully what we're saying... We're often checking assembly scripts and we're talking to each other, making sure that we are being appropriate for the context.” (Ministry Leader)

“There’s more scrutiny out there, I guess, you know it's more likely in certain areas, and someone will just double check what we're going to say before we say it... We talk about grounding statements. So, if I talk about being Christian well enough “as a Christian, I believe”, or “Christians believe” or talk about “the Bible teaches”. We ground it in the Bible, or we are we own it for ourselves. We don't assume a faith stance.” (Ministry Leader)

“Worship cannot be coerced. You can't force someone to worship, because once you force someone to worship, it's no longer worship.” (Ministry Leader)

The school staff and leadership team consistently highlighted the importance of respecting parental rights and maintaining transparency about what children would experience in school. This included clear communication, opt-out opportunities, and openness about content.

“It’s the right of the parents not to allow their children to be involved and that right has got to be respected... But perhaps where a principal is approached by a parent and who says, you know, “I don’t want my kids to go into RE,” perhaps there is the opportunity to say, “well, can you tell us why”? you know? “What's the problem”? Certainly, if I had the opportunity, I would be pointing out to a parent like that, you know how important it is not to, not to fill the something with nothing.” (Ministry Leader)

“A few years ago... we had a child, and his mother just asked if he could be excluded from Assembly, which was no problem at all. And he did. He stayed in the classroom with classroom assistants. Yeah. So that was no issue, no problem.” (Teacher)

“There would be an opportunity if, if someone didn't want to be involved, that they could, you know, then obviously not take part in that.” (Parent)

“We would always tell the parents at the start of the year you know, if you don't want your child to take part in assembly, or if you don't want your child to sit in on any Christian RE lessons, you know you're able to opt out. It's done every year. It's also done through our induction days for the new primary ones in June. It's also done through the school prospectus, and it's clearly on our school app.” (Principal)

“Anytime there's [Christian Organisation] coming in we always make sure that the parents know as soon as we find out and it's usually over a month in advance, so it's in the monthly newsletter, or if it's a last minute thing where someone said, “oh, I happen to be in this area - would you like me to come in and take assembly or do a special puppet show on this or that”? that we would always send a note out on our school app, which is like a messaging service, so the parents are informed beforehand, giving them the opportunity if they wanted to drop out.” (Principal)

“There's no hidden agenda. There's no secret messages... Parents know what we're going to be doing.” (Principal)

“We always know if there's a different event coming up... You can see clearly what's happening each month.” (Parent)

“We were open and transparent with parents. You know, it's not that anything has been done behind backs, so parents are aware of it being evangelistic, and you know, or there's been no objections to that. So, you know, we're just open and transparent about that.” (Governor)

Some participants highlighted the increasing diversity of school populations, with pupils from different cultural and religious backgrounds. The school staff emphasised inclusivity, while ministry leaders acknowledged the challenge of holding to biblical teaching in pluralistic settings.

“We live in a country now where there's many people have come from overseas, many different backgrounds, culture, all that there and then the whole identity and gender, that whole thing, and our organisation works tirelessly to come up with lessons, biblically-based sound Bible based lessons on how to approach these subjects, in a sensitive way, but yet in an honest way according to the Scriptures.” (Ministry Leader)

“We have had an increase of children from different communities. We're not solely a Protestant school, if you want. We've got children from Roman Catholic backgrounds with children that's come over from Africa. So that's just recently. So, there's been a change in the dynamic. We are an inclusive school. So, we welcome diversity. ‘All faiths and none are welcome in our school’ it says on our ethos statements.” (Principal)

“There are more children from diverse backgrounds and different backgrounds, and less and less people, for example, are religious or go to church. But nevertheless, from my perspective, the Bible never changes, and God never changes. So, for me as a Christian, it's important we keep bringing the Gospel message and message of Jesus to the children.” (Ministry Leader)

Finally, participants acknowledged the potential that not all parents or communities would welcome Christian input, pointing to broader cultural shifts, scrutiny, and occasional opposition. However, most experiences described were positive.

“Parents are becoming more vocal in their opposition. If they don't like something, they'll message or start up a WhatsApp group. They'll confront the teacher if their child's not happy, but quite often, for me, it's not the children's not happy, it's the parent who's not happy. And it's very seldom, the child will object to a Bible club or assembly. Children love it... But in this school, I'm always very welcome. I've had no objections whatsoever by parents or children in this school.” (Ministry Leader)

“There's an agenda that's been pushed on to our schools, and it's mainly pushing against the Christian ethos, and the belief that they are pushing is that there's nothing. But have we not every bit as much the right to say, listen, we're actually Christians and we believe this, so we have as much right as anybody else to share what we believe, and it's important to share it with the children!” (Ministry Leader)

“We can't fall under the pressure of one sector of our community. You know, just because one sector shouts so loudly about their opinion doesn't mean that the rest doesn't count. And there is such a large community out there of Christians and that just want the best

for our children, and that's all that they want. They want to be able to show the love to everybody, to show God's love to everyone.” (Ministry Leader)

“I'd be aware of many schools where there's some young people or children that don't attend their assemblies, and they're brought elsewhere because their parents would not, would rather that they didn't hear what we had to say... I find it hard because I think children have as much of a right to hear the Christian ethos and the Christian faith, as well as many others... It's sort of them making a decision for them. And personally, it breaks my heart that they don't get the opportunity to even explore that aspect.” (Ministry Leader)

“I've only been Chair of the Governors for a short period of time, but in my understanding, there's been no kind of opposition in relation to church involvement... You know, they mightn't love it, but they aren't objecting to it, you know?” (Governor)

“If others want to take the Christian ethos out of the school, we're leaving the children without a choice; that's not fair, on the child, that's not fair on the child. You know, what are they going to those that want to take it out of the school? What are they going to put in itsplace? What are they going to fill the vacuum with that we've talked about? What are they going to fill it with? Are they going to leave the children to do their own thing? And if we're left to do our own thing, we know what we're going to do, everything that I'm speaking against.” (Ministry Leader)

“I do think the small minority shouldn't have a say... I think most people would hold the Christian ethos as a high priority for their children.” (Parent)

Conclusion

The accounts of the pupils, parents, teachers, principals, governors, and ministry leaders highlight that school engagement with churches and Christian organisations is multifaceted and deeply valued. The most visible forms of involvement were assemblies, RE lessons, and Scripture Union groups, which consistently reinforced the school's Christian ethos while providing variety and enjoyment for pupils. Beyond this, churches were valued for their practical contributions, which alleviated pressure on school budgets and staff capacity. Engagement was also linked strongly to moral development, with participants highlighting how biblical teaching instilled values such as kindness, respect, and compassion, shaping both behaviour and community life. In addition, Christian involvement was seen to contribute to pupil well-being by offering prayer, pastoral support, and resources that helped children cope with stress and life's challenges. Finally, themes of inclusivity, diversity, and respect ran throughout, with participants emphasising the importance of transparency, parental choice, and sensitive communication in pluralistic contexts. Overall, the findings indicate that in this particular school, church engagement is not a single activity, but a broad set of practices that together underpin ethos, provide tangible support, nurture values, and offer children opportunities for spiritual exploration.

6.3 Urban Controlled Primary School Case Study

This case study focuses on an urban controlled primary school located in a highly diverse area. The school community is characterised by what the principal described as a form of “*natural integration*,” reflecting the wide range of cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds represented within its pupil population. While not formally designated as an integrated school, the principal emphasised that diversity was a defining feature of the school community.

Participants included the school principal, two members of the board of governors, and a small group of pupils (n=4). Together, they offered a detailed account of how the school engages with local churches and Christian organisations, and how such engagement is understood within the wider ethos of inclusivity, diversity, and respect.

Engagement with churches/Christian organisations

Participants described engagement between the school and local churches as both practical and relational. A recurring theme was the use of the local church hall, particularly when the school was unable to use its own facilities. Both the principal and governors highlighted the generosity of local churches in providing halls for assemblies, discos, and after-school activities.

“We’re using [church’s] hall for our disco and then they come to our play to support us, so that’s pretty nice.” (Pupil)

“Our hall is a total mess. And [church] have really stepped up. They have opened up their grounds. They’ve opened up their hall for us to use for our assembly. It has been absolutely fantastic.” (Governor)

“Our assembly hall was deemed out of bounds totally. I emailed the governors to say this is the position and the local governor from [church] literally within minutes had emailed back saying, “We’ve got halls. What can we do for you?” so they have been unbelievably generous to us... It’s a very open arrangement, I just email the person who manages the bookings for the hall. Is the hall available on this date? Is the hall available on that date? And if it’s available, we can have it.” (Principal)

Pupils noted the presence of local ministers in their assemblies, which were described as the main point of direct church input. The assemblies were described in positive terms, with pupils agreeing that they enjoyed the church input.

“[Local church] always comes in for assembly. They just talk about, like Christian stuff.” (Pupil)

“Mostly [name of minister] comes in just for like assemblies.” (Pupil)

“[Name of Christian organisation] come into our school. They make us relate to like Christianity and all. It is quite fun, we get to do fun games and stuff.” (Pupil)

“There’s nothing I don’t like about [church engagement].” (Pupil)

However, the principal outlined a clear distinction between assemblies, which were used to explore moral lessons through Bible stories, and Scripture Union, which provided an opt-in setting for explicitly evangelistic teaching.

“I do not see assembly as an evangelism tool. I see assembly as we can teach a Christian truth, but it’s almost, ‘this is my moral that comes from the Bible’. So if I’m wanting to teach about being inclusive, you could do the story of the Good Samaritan,

you know everybody is your neighbour. So I'm using the Bible story as a vehicle to teach that, but I would not be wanting anyone to be evangelising children and presenting the unique claim of the Christian gospel as opposed to another religion. We have Scripture Union. And if parents want to opt in, they can do that after school. But I don't think that assembly is the place for that, to do that.” (Principal)

Local churches were also seen as active partners in the wider life of the school, through supporting events, providing preparation for sacraments, and offering children opportunities to connect with the wider community.

“[Name of local church] have a community garden on up the road, so they would invite the children in to do things in the garden... They are very supportive. They would come to any of the events we do here.” (Governor)

“We do Holy Communion in our school.” (Pupil)

“[Name of local church] have a youth worker and [they] would come in and sort of give talks, and they used to take RE on occasions. But [they] don't work there anymore. I think for a lot of the youth work programmes, the funding has been cut.” (Governor)

The governors also highlighted the role of church representatives on the Board of Governors, noting the importance that these individuals were active and supportive, particularly in moments of need such as principal recruitment.

“I think being on the board of governors, the Transferor reps are all very active. We recently had a recruitment for the new principal, and the Transferor reps were all over it. So, it's not just sign up so that you've got a rep, it's actually take part and participate.” (Governor)

However, the governors suggested that the role of the churches should extend beyond specific activities and should incorporate being visible in the local community.

“Churches should be part of the community, and they should be leading from the front... Churches need to be very strong and make everybody aware that they're there, that they're part of the structure, part of the fabric of society... They should be coming into schools more. I think we should encourage more church involvement, be it socially encouraging.” (Governor)

Ethos

Participants consistently highlighted the strong ethos of the school, describing it as holistic, caring, and grounded in values that went beyond academic achievement. The school was seen to prioritise the wellbeing of the whole child, creating an atmosphere of peace and support.

“This school has a very caring ethos. You get a sense when you walk through the door, just peace and tranquillity, you know? I think, and they do treat the child holistically rather than academically. I mean, they want the best out of the child.” (Governor)

“The core value here is respect.” (Governor)

For some participants, this ethos was associated with Christian foundations. However, participants emphasised that these were expressed in a way that was inclusive and welcoming to all cultural and religious backgrounds.

“To me, it's, it's a Christian ethos, but that's because I'm coming out of a church background. But what I like about it is the fact that they embrace everybody's culture.” (Governor)

“I think the fact that it is a Christian ethos, it reflects on the moral compass of the school.” (Governor)

“This school has Judeo-Christian values, and those are nice. I'm not a Christian, but those are values that I espouse. They're values I agree with. You could not not agree with them!” (Governor)

Despite its Judeo-Christian values, several of the participants emphasised that the school did not have a religious identity.

“I do think the underpinning values are Judeo Christian values. But I would not want it to have a strong religious identity. Where there is a very strong religious identity to a school, I think that is alienating to newcomer families. And I think the balance is right, that people's religious views are respected, supported, and shared. But that the focus isn't on individuals, but the school community.” (Governor)

“So, our main value is respect. Respect for self, respect for others, and respect for the environment... We don't have a specific religious identity. I'm really grateful for the support of our local churches, and I'm a Christian so my values are derived from my faith, but the ethos of the school doesn't necessarily come from one particular religious tradition.” (Principal)

“Traditionally, it has always been classed as... a Christian school, a school with Christian values. But again, they've embraced First Communion. And I think there's a lot of reassurance there for parents. It comes across very much, I think, in open nights and things like that, it is promoted that we embrace all cultures and all.” (Governor)

One participant highlighted that although the school had Christian values, religiosity was handled in a respectful manner.

“[Christianity] isn't in your face here. It's respectful. It's a respectful way of working together. It's not, you know, we're right and you're wrong.” (Governor)

Although this participant emphasised the importance of inclusivity, they expressed concerns that changes in wider society might erode the place of Christianity in education, which could in turn weaken the role of faith in shaping school ethos.

“I happened to listen in to a radio programme. I only got the tail end of it and it said they're actually looking at the curriculum with regard to RE... My concern, I suppose, is that maybe there isn't this sense of wanting to teach RE as part of the curriculum. My concern would be that, if it gets diminished, you know, that it will become less part of the ethos. And I do think in general; Christianity is moving away from the centre of a lot of people's lives.” (Governor)

Value of Engagement

Participants identified a wide range of benefits associated with church and Christian organisation involvement in the life of the school. The governors and the principal emphasised how church engagement strengthened relationships between the school and the wider community. They described both the practical and symbolic value of children and families being welcomed into church spaces and activities.

“One of the key benefits [of church involvement] is that we are now getting people who would have tried to go to [Name of local Catholic Maintained school]. So there, there's an immediate benefit for those families, but there's also a benefit for us to be linking with the wider school community.” (Governor)

“Even getting the kids in through the door of the church, you know, we're fascinated, and they're running down the pulpit, you know, it's to let them know that church isn't this big mystery you know? it's normal, ordinary people go to church. And it's church buildings, just somewhere that people go, and it's for them, for the whole community.” (Governor)

“In my own context, I think our involvement with [name of local church] is deepening and growing, mainly because of their overwhelming generosity to us in terms of the hall, in terms of gaining access to the site, it has just been overflowing. It's really, really lovely, and therefore, I think there will always be that legacy and really good working relationships with each other.” (Principal)

The principal also emphasised the value of the pastoral and practical support offered by local churches. This ranged from prayer and encouragement, to the sharing of facilities and broader community support. They suggested that such contributions are welcomed by schools of any ethos and expressed concern that statutory restrictions on church involvement could risk undermining a relationship that has historically played a vital role in education.

“I know that I get prayer support from the local churches. I know that I could ask for prayer, and that means a lot to me. But for a principal who doesn't have their own faith, that's probably not going to be a big thing for them.” (Principal)

“Any school, regardless of the faith or not, will welcome practical support. So, it is things like, can you offer your car park? Can you offer your halls? I've heard of other schools that provide scones or whatever, just a ‘We know you're doing a good job’. I think something just to say ‘We know you're doing a good job and we've got your back’.” (Principal)

“Our school gets great support from our local churches, and I'm, as I say, really delighted to have that and to work well together. And I think it would be a shame to stop church involvement entirely. I understand where humanists are coming from... but they represent such a small proportion of my school. The vast majority of my school are Christian... I think it's a real shame if there was to be anything statutory that would prevent that linkage or support. Historically, the churches have had such a role in education as well, and that is where most of Western law is descended from. It is Judeo-Christian tradition. So I think it would be a shame if there was anything that breaking that link, you can't do it, that it has to be a purely secular system.” (Principal)

From the perspective of pupils themselves, Christian organisations were seen as adding value by offering skills-based learning and enjoyable opportunities that complemented the curriculum.

“[Name of Christian organisation] give you skills. They're really, really nice.” (Pupil)

Alongside these positive contributions, some participants voiced concern about ensuring engagement remained appropriate and not overly evangelistic. While they welcomed involvement that was linked to curriculum or community benefit, “proselytising” was considered problematic.

"[Name of Christian organisation] used to come into the school to give out Bibles. And I have to say, it was not my thing. It felt like proselytising, and it felt massively inappropriate... We would not let that happen for like the Church of Satan, and we have to be fair." (Governor)

"I'm not saying church organisations should stay away. There were certain examples, like where it's linked to proselytising, that aren't appropriate. But where it is linked to curriculum, where it is linked to giving something specific to the children, I think that is, and particularly things like youth work, very, very valuable." (Governor)

"Church shouldn't just be religion. It is 'How do we live our lives? What is the meaning of our lives?' Some people, they will find that basis in Christianity. Some people will find it in Islam. Some people will find it in something else. But it is important that people are exposed to that at a young age, that they understand what does that mean? What does that mean for me? and that the churches are then receptive to okay, come and talk to us about it." (Governor)

Inclusivity, Diversity, and Respect

Participants described the school as a diverse and welcoming environment, with pupils from a wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds. The governors reflected on the changes that had taken place over time, noting the increasingly multicultural nature of the school community.

"This school has changed radically over the years. I mean, you get more and more families, coming in that are other nationalities... So, there are lots of languages spoken. There are lots of migrant newcomer communities. There are also lots of students or pupils who are from integrated or mixed marriages." (Governor)

Respect for parental rights was central to this inclusivity. The participants emphasised that families who wished to withdraw their children from religious education or assemblies were supported in doing so. Pupils themselves also described these experiences, reflecting on what it was like for classmates to opt out.

"If parents don't want the children to get RE, they can ask for the child to be removed from the class, which is fine." (Governor)

"There's someone in my class and they have to like leave the room when they're talking about Christianity and stuff. They go out and there's like a little sofa area and they read or sometimes they play games." (Pupil)

"If parents don't want their child in assembly, they go out with another member of staff, and they will have a story that's a values-based story that doesn't have any faith related to it." (Principal)

"I will send a message via our school app or an email to the parents, basically saying that for every child RE is a statutory responsibility. But if you wish to opt your child out, you can." (Principal)

However, while this provision was seen as respectful of parental rights, the pupils explained that this right to 'opt out' was not always perceived positively. One child reflected that exclusion from assemblies could feel isolating, and argued that such decisions should involve the child as well as the parent.

“I’d feel left out if I wasn’t allowed to go to assembly, especially if there was no reason as well. Like, probably for other people, they have a reason, and they probably don’t even want to join in, as well, because it’s probably a decision, like with the parent and the child as well. But it should be the child’s decision. It’s their school, their assembly.”
(Pupil)

The principal described a careful balancing act between maintaining a Christian ethos and ensuring inclusivity. This involved providing opportunities for cultural learning across a range of faiths and traditions, while also making clear that parents could opt out of specifically religious elements.

“Scripture Union will come in and do specific, one-off events as well. Because we do have a diverse population. I write to the parents every year to say, RE is a curricular subject, but you have the right to withdraw your children if you wish, but I need that in writing. And we have probably about 20 children who have withdrawn from RE, for a variety of reasons. Some because they are very devout Muslims and they don’t want their children having any Christian form of education. Some, because they have no religious faith at all and they don’t want their children hearing anything? So, for me, that’s a parent’s right, and we acknowledge and accept that, I suppose, and work within that.” (Principal)

“I do what I call a culture assembly for every major Christian, or every major religious festival. So, we do a Diwali celebration, we do Christmas, we do Chinese New Year, we do Easter, and we do Eid. And everybody comes to those because as I say they’re not an act of religious observance. They are a culture awareness assembly. So even if you’ve opted out of assembly, and opted out of RE teaching, you’re still involved in that. Because for me, that’s just real learning about everybody’s culture that we can all celebrate.” (Principal)

“We learn about other religions as well. Like, we’ll probably do an assembly on Eid soon.” (Pupil)

The principal further illustrated this balancing act between respecting withdrawal and fostering inclusion, noting the complexity of managing parental rights when some families opted out of RE yet still wished their children to take part in cultural or festive events such as the nativity or carol service.

“Parents view school as, you’re either in or you’re out. So if you say you’re out of RE then your child won’t be participating in the Nativity. They won’t be participating in the Carol service, because clearly those are Christian in their content and in their teaching. But the CCEA guidance does say that parents have the right to opt in or out of specific activities. So then we have had parents whose children don’t participate in RE at all, but the children have wanted to be part of the Carol service, so they go to those practices, but then they don’t go to RE in January... I think it should be you’re either in or you’re out, because it’s definitely more difficult for children, sorry, for schools to try and remember that as well.” (Principal)

While parents from minority faith backgrounds were generally described as respectful in navigating differences, both the principal and governors reflected that the strongest opposition often came from atheist or humanist families. These parents were seen as more critical of the school’s Christian practices, sometimes questioning not just their child’s involvement but the presence of such activities in the school altogether.

“The challenge has been more the, and I don't mean this to sound crude, but it's been more the white Belfast atheist or humanist. They have been more critical of, 'Why are you having a Christian assembly?' They're almost not happy that their child can opt out. It's, “Why are you having it at all?”” (Principal)

“We have a family who were atheists, that the kids were coming in and telling people there was no Santa and no God and all sorts of crap, while at least, like the Muslim families were like, no, thank you. Don't do this!” (Governor)

Conclusion

Across the interviews, participants consistently highlighted the multifaceted nature of church and Christian organisation engagement with the school. While assemblies provided the most direct point of input, the principal stressed a clear distinction between using Bible stories to explore moral lessons and more explicitly evangelistic activities, which were reserved for opt-in contexts such as Scripture Union.

The ethos of the school was described as holistic, caring, and grounded in Judeo-Christian values, yet expressed in a manner that was inclusive and respectful of all backgrounds. Whilst the value of church engagement was widely recognised, the participants stressed the importance of ensuring such involvement was not “proselyting” in nature, emphasising that appropriateness and respect were key. Discussions around inclusivity and diversity highlighted the school’s commitment to navigating parental rights with sensitivity, offering clear pathways for withdrawal from religious education while also fostering cultural awareness through assemblies and events that celebrated a range of traditions.

6.4 Rural Controlled Post-Primary School Case Study

This case study explores a rural controlled post-primary school with a strong Christian ethos and deep ties to the local community. The school benefits from close relationships with nearby Protestant churches, and this connection is reflected in its leadership and day-to-day life. Participants included two local ministers, who both serve as Transferor Representatives on the school's Board of Governors, the school principal, four female pupils who attend the school's Scripture Union group, and two parents, who also worked at the school: one was employed as a classroom assistant, and one as a classroom teacher. Together, these participants reflect a rich cross-section of voices within the school community, providing a holistic view of its values, relationships, and everyday life.

Engagement with churches/Christian organisations

The school demonstrated strong and active engagement with a wide range of local churches and Christian organisations. Participants described the school as an interface between the faith community and the wider locality, with long-standing and multi-generational connections between the school and its surrounding churches.

"I have parishioners who work here, many who come here as pupils, many past pupils... My own [child] comes here. So, there's huge, huge connections between the church and the school, yeah." (Minister)

"The school is very positive about engagement with the local churches." (Minister)

One distinctive feature was the involvement of ministers in assemblies. The principal described a network of nine local ministers who regularly visited the school to lead assemblies and participate in school life.

"We have ministers on our Board of Governors, and we have nine ministers who come in regularly to lead assemblies. That's all the local churches." (Principal)

"Only those who are invited are entitled to lead an assembly, and you're limited to, I think, four or five times a year, to allow everyone to have a fair amount doing it." (Minister)

"This school has brilliant assemblies, and different ministers from local churches come in. And I think that's really good because then you see them and you know who they are, and when they go to youth groups or Girls' Brigade or whatever, they know who they are and they have that link." (Parent)

"During like assemblies we would have ministers from the area come in." (Pupil)

The parents praised the openness of the school to inviting churches from different denominations to lead assemblies, seeing this as a reflection of the school's community-minded and inclusive ethos.

"We have different denominations come in. I mean, our community here is quite small, it's a tight knit community. I'm not a Presbyterian but my kids know the minister there, they went to his holiday Bible club, they've been at his GB and BB, and when you're walking around the town, they'll see him, and they'll know him. Everyone knows everyone here, it's a community thing." (Parent)

“This school is really good at bringing people in from different churches. It’s really open, there’s an open mind, and they encourage the children to have a faith relationship in a positive way.” (Parent)

While the school maintains strong relationships with local clergy, participants noted that ministers are generally more willing to engage in some roles than others. Leading assemblies was often seen as a manageable and rewarding way for ministers to connect with pupils, whereas taking on governance responsibilities was described as more challenging due to time constraints and uncertainty about what the role might involve.

“If a pupil from our school goes to a local church, we’ll invite that minister to do an assembly. And ministers are usually up for doing an assembly, because they get to meet the pupils and interact with the pupils. It’s harder to get them to come on to the Board of Governors, because they’re all already so busy.” (Principal)

“[Some ministers] are reluctant to, to really, to get involved in things sometimes, I think getting people to volunteer can be difficult... There’s certainly some are concerned with what [being on the Board of Governors] might entail.” (Minister)

Another form of engagement mentioned by participants was the practice of religious inspection. While not widespread across Northern Ireland, this form of engagement has been particularly effective in this local context. One minister described how this initiative creates space for meaningful interaction between church leaders, staff, and pupils in a way that builds both familiarity and community connection.

“The Church of Ireland have really led the way with religious inspection... We are invited to go around and visit the classrooms, visit the different year groups, and ask them questions about their engagement with religious studies and curriculum... It gives the pupils the chance to ask us absolutely anything they want, and some of them really go for it, which is just so good. It builds familiarity, you know? And we’re community builders, we’re part of the community, and we want to engage with the children and the staff here.” (Minister)

The final notable form of church engagement in the school is the presence of a Scripture Union group. The group was praised by participants as a valuable space for exploring faith in a relaxed and engaging way. Its success in this particular school was highlighted as something that could be replicated elsewhere with greater church support.

“We have a really good Scripture Union here and there’s lots of teachers involved in that, so the children know that those teachers are Christians.” (Parent)

“In Scripture Union we talk mostly about things Jesus said. If the teachers haven’t gotten something prepared, they put a video on. But the videos are like, stories related to God as well.” (Pupil)

“You don’t have to go to SU. Not everyone does. But it’s good. It’s really good.” (Pupil)

“I would love for SU to be, to have a greater footprint in schools. They’ve had a massive impact in this school, but other schools should be using them, and churches should be supporting them.” (Minister)

Looking to the future, some participants reflected on how churches might increase their engagement with schools, by contributing to new areas such as music education.

“We're noticing in the church a depletion of the number of young people who are learning a musical instrument. And that has been seen then all around here. If young people are playing an instrument, it's going to be predominantly more something that's involved with a marching band, which maybe doesn't just as easily lend itself to be leading in worship in church. And we thought, well, I wonder, just in general, might it be a thing for churches to support more music lessons or the music programme in school?” (Minister)

Ethos

Participants consistently described the school as having a clear and visible Christian ethos, which shaped both its identity and practice. This ethos was expressed and sustained through the school's mission statement, leadership, and engagement with local churches and Christian organisations.

“This school has a Christian ethos. I think it comes across really strongly that it's something they want to uphold in the school.” (Parent)

“We have a Christian ethos, and it's part of our mission statement. People in the locality would know we have a strong Christian ethos.” (Principal)

“People know that we have a Christian ethos, so we have to be seen to be acting that out in the school. And yes, we have many Christian staff members, but it's more visible to have ministers coming in.” (Principal)

Several participants warned that a school's ethos cannot be assumed to continue automatically over time. Instead, it requires intentional leadership and ongoing investment from both churches and school communities. The principal's faith stance was seen as particularly influential in shaping how the ethos plays out in daily school life.

“It all hinges on the principal. If you have a principal who isn't as sympathetic to your Christian ethos, they're just going to be less likely to discuss these kind of areas. You could even have a principal who is neutral, who maybe goes to church but doesn't have a living faith, and that's problematic too.” (Minister)

The importance of church representation on school Boards of Governors was also highlighted. While many schools have church-nominated places on their boards, some participants expressed concern that these are not always filled. Ensuring that governors are not only skilled but also spiritually aligned was viewed as essential to protecting and promoting the Christian ethos of the school.

“Often the church family will have someone who's far better or more qualified to be on the board of governors, maybe a retired teacher, or someone who's got a financial background or HR or something. But sometimes those positions on the Board just sit empty. I think some churches have got maybe a wee bit lazy or a wee bit complacent, in the sense that they think, well, our school will always have a Christian ethos, but we've seen major shifts happen in schools... We need people who are Kingdom-minded on our boards of governors, who can do the HR or the finance but from a kingdom perspective.” (Minister)

Value of Engagement

Participants emphasised the value of Christian engagement within the school, both in terms of spiritual formation and broader pastoral support. Church and organisational involvement was seen as contributing not just to religious education, but to the overall flourishing of pupils and the life of the school.

“We're building a community. We don't get any direct benefit from what we do, but it's all about the flourishing of young people. We, of course, believe that the spiritual dimension to that is vital, but we're interested in the whole person. We support the whole child's development.” (Minister)

This holistic perspective was evident in the emphasis placed on relationship building between ministry leaders and pupils. Participants highlighted the value of pupils being familiar with trusted adults from local churches. These relationships offered a source of support that pupils could rely on when needed.

“The ministers want to get into the school so they can get to know their kids, and it's nice for the kids to be familiar with the ministers. Like there's one minister who does assemblies and he'll stand at the door and shake their hands and speak to them all.” (Principal)

“It's so good that the school has the support of the community, you know? You can have tragedies in school, and you can have like ups and downs, and I think it's really good to have that support network for the school to draw on. Whatever happens in the lives of those children, they're familiar with the ministers and they can draw on them for a source of strength, and I do think it's good to have a range of people from different churches who can help.” (Parent)

“Whenever there's a close relationship with the church and the school, it helps avoid young people falling through the gaps.” (Minister)

One participant reflected on the value of engagement by contrasting it with schools where such partnerships have been limited or absent, noting the risk of isolating key sources of community support.

“I used to work in a school where they didn't have ministers in at all because they were worried that people might be offended if they had them. But the thing is, if you're doing that, you're isolating a part of the community. And then in the school there was a sudden tragedy, and everyone was affected, but who could they go to for support? So, they did eventually let the local church in, and they really did support the children then. So, I think, based on that, I think it is so important that churches are able to come into school. The church is the community, and sometimes they know our kids better than the teachers do. They have different relationships with the children, and schools should be tapping into that as much as they possibly can.” (Parent)

Christian organisations and local churches were also valued for the specialist skills and experience they brought, offering both spiritual input and practical benefits.

“I view relationships with schools as extremely important, from just the point of view of being able to share my Christian faith and to have opportunities to share the gospel

with children and young people, and also, I suppose, to reinforce then the ethos of the principal and other members of the staff.” (Minister)

“The Christian groups we have coming have expertise in the field they’re coming in for, so there’s a real benefit for having them in... I know some schools where the assembly is left to the principal, but it’s nice for the pupils to have different voices coming in. And we know if it’s a Christian group, we don’t have to worry about, ‘Is the language going to be appropriate’, you know?” (Principal)

“The churches support us a lot. Even if we need financial support, you know? One last year a church actually paid for a mentoring charity to come into school to support the pupils. I mean that’s £1500 a year, and the church paid for it. So no, I can’t say I’d change anything about what the churches do for us.” (Principal)

Parents and pupils echoed the positive impact of Christian input, describing it as a natural and welcome part of school life.

“I’m really happy with the Christian involvement in the school, but if there was more, that would be good too.” (Parent)

“It’s nice having SU, because there’s this common ground, like you can relate to the people there because you’re all Christians.” (Pupil)

“I like the ministers that come in. Sometimes they’re fun, but sometimes it’s like a remembrance service or something and they can be quite strict. The best ministers make it really like interactive though. They have like a PowerPoint up or something and they’ll tell you a story and then relate it to us today.” (Pupil)

“I think if I could change one thing, I would make more ministers come in, because sometimes our school is so caught up with GCSEs that they forget about the assemblies completely. It’s been three weeks since we last had an assembly, and that was for behaviour!” (Pupil)

School leaders and ministers reflected on the importance of balance and discernment in engagement. While opportunities to share Christian beliefs were valued, participants recognised the need for sensitivity regarding how faith is communicated.

“I think if you were too overtly evangelistic for example, in a school setting where you’ve got a broad spectrum of pupils, well, I imagine that would be the principal’s responsibility to to draw alongside us and give us some feedback. Thankfully, it’s never had to happen.” (Minister)

“I do know a minister that has come in and has really been like they were in a Gospel Mission in a school setting, and basically they weren’t scheduled on the assembly rota the following year.” (Minister)

To ensure that engagement continues to be effective, the school has developed reflective practices that include feedback from staff, church leaders, and pupils. These opportunities for evaluation have helped maintain healthy boundaries and promote trust between the school and its Christian partners.

“At the end of the year we’ll bring the ministers in for a chat and a cup of coffee and we’ll say, ‘What did you find good about coming in? What would you change?’ And then with the Christian organisations we always do an evaluation. And if the pupils have any feedback they can send that on through the student council. But we’ve never had any complaints about anything like that, you never have children complaining, oh, ‘Do I have to go to assembly?’ It’s just part of school life.” (Principal)

Inclusivity, Diversity, and Respect

Participants spoke positively about the school’s commitment to inclusivity and respectful engagement with diversity. While the school holds a clear Christian ethos, staff and visiting church leaders were described as careful to present content in a way that welcomed all pupils, regardless of background or belief.

“We never assume everyone is from our background in the assembly. If we are saying something that is you know an absolute truth of some kind, and we would be well, we tend to go, well, Christians believe say, “well, this is a Christian position”, and so it allows the space in the room for them to say, well, that’s what a Christian believes but I don’t identify as a Christian, so I can have a different viewpoint to you.” (Minister)

Assemblies and Christian activities were said to be presented in a way that felt accessible and appropriate, with pupils encouraged to think for themselves and reflect, rather than pressured to conform.

“There’s a lot of non-Christians in our school but I feel like probably it’s good they’re in assembly hearing stuff about Jesus. Maybe it’ll make them curious and stuff.” (Pupil)

“If someone said to me they didn’t want to go to assembly because they didn’t believe in God I would just say ‘Maybe you should just like sit and listen, because you never know what’s going to make an impact on your life’.” (Pupil)

The pupils suggested that if there was a peer who wanted to opt out of a religious activity, they should be able to do so without the consent of a parent or carer. However, they acknowledged that opting out of assembly or RE could feel awkward or isolating, particularly in a school with a strong Christian identity.

“I think when you’re in P7 you should be able to choose for yourself if you want to go to assembly. Like at this age now we can make our own decisions.” (Pupil)

“I remember in primary school there was this one person who sat out on assemblies and RE because they believed a different religion, and they asked their mum to phone the school and say... I think they didn’t want to have to say, ‘I don’t want to go to assembly’ so they wanted their mum to do it for them. But they go to this school and they go to assembly here. I actually never thought about that. Maybe they just didn’t want to make a fuss. Well, so hopefully they’re like listening in assembly.” (Pupil)

“I think it would be awkward going to a teacher and saying I want to sit out, because you’d be the only one doing it. And this is a Christian school, so I guess everyone would be wondering, ‘Why did you come to this school if you don’t want to hear anything Christian? You should just go to an integrated school if you don’t want Christian stuff in assembly’.” (Pupil)

Adult participants affirmed that there were mechanisms in place for families to opt out of assemblies or express concerns, although these options were rarely taken up.

“If a parent feels that they don’t want their child to go into an assembly with a minister or whatever, then they can opt out. But it’s never happened, at least not to my knowledge. I think everyone attends assembly here.” (Parent)

“The mechanisms are there to protect the rights of parents and their pupils, their children, so that’s there, and that those procedures are there, that respect is there. But certainly we would, I mean, we’re informed, obviously, by our theology and the dignity and of every human being are all made in the image of God and respect is a very important part of our approach to everything... And certainly we’ve never had any complaints.” (Minister)

“The school always text if anyone’s coming in, and if you’ve got any concerns, you can always ring the school. And I know people do, like if they’re worried about what’s happening, and it won’t happen unless everyone’s happy with it. At least that’s my experience.” (Parent)

“I know a minister down the road for a primary school and they had a pupil whose parents requested they don’t sit in on assembly, but we’ve never had that here. It’s all been smooth sailing here, we’ve never had any issues.” (Minister)

Several participants emphasised that the inclusive nature of Christian activities made them welcoming, even for pupils who did not identify as Christians.

“This is a really inclusive school. My daughter has two friends and they aren’t from a Protestant Christian background but they go to SU and they enjoy it. There’s something there for everyone. I mean there’s the social element of it and games and stuff. It’s good fun.” (Parent)

“You don’t have to be a Christian to go to SU. Everyone is just really nice and really kind, and it’s a good place to make friends.” (Pupil)

However, the church leaders expressed concerns about how cultural and societal changes might impact the future of Christian engagement in schools. They emphasised the importance of continuing to protect Christian representation in governance and leadership roles.

“It just shows the importance of actually Transferor reps filling their positions with people who have an orthodox Christian faith so that whenever issues do come up, they can be a voice... It’s kind of like a culture war, you know? Things are going to be hugely contested in the future, and we need a strong voice on the board of governors.” (Minister)

“I mean just because somebody is silent doesn’t necessarily mean there’s agreement... You really want that spiritual hunger there. Maybe I’m being too negative, but I’m, I’m just wondering that. I also think that the future is a knife edge. I think all it would take is for something to happen to our principal, for him to move on to a new job and for a new principal to come in, you know, there’s so much, I mean, so much of it is the gatekeeper function that a principal and senior members of staff have. And you know,

if that, if that were to change, that's a huge issue, it's the same in any school. The principal is the gatekeeper.” (Minister)

The ministers also reflected on the constraints imposed by the controlled school sector, particularly in relation to staff recruitment.

“There are really tight rules around recruitment. Your hands are tied, when it comes to staff recruitment. I mean, I would love to recruit people who are Christians, but in a controlled school, you can't even ask the question in an interview about what the person believes.” (Minister)

“Controlled schools run by different rules... I've a few parishioners who are working in a Catholic school, and it's, it's quite incredible, but the Catholic schools tend to be more conservative, far more conservative, and far more definitive about what they're not going to allow and what they do allow than many controlled schools.” (Minister)

While concerns about cultural shifts were raised, the current experience within the school was overwhelmingly positive.

“We've never had any comeback from our engagement with Christian groups and churches. But to be fair, I think we've made it clear that when a child starts in this school, yes, they don't have to be a Christian, but this is a school with a strong Christian ethos, and a lot of the staff are Christian. And we've never had any kickback from that. No one's opting out of assembly or anything like that.” (Principal)

“Assembly is inclusive, because everyone goes. I mean no one's forcing them to go to Scripture Union after school or anything like that, but assembly is something that people all join in with. It's a bit like RE, you know? All pupils do RE right until the end of year 12, even if they aren't doing it as a GCSE. And we don't have kids opting out of that either, it's just what we do in this school.” (Principal)

“I think it's the way it's presented, you know? It's not presented in a way that's offensive, it's something to do with school life or real life, and then it's related to the Bible. There's something for everyone.” (Parent)

“We're a rural community and a lot of our pupils go to church or Boys' Brigade or whatever, so it makes sense to have the ministers in the school. But demographics change, you know? People attend church less, so who knows what will happen in the future. But I suspect the majority of our pupils will still be attending their local church in the future.” (Principal)

“From our point of view, engaging with local churches is definitely working and it's something we'll continue to do. I suppose in the back of my mind, I'm thinking, how long will this continue before we get some sort of kickback? But until that happens, we'll continue because it's working for us.” (Principal)

Conclusion

This case study offers insights into the nature and impact of Christian engagement within a rural controlled post-primary school context in Northern Ireland. The findings highlight a well-established and multifaceted relationship between the school and local Protestant churches, underpinned by a shared commitment to the development of pupils. Christian involvement was

not confined to formal religious instruction but extended into governance, pastoral care, and the wider school culture. The school's clear and intentional Christian ethos was consistently reinforced through these partnerships, with participants emphasising the importance of relationship building, denominational inclusivity, and mutual respect. While concerns were raised about the sustainability of such church and school engagement amidst broader societal and demographic changes, the prevailing experience among participants was positive.

6.5 Integrated Post-Primary School Case Study

This case study explores how engagement with churches and Christian organisations is experienced and understood within an integrated post-primary school. Perspectives were gathered from a range of participants, including two teachers, the school principal, and 18 pupils between Year 8 and Year 10. Together, their accounts provide insight into how the school negotiates its ethos of inclusivity and respect while navigating questions of religious identity, curriculum, and links with local faith communities.

Engagement with churches/Christian organisations

Engagement with churches and Christian organisations within the school emerged as complex and, at times, contested. Participants highlighted a mix of strong relationships with local clergy alongside a sense of limited or infrequent ministerial presence within the school. The principal described close connections with local ministers, while also acknowledging that such involvement has only recently been established and has not yet translated into regular contributions such as assemblies. In contrast, pupils tended to perceive only minimal ministerial engagement.

“We have very strong relationships with [local] ministers. There are so many ways in which that's illustrated, the very fact, for example, that we invite them in to be part of our celebration of Christmas, and occasionally we've had them in for things like Easter and we invite them to school events, so they are familiar. Coming into this school, they've been a massive support to us. But I'd say we're on a journey, because that hasn't yet found its way necessarily into, for example, assemblies.” (Principal)

“Demographically, this school leans more towards the Catholic community. When we brought [name of local Catholic priest] into the school, that was, they said that's the first time in 30 years that anyone from the Catholic Church had crossed the threshold. And I know in the early days of the school, locally, the Catholic Church was dead set against integration.” (Principal)

“We don't really have any ministers come in. We have one St Patrick's Day assembly, but that's just like the story of St Patrick.” (Pupil)

However, the school staff highlighted practical ways in which the local churches supported the school, through the use of facilities and collaborative initiatives. Ministers tended to contribute in non-religious ways, such as providing encouragement, gifts, or support with skills-based activities.

“[Name of local Church] is on the other side of our fence, so we've had great collaboration there... They provide an off-site facility for us, so there was a kind of practical working relationship there. And we've offered our facilities and will continue to do so.” (Principal)

“[Church leaders] would come in and help with lots of different things, but they're not necessarily religious things... One minister comes in to leave gifts, [they're] just really friendly... [They] help the Year 12s with interview prep too.” (Teacher)

Festive events such as the carol service and Christmas activities were mentioned by both staff and pupils, though accounts suggested that these occasions were not strongly Christian in character.

“At Christmas there might be the odd minister coming in. But I don't really think there's like, many Christian people who come in.” (Pupil)

“We have a carol service coming up at the end of term, but it's not Christian. It's just a choir.” (Pupil)

“Our carol service is on the last day, so it's maybe not officially optional, but maybe lots of children just don't come in if they don't want to be part of it.” (Teacher)

A recent controversy over the A-level RE specification highlighted the sensitivity around Christian influences within the school. When proposals were made to replace a philosophy module with one focused on Celtic Church history, some parents expressed strong opposition to what they perceived to be an unwanted Christian emphasis.

“The A-level students, when they were told that they can't do that philosophy module at A-level, that it was going to be Celtic Church history, that parents were up in arms about it, that their child didn't want to do it. They didn't want to do anything Christian based, even though the other module is Christian ethics. There was lots of resistance there.” (Teacher)

“I guess the storyline around the A-level religious course is instructive in itself, because the allergic reaction that some of the students and their parents had, to what was essentially an attempt to maintain the course, albeit by taking, in their view, more Christian units, which was, by the way, a complete red herring, means that there is certainly sensitivity there. And it's going to be interesting, going into the new school year, because we will be adding into the curriculum an RE element at GCSE, which currently doesn't exist.” (Principal)

Pupils themselves reflected on the character of RE within the school, often describing it as being focused on philosophy, ethics, or world religions rather than Christianity. For some pupils, this was understood as part of the school's integrated identity.

“Our RE teaches like foreign religions, like it doesn't teach us Christianity. It's more like philosophy and ethics. Like morals and stuff like that.” (Pupil)

“We don't learn about Christianity in this school, it's mostly like other religions like Muslims and all. We don't really learn about Christianity because we're an integrated school.” (Pupil)

Although the school had an established Scripture Union (SU) group, awareness of its existence was limited; most pupils indicated that they did not realise it existed. One teacher explained that pupils usually discovered the group accidentally.

“Sometimes year 8s have walked past and been like, “Oh, what is this? Can we come”? And you'll say, “Yeah, of course, you can, you know, this is SU, you know, we get together, we have a few snacks, we have a chat, someone will kind of share a little thought, you know, you can come”, and they'll be like, “Oh, I didn't know it's a thing”. And they sort of embrace it quite openly, without maybe necessarily having any faith of their own. It's just something nice for them to be part of. I've not really experienced anyone be like, “Oh, actually, no, I don't really want to do that”. They'll be like “I'll come and give that a go”.” (Teacher)

“There's like a club at break. It's like a book club where they read the Bible or something.” (Pupil)

“I don't think that many know that Scripture Union is here, it's so tiny.” (Teacher)

Despite the sensitivities around Christian engagement in the school, some participants expressed an openness to opportunities for learning about different beliefs in a way that was informative rather than prescriptive. Pupils voiced interest in having the option of engaging with religious practices and proposed that assemblies could draw on a range of traditions to give a broader perspective.

“It might be nice to have opportunities, even for them, to learn about something different, even if it's not, you know, I suppose I was thinking at different points of the year; yes, they have a carol service, which is nice, but maybe, you know, around Easter or something, it might be good that they say, this is what, this is what it is. You don't have to believe in it. But are you interested in finding out a bit about what it is?” (Teacher)

“I think we should get the option to, like, go to church or something like during the morning or something.” (Pupil)

“If [principal] brought in like, ministers and leaders from like, different religions to do assemblies, like every week and just like, rotate, that would be like, good.” (Pupil)

For other pupils, church involvement was seen as a matter of personal choice rather than something to be facilitated in the school context, with the view that those seeking a Christian education should attend a specifically Christian school instead. These pupils felt strongly that Christian engagement should remain separate from school life.

“If high school students want to go to church, they can do that in their own time. Primary school kids aren't going to go to church on their own, so they're made to do it.” (Pupil)

“If you want Christianity in school, you should go to like a Christian school.” (Pupil)

Ethos

Participants described the school's commitment to integration and respect for diversity. In order to create a context where different backgrounds were acknowledged and valued, both staff and pupils highlighted that their school's ethos was non-religious.

“It's quite an integrated school, mixed all-ability, very much trying to focus on making sure people other backgrounds are respected.” (Teacher)

“There isn't really a religious identity at this school.” (Teacher)

“Having no religion is like, most of the school.” (Pupil)

Some of the staff reflected on what integrated education should mean in practice. While the founding charter had envisaged a role for ministers of religion, this aspect of ethos had not always been realised. The teachers explained that integration should not mean avoiding discussion of religious difference but rather fostering an environment where diversity of belief can be expressed and respected.

“Our founding charter specifically talks about ministers of religion coming in and having a role in school. But our principal feels like in the past that bit has sort of been ignored.” (Teacher)

“This school is not ever going to become, you know, a school where religion is sort of forced on anyone. But, I think maybe sometimes people think that integrated education means that we just don't talk about anything that's different, and then we just say, “oh, but we're all the same, so it's fine”, but actually, maybe a better version of integration is, will we talk about the things that are different, but everyone's respected and everyone's encouraged... I think maybe that's kind of where we're kind of headed towards being more open about our differences but then respecting them. People should be allowed to be any faith or no faith.” (Teacher)

The principal echoed this, noting that the absence of religion in school life could sometimes be seen as a way to achieve integration, but argued that this risked excluding those with religious beliefs. The restoration of a statutory religious element was therefore welcomed as part of developing a more balanced ethos.

“We're going to restore the statutory religious element, I think because, I think there's almost been an aversion, and if I can understand where it's come from, I suspect in many integrated schools, leaving religion out, almost facilitated a particular brand of integration, but for me, that's excluding those with religious views.” (Principal)

Value of Engagement

Staff and pupils highlighted a range of perspectives on the value of engagement between the school and churches, with comments reflecting both positive experiences and reservations. Teachers described how involvement in faith-based groups such as Scripture Union provided important encouragement for some students who identified as Christians, offering them a sense of belonging and support.

“There was one of the year 13s this year, who hadn't come along before, but someone else in his year group said to him, “oh”, you know, “I found out you're a Christian. Do you want to come to SU”? And then he came along and sort of said, “I wish I'd known this was here, because I kind of felt like it's just me on my own”, and then felt like it was nice to have a little group of people that he could talk to and meet up with.” (Teacher)

The principal reflected on the wider value of church links, pointing to both practical and spiritual forms of support. While acknowledging the historically uneasy relationship between the integrated sector and churches, they emphasised the significance of prayer, encouragement, and community ties.

“There's been such an almost awkward relationship, with churches and the integrated sector... But the value is, it's intrinsic, it's spiritual, it's active, in terms of support from the churches. Practical support.” (Principal)

“I can testify now to the power of prayer... There was a particularly troubling situation the school was facing. And [local ministers] prayed for the school. And later that evening, we had a remarkable event. And I thought, do you know what? There's something in this religion thing, you know?” (Principal)

“[The churches] have our best interests at heart. They pray for us. They support us. And so, the value is immense. It's daily, and let's not forget, many of the children that come through the doors of the school every day, attend church. They're part of religious families, and so we should embrace that and celebrate that and respect those that don't have religious views, because if learning from each other means anything, it's the ability to have peaceful conversations and to be interested in each other without necessarily trying to change anyone's view.” (Principal)

Pupils expressed more mixed views regarding the value of Christian engagement in school. Some felt that schools could provide opportunities to learn about religion or engage with it when such opportunities were not available at home or reflected that their earlier education had left them with little understanding of Christianity.

“Some people in their like, homes and all, they don't have the, like, the chance to go to church or stuff like that. So they might want to, like, come into school and do that, learn a bit more about, like, the religion they follow, if they can't do that at home. So it'd be like a good thing if we had more of that.” (Pupil)

“I went to an integrated primary school, but I didn't like have the chance to learn about... Christianity, so I don't really know that much, but it'd be like, good if I could, like, learn more.” (Pupil)

“My primary school, like, had no funding, so I'm assuming they just used churches for, like, hosting extracurriculars and, like, filling the time.” (Pupil)

Other pupils voiced reluctance about religious activities being embedded in school life. For them, prayer and moral teaching were unnecessary elements of the school day, and should be as an individual choice, particularly for older pupils.

“I think it's better we don't pray here because I don't want to do it every morning.” (Pupil)

“For the younger kids... the Bible stories have good morals behind them. But I think as you get older and you're obviously like making decisions for yourself that I think it is important to not have anyone telling you, oh, this is great. You should definitely do this. I think it's something that it's a choice that you make. And I feel like we've all learned right from wrong once we're at this stage. So maybe the teachings, they're still important, but maybe they aren't as important.” (Pupil)

Inclusivity, Diversity, and Respect

Issues of inclusivity, diversity, and respect were central to how staff, parents, and pupils described the school's ethos. While experiences and expectations varied, participants consistently highlighted the importance of ensuring that all backgrounds were acknowledged and that pupils felt neither excluded nor pressured in relation to matters of faith. Teachers described the school as aiming to provide a balanced approach to religion, with respect for diversity a central element of its ethos.

“When I was doing the open day... some parents were like, asking me, so, ‘so is it all Christian based’? And I'm saying, ‘no, we try to give variety of views here’. And they were like, ‘Oh, that's good. That's good. Because everywhere else that I've been to is very Christian based’.” (Teacher)

“In this school religion is not mentioned at all, because Northern Ireland is becoming more diverse.” (Teacher)

The principal also emphasised diversity as a defining feature of the school community. They highlighted efforts to welcome refugee and newcomer families, while also noting that greater religious diversity could further enrich the school.

“Certainly, our corridors have become more colourful in the last four years. Again, we've been very active in welcoming refugee children, or indeed, welcoming families who've moved into the area from abroad, and trying to give them such a positive

experience that they would bring others. So, we're much more diverse, but we're not desperately diverse in terms of non-Christian religions, and I would like to see that change in keeping with our local population.” (Principal)

Pupils recalled a variety of experiences and views on inclusivity. Many contrasted their current integrated school with primary schools, where they had sometimes felt compelled to participate in Christian practices. Some valued the choice they now had, and questioned whether the school’s approach to inclusivity left space for them to openly express their own views.

“Because it's integrated here, so like he [the principal] can't like, force it on anyone, whereas, like, my primary school's Christian, Catholic. So, like, it was forced. You didn't really have an option.” (Pupil)

“My parents turned like atheist before I was born, but up until maybe P3 in primary school, we had to sing all the hymns... They took up with the school boards, and they changed it so that we didn't have to do that anymore. You're allowed to opt out if you want to. You just go to a different room with other people that opted out or you can just stay quiet and not join in.” (Pupil)

“When [Principal] made a comment about leaving our political opinions at the doorstep, I feel like it wasn't right for him to say that because we want to bring our opinions into our school and for people to respect them.” (Pupil)

Some pupils argued that offering space for one tradition could feel exclusionary, stressing that fairness meant including a variety of faiths or leaving religious practice outside of school altogether.

“I think it's better this way because we're an integrated school, we have a bunch of different religions. I would feel like left out if everybody was doing like Christianity and you didn't believe in any of that stuff.” (Pupil)

“If you don't really believe in it, why would you be there? Like what's the point in being there?” (Pupil)

“It wouldn't be fair like to learn just about the, just do Christian, like, prayers and songs, like, I think because we have, like, students from, like, a bunch of different backgrounds and stuff. So, it would probably be more fair if we done like Jewish, like, prayers and Muslim prayers and all.” (Pupil)

“My mum and dad said, like, when they were sending me to [school], they said, how like, it's good to learn other people's religions. So, like, if you're talking to someone in that, like, you maybe understand them a bit better.” (Pupil)

Some pupils were able to recall specific instances when they felt excluded in primary school due to their own or their family’s faith background. These experiences of being left out or pressured into conformity influenced how they now viewed the importance of inclusivity and respect in an integrated setting.

“In primary school, I would always have to sit out for church and stuff, because I'm Muslim and I don't do that, so I would have to stay in the classroom while they went out and stuff... I guess it was a bit sad that I couldn't be with my friends like all the time.” (Pupil)

“In primary school, I used to feel very left out when we used to do about Christianity, like I, there was a point in my life I wasn't a proper Christian, but I remember going to

the library and I brought home a Bible and I used to sit at home and read it because I wanted to be like my friends, so I could be with them, but I couldn't because, like, I was never a proper Christian, because my family's not religious, so I used to feel very left out until I was older, and then I realised, well, I don't need to be like I don't need to be a Christian to have Christian friends.” (Pupil)

“I don't really go to church or anything, but I remember... in P5 we were meant to go to Mass and I didn't really want to go, because, I don't know, I just didn't really have to sit, yeah, so I didn't, I didn't want to go. And I remember my teacher, she's very Catholic, and she was like suddenly, like, she's just making these, like, saying these things in front of the whole class to make me feel bad about not going to church. And the other kids were like, ‘that's not fair, like they went to our practices. Why aren't you going to theirs? You need to be respectful. It's their communion’. But I just, I wasn't very and then I felt like I had done something wrong, like the fact that I didn't want to go to church like, I was like, I just didn't, because I didn't really believe, like, so I just felt very left out and there was a point I didn't go to school for two days because my teacher was saying so many things that made me feel so like, almost guilty, like I'd done something wrong... It should have been optional to go to church.” (Pupil)

Others stressed the need for greater exposure to multiple religions. Both staff and pupils suggested that educating young people about a variety of beliefs was an effective way of promoting tolerance and broadening understanding.

“I think if they're gonna talk about Christianity, they need to include all the six main world religions... I didn't even know that there was more than two religions when I until I, like, maybe, like, P7 and P6.” (Pupil)

“Instead of just saying we accept everyone, but you can't show who you are, we should have the opportunity for people to feel welcome and to learn about other religions. Because I would be very interested in, definitely something I would go to if there was opportunities for that.” (Pupil)

“Maybe we just keep the same religions that we were given as a child because we don't know anything about any other ones. I think maybe if we had the opportunity to learn about other people's religions, where it might open like the door and realise you don't just have to be Catholic or Protestant in Northern Ireland, there are other like options.” (Pupil)

“If you don't talk about religion... [pupils] aren't aware that religion can exist outside of politics. It's kind of flattened down and it becomes more controversial if that's their only interaction with it... I think it would maybe benefit from some additional kind of information, and just not having it pushed upon them, but presented as these are people's experiences, and this is what they believe. And it might be something you believe, and if you do, then you don't have to pretend, that you don't have to fit in. But also, if you don't believe it, that's fine. You can take an academic interest in it. You can, you know, you can study RE without being at all religious.” (Teacher)

However, some staff felt that the school had gone too far in removing Christian engagement from school life. For them, the absence of space for prayer or visible expressions of faith risked leaving religious families feeling isolated or unsupported.

“I had one parent who had phoned wanting to explore the idea of, like a prayer space in school or something like that... They would have liked there to be something more,

and maybe felt like their children, I think, you know, they were coming from a religious background, and maybe felt like their two children in the school felt a bit isolated.” (Teacher)

A number of pupils also voiced a sense that opportunities for Christian involvement were lacking. Some suggested that having options such as attending church, celebrating Christian festivals, or accessing Scripture Union more visibly could help those who wanted to engage, while still respecting others’ choices.

“I think we should have an option to go to church, because some people are religious and they might not have time to do it in their own time, like after school.” (Pupil)

“I think it would be better if we had options to do anything, like, I didn't know that Scripture Union existed. I don't, like, know what they do in it either. We don't get to go down to the church, not even at Christmas or Easter. We don't get to experience, like, mass. But that would be good, because not everyone gets to do it in their home life. It would just be good if we could have the option to do that.” (Pupil)

“I think it's fair that people should also be able to follow their own religion. But then I think we should also have more Scripture Union things for like, different religions as well, not just one.” (Pupil)

Conclusion

This case study highlights the complexity of engagement with churches and Christian organisations within an integrated post-primary context. While staff emphasised strong links with local clergy and valued the practical and spiritual support offered, pupils often perceived limited visibility of such engagement, with many unaware of activities such as Scripture Union. Festive events, curriculum controversies, and the role of RE illustrated how easily Christian involvement could become contested, particularly among parents wary of perceived religious influence.

The ethos of the school was consistently framed in terms of integration, respect, and inclusivity, with staff and pupils alike stressing the importance of not imposing religion while creating space for differences to be recognised. The value of church involvement was understood in diverse ways: for some, it provided essential encouragement and a sense of belonging, while others felt religious engagement should remain an individual choice. Pupils’ recollections of exclusion or pressure in earlier school settings underscored the importance of maintaining choice and respect in religious matters. At the same time, some staff and families felt that Christian engagement had been reduced too far, leaving religious pupils and parents isolated.

6.6 Special School Case Study

This case study explores Christian engagement within a rural special school setting for children and young people with severe or profound/multiple learning difficulties. The participants included three school leaders (the Principal, Vice Principal, and a Governor), three teachers, and ten pupils. As one school leader explained, *“This is a special school for children with severe and profound, multiple learning difficulties.”* Twelve parents were also interviewed at an afterschool Christian youth club that used the school premises. The findings highlight how the school’s distinctively Christian ethos shapes daily practices, relationships with churches, and wider community involvement, while also illustrating the value placed on inclusivity, diversity, and respect.

Engagement with churches/Christian organisations

Engagement with churches and Christian organisations within the school was described as multifaceted, with assemblies, prayer practices, and sacramental preparation all playing an important role in school life. Participants emphasised that Christian themes are woven into assemblies and linked to the wider liturgical calendar.

“We’re marking the Christian calendar and all those different events. And some of us, depending on what’s happening in assembly, might take a value, for example, and hone in on that value. And I then would link that to a Bible story.” (Teacher)

“20 years ago, whenever I started here, I was RE coordinator for several years. And one of the things we did was raise the profile of assembly, because we were very good at coming together collectively. But it was very difficult to get a focus and our young people, there wasn’t a lot of looking at traditional values in terms of Christianity for through like singing, which was a big thing that I wanted to do and reintroduce... I really wanted that to be something and we would have had a lot more involvement with like priests coming in regularly.” (Teacher)

“This year at Harvest we did a thank you tree that all of the children contributed to being thankful for something.” (Teacher)

Assemblies were seen as a key area for outside involvement, though the number of external speakers had diminished in recent years.

“The assembly rota goes out and it’s done fairly. So, whenever it comes around to your turn, if you wish to get an outside speaker in, you’re free to do that. That could be local clergy or whatever, and in the past, we’ve done that a lot. Probably since Covid and coming back, we never really got that established again.” (Teacher)

Prayer was described as central to the life of the school, practised both corporately and in classrooms. The pupils demonstrated their ability to recite the Lord’s Prayer, the school prayer, and a thanksgiving prayer.

“Prayer is a huge thing in this school. There’s a school prayer that we say every day, and sometimes we do grace... Some classes do it in Makaton.” (Teacher)

“Every classroom have their morning assemblies, which is built around the morning prayer.” (School Leader)

“In the assembly, we do lots of prayers.” (Pupil)

The involvement of clergy in school life was viewed as positive, but not without its challenges. Participants reflected on denominational differences and emphasised the importance of appropriateness and sensitivity when outside speakers engage with pupils.

“I think it's harder for the priests coming in, because they are used to liturgy very much so whereas the Protestant faith people who come in are used to saying whatever they want to say.” (School Leader)

“Religion can have very strong words in it, and sometimes the people who say them don't break them down, and they leave them with this very strong image and picture, blood and and death and terrible things are said to small children... And I think that it's important that we put some form of protection in that. We're not asking people to dilute their faith. We're asking them to put it in an appropriate way” (School Leader)

School leaders stressed the importance of building relationships and understanding the particular special educational needs of their pupils before external visitors, such as clergy or church workers, lead activities. They highlighted the value of potential new external speakers spending time within the school community to gain insight into what pupils can engage with appropriately.

“It really helps that somebody just doesn't arrive here and think, right, I'm doing it today. It really would be helpful if they came and observed on a different day, joined us on that, on a you know, in barbecues or some of these sorts of things, so that they can get a feel for what the young people can manage, and then hopefully they can moderate what they maybe have to say.” (School Leader)

Sacramental preparation was identified as another key area of church engagement. Participants described the distinctive way these celebrations are approached in a special school context.

“There's booklets that are sent home to try and explain to the parents. But it's, it's lovely here. The sacraments are lovely here, because I've been involved in preparing children for sacraments for 30 years, but within a special needs setting, it's totally appropriate... It's special for the parents because it's pitched at an appropriate level. And the priest was saying, “if there's noise today, the more noise, the better”... There's no expectations for wearing fancy clothes. Wear what you want, make as much noise as you want, but the sacrament is delivered in a very appropriate way.” (School Leader)

Ongoing engagement with churches was seen in the long-running youth club organised by the school and its partners. The club was described by a school leader as both social and spiritual in its purpose. The pupils all said they enjoyed going to the youth club, and had friends who attended.

“We have a youth club... The objective is to show the love of Jesus Christ to young people with learning disabilities and to their parents, which is a really important part of it, and it's a safe environment where they can have their social and spiritual needs met. And that's our, our aim. So, we've been doing this once a month for 20 years.” (School Leader)

“You do different games, and at the end of the, then, at the end of the month, you get a barbecue.” (Pupil)

Ethos

The teachers consistently described the school's ethos as being firmly and historically rooted in Christianity, emphasising that it was central to the school's life and identity.

“The Christian ethos is the heart of this school.” (Teacher)

“Christianity is just part of who we are. It’s who and what we are. You don’t even question it.” (Teacher)

“As far as I can remember, the school has always had a Christian ethos.” (Teacher)

The teachers also highlighted the importance of being transparent about the school’s Christian identity and practices. One teacher explained how this openness is expressed in the life of the school.

“We are very open about our ethos, because we have to be. There’s no point pretending. We celebrate First Communion and we celebrate all of those sacraments, and we also talk about other denominations within Christianity too.” (Teacher)

At the same time, the school leadership team recognised that while the ethos of the school is distinctly Christian, its underlying values resonate more broadly.

“We would lose the richness of experience by not having a Christian ethos, the valuable experience of exploration within spirituality, regardless of what that is, because without something to compare it to and contrast with, what is the point?” (School Leader)

“It’s not named anywhere, but if anybody asked me, I’d say, yeah, it is Christian ethos, but the values that we have... they’re all very broadly speaking, any world religion would probably have very much the same values.” (School Leader)

Value of Engagement

The value of Christian engagement in the school and wider community was expressed in diverse ways, ranging from the enrichment of assemblies and opportunities for pupils, to pastoral support for staff, and the unique provision offered through the youth club. Teachers highlighted the importance of ensuring that any external input was carefully tailored to the needs of the pupils and emphasised that engagement provided the opportunity for spiritual connection even for those who cannot easily communicate.

“If we’re inviting someone in to take an assembly, it needs to be suited to the needs of the kids and pitched right... That’s why SU are a dead certain, you know they can entertain a crowd, for want of a better word.” (Teacher)

“We all need and have that desire for spirituality, whether or not it’s acknowledged. And I think of my young people who aren’t able to verbalise, and I think of how we would respectfully deal, like we’ve been doing about feelings about how you feel. And these are not young people who are necessarily going to give you an indication, because they’re not mobile and they’re not verbal. But you know when you know them so well, that reaction and there is a connection to something greater than us. So, we all feel that, that joy.” (Teacher)

The school leaders described how engagement broadened the experiences of the pupils and demonstrated inclusivity.

“The benefit is huge, huge, because it’s and I think it gives our staff that platform to say for us, as a leadership within the school, we’re not narrow minded. We’re actually opening our doors to everybody, and we have become inclusive. And actually the feedback from staff has been ‘It’s lovely to see somebody else that’s actually different’.” (School Leader)

“Some of those really meaningful experiences for young people, only happen when we open up the doors and bring people in and expose them. It's none of this, “Oh, you can't go here and you can't go there, and you're not allowed to do that, and whatever”, it's more providing opportunities. So, bringing people in to do it, is really uplifting, because there's nothing worse than the same person doing the same thing all the time?” (School Leader)

Participants emphasised the importance of including parents' voices in shaping and evaluating the school's engagement with churches and Christian organisations.

“We're always trying to gauge response from our parents, [Principal] is always throwing out surveys to gather evidence and feedback. And so, everybody has their input.” (School Leader)

The school's partnerships with churches were also seen as vital sources of pastoral care during difficult times.

“We as a school, benefit greatly from it, from a pastoral support point of view. When things have happened and things have happened, we've lost members of staff very suddenly here, we've had suicides here with the staff and it's our church friends who gather around us at those moments in time and support us... We had a very tragic loss a couple of years ago, and we brought in local pastors and they prayed with [the staff]. So, we had both the Catholic and Protestant faiths and different people on different days coming in, to support the staff. And that is hugely important. And again, people, you know, our churches, people change in them, so you have to keep revisiting those people to make sure that on the moments that you really need them, that they are there for you, for your team.” (School Leader)

Leaders reflected that many of their pupils are often overlooked by mainstream churches, making school-based engagement all the more significant.

“Many of our young people are really on the margins of whatever faith they're part of, and all of the churches have to make a bigger effort. They can only do that when they get to know the young people and they get to know what they can teach.” (School Leader)

The youth club was repeatedly highlighted as an invaluable expression of Christian engagement, not only for pupils but also for families and volunteers.

“It's been such a positive thing for the school and also for the local churches, because as well as providing something for children and young people, we've provided a place for young volunteers and older volunteers.” (School Leader)

“In that youth club, we're the ones who are the joy, the love of God, for whatever level that child understands that... And when you see children with their hands up, you know, doing the Hosanna thing, you're thinking, you know what? Even if they don't understand the words, they're getting the feeling.” (School Leader)

“I send [child] to the club because it's Christian. Because you've got the caring aspect with that. But most people just come for the provision I think.” (Parent)

“The first time I came, for me personally I just came for the provision, but then whenever I came I realised it was a Christian organisation and I was very happy with that.” (Parent)

“The care and the nurture in this school is unbelievable. And in the club, they provide one-on-one care for anyone who needs it, which is very rare. There’s no other clubs out there for our children. The love those volunteers have for our children, we can’t find that anywhere else. So, it’s fine saying, there shouldn’t be a Christian influence in school, but they’re the only ones offering any help or support. If they didn’t, no one would. And that speaks volumes.” (Parent)

“This club is probably one of only two places we’ve ever been where our child has been accepted for who he is... It was such a strange experience the first time I came, because somebody was coming and looking after my child, and that just doesn’t happen.” (Parent)

Parents also linked the engagement to wider moral and social support.

“You’ve got to believe in something. If you believe in nothing, you’ve got no moral compass. You’ve got to cherish the good, because if you don’t, the bad will replace it.” (Parent)

“We’ve seen our children grow up together you know, come here together and enjoy this and get the benefit of it. There is a bond there. And, you know, when you look back to, you know, whenever this began, and there was nothing like this before, you know, there were dark days since, you do get a lot of support from, from other, obviously, from other parents, because then you have, sort of, obviously, obviously, every child is different, but you have the, you know, we have that common, that common experience, as [name of parent] said, you know, even dealing with outside agencies and giving each other advice, but just the general, you know, you don’t have to go into detail explaining anything, because the other parent knows, because they have the same experience at home with their child and that sort of thing. Yeah, so it is good. It’s good for parents.” (Parent)

The uniqueness of the provision was further underlined by the distances families were willing to travel.

“We drive 25 miles to come here and the same home, obviously. And there’s nothing in any other school, anything remotely that looks like this, that we could take our son to. So, if the government were talking about not having things in schools because they’re Christian or whatever like, and yet it doesn’t, doesn’t worry us to drive 25 mile for it... And I think we have benefited more than [child] sometimes!” (Parent)

Inclusivity, Diversity, and Respect

The school staff described their school as a place where diversity, inclusion, and openness were central to its identity.

“What we do well is diversity. What we do well is we do inclusion, and what we do well is we do openness.” (Teacher)

Participants reflected on the respect shown towards pupils and families from a range of faith backgrounds. This included inviting external speakers from other traditions.

“We had a representative from a Jewish community, because I remember doing that, and someone from something else, I can’t remember.” (Teacher)

“It not about pushing views on anyone. We’re a mixed school... There is a lovely respect for that.” (Teacher)

“There are so many cultures who are now coming to the school, so many different aspects of the children's lives at home... We are being informed all the time about what parents want for their children. So as a board, we're very mindful of that.” (School Governor)

The diversity within the beliefs of the staff team was also celebrated, although it did come with associated challenges, especially with requirements to lead Christian practices such as assemblies.

“Our staff are very diverse, but for all of us to come together and to mix and to work together, and you come from so many different backgrounds... It doesn't matter what your background is. You're here for the good of the children.” (Teacher)

“Some of our teachers had developed almost a nervousness about doing assembly. And I think one of those things too, is that your personal belief system... We do have a Christian ethos, so it is part of our responsibility to speak about that... So if our staff feel they’re more secular, to use that term, we do have a duty to be responsible to that and sensitive. But we are a Christian school.” (Teacher)

The school leaders highlighted how they were explicit about the Christian ethos of the school from the outset but often reassured the inclusivity of their content and approach. They also described how children could be withdrawn from certain activities without stigma.

“At the start, when we're talking to [parents], I tell them that the school has a Christian ethos. We do Christian assemblies. Do you want your child to be in this? Not in this? We have one child potentially exempt, but actually, they're not at all bothered by it, really. When the parent really got to know what our assemblies were about, there was no offence with it and we actually, your child's missing out on something that's genuinely lovely and inclusive... They're very happy for the child to attend.” (School Leader)

“If I thought that our parents had a problem, I would have a problem. But no, our parents don't have a problem.” (School Leader)

“A few years back we did have one child that was withdrawn... There was no problem, different things were provided for that young person and it was never made a big deal of.” (Teacher)

This ethos of openness extended beyond the classroom into extracurricular provision. In particular, the school’s Christian youth club was described as both explicit about its faith basis and inclusive of families from all backgrounds.

“We have families from all faiths at our Christian youth club that is overtly Christian, and parents are much less suspicious of what we would be doing.” (School Leader)

“We have 40 volunteers from 12 to 14 different churches, of all faiths, who are volunteers and who are signing up to come to a Christian based youth club. We don't hide that. It's not just a youth club at a school. It is a Christian based youth club in the school. And that's explicit from the start.” (School Leader)

Inclusivity was also seen in the way staff from different Christian traditions contributed to sacramental preparation.

“Most staff that are preparing our children for the sacrament of Holy Communion are actually from the Protestant community.” (School Leader)

Both staff and parents emphasised that religion should not be excluded from the school environment, framing the school as a neutral meeting ground where faith and non-faith can co-exist respectfully. They argued that removing religion would not only diminish children’s opportunities to encounter difference but also risk isolating faith to private spaces, rather than modelling shared community.

“If you take all religion out of schools, you're not fulfilling your duty, because it is our duty to give our children options. It is our duty to explain that what this person believes is not the same as what this person believes, but that's okay, because you can still be together and you can still have a relationship and interpersonal development. It would be wrong to pretend it doesn't exist, because I always used to say that I loved it when someone said they're an atheist, I used to think that was amazing, because imagine being so sure of something that you could give yourself a label, I love that!” (Teacher)

“If you force [religion] out of the school then it's going to be isolated. It's going to be one person or one or one community centre, one the school is a neutral ground where everybody come to gather for the greater good.” (Parent)

Conclusion

This case study highlights how a distinctly Christian ethos can be both deeply rooted and openly expressed, while at the same time fostering inclusion, respect, and diversity. The school positions its ethos not as restrictive, but as a framework through which values, spirituality, and community engagement can be explored. Participants described a culture in which assemblies, prayer, sacramental preparation, and church partnerships play an integral role in daily life. Importantly, these practices were not experienced as imposed, but as opportunities for enrichment, connection, and pastoral support, carefully adapted to the needs of children and young people within a special school context.

At the same time, the school’s approach to Christian engagement was consistently characterised by openness and sensitivity. Participants emphasised that diversity of belief among pupils, staff, and families was recognised and respected, with provision made for those who wished to withdraw or adapt their involvement. Far from creating division, this ethos was understood as a way of bringing people together, offering neutral ground where faith and non-faith could coexist and relationships could flourish. In this setting, Christian engagement was valued not only as a spiritual expression but also as a vital source of inclusion, care, and community for pupils, parents, and staff alike.

6.7 Case Study Summary

The six case studies provide a varied depiction of how schools across Northern Ireland engage with Christian churches and organisations. While each school context was distinctive, several recurring themes emerged. These themes illustrate both the opportunities and challenges that characterise Church engagement within schools, offering insights into ethos, inclusivity and value.

Value of Engagement for Pupils, Families, and the Wider Community

Participants described church engagement as valuable on multiple levels. On a practical level, schools benefited from the tangible support of churches and Christian organisations through the provision of facilities, financial assistance and volunteer involvement. Churches frequently offered the use of halls and car parks, provided funding for specific programmes, and mobilised congregational members to support with reading, mentoring or extracurricular activities. In contexts of budgetary constraint, such support was seen as indispensable.

Alongside these practical contributions, participants highlighted the emotional and pastoral value of church engagement. Clergy and ministry leaders were regarded as trusted figures who could offer comfort during bereavement, guidance in times of crisis, and reassurance for pupils facing transition or personal challenges. Pupils themselves often described assemblies, prayer times, and Scripture Union groups as spaces where they could pause, reflect and feel a sense of calm or belonging.

Church engagement was also seen as central to pupils' moral development. Teachers, governors, and parents frequently emphasised that Christian teaching instilled values such as kindness, respect, honesty, and forgiveness; qualities regarded as vital not only for the development of personal character, but also for preparing children to contribute positively to society. While participants acknowledged that not all families were practising Christians, many argued that these values transcended religious boundaries and were widely recognised as beneficial for children's growth and wellbeing.

Ethos as a Defining Feature

Across all sectors, school ethos emerged as a central factor shaping how engagement with churches was experienced. In the Catholic maintained primary school, faith was described as integral to daily life, embedded through sacramental preparation, prayer and liturgical celebrations. In the controlled schools, ethos was often linked to the historic Protestant foundations of the sector, sustained through assemblies, pastoral care and governance. The integrated school articulated a more pluralistic approach, seeking to balance Christian influence with inclusivity across diverse backgrounds.

Importantly, the strength of a school's Christian ethos was often connected to the demographic profile of its community. Where the majority of pupils and staff identified as Christian, ethos was seen as a natural extension of shared values and traditions, rather than something externally imposed. This alignment between ethos and community identity reinforced a sense of authenticity and belonging, while also helping to sustain practices such as prayer, assemblies and church partnerships as normal and accepted parts of school life. In all cases, ethos was not static but seen as requiring ongoing leadership, intentionality and community support.

Format of Engagement

Across all six case studies, assemblies emerged as the most visible and regular format of church and Christian organisation involvement. Local clergy and ministry leaders were frequently invited to lead assemblies, often on a rota basis to ensure representation from different

denominations. These assemblies were valued for their accessibility, variety and the opportunity they provided for pupils to encounter Christian teaching and positive moral values in an engaging way. Parents and pupils described them as both enjoyable and formative, while school leaders emphasised that they reinforced the school's Christian ethos.

Beyond assemblies, clergy and ministry leaders also contributed in a range of other ways, including classroom visits, Scripture Union groups and governance roles. In the Catholic maintained primary school, the parish priest played a consistent and central role in sacramental preparation, pastoral care and religious education. In the controlled schools, ministers were often described as visible but their involvement depended on personal availability and existing community ties. In several contexts, Christian organisations were noted for their distinctive role in creating safe, voluntary spaces, such as lunchtime or after-school clubs, where pupils could explore faith in a more interactive or relational format.

Inclusivity, Diversity and Respect

Another theme across the case studies was the importance of inclusivity in faith engagement. Schools emphasised respect for pupils and families from different backgrounds, with practical accommodations made for those who opted out of certain religious activities. Staff and parents frequently described Christian values of kindness, respect and compassion as being applied in ways that included, rather than excluded, those from non-Christian or non-practising families. Integrated schools in particular highlighted their efforts to balance Christian input with the need to reflect broader societal diversity.

However, the case studies revealed differing interpretations of what “respect” entails. In some schools, inclusivity was framed primarily as an expectation that pupils and families of other faiths should respect the Christian ethos of the school, even if they chose not to participate fully. In others, respect was understood more in terms of the school safeguarding the rights of individual pupils and parents, with adjustments made to ensure they were not placed in uncomfortable or exclusionary situations. This contrast highlights a subtle but significant difference between an ethos-driven model of inclusivity, where the collective culture is prioritised, and a rights-driven model, where the emphasis falls on the accommodation of individual choice.

Tensions and Future Challenges

While experiences were overwhelmingly positive, some tensions were noted. These included uncertainty about the boundaries of evangelism in school contexts, the risk of over-reliance on individual clergy or principals to sustain ethos, and the challenge of adapting to societal changes in religious practice. Participants raised concerns about the sustainability of engagement, particularly in controlled schools where recruitment rules prevent faith from being considered in staffing, and in contexts where church attendance is declining.

Conclusion

The six case studies suggest that engagement between schools and churches or Christian organisations in Northern Ireland is multifaceted, relational and embedded in the ethos of the school. While the form and intensity of engagement varies across sectors, these findings highlight the potential value of church-school relationships, while also indicating areas where future attention is needed to ensure such engagement remains inclusive, respectful and sustainable.

Chapter 7: Focus Group with Parents for Inclusive Education

To ensure that the research reflected a diverse range of parental views, a focus group was organised with three representatives from *Parents for Inclusive Education*, which is a group advocating for a more inclusive approach within Northern Ireland's education system. Early in the research process, this group expressed concern that some parents might be reluctant to speak openly if their views were at odds with their child's school's Christian ethos. In response, the research team invited them to participate in a dedicated interview to ensure their perspectives, and those of like-minded parents, were fully represented within the study.

Participants expressed significant concerns about the extent and manner of Christian influence within the education system. For many, the first encounter with religious content in school was unsettling, with parents noting with concern that even seemingly innocent topics carried inappropriate theological themes.

“The first interaction we'd had was when my daughter who was in P1 came home and said there was a story at school today, it was about God dislocating someone's hip. I think it's the story of Jacob... We were quite surprised that this story had been taught to her in the first place... It didn't seem like an appropriate story for P1.”

“Christianity just permeates a lot of the things in the school system. They come home with colouring sheets of Noah's ark like again, just because it's animals, it's a story about genocide, I understand that animals are cute to colour, but I don't think that's a story that's very appropriate for kids.”

For some parents, concerns with church involvement extended beyond the content. Participants highlighted the structural embedding of Christianity within school, and questioned the appropriateness of using public funding for promoting a faith-based ethos.

“All the schools are Christian schools... There is an assumption that we're all Christian here type of thing.”

“If you're a state school, if you're taking public money, you should not be a faith school. If you want to send your children to a Catholic school and it's a fee-paying school, fine, go ahead.”

Participants raised concerns about the assumption that participation in school life often involves exposure to explicitly Christian content, leaving families with limited options if they want their children to take part in extra-curricular activities without religious messaging.

“My daughter was in the choir, wanted to be in the choir and participate in that. And we were finding that basically a hundred per cent of the songs were religious songs. One in particular was from Hillsong, which they, was their big song for the term and sort of a creationist song with a very catchy tune. But again, we had problems with the fact that to participate in that aspect of school life, it was pretty much, you were singing fairly strong, strong sort of Pentecostal Christian songs which as a non-religious family again sat uneasily with us. Now she ended up staying in the choir because she just really loved singing.”

Parents repeatedly emphasised that Christian organisations and churches should be able to offer extra-curricular opportunities provided that they were optional, outside of school time, and clearly communicated their content and intentions.

“I think it’s okay to call it indoctrination... here are after-school clubs where our school has got an after-school Scripture Union club, for example. That’s quite a popular club. That’s fine, you know, because people, that’s opt in and there’s plenty of after-school clubs... The problem is that it’s in school time.”

“I would never dare to go into a church and tell them you should not teach them this. Teach them whatever you want within your premises, in your time, and it’s an opt in system.”

Parents were careful to note that they did not attribute this to malicious intent on the part of schools, but rather to a deeply ingrained culture where Christian norms were taken for granted. This sense of a default Christian framework was experienced by some parents as an assumption of shared belief.

“I don’t presume bad intention. I just think this is so ingrained in the way schools operate that they just do not see it.”

“The problematic thing is that I genuinely believe that they’re coming from a good place. I think they really are trying to save my kids from hell. I understand that in their heads they’re doing something extremely positive... But I think they’re extremely wrong. So, it’s very conflicting.”

Parents also raised concerns about the conditional nature of some church-based support programmes offered in schools. While they welcomed practical help, they questioned whether it was appropriate for such initiatives to include faith-based elements, particularly if the support was offered in conjunction with an evangelistic motive.

“There’s one of the organisations that does lots of lovely things and it’s, most of it sounds great. There’s a reading support thing that they do and they come into schools and read one-on-one with the pupils, and that’s great. But part of it is that they pray with the child. Now, I think they do a consent form... But it’s this give and take, you know, we’ll give you this support which we know you need, but the reason they’re there is to proselytise.”

“The problem is the conditionality of the help. If churches want to help practically, if they want to come and support, that’s fine. But if it’s conditional to time or access to my kid’s soul, then don’t.”

Parents also reflected on inconsistencies across the school sectors, suggesting that some are more transparent about their faith-based approach than others.

“I think the Catholic maintained sector is much more outright and explicit about the fact they’re doing faith formation. They’ll call it faith formation... The controlled sector doesn’t say that, and it’s more inconsistent across different controlled schools.”

Participants repeatedly highlighted a lack of clear and proactive communication from schools about religious activities and church involvement. For many, their only awareness of what was happening came anecdotally via their children rather than through any prior formal notification.

“There's been there's zero proactive communication about what's going on. There's been zero communication from the school to say this is what's happening... You wouldn't know unless your children told you.”

Another parent echoed this frustration, explaining that despite a direct conversation with the principal, the information they were given turned out to be incomplete.

“There has been zero information coming from school from the word go, absolutely none. Just from things that my daughter told me... I choose not to withdraw them from collective worship or religious education, even though I would ideally like it to not happen... The principal took time to meet me and listen to me and I sort of felt OK. Thank you. You've given me information and I feel moderately reassured that the way she presented it to me was it was minimised. You know, they come in three times a year. It's Christmas, Easter and harvest. Christian festivals. That's it. And our religious education, it just is what it is. It's the law, it's our curriculum. It's Christian... So, at the end of that conversation, I came away feeling like I'm the one with the problem... As it transpired, the information she gave me wasn't accurate, and there were many religious visitors.”

Parents emphasised that this lack of openness was avoidable, noting that schools are generally capable of effective communication and should be proactive in sharing information about religious activities.

“Transparency I think is really key, and proactive communication, I think that would be a brilliant start and it shouldn't be something that's hard. Schools are pretty good at communicating. I mean, I think most of us as parents feel that we get over-communicated to about all sorts of other things, and there are opt in's to many activities that our children do like if they're ever going on a trip.”

Some parents described feeling misled when the school initially claimed to be neutral or non-religious, only for their children's experiences to suggest otherwise.

“Every time I go to a new school, I am extremely open about my beliefs... I'm like we are an atheist family. This is what I believe in. It's you know what? How are you approaching this? And they say it's just very calm. Everything is celebrated, blah, blah, blah. We don't do anything religious. And then my friend called me and she was like, ask [child] what they do before lunch and [child] put their hands together and said ‘Thank you, God’. And I was like, wow.”

Parents also spoke about the emotional and social impact of faith-based practices in schools, highlighting moments where their children felt singled out or stigmatised for being part of a non-religious family.

“There have been, sort of, certain things have been said, like your parents need to go back to school because we're a non-religious family. I think my daughter was told ‘Your parents need to go back to primary school to learn about God’, which she was sad about.”

“I don't mind [child] believing or not believing. I just mind the imposition and them feeling left out like ‘Oh, I was just there, but I wasn't really praying’.”

One parent described how some Christian moral teachings directly conflicted with their beliefs. This participant revealed how it created tension in their family.

“So, you get to tell us that that we're wrong on a Sunday, but then on Monday, you come and tell my kids that God loves us? That puts me in a very difficult position.”

Other parents described feeling a subtle but persistent pressure to conform, where expressing concerns about religious content could leave them feeling like they were being “difficult.”

“It's the insidiousness of how things get included in the school and you are made out to be the difficult one.”

“The problem is that even when you go out of your way to explain, still the burden is on you, and these organisations come and these kind of, it's like a death by a million cuts, because every time you have to make your kid feel different. Every time you have to either talk to them later at home, or make the choice of what is going to happen if I opt them out and it just feels like an unnecessary burden for families.”

One parent suggested that relatively simple changes, such as offering children the option to reflect silently rather than join in with the prayers, could help to create a more inclusive environment.

“Some of the changes are so easy. You can just say, ‘I'm gonna now take two minutes to pray. If anybody wants to pray with me and the rest of you, if you want to take this time, you know, to think about, to be grateful for something or just to think about something positive.’ It's the presumption, it's the way the kids are told when organisations come in, ‘We are all Christians’ because kids very early understand that like if I am not Christian and we're talking as if we all are, what is wrong with me? What is wrong with my family?”

A number of parents felt that systemic issues in governance and oversight contributed to the persistence of religious dominance in schools.

“I don't have a problem with ministers being governors, but I don't think they should have that right. I think they should have to go through the same process as anyone else. So, I don't have a problem with a minister saying I'm going to go to be an EA governor or a parent governor. If the parents are voting and they choose that person, that's fine, but I don't think they should have the four out of nine spots on the board reserved for them on every controlled school.”

Lack of external inspection of Religious Education (RE) was also highlighted as a gap in accountability structures. Participants communicated concerns that the current content of many RE classes should belong in the private sphere of the home, rather than in the learning environment.

“Every single subject is inspected by the ETI apart from RE. So, one of the problems, related to the transparency thing, is that there's no oversight about what's happening at all. The church is allowed to come in and inspect, and sometimes schools are allowed to invite ETI in to inspect, but you can imagine how often that happens.”

“I think that it's extremely enriching for kids to understand and be curious because that's what we want. Kids with curiosity and critical thinking and willingness to learn.”

But if it's about learning about Christianity, I think that belongs to the private sphere of the home.”

This focus group with *Parents for Inclusive Education* highlighted persistent concerns about the presence and practice of Christianity within Northern Ireland's schools. While parents recognised the value of children learning about religion as part of a broad education, they consistently drew a distinction between objective religious education and faith formation, the latter of which they felt should belong to the private sphere of the home or be offered on an opt-in basis outside of the school day. Participants expressed particular concern about the assumption that Christian belief and practice are shared by *all* pupils, and the resulting pressure this puts on non-religious or minority-faith families. The parents called for increased transparency, better communication, and a genuine choice for families about whether and how their children engage in collective worship, visiting speakers, and other faith-related activities.

Chapter 8: Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, evidence is drawn together from the study's four online surveys (pupils, parents, principals, leaders of Christian churches/organisations), the mapping exercise representing Christian Ministry Organisation engagement, six in-depth school case studies and also the Parents for Inclusive Education (PIE) focus group. These findings are critically analysed in light of the wider policy context set out in Chapter 1, including ongoing debates about the role of religion in education, the JR87 Supreme Court judgement of November 2025, and recent research highlighting demographic change and increasing diversity in the school system (Gallagher, 2024). The following synthesis highlights convergences and tensions across the data, and offers conclusions and recommendations for practice, policy and future research.

8.2 The nature of engagement

Widespread Engagement Across Schools

Survey data confirm that Christian engagement in schools is widespread in Northern Ireland, albeit uneven geographically (see mapping exercise in Chapter 5) and across sectors. Almost all principals (94%) reported that their school engages with at least one local church, while nearly three quarters (73%) indicated links with at least one Christian organisation. The range of engagement is broad, but most commonly takes the form of supporting 'collective worship/assemblies/carol services' (95%), 'community-based programmes e.g., charity events, uniform/food banks' (51%), 'extra-curricular activities' (50%) and 'supporting the delivery of the NI curriculum' (45%). The mapping exercise also revealed a particular intensity of engagement by Christian organisations in urban areas and especially along the 'Jordanstown-Belfast-Portadown-Armagh-Dungannon' and 'Belfast-Bangor' corridors with lower levels of engagement further west and in rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Embedded Ethos in the Catholic Maintained Primary School and Special School

The case studies reveal very different ways in which this engagement is enacted, depending on school type and ethos. In the Catholic maintained primary school, Christianity was not presented as an add-on to school life but as something seamlessly embedded into the daily and seasonal rhythms of teaching and learning. Prayer, preparation for the sacraments and the liturgical calendar were described as integral to the life of the school, forming a backdrop against which all activities took place. As one teacher explained, "*Our ethos isn't something extra – it's who we are. Prayer, Mass, preparation for the sacraments... it all flows naturally into the life of the school.*" A governor echoed this, commenting that "*it's not hidden, it's not defensive – parents know when they choose this school that it is explicitly Catholic, and that's part of the attraction for many families.*" A parent added that "*It's not shoved down your throat. It's very much part of their [the children's] learning. They grow up through the school with it and it's the core of who we are.*"

A similarly embedded ethos was evident in the special school (which attracts pupils from both sides of the community). Here, Christianity was described by teachers as "*the heart of the*

school” and “it’s who and what we are”, expressed through daily prayers, assemblies linked to the Christian calendar, sacramental preparation adapted for children with severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties, and a long-running Christian youth club for pupils and families. Teachers and leaders emphasised that the ethos was not imposed but carefully adapted: “*We all need and have that desire for spirituality, whether or not it’s acknowledged. Even for pupils who can’t verbalise, you see the connection – they get the feeling.*” For parents, the provision of the Christian-based youth club was unique and irreplaceable: “*It’s fine saying there shouldn’t be a Christian influence in schools, but they’re the only ones offering this support. If they didn’t, no one would.*”

Caution in Controlled and Integrated Schools

This contrasts with the more cautious positioning observed in the controlled and integrated schools. In controlled primary schools, leaders emphasised openness to a range of denominations, but often within a framework of managing parental expectations and sensitivities. Assemblies were valued, yet ministers and external speakers from Christian organisations were carefully rotated and monitored. One minister recounted that another local clergyman had treated an assembly like “*a Gospel Mission in a school setting and basically they weren’t scheduled on the assembly rota the following year.*” Similarly, in the rural controlled post-primary school, staff were acutely aware that engagement with churches was being closely watched by parents. One minister described the importance of always framing it as “*Christians believe...*” or “*this is a Christian position and so it allows the space in the room for them to say, well, that’s what a Christian believes but I don’t identify as a Christian, so I can have a different viewpoint to you.*” Some ministers and ministry leaders referred to a clear distinction between the approach they would take in an assembly (with the whole school) and an opt-in extra-curricular Christian group (most commonly a Scripture Union group). One commented that school assembly is “*not really the place for altar calls*” while another explained how there was a greater degree of faith formation possible within the extra-curricular setting:

“[Schools work] is not a moment for ‘let’s come to Jesus’ moments, do you know what I mean? We would say the Assembly Hall and the RE classroom are not places for that, an SU group is a bit different, because if children have opted in, principals have permitted that group to run, parents have committed to their children opting in, then we can, we can unpack what it looks like for you to follow Jesus. But again, that has to be cautious and careful.” (Ministry Leader)

In the integrated post-primary school, this caution was even more apparent. While the principal had begun to develop supportive relationships with local clergy since his appointment, pupils themselves often reported little church presence and some expressed discomfort with any suggestion of Christian emphasis. A teacher reflected that “*maybe sometimes people think integrated education means we just don’t talk about anything that’s different...but actually, maybe a better version of integration is, we will talk about the things that are different, but everyone’s respected*” (Teacher), while the principal acknowledged that “*leaving religion out almost facilitated a particular brand of integration, but that risks excluding those with religious views*” (Principal).

Thus, while there was clear evidence of a strong, embedded, and confident Christian ethos within both the Catholic primary school and the special school, controlled and integrated schools tended to present a more cautious stance, negotiating parental expectations and

adapting engagement to avoid controversy. The strength of the ethos did not depend solely on the school management type, however, as there was considerable variation in ethos among the three controlled schools. This suggests that the strength of a school's Christian ethos is also closely related to the demographic of its surrounding community. Where the vast majority of pupils and staff identified as Christian (as in the two rural controlled schools), the Christian ethos of the school was seen as a natural extension of shared values and traditions, rather than something externally imposed. This alignment between Christian ethos and community identity reinforced a sense of authenticity and belonging, which also helped to sustain practices such as prayer, assemblies and church partnerships as normal and accepted parts of school life. In the more diverse urban controlled primary school, this alignment was weaker and more contested, and consequently the Christian ethos was more cautious. In all cases, however, the ethos was not static but was seen as requiring ongoing leadership, intentionality and community support.

Practical Contributions Beyond Faith Activities

Although there was inevitably a focus on the religious/faith dimension of churches' involvement with schools, it became very evident that the involvement (across all the case study schools) was often very practical too. Alongside their spiritual and pastoral contributions, churches were also described as providing very tangible forms of support to schools, often meeting immediate needs in ways that stretched beyond religious activity.

Principals and teachers spoke of churches offering their premises, such as the integrated post-primary which regularly used the neighbouring church hall as an additional facility: “[Name of local Church] is on the other side of our fence, so we've had great collaboration there... They provide an off-site facility for us, so there was a kind of practical working relationship there. And we've offered our facilities and will continue to do so” (Principal).

In other cases, churches made their car parks available for school use, particularly to support busy events or in schools with limited space. Governors from local congregations also gave their time and expertise, ensuring that church representation was present within governance structures and contributing to the oversight of school life. Ministers and church members were described as offering free hands-on help with maintenance tasks, from painting a new outdoor classroom, playhouse and benches to providing gifts or resources.

As the rural controlled primary principal explained, this practical support was extremely impactful and helped to support the Christian ethos of the school: “...that would have cost me, as a principal, a lot of money to pay people to do... [The church is] showing an outpouring of practical love that came from wanting to serve God. And it started a lot of conversations, and it really did back up our ethos” (Principal).

This notion of service to the community was stressed by many of the church leaders. One explained that “How can you best show your love to your neighbour? Well, practically, we found ways that we could help here in the school, as well as other neighbours” (Church leader), while another noted that “The church is often willing to invest in the school and get nothing back in return. They're just fulfilling their call to be part of the community” (Church leader).

A teacher in the integrated school case study recalled how a local minister supported pupils with interview preparation for Year 12 and added that churches had helped with small but important acts of encouragement: “They would come in and help with lots of different things,

but they're not necessarily religious things... One minister comes in to leave gifts, [they're] just really friendly" (Teacher).

In the rural controlled primary school too, the principal recounted how members of the local church congregation came in to the school on a voluntary basis to “*help with reading and things*” (Principal) and how another local minister came in to speak to the P7 pupils about transition to post-primary school. These examples illustrate that for many schools, churches functioned not only as providers of faith input but also as valuable community partners whose practical contributions filled gaps that might otherwise remain unmet.

8.3 The perceived value of engagement

Positive perceptions across principals and pupils

Survey findings suggest that most school leaders, teachers, parents, pupils, and governors perceive Christian engagement positively, with many describing a Christian ethos as fundamentally important to the school. All but two of the 78 principals reported that church or Christian organisation involvement in their school was either “*very valuable*” (84%) or “*somewhat valuable*” (14%). A wide range of benefits were cited, with the most common being “*increased community involvement*” (86%), followed by “*enhanced moral/spiritual development*” (77%), “*pupil enjoyment*” (72%), and “*improved pupil wellbeing*” (67%). Pupil enjoyment of the activities provided by the churches/organisations was also rated highly: when asked if they enjoyed the activities, the most common pupil response was “*Yes, I enjoy them a lot*” (54%), followed by “*Yes, I enjoy them sometimes*” (23%). Only one pupil reported that they did not enjoy the visits.

The value of instilling Christian values

In the Catholic maintained primary, parents and staff alike welcomed the explicitness of the ethos. As one parent explained, “*It's very much part of their learning. They grow up through the school with it and it's the core of who we are.*” Parents in both the Catholic and one of the controlled primary schools agreed that there was value in a Christian ethos, not only for spiritual reasons but also for educating children in fundamental moral values such as “*kindness, honesty, forgiveness, compassion, respect towards one another, inclusion and love.*” Parents explained how these values were important both as preparation for adult life and as a contribution to society in general: “*Faith isn't forced onto you. It's not like when you finish [school] you have to be a Christian. We're just hoping that you're kind, compassionate, caring, yes, you've got to be well educated too, but also that you can cope with life's difficulties when they come your way.*”

For both principals and ministry leaders, Christianity was framed as offering hope: “*Life is not pointless, life is not ultimately unfair, life is not ultimately cruel. There is hope, and that hope is to be found in the Christian message*” (Ministry Leader). Parents, governors, and staff in Catholic and controlled primaries alike referred to the increasing importance of preserving a Christian ethos since “*the children are not getting the same exposure [to religious faith] at home*” (Governor) as might have been the case in the past and “*don't experience that nurturing*

atmosphere and environment.” As one teacher in the Catholic primary school explained, “*We feel it’s a moral responsibility to pass on the faith.*”

The value of pastoral support

Case study participants repeatedly emphasised the relational and pastoral dimensions of value. For instance, some parents spoke of the reassurance of knowing that ministers were familiar and available in times of crisis, as one parent from the rural controlled primary school explained: “*Whatever happens in the lives of those children, they’re familiar with the ministers and they can draw on them for strength*” (Parent). Staff in the special school described faith-based activities as uniquely able to provide spiritual connection for pupils with complex needs: “*And when you see children with their hands up, you know, doing the Hosanna thing, you’re thinking, you know what? Even if they don’t understand the words, they’re getting the feeling*” (Principal).

The value of practical support

The value of the practical support offered by churches was also expressed by many research participants. One (rural controlled primary) principal recounted how the local church’s contribution through painting, cleaning, and tidying represented an invaluable manifestation of “*the Christian ethos*” in action: “*When budgets are tight, the amount of financial resources that churches bring the schools for free...it helps the school budget...it’s great practically, financially, just having that support for the staff too, that emotional support*” (Principal).

For another (urban controlled primary) principal, the local church’s offer to allow use of its hall when the school’s own facilities were out of use represented “*overwhelming generosity to us...it has just been overflowing. It’s really, really lovely.*” Numerous other examples were cited across all of the case studies, including one church that paid £1500 per year to fund a local mentoring charity working in the rural controlled post-primary school.

8.4 Concerns and tensions

While the majority of research participants were very supportive of church/ Christian organisation engagement in schools, a minority of parents and governors expressed a number of significant concerns which are summarised below. These were expressed through the interviews, parental survey responses and also through some of the comments made in the interviews conducted with the school principals.

Conditional Motivation

The first concern to be raised was in relation to the motivation behind the engagement in the first place. The interview with the representatives of Parents for Inclusive Education highlighted the perception that churches and Christian organisations were motivated by a desire for “*indoctrination*” and that “*we’ll give you this support which we know you need, but the reason they’re there is to proselytise*” (Parent).

Others worried that children were being excluded from extra-curricular opportunities unless they accepted Christian content. Another PIE parent recounted that to participate in the choir, his daughter had to sing “*Pentecostal Christian songs which, as a non-religious family, again*

sat uneasily with us. Now she ended up staying in the choir because she just really loved singing.”

While they explained that they did not object to the practical support offered (e.g., through a paired reading programme), they were alarmed by the apparent conditionality of the support and the underlying motivation to evangelise. As one parent explained, *“If churches want to help practically, if they want to come and support, that's fine. But if it's conditional to time or access to my kid's soul, then don't”*.

While parents in the Catholic maintained primary school and the special school appeared to welcome explicit faith formation, there was evidence that a minority of parents in the controlled and integrated schools expressed greater unease. For instance, the principal of the urban controlled primary school explained how they had faced the greatest challenge from *“white Belfast atheist or humanist”* parents, who were unhappy even with the right to withdraw from Christian worship or teaching and questioned *“Why are you having it at all?”*

Parents in the integrated post-primary school were also reportedly *“up in arms”* at the proposal to introduce an A-level RE module on Celtic Church History rather than philosophy as they feared an unwanted Christian emphasis. Similar concerns were expressed by a governor in the urban controlled primary school who objected to a Christian organisation coming in to the school to give out Bibles to the children: *“It felt like proselytising, and it felt massively inappropriate... We would not let that happen for like the Church of Satan, and we have to be fair.”* (Governor)

Limited adaptation to diversity

Another concern to emerge from the study was that schools and churches have not always adapted their approaches to reflect the increasing diversity of Northern Ireland's school population. This concern reflects wider demographic shifts highlighted by Gallagher (2024) and NISRA (2022), which show that Northern Ireland's school populations are becoming increasingly diverse, with the greatest changes occurring in the Controlled sector.

The survey of churches and Christian organisations in the current study has revealed a gap between awareness and practice: while most reported being either *“very aware”* (52%) or *“somewhat aware”* (43%) of increasing religious and cultural diversity within schools, a majority (55%) admitted making *“no specific adaptations”*. Only 15% stated that they *“modify religious content to be more inclusive.”*

When the survey results were further analysed, it became apparent that, compared to the representatives of Christian organisations, church leaders were on average much *less* aware of the increasing religious and cultural diversity of schools, much *less* likely to make specific adaptations to the activities they deliver, and were *less* supportive of schools offering greater flexibility regarding pupil participation in religious activities.

Furthermore, in the parental survey, while a majority of parents (58%) felt that the religious activities their child participated in were respectful of pupils who did not share the same beliefs, a minority (15%) felt that they were *“not respectful”*, with a significant proportion *“unsure”* (21%).

Weaknesses in transparency and communication

A third area of concern related to transparency and parental communication. While almost all principals (97%) claimed to inform parents of their right to withdraw children from church- or Christian-organisation-led activities, only 79% of parents reported awareness of this right, and just 38% felt that the school provided enough information about the content and purpose of such visits.

Parents in the Parents for Inclusive Education (PIE) focus group were particularly critical of this lack of transparency. One explained, *“There’s been zero proactive communication about what’s going on ... you wouldn’t know unless your children told you.”* Another described being reassured by a principal who had *“minimised”* the extent of involvement, only to later discover that *“the information she gave me wasn’t accurate, and there were many religious visitors.”* Such accounts suggest that communication was often reactive rather than proactive, leaving some parents uncertain or misinformed about the scope of Christian engagement. As one of the PIE parents explained *“Transparency I think is really key, and proactive communication, I think that would be a brilliant start and it shouldn’t be something that’s hard.”*

Awareness and stigma around opting out

A fourth concern related to the awareness and exercise of the right to withdraw. Only a third (33%) of pupils surveyed were aware that opting out was possible, while 40% were unaware and 27% were unsure. Interviews confirmed that pupils often felt it would be socially difficult to exercise this right: *“I think it would be awkward going to a teacher and saying I want to sit out, because you’d be the only one doing it. And this is a Christian school, so I guess everyone would be wondering, ‘Why did you come to this school if you don’t want to hear anything Christian?’”*

Principals themselves recognised the complexity. One controlled primary school leader reflected on the challenge of respecting parental rights while maintaining inclusion, noting the difficulty of balancing requests for withdrawal from RE with parents who still wanted their children to participate in cultural events such as the nativity or carol service.

Lack of evaluation of impact

A fifth concern was the striking lack of evaluation by churches, Christian organisations, and schools themselves. Only 12% of churches and organisations surveyed reported having a formal process to assess the impact of their engagement. Most admitted they had no system in place, with one ministry leader openly acknowledging: *“We don’t look for feedback or need feedback, because it’s not something we need for our own endorsement”*. The distribution was however not consistent across the sample: while almost half (47%) of Christian organisations reported that they had a formal evaluation process in place, this was the case for only a very small minority (3%) of churches.

There were exceptions: one organisation described inviting teachers and parents to complete online evaluations, and one controlled post-primary school principal referred to annual meetings with local ministers to review and evaluate input. However, such practices were not

widespread, leaving questions about the effectiveness of provision largely unanswered or relying on anecdotal feedback.

8.5 Limitations

The study is not without limitations. While survey data provided valuable breadth, response rates were low, particularly from the pupil surveys, and engagement from the Catholic maintained sector was disappointingly limited across all surveys. The quantitative findings should therefore be regarded as illustrative rather than representative.

However, the qualitative case study data were extremely rich, detailed and diverse, offering deep insight into how Christian engagement is experienced and valued in practice across a wide range of different school types and geographical locations. The inclusion of a focus group with Parents for Inclusive Education further strengthened the study by ensuring critical perspectives were represented.

The sensitivity of the topic also shaped participation. The research team became aware that some principals were very reluctant to engage, fearing controversy, which may have limited the range of views captured. The absence of systematic evaluation by churches and Christian organisations also constrained the ability to assess impact beyond anecdotal testimony. Further research with larger samples and independent evaluation of faith-based activity in schools would help address these gaps.

8.6 Conclusions

The findings of this study underline the enduring significance of Christian engagement in Northern Ireland's schools, but also reveal its contested and uneven character. In some schools, a Christian ethos was seamlessly embedded, explicit and confidently expressed, providing clarity and coherence for families who chose such settings. In some controlled and integrated schools, by contrast, engagement was often more defensive, carefully managed, and shaped by awareness of increasing diversity and parental challenge.

Christian engagement was widely valued for the pastoral, practical and community support it offered, the sense of belonging it created, and the enrichment of pupils' spiritual and moral development. Yet concerns were equally evident: the lack of adaptation to a more diverse school population, weak transparency and inconsistent communication with parents, the limited evaluation of faith-based initiatives, and the risk of children feeling excluded or pressured.

These findings sit squarely within a highly sensitive and shifting policy context. With the 2022 judicial review (culminating in the November 2025 JR87 Supreme Court judgement), campaigning by parents, and research evidence of greater diversity in school populations (Gallagher 2024; NISRA 2021), there is growing pressure to ensure that Christian engagement, while highly valued in many school settings and communities, is not assumed as a default, but is transparent, respectful, and adaptable.

8.7 Recommendations

The findings from this study point towards a nuanced and at times contested picture of Christian engagement in schools, with evidence of considerable value being placed on church involvement, but also of tensions where practices are experienced as exclusionary or insufficiently adapted to contemporary diversity. On this basis, the following recommendations are proposed.

1. Recognise and communicate the enduring contribution of Christian churches and organisations

This study demonstrates that the vast majority of school leaders, parents and pupils continue to value the contribution of Christian churches and organisations to education in Northern Ireland. For most principals, teachers and governors, a Christian ethos remains fundamentally important, whether expressed explicitly through faith formation in Catholic maintained schools or more implicitly through values of “*kindness, honesty, forgiveness, compassion, respect, inclusion and love*” in other school contexts. Beyond ethos, the practical contributions of churches and Christian organisations were repeatedly highlighted: providing halls, car parks and facilities; painting classrooms and tidying grounds; funding mentoring projects; and offering pastoral care in times of crisis. These acts of service were widely perceived as generous, meaningful and deeply supportive of school life.

It is important, therefore, that this contribution is more clearly recognised at both system and school level, not only as a matter of historic legacy but also as an ongoing and evolving partnership. Churches and Christian organisations should also become more proactive in articulating the value of their engagement in ways that resonate with today’s educational and policy context. This could involve collating evidence of both spiritual and practical impact, showcasing case studies of good practice, and making the case for their role as partners in community wellbeing, moral education and inclusion. Doing so would help ensure that their contribution is not only cherished within schools but also more widely understood and affirmed in public discourse.

At the same time, the study highlights differences in how ethos is expressed across sectors: in Catholic maintained schools, faith formation is seamlessly embedded, while in controlled and integrated schools ethos can be more cautious and inconsistent. Recognising these differences openly, while affirming the positive contribution made in all sectors, is essential for building mutual respect and strengthening church-school partnerships across the system.

2. Strengthen transparency and parental communication.

While the vast majority of principals and parents in this study expressed strong support for church and Christian organisation involvement, a minority of parents (particularly those from non-religious backgrounds) highlighted frustrations around communication. Some reported only discovering the nature of school-based religious activities through their children, and occasionally felt misinformed about the extent of Christian involvement. Although these cases were not representative of the majority, they underline the importance of clarity. Schools should therefore continue to provide proactive information about assemblies, faith-based activities, or visiting speakers, using regular communication channels such as newsletters or digital apps.

Clear communication would not diminish the legal or historic role of Christian engagement but would help reassure all parents, strengthen trust, and avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

To support this, churches and Christian organisations should consider working with schools to develop a simple protocol for engagement. Such a protocol would not be intended as a restrictive framework but as a practical guide setting out what schools and families can expect when external faith-based groups are involved. It might include, for example, commitments to provide advance notice of activities, clarity about the nature and content of sessions, sensitivity to diversity within the school community, and opportunities for feedback. A light-touch, agreed protocol could help standardise good practice across schools and providers, ensuring that positive contributions are recognised while avoiding avoidable tension or mistrust.

3. Respect choice and minimise stigma.

Northern Ireland law protects the statutory right of parents to withdraw children from Religious Education or collective worship. In practice, relatively few parents exercise this right, and most pupils report enjoying religious activities. Nonetheless, some pupils in the case studies voiced concern that opting out could feel socially awkward or lead to a sense of exclusion: *“I’d feel left out if I wasn’t allowed to go to assembly... it should be the child’s decision.”* While these concerns reflect a minority perspective, schools should remain attentive to them. Sensitive management of opt-out requests, perhaps by providing space for silent reflection during prayers or offering values-based stories in assemblies, would help ensure that choice is respected without stigma, while preserving the central role of Christian engagement in line with current legislation.

4. Develop training for all those engaging with schools

Case studies and survey data confirm that most schools continue to embrace a Christian ethos with confidence and support. At the same time, Northern Ireland’s pupil population is becoming more diverse (Gallagher 2024; NISRA 2022), and this creates both opportunities and challenges for schools and those who engage with them. In one integrated post-primary, for example, pupils suggested that assemblies could sometimes include leaders from other faiths alongside Christian voices: *“If [principal] brought in like ministers and leaders from different religions to do assemblies, like every week and just rotate, that would be good.”* While such views were in the minority, they highlight an appetite among some young people for broader exposure to religious and cultural diversity.

These findings suggest that churches and Christian organisations engaging with schools should not only consider how to sensitively adapt their approaches (without losing their Christian character) to reflect the realities of today’s classrooms, but also ensure that those delivering school-based activities are equipped to do so. More structured training for clergy, youth workers and volunteers entering schools could strengthen confidence, improve cultural awareness and help them navigate sensitive issues. Training might cover practical guidance on working within diverse classrooms, strategies for inclusive language and clarity on the boundaries between faith formation and educational enrichment. Such preparation would enhance the quality and inclusivity of provision, while also reducing the risk of misunderstanding or controversy.

5. Evaluate impact.

Despite widespread activity, there is little systematic evidence of the impact of churches' and Christian organisations' work in schools. While almost half of the Christian organisations surveyed (47%) reported having some form of formal evaluation process, only a very small minority of churches (3%) did so. Several participants described positive contributions, for example, the ability of some visiting speakers to "entertain a crowd" or churches offering invaluable practical support, but in most cases evaluation rarely extended beyond anecdotal testimony. Both churches and Christian organisations would benefit from developing more robust frameworks to assess the outcomes of their involvement, whether educational, social, or pastoral, and sharing this evidence transparently with schools and parents. Such evaluation would not only build trust but also enable providers to refine and strengthen their practice in response to constructive feedback. Schools themselves should also be supported in evaluating the contribution of external partners, as this would help to ensure quality of provision and strengthen inclusive practice.

6. Ensure clarity of ethos.

Case studies illustrated stark contrasts in how ethos was expressed and communicated. In some of the case study schools, the Christian ethos was explicit, seamless and woven into daily practice. By contrast, several other schools adopted a more uncertain and even defensive approach. Schools should review and clarify their ethos statements to ensure consistency and reduce ambiguity. Being clear about what ethos means in practice may help avoid the defensive positioning noted in some cases, while also affirming inclusivity.

7. Support school leaders.

The research highlighted the sensitivity of this topic, with one controlled school principal privately admitting that he feared "*rocking the boat*" by engaging in this study, given challenges faced by other schools from non-Christian and/or atheist/humanist parents. School leaders should not be left to navigate this alone. Clearer policy guidance from the Department of Education and sectoral bodies is required to help principals balance statutory obligations, ethos and diversity in ways that are legally and socially sustainable. Professional development opportunities, peer learning and forums for open discussion could all provide needed support for principals, some of whom are obviously struggling at times to negotiate the complexity of accommodating the beliefs and expectations of all members of an increasingly diverse school population.

8. Further research.

Finally, the study points to the urgent need for further research. The survey element of this project was limited by small sample sizes and especially low engagement from the Catholic sector. Larger-scale quantitative research, particularly with parents and pupils, is necessary to provide a more representative picture of experiences across all sectors. Independent evaluations of faith-based programmes should also be commissioned to provide robust evidence of impact, moving beyond self-reported success. In addition, longitudinal studies could explore how schools adapt to increasing diversity over time, building on Gallagher (2024) and others who have documented the demographic shifts in school populations.

Taken together, these recommendations reflect both the strong appreciation and the minority concerns identified in this study, underlining the nuances and complexity of Christian engagement in schools. The challenge is to ensure that such engagement is appropriate, inclusive and responsive to the realities of contemporary Northern Ireland. This calls for schools, churches, parents and children and young people to work together in open communication and transparency, finding approaches that allow those who wish to engage to do so meaningfully, while also providing space and respect for those who do not.

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