Effectiveness of Religious Legitimating Agencies in Enhancing Accountability and Organisational Performance of Independent Churches in the Face of Rising Secularism and Public Scrutiny

By

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RESEARCH ABSTRACT

Platforms for affiliation and collaboration provided by umbrella agencies have been shown to bolster the legitimacy, accountability, and overall performance of entities in the nonprofit sector (Zeimers *et al.*, 2019; Ford, 2015; Tang and Wang, 2020). However, a gap exists in relating this literature to Religious Legitimating Agencies (RLAs) operating in the UK Independent Church Sector (UKICS). UKICS RLAs, as registered faith-based umbrella and resource bodies, offer voluntary association and support to independent (non-denominational/autonomous/self-governing) churches and provide accreditation to their ministers. They serve to advance the religious objectives of their constituents, represent their members' interests, and facilitate the accomplishment of their operations. In the context of the highly monitored and secular-leaning socio-cultural backdrop in which independent churches operate, this study sought to analyse the functions of UKICS RLAs. The goal being to assess how effective these agencies have been in enabling independent congregations to enhance their social legitimacy, organisational performance, and accountability to multiple stakeholders.

The selected research methodology involved a constructivist interpretivist process, with a theoretical underpinning that integrated related aspects of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and Christian theological concepts. Primary data was generated in multiple phases, commencing with an online survey administered to all identified UK-based ICS RLAs. Survey returns served to inform selection and in-depth study of 4 RLAs and 14 churches selected from across the four UK nations. The research also captured the experiences and views of 64 senior level sector officials who participated in online interviews and focus group discussions.

Findings of the study point to ten contemporary roles performed by UKICS RLAs. These RLA functions exert a legitimating influence and significantly contribute to enhancing the relational and revitalisation agendas of benefiting independent congregations. On accountability, the analysis sought to both identify the factors that trigger safeguarding and governance concerns and to develop a framework for independent church accountability. The inference drawn from findings is that the effective functionality of this accountability model is hinged on a tripartite working partnership involving individual churches, their RLAs, and charity regulators. This approach has the potential of enhancing overall stakeholder satisfaction while preserving independent church autonomy.

In examining the extent of ethnic diversity in the leadership structures of independent churches, the impact made by demographic and mission-related factors were evident. However, a significant imbalance was observed in their ethnic diversity in membership and ethnic diversity in leadership ratios. A further area of interest is the involvement of women in senior leadership positions. A key finding from studying five female-led churches is that patterns in their church growth attainment levels are consonant with that which pertains generally within the UKICS. That said, it is still the case that the egalitarianism v. complementarianism debate (Mowczko, 2022; James, 2022) continues to influence opinions and shape policies regarding women's role in leadership within the sector.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Full Term
AGBC	Association of Grace Baptist Churches
AOGGB	Assemblies of God Great Britain
BAME	Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIC	Churches in Communities International
COE	Church of England
CCC	Cornerstone Christian Centre
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EA	Evangelical Alliance
EDI	Equality Diversity and Inclusion
EFCC	Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
FBO	Faith Based Organisation
FBS	Faith Based Sector
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FIEC	Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches
FIMC	Fellowship of Independent Methodist Churches
GOAL	Governance, Openness, Accountability and Leadership
ICS	Independent Church Sector
ICSA	Independent Church Stakeholder Accountability
ICSUOS	Independent Church Sector Umbrella Organisations Survey
KICC	Kingsway International Christian Centre
NATCEN	National Centre for Social Research
NCT	National Churches Trust
NDCs	Non-Denominational Churches
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NPOs	Non-Profit Organisations
NPS	Non-Profit Sector
OSCR	Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator
RCCG	Redeemed Christian Church of God
RLA	Religious Legitimating Agency
RO	Research Objective

RP	Research Presupposition
RQ	Research Question
RORs	Range of Responses
ROVs	Range of Views
SLO	Social License to Operate
SNC	Scottish Network Churches
TPS	Total Population Sampling
UK	United Kingdom
UKCS	United Kingdom Charity Sector
UKICS	United Kingdom Independent Church Sector
VCUKI	Vineyard Churches UK and Ireland
WVS	World Values Survey

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University.
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated.
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed.
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work.
5. Where elements of this work have been published or submitted for publication prior to submission, this is identified, and references given at the end of the thesis.
6. This thesis has been prepared in accordance with Staffordshire University and Buckinghamshire New University.
7. I confirm that if the submission is based upon work that has been sponsored or supported by an agency or organisation that I have fulfilled any right of review or other obligations required by such contract or agreement.

Uchenna Nweke

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.0 Research Background

This exploratory research is centred around an element of the church community in Britain known as the UK Independent Church Sector (UKICS). Independent, in descriptive terms, is synonymous with being autonomous, self-governing, free from external control, and as such not under the authority of another (Collins English Dictionary, 2024). Independent churches operating in the UKICS are a part of the wider UK religious, socio-cultural, and economic structure, and within the sector, umbrella organisations, acting as Religious Legitimating Agencies (RLAs), offer voluntary membership and play a vital role in supporting the work of these churches (Stevens, 2014; University of Sheffield, 2024).

Issues about the legitimacy and accountability of UK independent churches came into greater focus in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Osgood, 2024; 2006). At that time, public trust in charities (of which a significant proportion were church-based) declined primarily because of proliferation in the sector and perceived accountability-related problematics (Gaskin, 1999). In keeping with this general perception, the British press 'questioned the legitimacy' of the independent churches that were springing up across the country many of which were being established by migrants from Africa and the Caribbean. They also wanted to know who these non-denominational/autonomous/self-governing congregations were 'accountable to'. These poignant concerns raised in the media, which seemed to express the depth of feelings in the wider society at the time, were exacerbated by the fact that no answers were forthcoming (CIC International, 2018, p.6). Furthermore, UK denominational churches were unwilling to affirm or work ecumenically with the new breed of independent churches because the congregations lacked a representative and cohesive voice that could speak for them in inter-church and inter-religious forums (Osgood, 2024; CIC International, 2018).

Intertwined with the issues highlighted above, an observable trend emerged towards the end of the 1990s that indicated there was a declining enthusiasm for religion in the UK. A survey of British social attitudes in 1983 found that 31% of the population had no religious affiliation. By 1999, this group (referred to as 'the nones') had increased to 44% (Jowel *et al.*, 2000). Projecting from the outcome of the 1999 survey, a report published by the National Centre for Social Research (NATCEN) painted a picture of 21st century British society that is multi-ethnic, less religious, and more open to embrace liberal ideologies (Jowel *et al.,* 2000).

In this setting of declining enthusiasm for religion coupled with growing calls for more transparency and accountability, the legitimacy problematics associated with UKICS entities became more evident, a situation that threatened their social acceptability and continued existence (Dong *et al.*, 2023; Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021; Degan 2019). Accordingly, it became obvious to many independent church leaders that in order to facilitate the social legitimacy of their operations and sustain their performance in a contemporary and more scrutinous environment (as was now the case in the UK), there was need for accrediting Christian-based umbrella bodies that would attest to their accountability, enhance their recognition and societal acceptance, represent them in inter-church and inter-religious circles, and advocate for them in government, media, and secular squares (Osgood, 2024; CIC International, 2018).

Given that conflicts in relationships and boundary issues (resulting in the loss of some form of autonomy) can be disincentives for joining umbrella groups and engaging in collaborative endeavours (Dong *et al.*, 2023; Proulx *et al.,* 2014), UKICS RLAs pre-empt this by offering voluntary association and respect of autonomy to their affiliated churches (Stevens, 2022, 2014). They perform roles and employ strategies (Lenz and Söderbaum, 2023) aimed at enabling these congregations to relate interdependently, enhance their legitimacy and accountability, improve their leadership structures and governance practices, and maximise their growth potentials (Reynolds *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, these agencies seek to be at the table in certain religious, governmental, and secular forums (including the media) to foster essential relationships, be a voice for the UKICS, and influence government policy and public

opinion (Calò *et al.*, 2024; Robinson, 2021; Purkis, 2021).   Their activities have become even more vital because the sector continues to operate in the backdrop of a contemporary British society characterised by both a declining enthusiasm for religion (Curtice *et al.*, 2019; Duffy *et al.*, 2023) and a heightened public scrutiny of the affairs of churches (Swerling, 2021; White, 2022; Mann, 2023).   Analysis of the World Values Survey (WVS) conducted in 2022 shows that only 33% of the UK public identify as religious (Duffy *et al.*, 2023; Williams, 2023), and there are growing calls for better accountability, greater transparency, and more reforms to the leadership frameworks of churches (Mann, 2023; Valencia, 2023; Drew 2023), brought about by the plurality of financial scandals, incidences of abuse of power, and gross failings in safeguarding duties uncovered in church communities in recent years (Evans, 2019; Dearden, 2020; Kanyeredzi, 2023; White, 2022).

Focusing on UK church attendance rates, NATCEN's 2019 report reveals a continuing decline in the performances of established denominational settings like the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Methodist churches. Remarkably, though, the report also finds that between 2008 and 2018, membership numbers of non-denominational churches grew from 10% to 13% of the UK Christian population (Curtice *et al.*, 2019). A more recent study (Hayward, 2022) analysed growth/decline patterns across church groups. Adopting the R rate of contagion technique (utilised in calculating the spread of disease), Hayward applied this method in determining the potential to reproduce for 13 UK church bodies (Meyrick, 2022). While the findings indicate that most established church institutions face possible extinction because their rate of contagion (ability to attract attendees through personal contact) continues to be in decline (Birrell, 2022), five church organisations were identified as having significant growth patterns. These are Vineyard UK (VCUKI, 2024), Redeemed Christian Church of God UK (RCCG UK, 2024), Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC, 2024a), New Frontiers Together (2024), and Elim Pentecostal (2024). Although Hayward refers to all the organisations studied as 'church denominations', the five groups experiencing growth are likely to take exception to this label. Vineyard, FIEC, and New Frontiers operate exclusively

as RLAs of autonomous and self-governing congregations, while Elim Pentecostal and RCCG UK run a mixed model that combines denominationalism and many independent congregations in their membership.

The UK 2021 census data released in November 2022, provides further corroborating evidence of the decline in the number of people identifying as Christians, amidst rising numbers with no religious identity. Figures for England and Wales reveal a 13% drop over a 10-year period in the number identifying as Christians (Wood and Ransley, 2023). While acknowledging that the fall in numbers was greater than expected, Brierley, a church statistician, draws attention to the exceptional growth occurring in the UKICS (Drew, 2022).

In seeking to provide credible explanations for the vibrant growth being experienced in some sectors of the UK religious community, Davie (2017) suggests that besides the economic movement of migrants into the country, innovative thinking across a variety of religious organisations has resulted in positive outcomes for many and enhanced the revitalisation of religion in the UK (see Chapter 6). Allen (2020) argues that the twin elements of church planting initiatives and development of bodies that resource congregations are indicators of health and confidence in the UK church sector. Allen further adds that greater resourcing of churches reflects the digital age which has made networking easier. As an illustration of the resourcing role played by Independent Church Sector (ICS) RLAs, the FIEC, one of the five church groups with a positive R rate (Hayward, 2022), marked its 100th anniversary in 2022 by announcing 100 resource initiatives in support of congregations in its membership (Mbakwe, 2022). An outline of the growth-oriented resource initiatives includes a £100 million fund set aside for church plants, building acquisitions and other revitalisation efforts.

Thorpe and Valencia (2022) question the extent to which a demise is likely in the Church of England (COE). In this regard, Thorpe (2021) points to some thriving 'resource churches' produced by revitalisation efforts within the COE. Accordingly, it is considered pertinent to inquire into the likelihood that RLAs (through their collaborative platforms, restructuring approaches, revitalising strategies, resource provision, and legitimating influence) may be

playing a highly significant role in enabling independent churches in Britain to not only address their legitimacy and accountability problematics, but also to demonstrate a more widespread growth in membership, contrary to patterns experienced by mainline established churches.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The essence of this research is to address the gap in knowledge that has existed in relation to the intertwined issues of UK independent church proliferation, legitimacy, and accountability. The considered approach is to bring academic attention to the role of umbrella organisations operating in the UKICS. Described in the study as RLAs (see Sections 2.3.1 and 2.4), their involvement in the sector became more pronounced in the aftermath of the legitimacy and accountability problematics that arose in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Osgood, 2024; CIC International, 2018). The concept of legitimating agencies (Durand and McGuire, 2005; Lenz and Söderbaum, 2023) is discussed in Section 2.3.1. While there is wide-ranging literature on their role, this literature is yet to be related to religious agencies in the UKICS. It is of interest then to properly identify UKICS RLAs and delineate their contemporary functions. Further lines of inquiry include ascertaining from primary data ways in which UKICS RLAs and their constituents have restructured their operations and the strategies they have adopted in revitalising the sector amidst an increasingly challenging socio-cultural landscape characterised by declining enthusiasm for religion and heightened public scrutiny.

In the Faith Based Sector (FBS), research shows that independent nonprofits that are affiliated with umbrella agencies, achieve higher degrees of organisational performance, given that they enjoy broader access to resources and networking possibilities (Ford, 2015). Furthermore, as Fu and Cooper (2021) and Calō *et al.* (2024) suggest, the capacity for resolving some sector-wide organisational problems can only exist if entities are working collaboratively. Adding weight to this view, Dornbrack (2023) argues that charitable entities seeking to attract increased public confidence in their operations can achieve this goal by collaborating with reputable organisations to ensure best practice. Collaborations between independent

organisations in the Nonprofit Sector (NPS) have been shown to bolster legitimacy, social responsibility, accountability, and performance (Zeimers *et al.*, 2019; Tang and Wang, 2020; Azmat *et al.*, 2023), and such collaborative efforts are enhanced where there are shared norms, convergent visions, complementary organisational goals, and a commitment to work towards achieving mutual benefits (Gazley and Guo, 2020; Tsasis, 2009). This study seeks to fill a further gap by relating the literature on collaborations in the NPS and FBS to the UKICS. In this regard, research effort will be made to investigate the modus operandi of the working relationship between otherwise independent congregations and the RLAs that offer them networking opportunities/platforms for intra and inter sectoral collaborations.

In analysing for RLA role in enhancing the accountability of ICS congregations, attention will be given to identify independent church stakeholders and determine how salience is attributed to them (Freeman *et al.,* 2020; Mitchell *et al.,* 1997). Focus will also be placed on ascertaining the factors that trigger ICS accountability concerns and developing a model for the sector's stakeholder accountability (Agyemang, 2023). Additionally, UKICS repositioning efforts around governance will be analysed to shed light on the impact they have on promoting ethnic diversity and inclusion of women in senior leadership roles, mitigating against abuse of power and unethical conduct, and enhancing good safeguarding practices within the sector (Im *et al.*, 2023; Drew 2023; Cave, 2022). Furthermore, while aiming to assess how effectively UKICS RLAs have functioned since the outset of the 21st century, it is of essence to determine if further measures need to be put in place by these agencies and their constituents to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction (Saunders *et al.*, 2023; Erickson, 2023).

1.2 Research Presuppositions

This study focuses on ascertaining the effectiveness of RLAs in enhancing accountability and organisational performance of their affiliated independent congregations in the face of rising secularism and public scrutiny. In line with literature in the relevant fields of knowledge (Fan *et al.*, 2022; Kraus *et al.*, 2022), seven key assumptions are implicit in this research. The

analysis and critical review of literature in Chapter Two is centred around these seven presuppositions:

1. Independent churches have stakeholders that they are accountable to, and their organisational performance is impacted by stakeholder demands.

2. Independent churches enter working relationships with RLAs based on the assurance of respect for their autonomy.

3. The UKICS currently operates in the backdrop of a contemporary British society characterised by rising secularism.

4. Both Independent churches and their RLAs serve to advance the Christian faith and while seeking to operate lawfully within civil society, they are guided primarily by the concepts of Christian theology.

5. RLA functions have a social legitimating effect on the operations of churches in the UKICS.

6. Public scrutiny of the activities of independent churches has become heightened in recent years.

7. There are growing calls for better accountability by independent congregations in areas such as leadership, safeguarding, and finance, and RLAs have a role to play in this.

1.3 Aim of the Research

The aim of this research is to analyse the functions of UK-based RLAs by assessing how effective they have been (since the outset of the 21st century) in enabling independent congregations to enhance their social legitimacy, improve their organisational performance, and meet the accountability demands of their stakeholders in areas such as leadership, safeguarding, and finance.

Considering the highly monitored and secular-leaning socio-cultural backdrop in which they operate, this study seeks to investigate the interactions between independent churches and their diverse stakeholders, and how these interactions are affected when independent

churches voluntarily establish working relationships with RLAs. The perspectives of UKICS agency officials and congregational leaders will be utilised in constructing patterns and meaningful explanations for these interactions and relationships (Tsakmakis *et al.*, 2023; Schänzel and Porter; 2022).

Based on their statutory obligations, UK charity regulators (who oversee and scrutinise the activities of independent churches in their register) may already be playing an effective role in enhancing their legitimacy, governance, and accountability (GOV UK, 2024a; Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021; Hogg, 2018), and it could be argued that RLA efforts in the ICS are a duplication of their public functions. Therefore, it is necessary to amply consider this line of thought by critically evaluating the extent to which RLA roles are complementary (or unrelated) to the functions of statutory regulators of charities within the ICS (see Section 2.3.2).

1.4 Research Objectives

The accomplishment of this study will be guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify the functions of RLAs of independent churches (and their restructuring/revitalisation strategies) in the face of rising secularism and increased public scrutiny.

2. To identify the factors that trigger UKICS accountability concerns and the role of RLAs in the operation of an effective accountability and transparency framework for the sector.

3. To determine the extent to which the leadership structures and governance practices in independent churches enhance diversity and safeguarding.

4. To establish the extent to which RLA activities are complementary (or unrelated) to the functions of statutory regulators of charities in the UKICS.

5. To examine if there is a need for further measures to be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction.

1.5 Research Questions

In keeping with its aim and objectives, this research is framed to explore the functions of UKICS RLAs and consider how effective their role has been in enabling the sector's congregations to operate legitimately, sustain growth, and enhance their accountability amidst the intertwined challenges of rising secularism and increased public scrutiny. In approaching the study, the researcher seeks to provide answers to six questions that are connected and focused on the research problem being examined (Mc Combes, 2023). The first three questions are centred around determining the functions of UKICS RLAs:

1. What are the contemporary functions of RLAs in the UKICS?

2. How complementary (or unrelated) are the functions of RLAs and charity regulators within the UKICS?

3. What role do UKICS RLAs play in the operation of an effective accountability and transparency framework for the sector?

The second set of questions are focused on ascertaining the impact of RLA functions on the UKICS, as the sector responds to societal challenges posed by declining enthusiasm for religion and heightened public scrutiny:

1. How effective are UKICS restructuring and revitalisation strategies in the face of rising secularism and increased public scrutiny?

2. To what extent do the leadership structures and governance practices of UK-based independent churches enhance diversity and safeguarding?

3. What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?

1.6 Developing a Literature Informed Study

The purpose, presuppositions, aim, objectives, and questions of this research have been outlined in the preceding five sections. In seeking to develop them and ensure that the research process is appropriately informed and guided by relevant literature (Nguyen *et al.*,

2022; USC Libraries, 2024), there was a need to draw on related aspects of multiple theories. This is because no single established theory has been found capable of fully and appropriately providing rationales for the interactions between UK-based independent churches and their diverse stakeholders, and how these interactions are affected when independent churches voluntarily enter working relationships with RLAs (Cornelissen, 2023; Nair and Ascani, 2022; Motta, 2019).

As such, the process of developing a theoretical underpinning for this research on the UKICS has involved identifying specific and well-established theories that are relevant to the study, delineating aspects of the theories that are related, and reviewing prior research that have been based on them (Crawford, 2020). In view of this, the research is theoretically framed to adopt an integrative approach (Fernando and Lawrence, 2014; García-Cabrera *et al.*, 2023), and related aspects of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984; Freeman *et al.*, 2021), Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995), and Christian theological concepts (Wolfe, 2022; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018; Pamplany *et al.*, 2021) have been employed as underpinning for its exploration. The criteria for selection (and the complementarity and analytical usefulness of related aspects of these theories and concepts) are discussed in Chapter Two.

1.7 Significance of the Study

There exists vast literature on the work undertaken by legitimating agencies. Durand and McGuire (2005) assert that the organisational field is increasingly being characterised by their activities. However, as earlier stated, the literature has not been related to religious agencies in the UKICS. This study seeks to attract recognition to the role of RLAs and encourage their inclusion in contemporary management, accounting, and social science discourse.

 The distinctive setting being studied (where otherwise independently existing churches voluntarily come into association with each other under an RLA) also creates a peculiar need to determine how effective RLAs have been in maintaining a healthy equilibrium in the interplay between independence and interdependence within their membership.

Additionally, given recent rises in the membership numbers of non-denominational churches (Hayward, 2022; Curtice *et al.,* 2019), it is considered significant to inquire into the ICS's performance and accountability. Through this process, it is anticipated that findings will enable RLAs and their constituents to become better positioned in their work, leading to enhanced outcomes for independent church stakeholders and a boost in public trust and confidence in the sector's role (Saunders *et al.,* 2023; Erickson, 2023).

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into eight chapters. The opening chapter provides a background for the study, discusses its purpose, and outlines the research presuppositions. The chapter also specifies the aim, objectives, and primary questions of the research, and presents a brief account of the literature informed nature and significance of the study.

Following the introductory chapter, the literature review provides detailed information on topics relating to the research presuppositions, beginning with the concept of independent church. Additional topics addressed within Chapter Two include the legitimacy, accountability, and regulatory problematics associated with UKICS congregations, and the nature and functions of the sector's RLAs. In the chapter, appropriate literature is utilised in discussing the integrative theoretical approach employed in undertaking the research, the criteria adopted for theory selection, as well as the complementarity and analytical usefulness of related aspects of the selected theories and concepts.

Chapter Three introduces the study's methodological design. The chapter brings attention to the exploratory nature of the research, its philosophical underpinnings, and its adopted approach which is constructivist and interpretivist in orientation. Following this, the iterative process implemented in gathering and analysing data is presented, and justification is provided for utilising multiple methods and online means in the process of generating information. A further topic addressed in the third chapter is the criteria for assessing the quality of constructivist interpretivist-based studies.

The thesis has four discussion chapters. Chapter Four presents an in-depth analysis of responses to the survey administered to UK-based ICS RLAs. The survey outcomes relate to key issues pertaining to the UKICS. These issues were further explored in subsequent phases of data collection, and analytical outcomes are discussed in the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters. Chapter Five focuses on identifying the contemporary functions of UKICS RLAs. Chapter Six provides detailed information on the restructuring and revitalisation strategies employed in the UKICS. While Chapter Seven analyses accountability issues associated with independent churches and proposes a stakeholder accountability framework suited to their model. The concluding chapter of the thesis presents an overview of the study, summarises its major findings, and articulates the contribution made to knowledge. Also discussed are measures that could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction. The last section in Chapter Eight focuses on limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Overview of the Chapter

In approaching this research on the UK Independent Church Sector (UKICS), it was vital to situate it in appropriate literature. The goal being to enable the inquiry to build upon existing knowledge (Fan *et al.*, 2022; Kraus *et al.*, 2022). As guiding criteria for undertaking the literature search, a conceptual design reflecting the areas of focus was constructed (see Fig. 2.1). Key subjects outlined in the design were extracted from the study's purpose, stated aim, and objectives. Following this, the conceptual design was then condensed into eight key areas of research focus. The areas of research interest are RLA functions in a working relationship with independent congregations, stakeholder identification and prioritisation of UK-based independent churches, and the legitimacy, accountability and transparency issues associated with their operations. Also of interest are the extent of diversity in UKICS leadership constructs (including the role of women), safeguarding practices in the sector, the restructuring and revitalisation strategies employed by RLAs and their members, and the social engagement activities of these congregations.

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Design of Literature Area
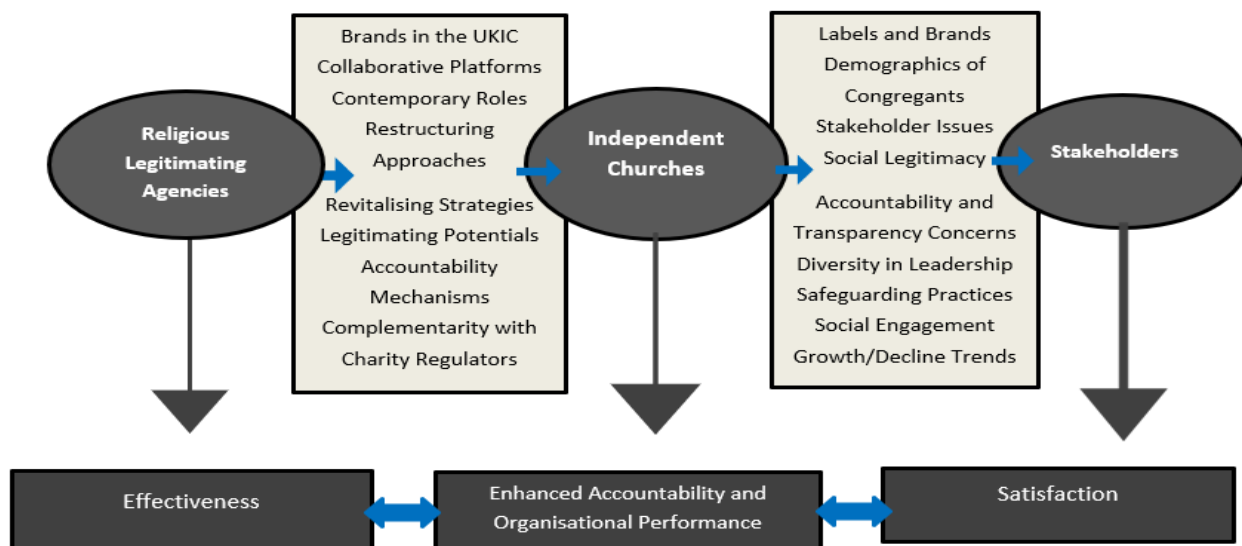
An overview of the extensive secondary data garnered from literature in the eight areas of research focus enabled the articulation of seven key presuppositions. These assumptions (see Section 1.2) which are core to the knowledge creation process of this investigation into UKICS operations, are amply discussed in this chapter. Concisely put, they consider that the working relationship between independent churches and RLAs is based on respect for autonomy and guided primarily by the concepts of Christian theology. It is also assumed that independent churches have stakeholders with varying accountability demands that could be met more satisfactorily with RLA involvement. Further presuppositions made are that UKICS actors operate in a socio-cultural environment characterised by rising secularism and heightened public scrutiny, and RLA roles have a social legitimating effect on independent church activities.

Table 2.1 shows the robust connection that exists between the eight key areas of research focus, the seven research presuppositions, the six research questions, and the theories and concepts that have contributed to informing and guiding this study (Luft *et al.*, 2022; Stenfors *et al.*, 2020).

In seeking to provide further clarity about the academic position on which a contribution to knowledge is to be made (Mensah *et al.*, 2020; Adom *et al.*, 2018), it is important to lay out a study's theoretical underpinning (USC Libraries, 2024; Stenfors *et al.*, 2020). For this inquiry into UKICS activities, related aspects of Stakeholder Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and the concepts of Christian Theology will be drawn upon to inform and guide the research. Justification for the use of these theories, their limitations, and the complementarity that exists between their related aspects, will be presented in this chapter. Additionally, the chapter contains a discussion on alternative theories which have been excluded and deemed inappropriate for undertaking the study. These steps are widely considered to be essential in the conduct of academic research (Saunders *et al.*, 2023; Ahmad, 2019).

Table 2.1: Link between Presuppositions, Questions and Theoretical Underpinning

Key Areas of Research Focus on the UKICS	Related Research Presuppositions	Related Research Question(s)	Underpinning Theories and Concepts
Independent church model, working relationship with RLAs, and RLA functions	**RP2**: Independent churches enter working relationships with RLAs based on the assurance of respect for their autonomy. **RP4**: Both independent churches and their RLAs serve to advance the Christian faith and while seeking to operate lawfully within civil society, they are guided primarily by the concepts of Christian theology.	**RQ1**: What are the contemporary functions of RLAs in the UKICS? **RQ2**: How complementary (or unrelated) are the functions of RLAs and charity regulators within the UKICS? **RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and Christian theological concepts.
Stakeholder identification and prioritisation of independent churches	**RP1**: Independent churches have stakeholders that they are accountable to, and their organisational performance is impacted by stakeholder demands. **RP4**: Both independent churches and their RLAs serve to advance the Christian faith and while seeking to operate lawfully within civil society, they are guided primarily by the concepts of Christian theology.	**RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory and Christian theological concepts.
Legitimacy issues/struggles of independent churches	**RP3**: The UKICS currently operates in the backdrop of a contemporary British society characterised by rising secularism. **RP4**: Both independent churches and their RLAs serve to advance the Christian faith and while seeking to operate lawfully within civil society, they are guided primarily by the concepts of Christian theology. **RP5**: RLA functions have a social legitimating effect on the operations of independent churches in the UKICS.	**RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and Christian theological concepts.

Key Areas of Research Focus on the UKICS	Related Research Presupposition(s)	Related Research Question(s)	Underpinning Theories and Concepts
Accountability and transparency issues of independent churches	**RP1**: Independent churches have stakeholders that they are accountable to, and their organisational performance is impacted by stakeholder demands. **RP6**: Public scrutiny of the activities of independent churches has become heightened in recent years. **RP7**: There are growing calls for better accountability by independent congregations in areas such as leadership, safeguarding, and finance, and RLAs have a role to play in this.	**RQ3**: What role do UKICS RLAs play in the operation of an effective accountability and transparency framework for the sector? **RQ2**: How complementary (or unrelated) are the functions of RLAs and charity regulators within the UKICS? **RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory and Christian theological concepts.
Leadership approaches and extent of diversity in leadership structures of independent churches	**RP4**: Both independent churches and their RLAs serve to advance the Christian faith and while seeking to operate lawfully within civil society, they are guided primarily by the concepts of Christian theology. **RP6**: Public scrutiny of the activities of independent churches has become heightened in recent years. **RP7**: There are growing calls for better accountability by independent congregations in areas such as leadership, safeguarding, and finance, and RLAs have a role to play in this.	**RQ5**: To what extent do the leadership structures and governance practices of UK-based independent churches enhance diversity and safeguarding? **RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and Christian theological concepts.
Safeguarding practices of independent churches	**RP6**: Public scrutiny of the activities of independent churches has become heightened in recent years. **RP7**: There are growing calls for better accountability by independent congregations in areas such as leadership, safeguarding, and finance, and RLAs have a role to play in this.	**RQ5**: To what extent do the leadership structures and governance practices of UK-based independent churches enhance diversity and safeguarding? **RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and Christian theological concepts.

Key Areas of Research Focus on the UKICS	Related Research Presupposition(s)	Related Research Question(s)	Underpinning Theories and Concepts
Restructuring and revitalisation strategies of UKICS RLAs and their members	**RP3**: The UKICS currently operates in the backdrop of a contemporary British society characterised by rising secularism. **RP4**: Both independent churches and their RLAs serve to advance the Christian faith and while seeking to operate lawfully within civil society, they are guided primarily by the concepts of Christian theology. **RP6**: Public scrutiny of the activities of independent churches has become heightened in recent years.	**RQ4**: How effective are UKICS restructuring and revitalisation strategies in the face of rising secularism and increased public scrutiny? **RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory and Christian theological concepts.
Social engagement activities of independent churches	**RP3**: The UKICS currently operates in the backdrop of a contemporary British society characterised by rising secularism. **RP4**: Both independent churches and their RLAs serve to advance the Christian faith and while seeking to operate lawfully within civil society, they are guided primarily by the concepts of Christian theology.	**RQ4**: How effective are UKICS restructuring and revitalisation strategies in the face of rising secularism and increased public scrutiny? **RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and Christian theological concepts.

As shown in Table 2.1, there is a connection between the key areas of focus in this inquiry, the research presuppositions and questions, and the study's underlying theories and concepts. For instance, primary attention in this research is given to exploring UKICS stakeholder accountability and transparency related issues. The research presuppositions relating to this key area of focus are Research Presupposition (RP) 1, RP6 and RP7, and the related research questions are Research Question (RQ) 3, RQ2 and RQ6. In effect, aspects of stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory and Christian theological concepts have all been found to be appropriate and effective as an underpinning for rationalising the research questions and collecting and analysing data pertaining to UKICS accountability and transparency issues (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022). This principle has also been applied to the other

seven key areas of research focus. The relevant aspects of these theories and concepts (and the complementarity between them) are presented in Sections 2.10 and 2.11.

In the succeeding sections, literature relating to the delineated areas of research interest will be elaborately and critically analysed, beginning with a focus on the concept of independent church, and the legitimacy, accountability and regulatory issues associated with independent church operations in a contemporary setting. To facilitate the generation of pertinent literature pertaining to UKICS RLAs, a scoping review was carried out. The process and outcome of the review are also discussed within this second chapter.

2.1 Concept of Independent Church

The concept of independent church relates to the right of a congregation to exist and operate autonomously under the sole authority of the Bible (Stevens, 2021; University of Sheffield, 2024). While seeking to remain under the headship of Jesus (the founder of Christianity) independent churches share a high degree of commonality in the exercise of autonomy, which furnishes them with a right to self-governance (Romanko, 2021; Reynolds *et al.*, 2021) and precludes any binding control over them from an external earthly authority (Towns, 1982; Strivens; 2022). This attribute distinguishes independent churches from mainstream established church groups such as the COE, Roman Catholic Church, Methodist Church, and Orthodox churches.

Ways in which independent church autonomy are often expressed include the freedom of the local congregation to own property, appoint their leaders, determine their doctrinal stance on issues, and administer their affairs as they deem fit, including adapting and making changes suited to their specific needs. They are also free to enter or exit affiliations and relationships at their own volition (Turley, 2023; Stevens, 2022; Deibert, 2024).

In outlining three disadvantages associated with an independent church structure, Gould (2020) and Deibert (2024) assert that self-governing church entities (in comparison to established church groups) lack the resources, influence, and other forms of support needed

to facilitate their growth. Additional drawbacks are a lack of proper oversight against doctrinal errors, and absence of an organisational mechanism for resolving internal conflicts on substantial issues. The essence of this research is thus to draw attention to the role of UKICS RLAs. The consideration is that these umbrella and resource bodies (Wittberg, 2013; Stevens; 2014) serve to significantly mitigate the shortcomings identified by Gould and Deibert.

Adopting independency as a framework for church operation does not entail a repudiation of the ideals of mutually beneficial cooperation (Romanko, 2021). Evidence from Scripture suggests that independency has never been synonymous with isolationism given that historically (from the pattern established in the Bible book of Acts) associations have been developed to give expression to the plurality of churches in an area, and discuss issues of mutual concern, whilst at the same time safeguarding the autonomy of each church (Underwood, 2014; Strivens, 2022). A presumption of veracity that this research seeks to determine is that in the collaborative platforms established by UKICS RLAs there are shared norms, convergent visions, complementary organisational goals, and a commitment to work towards achieving mutual benefits (Gazley and Guo, 2020; Tsasis, 2009).

Stevens (2021) and Reynolds *et al.*, (2021) are of the view that, globally, independency is the largest form of church structure. While a 2019 study suggests that the number of church congregations in Britain is 50,000 (Vincent, 2019; National Churches Trust, 2019), accurate figures are not available to show how many of them are of independent church background. UK independent congregations meet in varieties of venues, including living rooms and coffee shops (Pfeiffer, 2022; see Section 6.7), a factor which limits the chances of determining their actual numbers. In this research, focus will not be placed on all the churches in the UKICS. Rather, primary attention will be paid to independent congregations that are affiliated to RLAs (associations, fellowships, networks, unions, alliances, partnerships, and specialist groups) operating in the sector (University of Sheffield, 2024). Following from this, the inquiry aims to determine the extent to which such affiliations have impacted on the legitimacy, accountability,

and organisational performance of these churches considering the challenges they face from declining enthusiasm for religion and heightened public scrutiny in contemporary Britain.

2.1.1 Implications of Non-denominational Status

Independent churches are also recognised as being 'non-denominational' (Haynes Jr., 2023, Houdmann *et al.*, 2022a, Deibert, 2024). Non-denominational churches (NDCs) do not affiliate themselves with the government and other established denominations of Christianity. On a related issue, the status of independent congregations as being unaffiliated with neither the state nor its established church is the basis for including them among a group of church organisations categorised as 'free churches' (Wolfe, 2022; Blenheim Free Church, 2024).

In keeping with their non-denominational standing and adoption of the Bible as sole authority, churches that are independent place stronger emphasis on scriptural principles than on denominational rituals (Turley, 2023; Gould, 2020). Also, unlike the streamlined methodical order of service adopted by most established denominational and orthodox church institutions, independent churches are often non-liturgical in their mode of worship which incorporates modern forms of music, dance, shouts, and vigorous preaching (Onyinah, 2013; Wolfe, 2022). With respect to accommodating culturally resonant/customary practices (which is often done in sections of the ICS), Davie (2017) suggests that the established church in England, in failing to offer a welcoming place to the Windrush generation (O'Kane, 2020; Pennington, 2020), preferred their own rather staid habits to the exuberant and vibrant worship expressions of these Afro-Caribbeans. Consequently, the Afro-Caribbeans took their 'custom' elsewhere by setting up churches which are some of the most vibrant in the UK Christian spectrum. It is also argued that the inability to offer a desired style of church may have had a stronger influence in the establishment of these churches than the lack of a welcoming place (Osgood, 2024).

2.2 Diversities of Labels in the UKICS

There are diverse types of independent congregations (Reynolds *et al.*, 2021), and in positioning themselves to attract potential congregants, these churches adopt a multiplicity of

names in the communities where they operate (Gould, 2020). Also, depending on their doctrinal leanings and manner of communicating their faith, they are labelled in varied sub-divisions such as Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Congregational, Brethren, Baptist, Apostolic, House Churches, Emerging, and New Church Expressions (Brierley, 2020; Kay, 2016; Stevens, 2014; Anderson, 2013; Marti and Garniel, 2014; Labanow, 2009).

Evangelical churches, in staying true to their label, mobilise their memberships to practice a kind of Christianity that promotes evangelicalism; meaning that people who believe in Jesus need to have an initial 'born again' conversion experience and then go on to become actively involved in spreading the evangelion (gospel/good news) about him (Melton, 2024; Christian and Soal, 2022; The Economist, 2021). Pentecostals emphasise an experiential Christianity (resulting from divine empowerment by the Holy Spirit) characterised by speaking in tongues, healings, miracles, exorcism, prophesy, and other demonstrations of the Spirit's power (Fairchild, 2022; Anderson, 2013; Yadav, 2023). In the early 1960's, the influence of Pentecostalism spread beyond denominational lines (into Catholic, Anglican, and other Protestant circles) marking the beginning of the charismatic renewal movement (Anderson, 2013; Kay, 2016; Kay, 2008). Charismatics embrace Pentecostal spirituality, although they may not always express this in the form of speaking in tongues (Dorian, 2023). However, their spiritually empowered laity often play a more active role in the life of the church (Cartledge, 2011). The cautious approach of established church authorities (Kay, 2016), and their efforts to limit and control the unanticipated influence of the charismatic movement (Conradie, 2023; Pace, 2020), created frustrations and tensions some of which led to the formation of Neo-Charismatic independent congregations (Anderson, 2013; Pace, 2020). Kay (2016) points out that some House Churches and Apostolic networks in the UKICS originated from this transition.

Apostolic-based congregations in an independent setting are associated with Pentecostal characteristics (like speaking in tongues), but they practice a form of church government akin to the Early Church where the initial apostles of Jesus provided leadership (Yadav, 2023). As

such, these congregations are often led by an apostolic-type figure who claims direct authority from Jesus (Petruzello *et al.*, 2024) to establish churches and actively engage in spreading his teachings. Congregationalism (as an independent church model) emphasises a more involved role for individual members in decision making and church operations (Leeman, 2016; Wallace, 2015). Emerging churches focus on re-thinking and re-imagining Christianity in the post-modern era. They utilise deconstructive ways, innovative approaches, and relational connections in seeking to be relevant to themselves and their surrounding cultures (Labanow, 2009; Marti and Ganiel, 2014; Houdmann *et al.*, 2022b).   As part of the process of conducting a robust qualitative inquiry into the UKICS, there is a need to implement a case study selection criterion that enables the inclusion of congregations located across the UK, which are representative of the diversity of labels and sub-divisions in the sector ((Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Busetto *et al.*, 2020).

2.3 UKICS Legitimacy, Accountability and Regulatory Problematics

In Section 1.0 it was highlighted that legitimacy and accountability concerns relating to UKICS congregations came into greater focus in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Following the rapid increase in independent church numbers at the time, questions were raised in the British press about their legitimacy and accountability (Osgood, 2024; CIC International, 2018).

Addressing legitimacy concerns is essential for the continued existence and successful operation of independent churches because legitimacy is an organisational resource (Suchman, 1995). Thus, where it is perceived to be low or lacking, this absence could lead to an entity forfeiting its right to operate (Heleski, 2023). Furthermore, without properly addressing lingering legitimacy misgivings associated with them, independent congregations are unlikely to attract sustained support from their stakeholders (Kwestel and Doerfel, 2023; Ashfort and Gibbs, 1990). As is prevalent in the NPS, independent churches need to respond to a multiplicity of stakeholders (Mato-Santiso *et al.*, 2021; Osisioma, 2013; Costa and Da Silva, 2019), with varied demands for legitimacy (along with its intertwined factors such as accountability, transparency, good leadership framework and governance practices).

When reflecting on how legitimacy may effectively be represented, it is helpful to consider how in a comparative study of philanthropists Weinryb (2020) identifies two conflicting approaches they utilise in seeking to demonstrate their legitimacy. One way is to strive to demonstrate their independence as a basis for proving their legitimacy, and the other is to align themselves with other bodies. These two legitimacy-driven approaches are accentuated in the UKICS. However, a presupposition in this study is that in seeking to gain social acceptance (Xue and Hu, 2023; Degan 2019) and enhance stakeholder relationships (Freeman *et al.*, 2021), many UKICS congregations opt to align themselves with established sector based RLAs.

Von Billerbecks (2019) argues that self-legitimation is suited to organisations with contradictory and limited cohesive identifies. While there are diversities of labels in the UKICS, a high level of convergence exists in the sector's umbrella groups (see Section 2.4.2), and churches may find the option of alignment more appealing because of the synergistic benefits it avails. Synergy, a widely applied concept, refers to the increased effectiveness that comes from working together (Holtström and Anderson, 2021; Kachgal, 2015). In organisational terms, it involves two or more units networking (by, among other things, pooling their negotiating power, sharing know-how and resources, and coordinating strategies) in a way that generates greater value than they would have realised working apart (Goold and Campbell, 1998; Calō *et al.*, 2024). Networking triggers growth (Rennemo *et al.*, 2017). As such, UKICS congregations may be drawn towards affiliation because of the networking and growth-boosting platforms provided by RLAs.

2.3.1 Role of Legitimating Agencies

Legitimating agencies are accreditation or standard-setting bodies that operate in professional, institutional, and sectoral settings (Durrand and McGuire, 2005). They provide recognition to their constituents and support member organisations' activities in ways that enable compliance with norms, address stakeholders' expectations, and energise improved performance (Nunn-Ellison *et al.*, 2024; Duarte and Vardasca, 2023; Magd and Karyamsetty, 2022).   Legitimating agencies construct legitimation strategies (Lenz and Söderbaum, 2023)

that not only affect the functioning of their affiliates but also work to influence public perceptions about their members beliefs and activities (Schmidtke *et al.*, 2024). Malmelin and Malmelin (2015) assert that Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) face public legitimation challenges in their mission, brand and reputation, public relations, and trust. In view of the recognition offered by UKICS faith-based umbrella bodies (and the legitimation, restructuring, and revitalisation strategies they employ in supporting their members) it is considered within the context of this study that by function they are Religious Legitimating Agencies (CIC International, 2024a; FIEC, 2024a;).

Besides their recognition and standard-setting role, legitimating agencies furnish resources, and create platforms for self-identifying entities (with shared commonalities and interests) to adopt a coordinated approach to problem solving (Fiedler *et al.*, 2023; Shiu *et al.*, 2023). In effect, RLAs are faith-based umbrella and resource bodies (Wittberg, 2013) that exert a legitimating influence by providing accreditation, recognition, support, regulation/guidance, and collaborative platforms for organisations and operatives in different settings within the Faith Based Sector (FBS). RLAs serve to advance the religion of their constituents, promote and represent their interests, and facilitate the effective accomplishment of their operations (Stevens, 2014, 2021; Ortiz and Peris, 2022). In adopting a narrowed approach, this study focuses on UKICS RLAs, and the determination is that they are registered faith-based umbrella organisations that offer association, support, and networking opportunities to independent (non-denominational/autonomous/self-governing) churches and provide accreditation to independent ministers and leaders (see Section 5.1).

2.3.2 Role of Charity Regulators in the UKICS

Charity regulators maintain the register of organisations established for charitable purposes and regulate their activities (GOV UK, 2024a). They monitor the activities of registered charities to ensure they are compliant with predetermined statutory provisions (Breen 2018). Such monitoring it is argued enhances the operational effectiveness of charities (Hogg, 2018) and enables them to be transparent and accountable in a manner that promotes public trust

and confidence (Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021). Charity regulators also encourage good governance and management of charities by providing educational resources and guidance and reserve the power to institute an inquiry and place sanctions where necessary (Breen, 2018; Morris and Morgan, 2017). In terms of resources, a further benefit associated with charitable status is access to public funds. In the UK, charity law is a devolved issue (Morris, 2016) administered by statutory bodies established in its constituent nations.[1]

As of 15 May 2024, there were 170, 162 registered charities in England and Wales (Charity Commission for England and Wales, 2024) and on the same date, there were 25,052 registered charities in Scotland (Scottish Charity Regulator, 2024) and 7,226 in Northern Ireland (Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, 2024). However, the actual size of the UK charity sector is difficult to determine. This is because across the country, there are significant swathes of charitable organisations which are excepted or exempted from inclusion on the registers of charities. Among them are tens of thousands of church charities, some of which are independent congregations (Delahunty, 2021; Russell, 2022).

Given that charity regulators (who oversee and scrutinise the activities of independent churches in their register) may already be playing an effective role in enhancing their legitimacy, governance, and accountability, it could be argued that RLA efforts in the sector are a duplication of their public functions. However, it is the case that RLAs fulfil a distinct purpose, in consonance with their status as faith-based umbrella organisations (Wittberg, 2013). The Charity Commission for England and Wales regards a charity as a religious or faith-based charity if one of its core objectives is the advancement of religion for the public good (Yasmin *et al.*, 2014). As such, while the primary role of statutory bodies set up to oversee the activities of charities is regulatory (GOV UK, 2024a), the primary role of RLAs is religious. ICS associational agencies work to advance the religious interests of their members

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[1] There are three statutory regulators of charities in the United Kingdom. The Charity Commission for England and Wales was originally established in 1853. The Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) was founded in December 2003, and the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, was set up in March 2009.

while charity regulators are not directly involved in promoting the religious interests of registered charities. This is clearly an area where no role complementarity exists. It is considered though that there are areas of complementarity between the functions of RLAs and charity regulators in the UKICS (see Section 5.4).

2.3.3 The Complementary Role of Self-Regulation in the Nonprofit Sector

At the core of Charity Regulator activities is the desire to enhance public trust and confidence in charities which (according to public interest theory arguments) will ensure a sustained flow of goodwill and resources to the sector (Cordery and Deguchi, 2018). As such, there is often a perception in the public eye (in consonance with public interest theory) that charity sector accountability is best achieved through the robust regulatory mechanism of a more visible and involved charity watchdog that will define terms, demand, and enforce compliance, and conduct inquiries where necessary (Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021; Hogg, 2018). For UK churches, this public perception may not be unrelated to their lingering accountability problematics which has been exacerbated not only by recent cases of abuse and misconduct but also by instances of mishandling of abuse allegations as happened in the case involving Victor Whitsay, an ex-COE Bishop (Dowling, 2020; Premier Christian News, 2020).

In October 2020, following confirmation of mishandling of disclosures relating to Whitsay, one of the victims questioned the sufficiency of an accountability system where the church seems to be marking their own homework (Auxtova *et al.*, 2021). The victim went on to call for a move 'towards mandatory reporting and a regulation that is independent of the Church' (Dowling, 2020; Premier Christian News, 2020).

Gaskin (1999) reveals that (apart from external regulation) one option suggested by the public for achieving improved financial accountability in the charity sector is self-regulation. Hogg (2018) points to not only widespread public support for external regulation of charities but also arguments against external overregulation. Additionally, McDonnell (2017) acknowledges scholarly arguments which are based on the thinking that within the charity sector, an

accountability mechanism that privileges external oversight is a narrow conceptualisation with likely limited effectiveness. In keeping with this view, AbouAssi and Bies (2018) opine that growth in the NPS has outpaced the statutory regulator's ability for oversight. They go on to suggest the vital necessity for self-regulation.

Within the NPS, self-regulation takes place at organisational, umbrella and professional levels (Angelucci *et al.*, 2023; Similon, 2015; Auxtova *et al.*, 2021), including within the UK religious sector (Chong, 2020). AbouAssi and Bies (2018) assert that self-regulation is a way to preserve autonomy and garner legitimacy. This plays well for the ICS given that preservation of autonomy is a central issue in the sector and RLAs enable churches accredited with them to expand their social legitimacy beyond what could be achieved by their independent efforts (Weinryb, 2020). However, it is also the case that independent churches derive social and regulatory legitimacy (arguably to a higher degree) by becoming registered with statutory regulators of charities (Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021; NVCO, 2024). In this regard, Ebrahim (2003) sees the need for accountability to external stakeholders in dealing with the problem of public trust. However, Ebrahim (p.820) also suggests that 'self-regulation presents a complementary path that allows non-profits to address directly their own sector-wide problems while retaining some integrity'. Ebrahim believes self-regulation, as a form of accountability, can be accomplished through the development of formal codes of conduct appropriately suited to a sector.

In effect, the review/regulatory frameworks provided by ICS RLAs is an area where their roles and that of external regulators of charities are complementary. While not disregarding the increasing calls for more public scrutiny of the activities of religious organisations, it is important to consider that there is an ongoing need within society to protect the freedom of religion (Spencer, 2014). More specifically, there is also essence in ensuring that the autonomy of independent churches continues to be respected, as this is the basis on which the independent church model functions. The thinking then is that a regulatory approach that accommodates RLA review/self-regulatory activities is the best fit for the UKICS (see Section

7.4). In keeping with RO4, analytical effort will be made in this study to determine if there are other areas of complementarity (or further areas of unrelatedness) between the functions of RLAs and charity regulators in the UKICS (see Section 5.4).

2.4 Role of RLAs in the UKICS

The registered faith-based umbrella organisations that offer association and support to independent churches, and give accreditation to independent ministers, are referred to in this study as RLAs. RLAs operating in the UKICS are voluntary associations (fellowships, networks, unions, alliances, partnerships, specialist groups) of autonomous and self-governing churches, church networks, para church organisations and Christian ministries (Stevens, 2014). They are recognised by the regulators of charities as faith-based umbrella or resource bodies for other charities (Wittberg, 2013), and they serve to advance the religion of their constituents, promote (and represent) their interests, and facilitate the effective accomplishment of their operations. As umbrella bodies, UKICS RLAs do not directly serve the clientele that their members are reaching. Rather, they enable churches in their membership to do so more effectively (Wittberg, 2013).

When compared with other faith-based umbrella agencies, ICS RLAs are unique in their role because they support healthy independency as a model for local churches. Yet, they also provide a platform for independent churches to be interdependent (Reynolds *et al.*, 2021; Strivens, 2022); to work interdependently with their peers; relate ecumenically at inter-church and inter-faith forums; and stay connected to the wider society. In effect, ICS RLAs facilitate intra-sectoral collaborations between independent congregations, in a manner that respects individual organisational autonomy, minimises conflicts, and results in the attainment of mutually beneficial goals (Tsasis, 2009). They also provide platforms for cross-sector collaborations (Latonen *et al.*, 2023; Tulder and Keen, 2018). Collaborations at this level can be effective in enabling the ICS to engage in dialogues and working partnerships with other faith-based bodies, the public sector, and actors from other sectors (Glasgow *et al.*, 2023; Simo, 2009; Duff and Buckingham, 2015).

2.4.1 Scoping Review on Faith-based Umbrella Bodies in the UKICS

While there are references in the literature to some umbrella bodies/networks within the UKICS (Brierley, 2020; Stevens, 2014; Kay, 2008), a gap existed in properly identifying these agencies and delineating their vital functions. In January 2021, and as part of the literature review undertaken for this thesis, a scoping review focusing on faith-based umbrella bodies in the UKICS was commenced. The detailed search (Sahoo *et al.*, 2023; Lockwood *et. al*, 2019) involved reviewing available literature on the topic (McCloskey *et al.*, 2023), including documentary and web-based sources, annual reports, and records kept by charity regulators.

The goal of the scoping review was not to generate answers to research questions (Sucharew and Macaluso, 2019) but to establish key factors related to the topic (Khalil *et al.*, 2021) and provide evidence to support the following inclusion criteria (Sahoo *et al.*, 2023; Munn *et al.*, 2018) adopted in determining organisations that function as RLAs in the UKICS:

- Registration as a faith-based umbrella body/network with a UK charity regulator.
- Ability to offer membership/network opportunities to UK-based independent churches.
- Performing roles in the UKICS that include provision of resources and other forms of support.
- Evidence from the agency's objectives that it has the potential to enhance the social legitimacy, accountability, growth, and overall organisational performance of independent congregations in its membership/network.

Information from the scoping review enabled 43 organisations functioning as UK-based RLAs in the ICS to be identified (see Table 2.2). Evidence from the review shows that Evangelical Alliance (EA), established in 1846, is the oldest UK-based RLA with independent churches in its membership (Evangelical Alliance, 2024a). EA is also uniquely positioned in its relationship with other ICS RLAs as it serves as an umbrella organisation for some of them. In June 2003, EA had 3,183 churches in its membership, with independent congregations and new church networks representing over 23% of this figure (Osgood, 2006). By March 2015, the number of

EA's member churches had grown to about 3,600 (Evangelical Alliance, 2015). Accurate figures of membership size of UK-based RLAs are not often available through secondary sources, and where available, it may not be up-to-date information. In seeking to implement a robust research methodology (see Chapter 3), it is planned that the membership sizes of ICS RLAs (and the spread of their membership across the four UK nations) will be determined by generating primary data.

Table 2.2: List of Identified UKICS RLAs as at July 2022	
Affinity UK	Gospel Standard Strict Baptists
Apostolic Pastoral Congress of Great Britain	Ground Level Network
Assemblies of God Great Britain	Harvest Alliance UK
Association of Grace Baptist Churches East Anglia	Heart of England Baptist Association
Association of Grace Baptist Churches South East	Ichthus Christian Fellowship
Baptist Union of Great Britain	Independent Methodist Churches
Baptist Union of Scotland	Lifelink Global
Baptist Union of Wales	Multiply Christian Fellowship
Catalyst Network of Churches	New Apostolic Church UK
Christian and Missionary Alliance of Great Britain	New Frontiers Together
Churches in Communities International	New Wine Cymru
Congregational Federation	Old Baptist Union
Elim Pentecostal	Open (Christian) Brethren
Evangelical Alliance	Pioneer Network UK
Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches	Plumbline Ministries
Fellowship of Churches of Christ	Redeemed Christian Church of God UK
Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches	Salt and Light UK
Fellowship of Independent Methodist Churches	Scottish Network Churches
Free Methodist Church UK	Thirtyone:eight
Fresh Streams Network	Union of Evangelical Churches
Global Connections	Union of Welsh Independents
*List arranged in alphabetical order	Vineyard Churches UK and Ireland

Some UKICS associational groups have a predetermined national or regional confinement. For instance, the Scottish Network Churches (SNC) focuses on facilitating a more collaborative and impactful gospel-missional approach in engaging with communities in Scotland (Scottish Network Churches, 2024). New Wine Cymru promotes the proliferation of healthy effective churches in Wales (New Wine Cymru, 2024), while the Fellowship of Independent Methodist Churches (FIMC, 2024) has in its association independent churches

(with a Methodist background) that are based in Northern Ireland (Lisburn IMC, 2024). The Association of Grace Baptist Churches South East (AGBC South East, 2024), which is a network of around 70 churches based in the South East of England, is a regionally confined umbrella body.

Thirtyone:eight, a UK-based RLA that offers professional safeguarding services, plays a vital (but more specialist and limited) role in the sector. It is involved in resourcing, reformation, research, and self-regulatory activities that promote accountability, transparency, and better practice performance in safeguarding within the sector (Wright, 2023; Oakley and Humphrey, 2019). As a faith-based umbrella/resource agency, Thirtyone:eight has a wider-ranging membership that includes several independent churches, with membership providing access to their disclosure service and many other members only benefits (Thirtyone:eight, 2024a). In January 2017, Thirtyone:eight (then known as Child Protection Advisory Service) initiated a review of its brand (Thirtyone:eight, 2019). The approach employed was a rebranding strategy which involved a change in name and a restructuring of their activities (Marques *et al.*, 2020; Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006)

2.4.2 Branding Approaches Adopted by UKICS RLAs

A factor in identifying the composition of RLAs and their modus operandi is to consider the extent to which branding is utilised as a strategy in the ICS (Kylander and Stone, 2012). In a marketing sense, branding is a strategic tool (Rooney, 1995) that an organisation utilises to 'position' itself in a setting (Chermatony, 2010), and communicate a clear set of values to its stakeholders (Daly and Moloney, 2004). In the ICS, it is likely that branding is not only utilised as a strategy at the organisational level, but also at the agency and sectoral levels. At the organisational level, it is found that independent churches come in diverse labels (see Section 2.2), and in positioning themselves in the sector (and thereby developing their unique brand), individual RLAs often adopt a targeted approach of offering association to a niche in the sector. For instance, EA presents itself as an alliance of evangelicals that serve to advance the evangelical Christian faith (Evangelical Alliance, 2024a). Similarly, Affinity (2024a) and FIEC

(2024a) also streamline their membership appeals to attract churches committed to evangelicalism. Pentecostal leaning RLAs include the Assemblies of God Great Britain (AOG GB, 2024) and Elim Pentecostal (Elim Pentecostal, 2024). Newfrontiers (an apostolic-leadership oriented network established in 1980) seeks members from autonomous but interdependent apostolic spheres (New Frontiers, 2024; Kay, 2007), while various Baptist Unions and the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches (EFCC) are made up of churches that uphold the creed of congregationalism (Leeman, 2016; Wallace, 2015). VCUKI, highlighted in Section 1.0 for its growth trend, is an RLA that focuses on facilitating new and emerging churches (Labanow, 2009; Brierley, 2018). The organisation licences churches joining its association to adopt the brand name 'Vineyard' and use the Vineyard Churches logo (Vineyard Churches, 2024; Trent Vineyard, 2024a)

The Evangelical Alliance has a policy statement which effectively serves as a brand statement. It not only identifies itself as evangelical but goes further to point out that it offers membership to churches that will abide with the 'Evangelical Relationships Commitment' (Evangelical Alliance, 2024a). Afinity (2024a) lays a similar emphasis on shared evangelical commitment. While the tone may be considered uninviting to some, it enables these agencies to achieve domain consensus (Tsasis, 2009) among the participating churches, which helps to strengthen the collective brand and enhance collaborative relations. Domain consensus requires clarity in expectations about what the agency will and will not do.

So, it seems to be the case that the membership solicitation approach of RLAs (to the diverse brands of independent churches they seek to attract) tends to be more specifically targeted rather than broad-based in its appeal, and this enables them to create their own agency brand. Given this assumption, effort was made (in planning for primary data collection) to adopt a sampling and case study selection approach that enabled the varied umbrella and church brands in the UKICS to be represented (see Chapter 3). The expectation being that such a measure would enhance data richness and ensure a credible research outcome (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023).

A case could also be made for the ICS being a collective or sectorial brand that is positioned within the Christian community and the wider society (Kylander and Stone, 2012). As part of their role, UKICS RLAs function to attract recognition (at a collective level) primarily to churches in their membership, but also to the sector. They work to ensure that the vibrant growth occurring in the sector (Hayward, 2022), and its contributions to the British society as a force for citizenship empowerment, community development, social cohesion, and other forms of public good (Pennington, 2020; Bickley, 2017), gain widespread acknowledgement in the media and general populace. It is of interest to determine if RLA efforts to attract recognition to the ICS has translated into increased public awareness and improved positive media coverage of the sector.

2.4.3 Non-denominational Standing of Churches Affiliated to RLAs

By choosing to become affiliated (in a working relationship) with RLAs, it is likely that independent churches could, in a limited sense, be compromising their status as being non-denominational. For instance, Bialecki (2016) calls into question the non-denominational standing of congregations in the Vineyard Movement. As pointed out in the previous section, their UK-based RLA, VCUKI, holds trademark rights to the 'Vineyard' logo and its member churches adopt the name under license (VCUKI, 2024). However, Bialecki concedes that the association's approach preserves a great deal of autonomy, and Trent Vineyard, a leading independent church within the Vineyard movement, provides proof of this (Trent Vineyard, 2024). The congregation (established 1996 in Nottingham, England) is a registered charity in its own right. However, it acknowledges that it uses the Vineyard Churches logo with the permission of their RLA. In response, the congregation contributes financially to support the work of VCUKI (Trent Vineyard, 2023b). For instance, in the financial year ended 30 June 2022, Trent Vineyard reported a workforce of 99 employed staff, around 1050 active volunteers, and an income of £3, 262,949 (Trent Vineyard, 2023b). Clearly, for an independent church of this size, it could be argued (as this study supposes) that there are identifiable benefits to be derived from the form of affiliation it continues to maintain with VCUKI. Wright

(2017), a leader in the Vineyard Movement, stresses the need to recognise that each Vineyard church has a 'unique shape' and the Movement (as an RLA) is providing support in areas that lead to their continued health and growth.

It is equally noteworthy that besides its membership of VCUKI, Trent Vineyard is also affiliated to Evangelical Alliance, another UK-based RLA (Trent Vineyard, 2024b; Evangelical Alliance, 2024a). This suggests that dual or multiple affiliations occur freely in the UKICS, lending further credence to the autonomous status of churches in the sector. Therefore, in seeking to determine the extent to which such affiliations have impacted on the legitimacy, accountability, and organisational performance of independent churches, it is also of interest to ascertain if such dual or multiple affiliations have any effect on their autonomous status. While a guiding presupposition for this inquiry is that respect for independent church autonomy is guaranteed in a working relationship with an RLA, there is still a need to establish if this respect for autonomy is standard practice in the UKICS; if it applies in every given situation, or if there is evidence of exceptions, leading to loss of autonomy in certain aspects.

It has been suggested that the common independent identity and evangelical purpose shared by member churches of FIEC (another UKICS RLA) means the association could be described as denominated. While acknowledging this viewpoint, Stevens (2012) argues that the fact that membership is entered into and exited voluntarily underscores the validity of FIEC's framework as being non-controlling in a denominational sense. Also, despite the implications of adopting an affiliated status in working with RLAs, and the dissimilarities evidenced in their varied names and diverse labels, it is widely recognised that a universal distinguishing characteristic of independent churches is the right to autonomy and self-governance (Reynolds *et al.*, 2021; University of Sheffield, 2024).

2.5 Utilising an Integrative Theoretical Approach

As specified earlier, this research explores the effectiveness of RLAs in enhancing accountability and organisational performance of UK-based independent churches in the face of declining enthusiasm for religion (Duffy *et al.*, 2023) and heightened public scrutiny (White 2022; Jones, 2020; Evans, 2019). The study is informed and guided by related propositions of multiple theories. This is because no single established theory has been found to be capable of fully and appropriately accounting for the interactions between independent churches and their diverse stakeholders, and how these interactions are affected when independent churches voluntarily enter working relationships with RLAs (Cornelissen, 2023; Nair and Ascani, 2022; Motta, 2019).

Labanow suggests that conducting a truly effective church-related study would require employing a methodology that is 'sociologically rigorous, while having a decisively theological orientation' (Labanow, 2009, p. 8). It is considered that this thesis is a church-related study (given its focus on the UKICS) and thus there is a need to incorporate Christian theological concepts in its methodology (Holmes and Lindsay, 2018).

In their exploratory research into the contribution of students and academics from French-speaking Africa to the global science and religion debate, Bom and Toren (2020) utilise a triangulation of theoretical and methodological perspectives that accommodate a theological approach. They point out the necessity of critically reflecting on the appropriate framework that is best suited to both the unique research context and the research objectives. This will enable new and significant insights about the realities being studied to emerge.

Accordingly, this research is theoretically framed to adopt an integrative approach (Fernando and Lawrence, 2014; García-Cabrera *et al.*, 2023), and related aspects of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Freeman *et al.*, 2021), legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995) and Christian theological concepts (Wolfe, 2022; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018; Pamplany *et al.*, 2021) are collectively engaged as its underpinning. The idea being to conduct a well-situated scholarly

study (in keeping with the research aim) that recognises the impact made by both the Christian biblical worldview and the social structure of the contemporary British society on the issue under examination. Complementary aspects of these three theories and concepts inform the background setting of this research and permeate its process, including shaping the research questions, methodological approach, data collection and analysis, and the generation of study findings (Cheek and Øby, 2023; Ahmad, 2019).

2.5.1 Criteria Adopted for Determining Theoretical Approach

The process of developing a theoretical framework for this research on the UKICS has involved identifying specific and well-established theories that are relevant to the study, delineating related aspects of the theories that could be utilised collectively, and reviewing prior research that have been based on such theoretical models (Crawford, 2020). The criteria adopted for determining theories and concepts utilised for underpinning this research included their appropriateness and explanatory power (USC Libraries, 2024), and the likely complementarity in their related aspects (Cornelissen, 2023). Other inclusion criteria pertained to their ability to provide justification for the study (Crawford, 2020) and enable meaning creation about the UKICS (Kivunja, 2018), as well as their ease of application in the constructivist and interpretive process (Mezmir, 2020). There was also a need to ensure that a robust connection exists between the selected theories and the research presuppositions and research questions.

As shown in Table 2.1, a key attribute of the related literature that inform a study is that they are interlinked with the presuppositions of the study and the research questions it is seeking to answer (Luft *et al.*, 2022; Stenfors *et al.*, 2020). The theories and concepts will also serve as guiding lens in testing the presuppositions and providing answers to the research questions during the data analysis process. Part of the goal of establishing this interrelatedness is to situate the findings of this study within its theoretical base, which, it is anticipated, will ensure academic rigour (Varpio *et al.*, 2020; Kivunja, 2018).

2.6 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory is frequently used in scholarly works on organisational and social issues in management (Mahajan *et al.*, 2023; Dmytriyev *et al.*, 2021). Originally propagated by Edward Freeman (1984), its adoption as a strategic management tool is an acknowledgment of the fact that there are groups and individuals who have a (direct or indirect) stake in the success or failure of an organisation. The strategic approach of stakeholder theory emphasises seeking stakeholder support (Widhiastuti *et al.*, 2023) and building and maintaining sustainable stakeholder relationships as the key to improved decision making (Sharpe *et al.*, 2021) and enhanced organisational performance (Freeman *et al.*, 2021).

Since it was first outlined, stakeholder theory has been developed over the years to embrace an operational model that recognises that what an organisation does, its ethical conduct in doing it, and the groups and individuals who have a stake in it are intertwined and inseparable factors (Rosner *et al.*, 2023). In view of this, an organisation should take responsibility for its actions by ensuring that it conducts its affairs in an ethical manner and takes into consideration the interests of its stakeholders (Kwestel and Doerfel, 2023; Freeman *et al.*, 2010). This strategic stakeholder-oriented management approach is considered vital for independent church sustainability in a contemporary UK operational environment.

2.6.1 Challenges with Using Stakeholder Theory

Freeman *et al.* (2020) acknowledges that a tension in stakeholder theory is that some see it as a concept that is continually being contested with respect to its precise parameters and proper application. This could be explained by the fact that the theory has different connotations in different settings.

Stakeholder theory had a capitalist and business undertone in its original articulation and implementation in the mid-1980s (Freeman *et al.*, 2021). However, it is now widely agreed that the theory is multifaceted (Freeman *et al.*, 2020), and its generalisations which are not context or topic specific can be modified and adapted to suit the specific requirements of a setting

(Kivunja, 2018; Passey, 2020). For instance, despite the concept being developed in the for-profit sector, Barrett (2001), Dhanani and Connolly (2012), Hyndman and McConville (2016), and Brajer-Marczak *et al.*, (2021) provide ample proof that stakeholder theory could be meaningfully employed in examining non-profits. As such, an analytical opportunity exists to adapt the principles of this model to develop a stakeholder accountability framework applicable to the ICS.

2.6.2 Stakeholder Identification and Prioritisation

The identification and prioritisation of stakeholders remains a central question in stakeholder strategic management (Kwestel and Doerfel, 2023; Sharpe *et al.*, 2021; Parent and Deephouse, 2007). It is also a core issue that this research sought to address in relation to the management approach of UK-based independent congregations.

Arguments abound as to how widely to conceive of the network of an organisation's stakeholders (Freeman *et al.,* 2020), how to attribute salience to them (Kapiriri and Razavi, 2021), and how to effectively engage with them and manage their often-conflicting interests (Liu *et al.*, 2022; Guthrie, 2021). Freeman (1984) propounds that those groups and individuals who can affect or are affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives could potentially be identified as its stakeholders. Mitchell *et al.* (1997) provides further normative clarity by suggesting that neighbourhoods, institutions, societies, and the natural environment could also be identified as actual or potential stakeholders. Their comprehensive approach in developing a theory of stakeholder identification and salience is based on the proposition that organisations will avoid certain problems and become more effective in managing stakeholder relationships if inactive stakeholders (that are unrecognised or presumed to have little or no influence) are accounted for. This approach is also likely to aid planning (Megyesi *et al.*, 2024), boost organisational reputation, and foster good public relations (Guthrie, 2021). The comprehensive perspective proposed by Mitchell *et al.* was deemed relevant in the process of determining independent church stakeholders and how salience is attributed to them.

Stakeholder salience represents the degree to which competing stakeholders' claims are prioritised by an organisation's management (Mitchell *et al.,* 1997; Sahoo *et al.,* 2023). Greiling and Stötzer (2016) suggest that in a narrow concept of stakeholder identification, this prioritisation process is a function of relevance; those who are closely related to an organisation's operations, or those who are strategically relevant for achieving its primary objective, or those who supply critical resources. Mitchell *et al.* adopts a prioritisation criterion that is based on the three social concepts of power, legitimacy, and urgency, and the more of these attributes that a stakeholder group has, the greater its salience would be (Mahajan *et al.*, 2023; Parent and Deephouse, 2007). As will be discussed next, these attributes could explain why God is accorded the pre-eminence as a managerial stakeholder in the affairs of independent churches (see also Sections 2.7.1 and Table 4.1).

2.6.3 Concept of God as a Managerial Stakeholder

In identifying stakeholders prevalent in the 21st century UKICS (and attributing salience to them), it is assumed that the concept of God as a stakeholder (Schwartz, 2006; Hoffman *et al.*, 2014; Carradus *et al.*, 2020) is central to appropriately addressing issues related to the sector. Schwartz (2006) and Mitroff and Denton (1999) provide a basis for this assumption.

Schwartz suggests that there is both theoretical and ontological support for God to be considered as a managerial stakeholder in organisations that accept his existence and believe that he can affect the world. Mitroff and Denton undertook a two-year long study on spirituality, religion, and values in the workplace (Ashar and Lane-Maher, 2004). They proffer five distinct organisational models for practicing religion or spirituality in the workplace (Oliveira, 2004; Belwalkar, 2020); the religion-based organisation, the evolutionary organisation, the recovering organisation, the socially responsible organisation, and the value-based organisation (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Each model involves a holistic approach that integrates management policies, principles, practices, and organisation functions to enable religion or spirituality to be exercised systematically and responsibly without engendering controversy, conflict, acrimony and division over core beliefs and values (Mitroff *et al.*, 2009).

By definition, a religion-based organisation is positive toward religion (Oliveira, 2004) and is therefore likely to have God at the top of the hierarchy as the principal stakeholder (Hoffman *et al.*, 2014). While this may explain the approach in the running of independent churches, it also finds application in the for-profit sector. Belwalkar (2020) suggests that Chick-fil-A (an American fast foods chain) is a religion-based organisation because of the influence that Christian values have on its policies and practices. This is in keeping with Mitroff and Denton's model. For instance, since it began operations in 1946, Chick-fil-A has maintained a no-Sunday-opening policy (Genovese, 2020; Chick-fil-A, 2023) as a way of honouring God and enabling its employees to rest and worship, if they choose to do so (Clarendon, 2022). An incident resulting from a religious view expressed by the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of this firm is highlighted in the next section.

Work and faith may seem like two different ideas, but for Christian-based organisations, their faith influences their work, and they strive continually to maintain harmony between the two (Carradus *et al.*, 2020; Julian, 2014). Abandoning this approach could make them ineffective in accomplishing their purpose. A strategy they usually adopt in achieving harmony between their faith and work is to 'let God lead' (Julian, 2014). This is an often-misunderstood concept that is also susceptible to varied interpretations and abuse (see Section 7.2.1). However, it adds weight to the essence of recognising God as a stakeholder in the work of independent churches and their umbrella agencies.

2.6.4 Limitations in Moral Perspective of Stakeholder Theory

A further limitation associated with stakeholder theory is in relation to its moral perspectives. While Harrison *et al.*, (2015) draws attention to stakeholder theory's ethical approach that encourages fair and honest treatment of all stakeholders, there is also a call (in the contribution) for further research on the theory's offers on ethics and morality, given the complexities prevalent in the world. In arguing that stakeholder theory is not a comprehensive doctrine, (Parmar *et al.*, 2010) insists that it lacks the ability to address all the relevant moral questions, not only to the for-profit setting but also the rest of the moral world.

It is an established fact that socio-cultural and religious differences affect peoples' ethics related actions (Sigurjonsson *et al.*, 2022; Neville, 2022). Neville refers to the incident in July 2012 when Dan Cathy, the CEO of Chick-fil-A declared support for the biblical definition of the family unit. Cathy's declaration was based on the company's religious views which, over the years, have helped to attract customers with conservative beliefs (Genovese, 2020). The CEO's viewpoint on the family unit attracted widespread activist protests and calls for boycott against the firm. However, it exemplifies the influence faith could have on the stakeholder strategies of Christian-led organisations in responding to contentious social issues (Julian, 2014; Neville, 2022). It is likely that a similar approach may be adopted by actors in the UKICS.

Capizzo and Harrison (2023) are of the view that in a social media driven news environment, NPOs are being held accountable for their stance on values-based issues, more than ever before. However, Capizzo and Harrison also acknowledge that the traditional approach has always been for nonprofits to advocate on polarising issues in a manner that aligns with their mission and values. Given that church organisations claim a moral authority that is not available to secular actors (Steiner, 2011; Tutu, 2018), the assumption in this study is that there is a need to recognise the role that biblical principles might have in shaping the response of the ICS to its stakeholders (Conradie, 2023; Carradus, 2020; Roark and Cline, 2018). Therefore, in seeking to find a more comprehensive approach to exploring ethics and morality questions (as it relates to the UKICS), there is academic merit in integrating related aspects of stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory and Christian theological concepts.

2.7 Concepts of Christian Theology

The concepts of Christian theology refer to the core concepts that underpin the approach of Christianity and represent ways of making sense of its beliefs and practices (Blaylock *et al.*, 2016; Wolfe 2022). These involve critical reflection and interpretation, and create a robust, well-defined, and historically validated framework for studying, understanding, and applying the Bible (both the Old and New Testaments) from a Christian perspective (Pamplany *et al.*, 2021). Such concepts provide a Christian context for exegesis (the study of biblical texts),

systematic theology (the formulation of doctrine from biblical texts), historical theology (the dynamic movements of dogma and the practices of the church), and practical theology, the application of biblical texts in Christian living (Venter, 2023; Wolfe, 2022; Van Pelt, 2015; Bowald, 2020). Proponents of Christian theology contend that the Bible has a unified message (Durand, 2023; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018) and that Christian theology introduces a metanarrative that facilitates an understanding of the worldview of the Old and New Testaments' plethora of human writers (Hamilton, 2013; Lawrence, 2010).

Yasmin *et al.* (2014) proffers that Christian theology has made significant contributions to modern life, in areas such as the world's modern systems of accountability practices. Taking a relook at accountability, Agyemang (2023) proposes that any accountability related study would need to take cognisance of the importance of context, alongside the essence of accountability to a multiplicity of stakeholders. Accordingly, it is considered that in formulating a theoretical underpinning for studying the accountability of independent churches in contemporary Britain, the significant influence exerted by Christian theological concepts on their ability to be responsive and answerable to stakeholders would need to be recognised and integrated with the propositions of stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory.

Woods (2021), a philosopher, provides justification for adopting the concepts of Christian theology in developing a theoretical framework for academic research. Woods suggests that philosophy and Christian theology share a commonality in both their topics of inquiry and methods of inquiry. In their topics of inquiry, Christian theologians ask questions about fundamental ontology, epistemology, axiology, metaphysics, and political theory. Their methods of inquiry involve interpreting authoritative texts, and proffering arguments and evidence in support of their conclusions (Woods, 2021). In a line similar to Woods, Venter (2023) argues that theology has, since its earliest account, had interactions with philosophy. Going further, Venter posits that the complex social problems of the modern era and the diverse nature of academic disciplines have meant that theology is increasingly being prompted to embrace the field of interdisciplinarity, leading to discourses and the generation

of new questions. Adding weight to this line of thinking, Wolfe (2022) proposes that the patterns of individual and group behaviour observed and explained by the social sciences interact in a direct way with theological questions and claims, and these interactions have constructive (as well as other) dimensions which call for close and careful exploration.

Holmes and Lindsay (2018) point out that while the relationship between Christian theology and other theoretical streams utilised in contemporary research remains largely unexplored, Christian theology has philosophies based on it and its core features have methodological implications for research. Ontological approaches based on Christian theology (as identified by Holmes and Lindsay) include the key belief that the existence and persistence of all things is dependent on God, and the view that there is a distinct Christian way of being in the world. Epistemologically, the Christian theological approach to knowledge acquisition recognises the role of personal experience and belief that may not always align with logical argument. By implementing a theoretical framework that integrates the concepts of Christian theology, stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory, it is expected that this study will thus significantly contribute to filling the gap in knowledge that exists due to the largely unexplored relationship between Christian theology and other established theories (see Table 2.3).

2.7.1 Christology, Ecclesiology and Stewardship

A key concept of Christian theology is Christology which centres on the identity of Jesus Christ in relation to his divinity and humanity (McGrath, 2018). In examining the Holy Scriptures (and seeking to create an understanding about how they work and should be applied), proponents of Christian theology declare that Jesus (who expressed the Godhead in human form and through his redemptive work established the Church) is the central figure, and the kingdom of God and its rule and covenantal lifestyle (which Jesus exercises authority over) comprises the thematic framework (Van Pelt, 2015). Closely related to Christology, is the concept of ecclesiology, which deals with the identity of the Church and its different expressions (Kärkkäinen, 2021; Avis, 2018; Miti, 2020). Among other things, it asserts that the church is a divinely established body with divinely conferred legitimacy. As such, it has divine authority

and approval to operate, and is required to be compliant to divine stipulations, especially biblical principles reflecting the direct teachings of Jesus and other inspired writings by his early followers which were progressively received through revelatory processes (Conradie, 2023; Roark and Cline, 2018).

In its approach to service, the Christian church in general is guided by the concept of stewardship, which is motivated primarily by a sense of duty to Christ, love for God, and love for people (Kamer, 2018). The analytical relevance of the Christian concept of stewardship to this research, including its relationship with stewardship theory (Donaldson and Davis, 1991), is discussed in Section 2.9.3.

In effect, the main purpose, value system, ethos, frameworks, and modus operandi of the church (as a collective body) are clarified and guided by the propositions of Christian theology (Wolfe 2022; Conradie, 2023: Bowald, 2020), and this remains the case in the UKICS despite the secular-leaning socio-cultural environment in which it operates. For instance, EA state clearly that the Christian faith they profess (which in their words 'underpins everything we do') is for the common good of every member of society (Evangelical Alliance, 2019, p.5). FIMC, another UK-based RLA, point out that they are unwilling to accommodate fashionable tendencies of the age (contemporary societal values) which run counter to their biblical worldview (FIMC, 2024; Lisburn IMC, 2024).

Thus, it is of essence to recognise that although independent churches are obliged to operate within the legal and political framework of secular society (and conform with equalities, diversity and inclusion-based expectations found in the modern workplace), they are usually guided by a concept of the divine and the sacred in conducting their affairs and carrying out their mission (Berger, 2003). Also, like other church organisations, independent congregations claim a moral authority that is not available to secular actors (Tutu, 2018; Steiner, 2011), and with this authority, they seek to exert influence and shape (or reshape) the value systems of societies (Pamplany *et al.,* 2021).

2.7.2 Challenges with Using Christian Theology's Conceptualisations

The implication for research of the likely existence of a disparity between the value system of the church and that of the larger social system is that in conducting academic exercises that address social issues related to the church (as is the case with this doctoral study) the propositions of Christian theology may be assumed to be insufficient as the sole source of theoretical underpinning. Therefore, in keeping with the proposition of Labanow (2009), there is a need to adopt a grounding for the study which is both sociologically rigorous and theologically oriented.

Given that legitimacy is a key concept in this research, it is considered appropriate to both recognise independent churches' claim to a divinely conferred legitimacy (as proclaimed by Christian theologians) as well as to explore the social dimension of their legitimacy. A well-established and often utilised lens for analysing organisational behaviour in relation to social legitimacy issues is legitimacy theory (Olateju *et al.,* 2021).

2.8 Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy theorists view the concept of 'legitimacy' as the process by which social acceptability is obtained for the activities of organisations within the larger society in which they operate (Xue and Hu, 2023; Korkeamäki and Kohtamäki, 2020; Degan 2019). Two areas of analytical interest to this research are the legitimacy struggles of UK-based independent churches and the likely relevance that the concept of Social License to Operate (see Section 2.8.2) may have in enabling meaning creation about some of their legitimacy struggles.

2.8.1 Legitimacy Struggles of Church Organisations

It is widely acknowledged that challenges associated with gaining, maintaining, and repairing legitimacy are usually contextual. This means that an organisation's legitimacy struggles are a function of its given institutional, social, cultural, economic, and political context (Kuruppu *et al*., 2019; Demsar *et al*., 2023; Martens and Bui, 2023). As pointed out in Section 2.7.2, a challenge faced by churches in contemporary Britain is that social and cultural changes have,

over time, led to a situation where their value system can be said to diverge from the socially accepted norms of the mainstream of society, creating a disparity in value systems that threatens their legitimacy (Xue and Hu, 2023; Lindblom, 1994). Legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995) posits that for the church to operate legitimately in such a cultural setting, it needs to achieve congruence with the value system of the larger social system by meeting social expectation and gaining social support. This will enable it to be conferred with a separate socially constructed legitimacy (Chen and Roberts, 2010; Lee and Raschke, 2023), in addition to a divinely conferred legitimacy. Crossley *et al.*, (2021) argues that it is pertinent for organisations to adopt an evaluative position that is not just based on self-justification of a right to exist but recognises the need to achieve a degree of social connectedness through aligning with what society considers to be acceptable.

This research is thus conceptually poised to identify legitimacy struggles associated with UK-based independent churches and assess how effective RLAs they are affiliated with have been in facilitating their social legitimation. As Olateju *et al.*, (2021) and Deegan (2019) point out, legitimacy theory is often employed by researchers because it helps in the process of attributing meaning to social phenomena like the one being examined.

2.8.2 Concept of Social License to Operate

The concept of Social License to Operate (SLO), originally applied to the operations of companies in extractive industries, continues to gain wider usage amongst legitimacy theorists (Stuart *et al.*, 2023; Heleski, 2023; Meesters *et al.*, 2020). SLO reflects the perceptions of a host community toward an organisation that operates in its territory (Cruz *et al.*, 2021). It represents social acceptability or social legitimacy to operate or establish projects, granted by society, through a transparent relationship between a firm, individuals in its community of operation, and the broader stakeholder group (Stuart *et al.*, 2023; Chipangamate *et al.*, 2023; He *et al.*, 2023). Hester (2023) argues that SLO is interrelated with legitimacy, and it can be difficult to regain once it is lost or largely diminished. Viewing things more positively, Chen *et al.*, (2023) suggests that a benefit associated with obtaining SLO is that it can help in boosting

the positive impacts (as well as diminishing the negative effects) of an organisation's intended and unintended activities.

It is now recognised that other actors in society (besides communities) are exerting influence in the SLO process, including the media (Van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021), local authorities, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and religious institutions (He *et al.*, 2023; Cruz *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, the concept of SLO is considered relevant in analysing the operations of independent churches. For instance, in the UK, many independent churches do not own buildings. They meet in living rooms, community halls, buildings owned by other churches, schools, hotels, converted cinemas and warehouses, and other function centres (see Section 6.7). This suggests that, for these churches, SLO may be essential in obtaining an operational base. Also, the construction of new church buildings (or purchase and refurbishment of sites for purposes of public worship) often requires support from local communities and approval from local authorities, and the media could also play a role in swaying decisions on some occasions (Barker, 2017; see Section 6.7).

Another area where SLO may be a factor is in the relationship between independent congregations and established church institutions. It is argued that as independent churches began to spring up across the UK in the late 1990's and early 2000's, established churches were unwilling to relate ecumenically with them (CIC International, 2018). This lack of acceptance and support was based on the perception that (given their autonomous and self-governing status) independent churches lacked a sufficiently coordinated voice to speak on their behalf in inter-faith forums. Effort will be made to determine the extent to which this social legitimacy gap has been effectively bridged by the representative role that ICS RLAs play.

The implication of SLO for organisations (including independent churches) is that to generate social support and enhance their expectations, they would need to implement more strategic stakeholder-inclusive processes (Morehouse and Saffer, 2023; Gehman *et al.*, 2017). A particular area of focus would be the need to manage community relations and avoid neglecting the bargaining power of host communities (Moeremans and Dooms, 2021) which

could be vital in, for instance, obtaining building permission (Barker, 2017). It is considered that these necessary measures reveal the inappropriateness of solely adopting the propositions of legitimacy theory as theoretical grounding for this study.

2.8.3 Challenges with Using Legitimacy Theory

Limitations associated with legitimacy theory include the focus on society at large (Mio *et al.*, 2020) and the assumption of a pluralist society in which many groups and individuals have a voice and can exert influence. A down-side of this assumption is that conflicts and power imbalances that might exist are overlooked (Deegan, 2019).

Conflict is to be expected in stakeholder relationships because of competitive tendencies and the diversity in interests, goals, and thought patterns (Morehouse and Saffer, 2023; Gyan and Ampomah, 2016). It is also the case that actors in the UK contemporary society have varying ideological perspectives and motivational leanings, and some are 'positively antagonistic to Christianity' (Harris, 2002, p.49). Therefore, in seeking to critically analyse the subject of independent church legitimation and accountability in the UK (and address the likely existence of conflicts in stakeholder relationships) it is considered needful to implement a theoretical framework that integrates complementary aspects of the concepts of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, and Christian theology.

In the view of legitimacy theorists, legitimacy is a variable that is solely determined by society (Deegan, 2019). A challenge then arises in fully adopting this perspective in studying the ICS where the premier supposition is that legitimacy is divinely conferred. As already discussed, the approach in this inquiry is to reconcile both viewpoints by integrating their complementary aspects. While the extent of Christianity's embeddedness in the socio-cultural life of British people (Davie, 2015) may have reduced in recent years, it continues to exert a significant influence (British Council, 2024), and thus the core concepts of Christianity cannot be overlooked in efforts to understand social phenomena, especially as it relates to organisations operating from its domain (Wolfe, 2022; Venter, 2023; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018).

2.9 Theoretical Exclusions within this Research

Three theories, institutional theory, agency theory, and stewardship theory (each discussed below) were considered for selection while determining this study's theoretical grounding. However, after applying a rigorous assessment process to each of these theoretical models, they failed to meet the adoption criteria detailed in Section 2.5.1. There was a need to ensure that the propositions of any theory selected proves to be appropriate (when integrated with other theories) for fully explaining the phenomenon being explored, which is the UKICS. Accordingly, it was deemed that institutional theory, agency theory, and stewardship theory do not adequately reflect the concepts and assumptions that will facilitate the construction of this study (Varpio *et al.*, 2020; Malcolm-Davies, 2023).

2.9.1 Institutional Theory

Institutional theory was initially considered for inclusion because it is often used in contemporary organisational research (Schiavi *et al.,* 2024). Its propositions reflect the writings of scholars like Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Scott (1995). The theory focuses primarily on explaining how homogeneity in formal structures and uniformity of practices can be achieved among organisations within an institutional setting (Joshi and Purba, 2022). Institutional theorists argue that (for organisations within a society) there are institutionalised patterns and prescriptions that need to be conformed to and complied with, as a means of receiving social support and gaining legitimacy and stability (Xue and Hu, 2023; Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2023; Chen and Roberts, 2010). This process which is known as institutionalisation is accomplished through external coercive, imitative, and normative influences that bring pressure to bear on organisations (Demsar *et al.*, 2023; Joshi and Purba, 2022). With the emphasis on uniformity of beliefs, rules, formal structures, and roles (Berthod, 2018), individual organisations become less-strategic minded (and interest driven) as ever-increasing institutional pressure is applied on them to conform to the institutional mode (Aksom and Tymchenko, 2020). This restriction on individual agency (David *et al.,* 2019) runs counter to the offers of non-denominational status, self-governance, and

respect for autonomy, bedrock characteristics of the working relationship in the UKICS (Stevens, 2021) and hence this theoretical approach was excluded within this study.

A further argument limiting the usefulness of institutional theory as an underpinning for this research relates to the ability of organisations to decouple from the institution, which is often not guaranteed (David *et al.,* 2019). However, in the UKICS, individual congregations retain the right to exit voluntarily from their RLA (Stevens, 2022).

In their study that explored the extent to which moral issues are an essential part of organisational life, Moore and Grandy (2017) posit that, from a theoretical viewpoint, there is an existing need for the role of morality to be positively accounted for by institutional theory. The research they conducted focuses on the established church, with two case study organisations selected being Anglican Dioceses in the Northeast of England predicated on the Anglican Church as an institutional establishment.

In the context of church groups, the model of institutionalism aligns closely with denominationalism (Fortin, 2020), and suggests the operation of a hierarchically structured system of governance where external control is normally exercised over local churches (Haynes Jr., 2023). The Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, and Orthodox churches are examples of denominational church institutions. Strengths associated with this model include the high degrees of institutional coherence, corporate identity, and institutional loyalty (Fortin, 2020; Shah, 2021). In view of their autonomous, self-governing, and non-denominational status, independent churches are not considered to be a part of the established and structured institutional church system (Stevens, 2021; Haynes Jr., 2023). As such, while institutional theory could apply to individual organisations, its propositions would not represent an appropriate theoretical framework for conducting an examination of the ICS.

2.9.2 Agency Theory

It is also considered in this study that although it focuses on the role of ICS RLAs, the underpinning concepts of agency theory cannot be effectively utilised in framing the research.

Agency theory provides a lens for analysing principal-agent problems and the governance mechanisms associated with it in organisations (Onjewu *et al.*, 2023; Medina *et al.*, 2024; Garcia *et al.*, 2023). Propounded by Jensen and Meckling (1976), the theory is primarily concerned with the agency relationship in which one party (the principal) engages another (the agent) to perform some delegated service on contract terms (Garcia *et al.*, 2023). The goals of both parties are often incompatible (Rouault and Albertini, 2022) given that agency theory assumes that their interests may conflict and diverge (Ji *et al.*, 2024; Tran, 2022). Also, it is often the case that the agent opportunistically maximises their interests at the expense of the principal (Bhaskar *et al.*, 2023; Löhde *et al.*, 2021), requiring the principal to incentivise the agent to achieve alignment in interests (Shaik *et al.*, 2023; Foreman *et al.*, 2021). Importantly to this research, it was considered likely that in the working relationship between independent churches and their RLAs, a convergence of interests, visions, and goals would be found (Gazley and Guo, 2020; Tsasis, 2009), rather than misalignment and divergence. Finally, the idea of a binding contract may be considered incompatible with the terms of this working partnership given that independent congregations reserve the right to exit the relationship at will (Stevens, 2022).

While the approach of agency theory holds some relevance in addressing social science related problems, it is predominantly utilised within an economic application pertaining to firms, and thus is not considered appropriate in the context of this study (Mitnick, 2015; Solomon *et al.*, 2021).

2.9.3 Stewardship Theory

Stewardship theory, originally propagated by Donaldson and Davis (1991), is a trust-based management model (García-Cabera *et al.*, 2023; Torfing and Bentzen, 2020) that provides an antithesis to the perspectives of agency theory (Hadjielias *et al.*, 2022). It serves as a framework for specifying the motivations of an individual's behaviour (Murtaza *et al.*, 2021, Wei *et al.*, 2021). The underlying assumption of stewardship theory is that managers, as stewards, will be highly involved, committed, and behave in a manner that aligns with the

interests of the owners (Battisti *et al.*, 2023; Löhde *et al.*, 2021). In seeking to fulfil the duties of their stewardship responsibility, leaders (rather than being individualistic) adopt a pro-organisational and collective-minded approach aimed at benefiting the organisation and society (Bhaskar *et al.*, 2023; Wei *et al.*, 2021).

While classical stewardship theory (Donaldson and Davis, 1991) as applied to business management has some analytical strengths that could be useful in this research, the approach adopted in this research is that of Christian theology's concept of stewardship (see Section 2.7.1). There are three considerations behind this preference. Firstly, it is likely that stewardship theory draws its conceptual strengths from the Scriptures, which is the mainstay of Christian theology. Tilghman suggests that stewardship theory has close alignment with biblical foundations, and Carradus *et al.*, (2020) expounds on the connection between stewardship concept and Christian literature. This connection is grounded in the scripturally established obligation of responsibility that leaders have to God and to their fellow men to govern in a manner that channels organisational practices to achieve wellbeing for everyone and everything.

A second reason for preferring the Christian theological concept of stewardship is the assumption that it is best suited to the unique context and objectives of this research (Bom and Toren, 2020) and is, therefore, the most effective lens for appropriately addressing the issue of stewardship in the UKICS.

The final ground for not utilising stewardship theory is that, viewed from a broader perspective, Christian theological concepts provide additional areas of relevance to the analysis being implemented in this research. Accordingly, the propositions of Christian theology are more encompassing than those of stewardship theory, and it is likely that employing its varied concepts that are relevant to this study will enhance coherence in the analytical approach and increase the probability that significant insights about the realities being studied will emerge (Bom and Toren, 2020).

Having offered explanations for excluding theories deemed inappropriate for this research, effort will be made in the next two sections to further highlight the relevant aspects of the selected underpinning theories and concepts. Additionally, focus will be placed on establishing the complementarity that exists between them and how this complementarity will enable rigour to be applied in the analysis process.

2.10 Relevant Aspects of Underpinning Theories and Concepts

The rigorous process of literature search implemented (Fan *et al*., 2022; Kraus *et al*., 2022) yielded a range of relevant topics in the eight key areas of research focus. Examples of literature (cited in this thesis) which show the relatedness of the underpinning theories and concepts are outlined in Table 2.3. The varied but complementary literature are categorised into 'Relevant Stakeholder Related Topics', Relevant Legitimacy Related Topics', and 'Relevant Christian Theology Related Topics'.

Table 2.3: Literature Topics Showing Relatedness of Underpinning Theories and Concepts

Key Areas of Research Focus on the UKICS	Relevant Stakeholder Related Topics	Relevant Legitimacy Related Topics	Relevant Christian Theology Related Topics
Independent church model, working relationship with RLAs, and RLA functions	Stakeholder Approach (Freeman, 1984; 2021). Stakeholder value and firm performance (Dimytriev *et al.,* 2021; Beckenstein *et al*., 2019)	Organisational legitimation (Ashforth and Gibbs,1990). Legitimating agencies and legitimating strategies (Durrand and McGuire, 2005; Lenz and Söderbaum, 2023). Religious organisations (Berger, 2003) Faith-based umbrella organisations (Wittberg, 2013). Organisational models for practicing religion and spirituality (Mitroff and Denton, 1999)	Identity of the Church (Wolfe, 2022; Kärkkäinen, 2021; Avis, 2018; Miti, 2020). Headship of Christ and authority of the Bible (Van der Westhuizen, 2023; Wolfe, 2022; Tutu, 2020). Church independency (Stevens, 2014, 2021, 2022; Strivens, 2014, 2022). Non-denominationalism (Haynes Jr. ,2023). Evangelicalism (Christian and Soal, 2022). Apostolic networks (Kay, 2008; 2016; Bialecki, 2016). Neo-charismatic independent congregations (Anderson, 2013; Pace, 2020) Neo-Pentecostalism in Britain (Osgood, 2024, 2006; Adedibu; 2016). The emerging church: Labanow (2009).

Key Areas of Research Focus on the UKICS	Relevant Stakeholder Related Topics	Relevant Legitimacy Related Topics	Relevant Christian Theology Related Topics
Stakeholder identification and prioritisation of independent churches	Stakeholder identification and salience (Freeman, 1984; 2021; Mitchell *et al*., 1997; Parent and Deephouse, 2007; Kapiriri and Razavi, 2021; Kwestel and Doerfel, 2023) Stakeholder engagement and conflict management (Liu *et al*., 2022; Guthrie, 2021; Gyan and Ampomah 2016; Morehouse and Saffer, 2023).	Stakeholder legitimacy (Lee and Raschke, 2023). Society, community, government as stakeholders (Henriksson and Weidman-Grunewald, 2020). Congruence with value system of society (Suchman,1995; Lindblom, 1994; Crossley *et al*., 2021).	Church stakeholders (Osisioma, 2013). Role of the Godhead (Van der Westhuizen, 2023). God as a managerial stakeholder (Schwartz 2006; Carradus *et al*., 2020; Julian, 2016). Stakeholder engagement (Carradus *et al*., 2020; Neville, 2022).
Legitimacy issues/struggles of independent churches	Stakeholder value and firm performance (Dimytriev *et al.,* 2021; Beckenstein *et al*., 2019). Stakeholder engagement and conflict management (Liu *et al*., 2022; Morehouse and Saffer, 2023; Guthrie, 2021; Gyan and Ampomah 2016).	Congruence with value system of society (Suchman,1995; Lindblom, 1994; Crossley *et al*., 2021). Socially constructed legitimacy (Chen and Roberts, 2010). Social Licence to Operate (Stuart *et al*., 2023; Meesters *et al*., 2020; Cruz, 2021). Legitimacy struggles of organisations (Deegan, 2019; Kuruppu et al., 2019; Demsar *et al*., 2023). Declining enthusiasm for religion (Duffy *et al*., 2023). Issue engagement (Capizzo and Harrison, 2023).	Authority of the Bible (Conradie, 2023; Wolfe, 2022; Tutu, 2018). Concept of Christology (McGrath, 2018; Van Pelt, 2015). Concept of Ecclesiology (Kärkkäinen, 2021; Avis, 2018; Miti, 2020). Divinely conferred legitimacy of the church (Bowald, 2020; Roark and Cline, 2018). Embeddedness of Christianity in British society (Davie, 2015; Holmes and Lindsay 2018).
Accountability and transparency issues of independent churches	Concept of stakeholder accountability (Agyemang, 2023). Stakeholder accountability of non-profits (France and Tang, 2018; Costa and Da Silva 2019). Transparency in charity reporting (Hyndman and McConville, 2016). Trust building in organisation-stakeholder relationships (Dong *et al*., 2023).	NPO Legitimacy and accountability (Weinryb 2020; Deegan 2019). Regulatory legitimacy (Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021) Accountability as a legitimation strategy (Tanang *et al*., 2020). Legitimacy theory and sustainability reporting (Herbert and Graham, 2021). Transparency (Dong *et al*., 2023; Mabillard and Zumofen, 2017). Accountability concerns in UK Charity Sector: McDonnell (2017). Self-regulation (Similon, 2015; AbouAssi and Bies, 2018).	Church accountability (Osisioma, 2013). Spiritual and pastoral accountability (Rose, 2023; Underwood, 2014). Accountability in Faith-based organisations (Olarinmoye, 2014). Transparency (Ovando, 2020; O'Loughlin, 2013; De George 2018). Communicating accountability (McPhail *et al*., 2004; Yasmin *et al*., 2014); Role of accounting in the religious context (Jacobs, 2005).

Key Areas of Research Focus on the UKICS	Relevant Stakeholder Related Topics	Relevant Legitimacy Related Topics	Relevant Christian Theology Related Topics
Leadership and extent of diversity in independent church leadership structures	Stakeholder strategic management (Freeman, 1984; Freeman *et al*., 2021). Stakeholder-centric approach (Javed *et al*., 2020; Dimytriev *et al*., 2019). Exploring equity, diversity, and inclusion through stakeholder theory (Im *et al*., 2023). Ethical leadership (Hill, 2017; Voegtlin *et al*., 2020; Harrison *et al*., 2015). Moral duty to love one's stakeholders (Kaptein, 2021)	Transformational leadership (Qtait, 2023). Authentic leadership (Al Sabei *et al*., 2023; Towler, 2019). Leadership legitimacy (Nohria, 2023). Diversity and inclusion in leadership (Ashikali *et al.,* 2021; Zhang and Fulton, 2019; Samdanis and Özbilgin, 2020). Transition in leadership styles (Van De Mieroop *et al*., 2023). Transgressive leadership behaviour (Marques *et al*., 2021a)	Church leadership (Bilezikian, 2007). Christian stewardship (Kamer, 2018; Tilghman, n.d.). Multiculturalism in church leadership (Montgomery, 2017; Ndlovu, 2018). Diversity in leadership (Anumaka, 2021). Role of women in leadership (Mowczko, 2022; James, 2022; Allen, 2020; Lawrence and Lawrence, 2014; Birkett 2021).
Safeguarding practices of independent churches	Stakeholder ethical theory (Harrison *et al*., 2015).	Safeguarding culture in organisations (Cave, 2022). Broadening scope of safeguarding regulation (McRae-Taylor, 2022; Legraien, 2023). Social work legitimacy (Warner, 2021). Sustainability and legitimacy theory (Crossley *et al*., 2021).	Biblical theology for safeguarding (McManus, 2010; Loveland, 2024; Drake, 2016). Spiritual abuse (Oakley and Humphreys 2019; Oakley *et al.,* 2018). Domestic abuse (Kanyeredzi, 2023). Safeguarding red flags (Drew, 2023). Supporting survivors of abuse (Lawson, 2023). Safer recruitment (Ball, 2023).
Restructuring and revitalisation strategies of UKICS RLAs and their members	Stakeholder approach for evaluating organizational change projects (Peltokorpi *et al*., 2008; Chebbitt and Melanthiou, 2020). Stakeholder model of change implementation communication (Lewis, 2007).	Legitimation strategies (Lenz and Söderbaum, 2023). Gaining, maintaining, and repairing organisational legitimacy (Kuruppu, 2019).	The Church and innovation: Bickley (2017); Wilson (2020). Strategies for church growth (Wagner, 2010; Kao, 2013; Hayward, 2002). Church revitalisation (Thorpe; 2021; Brand, 2018). UK Church statistics (Brierley, 2020).
Social engagement activities of independent churches	Relationship between stakeholder theory and CSR (Dmytriyev *et al*., 2021). Stakeholder engagement (Brajer-Marczak *et al*., 2021).	Sustainability and legitimacy theory (Crossley *et al*., 2021). Legitimacy theory and CSR (Olateju *et al*., 2021; Crossley *et al*., 2021); Social responsibility (Azmat *et al*., 2023) CSR disclosure (Wang, 2023).	The Church and social cohesion (Pennington, 2020; Pepper *et al*., 2019; Bickley, 2018). Religion and Public Life (Davie, 2017). Church and social action (Wilson, 2020).

2.11 Complementarity of Concepts in Enabling Analysis of Key Research Areas

This section further discourses on the complementarity evident in the concepts selected for use within this study. It considers the usefulness of integrating the concepts and utilising them as analytical lenses. The section begins with a look at how this integration and utilisation approach could enable effective analysis of ICS RLA functions. This discussion is then followed by a detailed consideration of how the analysis process relating to UKICS accountability, transparency, leadership, safeguarding, restructuring and social engagement issues is enhanced by the interrelated nature of the selected concepts. There will also be a review of how the integrative theoretical approach will be employed in analysing for measures to increase confidence in the role of independent churches and their RLAs.

2.11.1 RLA Functions in a Working Relationship with Independent Churches

RLAs and churches in their membership have a working relationship that is not only structurally based but is also sustained by a spiritual bond (Vosloo, 2023). There is also a decisive influence exerted by the Christian Scriptures on how the affairs of the relationship are conducted (Wolfe, 2022; Conradie, 2023; Kärkkäinen, 2021). In effect, the assumption in this research is that applying rigour in seeking to obtain a thorough understanding about UKICS RLA functions will, in part, require employing relevant concepts of Christian theology. Also, legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995) is deemed to be useful in analysing RLA social legitimating roles in the UKICS. Similarly, stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) will be relevant in determining RLA activities which enable independent congregations to offer value to groups and individuals that affect or are affected by their operations.

2.11.2 UKICS Accountability and Transparency Issues

According to Faye (2014), accountability involves answerability, and it is required from all decision-making organisations, whether in the private sector, public sector, or civil society. This would therefore include independent churches. Deegan (2019) is of the view that legitimacy theory is a widely applied theory on issues related to accountability. Accountability

and legitimacy are two intertwined issues (Weinryb, 2020), as they are the means through which public trust is created (Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021). Ashworth and Downe (2020) see accountability as an organisation's obligation to respect the reasonable interests of others and report on its activities to a set of legitimate authorities. Dong *et al.*, (2023) argues that accountability requires unbiased disclosure of an organisation's performance, including strengths and weaknesses. This would enable the public to make fair judgments about the entity's responsibility and commitment.

Accountability, as a concept, also has a fundamental link with transparency (Mabillard and Zumofen, 2017). According to Ovando (2020), transparency is a function of disclosure, clarity, and accuracy, and involves intentionally sharing information. It contributes to trust-building in the relationship between an organisation and its stakeholders and is regarded by the public as a valid parameter for assessing authenticity and ethical conduct (Dong *et al.*, 2023). Recent focus on transparency-related issues within established churches (Mann, 2023; Altieri, 2021; Ovando, 2020; De George, 2018), and non-denominational churches in general (Haynes Jr., 2023), highlight the need to examine how the UKICS is responding to these issues.

It is now expected practice (with an associated social value) to effectively address accountability and transparency related issues in communicating with stakeholders about finances, governance practices (France and Tang, 2018), social responsibility (Azmat *et al.*, 2023; Zeimers *et al.*, 2019) and other sustainability reporting areas (Valenza and Damiano, 2023; Widhiastuti et al., 2023; Herbert and Graham, 2021). Such communication is considered a legitimation strategy (Wang, 2023; Tanang *et al.,* 2020).

Yasmin *et al.* (2014) asserts that Christianity places emphasis on accountability and ethics and sees communicating accountability as not just a social obligation but more importantly a religious duty. Similarly, McPhail *et al.* (2004) states that there is a plethora of scriptural references to accountability, and it can be viewed theologically in a form that is academically engaging and compatible with scholarly requirements. This provides further justification for, in

part, utilising the concepts of Christian theology as theoretical underpinning for exploring accountability and transparency related issues in the Christian setting being studied.

There is also a link between accountability and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) because accountability also pertains to identifying internal and external stakeholders and being responsive to their demands (Castillo, 2020; Im *et al.,* 2023). According to Agyemang (2023), any accountability related study would need to take cognisance of the importance of context, alongside the essence of accountability to a multiplicity of stakeholders. In this regard, Olarinmoye (2014) contends that stakeholder accountability can only occur when an organisation gives account, and their stakeholders are able to take and hold the organisation to account. Continuing, Olarinmoye suggests that, often, the mechanisms for accomplishing effective stakeholder accountability may be weakened by structural inadequacies and loopholes associated with external regulations. Among other things, this study seeks to develop a stakeholder accountability framework for UK-based independent churches. The consideration is that RLAs can play a complementary role (alongside external regulators) in enabling independent churches to effectively satisfy the diverse accountability demands of their external and internal stakeholders.

Mearns (2017) submits that for Christian organisations to fulfil stakeholder accountability obligations, their operations should be subject to inputs from others which ensures they are strong, sustainable, legally compliant, and above all, operating in accordance with New Testament biblical principles. Mearns' submission suggests a vital need for inputs from external bodies (like charity regulators) and sector-based agencies (like RLAs). This research will therefore examine the self-regulatory functions of RLAs (Similon, 2015; AbouAssi and Bies, 2018) and their efforts in addressing UKICS accountability concerns.

Factors that trigger accountability concerns in the ICS are varied, and some of them are located within a broad range identified by McDonnell (2017) who examined the UK charity sector. Governance, growth, and assets management issues (as well as late filling of annual returns) are amongst the most common of these issues (Osgood, 2024; Evans, 2019). An

often-recurring area of accountability concern, although not discussed by McDonnell (but which has gained track in recent years) pertains to safeguarding in church settings (Meyrick, 2023; Kanyeredzi, 2023; Drew, 2023; Oakley *et al.,* 2018). Approaching issues from a strategic stakeholder management perspective, Bowen *et al.* (2020) suggests that in seeking to meet expectations and resolve dilemmas and tensions associated with stakeholders, the decision-making process will need to be channelled to achieve effective governance, accountability, and transparency. This approach is considered relevant in the context of the investigation being undertaken into UKICS stakeholder accountability issues.

2.11.3 UKICS Safeguarding Practices

As a result of the high incidences of abuse cases and gross failings uncovered in recent years (including in the church community), safeguarding has assumed more social significance in the British society (Legraien, 2023; Meyrick 2023; Dearden 2020). Safeguarding has legitimacy issues associated with it (Cave 2022; Warner, 2021), and greater social value is attached to the ability to implement good safeguarding standards and effectively address issues arising from abuse cases (McRae-Taylor, 2022; Lawson, 2023). It is recognised that organisational commitment to good safeguarding practices enhances the ability to gain, maintain and/or repair legitimacy, as well as win the support of stakeholders (Crossley *et al.*, 2021). Among other considerations, ICS repositioning efforts around governance will be analysed to determine the effect they have in mitigating against abuse of power and other forms of unethical conduct, promoting good safeguarding and diversity practices, and fostering overall stakeholder satisfaction (Drew 2023; Cave, 2022).

Loveland (2024) suggests that there are over 2,000 references in Scripture relating to safeguarding principles. Added to this, attempts to develop a biblical theology for safeguarding (Thirtyone:eight, 2020; McManus, 2010; Drake, 2016) underscore the perception that aspects of Christian theology's concepts have a contribution to make in the conduct of research aimed at exploring accountability and transparency in the practice of safeguarding in church settings.

Bilezikian (2007) argues that a plethora of issues exist within the leadership structures of churches. Common concerns include heavy shepherding (which involves congregants submitting to and consulting 'the shepherd' ahead of making significant personal decisions) and a systemised pyramidal leadership structure, where the senior leader is at the pinnacle and controls decision-making. Both issues raise safeguarding challenges because of the likely occurrence of varied forms of abuse (Oakley and Humphreys, 2019; Drew 2023: Oakley *et al.*, 2018). It is therefore critically important to explore the safeguarding practices of UK-based independent churches and reflect upon this in relation to legitimisation issues.

2.11.4 Leadership Approaches and Ethnic Diversity in Leadership Structures

There are varieties of leadership styles, each with the potential to produce varying outcomes for organisations (Malak *et al.*, 2022). Leadership styles identified in literature include authentic leadership (Al Sabei *et al.*, 2023), servant leadership (Malak *et al.*, 2022), and the more collaborative forms of leadership (Van De Meroop *et al.*, 2023). Other well-known styles include autocratic, ethical, charismatic, and transformational leadership (Qtait, 2023; Zheng *et al.*, 2023). Anderson and Sun (2017) are of the view that leadership styles can overlap. It is likely that the dominant conceptualisation of leadership in independent churches is the charismatic, visionary, and transformational style. Transformational leaders are usually rational, inspirational, and persuasive (Curtis, 2020; Qtait, 2023), and often serve to energise a church growth agenda (Kay and Dyer, 2005). However, they are also susceptible to unethical conduct (Anderson and Sun, 2017) and transgressive leadership behaviour which can have an impact on the social identity of an organisation (Marques *et al.*, 2021a).

Nohria (2023) argues that gaining legitimacy is central to effective leadership. According to Marques *et al.*, (2021a) leaders can exert influence and power because of the legitimacy of their authority and legitimacy garnered through the display of competence, credibility, trustworthiness, fairness, and previous successes.

A stakeholder-centric approach to leadership (Javed *et al.*, 2020) is stakeholder-value oriented. It is anchored on an ongoing governance commitment to create value for all stakeholders, whether internal or external (Dimytriev *et al.*, 2021). This is achieved by operating a stakeholder management system that identifies and works to deliver things that will add value to the stakeholders (Beckenstein *et al.*, 2019). Stakeholder theorists also advocate for a commitment to ethical behaviour (on the part of leaders) in interactions with stakeholders (Hill, 2017; Rosner *et al.*, 2023). Commonly referred to as responsible leadership, such a commitment requires both behaviour that benefits stakeholders, as well as behaviour that avoids harmful consequences for stakeholders (Voegtlin *et al.*, 2020). It has the potential to foster and energise a citizenship behaviour-oriented culture in an organisation, which can create long-term value for society (Voegtlin *et al.*, 2020; Javed *et al.*, 2021).

In contributing to stakeholder theory, Kaptein (2021) draws a parallel between the biblical injunction to love one's neighbour and the moral duty leaders owe to their stakeholders to love them. Adding to Christian theology's concept of stewardship, Kamer (2018) puts forward the Pauline approach as a benchmark of leadership conduct for those working in Christian settings. The Pauline approach calls for a servant's attitude and faithfulness in fulfilling leadership roles. It is thus considered in this study that there is a need to explore how selected concepts of Christian theology (in combination with complementary aspects of stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory) could contribute to a well-situated and academically credible analysis of UKICS leadership issues.

It could be assumed that by improving diversity in its leadership team, a church is more likely to experience increased growth and enhance the satisfaction levels of its stakeholders (Anumaka, 2021; Im *et al.*, 2023). While there are calls for greater expressions of multiculturalism in the leadership teams of independent churches (Montgomery, 2017; Ndlovu, 2018), there is a need to both determine the extent of ethnic diversity in the leadership structures of independent congregations and the limiting impact of demographic factors on the ability of some churches to achieve any form of ethnic diversity.

2.11.5 Role of Women in UKICS Leadership Constructs

It will also be of interest in exploring ICS leadership frameworks to analyse current trends in the egalitarianism v. complementarianism debate (Mowczko, 2022; James, 2022) and ascertain its impact on the role of women. Some UKICS RLAs favour the Christian concept of egalitarianism, which proposes that all leadership roles are equally open to men and women, depending on their gifts and abilities (Pioneer, 2024b). Others, endorse complementarianism, which argues that eldership and pastoral positions within the church are open only to men, while considering that women can play significant roles in care, hospitality, teaching etc (Allen, 2020; Lawrence and Lawrence 2014).

Allen utilised a survey and qualitative interviews in a study on how complementarian-leaning evangelical churches in Britain are responding to the increasing demand from contemporary culture for equality of opportunity and representation. The study finds that in the FIEC, the number of female workers grew from 30 in 2012 to 60 in 2019, indicating that about a tenth of the churches in their membership have a female worker. In another study, Birkett (2021) surveyed women workers in complementarian COE. None of the roles held by the women in either of the studies is at a senior ministerial level.

In this research, focus will be placed on the role of female senior pastors of egalitarian-leaning independent churches. The goal being to determine how the growth patterns of their congregations compare with trends at the sectoral level (see Section 6.3).

2.11.6 UKICS Social Engagement Approaches

Entities in the charity sector share a social mission to address community expectations (Azmat *et al.*, 2023). In seeking to both comply with the Christian concept of doing good (Spencer, 2016), and be socially relevant, independent churches often engage in projects within their local communities of operation (Wilson, 2020; Bickley, 2017). However, as Brajer-Marczak *et al.*, (2021) asserts, a competent stakeholder engagement is one of the key elements in effective project management. NPO projects often involve high dependence on collaboration

with interest groups and informed and committed stakeholders are vital for their successful implementation. It is also the case that stakeholder language plays a vital role in enabling scholars to conceptualise and empirically identify and specify the social responsibilities of organisations (Dmytriyev *et al.*, 2021; Parmar *et al.*, 2010).

Legitimacy theorists also specify that corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities can be used as a strategy (in an organisation's legitimisation process) to enable it achieve congruence with the value system of society (Olateju *et al.*, 2021; Tanang *et al.*, 2020). For instance, organisations can justify their existence and enhance their perceived social legitimacy (within the society where they operate) by engaging in social actions (Schiopoiu and Popa, 2013) and accounting for them (Wang, 2023). It is also argued that undertaking more CSR activities will generate enhanced reputational capital and moral goodwill among an entity's stakeholders (Cheng and Feng, 2023).

The interlink between aspects of these theories on the issue of social engagement plays well into the context of this research examination as it has been claimed that churches in Britain are heavily engaged in social action (Bickley, 2017; Wilson, 2020). There is also empirical proof that such engagements enhance social cohesion (Pennington, 2020), attract social capital (Davie, 2017), and lead to church growth. Determining the contributions of RLAs in energising the social engagement efforts of independent congregations (and the revitalisation of their growth in the backdrop of a more-contemporary landscape) is of interest to this exploratory study.

2.11.7 Analysis for Measures to Increase Confidence in the UKICS

A stated objective of this research is to examine if there is a need for further measures to be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction (Saunders *et al.*, 2023; Erickson, 2023). This objective is reflected in Research Question 6:

- What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?

While this is a specific area of focus, the approach in analysis is to assume that it is also connected to the other key areas being explored. In effect, a thorough exploration of the eight key areas being inquired into in relation to the UKICS would involve determining if there are measures to be put in place in each area to enhance confidence in the sector and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction. As such, the underpinning theories and concepts for this study will also serve as effective analytical lenses in this determination.

A Populus survey (for the Charity Commission for England and Wales) carried out in February 2020 shows that UK public trust in charities has improved from 55% in 2018 to 62% in 2020 (Royle, 2020; Weakley, 2020). The figure for 2023, shows a slight increase to 63% (Birkwood, 2023; Dornbrack, 2023). Focusing on churches and religious organisations, findings of the World Values Survey conducted in 2022 also points to a rebound in confidence levels from 31% in 2019 to 42% in 2022 (Duffy *et al.*, 2023; Williams, 2023). Recognising that these survey outcomes have more general application, a need exists for a narrower inquiry that will focus, specifically, on the ICS.

2.12 Outlining of Gap in the Literature

This study seeks to shed new light on the legitimacy, accountability, and organisational performance of independent churches in Britain. The discussions in Sections 2.11.1 – 2.11.7 point to the areas where a contribution to knowledge is expected to be made. It is evident, following a thorough review of literature, that a gap in knowledge exists regarding these intertwined issues. As a basis for actualising the research plan, the considered approach is to relate the literature on legitimating agencies (Durand and McGuire, 2005; Lenz and Söderbaum, 2023), as well as NPS and FBS collaborations (Zeimers *et al.*, 2019; Tang and Wang, 2020; Ford, 2015) to the role being played by UKICS RLAs. Research effort will be made to properly identify UKICS RLAs, to delineate their contemporary functions, and

determine the legitimation strategies they employ. Further lines of inquiry include ascertaining from primary data how effectively these faith-based umbrella bodies have performed in supporting their affiliated congregations as they plough through a 21st century operational terrain characterised by rising secularism and heightened public scrutiny. The thinking is that UKICS RLAs perform roles and employ strategies that aid congregations within their membership in maximising their growth potentials, improving their leadership structures and governance practices, enhancing their legitimacy and accountability, which enables them to gain the confidence of both internal and external stakeholders.

Sector officials' views will be sought to determine if there is increasing public confidence in the role of independent congregations, and whether it can be attributed to RLA restructuring efforts. Where this is not the case it would then be necessary to ascertain if there are lingering issues that continue to limit public trust in the ICS and find out what further internal and external measures could be put in place by RLAs and their affiliates to resolve them (Saunders *et al.*, 2023; Erickson, 2023). These are further gaps in knowledge that will be explored through this study, utilising related aspects of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and Christian theological concepts as sources of information and guidance.

2.13 Chapter Summary

This literature review chapter has provided information on the activities of the two main actors in the UKICS, namely UK-based independent churches and the RLAs that offer them association. In seeking to create academic understanding about the role of UKICS RLAs, there was a need to conduct a scoping review focusing on umbrella bodies in the UKICS. The review yielded insights on the identity, nature, and composition of these agencies.

Additional topics discussed in the chapter include the labels and modus operandi of independent congregations and the legitimacy, accountability, and regulatory problematics associated with their operations in Britain. These lingering problematics have led to RLAs playing a more involved role in the UKICS.

A further area reviewed in this chapter is the academic position on which a contribution to knowledge will be made. The consideration is that an integrative approach that incorporates aspects of multiple theories is best suited for formulating the study's theoretical framework. In seeking to implement this, paradigmatic complementary insights from stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and the concepts of Christian theology have been drawn to develop a framework for informing and guiding the inquiry and meaning making process.

Following the review of literature, focus will be placed in the next chapter on developing the study's philosophical underpinning and discussing other aspects of the research methodology.

CHAPTER THREE:

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

The goal in chapter three is to discuss the methodological design for this research which focuses on exploring the UKICS and providing new insights into how effectively RLAs have functioned within it. The methodological design is an important part of the study's overall conceptual structure (Varpio *et al.*, 2020) and it is hinged on five methodological decisions made in the research process (see Fig. 3.1). The decisions involved clearly defining the type of research being undertaken, describing its philosophical underpinnings, and detailing the approach to be adopted in conducting the investigation and acquiring new knowledge. Additional methodological decisions made in the inquiry process relate to determining appropriate research methods to be used for data collection and analysis, and critically evaluating ethical considerations pertaining to the study. These five decisions are discussed in this chapter, along with the quality criteria likely to be utilised in assessing qualitative studies of this type. Providing clarity about methodological choices made and their justification in a research context (Saunders *et al.*, 2023), is considered of utmost importance in enhancing transparency (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021) and credibility (Stenfors *et al.*, 2020).

Figure 3.1: Methodological Design for the Research
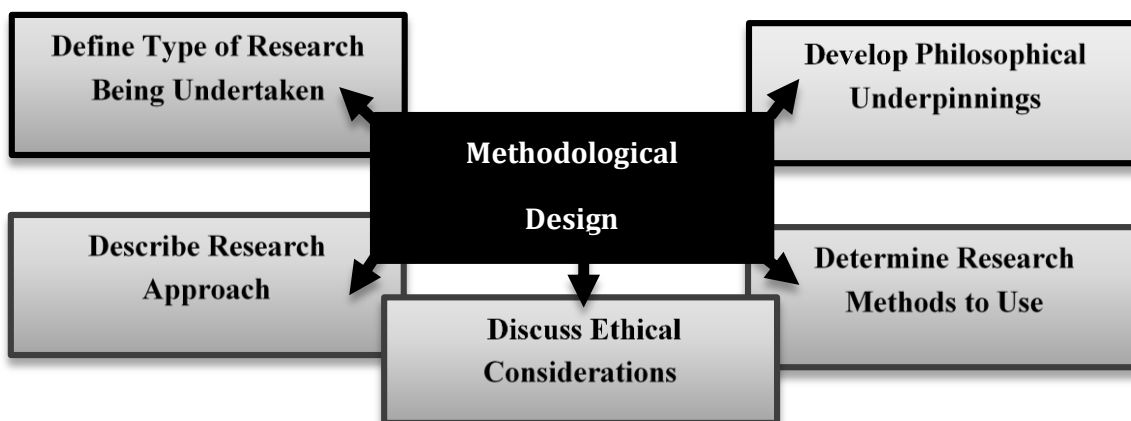
3.1 Type of Research Undertaken

This qualitative study is exploratory in nature (Megyesi *et al.*, 2024). Based on its objectives, it sought to examine the UKICS and furnish new insights into how effectively RLAs have functioned within the sector (Swedberg, 2020; George, 2023). As will be discussed in Section 3.3, a constructivist interpretivist approach was utilised in conducting the inquiry (Tsakmakis *et al.*, 2023; Schänzel and Porter, 2022). This involved interacting with research participants to understand, describe, and draw out meanings about the sector based on their perspectives (Burles and Bally, 2022).

The study has attributes of both business (nonprofit sector) research and social science research, and it investigated a phenomenon occurring within a sector in the UK religious, socio-cultural, and economic structure. In terms of its academic base, the inquiry is transdisciplinary in nature, given that it has used knowledge from different disciplines (Malcolm-Davies, 2023; Saunders *et al.*, 2023).

While the research is exploratory at its core (and primarily investigated an issue where there is limited academic knowledge) it integrates descriptive, correlational, and explanatory elements into its design, as is common (Kumar, 2019). The multiple objectives of the inquiry entailed that some aspects of it sought to provide a systematic description of the operations of RLAs in the UKICS (descriptive), some focused on establishing the nature of associations and interdependence amongst independent churches in the sector and their interactions with stakeholders (correlational), and others attempted to clarify the why and how of these relationships (explanatory).

3.2 Philosophical Underpinnings for the Research

In seeking to make a rationally defensible contribution to knowledge, there was a need to develop philosophical underpinnings to guide the research process (Creswell and Creswell, 2023; Martinich and Stroll, 2023). Three areas of philosophy that provided guiding concepts for the methodological framework of this study are ontology (the nature of reality),

epistemology (the nature of knowledge), and axiology (the nature of human values). These philosophical paradigms are a set of beliefs that guide human conduct (Mezmir, 2020; Denzin *et al.*, 2023). They are general principles of theoretical thinking, perspective and self-awareness that are essential in actualising academic research (Moon and Blackman, 2017).

3.2.1 Ontological Background to the Study

This study was grounded in a constructivist ontology. The consideration behind this ontological standpoint being that reality (in the context of the research problem addressed) is multiple and needed to be socially constructed utilising information generated through the perspectives of participants (Burles and Bally, 2022; Bell, 2022). This required immersion in the fieldwork setting with participants, while seeking to understand the phenomenon being investigated (Schänzel and Porter, 2022; Moser and Korstjens, 2018). Also, central to this model is the recognition that people's view of the world (including the settings where they work) is shaped by their perceptions which are influenced by their preconceptions, beliefs, values, and experiences (Walliman, 2018). The constructivist position is a commonly adopted ontological paradigm for qualitative research (Denzin *et al.*, 2023; Aurini *et al.*, 2022). Its implications and application to this exploratory study are discussed in Section 3.3.

From a business and social science perspective, ontology enables researchers to recognise the existence of a plethora of actors and stakeholders in different sectors of a society (as well as the socio-economic structures and religious and cultural norms they operate under) and to investigate and make meaning of the phenomenon that is continually being produced through their interactions (Al-Saadi, 2014). This is the concept of reality that underpinned this inquiry which explored the interactions between independent churches and their diverse stakeholders, and how these interactions are affected when independent churches voluntarily establish working relationships with RLAs. The perspectives of relevant UKICS actors have been utilised in constructing patterns and meaningful explanations for these interactions and relationships which presently occur in a secular-leaning and more scrutinous socio-cultural environment.

3.2.2 Epistemological Background to the Study

The process of investigating and making meaning of reality is grounded in not only an ontological position but also in an epistemological stance, and effort was made in this study to achieve congruence between both positions (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016; Yadav, 2021). Epistemology, regarded as the theory of knowledge (Martinich and Stroll, 2023), provided an additional philosophical root for conceptualising the study. Serving as a basis for critically reflecting on the methods utilised and approach adopted in acquiring new knowledge (Flick, 2022). There is then a need to discuss and justify the epistemic conditions underlying the contribution made to knowledge through this research (Tassone, 2017).

Neubauer *et al.* (2019) argues that the detailed and rigorous inquiry that characterises research often requires that researchers seek to understand the experiences of others so that they can gain new insights about a particular phenomenon. More specifically, Agyemang (2023) proposes that conducting an accountability-related study may require involvements and interactions with the organisations and people being studied, as a means of extracting insight and meaning about important accountability issues needing to be addressed. These contentions align with the foundational concepts of phenomenology which served as a guide to the interpretivist epistemological paradigm that underpinned this research (Friesen, 2023; Mortari and Tarozzi, 2010).

Phenomenology (a model initiated by Edmund Husserl) is utilised in knowledge acquisition to explore subjectivities and people's lived experiences (Suddick *et al.*, 2020; Aurini *et al.*, 2022). It aims, firstly, to develop new meanings and appreciations about the essence of a phenomenon by examining it from the perspective of those who have experienced it, and then to inform, or even re-orient, how people understand that phenomenon (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019).

In outlining the characteristics of four commonly utilised phenomenological epistemological approaches, Cal and Tehmarn (2016) suggest that their principal areas of difference lie in the way that they can be used to process the understanding of a phenomenon as well as the role

and influence of the researcher in the research process. When conceptualising transcendental phenomenology, the researcher is perceived of as separate from the setting being investigated, and the means to understanding phenomenon is descriptive. In the inquiry process, the researcher adopts a pure and value-free consciousness by bracketing off any previous understanding, past knowledge, personal views, and assumptions about the phenomenon of interest (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023; Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). In view of the requirement for a value-neutral approach (Saunders *et al.*, 2023; Martuccelli, 2020), transcendental phenomenology was not considered an appropriate epistemological fit for the constructivist ontological position adopted for this inquiry. As is explained in Section 3.2.3, the researcher's education, knowledge, interests, and experiences were employed as valuable guides in exploring the UKICS (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). In doing this, appropriate measures were adopted to ensure that the outcome of the study was not distorted by any form of biased interpretation resulting from closeness to the sector (see Sections 3.2.3 and 3.7).

Three other forms of phenomenology assessed by Cal and Tehmarn (2016) are in many ways characteristically similar. Hermeneutic, perceptual, and sociological phenomenology adopt an epistemological position whereby a study is conducted within the setting (not outside of it), and the means to understand phenomenon is interpretive. In the inquiry process, the researcher's interest, past experiences, and knowledge are not bracketed (put aside), rather they are utilised as valuable guides to the study (Neubauer, 2019). Sociological phenomenology (a school of thought founded by Alfred Schutz) goes further than the hermeneutic and perceptual models to posit that in seeking to understand phenomenon within a setting and interpretively create meaningful explanations about the subjective perspectives of its participants, the researcher cannot fully eliminate the influence of social interactions. Social interactions occur in varied spheres (including religion) and it is such interactions (or intersubjectivity resulting from interactions of minds between people) that generates

organisations, institutions, and social reality, and enables subjective meanings to be created (Cal and Tehmarn, 2016).

Alfred Schutz's theory of 'the lifeworld' enabled the interconnection between phenomenology and sociology to be established (Dreher and Santos, 2017). In doing this, Schutz was influenced by both Husserl's phenomenological thought and Max Weber's social action theory which combined interpretivism and interactionism (Dreher and Santos, 2017; Thompson, 2017). Interpretivists, in keeping with their epistemological standpoint, do not claim to offer an exact picture of the phenomenon being investigated, but rather an interpretive portrayal of it which in their view is based on constructed findings that are representative of the phenomenon (Kennedy, 2018a).

The consideration is that an interpretivist approach aligned to the propositions of sociological phenomenology (when combined with a constructivist ontological standpoint) is the best methodologically suited epistemological and ontological underpinning that can be effectively applied to the UKICS (the setting examined). A basis for this supposition is that by utilising a constructivist interpretivist approach for this study, the individual experiences, relationships, and interactions within the UKICS were appropriately represented (Tsakmakis *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, the approach enabled meaningful explanations to be provided for the interactions between UK-based independent churches and their diverse stakeholders, and how these interactions are influenced when independent churches voluntarily establish working relationships with RLAs. Detailed information on how this approach was applied in the research process is provided in Section 3.3.

3.2.3 Axiological Background to the Study

An important philosophical consideration in seeking to produce knowledge is to recognise the different human values (axiology) that may underpin the inquiry (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Coe *et al.*, 2021). Axiology focuses on identifying the underlying beliefs, values, and meanings that influence decisions, actions, perceptions, and interpretations in the research process (Melville

et al., 2019). Some researchers (including positivists and transcendental phenomenologists) assume that research will be value (or axiologically) neutral (Erickson, 2023; Saunders *et al.*, 2023). However, as explained below, the constructivist interpretive approach utilised in this study does not conform to the principle of axiological neutrality.

According to Martuccelli (2020) axiological neutrality signifies the effort and honesty with which those involved in research control (or aim to control) the influences that their interests and passions could introduce into the process of contributing to knowledge. In arguing against a principled disregard of the usefulness of the passions and interests of researchers in the analysis and knowledge production process, Martuccelli surmises that axiological neutrality is ideological, and there are reasons to question whether it should always apply. This view aligns with the epistemological standpoint of sociological phenomenology adopted for this study which does not assume a value-free research process (Cal and Tehmarn, 2016). For instance, in the process of collecting data, there was a need to establish relationships and interact with gatekeepers and participants in the UKICS (Schänzel and Porter, 2022; Moser and Korstjens, 2018). Maxwell (2018) suggests that the personal characteristics that the researcher brings to the inquiry will play a major role in this interaction. It is considered that the researcher's Christian faith (and position as a pastor) enhanced the process of interaction with gatekeepers and research participants.

Overall, the researcher positionality adopted (Bourke, 2014; Bayeck, 2022) meant that the researcher's education, knowledge, interests, and experiences in the independent church sectors in UK, Denmark, and Nigeria were valuable guides to the exploration of the UKICS (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Neubauer *et al.*, 2019). Investigating and effectively interpreting the experiences and social relations of participants in the sector required being immersed in the field of study, with the participants, while dealing with their intersubjectivity (Schänzel and Porter, 2022; Moser and Korstjens, 2018). However, this places an ethical responsibility on the researcher to ensure that the outcome of the study is not distorted by any form of biased interpretation resulting from closeness to the sector being investigated (Galdas, 2017;

Saunders *et al.*, 2023). It requires critical analysis and being sensitive to how the researcher's values influence the study situation (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Cheek and Øby, 2023). Maintaining academic rigour during analysis and writing up, and the oversight and support of supervisors (Almusaed and Almssad, 2020), mitigated the risk of interpretation bias. Additional preventive measures adopted, and other ethical issues relating to this study, are discussed in Section 3.7.

3.3 Research Approach

A consensus of scholarly opinion exists for categorising research approaches into quantitative, qualitative, and mixed (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). As already stated, this study is methodologically designed to adopt a constructivist interpretivist approach (Tsakmakis *et al.*, 2023; Schänzel and Porter, 2022). This approach is a variant of qualitative research, and it follows a subjectivist epistemology (Denzin *et al.*, 2023; Morselli and Marcelli, 2022). In contrast, quantitative approaches to research often employ an objectivist epistemology. A primary explanation for this difference centres on the use of theory (Gao *et al.*, 2022).

In an objectivist approach to knowledge acquisition, the inquiry starts with an existing theory, develops a hypothesis based on it, and collects data to test the hypothesis. The findings of the study may support, refine, extend, or challenge the hypothesis, or prove that it is false. This approach is often associated with researchers that hold a positivist or post-positivist philosophical standpoint (Gao *et al.*, 2022).

A subjectivist approach to research does not begin with a predefined theory. However, the study aim could be to develop theory (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021; Vanover *et al.*, 2021) or, where theory generation is not the goal, the research process would need to be underpinned with well-established and appropriately suited theory or theories (Varpio *et al.*, 2020). The latter subjective design has been utilised in examining the UKICS (Bell, 2022). As such, in implementing a constructivist interpretivist approach, the researcher actively and subjectively constructed patterns and meanings in collaboration with research participants

(Burles and Bally, 2022; Groenewald, 2023) and used a framework based on related aspects of three theories to explain the findings of the study.

Research utilising a constructivist interpretivist approach is not conducted outside the system (Schänzel and Porter, 2022; Moser and Korstjens, 2018). The constructivist position (as a commonly adopted ontological paradigm for qualitative research) entails approaching the world out there; seeking to understand, describe, and explain social phenomenon from the inside of a particular natural setting. The interpretive approach will then be to analyse and make meaning of the constructed subjective perspectives held within the setting and communicate this (in a way that they can be understood from the outside) as new knowledge (Flick, 2018; Vanover *et al*., 2021). Braun and Clarke (2021) surmise that in analysis, meaning is located at the intersection of data and the theoretically embedded interpretative practices adopted by the researcher.

In seeking to implement a constructivist interpretivist approach, the entire process of this study, including its methodology, was conceptually designed (as detailed in Chapter 2) to be informed and aligned with related aspects of three theories: stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and the concepts of Christian theology. The goal being to conduct a literature informed and effective church-related study that employed a methodology which recognised the impact made by both the Christian biblical worldview and the social structure of the contemporary British society on the issue under examination (Labanow, 2009).

Complementary paradigmatic insights from these three theories (Fernando and Lawrence, 2014; García-Cabrera *et al*., 2023) were intentionally utilised in interpretively determining how effective Christian-based legitimating agencies in the UKICS have been in enhancing the accountability and organisational performance of their affiliated congregations in the face of rising secularism and public scrutiny.

3.4 Overview of Primary Data Collection and Analysis Process

The primary data collection and analysis process for this study is presented in Figure 3.2. While it was planned that methods for collecting and analysing data would be mainly qualitative in nature, it was necessary (in seeking to appropriately address the research questions) to generate some level of quantitative data pertaining to the UKICS through an online survey (Zheng *et al*, 2023; Wu *et al.*, 2022). The survey was administered to the RLAs identified through the scoping review conducted as part of the initial literature review (see Section 2.4.1). Information from the preliminary outcome of the scoping review enabled 42 organisations to be initially identified as UK-based ICS RLAs. In seeking to ensure rigour in the review method (McCloskey *et al.*, 2023; Munn *et al.*, 2018), further levels of screening (utilising the criteria outlined in Section 2.4.1) were applied in the evidence synthesis process. The goal was to reduce error and increase reliability of evidence produced (Munn *et al.*, 2018). This resulted in the determination that, as at July 2021, 39 umbrella bodies/networks functioned as UK-based ICS RLAs (leaving out 3 organisations which failed, under further testing, to meet all the requirements of the adopted criteria). An initial online survey sent to these 39 agencies was core to the primary data collection process for this study (Haswani, *et al.*, 2023). Subsequent review efforts following the close of the survey yielded additional information which were then usefully employed to guide the FGD participants' selection process (see Section 3.10).

Questions in the survey enabled both quantitative data and open-ended responses to be generated (Zheng *et al.*, 2023; Creswell and Creswell, 2023). Survey returns were then analysed using a combination of descriptive statistical techniques (Samuels, 2020) and thematic categorisation (Weissman *et al.*, 2020), with analytical outcomes serving to inform the selection of case study organisations and the subsequent identification of individual interview (IDI) participants (see Section 3.9.2). Following this, data gathered in online interviews served to inform the themes within three online focus group discussions (FGDs), thereby enabling greater understanding of the issues being explored (Aurini *et al.*, 2022;

Kumar, 2019). As discussed in Section 3.13, IDI and FGD data were thematically analysed using a combination of thematic categorisation (Weissman *et al.*, 2020) and the six-phase approach (Kevern *et al.*, 2023; Tsakmakis *et al.*, 2023) proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022, 2021).

Data collection and analysis thus occurred in phases and proceeded iteratively (see Fig. 3.2 below) meaning that data collection did not precede in a linear manner to data analysis but overlapped to enable the analysis of data captured in one phase of data collection to inform the next element (Vanover *et al.*, 2021). For instance, transcripts of an initial set of audio-recorded interview sessions were analysed to inform subsequent ones (Braun and Clarke; 2021; Vanover *et al.*, 2021). Iteration in the data analysis process enabled continuous meaning-making (Alvesson, 2023).

The data collection and analysis process required significant exercise of flexibility (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Braun and Clarke, 2022, 2021) as there was need to mitigate against disruptions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic (Kevern *et al.*, 2023; Sohrabi *et al.*, 2021) and other challenges that arose in research plan implementation. Adjustments carried out, which were considered appropriate and effective in the circumstance, are discussed in Sections 3.6.1 and 3.8.3.

Figure 3.2: Data Collection and Analysis Process

Scoping Review

(To Inform)

Online Survey

Analysis

(To Inform)

Selection of Case Studies

First set of Interviews

Analysis

(To Inform)

Subsequent Interviews

Analysis

(To Inform)

Focus Groups

Analysis

Further analyses

(to extract explanatory insights and draw out interpretive meanings)
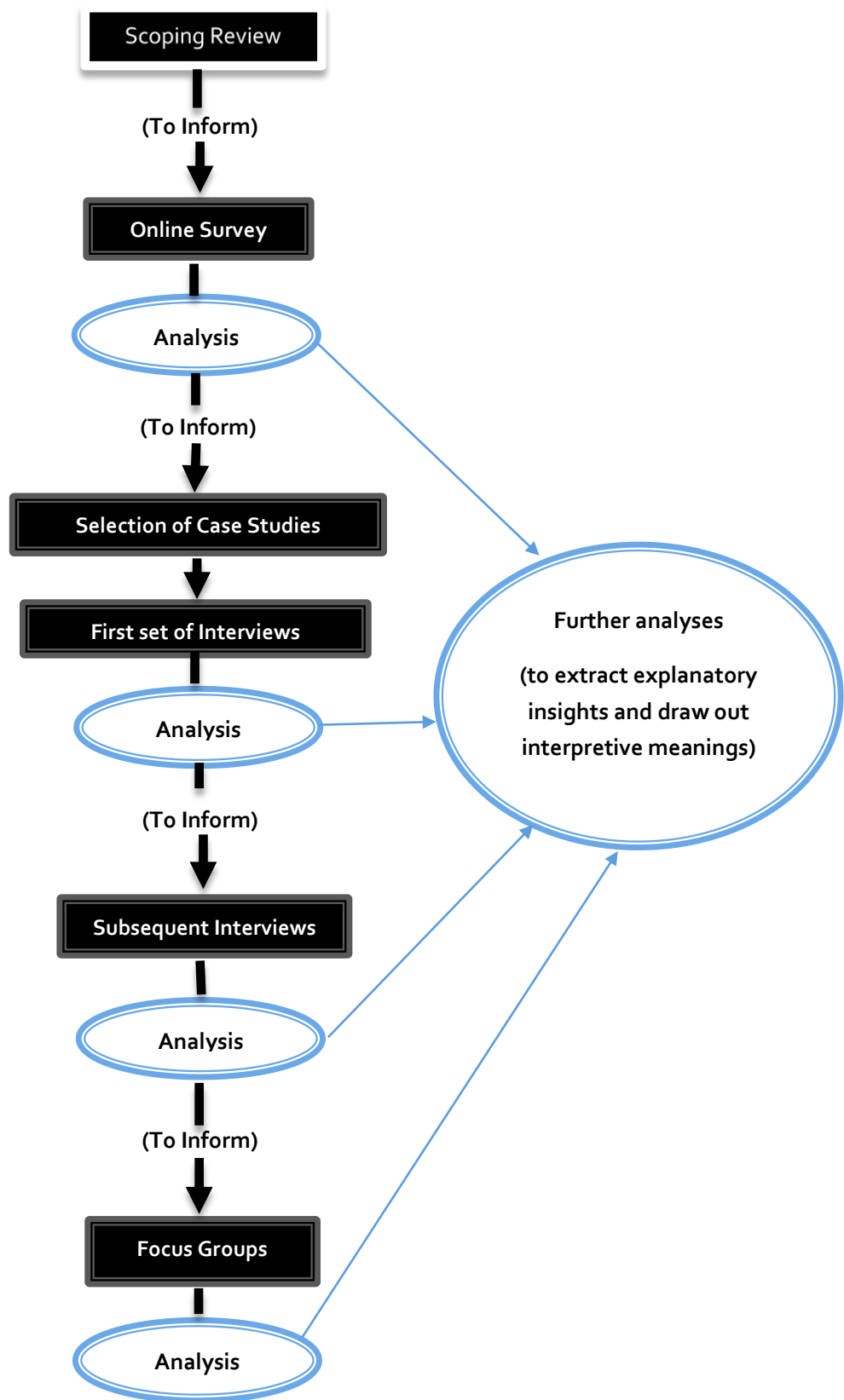
3.5 Justification for Using Multiple Data Collection Methods

In the data collection process for this study (see Fig. 3.2), an initial online survey served to inform the conduct of IDIs, and analytical outcomes from the interviews were usefully employed in organising FGDs. Faye (2014) employs these three methods in generating data for an examination of bank corporate governance regulation in the Gambia.

Utilising multiple data collection methods enabled a more in-depth picture of the research problem to emerge (Haswani *et al.*, 2023; Nightingale, 2020). It produced information beyond that which one research method could offer, thereby enhancing data richness and research quality (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008; Flick, 2018). It also enabled rigour to be applied to the constructivist and interpretivist process given that the errors and biases associated with a particular research method (when used alone) may limit its effectiveness in the construct of social phenomenon (Heath, 2015). In adopting the selected data collection strategy, the researcher assumed that when a constructivist formulation is based on multiple methods, it can lead to a broader, more differentiated, and comprehensive understanding of the complex social phenomenon being investigated (Aurini *et al.*, 2022; Flick, 2018). In this regard, the expectation is that achieving convergence of perspectives relating to the research problem across three data collection means will enhance trustworthiness of the study findings (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008).

3.6 Justification for Using Online Methods for Primary Data Collection

Online environments are increasingly assuming a central place in everyday life. As a result, there is growing use of online research methods by qualitative researchers (Gerber, 2023; Carter *et al.,* 2021; Morgan Brett and Wheeler, 2022). These methods are not only a timely and low-cost alternative for collecting primary data, but they also accommodate methodological rigour (Richards *et al.*, 2021; Geber, 2023) and ethical considerations (Kilian *et al.*, 2021). Such methods include online surveys, online IDIs, and online FGDs, which Bolin *et al.*, (2023) combined as a multiple approach in undertaking their qualitative project during

the Covid-19 pandemic. These three online methods were utilised in the different phases of primary data collection for this research on the UKICS.

The Covid-19 pandemic, which had a disruptive influence on almost all sectors of the UK society (Finlay *et al.*, 2022), also impacted on the way in which this study was carried out. Sohrabi *et al.*, (2021) points out that PhD students were particularly hard struck by the Covid-19 pandemic, as studies involving interviews could only be carried out through online and other digital means in certain periods of the pandemic (Kevern *et al.*, 2023; Bolin *et al.*, 2023; Flick, 2022). Given that this research was conducted against the background of the pandemic, this is considered an appropriate justification for using online techniques for generating primary data. For instance, utilising online interview methods (in preference to in-person means) was an effective way of limiting the risk of transmission (Carter *et al.*, 2021; Murray, 2022). Furthermore, it enabled the originally proposed research objectives to be completed within the pre-defined timeline (Sohrabi *et al.*, 2021).

Dodds and Hess (2021), who conducted online group interviews during the pandemic, are of the view that the uncertain global environment it created has meant that there is greater importance of being able to undertake good qualitative research online. Tsakmakis *et al.* (2023) considers that virtual qualitative interviewing is not only an acceptable alternative but also a preferred method in unprecedented circumstances. In common with this research, Tsakmakis *et al.* employed online interviewing method and a constructivist interpretivist approach in carrying out an Australia-wide exploratory study during the pandemic. Given that, in examining the UKICS, there was a need to implement a qualitative approach that facilitated a sufficiently wide exploration and generated adequate data, thereby enabling a more credible constructivist and interpretive outcome (Schoch, 2019; Yin 2018), online methods were pivotal to the process of undertaking this study.

To achieve detailed case study analysis and a fairer representation of the UKICS, selection criteria was adopted which required choosing independent churches from across the four UK nations (see Section 3.9.3). As such, it was considered that, in the background of the

pandemic, an increase in the number and geographical spread of participants would be more likely attained by utilising online methods (Bolin *et al.*, 2023; Murray, 2022; Marques *et al.*, 2021b). Furthermore, findings of a recent study (Francis and Village 2022, Francis *et al.*, 2020) show that churches (in response to the pandemic and subsequent government-imposed lockdowns) restructured their modus operandi by shifting to online delivery (Trent Vineyard, 2023b). This suggests an established or growing awareness on the part of church organisations of the technology for meeting online and could, in effect, be considered complementary to the approach adopted for data collection. Indeed, as has proven to be the case, it was anticipated that survey respondents and interviewees (being senior level UKICS officials) would be capable of utilising online means (Bolin *et al.*, 2023; Carter *et al.,* 2021) minimising any negative impacts on the swivel to online data collection methods.

3.6.1 Challenges and Mitigation Strategies Adopted in Using Online Methods

Limitations associated with online methods include issues with technology, engagement with participants, and data privacy (Murray, 2022; Bolin *et al.*, 2023; Kevern *et al.*, 2023). In seeking to mitigate likely challenges, the research methodology and in-person practices were adapted to online venues and processes (Saunders *et al.*, 2023; Dodds and Hess, 2021). For instance, the online platforms utilised for IDIs and FGDs were mutually agreed with participants, taking into consideration technology that is available and familiar to all involved in the research (Das Nair *et al.,* 2021). As already stated, the study participants proved to be capable of using the agreed platforms, engaging effectively in the interviewing process. Lapuz (2023) asserts that it is now acceptable practice to conduct IDIs using online spaces, while Bolin *et al.*, (2023) suggests that there is complementarity between in-person and online FGDs. Similarly, Acocella and Cataldi (2020) point out that online platforms can replicate real-time in-person interaction. They also claim that numerous studies have revealed that online FGs are equally as effective as in-person FGs in drawing out information from participants. Murray (2022) surmises that there is an ongoing role for online means in qualitative research as a likely alternative to in-person interviews.

An additional area of note (that provided immense benefits to this inquiry) is the convenience and increased capacities for recording and storing data associated with online platforms (Bolin *et al.*, 2023; Paulus and Lester, 2021). In view of the likely occurrence of technical hitches in digital recording, field notes were also kept as a supplementary source of raw data which could be usefully employed in analysis (Denzin *et al.*, 2023; Denny and Weckesser, 2022).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

In compliance with stipulated institutional requirement for conducting research involving human participants (Saunders *et al.*, 2023; Cheek and Øby, 2023), ethical approval was obtained for this study (see Appendix H). Issues regarding restricting factors on participation, anonymity of participants, confidentiality of data and so on were addressed in the application for ethical approval. The researcher adhered to specified standards and made every effort to reflect appropriate norms in addressing ethical issues that arose in different phases of the research process (Bolin *et al.*, 2023). Schindler (2018) submits that adhering to high ethical standards is a requirement that distinguishes good research from poor research.

All participants were aged over 18 and had mental capacity to be involved in the study. Given that interviewees/focus group participants were recruited from the pool of senior pastors, senior level church officials, agency leads, and other key persons in the UKICS, it was anticipated that the roles they perform would provide sufficient guarantee of mental capacity. This assumption was validated by the capability shown by all respondents in willingly consenting to participate in the study and in responding to the interview and discussion topics.

During participant recruitment, the selection of independent churches to be involved in the case studies was appropriately determined (see Section 3.9.3) to ensure they were not hand-picked by the RLAs. The RLAs, acting as gate keepers, notified churches in their membership about the research and the likelihood that they may be selected. However, the researcher formally invited selected churches to participate in the study based on the sampling criteria outlined in Section 3.9.3.

In seeking to ensure that there was not a level of complicity in relation to selection of individual interviewees (as it pertains to the 'second interviewee' in the RLA and independent church categories), the researcher formally selected and invited additional individuals to participate in the study. Albeit this involved the primary interviewee acting as a gatekeeper and suggesting a range of potential interviewees and confirming their roles.

In keeping with the principle of informed consent, the researcher specified in advance what information will be collected, how it is to be used, and how it will be stored (Acocella and Cataldi, 2020). Strict anonymity existed in relation to data gathered from participants both across categories and within RLA and church groups, to reduce risk of impacting interview data by suggesting a co-interviewee has made a particular proposal or creating a risk to participants if they could potentially be seen as adopting a stance at odds with the stated beliefs or representative model of the agency or church in question.

Confidentiality of survey and case study data and anonymity of IDI and FGD participants was observed in line with UK Data Protection Acts (Bolin *et al.*, 2023). There is a relatively low risk that placing a research focus on selected UKICS case study organisations may generate an interest within the sector or pressure to identify them when the study findings are published. The privacy of organisations and individual participants was protected by use of pseudonyms and redaction of any unique identification elements (Wang *et al.*, 2024; Heaton, 2022).

Appropriate preventive measures were taken to minimise potential bias. For instance, a clear focus was placed on the human elements in the research process, including the recruitment of participants and interactions with them (Sarnik, 2015; Saunders *et al.*, 2023). A supposition in this study is that while research can be biased, carrying values and interests is an integral part of constructivist-based inquiries, and this does not automatically imply bias (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Zhao *et al.*, 2021). As such, it is considered that the researcher's Christian faith and position as a pastor enhanced the process of interaction with gatekeepers and research participants in the UKICS. However, there was then an ethical responsibility to ensure that the outcome of the study was not distorted by any form of biased interpretation resulting from

closeness to the sector. The assumption is that adopting academically rigorous procedures and the oversight and support of supervisors were sufficient containment measures (Almusaed and Almssad, 2020).

3.8 Independent Church Sector Umbrella Organisations Survey

The Independent Church Sector Umbrella Organisations Survey (ICSUOS) was disseminated to 39 RLAs operating in the UKICS. Survey administration was done through the JISC Online Survey system, a platform utilised by academic researchers from different UK institutions (Jisc Online Surveys, 2024a). Prior to commencing this process, the researcher successfully completed a training on how to effectively conduct surveys using the JISC platform.

Secondary data generated through a scoping review (see Section 3.4) informed the determination of survey participants. Given the relatively small number of the target population (n=<40), total population sampling (TPS) was applied (Riyadh *et al.*, 2023; Etikan *et al.*, 2016). TPS is a type of purposive sampling where the entire population of interest (whose members all share a defined characteristic) are included. It was anticipated that using TPS would limit sampling bias (Saito *et al.*, 2020).

3.8.1 Pilot Survey and Prenotification of Survey Participants

It is recommended practice in research to pilot a survey before administering it to the target population (Jisc Online Surveys, 2024b). The pilot of the ICSUOS involved four respondents who were selected by utilising a convenience sampling technique (Stratton, 2021; Andrade, 2021). This number is approximately equivalent to 10% of the actual survey population.

Conducting a pilot survey enabled the researcher to test the survey tools, including its questions, structure, and distribution channel. It also led to a pre-empting of possible challenges in the main survey administration and provided a confidence boost prior to commencing the process (Shakir and Rahman, 2022; Williams-Mc Bean, 2019). The response rate to the pilot survey was 100%.

While the ICSUOS could be considered a fitting match to the setting where it was going to be administered, there was still the likelihood of an apathetic reception (Wu *et al.*, 2022; Rackoff *et al.*, 2023), given that many in the public feel a sense of being overwhelmed by the number of unsolicited surveys dropping into their email boxes (Nayak and Narayan, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic heightened this challenge (see Section 3.6). Therefore, in seeking to enhance ICSUOS participation and mitigate the risk of a low response rate, prenotification was adopted.

Prenotification has been proven to significantly improve digital survey response rates (Andreadis, 2020; Koitsalu *et al.*, 2018). It involves making an initial contact with participants before dissemination (Wu *et al.*, 2022). The means of contact utilised were emails, text messages, and telephone calls (Andreadis, 2020). This helped to prove the authenticity of the research, thereby limiting the chances of RLAs unintentionally ignoring or disregarding the survey.

Despite the efforts made in applying rigour to the prenotification process, six of the RLAs were not reached. This outcome may not be unconnected to the disruptions faced by these organisations resulting from the Covid-19 Pandemic (Finlay *et al.*, 2022; Francis and Village, 2022). Following close monitoring of responses later in the survey process (See Section 3.8.3), contact was made with all the umbrella bodies.

3.8.2 Survey Description

Among other benefits, the JISC Online Survey system enabled the creation of a custom survey instrument (see Appendix A), aimed at reaching UKICS RLAs with a diversity of question types (Lashley, 2018). Four key categories of questions in the survey are outlined in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Key Categories of Questions in the ICSUOS

Key Categories	No. of Questions
Roles and membership structure	4
Issues relating to the last five years	8
Stakeholder and accountability issues	9
Diversity and leadership issues	8

In its broader context, the approach to questioning adopted in the ICSUOS provided a basis for analysing the functions of these agencies to determine how effective they have been since the outset of the 21st century in enhancing the legitimacy, accountability, and overall organisation performance of their constituents. However, in seeking the views of the sector, particular focus was placed on the five-year period 2017-2021. It was anticipated that this would enable the generation of more accurate data and enhance the reliability of meaning created through the analysis process (Stenfors *et al.*, 2020). Also, a variety of questions were asked on the key subjects of independent church accountability, stakeholder relationships, leadership frameworks and governance practices, in consonance with the research emphasis placed on them. A detailed review of these questions and an in-depth analysis of responses received to the ICSUOS are discussed in Chapter 4.

In anticipation of the next phase of data collection, it was considered important to establish effective links with survey respondents by soliciting their email addresses in the questionnaire. The goal being to re-contact them at the appropriate time (Liu, 2020).

3.8.3 Challenges and Adjustments in Dissemination Strategies

There are challenges associated with conducting online surveys, and it is good research practice to be aware of them (Rackoff *et al.*, 2023; Wu *et al.*, 2022). While efforts were made to pre-empt possible challenges (Williams-McBean, 2019), some arose in the process of survey administration, thereby creating a need for adjustments in the ICSUOS dissemination strategies (Kilan *et al.*, 2021). For instance, although it operates an easy-to-use tool for the distribution of email-based online surveys, the Jisc Online Survey system did not provide information on undelivered emails (Jisc Online Surveys, 2024c). This proved to be challenging, as there was no way of ascertaining if any of the email addresses used was inaccurate or inactive.

Surveys are notoriously associated with the risk of a low response rate (Rackoff *et al.*, 2023; Wu *et al.*, 2023; Koitsalu *et al.*, 2018). This risk was particularly heightened in this study due

to uncertainties created by the Covid-19 pandemic (Dodd and Hess, 2021). While church organisations made efforts to shift to online delivery during the pandemic, there was noticeable disruption to their operations, including a reduction in their hours of availability (Francis and Village, 2022). With emphasis placed on performing mainly essential duties, it was then likely that participating in a survey may not have ranked highly in their to-do lists. Additional challenges routinely linked with surveys include assessment of optimal questionnaire length (Nayak and Nayaran, 2019) and failure to participate arising from absence of incentives (Saleh and Bista, 2017).

In seeking to mitigate challenges encountered in survey administration, close monitoring of responses was adopted. This enabled issues to be identified and survey dissemination strategies to be adjusted in a way that was appropriate to the target population (Kilian *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, there was a need to extend the survey duration, as the ICSUOS was open for a 3½ month period between July and November 2021. Also, friendly reminders were sent, and written assurances of confidentiality and anonymity of data reemphasised (Rackoff *et al.*, 2023).

3.8.4 Responses and Approach to Analysis of Survey

Twenty-seven RLAs (out of a target population of 39) responded to the ICSUOS. This represents a 69% response rate which is considered significant in view of challenges faced in the dissemination process. Wu *et al.* (2022) informs that the average response rate for education-related online surveys is 44%.

The survey generated mainly numerical data. However, opinions and value-based perceptions were also gathered through some open-ended questions (Zheng *et al.*, 2023; Albudaiwi, 2017). Statistical tools available on the Jisc Online System (Jisc Online Surveys, 2024d) were utilised in analysing both sets of data. The tools enabled summary tables to be created showing all responses to an open-ended question, as well as tables, bar charts, pie charts and cross tabulations for close-ended questions. The open-ended questions were analysed

by grouping them into thematic categories (Weissman *et al.*, 2020), while quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques (Samuels, 2020). Analytical outcomes were then distilled into clear and concise information to support the subsequent phase of data collection (Fricker and Kulzy, 2015; Haswani *et al.*, 2023). These analytical outcomes are discussed in the next chapter.

3.9 Selection of Case Study Organisations

Case study methodologies enable in-depth focus to be placed on a single case or selected cases whilst simultaneously retaining a holistic perspective in the research process. They are considered useful in providing answers to research questions that seek to explain contemporary circumstances or describe in an in-depth manner some social phenomenon (Aurini *et al.*, 2022; Yin, 2018). This inquiry was predicated upon six questions relating to RLA functions and the effectiveness of their role in the UKICS (see Section 1.5). In seeking to provide answers to these questions, four RLAs (from the pool of agencies that responded to the ICSUOS) were invited to participate in the study (see Section 3.9.2). The choice of a multiple-case design (Megyesi *et al.*, 2024) is based on the consideration that one data source may be insufficient in fully satisfying the multiple objectives of this research (Trachenko *et al.*, 2022; Kumar, 2019). Furthermore, Schoch (2019) argues that up to four distinct cases can be utilised in a multiple case study, and Megyesi *et al.* carried out exploratory research involving six different case study cities across Europe.

The questions posed in this research are also centred around creating an understanding about the operations of UK-based independent churches, in terms of the working relationship between them and their RLAs, and their interactions with their diverse and often conflicting stakeholders (See Table 2.1). To enable a detailed case study analysis which included adequate data on these issues, fourteen independent churches in the membership of UK-based RLAs were also invited to take part in the research. These congregations were mostly (but not exclusively) selected from the four participating RLAs, the goal being to facilitate wider exploration and provide a more credible constructivist and interpretive outcome (Yin, 2018;

Schoch, 2019). The sampling strategy and selection criteria implemented in determining case study organisations are discussed below (Stenfors *et al.*, 2020).

3.9.1 Sampling Strategy and Selection Criteria

In approaching the sampling and selection process, it was assumed that both RLAs and independent churches in the membership of UK-based RLAs are likely to be related, yet in some ways diverse (Brierley, 2020; Mukherjee *et al.*, 2002). RLAs are related (homogeneous) on the grounds of belonging both to the Christian faith and the UKICS. However, their associational and doctrinal differences, as well as their sizes, the geographical spread of their membership within the UK, and their leadership frameworks (in terms of the role of women), are reflective of their diversity or heterogeneity. Independent churches within each RLA can for the purposes of this research be held to be relatively homogenous because of their common membership in one umbrella agency, while their sizes, geographic locations, ethnic composition of their congregants, leadership frameworks, and accountability mechanisms are indicative of their heterogeneity.

Selection of case study organisations, as well as interview participants, involved purposive sampling techniques (Van Den Assem and Passmore, 2022). This ensured the identification and selection of organisations that are best suited to the examination, and participants who are proficient and well-informed about the phenomenon of interest, thereby enabling the research questions to be answered (Etikan *et al.*, 2016; Schreier, 2018).

3.9.2 Selection of Case Study Agencies

Four case study RLAs were selected first using a stratified purposive sampling technique. This involved dividing the population of RLAs that responded to the survey into three subgroups (Ames *et al.,* 2019). These initial groupings were based on range of membership size (see Table 3.2). Further stratifications considered two factors. Firstly, geographical spread of each agency's membership within the UK, and, secondly, the umbrella body's leadership framework as it relates to the role of women in senior leadership positions. Analysed statistical information

from the ICSUOS was utilised in determining what constitutes 'large', 'medium' and 'small' membership for RLAs, and in ascertaining the geographical spread of their membership, as well as each agency's stance on the role of women in church leadership.

Table 3.2: ICSUOS Responses Applied in Selection of Case Study Agencies

Membership Size Range of RLAs	No. of RLA Responses	RLAs Operating in only one Nation of the UK	Complementarian Stance on church Leadership
>750 (Large)	3	0	1
250-750 (Medium)	4	0	2
<250 (Small)	19	12	7

The classification into 'large', 'medium' and 'small' is for analytical purposes only. Also, the membership size range adopted (which is considered appropriate for an effective analysis) is partly intended to minimise the risk of participating RLAs being identified. In determining the case study RLAs, one agency from each of the membership-size subgroups was selected for case study analysis along with an additional agency from the subgroup with the largest number (<250), bringing the total to four.

Membership size-range is based on 26 responses, as one participant did not provide information on the number of churches in its membership. While a literature search indicates that this RLA has a membership in the range 250 - 750, this information was not applied in determining ICSUOS findings.

All RLAs with membership size 250 and over have congregations drawn from at least two UK nations in their associations. This level of diversity is not commonly shared among agencies within the membership-size range <250. Rather, there is a preponderance of RLAs (about two-thirds) with membership constituted solely of churches from one of the four UK nations. A possible explanation is that this is the current limits of their growth. However, it is also the case that many of these RLAs are either nationally based (with membership open by default to churches located in only one UK nation) or regionally based (offering affiliations to only

congregations located in a region within one of the four nations). Of the 12 RLAs under the 'operating in only one UK nation category', five are regionally based.

In seeking to apply further stratification relating to spread in geographical location of member churches, one RLA (with membership open by default to independent churches located in Scotland) was selected. Following this, leadership framework was applied as a second basis for further stratification. Given the focus on each agency's stance on women's role in senior leadership positions, one 'complementarian-leaning' agency was also selected. Almost 40% of the RLAs that responded to the survey (see Table 3.2) share an understanding of Scripture that excludes women from occupying pastoral and eldership positions within the church.

Overall, the four selected agencies reflect the membership size ranges of UKICS RLAs, with one of them operating in only one UK nation, and another adopting a complementarian position in relation to the role of women in church leadership. The supposition is that utilising the above stratification criteria ensured a fairer representation of the population in the sample (Aurini *et al.*, 2022).

3.9.3 Selection of Case Study Churches

Given that UKICS RLAs are likely to have churches with heterogenous characteristics in their membership (Brierley, 2020), a stratified purposive sampling technique was also used in determining the fourteen independent congregations selected for case studies. After considering survey findings, five criteria (church label, location, number of congregants, ethnic background of congregants, and gender of senior leader) pertained in the stratification process. The goal being to select varied-sized congregations, urban and rural based (located in all four UK nations) and operating under diverse labels (Evangelical, Pentecostal, Baptist, Charismatic, Apostolic, and so on). It was also considered vital to include churches with female senior pastors in the sample, as well as congregations with a variety of majority ethnic backgrounds (majority white congregants, mixed, majority black Africans, majority African Caribbeans, majority Asians and so on). The supposition is that implementing this selection

criteria ensured that, within the sample, there was a fairer representation of large, medium, and small-sized congregations of diverse labels and leadership frameworks. It is also assumed that the sample reflected the multi-national and multi-ethnic status of Britain and resulted in more reliable data and greater depth of interpretive explanations, leading possibly to a broader-based application of findings (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Mezmir, 2020).

Table 3. 3: Characteristics of Selected Case Study Churches

Location in United Kingdom	No. of Churches
England	11
Scotland	1
Wales	1
Northern Ireland	1

Urban or Rural Based	No. of Churches
Urban based	11
Rural based	3

Church Label	No. of Churches
Evangelical	4
Charismatic	4
Pentecostal	3
Apostolic	2
Baptist	1

Range of Membership Size	No. of Churches
250+	1
100-250	2
50-100	4
<50	7

Ethnic Background of Congregants	No. of Churches
Mixed	4
Majority White	5
Majority Black African	3
Majority Black Caribbean	1
Majority Asian	1

Gender of Senior Pastor	No. of Churches
Male	9
Female	5

In seeking to accommodate a mix of the 5 criteria, as reflected in Table 3.3, there was a need to broaden selection of participating congregations beyond the four selected case study RLAs (see Section 3.9.2). This enabled the selection of a majority Asian congregation and an additional female-led independent church from two UKICS agencies to create a booster sample (Lynn *et al.*, 2018). Lumsden (2022) points out that the selection criteria for the sample

coverage of a good qualitative study should be inclusive of the constituencies considered to be of importance.

Table 3.4: Regional Distribution of Case Study Churches Located in England

Region in England	No. of Churches
Greater London	5
South East	2
East	1
South West	1
West Midlands and Yorkshire & the Humber	1
North West	1
TOTAL	**11**

Eleven of the fourteen case study churches (79%) are located in England, an outcome in close alignment with recent trends in UK population. Based on the 2021 census, England accounts for 84% of the total UK population (UK Population Data, 2023). Table 3.4 shows a regional distribution of the 11 churches studied in England. England has nine regions (Office for National Statistics, 2022), and the churches are in 7 of these regions which is considered a good spread in terms of representativeness of the population. One of the churches under the apostolic label has locations in two regions of England, West Midlands, and Yorkshire & the Humber. In all, generating primary data from a combination of UK-wide, national, and regional perspectives is likely to have enhanced rigour in the constructivist and interpretive process (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Busetto *et al.*, 2020).

3.10 Recruitment of Study Participants

In keeping with the data collection design for this research, IDIs were conducted with study participants from each selected RLA and independent congregation (see Section 3.11; Appendices B and C). Following this, supplementary information was sourced through organising FGDs with UKICS officials (see Section 3.12).   Recruitment of study participants was carried out purposively and in a strategic manner aimed at achieving a sample relevant to the research questions (Denny and Weckesser, 2022). Where direct approach was deemed

ineffective, gatekeepers were sought to facilitate research access/introduction to participants (Silverman, 2022).

Email addresses provided by ICSUOS respondents (Liu, 2020) were used in directly contacting the RLA leads or appropriate senior officials who were then approached as gatekeepers to a second individual to be interviewed in each participating RLA. Following this, selected individuals were formally invited to participate in the study (Kevern *et al.*, 2023). A similar process was adopted in the participating independent churches.

Eight months elapsed between the close of the ICSUOS and the conduct of FGDs. Further secondary data search in this period yielded information on four additional RLAs in the UKICS, bringing the total to 43. It was adjudged that the four agencies had met the criteria for inclusion at this point (see Section 2.4.1). Recruitment of focus group participants was then widened to include agency and independent church officials from these additional RLAs and their member congregations. The goal being to enhance information richness by ensuring that the diverse perspectives in the sector are more fully captured in the data generation and meaning creation process (Lincoln *et. al.*, 2023; Busetto *et al.*, 2020).

Table 3.5: Gender and Ethnic Distribution of Study Participants

Data Collection Method	Gender of Participants		Ethnic Background of Participants				
	Male	*Female*	*White*	*Black African*	*Black Caribbean*	*Asian*	*South American*
Individual Interviews	20	13	16	11	3	3	-
Focus Group Discussions	20	11	19	8	3	-	1
TOTAL	**40**	**24**	35	19	6	3	1

Selection criteria for research participants sought to capture the experiences and views of a range of senior level RLA and independent church leaders including of different ages, ethnicities, and gender. In all, 64 individuals (33 for IDIs and 31 for FGDs) took part in the study, as shown in Table 3.5. Of this number, 24, representing 37.5%, were female (10 white, 10 Black African, 3 Black Caribbean and 1 Asian). The number of male participants was

equally distributed between IDIs and FGDs, with the following ethnic backgrounds, 26 white, 8 Black African, 3 Black Caribbean, 2 Asian, and 1 South American. The profiles of IDI and FGD participants are presented in Tables 3.6 and 3.7.

Based on initial selections, the proportion of male participants (particularly of Black African backgrounds) would have been higher. However, 7 participants (3 for IDIs and 4 for FGDs) who had previously indicated willingness to participate in the study, withdrew, citing work-related exigencies that impeded on their availability. It was then necessary to recruit replacements for the 3 IDI participants that withdrew. Following reapplication of selection criteria, choices of appropriate replacements were made. It is unlikely that the reselections had an unfavourable impact on the richness of information obtained given that, in each case, the criteria for selection were met.

3.11 Individual Interviews

Interviews were conducted with individuals aged 18+ who are authoritatively positioned within the leadership of each participating RLA and independent congregation. Open-ended and non-leading questions were posed to the interviewees (see Appendices B and C), thereby enabling them to share their meaning and experiences in their own words (Morgan-Brett and Wheeler, 2022). The profile of all 33 IDI participants (including their role and years of experience) is shown in Table 3.6. The range of years of experience is 2 – 40 (average being approximately 15 years) with the exclusion of three participants that did not provide specific information on this topic. Because of their elite positions and experiences, there was an expectation that IDI participants would provide information that may not be obtainable from other sources (Natow, 2020). The interviews were audio-recorded, with participants' consent, and then transcribed verbatim (Megyesi *et al.*, 2024; Denny and Weckesser, 2022).

Table 3.6: Profile of IDI Participants (*includes years of experience, where provided)

Unique Code	Gender	Ethnic Background	Role	Years in the Role *
R1	Male	White	RLA Official	7
R3	Female	White	RLA Official	-
R5	Male	White	RLA Official	24
R7	Male	White	RLA Official	-
R12	Male	Black Caribbean	RLA Official	24
R15	Male	White	RLA Leader	7
R18	Male	White	RLA Official	-
C1	Female	Black Caribbean	Church Official	6
C2	Male	White	Church Leader	14.5
C4	Male	White	Church Leader	9
C5	Female	Black Caribbean	Church Leader	15
C6	Male	White	Church Leader	8
C7	Male	Black African	Church Leader	29
C8	Female	Black African	Church Leader	20
C9	Male	Black African	Church Leader	36
C11	Female	White	Church Leader	9
C13	Male	White	Church Leader	10
C15	Female	Black African	Church Official	20
C16	Female	Black African	Church Official	14
C18	Male	White	Church Official	7
C19	Female	Black African	Church Official	15
C20	Male	White	Church Official	4.5
C21	Female	Black African	Church Official	15
C22	Female	Asian	Church Official	9
C26	Male	White	Church Official	15
C28	Female	Black African	Church Leader	40
C30	Male	Black African	Church Official	>10
C32	Female	Black African	Church Official	4
C35	Male	Asian	Church Leader	26
C36	Male	Asian	Church Official	2
C37	Male	White	Church Leader	19
C38	Male	Black African	Church Leader	19
C39	Female	White	Church Official	14

It was planned to involve a second interviewee in each participating organisation, given that a second respondent may be better suited than the first interviewee to answer certain questions that the study sought to answer (Dejonckheere and Vaughan, 2019). This plan was actualised in 3 out of the 4 agencies and 12 out of the 14 churches that participated in the study. A second individual from the fourth agency later took part in a focus group discussion. While no willing participant was available in one of the independent churches, a potential interviewee pertaining to another congregation was not selected on grounds of being related to the first

interviewee and concern existed over data contamination or influence of relatives impacting findings.

For the three agencies with two IDI participants, one of them was the agency lead (or similarly senior individual) and the other a member of its board of trustees or senior leadership committee (who is unrelated to the first interviewee). Selection of the second interviewee sought to capture the experiences and views of a range of senior leaders including of different ages, ethnicities, and gender. Interviews explored in-depth the respondents' experiences (Tsakmakis *et al.*, 2023) of serving in the leadership of a UK-based umbrella organisation that provides membership, resources, and support to independent churches. There was also a focus on the impact that rising secularism and increased public scrutiny have had on the growth and accountability of independent congregations as well as on each agency's role in enabling affiliated churches to enhance their social legitimacy, improve their organisational performance in terms of growth outcomes, and meet the accountability demands of their stakeholders in areas such as leadership, safeguarding, and finance (see Appendix B for topic guide).

For eleven independent congregations with two IDI participants, one of them was the senior pastor of the church and the other a member of the board of trustees or leadership team (who is not related to the pastor). Similar to the criteria applied for RLAs, selection of the second interviewee sought to capture the experiences and views of a range of senior leaders including of different ages, ethnicities, and gender. One senior pastor preferred having two other members of the leadership team to participate on behalf of their church. Interview questions explored each congregations' demographics and leadership structure, as well as their involvement in evangelistic and social engagement activities in the local community. Other issues addressed include approach to management of stakeholder relationships, for instance, relationship with their umbrella body and benefits (if any) being derived from membership. See Appendix C for topic guide.

Data generated from conducting IDIs contributed to informing three FGDs, which represented the final stage of data collection. A disadvantage associated with IDIs is that interviewees may choose to withhold or embellish certain descriptions either to protect their preferred self-image or to impress the interviewer (Natow, 2020). In seeking to mitigate any likely effect that this may have had (if it occurred), IDIs and FGDs were combined to achieve data completeness and data confirmation in this research (Natow, 2020; Denny and Weckesser, 2022).

3.12 Focus Group Discussions

Three online FGDs (Bolin *et al.*, 2023; Marques *et al.*, 2021; Richard *et al.*, 2021) were conducted, one involving RLA leaders/officials, another, independent church leaders/officials, and a third, a mix of RLA and independent church leaders/officials (see Table 3.7 for the profile of FGD participants). In all, five separate group interactive sessions were organised (Wu *et al.*, 2023), two with agency leads and senior level RLA officials, another two with congregational leaders and senior level independent church officials, and a fifth meeting with a mix of participants drawn from RLAs and churches in the UKICS. Thus, an element of heterogeneity was introduced in the set of participants for the final session. The supposition is that while homogeneity can be more productive in the FG interactive process, heterogeneity has the potential to provide deeper insight (Faye, 2014).

For each group discussion, individuals who did not participate in one-to-one interviews were selected using an expert sampling model, the goal being to assemble a group of persons with known or demonstrable experience and expertise in the phenomenon of interest to explore in more depth themes highlighted through analysis of the interview and survey materials (Billups, 2021). An average of seven participants (which is widely accepted as sufficient) was selected for each focus group (Busetto *et al.*, 2020; Nyumba *et al.*, 2018). Two RLA officials (R2 and R17) were involved in both FGD sessions for agency leads/officials (Wu *et al.*, 2023) to enable them to provide further insights about their organisations. As a result of withdrawals, the fifth group discussion featured five participants (see Section 3.10).

Table 3.7: Profile of FGD Participants

FGD Session	Unique Code	Gender	Ethnic Background	Role
1	R2	Male	White	RLA Official
	R10	Female	White	RLA Official
	R11	Male	White	RLA Leader
	R14	Male	Black Caribbean	RLA Official
	R17	Male	White	RLA Official
	R19	Female	Black African	RLA Leader
	R20	Female	White	RLA Official
2	R2	Male	White	RLA Official
	R4	Male	South American	RLA Official
	R8	Male	White	RLA Official
	R13	Male	White	RLA Leader
	R17	Male	White	RLA Official
	R21	Male	White	RLA Official
	R22	Male	Black African	RLA Official
3	C10	Male	Black Caribbean	Church Official
	C12	Male	White	Church Leader
	C24	Male	White	Church Leader
	C25	Female	White	Church Leader
	C31	Male	Black African	Church Leader
	C33	Male	Black African	Church Leader
	C40	Female	Black African	Church Official
4	C14	Female	Black African	Church Leader
	C17	Male	White	Church Leader
	C23	Male	Black African	Church Leader
	C27	Male	White	Church Leader
	C29	Male	White	Church Leader
	C41	Female	White	Church Leader
	C42	Female	Black Caribbean	Church Official
5	R6	Female	White	RLA Leader
	R9	Male	White	RLA Official
	R16	Male	White	RLA Official
	C3	Female	White	Church Leader
	C34	Female	Black African	Church Leader

In recognition of the central role of moderation in managing group dynamics and achieving an effective outcome, the researcher opted to serve as an observer, while selecting as a moderator an individual with the skills, qualities and knowledge required in facilitating the FGD process (Bolin *et al.*, 2023; Johnson, 2021; Acocella and Cataldi, 2020). The moderator had previously undertaken doctoral study on a topic pertaining to an element in the ICS.

Participants' selection and invitation to the online events, as well as the audio recording of proceedings, remained the responsibility of the researcher. The moderator followed the topic guide provided (Billups, 2021; Busetto *et al.*, 2020) in facilitating interactions on issues that emerged from analysis of IDIs, and in exploring participants' views on measures that need to be put in place to increase wider societal confidence in the role and performance of independent churches and their RLAs (Saunders *et al.*, 2023; Erickson, 2023).

3.13 Analysis of Interview and Focus Group Data

A variety of strategies exist for the interpretive analysis of qualitative data (Mihas, 2023, Silverman, 2024). In this inquiry, a combination of thematic categorisation (Weissman *et al.*, 2020) and the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022, 2021) was utilised in analysing IDI and FGD data. Thematic categorisation involves grouping participants responses into thematic categories (Weissman *et al.*, 2020), and as applied by Kevern *et al.* (2023) and Tsakmakis *et al.* (2023), the six-phase approach involves familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, and searching for themes. Additional stages are review of themes, defining and naming of themes, and write up of the outcome.

Effective implementation of the thematic analytical process required the exercise of reflexivity (Zheng *et al*, 2023; Kevern *et al.*, 2023), flexibility, and subjectivity (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Braun and Clarke, 2022; 2021). While observing methodological rigour, exercise of reflexive subjectivity afforded the researcher room to creatively adopt a distinct analytic interpretive approach that aligned with the study aim and best reflected the constructed perspectives of participants (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Data generated through IDIs and FGDs is extensive and often overlapping (Billups, 2021). As such, there was a need for close interrogation of the transcripts of audio recordings and field notes (Denny and Weckesser, 2022). In this phase of qualitative data analysis, the researcher sought to become familiarised with the transcripts and field notes, carry out data cleaning and reduction to locate and examine the phenomenon of interest, reorganise, classify, and

categorise the reduced data, identify themes, patterns, and relationships in them (which is key to developing explanatory frameworks), and then draw out interpretations and write up the findings (Soldana, 2021; Vanover *et al.*, 2021).

Braun and Clarke (2022) point out that data analysis needs to be underpinned by theoretical assumptions. Therefore, to enable the conduct of a robust analysis and synthesis exercise, related aspects of the underlying theories for this inquiry (Stakeholder theory, Legitimacy theory, and the concepts of Christian theology) were employed as lenses (Varpio *et al.*, 2020) in providing academically credible answers to the research questions (Bazeley, 2021).

Before commencing the process of filtering and sorting the collected data, the researcher became familiar with their variety and diversity by listening to the tapes and reading and re-reading the transcripts and notes (Mezmir, 2020; Billups, 2021). The subsequent engagement in data reduction enabled the elimination of irrelevant repetitive statements and data, leading to the location and examination of the phenomenon of interest and the development of preliminary codes (Roulston, 2014).

3.13.1 Coding Process and Data Presentation

According to Saldana (2021), a code (which in qualitative data analysis could adopt the form of a word or phrase) represents and captures the primary content and essence of a datum. In this research, coding was used as a categorising strategy (Maxwell and Chmiel, 2014) to classify sorted data into discrete categories and label them for further analysis and synthesis (Silverman, 2022; Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2020). It served to create a vital link between data gathering, the analysis of collected data, and the synthesis process which involved bringing together participants views to create new meaning (Saldana, 2021). In the coding process, patterns were detected, and themes manually developed across the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Schänzel and Porter (2022), who detected themes manually in their data analysis, are of the view that thematic analysis is compatible with the interpretivist approach adopted in this research.

Fricker and Kulzy (2015) argue that the coding process needs to be appropriately done to avoid analytical errors and unsubstantiated conclusions. So, in applying reflexivity in the deepening engagement with data (Alvesson, 2023), evolving codes remained fluid and open to expansion, contraction, renaming and abandonment. Thus, leading to the emergence of themes that are coherent, relevant to the research questions, and useful in providing contextual insights about the UKICS (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

In seeking to provide both a condensed understanding across the dataset (Vanover *et al.*, 2021) and a reliable picture of how the study findings were arrived at, it was considered essential to present relevant sequences of IDI and FGD quotes (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2020; Stenfors *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, segments from these data sources (that best illustrate the phenomenon of interest) were selected and displayed as textual representations of collected data (Mezmir, 2020). The varied segments of data served as building blocks for a more effective constructivist and interpretivist exercise (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2020).

3.14 Assessing the Quality of Constructivist Interpretivist Based Research

A benefit linked with qualitative approach to research is that it enables in-depth analyses of phenomena (Silverman, 2024). Additionally, such methods allow flexibility and creativity which provide particularly rich insights (Denzin *et al.*, 2023; Shah, 2019). These benefits are likely to be observed from this constructivist interpretivist-based study on the UKICS. The assumption is that the rigorous research process undertaken (and the resultant findings) meets the quality standards associated with constructivist-interpretivist based inquiries.

While it is recognised that ensuring quality in qualitative studies is of essence, there remains a lack of unanimity in defining appropriate evaluation criteria for qualitative research (Cain *et al.*, 2023; Charmaz and Thornberg, 2022; Lumsden, 2022). Yadav (2021) surmises (after reviewing 45 research articles on this topic) that the diversity of philosophical perspectives within qualitative research limits any feasibility of unifying quality assessment parameters. Despite this limitation, Yadav, as well as Denzin *et al.*, (2023), suggest that trustworthiness,

credibility, transferability, and confirmability can be considered as the four criteria for assessing the quality of constructivist-based qualitative inquiries. Table 3.8 includes additional criteria from other sources and outlines their implications for research.

Table 3.8: Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Qualitative Studies

Criteria	Implications for Research
Trustworthiness	Affirmation that the findings of the research are appropriately contextualised and are representative of participants' experiences. Relates to the importance of ensuring that credibility and rigour are applied to the inquiry process.
Credibility	Gauges confidence in the accuracy of findings.
Transferability	Evaluates the availability of sufficient detail to enable readers to judge the applicability of findings to other contexts.
Dependability	Determines that access to data has been provided.
Confirmability	Link between dataset and findings is clearly described and established through use of, for instance, quotes.
Transparency	A clear description of how the study was conducted, setting out underpinning theories and philosophical paradigms, as well as data collection, sampling and analysis methods employed, and justifications for their utilisation.
Authenticity	Examines if there is a balanced and fair view of multiple perspectives.
Reflexivity	Self-questioning, involving critical reflection on role and practices in the research process, in a manner that upholds research integrity.
Flexibility	Evidence of adaptation and refinement in responding to issues that arise in the research process (rather than rigidity in seeking to adhere to predetermined strategies).
Originality	Significant outcome from analysis, offer of new insights and fresh conceptualisation relating to an identified problem.
Applicability	In terms of generalisability, focusing on the extent to which findings in one setting can be applied more generally.
Key Sources	Yadav, 2021; Cain *et al*., 2023; McCloskey *et al*., 2023; Denzin *et. al*, 2023; Lincoln *et al*., 2023; Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021; Olmos-Vega *et. al*., 2023; Saunders *et al*., 2023; Stenfors *et al*., 2020; Lumsden, 2022; Mertens, 2018; Schreier, 2018; Morselli and Marcelli, 2022; Braun and Clarke, 2022; Silverman, 2022, 2024; Vanover *et al*., 2021; Bhandari, 2023

There may be an element of overlap in some of the eleven quality assessment parameters outlined in Table 3.8 (Lumsden, 2022). Applicability, in the sense of limited generalisability, is included among the criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative studies. While it is to be

recognised that context, conditions, and interactions associated with a particular constructivist interpretive-based research may not be easily replicated (Goundar, 2012), Silverman (2024) is of the view that certain kinds of generalisations can be made from case studies. However, in the search for a concept of 'generalisation' that is more compatible with the underpinning principles of qualitative research, Schreier (2018) suggests that more consideration should be given to achieving internal validity rather than external validity. External validity focuses on the extent to which the conclusions of a study can hold true for other people, in other places, and at other times (Trochim, 2024). Internal validity, on the other hand, assesses how well the variability within a case (or cases) that is studied is represented by the researcher's observations, explanations, and interpretive outcomes. In relation to this research, the supposition is that the purposive sampling models implemented, including Total Population Sampling for determining survey participants and stratified sampling for selection of case study organisations, worked to ensure that information generated, and knowledge gained, are representative of the UKICS (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Also, the multiple data collection methods employed may have contributed to enhancing the credibility of research procedures (Yadav, 2021).

In response to the disruptive influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the data collection process of this thesis (Bolin *et al.*, 2023; Finlay *et al.*, 2022), flexibility was achieved through the adaptation of research methodology and swivelling in-person engagement to online venues and processes (Kevern *et al.*, 2023; Dodds and Hess, 2021). Additional areas where adherence to quality standards can be evidenced include reflexivity, via the critical reflection on role and practice which ensured that research integrity was upheld (Olmos-Vega *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, originality is attested to by the new insights gained about the UKICS as illustrated through this study.

Combined, the primary objective was to ensure that research procedures, data collection, analysis, and the interpretive approach in the inquiry process are explicitly justified, and findings of the study appropriately represent the constructed realities of study participants

(Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; McCloskey *et al.*, 2023). It is the assumption that this desired outcome has been realised.

3.15 Chapter Summary

The focus in this methodology chapter has been on defining the type of research undertaken (which is exploratory in nature) and providing detailed information about the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions brought into it. Also discussed is the constructivist-interpretivist approach adopted in contributing to knowledge. The approach involved interacting with research participants to understand, describe, and draw out meanings about the UKICS based on their perspectives.

Primary data collection involved multiple data sources and a multiple case study design. This approach facilitated wider exploration of the UKICS. It also provided a more academically credible constructivist and interpretive background for the inquiry and enabled greater understanding of the issues explored.

A view acknowledged in the chapter is that the assessment parameters identified for evaluating qualitative studies have implications for research. In conclusion however, the working supposition is that their requirements are likely to have been met by the methods utilised, justifications provided, rigour applied, and findings derived from this investigation into the operations of the two main actors in the UKICS.

Following the methodology chapter of this thesis are four results chapters, beginning with the presentation and discussion of survey analytical outcomes.

CHAPTER FOUR:

ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESPONSES

4.0 Introduction

This study was initiated to explore the effectiveness of UK-based RLAs in enhancing accountability and organisational performance of their affiliated independent congregations. In this chapter, an in-depth analysis of responses to the Independent Church Sector Umbrella Organisations Survey (ICSUOS) is presented. Utilising a total population sampling design (see Section 3.8), the ICSUOS was administered to faith-based umbrella and resource bodies identified to be functioning as UKICS RLAs. The ICSUOS findings not only served as inputs to guide subsequent data generation (Haswani *et al.*, 2023), but they were also tested for rigour in the process of further exploration. In effect, some of the findings have made vital inputs into the results of this research.

4.1 Approach to Survey Analysis

In analysing ICSUOS participants' views, there was a need to determine if the seven underlying presuppositions for this research (see Section 1.2) were accepted as facts in the UKICS, and the extent to which this was the case. This approach was considered vital in enabling effective co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the participants (Tsakmakis *et al.*, 2023; Schänzel and Porter, 2022). As such, the presuppositions will be utilised as sub-headings in grouping the analysis of survey data.

Given that a combination of fixed-choice and open-ended questions were asked in the ICSUOS (Zheng *et al.*, 2023; Weissman *et al.*, 2020), survey analytical strategy involved employing descriptive statistical tools on the Jisc Online System for the analysis of quantitative data (Jisc Online Surveys, 2024d). Then, responses to open-ended questions in the ICSUOS were sorted and organised in thematic categories as part of the analysis process (Weissman *et al.*, 2020). To distinguish between respondents, participating umbrella bodies were coded

using RA (Religious Agency) and a series of numbers, for example, RA5 (Wang *et al.*, 2024; Heaton, 2022), thereby ensuring the confidentiality of these agencies and their officials.

4.2 Analysis of Survey Questions Relating to Presuppositions 1 and 7

Presupposition 1	Presupposition 7
Independent churches have stakeholders that they are accountable to, and their organisational performance is impacted by stakeholder demands.	There are growing calls for better accountability by independent congregations in areas such as leadership, safeguarding, and finance, and RLAs have a role to play in this.
Related Survey Questions	Related Survey Questions
Qs 14, 15, 17, 21-25, 27-30	Qs16-22, 24, 25, 27

The link between accountability and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) is discussed in Section 2.11.2. The view is that accountability also pertains to identifying internal and external stakeholders and being responsive to their demands (Castillo, 2020; Im *et al.,* 2023). In consonance with the primary focus placed on exploring independent church stakeholder accountability (ICSA) issues in this study, about a third of the ICSUOS questions are related to this topic. The breadth and variety of questions enabled evidence to be gathered in line with the less narrow connotation of accountability adopted (see Section 2.11.2). Areas explored include identification and prioritisation of stakeholders that UK independent churches are accountable to, factors that raise ICS accountability concerns, and the extent to which these concerns can be associated with unaffiliated independent congregations. Other areas covered are the role of RLAs in enhancing accountability of their member churches, and the public scrutiny of the operations of independent churches (in particular, the part played by statutory regulators of charities). Fifteen questions in the ICSUOS (Q14 – Q22, Q24, Q25, Q27-Q30) are analysed in relation to Presuppositions 1 and 7 (see Appendix A).

4.2.1 Identification and Prioritisation of Stakeholders in the UKICS

Q14: Which of these do you consider as stakeholders that individual independent churches are accountable to? If all apply, please choose the option 'All of the above'.

Stakeholder	Count (Percentage)
God	19 (76%)
Church members	18 (72%)
Employees and volunteers	11 (44%)
Donors (internal and external)	10 (40%)
Local community/communities of location	7 (28%)
Umbrella organisation(s) they belong to	15 (60%)
Other churches (their peers) in the umbrella organisation(s)	10 (40%)
'The Church' as a Body	4 (16%)
Wider faith/religious community	2 (8%)
Governmental authorities (central and local)	11 (44%)
Statutory regulators (for instance, The Charity Commission)	15 (60%)
Society at large	4 (16%)
All of the above	7 (28%)

Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)

The identification and prioritisation of stakeholders remains a central question in stakeholder strategic management (Sahoo *et al.*, 2023; Im *et al.*, 2023). In seeking to explore the adaptability of a comprehensive approach in developing a stakeholder identification and prioritisation framework for UK-based independent churches (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997), a list of twelve options were provided, with a further option to select 'All of the above'. As such, Q14 is a multiple-choice question that enabled more than one answer to be selected from the survey drop-down-options.

In the answers to Q14, only God was considered by all survey respondents to be a stakeholder that individual independent congregations are accountable to. This attests to the pre-eminence accorded to God by UKICS actors (see Table 4.1). Freeman (1984) propounds that those groups and individuals who can affect, or are affected by, the achievement of an organisation's objectives could potentially be identified as its stakeholders. In alignment with Freeman's proposition, an ICSA framework that is fit for purpose, will need to incorporate the

idea of God as a managerial stakeholder (Schwartz, 2006). It would also need to recognise the role of the divine and biblical principles in shaping the response of the ICS to its stakeholders (Conradie, 2023).

Based on responses to Q14, next in the order of prioritisation after God are church members, followed by RLAs and charity regulators, both of which have equal salience (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Order of Stakeholder Prioritisation by UK Independent Churches

Order of Prioritisation	Stakeholder	Number of Responses	(%) of Responses
1	God	26	100%
2	Church Members	25	96%
3	Umbrella Organisation(s) they belong to	22	85%
4	Statutory Regulators	22	85%
5	Employers and Volunteers	18	69%
6	Governmental Authorities (Central & Local)	18	69%
7	Donors (Internal & External)	17	65%
8	Other Churches (their peers in the umbrella organisation(s) they belong to)	17	65%
9	Local Community/Communities of Location	14	54%
10	The Church as a Body	11	42%
11	Society at Large	11	42%
12	Wider Faith/Religious Community	9	35%

Analysis of participant responses to open-ended questions on the theme of independent church stakeholder identification, prioritisation, and accountability, shows that the UKICS is open to accountability to external stakeholders, in so far as it does not lead to secular/governmental influences being exerted to change the mission/teaching and agenda of churches (see Table 4.2). The equivalence in prioritisation accorded to RLAs and charity regulators by ICSUOS respondents was further explored in subsequent phases of data collection. This was to enable Research Question 2 (RQ2) to be answered more fully. RQ2 asks, 'How complementary (or unrelated) are the functions of RLAs and charity regulators in the UKICS? This question is fully considered in Section 5.4. From the range of responses (RORs) in Table 4.2, it can be observed that there is an acknowledgement in the UKICS that independent churches have a breadth of stakeholders:

Table 4. 2: ICSUOS RORs on 'Independent Church Stakeholder Issues'
'It is possible for local churches to feel so 'independent' that they forget the breadth of their stakeholders, their mutual accountability, and sometimes their legal obligations.' *(RA23)*
'I am not sure stakeholders is the right term to use, but if interpreted as other interested or involved parties, people or entities, the above list seems to be very comprehensive.'*(RA1)*
'For clarification, I have ticked those above where there is a clear formal accountability. In one sense, there is a more informal responsibility and relationship with more on that list.' *(RA12)*
'Accountability is taught in scriptures… Jesus in the parable of the talents teaches accountability. So, accountability should not be an issue. We are stewards of God's money and God's people.' *(RA3)*
'The independent churches in our network are happy to be accountable to "outside" stakeholders. … Concerns grow when there is a suspicion that secular government stakeholders may extend their reach to change the mission/teaching/agenda of these churches.' *(RA12)*

Question 15, an open-ended question, gave participants the option to suggest other groups/individuals that could be considered as independent church stakeholders. Analysis of responses to Q15 did not reveal any other stakeholders that could potentially be added to the list of twelve, as suggestions made fit into the categorises already listed. Accordingly, as respondent RA1 stated, this validates the presumption that the list 'seems to be very comprehensive'. In seeking to categorise independent church stakeholders, respondent RA12 makes a case for a distinction between stakeholders 'where there is a clear formal accountability' and those where 'there is a more informal responsibility and relationship' (Agyemang, 2023). This view may explain the reasoning behind the lower prioritisation accorded the wider faith/religious community, society at large and the global church by ICSUOS respondents (see Table 4.1).

4.2.2 Factors that Raise UKICS Accountability Concerns

McDonnell (2017) identifies factors that create accountability problematics in the UK charity sector (see Section 2.11.2). In adopting a narrower approach, it was of interest in this study to determine the factors that respondents considered raise ICS accountability concerns:

Q16: What are the factors that raise accountability concerns in the UKICS?

Nine options were provided in Q16 (see Table 4.3). An order of ranking derived from analysis of responses to Q16 shows that the highest ranked factor is failings in church governance, followed closely by safeguarding issues. The third ranked factors are financial misconduct and non-compliance with orders given by regulators, while the least ranked factor is size of church.

Table 4.3: Order of Ranking of Factors that Raise UKICS Accountability Concerns

Options	Number of Responses	(%) of Responses	Order of Ranking
Failings in church governance	25	100%	1
Safeguarding issues	24	96%	2
Financial misconduct	20	80%	3
Non-compliance with orders given by regulators	20	80%	3
Benefits to trustees and senior leaders	17	68%	5
Assets management issues	17	68%	5
Late filling of annual reports and accounts	17	68%	5
Sudden rise in income	11	44%	8
Size of church	8	32%	9

Based on the order of ranking in Table 4.3, a correlation can be observed between Presupposition 7 of this research and the survey participant responses to Q16. Presupposition 7 states that 'there are growing calls for better accountability by independent congregations in areas such as leadership, safeguarding, and finance, and RLAs have a role to play in this.'

Focusing first on safeguarding, an analysis of Q17, Q19, and Q21 (which are open-ended questions) reveal a variety of views on the theme 'Accountability and Safeguarding'. From Table 4.4, it can be observed that while there is an acknowledgement of the need to put appropriate safeguarding measures in place and ensure accountability on safeguarding issues, it may not be a priority for all UKICS agencies. RLA roles in safeguarding include providing guidance on policy development and support with training for members. They also engage in non-binding monitoring activities (for instance, surveys issued to members) to ascertain the existence of safeguarding frameworks and compliance with good practice. However, responsibility for accountability and safeguarding is assumed to lie with the individual churches and their leaders.

Table 4.4: ICSUOS RORs on the Theme 'Accountability and Safeguarding'
'There are umbrella organisations which do not make accountability and safeguarding their concern. They are mainly there for fellowship and fundraising issues. Those umbrella bodies like ours that make accountability and safeguarding our concern have hired safeguarding bodies to offer training for church leaders. … We do surveys from time to time to ask how these measures are being followed up. … It is entirely up to the individual churches and church leadership to have the understanding that it is in the interest of God, the congregation, government, and society to put these measures in place'. *(RA3)*   'Over many years, we have observed a very small number of churches where leaders have created a controlling authority amongst their congregation.' *(RA25)*   'If there are moral falls of a leader or leaders in a church, it is good to have accountability to a wider oversight.' *(RA20)*   'The Union has increased its attention to compliance issues in recent years.' *(RA4)*   'Our role is to help churches to be properly compliant with their obligations – but we cannot be held responsible if they do not meet them'. *(RA2)*

4.2.3 Ethnic Diversity and Role of Women in Leadership

Leadership related issues are also a major source of UKICS accountability concern. Issues identified from ICSUOS responses include leadership style and organisational culture. For instance, Participant RA25 acknowledges they have observed some churches in their membership where leaders have created a controlling authority amongst the congregation (see Table 4.4). In designing the survey, primary focus was placed on determining the extent of ethnic diversity in UKICS leadership conceptions. Another issue of interest is the role of women in senior leadership within the sector. It was considered that these are areas of growing stakeholder interest and public scrutiny, in line with Equity, Diversity and Inclusion requirements (Im *et al.*, 2023). Beginning with ethnic diversity in leadership structure, two related questions, Q23 and Q24 were posed:

Q23: How would you describe the ethnic backgrounds of congregants in the independent churches in your umbrella body?
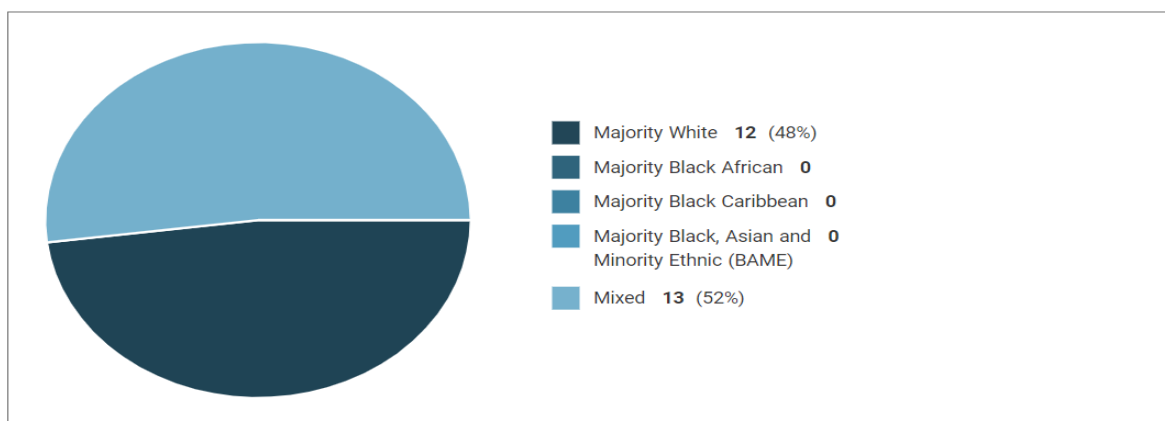
Fifty-two percent of UKICS RLAs that responded to the ICSUOS indicate that congregants in their member churches come from mixed ethnic backgrounds. This is nearly matched by the number of umbrella organisations with majority White congregations (48%). The impact of migration on the growth of independent churches is raised in Q11 and Q12 and analysed later in the chapter. When the responses to Q23 are compared with the responses to Q11, it can be observed that RLAs with majority White congregants in their member churches have mostly minimal contributions from migration to church growth. In contrast, migration makes a significant (61.5%) or very significant contribution (15.4%) to the growth of churches with majority mixed congregants in their membership (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5: Comparison of Responses to Q23 and Q11

How would you describe the ethnic backgrounds of congregants in the independent churches in your umbrella body?	Focusing on the last five years, to what extent has migration of people from outside the UK contributed to growth in the number of congregants in the independent churches in your membership?					No answer	Totals
	Very significantly	Significantly	Minimal contribution	No noticeable contribution	Not sure		
Majority White	0	2	6	2	2	0	12
Majority Black African	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Majority Black Caribbean	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Majority Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mixed	2	8	1	0	1	1	13
No answer	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
Totals	2	11	7	2	3	2	27

Based on comparison of Q23 and Q11, it is not beyond reason to expect that the model of membership diversity in UK independent churches will be reflected in their leadership diversity

ratios. However, survey findings on this relationship reveal an imbalance as shown in the responses to Q24 and a comparison of Q24 and Q28.

> **Q24: How would you describe the ethnic composition of the leadership teams of independent churches in your membership?**
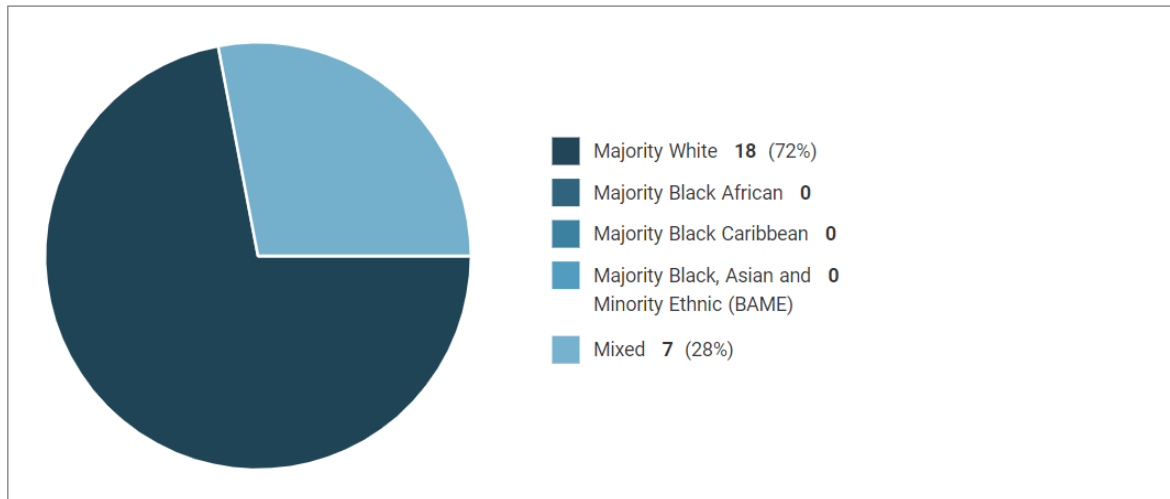
In describing the ethnic composition of the leadership teams of churches in their association, 72% of UKICS umbrella organisations consider that they are majority White, while 28% are of the view that they are mixed. No RLA indicated that most of the leaders come from ethnic minority backgrounds. Given that not all RLAs responded to the ICSUOS, there is no suggestion that there may not be a UKICS RLA with most of the leaders in its member churches coming from an ethnic minority background. Realising the need to ensure a robust view on this subject matter that is fair and reflective of the sector (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023; Busetto *et al.*, 2020), two RLAs (one with majority black and the other predominantly Afro Caribbean leaders in their congregations) were involved at the FGD phase of the research (see Section 3.12). However, participants responses to Q30 (an open-ended question) provide further insight on the answers to Q24. The range of views (ROVs) expressed (see Table 4.6) capture the ethnic diversity in leadership contexts of churches in various UKICS umbrella bodies and can be assumed to be a representative picture of the wider sector.

Table 4.6: ICSUOS RORs on 'Diversity in Membership and Leadership'
'We are aware that gender and age imbalance needs to be addressed.' *(RA13)*
'We are increasingly seeing diversity in our congregations, but this is not yet reflected in our leadership. Our prayer is for this to change in the years to come.'*(RA2)*
'We are already a multicultural umbrella organisation, but we would like to cover more of the Asian churches and those from Latin America within the UK.' *(RA3)*
'Some of our churches have a greater racial diversity than others. In those churches, we are working to enable and ensure a wider diversity in the leadership structure.' *(RA25)*
'One church has a very mixed congregation – especially from Brazil. All the rest are white British.' *(RA4)*
'We have a number of leaders from non-white or other ethnic backgrounds and a few of our churches are almost entirely non-white.' *(RA7)*

The role played by demographic factors need to be considered (Gilbert-Johns *et al.*, 2022). Independent churches located in areas of the UK with a predominance of White congregants are more than likely to see this reflected in their leadership compositions. Yet, a significant imbalance can be observed when the responses to both Q23 and Q24 are compared, with the ROVs in answer to Q30 pointing to a general dissatisfaction with the status quo. Therefore, in seeking to address imbalances in ethnic diversity in membership and ethnic diversity in leadership ratios (where they exist) a three-step approach seems appropriate for the sector. This is based on the initial four responses in Table 4.6. Firstly, an acknowledgement that imbalances do exist. Secondly, a desire for change. Then, thirdly, commitment to working towards enabling and ensuring wider diversity in leadership structure.

The relevance of the three-step approach becomes more evident when responses to Q29 (another question in the survey) is factored into the analysis:

Q29: Are you working towards achieving more diversity in the leadership structure of your organisation?

Yes	16 (64%)
No, it is already diversified	4 (16%)
No, not a priority	5 (20%)
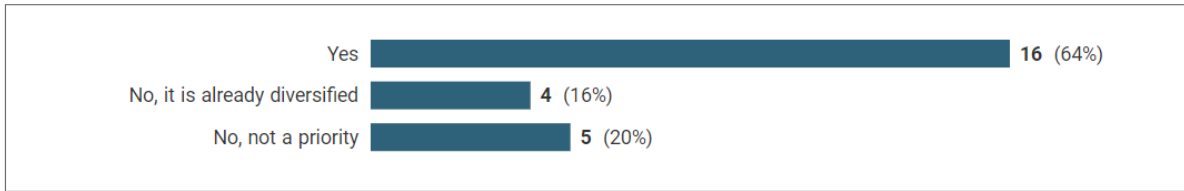
Based on responses to Q29, nearly two-thirds of RLAs agree that they are working towards achieving more diversity in leadership structure. Sixteen percent of RLAs argue that their leadership structures are already diversified, while 20% are of the view that it is not an issue of immediate priority. A comparison of responses to Q24 and Q29 enables further clarity to be gained on this issue.

Table 4.7:   Comparison of Responses to Q24 and Q29

Are you working towards achieving more diversity in the leadership structure of your organisation?	How would you describe the ethnic composition of the leadership teams of independent churches in your membership?					No answer	Totals
	Majority White	Majority Black African	Majority Black Caribbean	Majority Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)	Mixed		
Yes	14	0	0	0	2	0	16
No, it is already diversified	1	0	0	0	3	0	4
No, not a priority	3	0	0	0	2	0	5
No answer	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Totals	18	0	0	0	7	2	27

As shown in Table 4.7, 14 out of 18 of the RLAs that have majority white leadership teams in their member churches say that they are working towards achieving further diversification. In contrast, more RLAs with mixed congregational leadership structures say that the structure is already diversified, or that achieving diversification is not in the priority list. Overall, the essence of the three-step approach outlined above is still evident. However, while this approach can be usefully employed in achieving more ethnic diversity in the UKICS, it is unlikely that it will be directly replicated in addressing issues related to women's role in the sector's senior leadership positions as is explored below.

4.2.3.1 Role of Women in Leadership

In placing research focus on the issue of women's role in leadership within the UKICS, four questions were asked in the ICSUOS, including Q25 and Q28:

> **Q25: Based on your policy as an umbrella body, which leadership roles can women in your organisation aspire to?**

> **Q28: If there are other specified roles for women, please could you explain what they are?**

An analysis of the responses provides evidence of developing reforms within the sector. No UKICS RLA has a blanket policy that bars women from leadership roles. Close to two-thirds of them have a policy that equally enables both men and women to aspire to any leadership role, including serving as organisation leads and pastors.
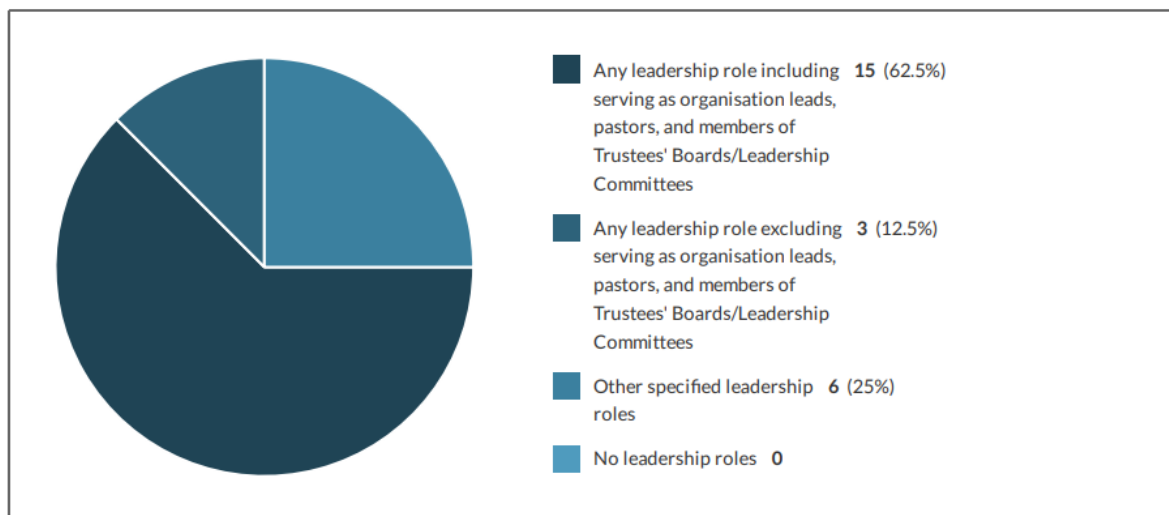
ICSUOS Q26 sought to determine if RLA policies on the role of women are binding or non-binding on member churches. While 54.5% of respondents indicate that it is binding, 45.5% are of the view that it is non-binding. In some cases, it is to be assumed that these policies on gender equality have been put in place as expectations rather than mandatory obligations. Table 4.8 presents a range of survey participants' views on the reasons for their stance on the role of women in senior leadership.

Table 4.8: ICSUOS RORs on 'Role of Women in Senior Leadership'
'We believe God calls both men and women to all areas of Christian life, including senior leadership.' *(RA26)*
'At the moment, we see a Biblical framework for different but complementary roles for men and women. In practice, this excludes women from positions as "elders" in the church, but all other roles, including leading teams and trustees, are open to male and female alike. … Many of our churches are working harder at raising up women to positions of leadership that are not "elders" but have been historically dominated by men.' *(RA25)*
'Our organisational position is that we accredit men and women equally to ministry.' *(RA23)*
'It is the collective position of churches belonging to the umbrella organisation, not a decision of the leadership of the organisation centrally. In practice, that means only independent churches that share this view join the umbrella organisation.' *(RA2)*
'We have no policy because we have no jurisdiction over our members. But the vast majority of churches would hold to a complementarian view of women's and men's roles in church life.' *(RA6)*
'Our network is based on independent churches not having women as pastors/elders/main leaders of churches or those teaching men. This is due to our Biblical understanding, in line with historic Christianity.' *(RA12)*

While noting the increasing expectations around more female involvement in UKICS leadership compositions, the survey provides confirmation that the egalitarianism v. complementarianism debate exists in the sector (see Section 2.11.5). From an egalitarian perspective, respondent RA26 writes, 'We believe God calls both men and women to all areas of Christian life, including senior leadership'. Another participant (RA25) provides a complementarian viewpoint: 'We see a Biblical framework for different but complementary roles for men and women.' Both positions seem to be entrenched, suggesting that the debate is likely to continue (Rudd, 2018).

This study has also identified the issue of historical dominance as an inhibiting factor to more female involvement in UKICS leadership roles. This refers to leadership positions that are open to both men and women within churches, but which have been historically dominated by men. In acknowledging the challenges that they face in achieving wider diversity in leadership structure, respondent RA25 (whose umbrella association leans towards complementarianism) provides credence for the existence of a culture of historical dominance. These issues were

further explored by conducting case studies that involved a diversity of churches, including five led by female pastors.

4.2.4 Accountability Concerns Associated with Non-RLA Affiliated Churches

In seeking survey respondents' views on the factors that raise UKICS accountability concerns, there was also a need to inquire into the extent to which these concerns can be associated with non-RLA affiliated congregations. Related questions in the ICSUOS are Q18 and Q19:

Q18: To what extent can these accountability concerns be associated with independent churches that do not belong to any UK-based accrediting umbrella organisation?
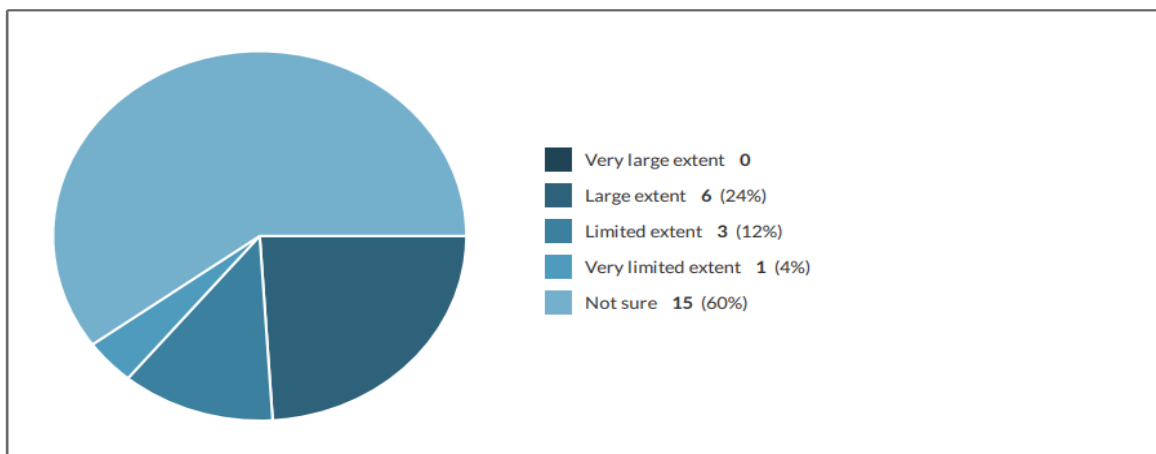
On the question of whether there is a correlation between not being in the membership of an RLA and raising accountability concerns, 24% said to a 'large extent', and 12% limited extent. 60% of respondents were not sure if there was a correlation. Q19 enabled participants to explain the reason(s) for their answers. Some participants acknowledged they may not have the experience to render an informed view, indicating that this is an area of limited knowledge and further exploration is required. The range of other opinions (see Table 4.9) include views on the protection from accountability concerns that comes with RLA membership and its usefulness in determining if a church/minister is in good standing.

Table 4.9: ICSUOS RORs on 'Unaffiliated Churches and Accountability Concerns'
'I've no experience to be able to answer that question. We have a very sound accountability structure.' *(RA7)*

> 'These are issues that affect all independent forms of ministry, not just churches, and not just those in umbrella bodies.' *(RA16)*
>
> 'Being part of an umbrella organisation can help protect a church from accountability concerns. This can be from the extra checks-and-balances of having custodian trustees etc. However, it would be a significant thing if an independent church had to be part of an accrediting umbrella organisation. That would, in itself, raise accountability concerns.' *(RA12)*
>
> 'If a church is not in membership with an umbrella body, then it is difficult to ascertain whether a church/minister is in good standing.' *(RA13)*

Participant RA16 argues that the nine categories of accountability issues outlined in Q16 affect all independent forms of Christian ministry. There was no suggestion that RLA membership should become mandatory for all independent congregations, as this would violate their right to enter association on their volition.

Saleh and Bista (2017) opine that the risk of a low survey response rate is heightened by the lack of interest in the research topic or aspects of it. While accountability is a vital ingredient in the effective operation of Christian organisations, there can be a lack of receptiveness (in some settings) to teachings on it (Mearns, 2017; Rose, 2023). Also, as Osisioma (2013) suggests, some individuals and organisations adopt an avoidance posture on issues related to accountability in the church because of their perception which is based on a narrow connotation of its concept. However, ICSUOS responses seem to provide ample evidence that there is no lack of interest (or hesitancy to engage) on the topic of accountability among UKICS RLAs. This theme is further explored in Chapter 7.

4.3 Analysis of Survey Questions Relating to Presuppositions 2, 4 and 5

Presupposition 2	Presupposition 4	Presupposition 5
Independent churches enter working relationships with RLAs based on the assurance of respect for their autonomy.	Both independent churches and their RLAs serve to advance the Christian faith and while seeking to operate lawfully within civil society, they are guided primarily by the concepts of Christian theology.	RLA functions have a social legitimating effect on the operations of churches in the UKICS.
Related Survey Questions	**Related Survey Questions**	**Related Survey Questions**
Qs 2 – 4, 6, 8	Qs 2, 3, 5-8, 10-12, 17, 27-28	Qs 2, 3, 18-21

Presuppositions 2,4, and 5 are centred around the working relationship between independent churches and RLAs (Presupposition 2), their common mission and primary guiding concept (Presupposition 4), and the likely social legitimating effect that RLA functions have on independent church activities (Presupposition 5). Survey questions relating to these three presuppositions are analysed in this section.

4.3.1 Working Relationship between Independent Churches and RLAs

An assumption made in approaching this inquiry into the UKICS is that congregations in the sector enter working relationships with RLAs based on the assurance of respect for their autonomy (Stevens, 2021). By adopting 'Working Relationship' as a theme, participants' responses were analysed to determine if, within the UKICS Presupposition 2 generally obtains, and applies in every given situation, or there is evidence of exceptions, leading to loss of autonomy in certain aspects. A ROR on this theme is presented in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10: ICSUOS RORs on 'Working Relationship between Churches and RLAs'
'We operate through relationship mainly, rather than official structures.' *(RA20)*
'As an umbrella body, we offer leadership without control.' *(RA3)*
'The independent church can carry the "badge" of the umbrella organisation, but the reality is that they are still an independent charity. … Our role is to help churches to be properly compliant with their obligations – but we cannot be held responsible if they do not meet them. This is the nature of independency. If we had jurisdiction over them in this respect, they would no longer be independent.' *(RA2)*
'As opportunity arises, we encourage churches to maintain good standards of accountability, but we seek to help and serve the churches, not dictate to them.' *(RA14)*
'Our role is therefore to provide guidance, although recognising that each church is autonomous and can ignore that guidance if it so chooses.' *(RA24)*
'We have an apostolic oversight structure. Part of that role is to continually ensure that the leadership of the local church is open and honest.' *(RA25)*
'Compliance with regulations is central to general governance and is inscribed in our creed.' *(RA8)*

From the above responses, it is evident that the concepts of 'leadership without control' and 'guidance' are entrenched in the working relationship between independent congregations and their RLAs. Participant RA24 points out that they 'provide guidance, although recognising that

each church is autonomous and can ignore that guidance if it so chooses.' On issues such as accountability and the establishment of good governance frameworks, the approach is to 'promote and encourage good practice' but avoid appearing to be dictatorial in doing so.

The relational model of providing guidance but not assuming responsibility is described as the nature of independency. Based on this model, it could then be considered that the unwillingness of an RLA to assume 'responsibility' puts an enduring dampening effect on any ambition it may have to intentionally override autonomy and self-governance within its body.

A type of working association that can be found in the UKICS (as discussed in Section 2.4.3) involves independent churches voluntarily consenting to operate under licence in the same label as their RLA. It has been argued that implementing this brand approach could call into question their non-denominational status and autonomy (Bialecki, 2016). However, the response provided by participant RA2 suggests that this is not the case, as being a registered charity (separate from the RLA) can serve as evidence of autonomy for an independent congregation.

It is likely though that exceptions to the self-governance rule exist within the UKICS. This often arises when RLAs seek to fully implement what could be referred to as their regulatory role. For instance, respondent RA8 states, 'Compliance with regulations is central to general governance and is inscribed in our creed'. In seeking to promote the adoption of best practices, some RLAs impose mandatory policy requirements which may lead to compromises in self-governance for the churches in their membership, although it could be argued that it is in the interest of the churches. In such situations, RLAs reserve the right to sanction churches by withholding accreditation or cancelling memberships. However, where there are conflicting issues that could interfere with self-governance, this is usually counter balanced by the continuing right of voluntary withdrawal that member churches hold (Stevens 2022, 2014; Haynes Jr., 2023).

It can then be inferred that the relationship between the two key UKICS actors seems to work best when no one party seeks to dominate the other. While the preservation of independent status is of prime importance in the working arrangement, the model thrives on interdependence, collaboration, and voluntary accountability to deliver benefits that independent churches cannot achieve solely by their independent efforts (Fu and Cooper, 2021; Calō *et al.*, 2024).

Besides seeking to determine the nature of the working relationship between independent churches and RLAs, it was also of interest to shed analytical light on their primary collective purpose, guiding concepts, and how effective they have been in recent years in achieving this purpose. Presupposition Four assumes that both RLAs and their constituents serve to advance the Christian faith, and while seeking to operate lawfully within civil society, they are guided primarily by the concepts of Christian theology. This suggests that there is likely to be convergence in vision, goals, and guiding concepts in their working relationships.

4.3.2 Functions of RLAs in the UKICS

By analysing responses to the ICSUOS questions related to Presupposition Four (Qs2, 3, 6-8) new insights have been gained on the functions of UKICS RLAs, as well as the outcomes of their umbrella Christianisation agendas in the five-year period 2017-2021. There is also useful data from the survey (Q11 and Q12) for evaluating the contribution of migration from outside the UK to the growth of independent churches in this five-year period. Furthermore, responses to open-ended questions provide ample information for determining the extent to which their operations are guided by the concepts of Christian theology.

Q2: As an umbrella organisation, in which of these areas do you perform functions that benefit UK-based independent churches? Please, choose all that apply:

Provision of accreditation and recognition through membership	19 (73.1%)
Advancement of Christian faith and collective religious interest	23 (88.5%)
Creation of platforms for relationship and collaboration	23 (88.5%)
Representation at faith and public forums	14 (53.8%)
Provision of resources (including training)	25 (96.2%)
Assistance in evangelistic efforts (including church planting)	17 (65.4%)
Facilitation of reforms through restructuring, innovations etc.	12 (46.2%)
Regular periodic and special reviews for accountability purposes	10 (38.5%)
Conduct/commissioning of research and special studies	7 (26.9%)

Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)

Question 2 has nine options but allows for multiple answers to be provided. Based on the responses, nearly all RLAs (96%) engage in resource provision, while only 28% involve themselves in the conduct/commissioning of research and special studies. In the next chapter, further analysis of responses to Q2 will be employed (along with other information) in providing answers to research questions which inquire into RLA roles in the UKICS.

4.3.3 Primary Purpose and Guiding Concepts in UKICS Operations

Returning to the topic of UKICS actors' primary purpose, a RORs to various open-ended questions (see Table 4.11) reveal that their collective mission is Gospel-centred. In other words, they primarily aim to advance the teachings of Jesus and the divinely assigned role of the church, and to do this in a form that aligns with the concepts of the Bible. In this setting of convergence in vision, goals, and guiding concepts, umbrella organisations not only serve to

pool resources and expertise that are channelled into independent church operations, but they also support them in managing conflicting stakeholder relationships.

Table 4.11: ICSUOS RORs on 'Primary Purpose and Guiding Concepts in ICS Operations'
'Our association charity exists to help its member churches fulfil their Gospel mission… The charity … helps the churches by pooling expertise and helping to avoid our churches being restricted in their Gospel mission due to governance matters with their stakeholders. … What if a secular government uses its influence to require changes to church teachings/procedures to fit in with secular legislation? … Will independent churches continue to place their ultimate accountability to God – as revealed in his word, the Bible?' *(RA12)*
'Independent churches are free to order their lives and ministries as they see fit before God. They are accountable to … fulfil the vision and mission that God gave them.' *(RA16)*
'We seek to follow God's ways as laid out in the Bible.' *(RA14)*

Questions 6-8 and Q11 in the survey enable recent outcomes in the collaborative Gospel mission activities of UK-based RLAs and their member congregations to be analysed.

Q6: As an umbrella organisation, which of these have you experienced in the last five years? Please choose as many as apply:

Question 6 gave RLA respondents an opportunity to provide information on trends in their membership numbers and revitalisation efforts in the five-year period 2017-2021. Analyses of responses from 26 UKICS RLAs show similarities in numbers from opposite perspectives. A similar number of RLAs (9) experienced net growth in membership as did net declines, with 7 indicating no change in membership numbers. Likewise, there are similarities in the number of RLAs (20) that experienced new church plants by existing members and those that experienced church closures. These outcomes may suggest an often static but more progressive overall sector growth level in the period under review than a retrogression. The figures for voluntary withdrawals/terminations of membership reinforce some of the points made in discussing the nature of the working relationship between independent congregations and their umbrella bodies.

Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)
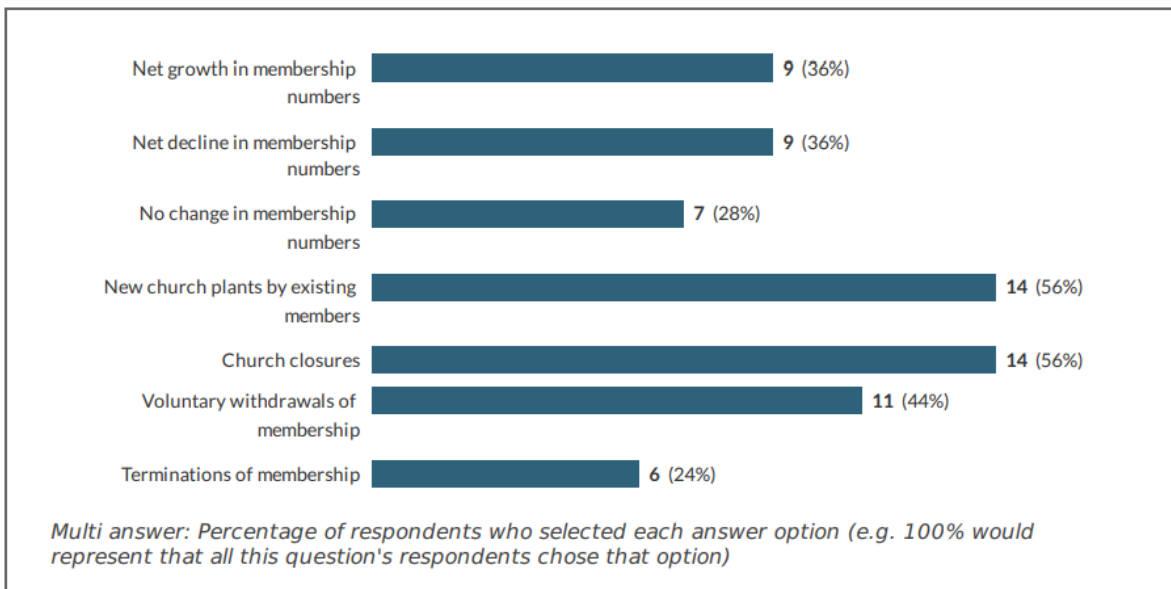
Explanations for these trends were also sought from the survey participants. For instance, Q7 and Q8 sought to obtain the perspectives of respondents on the openness of the British public to the Gospel mission of the ICS in the five-year period 2017-2021. Views expressed (see Table 4.12) range from 'growing interest in church activities', to 'growing hostility to biblical Christianity'.

Table 4.12: ICSUOS RORs on 'Openness to the Gospel Message and Church Growth'
'Some churches in certain demographics see more fruit than others. We have churches in all types of geographical situations and it's not an easy question to answer.'*(RA2)*
'In talking to people at "outreach events", there is a growing interest in our activities.'*(RA7)*
'UK is apathetic. Too rich, too busy, not thinking.'*(RA19)*
'Those in our member churches report a growing hostility to Biblical Christianity in their work and community lives. Member churches report greater apathy in attempts to reach their local community and more pockets of resistance over certain cultural issues. *(RA12)*
'Some of our churches have grown dramatically through migration, particularly those in large cities. Those in smaller towns have not experienced significant growth and have remained static or very slow growth.' *(RA25)*
'Some churches … would like to grow, others are more "maintenance" orientated.' *(RA4)*
'Younger people appear to be spiritually questioning and that makes a big difference.' *(RA11)*
'We have been able to engage with many on social media platforms and social events like street parties. The young have been more engaging than the older generation.' *(RA3)*

> 'Most churches are experiencing growth, but it varies more according to the type of outreach engaged with than with a particular region.' *(RA16)*

There is an acknowledgement of 'greater apathy and more pockets of resistance over certain cultural issues.' Furthermore, the implications of location in the UK (based on regional and urban-rural divides) are also evident in the views. Other factors in the mix include growing interest from the younger generation, as they are engaged through social media platforms and social events. These issues are explored further in Chapter 6.

4.3.4 Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic and Migration on ICS Revitalisation Efforts

Given that the survey was disseminated during the Covid-19 pandemic, participants were also able to weigh in on its impact:

Table 4.13: ICSUOS RORs on 'Covid-19 Pandemic and Openness to the Gospel'
'The pandemic has made some people much more open. Earlier societal changes made people less open.' *(RA26)*
'The Covid pandemic seems to have increased interest in the gospel, particularly amongst [*the*] younger generation.' *(RA25)*
'The recent Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in some people being more open to the gospel message in response, perhaps, to the growing awareness of the brevity of life and the inevitability of death.' *(RA12)*
'Church plants and churches more generally have seen some openness especially since the pandemic.' *(RA6)*

During the Covid-19 pandemic, independent churches experienced inhibitions to their operations, including the effects of government restrictions on religious gatherings (Trent Vineyard, 2023b; Wilson, 2020). However, from the views expressed in Table 4.13, the perception across the sector seems to be that the pandemic resulted in heightened interest in the gospel message. This development may explain the increased attendance rates reported by UK-based independent churches to their online events during the pandemic (Trent Vineyard, 2023b). A more detailed discussion on this topic is undertaken in Section 6.7.2.

The growth outcomes discussed so far seem to be consistent with trends reported in previous studies. In recent years, while there have been declines in attendance in denominational settings, non-denominational groups have experienced growth in membership numbers (see Section 1.0). It is also widely claimed that much of the growth in UK independent churches is attributable to contributions from migration of people into the country (Brierley, 2020; Hayward, 2022). Q11 and Q12 in the ICSUOS were utilised in exploring recent trends on the contribution from migration of people from outside the UK to growth in number of attendees in independent congregations:

Q11: Focusing on the last five years, to what extent has migration of people from outside the UK contributed to growth in the number of congregants in the independent churches in your membership?

- Very significantly **2** (8%)
- Significantly **11** (44%)
- Minimal contribution **7** (28%)
- No noticeable contribution **2** (8%)
- Not sure **3** (12%)
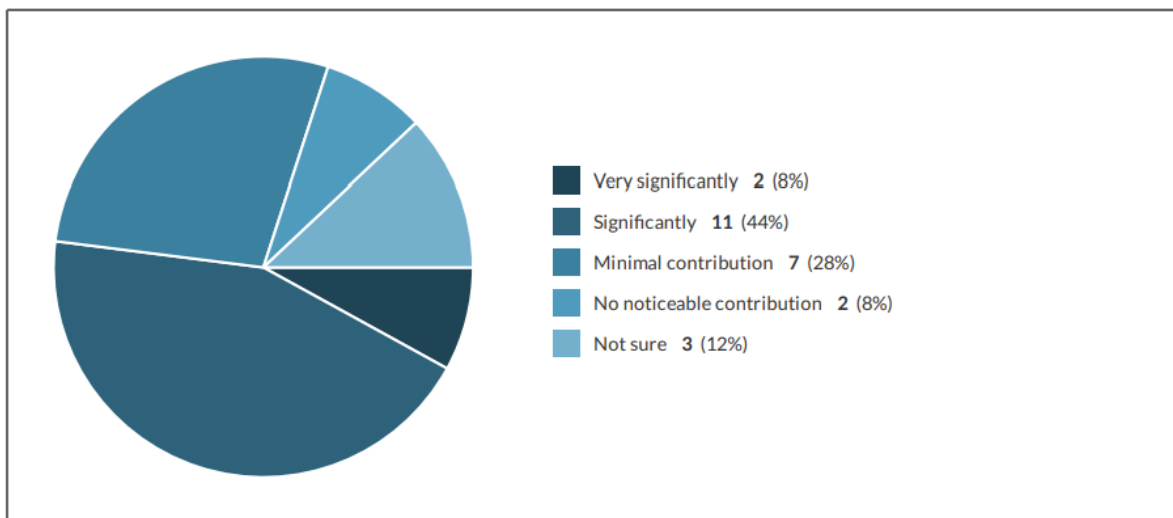
Eleven of the 25 RLAs that responded to Q11 indicate significant (but not very significant) contributions from migration to growth in the number of congregants in their member churches. Two RLAs (representing 8% of respondents) view the contribution as being very significant, while 9 umbrella agencies (36%) consider that the contribution is either minimal or non-noticeable. Three agencies are not sufficiently informed to be definite about the outcome. Reasons for the varied answers to Q11 are accounted for in participants responses to Q12 (see Table 4.14). Economic migrants and refugees coming to the UK continue to make significant contribution to growth possible, particularly in large cities where migrants tend to

reside. However, this is not the case for churches located in areas of the UK where migration is less evident, and language could become a barrier to engagement. Also, Brexit (Freeman *et al.*, 2022) and travel restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic (Davies, 2022) provide additional limiting effects to contributions from migration in the five-year period under consideration.

Table 4.14: ICSUOS RORs on 'Migration and Church Growth in the UKICS'
'Some of our churches have grown dramatically through migration, particularly those in large cities.' *(RA25)*
'Churches in areas where there are high levels of migration see additions to their membership and conversion growth. This has been especially true amongst Iranian and Farsi-speaking communities.' *(RA2)*
'Many churches in the UK among ethnic minorities were planted by missionaries or pastors from abroad…When members of their churches come to the UK to live, they just join their branch church over here.' *(RA3)*
'There has also been growth in churches meeting the needs of Eastern European migrants, but that has declined because of Brexit in recent years.' *(RA16)*
'We've seen very little evidence of this.' *(RA26)*
'We've always welcomed those from other nations and not noticed a significant increase in recent years. We have a couple of new, non-English speaking congregations.' *(RA7)*
'Migration is less evident in many of the areas of Scotland where our churches are located. Some cities benefit from a better contribution.' *(RA23)*
'The majority of our churches are Welsh language churches. Therefore, people arriving in Wales … would tend to engage with English speaking churches.' *(RA13)*

4.3.5 Social Legitimating Effect of RLA Functions in the UKICS

Presupposition 5 considers that RLA functions have a social legitimating effect on the operations of ICS congregations. ICSUOS questions related to this presupposition include Q2 and Q20. As previously determined when analysing responses to Q2, the recognition offered to affiliated churches by RLAs can be argued to have a legitimating effect, as it serves to promote and provide assurances for their operations. Similarly, the standing and legitimacy of independent church ministers is likely to be boosted by RLA accreditation.

Another RLA function identified from the responses to Q2 is the conduct of regular periodic and special reviews for accountability purposes. Accountability and legitimacy are two intertwined issues (Weinryb, 2020). Yasmin and Ghafran (2021) assert that accountability and legitimacy are the means through which public trust is gained. Bringing emphasis to this issue, Question 20 in the ICSUOS sought to determine whether RLAs consider that they play a role in enhancing the ability of member churches to be accountable to their stakeholders. Such a role has the potential of boosting the social legitimacy of benefitting congregations (Valenza and Damiano, 2023):

Q20: Do you think your organisation has a role to play in enhancing the accountability of your member churches to their stakeholders?
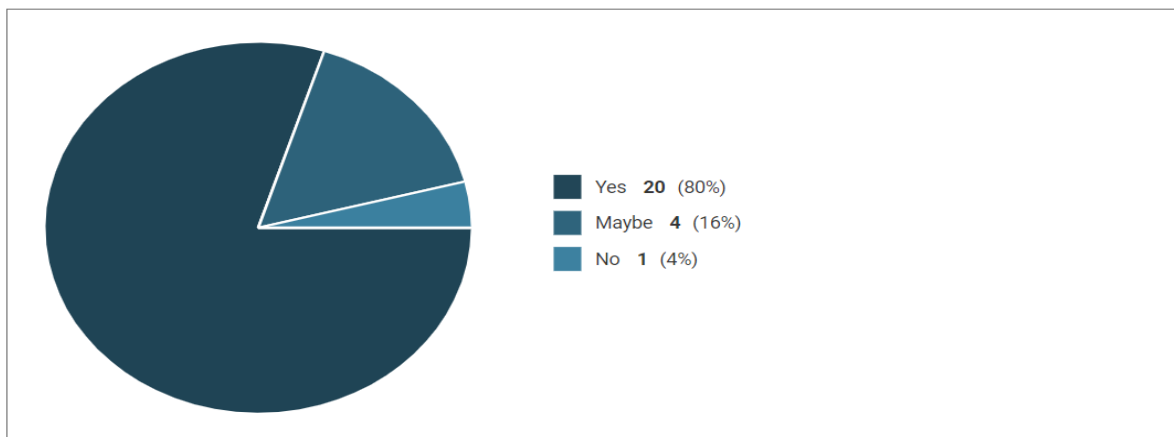
Eighty percent of responses to Q20 are in the affirmative, while 16% indicate that they may have a role to play in enhancing member churches accountability. Only one umbrella organisation does not see itself as performing such a role. The ROVs in Table 4.15 show that UKICS RLAs require would-be members to have an orderly governance structure in place. They encourage good practice by their members, and the affiliation they offer can help in protecting an independent church from accountability concerns. Whilst it is the case that UKICS RLAs lack the power to enforce compliance, there remains the likelihood of a social legitimating effect in their role.

Table 4.15: ICSUOS RORs on 'Social Legitimating Effect of RLA Role'
'Being part of an umbrella organisation can help protect a church from accountability concerns.'*(RA12)*
'We require churches to have corporate governance in order before joining.' *(RA2)*
'We promote and encourage good practice.' *(RA26)*

4.4 Analysis of Survey Questions Relating to Presuppositions 3 and 6

Presupposition 3	Presupposition 6
The UKICS currently operates in the backdrop of a contemporary British society characterised by rising secularism.	Public scrutiny of the activities of independent churches has become heightened in recent years.
Related Survey Questions	**Related Survey Questions**
Qs7 – 10	Qs13, 14, 16, 17, 22

Two interrelated assumptions in this study consider that UKICS actors currently operate in an environment characterised by both increase in secularism and heightened public scrutiny.

4.4.1 Extent and Impact of Secularism on UKICS Operations

In relation to Presupposition 3, responses to Q9 and Q10 in the ICSUOS are analysed below.

Q9: Would you say that Britain has become a more secular or less secular country in the last five years?

More secular   19   (73.1%)
Less secular   2   (7.7%)
Not sure   5   (19.2%)
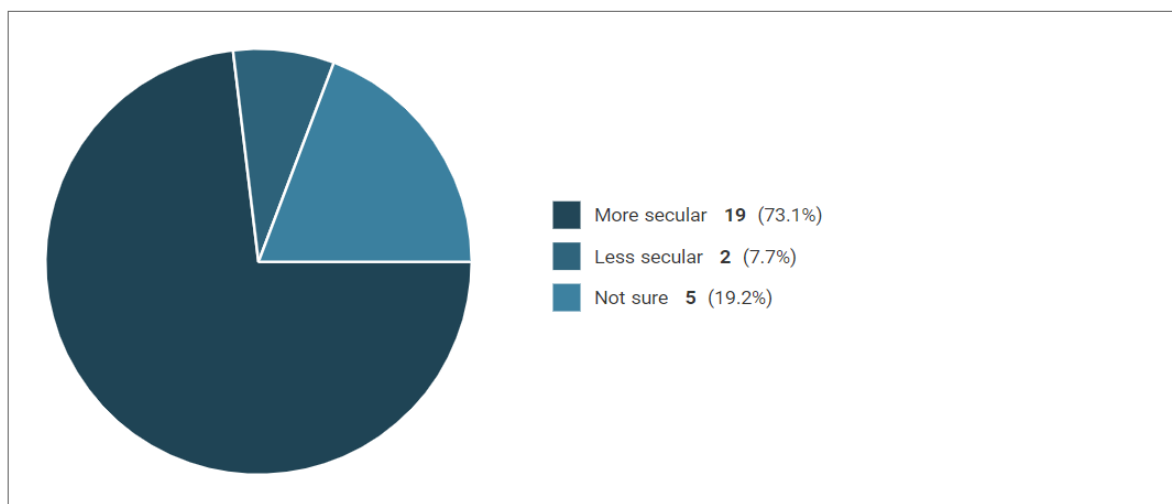
In response to Q9, close to three quarters of respondents acknowledge that the ICS currently operates in the backdrop of a contemporary British society characterised by rising secularism.

About a fifth of respondents do not share this viewpoint, with close to 20% saying that they are not sure. In providing reasons to explain their answers, as requested in Q10, one respondent (RA26) argues that a 5-year period is insufficient to assess changing trends in secularism but concedes that over twenty years it could 'definitely' be said that Britain has become more secular (see Table 4.16). This suggests that there may be a variety of perspectives in the 'not sure' category.

Table 4.16: ICSUOS RORs on 'Secularisation in Britain'
'Britain has been becoming more secular for over 100 years, and perhaps more quickly since the 1960s. In many ways, the momentum has gained through the passing of new government legislation that more sharply contradicts historical Christianity … and then a growing public mood that Christianity is not just outdated but dangerous.'*(RA12)*
'Five years is a short time scale to judge these kinds of changes. Over twenty years, I would say definitely more secular.' *(RA26)*
'Decreasing knowledge and understanding of Christian faith. Morality increasingly defined by non-religious principles such as human rights or critical theory. Declining participation in church worship.' *(RA23)*
'The church is on the margins and no longer occupies a central role in the everyday lives of people.' *(RA13)*
'Children who come to our clubs do not know the Bible, doubt God's existence.' *(RA19)*
'The younger generation have been a little more willing to listen to and explore the gospel. Society has been keen to receive help with social problems, but less accepting of taking an openly Christian response.' *(RA25)*
'A number of reports commissioned by inter-church bodies, for example, the Theos Report by Churches Together in England and the Social Commission Report by the Free Churches Group highlight this issue.' *(RA16)*

As participant RA16 points out (see Table 4.16), the issue of rising secularism in Britain and its impact on the practice of Christianity in the country is highlighted in previously published reports commissioned by UK church groups. In providing further insights, the media, education, politics, and arts are identified in the ICSUOS as 'the cultural drivers' of the changes that explain why 'the church is on the margins and no longer occupies a central role in the everyday lives of people.' The view is that continued expression of a post Christendom culture

is resulting in a growing voice for the right to an independent self-focused choice and a declining participation in church worship.

In many ways, the thinking is that the momentum has gained through the existence of the political will to support causes in sharp contrast with the Christian Church evidenced in 'the passing of new government legislation that more sharply contradicts historical Christianity.' There is 'decreasing knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith', given that 'morality is being increasingly defined by non-religious principles such as human rights or critical theory'. The operational implication of this continuing societal shift towards 'progressive secular individualism' is that the UKICS (and the wider Christian community in Britain) faces the challenge of responding to a mainstream culture that is rapidly becoming more divergent from its belief system. It is also considered that their activities are coming under increasing public scrutiny, a situation which is not unconnected with the multiplicity of accountability problematics associated with UK-based religious groups in recent years (See Section 1.0).

4.4.2 Extent and Impact of Heightened Public Scrutiny on UKICS Operations

Research Presupposition 6 suggests that public scrutiny of UK independent church operations has become heightened in recent years. Related questions on this issue in the ICSUOS include Q13 (which sought opinions on the five-year trend leading to November 2021) and Q22 (which brings in the element of registration with charity regulators).

Q13: In your view, has there been an increase or decrease in the public scrutiny of the operations of independent churches in the last five years?

Increase 14 (53.8%)
Decrease 0
No noticeable difference 12 (46.2%)
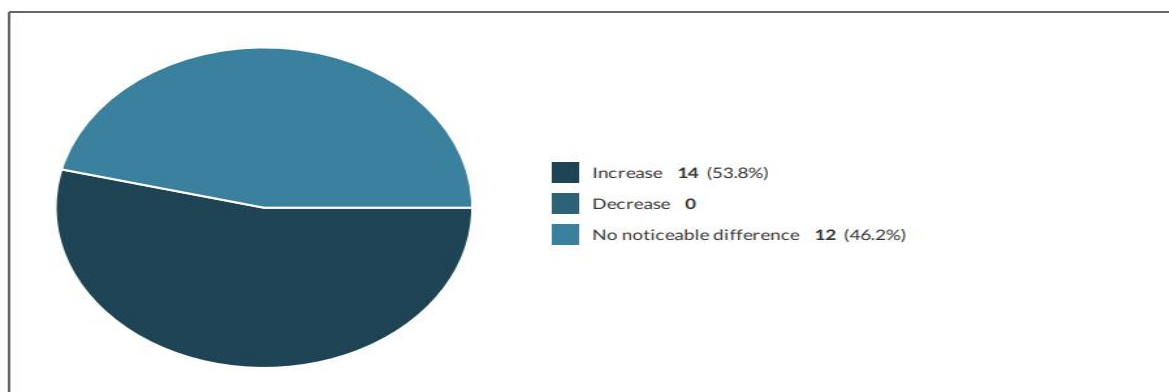
All respondents to Q13 agree that there has either been an increase (53.8%) or no noticeable difference (46.2%) in the public scrutiny of independent congregations in the five-year period 2017-2021. Significantly, no ICSUOS respondent is of the view that there has been a decrease in public scrutiny. This data indicates that there is an acceptance within the UKICS that the sector is under public scrutiny, and this scrutiny may be occurring at an increasing rate.

Q22: Are there churches in your membership that were already registered charities before seeking membership with you?
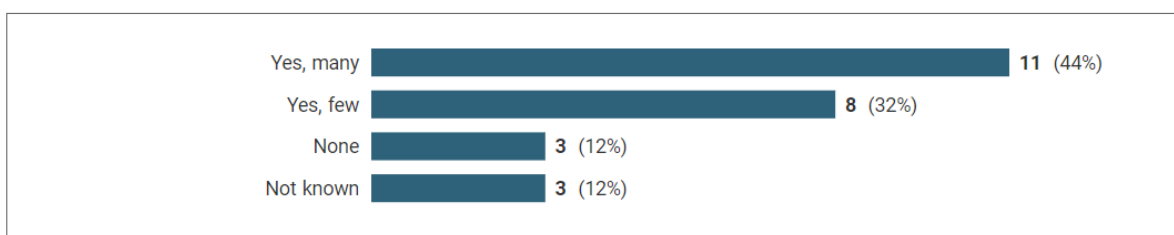
In response to Q22, 76% of respondents agreed that there are churches in their agency which became registered charities prior to seeking membership. 12% indicated that they did not have information on this issue.

Table 4.17: **Comparison of Responses to Q13 and Q22**

Are there churches in your membership that were already registered charities before seeking membership with you?	In your view, has there been an increase or decrease in the public scrutiny of the operations of independent churches in the last five years?			No answer	Totals
	Increase	Decrease	No noticeable difference		
Yes, many	7	0	4	0	11
Yes, few	4	0	4	0	8
None	2	0	1	0	3
Not known	1	0	2	0	3
No answer	0	0	1	1	2
Totals	14	0	12	1	27

When responses to Q22 are cross tabulated with responses to Q13, as shown in Table 4.17, the finding is that in acknowledging that there is an issue with public scrutiny in the ICS, most of the respondents also agreed that they had within their association congregations that became registered charities before seeking RLA membership. This suggests a recognition of

the legitimating benefits derivable from registration with statutory regulators of charities in an environment of heightened public monitoring (Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021; Church Growth Trust, 2020). Conversely, the fact that many congregations go on to join RLAs after registration with a charity regulator implies that there are other benefits to be derived from RLA membership which are not availed by being registered with the regulator. This topic is more fully addressed in Section 5.4.

4.5 Chapter Summary

It was considered necessary in this study to utilise an online survey in generating both quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to the UKICS. Within this chapter, findings from analysis of participants responses to the ICSUOS have been presented and discussed. The analytical approach adopted involved employing the seven research presuppositions in grouping the analysis of survey data. Thematic categories generated from responses to open-ended questions also served as guides in the analysis process. This process enabled the views of RLA senior officials on key issues relating to the UKICS to be interpretively analysed.

While the survey analytical outcomes have made significant contributions to the results of this research, they were primarily utilised to inform subsequent phases of data collection. These succeeding phases of data generation involved the conduct of IDIs and FGDs. Analysis of data generated by these additional means are presented in the next three chapters.

CHAPTER FIVE:

FUNCTIONS OF RLAs IN THE UKICS

5.0 Introduction

The individual interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in this research garnered information pertaining to the UKICS from both agency and congregational perspectives (see Sections 3.11 and 3.12). In carrying out qualitative data analysis of all the IDI and FGD datasets, a reflexive thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2022, 2021; Weissman *et al.*, 2020) compatible with the interpretivist approach adopted in this research (Tsakmakis *et al.*, 2023; Schänzel and Porter, 2022), was implemented (see Section 3.13).

To enable a robust analysis and synthesis exercise, related aspects of Stakeholder theory, Legitimacy theory, and the concepts of Christian theology (as discussed in Chapter 2) were employed as lenses (Varpio *et al.*, 2020) in providing academically credible answers to the six research questions (Bazeley, 2021). Insights gained relating to key aspects of UKICS operations are discussed in the next three chapters, beginning with a focus in this chapter on identifying the contemporary functions of the sector's RLAs. An additional area of discussion in the chapter is the complementarity, or otherwise, that exists between RLA functions, and the role played by charity regulators in the UKICS (see Table 5.1).

In approaching the discussions in Chapters 5-7, themes arising from analysis of IDIs are presented. Given that interview topics were further explored during FGDs, additional information garnered from the FGD sessions are highlighted separately and reflected under the relevant themes. The benefits of this approach are specified in Section 3.5. To aid the analysis process, participants have been identified (Wang *et al.*, 2024; Heaton, 2022) through coding transcripts using the rubric of R and a series of numbers (for RLA leaders/officials) and C together with a series of numbers (for church leaders/officials). As examples: R12, RLA Official interviewee12, and C11, Church Leader interviewee 11 (See Tables 3.6 and 3.7 for profile of participants). Wang *et al.* (2024) posits that the use of 'Letter + Number' is a popular

naming practice in qualitative research, and confidentiality of participating organisations and their officials as per ethics approval, has been ensured by utilising this process (Lapuz, 2023).

Table 5.1:   **Key Areas of Analytical Focus in Chapter Five**

Key Areas of Research Focus on the UKICS	Related Research Objectives	Related Research Questions	Underpinning Theories and Concepts
RLA functions in the UKICS and the complementarity (or otherwise) between them and the role of charity regulators in the sector.	**RO1**: To identify the functions of RLAs of independent churches (and their restructuring /revitalising strategies) in the face of rising secularism and increased public scrutiny. **RO4**: To establish the extent to which the activities of RLAs are complementary (or unrelated) to the functions of statutory regulators of charities in the UKICS.	**RQ1**: What are the contemporary functions of RLAs in the UKICS? **RQ2**: How complementary (or unrelated) are the functions of RLAs and charity regulators within the UKICS?	An integration of related aspects of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and Christian theological concepts.

5.1 Defining ICS RLAs and their Organisational Structure

In inquiring into the effectiveness of UKICS RLAs, it was of the essence to interact with a variety of participants selected from the broad spectrum of the sector. This approach enabled a multiplicity of views and perspectives to be obtained (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023). From the subsequent data analysis, themes emerged that enabled a determination of what UKICS RLAs are, what they do, how members join them, and the nature of the working relationship between them and their affiliated independent congregations. For instance, a response provided by Participant R5 has been found useful in determining a definition of what ICS RLAs are:

Participant R5, RLA Official
'When we did our first set of work together, it was very much about individual ministers being accredited rather than their churches necessarily joining a network. Then, when we started moving towards getting our charity number, the charity lawyers that we were using, in conjunction with the Charity Commission, advised us that we could not have individuals in membership. We needed to have their organisations as the formal members, and then the ministers would be the voting representatives of those organisations who we would hold to, in terms of ministerial standards and so on. So, there is an accreditation process that people go through. Then that leads to their ongoing accountability which is carried out on an annual basis. That in turn leads to a level of recognition.'

Themes that stand out from the views expressed by Participant R5 are that RLAs are registered charities. They operate as umbrella/resource bodies. They offer membership and networking opportunities to independent churches. They accredit independent ministers and leaders. They are also involved in providing ongoing accountability within the UKICS. This leads to a level of recognition that is vital in enhancing the legitimacy of operatives in the sector. Deriving from the identified themes, a fitting definition would be that ICS RLAs are registered faith-based umbrella organisations that offer association, support, and networking opportunities to independent churches, and give accreditation to independent ministers and leaders. The merits of this definition become more obvious when participants responses on why independent congregations join RLAs are considered. From the views of Participants C7 and R1, it is evident that the need for support is an encapsulating factor for would-be members of UKICS RLAs:

Participant C7, Church Leader
'I need support as a missionary in this country. I needed to find out people that know more about the land, they know the terrain, they know the challenges of the church in this country. … That is number one, metric of support. But not just in network of support, but people that may be in the same boat as I am. For example, there are many Established Church friends that I have, but their perspective of ministry is not necessarily the same as those that are in the independent sector.'
Participant R1, RLA Official
'Because they do not have any formal link up with a denomination, by virtue of the fact that they are independent, independent churches are often looking for support and help in their work in ministry. So, churches join us to get some of the support they would receive from a denomination. But also, to have that kind of meaningful fellowship with other churches who believe the same kind of core truths that they believe.'

Participant R1, highlights that the model of independency as a form of church administration is framed to operate without denominational affiliations and external control (Haynes Jr., 2023). However, a continuing vacuum that requires filling in the work of independent congregations is the need for support. As such, although independent churches place value on preserving their autonomous status, they also feel a need for support from complementary and closely aligned sources. Besides this, there is also a longing for wider belonging and

meaningful fellowship with like-minded churches in a relational forum that accommodates both independency and interdependency (Stevens, 2014). This is in line with the view of Participant C7.

An assumption made in undertaking this study is that within the collaborative platforms established by UKICS RLAs there are likely to be shared norms, convergent visions, complementary organisational goals, and a commitment to work towards achieving mutual benefits (Gazley and Guo, 2020; Tsasis, 2009). The views expressed by Participants C7 and R1 of being in the same boat and sharing the same core truths suggest that this is the case. That said, it needs to be pointed out that the existence of a strong convergent bond at the core of the relationships within UKICS RLAs does not necessarily imply absence of differentiations and the challenges that come with them. In this regard, it is common to find that umbrella organisations operating in the ICS harbour high degrees of variations in their membership characteristics. Participant R18, describes the nature of variations in membership characteristics within their association and the way in which the complexities they bring to the relationship are managed:

Participant R18, RLA Official
'They are all very different. …They all have a slightly different flavour to them. So, that may be historical. It may be cultural. It may be the location where they are. It may be the kinds of leaders they have leading them. … So, I think one of the challenges for umbrella organisations is dealing with the complexity that arises. Because everybody is different. It is quite difficult for us to just issue blanket proposals and suggestions and say right this is how you make it work in your church, because it rarely does work that way. So, basically, we have to give our churches principles, and then we have to help them apply those principles to their context.'

In effect, ICS RLAs adopt contextualisation as a working approach in relating with the wide variety of churches in their membership. The implication being that, for instance, an umbrella organisation is unlikely to issue a sample document to all its members prescribing a format for running their congregational gatherings. However, while variations in membership characteristic may seem to introduce an element of divergence in the setting explored, it

remains the case that the relationships within each umbrella group is largely non-conflicting because of the convergence in vision, values, and guiding concepts.

Another element of diversity that RLAs are having to accommodate in their associations is the multiplicities of contemporary ways being adopted by independent organisations in expressing their concept of church. Participant R5 sheds light on these non-traditional approaches, and R9 and R6 (FGD participants) provide confirmation and further insights (see Table 5.2):

Table 5.2: ROVs on 'Contemporary Ways of Expressing Church in the UKICS'
'We are seeing many of our parachurch ministries doing forms of community-based church that would not meet a traditional definition but would meet the concept of being a gathered group of people for the purposes of edification, growth, spiritual formation, socialisation and so on. … They would meet as small house church style fellowships, life groups, home groups, cell groups … enabling their members to be far more active within the communities and effectively be a form of church themselves, a representation of Christ. So, we are seeing a level of deconstruction of church going on ... Some are trying to get back to what it was, and some are being very adventurous. Both in urban and in rural settings, people are looking to find very new ways of doing church.'   *(Participant R5)*   'We have also been embracing different types of church. … Before, it was just literally "sit in a row saying preach". And there is still room for that. Do not get me wrong. But there has been a lot of work that has been done on community churches and missional churches, and a meeting in various places which would not normally be classed as a church years ago.'   *(Participant R9, FGD)*   'Smaller churches that have got a heart for a network or a neighbourhood. There is a group who are working with bikers. Within a particular subculture. Yes, I think churches that do not want to end up being a sort of a cookie cutter, but actually want to be able to express themselves in a particular missional way or style. As long as the gospel is being communicated and disciples are being made, we are very keen to see church expressed in different ways. So, I think that attracts people.'   *(Participant R6, FGD)*

The widening concept of church in the ICS means that, alongside traditional forms of gathering, people are 'doing church' in very deconstructed, subcultural, and often adventurous ways (Marti and Ganiel, 2014). This deconstructive and adventurous approach reflects the nature of the independent church model, and RLAs, in seeking to gather independent congregations under their umbrellas, are duty bound to respect it. From the contribution of Participant R5, it can be observed that independent churches thrive when they are able to retain their autonomy. When their right to self-governance is assured. When they are free to express their divinely endowed uniqueness in ways deemed fitting to their calling and setting.

Participant C4 addresses the issue of right to self-governance, and Participant C7 explains how fundamental it is that the independent congregation's ability to do what God has called them to do is not stifled:

Participant C4, Church Leader
'I believe that in terms of autonomy, the local church, as far as we see it, is where the governance lies. That is where the governance is. So, in terms of direction and vision and what we are going to preach on, and what direction we are going in and the new things that are about to happen; in terms of local accountability, then we have that, and we want to keep that, and we want to keep that local.'
Participant C7, Church Leader
'One of the key aspects of what I might call the fundamentals of being an independent church is the ability to do what God has called you to do.'

For a UKICS RLA, there is then a need for it to be seen to have within its operational setting a capacity to not only promote convergence in terms of interrelationships, but also to accommodate the uniqueness of each local church and the complexities associated with the diversities of congregations in its membership. This reflects well on the claims of the RLA to being a non-denominational non-institutional setting. Participant R5 highlights additional traits of non-denominationalism associated with the UKICS:

Participant R5, RLA Official
'We recognise people have multiple forms in which they might express church, and we express church in multiple forms, reflecting the diversity that is within our members. So, we would not fit a classic denominational structure. We do not have any of that right to transfer ministers from one place to another, and in that sense, we do not fulfil the more traditional denominational style of a minister career. We do not manage the career of any of our ministers. They are independent and they have to manage their own careers. … Each individual church is an organisation in its own right, and as organisations in their own rights, they have legal responsibilities themselves. So, we have far more a role to walk alongside them to make sure that they are aware of legislation because they are members for us, and they might not have the resources and the time to be able to do that sort of work. So, there is quite a multidimensional chess board of ways in which we relate and interact. It is more of a horizontal form of accountability than a hierarchical top-down form of accountability.'

Six non-denominational attributes associated with UKICS RLAs can be identified from the response of Participant R5. They are:

1. The expression of church in multiple forms.

2. The willingness to reflect the diversity within its membership.

3. A lack of the right to transfer ministers from one location to the other/manage minister's careers.

4. A recognition that each member congregation is an organisation in its right with legal responsibilities.

5. Multidimensional ways of relating and interacting.

6. The operation of an accountability framework that is horizontal in nature rather than hierarchical and top-down.

Participant R5 also points out that their members may not have the resources and the time to do the work that the umbrella body undertakes on their behalf. While this is to be expected, it highlights the fact that resourcing is a core function of RLAs. As will be discussed in the next section, provision of resources is one of the ten contemporary roles determined through this research which ICS RLAs play.

5.2 Identifying the Contemporary Functions of UKICS RLAs

The definition arrived at, based on the findings of this exploratory inquiry, is that ICS RLAs are registered faith-based umbrella organisations that offer association, support, and networking opportunities to independent churches, and give accreditation to independent ministers and leaders. In this section, participants responses will be utilised to uncover the contemporary roles of these umbrella bodies, including the various forms of support that they offer to their membership. To achieve this, a reflexive coding process has been applied in detecting patterns and manually developing themes across a range of data (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Two preliminary codes adopted in this analysis process are 'reasons for joining' and 'benefits from membership' (see Table 5.4). Both codes were extracted from IDI and FGD datasets, and they have enabled the identification of themes and patterns that are interpretively considered to be relevant in understanding why independent churches seek to join the UK-based RLAs operating in their sector (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In the end, refined themes

evolved that provided clear insights on Research Question 1. Table 5.3 presents the range of

study participant's views (ROVs) that are based on the two preliminary codes:

Table 5.3: ROVs on 'Why Independent Churches Join RLAs'
'Within the independent sector, there has been a real challenge to get recognition within society. So, you can imagine if you have an independent church that seeks to engage socially, even at local government level, not being recognised can become a barrier to them engaging. So, I think one of the main reasons is to have some kind of formal recognition of their existence, and then in terms of accrediting their ministers. … One of the huge roles is representation. … to be an advocate for them and oftentimes demystify some of the things that are brought towards the independent sector.' *(Participant R12)*
'I would say the reason why people join, it always starts with relationship, and I think that it is worth saying that that probably would not surprise anyone. Oftentimes they will have a relationship with one of our existing ministers and that minister will introduce them.' *(Participant R14, FGD)*
'[*RLA name withheld*] is probably one of the most valuable organisations that we have ever been connected to. They are not just an organisation where we pay a fee to come to display their badge, you know we really have benefited and used their resources.' *(Participant C4)*
'You know, it is important that we have somewhere that we can check in spiritually to make sure that we are not establishing something that is not biblical.' *(Participant C18)*
'People want to join an organisation with a national mission. So, churches join because they want to share the burden of reaching the nation of the UK with the gospel, so it is kind of a mission priority if you like.' *(Participant R18)*
'We ask them why they want to belong, and these are repeated time and time again. The first is that they want to stand together with likeminded gospel people who share the same kind of fundamental convictions. So, there is kind of the theological commonality.' *(Participant R13, FGD)*
'We have tried to embrace churches that are away from the kind of traditional norm, and I think that has helped. I think the second thing is that we have made adjustments to ensure that the reporting pathways are a lot easier, so churches do not feel they have to pass through a lot of bureaucracy in order to speak to someone in the organisation, and that is one of, if I dare say, our unique selling points.' *(Participant R12)*
I guess because of the revamp. I am calling it a revamp in [*RLA name withheld*]. Over the past couple of years, there is that sort of newness and excitement. This kind of talk of sense of success. Doing well. And I think people just gravitate to that kind of vibe. *(Participant R11, FGD)*
'We have a peaceful transformation group, set up by [*the RLA*], to move into a church at their behest, where they have a conflict going on, which they are finding they cannot resolve internally. Now, that might be between the pastor and the congregation, or it may be internal to the congregation, but the peaceful transformation group come in and seek to mediate. So, it is not imposed, it is invited. *(Participant R3)*

> Our goal is always to see how we can reconcile individuals, how we can restore individuals, but without doubt, there have been times, unfortunately, when we have had to, you know, rescind, and withdraw someone's ministerial accreditation.
> *(Participant R15)*
>
> 'There is an annual review form which basically checks the church still believes the same things that we believe; that it has reviewed its safeguarding; and then we ask the church for a donation; and we ask them for any changes that have happened in the church over the past 12 months.'
> *(Participant R1)*
>
> Accreditation is reviewed. It is reviewed in light of current conduct, which means that in certain cases someone's accreditation can be suspended or withdrawn indefinitely.
> *(Participant R12)*
>
> 'We have hired safeguarding organisations to train church leaders within our network and have used professionals in management to also help in that area. We do surveys from time to time to ask how these measures are being followed up. We have also followed up with surveys to see if these safeguarding measures are still in place within these churches.'
> *(RA3, ICSUOS)*

Participant R12 considers that the need for societal recognition is the foremost benefit that drives ICS congregations and leaders to seek membership and accreditation with umbrella organisations. The IDI participant further suggests that another key benefit availed UKICS RLA affiliates is representation. Participant C4 explains that one way in which the RLA they belong to (name withheld) meets the broad-based support needs of its member congregations is by making resources available to them.

The theme of ICS RLA roles and the reasons why congregations seek membership with them was further explored during FGD sessions. FGD participants contributions on this topic are highlighted in Table 5.3. For instance, for Participant R14, the key driver is more likely to be a need for relationship. Taking an overview of the perspectives offered by Participants C18 and R18, alongside the confirmation provided by FGD participant R13, it is apparent that the theological commonality available within UKICS umbrella groups and the platforms they provide for spreading the gospel nationally are among the reasons why churches seek affiliation with them. RLA forums enable like-minded independent churches to examine their ecclesiology (concept of church) and share their scriptural convictions. They are also useful for the spiritual development of ministers and achieving a united front in pursuing revitalisation

agendas. On the issue of RLA restructuring efforts, Participant R12 speaks about embracing churches that do not conform to traditional norms, adjusting existing structures and doing away with bureaucratic barriers by establishing horizontal lines of communication. Similarly, R11 (one of the FGD participants) draws attention to revamps carried out by their RLA, aimed at injecting newness into their operations. All these actions suggest that reforms are taking place.

Independent congregations often lack the will and ability required for resolving certain internal conflicts, especially where it involves the founding pastor or senior minister (Gould, 2020). Participant R3 argues that the mechanism established by their RLA for resolving conflicts is a further benefit derived from membership. Participant R15 adds that the primary goal of mediation is to achieve reconciliation and restoration, where possible. However, there is also a likelihood that ministerial accreditation could be rescinded where a case of impropriety is determined. On a related issue, it is also the case that ICS RLAs are involved in carrying out checks and reviews on their affiliated organisations and accredited ministers. Participant R1 provides information to suggest that these checks and reviews, which represent a form of accountability system, are undertaken annually.

A survey response by Participant RA3 was also found useful in presenting a more comprehensive picture of RLA roles as it highlights the research-related activities undertaken by their RLA. RLA research activities involve conducting surveys and commissioning special studies which are beneficial to their members and the wider sector/Christian community. By placing analytical focus on the ROVs in Table 5.3, themes emerged that point to ten core functions of UKICS RLAs, as shown in Table 5.4:

Table 5. 4: Outcome of Thematic Analysis Showing Core Functions of UKICS RLAs

Preliminary Codes	Data Extracts	Themes	RLA Role
Reasons for Joining	**R12** 'To have some kind of formal recognition.'	Formal recognition	Recognition
Reasons for Joining	**R12** 'I think one of the huge roles is representation.'	Representation	Representation
Reasons for Joining	**R14** 'It always starts with relationship.'	Relationship	Relational

Benefits from membership	**C4** 'We really have benefitted and used their resources.'	Resources	Resourcing
Reasons for Joining	**R13** 'There is kind of the theological commonality.'	Theology	Religious
Benefits from Membership	**C18** 'Somewhere that we can check in spiritually.'	Spiritual Check	Religious
Reasons for Joining	**R18** 'Share the burden of reaching the nation of the UK with the gospel.'	Gospel Outreach	Revitalisation
Benefits from Membership	**R12** 'We have made adjustments to ensure that the reporting pathways are a lot easier.'	Adjustments	Reformation
Reason for Joining	**R11** 'I guess because of the revamp …. Over the past couple of years, there is that sort of newness and excitement.'	Revamp	Reformation
Benefits from membership	**R3** 'Where they have a conflict going on, which they are finding they cannot resolve internally.'	Conflict Resolution	Reconciliation
Benefits from Membership	**R15** 'Our goal is always to see how we can reconcile individuals.'	Reconciliation	Reconciliation
Benefits from Membership	**R1** 'There is an annual review form which basically checks the church.'	Annual Review	Review
Benefits from Membership	**R12** 'Accreditation is reviewed. It is reviewed in light of current conduct.'	Review of Accreditation	Review
Benefits from Membership	**RA3** 'We do surveys from time to time.'	Surveys	Research

From the thematic analysis process implemented (see Table 5.4), the ten core roles of UKICS RLAs are evident to see: namely, recognition, representation, relational, resourcing, religious, and revitalisation. The other roles are reformation, reconciliation, review, and research. The constructivist and interpretivist approach adopted in this research (Schänzel and Porter, 2022) has led to the unveiling of these UKICS RLA contemporary functions (see Fig. 5.1). Each role is discussed in more detail in Section 5.3. Particular attention will be paid to the review role of RLAs in Chapter 7, as it is considered useful in enhancing independent church accountability. Annual reviews (where carried out) are important given that renewal of membership and

accreditations are tied to review outcomes. Participant R5 explains how the renewal process works:

Participant R5, RLA Official
'The way we operate is that each member organisation and its lead representative only have to be in membership for one year at a time. A bit like car insurance. It is annually renewable. So, we have stuck very much with that idea that people are free to come and go. This means that when they join the organisation, they agree to be bound by the various requirements that we might have in place at any given time. So, for example, at the most basic levels, they have to agree that they will abide by and recognise our doctrinal basis of faith.'

Renewal of RLA membership is based on annual reviews conducted partly to refresh relationships, and to ensure that certain requirements and standards are in place. In a sense, the process represents a quality assurance and control mechanism. Part of what could be referred to as a quality management system operated by UKICS RLAs (Curylofo Corsi *et al.*, 2023; Rehmani *et al.*, 2023).

5.3 Further Discussion on the Roles of Independent Church RLAs

Writing on how independency (as a church model) avoids isolationism, Stevens (2014) suggests that seven key functions performed by ICS umbrella associations include nurturing identity and common vision, accrediting, training ministers, and providing accountability. Other functions put forward by Stevens are sharing resources, providing expert advice, and exercising public influence on members behalf. In contributing to knowledge on this issue, the view in this thesis is that there are ten roles performed by ICS RLAs in 21st century Britain (see Fig. 5.1). The roles are recognition, relational, religious, revitalisation, resourcing, representation, reformation, reconciliation, review, and research. As determined in this study, these wide-ranging roles are vital for the effective operation of the ICS as they avail various benefits to churches and leaders in the sector.

Figure 5.1: RLA Roles in the Independent Church Sector
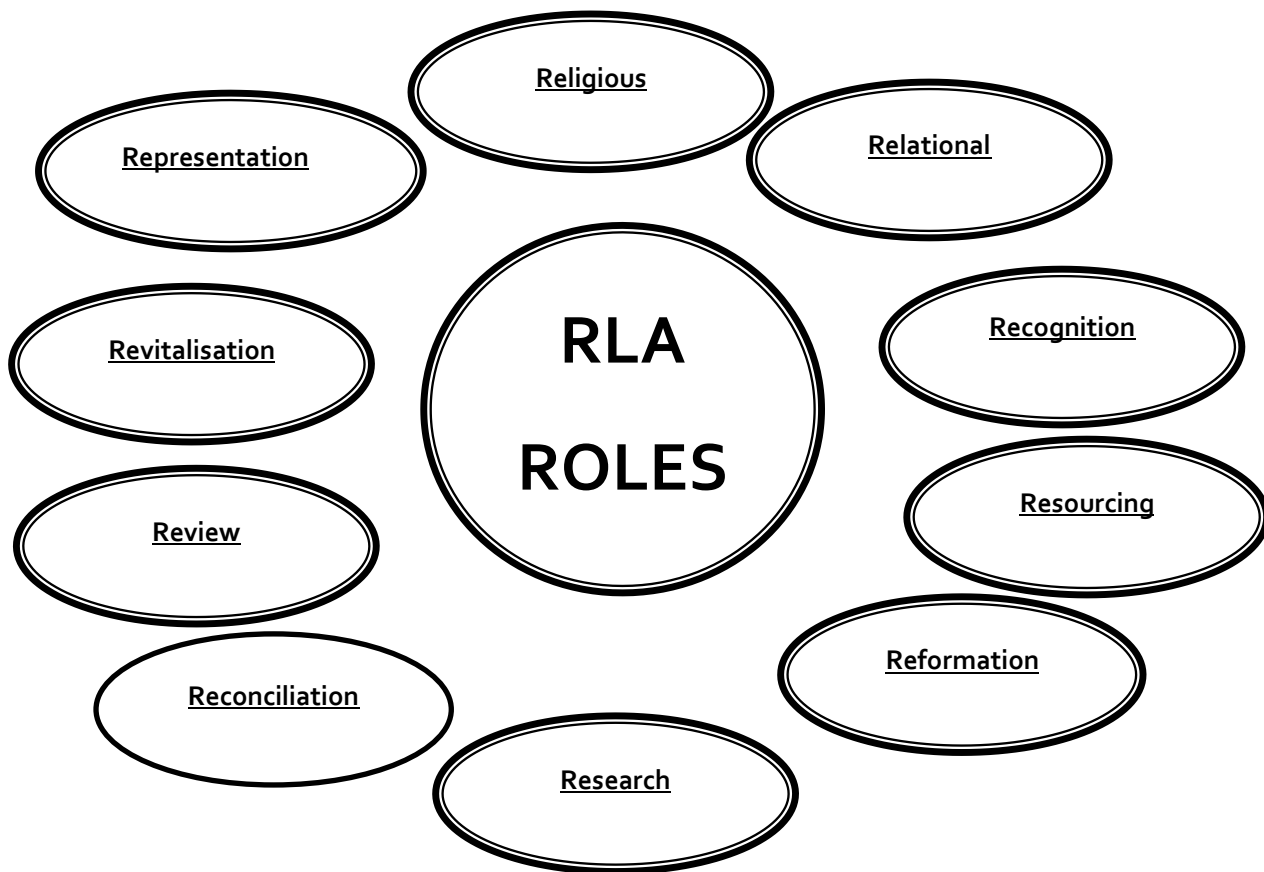
When independent churches associate on a platform provided by an RLA, it can be argued that their commitment to work together stems (first and foremost) from their common religion and shared Christian values (Yasmin *et al.*, 2014). In effect, the primary goal of ICS RLAs is the advancement of the collective religious interests of the Christian churches and organisations in their membership. RLAs are registered charities, and in achieving their charitable aims and objectives, they have an obligation to deliver services for the public good (GOV UK, 2023b; Hope, 2008). However, it is the case that being registered faith-based umbrella organisations, fulfilling their religious role is central to their overall function. For instance, EA is of the view that the Christian faith they profess underpins everything they do as an organisation (Evangelical Alliance, 2019), and to join EA's membership, you need to affirm their basis of faith and express a willingness to abide by their evangelical relationship commitments (Evangelical Alliance, 2024a).

It is the norm for RLAs to have formally written statements or Basis of Faith containing their religious stance and role in the sector (which they lay down as guiding parameters for member organisations and would-be members). This position/ethos statement is often informed by their theology and tailored to suit their doctrinal leaning and manner of expressing their Christian belief. For instance, FIMC holds that churches in its association (while being self-governing) must subscribe to a common statement of doctrine and standard of Christian living (FIMC, 2024; Lisburn IMC, 2024). In this research, the view of Participant R5 suggests that their umbrella body adopts an approach that is closely aligned with that of FIMC:

Participant R5, RLA Official
'So, we are very much a voluntary situation. Members are not required to come to join us, but once they do join us, they are then required to uphold certain standards of ministerial ethics. The way they behave, the beliefs that they hold, and they are expected to subscribe to our doctrinal basis of faith, which is an evangelical one.'

Kennedy (2018b), UK leader of Pioneer Network in the period 2009-2019 (Adeogun, 2019), suggests that it is now more common to find challenges to long held presumed positions on theological and ethical issues. While association is voluntary, position statements are binding, and independent congregations (in exercising their right to autonomy) may choose to question or stand against a doctrinal position held by their RLA which they deem to be incompatible with their congregational belief. As such, conflicts can arise over a religious stance in the working relationship between an ICS RLA and its constituents. In a measure aimed at averting doctrinally induced conflicts, some RLAs, while upholding the authority of Scripture, opt not to impose any doctrine on churches and leaders in their fellowship. For instance, R2, an FGD participant, describes the approach to doctrinal issues in their umbrella organisation:

Participant R2, RLA Official
'You know, other than holding to the authority of Scripture, our members operate in very different ways. We cannot always see exactly how they are operating on the ground. There are diverse views and opinions on maybe women in leadership and that sort of thing, but we do not impose a vision. We do not impose doctrine.'

Kennedy (2018b) argues that on doctrinal issues, some Christian bodies are becoming narrower in their perspective because in their pursuit of purity and truth they reject whatever does not align with their position. Expanding on this line of thought, Lawrence and Lawrence (2014), (while underlying the historical resistance in evangelical churches to the broadening of women's involvement in Christian ministry) suggest that in confusing church tradition with faithfulness to the Bible, there can be a reluctance to learn from the wisdom of wider society and an unwillingness to be informed by positives in social changes, wrongly judging that this could be tantamount to compromising on long-held doctrine. They surmise that there is a need to allow the Bible to challenge deeply engrained church tradition.

Kennedy sees the adoption of a narrower and narrower perspective as one extreme of the doctrinal pendulum, pointing out that a Christian body could also swing to the other unhealthy extreme where there are no filters and boundaries (such that it becomes doctrinally pliable and open to consider and embrace every new idea). As such, it is essential to get the balance right between upholding a biblically questionable traditional stance on theological issues and succumbing to what could be considered a liberal and secular-oriented agenda (Jonker, 2023).

Taking an overview of the recognition role of RLAs, it is two-pronged in its approach, holding relevance at both the organisational and sectoral levels. At the organisational level, RLAs give recognition to individual churches (attesting to the fact that they are properly constituted functioning entities within the ICS) and at the sectoral level, they attract recognition to the ICS as a collective brand (Kylander and Stone, 2012).

In playing a role that provides recognition for individual ministers and churches, RLAs (as credible and recognised umbrella bodies in their own right) offer accreditations to ministers, and affiliations to would-be members seeking enhanced legitimacy and respect from both internal and external stakeholders. For member churches, RLAs attest to the legitimacy of each congregation's uniqueness in terms of its autonomous status, and they also seek to affirm that (in exercising its right to self-governance) the congregation (as an organisation) remains healthy in terms of its spiritual soundness, governance structure, safeguarding

practices, and accountability. It is common practice for UK-based RLAs to add spine to their accrediting role by emphasising the need for independent churches and their leaders to operate and conduct themselves in a healthy manner (New Wine Cymru, 2024; Brand, 2018).

RLAs also function to attract recognition (at a collective level) to churches in their membership, and the wider sector. In this role, they work to ensure that the vibrant growth occurring in the sector (Hayward, 2022), and the contributions being made by independent congregations to the British society gain widespread acknowledgement in the media and general populace. Based on the outcome of this research, it is evident that RLA efforts to attract recognition to the ICS has not significantly translated into increased public awareness and improved positive media coverage of the sector (see Chapter 6).

One way of attracting recognition is through effective representation (CIC, 2024a). RLAs present a common face for independent churches (in a representational role) when engaging at inter-church/inter-faith forums, liaising with government and secular bodies, and advocating on their behalf. R15 (an IDI Participant) attests to the value of this role, and FGD participant, R17, provides further clarity:

Participant R15, RLA Leader
'As a network, we are in conversation with the government on various matters. Obviously, we have been quite a lot during coronavirus, so I think churches value the fact that there is a kind of voice in the national life that comes from being part of a network.'
Participant R17, RLA Official
'I think one of the biggest things that has made a difference is trying to be active in the national forum. In Churches Together in England and in other national places where we can be seen. There is that element of being actively involved, … so that we become recognised for the value and for what we can bring to the party.'

Many RLAs belong to Christian ecumenical bodies like Free Churches Group, Churches Together in England, and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. Ecumenism refers to efforts aimed at bringing together the various segments of the Church on a platform (for the

purposes of engendering consultation and collaboration between them) thereby giving greater visibility to their spiritual unity as the One Body of Christ (Mladin *et al.,* 2017; Wolfe, 2022).

Mladin *et al.* (2017) argues that the contemporary ecumenical landscape in England has become complicated because of significant changes in the landscape of Christianity in Britain, and two reasons adduced for this are related to the ICS. In their view, growth in the number and size of independent congregations has made the landscape more diverse, and the agencies they belong to are effectively ecumenical. This may suggest an acknowledgement of the growing strength of independent churches and their RLAs and the inescapable reality that they need to be better recognised and given a more pronounced voice at the ecumenical table. For instance, Hugh Osgood (founding President of CIC International, a UKICS RLA) was in September 2014 elected moderator of the Free Churches Group, an ecumenical body with 26 church bodies in its membership (Premier Christian News, 2014). Osgood's tenure lasted until March 2022. In this period, Osgood also served as one of the six presidents of Churches Together in England, alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury (COE), The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster (Roman Catholic) and three others (Thornton, 2021).

A benefit associated with ecumenical relationships is the platform it provides for churches to network in social engagement efforts at the community level. As C14 (an FGD participant) explains, the imperative in adopting this approach is heightened for independent churches with limited congregational capacities:

Participant C14, Church Leader
'As a church within our community, we build relationship and network with other churches. Because of my deep interest in ecumenism, I believe that we ought to work together. We ought to see how we can meet the need in the local community. So, we contribute, for example, towards the food bank or send volunteers to go and support them. We have not got enough congregation to be able to start one independently.'

A further benefit derived from ecumenical relationships is that it enables children whose parents attend independent churches to receive priority when seeking admission into faith schools run by the COE and the Roman Catholic Church. Participants C22 and C36 confirm

that this is an important reason why independent congregations seek to become affiliated with recognised UK-based RLAs. They suggest that RLA recognition is viewed as a good line of accountability by COE faith schools, and it enables children from independent church backgrounds to gain access to this highly valued school:

Participant C22, Church Official
'I think it is important to connect. We cannot really be isolated. When you have got young children in the congregation, the parents want them to go into good schools. Then, your church needs to be part of the Evangelical Alliance or something similar. So, that was also another trigger for us that our children, as they are growing, parents need to get them into decent schools, in terms of faith schools.'
Participant C36, Church Official
'I am not sure what the further benefits are in terms of membership, but I know it helps a long way in being recognised with schools out there who are part of the Church of England because it shows a good line of accountability.'

While RLAs share a common desire to relate in some form with other groups in the Christian community, not all of them are hermeneutically sympathetic to the idea of inter-faith liaison. This is understandable given that variations and incompatibilities exist in their theological stances. Yet, the need for a balanced perspective in approaching this issue has been highlighted by the likely beneficial effect of the collective inter-faith effort in responding to restrictions placed on public worship during the Covid-19 pandemic. In November 2020, leaders of various religious groups in the UK wrote a joint letter to the government questioning the justification for further collective suspension of worship services (Swerling, 2020; Sherwood, 2020; Christian Concern, 2020).

It is the case that certain religious, social, and community development issues that require amelioration often transcend the capacity and capabilities of one sector, and their effective resolution may require some form of cross-sector collaboration (Latonen *et al.*, 2023; Schmidt *et al.*, 2023; Simo, 2009). This is a strategy often adopted in enhancing health and well-being outcomes of the population (Martsolf *et al.*, 2018; Towe *et al.*, 2016), and Glasgow *et al.*, (2023) acknowledges the partnership role played by organisations from the faith-based sector in the formulation and implementation of this strategy. For instance, in September 2018, CIC

represented the ICS at a working group of National Health Service (NHS) England directors and service leads. The group met to receive recommendations on creating a long-term plan that would improve service in the NHS (CIC International, 2018). In effect, UKICS RLAs seek to be at the table in certain religious, governmental, and secular forums (including the media) to foster essential relationships, be a voice for the ICS, and influence government policy and public opinion. It is clearly the case that their activities have become even more vital in the backdrop of declining religious interest amongst the British public. As determined in this research, RLA functions, including their representational role and reformational efforts, have a legitimating effect on the operations of UK-based independent churches. These functions also contribute to enhancing stakeholder satisfaction. The reformation and restructuring strategies employed by UKICS RLAs are discussed in Chapter 6.

RLAs also provide platforms for mutual relationships among independent churches and serve as mediators in resolving conflicts that may arise in their member organisations. In facilitating an internal members' only relational circle, these associational bodies create forums for formal/informal communication and social engagement among churches and leaders in their membership. They also facilitate peer support groups. Like other agencies, Scottish Network Churches (SNC) places value on being together before doing together (Scottish Network Churches, 2024). That said, it is to be assumed that ICS RLAs recognise the vital importance of their role in providing platforms for partnership and networking activities geared towards growing the sector, and the revitalisation strategies they adopt (collaboratively with their member churches) will be considered in Chapter 6.

As discussed earlier, the reconciliatory role of ICS RLAs involves mediation to resolve issues in member churches. This is not imposed. Rather it is initiated on invitation. UKICS umbrella associations also function as resource agents for the sector. RLA resourcing makes trainings, strategies, logistic know-how, legal advice and support, research findings, personnel, and finance available to the sector. Participants R7 and R1 address two areas of RLA resourcing, namely safeguarding training, and provision of grants:

Participant R7, RLA Official
'For instance, training on safeguarding, training of trustees in their obligations on finance, training them in data protection, things like that are hard sometimes for a small congregation on its own to cover without the umbrella organisation bringing expertise to bear that can be rolled out amongst churches.'
Participant R1, RLA Official
'We also offer grants to churches. So, we have got mission funds and a training fund. The mission fund is designed to help churches with expansion of their day-to-day mission and ministry. It might be some particular evangelistic work or, perhaps, they are expanding their building to reach more people. Perhaps they have got a cafe or something that is regularly engaging with the community. Those kinds of things. So, the mission fund will offer money there.'

Transfer of funds from RLA to independent churches is not commonly done. Rather, we find that funds flow from churches to RLAs in the form of subscriptions and voluntary contributions. As referenced earlier, Trent Vineyard (an independent congregation within the Vineyard Movement) acknowledges that it makes financial contributions in support of its associational group (Trent Vineyard, 2023b). Where the reverse occurs (and financial resources are disbursed from RLA to independent churches), a portion of the centrally generated funds could be earmarked for redistribution to assist struggling congregations and help with projects like the planting of new churches. FIEC is an example of a UKICS RLA that engages in financial resourcing (Mbakwe, 2022; Stevens, 2014).

Associational groups in the ICS seek to tailor the training resources they provide to not only answer to the situational needs of the sector but to also inspire change. For instance, in a strategic stance aimed at equipping leaders in its membership to deal effectively with the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic, FIEC began providing a series of church leadership in lockdown webinars (FIEC, 2020). Topics covered include leadership during lockdown in deprived communities, youth and children's work in lockdown, pastoring people in a mental health crisis, marriage (as well as self-care and soul care) in a lengthy lockdown and leading in the new normal.

Thirtyone:eight is often recommended as a provider of safeguarding training within the ICS (CIC International, 2024b). In keeping with their overall organisational approach, Thirtyone:eight's training activities are geared towards equipping churches to have fit for purpose safeguarding systems, and their research activities also serve to guide church safeguarding practice (Thirtyone:eight, 2024b). The research related activities of RLAs are either undertaken solely or in liaison with faith-based think tanks and the academic community. For instance, in playing a research role, Affinity, a network of evangelical leaning churches and organisations, has since 1978 been publishing *Foundations,* an international journal that promotes studies on evangelical theological issues (Affinity, 2024b).

The review role performed by UKICS RLAs can be considered as a form of sector-based self-regulatory accountability mechanism (see Section 7.4.2). Among other things, it provides opportunity for a re-evaluation of ministerial accreditations and the status of member organisations. Participant R5 sheds light on how the review process functions as an ongoing spiritual accountability mechanism:

Participant R5, RLA Official
'There is an accreditation process that people go through. Then that leads to their ongoing accountability which is carried out on an annual basis. We are looking at things far more from a spiritual point of view when we do our accountability. We are trying to combine two things. We are trying to say to people "how has your year gone? Have you had a difficult year? Has it been a good year? How are you doing the work that you have been doing?" So, there is a sense of a professional element to it, but we are also wanting to ask people how they are actually doing in terms of running their personal affairs from a faith and spiritual order point of view. Are they managing to lead a life that is worthy of a Christian minister who is in good standing both within the churches, their own organisation and then more widely, within the society? We are combining a sense of almost like a faith audit with each individual minister who holds accreditation with us, and we ask about the health of their organisation as well as the health of them as a personal minister.'

Besides addressing spiritual issues and the wellbeing of ministers and churches, some ICS RLAs that conduct annual reviews also use it as an opportunity to confirm that organisations in their association possess and are operating in line with statutorily required governance documents. During the reviews, submissions of annual reports from individual churches are received, and checks are made to ensure compliance with safeguarding, and vetting

procedures, training requirements, and that leaders accredited with them are not barred on the grounds of criminal records (Ball, 2023). As participant R5 further explains, when the idea of carrying out criminal record checks on ministers was initially introduced it was misconstrued by some to represent a 'lack of trust in ministers':

Participant R5, RLA Official
'When we first brought in what was back in the day the Criminal Records Bureau check, there were some people who felt that that was showing a lack of trust in ministers and we quickly developed a way of saying no, this is a proof of our excellence. Rather than saying there is a lack of trust, we changed the narrative on it, but there were and there still are some people when asked to carry out those checks who do find that burdensome and exercise their right to leave us, and that is their right to do so. So, there are some things that we require of people, so they have to attend their annual review meeting.'

While compliance is required and expected in good faith, RLAs, in exercising their review functions, usually have no intention (and lack the statutory power) to enforce compliance. As will be discussed in the next section, the inability to enforce compliance clearly shows a public interest need for the self-regulatory efforts of ICS RLAs (which is sector based) to be complemented with the external regulatory oversight of statutorily established regulators of charities, like the Charity Commission for England and Wales. Yet, it is the case that a successful annual review is the basis for accreditation renewal with the RLAs that undertake them. They also exercise the power to withdraw accreditation where serious ethical breaches have occurred.

5.4 Assessing for Complementarity between the Roles of UKICS RLAs and Charity Regulators

A stated objective of this study is to establish the extent to which RLA activities are complementary or unrelated to the functions of statutory regulators of charities in the UKICS. This objective is the focus of Research Question 2:

RQ2: How complementary (or unrelated) are the functions of RLAs and charity regulators within the UKICS?

Based on ICSUOS responses, Charity regulators and RLAs share equal salience (after God and church members) in the stakeholder prioritisation order of independent congregations (see Table 4.1). Data from IDIs enabled further insights to emerge on how the functions of both actors are viewed within the sector. Focusing on charity regulators, three factors central to participants' responses on their role are church independence, accountability, and lawful operation in civil society. Speaking from the perspective of church independence, Participant C13 suggests that both charity regulators and RLAs are non-essential hierarchical impositions, with potential for encroaching on local church independence. However, the participant concedes that both actors offer benefits to the UKICS:

Participant C13, Church Leader
'Yes, I mean, technically you could do without any of them, couldn't you? That is my conviction in terms of being an independent. You are not supposed to have a hierarchy above the local church. And that is the way I understand the Bible, and so I would not say that they are essential to have. But they are certainly helpful, both in terms of accountability but also support and contribution to the work of the gospel across the whole of the UK.'

Participant R7 provides further insight on the benefits to be derived from Charity regulator functions:

Participant R7, RLA Official
'Not all churches, for example, may register as a UK charity and when they normally do that, that invokes certain levels of financial scrutiny from the Charity Commission. So, I think one of the big areas that the Charity Commission helps with is good financial practice, which then invokes confidence from the public.'

As such, scrutiny from charity regulators enable independent churches to adopt good financial practices in fulfilling their stakeholder accountability obligations. It also enhances public confidence in their operations. These are legitimacy issues. A further legitimacy issue linked with perceptions in the UKICS regarding the role of charity regulators is the need to be seen to be operating lawfully within civil society (Church Growth Trust, 2020). Participants R5 and R1 shed light on this issue:

Participant R5, RLA Official
'Our member organisations, if they meet the threshold, should register as charities in their own right. Some register as companies. … The Charity Commission makes sure that an organisation is operating according to good practice for charities, and there are specific remits that they have got in place for … churches.'

Participant R1, RLA Official
'The charity regulator is really about making sure that what a church is doing is legal and right within the framework of British law. There are things that every charity needs to do in relation to its governance and especially its finance and its safeguarding provision. To be a charity in Britain, you have to do those things.'

The views of Participants R5 and R1 align with one of the key presuppositions in this study. Presupposition 4 considers that independent churches and their RLAs, in serving to advance the Christian faith, also seek to operate lawfully within civil society.

In terms of resources, a benefit associated with charitable status is access to public funds. Participants R3 and C2 identify access to public funds as one of the benefits that independent churches derive from retaining this status:

Participant R3, RLA Official
'We are all compliant with OSCR on every level. We are accountable and compliant. If you are not, you risk losing your charitable status, which in turn would lose you a large portion of your income. So, loss of charitable status would be huge.'

Participant C2, Church Leader
'We are registered with the Charity Commission. We have all been receiving the benefits of being a charity; things like Gift Aid, and obviously there is a bit of credibility that comes from being a charity.'

Based on participant responses, it is the case that (in a general sense) the role of charity regulators would have, over the years, contributed to improving the legitimacy, accountability, resourcing, and effective operation of UK independent churches. It is outside the scope of this study to determine whether UK charity regulators have been effective in regulating the activities of independent churches. Also, the goal in this section is not to engage in a direct comparison of RLA roles and the functions of charity regulators. Rather, a guiding premise for

this assessment is that the tasks performed by both actors in the ICS (whether complementary, partly related, or unrelated) are vital and non-competing. The views expressed by Participants C18 and R5 lend credence to this presupposition:

Participant C18, Church Official
'Being the size of church and the type of church that we are there is not a major effect, either negative or positive, from being connected with the charity regulator. We would not look to be drawing from them what we draw from [*RLA name withheld*]. They are very much separate.

Participant R5, RLA Official
'Our member churches, we cannot hold them to account for the work that the Charity Commission does, but for the work that is faith-based that a secular organisation could not reasonably be expected to have any understanding, and particularly any right to hold [*them*] to account.'

Religious Legitimating Agencies, being registered faith-based umbrella organisations (Witberg, 2013), are established to fulfil distinct purposes that satisfy the public benefit test required for registration with statutory regulators (GOV UK, 2023b; Hope, 2008). While the primary role of statutory bodies set up to oversee the activities of charities is regulatory, the primary role of RLAs is religious. Participant R1 adds weight to this fact:

Participant R1, RLA Official
'As an umbrella organisation, we are here to help churches to be the best that they can be in terms of the way they disciple the people who attend their church. We want to resource churches and church leaders for their day-to-day tasks in ministry. So, we would do something very different to the Charity Commission in that we are opening the Bible in helping churches. What do the Scriptures say about this? How can we help churches to lead well in terms of what the Bible teaches in this area? That is different to the charity regulator. That is different to what their responsibilities are.'

So, there is distinctiveness in the roles played by Charity regulators and RLAs within the ICS. Charity regulators are not directly involved in promoting the religious interests of registered charities. However, they recognise that this would be a core objective for faith-based umbrella bodies (Yasmin *et al.*, 2014). It is also the case that the relational platforms provided by ICS RLAs, their representational obligations on behalf of their members, and their contributions to the revitalisation agendas of churches, do not find effective replications in charity regulator

functions within the UKICS (see Table 5.5). While identifying distinctness in their functions, Participants R3 and R15 draw attention to the complementarity in roles that results from a good working relationship between charity regulators and UKICS RLAs:

Participant R3, RLA Official
'The role of the umbrella organisation is not to function as an arm of the law of the land, but to function as a supportive body towards the federation of churches. It serves a completely different [*role*], but complementary in that the organisation … has a good relationship with OSCR, and OSCR have been very helpful in many situations. … They are there to work with the organisation, in the same way as other organisations who are arms of the law operate. … We liaised with OSCR on various points.'
Participant R15, RLA Leader
'So we would be, you know, flagging up [*to our members*], this is how we should relate to OSCR. … You need to make sure you have got all the appropriate policies in place for a charitable organisation in Scotland at this time. You need to be returning your financial details on time and remember that it is all there on the OSCR website for anyone to see. We would be speaking about it from a mutually encouraging fellowship. Trying to help each other to be the best churches we can be for the sake of Christ, for the sake of the country, and for the sake of one another.'

As evidence of complementarity in roles, the resourcing function of ICS RLAs includes providing their members with information, training, and reminders on charity registration and compliance. Likewise, to enhance their operational effectiveness in the UKICS, charity regulators often liaise with RLAs in the sector. A response provided by Participant R7 shows that this can involve sending staff on work placement with RLAs. The goal being to enhance faith literacy and better understand the issues that independent churches face:

Participant R7, RLA Official
'We have had quite a close relationship with the Charity Commission over the years. We did have somebody from the Charity Commission who did a placement with us some years back just to get a better idea of that part of the sector. The Charity Commission, I think they talk about faith literacy, that their awareness of the types of issues that churches and faith groups face is limited.'

 In effect, RLAs can act as intermediaries (in a representational role) between independent churches and the charity regulator (Osgood, 2024, 2006). Furthermore, it is considered that both actors have a complementary role to play in the operation of an effective ICSA framework. This framework is discussed in chapter 7.

Table 5.5: Relatedness of RLA Roles to Functions of Charity Regulators in the ICS

RLA Roles	Complementary	Partly Related	Unrelated
Religious	—	—	✓
Recognition	✓	—	—
Relational	—	—	✓
Representation	—	—	✓
Resourcing	✓	—	—
Reformation	✓	✓	—
Revitalisation	—	—	✓
Review	✓	—	—
Reconciliation	—	—	✓
Research	✓	✓	—

Therefore, apart from their religious, relational, representational, revitalisation and reconciliation duties, there are other roles played by ICS RLAs which can be assessed for complementarity with the functions of charity regulators within the sector. The suggestion from this research is that there may be complementarity in the areas of recognition, resourcing, reformation, review/regulation, and research (see Table 5.5). Even where there is complementarity in the roles of both actors (like in reformation and research), this may only be partly related. For instance, survey outcomes commissioned and published by the Charity Commission for England and Wales (see Section 2.11.7) show that public trust in charities improved from 55% in 2018 to 62% in 2020, and then increased slightly to 63% in 2023 (Weakley, 2020; Birkwood, 2023). However, such generalised findings (resulting from broad-based research initiated by the charity regulator) may hold only peripheral relevance as a credible empirical basis for assessing trust in churches. It is more likely that research conducted by RLAs will be narrower and better suited to the church community, thereby enhancing their relevance in effectively assessing and assisting the ICS. As examples, in 2020, Evangelical Alliance commissioned a survey which indicates that donations to almost 50% of churches fell during the Covid-19 pandemic (Fry, 2020). Research findings on the role of the church in promoting social cohesion was published in 2020 (Pennington, 2020), and Thirtyone:eight partnered with the University of Chester's Psychology department to conduct

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a study into the challenges of safeguarding children and young people in international Christian work (Oakley *et al.*, 2022; Thirtyone:eight, 2024b).

The submission being put forth in this section is that charity regulators play a necessary and helpful role in overseeing the activities of independent churches, and the recognition, resourcing, reformation, and review/regulatory functions of RLAs in the ICS are areas where the involvement of both actors in the sector are likely to be complementary. However, in fulfilling these related functions, they may not be as uniquely capable as each other in offering effective benefits to the sector. That said, it needs to be recognised that the primary roles of the two actors (external regulation by charity regulators and advancement of religion by RLAs) are both vital to the sector.

5.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The focus in this discussion chapter has been on ascertaining what UKICS RLAs are, what they do, how members join them, and the nature of the working relationship between them and their affiliated congregations. By thematically analysing data generated from IDIs and FGDs, it has been interpretively determined that, in relating with congregations in their membership, these umbrella organisations are structured to accommodate and promote both independence and interdependence.

In terms of their core roles, UKICS RLAs perform ten contemporary functions that their constituents find beneficial in the secular leaning and highly monitored socio-cultural environment that they operate in. As for the extent to which RLA activities are complementary (or unrelated) to the functions of charity regulators in the ICS, it is proposed that the operations of both actors (whether complementary, partly related, or unrelated) are non-competing and vital.

Having identified and discussed the roles of UKICS RLAs, insights will be provided in the next chapter on the restructuring and revitalisation approaches employed by these umbrella bodies

and their constituents as they seek to plough through what is becoming a more contemporary

operational terrain.

CHAPTER SIX:

RESTRUCTURING AND REVITALISATION IN THE UKICS

6.0 Introduction

A stated objective of this research is to ascertain the restructuring and revitalisation strategies adopted by UKICS RLAs in boosting their umbrella brand and supporting the growth agendas of churches in their membership. Given the shifting public attitude towards religion in the 21st century (Duffy *et al.*, 2023; Williams, 2023) and growing calls for more transparency, accountability, and church leadership reforms (Swerling, 2021; Mann, 2023; Ovando, 2020; Drew 2023), it is to be considered that RLAs and their affiliates have had to implement repositioning efforts to sustain their operations. An additional challenge was provided by the Covid-19 pandemic which exerted a disruptive influence and necessitated structural adjustments from ICS organisations (Finlay *et al.*, 2022; Trent Vineyard, 2023b). In responding to the disruptions, agencies and individual congregations would have employed innovative approaches, adaptive measures, structural and reset strategies to keep activities going and reenergise growth. The goal in this chapter is to utilise interview and focus group data in describing the socio-cultural landscape in which the UKICS operates. Following this, participants' responses will be presented which identify the restructuring and revitalisation approaches implemented by UKICS actors in responding to the changing operational landscape. Analytical effort has also been made to determine how effective these strategies have been in boosting performance and enhancing stakeholder satisfaction (see Table 6.1).

Within the chapter, the impact of secularism on growth/decline trends in various segments of the ICS will be considered. Besides seeking to ascertain the strategies employed by UK independent churches for growing membership numbers, the social engagement activities of these congregations, and their role as agents for promoting social cohesion will also be discussed. Further topics analysed include the strategic utilisation of church buildings and spaces in the UKICS, and the sector's experience of running online-only church venues during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Table 6.1:   **Key Areas of Analytical Focus in Chapter Six**

Key Areas of Research Focus on the UKICS	Related Research Objectives	Related Research Questions	Underpinning Theories and Concepts
Restructuring and revitalisation strategies employed by RLAs and churches in the sector.	**RO1**: To identify the functions of RLAs of independent churches (and their restructuring /revitalisation strategies) in the face of rising secularism and increased public scrutiny. **RO5**: To examine if there is a need for further measures to be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction.	**RQ4**: How effective are UKICS restructuring and revitalisation strategies in the face of rising secularism and increased public scrutiny? **RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory and Christian theological concepts.

6.1 The Changing Operational Landscape Facing the UKICS

Sector officials in the ICS acknowledge that the landscape in which UK churches operate in the 21st century has become more contemporary, and it continues to change. Insights from analysis of IDI and FGD data help to shed light on the changing landscape and enables the British public's evolving attitudes towards the church to be captured. For instance, Participant R7 argues that while there remains a measure of goodwill towards the church in contemporary Britain, this can no longer be taken for granted. A widening secularisation map means the population is now largely 'unchurched' (Davie, 2017), and for many people, the teachings of the church seem to hold no relevance to their everyday lives:

Participant R7, RLA Official
'Whereas churches would have taken for granted the goodwill of the community … that they belonged in a loose way to a church because maybe they were married in a church or they were christened, with increasing secularisation map, … the church as it were, particularly the established church, has become much more remote. So, people living in communities all over the country, wherever they look in the distance, there will be a church spire. But that does not necessarily have any relevance to their everyday lives, and they may not come. They may not really see what point the church serves, and they may wonder why there are all these bishops in the House of Lords. … But I still think there is quite a measure of goodwill towards the church, but rather vague and undefined. And people tend to think of it as possibly a good thing because they like the fact that there are churches around. They can go into a church and have a look around, and it is part of the cultural heritage, if you like. But as for really respecting it, its teachings, or living by the Christian faith, that is seen as being not very contemporary, if you like.'

Participant R7 suggests that church edifices to be found across the UK provide a reminder of the country's cultural heritage. Commenting on the cultural shift that has occurred in recent years, Participants R3 and C32 share the view that Sunday church attendance is no longer seen as fashionable, with people seeking other forms of engagement on Sundays, including work and rest. As Participant R15 elaborates, the socio-cultural shift associated with secularisation has resulted in declines in church attendance, a situation which is more pronounced in established denominational settings:

Participant R3, RLA Official
'I think secularisation has meant church attendance is seen as something dumb from the past. And people have found other things to do on a Sunday, even if it is just taking the children to the football or something like that.'
Participant C32, Church Official
'People too, they work on Sundays, and people sometimes feel like Sundays is when they should rest and not attend church at all. They work throughout the other days of the week and then rest on Sunday.'
Participant R15, RLA Leader
'The urgency at this time is created by secularisation. I appreciate there are different definitions of secularisation, but you know a useful one is in religious participation, isn't it? I mean, if you take Scotland slightly separately from the UK, although it is not really very different, but the national church, the Church of Scotland, has just been haemorrhaging members for the last two to three decades, kids and others. I mean, the Methodist Church is not that big in Scotland, but it is in fairly catastrophic decline. So is the United Reformed Church. … We are just slightly further back on the curve … of secularisation, and that might perhaps have something to do with the relative intensity of commitment that tends to be expected in [our] churches, and then some of the new church networks, you know, Black and Asian churches that are growing.'

Focusing on a segment of the population, Participant C2, a church leader, suggests that there is now an embedded materialistic culture in white British middle-class majority areas of the UK. In this setting, people are becoming more unwilling to consider what the church has to offer. Providing insights from a narrower perspective, Participant C2 considers that their community is based in a moralistic area, where the Christian values that shaped the British society in the past are still present. However, this moral disposition and willingness to engage does not necessarily equate to a positive response to the gospel:

Participant C2, Church Leader
'The middle-class area, they are fairly comfortable in terms of living standards, and, generally, it is a very materialistic culture where we are based. So, the comfort means that actually they are not bothered by it [*religion/the Church*], and they do not really have time for it. So, it is hard. It is hard ground to go through, which seems to be the case talking to other friends who are in similar settings, from the sort of a white British middle class majority culture. It seems to be hard ground to reach out into at present.'

Participant C2, Church Leader
'Majority of people in the community are not hostile to the gospel. It is still a fairly culturally moralistic area. I guess some of the sort of shaping of the country and society by Christian values in the past are still present there. There are enough people who have had positive experiences, maybe with some holiday clubs or kids' groups, and so there is not that negativity towards church, in terms of, the gospel. … To most people you can explain the gospel clearly. They would not necessarily be offended by it. They just would not really respond at all. They would give a very polite 'Oh, that is nice. Oh, thank you for sharing that word.'

In addition to the challenging socio-cultural terrain in which the wide spectrum of the British church community finds itself, independent churches are associated with unique perception issues, and questions continue to be raised about their legitimacy. Participants C19 and C32 identify some of the issues and lingering questions that independent congregations continue to grapple with:

Participant C19, Church Official
'When I was a child, we grew up in the Anglican Church … The Catholic Church as well, … I think the community is used to seeing those churches around, and there has been a lot of pop ups of independent churches. So, I think they are not always sure if it is safe. Like if they saw, say, an Anglican church on the High Road, somebody would walk straight off the road and go in and feel that it is ok. There will be a priest there you can pray with. But I do not think they have that same perception with independent churches. … So, I think that we have to reach out to communities more. … that is one of the barriers, definitely.'

Participant C32, Church Official
'The British society, they want something that is well established that they know of, like going to Church of England or going to Catholic Church or things like that. Some of them want to know where are you coming from? Who are you? And even members from the African demography, they still want to know 'where is this ministry from? How did it start?' They want to know your history before they go. … Some of these independent churches started in different countries, people do not really know their history.'

Legitimacy and accountability concerns associated with independent congregations are discussed in Sections 2.3, 3.9.2, 2.11.2 and 7.3. Besides questions about their legitimacy,

independent churches (and the wider Christian community) find that additional questions are being raised by both internal and external stakeholders seeking to understand the position of the church on emerging postmodern topics. For instance, Participant R5 draws attention to the enquiring attitude of the younger generation and the challenge the church faces in providing satisfactory answers to their cogent questions:

Participant R5, RLA Official
'Questions from the younger generations who are going through education and then being affected by secular postmodern issues. Gender identity is a big one. And issues around whether the pastors are sufficiently educated to be able to handle the questions that come from the very bright and inquiring minded young people. That is an issue that is true, both within black and white churches, indigenous and migrant. … It is fast becoming a situation where we have to say to our pastors "you actually may need to upskill yourself. Or you need to surround yourself with people who are sufficiently educated and able to interact with young people on these contentious issues" such that the pastor does not look to be out of touch with the issues of the next generation.'

6.2 Response of the ICS to the Changing UK Operational Landscape

As Participant R5 rightly asserts, it is possible for operatives in the church to be out of touch with emerging issues in the public arena. ICS leaders seem resigned to the fact that functioning on a 'business as usual' mode is no longer an option. As such, in seeking to respond appropriately to the changing socio-cultural environment in Britain, the ICS is increasingly recognising the need to restructure: To ask itself constructive questions and to adopt a strategic poise that is fit for purpose, as well as needing to carry out necessary reforms, and have leaders that are sufficiently skilled and up to these complex tasks. For instance, the views of R4 (a group discussion participant) and C18 (an IDI participant) show that the sector is becoming increasingly comfortable with addressing issues arising from the changing cultural landscape. To this end, there is a readiness to question the suitability of existing structures. Concerted effort is being exerted to determine structural adjustments that need to be implemented, and the overriding purpose is for entities in the sector to remain relevant in a continually changing operational environment:

Participant R4, RLA Official
'We have become increasingly comfortable in talking about issues, especially in the changing cultural landscape. Talking about issues … out there in the public square … as Pentecostal churches, engaging in that discussion. … So, we have been just galvanising around … reaching the unreached and church health. … And so, there are also some questions that we are looking at, the changes that we need to make structurally in order to serve as we and our churches are moving into the future.'

Participant C18, Church Official
'It is very easy to get lost in a structure of church and be so tied to that structure that you never question it. So, yes, we are constantly evaluating. We are constantly asking the Lord to give us clarity of direction. You know those things that we need to drop let us know and we will drop them. … We have really looked at our church and how we operate. And have evaluated every set area and done away with things that we have been doing for years just because they have become a habit to us and do not actually strengthen the church. … So yes, we are constantly evaluating.'

A senior church leader, Participant C5, acknowledges that the Holy Spirit can still lead people to achieve a measure of success as they utilise traditional approaches. However, Participant C5 asserts that engaging with the cultural context is proving to be a more effective way of getting the British public to be open to the gospel message, and this does not entail a dilution of the message:

Participant C5, Church Leader
'Do not always say it does not work because we know the Holy Spirit will still lead, regardless. But I think perhaps there have to be other ways of engagement in line with the cultural context. And it is not about diluting the message. So, are people open? I think it is along cultural lines and I think it depends on how the gospel message, even in my own church, is presented.'

It is then evident that the idea of cultural relevance in a changing society is playing strongly into the strategic objectives of UKICS organisations. However, while making efforts in this direction, ICS actors remain largely unwilling to compromise on core biblical values (Evangelical Alliance, 2019; Lisburn IMC, 2024), and strains brought about by this growing tension are emerging. As mainstream values diverge further from the long-held scriptural views of the Christian Faith, the ICS is increasingly coming to terms with the fact that tension will be generated when churches seek both to maintain an uncompromising posture and achieve relevance in a contemporary setting. For the sector, there is then a need to decipher

strategies for effectively navigating through the constant tension. Participant R12 sheds light

on how this issue is being addressed within their membership:

Participant R12, RLA Official
'There is going to be tension in the way in which relevance is interpreted. So, what we try to do, … we gather all our member churches together, to provide seminars where individuals can be equipped in facing some of the pertinent issues that they are facing in society and how they can remain relevant without feeling that they are actually compromising. And there is that constant tension. So, we try to equip. We try to bring in individuals with expertise. Individuals who perhaps work with local government, national government, and how they straddle between being people of faith and people who have to have relevant work within the communities that they serve. So, sharing, educating, empowering and not being afraid to discuss some of the pertinent issues that today's churches are facing.'

Participant R12's contribution reveals the central role being played by umbrella agencies in

enabling independent congregations to effectively navigate contemporary issues affecting

their operations in Britain. Within the ICS, there is growing acceptance of the fact that the

capacity for resolving many of the sector's commonly shared sustainability challenges exists

only at a collaborative level (Fu and Cooper, 2021; Calō *et al.*, 2024). The implication being

that the varied roles played by RLAs in supporting UK independent churches will continue to

be in demand into the foreseeable future. FGD Participant, R13, draws attention to this reality:

Participant R13, RLA Leader
'I think it is hugely important that independents connect with one another and work together, particularly in the cultural environment in which we find ourselves, which I think is going to get more and more difficult.'

Realising the benefits in adopting a concerted strategic approach, UK independent churches

are thus connecting on platforms furnished by umbrella bodies to effectively gain inroads into

a more challenging cultural environment. With this collective approach, there seems to be a

breaking away from systemised insulative tendencies, as constructive effort is being made to

engage the culture with a view to bridging the sacred-secular divide (Pioneer UK, 2024a).

Brand (2018, p.2), Missions Director for EFCC (a UKICS RLA), throws out a challenge to

churches in their association by stating that, 'we are independent, but we must never be insular'.

Insular Christianity is a term associated with the common features shared by Celtic and Anglo-Saxon monastics religious cultures that thrived from the 4th century (Herren and Brown, 2002; Thomas, 1981). However, in the descriptive context in which Brand uses it, insular entails isolationism in views and conduct (Merriam Webster, 2024). Elaborating on a model for growing healthy churches, Brand emphasises the need for a long-term partnership-oriented strategic process for revitalisation that will have prayer and evangelism at its centre. This process will also involve radical changes in approach to church growth, a serious review of the future, changes in leadership and leadership frameworks, and a review of the way in which church buildings are utilised. Various aspects of Brand's proposition will be usefully employed in evaluating participants' responses in this chapter.

6.3 Assessing Growth/Decline Trends in the UKICS

A presupposition made in approaching this study is that the ICS currently operates in the backdrop of a contemporary British society characterised by rising secularism. The range of views analysed in Section 6.1 clearly indicate that this is the case. However, while the rise in secularism is acknowledged, it seems that its impact on growth in the UKICS is more sectional than cross-sectional. Participant R5 identifies sections of their membership more likely to be affected by the rise in secularism and issues around it:

Participant R5, RLA Official
'The white indigenous charismatic evangelical churches and non-charismatic evangelical churches that are part of us have been far more community embedded. So, the rise of secularism and the issues around secularism do affect them, particularly postmodernism. They will have a lot of discussions about these sorts of things, but they will also have an overarching spirituality that tends to trump that, and in that they have a lot of commonalities with diaspora churches who come from cultures that are very spiritual, very committed to Christianity, and not really too concerned about issues around postmodernism.'

Participant R5 suggests that independent churches operating in predominantly white communities are more likely to be affected by secularism, particularly issues pertaining to

postmodernism (D' Moronoyo, 2022). This assertion is corroborated by considering in more detail the evidence provided by Participant R3. The congregations in their RLA are in predominantly white Scottish communities:

Participant R3, RLA Official
'Our membership is diminishing year on year due to people dying out and not being replaced by a younger generation or younger generations. I think there is a distinct lack of new young families coming around in some of our churches. I think secularisation has meant church attendance is seen as something dumb from the past. And people have found other things to do on a Sunday, even if it is just taking the children to the football or something like that.

Focusing on secularism's impact on the culture of Sunday church attendance, Participant C32, a church official, provides a contrary perspective to the view expressed by Participant R3. Participant C32 argues that for many people from African or Black British backgrounds, it is still a cultural resonant activity to attend church on Sundays. This suggests that secularism's impact on the culture of Sunday church attendance is not as pronounced amongst Black British people as it is amongst those from white backgrounds:

Participant C32, Church Official
'We have more Africans or Black British attending church more than White British … and it is because for us from Africa it is part of our culture, like Christian culture, to always go to church on Sundays and belong to such fellowships. But when it comes to gathering people here, it is a bit different.'

Despite the decline in attendances being experienced by sections of the ICS (including congregations in Participant R3's agency) findings from this study indicate that, overall, the number of independent churches in decline are likely to be in the minority vis a vis current sectoral trend. While there are a few other instances of decline/stagnation in growth, many of the RLA officials and church leaders involved in IDIs and FGDs reported experiencing growth in membership numbers (see Table 6.2).

Table 6.2: ROVs on 'Growth in UKICS Membership Numbers'
'We are having church growth and recently, in fact a few weeks ago, somebody asked me, you know, how have you done that? And I do not have an answer. I could not say how we are having the growth. I do not have some big, great plan. It is just the grace of God, and maybe the grace of God working in a unique town.' *(Participant C4)*
'We are growing. We have had about 240 churches join us in the last 10 years, and we have probably in the last sort of eight years planted about 50 churches.' *(Participant R13, FGD)*
'Huge growth over the last six months, which has been incredible. And we have become a very diverse church as well and half our congregation in the quite small market town [*name withheld*] is black now, which is really exciting to have that culture come in, and the added flair that brings.' *(Participant C3, FGD)*
'When I took over, I think we were down to 40 and so we have grown since then to about 100.' *(Participant C11, Female Church leader)*
'Very much in a growth phase as well. … In the last two years we have nearly doubled in size.' *(Participant R2, FGD)*
'Yes, the church is growing. As I said we have our challenges, as you know being a woman leader. … We have people joining us from different cultures and sometimes when they come, some stay.' *(Participant C28, Female Church Leader)*
'No, not really numerically. I think we have probably sustained numbers, even though those numbers are different. We are a church that believes in equipping people for them to go off to do things. And so, numbers are not a major sort of focus for us. … But looking at the church, the faces are probably very different to what they were seven years ago.' *(Participant C18)*
'There is clearly something going on and I just need to explain it a little bit. There are [*number of churches in RLA withheld*]. They are not all equally healthy. So, [*number withheld*] of them I think would be declining and dying. And that may be because they are in rural, very rural areas, or perhaps because they have not adapted to a change in their circumstances. Perhaps they are still living in the 1950s. All kinds of reasons.' *(Participant R1)*

Many of the views outlined in Table 6.2 reveal growth situations in the membership of ICS congregations and RLAs. More evidence of a wide-ranging growth pattern across the sector is provided in Section 6.7.2 where the experience of independent churches during the Covid-19 pandemic period is discussed. Participant C18's congregation (which is rural based) has continued to sustain numbers. This suggests that while growth may be occurring, it may not reflect in increased attendance numbers as people in the congregation relocate to other places. Often, relocations are career, study or marriage related. Participant R1 acknowledges

that some of the churches in their RLA are declining numerically. While the number of declining churches has been withheld for confidentiality reasons, it represents a sixth of the membership.

As highlighted in Table 6.2, Participants C11 and C28 are female senior pastors in congregations with growth experiences, and the determination from studying five female-led independent churches is that their growth patterns are in consonance with what pertains generally in the sector. None of the five congregations exhibited a pattern of decline. The view of Participant R15, an RLA Leader, helps to buttress this finding:

Participant R15, RLA Leader
'In terms of gaining the kind of support of a local church and leading of church forward in mission and ministry and enabling the church to grow and develop, I think all our women ministers are successful. I think they are all very good ministers. I would not say any of them are witnessing revival, but they are in positive and growing church situations.'

In effect, despite having to operate in a backdrop of declining enthusiasm for religion, the UKICS continues to witness growth in many of the sector's settings. Evidence from data suggests that the growth being experienced in the sector is the result of restructuring and revitalisation approaches implemented by sector actors in response to the changing work environment. For instance, Participants R1 and R18 refer to structural reforms made which led to the removal of cultural restrictions and impacted on growth:

Participant R1, RLA Official
'The fellowship made changes to allow it to grow by bringing in a different structure. … And in the last couple of years, we have adopted a new strategic plan which was signed off by the trustees, … which will enable the next phase of our growth.'
Participant R18, RLA Official
'We changed from being quite a small church conservative organisation to trying to be more generous. So, in effect we had placed more restrictions, even though they were not in our rules, we had placed in effect more cultural restrictions, for example, on churches. We have done away with all of those now. So, I think that has made [*RLA name withheld*] more attractive to other churches.'

From the views of Participants R1 and R18, it can be observed that there is a willingness in sections of the UKICS to accommodate and implement restructuring changes. There is also increasing adoption of a targeted strategic approach to actualising growth, and in pushing for more growth, many ICS entities are jettisoning restrictive positions that encouraged exclusions and embracing practices that enhance inclusion and diversity. Bowen *et al.* (2020) argues that stakeholder considerations should play a fundamental role in the development of an organisation's strategy. Participant C7 explains how key it has become for their congregation to dismantle barriers that have tended to exclude certain people/groups:

Participant C7, Church Leader
'One of the key things that we have is to make sure that whoever comes into our midst feels that they are welcome, they are loved, and they find a place where they can belong. Whatever it takes. In other words, we do as much to dismantle any kind of barrier that would exclude certain people or certain groups. So, whilst we may not have succeeded to the extent that we want, we see that we are doing something along that line that has been bringing in the diversity that we are seeing in our midst.'

The pattern emerging then from the data is of a sector that is becoming more confident in embracing reforms to its structures and norms. It is also of a sector that is increasingly keying into the benefits of being strategic minded. As a further example, FGD participant C23 throws light on efforts by their congregation's leadership to become strategically better positioned to meet needs within the local community. The approach involves matching information from a community audit with an inventory of the skills set in the church to formulate strategies for effectively delivering value to people in their base community:

Participant C23, Church Leader
'We the leaders went on a three-day strategic away day just to single space, pray, and strategize. I took with me some data that had been collected about our community, the demographics, economic situation, and so on. So, we were able on one hand to have a profile of the community, the sort of people there, what the needs are. And then we also did … an audit of the skills and giftings within the church and especially within the leadership team.'

The idea of a church leadership engaging in a three-day strategic away event provides a glimpse of the depth of strategizing that is ongoing in the UKICS, as the sector seeks to stay relevant and achieve enhanced performance in what has become a difficult socio-cultural terrain. In the succeeding sections, a more detailed discussion is undertaken, focusing on analysis of strategic approaches implemented by UKICS actors in the areas of revitalisation, social engagement, building utilisation, and online gatherings (particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic).

6.4 Strategies and Models Utilised for Growing Membership Numbers in the UKICS

Strategies and models for church growth refer to the theories, principles, methods, and policies that have been proven to be practically effective in growing the Christian Church (Wagner, 2010; Jackson, 2005). Findings from this study clearly indicate that (in the backdrop of a more challenging contemporary operational terrain) the ICS is becoming more strategic in its approach to spreading the gospel and achieving growth. Participants C5 and C7 address this issue:

Participant C5, Church Leader
'Interestingly, I am trying to think more strategically about evangelism. … In fact, we are having a training session from someone who works for the Salvation Army. … He wants to collaborate with us to give us training specifically on the dos and don'ts of evangelism within these spaces.'
Participant C7, Church Leader
'I think we are serving a community that is also not only diverse but also changing and the modes and the methods of reaching out the gospel are changing. So, we have got some things that we do, for example, on the social media side.'

There is growing acknowledgement within the UKICS that communities across the UK are changing and becoming more diverse. As such, changes may be required in the modes and methods of reaching people and making new converts. While assessing their outreach mechanisms, actors in the sector are realising that some long-employed traditional approaches are proving to be less effective in a contemporary setting. For instance, the

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effectiveness of handing out gospel leaflets to people is discussed in Section 6.4.5. On the other hand, Participant C7 emphasises how increasingly important social media platforms are becoming as a tool of choice for effectively reaching people.

There is also evidence pointing to the pivotal role RLAs are playing in enabling member congregations to become more strategically poised in their revitalisation efforts. An example is provided by Participant R18:

Participant R18, RLA Official
'We have limited resources, but we do work with individual churches to help them think about leadership strategies or growth strategies, or evangelism opportunities. May be groups of churches that are geographically linked. We might work with churches, small groups of churches, which are not geographical but have the same kinds of contexts. So, perhaps they are all in small villages. We might get 6 church leaders together who are all in small villages around the country to talk about, "how can they reach their village? How can they reach the countryside where they are?"'

Participant R1, another agency official, emphasises the importance of an honest self-assessment for churches in need of revitalisation. The participant suggests that a strategic change in direction and the willingness to do things differently are often required for revitalisation efforts to yield dividend:

Participant R1, RLA Official
'There is no kind of one size fits all. But we encourage churches to take an honest look in the mirror at their own situation and then work out what changes might need to happen to enable them to grow. … The key thing with their revitalisation is there has to be a willingness on behalf of the church that is being revitalised to change direction and do things differently. Sometimes when a smaller church talks about revitalisation, what they really mean is send us some people so that we can carry on doing the things we have always done and not change at all. That is why it never works.'

It seems then the case that concerted strategic effort is being expended by UKICS RLAs and their constituents to sustain the increasing growth trends experienced in the sector. Given that attendance levels in independent congregations are contrary to patterns in denominational settings (Hayward, 2022; Drew, 2022), there is a need to identify the strategies and models that actors in the sector have adopted in implementing their gospel agenda and revitalising

growth. In the sub sections following, eight of these strategies are discussed, beginning with church planting. Thoughts for consideration include an evaluation of how effective these revitalisation approaches have been.

6.4.1 Strategic Approach to Church Planting in the ICS

Church plants have always been central to the evangelistic mission of the Christian faith (Kao, 2013). It remains a prime strategy of choice and, as determined in this study, UKICS RLAs are keen to motivate their members to engage in church plants as a pivotal tool for actualising their growth agenda. The ROVs in Table 6.3 shows that a coordinated approach is often adopted, with umbrella bodies working to make training, financial resources, and a support structure available for congregations intending to undertake new plants:

Table 6.3: ROVs on 'RLA Support for Church Planting in the ICS'
'I am just rolling out a programme focusing on church planting and encouraging churches, saying, "look, we have been declining by about 1% every year for 20 years now and what are we going to do proactively to change? Well, one of the things is let us begin to see ourselves as a church planting movement rather than the church sustaining movement," and that was warmly received by the churches. … We have probably planted about 10 to 15 churches in the 21st century so far. But I think we should be planting quite a lot more. So, in that sense, for me it is ultimately a gospel imperative. We need to make Jesus known. We need to be in as many places as we can.' *(Participant R15)*
'We invest heavily in this huge great church planting conduit that runs through all our churches. It is funded nationally.' *(Participant R8, FGD)*
Because we pull certain financial resources, we have some funds made up of gifts from different churches. So, we are able to support missions, and financially in particular. We make gifts to churches that there may be church plantings.' *(Participant R15)*
'Since the 90s there has been a whole proliferation of church plants into cities, student communities, and those newer churches tend to be much younger in their profile in terms of the people who are part of them, and in London would be much more diverse.' *(Participant R13, FGD)*

FGD participant R13 draws attention to the proliferation of church plants in UK cities and student communities which has been ongoing since the 1990s. This aligns with the approach adopted by Paul, an Early Church missionary, who planted churches in the major cities of the

Roman Empire between AD 48 and AD 67 (Boer, 1976, Kao, 2013). One church organisation in the UK that has successfully applied Paul's urban-centred church planting strategy is the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) (Adedibu, 2016). Established in 1952 (Adeboye, 2007), RCCG is a missionary-minded Nigerian-initiated Pentecostal Church that has a strong focus on church planting (Burgess *et al.*, 2010). With a central office that functions as the umbrella body for its UK congregations, RCCG planted its earliest UK church in 1985. Fifteen years later, it had 50 churches across the UK (Hunt, 2000). This number increased to about 400 in 2009 (Burgess, 2009), and then 800 in 2019 (Brierley, 2019). By 2023, it had grown to 880 (RCCG UK, 2024).

Beginning from the late 1990's, there has been a more strategic approach in the way church planting is carried out by UKICS entities. Firstly, independent churches started 'springing up across the country' (Osgood, 2024; CIC International, 2018) because there was an increasing move away from being solely church building confined. Participants' responses (see Section 6.7) point to a variety of venues utilised for worship by independent congregations, including schools, community halls, refurbished cinema halls and warehouses, coffee shops and other business places, as well as people's homes. Also, in seeking avenues for growth, there is now an increasing move away from being urban-centric as more effort and resources are put into reaching people in rural communities and deprived neighbourhoods. FGD participants R4 and R8, who belong to separate RLAs, provide insights into successful rural experiments being carried out by their members:

Participant R4, RLA Official
'One interesting thing that we have noticed is that with our church plants, they are starting to move out into some of the rural areas. And people are having a heart to move not just to traditional locations like a city, but actually to rural. So, I think we have got a decent spread.'
Participant R8, RLA Official
'We do have some surprisingly quite successful rural experiments that we have done, where literally, we have got some little churches up in the Yorkshire Dales and we did not think they would work, but they seem to be thriving.'

6.4.2 Application of Growth Models from Business

Growth models utilised in corporate and secular circles can find some form of effective application in the church sector (Ruhr and Daniels, 2012). Moules (2020) sees a link between the growth being experienced in church plants in the UK and an openness on the part of churches to embrace ideas and techniques from the business world. Based on findings from observing a 'church planting' course, Moules submits that in the face of declines, UK churches have been spurred to adopt industry training techniques and lift ideas from business to create start-up churches.

The 'business-style' church planting course observed by Moules is run by the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication (CCX, 2024). The centre (founded by Ric Thorpe a former marketing executive at Unilever) is named after Gregory the Great, a 6th century Church leader in Rome who had a background in business and is remembered for sending a team led by St. Augustine to England in 597AD with a mandate to plant churches and raise leaders (Herren and Brown, 2002; Thomas, 1981). Thorpe (2021), the Anglican Bishop of Islington and a church planting and revitalisation expert, is of the view that churches need to learn from industry and encourage a culture of innovation (Moules, 2020). Participants at the Gregory Centre's church planting courses (many of whom have no clergy background) are trained to develop business plans for rebooting existing churches or turning places like coffee shops and community halls into worship centres. These plans will then be pitched to a panel of church officials (Moules, 2020).

Similarly, evidence from this study suggests that independent churches and their RLAs (in seeking to achieve their revitalisation goals) have become more willing to embrace innovative ideas and growth models from the corporate world. For instance, FGD participant R6 explains that, as an RLA, their organisation welcomes and nurtures innovative church start-up ideas:

Participant R6, RLA Leader
'We champion the smaller missional communities. We champion creativity, champion innovation as to what church can look like.'

Independent churches utilise office complexes, cafes, community halls and refurbished warehouses as venues for worship (see Section 6.7), and their leaders come from a wide range of professional backgrounds and often combine a professional career with their church leadership role. The experience of FGD Participant C17 reveals how operating from a business background can lead to the adoption of 'unorthodox' approaches, reflected in where a congregation meets, how it functions, and how the sermon that is preached is presented:

Participant C17, Church Leader
'We are currently very unorthodox because we meet … on the top floor of an office complex. … My day job, I am the chief executive of two other businesses. So, I wear multiple hats across the City of London and, also, within the church. I have very much got my foot in marketplace ministry as well as doing stuff for church.'

While acknowledging the likely successes that could result from applying corporate growth models in the church sector, it is of essence to recognise the challenges associated with importing secular and business constructs into a church setting. Pehrsson (2007) argues that whether in the corporate world or the nonprofit sector, it is essential for organisations to choose strategies and models based on a thorough understanding of their strategic state or setting. As such, models for business growth (where they are to be adopted) need to be contextually suited for church planting purposes. It is also vital that a business-minded approach to church planting is coupled with rich spiritual virtues like prayer, genuine love, and care for the people and communities being reached. Brand (2018) emphasises the need for a long-term partnership-oriented strategic process for revitalisation that would have prayer and evangelism at its centre. Also required will be radical changes in approach to church growth, a serious review of the future, and changes in leadership and leadership frameworks. Looking closely at two aspects of Brand's proposal, it would be useful to consider, firstly, the implications of a church partnership-oriented approach and, secondly, the role of leadership in the growth attainment levels of UK independent churches.

6.4.3 Church Partnerships for Revitalisation

A concept for achieving growth that is increasingly coming into use in the UK church community is establishing what could be called church partnerships for revitalisation (Brierley, 2019; Brand, 2018). This is a mutual engagement that involves a thriving church working (on invitation) with a struggling congregation to enable it to grow. Partnerships for growth are possible within the ICS because RLAs create platforms for cooperation and facilitate networking among the churches in their membership. Participant R1 explains how this concept works in their setting:

Participant R1, RLA Official
'Where we have seen it work is where a larger church has been willing to support a smaller church and kind of take them under their wing. That is when it has worked the best. Sometimes that will be the larger church sending twenty people to go and be part of the church and help it to grow. … The key thing with their revitalisation is there has to be a willingness on the part of the church that is being revitalised to change direction and do things differently.'

As Participant R1 points out, from the onset, both parties in a church revitalisation partnership recognise that changes need to be made for growth to be achieved (Brand, 2018). The more established and successful church partner provides personnel, strategic support, guidance, and sometimes finance (Brierley, 2019). It is more often the case that funding for church growth partnerships is centrally generated by RLAs in their role as umbrella and resource bodies (Mbakwe, 2022). Better-off congregations are encouraged to make financial, material, and other forms of contributions into a pool. Resources realised are then redistributed to support struggling churches and fund church plant initiatives.

6.4.4 Role of Visionary Transformational Leaders in Alignment with Congregants

Hayward (2002), in developing a systems approach to modelling church growth, asserts that growth is often driven by a subset of church members called 'enthusiasts' who actively participate in outreach. Enthusiasts are active in inviting to church family members, friends,

neighbours, and people they meet on the street and other places. Hayward's assertion is collaborated by the findings of this study into the UKICS (see Table 6.4).

Taking the investigation further, it is right to consider the role that independent church leaders play in creating a culture of sustained enthusiasm for outreach activities within their congregations. This has implications for church growth in the face of declining enthusiasm for religion in Britain. There is evidence to suggest that enthusiasts thrive in alignment with a charismatic visionary transformational leadership style (Anderson and Sun, 2017; Qtait, 2023) which it can be argued is the dominant conceptualisation of leadership in independent churches. The gifts, visionary abilities, and passionate dispositions of charismatic and transformational leaders (when positively invested) can motivate followers and attract new people. More significantly, if this leadership type personality comes into working alignment with an enthusiastic followership (even where it is a subset of the church), it is likely to drive growth and infuse an irrepressible evangelistic agenda into the culture of a church (Kay and Dyer, 2005). Kay and Dyer (p.29) suggest that what enables churches to grow (in the first instance) is 'the lively charismatic and evangelistic activity that the ministers inspire'.

Table 6.4: ROVs on 'Evangelistic Approaches Adopted in the ICS'
'We do not have an evangelistic team in the church. What we believe is that everyone must be involved in a level of evangelism. But everybody has a different passion. So, we encourage people to follow their passion and form groups to reach out based on their passion.' *(Participant C9)*
'My area … is more actually going onto the streets talking with people, sharing Jesus's love. That is really the area I am in … We have got so many different outreaches that go into the community.' *(Participant C19)*
'We engage in a lot of outreaches. Sometimes we just go for evangelism around where the church is, just to create the love of God to people and, you know, bring them to the saving knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.' *(Participant C32)*
'We have supplied door to door a leaflet that would advertise the programme and what is on in the church. And we would also do that in recent years through social media, through Facebook, Instagram.' *(Participant C37)*

Independent churches with an evangelistic zest show it in the way their members personally engage in handing out church invitation leaflets to people. These congregations are often involved in organising special events, some of which may feature guest speakers. It is also usual for the church to have an active online presence, and, as will be discussed in Section 6.4.6, some churches may utilise Christian media as a tool for attracting new members (Anderson, 2013).

6.4.5 Effectiveness of Handing Out Invitation Leaflets and Door-to-Door Approaches

Participant C37 discloses that an outreach strategy implemented by their congregation involves mobilising the membership to go door to door and hand out invitation leaflets, ahead of a special event (see Table 6.4). Similarly, another church leader, Participant C38, explains that their church regularly engages in street-to-street distribution of evangelistic tracts. Participant C38 goes on to describe the process and its outcome:

Participant C38, Church Leader
'We put out flyers. We organise ourselves to go into streets, say three to four weeks to the convention dates, to give these leaflets out into their homes. And we do see, if we put out let us say 1000 leaflets, maybe we would see five people show up. … To distribute tracts, some of them will wait to hear some words. Some of them take it from us. They will squeeze it in our presence into the bin. But that did not deter us. … There were two occasions those people we reached out to on Saturday, they showed up the next Sunday in church.'

In effect, the strategy of handing out evangelistic leaflets, whether on a door-to-door or street-to-street basis, continues to be employed by some ICS congregations. From the response of Participant C38, a minimal fraction of people reached show up at church, and there seems to be growing resistance to this approach from members of the British public.

Amidst changing social attitudes in the UK population (Duffy *et al.*, 2023), ICS actors are reassessing their methods of reaching people and making new converts. Information from data suggests there is growing realisation that the long-employed traditional approach of handing out church invitation leaflets/flyers is proving to be less effective in a contemporary setting:

Participant C5, Church Leader
'We have had occasions when we have gone out with the leaflets. But I am thinking more strategically, … and I have personally felt that leaflet giving is not always the best approach within the context of Britain. So, it is an area for further exploration.'

Participant C7, Church Leader
'We have done a survey to see how people are responsive to things like flyers and all that. And the response has been that very few people read flyers. … Door-to-door, we are still doing them visiting door-to-door. But very few people respond to just being knocked on the door, and they say, oh ok, what do you want? Do you think I have nothing to do? So, those kinds of reaching out, they are still there. But really, on a lower end of the scale rather than what we are doing within the community.'

Participant C5 questions the strategic usefulness of reaching people through handing out leaflets and calls for further exploration on the topic. While Participant C7 furnishes information from a survey conducted on the topic. The survey outcome shows a pattern similar to what Participant C38 experienced. It could be argued that the growing resistance from members of the public is linked to declining enthusiasm for religion. Beside this, the extent to which the manner of approach is contributing to making the method of approach less effective needs to be considered. For instance, Participant C19 suggests that an aggressive approach can hinder effective communication of the Christian message:

Participant C19, Church Official
'I think a lot of people are actually very open. Some are sceptical because maybe they have had people who have been a bit more aggressive in their approach. So, I think you have to be trained. You know, you have to learn how to speak to people because not everybody responds in the same way. Like people of some backgrounds are a little bit more aggressive in their approach, and maybe for people who they have grown up around, it is normal. But if you go into a community where things are done differently, you have to learn differently. You have to adapt, but you do not adapt the Word of God, you just adapt your approach so that people are more receptive.'

To encourage receptiveness in a changing environment, Participant C19 calls for training and adaptation of approach. This is important. In considering the effectiveness of revitalisation approaches, it is also appropriate to recognise that a shift in strategy may be required. For example, Participant C4's congregation made the strategic decision to change from an outdoor

focused approach of reaching their community to an indoor oriented approach. This has resulted in growth:

Participant C4, Church Leader
'Years ago, we were very much out on the streets, shall we say, proclaiming the gospel and those kinds of initiatives, marching through the streets. But since [*year withheld*] when I took over, we have a different approach where we kind of serve the town in a number of capacities, and that is where our outreach is. So, for example, like many churches, we have a parent and toddler group and a number of people have joined our church from the parent and toddler group.'

In carrying out their social engagement initiatives, independent churches across the UK utilise a variety of both indoor and outdoor approaches (see Section 6.5). While the strategic relevance of the approach to be adopted needs to be considered, it is clearly the case that churches grow when there is concerted effort and a passionate disposition to continue reaching out to win new converts. However, as Participant C37 points out, there are other factors that come into the church growth equation, besides engaging in outreaches:

Participant C37, Church Leader
'We are experiencing growth. And the vision would be to continually keep reaching out and doing all the things that we are able to do regarding the church and just seeing God multiply and increase the numbers, and that the work remains healthy. A healthy body always grows.'

From the view of Participant C37 it can be observed that although outreaching seems to be central to church growth, growth is sustained through a combination of three factors, namely, engaging regularly in outreach activities, ensuring smooth management of church operations, and maintaining a healthy organisational culture.

6.4.6 Use of Television and Other Media Platforms

Anderson (2013) is of the view that some independent churches utilise Christian media as a tool for attracting new members. Responses from study participants confirm that this is the case in the UKICS. Two media forms often employed for this purpose are television and radio:

Participant C30, Church Official
'Evangelising … can take, you know, many dimensions. It can take many forms. For example, people can go into radio and television programmes … People can now have specific programmes targeted at some segments of the population. That could be a little help in reaching out to people right out there. I believe that we can go in that direction to ensure that we are able to impact on some other people within the society. This could bring them to Christ.'
Participant C38, Church Leader
'We normally have the widest coverage of reaching out to the community, and even beyond the community, because we sometimes put it on the radio.'

Christian television (in particular) has been utilised by churches and preachers across the globe to increase their visibility, importance, and growth (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005, 2012). It provides opportunities to be heard and seen by a broader spectrum of viewership beyond cultural and geographical boundaries, and for some UKICS congregations, there seems to be a perception that purchasing airtime on Christian TV channels (whether to run a programme or an advertisement) is a marketing strategy aptly suited to their goal of attracting membership from a more diverse and contemporary-minded audience that is open to their style of messaging and worship.

Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC), a non-denominational church in London (Onyinah, 2013), argues that their church services are broadcast on cable TV because 'modern technology has a part to play in reaching people and sharing the Gospel' (KICC, 2024). Established in September 1992, KICC gained affiliation with Evangelical Alliance in 1995 (Osgood, 2006) and a year later began broadcasting on 'God Channel' and other TV networks (KICC, 2024). The church set up a TV station 'KICC TV' in June 2006 (GOV UK, 2024c). Presently, it has a network of UK and international branches/affiliated churches, and is headquartered at 'Prayer City', a sprawling 24-acre facility in Chatham, Kent, purchased in 2012.

The first foray into Christian TV broadcasting in the UK is attributed to Cornerstone Christian Centre (CCC), an independent church in South East London. CCC began broadcasting a

weekly one-hour programme on the Identity Channel in May 1994 (Alec, 2001). At this time, the congregation was led by its founder, Hugh Osgood. Osgood, in 1997, established CIC International, a UKICS RLA. The broadcasting initiative by CCC produced other initiatives, including Christian Channel Europe (the UK's first digital Christian TV platform) set up in 1995 by Rory and Wendy Alec. Rory and Wendy were part of the TV Department at CCC (Alec, 2001). Christian Channel Europe first rebranded as God Channel in September 1997, then in 2002 the company became known as GOD TV (GOD TV, 2024).

At the onset, GOD TV's doctrinal stance is asserted to be 'thoroughly evangelical and charismatic', with support coming mostly from free independent churches (Alec, 2001). A dedication event for the TV network (held in London on 24 May 1996) is reported to have attracted over 300 pastors seemingly interested in having a media presence on the platform. At this time, the channel was available daily in 25% of all UK homes (Alec, 2001), and it can be argued that the resultant effect of television as a tool for church growth in the UK has, in the last close to 30 years, disproportionately favoured independent churches, like KICC. While it could be assumed that churches with a presence on TV are more likely to see membership growth resulting from it than those without a TV presence, it is also probable that many independent churches that have no TV presence may have, over the years, witnessed an increase in attendees attributable to the influence of Christian television. A factor to consider in explaining this is that most of the Christian television stations available in the UK (some of which are based in other countries) often feature television evangelists and preachers that emphasise the importance of having a 'born-again experience', healing miracles, and prosperity. These TV stations broadcast spiritual outpourings from venues across the globe and promote Contemporary Christian Music. This has, over time, worked to expose the British public to a more contemporary and vibrant style of worship that aligns more with the non-liturgical style adopted by independent groups (see Section 2.1.1). It is therefore plausible that people from more established church backgrounds (and others in the secular society) who found the TV programmes appealing may have been drawn to the new, emerging, evangelical,

Pentecostal, and Charismatic oriented churches, most of which are independent congregations (Osgood, 2024; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005, 2012).

While independent churches may have benefitted disproportionately from a growing presence on TV, it is also likely that the resultant publicity boost worked inadvertently against these congregations by creating unanticipated problems with many of their stakeholder groups. As their growing numbers and wealth was coming into open view, this could have contributed to exacerbating public concerns about their accountability (Osgood, 2024; CIC, 2018). Also, funding issues need to be considered. The cost implications of staying on the air are likely to exert enormous strains on the finances of churches with a TV presence. It is often the case that donors are repeatedly asked to give in support of keeping such programmes going, and this could create funding-related accountability problematics (Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021).

6.4.7 Alpha Course and Messy Church Expression

The 'Alpha Course' is an eleven-week evangelistic initiative designed specifically for the contemporary age (Alpha UK, 2024). In 1990, Nicky Gumbel began popularising the course which aims to introduce people to the Christian faith. Since then, it has been widely utilised by churches in the various segments of the UK church community (Hunt, 2016; Gumbel, 2018; Trent Vineyard, 2023b). R9, an FGD participant, provides insight pointing to the scale to which the Alpha Course was recently employed by one umbrella group that has independent churches in its membership:

Participant R9, RLA Official
'They have a specific department for church planting and for evangelism and outreach. … In collaboration with Alpha, they did the biggest online Alpha, that there has been in the UK. I think there were 168 churches or something like that doing Alpha, which is a major contribution. … They certainly saw a lot of people come to the Lord through it.'

Research in 2002 indicated that churches using the Alpha Course are significantly more likely to experience increase in membership and attendance than those that are not (Randall, 2012). While the commonality of a correlation between running the course and experiencing growth

is contested (Hunt, 2016; Jackson, 2005), the view of Participant R9 suggests that churches in the UK continue to experience increased conversions through it.

Another outreach-oriented church expression that has yielded proven growth results is referred to as 'Messy Church'. Messy church operates on the concept that growth usually comes through attracting younger adults and children (Thorpe and Valentine, 2022; Jackson, 2005). Churches implementing the initiative offer fellowship, food, and fun in a family-friendly atmosphere (Brierley, 2019; Wolffe and Jackson, 2012). Brierley states that over 100,000 people attend messy churches in the UK.

6.5 Social Engagement Activities of Congregations in the UKICS

Bickley (2017) insists that UK churches are highly motivated to meet social needs and heavily engaged in social action. Also, a 2015 National Church and Social Action Survey by Jubilee Plus (a research-based organisation set up by New Frontiers, an ICS RLA) found that social action initiatives by UK churches (in forms such as food distribution, parent and toddler groups, homelessness assistance, and debt counselling) seem to enable connection with people and have a positive impact on church growth. These initiatives, as well as being a social good, enable people to be added to local congregations (Spencer, 2016). In effect, doing good through social engagement initiatives has been one of the strategies utilised by UK churches (including independent congregations) in connecting with people, and this often results in growth. R9, an FGD participant, and R3, an interviewee, shed light on this issue:

Participant R9, RLA Official
'I think there is a massive emphasis … on social action, … the value of being engaged in people's lives. So, getting people to belong, before they actually belong. It has become important, and great initiatives have opened up within the community. … There are lots of independent churches who are running their own food banks and professional counselling programmes. Some great things coming out, like supervised provision for parents who need to be supervised while they are having contact with their children and helping people to cope with bereavement. And there are just so many … and it is a great thing to see. But I am hearing time and time again that people are coming to Christ through it. … I am hearing genuine stories of people coming to Christ through social action.'

Participant R3, RLA Official
'A lot of our churches have a lot more community involvement than they had a decade ago. Some of them are involved in food banks, others are involved in ministry to the homeless. One church I know near here has a counselling organisation. … and it is seeking to lessen isolation and to bring companionship and purpose to people who have been particularly badly affected by the pandemic and issues of isolation, depression, and anxiety.'

Participant R9 suggests that independent churches strongly emphasise the need for social action, and Participant R3, asserts that many congregations in their membership have witnessed increased community involvement in the last ten years. Using various initiatives, independent churches make efforts to participate in community life by caring for people in the community. In return, their actions generate role acceptance and receptivity. As Participant R9 points out, by engaging in social actions, a church could create an environment for people to identify with the church and feel a genuine sense of belonging in the congregation, even before they actually belong.

Participant R3 refers to how independent churches responded well to some of the challenges faced by people in their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic. At this time, independent congregations had to adopt socially innovative ideas in delivering their social action initiatives. Participant C9 describes how with limited options in the lockdown period, their congregation still found a way of supporting the vulnerable:

Participant C9, Church Leader
'Almost everything was stopped, obviously because of the pandemic. No outreaches because it was locked down. … We had to obey the laws of the land, so that was one thing that we did. But then with the senior citizens, because they are vulnerable and they are dependent on us, we used to use mobile phones. Our team during the pandemic used to use mobile phones to communicate with them so that in case they have a need they can sometimes go to the door and leave whatever they had made. Before, they were not making any contact with them. Then, later on, when things began to relax, decided to make a level of contact that was permitted.'

While using phones seems a simple approach to adopt, the context provided by Participant C9 shows how expedient it is for independent churches to become more socially innovative. According to Bickley (2017), social innovation entails asking the question, 'how can we do

good things better?' It involves finding new ways of responding to social problems in systemic, scalable, and sustainable approaches, through making improvements in culture, attitude, and processes. In calling for social innovation to be embedded within the social action approaches of churches, Bickley suggests that it could drive greater social impact over the long term.

In making a further proposition, Bickley (p.7) states that often 'religious social action is delivered through small charities and congregations that have limited capacity for innovation'. As such, their activities need to be augmented by mediating bodies that will enable and support innovation. This clearly aligns with the findings of this research that the effective employment of revitalisation strategies and growth models in the ICS is best achieved through a partnership approach between independent churches and their RLAs.

6.5.1 Questions about Proselytism as Motivation for Social Engagement

It has been argued that drawing a link between doing good and church growth conveys the impression that social action initiatives are undertaken as a means to an end, which raises questions about proselytism (Spencer, 2016; Pennington, 2020). However, the findings of this study align with the view that while there is a desire to win converts, Christians do not usually set out to engage in social action with stated conditionalities (Davie, 2017), or to force their faith on recipients of their services (Spencer 2016; Pennington, 2020). Four IDI responses and one FGD response with bearing on this topic are outlined in Table 6.5:

Table 6.5: ROVs on 'Proselytization and ICS Social Action Initiatives'
'It is love for them. I do not know if I mentioned that the church is already involved in feeding the homeless in our building. We use it a lot to cater for the homeless people. So, getting into the winter, we give them shelter so they come and sleep. We cook for them. We feed them. Some of the men in the church sleep overnight with them. Some come from broken homes, broken relationships, drugs, alcohol. Different issues, different problems. The church is always around. They spend the night with them just to encourage them, share the word with them. Sometimes we help in preparing the food as well for the elderly in the community. To distribute it. … It just shows. It reflects, you know, and sometimes it can be contagious. People come and they want to be part of the church, you know, because of the love that they see.'   *(Participant C21)*   'I do not think that we do anything with necessarily a focus of purely attracting people. We do it out of a heart that we feel aligns with the heart of Jesus, and that in itself will sort of naturally be attractive, if that makes sense. So, certainly a real focus on loving and having some things happening within the

church which are able to love. I think that then becomes attractive to those people that have those needs.'
(Participant C18)

We were aware that when COVID hit, perhaps one of the first things that churches would do would be to cut their overseas giving, and we decided at the start not to do that, but to try and increase it. … We took up a couple of special offerings over COVID to give it all away to different churches in our locality as well, just to try and keep that focus not on us. And I think as that generous spirit exudes from a church, then its influence grows because people just see openness, they just see generosity, and I think that is the heart of Christ, isn't it?
(Participant C24, FGD)

'We started something called a homework club which was helping the children in the area with their homework. Because some of the areas are a bit deprived. So, that was another outreach.'
(Participant C9)

'We have … refugees who have been resettled in the area. So, we are reaching out to some of them. Helping them with the simple things. Like things to do with NHS, helping them to understand the school system, because some of them do not speak good English, and so when these forms come, we have had to help them fill these forms and so on and so forth. We have mums club and then the big one that we have is our outreach to senior citizens who are in residential homes.'
(Participant C9)

While conversions may result from the social action initiatives of churches, the ROVs in Table 6.5 clearly indicate that a loving and caring attitude (based on the biblical examples of Jesus) is usually at the core of their engagement activities (Louw, 2023; Kamer, 2018). Often, churches feel the needs in the community. It could be the needs of children in deprived neighbourhoods. It could also be the support needs of refugees. In these and other situations, churches are usually motivated to be like the biblical Good Samaritan and offer a helping hand.

While there may be a desire to meet a multiplicity of needs in the local community, limitations in resource availability can compel churches to become targeted in their approach (Pennington, 2020). As such, selection criteria may be required. Participant C2 suggests that the selection process adopted by their congregation for determining specific community needs to meet involves observation and strategic consideration as well as examination of statistics:

Participant C2, Church Leader
'Well, one of the things we have been trying to do in looking at the community is to think about what needs the community has, which we could bless them by giving support. … There are a number of young families in the community. … parents who are looking for things, activities, for their children, and opportunities to meet with other people. So, we run a mothers' and toddlers' group … And the

> final big way in which we have done this has really been, coming out of Lockdown, awareness of the statistics that are in the public domain, particularly about loneliness amongst the elderly.'

According to Participant C2, there are many young families in the community, seeking for activities for their children and opportunities to socialise. Having observed and considered this need, the church concluded that an appropriate response would be to set up a mothers' and toddlers' group. A second selection process applied by the congregation involves considering statistics in the public domain about local or national issues. Needs can also be identified through having foresight about likely future occurrences. For instance, while not claiming to be prophetic, FGD participant R9 foresaw that a cost-of-living crisis was looming in the horizon. Although crisis response requirements would be massively challenging, for the church it presents an opportunity to seek ways of supporting people in their struggles:

Participant R9, RLA Official
'I am not trying to be mega prophetic here. But I just feel over the next 12-18 months we are going to face new challenges in the church because of the cost of living, because of the way people are going to struggle. And whilst it is going to be a massive challenge, it is also a great open door. We just launched something here whereby we are going to give away 5000 winter hampers to families who are struggling.'

6.5.2 Catalogue of Social Action Initiatives by Independent Churches

Effort was made in data analysis to capture varied social action activities being undertaken by churches that study participants belong to. In all, 52 different initiatives were identified. These activities are outlined alphabetically in Table 6.6.

The variety of engagement efforts listed in Table 6.6 range from aerobics classes to support for partners of alcoholics. They include homework support for children from low-income families, and supervised support for parents having contacts with their fostered children (carried out with the approval of social services). The list also includes several community-based initiatives, like the publication of a catalogue of places and goings on within the community and operating a community car scheme to drive people to different places.

Independent churches are also involved in refugee resettlement schemes that, for instance, support refugees settling in the UK with National Health Service registration, English language lessons, and information about the school system:

Table 6.6: Social Engagement Activities of Study Participants' Congregations	
Aerobics sessions	Holiday feeding programme for children
After-school clubs for children	Homeless support
Bereavement support	Homework support for children
Birthday parties for senior citizens	Job support for youths
Black history celebration	Kids club
Cafes	Live music night
Car wash	Market stall in town centre
Care home visits	Meals on wheels
Carol service at care homes	Mental health support
Choir presentations at High Street	Money management workshop
Christmas hampers distribution	Mums club
Clothes distribution	Parent and toddler group
Coffee mornings	Parenting classes
Community barbecues	Poverty alleviation – with CAP
Community breakfast	Prison outreach
Community car scheme	Publication of catalogue for the community
Community fundraising	Refugee resettlement scheme
Community radio station	Rehabilitation of ex-prisoners
Crime prevention in liaison with local police	Senior citizens gatherings
Debt counselling	Sponsored walk
Drop-in centres	Sports day for children
Drug Addiction Support	Street pastor support for party/pub goers
Fashion shows	Summer camp for children
Food banks	Support for discharged patients
Fostering campaign	Support for parents of fostered children
Fuel vouchers	Support for partners of alcoholics

6.6 UK Independent Churches as Agents for Promoting Social Cohesion

The presence of churches in a local community is beneficial to the community's social fabric as churches are part of creating the social capital it needs (Corry, 2020). Social capital refers to 'the levels of trust, reciprocity and cooperative action in a community' (Bickley, 2018, p. 10). It is generated through interactions between people (Eriksson and Rataj, 2019), and is often componentised into cognitive and structural elements (Hikichi *et al.*, 2020). According to Hikichi *et al.*, the cognitive element of social capital describes people's perceptions of social

relations in their community, while the structural component focuses on what people do in terms of (for example) participation in social activities and informal socialising with neighbours. When churches engage in well-thought-out social actions in their communities of reach it enables them to generate significant amounts of (both bonding and bridging) social capital (Davie, 2017). It is also widely acknowledged that the forums provided by religious organisations (and their social engagement efforts) promote social cohesion within communities (Putnam, 2007; Pepper *et al.* 2019; Pennington, 2020). There is evidence from data to suggest that UKICS congregations play a significant role in enhancing social cohesion through their gatherings and social action initiatives (see below the views of IDI participant C11 and FGD participant C3).

A study in Australia (Pepper *et al.*, 2019) found that (in terms of belonging, acceptance of others, worth, civic participation, and social justice) social cohesion metrics were stronger among church attendees than the wider population. In the UK, a study commissioned by the Free Churches Group to explore churches' role in fractured communities and their involvement in enhancing social cohesion was published in November 2020 (Free Churches Group, 2024; Pennington, 2020; The Voice, 2020). According to Pennington, the study (conducted across 14 local councils within England) established that churches are embedded in their communities and often work quietly and concertedly to enhance social cohesion. They do this by utilising six church-based cohesion assets (buildings, community-wide networks, volunteers, formal and informal community leadership, convening power and transformational vision). The views of Participants C11 and C3 (see also Table 6.8) reveal how UK-based independent congregations are utilising these church-based cohesion assets in a coordinated approach with other agencies to transform people's lives in communities across the country. The role of UKICS entities in promoting social cohesion was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, a period in which most of this research was conducted. Participant C11 describes how their congregation's involvement helped in breaking barriers and improving connectedness at this time of need in the community:

Participant C11, Church Leader
'I meet with them once a week. In fact, a big group of those types of people, mental health teams and all sorts. We talked about individuals in our community who might need support and how we can provide that support during the lockdown. We housed the local clothes bank and we worked with the food resilience project in order to use our building, because it was standing empty, to feed local families in financial need. … In doing all of that, it just broke down so many barriers and so now we are really quite connected with other community organisations.'

Wilson (2020), the UK leader for Pioneer Network, an ICS RLA, assesses the churches' role in promoting social cohesion in the period following the introduction of government lockdown measures in March 2020. The measures were enacted in response to the corona virus pandemic (Walsh, 2020). Despite describing the period as one of 'intense disruption' for churches in Britain, Wilson suggests that Christians have utilised it to become catalysts for community building in their streets by forming 'Neighbourhood WhatsApp groups' that enable people to stay in touch, and offer a listening ear, as well as shopping for the vulnerable, elderly and those self-isolating. In Wilson's view, Christians (by doing this) are 'decrying fear, individualism and disconnection and creating community cohesion'. This view is validated by the findings of an online survey conducted by the National Churches Trust (NCT) in May 2020 which shows that during the lockdown churches established a wide range of new community support services (National Churches Trust, 2020), with the top new activity being contacting people who are isolated or vulnerable (Pennington, 2020). The survey involved 566 churches and it suggests that 89% of UK churches continued to provide some form of community support throughout the lockdown. Also, close to two-thirds of the respondents thought that because of COVID-19 churches will become more important in the future.

In line with Wilson's view and the NCT survey findings, FGD participant R6, an agency leader, argues that the Covid 19 pandemic created an opportunity for churches to network with others and play a centre stage role in meeting needs in communities (Schmidt *et al.*, 2023; Latonen, *et al.,* 2023):

Participant R6, RLA Leader
'It feels like for some churches, the last two years have absolutely propelled them right into the centre of providing for the needs in their community. And they have become so much more networked with, you know, the police and local authorities, social services, and a few others.'

Speaking on a more specific note, C3, an FGD participant, provides a detailed account of their congregation's involvement with the local council in breaking down barriers in a migrant community:

Participant C3, Church Leader
'The last 10 years, we have always had quite a big migrant community. … We work very closely with our local council. They actually come to us and say we have got this situation within the migrant community or the refugee groups that we have got. How can we partner with you as a church to help these people? … So, we are seeing a big difference there … Favour with local council and the police … and the breaking down of barriers between the different groups of people that we work with.'

Participant C3 refers to the close working relationship that exists between their congregation and the local council. Participant R12 suggests this may not always be the case given that some local governments continue to have misconceptions about the role of independent churches. The umbrella association senior leader calls for more conversations between independent churches and local councils to address the misconceptions and enhance closer engagement:

Participant R12, RLA Official
'I would love to see more engagement between local government and the independent churches. I know from my engagements … with local government that there are still a lot of misconceptions about independent churches, and I think that if there were more conversations between local government and independent churches, it will help to demystify some of the rhetoric that is out there and give the independent churches the credit and the affirmation that they deserve.'

Participant R12 also feels that RLAs may, at times, need to be involved in enabling churches to engage more closely with local authorities to promote social cohesion:

Participant R12, RLA Official
'There are some entities, some organisations, that will not necessarily willingly and openly speak to individual churches. But will speak or be more readily available to speak to an organisation that is representative of those churches. … Sometimes, you know, organisations will say "look now we want to speak to your umbrella body because we are already aware of that umbrella body, and that umbrella body has wide accreditation."'

An argument also needs to be made for central government to engage more constructively in achieving an effective working partnership with UK churches, including independent congregations. Given the contributions being made by churches (Schmidt *et al.*, 2023), an appreciative and listening tone is expected from government. Participant R7 suggests that this expectation is currently not being met:

Participant R7, RLA Official
'The church is providing a lot of services for local people, often the more marginalised and neglected communities. Churches sometimes are virtually the only group that is still actually there. Everybody else has retreated elsewhere. So, churches have a reach that the government can only envy because they don't. … They can see the value of what churches are doing, but on the other hand they don't seem, at least to me, to be listening very much to what churches are saying … if it doesn't fit with the government agenda.'

It is clearly the case that individual churches in the UK employ a variety of outreach-based growth generating initiatives in serving the communities where they operate. Yet, the synergistic benefits derivable from networking (Holtström and Anderson, 2021; Kachgal, 2015) suggest that a more-coordinated approach that involves partnerships and agency is required in effecting actualisation of widespread church growth. This associational networking approach is also needed for participating productively in civil society (González-Martinez *et al.*, 2023), addressing issues of inequalities and deprivation, and promoting social cohesion, and it is through such coordinated ways of being present in public spaces and engaging with society at the neighbourhood, communal and national levels (Burgess *et al.*, 2010), that the ICS is attracting recognition and social capital, increasing confidence in its role, and enhancing overall stakeholder satisfaction.

6.7 Venues Where UK Independent Churches Meet

As determined in this study, independent churches meet in a variety of venues, ranging from owned buildings (some of which are listed) to living rooms in private homes (see Table 6.7). Other places include hired facilities in office complexes, community centres, schools, hotels, pubs, cafes, converted cinemas and warehouses, as well as buildings owned by their RLAs and other churches. There is also a growing trend in meeting at online venues (see Section 6.7.2).

Table 6.7: ROVs on 'Venues where Independent Churches Meet'
'The church is fairly young and so 2 1/2 years been running and membership about 80 so far, and it is growing. We are currently very unorthodox because we meet in somewhere called the upper room, which is on the top floor of an office complex, and we are really praying believing the Lord for a new purpose-built space that will accommodate more people.' *(Participant C17, FGD)*
'The church is a listed building, and it has a lot of history. So, every year people from all walks of life come over to visit the church to look around.' *(Participant C21)*
'[*Name of RLA*] owns the building. *(Participant C24, FGD)*
'We then flipped again, so, went from a community centre into peoples' homes. And interestingly, we are finding people each week are coming now. So, one person inviting one person. And it is totally normal to sit at somebody's house and have a cup of tea and a piece of cake.' *(Participant C25, FGD)*
'As a church, we meet in a school and so one of the opportunities we have had is to come to do an after-school club for the kids who attend that school, which gives the opportunity for parents who work to have childcare for an hour and a half, then longer than the school day.' *(Participant C2)*

From the experience of FGD participant C17's church it can be deciphered that increasing attendance numbers mean independent churches often outgrow their meeting places. For this and other reasons, congregations that occupy rented facilities may from time to time need to find alternative venues which can pose challenges in terms of their social licence to operate (Barker, 2017; see Section 2.8.2). C14, another FGD participant, narrates a series of venue-related issues faced by their congregation, including a regeneration order and a declined F1 (formerly D1) building application return from the local council:

Participant C14, Church Leader
'The challenges we faced before COVID-19 set in was the building we have. We leased the building which we had to move into another building with intention to buy, but later discovered after four years in that building that the Council came with a regeneration order … and the Council declined our D1 application, so we were forced to move out. That was before COVID. So, during COVID we tried of course, like everybody else to meet online. … After COVID, the nearest location we could find was another remote village outside the city, and there was no bus. So, you can imagine how it was. It has just been a struggle in terms of location. And we recently again moved, 2-3 months ago, to another village and people are now beginning to return.'

It is argued that the UK government can play a role in ameliorating the venue-related challenges faced by independent churches. For instance, Participant C19, calls for legislation that would offer independent churches first right of refusal when premises owned by denominational churches are up for sale. The thinking is that the shared commonality in faith background is a basis for extending this concession to the ICS:

Participant C19, Church Official
'One of the big issues with independent churches is premises. Finding a building. … I think that is an area maybe we can ask for the government to give us a little bit of aid. Like, for example, an Orthodox Church is selling its property. If the government would give us first refusal rather than putting it straight onto the market. Because we have something in common, it's the same belief system. You know, we want to keep it going as it were. Also, maybe subsidise the amount so it is not like the normal amounts because of the good work that we are doing in the society. … I think subsidising premises and helping even find premises, appropriate premises, would be one thing that could be done so that the community knows you are there to stay. They don't think you are fleeting here and there, because a lot of independent churches have meetings in like classrooms or hotels, but it changes. And the community likes continuity. They like to see that you are here.'

Participant C19 makes the point that communities love continuity and the fleeting presence of independent churches in communities can be reversed by increased acquisition of permanent places of worship. This would enable these congregations to become better embedded in meeting needs within their localities (Dornbrack, 2023). For instance, going back to the ROVs in Table 6.7, Participant C2 talks about how their congregation meets in a school and the opportunity it provides to support working parents with childcare needs. The idea of running an after-school club at the same venue suggests a strategic utilisation of their meeting space.

This approach which appears to be commonly practiced in the ICS is the focus of discussion in the next section.

6.7.1 Strategic Utilisation of Church Buildings and Spaces

Brand (2018) claims that churches decline when there is a focus on keeping a building open the way it has always been. This assertion is validated by a 2019 study which found that nearly 90% of UK church buildings now serve as 'community hubs' for hosting, among other things, children's nurseries, concerts, senior citizens' events, farmers markets, and polling booths (Brierley, 2019; Becket, 2019).

The suggestion from this study is that independent churches are becoming more strategic in the utilisation of their buildings, meeting places, and spaces. As can be observed from the ROVs in Table 6.8, the resultant effects include increased capacity to meet needs in the local community and more opportunities to attract people to their venues, leading to enhanced social acceptance of the role of these churches. There is also the additional benefit of getting new church members in this process. For instance, Participant C4, reveals how a shift in approach to serving the community indoors yielded dividends in church growth. On the other hand, C3, an FGD participant, outlines the wide usage of their building, and points out the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns on its use and how the community warmly welcomed its reopening:

Table 6.8: ROVs on 'Strategic Utilisation of Church Buildings in the ICS'
'Our building is first and foremost church, but we use it during the week to run our community led projects like doing food deliveries, working with the young people, with the migrant community, and it is also used as a conference centre. So, local businesses would book us out and hire us for conferences, as well as different ministries from around the country would come to our centre and use it for their events.'   *(Participant C3, FGD)*
'Years ago, we were very much out on the streets, shall we say, proclaiming the gospel and those kinds of initiatives, marching through the streets. But since [*year withheld*] when I took over, we have a different approach … For example, like many churches, we have a parent and toddler group and a number of people have joined our church from the parent and toddler group.'   *(Participant C4)*
'During lockdown, obviously everything shut down and stopped. The building was literally locked up and we came down once a week to check it through, and that was pretty much it. So, coming back in

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> after lockdown, it has been a slow transition back. I think the quickest transition was reopening a lot of our community starts because people in the community just wanted to come back in. They wanted to come back to somewhere familiar, they tell us.'
> *(Participant C3, FGD)*

Wilson (2019) details the innovative idea adopted by some Pioneer UK churches that operate in the Midlands area of England who (once a month) replace their usual Sunday service with a Sunday morning community breakfast. They open their church venues on a Sunday morning to provide a free breakfast for the local community. According to Wilson, this enables them to connect with people, listen to their stories, share food together, and over time, share the good news of the Christian faith. It can then be assumed that as independent churches take more open-door-minded steps in their communities, they attract more people to their places of worship, enhance their societal acceptance and improve their growth figures.

6.7.2 Challenges Associated with Online-Only Church Venues

Growing digitalisation has led to increased usage of online means in societies around the world. For UK churches, this trend was heightened during the covid 19 lockdowns when it became necessary to shift all meetings to online-only venues (Francis and Village, 2022; Trent Vineyard, 2023b). Given that this research was ongoing at the time of the lockdowns, an analytic opportunity emerged (particularly during the FGD sessions) to test the effectiveness of operating online-only venues for church activities. Besides other widely acknowledged issues like technical malfunctions, participants' responses point to unique challenges associated with this approach. For example, FGD participant C25 acknowledges that their congregation gained momentum through running online meetings during the lockdown periods. However, it became apparent following end of Christmas festivities that certain social needs of congregants could only be met by people being in proximity at a physical venue. Another FGD participant, C24, presents an honest assessment highlighting limitations to online church models in terms of membership size:

Participant C25, Church Leader
'We went online and actually built quite a bit of momentum in the city, really surprising. … Just after Christmas this year, we realised [*how*] that although we were gathering in the venue, actually people in church missed so much the change. People wanted to be in a circle. They wanted to be eyeballing each other. They wanted to eat together.'

Participant C24, Church Leader
'I am not really sure what size of church we are, if I am honest. … Sometimes, we do not have a clue what is going on when we look online. I mean, we have got hundreds of people watching, but I do not know who they are, where they are from, whether they are part of the church, whether they are just being nosy. I think that is the honest take. We stopped all our midweek online stuff as soon as we could. We went back into in-person, partly because we have got a good facility for it. So, we try to encourage people back in. We have a cafe that is open every day of the week. So that is kind of our hub. A lot of people come in throughout the week.'

Findings from this study suggest that during the lockdown period, attendance rates in independent churches increased because of opportunities provided online for people to fellowship together from across geographical boundaries. However, considering the views of Participants C25 and C24, it seems online-only venues remained an unnatural territory for church gatherings as there was an eagerness to return to in-person modes. Similarly, FGD participant R9 makes the case that 'pyjama church' (as the participant refers to it) is unreal. The argument being that it engenders a laid-back attitude in terms of commitment to face-to-face church attendance. Also, it does little to support the development of other attributes of Christian commitment, including financial giving. This view is shared by FGD participant C31. From the experiences of both Participants R9 and C31 it is evident that many people (having gotten into the habit of joining church from the comfort of home) were unwilling to return to in-house fellowshipping after the lockdown:

Participant R9, RLA Official
'People enjoying pyjama church, you know, they got into a habit after 12 to 18 months. So, when we stopped, we got quite a few back. And people say, oh yes, you are losing people. I have got the persuasion though that if they are not coming, they are not fellowshipping. They are not giving. They are not worshipping. It is not real. Even though with all our different expressions of church, there still needs to be a focus on gathering God's people and corporate worship and however we do it. So, we have lost some, but we have gained quite a lot as well.'

Participant C31, Church Leader
'We have some members who are comfortable just to come once every two weeks. First of all, it was difficult. For me it was different. Let me say for me. Because these are people who were very committed and were there Sunday after Sunday and now, they come like once every two weeks, once every three weeks. At first, I said "is everything ok? Are you alright?" Then the answer would be, "but I was there two weeks ago", and they did not feel any how about it. So, I am thinking, that is not who you used to be.'

It is noteworthy that Participant R9 acknowledges there can be different expressions of church. In this regard, the thinking resulting from additional findings of this study is that while running entirely virtual church services may not be fancied in the ICS, the sector is open to employing a hybrid approach. The varied expressions of this approach are discussed in Section 6.7.3.

After the lockdown, many independent churches experienced a dip in membership numbers, as those on the fringes (in terms of their commitment levels) failed to return. Added to this, as Participant R9's contribution suggests, some congregants from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds were initially reluctant to resume in-person fellowshipping given that there was still a significant risk of the Covid-19 virus being transmitted (see Table 6.9). However, following the resumption of face-to-face gatherings, many independent congregations also witnessed an influx of new members:

Table 6.9: ROVs on 'UKICS Church Attendance Rates Immediately After Covid-19'
'We did close over that period for a minimum time. But we then went online. I think most churches did. … When we came back into services, and we were one of the first to open in the area, we had almost immediately a full take up of folks that we had prior. … The congregation itself has returned to its fullness with just one or two exceptions. … We have had to increase the services because of the need to add the new people to the existing people that have returned … a sort of multiple service thing.' *(Participant C12, FGD)*
'We obviously, like everyone, went online during the lockdowns. Came out for a couple of months in September 2020, I believe. Then went back online and then came out again 2021 Easter Sunday. And as regards what has happened with membership, we lost about 10% who never came back to church. We had some people that came back slowly to church. Now we have new members in church. … We have actually grown larger than we were before COVID.' *(Participant C31, FGD)*
'I think it would be fair to say churches have been remarkably resilient. … Churches have seen people come to faith during the COVID-19 period. … However, twinned with that, churches would report that the fringe people who attended the church, but perhaps attended once a month, … is not returned to quite the same level. So, churches have seen some drop off and some increase.' *(Participant R1)*

> 'We lost quite a few through lockdown, and we still have some people who have not come back yet, especially from the BAME community, … who are concerned about catching the virus and with all the reports on the news about that. That said, we have also seen a lot of new people come in … who did not know Christ and they have come to Christ since lockdown, which is very encouraging.'
> *(Participant R9, FGD)*

Participant C12 asserts that the period following end of Covid-19 lockdowns marked a big change in fortunes given the large number of new converts that joined churches. In seeking to provide a rationale for the influx of new attendees into independent churches, IDI participant C4 and FGD participant C23 argue that it may have resulted from greater openness to the gospel shown by sections of the British public impacted by the pandemic:

Participant C4, Church Leader
'We are talking post COVID here, and I think in our town there is a difference. There is more of an openness. There seems to be a kind of an awareness that there is more to life than what people thought it was before COVID. In general, we live in a quiet reserved town. … People would always be nice. But they would never really engage. Now, what we are finding after COVID is that because people have been through some difficult times, and … you know, we were serving them and showing them the gospel … we have much more openness now and people are very free and open to talk.'

Participant C23, Church Leader
'In the last couple of years, where it has been quite troublesome with everything surrounding COVID and stuff, I think it is almost like the doors have just been open from peoples' hearts. That is what I have noticed. … From what I have observed, the openness is there, the willingness to actually listen to the gospel.'

Returning to analysis of the effectiveness of entirely virtual church gatherings, it is evident that online church venues offer limited social interactions. Added to this, there are adaptation issues. FGD participant R6 shares information suggesting that young people in their member congregations struggled to adapt to online church during the pandemic. In a similar vein, FGD participant C10 states that their church has employed a youth pastor to help with rebuilding the youth programme which struggled during the Covid-19 pandemic:

Participant R6, RLA Leader
'Churches would have gone online and what we found is that while adults adapted to online church, young people really struggled, which in one way is ironic because obviously they are the digital natives. But you

know, an hour-long church gathering from their perspective just was completely disengaging. So, that is very sobering.'

Participant C10, Church Official
'Our youth programme really did struggle during COVID, and we have got to rebuild that. We have employed a new youth pastor, and so we are beginning to rebuild that.'

6.7.3 Implementing a Hybrid Approach

With the added experience of running fully virtual services, independent churches emerged from the Covid-19 lockdowns with a variety of options in terms of avenues for hosting congregational meetings. For instance, FGD participant R19 states that their RLA (which constitutes of a mixture of small and large churches) now has three operational strands in terms of venue, fully physical, fully hybrid and fully virtual:

Participant R19, RLA Leader
'We have a mixture. We have some very small ones, very few. Then we have some large ones. And of course, COVID, you know, things have even changed a bit. We have some that are fully physical and fully hybrid and fully virtual. So, we have 3 strands now, which work well for everybody. So, it depends on where you find yourself.'

Although the three strands mentioned by Participant R19 are implementable, it is clear from the findings of this study that many ICS officials have an aversion for online-only church venues (because of the challenges associated with them). While the option of choice remains in-person gatherings, there is increasing emphasis within the sector on the need to employ a hybrid approach. A hybrid approach would involve conducting some church activities online. It would also require investing in the life streaming of in-person events. In a changing and more challenging operational environment, UKICS RLAs realise the need to appropriately reposition their resource role to accommodate supporting churches intending to utilise online venues, whether in a fully virtual or hybrid form. RLA resource role in this area includes providing training and forums for exchange of ideas, where, for instance, churches intending

to implement a hybrid approach can learn from others that are already in the process. Participant R5 brings this fact to light:

Participant R5, RLA Official
'We encourage the leaders of churches to get together, and we facilitate opportunities for them to get together and share their expertise. … For example, a lot of people wanted to learn how to do hybrid church, and how to access people during the pandemic who were at home, and how to do Zoom based church, how to do gathered church but still film it and make that available on the Internet. Other people doing specifically online only forms of church, and had been doing that for a while, and we shared some of the expertise that was pulled across the churches.'

Although many independent congregations were already implementing a hybrid approach pre Covid-19 pandemic, the ROVs in Table 6.10 suggest that it has become heightened since the end of the lockdown periods**:**

Table 6.10: ROVs on 'Growing Use of Hybrid Approach in Hosting Meetings'
'We went online due to COVID. … We are meeting at the church on Sunday. But the midweek programme, we have it on Zoom still.'   *(Participant C33, FGD)*
'But this dual thing that most churches have … this hybrid church where you can be online and attend church, I think it is also happening. I suppose some people can be in the convenience of their own houses and still link up to church. So, the hybrid thing is helping people who would not want to come to church to still attend.'   *(Participant C32)*
'Pre-pandemic we were running two services and then when COVID hit we went online. We were kind of really blessed with some great people that have experience in presenting online. … Without them we would not have probably been able to have gone online or the quality of it being as good. … We went back on Good Friday 2021. That was our first service, and it has been a steady kind of build. I mean we still do online, … not knowing who they are really, only knowing those that sent comments on the service. And we have tried to put in leaders over that. That is kind of an online community, to some extent, which we get a bit of traction and a bit of kind of conversation from but not loads really. But our in-person service has been growing more and more.'   *(Participant C10, FGD)*
'We still have a few online. I am not sure who they are. But we also have some of our members who go online on Sundays when they have worked.'   *(Participant C31, FGD)*

FGD participant C10 informs about the in-house expertise their congregation has for operating online services. Although their growing in-person service receives prime attention, along with this, the church continues to stream events online, which has led to the establishment of an

online community. There are varieties of opportunities open to churches for engaging with online communities. For instance, C25, another FGD participant, talks about 'Speed Church', a 15-minute virtual expression that their congregation employs:

Participant C25, Church Leader
'Got something called Speed Church where it was like literally 15 minutes online Facebook live. One song, one prayer. One to one worship kind of thing, and the amount of people that connect into that, yes, it is awesome.'

It needs to be considered if UKICS entities are doing enough to tap into the potential for developing online church communities. Given that online is not the preferred mode of meeting (and recognising the increased numbers associated with in-person attendance in the ICS) congregations in the sector may be ill-equipped, apathetic/ insufficiently motivated to harness this potential. There is a wealth of potential for enhanced growth and impact available to churches through a strategic emphasis on establishing online communities. However, this potential can only be harnessed by engaging effectively on online venues.

6.8 Chapter Summary

A changing socio-cultural landscape has meant that there is declining enthusiasm for religion in 21st century British society. Faced with a more challenging operational terrain, the ICS has been stirred into employing restructuring strategies and more growth-driven initiatives. As discussed in this chapter, there is a weight of analytical evidence to suggest that approaches adopted by vast sections of the sector have yielded visible dividend. Many independent churches are not only experiencing increased attendance rates, but there is also significant community impact from their social engagement activities and role in promoting social cohesion.

Similarly, disruptions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic provided an even greater impetus for the UKICS to seek out innovative repositioning and revitalisation strategies. Following the sector's experience of running online-only venues during the Covid-19 lockdowns, there is increased application of a hybrid approach across the sector. In view of opportunities for

enhanced growth and impact offered by online means, the thinking is that the sector needs to engage more effectively to harness this potential.

An extensive discourse on the restructuring and revitalisation strategies employed by UKICS actors has been undertaken in this chapter. In the succeeding chapter, focus will shift to another key area of research interest, namely the stakeholder accountability of churches in the ICS. The discussion will also consider the role of RLAs and charity regulators in this accountability process.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

STAKEHOLDER ACCOUNTABILITY OF INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

7.0 Introduction

A key presupposition in this research is that independent churches have stakeholders that they are accountable to, and their organisational performance is impacted by stakeholder demands. Additional related assumptions made in the study are that public scrutiny of independent churches has become heightened in recent years, and there are growing calls for better accountability by these congregations in areas such as leadership, safeguarding, and finance. It is also considered that RLAs have a significant role to play in the operation of an effective Independent Church Stakeholder Accountability (ICSA) model. In adopting UKICS stakeholder accountability and transparency as an area of research focus, three research objectives were set, along with accompanying research questions (see Table 7.1).

Table 7.1: Key Areas of Analytical Focus in Chapter Seven

Key Areas of Research Focus on the UKICS	Related Research Objectives	Related Research Questions	Underpinning Theories and Concepts
Independent church stakeholder accountability and transparency framework and the role of RLAs in its effective operation	**RO2**: To identify the factors that trigger accountability concerns in the UKICS and the role of RLAs in the operation of an effective accountability and transparency framework for the sector. **RO3:** To determine the extent to which the leadership structures and governance practices in independent churches enhance diversity and safeguarding. **RO5:** To examine if there is a need for further measures to be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction.	**RQ3**: What role do UKICS RLAs play in the operation of an effective accountability and transparency framework for the sector? **RQ5:** To what extent do the leadership structures and governance practices of UK-based independent churches enhance diversity and safeguarding? **RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory and Christian theological concepts.

Survey analytical outcomes on UKICS stakeholder accountability and transparency issues are presented in Chapter 4. In this chapter, further exploratory outcomes will be presented, beginning with a definition of the concept of accountability practiced in ICS associational settings. Information will also be provided from analysis of IDI and FGD data on who the stakeholders of independent churches are, the order of priority accorded to them, and the stakeholder accountability problematics associated with the UKICS. Additionally, research participants' perspectives will be harnessed in proposing an effective ICSA model. In this analysis process, effort was made to determine the part played by not only RLAs but also external regulators in the functionality of this accountability framework.

7.1 Concept of Accountability in ICS Associational Settings

An important guiding concept for operating an accountability system in the UKICS is to achieve a balance between independent churches not being accountable, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, independent churches coming under control. Participant C7 explains why it is vital to avoid both extremes:

Participant C7, Church Leader
'When you are totally independent and not accountable to anybody, it becomes a disaster. The same way if it becomes so controlling and manipulative that you end up losing who you are, then it ceases to serve the purpose for which it is set up.'

In seeking to achieve the required balance between the two extremes described by Participant C7, the more common approach would be for an ICS RLA to transform its membership into a relational and mutually accountable community (Reynolds *et al.,* 2021; Stevens, 2014). Participant R12 contributes on this topic and two FGD participants, R17 and C17, provide further insights into the reasoning behind this approach (see Table 7.2):

Table 7.2: ROVs on 'Common Approach to Accountability in UKICS RLAs'
'There are different models that organisations use. We use a mutual accountability model … We allow them to remain autonomous, but within that autonomy, there is a willingness for them to be objectively scrutinised.' *(Participant R12)* 'Primarily, it is a relational network because we are a network of independent churches. Every church is an independent charity, but it is a matter of choosing to come together for the sake of the Kingdom, for mutual benefit, for mutual support, encouragement, and to try and build something together.' *(Participant R17, FGD)* 'It is very much relational. … Pastors looking for accountability without control I think is something that is very clear from within our sphere, and I think people are always looking for relational accountability. … So, in our family of churches, we are very much based on relational accountability, … it gives the congregation a sense of a wider … accountability to something that is bigger than themselves.' *(Participant C17, FGD)*

As such, the concept of accountability (Agyemang, 2023) commonly practiced within the membership of UKICS RLAs can be described as a combination of relational and mutual accountability. From an interorganisational perspective, relational accountability is a form of *holding ourselves accountable* (Stewart *et al*., 2023). Although it is widely practiced in various spheres, Fraser (2022) points out that the application of relational accountability is contextually determined to fit the requirements in a setting. In implementing it, attention is paid to 4Rs which are considered essential in relationships; namely, respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and relevance. Mutual accountability involves actors voluntarily committing to an accountability relationship with the aim of achieving complementary and commonly shared goals (Kim, 2022). Putting both terms together, the concept of integrating relational and mutual accountability is grounded in the understanding that accountability is based on relationship, and it is mutually beneficial for all involved.

A further attribute of relational and mutual accountability (as practiced in the ICS) is that accountability takes place by consent. Participant C7 sheds light on the modus operandi of this accountability relationship:

Participant C7, RLA Official
'I am only accountable as far as I am prepared to surrender. I think there is nothing that I surrender that I have not consented to. In other words, it is what you might call accountability by consent. Do I consent to be accountable? So, there is no autonomy that I actually lose. It is different from the other networks where you are almost like under somebody's guardianship. … It is a mutually accountable network. It does not take away any autonomy.'

A key takeaway from the view expressed by Participant C7 is that in the working relationship between independent churches and their RLAs, implementing an accountability mechanism on the premise of consent minimises any feeling of loss of autonomy for the participating churches. This consent is usually given on the understanding that whatever structures and measures that are put in place for accountability purposes must not stifle the vision of the local church or seek to do away with their right to self-governance. Participant R1 and FGD Participant C17 stress the importance of respecting these relational boundaries:

Participant R1, RLA Official
'Our realms of authority from our perspective must never be seen to challenge existing structures of authority. So, in many ways, it is down to the member church leadership to decide how far reaching our authority can be because while we are here to support, we do not want to become a denomination or have a denominational structure. … As an accrediting and accountability organisation, we do not seek to fill that role. That is why we are very clear that it is a mutual accountability relationship.'

Participant C17, Church Leader
'I think people are always looking for relational accountability, but when it becomes a top-down, and we must implement this like this, then I think the leaders get a little bit cautious for fear of control or fear of having to do something in a different way.'

Bringing these opening ideas together, the dominant concept of accountability operated by UKICS RLAs is an integrated form of relational and mutual accountability. It is based on an offer of support from an RLA and consent from participating churches. These churches are represented by their leaders, and they are looking for ways to be accountable without coming under denominational structures of control. Given that one of the objectives of this study is to uncover the role of RLAs in the operation of a fit for purpose ICSA model, it seems appropriate to conceive that such a framework would need to recognise and preserve the autonomous status of participating independent congregations.

7.2 Identification and Prioritisation of Independent Church Stakeholders

Table 7.3 presents participants ROVs on the identification and prioritisation of UK independent church stakeholders. As highlighted in the table, there was a need to garner additional information on this topic by further exploring it with independent church leaders in an FGD session. Analysis of the responses in Table 7.3 suggests an alignment with the findings of the ICSUOS (see Section 4.2.1). These findings point to a stakeholder network that is comprehensive in conceptualisation and accommodates a broad spectrum of internal and external stakeholders (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997; Freeman *et al.*, 2020).

Table 7.3: ROVs on 'ICS Stakeholder Prioritisation and Accountability'
'In doing things, the first thing I think about is God really… How does God see this? Having said that, I said earlier we have a multicultural multi-ethnic church. So, one of the things that we consider is, in the culture that we are ministering to, and that we are called to, how does that culture see this, and how will this culture respond to this, and how will they receive our ministry? … Within the context of holiness not compromising, you know, doctrines or Scripture.' *(Participant C31, FGD)*
'When we talk of maybe stakeholders, we ensure that members' needs are met. Apart from that, we ensure that the thing that we do as well is beneficial to the community. … Also, in terms of our stakeholders as well, we have relationship with other churches.' *(Participant C33, FGD)*
'Obviously, congregation members. That is a given. We have responsibility to them.' *(Participant C27, FGD)*
'You have got an apostolic type of figure going out and pioneering something. But then they need to actively seek out others around them. Not yes men who will say everything to them, but people that will challenge them and will ask questions of them and will represent the views of the body.' *(Participant R7)*
'I also feel a sense of responsibility to the partners of the church who stayed with the church who have committed their time, their resources, their energy over a long period of time to really respect them in that process of rebuilding and reshaping. So, we have done a big push on partnership again, trying to really value that connectedness on one area.' *(Participant C24, FGD)*
'Well, I cannot speak for other churches, but all I know is that we are very transparent. Our accounts here are done on a weekly basis. Our report is given, but them anyone that wishes to come and inspect our accounts can do so at any given time.' *(Participant C39)*
'A definite plus with the umbrella group is that it holds churches to account. … The umbrella groups bring a sort of credibility and accountability.' *(Participant C19)*
'Different people from member churches get involved at different levels within that organisation. They are not employed by them, but they have responsibility, and that responsibility stretches out to having set meetings with different pastors and leaders of other churches to check in with them to allow accountability. So, I think they actually do it really well.'

(Participant C18)

'One time I was invited to a function for faith leaders. … One of them was talking to me and he alluded to the fact that, "oh, you are one of those churches that literally what you are saying is you have no sort of accountability. You know, you do not have a connection to maybe a higher person or group." I think I did begin to tell him that no, that is not true. but I could not finish my conversation.'
(Participant C9)

'I know they have a good system in the UK. Every year you have to submit your accounts to the Charity Commission and the Company House.'
(Participant C35)

'A wider process, I think, in terms of accountability. … We need to remember those external accountability factors. Regulators. For example, financial regulators, social services, police, other people who will feed into how we are accountable.'
(Participant R10, FGD)

The diversities of views expressed in Table 7.3 reveal some of the major considerations in the minds of independent ministers as they and the congregations they lead play an active role in their localities of operation, and in the wider society. There is evidence to suggest that they are thinking about the value that is offered to individuals and groups, how well this offer will be received, and the kind of influence likely to be exercised because of the offer. Also, there is a recognition of the need for accountability and transparency, and the expediency of acting out of a sense of responsibility to God and various groups that affect or are affected by their operations. These considerations reflect attributes of stakeholder accountability. By analysing data extracts from the ROVs in Table 7.3, themes emerged pointing to a multiplicity of independent church stakeholders as outlined in Table 7.4:

Table 7.4: Outcome of Thematic Analysis Showing Independent Church Stakeholders

Data Extract	Theme	Stakeholder(s)
C31 'In doing things, the first thing I think about is God really. How does God see this?'	Accountability to God	God
C31 'We have a multicultural multi-ethnic church. … So, the culture that we are ministering to, …. how does that culture see this, and how will this culture respond?	Accountability to the culture	Society, Seekers
C39 'We are very transparent. … anyone that wishes to come and inspect our accounts can do so at any given time.'	Accountability to the public	Society

C33 'We ensure that the thing that we do … is beneficial to the community.'	Accountability to the community	Local community
C33 'When we talk of maybe stakeholders, we ensure that members' needs are met'.	Accountability to members	Church members
C27 'Obviously, congregation members. That is a given. We have responsibility to them'.	Accountability to members	Church members
C33 'Also, in terms of our stakeholders as well, we have relationship with other churches.'	Accountability to other churches	Other churches
R7 'You have got an apostolic type of figure going out and pioneering something. But then they need to actively seek out others around them.'	Accountability to leaders in the church	Employees, Volunteers
C24 'Responsibility to the partners of the church who stayed with the church who have committed their time, their resources, their energy over a long period of time.'	Accountability to committed church partners	Volunteers, Internal donors, External donors
C19 'The umbrella group … holds churches to account.'	Accountability to umbrella group	RLA
C18 'Different people from member churches … having set meetings with different pastors and leaders of other churches to check in with them to allow accountability.'	Accountability to member churches	Peers in the RLA
C9 'One time I was invited to a function for faith leaders. … One of them was talking to me and he alluded to the fact that, "oh, you are one of those churches that literally what you are saying is you have no sort of accountability."'	Accountability to people of other faith	Other religious groups
C35 'Every year you have to submit your accounts to the Charity Commission and the Company House.'	Accountability to statutory bodies	Statutory regulators
R10 'We need to remember those external accountability factors, … regulators, social services, police, other people who will feed into how we are accountable.'	Accountability to governmental and statutory authorities	Government, Statutory regulators

Different independent church stakeholder relationships are identified in Table 7.4. By reviewing them, a variety of accountability relationships can be observed with spiritual, internal, external, horizontal, and vertical dimensions (Agyemang, 2023; Osisioma, 2013) as shown in Fig. 7.1. Classifying these stakeholder relationships as either internal or external, the internal stakeholders are God, congregation members, employees, volunteers, and internal donors. The external stakeholders are society, seekers, local community, government, statutory regulators, RLAs, RLA peers, other churches and religious groups, and external

donors. The spiritual, upward, and horizontal implications of the identified independent church stakeholder network are discussed in the next section.

Figure 7.1: Stakeholder Accountability Framework of Independent Churches
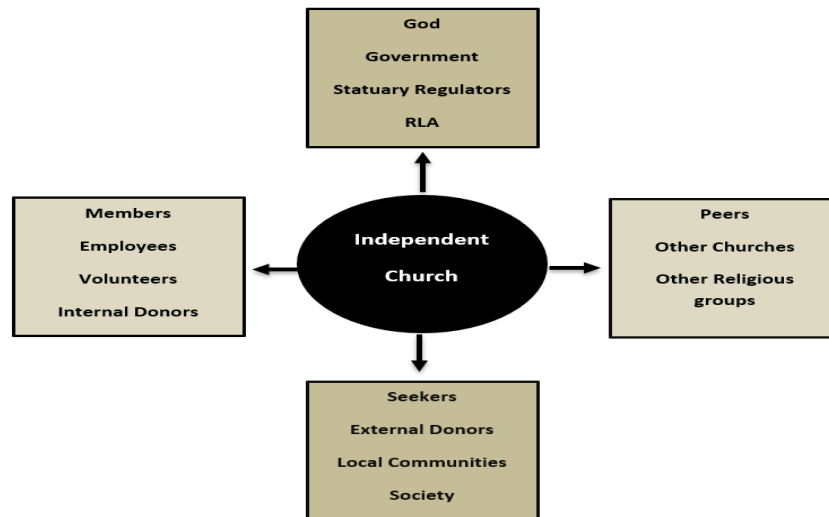
7.2.1 Independent Church Spiritual, Upward, and Horizontal Accountability

Spiritual accountability (in the context of Christianity) is a theological concept that holds relevance in the operations of independent churches (Jacobs, 2005; Rose, 2023). Christians and churches relate with God in a form that is spiritual (Vosloo, 2023), and often, the basis for establishing an independent church is traceable to what is referred to as 'a call from God'. In addressing this theme, Participant C7, a church leader, states as follows: 'one of the key aspects of what I might call the fundamentals of being an independent church is the ability to do what God has called you to do.' This sense of calling is usually accompanied with the assumption of a stewardship role that involves a commitment of spiritual accountability to God (Kamer, 2018; Rose, 2023). The implication being that God owns the church and he gives the directives that guide its functioning. The congregants belong to him, and the finances that are raised also belong to him and should be disbursed in keeping with his divine instructions. This understanding, where imbibed, enables a culture of integrity and transparency to become established. For instance, by expanding on the contribution of Participant C39, insight can be

gained on the practice of spiritual/biblical accountability and its resultant effect in an independent church setting:

Participant C39, Church Official
'Well, I cannot speak for other churches, but all I know is that we are very transparent. Our accounts here are done on a weekly basis. Our report is given, but them anyone that wishes to come and inspect our accounts can do so at any given time. That is the way we look at it. It is not our money. It is God's money, and we answer to him, and every penny should be counted. That the accounts, the money, has been done away with I cannot understand because I always come back, it is God's money. It is not my money. We normally keep every receipt that we can. So that, you know, they can come and have a look and see that everything coming in is recorded.'

Besides its implications as it relates to the management of finances, indexes for determining the spiritual accountability level of a church would include the authenticity of its commitment to the Christian faith and the Bible. Another determinant would be the centrality of its focus on the divine and human person of Jesus (founder of Christianity and Head of the Church) and proof (in the leadership and membership) of a personal relationship with him. This relationship needs to be nurtured and sustained through regular spiritual investment in fellowship, prayer, and study of the Scriptures (Conradie, 2023). Other factors would include the level of the congregations' missional passion, and the extent to which its congregants are engaging in promoting and communicating the gospel of love, grace, and truth to others in the society (Roark and Cline, 2018).

There is also a scriptural prescription to 'submit to governing authorities' (Romans 13:1, NLT, 2015), which provides a theological imperative for an independent church to practice upward accountability to governmental authorities at different levels. In its stakeholder accountability relationships with governmental agencies and statutory regulators, compliance from independent congregations is both required and enforceable. This is discussed in detail in Section 7.4. In a sense, independent congregations also engage in upward accountability to their RLAs. Based on the outcome of the ICSUOS, independent churches accord equal salience to both the RLAs that they belong to and the statutory regulators that oversee their charitable activities. However, in the stakeholder accountability relationship with RLAs, while

compliance is expected, it is not enforceable. As determined earlier, accountability to RLAs is not done out of compulsion. Rather it is consented to by participating independent churches, on the understanding of the mutual benefit that it yields.

The realisation of mutual benefits also informs the horizontal stakeholder accountability relationships that independent churches engage in with individuals and groups within their setting (including congregants, employees, volunteers, and internal donors) and others that are in related settings but external to their operations (including their peers in the umbrella body, other churches, and the wider faith community). From the findings of the ICSUOS (see Fig. 4.1), it can be observed that independent congregations accord varying degrees of salience to the stakeholders that they are horizontally aligned with. Next in their order of prioritisation after God are church members, while a very low prioritisation is given to other religious groups. Reasons for the low prioritisation are discussed in Section 4.2.1.

7.2.2 Accountability to Local Community and Wider Society

Churches exercise influence and claim a moral authority in society that is not available to secular actors (Steiner, 2011). They also have objectives and vision statements that have implications for local communities and the wider society (Pennington, 2020). Deriving from the findings of this study, and in keeping with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), it could be argued that people in the local community where an independent church operates (and others in the wider society) who are directly or indirectly impacted by its belief system, its drive for membership through various outreach initiatives and media activities, and its role in shaping community life and society, have a stake in its successful operation (Mahajan *et al.*, 2023; Henriksson and Weidman-Grunewald, 2020). As such, independent churches need to become more socially responsible in addressing issues within the local communities where they operate.

Additionally, independent churches receive taxpayer funds, and local community cooperation and goodwill flow into their operations. Thus, there is a need for independent congregations

to be seen to be openly accountable for public resources. They also have an obligation to be transparent in dealing with accountability problematics associated with their activities (see Section 7.3). For instance, as highlighted by Participant R7, the growing public interest in safeguarding, and the perceived credibility gap that seems to exist on this topic in relation to churches, means that independent churches need to be seen to be accountable on this issue:

Participant R7, RLA Official
'The church is seen as part of the privileged power structure of society, and people are quite rightly very intolerant of hypocrisy. So, when they see people saying something and doing something different, then they are not impressed, and I think it is a big issue for the church, about credibility. And you know, safeguarding is one area where that becomes very visible. So, people, you know, if they are thinking that kids go into a youth club or something that is run by the church, they want to know that it was properly organised, and that the people who were leading it had been checked out, you know, suitable people to be doing that. So, I think people are in some ways expecting more of the church.'

7.2.3 Conflicting Expectations in Independent Church Stakeholder Relationships

Stakeholder theory recognises that there are dissimilarities in the impact made by an organisation's stakeholders, and the diverse expectations of these stakeholders can at times be conflicting (Bowen *et al.*, 2020; Chen and Roberts, 2010). Conflict is to be expected in stakeholder relationships because of competitive tendencies and the diversity in interests, goals, and thought patterns (Gyan and Ampomah, 2016; Sahoo *et al.*, 2023). Often, even well-intentioned participants work at cross-purposes (Steiner, 2011), and when stakeholder groups try to exert influence, it can result in unhealthy conflicts, with an undermining effect on an entity's legitimacy and overall performance (Kwestel and Doerfel, 2023). In this study, effort was made to identify (and proffer remedial approaches to effectively managing) likely areas of conflicting interests and expectations prevalent in the relationship between independent churches and their diverse internal and external stakeholder groups.

Conflicts could arise in the working relationship between independent churches and their RLAs, and as has already been addressed, this can result from differences over doctrinal issues. It could also revolve around the review/regulatory activities of RLAs. While an objective

RLA scrutiny is beneficial, it needs to be implemented within boundaries that do not violate independent church autonomy.

Independent churches also experience conflicts with external actors over ideological issues, government regulations, state control, perceived overreach by local authorities on matters such as building permits, and much more. For instance, actors in communities and (wider British society) have varying ideological perspectives and motivational leanings, and some are 'positively antagonistic to Christianity' (Harris, 2002, p.49). This creates a rationale for surmising that certain conflicts (especially those with a spiritual connotation) are likely to remain unresolved and leave some community-based and society-wide stakeholders dissatisfied with the church.

A conflict with an external actor could become a catalyst for unifying a church internally as they 'stand together' (often with added support from their RLA) to resist what they are likely to consider to be a common threat. FGD participant C29 recounts a conflicting experience that their congregation had with one of its stakeholder groups:

Participant C29, Church Leader
'We took a decision …. [on] a particular issue that we felt quite strongly about, and we knew could have impact on the school where we hire and even on our reputation locally. That was quite a challenge for us. We sort of had to decide between integrity and reputation, and we felt that integrity was more important than reputation at that point. But we trusted God, and we knew that the decision that we took could have affected the way the school viewed us, and others viewed us. … We felt that this was such an important issue that we were prepared to put one thing in front of the other, and God was gracious and our relationship with the school continued and continued to grow. So, when we have got stakeholders, you know, sometimes you might have to play one off against another. We really want to be relevant in the community. … Sometimes because of a doctrinal issue or biblical issue, we might take a stand, but we want to make sure that we are doing it with grace … and truth'.

Some aspects of the conflicting relationship being referred to by Participant C29 have not been disclosed on confidentiality grounds. In critically analysing the subject of independent church legitimation, role, and accountability in a secular-leaning socio-cultural environment, it is of essence to recognise that although churches are obliged to operate within the legal and

political framework of secular civil society, they are usually guided by a concept of the divine and the sacred in carrying out their mission (Berger, 2003). Therefore, as much as there is a willingness on their part to include their local communities and the wider society in a more encompassing stakeholder accountability mechanism, they would not want to be overwhelmed with externally imposed responsibilities or rules that have the potential to take them outside the confines of their preferred religious setting, alter their modus operandi, or 'tone down' the religious principles underlying their work (Venter, 2023; Harris, 2002).

In the light of increased public scrutiny and ongoing modernisation of the British society, many independent churches and their RLAs are rebranding and repositioning themselves to enable a more-effective actualisation of their charitable objectives (Evangelical Alliance, 2024b; CIC International, 2024a). However, in fulfilling the public benefit test required of charities, they believe the Christian faith they profess is for the common good of every member of society (Evangelical Alliance, 2019). They are also likely to be unwilling to accommodate (as they see it) the fashionable tendencies of the age which run counter to their biblical worldview (Lisburn IMC, 2024).

While greater emphasis seems to be laid on conflicts with external actors, it is often the case that internal wrangling amongst the leadership (or between the leadership and membership) of an independent congregation could pose a greater risk to its operations (Gould, 2020). Internal wrangling can arise over claims of financial mismanagement. They can also result from leadership structure and style. For instance, leaders stamping a spiritual label on plans they wish to force through (by claiming, for instance, that God mandated it) or a new leadership seeking to force through a change in direction (after claiming to have heard from God) often without the patience to communicate the vision clearly and carry the membership along in its implementation. An additional issue that could harbour conflicts within an independent congregation is nepotism and the succession policy put in place by a leader. Such in-house conflicts can lead to church splits and members leaving in mass where issues are not quickly resolved (Starke and Dyck, 1996; Muse, 2020).

7.2.4 Resolving Conflicts in Independent Church Stakeholder Relationships

For an organisation to receive sustained approval and continuing support from its different stakeholders, it needs to be able to balance their conflicting expectations (Chen and Roberts, 2010). Therefore, strengthening stakeholder relationships through the translation of their diverse interests into a shared goal is a vital strategic management skill (Sahoo *et al.,* 2023; Gyan and Ampomah, 2016). Achieving this within the ICS is all the more important because churches claim to exercise a moral authority (Steiner, 2011) and this places on them a moral duty to work for peace and unity, and to be seen to promote them in civil society.

Models exist for resolving stakeholder-related conflicts in secular settings. Such models require an organisation's management to develop a platform that facilitates reciprocal relationships between its stakeholders, thereby enabling them to learn to recognise and respect the legitimacy of each other's interests and views, though they may differ and conflict (Usadolo and Caldwell, 2016). Secondly, leadership would need to articulate interest harmonisation and alliance-building strategies suited to their organisational setting (Sahoo *et al.*, 2023), and their accountability and transparency frameworks should have built into them conflict resolution mechanisms, including a formal complaints process that is timely and fair. Thirdly, concerted effort needs to be made to establish a stakeholder engagement and participatory framework (Im *et al.*, 2023; Lapuz, 2023). Such a framework would need to comply with the tenets of procedural legitimacy by evidencing that the views of all stakeholders are considered and that the decision-making process is transparent (Wolf and Christiaens, 2023). For independent congregations, while some elements of this secular-oriented model can be adapted to their setting, verbatim implementation of all its specifications is likely to be considered untenable. It is usually the case that winning divine approval and keeping to the tenets of Scripture are uppermost in their thinking on these issues (Conradie, 2023; Wolfe, 2022). Also, as Morehouse and Saffer (2023) assert, engagement with stakeholders can result in benefits as well as liabilities, and the socio-cultural environment prevalent in a society can influence how stakeholders engage with organisations. The implication then is that, as already

discussed, certain conflicts are likely to remain unresolved and leave some community-based and society-wide stakeholders dissatisfied with the church.

7.3 Independent Church Sector Accountability Concerns

Charitable organisations (including independent churches) make significant contributions to the British society (Corry, 2020; Pennigton, 2020). However, concerns continue to be raised in the media and wider public (and by various stakeholder groups) about their accountability and the robustness of the regulatory frameworks established to monitor their compliance (Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021; McDonnell and Rutherford, 2018). Focusing on the UKICS, Participant R7 concedes that there are vulnerabilities in the accountability structures in independent churches and the perception is that these structures are weakened by a lack of hierarchical lines of accountability:

Participant R7, RLA Official
'A lot depends on the local leadership, which is one area of vulnerability because they do not have obvious accountability structures through the hierarchy. Like, for example, the Anglican church is more explicitly hierarchical in the sense that people are managed by a large diocese that comes under a national organisation. That does not necessarily make them any better at it than those of us who are in independent churches, but it just brings different challenges. And I think the big challenge for independent churches is precisely the one that this research is about, which is the accountability structures, if you like, which tend to be much flatter.'

In acknowledging that the flatter structures in independent congregations may pose big accountability challenges, Participant R7 suggests that the hierarchical accountability structures in Anglican Churches are not without issues and may not represent a better approach. This view is borne out by the lingering accountability problematics associated with the broad spectrum of the UK religious community, which has been exacerbated by recent cases of abuse and misconduct (see Section 1.0). It is also to be recognised that these issues cut across all sections of the UK Charity Sector (Legraien, 2023; Birkwood, 2023; Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021).

As discussed in Section 2.11.2, McDonnell (2017) identifies a broad range of factors that trigger accountability concerns in the UK Charity Sector (UKCS). McDonnell also assesses

the effectiveness of the Scottish Charity Regulator in addressing the concerns, and proffers suggestions for improving charity accountability. By adopting a narrower approach (that examined a sub-set of the UKCS), this research sought to determine the predominant factors that trigger ICS accountability concerns. Also, the role played by the sector's RLAs in addressing the concerns (and their involvement in the development of a fit for purpose accountability mechanism for the sector) were considered. The goal being to provide insights on a framework for achieving effective ICSA.

Findings of the survey undertaken in this study indicate that the factors which trigger accountability demands in the ICS are varied, and some of them are located within the broad range identified by McDonnell (2017). Information derived from analysis of nine factors (see Table 4.3) shows that the highest ranked factor is failings in church governance, followed closely by safeguarding issues (an area of accountability concern not discussed by McDonnell). The third ranked factors are financial misconduct and non-compliance with orders given by regulators, while the least ranked factor is size of church. The theme of ICS accountability concerns was further explored with IDI participants. Table 7.5 presents ROVs on this issue:

Table 7.5: ROVs on 'UKICS Accountability Concerns'
'I have seen some awful things happen in churches. A financial lack of accountability. It is usually something around power, manipulation, control, spiritual abuse, thinking that they can persuade people that they are God rather than God himself. … I think you can probably tell that I am actually speaking from experience of an independent church which went very badly wrong.' *(Participant R3)*
'I guess around safeguarding, funnily enough, I was thinking we need to have a policy in place, and we do not actually have a written policy in place.' *(Participant C22)*
'You know if individuals are visiting a church, or partnering with a church in the community, it is important that they know that there are mechanisms in place to ensure integrity with money. … One of the things that is often levelled towards churches [*is*] what are they doing with their money? I think the second thing is … in terms of church authority, how that is administered, and unfortunately in recent times, and not just within the independent church, there have been historical cases of abuse.' *(Participant R12)*
'We are talking of accountability. So, for example, if the church is in my name, the question will be who are you responsible to? Who are you accountable to? Who are you reporting to? Because that is where you hear of things like, you know, misuse of the funds, abuse of members, abuse of children.'

Participants' views in Table 7.5 point to a variety of accountability problematics, ranging from a lack of financial accountability to issues of concern around safeguarding, including a lack of safeguarding policy. In line with the assertion made by Participant R18, it seems appropriate to surmise that at the heart of most accountability related failings in the ICS is a dysfunctional leadership structure. Participant R18 goes on to suggest that, in certain cases, there could be circumstantial reasons to explain why an independent church leadership may not be fit for the purpose of achieving effective accountability. Participant R18 backs this suggestion up with the following illustration:

Participant R18, RLA Official
'Let us say a church in a small town has three elders working well together. Two of them leave because of jobs. Just because of their job moves, suddenly one person is left on their own. There are not really any other people in the church who can be elders. He does not really have any accountability. It is not his fault they have left. It is just the circumstance he finds himself in. So, I think that is a leadership crisis which is not engineered. It just happens.'

In effect, leadership crisis that raise accountability concerns are not always self-engineered. They could be circumstantial. Participant C7 provides another scenario that buttresses this line of thinking:

Participant C7, Church Leader
'In the established churches, they have channels through which they can support a minister, for example if you want to take a break, they can say, ok, we will send somebody to take over your church while you take a break. But when it comes to support network for independent churches, you may not have anyone to do that. So, for you to leave the church and find somebody that can run your church while you are away, that is a big ask, and because now you do not have anyone that is within your support network, accountability becomes a problem also.'

While there may be circumstantial reasons to explain why in the ICS leadership dysfunctions that raise accountability concerns are not always self-engineered, it is appropriate to draw attention to a multiplicity of leadership accountability issues within the sector which can rightly be classified as being structurally self-engineered. Participant R18 gives a follow-up example pointing to one instance:

Participant R18, RLA Official
'There are some cases where people abuse their leadership positions, and they use independency to justify certain kinds of leadership models which actually are unhealthy. For example, there might be an imbalance of power. You might have one elder who is in his 50s. Let us say he was the founding elder of the church. And he has three other elders who are in their 20s and they all feel they owe him a debt and so they say yes to everything he says. And they never disagree. They never challenge him. That becomes a very unhealthy leadership structure, and that is avoidable. The senior leader in those circumstances has not taken enough care in designing the leadership structure of the church.'

As such, toxic leadership models that attract accountability concerns exist in the ICS. Some of them thrive on the back of a setting where there is an imbalance of power. It could be a situation where a congregation does not have a trustee board that is separate from the leadership. So, the executive and governance roles are all mixed up together given that the senior pastor, who is often the church pioneer, also serves as chair of trustees and appoints the other trustees. Under this self-engineered leadership structure, a sense of accountability may be created. However, it may only be a mirage, because a high degree of power (which is often unchallenged) is being exercised by the senior leader. As R10 an FGD Participant contends, it is a red flag not to be ignored if a senior leader retains sole right to decision making and is unwilling to inform on how decisions were arrived at (Drew, 2023):

Participant R10, RLA Official
'When people say, "you know the final decision is mine and we do not want to enter into a discussion with it", that for us is always a red flag. Any senior leader, yes, of course, you have got to make decisions, but if somebody asks you, "how did you come to that position?" Then actually it is ok to have that discussion and say, "this is why we have come to that position." You know, if a senior leader is saying, "I am just not discussing this with you. It is my way or the highway", then that in itself is an indicator that something is not right within that organisation in terms of accountability.'

In proffering solutions for effectively addressing engineered structural leadership accountability issues within an independent church, Participant R7 sees a need for plurality of leaders and the decentralisation of power:

Participant R7, RLA Official
'Some of the reviews that we have done of independent churches where things have gone wrong, especially where there have been issues about bullying or abusive harsh leadership, it has been the case there that you have got a strong leader. So there needs to be plurality of leaders. I think that is a very clear scriptural principle. Whether you call them elders or whatever, you know that there is got to be more than one. There has to be some … checks and balances. You know that not all the power is vested in one individual. … If power is too concentrated, it is liable to be corrupted and you know people get hurt. … I think you have got to have a policy and structure, but you also need a culture which is created through lots of things, partly by training and by mentoring and by modelling. Particularly, the leadership is very important in creating that culture which is about accountability.'

As independent churches seek to enhance their legitimacy and meet the accountability demands of their diverse and often-conflicting network of stakeholders, the need for tailored policies, some form of structure that is fit for purpose, and an enduring culture around accountability and transparency cannot be overemphasised. Added to this, it is considered that achieving robust and effective ICSA will require a tripartite partnership approach involving, individual independent congregations, their umbrella agencies, and the statutory regulators of charities. The argument for this stakeholder accountability model and its varied implications are presented in the next section.

7.4 Achieving Effective Stakeholder Accountability in the ICS

Evidence from this study suggests an acknowledgement of the merits of the growing public perception about Church (and wider charity sector) accountability (Premier Christian News, 2020; Yasmin and Ghafran, 2021). There is also a recognition of the vital necessity for independent external regulation in addressing accountability demands associated with the ICS. However, the thinking is that 'a working partnership' (that is not solely dependent on external regulation) is essential in developing an effective ICSA framework. To enable a fundamental element of this working partnership, there is a need for a sector-based review mechanism (a form of self-regulation by RLAs) to be considered as a credible complementary

approach to achieving effective accountability in the ICS. The thought process behind this submission is that continuing calls for more external scrutiny of the activities of independent churches by statutory regulators may not be unrelated to the public's lack of awareness of the existence of independent church RLAs and their intermediary and self-regulatory roles in enhancing the sector's accountability. The research undertaken seeks partly to create this awareness.

On the issue of whether an RLA can be relied upon to act as a credible accountability body, the ROVs in Table 7.6 seems to dispel any suggestion that UKICS umbrella agencies are not fit for purpose in supporting the accountability of churches in their membership:

Table 7.6: ROVs on 'RLA Accountability Roles'
'I think accountability is a challenging area for some churches more than others, and I think the umbrella ability just plays a part in helping with that. In practical terms, there are a range of things which certainly our umbrella body ends up supporting churches with. In terms of financial accounting, in the correct and proper ways, we give a lot of advice to churches. … Similarly, you know, reporting to OSCR, which is the Scottish equivalent of the Charity Commission, being aware of what is expected.'   *(Participant R15)*   'We allow them to remain autonomous, but within that autonomy there is a willingness for them to be objectively scrutinised. So, for example, when we talk about governance, we would be privy to their governing document, to the way in which they are running their ministry, and willingly holding them to account, and just ensuring that there are no blind spots.'   *(Participant R12)*   'They actually came and listened, listened to the leaders, …. trying to work out what people wanted. … What they ended up doing was putting a structure in place that was really bespoke to what we needed, … and that was all kind of bespoke support accountability for us that I think was unique for a network to provide.'   *(Participant C11)*   'We have these position statements that we as independent churches have agreed to and continue to agree. So, we are held accountable to this so that if there was a church that had gone off on a path that was no longer, you know, preaching a faithful gospel message, they could be challenged on that and no longer be part of our organisation. As a result of this, there is some accountability.'   *(Participant C13)*   'We also encourage pastoral supervision, and churches can call someone from the national team in when they are concerned about their pastor. And these are some of the things which make the umbrella organisation bring some safety to the community of the church.'   *(Participant R3)*

In this ROVs, there is a recognition of the challenges associated with independent church accountability. There is also evidence of the support that umbrella organisations render in areas such as financial accounting, sustenance of the relational/mutual accountability model that many of them employ, and their role in the supervision of independent church leaders. In one of the contributions, Participant C11 describes the approach adopted by their RLA in setting up a bespoke structure to ensure stability and accountability. The idea of a link between right structure and the minimisation of accountability issues in churches is suggested by another interviewee, Participant C37:

Participant C37, Church Leader
'Whether a church is independent or whether it is a part of an established denomination, if the church is structured right within the leadership, then there should not be accountability issues.'

In considering the merits in RLA accountability structures, it is vital to remember that central to the working relationship between them and their members is the respect of independent church autonomy. Participant R12 (see Table 7.6) argues that the approach of mutual accountability, which their RLA practices, functions based on one party (the RLA) recognising the autonomy of its member churches, and the other party (the churches in its membership) willingly submitting to an objective scrutiny process. As such, a balance needs to be struck between operating a robust accountability structure and ensuring that the autonomy of the independent churches involved is not impeded upon. Participant C7 stresses the importance of achieving this balance within any network of independent churches:

Participant C7, Church Leader
'I think there is a balance that needs to be struck between what we might end up calling control and what you might call structures that are intended to enforce that accountability. There needs to be a balance. The balance is that whatever sort of tools or structures that are put in place must not stifle the vision. But at the same time, I realise there is the need for these kinds of measures that are lines drawn to say, if you want to be part of this network, these are the minimum guidelines. Those are also required. … But I am just saying there is need for balance. All these things, if they are done in moderation, I think it can be healthy.'

It is then obvious to see that achieving a healthy functional accountability mechanism in the UKICS will require a working partnership approach. A partnership where individual congregations, while remaining responsible for their governance, voluntarily commit to a review process operated by the umbrella body. This sector-based review mechanism, which is considered a form of UKICS self-regulation, will serve to augment the role played by statutory regulators (with the external regulators joining in a non-binding tripartite partnership aimed at ensuring that the ICSA framework is robust and effective).

ICS RLAs play both an intermediary and self-regulatory role. In their intermediary role, RLAs liaise between external regulators and their members. They represent their collective interests in discussions with regulators and make contributions on their behalf that will inform policy formulation relating to the sector. They also mobilise their members and provide information and trainings that will enhance compliance with external regulatory requirements (Osgood, 2024). The implications of both RLA intermediary and self-regulatory roles on UK ICSA are further discussed in Section 7.4.2.

7.4.1 Lone Ranger Church Accountability Relationship with Charity Regulators

Opinions were expressed in this study on the importance of independent churches becoming registered with charity regulators. However, while touting the values in the accountability relationship between independent churches and charity regulators, participants seemed more concerned about the inherent weaknesses in the accountability structures of lone ranger independent congregations. The term 'lone ranger' (in the context of this research) refers to an independent congregation that lays claim to an accountability relationship with God and may have achieved registration with statutory bodies but is not accredited with (and accountable to) a UK-based RLA.

Table 7.7: ROVs on 'Lone Ranger Church Accountability Problematics'
'Pardon me, to be honest. … I did not want to be a lone ranger. I think one of the challenges that independent churches can have is that you could be a lone ranger.' *(Participant C9)*

> 'If I want to be rude and arrogant, I can tell you I mean you were not there when God told me what to do. I can again tell you to buzz off because at the end of the day I am accountable to God. … Of course, that gives the door to the community and the newsmen and everybody around to mudsling at the independent churches because they say these guys, they are just lone rangers. They are wolves, accountable to nobody, and then it also becomes a burden to the work of the Kingdom.'
> *(Participant C7)*
>
> 'There is a risk that a church could go well outside the mainstream to become extreme, I suppose in an unhealthy way, and for there to be no one who has a voice to challenge that. I think this is one of the things that umbrella bodies do well.'
> *(Participant R15)*

The ROVs in Table 7.7 indicate that within the UKICS there are strong feelings about the expediency of RLA membership for the purposes of independent church accountability. This is significant as it brings to the fore an inherent weakness in a lone ranger independent church accountability relationship with a statutory regulator (see Fig. 7.2). It is a one-dimensional direct relationship which excludes any sector-based intermediary and self-regulatory involvement.

Figure 7.2: Lone Ranger Accountability Relationship with a Charity Regulator
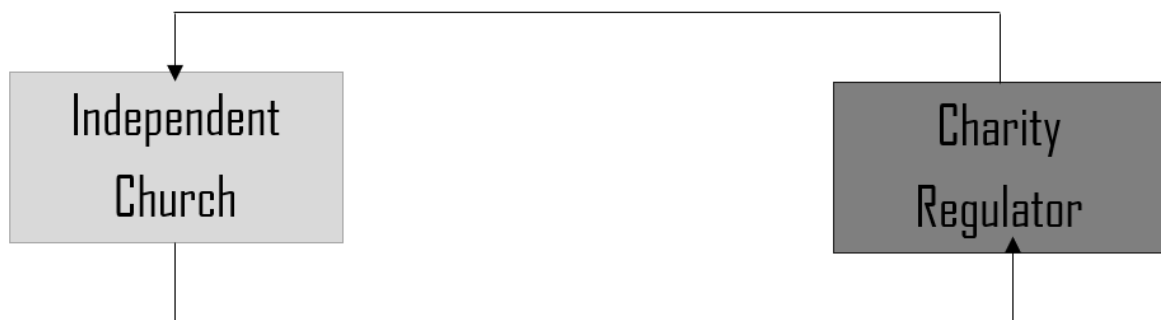
It is not unlikely that some lone-ranger independent churches (although obliged under the law to do so) seek registration with charity regulators out of an unhealthy financial motivation. Gift aid and other sources of public funding for local initiatives can provide an attraction for starting a church, and such church organisations may simply develop an accountability mechanism that is solely preoccupied with satisfying the public benefit and compliance requirements of regulators, whilst avoiding any additional scrutiny from within the sector.

Charity regulators demand accountability, and churches are bound by law to comply. However, RLAs encourage accountability in good faith, not just based on compliance. In keeping with the accountability principles associated with Christian theology (Rose, 2023; Jacobs, 2005; McPhail *et al.*, 2004), findings of this study suggest that RLAs motivate independent churches not to simply settle down to a secular rhythm of operating their accountability framework but to develop a healthy and balanced spiritual concept that recognises and incorporates accountability obligations to God, their local congregation, governmental and independent statutory authorities, an accrediting umbrella organisation, the church community as a body, and the society in general.

Evidence from participants suggest that the one-dimensional accountability relationship between lone ranger congregations and charity regulators is likely to pose limitations on efforts to achieve an effective sector-wide accountability mechanism (given that these churches can choose not to be associated with other churches, in exercise of their autonomous status and right to self-governance). RLAs offer accountability reviews to churches and accreditations to their senior leaders, and in doing so facilitate independent church accountability as well as pastoral accountability (Stevens, 2014). They provide training resources for church leaders, and support for those facing hard circumstances and moral failings. However, as part of their limited self-regulatory protocols, they also have disciplinary mechanisms in place for dealing with incidences of misconduct and abuse, which could lead to reprimands, referrals to appropriate authorities, and outright revocation of ministerial accreditation where necessary (FIEC, 2024b).

7.4.2 Intermediary and Self-Regulatory Roles of Independent Church RLAs

The argument being proffered (which is grounded on the outcome of this inquiry) is that the ICS is better served by an accountability framework that not only involves individual churches and charity regulators but also takes into cognisance the intermediary and self-regulatory roles played by RLAs (see Fig. 7.3). Heightened accountability issues involving independent congregations in the early 2000s led to calls for more robust external oversight of the ICS

(Osgood, 2024). However, the charity regulator's limited knowledge of the peculiarities associated with independent church operations meant that they were ill-informed and as such not sufficiently equipped to achieve effective oversight solely by their efforts. Participant R5 provides background understanding of what transpired:

Participant R5, RLA Official
'Back in the early 2000s there had been some quite large headlines and a lot of concern amongst a lot of the diaspora churches, particularly the African migration churches, when there were issues to do with potential accusations around how they organise their affairs. The Charity Commission were quite ignorant of how Pentecostal and independent churches were organised, … people who were doing church in a different way but did not have an unorthodox or an inappropriate theology. There was no heresy or anything like that. There were not bad practices. They were a few things that might be considered, particularly in those days, more African ways of doing things than white British ways of doing things, but then they were African migrant churches. So, of course, they are going to organise themselves and do things in a slightly different way.'

While the regulator was seeking to address accountability concerns relating to the governance of independent congregations, RLAs and independent church leaders had their misgivings about the overall direction of events surrounding it (Shifrin, 2004; Osgood, 2024). The efforts of the charity regulator in the ICS were eventually helped by the establishment of a process that required and accommodated active RLA intermediation. The intermediary activities undertaken by RLAs at the time (as explained below) yielded far-reaching benefits for the effective accountability of both the ICS and the wider faith community (Jump, 2007; Christianity Today, 2007b).

Figure 7.3: Tripartite Accountability Relationship Incorporating RLA Roles
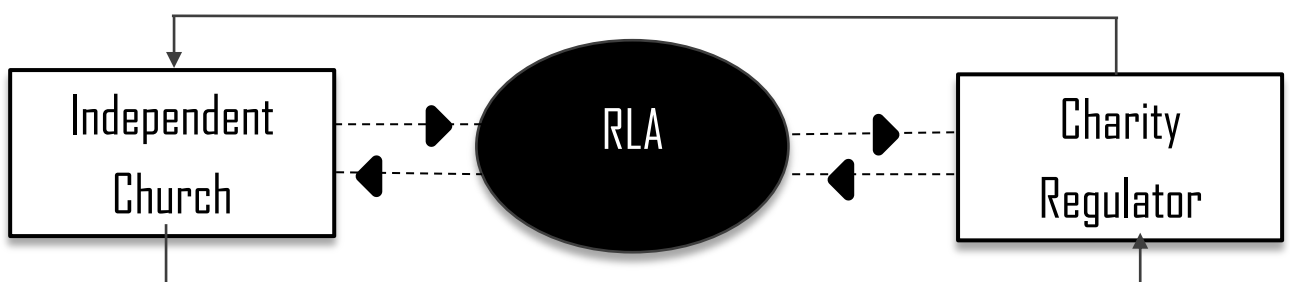
As Participant R5 alludes to, one issue (in particular) that did not sit well with independent church leaders was that the Charity Commission, at the time, had failed to understand how

black-led churches operated (Shifrin, 2004). In seeking to play an active role in resolving misconceptions, Evangelical Alliance (along with the African and Caribbean Evangelical Alliance, another RLA at the time) made representations to the Charity Commission (Jump, 2007; Christianity Today, 2007b). It was then agreed that a meeting should be arranged between church leaders and members of the Commission's investigation team (Osgood, 2006). The meeting which took place on 12 December 2002 had far reaching implications. The Commission provided clarifications on its guidelines (especially regarding paying pastors and trustees), and the RLAs undertook to organise training sessions for church leaders. One such training conference, on Governance, Openness, Accountability and Leadership (GOAL), was held at Brixton, London on 20 May 2003, with Mary Cridge, then head of customer services at the Charity Commission, in attendance (Osgood, 2006).

Speaking later in 2004, Cridge acknowledged that the Commission was working with ICS RLAs to develop model governing documents that would make proper provisions for any payments made to pastors (Shifrin, 2004). Cridge went on to stress that 'most independent charitable churches are well run and deeply committed to their congregations. There have however, been anomalies between charity law and the way that pastors are sometimes paid' (Shifrin, 2004). Cridge further pointed out that working closely with RLAs to deepen their understanding of independent churches had been of great benefit and would result in the launch of new governing documents for independent congregations.

The governing documents being referred to took four years to produce and were described (at the time of their launch in November 2007) as a collaborative effort between the Charity Commission and partner umbrella groups (Jump, 2007; Christianity Today, 2007b). Among other things, the documents established a new governance framework with better defined safeguards that separated spiritual governance of independent churches from their day-to-day administration, allowed paid church leaders to serve as trustees, and enabled the management of potential conflicts of interest. Alison Wells, then head of registration at the Commission, said the launch of the documents was a demonstration of their 'commitment to

effective collaboration' with what Alison referred to as an important part of the charity sector (Christianity Today, 2007b). Alison added that it was timely because the Commission was about to 'begin work with other faith communities in the context of the new Faith and Social Cohesion Unit' (Jump, 2007). It becomes obvious to see that the intermediary role played by ICS RLAs (in a working partnership with the Charity Commission) did not only serve to enhance ICS governance, transparency, and accountability, it also paved the way for further work between the Commission and other faith groups.

7.4.3 Operating a Contemporary Approach to Self-Regulation in the ICS

One meaning for 'regulate' is to require adherence to stipulated standards, and in this sense, RLAs are becoming more involved in ICS regulatory activities. Stevens draws emphasis on the fact that when an independent church seeks membership with an agency, the church, by implication, 'voluntarily chooses to submit to the required standards of the association' (Stevens, 2014, p. 85).

Traditionally, RLAs do not subscribe to being associated with the term 'regulator' because they would want to avoid being perceived to be controlling or having oversight, to the point of undermining the autonomy and non-denominational status of their affiliated congregations. As such, as Participant R1 contends, the approach has been to adopt a stance that respects autonomy and emphasises each member organisation's self-governing status and responsibility for their accountability to God and other stakeholders:

Participant R1, RLA Official
'One of the things that I think people are asking for is some sort of overseeing regulator that people can appeal to if they think they have been badly treated in an independent church. I have some concerns about that because I think we should be helping churches to be better at being independent. What I mean by that is make sure you have got the right policies and procedures in place that give people confidence in your independent church.'

To be clear, RLAs functioning in a self-regulatory role is dissimilar to the idea of having an overseeing regulator over the ICS, in the sense that each RLA would only exercise influence

over its member churches and would also need to adapt its accountability framework to suit the peculiarities within its membership. However, while recognising the importance of not compromising on their autonomy or shifting responsibility away from them, it is over-simplistic to continue to rely on independent congregations to effectively run their accountability all by themselves. The rationalisation behind this traditional restrained approach may be based on a need to maintain the status quo; to avoid getting involved in implementing a robust review mechanism, and this is unlikely to help the ICS in avoiding the repercussions that could result from incidences of misconduct and abuse (see Fig. 7.4).

Figure 7.4: Likely Outcome of a Restrained Approach to ICS Self-Regulation

Respect

for autonomy

Responsibility

Lies with individual churches

Rationale

Preservation of status quo

Reluctance

to conduct robust checks and reviews

Result

Increase in unaddressed sector-wide accountability concerns

Repercussion

Low public confidence in sector, and increased calls for more external scrutiny
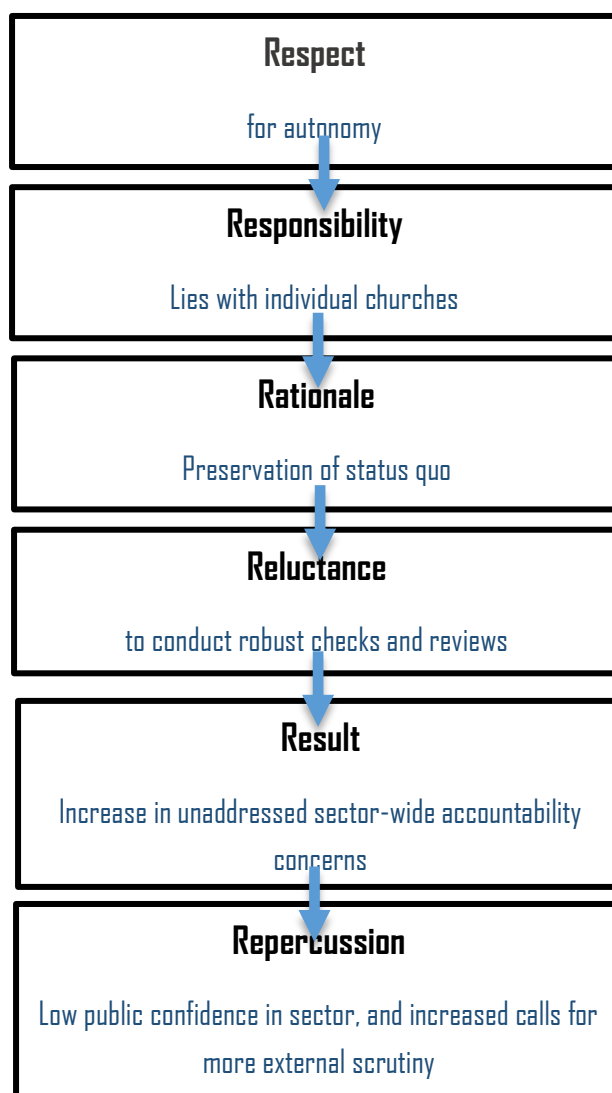
Participant C26, in assessing the accountability approach adopted by their RLA, feels that it lacks rigour and harbours an accountability gap that could be exploited by some churches. Participant C26 considers that there is a scriptural imperative for more rigour to be injected into the accountability process:

Participant C26, Church Official
'I would suggest it should be more rigorous because I think things can slip very easily at a local level … and it is easy to hide if you are not geographically close to some accountability. So, I think within our organisation I would say that accountability should be improved. From my understanding of scriptures and what I have from other organisations, I would say that it is probably lacking in the really hands on … kind of accountability structure.'

For ICS RLAs, there is then the necessity for a shift from an attitude of restraint (out of respect for autonomy) to a resolve to respect but become more effectively involved. Interpretive analysis of the diverse perspectives obtained in this study clearly suggests that there are legitimating and stakeholder accountability benefits to be derived by independent churches from a robust RLA operated review process. As such, a transition is required in the self-regulatory role played by ICS RLAs, from a traditional approach (see Fig. 7.4) that is very restrained in its level of involvement, to a reformed and contemporary approach that is designed to respond more effectively to the increasing multi-dimensional accountability concerns associated with the sector (see Fig. 7.5). The traditional approach has remained deficient in its ability to satisfy stakeholder groups within the wider public.

When pieced together, the requirements of this contemporary review process are akin to an umbrella-based self-regulatory approach, and it has the potential of encouraging good accountability conduct in the ICS. The views of Participant C5 fits in with the argument being made here:

Participant C5, Church Leader
'They do a review, which I like, and I have introduced that to other ministers this year. … Some people fall into error because there is no accountability. Doctrinally, it is suspect. Sometimes there is even sexual sin, and there is no accountability. So, there are a number of issues. Sometimes no safeguarding, even child protection. So, I think those safeguarding measures are useful to have, which is why being

part of a wider accountability body I think is important. I think just for credibility. Like belonging to the British Medical Council. So, I think it is important for independent churches to retain their autonomy but having these checks and balances.'

The goal then for UKICS actors should be to achieve accountability. This needs to be done within parameters suited to the sector. It also needs to be seen to be adequate and effective by all independent church stakeholders. Therefore, a move away from a restrained approach to a more robust contemporary approach is required in RLA self-regulatory activities. Putting together information from the research, a contemporary approach for achieving ICS self-regulation has been developed (see Fig. 7.5). The model has twelve elements, ranging from a continuing need to respect the autonomy of individual churches to the importance of engaging in research activities to inform policy.

Under the contemporary approach to ICS self-regulation (as conceptualised by this study in Fig. 7.5), responsibility for accountability continues to lie with individual congregations. In addressing the question of 'responsibility', Pioneer Network (a UKICS RLA) states that it does not bear legal or fiscal responsibility for individual churches in its membership. Yet, through the mechanism of annual reviews, it endeavours to ensure that 'sound governance and accounting procedures, and up-to-date safeguarding policies and training are in place' (Pioneer Network, 2024a). Such periodic compliance checks are becoming more commonly practiced in the sector.

Besides recognising the necessity of RLA periodic reviews, other elements in the proposed contemporary approach to UKICS self-regulation include the need for reforms to the traditional approach (see Fig. 7.4) and resources to inform practice and enhance accountability. Additionally, robust mechanisms are required for ensuring close liaising with external bodies and timely resolution of disclosures by victims, while not neglecting to provide an enabling environment for victims (as well as churches and leaders associated with misconduct and abuse) to experience restoration (see Fig. 7.5).

Figure 7.5: Contemporary Approach to UKICS Self-Regulation

Respect

for autonomy

Responsibility

lies with individual churches

Reforms

to traditional approach

Reviews

Periodic checks for compliance

Resources

Training and tools to inform practice and enhance accountability

Reports

to document outcome of reviews

Recommendations

For improvement based on reports

Referrals

to appropriate authorities, where needed

Revocation

of membership/ accreditation where called for

Restoration

for churches and leaders associated with misconduct and abuse

Redress

for victims, devoid of protectionist tendencies

Research

to inform policy and (re)shape practice

In addition to periodic reviews, an independent congregation could also request for a special regulatory review to be conducted to address identified accountability concerns. For instance, Thirtyone:eight (a UK-based safeguarding specialist RLA) carries out safeguarding audits,

complaints investigations, risk assessments involving clergy and officials, and case reviews. In one case, the organisation was invited to conduct a robust and comprehensive exploration of both good practice and failings in leadership culture and safeguarding practice. The invitation was based on recognition of the significant level of experience and expertise that Thirtyone:eight has in undertaking safeguarding reviews (The Crowded House, 2020). It is considered that such supplies of expertise and wealth of experience from RLAs to independent churches (whether utilised for facilitating reviews or some other purposes) is an essential resource element in the achievement of effective ICSA.

7.4.4 Maintaining a Balance between Self-Regulation and External Regulation

Similon (2015) argues that in some countries, self-regulation appears to be the most effective way of meeting the increased need for more transparency, accountability, and coordination from nonprofit organisations. In Similon's view, the rapid growth of the NPS (coupled with the fact that statutory bodies have limited oversight and enforcement capabilities to adequately regulate the sector) have intertwined to highlight the importance of self-regulation as the only effective solution that reconciles the interests of all stakeholder groups in the NPS. However, the argument (following the conclusion of this research) is that there is a need to maintain a balance between self-regulation and external regulation in the ICS.

It can be argued that the accountability concerns associated with the UK faith-based sector (some of which were identified earlier), along with the growing entrenchment of accountability and transparency as cultural and social norms in modernised societies (Dong *et al.*, 2023) have combined to result in a situation where there is a declining tolerance for the age-long governance structures of the church (O'Loughlin, 2013), including self-regulation. As such, the pendulum has been swinging further and further towards increasing calls for more public scrutiny of the activities of religious bodies (See Section 7.4). Yet, as alluded to in Section 2.3.3, there remains an ongoing need within society to protect the freedom of religion (Spencer, 2014) and ensure that the autonomy of independent churches continues to be respected, as this is the basis on which the independent church model functions.

In effect, an inference drawn from the findings of this exploratory study is that (in a contemporary setting, as is presently the case in Britain) the self-regulatory efforts of RLAs and the external oversight provided by statutory bodies are non-competing, complementary, and both essential in ensuring the ICS (while continuing to freely practice its religious belief) remains transparent and accountable.

7.5 Chapter Summary

The approach in this discussion chapter has been to utilise study participants' responses to establish an independent congregation's network of stakeholders and determine how salience is attributed to them. Analytical effort has also been made to identify the factors that trigger ICS accountability concerns and develop a framework for the sector's accountability. Findings of the research clearly indicate that the effective functionality of an ICSA framework is hinged on a tripartite working partnership involving individual churches, their RLAs, and the Charity Regulator. In critically assessing recent transitions in the self-regulatory approach of RLAs and its emergent discourse, the conclusion is that what is required is a self-regulatory system that (while lacking an enforcement component) is robust and fit for purpose. This sector-based regulatory system would then need to be balanced with the activities of external regulators of charities.

The existence of non-RLA affiliated independent churches continues to pose limitations on efforts to achieve an effective sector-wide accountability mechanism. However, although these limitations create a basis for justifying calls for more robust external regulation of the sector, they could also have the dual effect of pointing out the difference that RLA involvement makes.

Given that UKICS accountability is amongst the key areas of research focus, the findings discussed in this chapter will be further highlighted in the next one where effort will be made to bring the thesis to a close.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.0 Introduction

At its core, this research was exploratory in nature. The aim being to furnish new insights into how effectively UKICS RLAs have functioned in enabling their affiliated congregations to operate legitimately, sustain growth, and enhance their accountability amidst the intertwined challenges of rising secularism and increased public scrutiny. In this concluding chapter, a summary of the major research findings is presented. Further areas to be focused on within the chapter are the research contribution to knowledge and their implications for practice. Following this, recommendations will be specified for enhancing stakeholder satisfaction and confidence in the role of the UKICS. The study's limitations and the suggested direction of future studies are discussed in the last section of the chapter.

8.1 Summary of Major Research Findings

At the outset of this exploratory exercise, seven research presuppositions (RP1 – RP7), five research objectives (RO1 – RO5), and six research questions (RQ1 – RQ6) were specified to reflect the lines of inquiry (see Sections 1.2, 1.4, and 1.5). In designing a pathway for ascertaining the veracity of the presuppositions, and addressing the objectives and questions, eight key areas of research focus on the UKICS were delineated (see Tables 2.1 and 2.3). Study findings in these eight areas (which relate to RP1 – RP7, RO1 – RO4, and RQ1 – RQ5) are presented in this section. RO5 and RQ6 sought to determine further measures that could be put in place by the UKICS to enhance overall stakeholder satisfaction and increase confidence in their role. Recommendations made in answer to RO5 and RQ6 are discussed in Section 8.3.

8.1.1 Working Relationship between Independent Churches and RLAs

An assumption made in approaching this inquiry into the UKICS is that independent congregations enter working relationships with RLAs based on the assurance of respect for

their autonomy (Stevens, 2021; see RP2). From the responses, it is evident that the concepts of 'leadership without control' and 'guidance' are entrenched in this working relationship. On issues such as accountability and the establishment of good governance frameworks, the RLA approach is to promote and encourage good practice but avoid appearing to be dictatorial in doing so. The relational model of providing guidance but not assuming responsibility is described as the nature of RLA involvement in independent church operations.

It can then be inferred that the relationship between the two key UKICS actors seems to work best when no one party seeks to dominate the other. While the preservation of independent status is of prime importance in the working arrangement, the model thrives on interdependence, collaboration, and voluntary accountability to deliver benefits that independent churches cannot achieve solely by their independent efforts (Fu and Cooper, 2021; Calō et al., 2024). In certain situations, RLAs reserve the right to sanction churches by withholding ministerial accreditations or cancelling memberships. However, where there are conflicting issues that could interfere with self-governance, this is usually counter balanced by the continuing right of voluntary withdrawal that member churches hold.

For an ICS RLA, there is a need for it to be seen to have within its operational setting a capacity to not only promote convergence in terms of interrelationships, but also to accommodate the uniqueness of each local church and the complexities associated with the diversities of congregations in its membership. This reflects well on the claims of the RLA to being a non-denominational non-institutional setting.

8.1.2 Contemporary Functions of UKICS RLAs and their Legitimating Influence

In terms of their core roles (RO1 and RQ1), it has been determined that UKICS RLAs perform ten contemporary functions which their constituents find beneficial in the secular leaning and highly monitored socio-cultural environment they operate in. The specific orientations of these roles are religious, recognitional, relational, representational, reformational, resourcing, and reconciliatory. Other functions are revitalisation, review, and research.

In addition to its objective of delineating the core roles played by UKICS RLAs, this research also sought to establish the extent to which their activities are complementary (or unrelated) to the functions of charity regulators in the sector (RO4 and RQ2). It proposes that the operations of both actors in the sector (whether complementary, partly related, or unrelated) are non-competing and vital.

A further presupposition in this study (RP5) considers that RLA functions have a social legitimating effect on the operations of UKICS congregations. For instance, RLA recognition serves to promote and provide assurances for the activities of member congregations which, arguably, has a legitimating effect on their operations. Similarly, the standing and legitimacy of independent church ministers is likely to be boosted by the accreditation received from the umbrella body. Another RLA function is the conduct of regular periodic and special reviews for accountability purposes. Such a role has a potential for boosting stakeholder trust and enhancing the social legitimacy of benefitting congregations (Valenza and Damiano, 2023; Widhiastuti *et al.*, 2023).

8.1.3 Primary Purpose and Revitalisation Activities of UKICS Actors

Focusing on the topic of UKICS actors' primary purpose (RP4), a range of study participants' responses reveal that their collective mission is Gospel-centred. In other words, they primarily aim to advance the teachings of Jesus and the church that he started, and to do this in a form that aligns with the concepts of the Bible. In this setting of convergence in vision, goals, and guiding concepts, umbrella organisations not only serve to pool resources and expertise that are channelled into independent church operations, but they also support them in managing conflicting stakeholder relationships. Information has been provided through this inquiry on the trends in independent church membership numbers and revitalisation efforts in the five-year period 2017-2021, and the period leading to end of August 2022 when data collection was completed. Outcomes suggest an often static but more progressive overall sector growth level in the period under review than a retrogression. There is an acknowledgement of greater apathy and more pockets of resistance over certain cultural issues in terms of receptivity to

the sector's evangelisation activities. Furthermore, the implications of location in the UK (based on regional and urban-rural divides) are also evident in the views expressed by participants. Other factors in the mix include growing interest from the younger generation, as they are engaged through social media platforms and social events.

Given that data collection was implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic, participants were also able to weigh in on its impact. Findings suggest that within this period, independent churches experienced inhibitions to their operations, including the effects of government restrictions on religious gatherings. However, the perception across the sector seems to be that the pandemic resulted in heightened interest in the gospel message. This development may explain the increased attendance rates reported by UK-based independent churches to their online events during the pandemic (Trent Vineyard, 2023b).

The growth outcomes discussed so far seem to be consistent with trends reported in previous studies. In recent years, while there have been declines in attendance in denominational settings, non-denominational groups have experienced growth in membership numbers (see Section 1.0). It is also widely claimed that much of the growth in UK independent churches is attributable to contributions from migration of people into the country (Brierley, 2020; Hayward, 2022). Based on research outcomes relating to the period studied, it is the case that economic migrants and refugees coming to the UK continue to make significant contribution to growth possible, particularly in large cities where migrants tend to reside. However, this is not the case for churches located in areas of the UK where migration is less evident, and language could become a barrier to engagement. Also, Brexit (Freeman *et al.*, 2022) and travel restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic (Davies, 2022) provided additional limiting effects to contributions from migration in the period considered. In summation, while it is plausible to acknowledge that a plurality of factors would have contributed to enhancing the growth of many independent congregations in Britain, a determination in this inquiry is that a major contributory factor may be the synergistic benefits these churches derive from the

networking platforms and growth-boosting resources obtainable in their working relationship with RLAs.

8.1.4 UKICS Restructuring Strategies

As confirmed in this study, socio-cultural changes in the 21st century have resulted in shifts in the British publics attitudes towards religion (RP3). There is also increasing public scrutiny of church affairs (RP6), which has resulted in growing calls for leadership reforms, greater transparency, and more accountability (RP7). In responding to challenges posed by a more contemporary UK operational terrain, ICS RLAs and their constituents have not only focused on evangelistic initiatives aimed at growing membership numbers but have combined with them repositioning and rebranding efforts directed at redefining their roles, restructuring their leadership frameworks and governance practices, and enhancing their societal impact (RO1 and RQ4). Approaches implemented by RLAs include name changes, new leadership appointments, reviews of policy and strategic objectives, as well as structural reforms. These restructuring strategies are geared towards offering enhanced value to their membership, attracting new congregations into the fold, and increasing societal confidence in their role. Also, the strategies being employed have enabled independent congregations to become better positioned in meeting the varying needs of their diverse stakeholders.

There is a weight of analytical evidence to suggest that revitalisation approaches adopted by vast sections of the UKICS have yielded visible dividends. It is the case that many independent churches are not only experiencing increased attendance rates, but there is also significant community impact from their social engagement activities and growing role in promoting social cohesion. Similarly, disruptions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic provided an even greater impetus for the UKICS to seek out innovative repositioning and revitalisation strategies. Following the sector's experience of running online-only venues during the Covid-19 lockdowns, there is increased application of a hybrid approach across the sector. In view of opportunities for enhanced growth and impact offered by online means, the thinking is that the sector needs to engage more effectively to harness this potential.

8.1.5 Independent Church Stakeholder Accountability

On stakeholder accountability, two related presuppositions made in this study are that independent church organisational performance is impacted by stakeholder demands (RP1), and there are growing calls for better accountability by independent congregations in areas such as leadership, safeguarding, and finance (RP7). RP7 also considered that RLAs have a significant role to play in the operation of an effective Independent Church Stakeholder Accountability (ICSA) framework.

The approach adopted in analysing ICSA issues (RO2 and RQ3) involved utilising study participants' responses to establish an independent congregation's network of stakeholders and determine how salience is attributed to them. Research findings point to a stakeholder network that is comprehensive in conceptualisation and accommodates a broad spectrum of internal and external stakeholders (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997; Freeman *et al.*, 2020). The diversities of views expressed reveal that, amongst independent ministers and the congregations they lead, there is a recognition of the need for accountability and transparency, and the expediency of acting out of a sense of responsibility to God and various groups that affect or are affected by their operations. These considerations reflect attributes of stakeholder accountability.

Analytical effort has also been made to identify the factors that trigger UKICS accountability concerns and develop a framework for the sector's accountability. There is evidence to surmise that at the heart of many accountability-related failings in the ICS is a dysfunctional leadership structure. Toxic leadership models exist in the sector, and a multiplicity of leadership accountability issues associated with independent congregations can rightly be classified as being structurally self-engineered. For instance, issues with imbalance of power, including where a church does not have a trustee board that is separate from the leadership. In this setting, the executive and governance roles are mixed up together, given that the senior pastor, who is often the pioneer, may be playing a leading role in the board and takes responsibility for appointing trustees. A leadership-oriented red flag identified in this study is a

situation where a senior minister retains sole right to decision making and is unwilling to inform on how decisions were arrived at. As such, a high degree of power, which is often unchallenged, is exercised by the senior leader. Leadership accountability issues around safeguarding have also been identified (see Section 8.1.7).

As determined in the study, it needs to be acknowledged that leadership malfunctions in the ICS may not always be self-engineered. They could be circumstantial. For instance, small-sized churches are often constrained in their ability to achieve a leadership team that ensures a balance of power. Also, the congregation may lack sufficient trained personnel required to operate an effective accountability mechanism.

Evidence from the research clearly indicate that the effective functionality of an ICSA framework is hinged on a tripartite working partnership involving individual churches, their RLAs, and the Charity Regulator. In view of continuing calls for more external scrutiny of the activities of churches, this research exercise seeks to bring academic focus and public awareness to the vital function of ICS RLAs and their intermediary and self-regulatory roles in enhancing the sector's accountability.

8.1.6 Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion of Women in Leadership Structures

In designing this study, primary focus was also placed on determining the extent of ethnic diversity in the leadership conceptions/models operational in the UKICS. Another issue of interest is the role of women in senior leadership within the sector. It was considered that these are areas of growing stakeholder interest and public scrutiny (RO3 and RQ5), in line with EDI requirements (Im *et al.*, 2023).

8.1.6.1 Ethnic Diversity in Leadership Structures

In relation to ethnic diversity, evidence from data clearly suggests that demographic factors and the legitimate missional objectives of some UKICS operators can pose limiting constraints. For instance, independent churches located in areas of the UK with a predominantly White population are more than likely to see this reflected in their membership and leadership

compositions. Similarly, a narrow missional agenda (which, as an example, might focus on serving a defined diaspora community) could limit the chances that any form of ethnic diversity can be achieved. Yet, taking a sectoral overview, a significant imbalance has been observed in the ethnic diversity in membership and ethnic diversity in leadership ratios of independent congregations. There was also a range of participants' views pointing to a general dissatisfaction with the status quo. For instance, nearly two-thirds of RLAs agree that they are working towards achieving more diversity in leadership structure.

8.1.6.2 Inclusion of Women in Senior Leadership Roles

Evidence from data indicates that no UKICS umbrella body has a blanket policy that bars women from being involved in all forms of leadership roles. However, regarding occupying senior leadership positions, analysis of participants' responses attests to the fact that the egalitarianism v. complementarianism debate exists in the sector (see Section 4.2.3.1). Both positions seem to be entrenched, suggesting that the debate is likely to continue (Rudd, 2018). That said, the UKICS is more egalitarian in orientation than complementarian. Over 60% of the sector's umbrella bodies have a policy that equally enables men and women to aspire to any leadership position, including serving as organisation leads and pastors. However, the issue of historical dominance was identified as an inhibiting factor to more female involvement in UKICS leadership roles. This refers to leadership positions within churches (including complementarian-leaning ones) that are open to both men and women, but which have been historically dominated by men.

Focusing on the role of women as senior pastors, evidence from studying five-female led independent churches suggests that, with appropriate support in place, women are equally as capable as their male colleagues in leading successful congregations. While there are variations in church growth attainment levels for female-led independent churches, the pattern observed is in consonance with what obtains generally in the sector. Although there is evidence of progress, the thinking is that more needs to be done at the sectoral level to address issues of inequalities in leadership roles.

8.1.7 Safeguarding in the UKICS

Information from data shows that UK-based independent churches are placing a growing emphasis on safeguarding (RO3 and RQ5). Also observed is the support role played by umbrella agencies in enhancing safeguarding within the ICS. Among other things, RLAs are involved in organising safeguarding training, conducting reviews, and mediating to resolve abuse/misconduct cases. Analysis of safeguarding mechanisms operated by independent churches reveals a range: from organised settings, run by skilled personnel, to congregations that are yet to have a policy in place.

Issues of concern around safeguarding were identified including rising incidences of manipulative and abusive conduct on the part of leaders (see Table 7.5). A unique safeguarding challenge associated with the ICS is the fact that individual congregations bear sole responsibility for addressing safeguarding-related issues (unlike what obtains in denominational settings). It is argued that continuing concerted effort is required in the UKICS if the sector's congregations are to build a healthy organisational culture around safeguarding.

8.2 Contribution to Knowledge

With the conclusion of this study on the UKICS, it is appropriate to account for contribution made to knowledge. The view is that contribution has been made to knowledge in areas relating to literature, research methodology, and theoretical framework. Also, the findings of the inquiry have implications for practice in academia and the setting studied.

This is the first UK wide in-depth study to address the gap in knowledge that existed in relation to the intertwined issues of UK independent church proliferation, legitimacy, and accountability. The view is that the research has contributed to knowledge by shedding analytical light on how effectively UK-based RLAs have functioned since the outset of the 21st century in enhancing the legitimacy, accountability, growth, and overall organisational performance of independent congregations in their membership.

While there are references in the literature to some UKICS umbrella bodies/networks, a gap existed in properly identifying these agencies and delineating their vital functions. Accordingly, a scoping review focusing on faith-based umbrella bodies in the UKICS was undertaken (see Section 2.4.1). The detailed search, which involved critical evaluation of available literature on the topic (McCloskey *et al.*, 2023), enabled key factors pertaining to the topic to be established (Khalil *et al.*, 2021). For instance, in relation to literature, new light has been shed on the independent church model. In particular, the activities of independent congregations operating in a contemporary UK setting, their accountability to diverse stakeholders, and their overall organisational performance. Information has also been provided on the working relationship between otherwise independently existing churches and the RLAs that offer them association. Focusing on ICS RLAs, insight has been furnished on their contemporary role, and how these umbrella bodies function to maintain healthy equilibrium in the interplay between independence and interdependence within their membership. It is expected that literature generated will help to attract academic recognition to the role of RLAs and encourage their inclusion in contemporary management, accounting, and social science discourse.

Further contribution to knowledge has arisen from the need to develop a research methodology, theoretical underpinning, and stakeholder accountability model suited to the setting investigated. In undertaking the study, it was necessary to critically reflect on the appropriate research methodology and theoretical framework that are best suited to both the unique research context and the research objectives (Bom and Toren, 2020). For instance, there was a need to employ an integrative theoretical framework to guide the research process. Utilising related aspects of stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory and Christian theological concepts as theoretical underpinning enabled the impact made by both the Christian biblical worldview and the British socio-cultural structure on the phenomenon investigated to be evidenced (Labanow, 2009; Holmes and Lindsay, 2018). The thinking then is that relevant concepts of Christian theology (when integrated with related aspects of stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory), provide an academic framework for exploring the

issues of legitimacy, accountability, and organisational performance from the context of Christian-based organisations operating in a more liberalised and scrutinous socio-cultural environment. As such, researchers seeking to conduct effective inquiries in related areas are likely to find use for the theoretical framework and research methodology applied in this study.

Also, in seeking to conduct a robust and effective analysis of ICS accountability, it was vital to develop a stakeholder accountability framework suited to the independent church model. This has resulted in additional contribution to knowledge. The framework is hinged on the view that a tripartite working partnership approach (not overly dependent on external regulation) is required. To enable a fundamental element of this partnership, there is need for a sector-based review mechanism (a form of self-regulation by RLAs) to be considered as a credible complementary approach to achieving effective ICSA. These tripartite working partnership approach, involving individual churches, their RLA and the Charity Regulator, has implications for practice.

8.2.1 Implications for Practice in the ICS

It is considered that the inquiry undertaken into UKICS operations has contributed to knowledge in ways that have implications for practice in the sector (Saunders *et al.*, 2023, Erickson, 2023). Contributions made to practice also offer potential benefits to the public. For instance, focusing further on the need for effective ICSA, the model developed enables a transition to be made in the self-regulatory role played by ICS RLAs. The transition is from a traditional approach that is very restrained in its level of involvement, to a reformed and contemporary approach that is designed to respond more effectively to the increasing multi-dimensional accountability concerns associated with the sector. The traditional approach has remained deficient in its ability to satisfy stakeholder groups within the wider public. Two merits associated with the 12-element contemporary self-regulatory process developed in this study is that it can be implemented within parameters suited to the independent church model and it is sufficiently robust to be seen to be adequate and effective by independent church

stakeholders. These qualities make it fit for the purpose of encouraging and achieving good accountability practices in the ICS.

Besides its potential for contributing to improving ICSA, the outcome of this research has implications for practice in other areas. For instance, the findings on restructuring and revitalisation approaches employed in the sector are expected to contribute to energising a more strategic oriented view of independent church/RLA operation. Church growth strategies identified (see Section 6.4), and social action initiatives outlined (see Section 6.5.2), provide ideas that organisations in the sector can consider adopting and implementing in ways suited to their operational environment. Research findings are also expected to encourage reforms to ICS leadership conceptions, resulting in more ethnically diverse structures and increased opportunities and support for women in senior roles. Additionally, it is anticipated that insights generated via the study will influence independent church leadership and governance practices in areas such as safeguarding where challenges associated with the sector have been identified. Given the focus on UKICS RLA functions, a further implication for practice associated with the outcome of this research is that unaffiliated congregations in the sector will become better informed about the benefits to be derived from RLA membership.

8.3 Enhancing Stakeholder Satisfaction and Confidence in the ICS

One of the stated objectives of this study on the UKICS is to determine measures that could be put in place to increase confidence in the role of the sector and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction. This objective (RO5) and its accompanying research question (RQ6) are specified in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1: Key Area of Analytical Focus in Relation to RO5 and RQ6

Key Area of Research Focus on the UKICS	Related Research Objective	Related Research Question	Underpinning Theories and Concepts
Enhancing stakeholder satisfaction and confidence in the sector's role	**RO5:** To examine if there is a need for further measures to be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction.	**RQ6**: What further measures could be put in place by the UKICS to increase confidence in their operations and improve overall stakeholder satisfaction?	An integration of related aspects of stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory and Christian theological concepts.

Findings of the World Values Survey conducted in 2022 point to a rebound in public confidence in UK churches and religious organisations (see Section 2.11.7). While no figure has been determined, there is evidence from this study to suggest that the impact made on UK communities by independent churches during the Covid-19 pandemic reflected well in terms of public confidence in their role (Dornbrack, 2023). That said, the ICS remains in need of measures that will contribute to boosting public perception and confidence in their operations. The twelve recommendations in Table 8.2 are geared towards this purpose. These suggestions are also expected to contribute to improving overall stakeholder satisfaction in the activities of independent churches.

Table 8.2: Recommendations for Improving Stakeholder Confidence in the ICS

Areas of Focus	Recommendations
Independent church model	While the growth occurring in the ICS may indicate a level of acceptance within the UK population, there is a need to create public awareness about the concept of independent church and promote independency as a theological and socially credible church model. It is of essence to address misconceptions and seek to demystify some of the rhetoric associated with independent congregations. In doing this, an honest acknowledgement of the weaknesses of independency would be helpful. To be effective, awareness creation will require concerted sector effort. However, RLAs are better positioned to attract recognition to the ICS, in ways that individual churches may not be able to.
Community/societal impact	Given the limited public awareness of the spiritual, social, and economic contributions of independent churches to the UK society, attention needs to be drawn to the significant community impact being made by independent congregations through their social engagement activities and their role in encouraging social cohesion. These issues could be considered to have positive social legitimating implications.

Developing online church communities	In view of opportunities for enhanced growth and impact offered by online means, the UKICS needs to engage more effectively to harness this potential. While there are challenges associated with running an online church community alongside the in-person congregation, it can help to widen the reach of a church and broaden their social acceptance levels.
Stakeholder identification	Individual congregations need to adopt a stakeholder network that is comprehensive in conceptualisation and accommodates a broad spectrum of internal and external stakeholders. This is likely to result in better management of stakeholder engagement issues.
Accountability and transparency	Having a plurality of leaders and avoiding a centralisation of power are essential for effectively addressing many leadership-related accountability concerns associated with the ICS. There is a need in all churches (including congregations with few attendees) to make the decision-making process more open and transparent. Vital to avoid a situation where key decisions are made subjectively without consultation, or one person is seen to have overall preeminent control.
RLA role in ICS accountability	Umbrella organisations across the ICS need to consider the expediency of operating a periodic review/self-regulatory system that supports the accountability of member congregations. For effective implementation of this system, there is a need to transition from a traditional approach that is very restrained in its level of involvement to a reformed approach that would respond more appropriately to the increasing accountability concerns associated with the sector. It is suggested that the 12-element umbrella body based self-regulatory system designed through this study can be adopted as a guiding framework in the process.
Imbalance in ethnic representation in leadership structures	Given the progress being made within the UKICS to enhance leadership diversity and inclusivity levels, an honest and strategic approach (devoid of tokenism) is required. The consideration is that it is not only a contemporary view (aimed at placating some dissatisfied stakeholders), but also it has implications for congregational harmony and growth as exemplified in the story of the Early Church at Antioch.
Female involvement in leadership	To enable more female involvement in UKICS leadership roles, the inhibiting factor of historical dominance needs to be addressed. This refers to leadership positions that are open to both qualified men and women, but which have been historically dominated by men.
Appointment, accreditation, and training of leaders	It is important for internal and external stakeholders to be assured that due diligence has been applied in the appointment, vetting, accreditation, and accreditation renewal process of independent church ministers. Mechanisms to ensure that senior ministers are theologically sound and have a good name will invoke confidence in the wider church and faith community as well as in the society.

Welfare of leaders	Independent church leaders often adopt a hands-on approach and are passionately disposed to achieve their vision. This can be carried on at the detriment of their health and general wellbeing. As such, appropriate boundaries should be established to ensure self-care, time for family, holidays, sabbaticals, and opportunities for relaxation. This may require a non-binding support network to be set up within umbrella bodies, through which congregations can voluntarily request for and receive pastoral/teaching support while their pastor is unavailable.
Leadership succession	Often, independent churches are established as a pioneer effort. To achieve longer term organisational stability and success, a defined succession policy may be useful. Timely communication to other leaders and the congregation can work to limit conflicts and church splits.
Good Safeguarding	Sustained emphasis on the need for good safeguarding practice. To this intent, concerted effort is required to enable independent congregations to both build a healthy organisational culture around safeguarding and effectively address safeguarding-related challenges.

It is anticipated that the recommendations outlined in Table 8.2 will serve to invigorate ongoing restructuring and revitalisation efforts within the UKICS. The proposed measures are also expected to enable the sector to become better positioned in fulfilling its role.   As determined in this research, the existence of diverse ideological perspectives and motivational leanings in the British society create a rationale for surmising that certain independent church stakeholder-related conflicts are likely to remain unresolved. This is given that some of these ideological perspectives and motivational leanings may be at variance with the guiding concepts of ICS operators (see Section 7.2.2). Yet, study findings strongly suggest that while the UKICS is largely unyielding to adjusting its core values to accommodate practices that in their view represent a dilution or departure from scriptural prescriptions, the sector is in no sense static nor insular.

8.4 Limitations of the Study and Suggested Direction of Further Research

The process of data collection for this research on the UKICS has involved utilising online methods. Justification for this approach is provided in Section 3.6. In comparison with face-to-face methods, employing remote-only means in conducting IDIs and FGDs may have limited the ability of study participants to freely explore their thoughts and feelings (Kevern *et al.*,

2023). While it is argued that it is now acceptable practice to generate interview data using online spaces (Lapuz, 2023), in-person modes could be adopted in carrying out future studies relating to the sector investigated.

Unaffiliated congregations in the UKICS have not been involved in this study. Although many of the research findings (and vast volumes of collated literature) can be useful in explaining the operations of UK-based independent churches, it is the case that prime research focus has been placed on RLA-member congregations. As determined in the study, the challenging socio-cultural terrain in which UK independent churches operate has made belonging to an umbrella body more expedient for sustainability purposes. This could suggest that unaffiliated or lone ranger congregations are in the minority within the UKICS. However, further research is required to establish if this is the case.

A desired outcome of this research is that insights provided will encourage academic interest in RLAs and stimulate interdisciplinary discourse on their role. As such, further studies will need to be conducted to analyse the role/effectiveness of ICS RLAs in geographic settings different to the one explored. There would also be benefit in investigating the role/effectiveness of RLAs in other faith settings apart from the one focused on.

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Appendices

Appendix A: ICS Umbrella Organisations Questionnaire

Section One: Introduction and Consent Statement

The information provided by you in this questionnaire will be used for research purposes. It will not be used in a manner which would allow identification of your individual responses. Anonymised research data will be archived and made available to other researchers on request in line with current data sharing practices. The questionnaire will take you approximately twenty minutes to complete. You may choose not to participate in the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. By completing this questionnaire, you indicate that you understand its purpose and consent to the use of the data as indicated above. Any data provided will be analysed where applicable and included in the pool of findings. Data cannot be withdrawn as it will be anonymised.

Section Two: Roles, Membership Structure and Issues Relating to the Last Five Years

Please complete the following questionnaire by clicking the appropriate answer(s) or typing in your response where required.

1.Name of Umbrella Organisation: _____

2.As an umbrella organisation, in which of these areas do you perform functions that benefit UK-based independent churches? Please, choose all that apply:

O Provision of accreditation and recognition through membership

O Advancement of Christian faith and collective religious interest

O Creation of platforms for relationship and collaboration

O Representation at faith and public forums

O Provision of resources (including training)

O Assistance in evangelistic efforts (including church planting)

O Facilitation of reforms through restructuring, innovations etc.

O Regular periodic and special reviews for accountability purposes

O Conduct/commissioning of research and special studies

3. Do you perform additional roles apart from the ones listed above? Please specify:

_____

4. How many UK-based independent churches are in your membership?

_____

5. How are these churches geographically distributed?
   a.   Number of churches in England _____
   b.   Number of churches in Scotland _____
   c.   Number of churches in Wales _____
   d.   Number of churches in Northern Ireland _____

Questions 6 – 13 relate to the last five years:

6. As an umbrella organisation, which of these have you experienced in the last five years? Please tick as many as apply:

O Net growth in membership numbers

O Net decline in membership numbers

O No change in membership numbers

O New church plants by existing members

O Church closures

O Voluntary withdrawals of membership

O Terminations of membership

7. How would you assess the openness of people in Britain to the gospel message in the last five years?

O Generally, more open in all parts of the country

O Generally, more open in some parts of the country

O Generally, less open in all parts of the country

O Generally, less open in some parts of the country

O Not sure

8. Please could you comment on the reason(s) for your answer to the above question:

_____

9. Would you say that Britain has become a more secular or less secular country in the last five years?

O More secular

O Less secular

O Not sure

10. Are there reasons to explain your answer to the above question? Please specify:

_____

11. Focusing on the last five years, to what extent has migration of people from outside the UK contributed to growth in the number of congregants in the independent churches in your membership?

O Very significantly

O Significantly

O Minimal contribution

O No noticeable contribution

O Not sure

12. Please could you explain the reason(s) for your answer to the above question:

_____

13. In your view, has there been an increase or decrease in the public scrutiny of the operations of independent churches in the last five years?

O Increase

O Decrease

O No noticeable difference

Section Three: Stakeholder and Accountability Issues

14. Which of these do you consider as stakeholders that individual independent churches are accountable to? If all apply, please choose the option 'All of the above':

O God

O Church members

O Employees and volunteers

O Donors (internal & external)

O Local Community/communities of location

O Umbrella Organisation(s) they belong to

O Other churches (their peers) in the umbrella organisation(s)

O 'The Church' as a Body

O Wider Faith/Religious community

O Governmental authorities (central and local)

O Statutory Regulators (for instance, The Charity Commission)

O Society at large

O All of the above

15. Are there other stakeholders? Please specify:

_____

16. What are the factors that raise accountability concerns in the UK independent church sector? If all apply, please choose the option 'All of the above':

O Size of church

O Sudden rise in income

O Failings in church governance

O Benefits to trustees and senior leaders

O Assets management issues

O Financial misconduct

O Safeguarding issues

O Late filling of annual reports and accounts

O Non-compliance with orders given by regulators

O All of the above

17. Are there other factors that raise accountability concerns? Please specify:

_____

18. To what extent can these accountability concerns be associated with independent churches that do not belong to any UK-based accrediting umbrella organisation?

O Very large extent

O Large extent

O Limited extent

O Very limited extent

O Not sure

19. Please could you explain the reason(s) for your answer to the above question:

_____

20. Do you think your organisation has a role to play in enhancing the accountability of your member churches to their stakeholders?

O Yes

O May be

O No

21. Please could you comment on your answer to the above question:

_____

22. Are there churches in your membership that were already registered charities before seeking membership with you?

O Yes, many

O Yes, few

O None

O Not known

Section Four: Diversity and Leadership Issues

23.How would you describe the ethnic backgrounds of congregants in the independent churches in your umbrella body?

O Majority White

O Majority Black African

O Majority Black Caribbean

O Majority Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)

O Mixed

24. How would you describe the ethnic composition of the leadership teams of independent churches in your membership?

O Majority White

O Majority Black African

O Majority Black Caribbean

O Majority Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)

O Mixed

25. Based on your policy as an umbrella body, which leadership roles can women in your organisation aspire to?

O Any leadership role including serving as organisation leads, pastors, and members of Trustees' Board/Leadership committees

O Any leadership role excluding serving as organisation leads, pastors, and members of Trustees' Board/Leadership Committees

O Other specified leadership roles

O No leadership roles

26. Is the above policy binding or non-binding on the independent churches that seek membership with your organisation?

O Binding

O Non-binding

27. Please, could you comment on the reason(s) for this policy:

_____

28. If there are other specified roles for women, please could you explain what they are:

_____

29. Are you working towards achieving more diversity in the leadership structure of your organisation?

O Yes

O No, it is already diversified

O No, not a priority

30. Is there anything else you would like to say?

_____

31. A second phase of this research will be commencing after the completion of this survey. Please, indicate if your organisation will consider taking part:

O Yes, we will consider taking part after receiving information about the next phase

O No, we are not interested in taking any further part

32. Finally, if you are willing to take part, please could you provide an email address for a contact person, if this is different from the email address to which this survey was sent:

_____

Section Five: Appreciation

Thank you for taking part in this survey. If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact the researcher in the first instance using the contact details provided. However, if after speaking with the researcher you wish to complain formally, you can do this through contacting the Research and Enterprise Development (RED) Unit at Buckinghamshire New University. Please contact RED Unit, Buckinghamshire New University, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire HP11 2JZ. Email: researchunit@bucks.ac.uk. Normally, your complaint will be acknowledged within five working days and answered as soon as possible thereafter.

Appendix B: Topic Guide for Interviews with RLA Officials

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
NEW UNIVERSITY
EST. 1891

Effectiveness of Umbrella Organisations in Enhancing Accountability and Organisational Performance of Independent Churches in the Face of Rising Secularism and Public Scrutiny

GENERAL

1. **Standard Introduction (all participants)**

2. **Age/Gender/Role –** level of experience in role within umbrella organisation/ UK independent church sector

3. **Main reason(s) why independent churches seek membership with Umbrella Organisations** – probes to explore roles played by the organisation for its member congregations, and the implications of membership on issues such as non-denominational status, autonomy, self-governance, doctrinal positions, and financial contributions of member congregations etc.

4. **Main issues affecting increase/diversity in membership** – For example, effect of secularism on church attendance in different parts of the UK, effect of migration on church growth, BAME integration/integration of white British nationals in member churches etc.

5. **Main strategies adopted to enhance effectiveness in role performance** – For instance, redefinition of objectives/mission statement, restructuring to make leadership more diverse, complete rebranding requiring name change; revitalisation strategies to enhance growth of individual member congregations etc.

6. **Main factors that raise accountability concerns in the independent church sector** – probes to explore views on the effect of increasing public scrutiny of the operations of independent churches, whether the umbrella organisation has worked previously in partnership with a charity regulator in policy formulation or addressing other issues within the sector, comparison of umbrella organisation roles and charity regulators' functions in the sector to determine relatedness/non-relatedness and areas of complementarity in the roles of both actors.

7. **How issues of abuse, financial impropriety and other forms of misconduct are addressed** – For instance, whether annual reviews (and other forms of periodic or special reviews) of member churches are conducted, if there is enough emphasis on safeguarding, if umbrella organisation has powers to impose sanctions and what the grounds for termination of accreditation are.

8. **Measures that could be put in place in the sector** – Aimed at enhancing societal acceptance of independent churches, increasing confidence in their role, and improving the satisfaction levels of their stakeholders etc.

ANY OTHER ISSUES

Will need to thank participant(s) and end appropriately.

Appendix C: Topic Guide for Interviews with Congregational Leaders

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
NEW UNIVERSITY
EST. 1891

Effectiveness of Umbrella Organisations in Enhancing Accountability and Organisational Performance of Independent Churches in the Face of Rising Secularism and Public Scrutiny

GENERAL

1. **Standard Introduction (all participants)**

2. **Age/Gender/Role –** Level of experience in role within independent church

3. **Main demographic characteristics of congregation** – For instance, ethnic background of congregants (whether majority white/majority black or ethnic minority/mixed), age (majority elderly/majority youths/mixed)

4. **Trends in the growth/decline of membership numbers** – Explore experiences on response from local community/communities to evangelistic efforts; extent to which secularism/migration is an issue; views on the legitimacy of independent churches and the distinction between divinely-derived legitimacy and socially-conferred legitimacy; whether social legitimacy has been enhanced by membership of umbrella organisation etc.

5. **Main stakeholders to whom the church is accountable** – Probes to explore views on God, members, umbrella organisation, community, society etc. as stakeholders; order of priority in which stakeholders are ranked; consideration/involvement of stakeholders in decision-making; how conflicting relationships with stakeholders are managed/resolved; any established complaints procedure.

6. **Strategies for growing influence of church** – involvement in local community through social engagement and promotion of social cohesion, use of media including television and online means, resultant effect (if any) on church growth.

7. **Areas in which the church demonstrates accountability** – For instance, considerations given to leadership, safeguarding, and social accountability; means of communicating accountability, for example, annual reports.

8. **Leadership structure of the church** – Explore dominant leadership style of senior pastor, influence on Board of Trustees (whether also on the Board or family member on the Board, basis for this); extent of diversity in leadership team, role of women, BAME involvement etc.

9. **Main reason(s) for seeking membership with umbrella organisation(s)** – Whether registered with a charity regulator and if this was done prior to seeking membership with an umbrella body, if so, views on the relatedness/non-relatedness of umbrella body and charity regulator functions.

10. **Assessment of relationship with umbrella body** – Explore views on influence of umbrella organisation(s) (whether controlling or non-controlling), respect for autonomy and decisions on doctrinal issues, areas of conflict in the relationship (if any); in their experience, extent to which umbrella organisation's role is beneficial and effective/ how it could be more beneficial and effective.

11. **Measures that could be put in place in the sector** – Aimed at enhancing societal acceptance of independent churches, increasing confidence in their role, and improving the satisfaction levels of their stakeholders etc.

ANY OTHER ISSUES

Will need to thank participant(s) and end appropriately.

Appendix D: ICSUOS Responses from Participant RA25

Jisc Online surveys

Independent Church Sector Umbrella Organisations Survey

Response ID	Start date	Completion date	
775466-775457-85784557	8 Nov 2021, 14:40 (GMT)	8 Nov 2021, 15:10 (GMT)	

1	Name of Umbrella Organisation:	@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@ @@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@ @@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@

2	As an umbrella organisation, in which of these areas do you perform functions that benefit UK-based independent churches? Please, choose all that apply:	• Provision of accreditation and recognition through membership • Advancement of Christian faith and collective religious interest • Creation of platforms for relationship and collaboration • Provision of resources (including training) • Assistance in evangelistic efforts (including church planting) • Facilitation of reforms through restructuring, innovations etc. • Regular periodic and special reviews for accountability purposes

3	Do you perform additional roles apart from the ones listed above? Please specify:	N/A

4	How many UK-based independent churches are in your membership?	80

5	How are these churches geographically distributed?	UK based churches are spread throughout England & Wales
5.a	Number of churches in England	75
5.b	Number of churches in Scotland	0
5.c	Number of churches in Wales	5
5.d	Number of churches in Northern Ireland	0

6	As an umbrella organisation, which of these have you experienced in the last five years? Please choose as many as apply:	• Net growth in membership numbers • New church plants by existing members • Voluntary withdrawals of membership

7	How would you assess the openness of people in Britain to the gospel message in the last five years?	Generally, more open in some parts of the country

8	Please could you comment on the reason(s) for your answer to the above question:	The Covid pandemic seems to have increased interest in the gospel particularly amongst younger generation

9	Would you say that Britain has become a more secular or less secular country in the last five years?	More secular

10	Are there reasons to explain your answer to the above question? Please specify:	The younger generation have been a little more willing to listen to and explore the gospel. Society has been keen to receive help with social problems, but less accepting of taking an openly Christian response.

11	Focusing on the last five years, to what extent has migration of people from outside the UK contributed to growth in the number of congregants in the independent churches in your membership?	Significantly

12	Please could you explain the reason(s) for your answer to the above question:	Some of our churches have grown dramatically through migration, particularly those in large cities. Those in smaller towns have not experienced significant growth and have remained static or very slow growth.

13	In your view, has there been an increase or decrease in the public scrutiny of the operations of independent churches in the last five years?	Increase

14	Which of these do you consider as stakeholders that individual independent churches are accountable to? If all apply, please choose the option 'All of the above':	• God • Governmental authorities (central and local) • Statutory regulators (for instance, The Charity Commission) • Church members • Employees and volunteers • Umbrella organisation(s) they belong to • Other churches (their peers) in the umbrella organisation(s)
15	Are there other stakeholders? Please specify:	We follow a model of Apostolic oversight. Each church will hold itself accountable to an apostolic team, who would often consist of leaders of other churches within the group[.
16	What are the factors that raise accountability concerns in the UK independent church sector? If all apply, please choose the option 'All of the above':	• Size of church • Failings in church governance • Financial misconduct • Safeguarding issues • Non-compliance with orders given by regulators
17	Would you like to comment on these accountability issues? Please specify if there are other factors that raise accountability concerns:	Over many years we have observed a very small number of churches where leaders have created a controlling authority amongst their congregation.
18	To what extent can these accountability concerns be associated with independent churches that do not belong to any UK-based accrediting umbrella organisation?	Not sure
19	Please could you explain the reason(s) for your answer to the above question:	
20	Do you think your organisation has a role to play in enhancing the accountability of your member churches to their stakeholders?	Yes
21	Please could you comment on your answer to the above question:	We have an apostolic oversight strucure. Part of that role is to continually ensure that the leadership of the local church is open and honest - with the member of its congregation and other church leaders in their group.

22	Are there churches in your membership that were already registered charities before seeking membership with you?	Yes, many

23	How would you describe the ethnic backgrounds of congregants in the independent churches in your umbrella body?	Mixed

24	How would you describe the ethnic composition of the leadership teams of independent churches in your membership?	Majority White

25	Based on your policy as an umbrella body, which leadership roles can women in your organisation aspire to?	Any leadership role excluding serving as organisation leads, pastors, and members of Trustees' Boards/Leadership Committees

26	Is the above policy binding or non-binding on the independent churches that seek membership with your organisation?	Binding

27	Please, could you comment on the reason(s) for this policy:	At the moment we see a biblical framework for different but complementary roles for men and women. In practice this excludes women from positions as "elders" in the church, but all other roles, including leading teams and trustees are open to male and female alike.

28	If there are other specified roles for women, please could you explain what they are:	

29	Are you working towards achieving more diversity in the leadership structure of your organisation?	Yes

30	Is there anything else you would like to say?	Some of our churches have a greater racial diversity than others. In those churches we are working to enable and ensure a wider diversity in the leadership structure. Many of our churches are working harder at raising up women to positions of leadership that are not "elders" but have been historically dominated by men.

31	A second phase of this research will be commencing after the completion of this survey. Please, indicate if your organisation will consider taking part:	Yes, we will consider taking part after receiving information about the next phase

32	Finally, if you are willing to take part, please could you provide an email address for a contact person, if this is different from the email address to which this survey was sent:	

Appendix E: Transcript of Individual Interview with Participant C7

Interviewer

Today is the 9th of May 2022. I would like to welcome you and thank you for consenting to participate in this audio recorded research interview. As we begin, please could you confirm that you are over 18 years of age.

Interviewee

I am.

Interviewer

Thank you. Could you also confirm that in terms of your ethnic background and gender you are a black British of African descent and a male?

Interviewee

Yes, I am.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. At this point, could you say a little bit about your role in your organisation.

Interviewee

Right, I am the senior pastor or the senior minister of [*name of church*] which has churches in [*name of a place*] and [*another place*].

Interviewer

And how long have you been in this position?

Interviewee

Well, I have been a minister since 1993. That is when I was ordained as a minister. But as far as the networking, particularly in the United Kingdom has been, well, that's since 2005.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. Now, looking at your congregation, especially your congregants within the UK, how would you describe the demographics, their background, the ethnic makeup of your congregation?

Interviewee

Our congregation is very mixed. We have got Black British. We've got white British. We have got Nigerians. We have got Ghanaians. We have got Sierra Leoneans, who have come from the African continent. I think we have more than eighteen or so different African countries that are in the church. And then we've got people from the Caribbean. People of Caribbean descent from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago. People from Saint Lucia, people from Saint Vincent. So, we have got quite a very varied kind of people. We have got a couple from the Eastern European bloc that are part of the church, so I would say it is fairly diverse, although we have probably people of African descent, from the different continents, more than the white indigenous communities.

Interviewer

Thank you. So, considering the diversity in your congregation, how do you work towards achieving integration and ensuring that the members of the church find a place within the congregation?

Interviewee

I think from the onset, when God laid on our hearts to set up [*name of church*], it was one of those things that we clearly understood our mandate from the Lord that we are not a gathering of the diaspora of African descent. But we are missionaries in this land, so as missionaries in this land, the more obvious focus would be if we are going to be missionaries, how do we win the people of this country? That has been the hallmark of our focus. So, whilst we are celebrating the diversity that we are, we still know that we have got a lot to do as far as the focus of this country is concerned. About maintaining that balance or that diversity, one of the key things that we have is to make sure that whoever comes into our midst feels that they are welcome, they are loved, and they find a place where they can belong. Whatever it takes. In other words, we do as much to dismantle any kind of barrier that would exclude certain people or certain groups. So, whilst we may not have succeeded to the extent that we want, we see that we are doing something along that line that has been bringing in the diversity that we are seeing in our midst.

Interviewer

Thank you, thank you very much. So, in what ways do you reach out to your local community? How do you engage with the local community?

Interviewee

There are several things that we do within our local community. For example, we have got a programme that we run for the senior citizens. We have the tea and cakes that we do for the senior citizens, that is open to any senior citizens that are around. We also run programmes for children. Because of the pandemic, some of the programmes we had to suspend them. But we have programmes that we run for what we might call the less fortunate in our community. We normally run a programme that we call fit and fed. That means to say we look after children that are statemented at school or we say people that are on statements that are normally fed by the government during the term time. But when the term closes, the government does not run a programme to meet the needs of those children. So, we have a programme twice a week that we provide meals. And that gives us an opportunity to reach out into the community.

We also have got some youth programs that we run that are designed to encourage even youths within our community to find something to do. We used to have one that we used to run that had to do with driving the bus, put it out there in the community in one of the parks where the kids can come in. They can play games. They can meet with some of our youth. So, they just have somewhere to start from, because we know that it is very intimidating if you have not been in a changed environment. So, we have quite a number of programmes that we do within the community. One of the programmes that we had been doing was today. What we might call aerobics, aerobics for senior and as well as young and middle-aged people that would come in and have aerobics in our building. So, which would actually attract people from different diverse [*backgrounds*]. We had a couple of other programmes, of course, because of the pandemic, some of those programmes had to be scaled back. But as the pandemic scourge is moving away, we see ourselves beginning to build up from where we were.

Interviewer

Thank you very much, thank you.

Interviewee

Welcome.

Interviewer

Now, considering the situation in the UK, how receptive is the gospel message in your community as you are reaching out to people? How open are they to receive the gospel message?

Interviewee

I think we are serving a community that is also not only diverse but also changing and the modes and the methods of reaching out the gospel are changing. So, we have got some things that we do, for example on the social media side. We have done a survey to see how people are responsive to things like flyers and all that. And the response has been that very few people read flyers. Very few people look into all that. So, in other words, a lot of it is to do with programmes that we do in the communities. As well as offering an opportunity where we are talking about social media platforms or for example engagement. We might have like a day where we have in our town [*name of town*] we have got a stand there, a place where we are ministering to people. Giving some items that people can actually connect with. And maybe yes, door-to-door, we are still doing them visiting door-to-door. But very few people respond to just being knocked on the door, and they say, oh ok, what do you want? Do you think I have nothing to do? So, those kinds of reaching out, they are still there. But really, on the lower end of the scale rather than what we are doing within the community because we know that when we come out it is an opportunity and of course setting up stalls for example, in the markets and the like where people pass by, and you can actually have an opportunity to minister. Yes, so like I said, the modes and methods of ministering have changed, or the fish has changed. But the gospel message still remains the same.

Interviewer

Thank you, thank you. Being a leader of an independent church in the UK, in your view, what are some of the issues that raise accountability concerns about the work of independent churches?

Interviewee

Well, that's a big field. Being an independent church, one of the biggest issues is accountability, and not only accountability, but there are also issues like integrity. There are issues of, you know, support. Accountability, integrity, support. Those are key, particularly for the independent minister because whilst in the established churches they have channels through which they can support a minister, for example, if you want to take a break, they can say, ok, we will send somebody to take over your church while you take a break. But when it comes to support networks for independent churches, you may not have anyone to do that. So, for you to leave the church and find somebody that can run your church while you are away, that is a big ask, and because now you do not have anyone that is within your support network, accountability becomes a problem also. Even if you are going on with any tangent to your vision because you're not accountable to anybody, it also becomes a challenge. So, you will find that whilst there is the support, the accountability, and the integrity that one needs to have in the ministry, it becomes a big ask if you don't have any network of support that might be able to support you as far as the work of God is concerned because as human beings, there are times you get tired.

Like I said, in established churches, they have a programme whereby you say ok every six months you have got to go for a break for a month. But if you are the only one and the time you want to go on a break, the church is going through a turbulent time, you can't go on it because you find there will be no church, so you have to stay in until the church goes through those phases. But at the same time, it is wearing you down, so as far as the support network is concerned for independent churches, that is

really a big one. And secondly, like I said, integrity. That means to say if I can get away with it and nobody knows about it. So, you would need a lot of metrics that you can be accountable to; any system that helps you to be accountable. And not only are you looking for accountability and integrity, but as I said, support. Who is supporting that work in the event of you going through turbulent times, do you have any kind of support? So, for me, I have noted these three key areas. Of course, there are others that come into play but these three areas: Who am I accountable to? And when things are falling apart, can somebody pull me up and say, 'brother you are getting it wrong'. That's the accountability side and then, secondly, the integrity side. Who can come and check on me to say, 'brother you are not walking in faith'. You are not walking according to the scriptures.

So, if you are independent anyway, if I want to be rude and arrogant, I can tell you, I mean you were not there when God told me what to do. I can again tell you to buzz off because at the end of the day I am accountable to God. So, as far as accountability is concerned, it has to be people that have given room to be able to be accountable. And as I said, not only that, but it also now impinges on my integrity, whether I am running the work of God in integrity, and of course that gives the door to the community and the newsmen and everybody around to mudsling at the independent churches because they say these guys, they are just lone rangers. They are wolves, nobody accountable to nobody, and then it also becomes a burden to the work of the Kingdom. So, that is the way that I view it.

Interviewer

Thank you. Now, I am aware you are a member of an umbrella organisation in the Independent Church Sector. So, why did you choose to join this umbrella organisation? What are some of the reasons?

Interviewee

Yes, there are quite a number of reasons. Firstly, like I said, one has to do with support. I need support as a missionary in this country. I needed to find out people that know more about the land, they know the terrain, they know the challenges of the church in this country, or this region of Europe, what are the challenges. What are the dynamics. Of course, you know you don't have to reinvent the wheel. There are things that they have already seen that they know are challenges in this country. … That is number one, metric of support. But not just in network of support, but people that may be in the same boat as I am. For example, there are many Established Church friends that I have, but their perspective of ministry is not necessarily the same as those that are in the independent sector. So, I am looking for people that are going the same journey that have gone through the same humps and the same bumps that know the portals of the road that we are walking in and so that is, number one. So, there is this support network. I needed a support network and secondly, just as a brother, I need somebody that can check on me and say, 'listen my friend, I think you know what you're doing is going to ruin your church. That is going to ruin the work of the ministry.' Of course, I know that God spoke to me. I know that, but it would be a fallacy for me to think that because I am called of God that everybody else is not relevant.

As far as the work is concerned, I needed some place where someone can check my integrity, but also accountability. For example, like I said, I am a missionary in this country. So, there are things or some parameters that are relevant and vital for the survival of the church in the country that you would need somebody who can say OK now as far as accountability with the government is concerned, these are some of the things that you need to be aware of, and in so doing I found the platform or the place where I am very useful … Of course, there are times that you would need maybe to have a broader base, but of course for where I am heading, for what I am planning, for the goals laid in my heart, I think it's relevant to have these kinds of networks around your life.

Interviewer

Thank you. Now in your relationship with the umbrella organisation, to what extent is your autonomy as an independent church respected, and are there instances where you may have to forgo some level of your autonomy in seeking to comply with the requirements of the umbrella body?

Interviewee

Let me just mention to make it plain because I belong to a network called [*name of RLA*]. It is what we call a mutually accountable community. So, in other words, in a mutually accountable community, I am only accountable as far as I am prepared to surrender. I think there is nothing that I surrender that I have not consented to. In other words, it is what you might call accountability by consent. Do I consent to be accountable? So, there is no autonomy that I actually lose. It is different from the other networks, where you are almost like under somebody's guardianship, you understand. This stewardship is a different one. It's mutually accountable. I decide to say, 'my brother check on me.' And even after they have checked on me, I still have got the right to refuse whatever they've told me or to agree with it. So, in this particular case, it is a mutually accountable network. It does not take away any autonomy or authority in what God has called us to do.

Interviewer

So, from what I am hearing, it is important that while you recommend that independent churches should belong to such umbrella organisations, their autonomy needs to be respected and assured in that relationship.

Interviewee

Indeed, it has to, as I said, depending on the kind of network because one of the key aspects of what I might call the fundamentals of being an independent church is the ability to do what God has called you to do. So, when God called me to do what I need to do, really then I know that I don't need to consent with anybody to do what God has called me to do. But I need to find other people that will help me to achieve what I am in. At the same time, I'm putting myself in a place where the people that are around me, that are working around me, might be able to help or to guide or even to correct some stuff in my journey. So, in that case I bring in the accountability side, but that does not take away, particularly in the kind of networks that we are in, it doesn't take away who you are, but it actually enhances who you are.

Interviewer

Still on that topic, trying to connect accountability with the role of umbrella organisations in the Independent Church Sector, would it be helpful if the organisations assume more of an authoritative role in ensuring that independent churches are accountable? To what extent do you think these umbrella organisations should work to ensure that independent churches in their membership are accountable?

Interviewee

I think there is a balance that needs to be struck between what we might end up calling control and what you might call structures that are intended to enforce that accountability. There needs to be a balance. The balance is that whatever sort of tools or structures that are put in place must not stifle the vision. But at the same time, I realise there is the need for these kinds of measures that are lines drawn to say if you want to be part of this network, these are the minimum guidelines. We cannot accept you if you've got this, if you don't have this. Those are also required. But there are also other networks where they want to really shower you like a baby and make sure that you are spoon fed or controlled. I get that because also of the fears of some of the things that they have heard and seen, particularly

within the independent sector. But I am just saying there is need for balance all these things if they are done in moderation, I think it can be healthy. But once it tips on one side, when you are totally independent and not accountable to anybody, it becomes a disaster. The same way, if it becomes so controlling and manipulative that you end up losing who you are, then it ceases to serve the purpose for which it is set up.

Interviewer

Thank you so much. Just two more areas of questioning. First, what is the approach in your congregation in terms of the role of women in leadership? And how would you view this issue in terms of the Independent Church Sector in the United Kingdom?

Interviewee

Particularly speaking from the network that I belong to and our church, our church stance is that God can call women. God can use women, so for us it's not a problem. Women are not a problem in leadership. We subscribe to the ethos that allow that women can arise in leadership, and they can rise to any position that God calls them to. We are not making a theological argument in this place. So, we don't have that problem. Of course, I have got other people that I have met that have got very strong views about women in leadership that it is a 'no'. And I have got some people that once even attended our church that said, as long as there are women in leadership, we cannot fellowship in this church. I was gracious enough to point them to the church of a dear brother that I know that do not believe in women leadership, and I said, 'look these guys I still believe they are doing a Kingdom work, but they can be a safe place for you.' So, as far as the Independent Church Sector is concerned, there are places where it is an absolute 'no' for women. But as far as I am concerned, I have no problem with women in ministry and I am pretty sure I have also got my scriptural base or my theological lines that I have actually established about women. So, I have absolutely no problem with this.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. Now focusing on the last area of questioning, in your view, what are some of the measures that could be put in place to enhance confidence in the work of independent churches and their umbrella organisations?

Interviewee

I think there are certain levels that we can look at that particular question. It has got different levels for articulating it. When you are talking about confidence, whether it is from an individual perspective, or an individual church perspective, or our confidence as far as the community is concerned, or our confidence as far as the nation is concerned. I think particularly coming from a black minority background, one of the challenges that we have been seeing in the past, probably it's changing, is to find a platform that you are accepted for who you are. If it makes sense. There has been quite a challenge in looking at the aspect whereby you have other brothers that may not necessarily think you are doing Kingdom work either because you are independent or because of some whatever prejudices that are based on colour, some of those things. So, in a way, in some cases that would have dented the confidence of the work. Particularly, you would not love to hear somebody saying, 'oh, you know they're doing work, but it's a black people church', and 'oh, that's for blacks.' So, those kinds of things erode confidence from a community base. And every now and then, even when people are responding because they just don't feel that the church is their church, but when such sentiments are voiced openly, it dents the confidence. Then of course on an individual basis, sometimes when you're growing up within a particular church sector like, for example, I am coming from a background where the majority in the country where I came from are blacks, and you are talking about moving into a space where it's almost

90% the other way. So, in other words, the confidence to know that my gospel still works in those environments can be intimidating.

So, what I was looking at was also the aspect of these kinds of networks they begin to build up. You find others that have actually got the breakthrough. You get the information that you can glean from other guys. That helps you to actually build your confidence. So, such kinds of networks like the [*name of RLA*] that I am talking about. They have those platforms where you can learn from each other because you are mutually accountable to each other. You have got a platform to learn from people that are on the same platform, same journey, doing the same work. So, it builds their confidence and also you have got people who encourage you to know, like listen, it's not just a problem within your independent churches, but it's a problem that is being run over. So, just get on with the work of the Kingdom. So, from that perspective also builds up confidence. But of course, being also in the structures that make decisions, particularly within our communities. Being in the structures, whether it is in the Council, in the governing structures of towns, it gives you the confidence to know that you are represented, because one of the major challenges has been that unless you are represented, you don't exist.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. Finally, is there any other last word you want to add in to our discussion today?

Interviewee

I think, as far as this research is concerned, one of the key things that comes into play is to find out, well, maybe that's for your research, or maybe your research will reach that far, but is there any probability, because we have seen the other big networks scrambling, is there any possibility of these mutually accountable networks like ours, finding space where they actually replace the old structures that have been there? You will notice that in the olden days, for example, if we needed chaplains, they are going to come from the Anglicans, from the Catholic, from the Methodists, and we have noticed that some of these have been grinding slowly because of the challenge of manpower. And can the independent sector, can it replace, can it become the funnel, the channel through which some of these new ideas, new breeding grounds, can arise?

However, looking also into the structures that we hold, they need these kinds of parameters where they say, 'how many years have you been trained? Which theological college, which seminary, did you go to?' I realised that in the independent sector, one of the things I was just going to bring up is that maybe one of the areas that needs to be investigated is the training of ministers. Are we equipped for the work that we have been called to? I think enhancing the training and building up the trail, the ability and the capacity of ministers, must not necessarily be something that it becomes mutual that I don't want to go through it. I think there is a minimum that could actually help. So, my question was whether the new independent sector that you are looking at in the networks, can they become the lifeline of the churches to come?

Interviewer

Thank you very much, that is a very good note to end the conversation and clearly this view will be reflected in the research once the findings are made available to the public. I just want to thank you for participating in this research.

Interviewee

You're welcome, thank you so much for the pleasure.

Appendix F: Transcript of Individual Interview with Participant R3

Interviewer

Today is the 7th of January 2022, and I would like to thank you for consenting to take part in this audio recorded online interview. Please could you confirm that you are over 18 years of age?

Interviewee

Yes, I am.

Interviewer

Thank you. Could you also confirm that in terms of your ethnic background and gender, that you are a white Scottish female?

Interviewee

Yes, I am white, Scottish, and female.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. Please, I would like to begin by asking, can you tell us a little bit about your experience serving in your umbrella organisation?

Interviewee

OK. … I have been involved with this organisation either as a member of one of their churches or as a minister, or latterly as their [*role specified*] since 1998.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. Could you explain some of the reasons why churches seek to join your organisation?

Interviewee

It is an umbrella organisation which seeks to serve the churches that are part of it. It is a bit like a federation to serve them in a way that helps retain their independence but gives them a measure of interdependence and allows them to have the facility of matters that concern them that are hard for one church in its own to encompass. So, for instance, there is a board of ministry that assists with accrediting ministers, has a disciplinary function, and generally will support these ministers through confidential links with the national team. And it supports the leadership of the churches as well. But there are other areas in which having a broader look over the whole nation helps with, for instance, training or safeguarding. Training of trustees in their obligations on finance, training them in data protection. Things like that are hard sometimes for a small congregation on its own to cover without the umbrella organisation bringing expertise to bear that can be rolled out amongst churches we have at the moment.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. Are there other roles you can think of that your organisation performs for the churches in its membership?

Interviewee

Yes, we have a peaceful transformation group, set up by [*the RLA*], to move into a church at their behest, where they have a conflict going on, which they are finding they cannot resolve internally. Now, that might be between the pastor and the congregation, or it may be internal to the congregation, but the peaceful transformation group come in and seek to mediate. So, it is not imposed, it is invited.

Interviewer

Now, in terms of the autonomy of the churches in your membership, to what extent would you say they always retain this autonomy, or are there any instances where they may need to comply with some of your rules and regulations to retain their membership?

Interviewee

Yes and no is the answer to that. It's a charity funded by individual members. So, if individual member churches don't pay the required, we call it a per capita fee to retain their membership, they risk being asked to leave because obviously the umbrella body has no other source of income other than from its members. And that's based on the number of members within each church.

Interviewer

OK, but just a little bit more on this issue. Do the individual churches have a right to voluntarily exit the relationship if they choose to at any point?

Interviewee

Ok. We believe by our declaration of principle that each church has a right to discern the mind of Christ and what the word of God means to them. That's their individual right, and the only way that would be overridden would be if there was some breach of the secular law that was happening.

Interviewer

Thank you. Now, looking a bit more closely at some of the things your organisation has had to do in recent times, in what areas have you had to restructure in order to serve these independent churches better?

Interviewee

The word restructure leads me to say that I think it has been proposed in [*year withheld*], started to be implemented in [*year withheld*], and was finally brought to completion in [*year withheld*], and that was the transfer from us being an unincorporated voluntary body to being a charitable company limited by guarantee. And that came about in order partly to protect the personal liability of the trustee directors, but it also was brought about so that the perception of the governance of the organisation was one in which there was transparency and clear compliance with good governance practice as is expected of a charity company limited by guarantee.

Interviewer

OK, and how well received was this restructuring by your members?

Interviewee

Initially in [*year withheld*] there was a small element of dissent I can remember from the Assembly. At that time, it was a very small element of dissent because they did not believe that they should be compliant; they should be forced into this by societal push and the laws of the land. But that was a very

small element. Most people by that stage were recognising that for protection of the trustees and to limit their liability, it was better to have a structure that was fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Interviewer

Thank you. Moving on now to other issues. What would you say the effect of secularism has been on church attendance in terms of the churches in your membership?

Interviewee

The pandemic has had quite a large effect. Ok, which isn't secularisation. That's actually something that has affected everyone. I think one of the main things and this is someone coming from a situation where I have been through the process where it has been difficult to be a female in ministry. I think one of the most off-putting things for many people, particularly women, in the professional category, would be the fact about how difficult it has become for women in ministry to be accepted either in leadership positions, or actually as pastors. That has been a challenge over the first 20 years, I would say of this century.

Could you repeat the question because that's the first thing that came into my head.

Interviewer

Yes, I understand, yes.

Interviewee

There may be other things.

Interviewer

And maybe, I think, it would be helpful to explore that area you are focusing on now. So, would you say your organisation encourages women in leadership?

Interviewee

I would say that some of our churches, we are a very broad church, much from a theological perspective, so, we have people at one side who believe in egalitarianism and we have churches at the other end who are totally focused on complementarianism and we have many in between, who I would say they are egalitarian, but when it comes down to it, they are not prepared to appoint a female pastor. So, at the moment, I think we only have three and that's only very recently, until recently was only one. We only have three women in full pastoral charge.

We have a number of other women who are retired, or are chaplains, or are in an assistant or an associate position, but it is still an area in which [*name of RLA*] in particular, is seeking to change the perception, and it is slow, but it is coming.

Interviewer

Ok, so you are suggesting that your organisation is working towards diversifying leaderships to accommodate more women.

Interviewee

Yes, and I would say that my perception, I have been involved in ministry for well over a decade now and I would say that things are getting better as an older generation retires and more young people come in. Although having said that, there are some young male ministers who are still vehemently opposed to, well, they would, quite frankly say that a woman who is in ministry hasn't heard from God.

And there are churches in our organisation who would not have me preach. I am a female minister so would not feel that that was appropriate. But they are getting fewer.

Interviewer

So, would you say this debate, in terms of egalitarianism and complementarianism, is as prominent in the Independent Church Sector as it is in perhaps the Anglican community, or is it even more prominent in the Independent Church Sector?

Interviewee

Much more prominent because we have, we have the Scottish Episcopal Church, but it is much smaller than the Church of Scotland, which would deem itself to be the national church and they are much more egalitarian than the Independent Church Sector. …

Interviewer

Ok. Looking a little bit more at the issue of leadership and diversification, would you say there is ethnic diversity in leadership within your organisation, and how does this relate to the membership in terms of the constitution of your congregants? What percentage would you say represent ethnic minorities and how involved are they in the leadership of the churches that they are part of?

Interviewee

I think you have to understand the demographic in Scotland is my answer to that, and the demographic of Scotland is that we do not have large chunks of ethnic minorities represented within our churches. So, in parallel to the demographic, we have very little representation of ethnic diversification in all the structures of our church and that is something to be regretted.

I think [*name of RLA]* is desperately trying to diversify on the gender issue, on ethnicity, and on disability. [*Name of RLA]* is not keen on setting a quota, for the simple reason that it would be hard to meet that quota.

So, at the moment we struggle. For instance, we have the Assembly as the ultimate authority. Then we have the Council. We have the trustee board and all strata of that. It is very difficult to, particularly on the Board and the Council, to get a gender balance, let alone get a balance that is reflected of ethnic diversity and disability.

Interviewer

Ok. So, would you say that it is not binding on a church to pursue, for instance, ethnic diversity in leadership, if their membership does not reflect a need for that?

Interviewee

They are not obliged to pursue any diversity at all. Our organisation does not impose anything on our churches other than that they comply with their membership status, which involves paying a certain percentage of their income to support the national team who in turn support them.

Interviewer

Thank you, thank you for your answer. Please moving on now to how you are helping your churches to grow. What would you say is the attendance rate like in Scotland in terms of the population, people who attend your churches, and would you in any way say that there is a rise in secularism in Scotland?

Interviewee

Yes, there is. I think our membership is diminishing year on year due to people dying out and not being replaced by a younger generation or younger generations. I think there is a distinct lack of new young families coming around in some of our churches. I think secularisation has meant church attendance is seen as something dumb from the past. And people have found other things to do on a Sunday, even if it is just taking the children to the football or something like that. I think schools do not help us in that by arranging football matches and rugby matches and other sports over the weekend, particularly on a Sunday morning.

Interviewer

Ok. So, does your organisation play any role in terms of helping with the revitalisation efforts of your members, for instance, church plants and so on?

Interviewee

Yes. Yes, we do. And a lot of our churches have a lot more community involvement than they had a decade ago. Some of them are involved in food banks, others are involved in ministry to the homeless. One church I know near here has a counselling organisation. A project which has come from England and that is really gaining a great deal of traction in Scotland is something called renew wellbeing, and that is open to the public. Like offering a place if you are not ok, and it is seeking to lessen isolation and to bring companionship and purpose to people who have been particularly badly affected by the pandemic and issues of isolation, depression, and anxiety.

Interviewer

Ok. Now, if we may shift emphasis to something else. What do you think are some of the factors that raise concerns about the accountability of independent churches?

Interviewee

Ok, that is a big issue. Perhaps I should declare before I say anything that before I became a minister, I was a lawyer. I have seen some awful things happen in churches. A financial lack of accountability. It is usually something around power, manipulation, control, spiritual abuse, thinking that they can persuade people that they are God rather than God himself. Yes, some dreadful things have happened in churches. I think you can probably tell I am actually speaking from experience of an independent church which went very badly wrong.

Interviewer

Ok. So, we should relate some of the things you are sharing to your own personal experience.

Interviewee

Yes, but not all of it because I have got a wider experience than my personal experience, because I am also a trained counsellor and I have heard some awful stories as well.

Interviewer

Does your organisation have any role to play in establishing an effective accountability and transparency framework for churches in your membership?

Interviewee

All our ministers are accredited by us, and we encourage our churches to have an accredited minister. They have been trained and they entered a covenant of accountability with our Board of Ministry.

Interviewer

Ok. Do you conduct annual reviews?

Interviewee

Up there on the national team are people, and it is a new team just now, and they are mostly part time, and they sort of have one foot in the national team and one foot in the local church and they are available for people to speak to, to mentor. We also encourage pastoral supervision, and churches can call someone from the national team in when they are concerned about their pastor. And these are some of the things which make the umbrella organisation bring some safety to the community of the church.

Interviewer

Ok. Is there emphasis on safeguarding?

Interviewee

Yes, but not solely. I train in safeguarding. So, you are preaching to the converted here. There is an emphasis on safeguarding. Our churches are all encouraged to be part of Thirtyone:eight. For instance, [*the RLA*] offers a series of courses every year called continuing ministerial development and one of them this year is on safeguarding for ministers and one for designated safeguarding leads. I am actually teaching both of these courses this year.

Interviewer

That is good. So, how are issues of abuse and financial impropriety addressed within the umbrella organisation?

Interviewee

They are not, unless a church invites us in. Because this is where each church has the right to their own independence. But if they are struggling to resolve an issue and the peaceful transformation team will come in, or the Union finance director will give advice. Then the general director will also become involved. Where there has been an issue raised, we will give advice, but only on invitation.

Interviewer

Ok. Just two more questions in this area. Does your organisation have the power to impose sanctions? And then what are the grounds for termination of accreditation?

Interviewee

No, we don't impose sanctions. And on the grounds for termination, I have never been part of the board of Ministry other than going through it as a minister myself, I think the grounds for termination of accreditation would perhaps not actually be laid down, it would be something which would come before the Board of Ministry and be discussed and dealt with on its merit, and I have seen that process from a distance operating twice. So, it is not unforeseen that someone's accreditation could be revoked.

Interviewer

Ok, thank you. Now, looking at the role of an umbrella organisation, and recognising what you do to support independent churches in the area of accountability, how would you compare the role of your organisation and the role of charity regulators, for instance in Scotland?

Interviewee

OSCR, the office of the Scottish Charity Regulator.

Interviewer

So, how would you compare your role and the role they play for independent churches?

Interviewee

I can speak about this from being a member of one of our churches myself, I am a deacon in one of our churches, and also from having had experience with the umbrella organisation. We are all compliant with OSCR on every level. We are accountable and compliant. If you are not, you risk losing your charitable status, which in turn would lose you a large portion of your income. So, loss of charitable status would be huge.

Interviewer

Ok. So, would you say the role of umbrella organisations like yours and the role of, for instance, the charity regulator in Scotland that they are complementary, they are related to each other, or are there areas where they are not related and that you serve and perform a role that is unique for independent churches separate from what the charity regulators do for them?

Interviewee

Yes, we serve a role that is utterly unique and separate, but each have their own role to serve. With an independent church, the independent church has to observe the law of the land. If you want to be a charity, you have to be part of OSCR and you have to accede to the rules and regulations that are around having charitable status. The role of the umbrella organisation is not to function as an arm of the law of the land, but to function as a supportive body towards the federation of churches. It serves a completely different [*role*], but complementary in that the organisation accedes to the law of the land as it is framed by OSCR and I would say when we work out in practice, [*name of RLA*] has a good relationship with OSCR, and OSCR have been very helpful in many situations. And they are not there to impose, in a manner which is strong handed. They are there to work with the organisation, in the same way as other organisations who are arms of the law operate, for instance something like the Information Commissioner's Office who deal with data protection. If the ICO were to come saying you have breached something, you would be compliant and would take advice and would talk to them. So, these are all different things, but the umbrella organisation works within the framework of the law of the land, as every independent church should.

Interviewer

Ok. Please, one more question in this area. So, has your organisation in the past worked in partnership with the charity regulator in policy formulation or addressing other issues within the sector?

Interviewee

Yes, and when we were about to become a company limited by guarantee with charitable status, I was actually involved at the very beginning of that, and we liaised with OSCR on various points at that stage.

Interviewer

Thank you. I am now going into my final questions and please thank you for your answers so far. Concerning your experience in your organisation and within the independent church sector at various levels, what measures do you think could be put in place to boost confidence in the work of independent churches and the work of the umbrella organisations that they are a part of?

Interviewee

I think the biggest single thing that we have achieved in the last five years has been utter transparency. So, no longer is there any view that decisions are taken subjectively or without consideration, or without seeking counsel, or without coming together with people that have been appointed to come together, to seek the mind of Christ. We have thereby avoided a situation where one person could be seen to have overall preeminent control. I think, as I look back over the last five years in the transition that has happened during the time that I've been convener, I think transparency, integrity, being seen to make every effort to be compliant with the law, or to be seen to be at least attempting to get a gender balance and being seen to understand the churches that are within our federation all have different identities and being seen to respect peoples' theological view, but within the context of obeying the law of the land.

Interviewer

Thank you. And finally on this issue, looking broadly within the UK, and recognising the place of the independent church sector, what measures could be put in place in terms of UK wide measures in the independent church sector to boost confidence in the work of independent churches?

Interviewee

I am not sure that I'm the right person to answer that question because I am totally sold on an umbrella organisation that fulfils the role that I see the [*name of RLA*] fulfils for our churches. I have been involved in numerous denominations and part of my role as convener was in fact to attend the assemblies of other denominations. Having done that, I see this situation where churches come together, independent in their own right, but willing to be part of a federation together, is one of the best ways of securing compliance within a legislative framework that is becoming ever more complex and ensuring safety for the ministers and thus ensuring safety for the individual members. Because I have seen people desperately hurt in church situations which were not appropriately dealt with in the past and I am not saying that we are perfect; I'm not. I'm purely saying that what I have seen in the last five years has given me confidence that that is a good way forward.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. Yes, we are closing now. I want to thank you for your time.

Interviewee

That's not a problem.

Interviewer

Please, do you have any questions for me as we are closing now, and do you have any final comments to make in terms of the research and the emphasis on the independent church sector?

Interviewee

I'm not sure that I do. I'm very interested in your research. I think it's something that's badly needed because, as I have said before, I have seen some very difficult things happen in independent churches. But I would also reiterate that we are not perfect, and there have been bad situations that have happened in our churches despite the umbrella organisation being in place. But I would say that I think I'm glad you're doing this research. Is there any possibility that we would be able to read your final research paper? Because I think I would find it very interesting.

Interviewer

It will be published, so yes, you will be able to have access to it.

Interviewee

Yes, yeah.

Interviewer

Thank you very much for your time today.

Interviewee

Yes, that's ok. I hope I fulfilled what you were looking for.

Interviewer

Thank you, thank you very much.

Interviewee

You are welcome, good to speak to you.

Appendix G: Transcript of Focus Group Discussion with Church Leaders 1

Moderator

Great to have you on the call. Participant C12*,* would you like to tell us about [*name of a church]*?

Participant C12

Yes, good morning, everybody. My name is … and I am leader of the [*name of church]*. We are in a sort of jam-packed area for housing and social needs. We have got a little Chapel. … So, we are blessed with sort of several services running on a Sunday at the moment and various activities going on during the week. Feeding a lot of people. Strongly linked with the variety of churches in [*name of a town],* and Churches Together. Yes, and it's a joy to be here.

Moderator

That is great. Participant C24 from [*name of church*]. Where is the church?

Participant C24

Hello everybody. [*name of church]* is in [*name of town],* just near Manchester. And I have been senior minister there for 11 years now. … We are kind of an active church in the middle of the community, similar to some of your churches. … So yes, that is a little bit about me. Great to see you all.

Moderator

Yes, thanks. Participant C10, tell us about [*name of church]* and what you do.

Participant C10

Yes, my name is …. I am based in [*name of a town]* and one of two associate pastors at our church. Lead leadership development and preaching on Sunday morning services. … I am engaged in some community organisations, and I head up the stop and search board for engagement with the police in [*name of towns withheld*]. So, doing similar things in terms of senior programmes, youth ministry, schools' work. Yes, that is us.

Moderator

Great. Now, Participant C40, are you still with us? I can see you.

Participant C40

Yes, I am here.

Moderator

Ok. So, just to tell you the background of this. We have already had conversations with some of the national leaders of each of your movements. What we have been trying to do is to help Uche out with his research. He is looking at how relationships work between congregations and umbrella bodies when it comes to the independent churches in the UK. And we have been finding that everyone has been enjoying the calls and getting to know each other. So, in a sense, we appreciate the opportunity to meet up.

We have got some things to pick up today. The people that act at a national level have given us a few clips in each of your different organisations. But we are very keen to sort of route this down to the grassroot levels. Now, introducing ourselves has been quite helpful. It may be useful to go round and

get where you are at in your local congregation, in terms of what is going on at the moment. What is the demographic in your church? Are you seeing an increase? Are you seeing a decline? Have you got everyone back? Did you go online?

Participant C33

Well, we went online due to COVID regime. When we returned to church, we got about, say, 80% back. And as for growth, we are having new families joining the church. We are meeting at the church on Sundays, but the midweek programme, we have it on Zoom still.

Moderator

That is really good. Now, Participant C12, you mentioned in your situation that you have got a relatively small Chapel with a bit of a history to it that you are now in.

Participant C12

Yes, it has been a blessing, really. … We did close over that period for a minimum time. But we then went online. I think most churches did. At that point I'm a late convert to that sort of stuff. It's all beyond me and I had to rely on others. But I am definitely a convert to the online needs and requirements. That said, when we came back into services, and we were one of the first to open in the area, we had almost immediately a full take up of folks that we had prior. The online stuff has kept the same really, but I don't know who they are online particularly, but certainly the congregation itself has returned to its fullness with just one or two exceptions. Yes, so I think that is fair. And we have had to increase the services because of the need to add the new people to the existing people that have returned as it were and our building dynamics. It means that we just had to, you know, get rubber walls or a sort of multiple service thing. We are a Chapel. So, it is a restrictive building in that respect. … But we just expand in the areas we need to.

Moderator

Alright, sounds good. Are you already on multiple services Participant C12?

Participant C12

Yes, we have two and we are going to start the third probably in September. So, we do try to run the same service twice, perhaps three times, because people will then choose. But we are struggling on praise and worship numbers and things like that. But yes, the plan is from September three services.

Speaker 2

Yes. Participant C24, tell us where you are at.

Participant C24

Yes, we opened a new building a few years ago. So, we have got a good capacity for seating. We opened every week we could open, when it was legal, we opened. And we put quite a bit of investment in. We built two studios, multiple cameras, the whole thing. That is the kind of avenue we went down. So, we grew on the online, but that has now peaked off and steadied down. We reckon we are at about 95% of where we were. If anything, if I'm honest, I probably think we might be slightly larger than we were. But what I am noticing is attendance patterns are all over the show. So, where we would see people every week, now we are seeing people maybe once every two weeks or three weeks and visitors popping in and the whole thing. So, it is very fluid for us at the moment.

I am not really sure what size of church we are, if I am honest. That is the true leadership answer to that. Sometimes, we do not have a clue what is going on when we look online. I mean, we have got hundreds of people watching, but I do not know who they are, where they are from, whether they are part of the church, whether they are just being nosy. I think that is the honest take. We stopped all our midweek online stuff as soon as we could. We went back into in-person, partly because we have got a good facility for it. So, we try to encourage people back in. We have a cafe that is open every day of the week. So, that is kind of our hub. A lot of people come in throughout the week.

I think volunteering has been tough. Getting people, especially, back into children's work has been really hard. Youth work seems to have thrived. About getting volunteers for children, I think people just wanted to be back in worship services. They did not necessarily want to go and volunteer, and so that has been tough. But I would say in terms of the health of the church, one thing I have definitely noticed is that things feel a lot freer in terms of what we can and can't do. We seem to be able to change things a lot faster. People don't seem to react as badly if we change things quickly. So, I think it is a fairly healthy season, but not yet stable. I think it is the best way to describe it for you.

Moderator

Yes, that is helpful. Really appreciate that. Participant C31, are you happy to come in?

Participant C31

Thank you for that. Yes, we obviously, like everyone, went online during the lockdowns. Came out for a couple of months in September 2020, I believe. Then went back online and then came out again 2021 Easter Sunday. And as regards what has happened with membership, we lost about 10% who never came back to church. We had some people that came back slowly to church. Now we have new members in church. It appears, just like Participant C24 said, that we have actually grown larger than we were before COVID because we now have quite a lot of newcomer families that have probably just come into our town. We still have a few online. I am not sure who they are. But we also have some of our members who go online on Sundays when they have worked. During the weekend, we have some members who are comfortable just to come once every two weeks. First of all, it was difficult. For me it was different. Let me say for me. Because these are people who were very committed and were there Sunday after Sunday and now, they come like once every two weeks, once every three weeks. At first, I said 'is everything ok? Are you alright?' Then the answer would be, 'but I was there two weeks ago', and they did not feel any how about it. So, I am thinking, that is not who you used to be.

Moderator

When did you plant [*the church*]?

Participant C31

April 2009.

Moderator

OK that is good. Are you finding that your congregation is still largely Nigerian?

Participant C31

Well, we are the exception.

Moderator

Ok.

Participant C31

I have got a congregation that is 35% Caucasian and one Australian. And then I have got 16 African countries.

Moderator

Alright, yes, you are quite mixed. That is really interesting. Participant C25, it is great to have you online. We will get you to introduce yourself in just a moment. I am going to come to Participant C10. Yes, tell us about [*name of church]* where you are at in terms of your profile and how things have changed and are you getting the same pattern as Participant C24 and Participant C31 and not everyone coming every week, what does it look like?

Participant C10

I think Participant C31 really encapsulated everything. To be fair, in terms of before COVID, pre-pandemic we were running two services and then when COVID hit we went online. We were kind of really blessed with some great people that have experience in presenting online and so they helped us massively out with all those things in a way that I think without them we would not have probably been able to have gone online or the quality of it being as good. And so, it was a real testimony to those guys. And then we went back when we could, we went back on Good Friday 2021. That was our first service, and it has been a steady kind of build. I mean we still do online, similar to the two previous leaders that spoke about not knowing who they are really, only knowing those that sent comments on the service. And we have tried to put in leaders over that. That is kind of an online community, to some extent, which we get a bit of traction and a bit of kind of conversation from but not loads really. But our in-person service has been growing more and more. We are only at one service. That's mainly to do with volunteers, just as Participant C24. People coming out probably wanted more just to be in the building worshipping rather than volunteering.

Participant C24 said something that is great. I think pre-pandemic, to change something would have taken about 55 meetings, 20 million prayer meetings and Jesus himself coming down and telling us it's ok guys. Whereas now it feels like people are able to be a bit more flexible and we are able to try things out. And I guess people give us more benefits of the doubt as leaders, and things like that. Especially, I think predominantly because for a whole year without fail, we showed up on a Sunday morning and facilitated an opportunity for people to encounter Jesus. And so, I think that should build up some sort of credibility. To sum things up, we found that new people have joined and some of those people that were regulars have not returned at all. … So, I would say some of that is helpful and some of that is surprising.

Participant C24

Amen to that.

Participant C10

Yes. But our youth programme really did struggle during COVID, and we got to rebuild that. We have employed a new youth pastor, and so we are beginning to rebuild that in connection with the local schools. But obviously, our more community-based projects kind of thrived, like our feeding programmes and those types of things. So, yes, it's been really exciting and the opportunities that I think that we have, like we are finally talking about church planting as a church which could be really cool and fun to explore. Especially because we are 100 years in [*name of RLA]* in two years' time. So, yes, that's us.

Moderator

That is great. Yes, we are now going to Participant C25. It is great to have you with us and now you are part of [*name of a church*], which is based in [*name of a town*], but spreads out as a network into Wales, part of [*name of RLA*]. Just tell us a little bit about where things are for you, and then we are going to move on to another question.

Participant C25

So, I am in [*name of a town*] which is in Wales. I was at a church in [*name of a town*]. Pre- pandemic moved to [*name of a town*] in 2019 with the idea of church planting into [*name of a town*] in March 2020. So, my launch Sunday was the Sunday everything closed. It's not the strategy you tend to go for. So, yes, we literally pivoted from potential of launching in a venue to let's just go online. So, we went online and actually built quite a bit of momentum in the city, really surprisingly. And then stayed online and we did not go back until May 2020. Then we went from there to across [*name of church*] sites, then blended that with online service. Then I became the pastor of online as well as hosting a plant here in [*name of a town*] and then, just after Christmas this year, we realised [*how*] that although we were gathering in the venue, actually people in church missed so much the change. People wanted to be in a circle. They wanted to be eyeballing each other. They wanted to eat together, and they wanted very much to experience sitting in circles and connectivity and how we work together.

We then flipped again, so, went from a community center into peoples' homes. And interestingly, we are finding people each week are coming now. So, one person inviting one person. And it is totally normal to sit at somebody's house and have a cup of tea and a piece of cake. And we are finding that people are then seeing their friends saved in the streets and chatting to their friends. And it's weird. A bit of a messy situation. It's just interesting because everyone else has this grand plan for church planting and God kind of shook it and there went by the way everything you've ever known and planned. … if people's lives are being changed, that is the important thing.

Moderator

Brilliant. I am going to move you all onto something else, and that is the question of stakeholders. You know, the idea of who are you answerable to now? What do you bring into your reckoning when you are thinking about how you do church, how you reach out? Participant C31 to open it all up.

Participant C31

Thank you. Well, first of all, I would say that in doing things, the first thing I think about is God really. I am sure that is the same for all of us. How does God see this? Having said that, I said earlier we have a multicultural multiethnic church. So, one of the things that we consider is, in the culture that we are ministering to, and that we are called to, how does that culture see this, and how will this culture respond to this, and how will they receive our ministry? That's one of the things that we consider as our priorities. And then, because you know we are from [*name of RLA*]*,* a few of us that have multicultural churches have been given some leeway in the way we do things. So, we will continue to minister to the community the way our ministry will be acceptable. The important thing is the soul of the community, the soul of the people in the community. And so, we think about what does God think? Of course, everybody thinks that. How does the community receive our ministry? Within the context of holiness not compromising you know doctrines or Scripture. And then the leadership, the local leadership in the church. We think about, you know, how do we do things? How do we go about things? And of course, when it's bordering on the doctrine, then I refer back to [*name of RLA office*] to say this is what is going on. What is your take? So, in a nutshell, that is that, basically. I hope I'm answering the question correctly.

Moderator

You are. Brilliantly. But let us jump this around a little bit. Participant C24 let us bring you in next on this one.

Participant C24

Yes, I am just listening, trying to think how to phrase this, but I think in terms of stakeholders, obviously [*name of RLA*] is essentially our movement, so there are a lot of non-negotiable things for us and essentially governance. I feel, yes, I do feel accountable to [*name of RLA*]. But I feel when I have ticked those boxes and being a good boy then I have got quite a lot of autonomy on the ground to kind of shape what I think God is saying for our community. So, the question I have been asking the church is very simply this, who, what, where would we be missed if we ceased to exist? So, if our church ceased to exist, what couldn't be replaced by other organisations? And the only thing that I distil that down to is the message of hope found in Jesus Christ. So, we are just going crazy on preaching Jesus as much as I can, and not trying to tick the boxes of kind of dissatisfied floating Christians that that come with lots of expectations. But just preach Jesus every week because that is our distinctive. We can do food banks. We can do education programmes. We can do all of that, but that will be replaced by another organisation if we cease to exist. So, I think I feel more accountable to that call at the moment, more than ever. I really feel a sense of urgency around good communication of the gospel.

But I also feel a sense of responsibility to the partners of the church who stayed with the church who have committed their time, their resources, their energy over a long period of time to really respect them in the in that process of rebuilding and reshaping. So, we have done a big push on partnership again, trying to really value that connectedness on one area. That is what we have really tried to focus on, just this yearning, and you probably spotted the same in your towns and cities, this yearning for face-to-face relationship. Yes, so, we have restructured around lots of relational groups and basically a lot of them are mini churches within a church. I think people are just in that phase of wanting to be together and grow together and do life together, but keep Jesus, keep the conversation about Jesus on the surface, all the time. And I'm avoiding the heavy stuff on Sunday mornings, you know, like just going back to basics again. That's what I feel for this season.

Moderator

It is really good. Participant C10 I am going to bring you in next.

Participant C10

I am not the lead pastor at our church. So, I guess my accountability is more to our senior pastor in terms of the vision that he has for the church and the very kind of way he will lead the team. Locally, I think where we are understanding that we are a predominately black majority church. So, the framing of our preaching and our imagining of how life can be done is done through a bit of a black perspective and understanding the unique challenges that are a part of the black experience within Britain really. And so, we often have that conversation about how does all that we do reach out to people? And it's not trying to be monolithic in terms of just one, reaching out to one group of people, but just trying to pass through the people that are in front of you. So, there is that element of like being almost people driven and need driven. Yes, I think that's probably what I would say.

Moderator

Yes. Participant C12, do you want to come in next?

Participant C12

Yes, we found we are trying now to really focus on the children and the youth aspect as a congregation. Particularly because we have noticed the difficulties that the COVID experiences have had with children and behaviour identity and all that sort of thing. And so, as an eldership we have agreed to make that a clear focus for resourcing our time and even the way we preach and things like that, from, you know, that standpoint on a Sunday. We are also trying to be a little less, if I can use a phrase, ordered on a Sunday. We are running Sundays where there is no preaching. People are expected to come with a word or something on their heart. We don't do that all the time. Probably about three or four times in a year. We are changing things on our heads really. And as an eldership, we are just taking our hands off certain aspects of the service at certain times and just trusting the Holy Spirit to do what he wants to do. There has been a jolt at times, you know, because you get naturally nervous about it and the Lord has stepped in all the time on those things. So, we are moving forward more that way. I believe in order, and I believe in structure and things like that. But not to the point that it squeezes everything else out. And I think post-COVID, for us as leaders, that is where we are. So, our stakeholders, you know, we really have seen as our teenagers, and our youth and our children, because they are the ones having to learn so fast the spiritual lessons that we probably took many years to go through. So, that is where we are at the moment. We have changed in that respect.

Moderator

Yes, that is really helpful. Participant C33, anything you want to add on this?

Participant C33

Yes, although we belong to [*name of RLA*], each church has that autonomy to at least run their own activities the way they see fit. The main thing is to abide in what we believe in, that is, following the biblical principles, the doctrine of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, making sure that Jesus is proclaimed, and it is reflected, you know, in what we preach and what we teach. When we talk of maybe stakeholders, we ensure that members' needs are met. Apart from that, we ensure that the thing that we do as well is beneficial to the community, in terms of making sure that the community is reached with the good news of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Also, in terms of our stakeholders as well, we have a relationship with other churches. Like the [*name of ecumenical group*] which comprises of all churches in [*the town*] where the church is based, we meet to have prayer meetings, monthly fellowship, and early morning prayers. So, I think those are the things that more or less we focus on.

Moderator

Yes*,* that is good. One of the things in talking about stakeholders that we have picked up from you Participant C33 is that you hold a strong doctrinal responsibility, because [*name of RLA*] has quite a strong doctrinal basis, and if there was something doctrinally, it would have to go back to headquarters. Also, there is the premises issue. Am I right in thinking that [*name of RLA*] owns your premises?

Participant C33

Yes.

Moderator

So, where you are Participant C24, is it also owned by [*name of RLA*]?

Participant C24

Yes, [*name of RLA*] owns the building.

Moderator

Yes, whereas with [*name of RLA*], what is it like for you? Is your building the responsibility of the local church or is it provided through central office?

Participant C31

That is the responsibility of the local church.

Moderator

Ok, that is good to know. Participant C25, give us your insight into where you are at in terms of stakeholders, and Participant C40 I am going to bring you in first on the next question, so stand by.

Participant C25

On stakeholders, it is really powerful because I am only employed 12 hours a week by the church. So, the rest of the time, I take funerals. How do I get these people who are in a non-religious service, that are broken, people that are in heartache right now, how do I get them into gathered expressions of church? And so, they very quickly became our stakeholders. I thought, there are [*number of*] people here. Would they come to my Sunday morning service, and would it make sense to them? And that is the brutal truth. No, it would not. And so, if that is the case, what am I going to do about it and how am I going to build relationships? So, in every service It's like, right, how would I and who can I connect with? How can I connect to this space?

Moderator

Right. Yes, that is good. Participant C40, I am looking across the breadth of churches that are in [*name of RLA*] and I know you are around the Independent Church Sector a lot. Looking at strategies for independent churches growing in influence, not just growing in numerical size, but opportunities to actually influence society, what kind of strategies do you think we should be thinking of?

Participant C40

OK, I think one of the main strategies, out of various strategies that I have been part of and supported, is when a church leader begins to think outside the box. I think when church leaders get involved with the community, you know, they are able to influence a lot of changes. So, get involved with community civic leaders. Find out what their needs are, what is going on in that particular community, what was God's plan for that community? How can the local church plug into that? I know many churches who stepped out by getting involved with the local Council, the local Police, knowing what is happening, attending meetings at the local level, I see them having a lot of influence over time. The church I am part of, we have ads for community projects and things like that. So, we started coffee morning and just sent the flyer to the local council about what we are doing. There is an influx of families from outside London going through domestic abuse and during the assessment, they realised this family is Christian and one of the things they said will be good for them is to plug into a local church. Because it plays a major role in what they do. The social worker actually brought this family into our church for coffee money, and even when Muslims came, they brought them there as well because they are faith people. So, now we are being involved in a lot of things… People come to the church because of our car wash that we do once a month. So, when churches get involved in the local community, find out what is happening, the needs that the Council is trying to meet, they have influence. They are making friends. They are remembered, and that is what has been happening and playing out for different churches.

Moderator

Yes, that is helpful. I think it is really interesting that you have managed to get to the situation where the local government is now bringing people to you. I am also interested in the car wash, because mine

definitely needs doing at the moment. But probably not the right time of the month anyway. We are going to pick up on this question of influencing around us and what strategies we could be using. Participant C10, you are involved in [*name of community group*] right? What other areas of influence do you think we could pick up on?

Participant C10

Yes, as I said, I chair the community engagement and stop and search scrutiny panel.

Moderator

How did that come about [*Participant C10*] because that is interesting? Was it on the back of Black Lives Matter when everyone was saying we have got to do something, or did they pick it up before?

Participant C10

Yes, it happened during that time, but it was through a connection with one of the pastors in the local area who now runs an organisation called [*name withheld*]. I had a relationship with him, and he said I think this would be a really great opportunity for your church and for you to be much more involved in the community. And I think what was great about that is he could have easily just done it himself. But he was like, no, we need more leaders, pastors, Christians in these positions and in these places. So, yes, I think sometimes the danger is that we are a bit silo, and we try to reach the community all by ourselves with the power of God behind us, and actually it is much better to be more collaborative. He opened that door for me and that has really helped us to have conversations with, like the borough commander, around policing.

Moderator

You relate mainly to the police on that.

Participant C10

Yes, but then it is also like local authorities, and residents of [*name of the three towns withheld*]. So, it is quite a broad collection and group of people. It is having the impact of, 'ok these churches are interested in the running and the ways and the justice of our community, which, as we all know, is massively on God's heart. They know that I am a pastor. They know that I am from a church. They know where we are. But it is kind of like we are one of the other voices of the community that are wanting to hold the police to account.

Moderator

Yes, it is brilliant. I am excited. I think that is a great role, an important interface with the community. I just wonder how many people in the church are aware that that kind of profile position is something that you are holding.

Participant C10

Yes, I think you are right. It is more connected to like, ok, how do we mobilise the community of believers to do something like this? So, it is known but I think maybe it could be a bit more. Yes, a bit more publicised, so that it would inspire other people to be able to engage with things within their local community as well. Maybe 10-15 years ago, the majority of people that came to our church lived in the Borough of [*name withheld*], but with house prices going up and the age of our congregation kind of going down a bit, we have a lot of people that travel to our church as well. So yes, it is like where you live, how can you have that impact.

Moderator

That is great. Yes, Participant C24, you can follow with your own strategies for influence.

Participant C24

I think what we are finding is the more we keep a generous spirit in the church, the more generous we are with our community in terms of, you know, being involved in charitable stuff outside of the church forums and groups, I think that increases influence. We were aware that when COVID hit, perhaps one of the first things that churches would do would be to cut their overseas giving, and we decided at the start not to do that, but to try and increase it over Covid. It is just something we decided to do. We took up a couple of special offerings over COVID to give it all away to different churches in our locality as well, just to try and keep that focus not on us. And I think as that generous spirit exudes from a church, then its influence grows because people just see openness, they just see generosity, and I think that is the heart of Christ, isn't it? So, that was one thing, generosity. I think influence, it is sometimes hard, such as some of the ecumenical work that we do. I lead our Churches Together in the area. Probably many of you guys do. It is hard sometimes, and it feels like pulling teeth, but it is really profitable in the Kingdom. And I just feel like that is one area that as long as I am here, I need to try and provide a lead into that ecumenical work and keep that picture in front of the church every week. So, every week we try and pray for other churches and say how we are blessing other places. So, ecumenical work, generosity, and then for me to focus on mission. I think, influence grows.

We found that if we invest in children, if we invest in that generation, then influence grows with families, and people come to church with children. I mean, that is the way we are finding, the more money we put into children's work. The first staff appointment I made when I took over 10 years ago was [*with*] children. And we intend to just keep that going. Yes, so, ecumenical work, generosity, mission, children and overseas.

Moderator

Yes, it is interesting Participant C24. Participant C12, do you want to come in early on this?

Participant C12

Yes, I just listened to all the things that have been said so far, very encouraging. For us, it has been perhaps a push to be more visible. I think over the last years, we didn't hear from sort of people's visibility side of things, because we were less obvious. And so, to become visible. again, we have got a market stall now running in the town centre which can sort of profile some of the work the church is doing, but also raise money for various aspects of mission work and things like that. So, we have focused on that quite strongly. We have a choir, and so we proactively get the choir into the High Street just to do an hour of singing so that people can stop and hear something different and see something. And so, the visibility side is something that for us needed to be lifted. We found that because of the nature of our church, where it is located, though we have been here 100 years as a building, people didn't even know that there is a church there. They walk by it twice a day for school because we have got a school next door and everything else. We felt there was a spiritual blindness that we had to pray away and break. And it was astonishing the moment we started doing that, we had people coming in who were hearing for the first time the music coming through the windows. So, for us, it is the visibility side that adds to the influence, and it has been an interesting journey in that area.

Moderator

Yes, Participant C12. Yes, let us move on to Participant C33. Do you want to say a little bit, and then I will come to Participant C31 and then to Participant C25.

Participant C33

Yes, what we are doing to encourage our community is to hold breakfast meetings to bring the community into the church, and apart from that, getting involved in the activities of the community like [*name of event withheld*], getting involved in running around and in staging their presence. In terms of maybe distributing tracts and leaflets and the information about Jesus as well encouraging mission work in the community. We have some gatherings for youths. We encourage the youth meetings and the activities of the youth in the area. So, all those are the kind of things we are doing.

Moderator

That is great Participant C33. Participant C31, can I come to you just to say a little bit about influence and how you want to be influential as a church.

Participant C31

Yes, I will probably be repeating what everybody has said already. So, first of all, it turns out there is a lot of community work. We have a whole suite for homeless people. We have a kitchen. We have showers and laundry, and we have all manner of things. We offer some help, benefits help, with medical, and things like that, just signposting and sometimes accompanying people to GPs. We have other projects, including just singing. There is one we call singing for pleasure that over 60s come to that has become a community choir. Even in the community, the day that the lights go on close to Christmas, they actually call that choir to come and sing. We have a project for mental health and all that. We have something else that they call entertainment, which we call ministry, which is going into the town centre every quarter with the full worship team, and just worship in the town centre. We started to do this to change the atmosphere of our town because when we started ten, thirteen odd years ago, it was thick really. And so, we went back there to do that. They call it entertainment. Every January, the town centre manager would e-mail me to say, 'can you give me the dates you are coming to the town centre this year to sing'. You know, he didn't know what we were doing. We knew what we were doing.

I think it was Participant C10 that said something about the ecumenical relationship. Through that, I became a police chaplain, because one of the ministers who was a chaplain who was moving to [*name of city withheld*] was asked, who do you think can do this job? And he said, 'Participant C31 can do the job'. That is how I got interviewed and vetted, and all that time I have been a police chaplain. And I actually looked after the top floor, the commandants, the inspectors, and all that. And so, I get invited to top level meetings a lot of times. … There was a project we did … years ago [*number of years withheld*]. The police and the Council together called us into a meeting to say what we can do about these young people that have constituted security issues for all the people. We said we will open our doors …. So, that is the kind of relationship we have had with the Council, the police, and the community as well. The Council calls us to do things. The police call us to do things. The NHS has a project, and because we work with old homeless people, they met with us as well to say a lot of them have hepatitis B, and they wouldn't come to the hospital or GP. Can we come and meet them in your building? And so on [*a day in the week*], they come to meet with them and treat them. So, there is a clinic for hepatitis B for homeless people going on in the building.

Moderator

Now that is really interesting to hear. Participant C25, let us come to you on this.

Participant C25

There are two areas in which we really influence things. … Ecumenically citywide, set-up a whole youth structure across the city. Did all sorts of feeding programmes, you name it. This city can do with the

churches across the city…. The big one is if we can grasp the influence we could have at the city gate of funerals. So, I sit in the bereavement service meetings and in the forums, not just as this person who occasionally comes to take a funeral, but actually this is somebody who cares. This is a church that cares. This is somewhere we can go to. And it is interesting to see. And so, we do it for a reason. Got something called Speed Church where it was like literally 15 minutes online Facebook live. One song, one prayer. One to one worship kind of thing, and the amount of people that connect into that, yes, it is awesome. So, I would say for us that is it. It is a massive passion of mine, and it has become part of the passion of the church as well. So, we just input where we can. We have all the names, the funeral directors and everything we pray for them, and they connect with us, and they are slowly getting to know our names.

Moderator

That is great Participant C25. I know Participant C40, you need to go. But you launched that whole discussion. So, I am really grateful. Is there anything you want to share before you leave us?

Participant C40

Thank you. One of the things that we have been hearing and I just want to encourage as well, is for church leaders to be intentional about looking after themselves and their mental health. So, I just want to encourage all the leaders here. Once you have given everything to everyone, I just want to encourage you not to forget to look after yourself, especially your mental health. So, that is what I want to say. God bless you. Thank you.

Moderator

Yes, I think that is great. Well, you have all been incredibly real on this. This was amazing really. So, I just want to say a big thank you for your time and just really appreciate your input. We have got two more of these [*focus group discussions*],11am tomorrow and then one on Thursday. So, it is going to be interesting t**o** get the broader picture across an even wider spectrum of different organisations. Well, Uche thank you so much for getting us all together. Bye now, bye.

Appendix H: Ethics Approval Letter

22 March 2021

Mr Uchenna Nweke
School of Business, Management and Computing
Bucks New University
Queen Alexandra Road
High Wycombe
HP11 2JZ

Dear Uchenna

Ethical approval: Ref UEP2021 Mar02

I am writing to confirm that ethical approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Panel of Buckinghamshire New University on 22 March 2021 for your project:

"*Effectiveness of Religious Legitimating Agencies in Enhancing Accountability and Organisational Performance of Independent Churches in the Face of Rising Secularism and Public Scrutiny.*"

This approval is valid for data collection between 22 March 2021 and 21 March 2023.

Please ensure that you quote the above reference number as evidence of ethical approval and in all materials used to recruit participants.

The Research and Enterprise Development Unit must be notified of any amendments to the proposed research or any extension to the period of data collection.

I hope that your research project goes well.

Yours sincerely,

Dr M. Nakisa

Secretary to the University Research Ethics Panel
Research and Enterprise Development Unit