Ecclesial
FUTURES

edited by
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Ecclesial Futures

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EDITORIAL

Special Issue: Christian Empowerment, Secularity and Church Development in Germany

Felix Eiffler

It is my pleasure to introduce this special issue of *Ecclesial Futures*, which offers some papers that have been developed from lectures given at the annual gathering of the International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures (ICEF) in Halle/Saale in Germany in June 2024. It was hosted by the *Centre for Empowerment Studies – Christian Empowerment in Secularity,*[1] a research centre of the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. The conference was titled "Christian Empowerment, Secularity and Church Development". The **Conference Report**, written by Michael Herbst and Patrick Todjeras, gives a nuanced insight into the meeting and its different inputs, themes and discussions.

The golden thread running through this special issue is the current circumstances and challenges of the Evangelical Church in Germany. As in many Western countries, the churches in Germany are facing a steep decline, which has gained pace and dynamism since the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Germany is in the special position of being still divided – at least in terms of religion, faith and church membership. Since the majority of people in Western Germany are still members of either the Evangelical or the Catholic Church, the large majority (76%) of people in East Germany (the former GDR) are non-affiliated to any religious organization. Even though the West German states are catching up in many areas there is still a distinctive difference in terms of church membership, religious affiliation and secularity between the East and the West part of Germany. The latest Church Membership Survey (2022–24) showed that 13% of the entire German population is religious with affiliation to the church (evangelical and catholic). Another 25% of Germans are religious-distant and the majority of 56% is secular-oriented. In East Germany this is even true of 73% and in West Germany this is also applicable to a majority of 53% of the population. In East

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1   www.ces-halle.de (05.05.2025),

Germany the group of religious-distant people is 27% and in West Germany 13% of the people. The people who are religious in an ecclesial way, constiutute 9% in East and 14% in West Germany. These numbers show the stark differences between East and West Germany in terms of religion and church membership (Wunder 2024).

However, society is shifting towards secularity – and this affects East and West Germany equally. Thus, secularity is no longer a solely East German issue. Besides the fact that East and West Germany are still different in terms of religious affiliation, the last Memberships Survey also showed that the majority of the German population (56%) is secular-orientated and only a small minority of 13% is religious in a Christian and ecclesial form. This is a challenge for questions of sustainable church development and religious communication and sets the frame for this special issue.

The current situation and the expected trends and perspectives are thus the reason for founding the *Centre for Empowerment Studies – Christian Empowerment in Secularity* at the University in Halle. This interdisciplinary research centre combines different theological traditions and methodological approaches to research Christian faith and practice as well as religious communication and church development in a strongly secularized context like East Germany. One leading question is how Christians can be empowered by local congregations, the wider church and academic theology to express their faith in a mature, responsible and sustainable way. Another aim is to reflect theory and practice to communicate the gospel with as many people as possible, no matter if they are members of the church or not.

The team of the research centre takes a multifaceted approach, which combines different theological traditions as well as scientific fields like religious education and pedagogy, practical theology, psychology and sociology. It also combines different research approaches like empirical studies, discourse analyses, participative research etc. The team of researchers is convinced that only a poly-perspective approach is able to examine and describe the situation properly and is also more likely to develop (at least some) ideas and perspectives to deal with the German ecclesial situation and its challenges in a helpful way. Thereby the different discourses on empowerment prove to be inspiring dialogue partners, who offer helpful insights and impulses. By combining theological reflection with different empowerment-related discourses, the *Centre for Empowerment Studies* aims to develop forms and variants of a Christian formatted empowerment. The intention is to develop a Christian empowerment that serves regional churches, local congregations and individual Christians in their different attempts of religious education and their various ways to communicate the gospel and express their faith in the triune God.

In the first article **Michael Domsgen** introduces the idea of Christian empowerment in a secular context. He outlines the genesis of this idea born out of the observation of a changed self-evidence: for a long time, Christian religion functioned as the

defining medium that shaped collective perceptions of reality, but this has undergone a fundamental transformation. Thus, the Christian worldview, which was very influential for a very long period, has become one perspective among many – at least in the Western world. East Germany is a context in which one can observe these developments in a quite advanced arena. As a result, a threefold crisis can be described for the church in Germany: financial decline, losing trust due to sexual abuse and a broad loss of significance, relevance and influence. Domsgen identifies two major questions: How can the gospel be communicated under secular conditions and how can people have meaningful and relevant experiences with the Christian faith? The situation outlined, and its challenges, lead to questions of empowerment and this perspective opens new discourses and interlocutors from different academic fields, like theory of social work, disability studies, critical pedagogy etc. The proposed translation and understanding of Christian empowerment in the field of practical theology and religious education is *Befähigung* (enablement) and *Bevollmächtigung* (structural authorization).

In the second article, **Michael Herbst** presents the idea of regio-local church development and the ecclesial challenges it addresses. The structural background for this new approach to church development is the parochial system of the regional churches in Germany. Its aim is the pastoral and sacramental care of all church members in a certain area. Those who are members of the church are automatically listed as members of a local church when they choose their place of residence. This system is under severe pressure and proves itself as increasingly dysfunctional due to the rapid decline Protestant churches in Germany have been are facing for many years and which have grown in pace since the Covid pandemic. One way to react to shrinking church membership is through processes of regionalization. This means that communities, parishes and places of worship are becoming increasingly united in the region. Mostly it begins with cooperation and continues with joint worship service plans and united parish offices. Eventually there is often a complete merger. Regio-local church development tries a new approach and combines the necessity to act strategically more on a regional level with the potentials of local ecclesial life, which is more linked to the everyday life of those living in the parish. Besides practical insights and arguments, Michael Herbst offers also a theological rationale for developing church in a regio-local manner.

In the third article **Felix Eiffler** (i.e. myself) offers an introduction into the so-called *Erprobungsräume* (spaces of trial) – an innovation programme of the Evangelical Church in Central Germany – and the research which accompanied the programme from the very beginning. The text sketches the contextual conditions and development of this programme, which started in 2015 and functioned as a role model for

similar programmes in other regional churches in Germany. The article outlines the criteria for being an *Erprobungsraum* and what forms of new ecclesial expressions grew out of this attempt so far. Furthermore, the text gives some insights in the scientific evaluation, which started in 2016 and was finished in 2023. Since 2022 a redesign of the research was undertaken and among other perspectives an empowerment-orientated approach was influential. Next to results and the redesign, the text also depicts the challenges and limits of ecclesial innovation as well as the potentials and limits to research those innovations and to learn for a wider discourse and practice of church development and communication of the gospel to people today in an increasingly secular society with its specific chances and challenges.

The fourth article, by **Thomas Schlegel**, is thematically closely linked to the text about *Erprobungsräume*, because Schlegel is outlining insights about ecclesial innovation which he gained by initiating and developing *Erprobungsräume* in Central Germany. His main question is how innovative expressions of church emerge in mainline churches (*Volkskirche*). He asks about the formal and informal connections as well as the reciprocal dynamics between the different ecclesial levels that are part of this process. On the one hand is the "below" level of new expressions of church, which are mostly bottom-up grass-roots initiatives. On the other hand, is the "above" level of the institutional church and her aim to foster new initiatives without institutionalizing them. The new expressions need time (and freedom) to grow – sometimes in a different direction from that originally intended. This process is important; to engage with the surrounding (mostly secular) context of those initiatives and it often depends on the willingness of the institution to grant the needed time and space. To describe the reciprocal dynamics of levels, people and rationales, Schlegel refers to the heuristic model of church being a hybrid with different paradigms (that of institution, organization and movement) existing along each other and shaping the different ways church is organized. Regarding the *Erprobungsräume* Schlegel detects and describes four ways of how new expressions of church (new congregations, respectively) emerge in mainline churches.

The fifth article, by **Hanna Kauhaus**, presents reflections about diversity in local congregations and how more diversity can be fostered. The ecclesial context is the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and for the aim of diversity she asks two main questions: What variety of people show up in local congregations? And how well are those present included and have the chance to participate and contribute? For this purpose, she introduces into the concept of diversity management (DiM) and asks what churches and congregations can learn from it – in theoretical reflection as well as in practical implementation. To put the learning from DiM into congregational practice Kauhaus developed a framework with two parts. The first part is about raising

awareness that (non)accessibility and exclusion often reach further than expected. The second part explores areas of church activities where actual barriers can be found and removed. Within the model, she describes four levels of accessibility and exclusion, which build on each other: basic accessibility, understanding, positive experience and belonging. Besides levels of accessibility and exclusion, Kauhaus also identifies and describes areas of accessibility. To structure the areas, she provides a framework of five areas of congregational activities: information and public communication, buildings and times, content and culture of events and meetings, personal contacts and networks, and opportunities for participation and contribution.

This issue outlines the current socio-religious dynamics in Germany and the latest ecclesial attempts to deal with these realities. It shows how extensive and rapid the processes of secularization are and how fundamental their effects for the churches. It also sketches the consequent transformations the churches in Germany are undergoing currently. The perspectives might be helpful for other contexts with similar societal dynamics and ecclesial challenges.

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CONFERENCE REPORT

Christian Empowerment, Secularity and Church Development

Michael Herbst and Patrick Todjeras

1   Introduction

The annual international meeting of the International Consultation on Ecclesial Futures (ICEF) took place this year at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg in Halle/Saale (Germany) with the title "Christian Empowerment, Secularity and Church Development" on 10–14 June 2024. The host institution was the recently founded Centre for Empowerment Studies (CES).[1]

The aim of the annual meetings is to exchange research findings, promote critical dialogue and develop and discuss suggestions for missional, sustainable and context-sensitive church development. The guiding questions of the ICEF are: What are the specific conditions of our own context? How does God's mission manifest itself in our environment? Where do we discover traces of the work of the Holy Spirit and how does church life develop in our contexts? What theological questions arise from this and need to be reflected upon in greater depth? What can we learn from each other? What can be empirically ascertained and how can it be interpreted theologically?

The topics of the conference centred in particular on secularity and empowerment. The East German context and the development of a missional church were the specific local resonance space for this. The term "empowerment" was intended to enrich the question of the future of the churches through critical reflection.[2]

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1   Key questions of the CES include: How can the communication of the gospel succeed under the current conditions of secularity? How can people experience the Gospel as enabling and empowering for their lives? The CES conducts research with different focal points on Christian empowerment in religious education and practical theological contexts. https://ces-halle.de/forschung/ (22 November 2024).

2   On the CES homepage, empowerment is understood as aiming to "provide life support that enables people to trust their own strengths and shape their lives independently. This requires certain skills and competences on the one hand and strength, power and courage on the other. Anyone who addresses empowerment looks at both the resources of the individual, i.e. the personal space of opportunity, and the resources that are available for this, i.e. the structural space of opportunity. Ultimately, the aim is to explore in more detail how, from a Christian perspective, the possibilities can be expanded so that people can live their lives in a self-determined way." https://ces-halle.de/forschung/ (22 November 2024).

Didactically, there were lectures and discussions, spiritual impulses, field trips and visits to church plantings and missional and innovative communities and congregations in the local context (Evangelical Church of Central Germany, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony, Halle Free Church).

The public day, this time at the Halle-Wittenberg Faculty of Theology, addressed local and national theological issues in a special way, including the current German membership studies (Michael Herbst, Hanna Kauhaus), the approaches to empowerment in a hereditary-secular context (Michael Domsgen) and international perspectives, such as the missional potential of interculturality (Harvey Kwiyani, Nigel Rooms, Ariane Schneider), as well as methodological impulses (Dorte Kappelgaard, Marten van der Meulen, Thomas Schlegel).

2 Personal Reflections

What do we remember after five days of thinking, discerning and "walking together"? Some personal reflections:

2.1 Academic discourse and spirituality

The special character of the meetings of the ICEF network is the combination of academic reflection, exchange of experiences, reading the Bible together ("Dwelling in the Word"), and consistently one text for each of the five days: Lk. 10.1-12. One can recognize the integrative approach of the consortium's work in this: theological reflection and academic discourse are always combined with spiritual fellowship. However, one can also find the particular theological impulse that had a formative and determining effect throughout all the lectures and debates: that God not only "is", but also works and can be experienced – and his work is first and foremost the impetus for missionary work in the church and through the church. The question repeatedly asked is therefore: "Where is God already at work here?" And only then: "What should we do about it?" It has always been clear in the background that this attitude after the Enlightenment is certainly controversial, but nonetheless necessary.

2.2 Mission

It is therefore a special characteristic of this community of academic theologians and church practitioners that they share a distinctive understanding of mission, which is based on God's presence and his reconciling, healing and faith-creating work – and understands the church as a messenger who perceives where God is at work and then makes itself available to serve and celebrate God's salvation. Andrew Root's theological work has therefore been quoted in Halle repeatedly, including by Edwin van Driel: Root's "project aims to empower churches in this new missional era by helping

them focus ministry on the presence and work of God".[3] In contrast to a "functional atheism" that no longer knows how to speak of God's presence and action and therefore places the entire burden of mission on human shoulders, spiritual discernment is called for here, which – taught by the Holy Scriptures – seeks to perceive God's existence and action in the world.

2.3 God's preferred future

Beyond what is "already now" and can be perceived, however, the church needs an eschatological mindset (the "not yet"). Those who follow Christ do not live in the perpetual repetition of the old, but rather seek "God's preferred future" (Frederick Marais) and strive to embody something of it now. Here, social science theories about the diffusion of innovation (Everett Rogers) or the creation of prototypes and the "presencing" of the emerging new (Otto Scharmer) can support the spiritual insights and practical steps of the church.

2.4 Local congregations

Not only the meetings between theological and church leaders were in focus, but also the local congregations themselves. If an important task is for congregations to be independent actors in God's mission (and not just "care cases"), then the task of spiritual formation is on the churches' agenda. This was discussed using the example of a South African model (South African Partnership for Missional Church, Tom Smith), which introduces congregations (and not just their pastors) to a mission-oriented "rhythm of life" with spiritual disciplines and missionary explorations.

2.5 Secularization

Local churches develop in a very specific context, which also influences their mission. That's why the subject of secularization was a recurring topic of debate in Halle, not least with reference to Charles Taylor's insights into the "Secular Age". But the East German context, with the experience of 40 years of state discrimination and marginalization of church life, illustrated Taylor's insights in a highly impressive way.

2.6 Abundance

At the same time, this context should not put local churches in a depressive mood: There is abundance in places of scarcity. The conference did not just coincidentally take place in East Germany, one of the most secularized regions in the world (Felix Eiffler). The model of the "Volkskirche" (folk church) as the church of the majority

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3   E. v. Driel refers to several publications by Root (2017; 2019; 2021; 2022a; 2022b; 2023).
     The books are presented as volumes of a series entitled "Ministry in a Secular Age".

is obviously coming to an end here. The church finds itself in the *diaspora*: smaller, poorer and older. This became apparent, for example, at the presentation of the latest church membership study (Michael Herbst, Hanna Kauhaus). What was remarkable, however, was the less depressive mood that was conveyed, e.g. in the field trips, but also in the theological reflections on the *diaspora*. Without glossing over the situation, it became clear that there is abundance in places of scarcity. An East German pastor told of small new beginnings, e.g. of a church children's choir led by an atheist – and some of the children were then baptized. Equally revealing was the report of a pastor (Martin Golz, Halle) whose congregation has a presence in the middle of a socially deprived area with a construction trailer and has become a contact point for people from the neighbourhood – for fellowship, counselling and church services. They are not a church *for* others, but *with* others, and they experience in their ostensibly deficient situation: the resources can be found in the context. At first, secularity seems to be primarily a problem, but it is precisely when congregations seek God's presence and work anew that it becomes clear that this challenging starting position can also be a gift. Can one even say that the church in East Germany could be something like the "forefront of the church" (Dorte Kappelgaard)?

2.7 Crisis
Another danger was addressed in the discussions in Halle: The crisis of the Western churches could lead them to only concern themselves with themselves and to see the actual mission of the church as "fixing" the church. Marten van der Meulen distinguished between *crisis 1* (the decline of the church) and *crisis 2* (the forgetting of God's mission). Although *crisis 1* cannot simply be ignored, it is precisely in *crisis 1* that it is important not to lose sight of the right order of things and to recognize God's work. Signs of abundance can then be found in completely normal people, and shalom can be experienced in poor communities - as in the feeding of the people in the desert (with enormous leftovers!) according to Mt. 14.

2.8 Resonance
In addition to Charles Taylor, Hartmut Rosa's reflections on *Resonance* were repeatedly referred to. In a certain context, resonance also became a criterion for congregational development. Knut Tvetereit used case studies on various communities to show that resonance is contextual: "What resonates in one place, might not resonate in another place."

2.9 Experiencing faith
However, according to Edwin van Driel, resonance arises through being *with* and not only through being *for*. The first experience of resonance is that people experience faith: There is someone who hears us. Faith carries with it a promise of resonance.

That is why joy is its characteristic. God not only wants to remedy our needs (being *for*), but also to be with us and on our way (being *with*). "The church is the community in which God's gift of being with is already experienced." The fact that it exists, that people gather to listen and pray, is in itself a sign of God's goodness.

2.10 Unanswered questions

Of course, there are still unanswered questions regarding the willingness to learn new things, especially in times of uncertainty. The question was raised several times (and quite emotionally) as to whether the European church is finally ready to take the experiences of the African churches seriously and learn from them. The question arises not only with regard to global contacts, but also on their own doorstep: to what extent are the ministry and insights of the migrant churches (especially in Central and Western European cities) being taken seriously by the long-established majority churches? In the end, we are left with gratitude for the special opportunity to reflect on the church and God's mission with theologically and ecclesiastically active leaders from four continents, but also the challenge of continually entering into an intercultural dialogue on an equal footing.

3   Conclusion

To sum it up: There is a unique character of the ICEF network, which integrates academic theological discourse with spiritual fellowship, particularly through practices like Bible study. It emphasizes a theology rooted in recognizing and responding to God's active presence in the world, shaping a mission-oriented approach where the church discerns where God is at work and participates in it. This mission focuses on celebrating God's reconciling and transformative action, avoiding a purely human-centric view of ministry. Additionally, the church is called to adopt an eschatological perspective, seeking "God's preferred future" by embodying innovation and spiritual discernment to navigate the present and future challenges of faith and practice. The local congregation is an active participant in God's mission, focusing on spiritual formation and contextual engagement. Using models like the South African Partnership for Missional Church, churches are encouraged to adopt a mission-oriented lifestyle. The challenges of secularization, illustrated by East Germany's history, highlight the potential for abundance in scarcity. Stories of small beginnings and community-focused ministries reveal that even in declining or marginalized contexts, God's presence and resources emerge in meaningful ways. The discussions also warn against inward-focused "crisis management" that neglects God's mission. Instead, the church should prioritize recognizing God's work, as exemplified by moments of unexpected abundance (e.g., feeding the multitude). Concepts like "resonance" (Rosa) highlight the importance of contextual responses and the

promise of faith as relational joy, grounded in God's being with" people rather than merely "being for" them. The church itself embodies this divine presence, offering hope and purpose through shared worship and prayer.

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ARTICLE

Christian Empowerment and Secularity: Introduction to a Research Idea

Michael Domsgen

Abstract

This paper explores the challenges facing Christian churches in Germany amid increasing secularization and societal change. Key issues include the loss of institutional self-evidence, financial instability due to declining church membership, and the erosion of trust following abuse scandals. In response, the concept of empowerment is examined as a theological and pedagogical approach to fostering individual and communal agency. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives in community psychology, social work, disability studies and critical pedagogy, the study highlights how empowerment can create new pathways for engaging with the Christian message. Research at the CES focuses on religious communication, missional church development, and church theory in secular contexts, aiming to enhance the relevance of the Gospel through empowerment-driven approaches.

Keywords: Empowerment, Secularity, Germany, community Psychology, Social Work, Disability Studies, Critical Pedagogy, Gospel

1   Introduction

Currently, much is in motion – even in matters of religion. This unsettles many people, including the churches, even though, in principle, it is not a new phenomenon. From a broader historical perspective, change itself appears to be a constant.

The developments currently observable in *rebus religionis* in Germany can aptly be described using the term "changed self-evidence". What was long considered normal in the field is no longer the case for a significant part of the population. These processes are by no means linear; indeed, they often unfold in divergent ways. While the traditional churches face a perceptible loss of relevance unprecedented in recent history, other religious groups – primarily because of migration – are gaining significance. Christianity is experiencing a dramatic decline in relevance, both in Germany

and in much of the Western world. This decline is especially evident in its societal influence. For a long time, Christian religion functioned as the defining medium that shaped collective perceptions of reality. However, this has undergone a marked transformation. The Christian worldview, once dominant or at least influential, has become one perspective among many.

2 The Church in Germany is currently facing difficulties

The existing forms of an institutionalized church are increasingly reaching their limits and coming to an end. These developments are not new and have been accompanying the mainline churches in Germany for a long time. However, at least three things are new:

The money is running out: First, the number of people leaving the church has increased significantly. For the first time, this has led to a significant drop in church taxes. This shakes the financial foundations of the church's work.

Cases of sexualized violence shake the Church: Secondly, cases of sexualized violence raise questions about the harmful and usually unaddressed negative power dynamics within the church. These questions affect not only the church's structure but also its proclaimed message. A victim of sexual violence said to me: "Did God watch when this happened to me? And if he did watch, what kind of God is that? Or did God look away when this happened to me? But if he did look away, what kind of God is that?" This unsettles the substantive dimension of the church's work.

Loss of self-evidence and relevance: Thirdly, these events are embedded in a broader development that shapes Germany and large parts of the Western world, which can be described with the keywords "loss of self-evidence" and "loss of relevance". Christianity has lost significant influence. It is no longer the medium that, more or less unquestioned, shapes the perception of reality. Instead, it has become one option among many. This shakes the societal dimension of church work, because today's dominant medium is secular, and Christianity must prove itself within this context as well.

These three developments are so fundamental that previously unquestioned certainties are shaken. It also becomes apparent how fragile and diverse learning paths are. Approaching the Christian faith is no longer a matter of course for most people. It must be initiated and – just as importantly – repeatedly re-initiated throughout one's life. Faith no longer comes naturally. Moreover, the supportive cultural factors that could long be relied upon in this process are increasingly losing their influence.

This is a challenge that has been given little consideration within German practical theology. At least two overarching questions arise: First, how can the communication

of the gospel succeed under the current conditions of secularity, and secondly, how can people have meaningful experiences of relevance with the gospel?

It is particularly important to understand what encourages people to shape their lives as Christians independently and to use their strengths in solidarity with others. Against this background, Christian forms of communication such as praying, blessing, being blessed, celebrating and acting should be incorporated.

3   A question from Jesus as a source of inspiration

The fundamental direction can be biblically/theologically focused on the synoptically transmitted question of Jesus, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk 10.51; Mt. 20.32; Lk. 18.41). Here, the counterpart is seen as a conversation partner. Their voice is given space, and their desires and needs are carefully inquired. This basic attitude must be upheld. At the same time, it must be embedded in the broader orientation associated with the gospel. It is not just about self-improvement and increased autonomy in the general sense, but rather about a specific and unique form of self-discovery. This self-discovery is defined by the relationship between humans and God, a relationship in which the human is no longer the same but will be transformed. "He gets out of himself in order to come to himself" (Meyer-Blanck 2012: 411).

The direction associated with this can be described as an event that uplifts and reorients people. Sometimes it emerges as a disruption of the previous frame of reference. This perspective points to questions of empowerment.

4   In search of conversation partners

How can the challenges outlined above be addressed and reflected upon in practical theological terms? The guiding question lies openly on the table: How can approaches be opened which go beyond assumed self-evidence, predefined meanings and anticipated resonances? What does an empowerment-related perspective offer to this discussion?

These questions are not unique to Christian-motivated communication processes, and it is a promising endeavour to listen to other fields and discourses in order to learn for one's own questions and challenges. Other disciplines also operate within this reference framework, where *empowerment* plays a crucial role. Under this concept, one finds discourses offering a multitude of interesting ideas and suggestions. Here, the image of the table might be helpful: the problems are laid bare on the table, and the empowerment-related discourses bring inspiring dialogue partners into the conversation. The concept of empowerment introduces us to broader discussions that point to diverse receptions and perspectives. On the one hand, it

connects to educational theories, which offer preliminary reflections on learning processes beyond the realm of self-evident assumptions. On the other hand, it opens theological discourses that explicitly address questions of power and focus on marginalized groups.

However, as with any reference to non-theological discourses, critical inquiries arise. They cannot be elaborated here but must be taken seriously. They point out that these are not simply adaptations but interpretative mediations between the disciplines (Domsgen 2019, 354–67).

What can we learn from this?

5 Impulses and stimulations from empowerment discourses

I write this as a theologian and have theological theories in my head, such as the communication of the gospel. It reminds me of the dialogical nature of the gospel. And it points me to different forms of fulfilment. Ultimately, it is about allowing ourselves to be touched by the life, work and fate of Jesus of Nazareth. Three basic modes play a role here: learning, celebrating and helping. By talking about God, I introduce a dimension that does not simply dissolve into other discourses. At the same time, we can learn a lot from this about the communication of the gospel.

5.1 Expanding the possibilities to determine your own life

For example, we can learn from community psychology. Julian Rappaport introduced empowerment as a concept in the 1980s to determine the research-driven interest. As a minimal definition of this concept, he describes the goal "to expand opportunities for people to determine their own lives" (Rappaport 1985: 269).

There is no single solution but many solutions, differing regionally and depending on the conditions in various places, contexts and neighbourhoods. Questions of how to live a good live are thus contextualized. The community and the relevance for communal living come into focus. This relates with the discussions about communicating the gospel, because the processes of learning, celebrating and helping are communal ones. Questions of an individual person (e.g. concerning relevance) cannot be separated from the community of people that individual is part of.

5.2 Describing the direction

The theory of social work also features a well-developed discourse on empowerment. For professionals working in this field, the direction set by the empowerment concept is particularly significant. Both personal and structural spheres of possibility and ability must be taken into account. This can be summarized with Georg Bucher in the term pair of *Befähigung* and *Bevollmächtigung*, which could best be translated

as enablement and empowering in the sense of structural authorization. Religious impulses also need experiences of resonance and relevance, both on an individual as well as on a structural level. They can only be achieved within the framework of participation.

5.3 Supporting self-determination, co-determination and solidarity

The concrete implications of this, particularly the importance of self-directed processes in developing life-management capacities, can be explored in the discourse of disability studies. The overarching educational goal here is to "support and develop the ability for 'self-determination, participation and solidarity'" (Theunissen 2003: 79). It is essential to refer to strengths and resources to counteract the often-encountered perspective of deficit. This points to something very important, while at the same time, it must be noted: "Empowerment can only be realized where experiences of powerlessness are not dismissed as unreal" (Liedke 2013: 264).

5.4 Structural aspects play a significant role here

In critical pedagogy, particularly engaging with the works of Paulo Freire, such questions about the connection between education and cultural, social and especially economic structures are bundled and focused on the term "empowerment". Questions of power are addressed here, as well as those concerning encouragement and dealing with conflicts. In his dissertation, Georg Bucher has analysed the discourses mentioned here in an excellent way and made them fruitful for religious education (Bucher 2021: 228–326). The potential of this approach is not yet fully explored, notably when focusing on church theory and church development. More conversation partners must be included. At the same time, interesting and important aspects are already emerging.

6 Impulses concerning church theory and development

Empowerment addresses questions of life conduct. It aims at assistance, that enables people to trust their own strengths and shape their lives independently. In short: it is about enabling and authorizing. It requires specific abilities and competences on one hand, as well as strength, power and courage on the other. Ultimately, the goal is to explore how possibilities and abilities can be expanded for people to live self-determined lives. How can this be made fruitful for religious education and practical theology? How does it fit into the communication of the Gospel?

Very stimulating for this is the method of the "interpretative Vermittlung", which can be translated as the *method of interpretative mediation* strongly advocated by Karl

Ernst Nipkow (Nipkow 1978: 211). This approach avoids aiming for either identification or harmonization between theological and non-theological disciplines. Instead, it asks: What relevance do theological and non-theological perspectives have for their respective practical contexts? We try to bring theological and non-theological perspectives into conversation.

From the lens of empowerment discourses, we reflect on theological considerations and learn much about assisting in the communication of the gospel. For instance, we ask: How do Christian communicative practices sustainably support people in their lives? Or: How can the opportunities of an individual's development be described in light of the perspectives embedded in the gospel?

Conversely, from theological considerations, we engage with empowerment discourses and raise critical questions about the concept of empowerment. For example, we might ask: Where does resource orientation reach its limits? How can an overemphasis on the strength's perspective be avoided?

The overall focus is on empowerment as a description of the directional sense of the communication of the gospel. People should be addressed in their developmental possibilities concerning the perspectives inherent in the gospel. Thus, the focus is also on the inner and outer vulnerability inherent in humans, demanding empowerment in terms of support. The starting point is the fundamental human capacity for agency and freedom.

Ultimately, the gospel reveals itself as something that lifts people up and reorients them. For this to happen, specific abilities and competencies are required, including intrapsychic ones like confidence and courage and structural ones like power. Empowerment looks at both the personal possibilities in form of the individual's resources, as well as at the structural possibilities in form of the resources available. In both dimensions, a practical-theological perspective can and must explore both general and specifically Christian resources.

7   What do we research at the CES?

The *Centre for Empowerment Studies* is part of the Martin-Luther-University in Halle and this context has something to do with the research topics and questions we are dealing with. Halle is the second biggest city of the state of Saxony-Anhalt in Central Germany. In Halle, 8% of the population belong to the Evangelical Church and 4% are Catholic. So, 88% of the inhabitants are non-affiliated. In Saxony-Anhalt 85% of the people are non-affiliated.[4] This can be described as a highly secularized context and

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4   Ökumenischer Kirchenatlas, Bevölkerung und Religionszugehörigkeit, at www.oekumenischer-kirchenatlas.de (10.05.2025).

this environment, we work in, is one major reason why we deal with the topics and questions outlined in this article.

The research at CES happens at three research units, each focusing on different parts of the programme.

7.1 Research Unit for Religious Communication and Learning Processes (RKL)

RKL focuses on studying how non-religious people connect with religious and church activities. We investigate these questions with qualitative-empirical work and reconstruct approaches and learning paths of religiously non-localized people to religious/ church frameworks and offers. For instance, currently we are researching how mostly "non-affiliated" students and their parents perceive blessing ceremonies in Halle/Saale, offered by the Catholic and Protestant churches as a "Celebration of Turning Point" from childhood to adolescence (Project Manager: Helene Utpatel). We recently finished a project on how non-religious educators approach religious pedagogical elementary education (Project Manager: Ariane Schneider).

7.2 Research Unit for Missional Church and Community Development (MKG)

The MKG researches under the theological perspective of the *missio Dei* (God's mission) in the field of church innovation and renewal processes in secular contexts. The unit is involved in the scientific support of both the *Erprobungsräume* (spaces of trial) of the Evangelical Church of Central Germany and the *Inititiave Missionarische Aufbrüche* (initiative for missionary ventures) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony.

The MKG works primarily in an evaluative manner, using the dialogue and learning function of evaluation to learn from and with the local actors how the church can develop under predominantly secular conditions. Additionally, the unit offers long-term training for missionary pastors in Saxony and conduct various schools for full-time and volunteer church staff. The training and schools aim to encourage engagement with various topics (contextual mission, innovation and exnovation, impact orientation) and to enable participants to communicate the gospel in a context-sensitive manner.

7.3 Research Unit for Church Theory and Congregational Development: Ecumenism and Knowledge Transfer in the Global Lutheran Context (KÖW)

The KÖW works on how church and parishes can be thought of and shaped in the context of secularity. This involves looking at other denominational and cultural contexts:
- What can we learn from churches and parishes in other highly secularized countries on how to deal with the widespread loss of religious socialization in an emerging minority situation?

- Where are our existing notions of church and community challenged by ecumenical and international perspectives? Where do new think tanks emerge and theoretical as well as practical aspects clear up that can contribute to empowerment in and through the church?

Topics such as need orientation, reduction of barriers, and fluid forms of participation and involvement come into focus.

8   Outlook

The initial reactions to our initiatives have been very positive. It is especially the sense of direction named in empowerment that has attracted a lot of interest. How people can gain strength and courage through engagement with the gospel is very significant for those working in the church, whether they are volunteers or professionals. The expectations placed on us are often very high, sometimes too high. It is important to look at things realistically. Empowerment does not exist as a master plan to solve all or even most of the current problems. However, engaging with the discourses under this term offers many stimulating ideas that enrich practical theology as well as religious pedagogy and can be further developed. Realizing this potential and reflecting on it in the interplay of theory and practice is a worthwhile task. The CES is happy to contribute to this.

About the Author

Michael Domsgen studied theology in Halle, Jena, Bern, Kiel and Tübingen from 1987 to 1993. He completed his doctorate in Halle in 1997 with a thesis on religious education in eastern Germany. In 2004, his habilitation was with a thesis on family and religion. He has been Professor of Protestant Religious Education at Martin Luther University since 2006. In 2023, he founded the Centre for Empowerment Studies, of which he is Scientific Director. Main areas of research: Religious education in secularity, religious education theory of the family, theory of Protestant empowerment, Church-theory. Contact: michael.domsgen@theologie.uni-halle.de

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RADBOUD
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ARTICLE

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

Michael Herbst

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

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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).
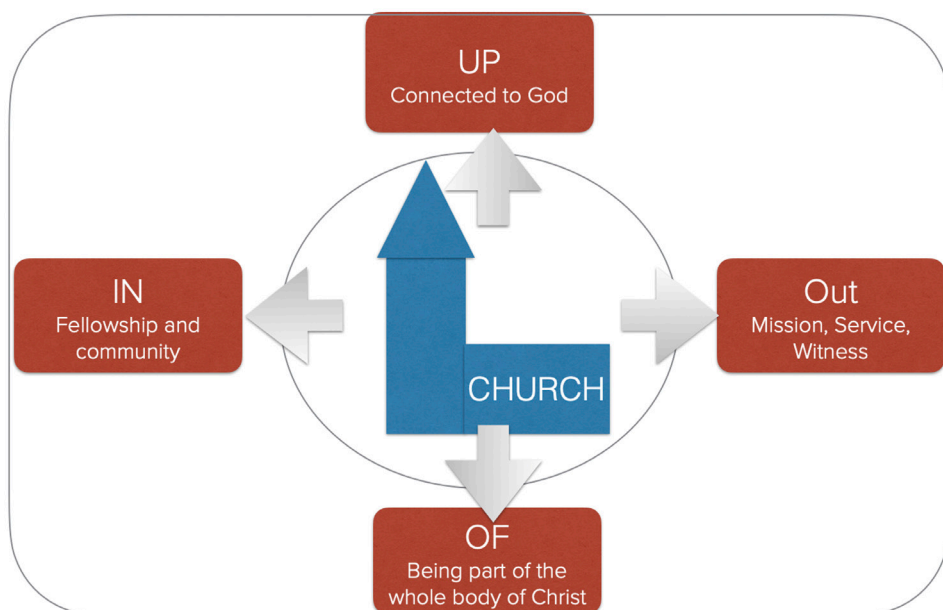
Figure 1   The four sets of relationships

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).
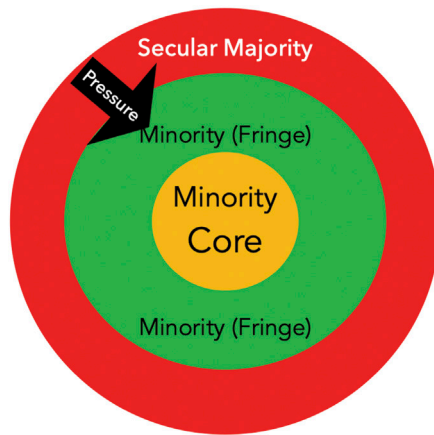
Figure 2 "Pressure"

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 sugarcoat 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):
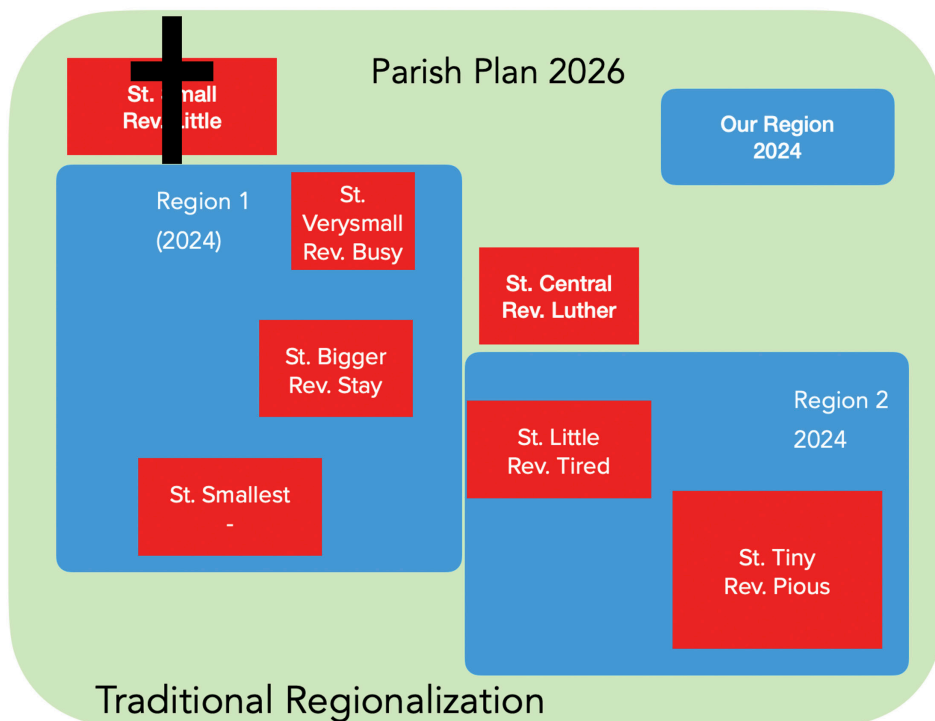
Figure 3   Regionalization

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 Domsgen 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]
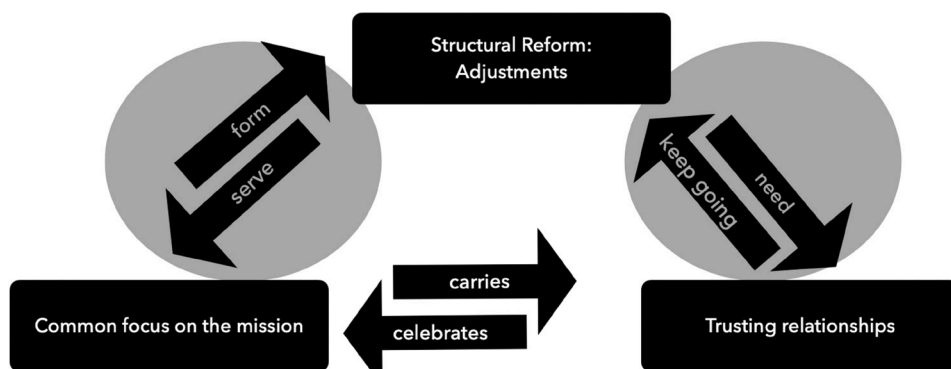
Figure 4   Structure, mission and relationships

- 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!

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

Investment in relationships.
Listening to God

Regio-local church development

Where can we cooperate better voluntarily?

What is our profile?
What are we particularly passionate about? What are we good at too?
What would we never give up?

Supplement instead of full program
What do we leave so that we do what we do with joy?

Church Schengen-Area
Freedom for options and choice
No self-definiton by borders

Regional plurality and complementarity.
New and old expressions of church.
New partners

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?
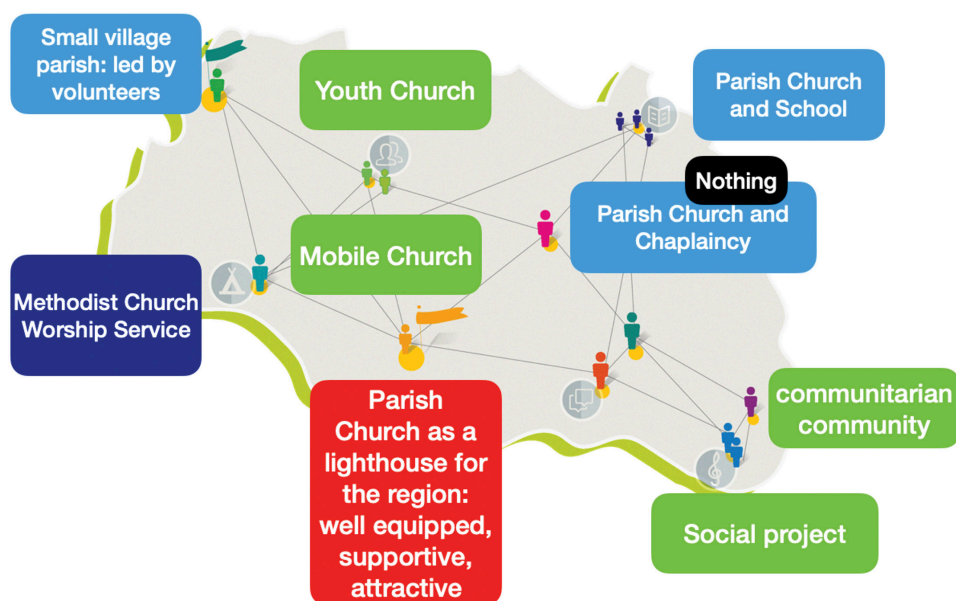

Figure 6   The 'new region'

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.

About the author

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RADBOUD
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ARTICLE

Evaluation of Ecclesial Innovations as Empowerment

Felix Eiffler

Abstract

The article introduces into the scientific evaluation of an ecclesial innovation programme initiated in 2015 by the Evangelical Church in Central Germany called *Erprobungsräume* (spaces of trial). By doing this, the text sketches the German socio-religious context and discusses the term "ecclesial innovation". The main part of the article offers and debates the key findings of the evaluation undertaken from 2016 to 2023. The results show how an institution like a German regional church can undergo a broad transformation and what can be learned by this example for innovative church development in general as well as for the scientific evaluation of such a process. Finally, the article connects the evaluation of ecclesial innovation with the discourse on empowerment and outlines the potentials of more participative forms of empirical research as a kind of empowerment.

Keywords: Ecclesial innovation, Evaluation, Learning process, Secularity

1   Introduction[1]

The *Missional Church Development* research unit (*Forschungsstelle Missionale Kirchen- und Gemeindeentwicklung* – MKG) at the Centre for Empowerment Studies – Christian Empowerment in Secularity (*Forschungszentrum Christliches Empowerment in der Säkularität* – CES) at Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg[2] is engaged in the scientific evaluation of ecclesial innovation programmes of the Lutheran-Evangelical Church of Saxony and of the Evangelical Church in Central Germany. These efforts towards church innovation are taking place against the backdrop of increasing

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1   The text was written with the support of DeepL.
2   See www.ces-halle.de (11.4.24).

societal secularity. With the so-called *Erprobungsräume* (spaces of trial), the Evangelical Church in Central Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Mitteldeutschland – EKM) is looking for ways to be a church in new expressions that is welcoming people who have had no contact at all with the church or the gospel or no contact for a long time.[3]

The majority of people living in the territory of the former German Democratic Republic (where the EKM is located) do not belong to any church, denomination or religious community. As far as statistics and surveys show, only very few of these non affiliated people have any kind of private religious practice (EKD 2023a: 42–67 and 20–22).[4] This secularized majority of society in turn exerts an influence on the religious minority (as "atmospheric pressure", Müller, Pollack and Pickel 2013: 144). In view of the results of the sixth church membership survey (EKD 2023a: 16–39) and the consistently high number of people leaving the Protestant and Catholic Church in recent years (EKD 2024),[5] the area of former West Germany is also increasingly developing into a secular society and so the German society as a whole (see Bertelsmann-Stiftung 2022).

On the other hand, do the results of the Religion Monitor 2023 show that "the majority of the German population can still be considered at least partly religious: Two thirds of those surveyed classify themselves as at least moderately or somewhat religious; three quarters at least believe in God, even if their faith is not very pronounced. The findings, therefore, do not reveal a clearly secularized society" (Bertelsmann-Stiftung 2022: 4). But if one compares the Religion Monitor's results from 2013 with those from 2023 the general societal trend points towards a growing secularism in Germany. The proportion of people who state that they were brought up religiously has fallen from 45% to 38%. At the same time, belief in God has become less important: in 2013, 47% said they believed in God very or quite strongly – this dropped to 38%. The same applies for prayer: the proportion of the population who pray daily has fallen from 23% to 17% (Bertelsmann-Stiftung 2022: 3). According to the slightly more recent sixth church membership survey, this applies only for 11% of the population and in contrast 47% never pray at all (EKD 2023b: 18). This survey shows, that "a large majority of the population (68%) consider themselves neither religious nor spiritual." (EKD 2023a: 25).

The evaluation and scientific monitoring of efforts to develop missional, contextual and innovative forms and new expressions of church should help to learn and better understand how a shrinking former so-called people's church (*Volkskirche*) can

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3 Both churches belong to the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland – EKD).

4 In East Germany, 73% of people can be described as secular.

5 In 2023 some 380,000 people left the EKD.

develop sustainably under the conditions of secularity. This is not only a task for the church in eastern Germany, but for the whole country and beyond for large parts of Europe (Bertelsmann-Stiftung 2023: 1–3).

2   A Brief History of *Erprobungsräume* in Central Germany

The *Erprobungsräume* (EPR) were initiated in 2015. They were preceded by the realization that the previous efforts to organize the church had reached their limits and that the structures, as well as the legal and organizational framework conditions, were proving to be increasingly dysfunctional in the face of progressive dismantling. This realization was accompanied by an ecumenical learning, which was inspired by processes of missional and ecclesial innovation in France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (Herbst 2006). Finally, a synodal discussion process lasting several years (2009–12) was carried out on the future contours of congregational and church development. The EKM was founded in 2008 through the merger of two formerly independent churches. The result of the discussion process was a twofold strategy: to continue the merger process that had already begun and at the same time to try out new approaches (Elhaus et al. 2024: 91–4; Elhaus and Hein 2023: particularly 56–66). In 2015, the *Erprobungsräume* programme was launched, which, according to § 1 of the EPR regulations (as of 2020), pursues two goals: On the one hand, "new forms of congregation in a secular context [and] other social forms of church are to be tested". On the other hand, the projects are "important for the future development of the church" (EKM, 2020b).

This dual objective makes the EPRs exciting in terms of church theory, as they are not only about local trials and experiences, but also about the question of what conclusions the entire church, as a learning organization, draws from the insights of the EPRs. The topics and levels of possible conclusions are diverse and concern, for example, the allocation of financial resources, the organization of employment and service relationships as well as questions of church law.

The EKM's willingness to learn from the individual EPRs regarding the overall church strategy reflects a learning attitude on the part of the church leadership, which has recognized that it is not just individual initiatives that are operating in trial mode, but the church as a whole. In this way, the EKM promotes the diffusion of the experimental approach and, thus, also the emergence of new ecclesial social forms in the entire church. Therefore, it fulfils a central criterion for innovation. The fact that the funding guidelines were adapted in 2020, and that church districts and parishes are now also supported in their experimental activities shows that this is successful (see Elhaus et al., 2024: 95–101). This brings us to the topic of ecclesial innovation.

3   What do we Mean by Ecclesial Innovation?

According to Tom Kelley (2016: 18–41), there are various ways or occasions for innovation: the misuse of an object ("crazy users" or "rule breakers"), trying out something new and unfamiliar or just observing people. Simon Sinek adds dissatisfaction (or frustration) as a further resource for innovation, as it can open up the possibility of improving a product, a concept, a way of doing things, etc (Sinek 2011: 1–7 and 38–50). By initiating the EPR, the EKM has already demonstrated the potential of dissatisfaction for innovation: Bishop Ilse Junkermann's statement at the 2014 Autumn Synod that previous attempts to secure the life and ministry of the church had come to an end did not lead to resignation, but to a fresh start (Elhaus et al. 2024: 105–6). In addition, trying out new paths offers the church the opportunity to ask important and groundbreaking questions, as it now has to do many things for the first time or in a completely new way. This provokes the kind of questions that someone who has been doing something for a long time rarely or never asks. Questions like: How do people discover the beauty and relevance of the gospel for the first time? What can the church build on in communicating the gospel? What do people expect from the church? What do they fear?

Catholic theologians Matthias Sellmann and Florian Sobetzko describe the following pastoral-innovative three-step process: ideation + application + diffusion = innovation (Sobetzko and Sellmann 2017: 27–43 and 59–95).

Ideation is the idea, the new approach, the inspiration. Sellmann/Sobetzko emphasize that innovations are ideas and behaviours "that are perceived as new by the members of a social system, regardless of whether they are *objectively* new or not" (Sobetzko and Sellmann 2017: 64). Consequently, an idea does not have to be absolutely new and original to form the starting point of an innovation.

Application describes the examination of whether the idea can be implemented, is suitable or makes sense at all.

Finally, *diffusion* (spreading) is required, i.e. the sustainable implementation of the new idea, the "penetration of the market", so to speak. The English theologian Michael Moynagh writes: "innovation is the modification of the 'rules of the game' so that church develops in new ways" (Moynagh 2017: 8). This quote makes it clear that an innovation does not only have to be new (at least in this context) but must be sustainable in order to be considered as innovation.

Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand warn against seeing effective innovation as *the* solutions to the church's current challenges and problems. They discover in it the transfer of a secular paradigm to church development (Root and Bertrand 2023: 1–13). In doing so, they point to an important fact: Innovation is not an end in itself but should serve to enable the church to communicate the gospel with as diverse a range of people as possible under changing (and increasingly secular) conditions. To do this, the church must acquire new knowledge, try out new steps and learn

from the experiences of others. In this sense, we are talking here about ecclesial innovation. Efforts to innovate are in no way a substitute for a spiritual process of repentance and revival. Innovation does not replace the work of God's Spirit, but I am convinced that the Holy Spirit can (and might) use innovative action to awaken and renew his church.

4   Evaluation of Church Innovation – Key Findings

From 2016 to 2023, fifteen selected EPRs were evaluated by the Sozialwissenschaftliche Institut der EKD (Institute for Social Science of the EKD – SI) and the Institut zur Erforschung von Evangelisation und Gemeindeentwicklung of the University of Greifswald (Research Institute for Evangelism and Church Development – IEEG). From 2022, the MKG research unit has taken over the tasks of the IEEG. The research team (Philipp Elhaus, Felix Eiffler, Tabea Fischer, Michael Herbst and Niko Labohm) summarized the results of the first evaluation as follows: "Missional outward orientation and contextual reference as well as lived spirituality in various forms are the strengths of the Erprobungsräume" (Elhaus et al., 2024: 102). This makes it clear that the EPRs investigated partially live up to their own claims. The EPRs were evaluated on the basis of seven guiding criteria:

(1) in them, the church of Jesus Christ comes into being anew;
(2) they transcend the logic of the mainstream church in at least one of the following places: parish, full-time pastoral ministry, church building;
(3) they reach the unreached with the gospel and invite them to follow Christ;
(4) they adapt to the context and serve it;
(5) they involve volunteers in a responsible position;
(6) they open up alternative financial sources;
(7) spirituality plays a central role in them (EKM 2020a: §1; see also Schlegel 2021: 30–6).

The EPRs evaluated fulfilled four out of seven criteria (2, 3, 4 and 7). They form different ecclesial expressions that are organized both interparish and transparish. Five types can be identified: (1) church "reloaded" (volunteer-based and socio-spatially oriented); (2) youth culturally oriented forms between network and church formation; (3) network-shaped Christian communities that offer experiences of a liquid church; (4) new church spaces (e.g. at schools); and (5) forms of conviviality with a communitarian core (e.g. housing projects in panel buildings) (Elhaus et al. 2024: 102–3). Amongst the initiatives are

– a social start-up;[6]

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6   https://pixel-sozialwerk.de (25.04.2025).

- a form of monastic community of young families living in a former monastery;[7]
- housing projects with groups of Christian families and individual Christians living in panel buildings and developing ways of being church with those living next to them;[8]
- two middle-aged female musicians, who visit elderly people, sing songs and spend time with them;
- an organ academy;[9]
- different social-diaconal projects;[10]
- a social-cultural project, where kids and youth are trained in the field of art and creativity;[11]
- a co-working space for entrepreneurs and start-ups;[12]
- as well as various forms of new expressions of Church;[13]
- and many more.[14]

Most of the EPRs evaluated succeed in communicating the gospel to people who are both unchurched and non-churched. In addition, the majority cooperate with (church and non-church) partners in the social space. Finally, lived spirituality is a resource: "The central role of spirituality forms the common mark of the projects and expresses their catholicity as well as their public representation as a Protestant church" (Elhaus et al. 2024: 102).

At the same time, there are also weaknesses: Only some of the EPRs evaluated succeeded in acquiring alternative funding and for "half of the projects, the fund-raising criterion proved to be dysfunctional" (Elhaus et al. 2024: 103). The participation of volunteers in responsible positions takes place, but there is room for improvement and falls short of the expectations of the criteria. After all, a third of the EPRs examined are led on a voluntary basis.

Since 2023, the SI has carried out an annual monitoring of all EPRs (as far as possible) and the results of the first survey from September 2023 supplement and expand the picture of the first evaluation. Concerning the acquisition of alternative funding, it can be seen that – contrary to what the results from the first round initially suggested – a larger proportion of the EPRs surveyed (n=32) do succeed in finding

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7   https://800-jahre-kloster-dambeck.de (25.04.2025).
8   https://www.senfkorn-stadtteilmission.de and https://www.stadtteilleben-gotha.com/community (28.04.2025).
9   https://www.orgel-akademie.de/willkommen.html (25.04.2025).
10 https://www.eckstein-stendal.de and https://jesus-projekt-erfurt.de (28.04.2025).
11 https://www.villa-wertvoll.de (25.04.2025).
12 https://gruenderhaus.bartho.org (25.04.2025).
13 https://www.herzschlag.me/start.html (25.04.2025).
14 https://www.erprobungsraeume-ekm.de/die-initiativen/ (25.04.2025).

alternative sources of funding. This also applies to the involvement of volunteers: seven EPRs are run entirely by volunteers, eight have volunteers involved in their leadership and a further eight have subdivisions managed by volunteers.

These results are confirmed by a study on the impact orientation of the EPR, which the MKG conducted in spring 2024 under the direction of Tabea Fischer. The results on finances and volunteering are more of a by-product of the survey but offer a helpful addition to the monitoring results. 21 EPRs took part in the survey on impact orientation.[15] Of these EPRs, only one receives more than 45% of its finances from the EPRs fund. In 11 of the EPRs surveyed, more than half of the available funds do not come from church sources, but from different foundations, private donors and public funds. The team composition also presents a heterogeneous picture:

More than half of the [surveyed] EPRs (n = 11) stated that they tended to be organized on a full-time basis (with voluntary support), the second largest group (n = 5) affirmed that they tended to be organized on a voluntary basis (with full-time support), and two EPRs each described themselves as being organized entirely on a voluntary basis or entirely on a full-time basis. (Fischer, Tabea and Eiffler 2024: 6).

An interesting finding about criteria 3 and 5 is that people from the target group are part of the team in two thirds of the EPRs surveyed.

Overall, the first evaluation has shown that criterion 1 is more difficult to fulfil than expected. There are probably various reasons for this, not least the fact that the term "church of Jesus Christ" (German *Gemeinde* i.e. congregation) is complex – both theologically and in terms of church law (see Hermelink 2018). The evaluation makes it clear that the development of new expressions of church is demanding and takes longer than expected, so that "the EKM would be well advised to make the first the seventh criterion and thus follow the Anglican logic of fresh expressions of church, which places the new form of church at the very end of the missionary process" (Elhaus et al. 2024: 105–6). At the same time, the diversity of ecclesial expressions that have emerged under the EPR label shows that the "potential of the projects to foster new expressions of church is considerable" (Elhaus et al. 2024: 102).

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15 Regarding the sample, Tabea Fischer writes: "As participation in the survey was voluntary and therefore not random, it can be assumed that the sample cannot be considered representative of the population of the EPRs: If EPRs who found the topic interesting or relevant were more likely to participate in the survey, the results would be biased in favor of impact orientation. […] The results of the survey should therefore not be classified as representative and generalizable, but rather as exemplary and exploratory, whereby the patterns and correlations found nevertheless point beyond the data." (Fischer 2024: 3).

5 Evaluation of Church Innovation as an Ecclesial Learning Process

The dual objective of the EPR (see EKM 2020b: §1) identifies the potential of the EPR for the whole church and assumes that the insights gained at project level are not only relevant for this specific context and its framework conditions but can also be used strategically at church level and offer insights for theory of church development.

The very fact that the church is having the process of testing extensively and permanently evaluated and scientifically monitored shows the church's self-image as a learning organization that is – in contrast to the logic of an institution – not just given, but is in the process of becoming and (further) developing.[16] This corresponds to the organizational logic of the church and Michael Herbst discovers an assistance function of the institution, which supports the church as an organization in trying out new forms of ecclesial expressions (Elhaus et al. 2024: 108–9). To this end, the institution provides human and financial resources and offers a legal framework that opens up opportunities and helps to circumvent some laws in certain areas – as provided by the EKM's Testing Act (*Erprobungsgesetz*), which was passed by the Synod in November 2023 (EKM 2024. Michael Domsgen points out that the assistance function of the church goes beyond testing: "It aims to support the communication of the gospel in various social forms" (Domsgen 2021: 38). Like innovation, the church as an institution does not have an end in itself but is intended to help communicate the gospel. That is its purpose, function and task.

Concerning the results of the first evaluation, Herbst mentions two aspects of the EPR that are relevant for church-wide action:

1. The EPRs show that "even relatively large and old institutions can at least partially reinvent themselves and have the courage to experiment" (Elhaus et al. 2024: 104). An institution that acts in this way fulfils its mission and supports individual Christians in sharing their faith in a variety of ways and under changing conditions, and in bearing witness to what they have "seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

2. The EPRs "show the way for a much smaller and poorer Protestant Church to be a witness to the Gospel in the future, to be close to the people and to try out life in faith together with them" (Elhaus et al. 2024: 104). The church is changing, but that does not mean that it ceasing to exist, nor that it can no longer fulfil its mission. The EPRs show that even a smaller and poorer church has the mission to "proclaim the message of God's free grace to all people" (Barmen 6). In this sense, the Protestant Church is and remains the people's church (*Volkskirche*).

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16 "The evaluation clearly shows that and how the program level sees and acts as a learning organization. Intensive process observation, reflection loops, a culture of feedback and the ability to take criticism as well as follow-up management characterize the process of the past seven years. The central role is the assistance function for the processes in the project" (Elhaus et al. 2024: 100).

6 Evaluation of Church Innovation as a Scientific Learning Process

The willingness to learn not only characterizes the church in its efforts around the EPR, but also concerns the scientific research. In the first phase (2016–23), the research was more of a (summative) evaluation in the narrower sense, which used the seven criteria to examine the extent to which the EPRs evaluated live up to their self-imposed standards, what helps them to do so (success factors) and where challenges arise.

The partners involved (EKM, SI and MKG) used the conclusion of the first evaluation phase to evaluate the evaluation itself. It became clear that an adapted approach was required, as the challenges were diverse and their possible management complex: "Instead of a broad-based 'all-round evaluation', future research should be leaner, more flexible and more dynamic, and take a more formative or responsive approach" (Elhaus et al. 2024: 112). This makes it possible to react better to current developments and changes as well as to results. This requires intensive and intentional communication between the various stakeholder groups and all persons and levels of action involved (see Döring and Bortz, 2016: 981–3). In view of these framework conditions, the SI and MKG teams have focused on the "dialogue and learning" function of evaluation (Döring and Bortz, 2016: 987).[17] The significance of this function has become increasingly important over the course of the first phase and it is now to be considered methodically and structurally in the second phase.

In terms of methodology, further research is to become more diverse and will from now on consist of three elements: a) annual monitoring based on the seven criteria, b) an annual focus study with changing focal points, and c) an accompanying reflection on the findings in terms of church theory.

In addition, new structures and formats for dialog and discussion are created and used:

- In an annual workshop, the results of the monitoring and focus studies are discussed and interpreted as well as conclusions are drawn for further support.
- The reporting system is adapted so that the results are accessible to the management and program level as well as the local initiatives.
- The results are regularly presented and discussed in the form of presentations and short texts at various levels of the church (e.g. church administration and synod, steering committee and advisory board as well as the projects).
- A representative of the steering committee is a member of the cross-institutional evaluation team.

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17 The other functions are: Optimization, decision-making, legitimation, insight.

- The extent to which further education formats such as the Winter Schools can be further developed and used as spaces for dialog and learning is also being examined.

The development outlined above shows that the evaluation of the EPR has been developed into a comprehensive scientific support that takes into account both the complexity of the subject matter and the associated need for a multi-perspective approach. It also reflects the realization that learning processes are necessary at all levels: project development, church management, and scientific reflection.

7   Evaluation of Church Innovation as Empowerment

The scientific support described above also shows an effort to empower people involved in the church at all levels. The research, which is geared towards dialog and learning, gives a voice to those who are involved locally in the projects or in church leadership. Their experiences are collected, arranged and processed. The experiences and findings on the ground can be used to learn something for other contexts and similar circumstances. Practical knowledge and approaches to solutions can be found locally and should be made visible and accessible through the evaluation. This acknowledges the skills of the local actors and enables them to make their own contribution to church development that goes beyond their specific location. By publishing the results, the local and contextual learning outcomes are in turn fed into the wider church theory discourse, which further increases their scope and enables their critical examination and further development.

During an evaluation, the question of objectives and assessment criteria cannot be avoided. By forcing these questions, evaluation stimulates discussion, creates new spaces for dialogue and brings different perspectives into conversation with each other. This helps to ask important questions, like:
- What goals are to be achieved through an innovation programme?
- Do the formally explicit objectives match the implicit objectives of the programme's participants? How are these goals pursued in the programme and project reality?
- How are they adapted if necessary?
- What are suitable strategies and steps to achieve them?

These questions need to be negotiated discursively, especially in the case of emergent programs that are designed for testing and therefore only become constituted during implementation. By asking about the actors involved, bringing them into dialogue with each other and taking their different perspectives seriously, evaluation empowers the groups of actors involved to participate in shaping and developing the church.

We know from learning theories that feedback is a prerequisite for learning processes. We learn from the consequences of our actions. In the course of an evaluation, this feedback is bundled under certain aspects and reflected into the entire church in the form of results – both at project and programme level. This enables everyone involved to reflect on their actions and, if necessary, adapt, readjust or optimize them.

The potential for empowerment of an evaluation as scientific support could be further developed in the direction of practice-based research or even participatory research (von Unger 2014). According to Hans Moser, practice-based research is a "scientific endeavor that is located at the interface between the scientific and practical system and aims to find mutual connections and makes them fruitful" (Moser 1995: 9). Sociologist Hella von Unger describes participatory research as follows:

Participatory research is a generic term for research approaches that explore and influence social reality in partnership. The aim is to understand and change social reality. This dual objective – the involvement of social actors as co-researchers and measures for individual and collective self-empowerment as well as empowerment of partners – characterize participatory research approaches. (von Unger 2014: 1)

In participatory research approaches, different interest groups and stakeholders are involved in the research to varying degrees of intensity and comprehensiveness. According to J. Bradley Cousins and Elizabeth Whitmore, three dimensions of participation can be distinguished:
a) Control of evaluation process (from researcher controlled to practitioner controlled),
b) stakeholder selection for participation (from primary users to all legitimate groups),
c) depth of participation (from consultation to deep participation). (Cousins and Whitmore 1998: 10-17; von Unger 2014: 13–50).

The desired empowerment has a dual perspective: in addition to involving practitioners in the joint learning process and the utilization of local skills, participatory research also endeavours to empower co-researchers, enabling them to critically and reflectively perceive their own practice, obtain feedback and further develop and improve their own work.

8   Conclusion

To summarize, it can be said that scientific-evaluative accompaniment of church innovation processes offers a variety of learning opportunities that are relevant in

terms of church theory, church leadership and congregational development. In view of the current multilayered challenges of the Protestant Church, this approach to the church's situation offers the opportunity to develop constructive contributions that are based on both empirical-practical and theoretical-discursive foundations. The scientific research of ecclesial innovation makes thus its own contribution to theory formation.

Theologically, an exciting perspective can be discovered in this: "What if God creates something new during decline – and we are part of it? What if we not only experience an end (we undoubtedly do!), but also a beginning?" (Elhaus et al. 2024: 111). The church as *creatura verbi* is not dependent on external structures but is renewed in the midst of the profound change of these very structures (Root and Bertrand 2023: 37–80).

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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 – "Erprobungsräume" (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 congrega-tions pass resolutions in the relevant committees, release suitable personnel and provide the necessary resources so that people can come together and a commu-nity 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 struc-tural 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 estab-lished; 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

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ARTICLE

Fostering Diversity in Congregations: A practical framework for local churches to reflect and improve accessibility

Hanna Kauhaus

Abstract

Diversity, understood as the extent to which the members of a group or organization differ from one another, is fundamental for the Church, but often not given to a great extent in local congregations, at least not in the Evangelical Church in Germany. This article wants to support practitioners in a diversity-oriented development process for their local churches.

In the first part, the concept of diversity management is introduced and some ideas pointed out and adapted for congregational development. Taking these basic ideas and additionally systematizing some suggestions from tools for diversity-oriented organizational development, in the second part a practical framework is presented. It has been created for identifying barriers and finding starting points for enhancing diversity in local protestant churches in Germany. Based on a model of four levels of accessibility and exclusion, the core is a framework of five areas of church activities in which unconscious barriers can be found regarding these different levels of accessibility. The aim is to help congregations to take some manageable steps to better include all who are already present and to become more accessible for others who are different in certain dimensions of diversity.

Keywords: Diversity management, Congregational development, Inclusion and exclusion, Accessibility, Participation

Diversity is at the roots of the Church (Eckhold 2017: 12–13). On Pentecost, when the apostle Peter first got the courage and inspiration to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, the listeners were a diverse crowd, having come to Jerusalem from different nations and cultural backgrounds (Acts 2.4-11). This is programmatic: From the very beginning, the Church is built with an astonishing diversity of people (Frey, 2014: 36). That mirrors the group of the twelve disciples and the larger group of Jesus'

followers, where cultural, economic, political, social and gender differences were struggled with, but somehow made less relevant by the charisma and teachings of Jesus. There are passages in the New Testament letters that can be understood as a plea for accepting diversity: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3.28, ESV). The gospel is for everyone (Mt. 28.20; 1 Tim. 2.4). The eschatological perspective also emphasizes the diversity of those who will cherish God's presence together (Lk. 13.28; Rev. 7.9).

This biblical opening is a bit one-sided and maybe even naïve. Within the same New Testament scriptures, there are passages that speak of exclusion, of "in" and "out", of the tolerable and the not tolerable, and of the struggles and developments regarding the norms and ground rules. Is diversity to be allowed regarding circumcision? Regarding the attendance of heathen festivities? Regarding sexual activity? The interdependence of ethics and culture is only one of the difficulties when making these decisions. And even though the vision for inclusiveness and diversity regarding race, sex, culture, religious background, socio-economic or family status and other dimensions is remarkable, the inclusiveness is not all-encompassing. There are certain shared beliefs and ethics that raise boundaries between "in" and "out", and at the same time these beliefs and ethics seem to serve as an anchor for unity – a unity that can then include many differences.

And yet, even with these shared beliefs and ethics, unity in diversity might be more of an ideal than a reality (Krieg 2017: 540–2) – at least when we jump into present times and walk into a Sunday morning service in most churches in Germany,[1] or look at data on participation in church activities, or at correlations between a felt connection with Church and the socio-economic status of church members (see below). Surely there is diversity among churchgoers, but the chances for positive encounters or even for belonging are by no means equal – even though equal opportunities, inclusion and being a church for all are strong values for the Protestant Churches in Germany (EKD 2015; https://www.landeskirche-hannovers.de/gesellschaft-und-leben/zusammenleben/vielfalt, accessed on 29.04.2025).

With this mixed background of New Testament visions, current values that are broadly shared in Church and society, and a few indicators of tensions and problems, I want to step into the topic of diversity in local congregations. "Diversity" basically means "the extent in which members of an entity, such as a group or organization, differ from one another" (Gonzales and Zamanian 2015: 595). How diverse are local congregations typically? Or: How homogenous is each of them? Who is more or less likely to show up for any church activities? Who, comparing those who are somehow

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1   The focus in this article is on local churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD).

involved in a congregation to all the local church members or even all the local people, is missing?

These questions have been researched and discussed in the context of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) for some relevant dimensions where people differ from one another, especially in age (Jacobi 2024), sex (Wunder 2024), milieus (Schulz 2014; Ahrens and Wegner 2008), and educational and socio-economic backgrounds (Kläden and Wunder 2024). In the context of missionary church development, especially the dimension of (non)-religious upbringing has often been considered, and churches have been called to lower thresholds and remove barriers for those without a church background (Herbst 2018: 180-89). Regarding the dimension of (dis) abilities, there are lots of publications, usually connected to inclusion discourses (e.g. Eurich and Lob-Hüdepohl, 2011; EKD 2022). The cultural and national background of people has received special attention in the discussions and projects of international churches (so-called "migrant" churches) and intercultural churches (Etzelmüller and Rammelt, 2022).

All these different aspects and discourses can be linked to diversity, an umbrella term that can include lots of dimensions of difference. Diversity can be used as a descriptive category – regarding any specific attributes, the range of diversity can be analysed and described. Yet, diversity isn't just a descriptive term. It also implies normativity, seeing diversity as a goal and a resource (Grümme, 2017: 595–6). Concepts of diversity emphasize the value of diversity. And they are linked to inclusion[2] traditions, thereby pointing to questions of participation and belonging. Therefore, when reflecting the diversity of local churches, two questions need to be considered together: What variety of people show up? And how well are those present actually included and given the chance to participate and contribute?

If limited diversity is diagnosed for a local church congregation, how can they act upon that? How can a local church start a process of diversifying and ensuring that different people can fully participate? There are instruments that are used in diversity-oriented organizational development, like questions for self-evaluation and suggestions of how to work on communication, structures, hiring policies etc. Some of these are also reflected in church policies and evaluation tools.

In this article, I will first give a short introduction to diversity management, and ask what could be learnt from the main concepts for fostering diversity in congregations. Based on that, a practical framework has been developed from diversity management concepts and instruments. This framework has two parts: one helps to reflect levels of inclusion or exclusion, and the other shows areas of accessibility and structures the process of recognizing biases and barriers. Both parts will be

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2   For an overview on the discourses on inclusion in protestant theology in Germany see Brunn 2021.

presented, with the aim of supporting practitioners in reflecting and taking some steps towards a diversity strategy that fits their profile.

1 Diversity management: Introduction and conceptual learnings for local congregations

Diversity management (DiM) is a concept for actively dealing with diversity in an organization. It is used in profit and non-profit organisations (see Bendl, Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann 2012: 13–14). It comes from two traditions and combines them: One is the equal opportunities movement, the fight for social justice.[3] This tradition is closely related to affirmative action and legal frameworks on equal opportunities. The other tradition, which comes directly from business management, is the realization that diversity is a vital resource for organizational performance (Cox 1993). DiM combines these two traditions and motivations. In theory and empirical research, there are different approaches and disciplines involved (see Yadav and Lenka 2020). From the beginning, it has a strong practical output, being used in consulting and training (Bendl, Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann 2012: 13). One reason for its increasing popularity is the "appeal of the idea that social justice and performance goals are not necessarily incompatible" (Gonzalez and Zamanian 2015: 595).

Since DiM is often used in institutions and organizations in education, social work and politics, it might also have something to offer for the church, in so far as the church has, amongst others, an organizational dimension (Hermelink 2011). If a church wants to deal positively with diversity and even increase diversity, what insights can it get from DiM?

DiM **appreciates diversity in itself**, as being a great resource for the group or organisation. Diversity helps both to complement and to challenge each other within a team or organization. This appreciation of diversity creates a proactive attitude. Instead of just asking "What needs to change in the organization for the people that are already here?", DiM asks the question "What needs to change so that people want to join? And how can we attract people from those groups that are not represented equally in the organization yet?"

DiM focuses on **group attributes** rather than individual attributes (Grümme 2017). This has the negative potential to reproduce stereotypes, but it can also be a necessary tool to think about accessibility and barriers for different people – even though each person is more than just part of different social groups (e.g. a woman, a mother, someone with migration background). Taking group attributes into

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3   For basic information on Diversity Management and its origins, see e.g. Gonzalez and Zamanian 2015; Bendl, Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann 2012: 12–13; Aschenbrenner-Wellmann and Geldner 2021.

consideration might serve as an auxiliary structure, because it can help to imagine, research and spell out different perspectives.

DiM generally focuses on **underrepresented and marginalized groups**. For pragmatic and legal reasons, in organizational development it often focuses on those dimensions of diversity that are part of antidiscrimination law, like race/ethnicity, sex/gender, religion and worldview, disability, age or sexual identity (Bendl, Hanappi-Egger and Hofmann 2012: 12–14). But each organization has to decide which dimensions are especially relevant for exclusion and inclusion and which underrepresented groups are most painfully missing. It also has to reflect where diversity has to be limited due to organisational goals. At a university for example, a certain exclusion of people without sufficient school education might be necessary – but the university should still make sure that as few secondary attributes as possible have an influence on the educational outcome. The university can use DiM programmes to help ensure that people from non-academic families have equal opportunities, or that there are second-chance degree programmes for those who are only able to discover or follow their academic abilities at a later stage of life. In the same way, churches have to do with religion and worldview – they cannot promise that inclusion has nothing to do with these attributes, but they should make sure that no secondary attributes are decisive, like a religious family background or a certain degree of sociability.

DiM knows that a balance is needed between **diversity and cohesion** (see Aschbrenner-Wellmann and Geldner 2021: 202–4). For the cohesion, relationships need to be built, communication skills need to be trained, and a sense of unity and togetherness needs to be strengthened, in order to deal with a broad diversity. An organization, a team or a group needs a certain amount of cohesive and unifying dimensions. The question for a realistic approach to the diversity of a congregation is: How much difference can it include? How can the sense of unity and belonging be strengthened, without making too many assumptions about equity? And when does more diversity in one direction lead to less diversity in another, to losing some people while trying to include others? In my experience, no congregation (or any organization or group) can be inclusive for everyone. Trying to accommodate some people will put others off. A sensible approach for practical purposes might be to seek to expand from the status quo towards just some people who are a bit different (Hauschildt and Pohl-Patalong 2013: 351–3), but still have quite a few overlapping attributes with those who are already well integrated. A congregation could focus on just one or two group attributes that they want to accommodate – and use an intersectional approach for that. For instance, if a congregation already has lots of families with similar secondary attributes, it could try to remove barriers for single-parent

families[4] or reach out to international families. A tool for expanding diversity will be presented below.

DiM often combines two approaches: One is to work on a **general culture of openness and acceptance**, the other to work on the **accessibility and inclusion for certain groups of people** (Warmuth 2012). One approach might actually lead to the other, in both directions.

Growing a general culture of openness and acceptance in a congregation is a huge undertaking in itself. I can only give some basic ideas on relevant aspects and possible approaches here.

a. **Welcome and hospitality, especially for newcomers:** To naturally expect visitors and create processes for people who come for the first time is a helpful basis for DiM. Clear signage, a welcome team with people who live hospitality, slides or leaflets that help to follow the liturgy, a good cup of tea or coffee – these are just some practical aspects that might help to create a general atmosphere of hospitality in the congregation.

b. **General diversity within the staff and volunteer leadership**: Even before there are thoughts on specific diversity attributes, it is generally helpful if the staff and core volunteers do not all look and think alike. Men and women, different ages and family status, different styles and talents – if they respect and complement each other and are able to work well together, it can be a model and invitation for others.

c. **Appreciation of differences instead of rigid ideas about what's right and what's wrong**: If there is a sense that there is the one right style and tradition (and lots of wrong ones), the one right way to behave, the one right set of thoughts and beliefs – this is the opposite of a general culture of openness. Instead, differences and ambiguities can be communicated as a positive thing. Programmes and events can include a variety of styles of worship, music, language, use of media etc. A variety in behaviour, styles, opinions, beliefs within the core community creates space for more diversity. This openness and variety needs to be balanced with profile and orientation, but the balance should be reflected on and discussed carefully.

d. **Fewer assumptions**, less taking for granted that everyone thinks or feels or wants the same: Sometimes the use of "we" isn't inclusive, but shows how one approach or perspective is represented and others are neglected. To avoid that, different realities and perspectives should be reflected in sermons and other

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4   The barriers that a single parent family might face in a congregation are well described in Lange, 2022.

public communication – and the rhetoric should leave space for a listener to silently agree or disagree, to identify or not.

e. **Ease of faults and errors**: Openness and acceptance is also influenced and mirrored by the way a congregation deals with faults, errors and disturbances. How does the congregation react if there are apparent mistakes made in the music or the spoken words, if a baby cries right in the middle of a quiet time of reflection, if the pastor forgets the Lord's Prayer? How willing are leaders to let volunteers try out different tasks, even if the first steps aren't always totally satisfying? This again needs to be balanced with a certain quality and professional approach.

f. **Ability to find compromises and to deal with and resolve conflict**: Conflict management is a necessary competence when trying to create this culture of openness and acceptance without the risk of disintegration. If different styles, habits and opinions are encouraged to be in the open, it is all the more important that this is twinned with the willingness to find compromises, and a positive attitude towards conflict.

2   Practical approach: A Framework for fostering diversity in a congregation

To put some of the learnings from DiM into practice for local congregations, I have developed a framework with two parts: One is about raising awareness that (non) accessibility and exclusion go much further than one might think at first. The other is about areas of church activities where actual barriers can be found and removed. For both parts, ideas from research outcomes, policy papers and practical instruments[5] are combined, adapted and systematized.

2.1   Levels of accessibility and exclusion

While talking about diversity, a church leader once said to me: "But we don't exclude anyone! Everyone is welcome and can take part!" This is what most congregations want, and how they would describe themselves. To raise sensitivity for actual exclusion mechanisms, people first need to understand that there are different levels of inclusion and exclusion. The issue involves much more than a basic form of accessibility. For this purpose, a model of four levels of accessibility and exclusion is

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5   https://www.aktion-mensch.de/kommune-inklusiv/praxis-handbuch-inklusion/planung/partizipation, accessed on 29.04.2025 (for local civil communities), https://www.stifterverband.org/diversity-check, accessed on 29.04.2025 (for universities and research institutes), https://www.diakonie-vielfalt.de/, accessed on 29.04.2025 (for diaconal and similar organisations), https://www.serviceportal-nordkirche.de/gemeinde-leiten/vielfalt, accessed on 29.04.2025 (for churches, but little information yet).

introduced. On all four levels people can experience barriers. The levels build on each other, so if someone is excluded on the first level, he or she usually doesn't even get to the next. And yet, all of them are vital and crucial for full inclusion and participation.

a. There is a first level of **basic accessibility**. Can people actually find and reach the place? Can they get into the building? Is information available in a medium that they can receive? Are events or meetings at a time when they can possibly attend? On this level, we suppose that people actually want to attend. Typical barriers for this basic level of accessibility could be physical stairs to the building, no toilets, costly fees or that information is only distributed in print to members or only available digitally.

b. The second level is **understanding**. Of course, understanding itself can be basic or profound, but here I am talking about a quite basic understanding. It implies the acoustics, the language, the media used and any required prior knowledge. Typical barriers are the use of insider-language and specialist terms, a complicated grammar, thoughts that demand a lot of shared knowledge or experiences, or noisy surroundings or bad acoustics that make it hard for people with hearing aids. For internationals or migrants, an altogether foreign language might prevent understanding.

c. The third level is a **positive experience**. This implies basic accessibility and understanding, but demands more than that. It is about people feeling welcome and comfortable, about people liking the atmosphere, the programme, the aesthetics, the people around them. Typical barriers could be that people feel insecure about the do's and don'ts, that they feel uncomfortable with a room, that they feel bored or overwhelmed, that they feel left out in communication, or that they have to do things they don't feel comfortable with. On this level it does get really tricky, because different people are used to and like different styles and programmes, and the different demands might seem to exclude each other. Aiming for a mainstream approach might be one option, or, when working with an existing congregation, trying to make the experience more positive for those who are already there plus bearing in mind others that are somehow similar and somehow different, in order to broaden the diversity of those who could have a positive experience.

d. The fourth level is **belonging**. There are different forms and needs. Belonging can, on the one side, be to visit now and then and to feel at the right place when it happens. Or, on the other side, it can be to have personal contacts, be part of a group and to take ownership. What can stand in the way of belonging, if basic accessibility, understanding and a positive experience are given? Barriers could be the feeling that everyone is different from oneself, that one's own situation and concerns are never mentioned, or that one's own culture is not repre-

sented at all. Exclusion from certain volunteer positions, whether by rules or by soft factors, can also obstruct a full sense of belonging.
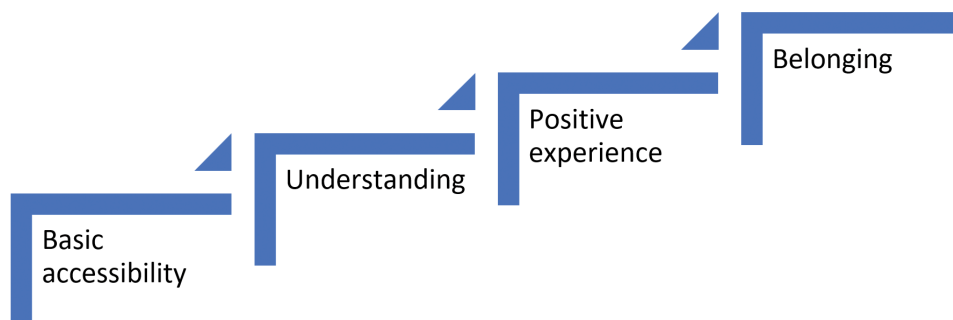
Belonging

Positive experience

Understanding

Basic accessibility

Diagram: Levels of accessibility and exclusion

2.2 Areas of accessibility

If a congregation wants to drive forward a process of diversifying, it is crucial to identify the things that put people off, make them feel unwelcome or prevent their participation – in short: the barriers that limit basic accessibility, understanding, a positive experience and belonging. These barriers are usually unintentional and often lie within habits and structures. To realize them is necessary if they are to be minimized.

Since no approach can fully remove barriers for everyone and some needs are even in opposition, I suggest to choose just a few group attributes to work with[6] How can such a choice be made? Maybe there are people who have already shown interest by visiting once or twice, but you feel it hasn't gone that well – in which dimension might they be different from others who are well included? Maybe some of the regular churchgoers have friends, family or other contacts in a specific milieu that isn't well represented in the congregation yet. Might that be a milieu to try to reduce barriers for? There might be longstanding members of the congregation whose health or family status has recently changed so that long-term illness or divorce might be a recent challenge, and a chance to think about those dimensions of diversity. Or there might be something in the local context that invites to choose a certain diversity perspective.

How can the actual barriers then be recognized? For illustration purposes, let us imagine that a congregation would want to expand their range of diversity to

6   Hauschildt and Pohl-Patalong (2013: 351–53) come to a similar conclusion regarding milieus.

be more accessible for international university students. They already attract native university students and want to diversify from there. The best way to spot barriers for international students would be to actually ask international students, especially if a few are already at the edges of the congregation. Another way would be that there might be bridge-builders in the congregation who work or live with international students and can put themselves in their shoes especially well. In addition to that, the leaders of the congregation should also try to take that perspective and to imagine different situations of congregational life from that perspective. Combining the different approaches and also hearing stories and reading research about other diversity groups might help to overcome the blindness that comes with routine and longstanding habituation.

For a structured approach, it is helpful to go through several **areas and aspects of the congregations' activities**. The following framework can be used for that.[7] It gives a structure of five areas of congregational activities: Information and public communication, buildings and times, content and culture of events and meetings, personal contacts and networks, and opportunities for participation and contribution. I give some ideas for each area, using the four levels of accessibility, and sometimes using examples of the group of international students for illustration. The question to ask for each area when using the framework is: What might be barriers for a group that you have in mind, and how can they be reduced?

a. **Information and public communication**: In this area, for basic accessibility and understanding the information needs to be easy to find, disseminated in the right places and channels, and available in an understandable language. For international students, who are often new to a town, online information with appropriate keywords and the use of English language would be basic features. For a positive experience, the design and choice of words matters – international students might like what is generally attractive for young, well-educated and globally mobile people. To open up for belonging, visual representation might be relevant. International students might feel less excluded if in the pictures there are young people and also ethnically mixed groups.

b. **Locations, buildings, times:** A traditional understanding of accessibility concentrates on physically disabled people and the appropriateness of entrance and facilities for them. But there are also other needs. For international students, basic accessibility could be hindered by inappropriate signage of and in the building, or by times of activities that don't fit with students' timetables. For inter-

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7   Some ideas are taken from guidelines on inclusion, on diversity management or on inclusive church services for specific groups. See e.g. Diakonie Deutschland 2019; Evangelische Kirche im Rheinland 2013; Bieler 2008; EKD 2015; Evangelische Kirche von Westfalen 2016; Kunz 2013.

national students, the concerns are probably more on the levels of positive experience and belonging – does the building feel welcoming and a safe space, does the interior design mirror the openness for their generation and cultures, do the rooms allow for different levels of participation, and does the congregation allow for not being strictly on time? For different groups of people, aspects like space, ventilation and temperature might be relevant, or lighting, acoustics and other things.

Another aspect worth mentioning is drinks and food. Although it is rarely relevant for basic accessibility and understanding, it can be vital for positive experience and belonging. It adds greatly to the surrounding and overall atmosphere, is crucial for hospitality and can have a strong inclusive impact. Drinks and food are closely connected with different cultures, milieus and generations – going the extra mile here to accommodate certain groups might be well worth it.

c. **Content and culture of events and meetings**: Depending on the type of event or meeting, different aspects come to mind. In a church service, understanding might be hindered for certain groups by unfamiliar or complicated language in songs, prayers and sermons. In addition, sometimes too much shared knowledge is required – about Christianity in general, but also about specific faith traditions or about the congregation. For international students, the altogether foreign language might have to be translated – which is easier if the original grammar, choice of words and lines of thought are easy to follow. For a positive experience and for belonging, it might help to address various senses and also to give different options to participate or to follow from a distance –intentionally opening the event for different levels of involvement might support diversity. Another important question is whether or not people's situations are mentioned in sermons and prayers: if people sense that the speakers only have other groups of people in mind, it might also make them feel excluded.

In church services, the music often has a strong impact on the experience of those who take part (see Ahrens and Wegner,2008: 36–9). There is no right or and wrong way of choosing between different styles of music, or mixing them, just as there is no right and wrong of a professional or amateur approach. Lots of conflicts arise around the choice of instruments and songs and volume. It is about culture, familiarity, faith traditions and personal theology. It seems to be closely connected to the dimension of belonging, and needs to be treated with great care.

All in all, if a diversity of people is involved in contributing to the event, it enhances the chances of representing a variety of perspectives and styles – at least if those who contribute are encouraged to bring their own preferences and thoughts to the table and act authentically.

d. **Personal contacts, networking and community**: In this area, opportunities for personal contacts and for experiencing a sense of community are fundamental. Different ways of interaction are helpful – not just the usual small talk at church coffee, but maybe also guided group discussions, communal meals, or joint activities. What is appropriate depends on the group of people a congregation wants to especially include. To foster diversity, the information about and access to joint activities and networking opportunities should be transparent and available via different channels. If there is a social gathering, the invitation should be clear; if there are digital networks or other structures where people can join to connect, they should be transparent and accessible. Personal contacts should, on the other hand, not be forced on anyone – if someone wants to come and go and not talk to anyone, that shouldn't make that person feel like an outsider. Respecting personal space or dealing sensitively with different perceptions of closeness and distance are also relevant.

    Community isn't just about personal interaction though. Singing or praying together can in itself create the experience of community. Standing together for Holy Communion can create a feeling of togetherness and community. If this sense of community is not disrupted by some of the barriers mentioned above, and if a general atmosphere of welcome and openness is facilitated, that might sometimes even be worth more for a positive experience and a sense of belonging than lots of opportunities for personal interaction.

e. **Participation and contribution**: As much as inclusion is not just about the possibility to passively attend and be cared for, diversifying a congregation is about allowing and inviting different people to have an impact and leave their mark. The attempt to diversify needs the contribution of diverse people. If people are invited to attend, but not listened to and not appreciated for their gifts, it might be yet another form of exclusion. Obviously not everyone wants to participate in the same way, or even take on an active role in the congregation. But if attempts are discouraged or some volunteer positions are principally closed to a group of people, that can be a huge barrier for feeling welcome and for belonging (Barron 2016).

    What can be done to open up for active participation and contribution and to foster diversity in this area? It is necessary to give opportunities to contribute with more or less time commitment. There might be situations where people can help or share spontaneously, whether carrying tables or putting forward their prayer requests. One-time activities like bringing food or taking part in a gardening day might be easily accessible. A mixture of short-term projects and long-term voluntary positions can serve different needs and living situations. Offering a variety of tasks and roles to include people with different gifts and preferences is also crucial. Communication and meetings for volunteers need to be barri-

er-free, just like public communication and events in general (see above). And last but not least, the ideal would be transparent information about possible contribution combined with personal approaches by someone who is good at getting to know people.

To work with these tools might seem complicated, but in fostering diversity, a congregation is dealing with a complex challenge. The different steps – choosing the group(s) they want to be easily and fully accessible for, understanding the different levels of accessibility, and getting hands-on in the different areas of their activities, can help to actually get a grip and start the process.

3 Concluding reflections

The presented framework wants to help practitioners to reflect and develop their own ideas for fostering at least one dimension of diversity in their local church. It has not been tested and evaluated yet. Research on the impact of using diversity checks and diversity-oriented frameworks for church development could be fruitful.

There are lots of open questions and critical reflections in my mind: Isn't the learning process of an organization far too complex to even suggest using this framework? Doesn't the process of linking this with the organisational vision and values deserve much closer attention? (see Warmuth 2012: 210). Isn't a professional process necessary, analysing the status quo, creating future goals and a strategy, implementing and evaluating this strategy? (Warmuth 2012: 210–30). Where should the resources in time and attention and emotional investment come from, when many local churches are struggling already? Still, the needs of churches deserve attempts to apply theories to practice, even though there are still open questions and reservations.

Last but not least: Any process of church development, whether diversity-oriented or with another approach, needs to be rooted in prayer and inspired by scripture. Dwelling in the image of Jesus and the early church, in God's calling of the marginalized and the perspective of heaven where all will feast together – that can encourage and enrich any diversity-oriented church development. When using the presented framework to grow the sensitivity for diverse perspectives, this rooting in prayer and scripture can help to balance the load of details and the demands for organizational activities with a spiritual approach and personal growth.

About the Author

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BOOK REVIEW

Herbst, Michael, Andreas C. Jansson, David Reißmann and Patrick Todjeras. 2024. *Evangelisation: Theologische Grundlagen, Zugänge, und Perspektiven*[1]

Stoppels, Sake, Jan Marten Praamsma and Jan Martijn Abrahamse. 2023. *Zoeken naar de dingen die boven zijn: heil in een seculiere tijd*[2]

Reviewed by Edwin Chr. van Driel

Among German theologians and religious studies scholars, evangelism is not a cool topic, so the writers of *Evangelisation: Theologische Grundlagen, Zugänge, und Perspektiven* assert. Therefore, as convinced students of the subject, they have launched a contextually appropriate mission to place evangelism back on the academic agenda. For the sake of German theological scholars, used to massive academic handbooks that with unparallelled *Pünktlichkeit* discuss every historical, systematic and practical aspect of a certain topic, the writers produce exactly that. In three parts, ten chapters, and five hundred thirty-five pages, they discuss the biblical grounding, historical expression, systematic-theological embeddedness, and practical theological implications of the Christian practice of evangelism.

The four authors of the book were or are all connected to the former Research Institute for Evangelism and Church Development at the University of Greifswald

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1   Evangelization: Theological Foundations, Approaches, and Perspectives.
2   Seeking the Things Above: Salvation in a Secular Age.

or to its successor institutes at the Martin-Luther-Universität of Halle-Wittenberg University of Halle-Wittenberg (Missional Church Development at the Centre for Empowerment Studies) and in Austria (Institut zur Erforschung von Mission und Kirche). For twenty years, after its founding in 2004, the institute at Greifswald was a somewhat lonely, but also highly productive voice, engaging developments in missional thinking in other parts of the Western world and contributing to them from the perspective of the deeply secularized context of eastern and central Germany. That work is now continued at the other two institutes.

In the first part of the book, David Reißmann lays the foundations of the discussion by offering an extensive historical account of the concept "evangelism" from its roots in the New Testament up to contemporary usage both in international missional and German ecclesial and academic accounts. Andreas C. Jansson follows with two chapters on the history of the practice and theology of evangelism, the first focused on evangelism in German Protestantism since the eighteenth century, the second on the notion of evangelism in international missional theology since the twentieth century.

The second part turns in a theological direction, beginning with two essays by Patrick Todjeras. The first essay returns to the New Testament notion of gospel/to evangelize and then document the remarkable lack of systematic theological reflection on the idea of evangelism in German-language literature. This lack stands in contrast to the notion of "faith" (G*laube*) and the path to faith, which receives significant attention in literature rooted both in pietism and liberalism. Todjeras lists a number of reasons why evangelism is theologically ignored, ranging from a perceived notion that evangelism is a practical theological concern rather than a systematic theological one, to cultural and theological resistance against the very idea of proselytizing and conversion (136–7). In the rest of this wide-ranging chapter Todjeras attempts to remedy this situation by looking at evangelism from the full range of theological *loci*, from Trinity and creation to ecclesiology. Interestingly, he does not push it all the way to eschatology, even while significant praxes of evangelism are eschatologically motivated. In a subsequent chapter Todjeras zooms in on the appropriation of faith in conversion or rebirth. This chapter is also most explicit about the book's confessional commitments, which are best characterized as "generous Lutheranism". The *Book of Concord* and the following Lutheran theological tradition are the *cantus firmus* for Todjeras' reflections. In the next two chapters, Andreas Jansson follows up with parallel theological analyses of the place of and reflection on the idea of evangelism in temporary missiology and practical theology. Michael Herbst concludes this part of the book with an extensive constructive contribution offering a "practical theology of evangelism". Herbst registers a similarly silencing of or resistance against evangelism among German practical theology as Todjeras noted concerning systematic theology (270–86). In response, Herbst offers a wide-ranging

discussion of both the theological motivation for evangelism as well as its practice as embedded in the holistic life of the Christian community. This chapter is particularly sensitive to the post-Christian context in which evangelism in western Europe takes place and engages the classics of a philosophical analysis of the secular (such as Charles Taylor) and the wider missional theological debate. In particular, Herbst takes up Lesslie Newbigin's suggestion that the congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel and develops an account of all the various ways in which the congregation gives public – and thereby evangelistic – witness to its faith. Herbst accounts for the goal of evangelism as conversion, but, based both on theological considerations and empirical research, wishes to conceive of conversion as a longer journey that itself leads to a continued life of *Nachfolge* ("discipleship"; Dietrich Bonhoeffer) rather than a particular moment in time. If there is such a moment, Herbst locates it, with Paul, in baptism, when one dies and is resurrected with Christ (392), rather than in a moment of human agency.

The third part of the book explores the idea of evangelism in two different directions. In his chapter, Patrick Todjeras takes on the question of what evangelization might look like in the unexplored realm of digital space. He maps the various digital religious practices and explores if and how they are conducive to evangelism. In the last chapter, David Reißmann ventures in another direction. His is the most constructive theological discussion, taking the topic right to the gates of German academic theology. When theological reflection is focused on religion rather than revelation, with the particularities and contextualities of people's experiences and convictions suppressed for the sake of the modernist construct of *religio*, evangelism is nothing more than another human religious expression, and an intolerant one at that. The heart of Reißmann's counterargument is the urging for the Christian community not to understand "evangelism" as an expression of Matthew 28, but of Luke 4. That is, evangelism is less about a commissioned activity of humans than it is about revelation; it is less about an obedient witnessing on our part than that it is about an inbreaking in all our lives – church people and academics alike – by the living God, a pouring out of the Spirit, a lifegiving work of Christ that demands not analysis, but a response.

Evangelisation can thus be read as an act of evangelism itself, a contextual witness to the gospel in an (academic) European culture that is increasingly post-Christian. But the book can also be read for the sake of determining what new thinking is demanded of us as we reflect on the gospel and its proclamation in a post-Christian world, and where our theological conceptualization is still thin, and our footing unsure. *Evangelisation* can help us to identify at least three.

First, what is the hoped-for outcome of evangelism? When congregations and churches give witness to the gospel, what vision drives them? In a Christendom

context, where the Christian faith was woven into the fabric of society, evangelism was meant to deepen that Christian conviction, to let is shape not only public but also individual lives and to draw back those who might have wandered away from the faith of their youth. As Christendom unravelled, evangelism for many became a means to attempt dechristianization, revival and finding new and fresh ways to counter the powers of secularism. But as in post-Christian Europe the immanent frame thickens (Charles Taylor), and not just the Christian faith, but any form of religiosity becomes to be seen as implausible or irrelevant, such dreams of revival seem increasingly improbable. What then shall we hope for? Moreover, in the background of such considerations are also deep questions that touch directly on the perceived identity of the church and its role in society, questions about the relationship between Christ and culture. Christendom is built on the idea that Christ is transforming culture, and that the church is a critical instrument or expression of this. Post-Christian realities seem to deal such vision a deadly wound. But then what should the church hope for when it preaches the good news? Such questions come particularly to the fore in Michael Herbst's essay. At several places he refers to contemporary Dutch missiologist Stefan Paas, who argues that we are to accept that the world will never be Christian, and that until the last day church and world will be different entities (e.g., 305–7). On such a view, mission in the post-Christian West needs a radically differently vision from anything akin to post-Christianization. Paas finds such vision in the idea that the church, on pilgrimage in exile, is to be a priestly community that prays and worships for and on behalf of the world. As such, it gives witness to the gospel, it welcomes and rejoices about those who wish to join her, but its witness is not driven by the expectation that the nations will (re)turn to the church. Paas is an increasingly influential voice in the European missional conversation. Herbst acknowledges the appeal of Paas' vision but is not ready to sign up. Is the biblical witness not more hopeful than that of an essential and enduring differentiation between church and world? If that is so, what does this mean for evangelism in the reality of a post-Christian society?

Second, but closely related to the first dilemma, is that of divine speech. *Evangelisation* can be read as a contextualization of the international missional reorientation on the *missio Dei.* That idea is now applied to the European and, in particular, German theory and praxis of evangelism. This is particularly expressed in the final essay by David Reißmann. Evangelism is not our speaking in response to the gospel we have received, but it is God's transformative speaking and working of goodness and healing. This is indeed the implication of the idea of the *missio Dei.* Notice, however, the unreflected assumption of these arguments: that God continues to speak. But is God still speaking? If God is, where is our post-Christian reality coming from? Why is Western culture caught in what seems to be an increasingly immanent framemin which the transcendent seems to have no place or voice? Is this simply the result

of human mishearing, or unwillingness to listen? But that would suggest that God's speaking is not as transformative as we hope it might be; that it very easily can be drowned out and ignored, that far more than we might be theologically comfortable with, creatures are the masters of their own universe. Therefore: might post-Christian realities not be the result of something else – that is, that sometimes God does *not* speak? The Scriptures speak of times when "the word of the Lord was rare, and visions were not widespread" (I Sam. 3.1). Might we not live in a similar time?

Contemplating the idea that we might experience divine silence rather than divine speech and mission is not comfortable. It also raises deep theological questions about God's relationship to history and divine intentionality within history. At the same time: *if* this is indeed what we are experiencing, we ignore these kinds of questions at our peril.

Third, we seem to be living in a time when history has sped upon considerably. I was particularly aware of this in reading Patrick Todjeras' essay on evangelism in digital space. While he does an excellent job naming and reflecting on the various questions that come up as we are trying to understand what digital reality is, and how community and communication happen there, Todjeras could not have realized how in recent months the owners of digital space – the technology gurus that own, shape and manipulate the social media on which most digital community life takes place – would prostrate themselves for the new American president and make common cause with what can only be characterized as a new authoritarian, illiberal, post-Christian regime. In fact, through the engineering of algorithms and other means, social media have become instruments that actively manipulate the electorate to usher in illiberal democracies, which in turn will serve the expansion of wealth and power for those who own those very same digital spaces. This invites renewed (theological) reflection on the realities we are dealing with here. Is digital space a neutral expansion of the space already familiar to us, to be used for good or bad; and are the social media platforms, on which most forms of evangelism take place, simply the cities and houses that allow us to inhabit this space and reach out to our digital neighbours with blessing or curse? Or do the developments of the last months reveal that digital space and social media are intrinsic instruments of wealth and power, designed to manipulate free citizens into commodities, and not just supporting, but actively furthering a project to colonize our hearts and minds in the service of venture capitalism? If so, is there any sense for Christian communities to inhabit those spaces, thereby contributing to the ways they make money for their owners and furthering the ways our identities are shaped by digital space, or are Christian communities called to counter-culturally resist the role digital realities play in our lives and unmask social media networks for what they are?

A fourth place where our theological thinking is thin, and our footing is unsure, is voiced by the other book up for review. Its editors have worked together on a research project sponsored by the Ede Christian University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, the country neighbuoring Germany to the west. Since the Netherlands is just as secularized as eastern Germany, Dutch theologians are wrestling with many of the same questions as their German colleagues. The question raised in the Ede research project is: when it comes to missional work, the forming of new worshipping communities and missional outreach to a post-Christian society, what is the nature of the good news we believe we inhabit and share? What do we take to be the nature of salvation of which the Christian faith speaks?

Their research and that of others revealed that many contemporary church planters in the secular West are highly motivated to working on forming new relationships and creating new places of community. They have a much harder time, though, in locating this work theologically in some account of salvation. Research shows that both pastors of existing congregations and leaders on church plants find it challenging to formulate an account of Christian salvation. Soteriological models that turn around individual accounts of sin and grace are considered outdated and, in fact, somewhat embarrassing. Church planters feel uncomfortable telling people that they are "bad". They are much more interested in the practical work of countering loneliness and engaging questions of meaning making, but are unclear on how to understand this kind of work in terms of Christian soteriology. Following British researcher Philip Wall, the editors of the book speak of "soteriological agnosticism". As they characterize it also, this is the immanentization of Christian soteriology. But salvation has to turn around more than building of community or making the world a better place. Without a transcendent dimension, salvation loses its hopeful character.

The twenty-two essays in this book offer avenues to explore new ways of speaking about salvation in a secular time. In character, this book is very different from *Evangelisation.* Whereas the German book is more determinate in its conclusions, the essays in the Dutch book are exploratory, open-ended, a first inquiry into a subject that demands significantly more attention. The essays take us in many different directions: explorations about soul and positive psychology; disability and soteriology; an intercultural dialogue about soteriology in African and Dutch contexts; contextualization of Israel's liberating understanding of its God for a contemporary city like Amsterdam; the relationship between salvation and Christian practices. (Given the fact that these essays are in Dutch, few readers of this journal will be able to access them. I understand an English-language collection of similar essays, product of the same research project, is forthcoming soon from Brill.)

For the sake of this review the observation to make is this, though: the fourth challenge for our thinking about the missional challenge in a post-Christian world is

that post-Christianity is not something that happens outside the church; it plagues also us within the church. If secularity is characterized by a loss of the sense of the transcendent, by living in the immanent frame, then, as the project that produced this book illustrates, those who lead the church do not escape it. Thus, we are called to missionally and theologically examine our own practices of proclamation and theologizing, of prayer and ministry, as much as we consider what it means to faithfully reach out to those outside the church.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Legrand, Lucien. 2023. *Paul and Mission*

Reviewed by John D. Doss

Lucien Legrand's study of *Paul and Mission* was initially published in French in 2021 as *Paul et la Mission: Apôtre des temps nouveaux*. The English translation of his research on the man, the mission, the message and the method of Paul the apostle is valuable for studying the New Testament, early Christianity, and the Christian mission today. *Paul and Mission* is very readable, consisting of twelve concise chapters. The New Testament scholar has a gift for expressing the complexity of Paul's thought in simple, understandable terms. Moreover, as a member of the Paris Foreign Mission Society and professor emeritus at St Peter's Institute of Theology in Bangalore, India, Legrand is uniquely equipped to speak both to the ancient context and the contemporary implications of Paul's mission.

Legrand opens the preface by asking, "Was Paul a missionary?" The method he rigorously applies to answer this question is studying the seven undisputed or authentic Pauline Epistles (Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon). The Pastoral Epistles (1–2 Timothy, Titus) and especially the book of Acts are also essential for reconstructing Paul's life and ministry even though they were written one or two generations afterward. Chapter 1 is the prelude. Legrand briefly sketches the life and times of the apostle, including his hometown of Tarsus, Roman citizenship, and especially his upbringing as a member of the Jewish Diaspora and training under Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem.

Chapters 2–5 are the first of three parts of *Paul and Mission*. Legrand begins with his conversion on the Damascus Road, where he saw the risen Lord and became an apostle. He focuses on Paul's own references to his conversion in Galatians, 1–2 Corinthians, and Philippians. The Damascus Road encounter is reported several times in the book of Acts. Legrand acknowledges the differences between the portrayal of Paul in his letters and Acts. Nevertheless, he identifies essential points of agreement, concluding that Acts is useful for reconstructing the historical Paul.

In chapters 3–4, Legrand explores two of Paul's most frequent self-identifications: apostle and servant of Jesus Christ. The former is the basis of Paul's authority to

teach, preach and establish churches among the nations of the ancient world. Paul defines an apostle as one who has seen Jesus (1 Cor. 9.1). Hence, his Damascus Road conversion was not a dream or vision but a physical encounter with the risen Lord himself. Moreover, the frequent designations of himself as a servant (*diakonos*) and slave (*doulos*) of Jesus emphasize his conformity to Christ and personal communion with him. Legrand notes the application for God's servants today as those who must empty themselves to be united with Christ and experience his fullness in their ministry. Chapter 5 concerns Paul's message, especially his "gospel". Paul's frequent use of the term demonstrates its centrality to his message. The gospel is the good news of God concerning his son, Jesus Christ. It is the message of love's victory over human weakness accomplished by Jesus's resurrection, which is the divine power of salvation for the world.

Part 2 (chapters 6–10) is the longest and most critical section of *Paul and Mission*. Chapters 6–7 concern Paul's missionary project. Legrand begins by surveying parallels to the Pauline mission in Second Temple Judaism and Roman Hellenism. Paul's ministry remains distinct, though he is firmly situated in Judaism. His purpose was not merely to preach the good news but to establish small communities of converts in major cities across the Roman Empire. Hence, the church (*ekklesia*) was central to Paul's missionary project, the subject of chapter 7. The new covenant community is comprised of those who are baptized in the name of Jesus and continually commemorate his death in the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, the church is a community united with Christ through practicing Christian virtue, especially the triad of faith, hope and love.

Legrand discusses Paul's mission field in chapter 8, defining his self-title as "apostle to the nations" (Rom. 11.13). He argues that this was not an ethnic but a geographical designation since Paul evangelized Jews along with Gentiles. Moreover, Paul's assignment was to go west, where Judaism was culturally absent. In contrast, the apostles and others focused on the southern and eastern parts of the Roman Empire that had large, established Jewish communities. Legrand moves on to Paul's methods in chapter 9. The apostle travelled with his missionary team around the empire by land and sea, working to support himself and receiving monetary support for his church-planting mission. Paul wrote letters to continue communicating his message to the churches in his absence.

Chapter 10 explores Paul's "inculturation" of the gospel, i.e., the contextualization of a Palestinian Jewish sect for a Greco-Roman audience. He begins with an intriguing comparison between Paul and Jesus, who mainly taught rural peasants in Galilee as opposed to the major metropolitan centers of the Roman Empire. He discusses the influence of Stoicism on Paul as well as Hellenistic virtues like wisdom, freedom and glory. Paul's genius lay in expressing the core of Jesus's message in terms familiar

to his Mediterranean audience, calling them to join the countercultural Jesus movement.

The third and final part of *Paul and Mission* reflects on the source of the apostle's power and his ministry of prayer. Paul credits the Holy Spirit as the source of his seemingly inexhaustible energy. The gift of the Spirit is also a primary motif in the book of Acts, but Legrand highlights Paul's distinct emphasis on the Spirit's resurrection power. In chapter 12, he asserts that Paul's prayers are a distinctive feature of his epistles among other ancient letters and indicate the centrality of prayer in his ministry. This has powerful implications for today as prayer is inseparably intertwined with mission. Legrand concludes by answering his original question that Luke presents Paul as the model and hero of Christian mission, while his letters provide an earlier and more personal portrait of the apostle. The resurrection was central to Paul's message of a new covenant community forged by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and transformed by the Spirit into his image.

Paul and Mission is a bath in the Scriptures, especially the Pauline Epistles, and a helpful resource for understanding his missiology. Legrand's extensive focus on Paul's mission in the seven undisputed epistles and the book of Acts is an important contribution to biblical studies. He is to be commended for situating Paul within Second Temple Judaism, not as a founder of a new world religion. The missiological principles he distils are applicable to all Christians today, especially those serving in cross-cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, *Paul and Mission* has several shortcomings. First, while Legrand's style of successively citing multiple passages immerses readers in the Pauline Epistles, further comment on their interpretation is desired. Libraries of books have been written on Paul the Apostle, resulting in numerous fiercely debated readings of his epistles. A contemporary study of Paul's mission cannot simply cite his letters, often lengthy block quotations, and assume readers know the proper meaning. I particularly enjoyed chapters 8–10 as Legrand makes intriguing claims concerning the interpretation of Paul and then supports his argument. These are more substantive and thought-provoking than other sections of *Paul and Mission*, which contain lengthy chain quotations with little exegetical comment.

A second critique concerns Legrand's methodology. His dependence on the book of Acts as a reliable source of historical information on the historical Paul conflicts with his view that it is a later tradition along with the Pastoral Epistles. Legrand often discusses the discrepancies between the portraits of Paul in Acts and his letters. Yet his reconstruction of the Pauline mission is sometimes primarily dependent on Acts. Further clarification of his methodology in this regard is needed. Moreover, some of the distinctions Legrand claims to have identified between the two corpora are suspect. For example, he asserts in chapter 3 that Acts does not refer to Paul as an apostle but reserves this title for the Twelve. However, Acts 14.4, 14 identify Paul and

Barnabas as apostles. Legrand explains that the term *apostolos* should be understood here as "missionaries". Nevertheless, the data clearly challenge Legrand's interpretation of Acts.

Finally, Legrand's portrait of Paul is instructive but incomplete. It is striking that Paul's eschatology and doctrine of justification are almost entirely absent in *Paul and Mission*. Instead, Legrand focuses on the reconciliation at the cross and the present victory believers enjoy through the resurrection. His treatment of these themes and their bearing on Paul's mission are insightful. However, one cannot understand the apostle or his mission without engaging his eschatology. Moreover, justification by faith in Christ was central to Paul's message, as both the undisputed Paulines and the book of Acts (see 13.38-39) attests.

In conclusion, despite its inadequacies, *Paul and Mission* is a valuable contribution to the ongoing study of history's most celebrated missionary and its implications for the contemporary Christian mission.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Percy, Martyn. 2025. *The Crisis of Colonial Anglicanism: Empire, Slavery and Revolt in the Church of England*

London: Hurst & Co Publishing
ISBN: 9781911723585

Reviewed by Benjamin Aldous

As someone who was ordained, both deacon and priest, in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa I often feel a step removed from direct critiques of the Church of England and its complex machinations. With recent gatherings of Synod full of tribal invective, handing-wringing over safeguarding failures and continued evasion for a move towards more accountability and transparency, Martin Percy's new book is timely. Percy explores the complex entanglements between the Church of England, the British Empire and the accidental birth of the Anglican global Communion in his typically uncompromising style.

Percy's central thesis is that the British Empire is primarily an English construction, and the Church of England has essentially served as the spiritual arm of this imperial project. He explores the Empire's Englishness and how it was embroiled in exploitation, racism and slavery which continues to shape its understanding of itself.

Divided into 15 pithy chapters, the introduction subtitled *implosion* sets out to "explore the expansion, gradual retraction, decline and fall of an empire and national church" (1). For Percy the church and the empire have always been in lock step and the Anglican communion a kind of quasi-ecclesial "commonwealth" riven with factionalism. At the heart of the problem for Percy is the Church of England's persistent evasion of scrutiny and transparency, its privileged monarchical pattern of control over clergy and laity and its tacit support for England's colonial conquest and subjugation of peoples the world over (3). In chapter 2, Percy notes that the fear of losing pre-eminence is a particular English vice and he links the desire for the Archbishop of Canterbury to maintain his *primus inter pares* with Henry VIII's desire for monarchical pre-eminence. He then charts the way in which Church of England interests were deeply embedded in the monopoly held by the East India Company. In essence the British Empire enabled the Church of England to move from being a

national church to becoming a global communion. Where the Empire grew in coercive power and influence, in its wake were Church of England missionary societies and their clergy effectively being agents of imperialism (49).

In chapters 4 to 6 Percy deals with the relationship between the slavery, church and colonial racism. Under slavery, capitalism and Christianity found their interests conflated. The now well-known legacy of English slave trading through the Queen Anne's Bounty, a charitable foundation which invested significant sums in transportation of slaves to the Americas, is a case in point. Percy asks why when the Church Commissioners have roughly £12 billion in investments would they only set aside £100 million (0.83% of the fund) as a way of addressing the church's historic links with slavery. Moreover, it is only the interest generated from this £100 million that will be used. For Percy this again speaks of the historical amnesia of the Church of England when it comes to the moral reckoning of its past duplicity (79). It is, as far as Percy is concerned, a problem rooted in the English psyche. "A nation not able to audit its own historical accounts means telling details get lost in the valorisation of the past" (169).

Chapter 11 asks why if slavery was the foundation of the British Empire and of English colonial expansionism why so few studies have emerged within theology that challenge the notion of the Anglican Communion has a highly problematic identity and legacy (165). For Percy the scale of this entanglement is undeniable and yet is often not faced squarely.

In chapter 14 Percy compares what he deems the "Old World" Church of England with that of the "New World" democratic shape of the Episcopalian church that quickly evolved in North America. The Old World believed in the pre-eminence of a God-willed monarchical authoritarianism which now looks increasingly untenable, out of touch with the vast majority of people in the nation and continually resistant to accountability and transparency in order to protect itself. The New World believed in the inalienable right to democratic equality. The Old World offered monarchy. Even if benign, kind and good, its citizens were *subjects* and others were born to rule over them (208). The dogged issues of classism, privilege and power continues to shape the way the Church of England operates in the world and puts in an uncomfortable position.

Finally, Percy paints a picture of the Anglican global communion as a wounded body never in hope of recovery. Percy suggests that the emergence of the Communion was an accident of history. Anglicans have already stopped doing things together and a family reunion every ten years cannot sustain the familial relations required to knit together a global communion (58). There is no common theological training. Evangelical and Catholic wings of the church promote different proclivities (59). Globally there is no international judicial oversight, no shared canon law and even the 39 articles are not adopted by all of the 46 members of the communion (191). On

top of these realities is the fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury's assumed default position as the first among equals has been seriously undermined by denouncements by various parts of the global South over the past few years and this is unlikely to improve with the recent resignation of Justin Welby. The Communion is fractured – conservative Anglicans now have new networks to enshrine their values. GAFCON, ANCA and smaller groups are effectively outside of any control of Lambeth. This, for Percy, is partly about the Church of England's hubris and desire to control to be seen as a global church of significance.

Percy concludes that this postcolonial era is no time to patch things up and move on, as though nothing serious has ever really happened but is a time to face the past and pay the dues owed (236). Until the church squarely faces the past, deals with its love of power, its continued racist and classist attitudes and favouring of monarchical privilege it cannot be the church of the nation and nor should it perhaps claim to be.

This is an important book, but at times the rhetoric borders on polemic, which can begin to undermine the argument. This is understandable given Percy's own treatment by the Church of England (which he has now left to move to Scotland and be part of an Episcopalian church) and his long-drawn-out and bitter dispute with Christ Church Oxford over various allegations. I think Percy fails to give fair treatment to Church of England mission societies. Everyone recognizes their links to imperial power but there are stories of sacrificial incarnational ministry amongst those who left to share the gospel. Again, the Anglican Communion is a complex animal but Percy's analysis fails to admit there may be any collegiality and value in the gatherings or hope of a new path for the future if the Archbishop of Canterbury's role is reassessed. Ultimately Percy suggests the writing is on the wall for the Church of England. In the words of Daniel 5 'Your days are numbered; you have been weighed and found wanting; your empire will be divided.' Or there may be a more hopeful future.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Smith, Jennifer R. 2023. *A Thematic Analysis of Religious Identity and Volunteer Motivation among Emerging Adult Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

Mississippi State University, IN: Institutional Repository[1]

Grell, Daniel. 2023. *Pursuing Jesus Christ Until We Meet Him Face-To-Face: A Biblical and Theological Challenge to Retired Baby Boomers to Become Transformed Disciples of Jesus Christ Who Faithfully Serve Him in the Context of Their Local Church*

Pro-Quest ID: 30486295[2]

Reviewed by Johannes Fröh

Volunteers are the backbone of church life, simultaneously deepening their own spiritual formation while serving their congregation and community. However, in most Western countries, volunteer rates have been steadily declining for the past half-century and are likely to continue doing so as average household working hours increase. This challenge to the church's future is addressed in the recently published dissertations of Jennifer R. Smith and Daniel Grell. Their research focuses on the volunteering potential and motivation of two underexplored age cohorts in the church: emerging adults (Smith), before their time becomes predominantly occupied

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1   Available at: https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/td/5979/
2   Available at: https://www.proquest.com/docview/2808449826?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses

by the job market, and Baby Boomers (Grell), as they transition into retirement over the next decade.

Jennifer R. Smith is an adjunct professor of Family Life and Human Development at Southern Utah University (SUU). While earning her advanced degrees from Mississippi State University, she contributed to several studies exploring the intersection of family relationships, religion and aging. Her academic expertise is complemented by her firsthand experience as a religious volunteer. As an active member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), she teaches Primary, Young Women and Relief Society – church programmes for women across different age groups. Additionally, Smith's perspective has been shaped by her exposure to different cultural environments. She grew up in Southern Utah but spent nearly a decade living in Kentucky and Mississippi, providing her with valuable insight into varying societal dynamics. The combination of her academic research, religious volunteer work and cross-cultural experiences led her to identify the central issue of her dissertation: volunteering among emerging adults has largely been overlooked in church contexts, particularly in relation to the cultural factors that influence engagement. Smith's research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religious identity and volunteer motivation among emerging adult members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. More specifically, she explores how religious identity shapes personal identity development and how it affects both the volunteering experience and the motivation to serve. Her findings offer practical insights into improving church volunteer recruitment and retention.

Daniel Grell is the Executive Director of VOCM-America, a mission organization focused on church planting in Southern India. His current role follows five decades of pastoral service in the Evangelical Free Church, where he ministered in various locations across the United States – including Yuba City, California; Conover, Wisconsin; Austin, Texas; Boone, Iowa; and Illinois – as well as internationally in Austria, Germany and England. After retiring in 2018, Grell served as an adjunct professor at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago for four years before assuming his current position at VOCM-America. As a retired Baby Boomer who has remained actively involved in church service, he is keenly aware of the ongoing decline in church volunteerism. This awareness led him to his central research question: *What would motivate Baby Boomers, upon reaching retirement, to continue serving Jesus Christ through their local church?* His project seeks to explore this issue in depth and provide practical solutions for both Baby Boomers and church leaders.

Both dissertations follow the traditional structure of empirical research projects. They begin with an introductory chapter that provides a concise overview of the study – well suited for informing church leadership about the key perspectives and most significant findings. This is followed by sections covering the theoretical foundation, chosen methodology, analysis of results and a discussion of those results.

Despite their shared structure and common focus on church volunteering, the two dissertations offer complementary perspectives, particularly in the context they provide. Just as their focus on the beginning and end of the working adult population forms a natural complement, their insights together create a more comprehensive understanding of volunteer engagement across different life stages.

Smith's literature review (Chapter II) begins by addressing the decline in volunteer rates. From this starting point, she defines the conceptual framework of volunteering, summarizes current research on volunteer motivation and introduces self-determination theory as the study's guiding research framework. She then examines prior studies on religious volunteers, using the topic of religion as a bridge to the specific research context of the LDS Church. Next, Smith introduces the concept of identity, setting the stage for the missing pieces of the theoretical foundation. She establishes a strong temporal perspective on identity formation by focusing on Erikson's well-known lifespan development model and its adaptation by Marcia. After further contextualizing this model through the lenses of cultural and religious identity, she narrows her focus to the life stage of *emerging adulthood*. With all key concepts now defined, Smith integrates them into a holistic framework that connects emerging adulthood with religion, culture, church membership, and volunteering.

Grell, by contrast, takes a significantly different approach. Like Smith, he begins by addressing the decline in volunteer rates among his target age cohort. However, rather than defining sociological core concepts related to this issue, he lays a biblical-theological foundation that examines its root causes (Chapter 2). He identifies four key factors contributing to Baby Boomers disengaging from Christlike service:

1. He contrasts disengagement theory with a biblical analysis of aging and retirement, concluding that God's view of seniors challenges disengagement theory.
2. He argues that while God has a special calling for seniors, many fail to recognize it.
3. This lack of understanding is shaped by cultural influences that conflict with the theological concept of lifelong discipleship, a perspective he primarily explores through Wilkin's discipleship model.
4. Fully embracing discipleship, in turn, leads to spiritual transformation, as described in Romans 12.2 and Matthew 16.24.

After establishing this biblical-theological foundation, Grell shifts to a review of empirical research on Baby Boomers' perspectives on these issues (Chapter 3). He examines theories of aging – contrasting chronological and agency-based approaches – as well as discussions on retirement, vocation, volunteerism, church life and spiritual formation. In each case, he evaluates these topics against the theological framework he previously outlined.

In their respective methodology chapters – Smith (Chapter III) and Grell (Chapter IV) – both researchers take a fairly similar approach to their topic. They employ a qualitative research methodology, conducting semi-structured interviews that align with their overall goal of exploring motivational factors in depth for their respective age cohorts. For data analysis, Smith uses thematic analysis, while Grell adopts a phenomenological approach with thematic clustering. To ensure transparency and rigor in their analytical perspectives, both researchers supplement their methodology with a section on self-reflexivity and positionality in their data interpretation.

Both dissertations proceed with the analysis and presentation of results. For Smith, this is by far the most extensive chapter of her work (Chapter IV), structured into five sections, each corresponding to one of her research questions. The first section examines key experiences that shaped participants' views on volunteering. Emerging themes include:

1. Family influence and role models.
2. Feelings of comfort, guidance, or peace in church settings, often rooted in childhood.
3. A phase of careful reexamination of the belief system they were raised with.
4. A personal decision to follow church teachings.
5. The experience of community within the congregation.
6. Volunteering role models in church leadership.

The second section explores the connection between church membership and self-perception. Smith finds that participants overwhelmingly see themselves as children of God, a belief that profoundly influences their sense of purpose, confidence, belonging, happiness and self-worth. She concludes that their understanding of God's plan and their relationship with him serves as the foundation for their self-perception. The third section focuses on prior volunteering experiences, revealing that participants engaged in a broad range of volunteer activities from early youth through college, spanning both secular and church-related initiatives. The fourth section analyzes the data through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT). Contrary to prior research, Smith finds it striking that while participants reported experiences reflecting all three psychological needs related to service participation and motivation, *relatedness* was the most frequently mentioned, cited by all 24 participants. The final section examines the influence of religious identity on volunteering behavior. Smith identifies three primary motivators for volunteering:

1. A desire to follow Christ's example.
2. The belief that all people are children of God.
3. Adherence to specific scriptural teachings on service.

Smith concludes her dissertation with a brief discussion of the results (Chapter V), mirroring the structure of her literature review by integrating various theoretical perspectives into a cohesive understanding of emerging adults' volunteer motivation. She then outlines practical implications for both church leadership and nonprofit organizations seeking to improve volunteer recruitment and retention.

Unlike Smith, Grell's presentation of results (Chapter V) is comparatively brief, yet it remains concise and insightful. He structures his findings into two main sections. In the first section, Grell presents the results of his semi-structured interviews with retired Baby Boomers, focusing on their perspectives on church volunteering. Based on his data, he concludes that the primary post-retirement goals for Baby Boomers *serious about pursuing discipleship to Christ* include:

1. Ending well and serving God for the remainder of their lives.
2. Having a meaningful influence on their families and others.
3. Fulfilling God's unique calling for them.
4. Sharing what God has done in their lives, for them, and through them.

These findings suggest that professionals working with Christian Baby Boomers should recognize their strong interest in spiritual growth and development through volunteering. Grell further notes that his interviewees view discipleship – understood as a personal relationship with Jesus – as an ongoing journey. This includes intentionally dedicating more time after retirement to spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and Scripture reading, while also identifying areas of personal struggle and surrendering them to Christ. However, Grell identifies two key barriers to Baby Boomer engagement in church service:

1. A reluctance to step outside their comfort zones.
2. A perception that their contributions are no longer valued by the congregation, which discourages them from taking on new or challenging roles.

In the second section, Grell shares insights from five additional semi-structured interviews with church staff who work with Baby Boomer volunteers. Their responses echo the Baby Boomers' strong commitment to Scripture and acknowledge their ability to offer wisdom shaped by a lifetime of experience. However, church staff also highlight key challenges in managing Baby Boomer volunteers, including:

– A tendency toward comfort and routine.
– eclining physical health.
– The need for transparent communication about evolving church culture to prevent feelings of disconnect.

Grell concludes his analysis with an overview of further remarks from church staff on how to support Baby Boomers in their spiritual transformation, encourage their

service within the church, address the effects of retirement, and explore mentoring as a potential avenue for engagement.

Like Smith, Grell synthesizes the various aspects of his in-depth analysis to form a holistic understanding of what motivates Baby Boomers to continue volunteering after retirement. After summarizing his findings at the end of Chapter V, he concludes his dissertation with a final chapter (Chapter VI), offering a brief project summary and practical implications for church leadership and staff working with Baby Boomers.

Overall, both dissertations address an increasingly critical issue for church leadership and management, focusing on two key age cohorts – one transitioning into full-time work and the other concluding their careers and entering retirement. Both researchers provide a thoughtful reflection on their own connection to their research context, offering transparency regarding their positionality while leveraging their unique contextual knowledge for in-depth qualitative analysis.

Smith's work excels in its nuanced exploration of emerging adults, grounded in the research frameworks she establishes in her literature review. These frameworks allow her to rigorously analyse her data from multiple perspectives, revealing the complex interplay between religious convictions, biographical experiences, cultural influences and interactions with the LDS Church. Additionally, her deep familiarity with LDS teachings enables her to skillfully analyse the religious connotations in her participants' responses, highlighting the central role their belief system plays in their motivation to volunteer. However, a notable weakness of her study is the somewhat associative application of the self-determination theory (SDT) framework. After only briefly introducing the theoretical perspective, neither her interview questions nor her analytical process fully engage with the abstract meta-concepts of SDT in a way that meets the necessary level of rigour.

Grell's study stands out for its practical applicability to church leadership. One of its key strengths is the solid and extensive biblical-theological foundation he establishes, offering a Scripture-based, multifaceted perspective on aging and discipleship. His work is particularly well-suited for church teaching preparation, as it presents theological insights in an accessible and applicable manner. Another major strength is his inclusion of interviews with church staff, which not only contextualizes the perspectives of Baby Boomer participants but also provides valuable insights into the challenges of leading this generation within a church setting. However, Grell's study is less rigorous in its engagement with existing research and theoretical frameworks. His biblical-theological foundation lacks engagement with exegetical and systematic theological scholarship, and his methodological approach is not presented with the same depth and clarity as Smith's. This limits the study's academic integration and theoretical robustness.

Overall, despite their respective weaknesses, I recommend both dissertations. Smith's work is valuable for both church practitioners and academics. Not only does it offer important insights into her target age cohort, but it also provides a strong theoretical foundation that invites further academic inquiry into an SDT-based perspective on emerging adults' motivation – potentially even challenging the framework itself. Grell's work, on the other hand, is particularly useful for church practitioners from non-liberal theological backgrounds. His pastoral intent, shaped by decades of experience, is compelling throughout the text, and he offers solid, practical recommendations for engaging Baby Boomers in church service.

About the Reviewer

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BOOK REVIEW

Cavanaugh, William T. 2024. *The Uses of Idolatry*

New York, NY: Oxford University Press
ISBN: 978-0-19-767904-3

Reviewed by Scott J. Hagley

It is difficult to attend a football game at Lambeau Field in Green Bay or Anfield in Liverpool and not recognize the tell-tale signs of religious enthusiasm. Sportscasters call these cathedrals to sport and capital "hallowed ground" in reverence to the storied histories of these two clubs. Fans throw themselves into certain liturgies, learned by imitation and repetition and passed on from generation to generation: singing the songs, drinking the beers, dressing in the colours, carrying totems for luck and good fortune. And when Steven Girard hits a strike from 35 yards out to win in stoppage time, or Aaron Rogers heaves a sixty-yard pass into the back corner of the endzone with seconds on the clock, tens of thousands of people are thrust into the kind of revelry usually reserved for the sawdust trail. For all our interest in the "secular West" and our age of "disenchantment", the signs of religious commitment are present for those with eyes to see.

In *The Uses of Idolatry,* William Cavanaugh explores the intense religiosity of our secular age, arguing that we willfully misunderstand the current moment by using terms like "disenchantment" to talk about late modernity. As Anfield or Amazon or resurgent nationalisms demonstrate, we live in an age of *misenchantment,* not disenchantment. Drawing together Durkheim and Augustine, Cavanaugh reminds us that we are, in fact, worshipping creatures who cannot help but create rituals and liturgies to integrate and organize our social life according to particular social goods. That we no longer do this by way of explicit religious communities does not change the functional religiosity of things like consumer capitalism and nationalism.

For Cavanaugh, "disenchantment" serves a polemical purpose, creating a sense of discontinuity between modern and pre-modern societies and flattering us with stories of rational progress. But a closer look at our theories of modern disenchantment makes such polemics harder to sustain. Cavanaugh turns to Max Weber's theory of rationalization and Charles Taylor's framing of the immanent frame to

show how the enchanted nature of human society is never able to be written out of the story. Weber, for instance, uses rationalization to describe the migration of religious belief form one realm to another. Capitalism, shaped by Puritan "inner worldly aestheticism" empties the world of meaning, trading ends for means and giving us over to the impersonal forces of the market and technology – the "iron cage" of modernity. Weber, Cavanaugh notes, does not use "death of God" language, but rather describes modernity as a new form of polytheism. The old gods are resurrected – Apollo become capital (41). As with former polytheistic eras, we are pushed and pulled by forces beyond our control, with the difference being the impersonality of modern bureaucracy and technology and capital flows, along with the possibility of choice. But make no mistake, Weber found the "border between enchantment and disenchantment" hard to defend (43). Cavanaugh concludes: "An exchange has taken place, whereby God has been depersonalized, reduced to merely immanent and impersonal forces of human creation, while the most mundane and rational processes and institutions have been divinized ... enchantment and disenchantment are inextricably entangled" (47).

Cavanaugh identifies a similar tension in Charles Taylor's work, arguing that Taylor is unable to maintain the binaries that describe our current age as secular, such as belief/unbelief, religious/nonreligious, immanent/transcendent. Drawing from Emile Durkheim's functionalist theory of religion, Cavanaugh shows how Taylor's account ignores modern religious activity that falls outside the bounds of religious belief. Capitalism and nationalism, for example, exhibit a Durkheimian religious function, but no discernible belief in God or gods, and so they fall to the side of Taylor's account. Secularization, Cavanaugh argues, "is the very invention of the religious/secular binary and the process by which certain things got labeled religious and others did not" (99). For "it is not religion that has declined, but Christianity" (102).

Because our world is *misenchanted* rather than *disenchanted,* idolatry offers a useful framework for thinking about the nature of Christian practice and theology in two different ways. At the most basic level, idolatry describes the objective worship of false gods in modern life. Working with the biblical tradition and Augustine, Cavanaugh explores the corrupting nature of idolatry, misdirected desire that distorts our sense of self, God and world. Here Cavanaugh echoes traditional jeremiads against the evils and dangers of idolatry. But idolatry offers a second, more nuanced frame for thinking about modernity. Not all idolatries are created equal. Turning to Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of the idol and his notion of "splendid idolatry", Cavanaugh places nationalism and consumerism on the continuum of idolatries. While nationalism certainly distorts our relationship with one another and God, it contains a "splendid" dimension as well. As a type of "splendid idolatry", nationalism draws us out of ourselves and cultivates in us a desire for something greater than the self, an urge to give ourselves to something transcendent. Consumerism, however, does the

reverse. It offers a self-enclosed and enclosing form of idolatry, a hall-of-mirrors that leaves one worshipping the self, or the image of the self.

Those familiar with Cavanaugh's other works on capitalism and nationalism, such as *Being Consumed* and *Migrations of the Holy,* will not be surprised that the book ends with a meditation on the Sacraments and Incarnation. The consequence of misenchantment, he argues, is not materialism but rather a form of disembodiment, an attempt to escape from the world of things and our existence as creatures. In Cavanaugh's view, the Incarnation affirms God's solidarity with creation, offering the possibility that what is created can be *icon* and not only idol. The Sacraments – distinguished from principles of sacramentality – place us within the story of God and God's people and on the continuum between idol and icon. They are given by God, a concrete place in which God gives of Godself, but they are also a practice we give ourselves to, thus speaking in a kind of "'middle voice', in which humans are neither simply active nor passive in the face of God's action" (375). Idolatry, in the end, "can be healed only by encounter with the living God … [for] to worship the incarnate God is to participate in God's kenosis; rather than grasp God, we allow ourselves to be poured out in the encounter with God, to receive the presence of God as a gift" (382).

In many respects, *The Uses of Idolatry* introduces important and troubling lines of inquiry into the tired "Post-Christendom" discourse. By subverting well-worn accounts of Weber and Taylor, he shifts attention away from declining church attendance to what he calls the "migrations of the holy" in Western contexts. And by interrogating late modernity with a thick understanding of idolatry, he affirms the importance of Christian worship and sacramentality in this misenchanted time. But it is also here, in considering the Sacraments, where Cavanaugh becomes the most predictable and perhaps the least demanding of his readers when considered against the "splendid" and "unsplendid" idolatries of nationalism and consumerism, or of pop culture and sports fandom. The rise of violent ethno-nationalisms in the United States and Europe within and amid Christian communities affirms Cavanaugh's basic insight regarding idolatry and late modernity. However, the fact that this is happening, not only among evangelicals and Pentecostals, but also within Catholic and Orthodox communities characterized by the type of sacramentality to which Cavanaugh appeals, raises new questions about the conditions of possibility for encountering the living God, and what faithful witness to this God looks like in our misenchanted time.

About the Reviewer

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Ecclesial Futures publishes original research and theological reflection on the development and transformation of local Christian communities and the systems that support them as they join in the mission of God in the world.

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We are an international and ecumenical journal with an interdisciplinary understanding of our approach to theological research and reflection; the core disciplines being theology, missiology, and ecclesiology. Other social science and theological disciplines may be helpful in supporting the holistic nature of any research, e.g., anthropology and ethnography, sociology, statistical research, biblical studies, leadership studies, and adult learning.

The journal fills an important reflective space between the academy and on-the-ground practice within the field of mission studies, ecclesiology, and the so-called "missional church." This opportunity for engagement has emerged in the last twenty or so years from a turn to the local (and the local church) and, in the Western world at least, from the demise of Christendom and a rapidly changing world – which also affects the church globally.

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