

Sleeping beauty or wide awake?

Mission agreements in the congregations of the Church of Norway

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ABSTRACT

This article studies mission within the context of traditional Nordic national churches. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, a state church until 2012, eighty percent of all congregations have formal agreements with a mission organization to support a project abroad. Given their prevalence, these agreements need empirical investigation as they provide access to congregational understandings and their practicing of mission. From the perspective of missiology and organization theory, this article asks: *What do the mission agreements accomplish in the congregations, and how do the congregations use the agreements?* Based on interviews in six congregations, our analysis shows that the function of the agreements depends on the engagement of individual volunteers and employees. Engagement is high when projects are perceived as concrete and diaconal and are incorporated into congregations' organizational structures and key activities. Mission is primarily understood as supporting projects in the global south and as sharing the Christian faith with churches in other countries.

Keywords: mission, missional, church, organizing, congregation, Church of Norway

INTRODUCTION

Mission and the Church of Norway

The Church of Norway (CoN) defines itself as a confessing, missional, serving, and open national church.¹ Its self-understanding as a missional church was discussed at the annual synod in 2005 (Kirkemøtet, 2005). In the aftermath of the centenary of the 1910 Edinburgh mission conference and in relation to the international ecumenical dialogue, the synod elaborated further on its missional identity in 2012 (Kirkemøtet, 2012). Both synods used the concept of *holistic mission*, which distanced the CoN from a former understanding of mission, which implied “from the West to the rest”. In its vision statement on mission, holistic mission means to “share the gospel through presence, action, and words, locally and globally.” Mission is anchored in the triune God who acts in the world as creator, reconciler, and life giver. It includes diaconia, preaching, and dialogue. Furthermore, mission emerges when God sends the church and all who are baptized to share their faith and life, struggle for justice, and invite others into community across borders. The mission agreements are short documents signed by a local congregation and its partner, a Norwegian mission organization. They commit the congregation to support a chosen mission project in another country, at least through funding. The present article concentrates on congregations by empirically investigating how the mission agreements serve as a resource to strengthen the congregations in their missional functions. This research interest inspired the title of the article, which asks if these agreements are dormant or vibrant in congregations.

Collaboration Congregation and Mission

Within the CoN, eighty percent, that is around 1000 from a total of 1164, congregations have signed at least one mission agreement with a mission organization. Such agreements entail financial support for a project abroad and intercession, and may include exchange of information and even mutual visits. These agreements constitute the central aspect of the formalized collaboration between the CoN and the seven largest Norwegian mission organizations, called the Collaboration Congregation and Mission (CCM).² The CCM identifies itself as a network organization linking local and global work within the church, linking the church and mission organizations, and linking missional theory with practice.

The CoN has not established a mission organization of its own, as the Church of Sweden has done, but chose to collaborate with the CCM against a backdrop of 150 years of Norwegian mission engagement. There were several reasons for introducing the CCM. The main reason was the realization, in both the CoN and mission organizations, that engagement with mission was low in many local congregations. Both parties searched for new ways to strengthen this engagement. This was based on the understanding that it is the responsibility of a local congregation to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. In addition, institutional changes called for new ways of collaboration, and significantly, the increased number of employees in CoN congregations now made it possible for them to engage in fields that were traditionally covered by mission organizations (Sirris et al., 2020). The CMM was founded by the national synod in 1994, and it aims to realize the missional purpose of congregations and to strengthen mission engagement in the context of increasing globalization and internationalization. It consists of a national council comprising top leaders from the member

¹ National church is our English translation of the Norwegian word folkekirke.

² Samarbeid menighet og misjon

organizations. According to an evaluation of the CMM, it serves as a platform for collaboration and dialogue among the parties involved (Sirris et al., 2020, p. 2). The national director of the CCM holds a position in the international department of the CoN. Moreover, each diocese has a regional council of member organizations and a mission advisor who, at the time of the study in 2019, was jointly financed by the church and the organizations. Now, the diocese carries the entire cost. Each agreement collects, on average, 16 000 NOK from its participating congregations annually, which nationwide, adds up to a total of 16 million NOK.

Mission in the Norwegian national church context

Almost 30 years passed between two standard works done on mission in the Norwegian context: *Missiologi i dag* [Missiology today] (Berentsen, Engelsviken, & Jørgensen, 1994), and *Missiologi – en innføring* [Missiology – an introduction] (Bach Nikolajsen, Haug, Thoresen, & Eskilt, 2022). The foreword to the earlier volume begins: “The last two decades have, in many ways, turned the world upside down” (Berentsen et al., 1994, p. 4), which implied that mission too was undergoing change.³ The introductory chapter in the recent book states that “there has been great changes in the field of missiology the latest decades” (Bach Nikolajsen et al., 2022, p. 6). Like the earlier volume, this book also aimed to cover most areas of missiology, and it was written mainly for theological students by researchers in the field (Bach Nikolajsen et al., 2022, p. 6). Between 1994 and 2022, several other works on mission were published, and each of them focused on one aspect of mission as a whole (Hegstad, 2004; Hanssen, 2004; Engelsviksen, 2004; Jørgensen, 2004; Bjørdal, 2005; Aano, 2010; Ekenes, 2011; Austnaberg & Haug, 2013; Austnaberg, 2014; Haug, 2015; Aano, 2015). Additionally, some master’s theses have concentrated on mission, the majority of which, however, have focused on contexts other than Norway. One worth mentioning is that of Landgren (2013) concerning the national church and mission. Importantly, except for the evaluation report on the CCM, none of these contributions focused on mission agreements between the CoN and mission organizations. For this reason, the empirical material to that of the CMM evaluation constitutes the background for our article (Sirris et al., 2020).

Against this background, our research focuses on mission agreements. The research questions guiding this article are: *What do the mission agreements accomplish in the congregations, and how do the congregations use the agreements?* In what follows, we elaborate on the theoretical perspectives drawn from missiology and organization studies. As noted above, the annual synod of the CoN discussed mission and passed resolutions in both 2005 and 2012. It then added a further resolution in 2021. Whereas the first two synodal resolutions concerned what the CoN *is* as a missional church, the third was concerned with what a missional church *does*. This reflected a shift in emphasis away from theological self-understanding and toward practices and interactions. The research interests over the last thirty years cannot be seen in isolation from the development of missiological understanding in the field—which, in the following review, is interwoven with theoretical perspectives. In the Methods section, we spell out how the empirical study was undertaken. We then present our data analysis, foregrounding three main findings concerning the interaction between mission agreements and congregations: practices, roles, and motives. We discuss what the mission agreements have accomplished and how congregations use them, before presenting our concluding remarks.

³ This book replaced another standard work in the Norwegian context, *Misjonskunnskap – en innføring* [Science of mission – an introduction] (Myklebust, 1972).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Holistic mission in the national church

The CoN's identification as missional⁴ is specified as holistic mission (Den norske kirke, 2021). The resolutions from the synods in 2005 and 2012 support this understanding, which is characterized by sharing the gospel through dialogue, preaching, storytelling, and presence (Kirkemøtet, 2005, p. 5). The synod commended the mission organizations for contributing to the holistic mission of the church (Kirkemøtet, 2012, p. 3). The CCM's vision for mission, embraced by both the CoN and all the mission organizations involved, is: "Congregations in mission, where the gospel liberates and equips people to share the faith through presence, actions, and words, locally and globally." In the following, we address two debates within the emerging understanding of holistic mission within the CoN: the first considers relations between the national church and mission, and the second, between preaching and diaconia. Importantly, we presuppose that congregational understandings of mission will reflect different positions within these two debates.⁵

What does holistic mission mean in the national church context, where mission organizations have historically been mission agents on behalf of the church? In an article dated 2004, theologian Harald Hegstad asks whether a missional national church is a contradiction in terms or an opportunity (Hegstad, 2004, p. 220)? He challenges the national church perspective, pointing out that it is problematic to talk about mission within a national church with its baptized members, and he confirms the missionary perspective: that not all members of the church are Christians, and they therefore need to convert to a true faith. Hegstad argues for a dynamic ecclesiology that both confirms and challenges all members of the church. The possibility of conversion and a new start must always be included in Christian preaching to all people alike.

Taking a historical perspective, the former Secretary-General of the Norwegian Mission Society, Kjetil Aano, asserts that mission organizations should be understood as a democratization process that empowers the laity and reduces clerical authority (Aano, 2015). Simultaneously, a new kind of professionalism has emerged in those mission organizations that were strongly influenced by revival movements. These organizations held national church membership in low esteem, and perceived that true faith was expressed through their own patterns of engagement. In our view, the CCM has illustrated how new relationships and alternative arenas of engagement can be built between the national church and mission organizations. Both parties are challenged by the missional understanding of the church as well as by ecumenical impulses.

Missiologist Kari Storstein Haug (2015) also discusses the national church as a missionary church. She first states that the CoN, according to its vision, understands itself as

⁴ The word used in the Norwegian original is *misjonerende*, which can be translated as missionary, or as actions that are missionary in their intention. In the English version of the vision statement, however, the Norwegian word is translated "missional," which focuses mainly on the identity of the church, as reflecting a dimension of everything the church does (Haug, 2015, p. 180).

⁵ The international discourse on mission has heavily influenced the debate on church and mission within the CoN. This is especially seen in the preparatory work done for the annual synod in 2012 (Kirkemøtet, 2012) in the aftermath of Edinburgh 2010, and many of the authors listed above draw on international developments in mission when discussing the situation in the CoN. In this article, however, we have limited the discussion to the Norwegian setting, and we do not elaborate on the global situation of mission. In a forthcoming article, Hans Austnaberg and Kari Storstein Haug analyze different understandings of mission in CoN congregations in light of international discourses on mission.

having a missional identity and as being sent into the world with a global mission. This missional identity necessitates that the church remains contextual amid a changing multicultural and multi-religious society. The church, as a global fellowship, invites the CoN to look beyond its own context and interact with congregations in other parts of the world. Such interactions contribute to new insights and constructive impulses in relation to our own culture and ecclesiology. With Christ as the model, the church is challenged to be inviting and inclusive, especially toward the marginalized. Identifying itself as “being sent to the world,” the CoN will always be committed to development in diaconia, evangelizing, and dialogue (Haug, 2015).

Moving on to the second point in our review, Aano discusses the relationship between proclamation and diaconia (Aano, 2010). He argues for a comprehensive understanding by making a strong case for holistic mission. He shows that diaconal organizations have historically faced difficulties in connecting their diaconal and social-ethical work with the church’s preaching and challenges to conversion and faith. Similarly, mission organizations have encountered problems in finding a proper place for diaconal and social-ethical witness (Aano, 2010, p. 46). Aano asserts that both views display a theological reductionism. He emphasizes that the church’s teaching on the trinity can contribute to solving this challenge, which also implies a more dynamic understanding of the church. An *economic* understanding of the trinity emphasizes the sending activity of the Godhead and, as such, the church is invited to take part in this sending. A *perichoreic* understanding of the trinity underlines the ongoing conversation in the Godhead and what it means to be created in the image of God. The church’s preaching and diaconal work do not stand in opposition to each other, but are interdependent and involved in an ongoing dialogue. Aano pleads strongly for a combination of the two perspectives, that is, a comprehensive view, which, while acknowledging that preaching and diaconia have different aims, sees them as supplementary to each other (Aano, 2010, p. 49).

The committee suggesting resolutions for the 2021 synod criticized the preparatory work committee for not connecting the CoN’s global mission more closely to creation theology and the incarnation (Kirkemøtet, 2021, p. 2). Furthermore, they asserted that the traditional concept of mission can be experienced as problematic in certain contexts; thus, it is important to emphasize the perspectives of the marginalized and minorities. The synod’s resolutions included aspects of holistic mission, for example, when they pointed to global challenges to be faced prior to 2030. These aspects included communicating the gospel of salvation through words and deeds, recognizing God’s love for the created world, working for reconciliation and peace, taking part in diaconal mission through love and solidarity, working for change in dehumanizing structures and injustice, and further, developing an understanding of mission that is based on the perspectives of the marginalized (Kirkemøtet, 2021, p. 5). Regarding the financing of mission, the 2021 synod encouraged local congregations to have at least one mission agreement with the CCM, to stimulate and increase the church’s offerings, and especially, to emphasize sister churches’ efforts to nurture other churches (Kirkemøtet, 2021, p. 3).⁶

Hitherto, we have reviewed the emerging understanding of holistic mission within the CoN. Importantly, this was not a sole theological endeavor but was institutionalized through the formalization of the CCM and the mission agreements. We regard these as organizational arrangements established to embody, safeguard, and promote holistic mission engagement in

⁶ This challenge has to be understood against what is said in the proceedings, enclosure 2:9, namely that most parochial church councils do choose diaconal projects. Therefore, it is a challenge for the future to communicate how important it is to support projects that directly build the church. If congregations do not support what builds the churches, especially preaching, church teaching, and invitation to baptism and faith, no one else will do so (Kirkemøtet, 2021).

congregations. Thus, the following perspectives are drawn from organization theory, where we elaborate on the concept of mission agreements as an organizational template for engagement in mission.

Concepts as scripts for organizing

Organization researcher Kjell Arne Røvik (1998) refers to the ideas of organizing and leadership as templates, scripts, or recipes. As such, these are general and abstract prototypes. Which organizational scripts work and have proven effects is very weakly established within the field of study, and it needs to be investigated in each case. We regard the mission agreement as an organizational template. Some concepts are imported from one organizational sector to another. The popularity of certain ideas is not only due to their content but is also dependent on who presents and supports the ideas and how they are formulated and timed. In terms of mission within the CoN, our review has elaborated on how the national synod placed mission on its agenda.

Organizing scripts are conceptualized through new terminology and recognized by distinct concepts (Christensen, Læg Reid, Roness & Røvik, 2015, p. 93). Often, they are integrated within an argument that is scientifically underpinned. This is the case with the emerging understanding of holistic mission that has been developed by key Norwegian theologians. As pointed out by Røvik (2007), organizational scripts are part of a larger argument with defined underpinnings. In the case of mission, this resides clearly in the Bible as well as within the Norwegian history of mission (Aano, 2010). In our context, the scientific underpinning lies in theology, and also in the synod's resolutions over several years. Such adjustments do not happen in isolation from other ideas, actors, or traditions that are already established within organizations.

Concepts are inherently different from actions. Røvik (2007) underlines that a concept has to be materialized through collective action. How concepts are spread and what organizations do with concepts is studied from the translation perspective. Translators may be researchers, consultants, leaders, or employees. They have a particular status and authority due to their competence or managerial position. What is transferred is not the idea or the practice but descriptions or materialization of the concept (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). A central observation, internal to this tradition, is that scripts are negotiated and contextualized locally rather than imported in their totality. Accordingly, we assume that the mission agreement can be understood as one such concept that is locally interpreted and reshaped. This means that the initial organizing script—that is, the mission agreement template—can be adapted and related to very different congregational practices. While verbalizing can show how concepts are spread, it is equally important to ask why organizational templates were introduced in the first place. Within institutional theory, the surroundings into which an organization is placed are given attention. To an organization, adopting a new script can secure its legitimacy within its constituency—irrespective of whether the script has a proven effect.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) wrote an article about why organizations increasingly become more alike, and they used the term isomorphism. They pointed to three mechanisms that contribute to such development. First, cohesiveness is established through laws and regulations, such as public statutes interfering with organizational activities. Second, concepts are used and related to what is considered “good practice,” as communicated in professional education. This is a normative pressure about what is the right thing to do where professions have values, standards, and ideas in common, which are derived from their education and professional communities. Third, adapting a script can be the result of indirect pressure because organizations imitate others that are perceived as successful. This import can be due to

insecurity. By these three mechanisms, organizations develop a shared vocabulary through which they draw on an organizational template as a resource. Such organizational scripts can be called “myths,” since they give organizations rational and legitimate arguments for practices without knowing their real effects (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Consequently, an organizational script can be introduced for symbolic reasons or to increase efficiency; however, a combination of these alternatives is also possible. Myths refer to a possible gap between theory and practice (Christensen et al., 2015, p. 91). Coupling indicates that an organization launches an idea rather swiftly and expects effects. Free coupling occurs when organizations experience pressure to incorporate a new organizational concept and yet face dilemmas and resistance. One solution is to formally adopt the concept and yet allow it to have only a limited influence on the organization in order to avoid conflict. In this way, different stakeholders are satisfied, and legitimacy is secured. Loose couplings between parts of an organization can be described as organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson, 2002). We have reason to assume that several of these mechanisms are present in our data. In alignment with the institutional perspective, we regard scripts as symbols laden with meaning (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017). To sum up, we understand organizational scripts as a combination of tools and symbols. Thus, we assume there are various motives for congregations to establish a mission agreement. Institutional theory provides an analytical lens through which to study the reciprocity between concept and organization, in our case, mission agreement and congregation.

METHODS

Data collection

The empirical material in this article is drawn from fieldwork conducted in connection with an evaluation of the CCM. Both authors of this article participated in this research project commissioned by the National Church Council of the CoN (Sirris et al., 2020). The empirical material for the evaluation report included qualitative interviews, quantitative surveys, and document analysis. The document analysis consisted of documents on mission from the national level of the CoN, and strategic plans from selected dioceses and congregations. The surveys were sent to most professional groups in all congregations, to the administration in the dioceses, and to employed and chosen leaders in the seven mission organizations included in the CCM. The CCM's national leader was interviewed individually, while the rest of the research interviews were performed in groups: the advisory boards of the CCM, both nationally and in three dioceses, representatives from three of the mission organizations, and from two local congregations from each of the three selected dioceses. The Norwegian center for research data (now Sikt) recommended the project application (reference 326659), which permits future research publications based on the original empirical material.

The selection of data for the present article is limited to group interviews with representatives of the six selected local congregations. The rest of the empirical material functions as background, and it is used to contrast, deepen, and explain our selected data. The reason for this limitation is the vast amount of data included in the evaluation project as well as the more precise research question guiding this article. We wanted to investigate how an agreement on a specific mission project, run by a particular mission organization, contributes to engagement by a congregation and how congregations use these agreements. The sampling of congregations was based on the three dioceses that were chosen for inclusion in the evaluation. Each of the mission advisors was asked to suggest two congregations from their diocese. The senior pastors in the chosen congregations were approached by e-mail and served as contacts

with the participants. Table 1 provides an overview of the group interviews included in the data for this article.

Table 1: Interviews

Diocese	Interviewees	Duration of interview (minutes)	Demography
Stavanger	Senior pastor and manager (2)	65	Inner city
Stavanger	Manager, parochial church council member, three members from mission committee (5)	66	Suburb
Oslo	Deacon, leader of parochial church council, leader and member of mission committee (4)	83	Suburb
Oslo	Church musician, leader of parochial church council, volunteer (3)	57	City
Sør-Hålogaland	Senior pastor (1)	50	Town
Sør-Hålogaland	Senior pastor (1)	55	Rural

The congregational interviewees varied according to what the congregations themselves considered most relevant. A common denominator was that it was people especially interested in mission who took part, whether they were on the local mission committee, a local contact person for the chosen mission project, the representative of the parochial church council carrying this responsibility, the main administrator for the congregation, or the pastor. This composition of the group inclined it toward favorable views of mission, which we take into account in our analysis. Despite this, the interviews also yielded insights into more problematic areas. We used an interview guide with three main areas: 1) questions relating to the structure of the collaboration, 2) questions on how the collaboration has contributed to change toward greater engagement and ownership of mission by the congregation, and 3) the cost effect of the collaboration. Four of the group interviews were taped, and the main content was condensed and made available through a written summary. Two of the interviews were shorter than the others, but they gave interesting information since they were conducted in congregations that had no special focus on the mission agreement.

Analysis and ethical considerations

In our analysis of the empirical material, we worked through the data and condensed the comments into twelve pages of text. Each researcher individually identified significant themes in the material, and we then discussed them jointly. In this first phase, we emphasized inductive reading to become aware of the nuances and details in the material. In a second reading, we analyzed the material, being especially aware of how our theoretical perspectives could assist us in arriving at a better understanding, while we organized the data into important themes to be discussed further. Both researchers are sympathetic to church work and to mission. Both are ordained ministers in the CoN but are now researchers and teachers in a Christian specialized university. One of the authors has worked as a missionary abroad. An intimate knowledge of a field of study may cause bias and blind spots, but being aware of the possible dangers of being an insider can also be a strength in research (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

ANALYSIS

Our data provide access to how mission is practiced and understood in congregations. We present the empirical material in three categories. First, we describe what the agreements have accomplished in congregations and what practices have been established or encouraged. Second, we analyze the roles of the participants in terms of initiative and responsibilities. Third, we elaborate on the understandings of mission and what motivates congregational practices. These themes, respectively, spell out the *what*, the *how*, and the *why* of the mission agreements in the congregational context.

Practices emerging from mission agreements

We found three practices relating to the first theme of *what* has been achieved: an intertwining of the material and spiritual dimensions of mission, the contextualizing of mission, and the importance of integrating a mission project into the congregational structure.

Intertwining the material and the spiritual

The interviews provided information indicating substantial variations between congregations in terms of practices relating to their mission agreements. In most cases, specific activities were mentioned in the formal agreement. Despite differences between the various agreements, a common denominator was the obligation to support the chosen project with an annual monetary amount. This can, in fact, be regarded as an easily measured indicator of congregational mission engagement. The money is mostly collected in Sunday service offerings. The parochial church council annually decides on a list of recipients for the offerings. In the case of the congregations represented, the number of Sunday service offerings devoted to the mission project each year varied between two and eight. These were not allocated randomly; rather, selected Sunday services were profiled as mission services. Additionally, some congregations arranged bazars or fundraising activities, or groups supported the project by raising funds through their meetings and activities. Our data clearly indicate that congregations entering into mission agreements provided substantial financial aid. They used the agreements as tools for placing mission on the agenda regularly.

There were basic connections between the offerings and awareness of the project. Hence, the mission agreement was more than a formal structure; it was intertwined with the spiritual dimension, as described by a member of the parochial church council: "We have a friendship congregation in England we pray for in each service. The same goes for our mission Bible study group, which collects money for the project in each meeting." The same point was made by a volunteer, who pointed to what he called a double track: "I believe that the spiritual and the material are interconnected. Preaching triggers an engagement that generates money." He related this to traditional Norwegian mission engagement, in which fundraising enjoys a long history. Another congregation had a spring bazar that raised about 150 000 NOK. Support for the mission project could also come from personal donations.

Contextualizing mission

Many donations were related to the contextualization of mission. For example, in one congregation, the confirmands participated in an international soccer project that was formalized in their mission agreement. An interest in sports unites people across geographical borders and was highly engaging for the teenagers involved. The soccer project was presented in the Sunday services and, according to a mission committee member, "Every time these projects are introduced and given attention in the services, the amount given in the offering doubles or triples."

Another illustration of the significance of context was found in a congregation that supported a project in Egypt. Less than fifty percent of the inhabitants of the parish were members of the CoN, which meant they were a religious minority in that part of the city. The population was distinguished by its different nationalities, and there were large numbers of Muslims and several mosques within the geographical area. The church was engaged in local inter-faith dialoguing. The church staff elaborated on how the engagement had generated creativity in their local work, as portrayed by the deacon: “Yes, we support a project abroad, yet we work locally. The project enables a lot of energy. We entered it because we wanted it to fuel engagement here.” The interviewees pointed to a local connection, since one of the leaders in the cooperating mission organization lived in the parish. This congregation supported a Coptic project. This was not chosen by chance, but was recognized as mirroring some aspects of the Norwegian congregation itself in dialogue with local Islamic believers. The manager told how they had been inspired by a week’s stay in Egypt, where they visited Christian leaders Mama Maggie and Bishop Thomas:

We extract themes that the kids here can relate to, both religiously and more generally. What is freedom, what is identity? The value of second-hand use, prayer—who God is. In the Christian education activities, we use a prayer from the Coptic church as well as the distinctive Coptic *yota* cross.

Visits from the project were deemed very important. According to the church musician, “We live a long time on these experiences, telling stories about it for ages. Visits keep mission alive. It inspires us as a congregation. We really own this project.” Mission Sunday services could also include a visit, possibly from the mission organization cooperating with the congregation, but this was seldom more than once a year, or, even more rarely, there was a visit from the project abroad. Several of the congregations told how they chose a project that matched their own interests, while for others, it was more coincidental, as expressed here by the senior pastor:

At the start, the formal agreement was a mere tool. The challenge in our time is to fill the agreements with contents. Mission is not only about giving money to the poor people in the third world. Here lies a risk of maintaining an old understanding of mission. It is about global solidarity, and about what we can do locally in our own context.

Some interviewees told how visits served to contextualize mission and had long-term effects, and particularly so when the mission project “spreads to various parts of the congregation,” as one catechist articulated it.

Integrating mission into congregational structures

A clear pattern was that the mission project thrived when integrated into the regular structure of the congregations, rather than being an “isolated satellite,” as described by one parochial church council member. A senior pastor stated, “The main challenge is to prioritize mission among many important tasks. Engagement depends on integrating mission in the ecclesial structure and with the employees.” The interviews gave insight into how mission was positioned on the agenda in the congregations. The local representatives emphasized the importance of integrating mission into their Christian education reform activities. Every Norwegian congregation offers annual gatherings for each age group between 0–18. The best collaboration occurred when the mission project became visible and tangible in the Sunday school classes, Christian education, and with confirmands: “Then it permeates the congregation.” One deacon described it thus:

There are many measurable effects beyond money. The mission project succeeds when we have created an engagement in which the congregation has a sense of ownership. And it creates life and nurtures church growth and meaning. That is what we want to facilitate. Most crucial are local persons with resources and initiative. Mission needs a structure, yet people with engagement are decisive.

For ten years, another congregation had supported a project in which a Norwegian couple worked at a local hospital. This congregation had a mission committee with very active participants, most of whom were retired women, as articulated here by one of them:

We have regular visits from the project since the couple used to live in our area. In the coffee after the Sunday service, we share information and show pictures from the project. Mission can be perceived as abstract; however, we have made it more concrete by knitting small blankets intended to newborn babies at the hospital. People that claim not to be interested in mission knit and ask for the newsletter. A total of 1800 blankets have been knit. We had a great knitting party recently.

The mission committee members talked about the hospital's work involving nutrition and its vision for children. They found these very appealing and easy to communicate about, both within the congregation and beyond. These members underlined how important it was for the project to include young people and diaconal work, which they deemed a success factor in their project.

Roles and responsibilities

As seen above, integrating the mission project into the congregational structure was deemed crucial. This raised questions regarding the roles of the actors in the congregations. This theme emerged as very important in our data. A key issue was thus who was responsible and what the roles of volunteers, employees, parochial church councils, and committees were. We highlight three sub-themes: the role of the so-called "souls of fire," the shift toward the key role of the employee, and information flow.

"Souls of fire"

The interviewees were in unison regarding the importance of engaged local people. These were often identified by the Norwegian idiom "souls of fire," meaning they were very engaged persons who were also able to spark energy in other people. The interviewees described how these were sometimes individuals in the parochial church council, one employee, or a group of volunteers. As a catechist expressed it, "Nevertheless, the criterion of success is when several people realize that they are together in the project, even if some are the engines." A church musician underlined that the strength of vital projects lies in personal engagement. The energy was very often generated by traveling and visiting the project:

It gives more than it takes. It is a mutual exchange. We are enriched. Very often local "souls of fire" are responsible for the project, and they put a lot of effort into it. The survival of the mission project depends on local efforts and that is it visible in the congregation.

Some church employees with work experience in several congregations suggested that it appeared easier for mission organizations to serve congregations where there was an existing engagement. Moreover, congregations with good experiences functioned as ambassadors, both for the mission organization and in terms of highlighting the intrinsic value of a mission

project. Certain conditions, such as history and local traditions, the nature of the project, and communication and information, contributed to mission engagement. An example was in a congregation where a former missionary in South America worked in a center for disabled people in that country. The congregation chose this center as their mission project. This engagement also led to collaboration with a local center for the disabled in Norway. The direct contact between the congregation and the organization meant a great deal. The organizations' contact persons could, metaphorically speaking, awaken the sleeping church and encourage congregations to enter a mission agreement.

Centrality of the church staff

Crucial to both entering an agreement and subsequently fueling it were initiatives, taken either directly or indirectly, by the local church staff. A member of a mission committee told how she had seen a shift toward a less prominent role for volunteers:

Before, volunteers were regarded the most central actors for promoting mission engagement. CCM has been important to reach the local church staff. When we enable contact with the clergy, something happens in the congregations. And other employees tag along. There has indeed been a shift from volunteers towards staff.

They linked this development to the increased professionalization within the CoN, where a large number of employees, in addition to congregational members, now ran activities formerly arranged by mission organizations. Many interviewees emphasized the relationship with local congregational staff. As one mission committee member articulated it, "We depend on the pastors. Those who think that mission is important, give it room." Several of the interviewees emphasized the active role played by local clergy as being paramount, in contrast to a tacit attitude or even hostility toward mission.

Information flow

Another point was the importance of information flow. As noted above, the preferred mode of communication was face-to-face visits. Some congregations published information letters about the project twice annually or had a regular column in their parish journals. The congregations were, in general, skeptical about the value of e-mails containing information from mission organizations, as they experienced a tendency to "drown" due to over-full mailboxes. The church employees talked about their increased expectations of receiving information and for personal follow-up, whereas the organizations themselves seemed to have limited resources to do so. An employee in a mission organization said:

It is important that missionaries visit the congregations. Proximity to projects is what counts, directly by your own visit or indirectly by visits here, or that someone you know has been there and seen for themselves. That results in engagement and income for the project.

At the same time, several interviewees asserted that it was more fruitful to listen to the engagement of a local person who was part of the congregation than to meet an external representative coming from the mission organization.

Motives for mission projects

A key question was why congregations entered into mission agreements in the first place. Several interviewees pointed to the fact that some of the mission agreements were dormant and

did not lead to any activity or raise money. In the congregations we investigated, motives were explored in relation to two interrelated themes: global engagement and holistic mission.

Global engagement

A theme in all interviews was the fact that four out of five CoN congregations had indeed signed a mission agreement. A church administrator explained how the number of agreements had increased and linked this to “a positive normativity in having such agreements with the mission organizations. When I started in my job, they were taken-for-granted. Of course, they should be continued.” In the congregations, there seemed to be a clear expectation of giving something, namely financial aid, to mission organizations. One member of the parochial church council explained, “Every year, we receive about 60 applications for the Sunday service offerings. We give more to those organizations with which we have formal agreements.” He asserted that engagement in a mission project strengthened relations between western countries and third world countries in a time of increased globalization and internationalization: “We live in one of the world’s richest countries. We need to be engaged and give; it is a moral responsibility.”

Holistic mission

For those representatives from the congregations who were greatly engaged in mission, it was hard to imagine a congregation without such projects. A member of one parochial church council explained:

Then, we would have lacked an important pillar in our work. We cannot just sit here and be occupied with our own nitty gritty. We need an engagement beyond ourselves. We risk being so filled with compassion in the zone around ourselves, that we forget that people elsewhere live under other conditions. As a congregation, we need a perspective about the suffering of the world, like Jesus had. When he returns, he will not ask us what our opinions are, but what we did for the poor. This is a congregational responsibility.

Some also told how many people whom they knew did not attend church regularly, were yet committed to justice. When they listened to what the congregation did through the projects, and without using the word *mission*, it made an impact on them. According to a deacon, “Peace and reconciliation work is popular, diaconal projects also. Less so evangelizing and church development.” A clear pattern in the data is that congregations were most interested in diaconal projects. However, some interviewees underlined that there were few clear-cut differences: “We are part of a new mission movement where the distinction between diaconia and evangelizing is not experienced as relevant.” Many told about a weakened understanding of traditional mission that emphasized evangelizing. It appeared to be more legitimate when the mission consisted of diaconal measures, as expressed here by a mission committee member: “Providing humanitarian help in a Christian framing is better than forcing our mind-set upon others.”

Sharing faith across borders was a recurrent phrase. A senior pastor in an area with a weak historical mission engagement told how the phenomenon of mission agreements made mission acceptable. In this rural area, it was meaningful for local people to support village development projects in the remote countryside of Madagascar. Some mission committee members made a distinction in favor of supporting local churches abroad in terms of diaconal projects. This enabled the locals to work with evangelizing and church building, which were best left in local hands due to their contextual knowledge and language skills.

DISCUSSION

The overall research questions are: *What do the mission agreements accomplish in the congregations, and how do the congregations use the agreements?* In this section, the two parts of this question are addressed and related to the theoretical perspectives elaborated above. Missional engagement in Norwegian congregations has not previously been studied in relation to mission agreements. Although addressed in theoretical studies (Aano 2010, 2015; Hegstad, 2004), this article provides new empirically based knowledge on the role of mission in CoN congregations that goes beyond the intra-ecclesial discourse. Our venture point has been to explore the impact of mission agreements in congregations, and discover which related practices were deemed to be successful.

Reciprocal Christian internationalization

One key insight concerns the motives for entering a mission agreement. Here, we saw that global engagement and international perspectives were paramount and closely associated with mission by our interviewees. In alignment with the literature on mission, our interviewees placed mission in the context of change. These changes are related to increased globalization, secularization, and religious and cultural plurality (Bach Nikolajsen et al., 2022). Additionally, digitalization has revolutionized how we communicate and interact. These substantial cultural changes in society provide the church and mission organizations with new challenges as well as possibilities. The congregations have access to information about mission projects and, in many cases, have sent representatives to visit these projects. These are the contextual features of a new collaboration marked by reciprocity. The congregations' responses to such visits can hardly be overrated. There seems to be a mutual exchange and not just an asymmetric relation between giver and receiver.

Moreover, internationalization is not only due to people traveling more and witnessing growing globalization in their daily lives. How mission was framed by our interviewees reflects the internal development within the church. Particularly significant is the ecumenical and international understanding of mission, which has emerged due to a broader, global ecumenical collaboration concerning mission. The center of Christianity has moved southward (Engelsviken, 2004). The CCM has developed in parallel with changes in work forms and collaboration, and we see new relations emerging between churches and mission organizations. There has been an increasing emphasis on dialogue and contribution to social development in partnership countries (Haug, 2015). Thus, internationalization can be a resource for congregations, and mission projects are carriers of this concept (Haug 2015). We want to point out that increased internationalization and an appreciation of belonging to a worldwide Christian community are distinct accomplishments of the mission agreements.

The missional dilemma

Whereas most people find it interesting to travel abroad and eat exotic food at home, our data illustrate a dilemma throughout the analysis. This links to how the congregations understand mission and how holistic mission is rooted in the congregations. Resolutions from the CoN 2005, 2012, and 2021 synods have outlined a basic understanding of what a missional church is and does. The synods underlined that all baptized people are called to share their faith, yet with respect for people of other faiths and different world views. Even if holistic mission is the ideal of the CoN, the congregations primarily understand mission as supporting diaconal projects abroad. This implies a tension in relation to the central vision of the CCM: "Congregations in mission, where the gospel liberates and equips people to share the faith through

presence, actions, and words, locally, and globally.” This tension concerns mission as being both local and global, where our analysis shows that the latter context is the preferred space for practicing mission. By supporting a project far away, the congregations have simultaneously distanced themselves from uneasy encounters in their own neighborhood. The challenges of being missional in their own context were hardly visible in our data.

The uneasy relationship between preaching and diaconia did emerge in the interviews. The implication is that holding together the two perspectives, while recognizing that they constitute a comprehensive understanding of mission, is challenging to realize in the Norwegian context. Hegstad’s (2004) perspectives on preaching and diaconia as integrated within mission in the national church context seem underdeveloped in Norwegian congregations. This finding indicates that the backgrounds of the mission organizations and the CoN have not yet been fully resolved (Hegstad, 2004; Aano, 2010), even though the CCM has existed since 1994.

Revisiting the cultural streams in Norwegian society, holistic mission fits very nicely with the Norwegian tradition of providing humanitarian aid and supporting local development projects in third world countries. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a strong preference among congregations for diaconal projects, as documented in our study. One central learning arising from our study is that mission agreements have not accomplished the establishment of holistic mission within congregations, despite their theological underpinnings and the rhetorical efforts of the CoN. Nor could we trace that the missiological literature has impacted the congregations or the clergy. As pointed out by Røvik (2007), organizational scripts are part of a larger argument with its own underpinnings. In the case of mission, these reside clearly in the Bible, as well as within the Norwegian history of mission (Aano, 2010). Furthermore, the scripts are integrated within an argument that is scientifically underpinned. In our context, this is theology and, not least, the synod’s resolutions over several years. Such adjustments do not happen in isolation from other ideas, actors, or traditions that are already established within organizations.

Prevalence and presence

Once again, we want to underline that one of the great accomplishments of the mission agreements has been their numerical prevalence. We deem this a success as it has made mission present to these congregations. Additionally, this organizational template has provided a legitimate entrance, enabling contact between mission societies and local congregations. The success of the agreements is that they have transported mission into all the involved congregations as an organizational template or script. Despite—or due to—its simplicity, the agreement has become a tool for mission engagement. It has served as a bridge between mission organizations and the CoN. In this respect, it is quite formal. It is difficult to imagine how the situation would have been without the CCM, since mission has been made accessible to all congregations despite local traditions and sentiments toward it, which have been described as tensions. Even if the concept of mission is contested (Hegstad, 2004; Haug, 2015), the CoN has chosen to continue with its identification as missional as one of its four core values. It is also worth noting that the concept of mission has been maintained, and has not been replaced by other terms. As a script, the agreements have, by their prevalence, signaled the official view of holistic mission as legitimate within the CoN.

Congregations can have different and multiple purposes when signing a mission agreement. We understand these motives in relation to the arguments in the discussion so far: internationalization, a moral responsibility to support third-world development projects within Christian frames, answering the Biblical call, and earning ecclesial legitimacy. Here, we saw various positions. A major point made within neo-institutional theory is that scripts are adopted for reasons of legitimacy rather than for efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As is

evident in our data, the agreements have been institutionalized and taken for granted in many places. However, their flexibility in application is due to their lack of definitions of content beyond basic funding. When a template is available, leaders frequently become more enthusiastic and choose to adopt it. The congregation then chooses the project and the amount and, importantly, decides on the role of the mission project in their congregation. Scripts and concepts provide the raw material to be launched in a local context. This, in turn, foregrounds the role of the actors.

Pivotal and engaged actors

Again, despite their prevalence, the agreements do not necessarily imply real content or vibrant mission engagement at the congregational level. From a more critical perspective, the agreement is dormant in terms of generating money and practices despite its theological and rhetorical attractiveness. Thus, it can, metaphorically, be called a “sleeping beauty.” How the agreements are actually used varies greatly, both in terms of engagement and the amount of money generated. Concepts are reshaped in the context of the recipients (Røvik, 2007). Organizational ideas are elastic and open and need to be interpreted and adjusted locally. Our study shows that it is inaccurate to say that the mission agreements themselves fuel mission engagement. That engagement is very much dependent on specific actors. A major insight is that an organizational script is no guarantee of thriving practice in a real-life setting. This perspective is not explicated in the Norwegian missiological literature reviewed above. However, this is a key insight in organizational studies. This makes the role of the actors pivotal.

Our findings highlight the roles and responsibilities of effective actors. They are above all the “souls of fire,” whether as volunteers, employees, or council members. Changes within the CoN have involved increased professionalization and more central roles being given to employees. According to our interviewees, clergy are especially key in promoting mission engagement. This means that increased attention is given to mission, and not least in the Sunday services where decisions must be made to allocate time to mission and determine how this should be done. Information about a mission project can be given in the announcements; it can be mentioned in the prayers, or highlighted in the sermon, whether by the local pastor or by a visiting representative from the mission organization. The interviewees also noted that some pastors did not regard mission as central, and hence, gave it little attention. Importantly, the congregation is in charge of implementing the agreement and is responsible for follow-up. However, there is a lack of pressure from regional or national church organizations. The evaluation report of the CCM points to how the CoN rhetorically favors mission; nonetheless, key persons do not seem to prioritize it (Sirris et al., 2020). The data also indicate that the congregations are not deeply involved with the diocesan mission advisor nor with the mission organizations. In our view, the congregations appear highly autonomous in relation to mission, irrespective of whether this is on the national church’s agenda or not. This insight should also be related to the contextual fact that the CoN is a fairly decentralized organization and is distributed in terms of its authority (Sirris & Askeland, 2021).

Factors promoting mission

We have identified the factors that promote mission engagement in congregations. Such practices have three characteristics. First is the intertwining of the material with the spiritual. Second is the contextualizing of mission and making it relevant in the congregation. Our data show that mission was contextualized (Haug, 2015). Third, practices that were integrated into the established structures and activities of the congregations continued to thrive. Without this framing, they risked being neglected.

A script often builds on or develops something that is already known to the actors: “Concepts tend to be presented to others in terms of existing templates, examples, categories, scientific concepts, theoretical framework, and widespread classifications that are familiar” (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008, p. 225). Their legitimacy and ability to spread are due to rational values, such as progress, development, modernization, change, democracy, and science. A central mechanism for adopting and maintaining a script is that it is taken for granted that it is right. An organization may decide to introduce it due to its assumed benefits. The prevalence of a concept can be driven by both instrumental and institutional forces. In other words, there are several reasons for introducing a concept as an organizational template. That they are formally adopted does not mean that they are translated into practice, and this has implications for activities in the organization (Christensen et al., 2015, p. 92). This recognizes the reality that some of the mission agreements are “sleeping” and do not serve as a means of introducing mission into their congregations. This resonates with the evaluation report of the CCM (Sirris et al., 2020). Another factor to consider is the great variety among CoN congregations. The congregations included in our study can, to some extent, be regarded as exhibiting “best practice,” as indicated in the method sections. This means that mission engagement here was assumed to be stronger, and participants’ awareness of the mission projects was high. Thus, we do not consider all our findings to be representative in the strict sense of the word. However, we believe that our analysis will provide a resource for practitioners, with points to be learned from the engaged congregations.

CONCLUSION

Mission agreements are paramount in maintaining the CoN as a missional church. In congregations, mission agreements constitute a basic structure linking the church with mission organizations and the local church context with an international perspective. The agreements concern concrete projects abroad and epitomize mission, liberating it from being merely an abstract concept. However, it is the congregation, and particularly the engaged people, who must transform the template into vibrant engagement and specific practices. In this respect, the agreements show a wide range of areas of application. They are mostly interpreted as expressions of holistic mission; however, they seem to carry only partial aspects of this concept. The agreements alone cannot awaken mission engagement in congregations but are dependent on engaged people to do so.

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