Mission in Crisis

Mission und Kontext (MuK)

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Mission in Crisis

The Church's Unfinished Homework

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Mission as Opportunity and Threat. How the Social Type of Church Influences Its Attitude Towards Mission

Stefan Schweyer

Introduction: Sociological Classifications of "Church"

There are different typologies to describe the social composition of the church.[1] One of the most influential typologies was developed by Ernst Troeltsch. Following the traces laid by Max Weber, he described three typical forms of Christian communities: *church*, *sect*, and *mystical movement*.[2] This typology was widely received,[3] which aided in the development of the church.[4] Troeltsch's terminology, however, was often misunderstood due to a combination of technical definitions with normatively highly charged terms such as *church* or *sect*. Compounding upon Troeltsch's ideas and combining them with the systems

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[1] This article is based on a response to the paper by Ralph Kunz titled "Why are Folk Churches Afraid of Mission?", cf. chapter 1 in this volume, pp. 17 ff. Spencer Clark assisted me with the English, for which I am very grateful.

[2] Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1912) [english: The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, London: Allen and Unwin, 1931].

[3] Cf. Reiner Preul, *Kirchentheorie. Wesen, Gestalt und Funktionen der evangelischen Kirche*, de Gruyter Studienbuch (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), §§ 7–9; Jan Hermelink, *Kirchliche Organisation und das Jenseits des Glaubens. Eine praktisch-theologische Theorie der evangelischen Kirche* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011), ch. 2.2.1; Christian Grethlein, *Kirchentheorie. Kommunikation des Evangeliums im Kontext*, De Gruyter Studium (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), §2.

[4] Cf. Ralph Kunz-Herzog, *Theorie des Gemeindeaufbaus. Ekklesiologische, soziologische und frömmigkeitstheoretische Aspekte* (Zürich: TVZ, 1997); Johannes Zimmermann, *Gemeinde zwischen Sozialität und Individualität. Herausforderungen für den Gemeindeaufbau im gesellschaftlichen Wandel*, BEGB 3, (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2006).

theory of Niklas Luhmann,[5] Eberhard Hauschildt and Uta Pohl-Patalong present descriptions of the different social forms of the church using a threefold typology: *institution*, *organisation*, and *movement*.[6]

In his contribution, Ralph Kunz identifies the *tension between institution and movement* as a factor that hinders mission in the "Volkskirche". By using the tension of institution and movement, Kunz implicitly refers to two of the three types of churches described by Hauschildt and Pohl-Patalong. By doing so, Kunz follows a tradition that works with this tension, e.g., Emil Brunner's tension between the church as an institution and the *ecclesia* as the community of the Holy Spirit,[7] or the juxtaposition of the "Volkskirche" and the community of the saints by Josuttis.[8]

It seems worthwhile to me to extend the binary tension between institution and movement through Hauschildt and Pohl-Patalong's triadic scheme and to further analyse what attitudes toward mission are associated with the three typical social forms of the church, that is, the *church as an institution* (2.); the *church as a movement* (3.); and the *church as an organization* (4.).

By taking the type of church as an organisation into account, I pay attention to a form of church particularly significant in the "free church" domain.[9] For the

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[5]   Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme. Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2002) [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984; english: Social Systems, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995].

[6]   Eberhard Hauschildt and Uta Pohl-Patalong, *Kirche*, Lehrbuch Praktische Theologie 4, (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013). Cf. Michael Krüggeler, Karl Gabriel, and Winfried Gebhardt, eds., *Institution, Organisation, Bewegung. Sozialformen der Religion im Wandel*, Veröffentlichungen der Sektion Religionssoziologie in der DGS 3, (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1999).

[7]   Emil Brunner, *Das Missverständnis der Kirche* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1951). See also Fritz Schwarz and Christian A. Schwarz, *Theologie des Gemeindeaufbaus. Ein Versuch* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Aussaat, 1987) [1984].

[8]   Manfred Josuttis, *«Unsere Volkskirche" und die Gemeinde der Heiligen. Erinnerungen an die Zukunft der Kirche* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1997).

[9]   I am thinking here of the free church scene in German-speaking Europe, cf. Karl Heinz Voigt, *Freikirchen in Deutschland (19. und 20. Jahrhundert)*, KGE III/6, (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2004); Erich Geldbach, *Freikirchen – Erbe, Gestalt und Wirkung*, BenshH 70, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005) [1989]; Jörg Stolz et al., eds., *Phänomen Freikirchen. Analysen eines wettbewerbsstarken Milieus*, CULTuREL 5, (Zürich: Pano, 2014); Markus Iff, "Evangelische Freikirchen," in *Handbuch der Ökumene und Konfessionskunde 1*, ed. Johannes Oeldemann (Leipzig: EVA, 2015); Philipp F. Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission. Perspektiven für den freikirchlichen Gemeindeaufbau im nachchristlichen Kontext* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019).; cf. my own research on the free church landscape: Stefan Schweyer, *Freikirchliche Gottesdienste. Em-*

purpose of this chapter, the topic of "free church" will not be intensely discussed. "Free church" can be briefly described as an attempt to give organisational form to a religious movement, therefore combining aspects of church as a *movement* with church as an *organisation.*[10]

This chapter attempts to identify what kind of mission is perceived as an opportunity and corresponding threats to the three types. In the conclusion of the chapter, I focus my attention on Hauschildt and Pohl-Patalong's proposal to view the church as a *hybrid* of institution, organisation, and movement. I attempt to answer the question of whether it is sensible to also view mission as a hybrid (5.), based on the character of the church as a *relational network* (6.).

Mission of the Church as an Institution

By the term "*institution*", I denote a social entity with the following characteristics: An institution is stable, established, long-lasting, and firmly anchored in society. The existence of the institution is widely accepted. An institution is perceived as a social force in which its values are shared by the majority of the population. Belonging to an institution requires minimal individual commitment.

The *church as an institution* has direct ties with the state. It is often taken for granted that one belongs to the church. Membership is established through infant baptism, handed down through Christian socialisation. Furthermore, the church is financially sustained through church taxes. These established traditions and regulations ensure that the church as an institution faces no future concerns regarding its existence. It enjoys public privileges and maintains a robust foundation in society. Its existence is guaranteed, irrespective of the level of commitment from its individual members.

The *mainline churches of Europe,* as they existed until around the mid-twentieth century, exhibited numerous characteristics typical of institutionalised churches. For instance, up until the 1960s, over 96 % of the Swiss resident population belonged to the Roman Catholic or to the Protestant Reformed Church.[11] Free churches, other religious communities, and non-religious individuals con-

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pirische Analysen und theologische Reflexionen, APrTh 80, (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020).

[10]   Wolfgang E. Heinrichs, *Freikirchen. Eine moderne Kirchenreform. Entstehung und Entwicklung von fünf Freikirchen in Wuppertal,* TVGMS 346 (Gießen: Brunnen, 1989); Michael Schroth, *Freie evangelische Gemeinden. Eine kirchentheoretische Studie im Zusammenhang mit einer empirischen Befragung,* APTLH 100 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022).

[11]   Cf. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bevoelkerung/sprachen-religio nen.assetdetail.23925665.html, accessed 16.05.2023.

stituted marginalised minorities within the religious landscape shaped by church institutions.

Over the past five decades, the situation has changed significantly. As of 2021, only 54 % of the Swiss resident population aligns with one of the two mainstream churches. The fastest growing group consists of individuals who no longer identify with any religious community, with their numbers increasing from a mere 0.5 percent in 1960 to a substantial 32.3 percent in 2021. Religious pluralisation resulting from migration movements and the substantial rise in people leaving the church has created a situation in which the churches as institutions are no longer self-evident. Even if religion has not disappeared and the classic secularisation thesis has not proved true in this respect, one factor of secularisation is clearly discernible, namely: the *de-institutionalisation* of the church, i. e., the loss of precisely those characteristics that had distinguished the church as an institution.[12]

I concur with Kunz in that the church as an institution is driven by the *fear of losing members* and the *fear of losing public-legal privileges.* Although a concern for a loss of further institutional privileges and characteristics remains high among institutional churches, the institutions themselves are not completely hostile toward mission. In fact, there are some aspects of mission that fit within the subframe of a church as an institution.

An institutional church that emphasises socially accepted aspects of mission such as *social care, culture*, and *education*[13] is likely to be accepted by most societal orders. These forms of mission even add stability to the institutional character of the church.

Simultaneously, *conversion-oriented mission* is perceived as a threat, as it challenges the institutional character of the church. Those advocating for conversion implicitly suggest that merely being baptised and paying church taxes is insufficient. In doing so, the crucial foundation of the institutional character of the church is being renounced with its members consequently called to conversion. It is thus unsurprising that proponents of missional church development, while recognising the advantages of church institutionalisation, also openly acknowledge the challenges posed by conversion-oriented missions. Consequently, they refrain from defining the nature of the church in institutional terms.[14]

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[12]   On the empirically observable aspects of secularisation and on different interpretative patterns, cf. Stefan Schweyer, *Kontextuelle Kirchentheorie. Eine kritisch-konstruktive Auseinandersetzung mit dem Kirchenverständnis neuerer praktisch-theologischer Entwürfe* (Zürich: TVZ, 2007), part I.

[13]   Cf. Preul, *Kirchentheorie*, 209 and §§ 210–211.

[14]   Cf. Eberhard Winkler, *Gemeinde zwischen Volkskirche und Diaspora. Eine Einführung in die praktisch-theologische Kybernetik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1998); Michael

Table 1. Church as an institution

	church as an institution
characteristics	undisputed existence; established; public privileges
fears	losing members; losing privileges
mission as opportunity	social car, culture, education
mission as thread	conversion

Mission of the Church as a Movement

Kunz contrasts the institutional church with the characterisation of mission as a movement. Unlike an institution, a movement is marked by *dynamism* and transience. The existence of a movement is driven by intrinsic factors and is therefore easily endangered. The social stabilisers seen in institutions provide no support for movements. A movement thrives on people's shared *experiences.* What matters most in a movement are not external regulations and formal criteria but rather inner emotions and convictions.

The church as a movement is defined by the dynamic interplay of God's calling and the existential response of faith. Faith entails taking risks and making leaps of faith. It is not quantified by objective criteria but by the profound trust in God at an existential level. The church as a movement reaches its most meaningful symbolic representation in the concept of *conversion.*

Conversion can be described as an existential transformation process, marked by a distinct "before" and "after". It is a personal experience of witnessing the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, resulting in a profound reorientation of one's life. This experience encompasses the entirety of existence and illuminates every aspect of life in a new perspective. This type of mission has the power to thrust both the church and the world into a state of crisis, causing disruption and uncertainty. Consequently, it unleashes a dynamic that is reflected in faith movements. Therefore, one could argue that mission that promotes the church as a movement is essentially conversion mission.

This does not mean, however, that the church as a movement joyfully embraces all forms of mission. The church as a movement also has its fears which challenge its fruition. It is mainly the fear of the *movement freezing.* Anything that smells of institutionalisation is avoided at all costs. Therefore, it is emphasised that the church is not an institution and not an organisation, but an organ-

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Herbst, *Missionarischer Gemeindeaufbau in der Volkskirche,* BEGB 8 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2010) [1987].

ism.[15] The corresponding slogans are well known: No formalities! No structures! No rituals! No tradition! Such things would only impede the progress of a movement. *Mission as a religious service* to society, as often associated with the church as an institution, is seen as a threat to the movement. Occasional services and church taxes are seen as deceptive comforts that lull people into complacency instead of inspiring them to embrace faith. Therefore, church as mission distinguishes itself from the educational and socialising aspects of mission and places greater emphasis on the transformational aspects of mission, specifically, conversion.

The ongoing call to conversion, repentance, and the redirection of one's life serves as the driving force behind revival and the continuation of a movement. Nonetheless, it appears to be an undeniable truth that no movement can maintain constant dynamism indefinitely. The aspiration for perpetual revival eventually wanes. Consequently, new movements invariably emerge, critiquing earlier ones that have lost their vigour. These fresh movements challenge the organised and institutionalised forms of religion and dare to dream anew that an unstoppable movement of the Spirit is emerging.

Table 2. Church as a movement

	church as a movement
characteristics	dynamism, experience
fears	institutionalisation, freezing of the movement
mission as opportunity	conversion, transformation
mission as thread	religious service, rituals, tradition

The dilemma, as highlighted by Kunz, is obvious: the mission aligned with the church as an institution contravenes the mission that fits the church as a movement. To put it even more strongly: The movement-mission endangers institutions because it challenges the very foundation of the institutional structure, specifically, the interweaving of infant baptism with formal-legal membership and church taxes. Conversely, the institution-mission poses a threat to the church as a movement due to its regulated and stifling nature. What one side sees as an opportunity, the other regards as a threat, and vice versa.

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[15]   Cf. Neil Cole, *Organische Gemeinde. Wenn sich das Reich Gottes ganz natürlich ausbreitet* (Bruchsal: GloryWorld-Medien, 2008) [Organic church]; Neil Cole, *Organisch leiten. Wie natürliche Leitung uns selbst, Gemeinden und die Welt verändert*, Novavox (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld, 2010) [Organic Leadership. Leading Naturally Right Where You Are, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2009].

Mission of the Church as an Organisation

Given the nearly insurmountable contrast between institution and movement, one might contemplate whether an examination of the organisation as a social hybrid could provide a possible solution to this dilemma.

When I use the term "organisation" here, I'm referring to a social entity whose existence, unlike that of an institution, is not uncontroversial and self-evident. Instead, it must actively strive to ensure its continued existence. In other words, the primary concern of an organisation is its *loss of existence.* Therefore, organisations typically need to stabilise, self-regulate, organise, and engage in promotional efforts to retain or attract members. Organisations operate based on market principles, following the laws of supply and demand. This often results in competition among various organisations.

In contrast to many European churches, which often take the form of state or free churches, churches in the United States primarily operate as organisations. The religious landscape can therefore aptly be described as a *religious market.*[16]

In countries with a state-church tradition, it is notably the free churches that have established themselves as organisations. The rationale of the organisation can be clearly observed in the free-church form of association. At its heart, this structure relies on voluntary membership acquisition, a commitment driven by personal conviction. This conviction cannot be assumed; it must be actively cultivated. Individuals must be convinced to become part of an organisation and ideally provide support, both financially and through voluntary work. The form of mission that sustains the church as an organisation is *membership recruitment.*

In recent years, there has been a noticeable trend among institutions. They have begun to adopt support strategies similar to those seen in organisations, involving the active solicitation of members and the collection of donations. This shift provides compelling evidence that their existence is also no longer undisputed. Their financial and personnel resources are no longer sufficient to envision the future without concerns. Therefore, action programmes have been developed to maintain the church's permanency, a characteristic more typical of an organisation.

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[16]   Cf. Laurence R. Moore, ed., *Selling God. American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776–1990. Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992). For a discussion of the market metaphor for describing the church, cf. Michael Nüchtern, "Was heißt «religiöser Markt»," *MEZW* 59 (1996); Michael Nüchtern, *Kirche in Konkurrenz. Herausforderungen und Chancen in der religiösen Landschaft* (Stuttgart: Quell, 1997); Hartmut Zinser, *Der Markt der Religionen* (München: Fink, 1997); Schweyer, *Kontextuelle Kirchentheorie*, ch. 9.1.2.

One could say that mainline churches and free churches are converging sociologically. While free churches aim to perpetuate a movement through an organisation, the development of the mainline church can be described as a path from institution to organisation. What both types of churches share is that, to some degree, they are inevitably subject to the principles of organisational logic, whether they intentionally embrace it or not.

In light of this, we can examine the opportunities and challenges of mission from the viewpoint of the church as an organisation. For an organised church, a mission that promotes its institutional nature could be perilous, as it might undermine the loyalty of its members. Hence, the emphasis is placed on individual participation and the reinforcement of voluntary dedication rather than on professional services. *Passive membership* and distanced church affiliation, which may be considered the ecclesial norm for the church as an institution,[17] are regarded as ecclesial weaknesses by the church as an organisation.

While mission in terms of member recruitment or activation poses a threat to the church as an institution, it remains a necessity for the church as an organisation to ensure its sustainability. However, unlike for the church as a movement, the mission in an organisational context does not necessarily have to be conversion-oriented. From a purely organisational perspective, even *transfer growth* from other churches is acceptable, as long as it results in loyal and committed members.

Free churches in particular, whose origins lie in revivalist movements, are thus caught in the tension between a movement-oriented and an organisation-oriented understanding of mission. They attempted to address this tension by incorporating conversion into the organisational framework, requiring a conversion experience as a prerequisite for membership. Any form of conversion that reinforces the organisations membership is embraced. This applies to children who are born and raised in their own community as much as it does to adults who come to faith or reaffirm their faith through missionary efforts. From this standpoint, a mission that results in conversion but not in church membership or growth may be seen as inadequate and is often considered frustrating. This leads to the peculiarity that mission in the sense of conversion is propagated in free churches, but at the same time, the dynamics of conversion are somehow domesticated so that conversion is directed toward the growth of the local church. If the intensity of conversion were too overpowering, it could potentially create a movement that bypasses the local church entirely, which would not align with the concept of a church as an organisation.

These observations and reflections underscore the enduring tension between the notions of movement and organisation. Especially in the case of free

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[17]   Gerald Kretzschmar, *Distanzierte Kirchlichkeit. Eine Analyse ihrer Wahrnehmung* (Neu-kirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001).

churches, it is recognised that from a biblical-theological perspective, mission can never be advertising for the church; rather, it should be an invitation to Christ and a call to faith in Christ. Theologically, the loss of members, whether real or anticipated, is not a legitimate motivation for mission. It is good that Kunz does not open the door to this, not even by a millimetre! Mission does not serve the church's self-preservation, be it the preservation as an organisation or as an institution. And membership loss serves at most as a discovery of mission, but never as a justification for mission.[18]

Nonetheless, I view the organisational aspects of the church as a constructive approach to preparing for the future, as it can more flexibly incorporate the dynamics of a religious movement compared to the rigid structure of the church as an institution. It appears to me that any religious group or church, whether it's a former mainline church or a free church, can only have a viable future as a community driven by conviction. Such communities are better equipped to assimilate influences from a conversion-oriented mission. To put it differently, a church as an organisation is receptive to mission focused on conversion, but it runs the risk of misusing conversion to safeguard its own existence.

Table 3. Church as an organisation

	church as an organisation
characteristics	market logic
fears	loss of existence
mission as opportunity	membership loyalty, transfer growth
mission as thread	passive membership

Mission of the Church as a Hybrid

Hauschildt and Pohl-Patalong suggest a perspective in which the church is seen as a *hybrid*, wherein the rationale of institution, organisation, and movement co-

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[18]   In my perception, this can be seen well in the EKD Synod on Mission 1999. The reason for taking up the topic of mission was undoubtedly the downward development of the church as an institution. In the opening speech, however, Eberhard Jüngel worked out the theological foundations very clearly, that mission belongs to the essence of the church and is not a means to the end of church self-preservation, cf. Eberhard Jüngel, "Referat zur Einführung in das Schwerpunktthema: Mission," 1999, https://www.a-m-d. de/fileadmin/user_upload/Material/Dokumentation/Mission_allgemein/EKD-Synode_ 1999_Leipzig_Juengel.pdf. Accessed June 20, 2020.

exist simultaneously and complement each other.[19] Depending on the specific situation, factors must be constantly weighed. It would be to the church's detriment if only one aspect were realised. The church needs impulses from all three types of mission for its existence.

Hauschildt and Pohl-Patalong understandably refrain from endorsing any of the three types as the dominant or normative expression of the church. However, from a systemic perspective, it appears reasonable to regard the *church as an organisation* as the middle form, which is most able to integrate aspects of the institution and the movement. But this also means that the church as an organisation finds itself in the middle, being pulled in opposite directions, on the one hand towards the institution, on the other towards the movement.

These contrasting developmental directions are prominently evident in the free church landscape. On the one hand, there are *forces that promote a stronger institutionalisation* of the free churches, such as the establishment of the Free Church Association in Switzerland as a political player[20] or the grant of public law status to free churches in Austria in 2013.[21] On the other hand, there are continually *emerging movements* that disrupt the free church scene, resulting in divisions. For instance, the "Last Reformation"[22] movement emphasises the dynamic nature of faith and strongly criticises the organisational form of the church. Additionally, former megachurch leader Francis Chan is promoting small, informal house churches, further highlighting the diverse and evolving nature of free churches.[23]

So even if the idea of the church as a hybrid cannot resolve inner tensions, the basic idea is nevertheless forward-looking because it guards against one-sidedness. It seems worthwhile to me, therefore, to apply the hybrid metaphor to the area of mission as well. The call for holistic mission, as often heard, for example, in the context of missional theology,[24] can be well combined with the idea of mission as a hybrid.

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[19]   Hauschildt and Pohl-Patalong, *Kirche*, ch. 3.7.

[20]   freikirchen.ch (Accessed May 16, 2023).

[21]   freikirchen.at (Accessed May 16, 2023).

[22]   thelastreformation.com (Accessed May 16, 2023).

[23]   Francis Chan, *Letters to the Church* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 2018).

[24]   Cf. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church. A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998); Roland Hardmeier, *Kirche ist Mission. Auf dem Weg zu einem ganzheitlichen Missionsverständnis*, Edition IGW 2 (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld, 2020). On the relationship between evangelism and diakonia, cf. Erhard Berneburg, *Das Verhältnis von Verkündigung und sozialer Aktion in der evangelikalen Missionstheorie unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Lausanner Bewegung für Weltevangelisation (1974–1989)*, STM 425 (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1997); Erhard Berneburg, "Mit Wort und Werk und allem Wesen" – Ganzheitlichkeit in der Evangelisa-

Hybrid mission implies that the call to conversion, engagement in social and diaconal work, dedication to Christian education, and community-building are not seen as conflicting with each other but are considered as complementary aspects of mission. Acknowledging the hybrid nature of mission would also help prevent one-sidedness, such as solely pursuing mission in the direction of socially accepted social diakonia while criticising conversion-oriented mission, or, conversely, regarding conversion-oriented mission as the only legitimate form of mission.

Mission for the Church as a Relational Network

This raises the question of what a social form of the church might look like that is *conversion-friendly,* and that could at the same time integrate the dynamism of the movement, the stabilisation of the organisation, and the serenity of the institution. I consider the idea of the *church as a relational network* as a more advanced perspective of a hybrid model.[25] Without going into detail, a network would have the advantage that different social forms could be interconnected, that is, mutually complementary rather than mutually exclusive. From a theological perspective, the network metaphor can be linked to the image of the church as the body of Christ with many interconnected members (Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4:16).

In such a network, nodes and branches with different ecclesial and missional characteristics would be interconnected. The inner connection through Jesus Christ and the community of the Holy Spirit could thus find an outer form that breaks down institutional and organisational restrictions, integrates the dynamics of the movement, but also puts any anti-institutional arrogance in its place.

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tion," in *Evangelisation im Gegenwind. Zur Theologie und Praxis der Glaubensverkündigung in der säkularen Gesellschaft*, ed. Herbert H. Klement, TVGMS (Gießen: Brunnen, 2002); Andreas C. Jansson, *Der eine Sendungsdienst der Kirche. Ein Beitrag zur Verhältnisbestimmung von Evangelisation und Diakonie unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Missionstheologie David J. Boschs* (Leipzig: EVA, 2023).

25   Wolfgang Nethöfel, Holger Böckel, and Steffen Merle, eds., *Vielfältige Vernetzung. Hinauswachsen aus der Großkirche* (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2016); Maren Lehmann, *Zwei oder drei. Kirche zwischen Organisation und Netzwerk* (Leipzig: EVA, 2018); Hans-Hermann Pompe and Daniel Hörsch, eds., *Kirche aus der Netzwerkperspektive. Metapher – Methode – Vergemeinschaftungsform*, KiA 25 (Leipzig: EVA, 2019); Felix Roleder and Birgit Weyel, eds., *Vernetzte Kirchengemeinde. Analysen zur Netzwerkerhebung der V. Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung der EKD* (Leipzig: EVA, 2019); Felix Roleder, *Die relationale Gestalt von Kirche. Der Beitrag der Netzwerkforschung zur Kirchentheorie*, PTHe 169 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2020).

From my point of view, such a network would be characterised by the following features:

1) A *conversion-friendly shape* of the local church. Philipp Bartholomä identified the following characteristics of conversion-friendly churches in his study,[26] thus blending elements of both movement and organisation: missional passion; sensitivity to the context that has changed; relationships with people who do not yet believe; high quality local church events; and all of this embedded in an atmosphere of hospitality and acceptance.

2) As *nodes* of an ecclesial network: *Lively Christian communities*, which serve as spaces where Christian life is deeply experienced and nurtured. These communities can be likened to plausibility structures[27] in which faith is shared, lived, and passed down to the next generation. They are dynamic and charismatic hubs, "biotopes of faith",[28] resembling open, monastery-modelled communities.[29] Yet, these faith-driven hotspots truly become part of a relational network within the church when they avoid isolation and disengagement from society and other churches. Instead, they contribute their strength of faith to benefit the broader church and society as a whole.

3) As *connection lines* of an ecclesial network: *Network structures* that connect different church forms. However, what is even more important than that are people who can operate in different worlds and, as a result, have a connecting effect. A relational church needs *network people* who have many different relationships with different ecclesial and social players. These networkers, in their own capacity, embody the network character of the church.

4) There is a need for *open spaces*, where the call to faith can be heard and an approach to faith is possible, even in ways that are still quite unexpected – as the

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[26]   Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 570–576. Cf. The more practice-oriented publication, which makes the insights of Bartholomä's study fruitful for local church practice: Philipp F. Bartholomä and Stefan Schweyer, *Gemeinde mit Mission. Damit Menschen von heute leidenschaftlich Christus nachfolgen. Grundlagen und praktische Impulse* (Gießen: Brunnen, 2023).

[27]   Cf. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie*, Fischer 6623 (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2016), 139–185 [The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge, 1966]; Peter L. Berger, *Zur Dialektik von Religion und Gesellschaft. Elemente einer soziologischen Theorie*, Fischer 6565 (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1988), 45–51 [*The sacred canopy. Elements of a sociological theory of religion*, 1967]. Adapted for church practice by Zimmermann, *Gemeinde zwischen Sozialität und Individualität*, 323–364.

[28]   Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, ed., *«Zeit zur Aussaat". Missionarisch Kirche sein*, DtBis 68, (2000).

[29]   Rod Dreher, *Die Benedikt-Option. Eine Strategie für Christen in einer nachchristlichen Gesellschaft* (Kißleg: fe, 2019).

Holy Spirit gives it. Perhaps we need something like *conversion spaces* where conversations about faith and prayer are possible and where there are ritual offerings to enact steps of faith.

5) A shared *set of unifying beliefs* are at the core of this network. Foremost amongst these shared beliefs is that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and the Lord of the world, and that in him, God himself became human, shared our humanity – even to the point of death. This gospel message underscores that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and was raised as the firstborn of the new creation (1 Cor 15:1–4). Alexander Garth argues that a "high Christology" is the driving force of mission.[30] Even before defining missiology and ecclesiology, we have to think about who this God actually is that has revealed himself in Jesus. Missional paralysis is a symptom of a theological imbalance. In this regard, it seems to me to be a very helpful approach to combine the inspiration of the early church – orthodoxy in the best sense – with an open-minded approach to our context. A "generous orthodoxy", as Graham Tomlin calls it,[31] points to this set of unifying beliefs without becoming narrow minded.

6) All this requires a *missional attitude of self-giving.* It is a firm rejection of any form of mission that is oriented towards the increase of one's own power, towards ecclesiastical self-preservation and towards the attainment of power in society. Indeed, the gospel holds significance for all aspects of individual and societal life. However, it can distort the mission of the church when the church's primary objective becomes the acquisition of social influence and power, as seen in the concept of reclaiming the "seven mountains" (business, government, family, religion, media, education, entertainment) of society.[32] Instead of lamenting the decline of a Christendom culture, we should view the post-Christendom era as an opportunity to shape the Gospel in a new and authentic manner, a perspective akin to that of Stuart Murray.[33] A mission that aligns with a high Christology is a mission that seeks to recognise the power of the resurrection. And there is no other way to do this than the *way of the cross*, of surrender, of self-giving, and of conformity to the death of Christ (Phil 3:10–11). Suffering is an intrinsic part of conversion, although it does not belong to the last, but to the penultimate.

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[30] Alexander Garth, *Untergehen oder Umkehren. Warum der christliche Glaube seine beste Zeit noch vor sich hat* (Leipzig: EVA, 2021).

[31] Graham Tomlin and Nathan Eddy, eds., *The Bond of Peace. Exploring Generous Orthodoxy* (London: SPCK, 2021); Graham Tomlin, *Navigating a World of Grace. The Promise of Generous Orthodoxy* (London: SPCK, 2022).

[32] Johnny Enlow, *The Seven Mountain Prophecy. Unveiling the Coming Elijah Revolution* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Creation House, 2008); Lance Wallnau et al., *Invading Babylon. The 7 Mountain Mandate* (Shippensburg, Pa.: Destiny Image, 2013).

[33] Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom. Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade, 2018).

7) The *new creation* is a journey that began with the resurrection of Jesus Christ and for whose fulfilment the church and the whole cosmos longs. The picture of the New Jerusalem is the perfect combination of institution, organisation, and movement. It is the city of God, vibrant with life, simultaneously dynamic and stable, an exemplary institution perfectly designed as a cuboid, yet teeming with movement. This eschatological viewpoint serves to put into perspective every present social form and provides the right orientation for every form of church. It is this grand vision that fuels the mission and the church's existence.

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