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# Unpacking the strategic bridge-building capabilities of legitimating agencies

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study investigates the strategic bridge-building capabilities (SBBCs) of legitimating agencies (LAs). By focusing on the role of LAs in a faith-based setting, the study examines how these accreditation bodies foster intra-sectoral collaboration and advocate for their members' interests across secular domains and the broader socio-economic landscape.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Evidence pertaining to LAs was generated through a scoping review, enabling primary data collection to commence with a survey. Survey responses informed the purposive selection of four LAs and fourteen affiliated organizations for in-depth study. Insights were further enriched through online interviews and focus group discussions involving sixty-four senior officials.

**Findings** – The findings reveal ten contemporary roles fulfilled by LAs in the sector examined. Through tailored strategic approaches and multidimensional bridge-building capabilities, these agencies promote convergence and encourage best practices among otherwise autonomous entities. Moreover, their activities exert a legitimating influence within the social sphere and play a pivotal role in advancing member congregations' revitalization agendas.

**Practical implications** – It is anticipated that legitimating agency leaders and their affiliates will be inspired to adopt a more strategically oriented perspective on their roles, fostering more effective stakeholder relationship management and driving improvements in overall organizational performance.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to the literature on LAs. By addressing a significant gap in understanding the SBBCs of these accreditation organizations, it aims to shed light on how their functions enable constituents to navigate operational challenges intensified by legitimation struggles.

**Keywords:** Legitimating agencies, Accreditation bodies, Strategic bridge-building capabilities, Religious legitimating agencies, Independent church sector, Faith-based umbrella organizations

## Introduction

Legitimating agencies (LAs) are accreditation and standard-setting bodies that operate across professional, institutional, sectoral, and international domains (Durand & McGuire, 2005; Lenz & Söderbaum, 2023). Their activities confer formal recognition, promote adherence to shared norms, and cultivate cultures of quality assurance and continuous improvement (Magd & Karyamsetty, 2022; Lurie *et al.*, 2026; Morris, 2026). Beyond accreditation, LAs provide resources, advocate on behalf of member organizations, and establish collaborative platforms that facilitate coordinated problem-solving (Fiedler

*et al.*, 2023; Sjolund *et al.*, 2025). In their comparative analysis of business-school accreditation bodies, Reddy *et al.* (2024) highlight the shared imperatives of upholding standards and harmonizing procedural frameworks across LAs. Acknowledging the limitations of their subject-specific focus, they call for further research in diverse organizational contexts. Responding to this need, the present study examines the operations of LAs within the Independent Church Sector (ICS), a faith-based setting characterized by autonomous, self-governing entities (Stevens, 2014; Kgatele, 2022).

LAs play a significant role in shaping legitimation strategies that influence both internal governance practices and the public perceptions of affiliated organizations (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2023; Loos & Spraul, 2025). For example, Prastiwi *et al.* (2025) identify six strategies employed by higher education institutions to navigate accreditation-related challenges: strategic planning, collaboration, communication, knowledge sharing, resource management, and the adoption of tailored or context-specific approaches. While the broader organizational literature offers considerable insight into the functions of LAs, less attention has been given to their SBBCs and its potential to establish effective links between independent entities, align practices, address legitimacy gaps, and foster social connections. The three-year study undertaken into ICS LA operations provided an opportunity to explore these dynamics within a faith-based and structurally decentralized environment.

Faith-based organizations frequently confront legitimacy pressures linked to mission clarity, branding, reputation management, public relations, and stakeholder trust (Malmelin & Malmelin, 2015). Within the ICS specifically, legitimacy challenges are often compounded by governance complexities and leadership-related accountability concerns (Osgood, 2024). In this context, umbrella bodies serve as religious legitimating agencies (RLAs), deploying a range of strategies, including accreditation, restructuring initiatives, and revitalization programmes, to support the credibility, sustainability, and developmental trajectories of their member organizations (Nweke, 2024).

Within the ICS, there is growing recognition that resolving shared operational and strategic challenges requires inter-organizational agility (Fasnacht & Proba, 2024) and collaborative approaches (Fu & Cooper, 2021). Independent churches increasingly leverage associational platforms provided by RLAs to navigate socio-cultural complexities and engage constructively with secular society (Shepperson *et al.*, 2025). As Still *et al.* (2025) argue, effective bridge-building requires innovative networking practices, coalition formation, and sustained intra-sectoral collaboration; activities essential for generating meaningful and enduring change (Gamble & Ozer, 2025; Katz & Sasson, 2017). Such endeavours rely heavily on the development and deployment of robust strategic capabilities.

Strategic capabilities, understood as the cumulative skills, shared insights, and coordinated practices within an organization, underpin value creation, competitive distinctiveness, and long-term sustainability (Otiso, 2024; Runtu & Ellitan, 2021). They strengthen organizational learning, support

iterative growth, and enhance adaptive responses to dynamic environmental conditions (Okyere *et al.*, 2026). Within this framework, SBBCs represent the integrated skills and structured approaches that enable independent yet mutually aligned entities to collaborate interdependently, foster social connectedness, and operate sustainably. SBBCs shape organizational distinctiveness and advance domain consensus within a LA (Tsasis, 2009). When effectively mobilized, they create the conditions necessary for affiliated organizations to cultivate and exploit network capabilities (Zaca, 2026) across interorganizational, intersectoral, and broader societal arenas (Bakker *et al.*, 2026).

Our study explores the contemporary functions of ICS RLAs in Britain and their SBBCs in fostering collaboration, enhancing social connectedness, and supporting legitimacy and revitalization efforts. We aim to identify these LAs, delineate their roles, and examine the strategies they adopt in working with the sector's entities amid declining religious enthusiasm (Duffy *et al.*, 2023; Curtice, 2025) and heightened public scrutiny (Fox, 2025; White, 2022). Analysis of data underscores their pivotal role in enabling independent churches to navigate contemporary challenges and sustain operations within Britain's evolving socio-cultural landscape.

## **Literature Review**

The proliferation of independent churches in Britain (Rogers, 2017; Curtice *et al.*, 2019; Nweke, 2024; Curtice, 2025) has raised critical questions regarding their social legitimacy and licence to operate (Suchman, 1995; Breaky *et al.*, 2025; Osgood, 2024). These congregations are typically non-denominational, autonomous, and self-governing, precluding any binding control from external ecclesiastical authorities (Stevens, 2014; Kgate, 2022). They exercise independence in property ownership, leadership appointments, doctrinal positions, and internal governance, while retaining the right to join or leave affiliations at will. This distinguishes them from hierarchical mainstream denominations such as Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox traditions (Harris 2021; Johnson, 2020).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, British media spotlighted legitimacy and leadership-rooted accountability concerns surrounding independent church operations (Osgood, 2006). This unanticipated legitimation struggle (Malmelin & Malmelin, 2015; Korkeamäki & Kohtamäki, 2020; Banerjee, 2025) amplified misconceptions about the independent church model and deepened public disconnect during a period of growing secularisation and liberal ideologies (Jowell *et al.*, 2000). Mainstream denominations further compounded issues by withholding ecumenical recognition, citing the absence of a cohesive voice to represent independent churches in interfaith and public forums (Osgood, 2006). These developments created existential threats for ICS entities at the turn of the century (Dehkordi *et al.*, 2025), highlighting the need for strategic engagement and stakeholder relationship-building

(Shepperson *et al.*, 2025; Doyle & Poškutė, 2026). However, Osgood (2006, 2024) argues that independent leaders lacked the capacity to sustain their congregations alone.

Remarkably, recent trends show that independent churches in Britain have demonstrated resilience, often maintaining or increasing attendance numbers, in contrast to the decline observed in mainstream denominations (Hayward, 2022; Nweke, 2024; Curtice, 2025). This study addresses a gap by examining survival and resilience strategies (Eapen & Finkenstadt, 2024) employed by ICS LAs to energise legitimacy repair and enhance organisational performance (Kuruppu *et al.* 2019; Dehkordi *et al.*, 2025).

ICS religious legitimating agencies (RLAs) are faith-based umbrella and resource organizations (Wittberg, 2013) that provide accreditation, support, networking, and self-regulatory frameworks for autonomous congregations and leaders. Their distinctive role lies in promoting healthy independence while fostering interdependence among members (Reynolds *et al.*, 2021). This dual mandate enables independent churches to collaborate, engage ecumenically, and maintain societal relevance. Unlike direct service providers, RLAs operate as enabling structures, equipping affiliates to deliver services effectively and sustainably.

In contemporary Britain, marked by declining religious enthusiasm (Duffy *et al.*, 2023; Curtice, 2025) and heightened scrutiny following financial scandals and safeguarding failures (Fox, 2025; White, 2022), RLA activities have become critical. Robust safeguarding standards and governance reforms now serve as key markers of social value (Legraien, 2023; Cave, 2022). Proving how legitimacy, as an organizational resource (Suchman, 1995), is essential for survival. Deficits undermine stakeholder trust and threaten operational viability (Heleski, 2023; Kwestel & Doerfel, 2023). Thus, independent churches, like other nonprofit actors, must address legitimacy demands in areas such as accountability, transparency, and governance (Costa & Da Silva, 2019).

### ***Legitimation strategies and alignment dynamics***

Weinryb (2020) identifies two primary approaches to organizational legitimacy: asserting independence and aligning with other bodies. Self-legitimation often suits organizations with fragmented identities (Von Billerbeck, 2019). While ICS congregations exhibit diversity in brand labels (Brierley, 2020; Kay, 2008), their umbrella groups demonstrate notable convergence (Nweke, 2024; Stevens, 2014), making alignment strategies attractive due to their synergistic benefits. Synergy, widely recognised in organizational theory, refers to the enhanced effectiveness achieved through collaboration (Kachgal, 2015; Garlet *et al.*, 2025). Organizational synergy involves networking between two or more units, pooling negotiating power, sharing resources and expertise, and coordinating strategies to generate greater value than would be possible independently (Goold & Campbell, 1998; Calō *et al.*, 2024).

Networking is a proven catalyst for growth (Rennemo *et al.*, 2017), suggesting that ICS congregations may be drawn to LAs for the networking and growth-enhancing platforms they provide.

Brand (2018) advocates for ICS entities to avoid insularity and embrace networking opportunities that foster co-dependence within the sector (Katz & Sasson, 2017). Nonetheless, conflicts and boundary issues, often resulting in perceived loss of autonomy, can deter participation in umbrella groups (Proulx *et al.*, 2014). ICS LAs mitigate these concerns by offering voluntary association and respecting the autonomy of affiliated churches (Stevens, 2014). They employ strategies (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2023) that enable interdependent relationships while safeguarding self-governance (Egwuonwu *et al.*, 2025; Sjölund *et al.*, 2025). This study addresses a gap in understanding the contemporary roles of ICS LAs and the strategies they utilize in enabling constituents to embrace cooperative environments while navigating operational challenges intensified by legitimation struggles.

Developing resilience-oriented strategic capabilities with bridge-building capacities (Otiso, 2024; Still *et al.*, 2025) requires LAs to draw on established strategic management principles (Lynch *et al.*, 2024; Amason & Ward, 2021). Effective strategic bridge-building plans (Dhlamini, 2024), implemented across the agency (Allio, 2025), should integrate intra- and inter-organizational agility, strategic orientations, strategic flexibility, and strategic foresight.

Intra-organizational agility fosters a cooperative environment and cultivates cultural alignment within LAs (Fasnacht & Proba, 2024), strengthening domain consensus and enhancing brand legitimacy (Tzasis, 2009; Besharat & Langan, 2014). Inter-organizational agility, by contrast, underscores integrative practices that enable LAs to accommodate member diversity while supporting collaboration that respects each organization's independence and interests (Fasnacht & Proba, 2024).

Strategic orientations shape the operational and cultural foundations necessary for organizational viability (Melesse & Khatko, 2024; Son *et al.*, 2026). Strategic flexibility enables both reactive and proactive responses to uncertainty (Sushil, 2015), demonstrating an organization's capacity to reconfigure resources and adjust operations in rapidly changing environments (Li *et al.*, 2025). Flexibility is closely connected to strategic foresight, which anticipates change, mitigates risk, and supports adaptive responses that enhance resilience (Carayannis *et al.*, 2025; Galpin, 2023; Allio, 2023). Strategic foresight also promotes co-innovation and dynamic capabilities (Fasnacht & Proba, 2024), aligns organizational actions with stakeholder expectations (Shellenbarger, 2022), and contributes to improved performance (Awais *et al.*, 2023).

Within the nonprofit sector, collaborative arrangements strengthen legitimacy and performance by facilitating resource access and the adoption of best practices (Zeimers *et al.*, 2019; Ford, 2015). In the UK context, Davie (2017) identifies migration and innovative organizational strategies as key drivers

of religious growth. Building on these insights, this study investigates whether ICS LAs, through collaborative platforms, restructuring initiatives, revitalization strategies, resource provision, and legitimating influence, play a pivotal role in enabling independent churches to address legitimation challenges and achieve membership growth, in contrast to the decline observed among mainline denominations.

### ***Theoretical framework***

This study adopts an integrative theoretical framework consistent with Fernando and Lawrence's (2014) argument for multi-lens approaches to complex organizational–societal interfaces. Interactions between independent churches, their stakeholders, and LAs involve organizational, social, institutional, and theological dynamics that exceed the explanatory power of any single theory (Cornelissen, 2025). Accordingly, this study synthesizes insights from Stakeholder Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and relevant Christian theological constructs to provide a comprehensive analytical foundation.

Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) offers a useful lens for analyzing how LAs assist independent congregations in creating and sustaining value for diverse stakeholders who influence, or are influenced by, their activities. Core propositions regarding stakeholder identification, salience, and relationship management are applied to examine how LAs mediate and structure stakeholder engagement across this organizational field.

Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995) adds a critical evaluative dimension, enabling an exploration of how LAs respond to concerns about social acceptance, normative appropriateness, and sector-wide credibility. Integrating this perspective strengthens the analysis of the legitimacy challenges confronting independent churches and the strategic legitimation practices adopted by their LAs. Although institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) offers insights into the institutional pressures shaping organizational behaviour, its application is limited in this study. The theory's constraints on organizational agency (David *et al.*, 2019) conflict with the autonomy-oriented ethos underpinning the relationships between independent churches and their LAs, where non-denominational status and self-governance remain central.

To account for the spiritual foundations of these relationships, the framework incorporates selected Christian theological concepts. These recognize that interactions between LAs and churches are rooted in shared faith commitments and shaped by Scripture-informed understandings of organizational conduct (Wolfe, 2022). Theological constructs also introduce epistemological and methodological considerations requiring reflexive engagement (Holmes & Lindsay, 2018). Ecclesiology, in particular, provides a relevant theological category concerned with the nature, identity, and expressions of the

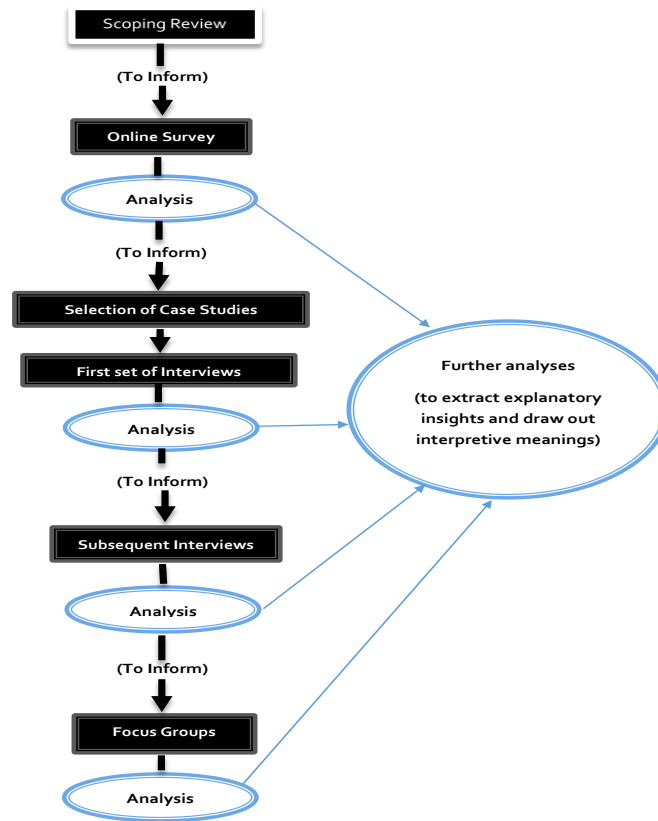
Church (Kärkkäinen, 2021). Its insights inform congregational self-understandings and their approaches to working with legitimating bodies.

Together, these theoretical strands offer a coherent and analytically robust framework for examining how LAs support independent churches in navigating legitimacy demands, managing stakeholder expectations, and sustaining spiritual integrity.

## **Methodology**

This study aimed to systematically identify United Kingdom-based (UK) ICS LAs, delineate their core functions, and examine their SBBCs. Although prior literature references various networks, alliances, fellowships, and associations within the UKICS (Kay 2008; Stevens, 2014; Brierley, 2020), comprehensive identification and classification of these agencies remain limited. To address this gap, a scoping review was conducted (Pollock *et al.*, 2024), drawing on academic sources, charity regulator records, annual reports, and web-based documentation, guided by established frameworks. Inclusion criteria required organizations to: (1) be formally registered as a faith-based umbrella body or network with a UK charity regulator; (2) provide membership or networking opportunities to UK-based independent churches; (3) actively engage in ICS roles, including resource delivery and organizational support; and (4) demonstrate objectives aimed at enhancing legitimacy, accountability, growth, and performance.

The review identified 39 LAs, forming the basis for primary data collection via an online survey (Haswani *et al.*, 2023). The survey design combined closed-ended questions for quantitative analysis and open-ended questions for qualitative insights (Wu *et al.*, 2022). Key subjects covered include RLA functions and membership structure, stakeholder accountability, leadership, and governance practices. In line with recommended practice, the implemented survey administration strategy (Kosnáč, 2026) involved prenotification, piloting, and use of an online platform dedicated to academic research. Given the small population ( $n \leq 40$ ), a total population sampling strategy was adopted to minimize bias (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Responses were analysed using descriptive statistics (Dong, 2023) and thematic categorisation (Weissman *et al.*, 2020), informing subsequent case study selection and interview sampling as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Data collection and analysis process

Source: Author's own work

The qualitative exploration adopted a constructivist–interpretivist approach (Tanlaka & Aryal, 2025), which emphasizes engaging directly with participants to explore, describe, and interpret the meanings they ascribe to the phenomenon under investigation (William, 2024). This approach, rooted in the principles of sociological phenomenology (Raza, 2024) and underpinned by a constructivist ontological orientation (Aurini *et al.*, 2022), was deemed methodologically and epistemologically appropriate for examining the UKICS. It enabled a nuanced representation of participants' lived experiences, relationships, and interactions within the sector.

Regarding researcher positionality, the lead researcher's knowledge of, and prior engagement with, independent church communities in the UK, Denmark, and Nigeria provided valuable contextual insight that informed the fieldwork and interpretation (Goundar, 2025; Yip, 2024). Investigating participants' experiences and social relations required immersion in the field and attentive engagement with their intersubjective realities. This process necessitated sustained critical reflection and sensitivity to the ways in which the researcher's own values and experiences could shape data generation and interpretation (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023).

### *Case study selection and participants' recruitment*

A multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018) was implemented to ensure representation across the four UK nations. Four LAs and fourteen affiliated independent churches were purposively selected (Ahmed, 2024), primarily from survey respondents, to enhance construct validity and provide holistic insights (Aurini *et al.*, 2022). Detailed information relating to the purposive stratification process employed in selection is presented in Appendix A.

Data collection combined IDIs and FGDs to enhance completeness and confirmability (Natow, 2020). It was planned to interview two individuals who are authoritatively positioned within the leadership of each participating RLA and independent congregation (Dejonckheere & Vaughan, 2019). The plan was implemented in three of the four agencies and in 12 of the 14 participating churches. A second participant from the fourth agency later joined a focus group. One independent church had no willing participant, and an additional potential interviewee from another congregation was excluded due to a familial relationship with an initial participant, to avoid data contamination.

Five interactive FGD sessions were organized: two with agency leaders, two with congregational leaders, and one heterogeneous group to enrich discussion (Faye, 2014). Participants were selected using expert sampling to ensure inclusion of individuals with demonstrable experience (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Each focus group comprised an average of seven participants, consistent with recommended practice (Busetto *et al.*, 2020).

**Table 1.** 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
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>24</b>	35	19	6	3	1

**Source:** Author's own work

The purposive sampling strategy employed in participant recruitment ensured relevance to research objectives and diversity in age, ethnicity, and gender (Ahmed, 2024). As observed in Table 1, the study included 64 participants: 33 in IDIs and 31 in FGDs. Of these, 24 (37.5%) were female, comprising 10 White, 10 Black African, 3 Black Caribbean, and 1 Asian. Male participants were distributed evenly across IDIs and FGDs, with ethnic representation as follows: 26 White, 8 Black African, 3 Black Caribbean, 2 Asian, and 1 South American.

All participants were over 18 and provided informed consent. Ethical standards were rigorously observed throughout, in line with established norms. Adherence to high ethical standards was considered essential for research quality (Schindler, 2018).

Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Consistent with qualitative scholarship, the analysis incorporated reflexivity, flexibility, and interpretive subjectivity to support methodological rigour and enable an analytic approach aligned with the study aims (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Given the extensive and sometimes overlapping nature of data from individual interviews and focus groups, transcripts and field notes were closely interrogated to ensure analytic depth. This involved systematic familiarization, data cleaning and reduction, and the reorganization and categorization of relevant segments to locate the phenomenon of interest. Through iterative coding, patterns were identified and themes manually developed across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

To strengthen analytical robustness and enhance explanatory insight, Legitimacy Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and selected concepts from Christian theology were employed as interpretive lenses. This framework supported coherent synthesis and facilitated the development of academically grounded interpretations aligned with the study objectives.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the analytical outcomes, beginning with the identification of UKICS LAs. An initial scoping review identified 42 potential UK-based ICS LAs. To ensure methodological rigour (Pollock *et al.*, 2024), successive screening stages were applied using predefined inclusion criteria, minimizing error, and enhancing reliability. Following this process, 39 umbrella bodies were confirmed as UKICS LAs, while three were excluded after failing to meet all criteria. A survey administered to these 39 agencies achieved a 69% response rate which is substantially higher than the average reported for academic research (44%) and business and management studies (51%) (Wu *et al.*, 2022; Taherdoost & Madanchian, 2024). This strong engagement enhances the validity of the findings and provides a robust basis for analysis.

Eight months after survey closure, further secondary searches identified four additional UKICS LAs, bringing the total to 43 as of July 2022. Recruitment of FGD participants was expanded to incorporate representatives from the four additional LAs and their affiliates, thereby enriching data diversity and supporting comprehensive meaning-making (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023).

***Analysis to delineate the contemporary functions of UKICS RLAs***

As shown in Table 2, two preliminary codes adopted in the thematic analysis process were “*reasons for joining*” and “*benefits from membership*”. Both codes were derived from survey, IDI and FGD datasets and facilitated the identification of themes and patterns relevant to understanding why independent churches seek RLA affiliation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Through iterative refinement, these themes provided clear insights into the contemporary functions of UKICS RLAs. The first range of respondents’ views (ROVs) grounded in these preliminary codes, is presented in Table 2. To preserve confidentiality, participating umbrella bodies were coded using the prefix RA followed by a numerical identifier (e.g., RA1, RA2), in line with established qualitative research practices (Wang *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, IDI and FGD participants were coded as R plus a number for RLA leaders and C plus a number for church leaders.

**Table 2.** Thematic analysis for first set of RLA functions

<b>Preliminary Codes</b>	<b>Data Extracts</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>RLA Role</b>
Reasons for Joining	<b>R12</b> ‘To have some kind of formal recognition.’	Formal recognition	Recognition
Reasons for Joining	<b>R12</b> ‘I think one of the huge roles is representation... to be an advocate for them.’	Representation	Representation
Reasons for Joining	<b>R14</b> ‘I would say the reason why people join; it always starts with relationship.’	Relationship	Relational
Benefits from membership	<b>C4</b> ‘We really have benefitted and used their resources.’	Resources	Resourcing
Reasons for Joining	<b>R13</b> ‘To stand together with like-minded gospel people... there is kind of the theological commonality.’	Theology	Religious
Benefits from Membership	<b>C18</b> ‘Somewhere that we can check in spiritually.’	Spiritual Check	Religious

**Source:** Author’s own work

Participant R12 emphasised that the pursuit of societal recognition is a primary motivation for ICS congregations and their leaders to seek membership and accreditation with umbrella organisations. This participant further identified representation as a critical benefit, particularly the advocacy role that RLAs play in “demystifying” misconceptions about the sector. Together, the desire for recognition and representation suggests the presence of legitimacy gaps (Schnell & Mattes, 2026) and ongoing challenges in stakeholder relationship management (Doyle & Poškutė, 2026).

For FGD participant R14, the key driver of membership is relational, often emerging through existing ministerial networks. Participant C4 underscored the resourcing function of RLAs, describing their affiliation as “one of the most valuable” due to the tangible benefits and practical support obtained. Similarly, participant C18 highlighted the importance of theological accountability, while R13 pointed to the desire for “theological commonality” and solidarity among “like-minded gospel people.” Consistent with ecclesiological perspectives (Kärkkäinen, 2021), the emphasis on relationship, resource-sharing, and doctrinal alignment among independent congregations reflects the spiritual bonds that shape their identity and their commitment to forms of interdependence.

Analysis of the responses presented in Table 2 resulted in the identification of five core functional roles of UKICS RLAs: recognition, representation, relational, resourcing, and religious functions. Additional roles emerged through further examination of respondents’ open-ended comments regarding motivations for joining RLAs. These insights are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Thematic analysis for second set of RLA functions

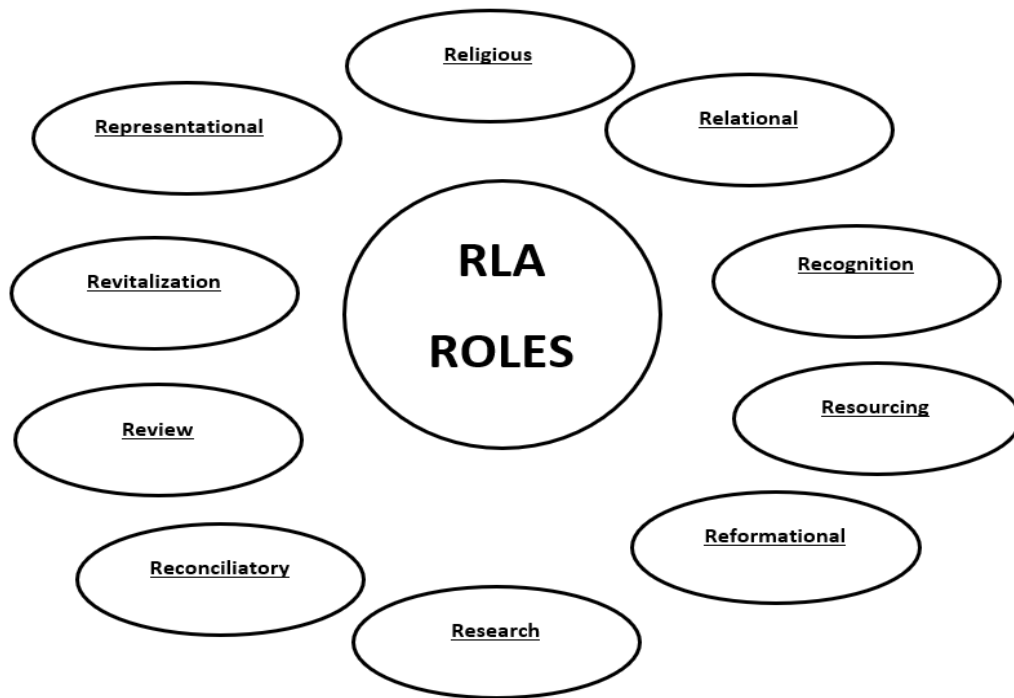
<b>Preliminary Codes</b>	<b>Data Extracts</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>RLA Role</b>
Reasons for Joining	<b>R18</b> ‘Share the burden of reaching the nation of the UK with the gospel.’	Gospel Outreach	Revitalization
Benefits from membership	<b>R12</b> ‘We have made adjustments to ensure that the reporting pathways are a lot easier.’	Adjustments	Reformation
Reasons for Joining	<b>R11</b> ‘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	<b>R3</b> ‘Where they have a conflict going on, which they are finding they cannot resolve internally.’	Conflict Resolution	Reconciliation
Reasons for Joining	<b>R15</b> ‘Our goal is always to see how we can reconcile individuals.’	Reconciliation	Reconciliation
Benefits from Membership	<b>R1</b> ‘There is an annual review form which basically checks the church.’	Annual Review	Review
Reason for Joining	<b>R12</b> ‘Accreditation is reviewed. It is reviewed in light of current conduct.’	Review of Accreditation	Review
Benefits from membership	<b>RA3</b> ‘We do surveys from time to time.’	Surveys	Research

**Source:** Author’s own work

Participant R18 emphasized that churches join RLAs to pursue a united front in advancing national gospel mission and revitalization agendas. On the issue of organizational restructuring, R12 highlighted efforts to reduce bureaucratic barriers by creating more horizontal communication pathways. Similarly, R11 drew attention to recent “revamps” within their RLA, which have generated “newness and excitement,” suggesting that reforms are actively taking place.

As described by R3 and R15, independent congregations often lack the capacity to resolve internal conflicts, particularly those involving founding pastors or senior ministers. This creates a need for RLA mediation to achieve reconciliation and restoration, though ministerial accreditation may be rescinded in cases of impropriety. Relatedly, R1 and R12 indicated that RLAs conduct annual reviews of affiliated churches and ministers, assessing doctrinal alignment, safeguarding compliance, and organizational changes; an accountability mechanism that may lead to suspension or withdrawal of accreditation where necessary. Finally, RA3’s survey response highlighted the research-related activities undertaken by RLAs. Analytical focus on these ROVs led to the identification of five additional core functions of UKICS RLAs: their revitalization, reformation, reconciliation, review, and research roles as shown in Table 3.

Figure 2 reveals that ICS RLAs fulfil ten core roles critical to the sector’s effective operation. Collaborations facilitated by these agencies are primarily driven by shared religious identity and Christian values. Accordingly, RLAs aim to advance the collective religious interests of affiliated organizations while, as registered charities, ensuring public benefit in line with their charitable objectives. In effect, their faith-based mandate remains central to their operations.



**Figure 2.** Contemporary roles of ICS RLAs

**Source:** Author’s own work

Another key function of ICS RLAs is conferring recognition and legitimacy through organizational affiliation and ministerial accreditation. In so doing, they attest to the fact that the organization is a properly constituted functioning entity within the sector. This enhances societal acceptability and credibility among stakeholders. RLAs also serve as representative bodies, articulating the collective voice of independent churches in inter-church, inter-faith, governmental, and secular forums. Additionally, they foster mutual relationships by creating platforms for communication, social engagement, and conflict resolution, while facilitating partnerships and collaborative initiatives to revitalize the sector.

Furthermore, RLAs act as resource hubs, offering training, strategic guidance, legal advice, research insights, personnel, and financial support. Their training programmes address sector-specific challenges and promote organizational transformation. RLAs also implement self-regulatory mechanisms through reviews that inform membership renewal and ministerial accreditation, reinforcing accountability. Additionally, they engage in research, independently or with faith-based think tanks and academic institutions, contributing to evidence-based practice and policy development.

In positioning themselves within the ICS and actualizing their functions, RLAs employ varied strategic approaches that reveal bridge-building capabilities (Still *et al.*, 2025). Subsequent analyses will focus on unveiling these SBBCs.

### *Thematic analysis of positioning approaches among ICS LAs*

Independent churches frequently adopt brand names (Landgraf *et al.*, 2026) that incorporate self-descriptive elements (Chen *et al.*, 2025) such as *Evangelical*, *Pentecostal*, *Congregational*, *Baptist*, *Apostolic*, or *New Methodist* (Nweke, 2024). These labels reflect doctrinal orientations and modes of mission communication and are evident in the names of UKICS LAs. The recurrence of similar brand identifiers between umbrella associations and individual entities suggests that membership solicitation strategies are often narrowly targeted rather than broadly inclusive. This approach enables LAs to cultivate distinctive organizational brands and perceptions (Hu & Wang, 2025). Participants responses illustrate this differentiation. For example, Participant R5 emphasized an evangelical orientation: “Members are not required to come to join us, but once they do join us, they are then required to uphold certain standards.... They are expected to subscribe to our doctrinal basis of faith, which is an evangelical one.” Similarly, Participant R4 highlighted Pentecostal engagement with contemporary cultural discourse: “We are seeing as Pentecostal churches, engaging in that discussion is not an either or this, but becoming increasingly comfortable in that space.”

Consistent with R5’s contribution, RLAs typically maintain formal statements, often referred to as a *Basis of Faith*, which articulate their approach to fulfilling their religious role and serve as guiding parameters for member organizations and prospective affiliates. The view of Participant R13, as shown in Table 2, suggests that these statements aim to foster “theological commonality” among “like-minded gospel people”. Thus, indicating their strategic implications in shaping the relational and reconciliatory roles of RLAs. Furthermore, the emphasis on theological alignment as a defining organizational attribute underscores the presence of doctrinal diversity among ICS RLAs. For instance, responses received on the topic of women’s inclusion in senior leadership roles reveal divergent positions (Flavell, 2025). From an egalitarian standpoint, Participant RA23 declared: “Our organizational position is that we accredit men and women equally to ministry”. In contrast, Participant RA12 articulates a complementarian position: “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”.

These contrasting perspectives illustrate the sector’s heterogeneity and the role of doctrinal positioning in shaping membership criteria and organizational identity within each RLA. The highlighted terms, “*like-minded gospel people*,” “*theological commonality*,” “*our doctrinal basis of faith*,” “*our Biblical understanding*,” and “*our organizational position*,” represent related codes with significant strategic implications. The emerging pattern suggests that UKICS LAs actively engage in strategic brand positioning. In marketing theory, branding is recognized as a strategic tool (Kylander & Stone, 2012;

Barrenechea, 2025) that organizations employ to position themselves within a given context and communicate a clear set of values to stakeholders (Chernatony, 2010; Hu & Wang, 2025).

It is likely that, in positioning themselves within the UKICS landscape and developing distinctive brands, RLAs adopt a targeted approach, offering affiliation to a niche segment of the sector rather than pursuing broad-based appeal (Barrenechea, 2025). In effect, branding functions as an intra-sectoral bridge-building strategy, enabling RLAs to attract independent churches that share similar theological convictions. Participant R18 underscores the defining nature of their agency's complementarian stance:

“By definition we are complementarian.... So, if you want to appoint a female elder in a church, you cannot be part of [RLA's name withheld]. What that means is there is not disagreement amongst our churches about the role of women as elders.”

In keeping with equity, diversity and inclusion expectations, female representation in leadership is increasingly viewed as an essential component of contemporary organizational governance. The survey findings shown in Table 4 (see Appendix A) provide evidence of ongoing reforms in ICS leadership structures, with over 60% of RLAs having policies that explicitly enable both men and women to aspire to any leadership position. The survey outcome also confirms that the longstanding egalitarianism vs. complementarianism debate (Flavell, 2025) remains present within the UKICS context and is likely to persist.

Although R18's view may not represent the broader UKICS landscape, it demonstrates how a clearly articulated stance can foster domain consensus (Tsasis, 2009; Besharat & Langan, 2014). Domain consensus clarifies organizational expectations, what the agency will and will not do, ensuring alignment in mission, vision, and core values. Such alignment evidences strategic orientation and provides a valid test of SBBC (Okyere *et al.*, 2026; Otiso, 2024).

Despite strong convergent bonds within UKICS LAs, membership diversity; historical, cultural, geographical, and leadership-related, introduces complexity. As R18 observes, “they all have a slightly different flavour... One challenge for umbrella organizations is managing this complexity. We give churches principles and help them apply those principles to their context.” This underscores contextualization as a key operational approach for RLAs in managing diversity, further evidence of SBBC. While variations create divergence, relationships remain largely non-conflictual due to shared vision, values, and guiding principles.

Another dimension of diversity RLAs must navigate is the proliferation of contemporary approaches to church expression among independent churches. This is in keeping with ecclesiological propositions (Kärkkäinen, 2021). Participant R5 notes that “both in urban and in rural settings, people are looking to

find very new ways of doing church.” This shift is welcomed by Participant R6: “We are very keen to see church expressed in different ways. So, I think that attracts people”.

Alongside traditional congregations, churches increasingly adopt reformed, emergent, subcultural, and experimental models. LAs, tasked with coordinating autonomous congregations under umbrella structures, must therefore respect and accommodate these innovations (Prichard & Moore, 2016; Ingvaldsen *et al.*, 2012). As R6 suggests, independent churches flourish when autonomy, self-governance, and freedom of expression are safeguarded. LAs that foster environments where independence coexists with interdependence provide further evidence of SBBC. This approach enables cohesion while allowing contextualized practices aligned with mission and cultural setting.

### ***Analysis of restructuring strategies and their bridge-building impact***

Participants’ responses indicate a clear recognition of the unique perception challenges faced by ICS entities. Two views highlight some of the persistent issues that these organizations continue to navigate:

“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... I do not think they have that same perception with independent churches... that is one of the barriers, definitely” (C19).

“The British society, they want something that is well established... 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” (C32).

Beyond questions of legitimacy, independent churches, as do other groups in the wider society, face increasing scrutiny from internal and external stakeholders on their stance regarding emerging postmodern issues. While drawing attention to “the questions that come from the very bright and inquiry-minded young people,” Participant R5 underscores the strategic approach proposed by their agency to address these challenges: “We have to say to our pastors ‘you 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.”

As R5 suggests, church operatives risk appearing disconnected from contemporary societal debates. In response, the ICS increasingly acknowledges the need for restructuring; asking critical questions, adopting strategies fit for purpose, implementing reforms, and ensuring leaders possess the requisite skills to navigate these complexities. Participant R4 provides further evidence of this strategic orientation: “We have become increasingly comfortable in talking about issues, especially in the

changing cultural landscape... The changes that we need to make structurally to serve as we and our churches are moving into the future.” Similarly, an independent church leader (C18) confirms that they “have evaluated every set area and done away with things that... do not actually strengthen the church.” Thus, UKICS agencies and their affiliates are implementing structural adjustments to maintain relevance in a rapidly evolving cultural context. Participant C5 emphasizes cultural engagement as an effective means of fostering openness to the gospel without compromising its integrity:

“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.”

The pursuit of cultural relevance increasingly shapes UKICS strategic objectives. However, actors remain unwilling to compromise core theological tenets and values (Wolfe, 2022), creating tension between doctrinal integrity and contemporary engagement. As societal values diverge from scriptural positions, churches face a legitimation struggle (Malmelin & Malmelin, 2015) in seeking to remain relevant while navigating this tension. Participant R12 explains that their approach as a LA is to equip: “We try to bring in individuals with expertise... Sharing, educating, empowering and not being afraid to discuss some of the pertinent issues that today's churches are facing.”

Umbrella agencies play a central role in enabling ICS entities to navigate operational challenges intensified by legitimation struggles, exemplifying their SBBCs. Despite declining enthusiasm for religion (Duffy *et al.*, 2023), the UKICS continues to grow in many contexts (Hayward, 2022), driven by restructuring and revitalization strategies. Participant R18 describes their experience: “We had placed in effect more cultural restrictions, for example, on churches. We have done away with all of those now... We work with individual churches to help them think about leadership strategies or growth strategies.” This approach is corroborated by Participant R1: “The fellowship made changes to allow it to grow by bringing in a different structure... We have adopted a new strategic plan... which will enable the next phase of our growth.”

These perspectives reveal a willingness to embrace reforms and adopt targeted growth strategies. In pursuing expansion, many ICS entities are discarding restrictive positions that fostered exclusion and are instead embracing practices that promote inclusion and diversity. Participant C7 underscores this fact:

“One of the key things we have is to make sure whoever comes into our midst feels that they are welcome... We do as much to dismantle any kind of barrier that would exclude certain people or certain groups... That has been bringing in the diversity we are seeing in our midst.”

The analysis indicates a sector increasingly confident in advancing both structural and normative reforms, using SBBCs to dismantle exclusivist barriers, stimulate organizational growth, and enhance stakeholder satisfaction. Participant accounts suggest that ICS organizations are broadening their community presence through targeted social action initiatives. As Participant R3 noted, “a lot of our churches have a lot more community involvement than they had a decade ago,” while Participant R9 highlighted “a massive emphasis on social action and engagement in people’s lives.” These developments reflect longstanding Christian commitments to benevolence and service, while simultaneously strengthening organizational legitimacy (Loos & Spraul, 2025).

Community engagement depends on securing a social licence to operate (Breaky *et al.*, 2025) and is often facilitated through cross-sector collaboration (Bakker *et al.*, 2026). Participants highlighted the importance of collective representation for independent churches. As R12 noted, misconceptions about independent congregations can restrict direct engagement: “Some organizations will not willingly and openly speak to individual churches but will... speak to an organization that is representative of those churches.” Similarly, R17 described the strategic value of involvement in national ecumenical forums: “One of the biggest things that has made a difference is trying to be active in the national forum... where we can be seen.” R15 further emphasized the role of intermediary bodies in liaising with government: “We are in conversation with the government on various matters... Churches value the fact that there is a kind of voice in the national life that comes from being part of a network.”

Through LA strategic practices, independent churches gain effective representation in ecumenical, interfaith, governmental, and secular arenas, while also participating in local social action initiatives that reduce sociocultural barriers and foster social connectedness. LAs therefore play a critical role in shaping the relational infrastructure that enables meaningful engagement. By deploying SBBCs, they cultivate bridging and linking social capital across stakeholder groups (Putnam, 2007; Soegiharto *et al.*, 2026). These coordinated efforts are strengthening the UKICS’s contribution to social cohesion, enhancing its capacity to attract social capital, increasing confidence in its societal role, and improving stakeholder satisfaction. Collectively, these evolving practices are reinforcing the sector’s legitimacy and long-term sustainability.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the ICS in Britain with the aim of systematically identifying its RLAs, delineating their contemporary functions, and exploring the SBBCs they develop and deploy to enable effective role-actualization. Applying predetermined inclusion criteria, the research identified 43 faith-based umbrella organizations functioning as RLAs within the UKICS. Thematic analysis of primary data revealed that these LAs perform ten distinct roles that enable their constituents to navigate socio-cultural complexities, foster interdependence, and engage constructively with secular society. These roles

encompass religious, recognitional, relational, representational, reformatory, resourcing, and reconciliatory functions, alongside revitalization, review, and research. In particular, the findings show that the social legitimacy gap associated with UK independent church operations is effectively bridged by the strategic practices employed by LAs in fulfilling their recognition, representational, reformatory, review, and research roles.

Additional findings indicate that ICS LAs, in seeking to actualize their religious, relational, resourcing, and reconciliatory roles, typically adopt targeted branding strategies. This involves offering affiliation to niche segments of the sector rather than pursuing broad-based appeal. Branding thus operates as an intra-sectoral bridge-building mechanism, attracting independent churches with shared theological convictions. Furthermore, the collaborative platforms provided by LAs enable networking to advance collective revitalization agendas while accommodating the autonomy and contextual diversity of local congregations. This necessitates the exercise of SBBCs to deliver tailored support and foster sector-wide cohesion.

Evidence from the study highlights the innovative approaches employed by ICS LAs and their affiliates, including repositioning efforts, adaptive measures, structural adjustments, and reset strategies aimed at sustaining operations and revitalizing growth. They also demonstrate multidimensional SBBCs by actively seeking representation in religious, governmental, and secular forums, including media platforms, to cultivate strategic relationships, advocate for the sector, and influence policy and public opinion. These activities exert a legitimating impact and underscore the indispensable contribution of LAs to the vitality and sustainability of the ICS in contemporary Britain.

### ***Practical implications, research limitations and future directions***

This study makes a substantive contribution to the literature on LAs by providing a comprehensive account of the roles and SBBCs of ICS RLAs. By clarifying and deepening the conceptualisation of SBBCs, the study advances current understandings of strategic capabilities more broadly. It illuminates how the inter-organizational and inter-sectoral relational management components of strategic capabilities can be effectively cultivated and deployed to strengthen organisational functioning within complex and pluralistic environments. In this regard, it draws academic attention to the strategic role played by LAs in shaping the relational infrastructure necessary for meaningful independent church engagement in varied spheres. Furthermore, the study contributes to the literature on coordinated autonomy by shedding light on the ability of ICS LAs to foster healthy independence while promoting interdependence.

With respect to legitimacy, the study captures the multi-level legitimacy dynamics at play within the setting examined. The findings suggest that umbrella bodies have the potential to extend their remit

beyond pursuing legitimacy for themselves to actively conferring legitimacy on affiliated organisations. The notion of legitimacy conferral, as articulated here, offers theoretical value to both LA scholarship and the broader inter-organizational literature. It provides a conceptual model through which umbrella bodies can support, enhance, and sustain the operations of individual entities, particularly those encountering legitimacy deficits or navigating persistent legitimation challenges. As such, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of legitimacy processes within networked organisational fields and underscores the strategic importance of LAs in shaping sectoral accountability and resilience.

A further contribution to knowledge arises from the development of a research methodology and theoretical foundation tailored to the setting investigated. Conducting the study required critical reflection on the methodological and theoretical approaches most appropriate for the unique research context and objectives (Bom & Toren, 2020). Thus, the study adopted an integrative theoretical framework drawing on stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and relevant Christian theological concepts. This combination provided a robust analytical lens through which to examine how both a Christian biblical worldview and the broader British socio-cultural environment shape the phenomenon under study (Labanow, 2009; Holmes & Lindsay, 2018). Integrating theological principles with organisational theories offered a coherent framework for exploring legitimacy, accountability, and organisational performance within Christian-based organisations operating in a liberalised and increasingly scrutinised societal context. Consequently, this study offers a methodological and theoretical model that researchers can adapt when investigating similar organisational settings or faith-informed operational environments.

Beyond its theoretical significance, the findings of the study also have important practical implications. Specifically, they have the potential to stimulate ongoing ICS reforms by creating awareness among unaffiliated entities regarding the benefits of RLA membership. Additionally, RLA leaders are likely to employ the ten-role model in structuring their operations. This would create an enabling environment for the development and deployment of SBBCs. For an ICS RLA, it is crucial to demonstrate operational capacity not only to promote convergence and coherence across inter-organisational relationships, but also to recognise and accommodate the distinctiveness of individual churches and the complexities arising from the diverse congregations within its membership. This dual capability to foster unity while respecting diversity constitutes a central requirement for an effective and credible faith-based umbrella body within the ICS. Furthermore, it furnishes a model of coordinated autonomy (Ingvaldsen *et al.*, 2012; Prichard & Moore, 2016) applicable beyond religious contexts to professional associations, franchises, and federal governance structures.

Given the accountability concerns associated with ICS entities, the findings of this study carry important implications for the development of evidence-based policy aimed at establishing an effective

stakeholder accountability model for the sector. Such a model should recognise and incorporate the self-regulatory functions performed by ICS RLAs. The findings indicate that the self-regulatory efforts of RLAs and the external oversight provided by statutory bodies are not competing mechanisms. Rather, they are complementary and collectively essential in ensuring that the ICS remains transparent and accountable while retaining the freedom to practise its religious beliefs. Moreover, the study suggests that the principle of sector-based self-regulation, as practised within the UKICS context, offers a potentially transferable framework that could be adapted to other jurisdictions or organisational settings.

In keeping with the predominant positioning approach implemented by ICS RLAs, LAs in other settings could consider the benefits in developing distinctive brands as an intra-sectoral bridge-building strategy. This would enable them to adopt a targeted approach that entails offering affiliation to a niche segment of a sector rather than pursuing broad-based appeal (Barrenechea, 2025). Furthermore, it creates an enabling environment for the fostering of domain consensus (Tsisis, 2009; Besharat & Langan, 2014).

More broadly, the findings highlight the need for organizations to develop strategic orientations and capabilities that accommodate asking critical questions, adopting strategies fit for purpose, implementing reforms, and ensuring leaders possess the requisite skills to navigate the complexities associated with operating in an evolving socio-cultural and economic backdrop. Such a shift is likely to facilitate more effective stakeholder relationship management and, in turn, contribute to improvements in overall organizational performance.

A limitation associated with the study is that it employed online means in generating primary data. While the use of virtual platforms for interviews is increasingly recognised as an acceptable research practice (Anthony *et al.*, 2025), future investigations could incorporate in-person approaches to enrich data quality and capture nuanced perspectives. A further limitation relates to the UK-centric and faith-specific context of the research. Additionally, the study focused primarily on ICS RLAs and their affiliates, at the exclusion of unaffiliated churches. As such, an opportunity exists for future studies to examine the prevalence, characteristics, and operational dynamics of unaffiliated ICS congregations. Comparative studies could explore the functions and SBBCs of ICS RLAs in diverse geographic contexts beyond Britain. Furthermore, there is scope for extending the inquiry to LAs operating within other faith and non-faith settings, thereby enabling cross-faith and cross-sector analyses leading to broader understanding of the phenomenon in varied ecosystems.

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## **Appendix:**

### ***Appendix A – Stratified purposive approach employed in case study selection***

Legitimizing agencies (LAs) were stratified by membership size (large, medium, small) and further by geography and gender representation in senior leadership. One LA was selected from each subgroup, with an additional agency from the largest subgroup ( $\leq 250$  members), resulting in four LAs. Additional

criteria ensured diversity in organizational characteristics, including geographical spread (e.g., Scotland) and leadership stance on gender roles, as survey data in Table 4 indicated that approximately 40% of RLAs exclude women from pastoral and eldership positions.

**Table 4.** Survey responses applied in selecting case study agencies

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

**Source:** Author’s own work

As observed in Table 5, a similar stratified purposive approach guided the selection of fourteen independent congregations, based on brand identity, location (urban/rural across UK nations), congregation size, ethnic composition, and gender of the senior leader. This ensured inclusion of churches of varied sizes, brand labels, and ethnic profiles, including majority white, mixed, Black African, African Caribbean, and Asian congregations. Churches led by female pastors were also included to strengthen analytical depth (Lincoln *et al.*, 2023).

**Table 5.** Characteristics of selected independent churches

<b>Location in United Kingdom</b>	<b>No. of Churches</b>	<b>Urban or Rural Based</b>	<b>No. of Churches</b>
England	11	Urban based	11
Scotland	1	Rural based	3
Wales	1		
Northern Ireland	1		

<b>Church Label</b>	<b>No. of Churches</b>	<b>Range of Membership Size</b>	<b>No. of Churches</b>
Evangelical	4	250+	1
Charismatic	4	100-250	2
Pentecostal	3	50-100	4
Apostolic	2	<50	7
Baptist	1		

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

<b>Gender of Senior Pastor</b>	<b>No. of Churches</b>
Male	9
Female	5

**Source:** Author's own work

Of the fourteen churches, eleven (79%) are in England, consistent with demographic trends. England accounts for 85% of the UK population (Office for National Statistics, 2024). As shown in Table 6, these churches were distributed across seven of England's nine regions, providing satisfactory geographical coverage. One Apostolic congregation operated across two regions (West Midlands and Yorkshire & Humber). Collecting data from UK-wide, national, and regional perspectives enhanced methodological rigour and interpretive validity (Busetto *et al.*, 2020).

**Table 6.** Regional distribution of case study Churches in England

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

**Source:** Author's own work