

Religion-free church lifts your spirits

August 9 2018, by Hayley Jarvis



The Sunday Assembly Brighton. Credit: The Sunday Assembly Brighton

Congregational meet-ups without the worship can boost wellbeing in the same way as going to church or attending other religious groups, a new study suggests.

Whether at the temple, church or mosque, worshipping together has long

been linked to better mental and physical health.

Now people who regularly attend secular or non-religious groups are shown to get similar feel-good vibes, simply through social bonding, psychologists reveal.

Researchers at Brunel University London studied members of the growing secular community, [The Sunday Assembly](#) – described as a church without the religion.

"Secular congregations may be a good alternative for non-religious people who want the health benefits religious communities traditionally offer," said [Dr Michael Price](#).

The psychologist tracked 92 people aged 23 - 73 as they attended Sunday Assembly sessions in the UK, US, Australia and Canada. With social bonding, inspirational talks and group singing, Assembly meetings take much the same form as religious gatherings – minus the religion.

Price, who led [the study](#), spent longer than six months measuring Sunday Assembly goers' satisfaction with life, feelings of social connectedness and general happiness.

As religion's popularity steadily wanes across Western cultures, he wanted to see if non-religious people can tap into the same [wellbeing](#) benefits group worship offers.

Results just out in the journal [Secularism and Nonreligion](#) show going to Sunday Assembly sessions relates positively to wellbeing. Spending 2.5 hours a week doing Assembly activities was linked to an extra 10 percentile points on the UK national wellbeing scale. For example, an attendee's wellbeing score might go from being higher than 60%, to being higher than 70%, of other Brits.

"It is brilliant to have independent confirmation of what we see with our own eyes – people's lives improving," said Sunday Assembly founder, Sanderson Jones. "This is exactly what we wanted to happen.

"Society is experiencing a crisis of meaning and belonging. Congregational communities answer the most fundamental human needs for belonging and meaning. The problem is that today, religious stories don't ring true in our increasingly secular age."

Assembly goers started an average 1.2 close social relationships with people they met there, a degree of bonding similar to that experienced by traditional church-goers. And joining in Assembly activities was more strongly linked to wellbeing, compared with other kinds of social activities.

Surprisingly, the most important part of the meetings for [social bonding](#) was not the formal service but the informal socialising before and after it. Group singing was also commonly noted for creating a sense of community.

"If secular quasi-religious organisations like The Sunday Assembly continue to gain popularity," Dr Price said, "they could have a positive benefit on the wellbeing of many people who, for whatever reason, would affiliate more readily with them than with more traditional [religious groups](#)."

"The increase of social isolation, mental ill health and fractured cultural climate can all be alleviated with a renewal of inclusive, welcoming congregational communities," Jones added.

Provided by Brunel University

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