

ARTICLE

Regional and/or local: Can church be present in close proximity and in regional cooperation at the same time?¹

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Abstract

This article deals with the efforts of the churches in Germany to rebuild the structures of church life in view of the loss of members and resources. The experiences with structural reforms of the last 20 years are evaluated. A critical light is shed on the associated danger of prioritizing structural issues and losing sight of theological aspects as well as missional calling. In addition, structural reforms are creating ever larger units; the life of the local community is drying up more and more. In contrast, it is proposed here to pay equal attention to local and regional church work, to promote the maturity of the local community (including in worship services without a pastor), to promote regional cooperation and to focus on the church's mission to serve the Kingdom of God in local and regional social spaces. Missional ecclesiology proves to be a critical and constructive corrective to a church reform that is only oriented towards structures.

Keywords: Regional church cooperation, Structural church reforms, Missional ecclesiology, Decline of the “Volkskirche” (People’s Church)

1 Introduction

This paper deals with dilemmas of fundamental changes of church life. Due to the decline of members and resources, the churches in Germany restructure church life and services and bring together several local congregations in greater regional units. This strategy causes controversial debates. Local churches complain about the loss of proximity to their people. They expect more cuts – in waves. Today’s

1 This article was first presented as a lecture at the ICEF Conference from 5 to 9 June 2024 in Halle (Germany). The oral style was largely retained.

solutions could be tomorrow's problems. The idea of a "regio-local" church tries to reconcile *the idea* of a local church which is close to its people with *the need* to save resources. Under the bottom line this concept is based on the idea of self-employed local churches; it recommends encouraging the local Christian people to take over responsibility for local church life and to concentrate activities on local worship and gift- or charisma-oriented services. This is in tension to the parochial principle that has been customary in the Evangelical Churches in Germany to date. Its aim is the sacramental and pastoral "care" of all church members in a certain area, who are automatically listed as members of a local church when they choose their place of residence. This parochial way of organizing church in Germany is under severe pressure, because the number of people who are members of the church is rapidly declining. This dynamic has an immediate effect on resources, like money and paid staff. Thus, the German Evangelical Churches are looking for new attempts and ways of being church and organizing local ecclesial life, which is strategically linked to a more regional level. Ideally, the regional and the local level of being church are deeply connected and support each other. This is the basic idea of regio-local church development. For the future of the church at least two things are needed: one the one hand, a regional ecclesial strategy is important. On the other hand, vital and inviting church communities that are places of attraction for their surroundings are crucial for being church, where people are.

Which paths lead to a *good* future for the church? We should pay particular attention to the relationship between *local* communities and the *regional* church.

2 Mission statements of the church

We start with the question of what really is meant, when talking about the church whose path into the future we are looking for. I want to remind us of three key statements.

First, Church exists for the sake of the gospel. In 1530 the Reformers said in very concise terms what is important when talking about the church (Cf. Amt der VELKD 2013; Confessio Augustana, 1530: Art. VII). The church is the assembly of believers. In this assembly people should hear and experience the gospel. They should hear who Jesus Christ is for them, they should hear that their lives are sustained by grace and mercy, that they are justified before God, regardless of what they achieve, but also free from all their guilt. We can put it this way: that they are justified by grace and thus free to live a life of faith, love and hope. Church is the gathering where people come together to hear and celebrate this gospel. And to emphasize that, the Reformers tell us something else: In order to be a church and to get along with others who are also a church, it is not necessary to agree with each other on all the ceremonies instituted

by people. With this statement the reformers tell us what is mandatory and where we are more flexible (Cf. Abraham 2007).

We are fundamentally bound to what makes faith possible and brings the church into being: the gospel, which the Holy Spirit brings to the people through word and sacrament and through which he calls the people of God together. This is what Church is for.

But we are fundamentally free to adapt, rebuild and redesign the church's "ceremonies". Ceremonies are structures, liturgies, church professions, forms of community, financing, size and layout of congregations – always in connection with the fundamental task of making the gospel accessible. We are free to adapt, rebuild and redesign. If circumstances so require, we are even *obliged* to do so. It is not completely irrelevant how we arrange our ceremonies, but our ceremonies can be arranged in different ways and our current ways can be changed. Perhaps one could say with John 12.24: Even *ceremonies* sometimes have to die like a grain of wheat *so that* the *service* of a church can be fruitful again.

My second image comes from the Anglican Church, the Church of England. Here we can see that the Church is a creature of the Word of God (*creatura verbi*). Figure 1 shows more precisely how the church that hears and celebrates the gospel will live. Its life consists of four relationships (Moynagh 2012: 99–119). She should maintain, develop and expand these relationships:

- It is (1) the relationship with God ("up"), to whom she listens, to whom she prays and whom she praises.
- It is (2) the *inward* relationship ("in"): those who have heard the gospel cannot be indifferent to one another. They become sisters and brothers. They may be highly different, but they share the same faith. They are there for each other. They live in some form of fellowship.
- It's (3) the relationship to the outside ("out"): the *inward* community is important, but it doesn't exist for its own sake. We are on the Lord's mission, and this means we are on our way to the people in our world. The church shall bear witness to the gospel and pass it on, in word and deed. She should introduce people to faith in Christ and recommend it to their hearts. It is "the universal task of the church: to witness to Jesus Christ and to make disciples in the challenging context of secularized Europe" (Paas 2016: 240).
- And it's (4) the relationship "downwards" ("of"). Every congregation is a *church*, but no congregation is the *whole* Church. That's why local churches are connected to other local churches. This is important for our topic: local churches cannot be indifferent to one another. They form a network of communities that share faith in Christ – even if our ceremonies differ significantly from one another (Herbst and Pompe 2022).

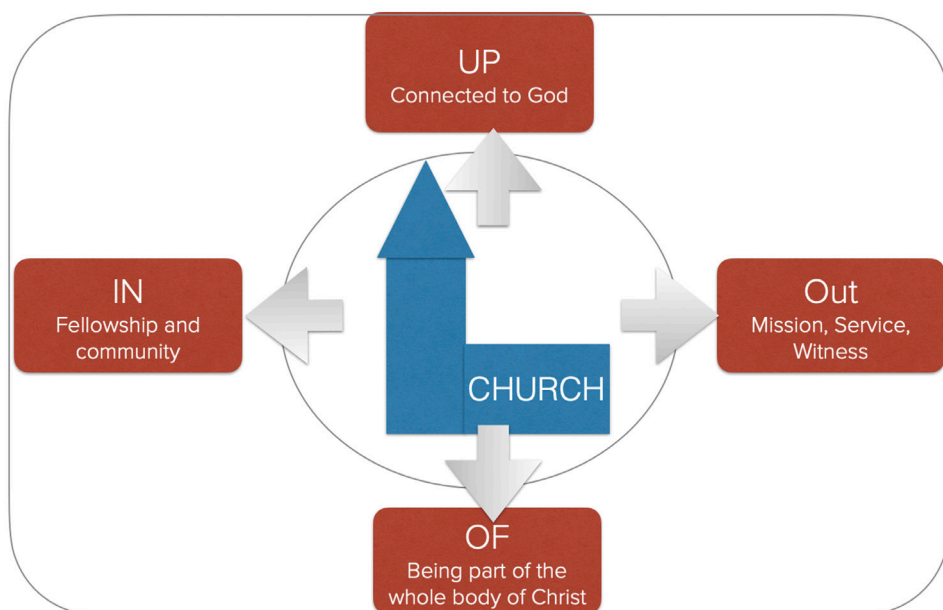


Figure 1 The four sets of relationships

A congregation thrives when it nurtures these four relationships, striving to grow and mature in each of these four relationships.

Thirdly, in Ephesians 4 we read (4.11-14, NIV): “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Cf. Barth 1974; Böttrich 1999; Hofius 2006).

In the church there are people who take on special tasks. Here in Ephesus there are five. There are apostles and prophets, but there are also evangelists, pastors and teachers. There could be others (with other titles) too, that’s not the point here. We can roughly imagine what they do, the founders and preachers, the pastors and the missionaries, the teachers. And today we say very consciously: there are men and women in these and similar tasks. But the point is this: These people with their special talents are *a gift* to the community. But why? *So that* they take good care of the community and do everything a local church does in their place? No, the apostle puts it like this: These *special* ministries of pastors, teachers, evangelists and so on exist *so that* the church, that is the saints, the baptized and gifted, *so that* the people in the church are equipped: encouraged, trained, empowered, accompanied. And then the church should be built up through this service of the saints, which means

the relationships should be maintained upwards and downwards, inwards and outwards. The pastors and deacons, the musicians and educators, the youth leaders and administrators (and other full time, paid staff) do not *replace* the actions of the fellowship of believers, but rather they *equip* the “saints”.

3 What we are currently experiencing as a church: On the way to become a minority

One central insight of the latest (sixth) church membership survey in the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD 2023) is that we are not simply becoming *smaller* at a high level, but that we are experiencing a *massive shrinkage*. The number of people *actually leaving* church remains at a very high level. The *willingness* to leave, particularly among young people, remains high. Only 35 % of our members rule out leaving the church. Fifty years ago, it was 83 % (EKD 2023: 57). The Church is becoming smaller at a rapid pace.

Today we are interested in local church communities and the regional network of churches. In local churches people often feel the decline somewhat late, because the local worship services and the groups and meetings can still function quite well and may be well attended. Maybe they have fewer confirmation candidates, maybe slightly fewer baptisms and weddings. But at the bottom line it feels normal. And the active members are faithful.

That's because the shrinkage is starting at the edges of the church, among those who were once unquestionably evangelical without attending church every Sunday. But even as rather passive members they thought it was a good idea to be Protestant and to celebrate the major transitions in life with church, like baptism, confirmation, marriage, burial. They also sent their children to Protestant kindergartens and attended worship services on Christmas Eve. The number of these people is now decreasing at a relatively high rate. So we are crumbling mainly at the edges.

You can picture it like this:

The majority of people in our country live secular lives. It is becoming more and more normal not to belong to church and not to share Christian beliefs. The new normal exerts gentle pressure on those who still belong – in one way or another – to church. But this pressure affects the fringe of the minority – not the core of the convinced and active (Müller, Pollack and Pickel 2013).

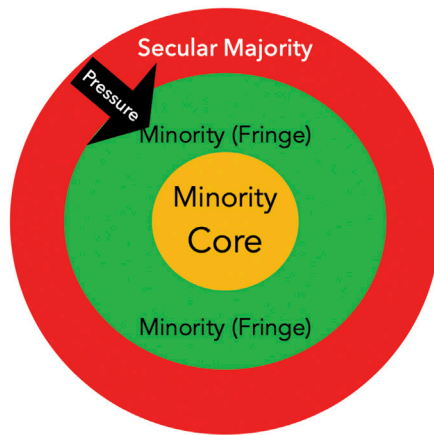


Figure 2 “Pressure”

We are on the way from a “Volkskirche” (people’s church) (Huber 2003) to a still considerable but minority church. In the long run, the church will be composed of those who are convinced and more or less involved – and that is at least partly good news. That’s why we don’t immediately see the demolitions on site: the convinced and active people are there – and mostly remain so. But the “naturalness” of faith is lost.

This minority church will operate in a highly secular environment. The latest Church Membership Survey shows the trend towards a secular society that doesn’t know what to do with the Christian message. Among Germans, 56% say that their worldview and their way of life are completely secular. In other words, they can make ends meet without some remaining Christian traditions (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2023: 15-23). They still trust and welcome the church’s *social* engagement, the services for the poor, the old and the sick. But the *religious* content hardly resonates with the majority of people. There is no need to mention that the abuse scandals are increasing the distrust of church (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2023: 51-7).

Philosopher Charles Taylor looks at the change in Western society from a condition in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which believing in God is simply one option among others – even for religious people (Taylor 2007: 25).

The church is therefore faced with the question of how to cope with this situation. It is not easy to hold on to faith and stick to the church when fewer and fewer people in your environment do so.

Which attitudes can support us? It wouldn’t be good if church people resigned and thought: Now it’s the end for the church. Nor does it help to ungratefully overlook everything that is vital and thriving in the church. Of course, we shouldn’t sugar-coat the massive decline because the churches are still full at Christmas. And we

shouldn't fix our hopes on the past and dream that things could maybe go back to the way they used to be.

It would be more helpful to accept the new situation as *God's instruction*. Throughout its history and throughout the world, the fellowship of Jesus has often been a minority, even a *persecuted* minority. And in many cases that didn't stop them from hearing, celebrating and sharing the gospel. Even as a minority the church can be *church*, with one another, before God and still for all people in our world.

But there is also something painful about it: namely a yes to the fact that the "ceremonies" must change, that the church will be different from what Christians have been familiar with and loved for so long. The dominant mental image of church is the local community with its church, its parsonage, in which "the lights should be on", and the Sunday service that "our pastor celebrates with us". This is a possible, beautiful image of church, but it is not the one and only possible image; it is actually about "ceremonies".

And this brings us to the painful transformations that the church is currently going through:

4 A painful transformation

As a result, the Church is not only becoming smaller, but also poorer. The resources are becoming scarcer. But this is *now* also being felt in the local communities and is the core of the problem local church people are dealing with today. This core concerns precisely the central mental idea of the church as a local community to which people belong because of their place of residence. The traditional system of the parish or local church community ensures that there are no "church-free spots" in our country, so to speak. There is always and everywhere a church nearby, with short distances and pretty much the same programme for everyone. And the local priest is the central player. Around him or her, church life revolves. Without her or him, church life withers.

However, the local churches are becoming smaller in terms of membership. Their resources are shrinking. And there are fewer young people for pastoral ministry. And this has resulted in structural reforms across the country for many years. And the central strategy of these structural reforms is regionalization (Ebert and Pompe 2014). Communities, parishes and places of worship are becoming increasingly united in the region. It begins with cooperation, and it continues with joint worship service plans and united parish offices. At the end there is often a complete merger.

You can see this as a fictional example (Figure 3):

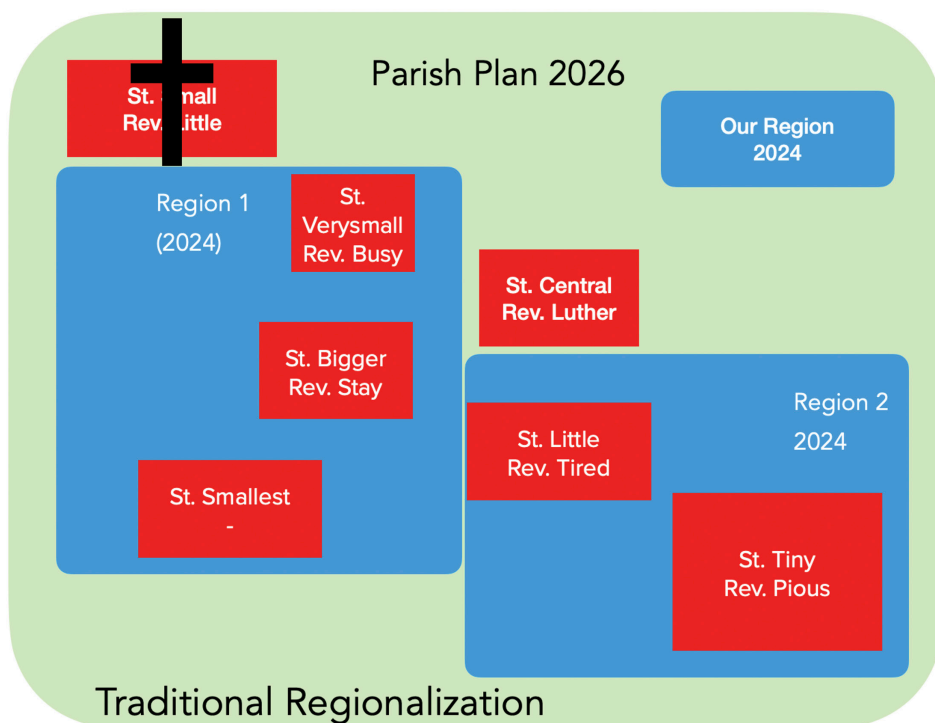


Figure 3 Regionalization

In a rural area, the independent local churches are united step by step. And today's parish plan is usually just a prelude to tomorrow's parish plan. Michael Domsen puts it this way: The "stroke rate" is increasing: "As soon as one structural reform is implemented, the next one has to be initiated."

Put differently, there is a double movement of contraction and expansion: people and resources are *shrinking*, districts and areas of responsibility are being *expanded*. But the expansion means that not only resources and people are shrinking on site, but also the presence of community life, the number of worship services, the visits of "our" parish priest. The processes are more or less consensual, but hardly anyone

is really happy with them. There are some features that stand out in the strategy of regionalization:

- On the one hand, there is a well-intentioned desire to maintain area-wide provision of church services in the region. However, the decisive measurement is and remains the number of available pastoral persons. When there is still a pastor, there is still a congregation, perhaps only with part-time staff and a somewhat reduced programme, but it still exists. The principle is that of comprehensive coverage.
- On the other hand, the structural processes turn out to be basically endless. There are endless seasons of this series. One parish plan comes and goes, and the next one follows quickly. The compressions and expansions seem to never end, so no one can be sure that the worst is behind them at some point. And that has a high potential for frustration.

The processes primarily focus on restructuring the structure. I'll come back to this later: the *structural* often dominates, while the question of relationships with one another or praying together and asking about God's promises and orders takes a back seat.

In addition, not all hopes for relief are fulfilled: life will by no means become easier after a structural reform, the number of meetings will not (as promised) be smaller and concentration on genuine spiritual tasks will not be easier. There just doesn't seem to be an end. And the price is high: the church presence is decreasing. The dominant principle is dismantling. Who would have the courage to try out new things at the same time, hope for growth and give space, money and resources to new ideas? But that is exactly what is needed.

The former bishop of the church province of Saxony, Axel Noack, said: "A ghost is haunting the church – the specter of regionalization" (Noack 2012).

This motivated us, together with Hans-Hermann Pompe, the former head of the EKD-Centre for Mission in the Region, to take a different approach. And that leads to the idea of regio-local church development:

5 One possible approach: regio-local church development

The church in 2030 will either have continued the process of downsizing/enlarging undeterred and in many places will have reduced church life to homeopathic dosages. Or it will have reconciled the idea of the *local community* with the idea of the larger *regional community* and thus gain new opportunities for action, enable relief and promote a spirit of hope alongside the dismantling. This is how the neologism "regio-local" was born (Herbst and Pompe 2022, 2023).

This is not a bypass that simply saves us from having to make cuts. Nothing will just stay the same. But it is a different approach that relies on the fact that regional cooperation does not have to be the end of local religious fellowship.

When it comes to regio-local church development, we are not talking about a *method*, but rather about an *attitude*.

The first thing is to look away from your own church steeple and towards the community of communities in the region. In the New Testament the same word for church, namely “ekklesia”, is used both for the small home group and for the local congregation, but also for the entire church in a region. The church in the region is *a church*, it is more than just an administrative unit. Our new attitude should focus on the region as a shared mission. The local churches and the full-time and volunteer workers, are responsible together in this area for the Christian faith to be passed on, with the Augsburg Confession (Art. VII), for the gospel to be accessible to as many people as possible, and with the Anglican idea of church, that the community can develop upwards and downwards, inwards and outwards. They are collectively responsible for this. This is what they pray, plan and work for – together. Regional church development calls for exchange, mutual trust, willingness to work together for the common good, for prayer and fresh ideas and the treasure hunt for all the good gifts that have been entrusted to the church here and there.

At the same time, the church teams say goodbye to toxic attitudes. There are a lot of things that must be put under the cross. These are the old stories about why someone can't go with someone else under any circumstances, the pride that we have to handle it alone, the worry, our small community could be coming under the wheels, the prejudice that the other person is far too liberal or unbearably pious or too progressive or too conservative, the arrogance that we alone know how things can work with the church, the first calls for self-preservation (“Make my church great again”). Likewise: This includes not least the willingness to put aside envy, and to orient oneself towards the common goal.

Hopefully they will cultivate a slightly different culture together. They are still dealing with changes in structures. But unlike many structural debates, this is about the harmony of structure, mission and relationship (see Figure 4). And they can look at two aspects of this complex picture:²

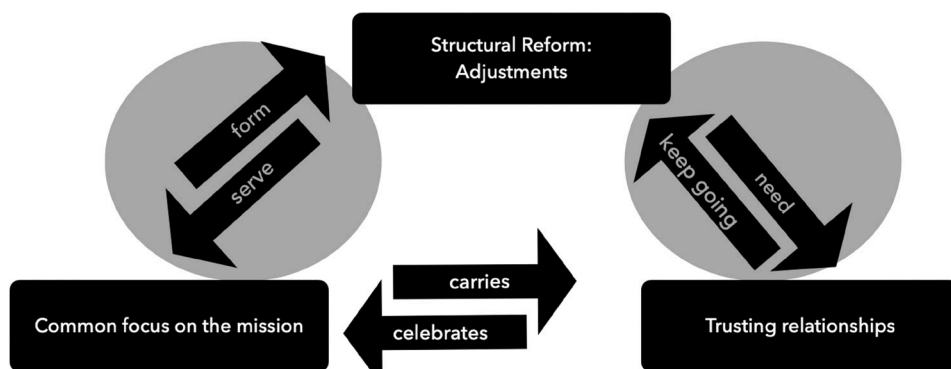


Figure 4 Structure, mission and relationships

- On the one hand they can see that structural processes always work better when trusting relationships have developed. But that means: If everybody has invested in a healthy relationship. When they have taken the time for talking person to person and for getting to know each other. When trust could grow.
- And on the other hand: When they have agreed on their mission. They often have structural discussions and try to save buildings or places of worship. Nothing to say against it! But it would be better if they had clarity about what they are tasked with doing in this region – and then asked what structures they need for this. Designers say: *Form follows function*.

But then there are six questions that local and regional church people discuss with each other, in their local communities and together in the region (Figure 5). But behind every question there is a challenge!

² The idea and illustration were developed by Hans-Hermann Pompe.



Figure 5 Six questions

- What can we do to *build good relationships* with the other communities and their paid staff/volunteers and to allow trust to grow?
- Where can we *cooperate better* voluntarily? What would be easier and more successful for us if we cooperated with others? *Voluntary* is an important keyword: When things get tight, everything works better if we have already had good experiences together. This can happen in very different areas. Maybe a nurture course like Alpha is too expensive and exhausting for one local church alone, but with three neighbouring congregations it can work. In Pomerania (East Germany), the confirmation classes were often so small that even urban local churches had no more than 1 or 2 candidates. This led to a joint confirmation course for the inner-city churches in Greifswald. Or perhaps several parishes can work together to employ a curator for construction and finances and to relieve the administrative burden on the local priests.
- What is our *profile*? What are we particularly passionate about? What are we good at too? What would we never give up? Then that is what we should continue to focus on. Theological profiles also belong here! Regio-local church development says: Our differences do not have to separate us. Our diversity is our strength: It allows different people to feel at home here *or* there. Profiles should not be levelled. We can confidently say: We are so charismatic, so liberal, so progressive, so traditionally Lutheran – and that's a good thing. That's just how *we* are, and others don't have to be like us. We are strong in music, we have a special calling for families, and we are invested in evangelism, we are passionate about working with refugees.

- The consequence of this approach and perhaps the downside of this idea is hidden in this fourth question: This is about saying goodbye to the idea that in a church region every local church or congregation should *offer a full programme*: Everything everywhere and mostly the same for everyone. By trying to offer everything to everyone, we are over-exerting ourselves. In church reform processes this insight is gradually emerging: to say goodbye to the claim of full spiritual care. We don't have to do everything! What do we need to do to be a *church*? Something like worship service of course! But is Sunday at 10 the only proper time? We live from the gospel and from communal prayer. We want to maintain relationships in some way: upwards, inwards, outwards, downwards. Do we need our own choir? Do we need our own scout work? If we knew: We don't have to keep everything in reserve, because the other church a few kilometres from here offers exactly that, because it is their strength and passion. We could get rid of this burden.
- Can we then imagine that our region will become a kind of *ecclesiastical Schengen area*? What is that? The European Schengen process allows free border crossing back and forth within the Schengen area. This means for our church life: We say yes to people in our region settling there, becoming at home there, and getting involved wherever it suits them. This also follows from our specific profiles and the waiving of a full programme. We do not view Christians as the property of the local church. We are *one* church in the region with *many* local congregations. And we are happy when people choose their best place to live their spiritual life with others. In the end, what matters is *that* people find a spiritual home, but not *where* they find it or that they necessarily find it with us. We allow border traffic without tedious passport controls. But that means something else: We no longer see ourselves as a community in terms of our boundaries. We see ourselves as a community based on our profile, which attracts people who are looking for exactly that in our region. We respect that late modern people seek options and make their own choices, including church ones. Perhaps we now feel what it means that the grain of wheat must first die before it bears fruit.

So, what can our region look like? In the diversity of communities? Not just with different profiles, also with *different structures*. There are larger, central, well-equipped communities ("resource churches") (Philipp 2022: 315–70) that are highly visible and publicly attractive. Well-functioning parish churches play their role in coexistence. There are also fresh expressions of church that focus on specific topics or target groups (Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004; Müller 2016; Lings 2018). In this respect too, the position of the parish church is not abolished, but it is reduced in size. The church also tries out new forms of community wherever local or regional initiatives are available (Moynagh, 2024). And the mode changes from official permission to willing enablement. And then there are also smaller communities without full-time paid staff. There may be a small communitarian fellowship in a former rectory. There

is a diaconal initiative, which also includes fellowship through word and sacrament. There is a youth church and a music church. There are analogue and digital forms of community. All of this can be expressed if we ask each other how we can *together* give as many people in the region as possible as many opportunities as possible to explore the gospel, take hold of it and live out the gospel in community with others.

An ecumenical horizon is helpful as well: Is there a Methodist community here or there? Can't it too be part of the regio-local landscape? Can't the worship service of the YMCA, which has long seen itself as a sort of church, in a village be the worship service for this village (Figure 6)? To show the biggest annoyance once again: The church 'Schengen area' has long been a reality: people vote. They do it when shopping, choosing a school, joining clubs. And they also do it by choosing the church that suits them! Faith and church loyalty cannot be taken for granted. They are not handed down but chosen, considered as an option and affirmed. Being a Christian is not a given. We should reintroduce and suggest it to a religiously inexperienced population, recommend it and practise it with people. But then we need diversity of access for such different people. We need the 'Schengen area'. We need it so that we can be grateful about everyone who is won, either by us or by our neighbours. This is how the church grows, with one *here* and one *there*, one by one. One local church alone cannot do this. But we can use our profile to ask: Who could *we* attract? Who will gain from us what he or she needs for their own journey of faith?

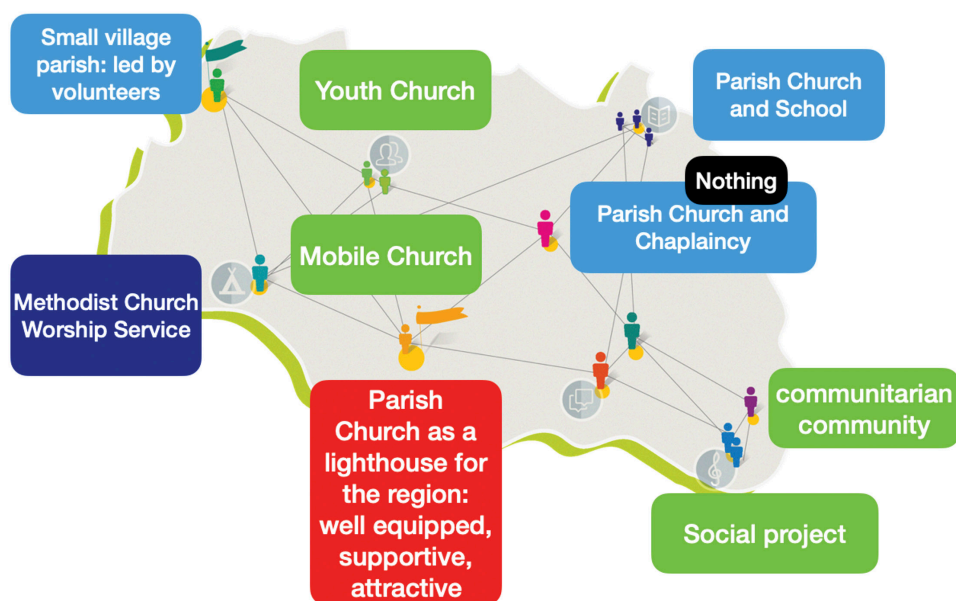


Figure 6 The 'new region'

6 Who is supposed to do all that? For example, the worship service ...

There are still some loose ends. Forgoing the full programme, regional cooperation – this saves resources! But there is not more money or more people, especially not more pastors, youth workers, deacons or musicians. There's still something missing.

Churches have lived for a long time with very comfortable facilities and more than sufficient resources. They have simply practised and enjoyed area-wide provision with church services. But in many places, not everywhere but in many places, they have also got the local church folk used to being something like 'assisted living for the baptized'. They have been less successful in promoting the 'priesthood of all believers' with local church folk using their gifts, as was intended in Ephesians 4, where leading ministries equip the saints and the saints do the work in building up the church. Every baptized person is also a charismatic, entrusted with a gift, with a measure of strength and time. Regio-local church development will not work if churches do not manage the turnaround from a supported to an independent congregation, from assisted living to team sports.

But this doesn't happen by appeal. Just like in Ephesians 4, there is a need for guidance, formation, encouragement and empowerment. And that is where churches should concentrate their efforts. In everything they do, they should ask: Who can we do it with? What can a team be formed for? Where am I not needed as a full-time employee? And what measures do we need to take to ensure that people in our community work happily and competently? Who do we need to train and who can help us? And who should we no longer burden? Can we perhaps tackle this through regional cooperation? And how do we celebrate our talented volunteers?

One of the most difficult questions in all regional processes is worship life. It's easy to say that local churches should become more independent and take their lives into their own hands, but seriously – leading worship services as lay people? Possibly preaching or administering the Lord's Supper? *Are we allowed to do that?* More than that: *Can we do it?* Who would dare to do that? *That's a task for those who have studied for years, isn't it?*

On the other hand, it hurts, especially this: regionalization means so often that there will only be a few worship services in our church. First every 14 days, then monthly, then at odd times like Sundays at 2:30 p.m., then only on holidays, and eventually not at all. We cannot simply impose more and more worship duties on pastors without jeopardizing their joy in ministry and their health. And then we are told that we can drive to the neighbouring town if there is no worship service in our local church. There is always a worship service somewhere in the regionalized community. Maybe they can also offer a transport service.

But the former dean of Fürth (Bavaria), Ludwig Markert, told me at one of my first lectures (1993): "The people from Veitsbronn don't go to worship in Obermichelbach,

and the people from Obermichelbach don't go to worship in Veitsbronn." Two small villages, only three and a half kilometres (about 2 miles) apart from each other. People travel around for shopping, for their children's activities, for medical care – but not for church. Church has to be *here*, in our village, in our local church. There's no other way!

This is a real worship dilemma. Regio-local church development is not the magic wand that can solve this problem. But it provides a direction in which a solution can be found. As always, this can work in *many* places, but certainly not in *all* places. Here are a few such pointers:

- Local/regional churches can increase the number of people who can prepare and lead worship services by encouraging and training people to become lay preachers. In a local parish in Bamberg (Bavaria) there are five volunteers who have such training and who now lead the worship services after the pastor's position was halved. No worship service is cancelled.
- Local/regional churches can set up a fair plan: worship service reliably on every Sunday in a central, accessible location;; in all other locations, worship service reliably once or twice a month, including Christmas and Easter.
- Local/regional churches can also assign churches a certain type of worship: here an evening service in a free form, there a weekly traditional service, here a 'messy church' (Moore 2006) for the whole family once a month, there a monthly youth service. Each place then has its own special liturgy – and everyone can find the service that suits them somewhere.

The "Michelbach/Veitsbronn syndrome" (MVS) is a common problem. What shall we do if people just don't play along? Here is a somewhat robust answer and suggestion: deal with them as adults. Respect and empathize with their sense of loss, but don't use their refusal as an opportunity to choose worse solutions: *You are adults, so we expect this from you: We can no longer celebrate worship services everywhere without exploiting our resources. You drive 20 kilometres to go shopping, your kindergarten is 20 minutes away, as are the sports club and piano lessons. We believe you can do it. Worship is important to you; then you will be able to change.* And those who can't do it get support. This won't completely fix the MVS, but here are some more ideas:

- Local/regional churches can make leading worship services easier. Here is an example from the Evangelical Church in Central Germany. Hardly any other region has as many church buildings as Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt. And at the same time, the number of pastors is no longer sufficient to celebrate worship services everywhere. Now it happened that on the Open Monument Day the elders of a village community turned to their dean and said: it is such a shame that the church was open for visitors on this Sunday, but no worship service was being celebrated. Couldn't he help? He could! He sat down with his team, and they wrote

a small script for a simple worship service led by the elders in the village. They were able to follow this script with prayers, readings and song suggestions. The village community did not hesitate; the service took place, and the dean thought everyone was happy and content. But what had he done? The Christians in this village community were so excited that they asked for more (Bremer and Wegner 2012). Long story short: In the Central German Church there is now a so-called 'community liturgy/book of prayer' with service plans for all Sundays in the church year. In some East German regional churches, there are now congregations that celebrate together on many Sundays without a pastor. There doesn't have to be a sermon: maybe someone reads aloud a devotional text, maybe there is a period of silence or those present talk about the sermon text for a few minutes and use the ecumenical seven-step-method of Bible sharing (Hirmer 1998).

Decades ago (1987), East German Practical Theologian Eberhard Winkler from Halle asked: If there are still 10 Christians living in a village (during GDR times) who would like to get together and celebrate communion, does the pastor have to travel from 35 or 40 kilometres away? Or couldn't we authorize these 10 Christians to celebrate the meal together, even without the priest? *Yes, but that requires a calling*, some people now reply. Yes, says Winkler, then let's give them this calling! *But*, as they say, *you have to be trained for that!* Winkler doesn't object there either, but asks back: Does this really have to be an academic training? Isn't there the spiritual formation of the baptized? And how difficult would it be to teach them what they need? Under the conditions of a church in the minority, Winkler asked: Why don't we empower the local community to become more responsible and self-active (Winkler 1987)?

And we can become even more resourceful when it comes to the shape and rhythm of worship services. The Church of England is an old folk church like the German and has experienced a somewhat even more brutal decline. At the same time, there are courageous and successful attempts to revitalize church life in England. Not only are local congregations being merged or even closed – on the contrary, new, fresh expressions of church are being founded, with a special profile, often aimed at specific target groups and not at a specific residential area (Moynagh 2024).

Here is an idea that two theologians from Sheffield expressed and which has changed the worship life in the parish of St Thomas Philadelphia. Mike Breen and Bob Hopkins thought about having elaborate worship services every Sunday (Hopkins and Breen 2007). They ask: What was it actually like at the time of the Temple in Israel? Did people go to the Temple *every Sabbath*? No, they say, not at all: people made a pilgrimage to the temple rarely, perhaps once a year. And the visits to the temple were highlights in the life of faith. On all other Sabbath days, it was more modest, on site, at home or in the synagogue. Liturgical life in Israel had three places: the home, the synagogue and the temple. And now the two Anglicans suggest

translating this idea to their circumstances: house, synagogue and temple then become 'cell', 'cluster' and 'celebration'. The 'cell' is the small format, the personal community on site or in the house, the home group or the end-of-week service in the chapel or the little church group that celebrates a short worship service in the church at the end of their meetings. A 'cluster' is the medium-sized community, perhaps weekly, on Sundays, in our church, sometimes with, but usually without the priest, but with us on site, 15 to 50 people who are happy that the local church is accessible even without a priest. And then 'celebration', the big festival. How would it be if large, solemn church services were the exception, truly celebrations of faith, where we come together from all parts of the region, with special music, the 'big' sermon, with communion and baptism? For our topic: in the central church of the region, with our regional priest and the organist. Maybe every six to eight weeks. In short: At this crucial point, regio-locality would have to prove itself, it would have to be an alternative to a regionalization which leads to the church becoming less visible, less accessible and less close to people.

At the end we return to the Augsburg Confession. There is still a biblically well-founded promise in there, not as a cushion for defaulting church people who don't want to change anything, but as a promise to those who set out and ask in what ways Christ will build his church today. At the beginning of the 7th article, it says: "Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever." (Confessio Augustana, 1530: Art. VII) Of course, *that* is God's work and not our contribution.

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