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Re-weaving threads of member identity
following a church merger

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Abstract

A merger of churches has a large impact on the members and this research explores how member identity is impacted in the merging process. An explanatory metaphor – threads of member identity – was developed to explain how a merger challenges established attachments and to explore the process of re-weaving the threads. It is suggested that the six threads of identity that connect a member to the church are relational, locative, temporal, purposeful, procedural, and valuative.

The research question was considered through exploratory case studies in two merging churches, at different stages of merging. A semi-structured interview format was adopted as a means of data collection. Overall 31 members and leaders of the churches were interviewed, along with observation, participation and written material. The participants were asked about various aspects of their church involvement in the merging process and their understanding of identity.

The mergers were shown to disrupt member identity across the breadth of the six threads in affect, behaviour and cognition. The threads of member identity metaphor also provided an analytical tool for interpreting the identity work that was undertaken by church members in re-weaving their sense of belonging and identity into the merged churches.
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