

## **INCREASED WELLBEING FROM SOCIAL INTERACTION IN A SECULAR CONGREGATION**

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A recent study explored whether secular congregations, like the [Sunday Assembly](#), can provide the mental health benefits often associated with traditional religious gatherings, such as increased life satisfaction, reduced loneliness, and stronger social bonds. A typical Sunday Assembly service lasts about an hour and follows a structured format, typically occurring twice monthly. Services include an introductory speech, group singing of popular songs (often with a live band or choir), a poetry reading, a TED-style guest talk, and an inspirational personal story. Beyond the main services, the Sunday Assembly offers frequent small-group activities based on shared interests, allowing for more personal, face-to-face interactions.

The study involved 92 participants, primarily from the U.S. (53%) and the U.K. (41%), with smaller representation from Australia (6%) and Canada (1%). Most were White (91%), with smaller percentages identifying as Hispanic/Latino (5%) and other races (4%). Participants ranged in age from 23 to 73 (average age 45), with 58% identifying as women. Over six months, participants completed monthly online surveys measuring wellbeing, loneliness, and the number of close relationships, alongside their engagement in Sunday Assembly and other social activities.

Researchers found that participation in Sunday Assembly small-group activities positively impacted overall wellbeing, particularly among men. In contrast, regular attendance at Sunday services and participation in non-Sunday Assembly social activities (such as sports or volunteer groups) did not significantly correlate with improved wellbeing. In addition, Sunday Assembly participation had no significant effect on loneliness. Participants reported that 16% of their close relationships were with people they met through the Assembly, suggesting it serves as a meaningful source of social connection.

Informal socializing before and after services, like chatting over refreshments or helping with setup, emerged as key moments for forming friendships and fostering a sense of belonging. These unstructured interactions were identified by participants as more impactful than formal aspects of the service. However, one structured component, group singing, stood out as especially valuable for cultivating a sense of community.

The study suggests that secular communities like the Sunday Assembly can provide some of the social and emotional benefits similar to those found in religious congregations, particularly through direct, small group engagement. These groups may support the wellbeing of individuals who do not engage in traditional religious settings. Still, further research is needed to understand how such communities can be improved to provide greater emotional, physical, and practical benefits to members. Future studies should also examine how secular congregations can better engage diverse communities.

**Thinking of your own experiences, have you found a sense of community or support in non-traditional settings, like a hobby group or secular-focused organization? Feel free to reply all and share your thoughts with the group!**