

# **RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEVELOPING CONGREGATION OF PEMBURY BAPTIST CHURCH**

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## 1 Introduction

The rational choice theory (RCT) approach to the sociology of religion assumes individuals maximise net benefits from religious activities, as they do in areas of “economic” life. RCT has proven fruitful in explaining secularisation,<sup>1</sup> as well as in micro-analysis of religious behaviour of individuals, congregations and local religious “markets”. We apply RCT to the developing congregation of a local church, Pembury Baptist Church (PBC) in the light of its vision for growth.

## 2 The RCT approach

RCT assumes that individuals on average act rationally in spending time and money, weighing costs and benefits of options and maximising net benefits.<sup>2</sup> In the case of religion, by paying costs of church attendance they obtain inter alia the reward of ultimate meaning in life, and a link to the supernatural.

The underlying “needs”, e.g. for ultimate meaning, are viewed as part of the human condition and vary little between individuals, so differences in behaviour (across individuals) or changes in behaviour (over time) reflect changing external circumstances (e.g. prices, incomes, education) not changes in tastes, norms or beliefs. They will also reflect competitive behaviour of “producers”, i.e. churches, which maximise membership (or other “success” indicators) in competition with others, and subject to constraints (e.g. laws and regulations). Aggregation of choices of consumers and producers then gives rise to “religious-market outcomes”.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Stark and Iannacone, ‘Supply’.

<sup>2</sup> Iannacone, ‘Rational’, 26.

### **3 Pembury Baptist Church**

Pembury is an affluent Kentish village near Tunbridge Wells, with a population of 6000.

PBC's membership totals 150, with a small sanctuary seating a maximum of 200. There are two Sunday services (10.00 and 18.30), as well as ministries in the week to the elderly and mothers-and-toddlers, and small groups. The Pastor is aided by an Associate Pastor, an Administrator and a Community Projects Co-ordinator. The leadership structure comprises Elders (where the Pastor is *primus inter pares*) plus Deacons managing individual church activities.

In the following analysis, we use RCT to cast light on the behaviour, constraints and potential of the congregation in the light of PCB's Vision entitled "Enlarging the Tent", whose main goals are marked expansion of membership and of small groups, increasing community action and a possible extension or new building.<sup>3</sup>

### **4 Resource and attendance issues**

The vision needs a larger regular income. At PBC, the 10 largest givers in a congregation of around 100 households contribute 40% of the total,<sup>4</sup> as against being 10% of the number. This is in line with RCT that predicts the distribution of contributions to be skewed,<sup>5</sup> as income interacts with underlying religiosity to generate very large contributions by those with high incomes and commitment. This means the church is vulnerable to departure of "large givers" and should ideally spread contributions more widely across the congregation.

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<sup>3</sup> See Annex for full text.

<sup>4</sup> Total giving is currently around £10,000 per month.

<sup>5</sup> Hoge, *Theoretical*, 2.

The vision requires major inputs of time by members (e.g. as small group leaders or in community projects). RCT suggests people with high monetary values of time, as in an affluent village, will engage in money-intensive religious practices, economising on time.<sup>6</sup> Evidence on “time-economising” is mixed. On the one hand, observation shows that PBC does rely strongly on volunteering. Elders, who commit the most time, are often among the most affluent; there is no major pressure for shorter services from rich people; and there are a number of individuals willing to lead small groups.

On the other hand, in line with time-economy, richer people often do not attend potlucks or prayer groups, and the church has expanded its staff considerably since 1998 despite slow growth in membership, suggesting a congregational preference to substitute money for time, with the professional staff being more active. Furthermore, at PBC there is a “20-80” problem whereby a small core of individuals do the bulk of the volunteering, and often risk “burn-out”.

The “20-80” issue links to a wider problem, as also only 60% of member-households give money to the church on a regular basis. RCT highlights that congregations can be vulnerable to free-riders, who take the benefit of the church without any commitment, taking advantage of others’ efforts and potentially leading to congregational decline.<sup>7</sup> PBC imposes some costs on members, which mitigates free riding. A membership course has to be taken prior to joining, members are expected to be on the cleaning rota and a new position has been mooted to regularly ask members about further volunteering. The balance of cost and free-riding needs delicate handling.

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<sup>6</sup> Iannacone, ‘Religious’, 309.

<sup>7</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts*, 147.

The Vision implies the whole community worshipping God; instead there are biases. PBC has a greater proportionate attendance by older individuals and women, especially at prayer meetings and other non-core events. This is both relative to the membership and (even more) relative to the demographic profile of Pembury. RCT suggests there develops “religious human capital” (RHC)<sup>8</sup> in individuals over time, related to experience in church, religious upbringing, social networks and ties to the denomination. This generates greater participation as people get older, and also loyalty to the church, although their greater participation could also link to less competing uses of time – or less plausibly, desire to “delay payment for religious goods”.<sup>9</sup> High participation of women could fit in with this paradigm since they are more involved in social networks than men.<sup>10</sup> The challenge is attracting men and younger people, one response to which has been a major growth in the number and quality of men’s events, building RHC for men.

Membership needs to grow; a key aspect of attracting and keeping members at PBC is use of testimonies; baptismal services are often times when casual attendees are attracted durably to Jesus. Religious institutions are explained in RCT partly as a means to reduce risk, given the uncertainty surrounding religious goods.<sup>11</sup> Confidence in religious explanations is strengthened by others’ expressions of confidence, within a community.<sup>12</sup> In this context, member testimonies can be seen as more trustworthy than those of “self-interested” clergy. To retain members, there are comprehensive activities offered to the committed beyond services per se (small groups, prayer, Alpha courses, socials, youth groups, Sunday school, social action). Following RCT these can be seen as reducing the incentive to diversify into

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<sup>8</sup> Iannacone, ‘Rational’, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Stark and Finke, *Acts*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Neitz and Mueser, ‘Man’, 107, criticises RCT for insufficient attention to relational aspects of the self that are a key focus of women.

<sup>11</sup> Iannacone, ‘Rational’, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Sherkat, ‘Embedding’, 68.

attendance at other churches, and regular attendance of members at services suggests this is successful.

People sometimes leave the church and usually this is because of the needs of the job that lead people to move away from the area. However, a small number leave due to disagreement, upset or other conflict. We can see this in RCT terms as involving a sudden increase in costs of attendance that goes so far beyond perceived rewards as to lead to departure. Or, as at PBC, some members who were very close to the former minister (who left in 2004) found their RHC devalued and some left.

## **5 Church dynamics and market structure**

The leadership has been active in innovation to increase scope for new membership in line with the Vision. A key difficulty is capacity, which increase the “cost” in RCT terms of attending the morning service. The service is usually so full that overflow seating is needed in the foyer, and the line of sight and sound for those who come in last is poor. They may be the potential new members who are immediately put off returning. A new Sunday evening service seeks to overcome these costs. In RCT terms, the second service also enables PBC to cater for differing tastes from the morning, via a café style of seating and group discussion of the sermon during the service (as well as young people’s preferences to get up later).

Looking at the wider religious market, 76% of Pembury residents declare themselves to be Christians, 5% above the national average,<sup>13</sup> but we estimate that weekly attendance at all three churches (Anglican, Catholic, Baptist) is at most 350,<sup>14</sup> equivalent to just below 6%. This compares with recent figures from Tearfund suggesting 10% of UK residents attend

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<sup>13</sup> See PBC, *Survey*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> We estimate that typically 200 attend PBC, 100 the Anglican and 50 the Catholic church.

church weekly.<sup>15</sup> RCT suggests that low levels of participation in a locality are usually due to low levels of differentiation and competition among churches.<sup>16</sup> Pembury's three churches are clearly pluralistic, but competition is not overt; the spirit is more one of co-operation. The objective of churches is to save the lost and not gain members from other congregations. "Competition" is expressed in living out the Gospel message and attracting the lost.

Assessing PBC in this light, on the one hand it can be seen as successful in the sense that it attracts well over 50% of Sunday churchgoers in Pembury, compared with a 4% penetration of the denomination nationally.<sup>17</sup> This is in line with the RCT concept that it is churches that are not subsidised (from outside the congregation) that are most dynamic in drawing in new members.<sup>18</sup> Whereas RCT stresses the role of the Pastor in this case, experience at PBC suggests that the committed congregation that draws in friends and relatives evangelistically (for example at Baptisms or Alpha courses) is as or more important in this regard. The pattern is also in line with Davie's view (taking an "industrial organisation" approach like RCT), that the Anglican church is viewed by the community as a form of "public utility",<sup>19</sup> only used to half capacity except for special occasions (such as Remembrance Day).

The issue remains of how churchgoing in Pembury could be raised to and beyond national averages (which would imply aggregate attendances of 600), notably in the light of the high level of overall belief shown by the census. Arguably, PBC's contribution to the problem is its capacity constraints rather than any lack of dynamism. These problems have not been wholly resolved by extra services as most people still prefer to come in the morning. Indeed,

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<sup>15</sup> Ammerman, 'Religious', 128, suggests that RCT finds it hard to account for those who are potentially but not actually religious, although new age activities may provide religious experiences for some of them.

<sup>16</sup> Finke, 'Consequences', 50.

<sup>17</sup> Ashworth et. al., *Churchgoing*, A8.

<sup>18</sup> Finke, 'Consequences', 52.

<sup>19</sup> Davie, 'Exception', 68.

PBC is seen by leaders as having a history of membership “cycling” between 120 and 150,<sup>20</sup> as capacity problems bind and lead to temporary decline, followed by a foreshortened recovery. On the other hand, RCT suggests that beyond a congregation of 300 there may be loss of membership commitment and community (in RHC terms) that threatens the cohesion of the church.<sup>21</sup> Or at least, a church going beyond this would need a careful attention to small group structure to allow commitment and community in a larger congregation.

A project for a larger building to cope with capacity problems would have to face the challenge of fund raising. Whereas we noted some reluctance to commit to large regular giving, past gift days show a willingness to give one-off, which is far in excess of regular giving. For example, a call to pay off debts in 2004, which sought to raise £66,000 in fact raised over £74,000. In the spirit of RCT, it may be that people in Pembury are cash-rich and income poor (especially the elderly) and thus more willing to give on a one-off than a regular basis.

## **6 Conclusion**

RCT enables insights to be formed into the scope and potential of the Vision for PBC’s congregation, as well as possible constraints. For example, it raises the issue of whether costs of membership should be higher to deter free riders? Can and should there be a larger sanctuary?

Note, however, that these relate mainly to time and money-related issues – the limitations of RCT should be borne in mind. These include lack of assessment of “intuition, affect and

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<sup>20</sup> Note that there could be other factors accounting for this pattern, but the explanation is arguably important as a story or myth prompting action (Ammerman, ‘Culture’, 95).

<sup>21</sup> Stark and Finke, Acts, 155.

transcendental experiences”<sup>22</sup> that are an important aspect of the attraction of a place of worship. RCT also does not take into account influence of historic milestones<sup>23</sup> that might for example highlight the experience of a highly charismatic period in the early 1990s, rebuilding of the sanctuary in 2001 and Community Survey in 2003. Furthermore, besides the relative lack of younger people and men, there is a marked middle class bias, that may link to the historic relation of churchgoing to class in the UK. Hence, other sociological paradigms are needed to give a complete assessment of the current situation and potential of PBC.

Beyond sociology, there are spiritual aspects to success or failure of churches; people may plan but for a church it is only when “encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord” (Acts 9:31).

**WORD COUNT: 2000 WORDS**

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<sup>22</sup> Ammerman, ‘Religious’, 120.

<sup>23</sup> Ammerman, ‘Culture’, 94.

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**ANNEX: ENLARGING THE TENT – PBC VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

“Over the next few years PBC is embarking on a faith venture to see PBC grow in effectiveness, size and influence.

At PBC we are determined to keep in time with God’s heartbeat for us and for the world into which he has placed us. As a church member you have an integral part to play in the “Enlarging the Tent” vision that God has given us. We sense that the PBC of a few years time will be an innovative church with at least these key features:

- A church that is intentional about the numerical growth of active and serving members; more than doubling the size of PBC through friends coming to know Jesus for the first time.
- A church with an increasing influence; in Pembury and nationally through developing community projects to serve Pembury and equipping its members to be ambassadors for Christ around the UK and the world.
- A church with dozens of diverse Small Groups; if we are to continue to go deeper as friends and disciples in a growing church and challenging world, our small groups are of paramount importance.
- Radical redevelopment of our buildings; PBC requires innovative and excellent buildings/facilities on our current site that God can use for serving Pembury through our Community Projects and ministry in the week. PBC also requires substantially larger buildings for our weekend services, perhaps on a different site, with ample car-parking and ministry facilities for hundreds of attendees, young people and children.”