

ARTICLE

“Bringing the Gospel to the City together”: Interconfessional Cooperation in Missionary Church Development in Vienna

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Abstract

In the changing context of Western Europe, many churches and denominations aim to reach non-Christians with the gospel through new missionary ecclesial forms. From the perspective of missional theology the mission and unity of the Church are inherently connected. This raises the question how interconfessional unity might be expressed in the praxis of missionary church development. However, there has been very little research on this issue. Thus it remains unclear what ecumenism in missionary church development looks like in practice, what promotes and what hinders it. Therefore, an empirical investigation among seventeen Christian leaders from different confessions involved in missionary church development in Vienna was conducted. The study found that ecumenical cooperation is very limited, with some exceptions. This seems due to both theological factors, like diverging interpretations of mission and the gospel or different stances on issues of sexual ethics, and non-theological, like lack of time and resources. Building on these insights, the paper suggests the establishment of a regional ecumenical church planting hub and outlines possible steps toward its realization. This platform might foster relationships and exchange across confessional boundaries and thus help new forms of church in Vienna to express the ecumenical unity of the Church and to complement each other toward a faithful participation in the mission of God in the city.

Keywords: Missionary church development, Missional theology, Ecumenism, Regional cooperation, Urban church planting, Austria

1. Introduction

The socio-religious context of Western Europe has changed significantly due to processes of pluralization and secularization. In light of these dynamics, there has been a renewed interest in the missionary dimension of ecclesial life in the traditional churches (e.g. Elhaus and Kirchhof 2020). Consequently, various attempts are being

made in almost all confessions to find new ecclesial forms to reach non-Christians with the gospel through church planting, innovation or experimentation (Philipp 2020; Schlegel and Kleeman 2021). This article deals with ecumenical cooperation in missionary church development, for “there is a growing realization among churches and Christian mission organizations” that stronger interconfessional collaboration in mission “has become more important and urgent than ever before” (Kafwanka 2014: 154–5).

So far this topic has not received much scholarly attention, which is somewhat surprising for several reasons. Not only does the shared concern for missionary church development evoke the practical question if and how churches in Western Europe might cooperate in these efforts. There have also been important recent missiological developments towards the realization of what Bosch called an “ecumenical missionary paradigm” (Bosch 2011: 377). Thus, the twentieth-century rift between ecumenicals and evangelicals has largely been overcome. In fact, there are now “significant missiological convergences” between all Christian confessions (Keum 2014: 397), as evidenced by recent missiological documents from different traditions (cf. Bevans 2015).

Most centrally, this ecumenical missiological consensus includes the conviction that mission is primarily the act of a missionary God. The Church originates in this mission of God and is therefore missionary by its very nature (Franke 2020: 6). Moreover, God’s mission and consequently the Church’s as well is understood to be holistic, including but not limited to evangelism, discipleship, social engagement and creation care (Franke 2020: 27–30; Bevans 2015). According to Keum, general secretary of the Council for World Mission, the time is thus ready to “shift gears from convergence to cooperation” (2014: 398). Shouldn’t this imply promising preconditions for interconfessional collaboration in missionary church development as well?

Furthermore, in the *missio Dei* paradigm the mission of the Church and the Church’s unity are intrinsically connected. Because all churches originate from and participate in the one mission of God, the call to mission is always also a call to ecumenical unity (Bosch 2011: 474–5). Must research on missionary church development then not also ask how this unity can find expression in these efforts?

Some scholars have recognized this and accordingly appeal for an ecumenical extension of the mixed-economy concept (Herrmann 2020: 91) or for the formation of regional interconfessional networks in church development (Eiffler 2020: 496–7; Herbst and Pompe 2022). However, the discussion so far has not gone beyond these initial impulses and hardly any research has been done in actual church development practice. Current insights are limited and point toward a discrepancy between the missiological ideal of ecumenical missionary unity and lived church practice, so that the described missiological consensus has “little to do with what happens on the ground” (Währisch-Oblau 2016: 165). The reasons for this are not sufficiently

researched, but both remaining significant theological differences (Franke 2020: 5) and more mundane aspects like lack of time and resources (Brinksma 2018: 196–201) might play a role.

It consequently remains unclear how ecumenical missionary unity happens in urban church development as well as what promotes and what hinders it. To answer these questions, this article reports an empirical study among practitioners in the Austrian capital Vienna.

This city offers a fitting research context, for here not only various free churches but also the traditional churches, most notably the Catholic Church, are highly active in church development. Over the last decade, the archdiocese of Vienna underwent a developmental process, in which all activity was to be “reoriented around the missionary nature of the church” (Schönborn 2015: 3), as part of which several church plants and revitalizations were started (Flachberger 2020: 25–62). These new forms of church are characterized by scholars as “charismatic-evangelical-catholic”, because they often combine typical aspects of evangelical spirituality like personal conversion to Christ and discipleship with Catholic features like strong Marian devotion and high eucharistic spirituality (Sandler 2022: 160–3; Hinkelmann 2022: 200–9). Because of this they are on the one hand more easily compatible with evangelical¹ and Pentecostal free-churches. On the other hand, previous research has shown that cooperation in mission with Catholics still represents a challenge for many Austrian evangelicals (Miller 2010: 341–7). Thus, these new Catholic missionary forms of church inhabit “a confessional field of tension” (Hinkelmann 2022: 195) and demonstrate the complex conditions of lived ecumenical missionary cooperation in Austria.

In the rest of the article we will first describe the research design of the study, then present the key findings and finally discuss them in light of relevant literature.

2. Methodology

The empirical investigation aimed to contribute to a better understanding of inter-confessional cooperation in missionary church development in the tension between theological ideal and lived ecclesial practice. As part of that “lived theology”, the theological convictions informing said practice were of special interest (cf. Ward 2017: 62–7). Thus, we used an explorative research approach with qualitative empirical methods to explicate the “deep meanings about the nature, purpose and intentions of the actions and assumptions of particular individuals or communities” (Swinton and Mowat 2016: 22).

1 In Austria, “evangelical” refers not only to the cross-denominational evangelical movement, but also to one free-church denomination, the “association of evangelical churches” (BEG). To distinguish these, when referring to the denomination, this article uses the capitalized “Evangelical”.

2.1 Research Method

The objects of investigation were projects of missionary church development in Vienna. These could be church plants or revitalizations, fresh expressions, “Erprobungsräume,” or church development processes. The selection criteria were purposely kept broad due to the explorative nature of the study.

To understand how and why cooperation does or does not take place between these projects, from February 2023 to February 2024 Kräuter conducted seventeen semi-structured interviews with project leaders from seven different confessions. Five Catholic priests and theologians, four Evangelical free church pastors, three Lutheran ministers, an Anglican minister, a Baptist pastor, a house-church pastor as well as one Pentecostal and one Reformed pastor. Most of them were directly involved in church planting or church development in Vienna, while three were guiding regional or national initiatives in their denominations. The interviewees were deliberately selected through theoretical sampling to include those most likely to provide insights relevant to the research questions. The final number was reached via data saturation.

The interview guide centered around two main topics: (1) the interviewees’ conception and practical embodiment of mission and gospel as well as (2) their experiences with interconfessional collaboration. To make different emphases in missional practice apparent, we used the Anglican “five marks of mission” inspired by a recent study on the soteriology of Dutch pastors and church planters (Paas, Stoppels and Zwijze-Koning 2023). The five marks differentiate mission into evangelism, discipleship, loving service, societal transformation and creation care and can be considered as one of the most common explications of the ecumenical consensus on the integrality of mission discussed in the introduction.

2.2 Data Analysis and Reflexivity

All participants gave informed consent on their data being used for this study. The audio recordings were securely stored and deleted after transcription. The transcripts were anonymized and sent to the participants for review. Once approved they were analysed using template analysis (King, Brooks and Tabari 2018), which organizes the relevant data sections in a hierarchical thematic template through subsequent rounds of coding.

The final template encompassed three overarching themes: “mission”, “gospel” and “experience with missionary cooperation”. These included several layers of subthemes and codes. For example the theme “mission” contained the subthemes “understanding of mission”, “goal of mission”, “strategies of mission” and “context of mission” (see table 1 for a list of themes, subthemes and codes). The template was then used as basis for data interpretation. The important themes were reflected according to the study’s epistemological interest and connected to each other. Thus,

for instance, different understandings of mission were linked with corresponding soteriological convictions.

The epistemological potential of this study was limited by both our personal situatedness and the research design. As our own evangelical convictions influenced the entire research process, this project can be seen as an evangelical reflection on the possibilities of missionary ecumenism in Western European church development, nevertheless aiming to serve the whole Church (cf. Franke 2020: 85). Furthermore, the research method and sample affected the results. The data is grounded only on the reflections of a single leader per project and thus includes neither other diverging perspectives nor directly observed lived practice. Also, the interviewees only included one Pentecostal pastor, no orthodox priests and no representatives of migrant churches.

Table 1 Sample List of Themes, Subthemes and Codes

Themes	Mission	Gospel	Experience with missionary cooperation
Subthemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - understanding of mission - goal of mission - strategies of mission - context of mission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - what is the gospel - meaning of salvation - meaning of lostness - different understandings of gospel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - theological criteria for cooperation - motivations for cooperation - examples of cooperation - factors promoting cooperation - factors hindering cooperation
If necessary, more subthemes	in the subtheme "understanding of mission": <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a disputed term - different dimensions 		in the subtheme "factors hindering cooperation": <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of resources - theological differences - bad experiences - ecumenical thinking underdeveloped
Codes	in the subtheme "a disputed term": <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - negative connotation - narrow and broad definitions - variously filled 	in the subtheme "meaning of salvation": <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fullness of life - reaching heaven - new earth - justification - access to kingdom - community with god 	in the subtheme "factors promoting cooperation": <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - shared theological profiles - personal relations - trust - spiritual community - humility - generational differences

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 Missionary Cooperation in Vienna: Pluriform and Limited

The main research question was how interconfessional cooperation happens in church development in Vienna. To do justice to the complexity of lived ecclesial practice, the terms “cooperation” and “collaboration” were only loosely defined to capture multiple forms of interaction as reported by the respondents, varying in intensity, duration and purpose.

One of the chief insights gained was that generally the closest missionary cooperation happens within the respective denominations. Thus, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Reformed, Catholic and Lutheran leaders connect in *inner*-confession regional or national networks for spiritual fellowship, strategic partnership, the sharing of resources and further training. At the local Viennese level, only the Catholic diocese entertains a cooperative network between its practitioners.

Additionally, there were also several instances of *inter*-confession cooperation observable. The Roman-Catholic archdiocese and its church development initiatives are most actively seeking ecumenical cooperation. They partner with the Anglican Church, especially its centers for church planting and multiplication as well as the HTB network² (Catholic theologian interview 16). Furthermore, priests and deacons are regularly sent on study trips or internships to Anglican or free-church church plants and representatives from other confessions are consulted as external experts (Catholic priests interviews 2, 4 and 17). Moreover, all interviewed Catholic leaders were well-acquainted with evangelical church planting literature and some recounted how they sought help from free churches in their start-up phase.

There were also a number of regional, national and international church planting networks between primarily evangelical and Pentecostal leaders from different denominations as well as international church development networks between leaders from the traditional churches. Most of the interviewees were attached to one or several of these. On the local level, ecumenical collaboration mostly remained limited to particular events organized together or sporadic networking meetings.

Altogether, with few exceptions, interconfessional cooperation in missionary church development in Vienna was quite sparse. Many even stated that they were hardly in contact with or completely unaware of any initiatives from other denominations (e.g. Reformed pastor interview 6, Lutheran minister interview 9, evangelical pastor interview 13).

2 Churches planted by the London Anglican church Holy Trinity Brompton and their plants.

3.2 Three Kinds of Cooperation

Research participants identified three main aspects of cooperative praxis. The first and most widespread was mutual learning. In exchange with other practitioners, “we can show each other how to proclaim Jesus in our context”, a Catholic priest noted (interview 4). Similarly, an Evangelical church planter stated that he wants “to learn from the experiences of others who previously planted churches here” (interview 1). In most cases, however, this exchange happens primarily within denominations or theological traditions.

At the same time, many of the respondents told of cross-denominational learning experiences. Several Catholic leaders explained how they gained a new appreciation for the cross and the Bible from their evangelical colleagues, as expressed for instance in expository sermon series through Bible books. On the other hand, some Evangelical leaders mentioned how they adopted liturgical elements from Catholics or were inspired by Pentecostal boldness and the house-church emphasis on communal discipleship. Still, there were significant differences in the respondents’ readiness to learn. While some believed that they “could learn something from everyone” (Catholic theologian interview 12), one participant differentiated between “theological and logistic aspects of church planting” and stated that “theologically, I don’t think I could or would want to learn from others” (Reformed pastor interview 6).

The second often-repeated kind of cooperation was support and aid. For some, this help took the form of collegial counselling, “where we can carry each other” (Catholic theologian interview 12) or “where we sit together, one recounts a situation and asks for insights. What would you do differently?” (Evangelical pastor interview 13). Others mentioned the sharing of tools and resources.

The third kind was spiritual fellowship with colleagues. Many noted how important it is to regularly have the opportunity to “open one’s heart”, pray for and encourage each other (Evangelical pastor interview 13).

3.3 Diverging Interpretations of “Mission” in Church Development in Vienna

Differences in the respondents’ conceptions of mission became apparent. Concerning the five marks of mission, the majority of the participants professed a holistic understanding including “both word and deed” (Anglican priest interview 8) or both “proclaiming the gospel” and “co-shaping the world out of the gospel” (Catholic theologian interview 12). However, on closer inspection the relationship of these two aspects was assessed quite differently.

Most evangelical pastors clearly prioritized gospel proclamation in evangelism and discipleship in their missionary praxis. Referring to the Great Commission, they repeatedly argued that it was “the primary task” or “highest goal” of mission to preach the good news of Christ, so that people become his disciples. This did not

at all mean that they disregarded the social responsibility of the Church. However, they considered these efforts a “pre-stage” to the “real” mission, namely evangelistic action (Evangelical church planter interview 13). Hence, the Reformed pastor recounted how they gave a Ukrainian refugee visiting their church money for food and housing, but also evangelistic tracts. “We told him ‘We want to help you, but what you really need is not money, but something deeper’” (interview 6). Furthermore, marks four and five, the transformation of society and creation care, were not included in the mission interpretations of most interviewed evangelical leaders.

On the other hand, only one Baptist pastor prioritized acts of service, societal engagement and creation care over evangelism and discipleship. Her motto was, “you don’t need to talk about your faith a lot, live so that people ask you” (interview 15). Similarly, a Lutheran minister remarked, “the people don’t look where the finger points, but who the pointer is. Primarily it is about setting an example and not preaching” (Lutheran minister interview 9). These respondents further distanced themselves from the evangelical mission interpretation described, which would patronizingly perceive the world as mission objects.

These different conceptions of mission are vividly illustrated by the following example. Three projects described how they sent or handed out Christmas cards to locals. The card of one evangelical church plant included a QR code, which led to an evangelistic sermon where the pastor explained the meaning of Christmas. The two other initiatives instead invited passers-by to themselves write down a prayer or wish to the Christ Child. Their aim was not evangelistic but simply to “give somebody a treat, no strings attached” (Lutheran minister interview 9).

3.4 The Gospels of Personal Redemption and Complete Restoration

These diverging mission interpretations corresponded with different understandings of the gospel. Many leaders from different confessions emphasized the notion of “personal redemption” for sinners through the sacrificial death of Jesus in their gospel presentations. Everyone who trusts in Jesus gets saved from divine judgement. These included the majority of evangelical participants but also other leaders. Thus, a Catholic priest characterized redemption as “being freed from sin and eternal death. Christ tore down the dividing wall between God and us on the cross. Now we can freely access God through Jesus” (interview 4). Similarly, a Lutheran minister remarked that the gospel included “showing people that God loves them, but that we are separated from him because of our wrongdoings” as well as explaining that “because of Jesus’ death and resurrection the way to God is open” (interview 5).

In contrast, others understood sin not so much as a transcendent personal problem warranting redemption, but rather highlighted its immanent and social dimensions, requiring restoration. In Jesus, God reconciled the world to himself.

Therefore, the gospel enables us to “accept that humans are not perfect”, because God loves us despite our mistakes (Catholic theologian interview 12). It “frees from the brokenness of sin and leads into freedom as a person and fullness of life” (Catholic priest interview 2). Furthermore, ultimately God will not judge, but instead completely restore creation from its brokenness. He will “fix everything” – a word-play made by a Lutheran minister (interview 9) on the German “richten” (meaning “judge” or “fix”) of the Apostles’ creed’s article seven. Consequently, most representatives of this gospel of “complete restoration” also rejected the notion that non-Christians would be separated from God in hell. This was either seen as “too exclusivist” (Baptist Pastor interview 15) or “incomprehensible with the loving nature of God” (Catholic priest interview 2).

Generally, those advocating for the “personal redemption gospel” tended to give precedence to evangelism and discipleship in their mission interpretation and practice. On the other hand, the representatives of the “complete restoration gospel” either prioritized demonstrating the gospel by acts of service, societal engagement and creation care or practised their evangelism and discipleship in a decidedly less-confrontational manner. In addition, a minority of the respondents embraced a third “holistic” understanding of mission and gospel (described below).³

3.5 Factors Hindering Cooperation

The different soteriological and missiological convictions clearly negatively affected collaboration. For evangelicals, a shared gospel interpretation was a precondition for missionary cooperation. Still, the evangelical respondents assessed the other traditions differently. While one Evangelical church planter continuously differentiated between those “who have the gospel in the centre” and those who don’t; in his view a local Catholic parish met these requirements, because “they really follow Jesus” (interview 1). For others, gospel agreement with Catholics signified an oxymoron.

That said, a key insight of this study is that interconfessional cooperation also remained limited in the presence of broad soteriological and missiological agreements. Although many spoke about the importance of “a kingdom perspective” or “bringing the gospel to the city together” (Catholic theologian interview 16) this was not reflected in much of the praxis. Often, projects with very similar concerns in close proximity didn’t keep in touch or weren’t even aware of each other. It thus seems that generally, “missionary ecumenical thinking is still underdeveloped” (Lutheran minister interview 3) in Vienna.

3 These types are simplified models highlighting important similarities and differences in the responses.

A second inhibiting factor was reservation and distrust against other traditions. Evangelical and Pentecostal free churches still often deal with suspicion from main-line churches and thus “always first have to wait and see what others think about them” (Pentecostal pastor interview 11). While evangelicals are often suspected of fundamentalism, Pentecostals face allegations of spiritual abuse or manipulation. On the other hand, almost all Evangelical leaders spoke of a negative bias against Catholics in their denomination due to past experiences of discrimination and exclusion.

Thirdly, sexual ethics, particularly the evaluation of homosexual practice, are highly divisive. These “ethical sexual-moral topics currently are to ecumenism what baptism or the Lord’s supper were before,” a Baptist pastor opined (interview 15). In fact, the question of homosexuality seems to have reached almost confessional status. Four of the first five interviews raised the issue by themselves and multiple representatives on all sides of the debate stated that cooperation with those disagreeing was difficult to impossible for them.

Nevertheless, the fourth and by far most-repeated hindering aspect was simply a lack of time and resources. In the eyes of many leaders, interconfessional networking requires more resources than available besides other pastoral duties. Consequently, it is frequently perceived as an “additional burden that drains the energy of the local congregation” (Pentecostal pastor interview 11).

3.6 Factors Promoting Cooperation

Besides shared theological profiles, three other aspects promoting collaboration were discovered. The first can be described as “a theology of generosity” (Lutheran minister interview 3), “the ability to differentiate between foundational and secondary issues, paired with humility and readiness to learn” (house-church pastor interview 10).

Secondly, the age of practitioners also appears to play a role. According to an Evangelical pastor, “postmodern” young people “are well aware that there isn’t always black and white, that there are grey areas and tensions in the bible that you can’t resolve” (interview 14). Similarly, a Catholic respondent observed that “young people attend youth vigils at Heiligenkreuz abbey and then afterwards go to a worship night at ICF” (interview 16).⁴

Thirdly, ecumenical collaboration across theological differences seems to be more successful when grounded in personal relationships and spiritual community. For most interviewees, encounters or friendships with Christians from other confessions helped to overcome prejudices and initiate cooperation. “A short while ago, I

4 Heiligenkreuz is a local Cistercian monastery, ICF is a neo-charismatic free church.

met the local Catholic priest and was astonished by seeing how he hurts that so many people don't know Jesus personally. That completely changed my outlook on Catholics", an Evangelical pastor explained (interview 7). Similarly, a Catholic participant remarked that ecumenism must happen "while we pray and do mission together" (interview 16).

4. Discussion and Theological Reflection

The interviews showed that interconfessional cooperation in missionary church development in Vienna happens diversely but only in a limited fashion. Moreover, it is set in a "confessional field of tension" (Hinkelmann 2022: 195), marked by different mission and gospel interpretations as well as diverging views on sexual ethics. Together with the described time constraints, it is easily understandable why close collaboration generally tends to stay within inner-confession or inner-tradition boundaries.

Nevertheless, from a missional perspective the question still remains how the unity of the whole Church can be expressed in church development in Vienna. The interviews showed that missionary ecumenism is often experienced as an additional burden for local practitioners. Therefore, in this section, we will discuss what form of interconfessional cooperation might avoid this and thus make sense in the context of Vienna.

4.1 The Power and Problem of Diversity in Cooperative Networks

A crucial element of practical theological research is incorporating insights from other relevant disciplines into the interpretation of observed practice (Osmer 2008: 93–4). For this study it makes sense to learn from research on cooperation in urban development and planning, for like church development the development of cities also happens in the midst of change processes and necessitates collaboration between various stakeholders sharing a similar concern in a region (Görgl, Döringer and Herburger 2020: 378–87).

In such cooperative networks "network power", the ability to achieve things together that are not possible alone, emerges when three factors are present (Booher and Innes 2002: 225–31). First, a diverse array of actors "consistent with the full range of interest and knowledge relevant to the issues at hand" jointly works on a common problem. Secondly, these agents are aware how they themselves can profit from what the others bring to the table - experiences, insights, resources or contacts. The third requirement is "authentic dialogue" about the shared concern, where all divergent perspectives are valued and maintained. Only then creative solutions and options for action in complex situations can be found. At the same time, too much diversity can harm cooperative networks. If the different perspectives

prevent the development of common goals or a shared vision, a network becomes incapacitated (Payer 2008: 35).

Thus, in cooperative networking it is crucial to find the right amount of diversity that enables mutual benefit but does not thwart productive collaboration (Barentsen 2024). In missionary church development in Vienna it would not be reasonable to encourage leaders holding diverging mission and gospel interpretations to partner closely, as the diversity would be too high to set shared goals. Nevertheless, the different theological traditions and missionary approaches provide valuable insights from which the whole Church can benefit. In the words of Dutch missiologist Stefan Paas (2014: 188):

Unity in mission is extremely important, because the missionary challenge in Europe is so immensely complex. Co-operation, networking, and constant interaction are crucial to open up the hermeneutical space that we need for a better understanding of this challenge.

It is a profound conviction of missional theology that every tradition has “something that can be shared with others” for mutual enrichment and the building up of the church to “the fulness of Christ” (Kim 2016: 263). Therefore, cooperation in missionary church development needs to enable both close collaboration with those of similar missiological and soteriological convictions as well as truly ecumenical exchange with practitioners from all traditions. As one church planter succinctly remarked: “I believe that you need a strong shared theological direction for cooperation in church planting. At the same time, we still need the big picture, to learn from one another, share synergies, and connect” (Evangelical church planter interview 7). In our opinion this necessitates complementing forms of cooperative networks. That way the missional demand for ecumenical unity can be met while remaining missiological, soteriological and ethical differences are also taken seriously.

Almost all of the interviewed practitioners already participate in regional or national cooperative networks within their respective traditions or confessions. Furthermore, existing international church planting networks connect similar traditions like evangelicals and Pentecostals. Still lacking, however, is a broader ecumenical regional Viennese network that connects diverse church development actors in the city. This vision matches Eiffler’s proposal for an ecumenical network of all new forms of church in a place (2020: 460–1). Such “collaborative hubs” already exist elsewhere and facilitate “connection across a broader ecclesial ecology through partnership, education, and leadership development” (Benac 2022: 4.118). We will now further discuss the inception of such a network for Vienna, “The Vienna Church Planting Hub”.

4.2 The Vienna Church Planting Hub

The German theologians Herbst and Pompe try to flesh out the practical implications of the missiological togetherness of mission and ecumenical unity in their concept of “regio-local church development.” They want to aid churches and new ecclesial expressions to see their action as part of a collective, cooperative practice, namely the mutual participation in the one mission of God in their context, instead of ignoring or competing with each other (Herbst and Pompe 2022: 10.31).

To that end, participants should realize their respective strengths (profiling), complement each other in their shared responsibility (complementing), coordinate common tasks and reciprocal duties (cooperation), and practically support each other (solidarity) (Herbst and Pompe 2022: 24).⁵ These dimensions can be connected with the three aspects of cooperative praxis discovered in the interviews: support and aid, mutual learning, and spiritual community.

In terms of Herbst and Pompe’s cooperation and solidarity: material, personal, or social resources could be shared and common projects undertaken (cf. Kim 2016). For complementing and profiling, contextual learning from and with each other could be fostered in learning communities, training events or visits. Moreover, church planter training could be contextualized for Vienna in cooperation with seminaries, mission organizations and church governance boards, encouraging students of theology to do internships in local initiatives.

Such initiatives would need to be embedded in spiritual community, a wish expressed by many leaders in church development in Vienna. The Church Planting Hub could support this community by enabling encouragement, comfort and intercessory prayer through periodic meetings for exchange, worship and prayer or a yearly conference.

What might concrete steps towards such cooperative networking in ecumenical plurality look like? First of all, network research points to the necessity of establishing trust between the diverse partners, which requires authentic dialogue about similarities and differences (Payer 2008: 35; Benac 2022: 110). In the Viennese context, the soteriological and missiological diversity of the potential partners needs to be addressed. One suitable theological framework for this exchange could be Tomlin’s “Generous Orthodoxy”. Based on the Nicene Creed, he attempts to lay down the essentials of orthodox Christian faith, while also pointing out how different traditions can learn from each other in their witness (Tomlin 2022: 125–70).

Moreover, Herbst and Pompe highlight the importance of reconciliation for ecclesial cooperation (2022: 20; cf. Avtzi 2013). The interviews revealed the enduring

5 It must be noted that this model has not been empirically tested and is situated in the German regional church context. Further research is needed to assess the practicability of our inferences.

negative effect of past hurtful experiences as well as continuing prejudices in collaboration between different denominations. These need to be addressed, acknowledged and forgiven. If a cooperative network like the Vienna Church Planting Hub is to succeed, its beginning must be strongly rooted in the establishment of relationships and trust.

Secondly, the development of networks requires different roles (Payer 2008: 45–6; Zimmer 2017: 173–4). For instance, forerunners initiate networking by establishing first contacts and cooperations. Gatekeepers generate new impulses and partners through their social capital and providers support the network administratively, financially or logistically. Furthermore, existing research suggests that the establishment of collaboration depends on the initiatives of both church governance and individual local leaders (Eiffler 2020: 451; Zimmer 2017: 174; Benac 2022: 20–1, 93). Consequently, both local and regional Christian leaders in Vienna need to invest in relationships with representatives of other confessions. On the local level, forerunners could begin to meet for prayer with colleagues in their district and jointly invest in the neighbourhood. At the same time, church governances could aid interconfessional cooperation by providing resources and developing support structures. For instance, each confession could employ one suitable leader on a part-time basis to help develop the Church Planting Hub.

Thirdly, a network needs moderators. These lead the participants in the development of a shared vision and transparent decision-making processes. They also take steps to promote the relationships and trust needed for the network to properly function (Hucht 2017: 141–7). To avoid intergroup conflict, the diverse Vienna Church Planting Hub should be moderated by a team of leaders from different confessions and theological traditions. These moderators should be respected in their own denominations and share a commitment to missional ecumenism in the city. With their interactions they can then prototypically model interconfessional cooperation and exchange for the network participants.

4.3 The Theological Vision: Participating Faithfully in the Mission of God in Vienna

Pursuing ecumenical unity in missionary church development in Vienna through the Vienna Church Planting Hub will be challenging and require time, resources and dedication. However, it is worth the effort. To faithfully participate in the mission of God in the city, all churches and traditions are “in need of the witness of the other” for complementing and correction in their missional practice (Franke 2020: 165). In closing, this is briefly illustrated with the two dominant gospel interpretations and corresponding missionary paradigms observed in the interviews.

From the perspective of missional theology, the redemptive and restoring mission of God in which the Church participates needs to be understood as holistic. It brings

about personal redemption as well as restoration for society and all creation (Wright 2006; Keller 2012: 267–71). However, it seems that many Viennese practitioners fail to maintain this integral vision.

Missional theology hence reminds those holding to a personal redemption gospel that human sin has societal, economic and ecological dimensions that manifest themselves in unjust structures, oppression or the destruction of creation. These immanent expressions of sin are addressed in the gospel just as much as its transcendent, spiritual effects and therefore require confrontation and transformation through the missionary church. At the same time, representatives of the complete restoration gospel must not miss the fact that the mission of God is at least as concerned with the transformation of the human heart. Because the horizontal consequences of sin are intrinsically connected with the disrupted vertical relationship with God, the Christian engagement for justice, peace and reconciliation ultimately cannot do without reconciliation to God through personal repentance and faith.⁶

The Vienna Church Planting Hub could be one important way to foster such ecumenical missional correction and complementation and thus help new forms of church to faithfully participate in the mission of God in the city.⁷

5. Conclusion

This article sought to contribute to a better understanding of interconfessional cooperation in urban missionary church development. To that end an empirical study with 17 practitioners from seven different denominations was conducted in the Austrian capital Vienna. The study showed that despite the ecumenically shared missionary concern, interconfessional cooperation as of yet remains rather limited. Only the Roman Catholic Church actively seeks to collaborate with and learn from the Anglican Church as well as from various free churches in its efforts to revitalize old and plant new churches.

Part of the reasons for the limited amount of ecumenical cooperation are theological differences, such as diverging mission and gospel interpretations or contrary positions on sexual ethics. However, the most mentioned factor simply was a lack of time and resources that often leads to ecumenical networking being seen as an additional burden.

6 In the interviews three participants, a Baptist pastor, a Catholic priest and an Anglican reverend (interviews 8, 10, 16) embodied this holistic gospel and mission interpretation.

7 James (2018), in his study on church plants in Seattle, shows much more extensively how this correction and complementation between different missionary ecclesial types can look like in ecclesial praxis.

Based on these insights, we discussed what form of missionary ecumenism might be suitable in the observed tension between the missional mandate for unity and the contextual factors complicating that quest. Hence, we suggested the formation of a regional ecumenical network, the Vienna Church Planting Hub, complementing existing inner-denominational cooperative activities. This platform would deliberately bring together the diverse theological perspectives present in church development in Vienna to correct and complement each other in their joint participation in the mission of God in the city. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen in further research whether this theoretical proposal could work out in actual ecclesial practice.

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This article represents the publishable summary of Kräuter's Master Thesis at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit Leuven (2024), "Gemeinsam für die Stadt: Wie geschieht interkonfessionelle Zusammenarbeit in der missionarischen Kirchenentwicklung im urbanen Kontext? Eine qualitativ-empirische Untersuchung in Wien," supervised by Barentsen.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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