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Report

Disunited Kingdom?
Local churches and the riots of summer 2024

Hannah Rich

Theos is the UK's leading religion and society think tank. It has a broad Christian basis and exists to enrich the conversation about the role of faith in society through research, events, and media commentary.

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"What is sung by the prophets is but the same song sung across time... that the world is always ending over and over again in one place but not another and that the end of the world is always a local event, it comes to your country and visits your town and knocks on the door of your house and becomes to others but some distant warning, a brief report on the news, an echo of events that has passed into folklore."

(Paul Lynch, Prophet Song)

This report in 60 seconds

In Summer 2024, the most extensive outbreak of riots across England in over a decade took place, driven by anti-immigrant sentiment, civil unrest and online misinformation in the wake of the murder of three girls in Southport.

The local church played an important role in the response to the riots, both immediately and over the longer term in rebuilding communities. This report explores how local churches in places where riots occurred were well-placed to respond by: (a) leveraging their strong community networks in order to work with other faith and activism groups; (b) maintaining a trusted presence in the community even when the riots threatened the buildings; (c) holding institutional relationships with local police and being conduits for information; and (d) using their convening power to draw the community together for vigils and moments of much-needed reflection.

There are lessons to learn from these experiences, about the causes of the riots, the emergency response and what preventative measures might be developed going forward. There is a willingness from local churches to engage in the deep listening required to heal communities fractured by the riots, addressing the sense of disenfranchisement and material challenges, as well as correcting misinformation. We offer recommendations to national and local policymakers as well as to churches in how all might work together to improve cohesion and rebuild communities.

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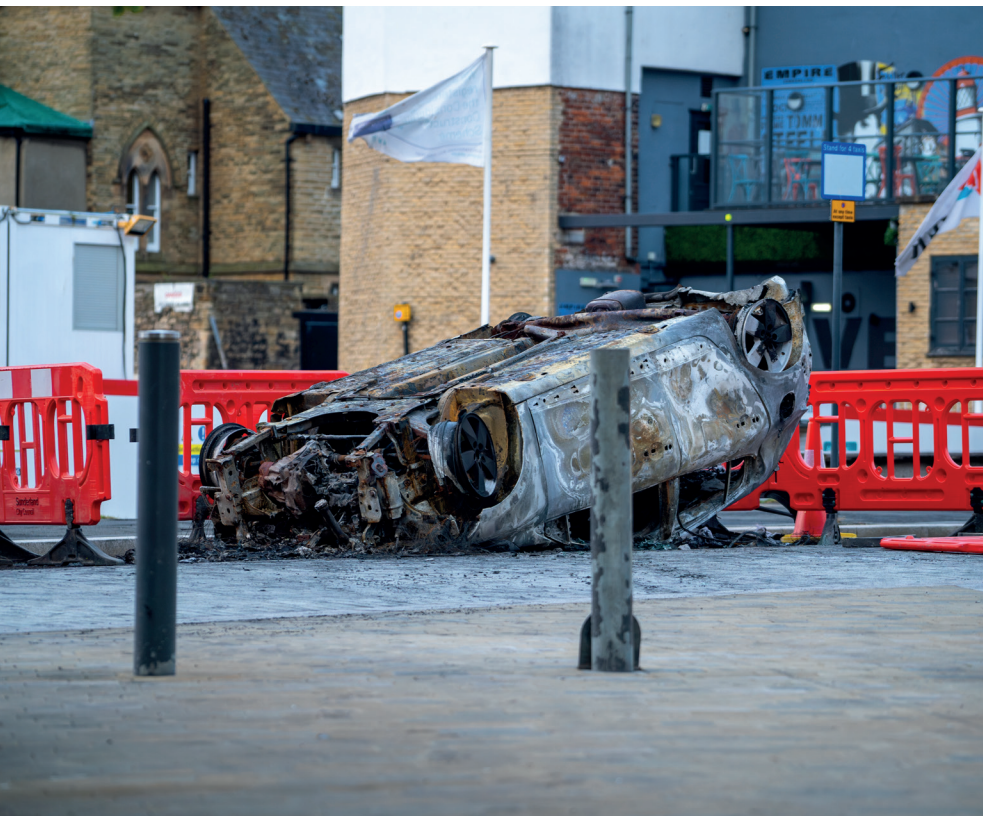
Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the generosity of the church leaders who gave their time, wisdom and sensitivity in the midst of a challenging season for their communities. I am grateful to each one of them and hope the report has done justice to their voices.

Thank you also to Theos colleagues, in particular Madeleine Pennington, Nick Spencer and George Lapshynov, for their support and advice throughout.

Introduction



Over the course of ten days in summer 2024, a wave of rioting and disorder broke out across the UK, in particular across England. It was sparked by the killing of three young girls at a dance class in Southport on 29th July, following which far right and anti-immigrant protestors gathered outside a mosque in the town. This was catalysed by false online rumours that the individual responsible for the murder of the three girls was a recently arrived Muslim asylum seeker.[1]

The mosque in Southport was attacked, a police van set alight, and a number of police officers were injured. In the days afterwards, similar unrest occurred in over 30 different towns and communities across the country. Several of these centred on hotels which were being used to house asylum seekers, a number of which were violently damaged or set alight by protestors. A 'hit list' which circulated online purporting to detail targets for violence later that week included mosques, Islamic community centres, hotels, asylum law firms and refugee advice centres.

It was the most widespread outbreak of civil unrest and racial violence in the UK since 2011. Over 1,200 people were arrested, with around a third having been jailed since.[2]

What happened in Southport was tragic, but it did not in isolation give rise to the widespread violence and racism that proliferated in the days afterwards. These riots, and the worsening climate of social cohesion, did not occur in a vacuum. Incidences of religiously motivated hate crimes are at a record high, having increased by 25% year on year between 2022-23 and 2023-24, according to government statistics.[3] Immigration was also one of the top issues during the 2024 general election, with heated debate about how to address

illegal migration alongside differing proposals around the numbers of legal migrants and asylum seekers the country should welcome. Polling by Ipsos identified that immigration was consistently in the top four issues for voters[4] and analysis by Theos found a consensus in public opinion that the then-government had done a poor job on immigration.[5]

This research explores **how churches in the direct vicinity of violent disorder responded to the events** unfolding around them in summer 2024, both in the immediate aftermath and in the weeks and months since.

It considers whether there was anything distinctive about the churches' response, what they learned from this, and what this can teach us all going forward, both in healing from this summer's events and in preventing them occurring again.

The research

This report draws on a series of in-depth interviews conducted in August and September 2024 with 16 local church leaders in localities which had been at the centre of the riots.

The interviews spanned 11 different towns or communities across England: Aldershot, Bristol, Hull, Liverpool, Manchester, Middlesbrough, Rotherham, Stoke-on-Trent, Sunderland, Tamworth and Weymouth. They also represented a variety of different church denominations or non-denominational groups, including Baptist, Church of England, Methodist, Roman Catholic and Vineyard churches and a number of non-denominational or independent churches.

The majority of interviewees were ordained or denominationally recognised church leaders of congregations,

along with a small number of lay leaders with responsibility e.g. elders of non-denominational churches.

We identified geographical locations that had been particular focal points of disorder. These ranged from town centres where there were significant numbers of arrests, to specific mosques or community centres that were targeted or hotels that were attacked because they are housing asylum seekers for the Home Office. We then mapped churches in closest proximity to each of these locations, including the Anglican and Roman Catholic parish churches and those of other denominations. We approached the clergy and/or senior leaders with an invitation to participate in the research, which, it was made clear, would be conducted sensitively, given the often traumatic nature of events locally.

We wish to acknowledge at this point that the religious community most directly and explicitly targeted in the 2024 riots was not the Christian community, but the Muslim community across the UK. The scope of this research has been limited to churches, their experiences and responses to what took place, and we do not claim to represent the voices and experiences of other faith communities or groups.

Several of the churches involved in this study have a significant ethnic minority contingent within their congregations and leadership, although none would be considered Black majority churches. Some have significant proportions of white Eastern European migrants within the congregation, for example. A number share their building with congregations of other languages or minority denominations, for example Ethiopian Orthodox. Again, the different experiences of congregations and churchgoers depending on their race, ethnicity and nationality are considered here.

1 Quinn, B. (2024). 'Misinformation about Southport attack suspect spreads on social media.' *The Guardian.* 30th July. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jul/30/misinformation-southport-attack-suspect-social-media-conspiracy-theories

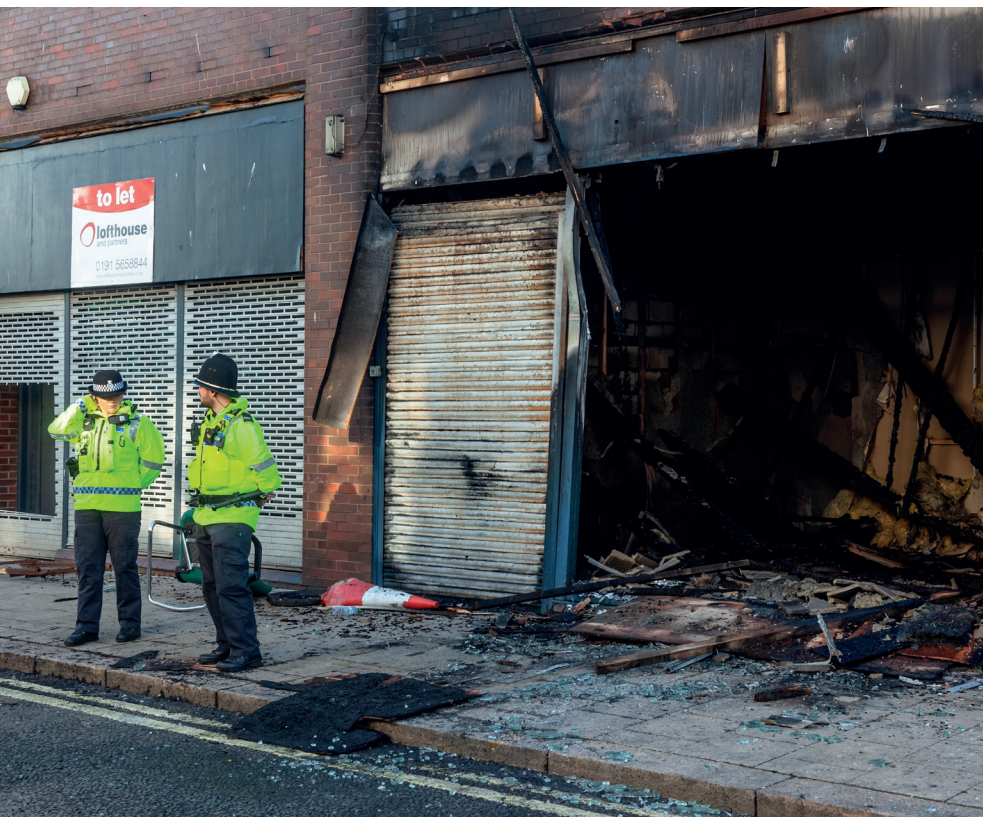
2 Ministry of Justice (2024). *Nearly 400 people already jailed following summer's violent disorder.* 10th October. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nearly-400-people-already-jailed-following-summers-violent-disorder

3 Syal, R. (2024). 'Religious hate crimes at record levels in England and Wales, official figures show.' *The Guardian.* 10th October. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/oct/10/religious-hate-crimes-at-record-levels-in-england-and-wales-official-figures-show

4 Ipsos (2024). *NHS, the economy, inflation and immigration set to be biggest election issues.* https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/nhs-economy-inflation-and-immigration-set-to-be-biggest-election-issues

5 Bickley, P., Lapshynov, G. and Y. Huang (2024). *Religion Counts: What do the religious think about key election issues?* https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2024/06/13/religion-counts-what-do-the-religious-think-about-key-election-issues

Emergency response



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There are clear lessons to be learnt from the response of churches during the riots, in the immediate aftermath and also over the longer term. We begin by exploring the 'emergency' phase; how churches, their leaders and congregations responded in the hours and days when the violence and unrest broke out in their community.

Strong community networks

It was striking that, in asking church leaders when they first became aware that rioting was going to happen in their neighbourhoods, not a single one expressed surprise that it was taking place there. They were saddened, horrified and shocked, but not *surprised*. Several said that as soon as they heard reports of growing unrest across the country, they felt it was "only a matter of time" before it reached their community. Through involvement with community activist groups and interfaith networks, a number of interviewees had prior warning and were proactively in contact with local police even before incidents were declared.

"We knew it was coming, we had been invited to the police liaison meetings and we knew already what the plans were."

This is indicative of the **deep understanding of their context and connection to place** that local churches have, and the vital value this offers.

> *Something I think the wider church should be thinking about is that we knew this was coming almost straight away, because we've been involved in the anti-fascist and anti-far right monitoring here from the beginning. We knew it was coming, we had been invited to the police liaison meetings and we knew already what the plans were. We had our strategies.*[1]

For this particular priest, their existing networks across the city meant pre-emptively protecting mosques and other buildings that were thought to be likely targets. Along with

members of their congregation and other local churches and activist groups, they actively monitored where the crowds were gathering early on in the day and communicated this with each other and with the local police. As the unrest evolved and was seen to have been heavily orchestrated, they were in constant communication with Muslim friends and colleagues in particular. This was both strategic and relational; they spoke about it in terms of "checking in on my friend who was barricaded inside the mosque," a friendship which had developed through co-chairing an interfaith forum.

The importance of these strong preexisting community relationships was apparent; the vicar and the imam in this example were already on first name terms, already friends and involved in each other's lives when the point of crisis emerged. So too, **they could draw on existing channels of communication** with the local police, other churches and community groups for support and information. This was the case for the majority of key relationships in the emergency response phase. Previous Theos research into the response of faith communities to the Grenfell Tower disaster found that solidarity and cross-community support was deepened and facilitated where relationships were already strong.[2] We observed the same here, although as with the Grenfell example, there were also new relationships forged in the hours and days after the tragedy.

Some of these new relationships emerged organically during the 'morning after' response of cleaning up after the riots, which was praised unanimously. **The force of the riots was met without fail by the strength of the community response afterwards,** which ought to be celebrated. In most places, this was not coordinated in any formal sense, but emerged as a

natural groundswell of local residents, including congregation members, engaging in the clear up effort.

Relationships with local institutions

New relationships and channels of engagement in particular were often initiated by the local council, seeking to draw the community together in response to the riots. There were examples of coordinated meetings with local councillors, members of parliament, imams, faith leaders and community stakeholders in the weeks after, with a view to building cohesion.

From a political perspective, it was notable that a significant proportion of participants were situated in parliamentary constituencies where the MP had been newly elected at the recent General Election. This meant that, merely four weeks into the role, the first time some MPs formally visited the churches in their constituency was for prayer vigils, community forums or other response events.

With reference to the efficacy of the community meetings set up in the aftermath, there was some concern that, while **these were valuable and cathartic in the immediate moment, there was a need for greater longevity of such initiatives.** Relatedly, there is significant variation in the strength of local interfaith networks across the country.

Communication between the local police and the local church was generally seen to have been constructive and mostly proactive. This underlines the important function of churches and other faith groups in cascading information and communicating quickly, as previous Theos research on social cohesion found.[3] One parish priest had been contacted directly by the local police alerting him to rumours that the church

building was on a speculative 'hit list' of possible targets in their city, because it hosts a drop-in advice service for refugees and asylum seekers:

> *That's when I knew that things were going to be bad, that this was not just people demonstrating, but that this could become actually quite violent [here] and that we could be at the centre of that because of who we are and what we do. That was really hard to hear.*[4]

In the context of understanding how well-connected churches are within their communities, it is also worth noting that these events took place at the start of the school summer holidays. Consequently, several of the participants were away at the time, with a number having cut short their holidays in order to be present for the community. Numerous other church leaders we contacted declined to be involved because they had been on holiday during the events and didn't therefore feel well placed to comment.

This was also a key point in discussion of wider church and community networks; for example, we heard multiple times that "we would have done X, but Y was on holiday". This highlights how within faith communities as institutions, **key individuals often hold significant institutional capital and organising power.** This is simultaneously an affirmation of these individuals and a warning against over-reliance on a few people.

> *We do have those communication networks. We do have a really strong Churches Together group here but we weren't meeting because it was the summer holidays. I think if it had caught us earlier or later, we would perhaps as a group have talked it through and reacted quicker. Our spiritual antenna might have gone up a bit sharper.*[5]

This underlines the importance of strong networks between both individuals and institutions at a local level. It is vital to bear this in mind, particularly at a time when interfaith networks across the country are being stretched and, in many cases, under-resourced.[6] The value of community and faith networks is not only important for mutual understanding in peace time, but also of essential practical value in crisis moments.

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Community presence

When tragedies or crises occur, whether locally, nationally or globally, the immediate response of churches is often to emphasise their physical presence and open their buildings as spaces of safety and places of prayer for those in need of it.[7] This is the church doing what the church does instinctively. For many, however, the nature of the riots called this into question, at least initially.

> *This is a city of refuge so that means we're supposed to be a safe place. Officially, that means, we are a safe place for people of all backgrounds. On the Friday night, we were not a safe place, because even I felt unsafe. On the Sunday, church was empty.*[8]

Particularly for town/city centre churches, their buildings were physically at the centre of the violence and opening as 'safe places' was simply not an option. Several interviewees talked about the difficult decisions they had to make to close the building to protect church staff and members of the community. This was especially acute for churches known for their work with refugees and asylum seekers. This complexified the practical response, but also brought with it difficult emotions for people used to being able to offer security. In some ways, it was a challenge that went to the heart of the very nature of what the church can be in a crisis.

It broke our hearts, but we had no option but to lock it up and keep everyone safe.

> *We are always open for prayer, because in the city centre, people are popping in and out all the time. There are always people in the church praying. But that lunchtime, on police advice and speaking with the diocese, we shut the church, which was tragic. It broke our hearts, but we had no option but to lock it up and keep everyone safe.*[9]

Some spoke about how counter-intuitive it felt to lock up the church premises and help neighbours board up their shops, grappling with the fact their churches literally could not offer places of refuge at a time when, in some cases, the violence had entered right into their churchyards.

These same judgements were also made by other community institutions which should be 'safe' places, with charities, businesses, other places of worship, community centres and even hospital wards all closing their doors temporarily for the safety of staff and visitors.[10] Locations burned and vandalised by the rioters included a Citizens' Advice Bureau[11] and a community-run library,[12] both of which provide vital services for the whole community in addition to advice for asylum seekers.

> *It was so surreal. On the evening that we thought the riots were going to be, we were telling people to stay at home and helping people decide whether they boarded up their shop, when really, we wanted to be saying, "come to ours, it's a safe place".*[13]

Similarly, the natural instinct of some to counter-protest was discouraged by local police and councils almost universally, because of fears this would further enflame the situation.

While practical activities in the church building were not feasible, immediate practical responses included: reaching out

to neighbours, posting prayers on church social media, holding online prayer gatherings, sharing prayer resources for the congregation when it wasn't possible to gather, coordinating with other local churches, texting vulnerable congregation members (in particular those who are refugees, asylum seekers or immigrants), extending solidarity to local Muslim communities and mosques, and visiting local businesses once safe to offer prayer and support.

This pastoral support extended to acknowledging particular members of the church community who might be most deeply affected by events, as well as offering solidarity to other faiths.

> *We felt it was important to say that although all of us would be feeling upset by this, this is going to be particularly difficult for people of colour, that some people within our church family will be feeling this more than others. My wife and I texted people individually. We wanted them to know that they're valued, that they're loved, that we're with them. I feel quite emotional, even talking about it now. It's just so, so painful, just imagining the people in our community who are behind their doors and seeing this stuff on the news and things like that.*[14]

While the church is often most visible in its buildings, **churches are not just buildings but communities of people who love each other and bear each other's burdens.** This was clearly apparent in the ways that churches found to be present, loving and active in their communities even when the physical assets of their buildings were challenged or limited.

Convening power

Once it was safe to open buildings again, it was seen as vitally important that churches did so, with many organised

prayer vigils and special services for the community to gather and reflect on what had happened. **The convening power of the local church was on display** here.

By virtue of being prominently located in town and city centres, many of the church buildings in closest proximity to the riots were also the ones who hosted these vigils and services, even where they were held in partnership with churches from across the town or city. A number of these were Church of England parish churches, which were seen to represent symbolic rallying points for the wider Christian community even where they are not the largest congregation in numerical terms.

On multiple occasions, other denominational leaders in the town had initiated prayer events but approached civic or parish churches in the centre of town to host them.

> *Because we are the Minster church, even the local folks and ministers of other denominations look to us as a focal point. We hosted prayer sessions here during the trouble in the past and even the vigil most recently was not my idea. It was one of the local Pentecostal pastors who asked if we could host something at the Minster to acknowledge this and pray into this. People are happy to look to the Minster to play a more town-wide role.*[15]

Several of these vigils and services took place on the evening when (nationally) there were fears of another wave of violence. While these fears did not ultimately materialise, some people did not therefore feel safe to attend the vigils, but they still valued that the church was hosting this.

It was significant that these special services and prayer vigils were **primarily places of reflection and contemplation, rather than rushing to find solutions.** One consisted of a simple

liturgy of passing candles around the building, symbolically passing light into the darkness. Prayers were said for all those involved in the riots; several of the clergy stressed that, while finding the words to do so was not easy, they had felt it important to pray for the victims and perpetrators alike, because all are part of the community they serve, and all are loved by God.

> *We prayed for asylum seekers and refugees. We prayed for those who'd got caught up in what they'd got caught up in and for those who'd intentionally set out to do that. We prayed for community cohesion within our town. Ultimately, we stood for hope and peace.*[16]

We prayed for community cohesion within our town. Ultimately, we stood for hope and peace.

1 Interview #3.

2 Plender, A. (2018). *After Grenfell: the Faith Groups'* Response. London: Theos Think Tank.

3 Pennington, M, (2020). *The Church and Social Cohesion: Connecting Communities and Serving People.* London: Theos Think Tank, pp. 80-81.

4 Interview #9.

5 Interview #13.

6 Maqbool, A. (2024). 'Interfaith charity to close after government funding pulled.' *BBC News.* 22nd February. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-68365887

7 Pennington, M, (2020). *The Church and Social Cohesion...* pp. 63-74.

8 Interview #9.

9 Interview #9.

10 Thomas, R. (2024). 'NHS staff sent home and GP practices close early for safety over fear of more riots'. *The Independent*. 7th August. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/health/uk-riots-nhs-staff-gp-practices-london-b2592658.html

11 Manning, J. and Watson, A. (2024). 'Staff devastated after Citizens Advice set on fire'. *BBC News*. 6th August. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cwy55pdgpd3o

12 Creamer, E. (2024). 'Liverpool library torched by far-right rioters raises repair funds.' *The Guardian*. 6th August. https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/aug/06/liverpool-library-torched-by-far-right-rioters-raises-repair-funds-spellow-hub

13 Interview #6.

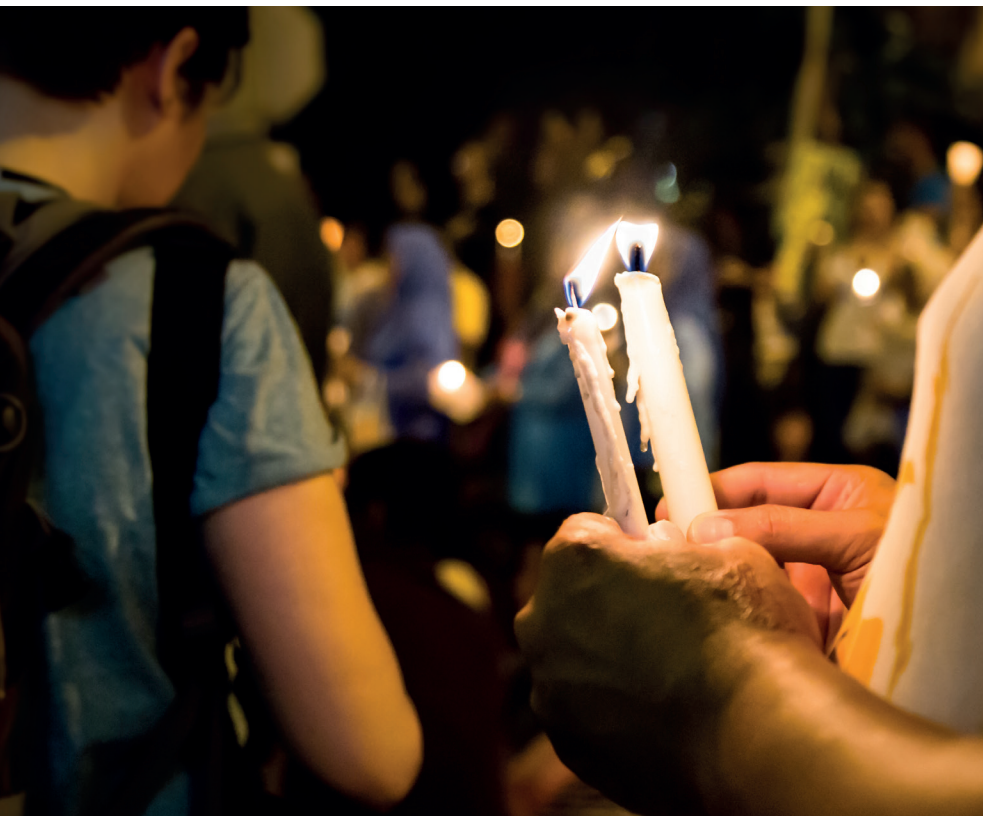
14 Interview #4.

15 Interview #2.

16 Interview #1.

6

Moving forward



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While the immediate response to the riots was vital, it is perhaps even more important for the local and national church to consider the role it might play in the rebuilding and healing effort going forward. The impetus for the riots was latent long before the tragedy in Southport, although this was the trigger, and as such the response must also be long term and sustained. There are both material and structural responses needed to address what took place and what led to it. There are also deep societal questions raised which bear examining.

Disempowerment

It is tempting to embrace the rhetoric that 'this' is not who we are as a rejoinder to violence and hatred. Many of the interviewees were keen to stress that 'this' does not represent the heart of their community; the idea that 'this is not who we are as a nation' was also prevalent in national media coverage of the riots. It may be true that the majority of the community, and indeed the majority of the country, were not engaged in rioting and do not share the views of those who were.

However, dismissing it this easily may entrench some of the feelings that led us here. **If disempowerment and feeling disenfranchised were root causes of the unrest, then not engaging with the underlying sentiments head-on risks reinforcing this.**

> *Those who were involved in the violence, and those who were the victims of the violence, have both been hurt and wounded by this and we can't do nothing. We can't just bury it. We're not talking about it now. You may want to let sleeping dogs lie, but there are still dogs there in the corner.*[1]

There was a repeated sense of communities having "been done to" by both national and local governments and

feeling disempowered as a result. This sense of resentment and disenfranchisement is palpable and runs deep; several interviewees pointed to events and policy decisions as long ago as the 1980s and even the Second World War in explaining the backdrop of resentment felt locally.

> *I think it's going to be a long-term process. It starts at the bottom, but there are also needs to be met from the top.*[2]

I think it's going to be a long-term process. It starts at the bottom, but there are also needs to be met from the top.

As many of the interviewees acknowledged, this can be uncomfortable to confront but it is imperative to do so in order to move on.

> *There are real cultural tensions here still and I think we're kidding ourselves if we think we're as far down the line as sometimes we seem to pretend. I think people really struggle with cultural difference. That's not the same as racism. I think it can be racist, but I don't think it always is... The question is how you support and resource communities in being able to process that. You understand that irrational fear, but you then need to stack it up as irrational.*[3]

Several of the places where riots broke out this summer have also previously been the epicentre of racial tension and violence. These include towns which were at the heart of large-scale prosecutions for grooming and child sexual exploitation in which the majority of those convicted were British-Pakistani men and their victims were white British girls. There were concerns that this had unfairly shaped press coverage of events this time round; one church leader noted in this vein that his town had been named first in many national headlines about events, despite not coming first alphabetically or chronologically nor having the most widespread or most violent scenes of unrest.

It is notable that the Home Office dispersal policy has added to the sense of disenfranchisement felt. These are places which have been designated as communities where asylum seekers should be housed, often because of the relatively cheap and low quality accommodation, rather than which have actively sought to welcome migrants through models like community sponsorship.

A key recent example of this in several instances was the use of local hotels (later targets of the riots) to house asylum seekers and refugees without community consultation or engagement.

Without fail, we found a willingness on behalf of the church to support refugees and asylum seekers housed locally, but for the most part this had not been accepted or capitalised on by the agency running the hotel. Clergy seeking to engage with congregation members who live in the hotel talked about having been turned away or not welcomed by security guards. In the only example we encountered where there were good relations between the church and the hotel, this was because the church was established enough to have its own charitable entity which had bid for the 'support contract' for residents and was paid for it. No such arrangement exists for smaller churches or voluntary groups wanting to help informally, regardless of willing.

In one case, the parish priest described having first become aware that the hotel in the parish had been requisitioned for accommodation when a church Christmas meal due to be held there was cancelled, and there were similar anecdotes about cancelled wedding receptions and other social events. Perhaps understandably, this did not leave the local community well disposed towards the new hotel

residents. We also heard how it had been the policy not to widely publicise the nature of asylum seeker accommodation, in order to protect vulnerable residents, but that this may have further added to suspicion and allowed rumours to proliferate.

There are a series of narratives which need unpicking and changing; the narrative around refugees and asylum seekers; the narrative of interfaith conversation and cohesion; and in many cases, the narrative of how we speak about our own communities negatively or unhelpfully. There is deep spade work required in changing how we talk about refugees and asylum seekers, as well as similarly deep work required for interfaith relationships in places where these are contested. Forthcoming Theos research will explore the role of churches in helping the integration of refugees and forced migrants and is due to be published in early Spring 2025.

“There is deep spade work required in changing how we talk about refugees and asylum seekers.”

Structural challenges

It would be remiss not to highlight that in many cases, there are underlying material conditions which led to the riots. Locally and nationally, there are a whole host of material (and especially economic) factors which led to a situation whereby, in the words of one interviewee, their community was “a powder keg of tension” long before the Southport stabbings.

> *I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I think poverty is a factor. When the narrative about immigrants is so negative and people are living at the sharp end of the pointy stick in a cost of living crisis and they feel disenfranchised and don’t feel heard, then when someone else comes along who seems to be listening to them, is it any wonder they pay attention?*[4]

While there are patently racist narratives to be reckoned with and dismantled, it is also true that these stem in part from other material concerns. More than two thirds of those charged in relation to the riots are from very economically deprived neighbourhoods.[5]

> **Much of the anger is in reality a projection of frustration and with living conditions and dissatisfaction with the status quo.**

Affordability and availability of housing is a key concern and area of tension in almost all the communities here, together with the misperception that asylum seekers have better accommodation conditions than local residents. One interviewee hypothesised that if there was adequate good housing for the whole population, there would be no riots. This may be an over-simplification, but it is rooted in the notion that much of the anger is in reality a projection of frustration and with living conditions and dissatisfaction with the status quo.

Across the constituencies represented here, an average of 63% of the population voted to leave the European Union in 2016.[6] In all bar one of the communities in the research, over 15% voted Reform in the 2024 general election, with an average Reform vote of 20.2% across the constituencies. In three of them, a third of voters voted for Reform, but none elected a Reform MP.

These are also, by and large, communities which have undergone significant demographic change, becoming rapidly more diverse. In one parish where the population had been 99.7% white British two decades ago, that figure is now just over half.[7] Other places had become more visibly multiethnic since the Brexit referendum, due to greater immigration from Africa and Asia as opposed to Eastern Europe. The speed of change and apparent lack of agency felt around it in these places is significant.

Work with young people

In recent years, **faith groups and charities have become a key provider of youth work**, especially in deprived areas. State funding for youth work provision has fallen by more than 60% nationally since 2010, with cuts of up to 95% in some local authorities, including some of those in this research.[8] This has had demonstrably negative impacts on educational outcomes and teen offending rates.[9] The church has filled the gap in many communities, running drop-in youth clubs as well as outreach work. As a result of this, and the informal relationships established, many of the church leaders talked by name about particular teenage boys they knew or suspected had been involved in riots and whom they also knew in the context of church youth engagement.

> *We run an open access youth club, and there's about 15 of them who come every week and so we have incredibly strong relationships with them. We're probably going to do some work in the youth club about difference and understanding. That feels really important to us, particularly because as a town, we're really lacking in youth provision. I think it's a real gap. We have big dreams for that and we're about to employ a youth pastor, which is great. That feels like incredible timing.*[10]

Alongside declining youth provision, **online conspiracies and influencers such as Andrew Tate have grown significantly in their prominence.** Some interviewees suggested the issues behind the riots are intertwined with narratives of masculinity and male identity which require strong counter narratives to address. Whether the popularity of this is a cause or a symptom of the problem is up for debate, but several people we talked to drew a direct connection between this and the propensity of teenage boys to be swept up in the rioting.[11]

By contrast, church schools, at secondary age in particular, were highlighted as often being the last point of contact that the Church has with many of these teenage boys. One Catholic priest, who is also chaplain to the local Catholic boys' secondary school, spoke powerfully about need to challenge this intentionally through working in the school:

> *I am acutely aware that some of the lads in balaclavas out there fighting were the same lads I meet in school. They may sit down next to a Muslim classmate, or an African classmate, or a Filipino classmate, and that'd be fine, but they were there on the Friday or the Saturday, in a track suit, in a balaclava, just looking for a bit of fun. You wonder what narratives they have heard at home and online. There's a lot of work to do there.*[12]

He spoke specifically about how the narrative of Catholicism should serve as a direct antidote to anti-immigrant and racist sentiments. The literal catholicity of the church, meaning its universality or all-compassing nature, is reflected in the school and congregation and means people of all backgrounds and races "actively sharing a belief in common and having their identity in Christ as being their shared foundational identity, more so than any sense of nationalism or tribalism."[13]

Misinformation

Equally, there is a **role for churches, faith leaders and educators to play in combatting misinformation.** Several spoke about the growing challenge posed by the ease with which false information spreads online, not only among teenage boys but the whole community; this was glaringly apparent in the channels through which the riots were organised and catalysed by online rumours in the wake of the Southport

killings. This is a considerable threat to community cohesion, based in false understandings of other people.

A Catholic priest spoke about how a rumour had proliferated in his community that Muslims who gathered to pray in their living rooms were able to claim their homes were mosques and therefore avoid paying council tax. When he used this example in a Sunday homily, numerous parishioners were surprised to learn it was not true and admitted they had not only believed it was but had also spread this idea to others.[14]

The role of the church here is not only to challenge misinformation, but to tell the truth in its place.

The role of the Church here is not only to challenge misinformation, but to tell the truth in its place. For the Church, this is as much a practical task as it is a theological one, and one which should be taken seriously over the long term. The earlier-stated value of the church in cascading information to the community is a practical asset for policy makers and councils to draw on.

"However long it takes."

Given the deep connection many churches have to their communities, as well as the practical community roles they play, churches (and perhaps especially church leaders) are well-placed to assist with some of this examination. Several interviewees mentioned being concerned by the feeling that on the whole their communities had already moved on from what happened, or that it already felt like it had been forgotten.

> *I think in a way, that's how things are done here. Life is tough, you roll your sleeves up and you get on with it. Every now and again, there's something incredibly tough happens, but we take it on the chin, and we move on. That's how it seems to be, and I*

> *have mixed feelings about that. In one way, I think that's really admirable. You know, I'm so proud of the people in my parish that, they're so strong and resilient. But another part of me thinks, "no, this isn't good for you". It's too quick.*[15]

There is value in "living with the lament of it all for a while, before rushing to find the hope".

Church leaders perceive a clear need for **communities not to rush too quickly to finding answers and solutions,** but to first sit with the reality of the situation. There is value in "living with the lament of it all for a while, before rushing to find the hope", as one vicar put it, and "recognising the weight of what has gone on in our community".[16] One of the gifts of the local church is its commitment to the community for the long-haul, with a permanence and longevity that other institutions may not always have, particularly when funding is cyclical.[17] This may mean churches are well-placed to hold the space for the healing process – however long it takes.

Simultaneously, there is an acknowledgement that for those directly targeted by the riots, they cannot simply move on. This is a theological challenge as well as a practical one, for churches to be **spaces where the complexity of events and emotions are held while they are still raw** and given time to heal properly rather than scarring.

> *The wounds certainly haven't all healed. For those men and women and children who are in the hotel, they must constantly feel under threat. I think there's a sense of normality again but it's certainly not forgotten. There's still a sense of shame for many parishioners that this should happen in our town... For the specific people who are most at threat, I think they'll always carry that nightmare of that night in their minds.*[18]

The majority of churches in this research are multicultural congregations and often actively involved in welcoming migrants and refugees to the area. Many were

acutely aware of how particular members of their church community and clergy colleagues would be experiencing events painfully, whether because of their ethnicity or their migration status, and made deliberate efforts to reach out to these people. In one example, an African priest was abused and told, "we're protesting against people like you" while returning home to the presbytery wearing a collar, and nurses from within the congregation were also abused while travelling to work at the local hospital.

One church leader spoke about some of the members of their congregation who are asylum seekers had struggled with leaving their house since, and had not attended church since the riots took place.

> *It was so good to have the asylum seekers in the congregation and to be able to minister to them and to be welcoming and everything else, but they understandably sort of disappeared. There's a couple of them have come back but there's maybe about six people that haven't. We're trying to reach them. I think they don't really know how to respond while they're trying to make up their mind whether they feel safe enough to come to church in the midst of all of it.*[19]

Deep listening

As well as speaking truth, local churches and faith groups also have the capacity to be spaces of deep listening. Several of those we spoke to had already begun to think about what it might look like to host conversations, storytelling events and listening exercises for their community.

> *I think the solution has to come from within the communities. People need to be heard, if we're going to address the underlying stuff that's going on... because let's face it, the far right were*

only part of this. There were some local people who got involved in this because of a generalised sense of feeling disgruntled about their lives. Those are the things that I think need to be addressed. People need to be heard. I know that's not an easy thing to do, but to just stick the offenders in prison doesn't address the simmering, bubbling stuff that's under the surface.[20]

There is a desire and a need to strengthen spaces where different communities can interact and build relationships in which disagreement is not a barrier to mutual understanding and collaboration. However, this is coupled with the recognition that such spaces do not always encompass the whole community; there is clear value in interfaith spaces where, for example, Muslim and Christian neighbours deepen solidarity with each other, but (as various participants recognised themselves) this does not necessarily bridge the gaps of class or political opinion around topics like migration.

“I think the church is uniquely placed to hold and create and foster relationships in a way that isn't a shiny project but will genuinely change the world.”

I think the church is uniquely placed to hold and create and foster relationships in a way that isn't a shiny project but will genuinely change the world. There's not many other places in society other than faith groups, where very different people, ages, ethnicities, class, all come together and are trying with one common goal to do something.

I think what these moments do, particularly in a church like ours that is more of a melting pot of theology, politics, experience of privilege – there's really different ideas and it sort of exposes that and it comes to the surface a bit more. Things that I maybe take for granted politically and would believe fits in my theology are suddenly challenged.[21]

One church leader spoke about engaging on a one-to-one level with individuals in their congregation who they knew were sympathetic with the views of the rioters. These

conversations were important, they stressed, in seeking to understand each other's perspectives and live as a community together. Since the riots, they had had several of these conversations with individuals who had initially expressed agreeing with far-right views and being tempted to engage in violence, but had "gone on a U-turn" as a result of non-judgmental but gentle challenge and discussion. This change happened primarily through individual engagement and relationship, rather than a church-wide programme or project, which takes longer-term engagement and deep listening.

> *The way we change this is conversation. The way we change this is engaging with each other. Engaging with people in our living rooms, in our churches, in our circles, having conversations and meeting people where they are on both sides.*[22]

These divides are often deeper and harder to unite than those of religion. More can be done to create spaces where people who engaged in or sympathised with the riots are brought into conversation with those who countered them or were victimised by them.

As a recent collaborative report by British Future, Belong and the Together Coalition recommended, grassroots sport can be a natural locus for this.[23] In one parish, there are plans to set up a football project for young male asylum seekers living in the nearby hotel to play five-a-side with young men from the local community.

There was also a strong sense that in the rebuilding process, the church ought to keep faithfully doing what it does. **None of those we spoke to who work with asylum seekers and refugees in their communities had been dissuaded from this by the riots, even where their work had been a direct target.** If anything, they were more convinced of the theological

imperative to do so – the way Jesus instructs people to love the stranger, for example – as well as the profound need of their community to understand and engage in this activity.

Lastly, there was a frequent feeling of frustration from some that these events shone a light on situations they had long been dealing with and that are 'normal' life for their communities. The hotels and mosques at the centre of events have often been the focus of tension, if not such extreme violence, for far longer than a few weeks this summer. These tensions are not new for many of the community leaders; violence may not be a regular occurrence, but protest and anger often are.

Local churches are there before the media circus arrives – and after it has moved on.

> *Lots of people from our wider church network texted me being like, 'how are you guys doing? Are you alright?' and to be honest, I was like, 'yes there's this moment of crisis but this isn't new'. There are protests at that hotel all the time. This is something that people in our town have to live with all the time... I felt a bit irritated, as if people were all wading in just because it was a national headline, but equally I felt thankful that people were paying attention and wanting to pray.*[24]

This is not to downplay or normalise riots and violence, but to acknowledge that it is an ongoing challenge that the national church and networks are not always attuned to. Local churches are there before the media circus arrives – and after it has moved on.

1 Interview #9.

2 Interview #8.

3 Interview #2.

4 Interview #2.

5 Duncan, P., Aguilar García, C., Goodier, M., Lee, O. and Clark, A. (2024). 'Local. Left behind. Prey to populist politics? What the data tells us about the 2024 UK rioters.' *The Guardian*. 25th September. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/sep/25/local-left-behind-prey-to-populist-politics-data-2024-uk-rioters

6 Based on Chris Hanretty's constituency level estimates, available here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1wTK5dV2_YjCMsUYlwg0l48uWWf44sKgG8uFVMv5OWlA/edit#gid=893960794

7 Interview #1.

8 UNISON (2019). *Youth services at breaking point.* Available at: https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/04/Youth-services-report-04-2019.pdf

9 Villa, C. (2024). 'How cuts to youth clubs affected teen crime and education.' *Institute for Fiscal Studies.* https://ifs.org.uk/articles/how-cuts-youth-clubs-affected-teen-crime-and-education

10 Interview #6.

11 Interview #8, #9.

12 Interview #9.

13 Interview #9.

14 Interview #8.

15 Interview #10.

16 Interview #7.

17 Rich, H, (2020). *Growing Good: Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England.* London: Theos Think Tank. Available at: https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2000/01/31/the-grace-project

18 Interview #11.

19 Interview #10.

20 Interview #10.

21 Interview #6.

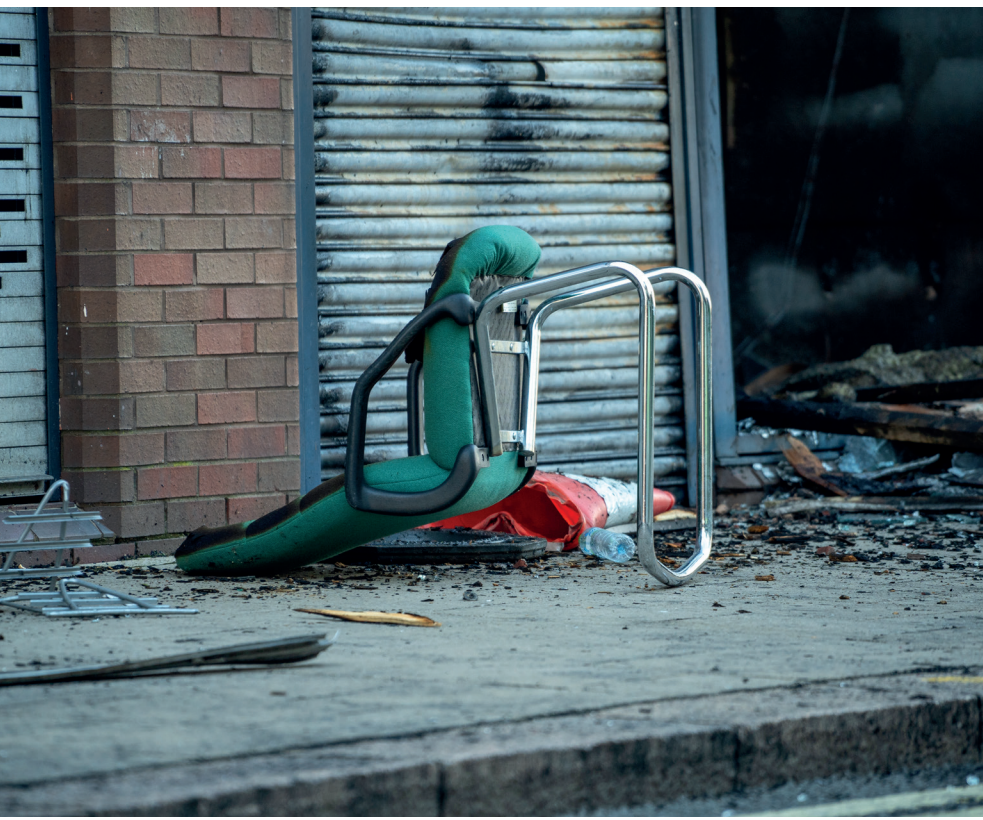
22 Interview #6.

23 British Future, Belong and the Together Coalition (2024). *After the riots: Building the foundations for social cohesion.* Available at: https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/After_the_riots_report.Final_.pdf

24 Interview #6.

6

Recommendations/ conclusions



As this research has shown, through a combination of their hard assets, community networks, spiritual capital and convening power, local churches are well-placed to play a significant part in the long-term solutions and healing process in communities affected by this summer's riots.

With all this in mind, we make the following recommendations to churches and policymakers.

Local churches, in common with other faith communities, bring several key strengths and assets that are often difficult to replicate in other organisations and structures, including physical buildings, strong community networks and the capacity to cascade information across the population.

— **Those responsible for cohesion policy and resilience, locally and nationally, should therefore actively include churches (and other faith communities) in their planning processes.**

The reflections gathered from this research have also generated broader lessons for government, based on the wisdom of church leaders as community figures. This is particularly stark with reference to Home Office engagement around asylum seeker placements and hotels.

— **The relevant government agencies and hotel contractors should engage more deeply and build relationships with local communities, including churches, particularly where there is a clear willingness to help which has not typically been taken up.**

There is a need for greater interaction between different worldviews, not only different faith groups. Interfaith networks are a valuable part of this, but there are also other non-faith-based parts of the community that are not always engaged in these, particularly those sympathetic with the

rioters. Churches, sports clubs, community centres and libraries all have the potential to offer this.

— **Community spaces should be funded sustainably in order to encourage deep listening and interaction between different worldviews. Many churches already have these spaces but would benefit from support to heat and sustain the physical buildings and fund the work they do in developing more cohesive communities.**

— **Churches might also host opportunities for mediation work across the community.**

These cross-community dialogues would touch on subjects that are not always easy or comfortable to articulate, for example unpicking the motivations and structural factors behind apparent racism and trying to understand how this has led to violence. This requires creative dialogue and engagement which addresses local tensions directly but without prescribing solutions.

— **In order to address this, there is a role for creative structures and trusts which are open to funding this work without defining from the start what it will look like. This is at odds with the detailed strategic plans typically involved in securing funding, but funders could take greater risks in funding work to ask questions rather than beginning with answers.**

The work that churches and voluntary groups do in youth provision and schools' work is vital to addressing misinformation and conspiracy theories, particularly but not exclusively among teenage boys. Strategic funding for youth and schools work is invaluable, whether statutory or church-led.

— **Both churches and policymakers should reflect on how church and voluntary sector involvement in youth work can be leveraged to feed into post-riot rebuilding and cohesion strategy. Faith schools should also be included in this conversation.**

Greater support for high-quality religious education in schools also has a key role to play in building the resilience of communities that are often diverse and fast-changing. However, as other Theos publications have noted, support for the subject is not always forthcoming.[1]

— **Policymakers and churches with involvement in the education system should ensure a level of RE provision commensurate with its indispensable role in building stronger communities.**

The causes and after-effects of this summer's riots are complex, long term and do not lend themselves to easy or quick fixes. There is a temptation in the wake of any crisis to prioritise new policy programmes and initiatives; these are important but so is longevity.

Within this, we acknowledge that there is a significant level of investment into material conditions, for example housing, required to genuinely transform communities and prevent reoccurrence of the disaffection that led to riots.

— **Any intervention developed in response to this summer's riots, whether by governments, charities or faith institutions, should be structured and funded in such a way that it is sustainable over the long term and to give stability beyond a single parliament.**

For churches specifically, the riots and related tensions raise uncomfortable questions about what it means to love

your neighbour, in contexts where neighbours are both the ones rioting and the ones being attacked. The church at large can (and often has) repeated the same errors of "doing to" that other national institutions are guilty of and should listen deeply to this too.

— **The church, and local churches, could become more active in addressing rootlessness and frustration among young men in particular, but this has to start with listening.**

As churches have often learned through experience, there is no shortcut for relationships, and for listening to hurting communities. Churches are often willing to engage in this work, and indeed, in many cases, already doing it, and this could be better acknowledged and capitalised on by policymakers.

Of course, that is not to say that churches can be the whole solution. The church leaders interviewed for this project had a wealth of expertise and contextual understanding to offer, but many by their own admission are still one step removed from the lives of their congregations. Nor were churches themselves the primary target of the discontent expressed in the riots.

"The hope is that we do not rush to find easy solutions but rather engage in the deep listening needed to genuinely heal fractured lives and communities."

But if there is one message that came through in every interview with a church leader in this research, it was the hope that we do not rush to find easy solutions but rather engage in the deep listening needed to genuinely heal fractured lives and communities. It is our hope that policymakers and churches alike heed this in any work they develop in the coming months and years.

1 The Theos team (2024). *Why RE Matters*. London: Theos Think Tank. Available at: https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/RE-Pamphlet_V3.pdf

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In Summer 2024, the most extensive outbreak of riots across England in over a decade took place, driven by anti-immigrant sentiment, civil unrest and online misinformation in the wake of the murder of three girls in Southport.

The local church played an important role in the response to the riots, both immediately and over the longer term in rebuilding communities. This report explores how local churches in places where riots occurred were well-placed to respond by: (a) leveraging their strong community networks in order to work with other faith and activism groups; (b) maintaining a trusted presence in the community even when the riots threatened the buildings; (c) holding institutional relationships with local police and being conduits for information; and (d) using their convening power to draw the community together for vigils and moments of much-needed reflection.

There are lessons to learn from these experiences, about the causes of the riots, the emergency response and what preventative measures might be developed going forward. There is a willingness from local churches to engage in the deep listening required to heal communities fractured by the riots, addressing the sense of disenfranchisement and material challenges, as well as correcting misinformation. We offer recommendations to national and local policymakers as well as to churches in how all might work together to improve cohesion and rebuild communities.

Hannah Rich is senior researcher at Theos and the author of *A Torn Safety Net: How the cost of living crisis threatens its own last line of defence.*

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