

Church Interpreting as a Deliberately Chosen Language Strategy: an exploratory survey

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Abstract

This article presents findings of a snowball survey of the language provision offered by churches and how these churches view themselves in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity. Within this, the characteristics of churches with interpreting are compared to those of churches offering weekend services in only one language. While definitive findings are not possible due to small sample sizes, the survey found a complex relationship between churches' views of their diversity and the language provision they offer, as well as a strong link between the use of interpreting and satisfaction with language provision. A high proportion of churches also reported using professionals, in direct contradiction to much of the available literature. Yet an even higher proportion report they favoured the use of interpreters from within the church, in line with prior research. The importance of these results for research on church interpreting and multilingual church is discussed, especially regarding the need to contextualise research within the churches in which language provision is offered.

Keywords

Church interpreting, multiethnic church, interpreting and diversity, sociology of religion

As the linguistic and cultural diversity of many towns and cities continues to increase, churches are faced with the question of how best to meet the linguistic needs of their communities. The last two decades have seen considerable efforts to understand the responses of churches to cultural and linguistic difference, as shown by increasing research interest in the topic within Interpreting Studies and Sociology of Religion. Each of these disciplines has historically tended to concentrate on the solution that most fits within its own theoretical frameworks. Sociologists of religion have tended to either minimise attention to language issues or to view bilingual liturgies and holding monolingual services in different languages as the only answers. Meanwhile, scholars of interpreting have largely ignored any solution that does not involve the use of human interpreters.

This article seeks to unite these approaches by presenting descriptive data from an international snowball survey of churches with at least some interest in issues around language differences. It will answer the following three, closely related research questions:

1. How does the language provision offered by churches relate to the church's view of its own linguistic and cultural diversity and to the importance given to language provision?
2. What are the characteristics of churches choosing to offer interpreting and how do these relate to common claims about church interpreting found in the literature?
3. How does language provision relate to a church's satisfaction with its current service to those who speak different languages and its future plans?

In answering these questions, church interpreting will be viewed as a deliberately chosen language provision strategy, both in terms of its existence at all and the fact that it is employed in places where other strategies are possible. This type of comparative analysis offers theoretical insights that have implications beyond church interpreting and even beyond churches. It is important to first explore how existing research has understood church interpreting and its alternatives. Following standard practice in church interpreting research (e.g. Downie 2016; Hokkanen 2016; Youssef 2023 etc), the precise definition of a "church" is not discussed in this article. That being said, the fact that this article reports on a snowball survey means that the churches which responded were largely Protestant churches. Of the 122 valid responses 7 came from Roman Catholic churches and 1 from a Unitarian church.

1. Background and literature review

Understanding the characteristics of churches that manage to create space for people who do not share a linguistic background has been a focus of research in Interpreting Studies, via research on church interpreting. Likewise, researchers in Sociology of Religion have sought to understand how churches accommodate people of diverse cultural and racial backgrounds. Yet, despite substantial overlap in the object of study, research in both disciplines has gone on with little interaction between them. Research on church interpreting has largely concentrated on the interpreters themselves and

mostly turned to contextual and organisational factors only as explanatory theories. Likewise, research in Sociology of Religion has tended to focus on the churches themselves, and occasionally their leaders, with little to no focus on anyone else involved in the work.

It would seem helpful to combine both approaches to create a holistic view of how churches deal with linguistic and cultural differences. For the purpose of this study, the focus is on why churches choose interpreting, here assumed to be human interpreting unless otherwise specified, among other options and how this is then realised. It is important to note that language differences often parallel cultural, ethnic, or even racial differences. For that reason, the analysis of the relevant literature will begin with a discussion of the key arguments and methods used in the study of multiethnic and multiracial churches in Sociology of Religion. These areas are especially pertinent to this study as findings from such research formed the basis of the survey design. The impact of the literature from each area on the final survey design is therefore clarified throughout.

1.1 Multiethnic Church

The recent surge of research on multiethnic churches can be dated back to the appearance of manuals for such churches in the 1990s. It would be some time, however, before such literature discussed language difference. Indeed, in one of the earliest manuals, Ortiz stated that “the multiethnic church includes culturally diverse people who meet together as one congregation, utilizing one language, usually English” (1996: 86).

The assumption of linguistic unity, either in the church as a whole or at least within each individual church service, has become common in research on multiethnic church. Thus, for Garces-Foley, a multilingual church is “a single entity that manages its diversity by holding separate services for the main language groups” (2007: 156). Especially in the USA, scholars have tended to assume that race or ethnicity, rather than language, is the important variable (e.g. Christerson and Emerson 2003; Edwards 2008; Marti 2010). This is not to say that linguistic difference has been entirely excluded from debate. Based on a large, nationwide survey of Roman Catholic parishes in the USA, Reynolds and Reynolds (2018) concluded that the presence of bilingual liturgical services and the interactions between different language groups predicted the integration of such parishes. Likewise, in a doctoral thesis on an attempt to build trust in a multilingual leadership team of a church in California holding services in Spanish and English, Perez (2019) has written about the difficulties of building such trust, with the researcher blaming the failure of the project on differences in philosophy of leadership.

Yet it remains true that interpreting has not appeared on the agenda of scholarship on multiethnic church, even if popular accounts (DeYmaz and Li 2013; Patten 2016) have mentioned translation and interpreting. The research on multiethnic church does suggest, however, that there are a range of methods for delivering multilingual church that do not include interpreting. Of specific interest in this case is the choice to offer different monolingual services in different languages, as discussed by Garces-Foley

(2007: 156) in her appendix on different modalities of multiethnic church and Reynolds and Reynolds (2018: 358) in their survey. Exploring the factors affecting the choice of different forms of language provision is a key aim of this survey.

Findings from research on multiethnic church have impacted the survey design in two main ways. The first is that the focus on monolingual multiethnic churches in this area led to the development of a scale to measure the diversity of the church, irrespective of its use of interpreting. The second impact was that the research on multiethnic church that did include multilingual churches (Garces Foley 2007; Reynolds and Reynolds 2018) demonstrated that churches can hold services in different languages, rather than using interpreting. This showed that there was a need to explicitly uncover the range of language provision that churches can offer. Specific questions with regard to this were included in the survey, with the intention of understanding the factors behind such decisions.

1.2 Church interpreting as a specific context

Compared with research on multiethnic and multiracial churches, church interpreting research has concentrated far more on interpreters. From the earliest pedagogical manuals for sign language church interpreters (Bearden 1975; Sampley 1990) to some of the most recent investigations into the use of interpreting in bilingual churches (Hokkanen 2022; Valero-Garcés 2022), expectations of interpreters and elements of their performance have served as recurring questions. Alongside the continued tendency towards evaluations of church interpreting (Mwinuka *et al.* 2022; Adebayo/Zulu 2023), there is also a stream of research that has linked the existence and performance of church interpreting with specific contextual factors, related to the needs, theology, and values of the churches themselves (Giannoutsou 2014; Balci Tison 2016). The relationship between these two streams has been thoroughly discussed in two recent publications (Downie 2023; Downie 2024). Given space limitations in this paper, coverage of church interpreting research is limited to patterns common across many different studies. A critical review of extant literature can be found in Downie (2024). Likewise, introductions to church interpreting research can be found in Hild (2015), Tipton/Furmanek (2016: 237-277) and Furmanek (2022).

Church interpreting research has involved a wide range of research methods from experimental testing (Franke 2014) to historical studies using documentary (Sarmiento Pérez 2018) and oral (Harkness 2017) sources, and from autoethnography (Hokkanen 2016) to surveys (Shin 2013; Peremota 2017). Several key findings have become common, with their strength varying according to the methodology used. This paper will first examine the most common findings from qualitative field research and interviews, before asking whether support for these can be found in wider survey research.

1.2.1 Common findings from qualitative research and interviews

Across much qualitative research on church interpreting, a common picture emerges of the people who deliver the service, their professional status, and their personal

commitment to church life. The claim that the majority, if not the entirety, of church interpreters are volunteers permeates research. It can be found in the very earliest examples of researchers visiting churches, such as the work of Jennifer Rayman (2007) on work of an ASL interpreter at a church building dedication or the work of Jill Karlik (2010) on interpreting in churches in the Gambia. In the former case, the interpreter gained their position due to the trust they formed with both the hearing and deaf church and their personal commitment to uniting both congregations. In the latter case, the interpreters were professionals from the teaching field, who gained their position due to kinship links and being known by the communities.

Thus, the view that churches with interpreting tended to use volunteers became a key plank of the argument in favour of a proposed “professionalisation” of church interpreting in evaluation research. Thus, Mlundi, despite remarking that church interpreters in Tanzania shared almost identical quality criteria with those found in the professional literature (2021: 309), concludes that professional training is required (*Ibid.*: 310). Similarly, Salawu (2010) concluded, on the basis of answers to 50 yes/no questions, which are not detailed in the study, that churches should swap to exclusively using interpreters who were professionally trained.

It is important to note here that it is still quite common for researchers to cite lack of professional training is deemed to create a need for such training, irrespective of the performance level or self-reflection of interpreters or the needs of the churches. Indeed, when a team led by Andrew Tan interviewed and observed six untrained church interpreters in Malaysia, they found their practices and self-reflection to be similar to that of professionals (De Tan *et al.* 2021).

While volunteering does not preclude the interpreters from being professionally trained (see Hokkanen 2012), it is still common for researchers to equate church interpreting with “non-professional” interpreting (see Hild 2017; De Tan *et al.* 2021). This is despite indications of the use of professionals in the literature, such as Downie (2016: 9), who states his position as a researcher-practitioner in the area and in the work of Kinnamon (2018: 30), where church interpreting was found to commonly be a step towards professional training and something professional interpreters still did.

The equation of volunteering with non-professional interpreting parallels the assumption that those interpreting in church do so because of personal commitment. While the first indication of such commitment was found in the description of the interpreter given by Rayman (2007: 85), reflections of this can be found in the common, but not universal, preference found for interpreters to be recruited from within the church, rather than from outside (Karlik 2010: 166-167; Balci Tison 2016: 120-122; Kotzé 2018: 7). Given the complexity of results from survey methods (see section 2.2.3), this result will be examined in this article.

Finally, there have been, broadly speaking, two competing claims about the purpose and aims of church interpreting. In evaluation research, it is largely assumed that the interpreting is something of an afterthought, despite its spiritual significance. Interpreters are said to take a “casual approach to interpreting quality” (Alvarenga 2018: 55) or called “careless” (Biamah 2013: 155). Researchers can therefore call for leaders to have a “prise de conscience” [realisation] (Salawu 2010: 133) that would make them use professionals. The overarching view in such research is that the use of volunteers is a sign that the churches do not take interpreting seriously.

Set against this is the view that church interpreting is “defined and experienced through the lens of organisational values” (Downie 2016: 172). In this view, interpreting is something that churches use to display and enable their vision for the future such as in Vigouroux (2010), where a church used interpreting as part of a wider vision to reach people across Africa and to fit into their local South African context. Similarly, Balci Tison (2016) reported on how a church in Turkey used the move from interpreting into Turkish from English to interpreting from Turkish to English as a reflection of their move from being a church planted by American missionaries to being a truly Turkish church. Youssef (2023) also argued that bilingual preaching, involving interpreting between Spanish and English also formed part of the identity of the bilingual church he leads. On a more practical note, Duve (2014) on the interpreting of evangelism in American Sign Language and Harkness (2017) on English to Korean interpreting at evangelical crusades, both view interpreting as a way of allowing people to access the content and emotions of a service that from which they would otherwise be excluded. The multiplicity of purposes in this view may be helpfully summarised in the hypothesis that there is a link between the way a church sees itself, including its priorities, and its use of interpreting.

This overview provides three key claims that have become common in qualitative research, despite the differences in languages and scope. The first of these is that church interpreting is mostly delivered by volunteers. The second is that churches will tend towards using people from within the church. The third is that there will be a link between the language provision offered by churches and the way a church views itself, in terms of its linguistic diversity. The third claim is based on the research of Balci Tison (2016) and Downie (2016) who found a tendency for views of interpreting to be consistent across actors within a specific church. More recent studies, such as those by Parish (2018) and Alvarenga (2018) have found similar consistency using different methods. Thus, while it is correct to view churches as complex organisations, it does seem feasible to treat a church with established language provision as having a dominant view. All three claims led to the creation of questions within the survey. Before exploring what the limited data in this survey suggests about these claims, it is important to examine existing survey research in church interpreting, which has already offered nuanced answers to these questions.

1.2.2 Surveys of church interpreting

While most research on church interpreting has taken the form of case studies or theoretical explorations, there have been three multi-church surveys. Of these three surveys, two are language-specific, covering interpreting involving American Sign Language (Kinnamon 2018) and Russian (Peremota 2017). The third, while not explicitly language-specific, is country specific, covering only interpreting in South Korea (Shin 2013).

Returning to the common findings highlighted above, these three surveys offer far more nuanced views of the purported status of church interpreters than is found in qualitative research. Shin (2013) reported that, while churches mostly used untrained lay interpreters, audience members marked faith and spirituality as the most important

criteria, with interpreting skills and language competence receiving similar marks.

The work of Peremota was far more equivocal with spirituality only being mentioned as a requirement in responses to open questions by 34.5% of respondents (2017: 48) and being generally rated as “important” (*Ibid.*: 50). This can be compared to 57% of respondents who mentioned linguistic competence in open questions (*Ibid.*: 30) and its rating of “important” to “vitaly important” (*Ibid.*: 32). In addition, the researcher found that 34.9% of respondents mentioned a need for some measure of professionalism in their answers to open questions, with 2.3% calling for professional qualifications and an additional 9.8% looking for prior experience in interpreting (*Ibid.*: 59).

The research of Kinnamon (2018) looked at the career trajectories of ASL interpreters working in church. Of the 99 interpreters who responded to that question, 77% were certified at the time of the study (*Ibid.*: 42). Among those who pursued certification, interactions with Deaf people in church and seeing the interpreting these Deaf people received was the top reason for doing so (*Ibid.*: 33). Three quarters of the interpreters in her study were currently affiliated with the church in which they interpreted, which led to “the majority” (*Ibid.*: 50) not seeking financial compensation and only taking it when offered.

Qualitative and survey research therefore show different trends in their findings. Surveys of church interpreting paint a picture of a service which, while strikingly different to interpreting in more well-studied contexts, often requires solid language and interpreting competence. These surveys also suggest that interpreters who work in church are far more varied than some researchers have surmised. While this present article cannot entirely resolve any apparent contradictions between survey and qualitative data, by presenting more data on the relationship between individual churches and the language services they offer, it can reveal variables that may be useful for further study.

2. Data

The data for this study come from an international snowball survey, carried out by the author. This survey went through the SocArXiv pre-registration process, which details all data handling and ethics declarations. These are found here: <https://osf.io/zjm3h>. This includes the entire survey tool. Full data can be found here: <https://osf.io/p5xf6>. The author is an active church interpreter and prepares training materials for churches and interpreters, as a consultant in the field, in addition to being a church interpreting researcher. Its purpose, aims, structure and administration are described below.

2.1 Aims and objectives of the survey

The survey had a single aim: to provide an initial international, multid denominational exploration of language provision in Christian churches. While the original aim was that this exploration would take in several levels of analysis, the number of valid returns meant that only an initial impression could be given. Achieving this involved three objectives, the first two are of direct relevance to this article.

Objective O1 is to provide an exploratory account of the language provision offered by churches and how this relates to factors such as how the church views itself, the importance given to reaching people who speak different languages, and the church's current satisfaction with language provision.

Objective O2 is to explore the factors that lead churches to adopt interpreting, rather than other solutions to linguistic difference, such as holding services in different languages, or simply expecting attendees to share a common *lingua franca*.

Objective O3, which will not be explored in this study, is to provide a test of Downie's (2016: 171-172) matrix of organisational expectations of interpreting, and specifically how this relates to expectations of interpreters and the position of interpreters in the church.

2.2 Survey structure

To attain these objectives, the survey was split into five sections. After a clear informed consent section, the first response section gathered basic geographic and biographical data about the respondents and the churches they represent. Given the possibility of the information entered into this section becoming "personal information" under the United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulations, it is reported in aggregate and will not be publicly available. Respondents were informed that their data was stored anonymously and thus that withdrawal after submission was not possible. This section also sought information as to how the respondent viewed their church in terms of its multiculturalism, multilingualism, and diversity. These questions were tied to Objective O1 and provided some data to cover the factors that Objective O2 sought to uncover.

The second section sought to gather information on the language provision offered by churches. At the end of this section, the survey split according to the specific language provision offered. The section covered Objective O2 and was based on the language provision options demonstrated in research on multiethnic church and church interpreting.

The third section was for churches offering services in both languages. It covered the languages offered and the engagement of the respondent with these different language groups. Engagement with the different language groups was shown to be an important factor in the future of multilingual churches by Perez (2019) and Reynolds/Reynolds (2018). The section therefore relates to Objectives O1 and O2.

The fourth section of the survey was for churches offering interpreting. This section was concerned with who was interpreting, the interpreting modes offered, the languages interpreted, and questions designed to fulfil Objective O3.

The fifth section was sent to all respondents and asked questions about satisfaction with current provision and future development plans. Measuring satisfaction with a service or product has a long history in marketing research (Danaher/Haddrell 1996). In the case of research on church interpreting, measuring satisfaction is vital for attaining objective O1 and provides important insight into the factors that are important when churches choose how they will offer language provision.

Any account of language provision that is only based on short-term case studies, as has been the case in church interpreting, can provide only a snapshot of views of

the phenomenon. Thus, Vigouroux's (2010) observations of the relationship between a preacher and his interpreter in Glory Gospel Church reflects only the practices used while the researcher was there. Likewise, Harkness (2017) explores interpreting at a single crusade, while Mlundi (2021) draws conclusions about training needs from a small number of church services.

Measuring satisfaction and future plans therefore extends the work of Balci Tison (2016: 108-110), who placed the choice to offer interpreting within the larger historical context of the church and its future plans. Measuring such intentions across a number of churches therefore offers the opportunity to explore the factors affecting church language provision, helping to fulfil objective O3.

2.3 Administration

As the researcher is an independent researcher, institutional ethical approval was not available. The survey was therefore pre-registered with SocArXiv and no respondents were recruited until preregistration was completed and approved by OSF Registries, the entity managing SocArXiv. Preregistration is available from <<https://osf.io/zjm3h>>. Preregistration includes the final draft of survey questions and the entire informed consent section.

To the best efforts of the researcher, all respondents were informed that the survey used a Google form. Respondents were recruited directly by direct contact, through a dedicated WhatsApp group for interpreters, groups for multicultural churches, the ChurchInterpreting.com website and newsletter, and through carefully selected social media routes. In the last case, Christian social media influencers with over 5,000 followers and at least one traditionally published book were asked to send the survey privately to their contacts, with public posting on algorithmically driven social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn discouraged. The author did, however, post the survey several times on Mastodon, as this channel is driven purely by contacts and simply shows the posts of people followed and people on the same instance in reverse chronological order.

2.4 Data cleaning and standardisation procedures

The data were cleaned to remove any obvious false responses, such as impossible attendance figures. Ranges given by respondents were anchored to the midpoint, except where the wording of the question clearly indicated that the aim was to provide a maximum. Names of countries were standardised to a single form for each country.

2.5 Demographic breakdown of respondents

The 122 valid responses came from 36 countries, and from churches ranging in attendance from 4,800 to 10, with a mean attendance of 245.7, a mode of 200 and a standard deviation of 506.9. This suggests that attendance was very heterogeneous,

weighted towards smaller churches. Aside from one respondent, who gave the number of services held by their entire denomination each week, respondents reported holding an average of slightly more than 2 and a mode of 1 service per weekend. The table below gives the breakdown of the continents represented in the sample.

Continent	Count	Percentage of total
Africa	7	5.7
Asia	10	8.2
Central America	6	5
Europe	52	42.6
North America	38	31.1
Oceania	6	4.9
South America	3	2.5
Total	122	100

Table 1: Continental breakdown of survey responses

3 Methods

As the volume of responses did not justify the statistical methods envisioned in the pre-registration, the methods used here are descriptive. The survey logic automatically divided responses from churches adopting different language solutions to be separated into sub-groups, with some different questions for each. Responses from the two largest sub-groups were then compared.

4 Results

While offering main weekend services in a single language was the most common solution (55 responses), respondents reported offering a mixture of other solutions. Interpreting was the next most common solution (32 responses), followed by using interpreting and different services in different languages (12). A much smaller group was the one consisting of churches offering different services in different languages (5 responses). Another 9 responses indicated that their church offered different solutions, ranging from very occasionally offering interpreting for visiting speakers to mixtures of machine and human translation. Five respondents reported that their church offered a single multilingual service. One respondent reported the use of interpreting within a single multilingual service, one each reported the exclusive use of machine interpreting or machine translation, while one final respondent reported machine interpreting being used alongside different services in different languages.

4.1 Comparing churches with interpreting and those with only one language

A useful point of comparison is to look at the attendance of churches with interpreting and those offering services in only one language, as these are the largest subgroups (45 and 55 respectively). Churches with interpreting in this survey had an average attendance of more than twice that of churches with weekend services in only one language (400.2 vs 158.9). The same difference was observed between the median attendance (200 vs 100). Part of this may be attributable to a smaller number of larger churches with interpreting in the survey, given the difference in standard deviations (776.8 vs 151.2).

Given the aim of the survey, a comparison was made between the reported overall diversity of their church and the language provision offered. These views were discovered through three questions, which asked if the respondent viewed the church as, in turn, multi-cultural, diverse, and multilingual. Respondents were offered three choices: “yes,” “no,” “I don’t know”, with these each being turned into numerical dummy variables as 1, -1 and 0 and the scores combined to give a single aggregate score. This aggregate score is referred to as the Overall Diversity Score in this article. The charts below compare the overall diversity scores of churches offering interpreting on its own or alongside any other solution and those offering weekend services in only one language.

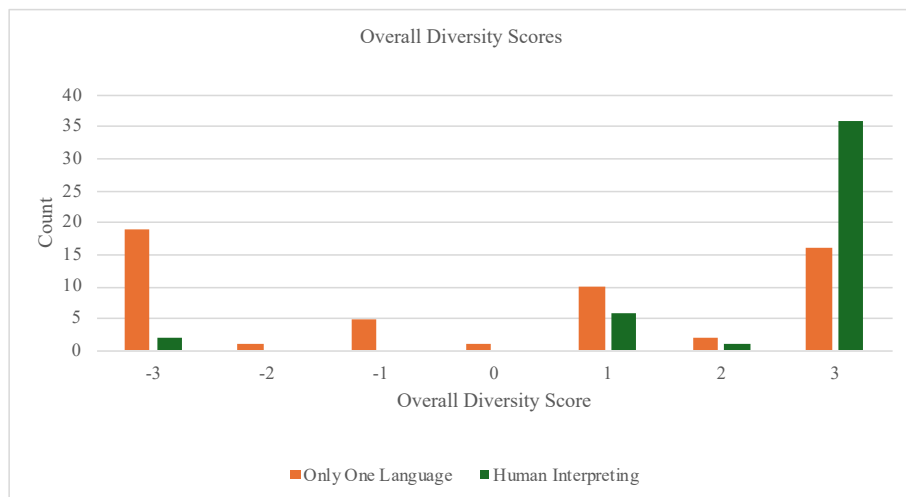


Figure 1: Comparison of Overall Diversity Scores

While the Overall Diversity Scores of churches with only one language span the entire range of possible values, there are slightly more respondents with positive (28) than negative (25) scores. Among churches using interpreting, the trend is much more pronounced. In this group, 43 respondents report positive overall diversity scores, compared with 2 reporting negative ones.

In terms of other facilities for speakers of different languages, 51.1% (23 respondents) of churches offering interpreting for weekend services also reported having Bible study or small groups for speakers of different languages. This compares to 9%

(5 respondents) reporting the same among churches with services in only one language. Similarly, 68.9% (31 respondents) of those reporting interpreting at weekend services stated that the church offered written materials in other languages. Among respondents from churches where weekend services were in only one language, the same figure was 24% (13 respondents).

These results may suggest that, overall, providing for those who speak different languages is a higher priority in churches with interpreting than for those who offer services in only one language. Yet the results of the question that asked respondents to rate how much of a priority this is for their church, on a range from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (of vital importance), presents a more complicated picture. This is illustrated in the following chart.

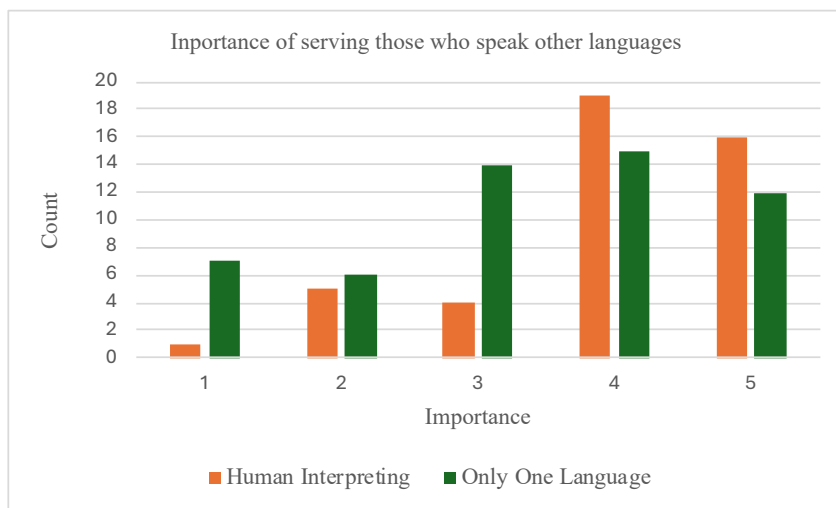


Figure 2: Importance of serving those who speak different languages

While both groups have responses across the entire scale, churches with only one language in their weekend services show a slightly more even spread of ratings. Churches with interpreting tend to cluster around the higher ratings of 4 and 5. The trend can more obviously be seen in the table below.

Importance	Interpreting Count (percentage)	Only One Language Count (percentage)
1	1 (2.2%)	7 (13%)
2	5 (11.1%)	6 (11.1%)
3	4 (8.9%)	14 (25.9%)
4	19(42.2%)	15 (27.8%)
5	16 (35.6%)	12 (22.2%)

Table 2: Reported importance of serving those who speak other languages

The more even response among churches who only use one language explains why the average response among such churches was 3.35, while the average among churches with interpreting was 3.98. It is safe to say, therefore, that churches with human interpreting in this sample tended to place a slightly higher value on serving those who speak different languages.

Having contrasted churches with interpreting to churches offering weekend services in only one language, analysis can now move on to exploring precisely how and by whom interpreting is offered. In the next section, this article will explore the assumed preference for volunteers and for those from within the church, rather than from the outside.

4.2 Who interprets in church, how and for whom?

Contrary to what might have been expected given some claims in the literature, 20 respondents (50% of those who answered the question) reported professional interpreters working in their church. It must be noted that, following the problems with researcher definitions of professionalism being used in such a way as to cause possible reputational harm to churches (Downie 2023), in this survey, no definition of “professional” or “volunteer” was given. Thus, responses reflect churches’ views on the meaning of these terms. In every case, these were professionals from within the church. In 13 out of those 20 responses, those professionals worked alongside those from within the church who were not professionals. One respondent among those 13 also reported the use of volunteers from outside the church working alongside those professionals and non-professional interpreters from within the church.

A further 20 respondents reported the exclusive use of interpreters who were not professionals. In 19 of those 20 cases, these non-professional interpreters were used exclusively, with volunteers from outside of the church used alongside them in the final case. There were five blank responses to this question. It is worth noting that these results mean that in 38 of the 40 responses, churches exclusively relied on interpreters from within the church. In only two cases were outsiders used. Both cases had them working alongside insiders.

In terms of interpreting mode, simultaneous interpreting using equipment predominated with 21 responses, followed by short consecutive with 16 and whispered interpreting with 3. Once again, five responses were left blank. This spread of interpreting can be usefully combined with a strong reported preference for in-person interpreting. Of the 40 responses to the relevant question, 38 respondents reported the interpreters were in the same room or building while 2 reported the use of in-person and remote interpreting. No respondents reported the exclusive use of remote interpreting.

Results on the intended audience of interpreting show a strong lean towards interpreting that serves the needs of those already within the church. Respondents were presented with two questions, one that asked them how far they agreed with the view that the interpreting they offered was primarily for those inside of the church. The other asked for their agreement with the statement that the interpreting was primarily for those outside of the church. There were 40 responses to the first question and 39 to the second. Responses are shown below.

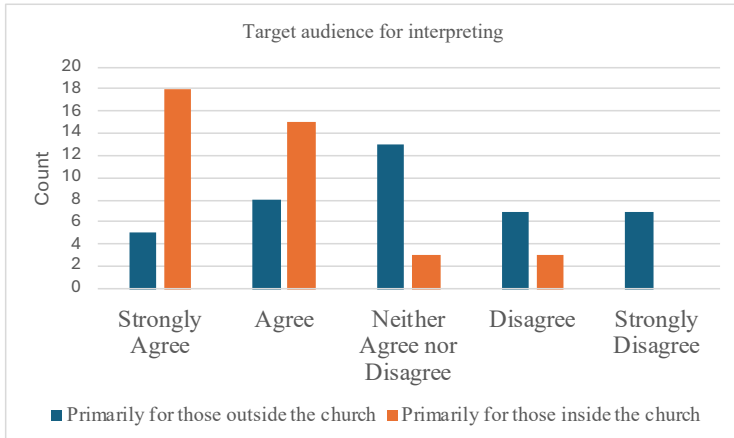


Figure 3: Target audience for interpreting

While the responses are not exactly opposite, as would be expected for reverse-coded Likert-style items, their differences are notable. While there seems to be broad agreement with the idea that the interpreting is for those already within the church, the spread of results for the reverse question favours the middle option. It would seem plausible to conclude that, among these respondents, interpreting tends to be aimed at those already within the church, with some awareness of its utility for those outside.

4.3 Current satisfaction and future plans

As the chart below shows, there was a clear difference in satisfaction between churches using interpreting during Sunday services and those who only offered services in a single language.

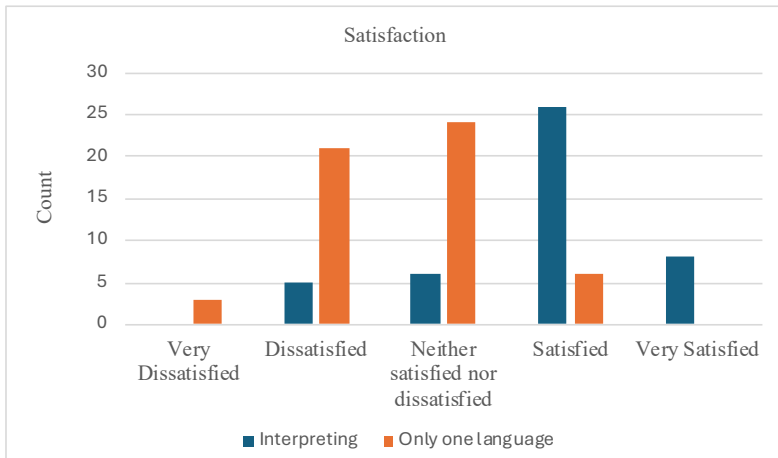


Figure 4: Satisfaction with language provision

In this case, most respondents who reported that their church only offered weekend services were either dissatisfied to some degree (24 respondents, 43.6%) or neutral (24 respondents, 43.6%). This left only 6 (10.1%) who were satisfied and 1 who did not respond. Among those reporting the use of interpreting for weekend services, 34 (75.6%) reported some level of satisfaction, with 6 (13.3%) neutral and 5 (11.1%) dissatisfied. While these samples are too small to permit statistical analysis, the purely descriptive picture offered by these results is that, in this sample, there is a strong trend that using interpreting is linked with far greater satisfaction with language provision.

It might be expected that these results for satisfaction would lead to clear patterns in future plans. Yet this is not the case. As the table below shows, churches with weekend services in only one language tended to be happy to stay that way. Churches with interpreting tended to be happier to keep that interpreting or do even more

	Interpreting		Only one language	
Future plans	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
We plan to do more to reach people who speak different languages	18	40	12	21.8
We plan to do about the same for people who speak different languages	17	37.8	10	18.2
We plan to do less for people who speak different languages	2	4.4	0	0
We have no plan to reach those who speak different languages	7	15.6	32	58.2
Blank	1	2.2	1	1.8

Table 3: Future language provision plans

5. Discussion

It should be stressed at the outset that the small sample size, alongside the use of purposive, snowball sampling mean that these results should be read as preliminary and exploratory, rather than representative or definitive. That being said, the range of language provision recorded in the survey, the use of combinations of approaches, and the complexity of results all suggest that language provision in churches might be more complex and nuanced than suggested in any discipline that has investigated it. Even this initial survey suggests a pressing need for interdisciplinary research. Existing theories may also need to be revisited. In this light, it makes sense to discuss how these results compare with common claims found in the literature.

5.1 Reassessing common claims about church interpreting

The first claim was that church interpreting is mostly delivered by volunteers, a claim that is often associated with calls for this form of interpreting to change somehow. While this survey did not ask about the financial compensation of church interpreters, it did generate results on the use of professionals. It is striking that, even in this small sample, 50% of churches used professional interpreters. It is not possible to generalise this result. It is, however, safe to say that any claim that church interpreting is the sole preserve of untrained interpreters now must be called into question. It may also be time to reassess whether church interpreting can still be unproblematically labelled as “non-professional interpreting” (as in De Tan *et al.* 2021 cited above and Hild 2017). Indeed, it may be time to reflect on whether “non-professional” interpreting is a distinct category.

Indeed, the complexity of characterising church interpreting as “non-professional” found in this present study reflects the pattern of church interpreting being both a route towards professionalism and an activity performed by professionals, found in Kinnamon (2018). Extant claims about the professionalism of church interpreters or of church interpreting as a whole therefore need to be reviewed, given the mounting evidence of a far more complex and nuanced relationship.

What further complicates any such discussions is that, in most cases where professionals were used in this sample, they worked alongside volunteers. Among the churches who responded, it seems that the interpreting pool is rather mixed, with other criteria being given more importance. One such criterion appears to be having a prior relationship with the church. With 95% of those who responded stating that their church exclusively relied on the interpreting services of those within the church, the survey offered support for a link between church interpreting and personal commitment.

This link between church interpreting and personal commitment is line with the research of Shin (2013), who found similar expectations in churches in South Korea and in contradiction to the survey research of Peremota (2017) on churches with Russian.

This preference may simply mean that in this case churches use interpreting to serve their internal needs and therefore look for people who understand the organisation to deliver it. If this were true, these delivery preferences would be similar to those around “designated” interpreters in sign language interpreting (see De Meulder *et al.* 2018). Whether such arrangements are deliberately sought by churches or simply a result of the nature of the task will require further research. The literature, especially the work of Karlik (2010), Balci-Tison (2016), Hild (2017) and Parish (2018), strongly favours the idea that churches deliberately choose interpreters from within the organisation. The key variable therefore may be trust, rather than professionalism, however it is defined.

This in turn explains why calls for church interpreting to be performed exclusively by professionals would miss the mark for respondents to this survey. Not only would such calls run into satisfaction with current arrangements, but they would also have to ignore the literature explaining why such preferences exist.

5.2 Characterising churches with interpreting

Comparison with churches with only one language and sub-group specific questions revealed several interesting characteristics of the churches with interpreting which responded to this survey. The survey offered qualified, limited, and nuanced support for a purported link between church identity and language provision. Overall, such churches tend to have greater attendance and be more diverse. This may be linked to them placing some more importance on reaching those which use other languages. This latter difference was, however, somewhat weaker in the survey. The survey did not permit the direction of association to be determined. Thus, it is not clear whether interpreting is a product of bigger, more diverse churches that place more importance on reaching those who speak different languages or that using interpreting makes churches bigger and more diverse.

Churches with interpreting in this survey during weekend services also tended to offer other forms of language provision. It seems that interpreting at weekend services therefore signalled a wider willingness to engage with the needs of those who use other languages, even if this was not always deemed important. For respondents to this survey, it seems that interpreting is part of a wider language provision strategy. If this result is in any way generalised, it would have important theoretical ramifications.

Linking the use of interpreting at weekend services with other forms of language provision may also explain why churches with interpreting during weekend services in this sample also tended to be more satisfied with their efforts and more likely to wish to maintain or expand them. Taken together, these results are more clearly suggestive of a link between church identity and language provision.

It seems that unpicking the relationship between church identity and language provision will require more work. This may not be a binary relationship, with identity determining whether provision is offered, but instead more of a multi-variable matrix, with different variables combining to affect the choice of language provision between several options.

5.3 Bridges towards theoretical development

While this survey is indicative, rather than definitive, it does offer some theoretical insights, as well as posing some problems. The most important theoretical contribution of this survey is that it strengthens the case for church to be viewed in terms of its relationship with the wider church. As such, it offers qualified support for research that seeks to describe interpreting within specific contexts. It also suggests that it would be useful to further explore which factors define churches with interpreting, as opposed to those who use other strategies.

Any such work would likely have to grapple with the tricky, and now seemingly multi-faceted question of how church interpreting relates to church identity. While this question has been the subject of research before (see Balci Tison 2016; Downie 2016), the limited results of this survey suggest that tackling this question on a much larger scale will be of theoretical importance.

This leads on naturally to questions around the identity of church interpreters. Once again, the sample size and nature of this survey does not permit any general-

isation. Yet, it is hard to ignore its general agreement with studies by Hild (2017), Kinnamon (2018), Kotzé (2018) and De Tan *et al.* (2021), that found that any distinction between church interpreters and professional interpreters is likely fuzzy. Indeed, perhaps the strongest criticism of calls for church interpreting to professionalise is that professional interpreting is rarely defined and when it is defined, there is often contradictory evidence in favour of the view that church interpreters act unprofessionally (Downie 2023: 145, 153-154). Resolving questions around the identity and work of church interpreters will require further research.

5.4 Contributions

Considering the limited sample size, all the contributions of this article are preliminary in nature but still worth noting. The first is that, on the conceptual level, this survey is the first to combine research on Sociology of Religion and Interpreting Studies. The different foci of these fields, multiethnic yet monolingual churches in the former case and churches with interpreting in the latter, have meant that the two fields have rarely been brought together. For Sociology of Religion, this combination suggests that paying further attention to churches with interpreting would be helpful. For Interpreting Studies, these preliminary results suggest that it would be useful to view interpreting as an intentional choice among many possible ones.

The second contribution is that the claim that church interpreting is solely or largely the preserve of non-professional volunteers needs to be reviewed. While no strict definition of “professionals” was given in this survey, half of all respondents with interpreting reported professionals working in their church, always alongside volunteers from the church. The fact that these are self-reports is important in itself as it suggests that churches have a view on what they see as the difference between volunteers and professionals. This distinction will need to be teased out in later research.

Purported links between church language strategies and how a church views itself were also pursued for the first time in a multi-church survey. Churches with interpreting reported higher diversity, higher importance being given to serving those who speak other languages, higher satisfaction, and a higher likelihood of extending language services. These suggest that the provision of interpreting can become formative for both the church’s view of itself and its future plans. Once again, it is important to bear in mind that these initial results will need to be further researched before they can be seen as firm.

5.5 Limitations and further research

The requirement for further research is a common theme in any discussion of the results of this survey given its limitations. Foremost among these is the relatively small size of the sample, despite its global reach and wider scope than previous surveys. Indeed, the decision to allow for a comparison between interpreting and other forms of language provision means that sub-groups were even smaller. While such comparisons are theoretically important, their size here made it impossible to reach firm conclusions. All findings must therefore be treated as indicative and interim. Fur-

ther research will need to be done to collate a larger sample that is more reflective of individual sub-populations. This will require a trade-off between the coverage of the entire survey and the homogeneity of the sample.

Likewise, the use of purposive, snowball sampling means that these results are likely not representative in the same way as a random sampling survey would be. It is very unlikely, for example that the proportion of churches around the globe with interpreting is anything like the proportion in this sample. Similarly, it is possible that, since the researcher is a professional interpreter with contacts in that world, it is more likely that respondents contacted using the methods in this article would themselves include professional interpreters. It is therefore not possible to say anything definitive about the overall proportion of churches using professional interpreting in their weekend services. This is why such claims do not appear in this paper and references are made to “this sample”. Future, larger-scale randomly sampled surveys will help to alleviate these issues. While this will require substantial research funding, it will provide clearer results.

These limitations lead directly to the need for a repetition of this study using a larger sample. It would also be useful to increase the sensitivity of certain items, most notably, the Overall Diversity Score, to allow more fine-grained results.

Finally, this is now the fourth multi-church survey to examine church interpreting and the fourth change in scope, items, and analytical approach. If anything approaching definitive results are to be reached, some kind of standardisation will be needed to allow direct comparability and longitudinal validity.

6. Conclusion

This article discussed the results of an international, multi-denominational survey of church language provision and its relationship to church identity. It sought to answer the following three questions.

1. How does the language provision offered by churches relate to the church’s identity and priorities?
2. What are the characteristics of churches choosing to offer interpreting and how do these relate to common claims about church interpreting found in the literature?
3. How does language provision relate to a church’s satisfaction with its current service to those who speak different languages and its future plans?

The small size of the sample did not permit definitive answers, yet some initial patterns did emerge. The choice of church interpreting was associated with larger, more diverse churches, who generally place more emphasis on reaching those who speak other languages. On the second question, a far greater proportion of churches in this sample relied on the services of professional interpreters than was assumed in the literature. In this sample, churches offering interpreting also tended to offer other forms of language provision more commonly than churches with services in one language. As far as the third question was concerned, churches with interpreting were also more satisfied with their provision and tended to wish to do more or at least to continue with their current arrangements. While these results are necessarily limited in scope to this

specific sample, their interaction with existing literature on multiethnic church and church interpreting suggests important avenues for further research and theoretical development, especially regarding the relationship between church identity and the language provision offered.

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