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ARTICLE

How do new forms of Church emerge in mainline churches and what does it tell about patterns, dynamics and competition?

Thomas Schlegel

Abstract

This article deals with the conditions for the emergence of new forms of church, especially in the perspective of top-down dynamics: how do Bottom and Top relate to each other in the development of new churches? To do research in this realm can help church leaders in inititating new churches: Is it possible to control it in a more direct way – not only by establishing the right conditions? I focus in this paper on data collected from the "Erprobungsräume" (church start-ups) in the Evangelical Church of Central Germany. The results contradict in a way the powerful narrative that new churches emerge at the grassroots level far away from traditional institutions. There are basically four ways top and bottom interactt. It would be interesting to validate the results in other areas/churches.

Keywords: New forms of church, Church innovation, Pioneering, Church institutions, Movements, Top-down or bottom-up church change?

1   A German question

This article deals with the conditions for the emergence of new forms of church, especially in the perspective of top-down dynamics: Where does leadership foster what is growing at grassroots level? Where are initiatives thwarted (or initiated) – from above? How do bottom and top relate to each other in the development of new churches?

"Above" and "below" are understood in very German, very traditional terms. "Above" coincides here with the Volkskirche institution and its administration, jurisdiction and long history. And "below" should be understood here – a bit simplified – as movement, referring to the fluid and dynamic aspects that can be found in churches mostly between people, during gatherings, in relationships and networks.

My paper is therefore about the interplay of actors within the Volkskirche – and the logics for which they stand. My contribution refers to a concept of church theory that I would like to briefly outline for our international friends:

A concept of church theory was introduced by Eberhard Hauschildt, an emeritus practical theologian from Bonn. He compared our "Volkskirche" with a hybrid at an EKD synod in 2007. Different social forms and logics can be found everywhere and always effective. And instead of playing one off against the other or devaluing it as "not the real church", he advises that all three social forms should always be taken into account in church activities (Hauschildt 2007).

He adopted this idea of a hybrid from sociologists who observed the hybrid nature of organizations (see Evers, Rauch and Stitz 2002). According to Hauschildt - and many others like him - this can also be observed in the German "Volkskirche". Since then, this has been a popular heuristic tool for reflecting on processes in the Protestant church and understanding its actions.

An actual issue of practical theology is dedicated to new forms of church within the EKD context (Schlegel 2024). I was asked to look at the intereplay between innstitution and movement in the emergence of new churches. Despite the German background, I think this question is also interesting from an international perspective. There is a powerful narrative circulating that new churches emerge at the grassroots level amongst people with a missionary enthusiasm, far away from traditional institutions. The journey to a Fresh X illustrates this widespread image (Moynagh 2012 195–212). But is it the whole truth? Is it right that the institution does not play an active role in the emergence except in the qualification (Befähigung) of Christians? Could the institution promote new forms of church in a more direct way – through authorization (Bevollmächtigung) for example?

I try to answer this question by looking back at the developments here in Central Germany. A church innovation programme in one of the 20 EKD churches has tried since 2015 to organize financial support and stimulate new plantings – "Erprobungs- räume" (experimental spaces). The Evangelical Church of Central Germany (EKM) was thus the first to introduce the idea of church planting or fresh expressions in the German context.

2   When church emerges

So how do new forms of church emerge? "New" forms of church emerge in the same way as "old" ones. The church is first and foremost the description of a calling and sending process: where "little sheep … hear the voice of their shepherd" (Dingel 2014: 459, 22), where the Holy Spirit awakens faith through the Word and gathers people. Wherever the Church of Jesus Christ is to be found, it is an event, a process (cf. Barth 1953: 727–8), and in this sense the Church is always new and innovative,

quite independently of the concrete social forms. This is obvious, but by no means banal: it makes sense of the invisible work of the Spirit making Church to be Church amidst fixed plans, formats and structures.

The second insight might be also obvious but by no means banal: "No man builds the church, but Christ alone" (Bonhoeffer 1984: 375–6). The subject of new forms of church is therefore neither the leaders "above" nor the basis "below"; it is Jesus Christ, as with all forms of church.

In a way, this is comparable with innovative processes. They are unavailable and contingent. They cannot simply be created. If you want something new to happen, you can create favourable framework conditions that make the occurrence more likely, but innovations cannot be guaranteed.[1]

Such framework conditions for innovation have been described again and again. The pioneers, entrepreneurs or heroes are of the greatest importance: people want to change something and infect people with their energy; teams and networks are formed; a sense of unity is created and a collective subject emerges. Soft factors, corresponding attitudes and mindsets make change tangible, but also fun for those involved: agility, openness, error-friendliness and perseverance are just a few examples. Tapping into resources, public relations work, good process and planning management are also among the factors without which it (usually) does not work. A certain amount of pressure to change, which creates a sense of urgency – and scope for playful experimentation – are also among the ingredients for getting a new project started (Schlegel 2016).

3   New congregations in the constitutional church: the structural interplay

So how do new congregations emerge in the German regional churches? There are basically four different ways.

First, there are the initiatives that come from Christians. Charismatic individuals or groups get things moving with their concerns: charitable activities in a neighbourhood, games for children, opportunities for bereaved people to meet or spiritual life at the train station. Sooner or later, structures are formed from these initiatives, they become associations, can raise funds and conclude agreements with the church.

The Christians involved are, to a greater or lesser extent, part of a congregation, but their joint initiative is not as such part of a church activity. It grows, metaphorically speaking, on a "greenfield site". Such grassroots start-ups represent the

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1   "It is impossible to plan real innovation. . . . So, how does innovation take place? Only by not concentrating on results, but in the arrangement of stimulating processes." (Paas 2012: 2).

bottom-up type of innovation, which can be found in various forms and is often regarded as a model for new forms of church. Of the 65 Erprobungsräume in the EKM, around 16 initiatives (25%) can be categorized as this type of development.[2]

But there are also such initiatives *within* church organizations. The approach is similar to that just described, but they are formed within their organizational unit or act as its representatives in public. A church community wants to develop an unused car park into a meeting centre. In a village, a parish council resists merging with its neighbours, expands the vicarage and starts a series of events. Or the teaching staff at a Protestant primary school form a group to establish a school church in a deprived area. In contrast to the previous type, a legal entity forms the umbrella under which this initiative can grow bottom-up. However, the initiative itself does not come about through a formal decision by the responsible committees; instead, it emerges based on the charisma and concerns of individuals. Of the 65 Erprobungs-räume in the EKM, around 24 initiatives (37%) are of this type.

And finally, there is the other way round: parishes, church districts or congregations pass resolutions in the relevant committees, release suitable personnel and provide the necessary resources so that people can come together and a community dynamic emerges. A church district rents a shop in a pedestrianized area, hires a pastor and offers him professional support. In order to rebuild churches in rural areas, a pastor – equipped with a bus, coffee and chairs – offers mobile pastoral care. An association which emerged from a grassroots movement, may go on to rent suitable rooms in socially deprived areas, sending staff and starting the same programme as in twelve other places in Germany. This approach, which reminds me of strategic church planting (Paas 2016: 31–49), is an indirect procedure because it gathers together the supposed ingredients of church innovations, but cannot ensure the actual emergence of a new church. This is true in social and theological terms: it remains uncertain whether movements will grow and whether the Holy Spirit will call people. What is certain, however, is the framework: legal clarity, financial resources and full-time support characterize the work right from the start. Of the 65 Erpro-bungsräume in the EKM, 16 projects (25%) can be attributed to this third type.

Another variation is when the framework conditions are not created locally or for a specific project, but rather the aim is to bring about innovation through structural measures, educational initiatives or special incentives. Pastors in a region are relieved of administrative tasks so that they can initiate small missionary initiatives in congregations. In one church district, a start-up coaching programme is being established; in another, an employee is specifically looking for Christians in the villages who can be called to take responsibility in local grassroots teams. Institutions are

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2   According to the "Masterliste Erprobungsräume (Stand November 2023)" and the application forms.

changing their culture and rules. In the EKM, nine programmes belong to this fourth type (14%), and the "Erprobungsräume" programme can also be categorized here.

4 "Above" and "below": How they work together

Institution and movement are intertwined. Only the first type does not actually require the mainline Volkskirche. It only comes into play later, but does not have to. In types 3 and 4, the movement only comes into play later, but the whole thing does not work without it. Simply creating favourable conditions for new forms of being church does not guarantee that they will emerge. Nevertheless, the indirect path of types 3 and 4 is interesting for institutional players: their own control logic, which functions via committee work and financial allocations, hardly allows for any other path than the formal one.

Legally binding resolutions and procedural certainty offer emerging movements a level of security that should not be underestimated; they can offer reliable support in co-operation and exploratory travel. The institutional framework means that employment relationships are less precarious, cash flows are regulated, spaces can be utilized and external communication simplified: as a partner or part of a church body, you generally enjoy trust in society.

However, there is a fine line: security requirements, standards in administration and collective labour agreements can also be stifling. New forms of being church are quickly overwhelmed by the church's regulatory system; they need it "lighter". If an institution wants to promote movement, it will not be able to ignore its own rules or interpret them liberally, possibly on a local and temporary basis.

Emerging new churches require a willingness on the institutional side to engage and follow their logic. Conflicts are inevitable here, because the degree of acceptance cannot be formally determined, but must be negotiated individually. Communication and trust are essential.[3] Where there is a lack of trust, even the weakest parish can slow down or prevent the strongest experimental space – because it has legal stability, is integrated into the church system and enjoys local trust.

To summarize: from an institutional point of view, there is less to do than to let things go: spaces must be kept open for inititiatives to arise. "The best approach we have been able to develop has removed obstacles rather than creating new templates or strategies."[4] These can be open spaces that have already been created

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3 "The biggest challenge for the Fresh Expressions in the UK came from not talking carefully enough" (Croft 2016: 19).
4 Essential was the "careful relaxation of structures to give the new churches space and time to grow", because "we need facilitation and creativity rather than regulation and risk exclusion." (Croft 2016: 19).

by the withdrawal of infrastructure or that exist alongside the institution, or institutional niches that are utilized by initiatives, through to the deliberate defining of a framework to establish a climate in which the emergence of new types of church is more likely.

This means that innovations will only occur where institutions consciously relinquish their control and allow, and in the best case even promote, other patterns. These are the critical edges from which renewal comes. As such, they are essential for inflexible, bureaucratic large institutions – all the more so in view of the current dynamics of change.

But do the incubators need the shelter of church institutions? They can develop their projects according to their own rules, so why do they need church habitats? It is important to differentiate here: if initiatives grow within church congregations or are initiated by church districts, they are already located in the church body and are usually dependent on a "top" in terms of legal or financial independence. So the questions do not arise here: they only enjoy the freedom that is granted to them. In return, they are offered a reliable level of security.

The situation is different for those that arise independently of church structures or are affiliated with other organizations. They exist outside the church hierarchy and are not structurally or legally dependent. Nevertheless, they seek contact with church representatives or are open to it.

An ecumenical initiative at the railway station in Erfurt would like a visit from the regional bishop and a project of a private foundation would like to be considered an Erprobungsraum of the EKM. Why? They did not apply for financial support. Is it because of the close ties of persons that have developed in the past? But free-church initiatives are usually also interested in the Protestant church. They like to be an Erprobungsraum. They might gain trust in society if they belong to the established church. It might be that their common desire to communicate the gospel in a secular context is a binding element. We need more research here.

The innovation programmes of the churches offer attractive financial support and an innovation network with inspiring educational opportunities and exchange between colleagues. Nevertheless, the connection usually remains loose and is organized on an equal footing as partners. Although they are bottom-up initiatives, they do not want to be seen as innovations somewhere down there.

Attempts to integrate them structurally into the system regularly fail. This may be sobering for the Protestant church because the new forms of church are not officially part of the organized church. Their visitors do not become members, either in the project or in the Protestant church. The connection to others can be described as a network based on shared content rather than formal ties. However, this may

be precisely the innovation that is expected from these marginalized groups: they represent a form of church that belongs to the future.[5]

5   Institution versus movement?

There it tension between traditional parishes and other forms of church. There will be different patterns and values, different styles of piety, appropriate forms of communication and other self-presentations. Both vie for attention, resources and the authority to interpret how church really is.

Such competition can be seen in the innovation programmes of German churches (Pohl-Patalong 2022: 462) – as well as in the UK since the emergence of Fresh Expressions. However, a careful analysis was able to dispel the concerns there: "Fears that the overflowing of parish boundaries was a creeping wave, rendering these markers meaningless and spreading unprincipled competition, have no more fuel for that view than before. Fears for the parish look exaggerated" (Church Army's Research Unit 2013: 68). In Germany, new congregations often emerge within the church structure and, where they grow independently, they are generally interested in a fruitful relationship with the established church. They benefit from each other in terms of content, spirituality, style etc. and being together is usually attractive for both sides. "The pioneers need the church leaders to stay connected and to be supported in realising new possibilities. The church leaders need the loyal radicals to keep engaged, challenged and refreshed by those at the very edges of the life of the church" (Croft 2016: 20 (see fn. 9)).

Institution can handle movement and movement can handle institution. However, the intertwining also implies moving away from the preferred pattern. For church leaders, for example, there is a great temptation to "build a large internal church structure, a programme full of activities . . . or detailed guidelines". But what is needed instead is "simplicity, open eyes, listening ears, time, prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit" (Croft 2016: 19 (see fn. 9)). To get to the projects and listen to the pioneers fosters more innovation in the church than new laws or mission committees. Something similar, but vice versa, could be said about pioneers who start working in church committees or get involved in the synod. This kind of activity changes their own operating mode and points to a "special form of 'hybrid figure'" in church innovation programmes (Pohl-Patalong 2022: 458 (see fn. 14)). Of course,

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5   Richard Passmore (Diocese of Carlisle) appreciates especially those on the edge for the established system when he writes: "These were set up to be pathfinders, to constructively disrupt, to be innovative, to playfully push the boundaries of orthodoxy and to embrace the heretical imperative of challenging the status quo" (Passmore 2018: 25).

intercultural competence is needed for both actors. At best, this deviation is a contribution to their own future and thus increases adaptability and stability. Then the tense relationship should lead to fruitful cooperation.

About the Author

Thomas Schlegel, b. 1973 in Weimar, received his PhD with a dissertation on Karl Barth at Jena University and Princeton Theological Seminary. After a time as pastor in Munich and Biberschlag (Thür) he was associate at the Research Institute for Evangelism and Church Development at the Greifswald University (2009–14) and later at the Centre for Empowerment Studies at the University of Halle (2023–25). Church innovation, secularity in Eastern Germany and the mechanisms of shrinking were his research interests. He was one of the designers and head of the "Erprobungsräume" (Experimental Spaces) – a process to foster new forms of being church. Since 2025 he has been Director of "midi" – the Think Tank of the Evangelical Church of Germany in Berlin. Contact: Thomas.Schlegel@theologie.uni-halle

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