Recent discussions of social capital have begun to distinguish between ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital (Woolcock and Narayan, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital is usually characterised as having dense, multi-functional ties and strong but localised trust. In contrast, bridging social capital is characterised by weak ties, as described by Granoveter (1986), as well as a thin, impersonal trust of strangers.

Woolcock and Narayan (2001) argue that while localised, bonding social capital operates as effective defensive strategies against poverty, the necessary condition for real economic development entails a shift to other looser networks. Thus a shift from ‘getting by’ to ‘getting ahead’ entails a shift from bonding to bridging networks, thus suggesting a negative relationship between bridging and bonding. There is some empirical support for Woolcock and Narayan’s suggestion of a negative relationship (Swain, 2000; Portes, 1998) however it is likely that the relationship is more varied than this. Contrary to predictions, Leonard & Onyx (2003) found that close multi-functional ties were preferred for both bonding (within group) and bridging (between group) connections, where bridging occurred through a chain of strong ties.

The present research provides more intricate empirical examination of the relationship between bridging and bonding. There may be a moderate, optimal level of bonding that is needed for bridging because people cannot reach out to others until they have a level of security in their own identity group. Alternatively both forms of social capital may be independent, with the degree of each varying according to the values of the group or community.

The data set used for the quantitative analysis was National Church Life Survey I, a random sample of 2,710 Christian church attendees across Australia. Survey I which focuses on community involvement and concepts that have been related to social capital and civil society. The survey asks about membership and voluntary work in non-religious community organisations, involvement in social welfare and social justice issues, friendship networks, sense of optimism and the rate of social change, trust in people generally and in public institutions. Other questions give a strong indication of a respondent’s level of bonding within the congregation, for example involvement in congregational activities length and frequency of attendance, valuing in-group activities and a sense of belonging. Another significant aspect of this data is that it asks for the respondent’s faith orientation (e.g. traditional, evangelical, liberal). Different orientations differ in their values (Hughes, Bellamy & Black, 1998) and thus may vary in their degree of bridging and bonding and the relationship between them.

Thus the main research question was: What is the relationship between bonding within the congregation and bridging between the congregation and the wider community and does the relationship vary with faith orientation?

The results revealed a positive relationship between bonding and bridging social capital with differences among the faith orientations. Traditionalist, Moderate and Liberal respondents were significantly higher on Bridging only. Charismatics or Pentecostals were higher on Bonding only and New Age people were low on both. The Evangelical or Reformed group had average to high bridging scores even for the
low bonders. Within the largest faith orientation, Catholic or Anglo-Catholic most are not particularly involved, with low scores on bridging and bonding.

The differences among the faith identities reinforce the importance of beliefs and values. The results suggest that there is no simple fixed relationship between bridging and bonding social capital because the relationship will vary with the values and orientation of the group.