

Church in crisis: Coping strategies and reform stress

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The church is in crisis. It is becoming steadily smaller and is therefore looking for reforms to bring about a change. But the church's reforms are structural adjustments, not reforms in the true sense, and therefore limited in scope. They make sense in order to save money, but they cannot reverse the overall social trend. Against this background, this chapter asks in which respects organizational reforms can actually be helpful and inspiring. But above all, the question arises where in society religious and spiritual dynamics can be observed and how the church could take them up and strengthen them.

Church in crisis

In most countries in Europe and in the USA, the mainline churches are under pressure. They are losing their social relevance. In what follows, I will refer primarily to Germany, since that is where I know the situation best. For decades now, church membership figures in Germany have been in continuous decline. Whereas, in the years after the Second World War, more than 95 % of Germans had some church affiliation, currently only about 50 % are members of one of the two major national churches. The 2019 Freiburg Study "Church in Upheaval" predicted that, by the year 2060, the churches will have lost a further 50% of their membership. This development gives cause for concern (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2019, 6). It seems that the "Volkskirchen" ("people's churches") no longer represent the people ("Volk"), but are becoming minority churches. Even by the year 2030, the churches in Germany will have to reckon with a drop of around 25 percent in church tax income. At the same time, retirement figures will rise dramatically from 2025 and, with them, the costs of providing, in particular, for the clergy. And the upheaval caused

by the pandemic crisis is not even included in these predictions.

It is abundantly clear that this trend poses major challenges for the church leadership. How is church life to be financed in the mid-to-long term? What priorities need to be set? Which posts are to be dissolved, which work sectors cut back, which buildings closed? The regional churches ("Landeskirchen") are not to be envied with regard to these weighty decisions and the disappointment that will be caused, no matter what they decide. This also raises the question as to whether and how churches can undergo such a transformation that will put them in a position to stop or at least to slow this downward trend.

In what follows, I will first explore the question of how churches are trying to respond to the crisis in the church. Then I explore the question of whether the reform programs that church leaders are pursuing should not rather be understood as structural programs and how, from a sociological point of view, the possibilities and limits of organizational reforms are to be assessed. After focusing on the limits of structural reforms, I will then address the question of what the church can do to constructively





confront the crisis. Here I will focus on religious and spiritual needs that can be observed in society.

Reform programs in the church of Germany

Over the past two decades, the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland—EKD) has regularly produced a series of new reform papers. They not only reflect on cutbacks and mergers, but also on what structural decisions might, at the same time, trigger reform processes with regard to a new participative behavior amongst church membership, and how the church as a whole might become more attractive for the people once again. Even a quick glance at the reasons behind the declining membership clearly reveals that demographics are the most significant reason, but that individuals' decisions against baptism or in favor of leaving the church are also major factors. The only aspects that it might be possible to have an influence on are these last-named reasons.

The 2006 EKD reform paper "Church of Freedom" still focused primarily on structural measures, on 'beacons' (Leuchtfeuer), and other centers designed to radiate new and fresh attractiveness. The paper gave rise to many discussions, but hardly to the desired transformation processes (Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland 2006; cf. Karle 2010). Last year, the Synod of the EKD presented "Twelve Guiding Principles for the Future of an Open Church" (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2021). The paper demonstrates that the EKD now no longer believes it can buck the downward trend and grow, as was still proclaimed by the 2006 impulse paper. At the same time, one gains the impression that the church still finds it difficult to actually accept this realization. The paper thus suggests, that, in the end, all will be well—if only church players were to live out church with authenticity and fluidity, and full of vitality, activity, motivation and dynamism. Many of the ideas formulated in the paper's guiding principles are set next to each other without any recognizable structure. What is particularly surprising is that the paper almost exclusively focuses on a highly committed church as 'movement' and ignores the institutional church structures. Spontaneously, one asks: Where does this 'church in motion' take place apart from church venues? And what, in concrete terms, is it supposed to enliven?

What is even more serious, though: This focus on a highly committed church means that the many still quiet voices are lost sight of, including those church members who primarily get in touch with church for occasional services such as baptisms, confirmations, marriages or funerals and the central feasts of the church year. This is all the more astonishing since, over the past decades, Practical Theology has never tired of emphasizing how fatal it is to underestimate this group of all groups, and to disparagingly view them as religiously indifferent. The membership studies that the EKD itself has conducted over the past several decades clearly show that those who do not regularly attend worship are not disinterested "dead wood" (Karteileichen) or nominal members, but rather are Christians who, for a variety of reasons, prefer to remain "semi-distant". As a rule, they have little interest in those missionizing activities and the staging of authentic piety of which the new EKD reform paper speaks, but they are grateful if, in times of crisis, they can turn to a pastor who will support them pastorally at life's turning points, engaging with them in conversation, and who knows how to read an existential life event in religious terms and to observe and celebrate it with them.

This form of church membership, switching selectively from distance to closeness and, without a bad conscience, back again to distance, is not flawed or deficient (Kretzschmar 2012). It is in fact one of the true strengths of "Volkskirche" that, alongside sociable and intensive forms of community, it also permits and facilitates distance. It is an essential feature of Protestantism that it does not encroach too much on the individual but allows people free scope to live out their faith in their own way. Thus, the fact that most people only get in touch with the church sporadically should not be lamented but should be acknowledged as a "normal" form of communication in a functionally differentiated society. It is precisely this distance that is the cohesive kit of a society or church in all its diversity.

At the same time, it must be granted that good advice is hard to find in the present situation. Academic reflection also has little to offer in response to the perplexity which the paper takes as its starting point. At this stage, not even the best of activities and innovations can stop the secularization processes in society as a whole and the associated decline in church membership. A great deal would be gained, therefore, if the church were to openly confess to its own perplexity and helplessness—and, in

the light of that, with an attitude of thoughtfulness and of open, searching questioning, to enter into dialog with the various church players and experts.

Possibilities and limitations of organizational reforms in an empirical and sociological perspective

Organizational reforms are a complex undertaking in which there is always a likelihood of paradoxical effects. Reform processes in organizations should not therefore be understood as linear processes that run in a straight line from the planning stage to their implementation, as church players often assume. Many modifications and a great deal of resistance arise in the course of reform plans, so that it is impossible “to keep reforms on track with their intended effects and to achieve the envisaged objectives” (Luhmann 2000, 341). In Protestant churches, which are not governed top-down, but bottom-up, and which are synodal in their constitution, this is even more pronouncedly the case than, for example, in business enterprises.

This much becomes evident when looking at reform processes not only in churches, but also in universities and schools: In order to enforce a reform in the first place, the past is strategically made worse than it was and, at the same time, the future is idealized. Once the future arrives in the present, it is never as good as it was originally hoped and planned to be. As a result, it is not uncommon for the reform to trigger further reforms. An additional problem is that organizations such as churches can only decide what they are able to decide—and that means organizational questions such as cost savings in certain areas, structural changes, parish mergers, cuts in salaries, etc. What ultimately counts, however, is not open to decision-making—that people are affected by religion, that the Spirit of God takes hold of them, and that they become committed to and involved in a vibrant church. Religious processes and “conversions” are not plannable and are therefore not part of church reform programs.

At the Ruhr University Bochum, we conducted comparative studies on church reform processes in various regional churches in Germany. In the course of this, we were able to observe exactly that: the impossibility of achieving the initially envisaged objectives and the disillusioning realization that it is only possible to decide about structures, and that this is a far cry from making religious communication come

to life (Brauer-Noss 2017; Gabriel, Karle and Pollack 2016). Often, church mergers failed even to produce the organizational synergy effects that had been hoped for, but they did lead to upheaval and disappointment and thereby to stress and exhaustion. If nothing else, it became clear that cost savings are not possible without loss—contrary to the rhetoric of the church reform programs. The cutbacks lead either to overtaxing the remaining personnel or to a reduction in the scope of services or to a loss of quality. It ultimately became apparent that structural reforms are primarily motivated by a lack of money and not by theological programs or convictions. To some extent, namely, the content programs are “tacked on” as legitimization for the planned cutbacks, but they are mainly of rhetorical, not of fundamental, importance. The outcome of this is a disjunction of organization and theology: Theology does not play any decisive role in this kind of church reform; it is not a matter of awareness processes or of a church in the power of the Spirit, but of structural reforms and thereby of structural adjustments at a time when there is progressively less and less money available in the churches.

In my view, there is much to be gained if the churches were first to admit to this and thus to acknowledge more clearly the difference between organization and religion: Stated objectively, it is a matter of necessary structural adjustments due to declining resources. These are painful, and they cause disappointment and conflict, although they are frequently unavoidable. But the fact that they are necessary does not mean they are uncontroversial. They should therefore be carried out with great caution and care, otherwise they will lead to destructive reform stress that saps the strength of church players, destroying rather than encouraging the motivation of the very people who are actively involved in the church. Structural adjustments, then, are not to be equated with reforms in the proper sense of the word. They do not lead to more members or more baptisms or to fewer people leaving the church. Any such suggestion is probably illusory. The church leadership is quite justified in wishing for a vibrant and authentic church, but religious awakenings operate on quite a different plane and in a completely different manner than structural reforms do. Religious revival processes cannot be decided according to plan, but generally happen spontaneously and unpredictably—and the model they follow is that of evolution rather than of planning.

At the same time, it is essential to ensure that the structural adjustments necessitated by financial



constraints do not impact negatively on the overall conditions for the working of the Spirit and hence for religious awakenings and formation processes. Here and there, they may even succeed in improving these conditions. To that extent, structural adjustments and reforms in content are not to be seen as totally distinct and separate, even though they are by no means identical. It is my opinion that, by taking this somewhat more modest perspective, the churches might achieve more. At the structural level, they would avoid illusionary expectations that can only ever be disappointed, and would not need to dress up painful economization processes as a fresh start or opportunity. In view of this, they would enter into dialog with many players and experts with a greater willingness to learn, more reflectively, and as seekers. If nothing else, this approach would go easier on the dedicated full-time staff and volunteers who, out of mistaken activism in crisis, always seek the fault in themselves, instead of in the dramatic changes that are to be ascribed to the tendentially anti-church social processes and dynamics with which the church currently sees itself faced.

On the one hand, one could feel a sense of relief that the church has not got it all wrong, for there is much that lies beyond the church's control and its disposing. At the same time, however, resignation can also arise at how little it is possible to change. Resignation is not the manifestation of a church that seeks to confront the world with tidings of faith, love, and hope. I would therefore like to reflect once again on what institutional parameters are better able to facilitate the working of the Spirit rather than obstructing it. What religious and spiritual needs and activities are to be observed in society, and what might be learned from that for what the churches have to offer? I wish to cautiously develop a few perspectives.

Perspectives and ideas for church development

Church leadership measures

Diversity

Let me begin with one or two organizational reforms that are not related to cost factors, but that could indeed revitalize church life. There is probably even more that falls to mind on the catholic side

than on the protestant side. Thus, for example, the ordination of women was and is a huge asset for the protestant church. But the protestant church, too, struggles with the diversity of life in society. If the church of Jesus Christ really bids each and every one welcome and is serious about accepting each and every person in their suchness as created by God, then that church must also be serious about putting same-sex partnerships on equal terms with heterosexual couples. What is more, the church's regulations for pastors must be liberalized. It should be made possible, for example, for pastors to be married to Muslims or to partners with no religious affiliation, or to be able to live together with a partner as an unmarried couple in the pastor's official residence. This would not only be of great benefit for the pluralism of the clergy, but it would also be conducive to the credibility of the church, which would thereby effectively present itself as an open and tolerant church that does not shy away from social pluralism and biographical complexity but is also able to perceive these as something to be cherished rather than simply as a threat.

It remains true to this very day that the church, in keeping with the Spirit of Jesus Christ, sees itself as committed to judging people irrespective of their background, gender or status, instead paving the way for community that goes beyond all kinds of barriers and hurdles (Karle 2006). On this point, the church should scale down its official regulatory aspect and make more space for the vibrancy and "untidiness" of the Spirit of Pentecost.

Digitalization

As a result of the pandemic, society as a whole has undergone huge forward surges with regard to digital forms of communication. The church, too, has also been affected by this digital activism. Whereas the church regarded digital communication prior to the pandemic primarily with missions-strategy objectives, thereby implying a certain degree of opposition between church and internet, the perspectives have now become a good deal more realistic and are geared more to the user or member perspective than to the interests of the church organization. This is also due to the immense digital activity developed at the grass roots of the church during the pandemic—with regard to forms of worship, all kinds of dialog formats, digital celebrations of communion, teaching modules, meetings, etc.

Church and theology are now called on to examine in greater empirical detail how digital opportu-

nities are being used in relation to situation and context. What are people already using? What do they regard as helpful? What would they like to see in the future in regard to a blend or mix of analog and digital elements in the church? What support might full-time staff and volunteers need “from the top” in the process? “A more finely tuned, context and application-oriented approach” (Kretzschmar 2021, 277; cf. Kretzschmar 2019) is therefore to be recommended on the subject of church and digitalization. The challenge in this for the organizational leadership of the church would primarily be to act in a helping, advisory, and service-oriented capacity rather than imposing too many regulations.

Spirit and organization

Religion cannot cope with too much organization. Chaos and vitality are part of religious communication. It has not been uncommon in the history of the church for the blowing of the Spirit to have had a contra-organizational aspect. Jörg Lauster (2021) has demonstrated this impressively in his monograph on the history of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is very often spontaneous and untamable. The church as organization should therefore consider how it can manage to be well organized on the one hand, yet on the other hand not to emphasize this organizational character even more, but at certain points to have the wisdom to take a step back.

In terms of religious sociology, it is evident that the formation of religiosity presupposes religious addressability and hence certain social forms: only so can it flourish. Religiosity does not develop of its own accord but requires conducive social environments. The question is then, what “softer” social bases and social forms might look like that allow more scope for individuality than some traditional formats do. Permit me to suggest a few examples here.

Church buildings as spiritual places

One of the great treasures of the church is its church buildings. A church already communicates religion by the sacrality of the space, and by the traces that centuries of the faithful have left in that space. It receives visitors and draws them into its own cosmos of symbols. At the same time, a visit to a church building affords the opportunity for religious practice in miniature: by lighting a candle or saying a prayer or listening to the organ play and immersing oneself in the space and its religious symbols.

We know from Eastern Germany that attachment to a church building can outlive membership of the church. Wherever church buildings are accessible, they are appreciated and frequented as spaces for quiet and contemplation. The calm of a church interior sets a pleasant contrast to its visitors’ daily routine. Visitors especially appreciate the semantic vagueness that is coupled with the stable invariance of a church building. Churches are quintessential loci of the presence of God in the world. They symbolize the inaccessibility of individual and collective conditions of existence. In a world in which digital communication is increasingly gaining in importance, it is precisely “the immobility and materiality” (Erne 2009, 31) of church buildings that establish confidence and trust.

During the pandemic, churches were and are, therefore, often frequented as places of refuge by people who are afraid or are in emotional distress. Aesthetic church buildings, particularly in city centers, therefore need to be accessible, and small-scale religious formats in them (organ music, lunchtime prayers, etc.) should extend a low-threshold invitation to religious meditation and practice. Churches must—quite literally—be open churches.

Church music and art

A further important focus, which is directly linked with church buildings, is on church music and art. Throughout its history, church music has had a central role to play in Protestantism. The Reformation was, among other things, a singing movement of the people. Many people in our own day, who never or seldom enter a church, are nevertheless touched and moved religiously by music and singing. The fact that hardly any singing or musicmaking has taken place since the pandemic is therefore also a major setback for peoples’ religious lives.

An immense wealth of modern sacred songs has emerged since the 1960s, choir singing continues to thrive, and Gospel music is enjoying great popularity, but classical music also persists unabated, especially in the form of Johann Sebastian Bach’s passions and oratorios, which regularly pack the concert halls and churches.

Religious communication refers not only to verbal forms of communicating and comprehending, but also to aesthetic forms, to music and visual arts. For Friedrich Schleiermacher, worship was a center of regeneration for Christian living, not least because of the great importance of music and singing (Karle 2021, 296–303). According to Schleiermacher,



music gives voice to something distinctive and characteristic that cannot be expressed in words. Not only the classics, but contemporary music too should therefore be given more space in the church. Visual arts with an affinity to religion also have an important role to play. They extend an invitation to individual contemplation and identification. A good number of theaters and opera directors choose churches as the venue for their productions, whereby the space surrounds the piece performed, communicating a further interpretation of its own. All of these are opportunities to offer low-threshold formats of religious communication that is appreciated by many people.

Spirituality

Spirituality is in vogue. Even if it is not to everyone's taste, spiritual and meditative religious social formats should therefore be fostered in the church. Spirituality is not infrequently a kind of "self-religion" (Knoblauch 2009, 127), yet at the same time it is also open for religious questions. For many people, spirituality is attractive because of how it is associated with body-related forms that are perceived and experienced as "holistic" in terms of the "body turn"—as in Christian fasting and pilgrimages, for example. The popularity enjoyed by pilgrimages in particular remains unbroken.

There is also a highly positive response to mystic and meditative forms, as practiced, for example, in Taizé worship with meditative songs and prayers. Allow me to mention here a further social support base for religious activity in the German context that is related to church, yet is often not associated with church. I am thinking of the calendar "Der Andere Advent" ("The Other Advent"), published by a Christian association, which guides its readers six weeks long through the Advent and Christmas season. It is highly aesthetic in design, oscillating between a Christian profile and a low threshold approach, and it invites individual interpretation on the part of its readers. In the shortest space of time, the calendar has proved extremely successful, expanding from an initial print run of 10,000 to currently more than two million readers. This religious and aesthetic form of address clearly meets the needs of the users. On the one hand, they can draw personal and individual inspiration from the calendar, but they can also exchange views on it with other users, either directly or via Facebook (Happe 2015). Weakly determined, searching forms of religious communication should therefore not be dis-

couraged, as is tendentially the case in the EKD's 'guiding principles'.

On the whole, the point is to recognize that church is often a catalyst for religious practice in places where people are not even aware of it as church. Even modern religiosity is reliant on social forms and cannot exist of its own accord. In all of this, it is evidence of the strength of Christianity, not of its weakness, that it is able to leave certain questions in abeyance while at the same time offering concrete interpretations. It is a question of being open for the diversity of late modern spirituality while at the same time holding on to something like the church's own distinctive core.

Persons and places

The latest EKD church membership survey of 2015 reveals that more than three-quarters of all Protestant church members know a pastor, at least from sight, and that this is the most significant factor for their church affiliation (Bedford-Strohm 2015, 33pp.; Karle 2015). Personal encounters with pastors, supported by role expectations, enable and strengthen emotionally and cognitively stable relations to church. Pastors are the personal face of the church and have the highest contact rate; they motivate people to become actively involved as volunteers and, at the same time, are often bridge builders between those actively involved in church and those who are more distanced.

But, like pastors, church buildings and local parish life with all its associated activities and organizations are also elementary for people's contact to church. In summing up, the fifth church membership survey comments that:

Even in all the differentiation, religious diversity and biographical mobility that is characteristic of modern society, the local church would appear to be of paramount importance from the perspective of its members, on occasions even to the extent of shaping their identity. The church achieves this above all because its members in the local parishes are aware of a whole range of highly varied topics, persons, and activities, in which they themselves ..., in a similarly wide variety of ways, are able to take an active part. (Hermelink 2015, 67)

But, at the local parish level, it is also possible to offer low-threshold religious educational activities in the form of kindergartens and confirmation classes. Needless to say, the churches also need a wide range of contact points beyond and apart from the local parish but, at the same time, it would be mistaken to

underestimate this sometimes seemingly antiquated form of contact.

Summary

Innovations always involve risks, and this holds true all the more for organizations with survival problems: “High-risk both in the question of whether the environment will accept the changes or rather hold on to habitual expectations; and high-risk too in the question of whether and how the changes can be implemented within the system” (Luhmann 2000, 353). To this extent, it is crucial to proceed cautiously and circumspectly, and not to regard established factors too readily as the costly ballast of the past. It is not only dynamism, movement, and fluidity that is called for, but also dependability, stability, and consistency. The more critical the present is perceived to be, and the more uncertain the future, all the more important it then is to proceed as seekers and questioners—with confidence in the people who live and embody church in the widest possible variety of ways and in the widest possible number of places.

In all of this, it is vital that the church should avoid regarding its tried and tested social forms, in which the habitual form of religious practices can be established in all their diversity, as being outdated but, as far as possible, it should uphold them and develop them further. Church as movement but with no institutional backbone is without stability and without future; it lacks the accessibility and predictability that guarantee people the possibility of approaching it, even if it has been a long time since they were last there. The focus should therefore be set not only on activity and commitment, but also on receptive forms of religious inclusion, in which people are “only” listeners or attendees or visitors.

At the same time, research on voluntary work reveals that there are many people who enjoy being actively involved in church and who do so with a great deal of motivation. They are a special treasure-trove of the church, and it is important to nurture them, so that religious and helping communication is not only sustained by the church as organization, but by a whole variety of people for whom faith is of importance—even and especially in times of uncertainty.

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