



Clustering

The report of the EBA Council Study group on clustering in Baptist churches of the Association

Abstract

Clustering was meant to be foundational in the national reorganisation of the BUGB, but overall this has failed. The implementation of the higher hopes of clustering has not yet occurred and it continues to be purely aspirational in many places.

It is clear that no one model of “Clustering” will fit all circumstances and a degree of experimentation is clearly needed. Where clustering is successful there is a need to share the good news and encourage others to participate.

The topic of clustering needs to be included within the topic of mission, in terms of encouraging enhanced mission through mutual support.

“Clustering” is clearly linked with God’s mission in the EBA.

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Introduction

This report has been produced by a Study Group that was established by the Eastern Baptist Association Council at its meeting on 16 April 2005.

The remit given to the Group was:

"Having undertaken appropriate research, produce a report that will offer a number of models for clustering which will be helpful to local churches. In addition suggest ways which are not likely to be productive, and pitfalls to be avoided"

The report reviews the original National and Association rationale for clustering before explaining the results of two strands of research. The first strand sought to discover best practice within the wider Baptist Union and useful materials with which to foster clustering. The second strand sought to quantify the situation regarding clustering within the Eastern Baptist Association. Based on this research, the report offers possible ways forward, models of clustering for different situations Part 4 draws together the conclusions of the findings and offers recommendations as requested in the remit.

The rationale for clustering.

In 1998 The Baptist Union issued the Report of the Task Group on Associating, *Relating and Resourcing*. This Report contained recommendations which were instrumental in the reorganisation of the Union. On the issue of Associating the group submitted the following findings:

Many ministers have been seeking a deeper partnership in the Gospel, a greater degree of connectedness with others, so that there are close colleagues to whom they can turn in times of pressure or personal need.

There is concern for relationships with a kingdom purpose, for comradeship in pursuit of the common mission task.

There is a sense of solidarity in a larger vision, so that the local church is seen to be playing its part in a vision that is being expressed regionally and nationally.

There is an exploration of ways of strengthening whole church relationships, whether through training days for several teams of elders and deacons, united celebrations across a town or region, or the twinning of the churches with diverse social settings, needs and opportunities.

There is a willingness to identify and seek to benefit from trans-local ministries whether as preachers or trainers, prophets or evangelists, trouble shooters or vision and strategy consultants. With spiritual grace but without dogmatic authoritarianism, these ministries can speak into, serve and strengthen the life of the local church." The Report stated that " The overall vision which emerges from the Task Group's findings is one in which churches are learning to relate to one another in supportive clusters or networks. These will of necessity be limited in size and may diverge in the direction, with some finding their nearest support ecumenically and others within largely Baptist groupings. Such networks or clusters will find their place within reformed and streamlined association structures which will be focussed on mission. One of the primary functions of Associations will therefore be to promote, enable and support associating for the advance of our mission.

The Basis for Clustering

At the time of reorganisation the following guidelines were produced by the Regional Ministers for use within the Eastern Association.

The primary basis for clustering is the fact that God himself is unity in community. Christians together form one universal Church with the same Father, a shared life in the Spirit and one eternal purpose as agents of the coming Kingdom of God. It is our confidence in God, his promises and his purpose that provide all we need to take the following risks.

For clustering to work well, a change in culture is needed which must be modelled at all levels of our regional life. Independency, bureaucracy, competition, and debate for its own sake must give way to a new spirit of co-operation, open-heartedness and desire to give ourselves away to the glory of God and the growth of his Kingdom. There is also a need for each church to see its paid staff as having a valid trans-local ministry. When this gospel attitude prevails every church will end up with more that it had before.

Levels of Clustering

There will be many reasons to be involved in one or more clusters, including:

- Geographic location
- Historic relationships
- Natural affinities
- Common training needs
- BMS World Mission links
- Ecumenical ties
- A shared mission agenda (specific events or overall aim)
- A desire to pray together for a town or region.

Some of these clusters may have a limited life. Others will grow and develop.

Facilitation of Clustering

Clustering will not just happen. There has to be a degree of frustration with what is and a vision for what can be achieved before we'll take the risk and make the time. Where these exist, local leaders will undoubtedly take new initiatives themselves.

There is also an expectation that Regional Ministers will play an important proactive role in:

- Introducing leaders and churches who may have something to offer each other
- Identifying relationships spoiled by division and bringing reconciliation
- Linking specialists in different churches
- Provoking churches to share their best points with each other
- Promoting a greater understanding between churches
- Pointing out the potential for new clusters
- Encouraging churches to reflect on their life
- Suggesting gifted individuals to teach or oversee them in certain areas
- Communicating about events that could be of wider use beyond a cluster
- Bringing churches together in more formal co-operative partnerships.

Research – the wider Baptist family

We decided that one line of research should be to gather details of clustering around the BUGB. To this end we sent a letter via e-mail to the contacts given in the current Directory for every Association within BUGB, to the Ministry Department of BUGB, and to the e-mail addresses of the Baptist colleges. The letter asked for any examples of current good practice and materials that had been found useful. Seven people sent acknowledgements but no reply. Three Associations did reply, but only one provided more than skeletal information. This Association sent details of a scheme intended to remedy the problem that “clustering is not working at the level we might have hoped.” It was about to be discussed by churches in that Association. However, the clusters were geographical and “top-down”, rather than the “bottom-up” approach that we had found on the few other occasions that clustering was mentioned.

We tried a second letter, addressed personally, adding a request for details of how clustering was included within the ministerial formation process by both colleges and Associations. The response was better, particularly from the colleges and from a few Regional Ministers responsible for Newly Accredited Ministers (NAMs). This presented the worst scenario that we had feared – neither colleges nor Associations consider it their task to encourage NAMs to engage in any form of inter-church activity. Colleges seem to think that students will take it in by spiritual osmosis as they discuss Baptist history, and RMs in general say that they respond to the issues that NAMs bring, rather than set any agenda themselves. In the words of one RM, “it may come up in conversation”. We concluded that there is no current good practice, and no materials suitable for use in encouraging and facilitating clustering. One member of the Study Group met a NAM at a gathering, and was told that clustering had not featured in his training, nor had it featured up to then in his mentoring or NAM meetings.

We thought that the obvious part of the Baptist Union to ask about clustering was the Ministry Department but we eventually learned that the Ministry Department isn't involved in clustering. The Head of the Ministry Department explained that it's the responsibility of the Department of Research and Training in Mission, but held out little hope of that department being able to assist. The Revd Derek Allan had led the topic, but had not left any notes when he left to go to New Zealand.

Only three other Associations apart from the Eastern Association appear to have done any thinking on clustering.

The former RM Team Leader of the Heart of England Association reported that he thought that HEBA had not really done any specific work on this until about 18 months previously, when they did a fact finding exercise to see whether churches were in cluster relationships. The general impression was that about 25% had strong relationships, perhaps about 40% were in some kind of loose knit relationship, but probably wouldn't have called it a cluster, and probably up to about 80% related to local ecumenical partners at varying levels, again not necessarily regarding that as a cluster. He estimated that anything up to 20% were probably quite independent, some of them quite isolated. A large majority of the whole still had some interconnection through the BMS Link group system.

HEBA had chosen not to use clusters as a formal structural part of the association, but he thought that with hindsight maybe it should have. The Association produced a leaflet some years ago around the time of restructuring on what a cluster might look like, but it was ‘not widely promoted’.

The Southern Counties Association has opted for a heavily “top-down” approach, allocating churches to clusters, and sent the details of the plan. The Yorkshire Association promotes a course that churches may use, which includes “Associating” as one aspect of Baptist church life.

The information so far collected indicates that the whole concept of interdependence, including clustering, has been largely ignored by BUGB at Didcot, by the Baptist colleges and the majority of the regional Associations, so that there has been very little active input to either existing or incoming Baptist Ministers.

Research – the Eastern Baptist Association

Research took the form of a questionnaire distributed to all churches in the EBA; separate copies were sent to ministers and secretaries; copies were also sent to ministers not in pastoral charge. The questionnaire is reproduced below:

Clustering Questionnaire

Please answer all relevant questions as fully as possible

1. Name of church _____
- 2.a Are you already involved in a cluster with other Baptist churches? YES / NO
- 2.b Are you involved in an ecumenical cluster? YES / NO

if you are NOT involved in a cluster go to question 6

	In Baptist cluster	In ecumenical cluster
3.a What do you consider to be the advantages of clustering?		
3.b What do you consider to be the drawbacks of clustering?		
4.a How large (number of churches) is your cluster?		
4.b With which churches are you clustered?		
5. What cluster activities are you engaged in?		
6.a Is your minister involved in a ministers' fraternal?	YES / NO	YES / NO
6.b Does the ministers' fraternal match the cluster?	YES / NO	YES / NO

- 7.a Is your church part of a BMS world mission link group? YES / NO
- 7.b Does this link group match your cluster? YES / NO
8. If your church is not involved in clustering, please indicate the reasons for this:

a.	Distance too great	
b.	Differences in theology	
c.	Differences in worship style/music	
d.	Differences in ways of being church	
e.	Differences in congregational awareness	
f.	Lack of enthusiasm	
g.	Lack of awareness of possibility of clustering	
h.	Previous or traditional boundaries	
i.	Too busy with church activities	
j.	Previous negative experience	
k.	Other (please give brief details)	

9. If you have had experience of clustering elsewhere or in the past, please give details:

Responses

110 responses were received, representing 61% of churches in the EBA. The distribution of responses across the size categories reflects the numbers of churches in these size categories. The responses can therefore be taken as representative of the area as a whole

56 churches were involved in clusters with other Baptist churches; 66 were involved in ecumenical clusters, particularly “Churches together in ...”

16 churches were only in Baptist clusters, 27 in ecumenical clusters only and 38 in both Baptist and ecumenical clusters.

Baptist clusters are predominantly small, or 3, 4 or 5 churches; ecumenical clusters tend to be larger, of 4, 5 or 6 churches but extending to 22 churches in one area where all churches in a town cooperate.

Responses were received from all parts of the Association, geographically speaking, though south-west Essex (Dagenham-Romford etc) was underrepresented in the responses.

Negative responses

A wide range of drawbacks to clustering was given by respondents; no single cause could be extracted either for Baptist or ecumenical clustering being a drawback.

An interesting selection of reasons was given by those not clustering for not being involved. Two responses need to be highlighted here:

1. the long distance between some of our Baptist churches
2. the difficulties experienced by elderly congregations in travelling

Positive responses

Positive responses were very much clearer. Reasons or advantages for Baptist clustering were:

1. Mutual support
2. shared resources
3. prayer support
4. large numbers for services and events.

Reasons and advantages for ecumenical clustering were:

1. Joint witness to town or village (overwhelming response)
2. Richness of experience
3. Wider horizons

Cluster activities

Predominant cluster activities are joint services, especially at the high points of the Christian Year or at regular intervals throughout the year, particularly evening services.

In addition there are shared Bible Studies, shared outreach activities. Some social work is shared among churches, e.g. to the elderly, impoverished and youth. Training and evangelism is shared in some cases.

Baptist clusters had a large proportion of ministers' fraternal as the only cluster activity.

We highlight below some of the responses to open questions, first, negative answers to question 8k, 'If your church is not involved in clustering, please indicate the reasons for this: Other.'

Never thought about it	Never been asked to be involved	Don't know anything about formal clustering	Never any formal arrangements
No-one else wants to know	Much too far from anyone else	No minister, no clustering	Lack of need
New ecumenical church - its own cluster	Elderly congregation but specific groups meet together	The only BU church for many miles	Advanced age and cannot drive to other places
The first I have heard of clustering	Too much involved with all sorts of village activities	Clusters need leadership to be effective	Urban versus rural priorities
Key issue - is it about relationship or about activity?	No immediate reason to cluster with other Baptist churches	Distance and total lack of interest	Major concern no mission/vision orientated
No obvious reason for clustering - different environments	Other local Baptist churches didn't want to know!	Being treated with suspicion as the largest church in the cluster	No large church to take the lead and help the small ones

Question 3b asked for perceived drawbacks to clustering, both Baptist and ecumenical:

Baptist	Ecumenical
Time	Watching we don't step on each others toes
Trying to enthuse membership whose focus is more localised	Totally different understanding of church
Distraction from local mission	Time & Effort required
Distances of travelling	Not clear in our objectives
Not sharing each other's community	Competition and fear of a threat
Individual members not seeing the point of it	Historic views of church and chapel
Need to close our church for united services	Getting people out
Too big geographical area	Unless "needs led" can get bogged down in committees
Geographically nearest may not be the one you have easiest fellowship with	Delays caused by need for agreement
Loss of local focus and dilution of specific issues	Theological dilution
Attacks of lethargy	Divide in styles of worship
Length and noise of services	Unfamiliar and unattractive worship format
Other people's agendas	Politics
Jealousy	Other people's agendas
Meetings for meetings sake	Owning everything and sharing nothing
Getting it truly congregational, not just ministerial	Different values
Distances on winter evenings	Doesn't work if ministers don't work together
Only ministers meet	Doing things for the sake of it
Fitting dates in active church calendar	Confuses new Christians when working with non-evangelicals
Organisational focussed rather than mission/vision focussed	Communication failures
Encourages people to leave their own place of worship	Same few people always get the work
Failure to live up to expectations	Failure to live up to expectations
Nothing ever followed up	Anglican imperialism!

Question 3a was the positive contrast to 3b – ‘What do you consider to be the advantages of clustering?’

BAPTIST	ECUMENICAL
Common fellowship	Common mission focus
Leadership encouragement and accountability	Shared community issues
Training/prayer etc for deacons & elders	Leadership encouragement
Links with Baptist family	Local outreach & mission
Fellowship with those close theologically	Working to benefit a wider world
Responsibility of supporting Baptist family	Joint witness to the town
Joint services	Mutual support
Mutual support	Visible sign of Christ’s unity
Shared vision	Learning from different traditions
Help and encouragement of one another	Pooling of resources and manpower for big events
Sharing problems	Town-wide initiatives
Larger numbers at services gift uplift	Wider horizons
Complementing our independence	Friendship and support on one another’s work
Getting out of our own routine	Co-ordination of events
Sharing at an intimate level with trusted colleagues	Praying together; cross-church prayer initiatives
Joint special events	Better use of facilities
Encouraging the smaller members	Avoiding duplication
Destroying the feeling of isolation and providing specific focus for prayer	Richness of experience
Widening members horizons	Joint alpha courses
Consistent message - encouragement, support and building up of fellowships	Consistent message - the strength of united witness in a town or village where all churches work together

The messages above are remarkably consistent throughout the positive responses.

Further research

Following this research, we took the opportunity of further contact with those EBA ministers attending the Ministers’ Conference at High Leigh in February 2006. Our preliminary results were presented to them and then they were given a series of statements and asked to make responses on the spur of the moment, without warning or deep consideration, and in a limited time. The statements and their responses are tabulated below.

Ministers’ Conference responses

Statement\	Responses >					
	SA	A	I	D	SD	NR
1. The Emphasis of Baptist Colleges’ training is towards autonomy	3	15	27	12	3	11
2. Clustering is one thing for Ministers and another for congregations	6	43	3	9	9	0
3. We suffer from “only within these four walls” attitude	3	13	14	29	10	1
4. Kingdom Attitudes founder on us/me centred attitudes	5	28	8	21	4	4
5. It is difficult to create co-operation in the face of competitive church attitudes	7	21	9	25	4	3
6. Attempts to cluster will result in big church takeover	0	6	7	34	21	2
7. Meeting for worship is all that clustering is about	0	4	3	34	25	2
8. Clusters and fraternals cannot co-exist	0	1	3	28	36	2

SA = strongly agree A = agree I = indifferent D = disagree SD = strongly disagree NR = no response

These responses produced very clear groupings of opinions which are emphasised in the table. It would appear that clustering is held to be a valuable activity by the majority of participants but that there is an awareness of the dangers and possible obstacles. However, it might be noted that negative answers need not imply that the opposite attitude is held.

It is also important to point out that the ministers attending the conference are, by the nature of the activity, those who have a positive attitude to associating with others. A more-general survey would be likely to produce a different pattern of responses.

Additional material

Who'd be a Baptist

The BU leaflet *Who'd be a Baptist* which includes the following comment in the section, "What makes a Baptist", sub-section 7. 'Associating together':

On the basis of the New Testament, Baptists believe that churches should not live in isolation from one another but rather be "interdependent", both as Baptists and as a part of the church universal.

Together we triumph

The EBA organised a one-day conference on 24 November 2005, *Together we triumph*, led by Revds Nigel Wright and Greg Haslam. The publicity explained:

Historically, Baptists related more to each other than is the case now. The culture of interdependency has moved to a life of dependency and in so doing has lost many of the associating and relational aspects of being a union of churches that were so important in the past

In this day we hope to explore how we

- Renew our mutual care of one another
- Re-establish the interdependency
- Allow the Spirit to speak through our Association and Union life together
- Revive the best of our historical accountability, vision and mission together.

Do come along and be a part of this event, bringing input and vision. Maybe together, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will discover a better, stronger and richer way of belonging to a Union together.

Among the comments made during the day were the following:

"What can the BU do for me/us?" is a bad question because it's "me" oriented. We should seek relationships because it's right, not to gain benefit.

"None of us is as wise as all of us." The local church can be competent, but not omniscient – all churches need help, none can say "I have no need of you."

God grants a diversity of ministries for building up the body.

We need to move away from the Greek educational model of handing out information and towards the Jewish model of the teacher setting and example.

A character change is needed if interdependence is to be achieved. Churches need to be humble and gentle, not proud, "and there's a lot of pride in all sorts of 'special' areas" that leads to a refusal to network with those 'lesser' believers.

Possible ways forward

We have done the research; we have found out that “Clustering” happens in some places, works well occasionally and is supportive and helpful where it works well.

But what can be done to encourage and develop it, both on an Association scale and more widely throughout the BUGB?

What follows really deals with Baptist clustering, as ecumenical clustering in town or village situations seems to be quite well established.

Points that need to be made

1. There are large churches that are, or feel they are, self-sufficient and see no purpose in clustering with other churches. These churches will probably never get involved in clusters.
2. Compulsory clustering imposed from “above” is a possibility (as in the Southern Counties Baptist Association project) but it is unlikely to be successful unless lots of research goes in to which churches already get together, and which areas are “geographically” suitable, let alone theologically similar.
3. It clearly helps if churches are close to one another – small congregations of elderly folk do not want to drive long distances or drive at night, so short distances to familiar places are more welcome.
4. There will be areas where clustering is almost impossible because of the distance between Baptist churches (e.g. Norfolk). Here ecumenical clusters would seem to be most sensible and suitable.
5. There has to be a purpose for clustering otherwise it becomes “just another meeting” and this explains why ministers fraternals work but congregational get-togethers are not so widely successful. Worship together is only part of the purpose of cluster meetings – there are many other purposes.
6. The responses to the EBA-wide questionnaires show that there is a range of negative attitudes to clustering, which stem from a range of experiences (positive and negative), hopes and fears.
7. Clusters and fraternals can co-exist; they do not have to include exactly the same churches but it may help if they do.
8. Very few churches have all the resources for a full range of ministries. Therefore some degree of co-operation is essential almost everywhere for improved mission and Kingdom building.
9. Someone has to make the initial move! The leaflet, “Consultancy, a way forward in Mission”, in which churches are encouraged to take part, could be a start. In this process churches are asked to consider not just involvement within the fellowship or community but also involvement with neighbouring churches. (One hopes that these other churches have also been involved in a Mission Consultancy).
10. If Mission Consultancy does happen, it is a start. If it does not, perhaps it should. If churches do not involve themselves in Mission Consultancy, is there anyone who could help them start the process of clustering?

Possible models for clustering

- a) One big church, several small churches – the big church provides the workers, skills and support that can be exercised, for the benefit of everyone involved, in the smaller churches, whilst never submerging the positive qualities of the smaller churches. Also there could be the opportunity for uplifting worship, in large numbers, at frequent intervals.
- b) A large church becoming a group of small churches in itself i.e. a Baptist Church meeting in several centres on Sunday mornings and at the central church in the evenings.
- c) Several similar churches facing similar situations – the suburban group or the rural villages group – where each church is trying to do the same thing in its own location, when it would be more sensible to combine efforts and resources to achieve one object at a time. This could be outreach in one church at a time, or all the churches engaging in a similar project (e.g., the “Who is this Jesus” video distribution).
- d) Struggling fellowships getting together to encourage one another and defeat the “Elijah Syndrome” (I, only I, am left!). This can lead on to ideas of mission and combined events moving them up to type c. above.
- e) The longitudinal group – along a main road or river valley, joining along a natural line of communication or similar geography.
- f) The theological group – by which we mean a grouping of churches that have the same type of worship, the same particular outlook, the same organisational structure
- g) The group where churches deliberately share their differences together so as to enhance their worship and Christian experience.

The problems and the benefits

What is clear is that there are several obstacles to be overcome, several areas where the subject needs higher profile, but also many advantages to be gained from successful clustering.

Obstacles to be overcome

These include:

1. A lack of any national, college or association structure for clustering
2. An apparent lack of encouragement for clustering from national, college or association personnel and an absence of suitable training.
3. A Ministerial Accreditation system that does not require ministers to inter-relate.
4. During the mentoring process a Newly Accredited Minister has such a high demand on their time that they are unable to cluster and therefore fail to create relationships that could be the basis of future (and present) support.
5. The unwillingness of churches and Ministers to step outside their comfort zones
6. The unwillingness of churches and Ministers to get involved with others, for whatever reason
7. Theological differences
8. The ignorance and lack of awareness identified by the questionnaire
9. The drawbacks identified by the questionnaire

Areas where clustering needs a higher profile

1. The topic of “Clustering” itself.
2. BUGB headquarters at Didcot
3. Baptist ministerial training colleges
4. The mentoring process for Newly Accredited Ministers
5. Association Executives and Councils
6. Churches, both large and small
7. Regional Ministers

Advantages to be gained from clustering

1. The greater glory of God through the unity of his people
2. Greater impact of mission through unity of purpose and practice
3. Greater sense of worship and wonder when we gather together
4. Visible signs of the kingdom in the unity of God’s people
5. Growth through strength together
6. Discovering God’s wider horizons, through our “Unity in Diversity”
7. Supporting the weak and downcast through shared resources, especially personnel
8. Helping insular churches participate more widely in God’s mission

(These lists are in no way to be considered exclusive or complete.)

Conclusion

The Study Group feels that it has, from the beginning, been working in an area of our Baptist Church life that has had very little previous attention at any level within the whole of the BUGB. There is obviously very little clear guidance from above, i.e. from BUGB, from the Colleges and from other Associations. Therefore this seems to be a pioneering piece of work where what is decided or presented within the EBA could form a useful resource for other regions.

Clustering was meant to be foundational in the national reorganisation of the BUGB, but overall this has failed. The implementation of the higher hopes of clustering has not yet occurred and it continues to be purely aspirational in many places. The number of vacant seats on the EBA Council might be reduced if the Council Constituencies were directly linked to “Clusters”. This may create a better means of engaging with the EBA and distributing information.

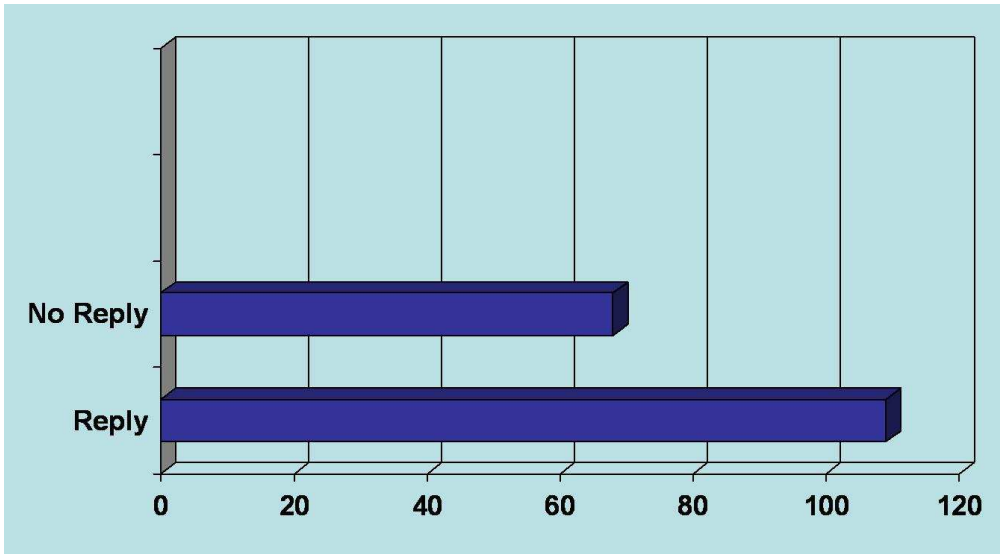
It is clear that no one model of “Clustering” will fit all circumstances and a degree of experimentation is clearly needed. Where clustering is successful there is a need to share the good news and encourage others to participate.

We feel that the topic of clustering needs to be included within the topic of mission, in terms of encouraging enhanced mission through mutual support.

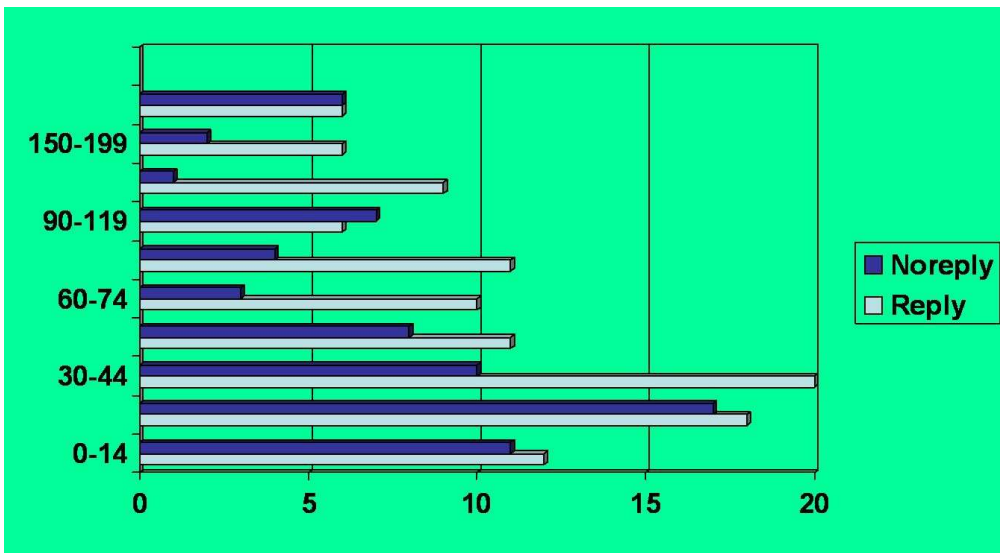
It seems to us that “Clustering” is clearly linked with God’s mission in the EBA.

Appendix 1

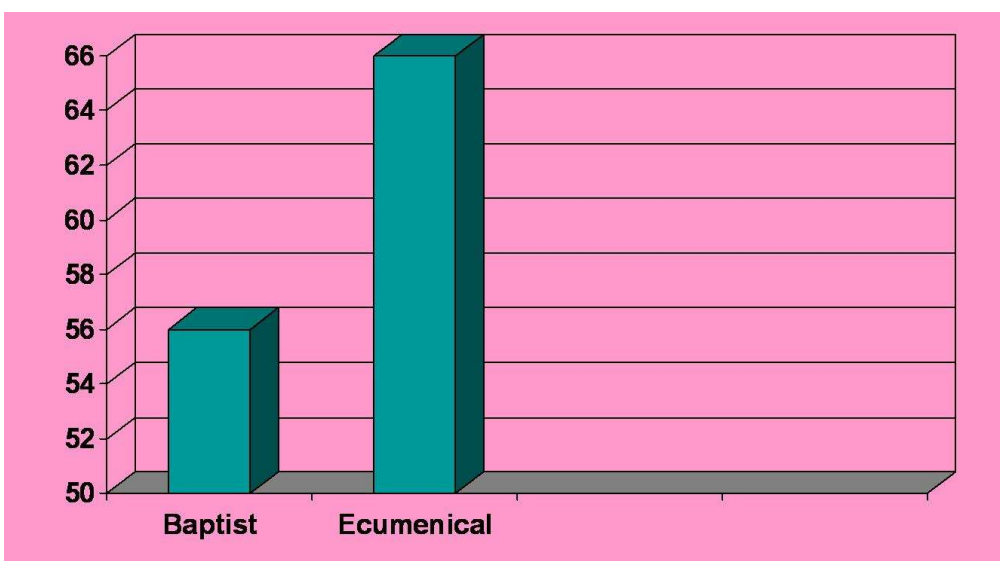
A graphical analysis of the responses to the Association survey follows.



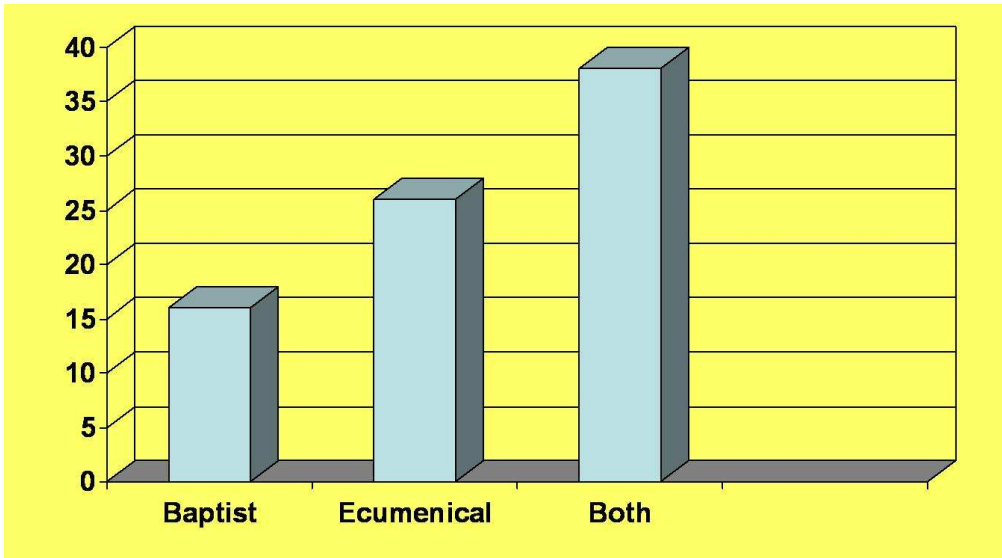
Response rate



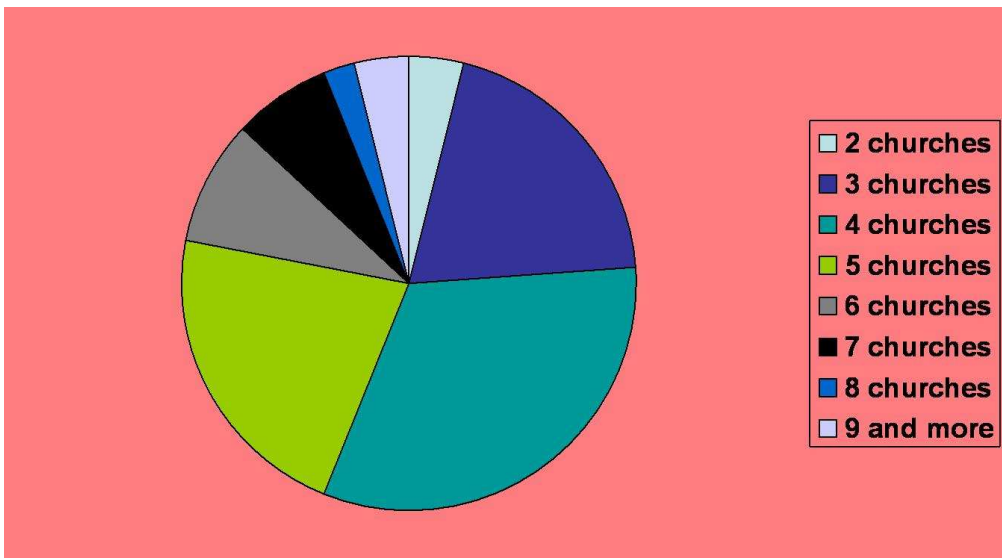
Responses by size categories



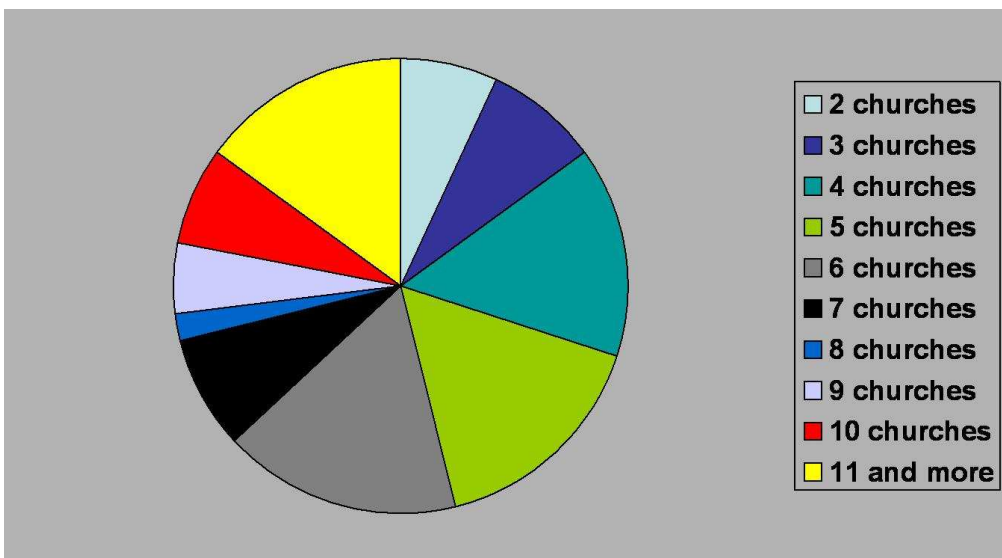
Involvement in Baptist and ecumenical clusters



Participation in clustering



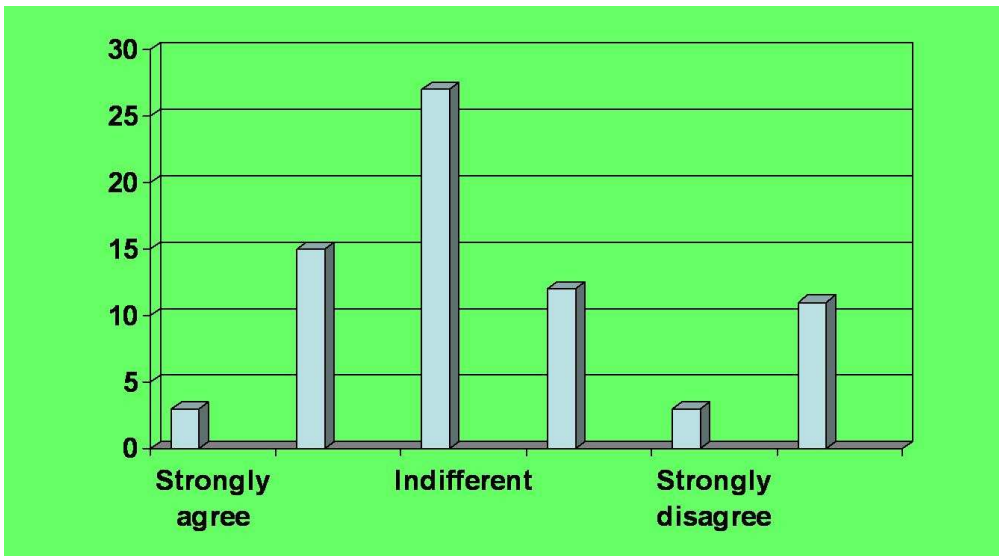
Baptist clusters by size



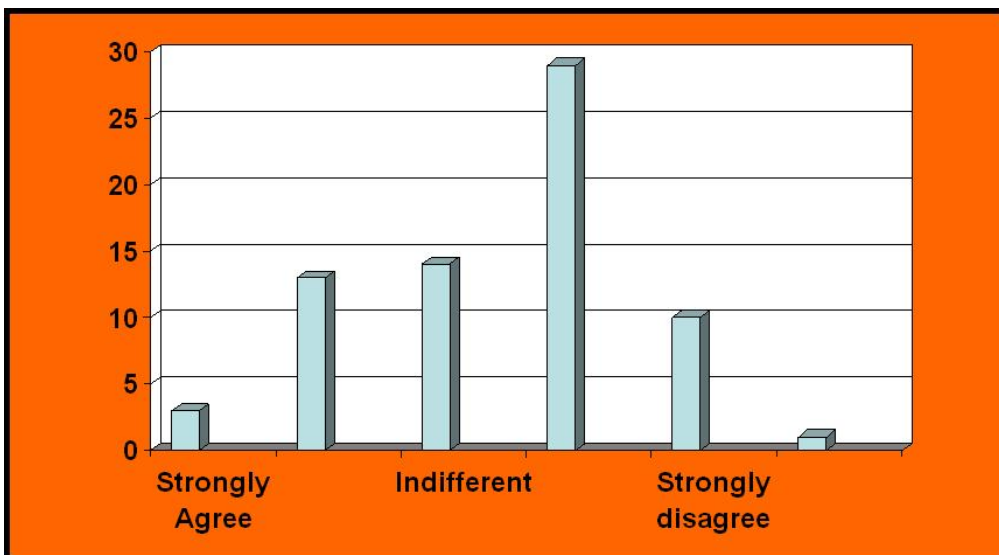
Ecumenical clusters by size

Appendix 2

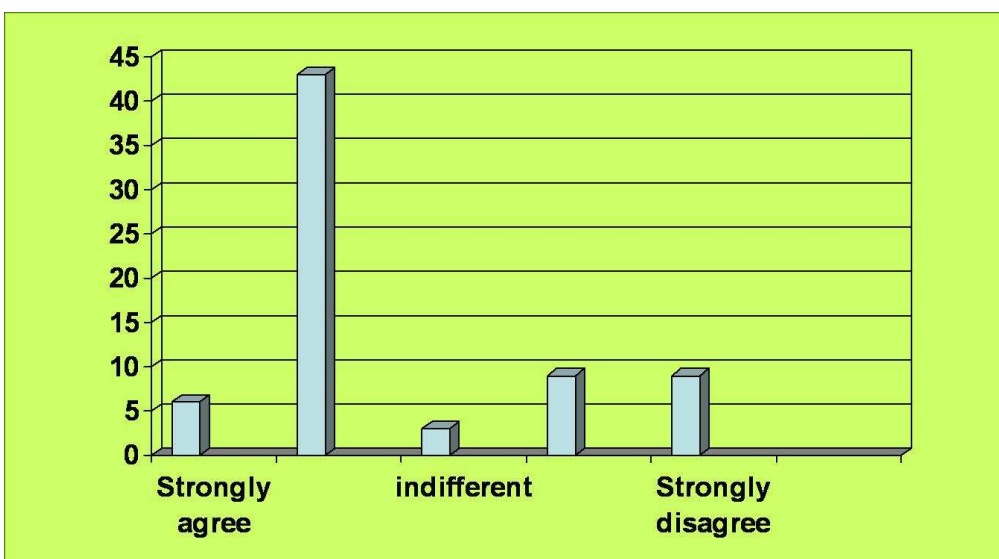
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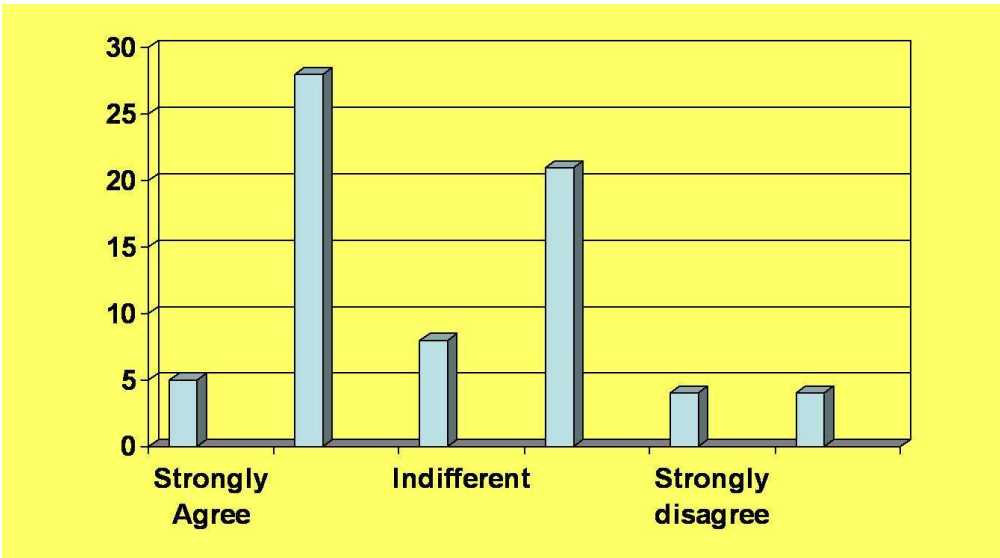
The emphasis of Baptist College training is towards autonomy



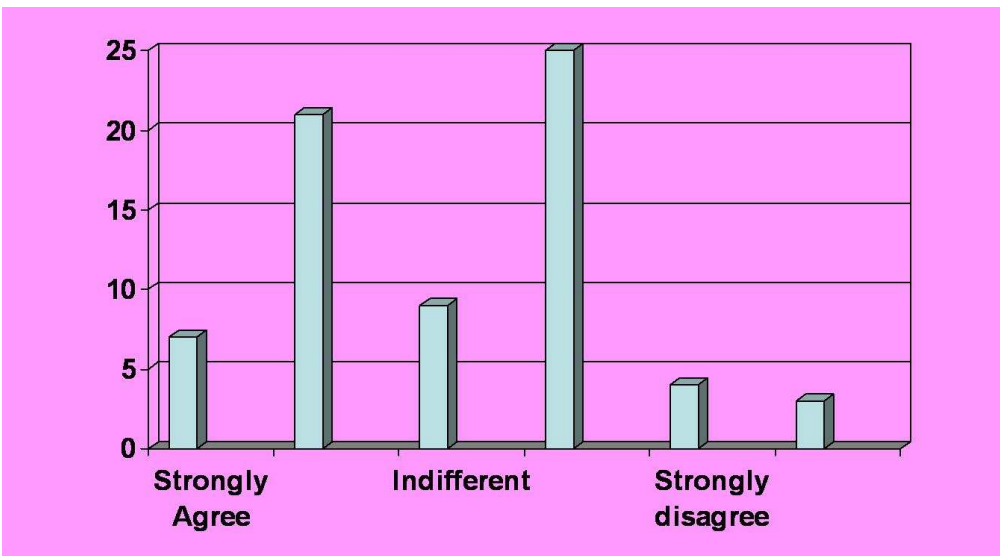
We suffer from "only within these four walls" malaise



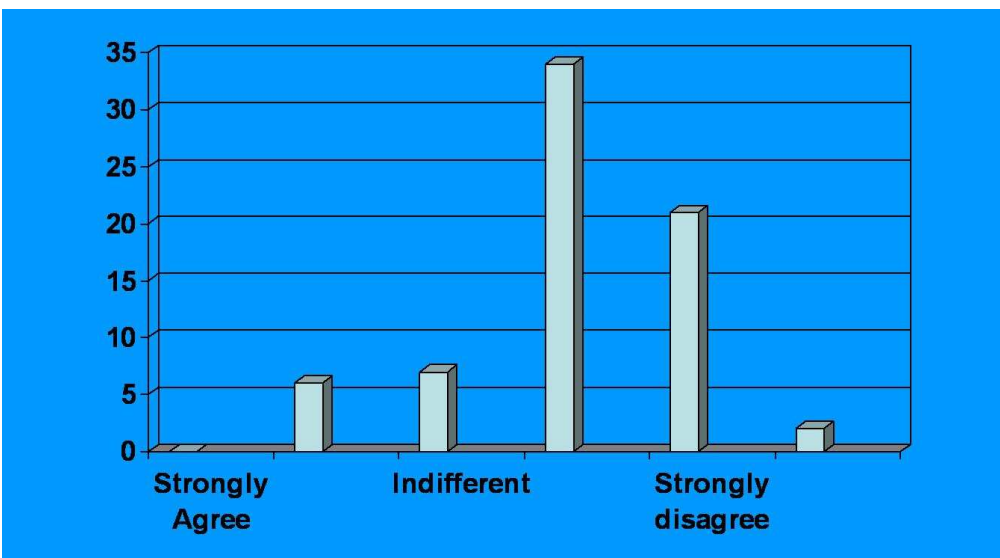
Clustering is one thing for ministers and another for congregations



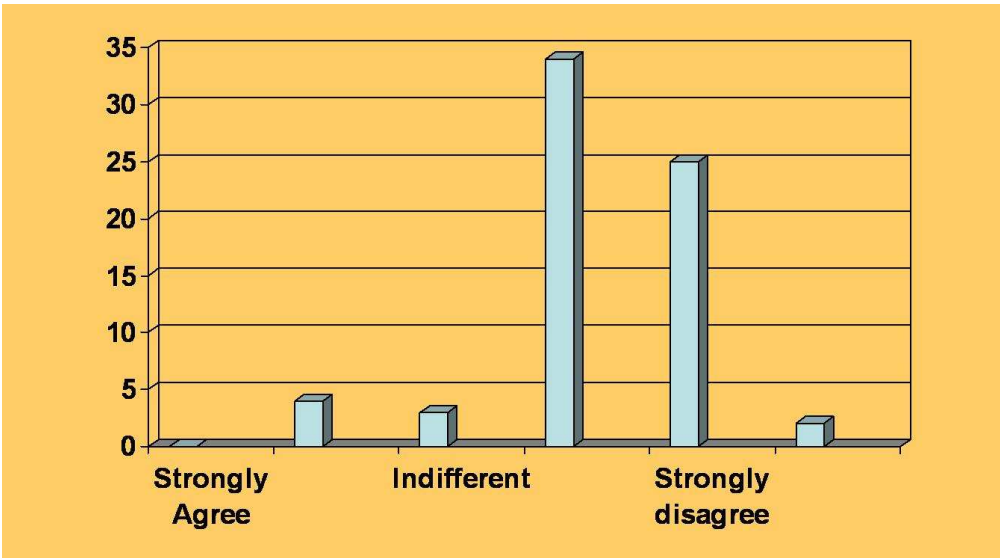
Kingdom attitudes for clustering founder on us/me centred attitudes



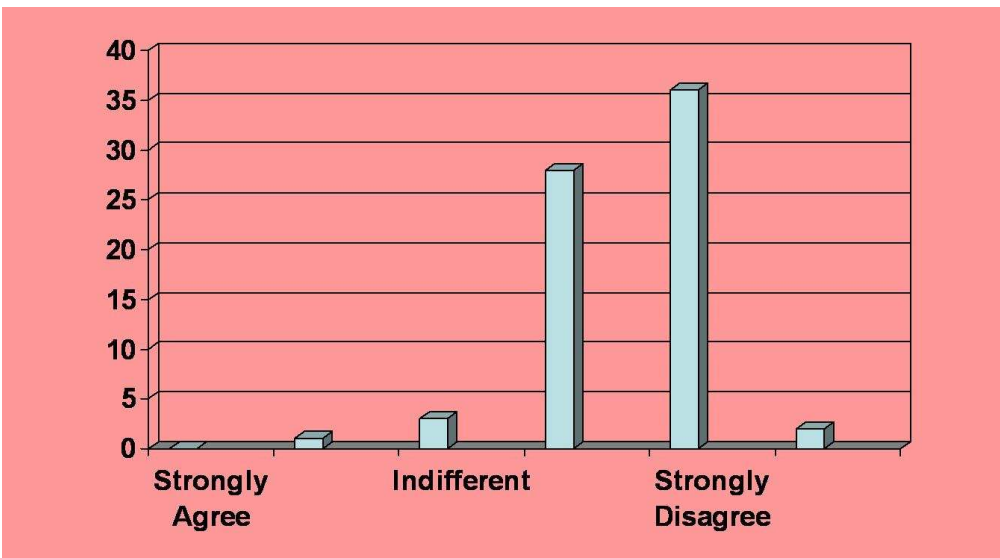
It is difficult to create co-operation in the face of competitive church attitudes



Attempts to cluster will result in "big" churches taking over



Meeting for worship is what clustering is all about



Clusters and fraternalists cannot co-exist