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A living church across the earth – and also in Europe!

Report on an evaluation of four NMS-led church planting
projects in Europe



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Preamble

In April 2022, the Center for Values-Based Leadership and Innovation at VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway, was encouraged to submit a tender for the evaluation of four Norwegian Mission Society (NMS)-led church-planting projects in Estonia and France in 2010–2022. These projects are named according to their location: Créteil and Lyon in France, Mustamäe and Saku in Estonia.

The scope of the evaluation was developed in dialogue with NMS, and an agreement framing the evaluation project was signed in January 2023. A research team consisting of Lise Tørnby (project leader), Atle Sommerfeldt (consultant), Hans-Joachim Lung (researcher from France), Kaido Soom (researcher from Estonia) and Kari Storstein Haug (researcher from VID) was established. The team analyzed documents made available by the NMS and by the congregations in Estonia. It interviewed 18 people involved in the four projects and two staff members from the NMS head office, and it visited the four project sites in Estonia and France.

The findings are presented here in one comprehensive report to stimulate learning across projects and countries. Each project is presented with a subsequent analysis. As the projects in France were quite different, the discussions are presented separately. In Estonia, the projects were more closely related through their shared goals, so the discussion of the two projects is therefore combined.

The NMS was established in 1842 and, as Norway's oldest organization for international mission, it has a long and interesting history. In 1987, the NMS General Assembly decided to start working in Europe. This raised lively discussion in the organization as to whether Europe was a relevant geographic area for an organization that traditionally worked in cultural contexts very different from the European culture, which is characterized by the presence of Christianity and a long history of church presence. An important aspect of the work in Europe since 1987 has been congregational development and church planting, done in partnership with the national churches in various countries. This report aims to provide insight into four of these projects and to be a resource for future learning.

The authors give thanks to Sven Ebbell Skjold and Sandra Bischler for their constructive facilitation, to the leaders of the projects, to the leaders in the national churches involved, and to the NMS for the possibility of studying four very interesting and stimulating projects.

The NMS has read through these reports to correct any misunderstandings or possible mistakes in the presentations. Helge Nylenna, program director for Center for Values-Based Leadership and Innovation, has, on behalf of the authors, read through and finalized the report.

1. Introduction

Since 2014, the Norwegian Mission Society's strategy for Europe has been to focus on five areas of intervention: Norway, France, Estonia, Spain, and England. Missionaries from the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS) have been present in France for several decades, while Estonia was included only in the late 1990s. In Norway, the work of the Europe plan is mainly linked to the integration of migrants into the church and society, and it includes the use of expatriate missionaries. One of the declared aims of the strategy for Europe is to "Strengthen the planting of congregations and congregational development in Europe and also in Norway."

This evaluation is not intended to be an evaluation of the whole European strategy, nor of the entire work of the NMS in Estonia and France, but it is limited to four identified projects, two in France and two in Estonia.

The projects in Estonia were conducted in conjunction with the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC). Prior to the Second World War, the EELC was the national church for Estonian-speaking citizens, with its roots going back to the Lutheran reformation. During the Soviet occupation and communist rule, the church was rigidly restricted and put under pressure, and at times, even persecuted. After the liberation and the reestablishment of an independent Estonia in 1991, the church found itself in a heavily secular country. Still regarded as the national church of Estonian speaking people, membership and participation in church activities were drastically reduced due to the secularization and also due to a lack of venues in which to experience church.

Mustamäe is a community established during the Soviet period as a dormitory town for the working class of nearby Tallinn. In a community with close to 69,000 inhabitants, there is no physical presence of any congregational or church building. Saku is a smaller community outside Tallinn, with approximately 11,817 inhabitants, but it is developing rapidly and is largely populated by young professionals with families and by a retired middle class. This community has had a small prayer house since 1922. This prayer house was closed during the communist period and reopened in 1993. The membership was small, but a small group of people who met to pray and read the Bible together were served by the pastor from the nearby Hageri congregation.

In both communities, there were people who wanted to establish a congregation and construct a church building.

The projects in France are part of the United Protestant Church of France (EPUdF). The EPUdF was founded in 2012 as a merger between the Reformed Church of France and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of France. The vast majority of its members came from the Reformed Church. Protestants are a minority group in France, with a membership numbering between 2% and 3% of the population. Of the entire population of France, 33% declare that they are not members of any denomination. The EPUdF has approximately 250,000 members, with 850 congregations distributed across all of France, with the exception of Alsace and Lorraine, where there is another Protestant church (the UEPAL).

Créteil is a city in the Paris region with 94,000 inhabitants, which increased from 30,000 in 1962. The city can be dated back to the year 400, and it has a university with 40,000 students. The need for a Protestant congregation in Créteil was recognized by the leadership of the national and regional church. The first attempt to start a Protestant congregation here commenced in the 1960s; a second attempt was made in the '90s, and a third, involving this project, in 2013. There is, however, a Protestant congregation in Charenton, a municipality (commune) of the Nogent-Sur-Marne arrondissement.

Lyon is the third largest city in France, with approximately 520,000 inhabitants. The city was established in the year B.C. 43 and is today a major communication center between east and west in southern Europe, and between north and south France. Lyon has several universities and academic institutions. The Académie de Lyon has 50,000 students. Altogether, there are 130,000 students in Lyon, making it the second largest student population in France. There are several Protestant congregations in Lyon. The city center dates from the Middle Ages, and includes a church building that belongs to the EPUdF. The project started with an awareness of the need for an increased pastoral presence among the students. The project was part of a tripartite partnership between the NMS, the EPUdF, and Missão Zero. Missão Zero is a Brazilian organization with ties to the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Brazil. It has a presence in three continents, and works with church-planting and the revitalizing of congregations.

The purpose of this evaluation is to increase knowledge of the process of church planting and congregational development in order to stimulate the learning that will be useful for similar projects in the future. Different stakeholders were contacted during the evaluation process. The evaluation focused on the four projects and on the organization of the projects' follow-up. We did not take into our consideration the views of the worshipers regarding the development and life of these projects but focused on the process of establishing a vibrant congregation and on the subsequent development of the congregation.

Six research questions were formulated in cooperation with the NMS, and the researchers then operationalized these questions into an interview guide:

- 1) In what ways and to what degree have the four projects achieved their overall goals?
- 2) What characterized the project development process in the period 2010–2022, in terms of key decisions, success factors, obstacles, time frame, and pace?
- 3) How did the projects relate to the organizations involved in them, and how good was the cooperation between these organizations?
- 4) In what ways have the learnings been addressed and transferred beyond the projects?
- 5) What are the participants' views on the future state of the projects, subsequent to their closure, and what are the consequences for the organizations involved?
- 6) How did the project work in relation to the spiritual dimension?

In this report, we first provide a summary of our findings from the evaluation. Next, we discuss the concept of “church planting” (Chapter 3) and then the materials and methodology applied in the evaluation (Chapter 4). In Chapter 5, the findings from the study involving the four projects are presented and discussed. Each project is allocated a subchapter. The presentation of the findings is structured by the research questions and is followed by a brief discussion. In Chapter 6, we discuss the points of learning and offer recommendations.

2. Main Findings

The evaluation found that the NMS is greatly appreciated as a partner by both local and national stakeholders. The projects all seemed to be well-rooted within their national church leadership. The competence and financial contributions supplied by the NMS were essential to the realization of the projects, and the recommendation is made that the NMS should continue to include the congregations (of Mustamäe, Saku, and Créteil) within their network of outreach.

All projects achieved their overall goals, although adjustments were required in some (especially in Lyon).

All projects were marked by a living spirituality, which had a major influence on the running of the projects and on building the profiles of the fellowships established.

It is recommended that the NMS clarify the concept of "church planting" and its relationship to the concept of "congregational development." It also needs to clarify organizational roles, authorities, and the decision-making process to be followed during the first phase of future projects.

Expat missionaries played crucial roles in the success of the projects in France and in Saku, while the project in Mustamäe was primarily led by a domestic priest. However, there does seem to be a need for a clearer description of the role of expatriate missionaries in relation to the structure of the partner church, and for reflection on the best roles to be assigned to expat missionaries.

Both the project leaders and the national churches claim that all four projects have renewed the way congregational work is done, both in the EPUdF and in the EELC, a renewal that is seen as necessary throughout the areas served by these churches.

Projects such as these may be seen as organizationally innovative, involving processes that are likely to elicit resistance from actors in the existing work. Such tensions may release energy and creativity, but they may also lead to conflict and feelings of isolation by the leaders of the innovation. It is recommended that the NMS should follow such processes closely and serve as a facilitator to ensure follow-up with the personnel involved and good communication between all actors.

3. Theoretical Perspectives on Church Planting in the NMS

The NMS is a specialized organization within the Church of Norway, with the goal of mission. Through its work, the NMS aims to share its faith in Jesus, both globally and nationally, to end poverty and fight injustice. A core task of its mission is to organize communities of Christian believers and to build congregations and national churches based on a holistic understanding of the mission of God and the role of the church in the world. The theological base of the NMS is the Lutheran confession and ecclesiology.¹ The projects in Europe aimed at planting new Christian communities must be seen as part of this overall vision and mission.

The concept "church planting" is used in a variety of ways in different ecclesiological traditions. A simple definition is "the practice of establishing a core of Christian worshippers in a parish, with the intention that they should develop into a thriving congregation."² This broad definition allows room for different traditions. The concept is supported by the evangelical–charismatic tradition,³ but it is also used in mainline churches as part of a comprehensive concept of mission, for example, by the House of Bishops in the Church of England (Statement 2018). Different interpretations may give rise to different approaches to the work established in partner churches, and they may create tensions when the theology of the project is too different from that of the partner church.

It has not been possible to identify clearly the theoretical understanding of the NMS concerning "church-planting." Neither the documents nor the interviews clarify exactly what the NMS means by this concept. Furthermore, different terms are used to describe the same project. The Europe plan 2012–2014 uses the expression "building and developing congregations" (Programplan for Evangelisering og menighetsbygging i Europa), and not "church-planting." In the project documents, both "church planting" and "congregational planting" are used. In the announcement of intention for this evaluation, the term "church-planting" is used, while this is absent from the basic NMS document on mission, dated 2020.

The NMS appears to include different theological traditions within its interpretation of church planting and congregational development and to have a rather pragmatic perspective, adapting the concepts to different contexts as may be appropriate but also being dependent on the interpretation of the persons involved in the projects, especially the missionaries.

However, some basic ecclesiological concepts are in place. Church planting in Europe must be based on a request from the leadership of a partner church, which would be the national Lutheran church of the given country (or, as in France, a merger between the Lutheran and the Reformed churches), with local anchoring and involvement. The aim

¹ NMS, "Love Never Ends," NMS' foundational document on mission, 2020.

<https://nms.no/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/LOVE-NEVER-ENDS-versjon-06.11.2020.pdf>.

² Oxford language dictionary.

³ Johannes Vålandsmyr, "Hvorfor og Hvordan Plante Menighet i Norge? En Kvalitativ Studie av Misjonsteologiske Begrunnelser og Misjonstrategiske Modeller for Menighetsplanting" (Misjonshøgskolen, 2014). <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/283754>.

appears to be to establish independent units or congregations within the partner church and to seek to develop these units or congregations with a missional understanding of their roles. This implies a holistic understanding of mission, which includes (1) diakonia , (2) outreach to non-practicing members and non-members of any church, (3) empowering lay people to participate and take responsibility, preferably organized into cell groups, (4) a contextual liturgical praxis within the liturgical tradition of the given church, and (5) administration of the sacraments by an ordained priest in accordance with the Lutheran confession (Confessio Augustana Art. 5).

Given this frame, it seems that a more precise ecclesiological term would be “congregational planting” rather than “church planting.” This congregational planting may or may not be rooted in a specific geographic community. These “planting” projects are complete when the fellowship is organized as a registered, independent unit (either as a fully developed congregation or a unit linked to a “mother” congregation) of the national church. A prerequisite for this organizational development is a parallel process of congregational development toward renewal in their working methods and in the establishment of a missional culture, which will continue after the planting is complete, and is described as “nurturing the new plant.”

The various church planting traditions and the congregational development tradition all represent a synthesis between spiritual and organizational development. From the organizational theory perspective, congregational planting can be seen as social innovation. In the context of innovation within the ecclesiological context,⁴ it is helpful to limit innovation mainly to new combinations of known and existing ideas, either in the context of a specific project or in the wider global church. For the purposes of this evaluation, a definition by Geoff Mulgan is considered sufficient, after slightly adaption to fit the realm of church and congregation: “New ideas that work.”⁵

Mulgan points out that this definition “differentiates innovation from improvement, which implies only incremental change, and from creativity and invention, which are vital to innovation but miss out on the hard work of implementation and diffusion that makes promising ideas useful.” Mulgan underlines that social innovation is a process involving stages that an innovation project will have to work through, which is best described as a spiral. The stages he describes are as follows: (Others may have more elaborate stages, but for our purposes, this simple four-staged process is sufficient.)

1. Generating ideas by understanding needs and identifying potential solutions
2. Developing, prototyping, and piloting the ideas into concrete projects
3. Assessing and then scaling up and diffusing the good ones
4. Learning and evolving

⁴ For a comprehensive introduction to innovation and faith-based organizations, see Dag-Håkon Eriksen and Annette Leis-Peters, “Faith-based Organisations and Social Innovation for Just and Inclusive Communities? A Scoping Review,” in *Developing Just and Inclusive Communities: Challenges for Diakonia/Christian Social Practice and Social Work*, eds. Hans Morten Haugen et al. (Regnum Books, 2022).

⁵ Geoff Mulgan, “*Social Innovation – What it is, Why it Matters and How it can be Accelerated*”(Oxford SAID Business School, 2007).

According to Mulgan, social innovation requires a dynamic relationship between an innovative pilot and an established and larger organization if sustainable innovation is to be achieved and if the results and experiences are to be scaled up. Very often, this dynamic relationship is vital for identifying the need for innovation and change and for securing the subsequent learning. It is also relevant that social innovation often requires financial and human resources from outside of the first-line actors in the project. Finally, there is a need for clear, flexible, and tolerant leadership that allows space for trial and failure on the road to success.

4. Materials and Methods

The project used qualitative methods to conduct its evaluation, with the data material consisting of written documents, field notes, and qualitative interviews conducted by the researchers.

The documents used included:

- Several applications and annual reports from the four projects,
- The NMS program plan for Europe,
- Annual reports for 2022 to the head office of the EELC from the two projects in Estonia, with extensive statistics,
- “Some guidelines to finding a church planter,” and
- The NMS basic document on mission, 2020.

The researchers made field visits to all the projects, in Mustäme, Saku, Lyon, and Créteil, to the head offices of the EPUdF and EELC, and conducted 18⁶ qualitative interviews with different stakeholders (project leaders, lay leaders of the congregations, leaders in the national churches, and, in Estonia, representatives from the local municipalities), and also representatives from the NMS head office. The 18 interviews were conducted using an interview guide that was developed on the basis of the six research questions formulated for the tender application. The interviews formed the main basis for the analysis and discussion, while the written documentation was mainly used as background for the interviews.

While quantitative methods seek data that can be tested by others and provide the possibility of generalization, qualitative methods invite, to a larger degree, the accumulation of knowledge, wherein reflection, interpretation, and description of social realities are central. The aim here was to use observation and conversation to transform experiences and events into text and reflection.

According to Askeland and Sirris, the aim of an evaluation is to contribute answers to the question, “What is functioning, for who, under which circumstances, in which ways, and how?”⁷ They point out that there has been a change in evaluations, away from a focus on the results and the means of implementation, and toward a focus on the process and its effects on people. This evaluation, therefore, aimed to describe, understand, and analyze four “church-planting” projects in two European countries. This made our decision to use qualitative methods, with a major emphasis on the 15 interviews, a natural choice.

The analysis of qualitative data is always influenced by the researcher’s interpretation of the data. The ideal relationship between a researcher and the object of their research is well described by Neumann and Neumann: “The best possible relation between the researcher and the research object is probably not the largest possible distance, but rather sufficient closeness to the object in order to be able to sort the material and sufficient distance in order to keep an analytic distance.”⁸

⁶ Two of the interviews in Estonia were conducted with two interviewees.

⁷ Harald Askeland and Stephen Sirris, “*Majorstua+ Kirke for Unge Voksne.*” *Evalueringssrapport 10. August 2015* (Diakonhjemmet høgskole, 2015). <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/295740>.

⁸ Cecilie Basberg Neumann and Iver. B. Neumann, “*Forskeren i Forskningsprosessen – Metodebok om Situering*” (Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2012), 93.

The evaluation was a responsive evaluation, done with the aim of understanding the projects from within their own frame and with an attempt to understand the issues central to the persons interviewed.⁹ It is relevant to our evaluation that the team leader, Lise Tørnby, had worked for the NMS in Africa, at their head office as leader of their global work, and also as assistant general secretary from 2015 to 2019. This implied a deep knowledge of the NMS culture and strategy and personal relations with people in the NMS organization. The necessary distance between the researcher and the research object was sought here through open communication of this relationship and through critical discussion in the team and with other colleagues.

The other researchers in the project were bishop emeritus Atle Sommerfeldt, Kairo Soom (from Estonia), and Hans Joachim Lung (from France). Professor Kari Storstein Haug of the VID Specialized University also contributed to the process. Sommerfeldt and Soom carried responsibility for the field visits and interviews in Estonia, while Tørnby and Lung carried these responsibilities in France. The group also met for joint reflection. All interviews were conducted jointly by the two researchers allocated to the country. In addition, Sommerfeldt and Tørnby consulted with each other concerning the process of analysis, and the final draft was discussed by all. This combination of the different researchers' capacities for interpretation and analysis, and with their different references to theory and praxis, gave richness to the process and provided a broad base for our recommendations.

The written documents were analyzed before the field trips and the interviews served to provide impressions of the projects and of the central issues to be researched. The documents provided by the NMS were mainly applications and reports, and did not include any comprehensive project description or any coherent format. The documents could therefore not be evaluated on their own, but were useful as background for the field visits and interviews.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The languages used were English, Norwegian, Estonian, and French. Soom and Lung transcribed the interviews into English, and Sommerfeldt and Tørnby adjusted these according to their own notes. The interviews represent rich material, which can be used for further research.

The fieldwork was limited to one visit to each of the four places included in the project. The intention was to observe the informants in their own contexts and to see the actual locations. This was of special importance in Estonia, where the projects included construction of new church buildings, but it was also important in France, where the location of the projects was an important issue in the discussions.

The analyses were drafted by Tørnby for France and by Sommerfeldt for Estonia, while the final recommendations were created in cooperation. It must be noted that the four projects are quite different, and that the contexts in France and Estonia are also very different. Due to different authors contributing to the analyses, the formats of the analyses are not fully harmonized in the report.

⁹ Sidsel Sverdrup, *“Evaluering – Tilnærminger, Modeller og Eksempler”* (Gyldendal akademisk, 2014).

5 Presentation, Analysis, Discussion

5.1 Lyon - Analysis and discussion

5.1.1 Goals and results

The goal of the church planting project in Lyon changed during the project period. In the beginning, the aim was to start a work among students at the University of Lyon. After a while, the goal became to establish a project to mobilize young adults to active church participation, as linked to congregations in the Lyon area.

Christine Mielke, the national youth coordinator in the partner church, expressed it this way:

In the beginning, the goal was to start a Chaplain service at the university, but it was not done like it was said. I don't know, but after a while, it was JEEPP (Jeunes, Etudiants et Professionels Protestants). I think there has been two changes in the project. The place changed from the university of Lyon to the church in the center of Lyon, where the missionaries lived, and the target group changed from students from 18–25 years, to students and young professional from 18–40 years.

The regional president of the church expressed it much the same:

I think that the goal in the beginning was to start or build a church, a parish, a new church for young students. But it changed. By the missionaries and their research maybe? Now, it is about supporting a young group of students and young professionals in their faith.

Even if the goal changed, the director of Missão Zero, Mauro Westphal, emphasized that the overarching goal of the church, at all times, was to reach out to students and young adults in Lyon with the Gospel and to include them within the church.

The different actors in Lyon were all of the opinion that the project was a success. They were very satisfied that work with young adults had been established in the church:

I think the project fulfilled its goal. The missionaries started with “nothing” – but they made it. And this inspires us all. Also, to start the JEEPP work [in] other places.
(Christine Mielke)

The project is a capital for our church. It changed our church. It makes us move. It changes minds in the church. It was important to support a population that we do not support normally—the young. We have seen that it is possible to start new churches. (Frank Honegger, president of the region Centre-Alpes-Rhône of the EPUdF)

We fulfilled our goal, I think. We didn't have goals in numbers, but it is impressive to see how many we have reached. We started with a group of 6 but when we ended, it was 40 to 50 participants. Both students and young professionals. (Mauro Westphal)

The informants claimed that the project had changed the mindset of the church. They said that the missionaries had succeeded in making the church more missional. The regional president formulated it in this way:

The project changed the mind of the church, like the church has been armed up; the projects have increased the interest and commitment to mission in the church.

(Frank Honegger)

Mauro Westphal underlined that the project was a success as a church planting project that involved three partners.

5.1.2 Process phases

Phase 1

There was a local initiative to establish a church planting project. A group of five persons was established with the aim of starting a work among young people in the church in Lyon. This coincided with the idea in the NMS to send missionaries to France in cooperation with the Brazilian mission organization, Missão Zero. In October 2016, it was formally decided that the local church, the NMS, and Missão Zero would start a church-planting project in the form of a chaplaincy among students in Lyon. In 2017, the missionaries Mateus Pereira and Mariana Erhard, from Missão Zero, arrived in Lyon.

The initial fieldwork of these missionaries lasted six months. They visited different university campuses and Protestant congregations, the chaplaincies of other denominations, and they observed different activities aimed at young people in the various congregations. This resulted in an action plan that changed the aim of the project from a student chaplaincy to outreach work, aimed at students, young professionals, and young adults.

The missionaries were introduced to the small group that already existed. The missionaries initiated the idea of constituting this group as a prayer group to support the project.

Phase 2

The venue for the project changed from one of the campuses to a Lutheran church building in the center of Lyon. The space at the university was closed to them. No request for a Protestant chaplaincy was encountered during the fieldwork. Instead, students and other young adults were invited to youth gatherings in the church building in the center of the city. The building was rehabilitated to serve as a meeting place for encounters between people. Two evening events were organized every week: one was a gathering that included dinner and conversation and the other was an ecumenical gathering. Training in the Christian faith was central in both gatherings. The ecumenical profile adopted was based on the dialogue the missionaries had with different churches in Lyon about their own student work. After a while, the missionaries moved into an apartment in the church building, prepared for them by the congregation.

Phase 3

The third phase is described by the French church as introducing a new praxis, where students participated in services in various congregations in Lyon:

One milestone was the idea of students from JEEPP to take part [in] Sunday worship in the different parishes in Lyon. We wanted the young people to go out and take part [in] the parish life. And they did. (Local pastor, Françoise Sternberger, pastor for Lyon Consistory)

This praxis was problematized by both the missionaries and the new pastor and is discussed in the analysis.

Phase 4

The project was closed, and the missionaries moved away from Lyon to start a new project in Nice. A new local pastor, Dina, was employed in Lyon. He continues to work in the project without financial support from the NMS, but he participates in the NMS network and in the sharing of competencies.

The change in the locality of the project introduced two new elements: an ecumenical profile and the sending out of students into congregations to participate in the work already being done there.

5.1.3 Success factors: “with peace, love, and grace”

All the respondents highlighted the commitment and efforts of the missionaries as the main reason for the success of the project. They had extensive capacity, unique competence in missionary work, and very good communication with the youth. Their presence was crucial to the cooperation between the three partners. They took the initiative in moving the project away from its intended location at the university to the church in Lyon.

The good tripartite cooperation between the church and the two international mission organizations is identified as another success factor. Mauro Westphal claims it was the first time his organization had a successful tripartite cooperation—experienced “with peace, love, and grace.” The project was established as a new work in Lyon, and the EPUdF increased its competence through this new experience of doing mission.

The final success factor is the systematic work of developing a good organization where roles, responsibilities, and authority are clearly defined. In the beginning, things were not sufficiently clear, resulting in energy leakage from the core work.

In considering obstacles to the work in Lyon, it is worth mentioning that the presence of the missionaries was not only a blessing but also created some challenges. The main difficulty with including the missionaries in the established church structure was due to the different salary **systems**, mentioned by the pastor as an example, because it created a distance between the missionaries and the others. This was also observed in Créteil. The French respondents also said that the local congregation did not welcome the missionaries very warmly, and they were also unsure whether they really wanted youth outreach rather than a work with students at the local university. The other challenge with the missionaries was that they worked extremely hard and “*They were all over in the church*” and also nationally (Christine Mielke). By the end, the missionaries were exhausted. This was interpreted as a sign that those of their leaders who had personnel responsibilities should perhaps have followed their work more closely.

5.1.4 Cooperation and organization: “It has been very fruitful to work with different partners from the global church”

In the beginning, the organizational structure lacked clarity, and during the process, it became necessary to clarify roles and power structures:

It has been very fruitful to work with different partners from the global church. But in the beginning, there were a lot of confusion about roles, power, and the financial aspect was not clarified. It really took us a lot of time to find a good way of, to manage the project. (Local pastor)

The initial local group became an important prayer group, and they gave the missionaries important support throughout the project period. At the same time, a more formal project committee with representatives from the different cooperating partners was established. The committee functioned as a learning arena, involved in project organizing, reporting, and evaluation, and in contributing knowledge about mission:

The collaboration has been very good. The partner listened to each other and made decisions together. Everybody in the project had a voice. It was not the case that those who had paid most for the project also could influence most. It was not like that. The missionaries managed the project and took a lot of initiative, as well as the partners. We were together. We made it together. We fulfilled the vision in the project. NMS sent money and expat, and the French also participated with money and people. And Missao Zero, we had experience and competence to share. For us, as a mission organization, we are proud of having created this church planting project in Europe, together with partners. It is important for us. We are a small mission organization. This is our third mission project abroad. (Mauro Westphal)

Cooperation within the project committee, in which the missionaries also participated, functioned well, with space for the sharing of experiences and knowledge and space for disagreements:

It was fruitful to work with both NMS and Brazil. The collaboration with them was important. They had different visions, other questions, and they saw things from another side. (Christine Mielke)

5.1.5 Learning in the project: “We need partners from different countries, with their competence and knowledge. They know things we don’t know.”

The informants underlined that, through the project, they had learned international cooperation with international partners. This seems to have been of particular importance to the church in France. The French informants greatly appreciated the competence they gained, in terms of methods of mission, church planting, and project organizing, and also in terms of planning, analysis, reporting, budgets, and evaluation. They also underlined the need for the French church to link up with international actors with knowledge and competence beyond that which they have themselves. The cooperation experienced during the projects had changed the mindset in the church.

The project showed how important good organization, with clear roles and mandates, is, especially in international cooperation. The different partners had different competencies, and the open culture, where there was sharing of experiences, made it possible to build on their different experiences.

5.1.6 What about the future?

There is no finalized goal for the continuation of this work since the project closed and the missionaries left. The debate is now whether the goal was to establish a congregation or

separate unit, specifically for students and young adults, or whether the goal was to mobilize young people into already existing congregations.

I don't want the establishment of an independent student organization; I want the work to continue to do mission, [to] give witness to the Christian faith, equipping people and strengthen the students. (Christine Mielke)

The work continues with new organization, and people participate in new ways and many young people participate in the JEEPP way of working. It has been a growth in participation of youth in congregations and the church, which is very good. (Mauro Westphal)

5.1.7 Spiritual profile

The project had a strong emphasis on spirituality: “*It was a prayer project—in the methodology of church planting—the Holy Spirit is present*” (Christine Mielke).

The overall impression is that the stakeholders saw the basis of the project as a work of the Holy Spirit; the results were unique, and there is a firm belief that God participated in the project.

5.1.8 Discussion

The goals were unclear and changed in the course of the project. It seems that the stakeholders did not all have a common vision for the project. The change in the project aim from planting a specialized unit or congregation for students at the university, or eventually in a church in the city of Lyon, to becoming a project that mobilized young adults for mission, makes it questionable whether, strictly speaking, the project continued to be a “church-planting” project.

The project became ecumenical, and the youth were encouraged to visit other congregations in Lyon and to participate in the life of those congregations.

It seems that the change in the goal and workplace was decided locally, as a result of the initial analysis done by the missionaries. This led to an agreement with the Consistory of Lyon to change the venue to the old Lutheran church in the city center, which was rehabilitated for the purpose. However, it seems that different opinions on the profile of the project continued after the closure of the project, especially regarding the role of existing congregations and the need for a specialized student/young adult congregation in the church building in the city center. The French informants were more positive regarding the links to the local congregations than the missionaries or the new pastor. The missionaries and the new pastor pointed out that the youth were not very enthusiastic about the relationship, nor confident that they were welcome in the distributed congregations. The leadership in the church, on the other hand, was enthusiastic about the achievements and the participation of a number of young adults in the various congregations, together with the establishment of a youth organization, JEEPP: Teenagers, University Student and Young Professionals.

Despite this tension, the project has made a major contribution to a change toward a more missional approach and culture in the church, and the regional and national leadership of EPUdF see the youth organization JEEPP as a significant tool for scaling up these experiences.

The tripartite cooperation with two international organizations seems to have been a successful experience. The challenges in the organizational setup between the different actors at the start of the project seem to have been solved in a constructive way, providing an indication of a constructive organizational culture. The learning is that sufficient time must be set aside to establish a clear organizational structure.

The tensions and disagreements regarding the profile of the project and how the work will continue may be an indication that communication and dialogue with the local congregation was not sufficiently thorough. It seems that the project was anchored more in national leadership than in the local church. This has made it possible to scale up the experiences and make them relevant to the wider church, but it also seems to have led to a continuation of different opinions, which must be resolved if they are to find clear unity of purpose.

The challenge of the missionaries being outside the line management of the church and not being able to serve as pastors in the church is something that the NMS and EPUdF must clarify to ensure that this tension does not become part of future projects.

5.2. Créteil – Analysis and discussion

5.2.1 Goals and results

The missionaries, the local leader of the congregational council, and the national employees in the church all confirmed that the project had two goals. The first goal was to plant a church or congregation, and the second was to equip people to share their faith in Christ.

The goal was related to train people to share their faith and to do church planting in a suburb of Paris. (Claire Sixt-Gateuille, former leader of the international work of EPUdF)

Whether the initial goal was to establish an independent congregation within the structure of the EPUdF or to establish a unit inside the existing congregation in Charenton seems unclear. The missionaries, Mary and Rafi Rakotovao, say that the *“The goal was to plant a church in Créteil,”* while Gwenaël Boulet, the national secretary for national evangelization, says that the initial goal was to build a work within the congregation in Charenton.

In the beginning, it was important to re-plant a congregation inside an existing congregation. In Créteil, one could say that there were no church, no religion, no Sunday services, and the congregation wanted to reach new people with this project. (Gwenaël Boulet)

However, in the minutes of the first meeting of the Pilot Committee for the Créteil Project on April 3, 2014, where Gwenaël's predecessor Andy Buckler participated, it states: "What is the objective of the Créteil missionary project? It is to create a community in Créteil through evangelization. It is first a matter of “planting a Church”, then of “develop” it.» It seems that the implication of «planting a church» is not by everybody understood as creating a new congregation, independent from the «mother congregation».

All the actors and all the documents showed that the goals were reached within the project period. The fellowship formed was legally registered as an independent congregation within the EPUdF in 2018. This was mainly due to the growing participation centered around the wholistic spiritual life in the fellowship, but it also reflected the need to be independent from the original congregation due to a conflict with the leadership of that congregation:

We made it. We succeeded to plant a church in a very difficult context. (Claire Sixt-Gateuille)

In 2018, the congregation was founded as a legal unit inside the church. For us, there was two reasons why this happened. First, the congregation was growing, with all the function and structure necessary. Second, the conflict with the Charenton Pasteur and congregation. To protect the project, it was better to start a process to create a new congregation. (Mary Rakotovao)

5.2.2 Phases of the project

Before the project started in 2013/14, the local pastor from Charenton had started with a Sunday service once a month, and diaconal work was already established with the

municipality of Créteil. In other words, there was a willingness to renew the presence of the church in Créteil. At the same time, NMS missionaries, Mary and Rafi Rakotovao, were available for the new task, and the national leadership of the church in France considered

Créteil to be strategically a good place to start a church planting project. A church building was also available in the area.

Phase 1: Fieldwork and prayer

The missionaries started with a six-month period of fieldwork, analyzing the community and the needs of the different actors. A team was established with experienced Christians from different congregations in Paris, in addition to people from Créteil, to support the missionaries and the project. This team became a prayer team.

Phase 2: Weekly Sunday services and other activities start

The missionaries invited people in the community to come to the weekly services. One approach to making contact with people was to invite them to church coffee outside the church building. Although the plan was to concentrate on the Sunday services, other activities were started in response to people's requests.

We wanted to start with Sunday services, and not a lot of other activities. We didn't think it was necessary to have "everything," like Sunday school, teaching, and other activities. But people asked for it, and we started up more than we had planned. It grew naturally. (Leader of the congregational council)

Phase 3: Involvement and equipping of new members of the congregation

New participants were warmly welcomed and were soon involved in the work and given different tasks. The missionaries related to new people coming in, for example, by celebrating everybody's birthday. They gave teaching in the Christian faith, and the NMS course "Use your talents" became an important tool in the growing and deepening of the fellowship.

Phase 4: An independent congregation

In 2018, the congregation was legally registered with the national church as an independent congregation.

The last milestone was to create the legal structure for the local church in Créteil, with a church council. And then make the church become a part of the regional synod with all the formality and representations. (Claire Sixt-Gateuille)

The steering committee of the project, consisting of different stakeholders, took the initiative to register the fellowship as an independent congregation of the national church. The timing of the decision was linked to a rather heavy conflict between the two congregations, involving the missionaries, and it was seen as a way of resolving the conflict. However, the conflict is still unresolved, and it is now linked to the use of the church building, for which the national church pays the rent.

However, **during the first two years, there was much cooperation between the mother congregation and the church plant. At the request of the local pastor in Charenton, the NMS missionaries help start a Sunday night contemporary worship service.**

5.2.3 Success factors

The informants highlighted that the most important reason for the success of the project was that, from the beginning, it was upheld by prayer, especially by the prayer team, who met weekly.

The six-months of fieldwork, with its analysis of the local context, under the leadership of the missionaries, was important for establishing the profile of the congregation. Prompted by the missionaries, this led to the creation of a welcoming culture, where new participants were invited to become involved in the running of the fellowship and were given specific tasks according to their interests and knowledge. The tool “Use your talents” was successfully implemented.

The missionaries were present with the people and performed their leadership roles in a stimulating way, working very differently from most of the work normally done in the EPUdF.

The missionaries’ competence and the financial support given by the NMS, both directly to the project and to pay the missionaries’ salaries, were decisive factors in the success of this project.

5.2.4 Obstacles and challenges

Three particular challenges were highlighted by informants as obstacles to the project’s growth. First, there was a lack of local anchoring for the project. Second, the role of the missionaries in relation to the structure of the French church was complicated. Third, a conflict arose, which grew larger and made the work difficult, robbing it of energy and focus.

The first challenge was the limited local anchoring. The initial project, relating to the initiatives by NMS and the national level in the EPUdF, can be described as a top-down project, which did not sufficiently consider existing local work. The NMS seems not to have come close enough to existing local actors.

Second, the presence of the missionaries was an important success factor but also contributed significant challenges:

I have never been asked to give feedback on the work the missionaries do. They work for NMS but also for us. I wonder, are NMS satisfied with the work of the missionaries? I don’t know, because we do not talk about that here in France. All the pastors have the same salary; it is only the missionary who have a salary twice as big. That is a problem.
(One of the informants from the national church)

With the missionaries being directed from Norway, while their colleagues were directed by the national church leadership, the potential for tension becomes obvious. It did not make the situation any easier that the missionaries were important actors in influencing the financial flow from the NMS. One of the informants made this clear: *“The one who has the money has the power.”*

The role of the missionaries was not sufficiently clear, and it seems to have been a contributing factor in the third challenge, the serious conflict between the new congregation and the local pastor in Charenton parish, who turned against the project when the fellowship grew and became seen as an attractive place to find fellowship and spirituality. The use of the building was the visible aspect of the conflict, but it also concerned the profile of the diaconal work and probably also involved theological differences. This conflict was characterized by one of the informants as a significant obstacle in the way of the project.

5.2.5 Cooperation and organization

The organization, with its prayer team and a steering committee that included representatives from the national leadership, and the missionaries, appears to be a wise way of organizing the work, leading up, as it did, to an elected congregational council. The committee was important as an arena in which to clarify roles and responsibilities that were not clear from the beginning.

The cooperation between the missionaries, the national leadership of the church, and the NMS functioned well. The participation of the missionaries in different networks, both within the NMS and in the national church, especially the national body for mission and congregational life, was particularly beneficial for the project. The competence supplied by the NMS was greatly appreciated. However, a resulting challenge is that this network and its competence were linked to the missionaries, with the result that the closing of the project significantly reduced access to these networks for the leaders of the new congregation.

5.2.6 Learning

The main learning mentioned by several informants was that the project showed that it is possible for their own church to plant new congregations and do mission work in France.

Several informants expressed the opinion that this type of project would benefit from stronger local ownership from the start and throughout the project period.

The project also showed the necessity of working out a clear organizational setup with clarity regarding roles, power, finance, and decision-making authority. The need for formal and written agreements was identified as being important to avoid tensions that can develop into conflict.

The project taught the congregations and the church to appreciate the competence of the NMS and its programs, which were put to very good use in the project.

The project reminded the church of the importance of organized prayer and the necessity of involving volunteers in the development of a congregation.

The project also taught the stakeholders the need to be clear regarding the role of missionaries.

5.2.7 The future

The local leadership wondered how the congregation could continue to have contact with the NMS and the NMS network once the project was closed. The new congregation has a distinct profile compared to other congregations in the church. It carries a special missional spirit with a zeal to reach out to new people and invite them into a spiritual and human home in the church. Their wish is not for financial contributions, but for a continuous sharing of experiences and the transfer of competence.

5.2.8 Spirituality

The project was seen as a praying project. The spiritual dimension of the work was evident throughout the project.

5.2.9 Discussion

The project succeeded in achieving its two goals. A new congregation was planted, and a living faith community, committed to sharing the Gospel with people not linked to any church, has been established within the EPUdF. The potential for the project to serve as a pilot in the national church seems good, given the close involvement of the national church leadership in the project. The outcome would seem to be a more missional approach and culture in the EPUdF.

The conflict between the congregations was discussed in all the interviews. This may be an indicator that the conflict was not sufficiently discussed or adequately handled following the apparent resolution through the congregation's formal establishment. An organizational solution is seldom sufficient to heal emotional wounds.

Whether the very strong emphasis on prayer and spirituality in the project made the resolution of the tension and conflict more difficult could be an issue for consideration. Not all tensions are resolved by prayer.

The awareness that it is normal for innovation in an organization to create tension is important. It rests with the leadership to handle those tensions, which are potentially positive and energy releasing, and to ensure that they do not develop into conflicts with a resulting loss of energy. It takes courage to do the work of renewal.

5.3 Mustamäe - Analysis

5.3.1 Goals and results

The project in Mustamäe is the oldest of the projects evaluated. The input from the NMS was initially a part-time missionary, followed by financial support for the project leader and for various activities, and then contributions to the construction of the church building.

The goals of the project(s) in Estonia were formulated slightly differently in the initial objectives from those in the concluding description of the project, found in the start-up application to the NMS for the project: "Congregation plant project in the EELC in Tallinn (Estonia)." Dated 2007, the project was intended to cover the period 2008 to 2011. The application was signed by the Dean of the Tallinn Deanery and approved by the Archbishop of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC). A synthesis gives the three goals formulated in the project document:

Goal 1: To plant and build up a functional and legally registered congregation in one (or two) communities in Tallinn, in which the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) currently has no presence.

Result: According to the "tentative project plan" presented in the application from 2007, the goal was to establish a new congregation by 2010. The congregation in Mustamäe was legally established in 2010 as an independent congregation within the EELC.

Goal achieved.

Goal 2: To explore the possibilities and possibly construct a modern and multifunctional church building.

Result: The construction of the church is well underway and partly in use in March 2023, hopefully to be inaugurated by the bishop by the end of 2023.

The goal is almost achieved and will soon be accomplished.

Goal 3: To build a living congregational fellowship in the Mustamäe community.

The aim is to support people mentally and spiritually. This links to the mental health program of the municipality. The scale is smaller than wanted, but achieved what we dreamt of, so far, on a smaller scale. Our small congregation is active. People come to church. We will stabilize when the church is ready. 25–40 people attend worship. When the building is ready, we will be able to invite more people to services. (Jaana Maria Unga, Leader of the Congregational Council)

Results: In 2023, the congregation is a vibrant fellowship with a wide range of activities, firmly rooted in and appreciated by the municipality in Mustamäe. A rich spirituality has developed, which includes inspiration from Taizé, and the congregation is representative of the renewal in the national church.

The project applications and reports do not have precise result indicators that could document external indicators of the progress made toward building a congregational fellowship. However, the Europe plan 2012–14 has indicators that link to external indicators: the number of members, economic autonomy, growth in participation in

services and activities, and organizing as an independent congregation within the national church.

The statistics given to the EELC national consistory from the congregation documents confirm the indicators used in the Europe plan regarding external indicators of congregational life. These reports indicate that a living and missional congregation has been established and is developing.

Goal 4: Financial autonomy

This goal was not formulated in the first project application but it is part of the Europe plan 2012–2014 and of the general project management of the NMS, and it forms part of the application in 2012. It is unclear what this goal implies. Does this imply that the congregation should aim to be 100% financially self-sufficient, or to be independent of all financing from outside Estonia, or independent from NMS funding?

The first two interpretations are not feasible. The congregation has to have financial contributions from actors outside of the congregation, be it from the national church, from the municipality, or from friends and partners outside of Estonia. In the context of this evaluation, the interpretation must be “financial independence from NMS funding,” which, in 2023, amounted to approximately €23,000 of a total budget of €82,000 (the same as in 2022). The congregation receives income from other partners outside of Estonia, mainly from Norway, and also from the municipality for specific activities, in addition to its members’ contributions.

Result: It has not achieved autonomy from NMS funding, but it does have significant income from other sources.

5.3.2 The project development process in phases

Phase 1

The Dean of Tallinn initiated the project with the NMS in 2003, having been inspired by a project supported by the NMS and the Church of Norway to train youth leaders in the Tallinn area. The Mission Center of the EELC was involved from the start.

Phase 2

A priest started full-time in the project in 2008, herself one of the leaders in the initiating group of young adults, and the congregation started up in the cellar of the Municipal Center in 2009. The “congregational planting” project was established with NMS financing in 2008, and it received formal recognition as a congregation in the EELC in 2010. Regular Sunday services, prayer groups, and confirmation classes were established. Once the planting of the congregation was finalized, the subsequent phases were congregational development phases.

Phase 3

The decision to start exploring the construction of a church building prompted the allocation of a plot by the City Council in 2012. The focus on diakonia was strengthened by a missionary from Finland, and, in 2013, it involved the establishment of a Mission Shop and cooperation with the Food Bank. During this period, activities, and growth continued, including support for street children and camps for children.

Phase 4

On June 4th, 2017, the cornerstone for the church building was laid, and in summer 2019, the congregation moved from the cellar of the municipal building to the new church building, still under construction. More activities were developed, including an outdoor community and, in 2022, a Church/Mission web, with multiple events and programs for all ages, and from 2022, support for Ukrainians.

The move and the pandemic made activities challenging, but from 2022, participation and activities were back to the 2019 level.

Phase 5

The next phase will start when the church building is consecrated and most of the facilities are finalized and in use, hopefully by the end of 2023.

5.3.3 Success factors

The local fellowship, the dynamic relationship with the municipality, and support received from the NMS and other groups in Norway and Finland (the diaconal worker) have all been important factors contributing to the project's success.

Continuous prayer and services, including the eucharist, have been at the heart of the project. A culture of exploring possibilities and the willingness to adjust to meet people's needs has likewise been a very important base for the progress made.

The relationship with the NMS is described as very good, and communication has improved in recent years, also involving the board. The patience and long-term commitment of the NMS are regarded as particularly valuable.

5.3.4 Challenges and obstacles

The corona-pandemic was demanding because it reduced the possibilities for being together, and it slowed down the construction work. Various regulations and the capacity to manage the huge construction process have also been, and still are, demanding.

The limited number of staff and volunteers makes it demanding, and it is necessary to use every opportunity that there is.

The three-year project cycle was regarded as helpful, but it was emphasized that a congregation is not a project, and the format for reporting on the project may not reflect the life of the congregation. It was also found challenging that the format for reporting to the NMS had changed, and it was no longer linked with the report to the national church.

5.3.5 Cooperation and organization

The project has been well integrated into the strategy of the national church and, since 2010, also into the structure of the EELC. The project leader has been a priest in the

EELC for some time, and the congregation has a Congregational Council and a Congregational Board, led by a layperson. The construction of the church building has been managed by a foundation, with representatives from the national leadership, the municipality, and the local congregation. However, it seems that the relationship between the Dean, who was part of the initial process and the regional leader between the bishop and local level, and the national leadership of the church could be more dynamic.

The cooperation with the NMS has been very good, and the cooperation with the municipality has been exceptionally good from the start. Direct cooperation with Norwegian congregations and with one specialized organization in Norway has been good, with several mutual exchange visits. This relationship is outside the “control“ of the NMS and may be a challenge for the NMS head office, but it also represents an opportunity for the congregation to become financially independent from the NMS when the project period ends.

The NMS network has served an important role as advisors, and its broad knowledge base has given added value to the development process. However, the lay and voluntary leaders in the congregation have had limited participation in the NMS network arena.

5.3.6 Learnings

The Council, board meetings, and small groups have all served as arenas for learning. This has led to a culture of learning, with many people involved. It may be correct to say that they have also established a network of actors outside of the congregation who provide learning. This includes cooperation with the Saku and Lasnamäe congregations (diakonia), with the NMS platforms and networks (for the project leader), with congregations and organizations in Norway, and it includes dialogue with the municipality and with the Mission Shop, which is working with different organizations running charity shops.

The process seems to have fostered a leadership culture built on teamwork with a significant involvement by board members and members of the congregation, both in taking part in decision-making and in being responsible for specific tasks.

Life in the society generally, and in the congregation in particular, has provided space for a deeper spirituality, for spiritual growth, and for learning the importance of having a living spirituality at the core amid the activities and demands of the construction work.

5.3.7 The future

The future is seen as quite demanding once the NMS withdraws its funding. Since the congregation does not have an expatriate pastor, its dependence on the NMS is, however, less than it might have been. In their project applications, since 2015, they have pointed to receiving funding from the national church and from partners abroad, to project support from various actors in the local community, and to fundraising by the congregation as their way forward. They express the hope and have constructed the church building in such a way that it allows space for programs to be conducted in cooperation with the municipality and with other actors from the local community, who come from outside of the

congregation. In an interview (2023), a municipal representative indicated the will to continue the cooperation in relation to specific projects, including financial support for the project:

We have a 40% Russian-speaking population. Some of them are also interested in this church. When the church is ready, we can also discuss whether ecumenical events could be organised here. The way to the people is through the children, and if the church does this work, the way to the people will be found. We also have a lot of foreign students, with whom we can also cooperate. The issue of integration is also important. Now that other nationalities have come, in addition to the Russians, it is also important to integrate these minorities. We are happy when we find partners who are also prepared to do voluntary work, and here the church can be one such partner. We have also supported some church projects; for example, for the church summer days, we gave a grant for musical instruments. We are also open to joint projects in the future. We hope that by helping to build the church, we are laying the foundations for the future. (Oksana Talisainen, chief public relations specialist, and Aleksandra Lorvi, chief specialist in the field of culture)

The congregation hopes that the relationship with NMS will continue in other forms, especially as a source of advice and networking. There is also the possibility of greater support from the national church.

5.3.8 Spirituality

The project is marked by the high integration of spirituality with its various activities. It is a mission-oriented spirituality, which stimulates outreach programs into the community and cooperation with the municipality. Attempts to include elements from orthodox spirituality, such as ikons, candles, and the eucharist, are at the center of the spirituality, and this makes the spirituality relevant for the 40% of the population in Mustamäe who have a Russian background and for the increasing number of orthodox refugees from Ukraine. The work is carried by prayer, and the congregation would not have existed without the ongoing prayer.

The spiritual side is the main work, the base for keeping the work running. Tiina has a deep spirituality. She is strongly connected to Jesus. A priest is a very important person in Estonia. (Jaana Maria Unga, interview 2023)

The work lives by prayer, Bible studies, services. Church is not a project; church is living life. Project starts and ends, the church stays. (Tiina Klement, interview 2023)

5.4 Saku - Analysis

5.4.1 Goals and results

The project in Saku is the second project in the overall church-planting project in Estonia, and it has the same four general goals as described for the project in Mustamäe. Differing from Mustamäe, the main input into the project has come from expat missionaries (120%). There have also been smaller inputs in terms of equipment, support for a part-time youth worker, and crucial support for the process of constructing a church building.

Goal 1: To plant and build up a functional and legally registered congregation in a community in a densely populated area where the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) has a limited presence.

Result: The congregation was legally established in 2013 as an independent congregation within the EELC. *“The vision was to plant a congregation within EELC, which was fulfilled in 2013”* (Project description in the Project Application 2016–2018. EELC St. Thomas Congregation’s youth worker).

Goal achieved.

Goal 2: To explore the possibilities and possibly construct a modern and multifunctional church building. *“The overall goal is to have good facilities for a growing congregation, and to make the congregation more visible in the Saku landscape”* (Project application to the NMS, “Church in Saku,” Annual Report, 2014).

Result: The construction of the church is almost finalized and it was inaugurated in December 2022.

Goal soon to be achieved

Goal 3: To build a living congregational fellowship in the community.

In 2023, the congregation is a vibrant and growing fellowship with a wide range of activities. A rich spirituality has developed with a special focus on youth and praise singing with instruments other than the organ, and it is representative of the spiritual renewal in the national church.

We are on the way; we have a long way to go. We are not finished yet, but we are moving in the right direction and experience fruits of the work. (Kriistina Seppel, chair of the board, lay)

Results: The Saku project applications and reports are on concrete projects within the larger project of congregational planting and development. It is therefore difficult to find precise external indicators as to whether this goal has been achieved. The project applications and reports do not have precise result indicators that would document “external indicators” of progress made toward building a congregational fellowship. The Europe plan 2012–14 does, however, have indicators that link to the “external” results: number of members, economic autonomy, growth in participation in services and activities, and organizing to be an independent congregation within the national church.

The statistics given to the EELC national consistory from the congregational documents mean that the indicators used in the Europe plan concern the external aspects of congregational life. We have chosen a few of the results reported that link to the result indicators in the NMS Europe plan. The quantitative data support oral reports that this

goal is largely achieved. The inner aspects of the spiritual life of the congregants is more difficult to measure, but the increase in participation is an indicator that spiritual growth is also taking place. During the period 2020 to the first half of 2022, participation was restricted due to the corona virus; therefore, 2019 was used for the comparison.

Goal 4: Financial autonomy.

It is unclear what this goal implies. Does it imply that the congregation should aim to be 100% financially self-sufficient, to be independent of all financing from outside Estonia, or to be independent from NMS funding?

The first two interpretations are not feasible. The congregation must have financial contributions from actors outside of the congregation, whether from the national church, from the municipality, or from friends and partners outside of Estonia. In the context of this evaluation, the interpretation must be “financial independence from NMS funding.”

Result: The dependency on NMS funding is mainly the personnel costs of 150% expatriate missionaries (although 50% is an Estonian), which are quite substantial. The costs will be reduced significantly when the positions are domesticated, but they will still be significant. The financial contribution from the NMS has mainly been for specified projects linked to different hardware and for a position as a youth worker. There is a systematic effort to increase individual contributions from members and other individuals in the community and beyond. The income in 2022 was €33,000, with an additional contribution from the NMS for a sound system in the church (€20,000). The Saku congregation has several partners outside Estonia who are contributing financially, including Norway, Finland, Germany, and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Support from the municipality is limited, but it is still an opportunity. Solar power covers almost 100% of their energy needs.

5.4.2 The process in phases

Phase 1

The seeds of the project were planted in the mid-1990s with the reopening of the Moravian Prayer House and with monthly Sunday services there, conducted by the neighboring Hageri congregation. Forty to fifty people were regular participants. In 2000, the vision of constructing a modern church building had already started. Around 2005, the youth minister from the Hageri congregation and a group of young people started youth services with a liturgy and music inspired by the Baptist church—more modern music with a lively form. The present leader of the Board in Saku was part of this group, and they were also inspired by Tiina, the present pastor in Mustamäe.

Phase 2

The Mission Center of the EELC approached the Hageri congregation to ask whether they would be interested in receiving a missionary, and the congregation responded positively. In 2011, with the arrival of the missionaries, who are still there, extended cooperation with the NMS commenced.

In 2014, they formulated their vision for the congregation: “Close to God, close to people.” After significant political resistance, a plot for the church building was allocated by the municipality, as reported in an interview with deputy mayor Tanel Ots.

People's skepticism and pessimism were a problem in the beginning. There was skepticism in the church hierarchy about starting a new congregation, mainly from

outside the project. There were also those who supported and prayed. (Kriistina Seppel, chair of the board, lay)

The NMS was a crucial supporter, making it possible to start the construction of the church building.

According to Kriistina Seppel, leader of the congregational council, the relationship with the mother congregation in Hageri has generally been supportive, and where tensions have occurred, they seem to have been handled.

The church musicians from Hageri started to organize church music events, and then regular weekly services started in the Saku prayer house with different music styles and an emphasis on the youth and children. The Saku children's camp, which includes a complimentary spot for children with special needs, supported by the municipality, was started the same year. The congregation was formally registered as an independent congregation of the EELC in 2013.

Phase 3

In parallel with the registration process, the work of developing the (congregational) plant increased as an organic process.

In 2013, a café opened for people in the community, and systematic work recruiting volunteers started the same year. The following year, Sunday school, called Children's Church, was started every Sunday, and the first large confirmation service for Saku members was held in the Hageri church.

The planning for the church building continued.

Phase 4

The construction of the church started in 2019, and the new church building was consecrated in December 2020. Public fundraising for church bells was successful. After a drop in attendance during the pandemic, participation is again increasing. In 2022, the congregation responded on a substantial scale to the crisis in Ukraine.

During the process, the prayer group with its roots in the 1990s, and even before that, has declined due to the age of its members.

Phase 5

Life in the consecrated church building started in December 2022.

5.4.3 Cooperation and organization

Cooperation with the NMS has, according to the informants, been excellent, although changes in structure and staffing at the head office have proved a bit challenging. The NMS has been a patient companion and supporter throughout the whole period, unlike most other mission organizations, and its support for the missionary in the congregation for the whole period has been of vital importance.

The cooperation with the Mission Center of the EELC has been constant, especially in providing training and tools, in addition to being the instrument that deals with the logistics

for missionaries. The leadership of the national church has been more distant, and it has shown limited capacity for performing a leadership role. However, as the dean could be understood as a leader within the national church, and as the archbishop has been involved in the church building foundation, there has been a relation to the national church.

Cooperation with the LWF on a specific project has been fruitful, and links to German organizations have been important, as have they with congregations in Norway and Finland. Cooperation with the Hageri congregation is very good, as is cooperation with the congregation in Mustamäe.

The exit of the NMS is regarded as an orderly and open, although demanding, process.

5.4.4 Learning

We learned teamwork, joint leadership, and collaborative leadership style, to involve people and define roles and duties in a systematic way. We learnt relying on God. We learned to volunteer and to appreciate it. We also learned to pray more. We learned to cooperate with the local government and especially with their social department. We have learnt about diaconal work from the Santa Clara parish in Sweden. From NMS/Magne communications competence and the seven principles of church planting. (Kriistina Seppel, interview 2023)

The main learning arenas for the congregation have been the regular staff meetings and discussions with volunteers and the board. Annual reports have been used as a tool for review and planning. The close contact with Mustamäe is also a learning platform, as are the regular meetings and events in the NMS system, especially for the missionaries. Some learning also passes from Saku to the other congregations in the EELC. Important learning and inspiration were also acquired during a visit to the St. Clara church in Stockholm.

The project has provided experiences that could serve as both vertical and horizontal learning in the EELC, and demonstrate:

- How to involve volunteers in a pastor-driven church culture,
- How to combine traditional and modern music in the services, and
- How to focus on the congregation as a body, a fellowship of people, where the priest is just a part of the body, who works in teams with other parts of the body.

5.4.5 The future

The participants found the ending of the NMS involvement demanding and challenging. The departure of the missionaries involved the loss of a priest, of a very talented and inspirational project leader, and of a committed worker with children and youth. The main challenge going forward will be to finance a full-time priest and a youth worker. A priest is already recruited and financed in a part-time position. It is hoped that the NMS involvement in Estonia will continue, and that some links will be maintained.

5.4.6 Spirituality

The project and the congregation have been carried by systematic prayer by committed people for decades. The whole project is driven by a search for a new and more relevant spirituality in today's Estonia, and it has inspired fresh expressions of work and prayer.

5.5 Estonia - Discussion

Both projects were well rooted in the EELC strategy. The planting of the congregations in the two areas was motivated by local initiatives and groups, and supported by the Mission Center, as the specialized mission organization of the Estonian church. The NMS was invited to become involved in the planting process, and it gave important input from the start, both financially and professionally.

In both projects, the congregational planting was finalized within two years of the NMS involvement (Mustamäe, 2010; Saku, 2013), thanks to support from the national church and the commitment of the local fellowships.

The projects followed the organizational form of the Lutheran tradition with a priest, deacon, cantor, and lay leaders, both in the governance structure of the congregations and in the leadership of activities.

The services follow the order of the liturgy of the church, with an orderly administration of the sacraments, according to the Lutheran understanding of the priestly ministry, but with liturgical adaptations and new elements and forms being contextualized. It seems that the two congregations have developed certain differences in their liturgical and spiritual practices, which is an indicator of their contextual adaptation. The attendance and membership of both are increasing, although more so in Saku with its new sanctuary.

Both projects have a holistic mission agenda, which included diakonia from the start of the projects, with the social uplifting of marginalized people, global solidarity, and close links to the social offices of the local community and municipality. This is in line with the NMS vision and mission, although, according to the bishops of the Church of England, this differs from the evangelical–charismatic focus in church planting.

Both congregations have established good relationships with the municipality and have a good reputation as cooperative partners. The Mustamäe congregation is more deeply involved in a dynamic cooperation with the municipality, as regards both programs and financial support, which, in the Estonian context, is an astonishing renewal of the Lutheran folk-church tradition. The close relationship with the municipality is used as a vehicle for achieving the missional goals of the congregation.

In parallel with the planting processes, the congregations have developed new ways of working, both having services every Sunday, baby song, children's church and youth services, summer camps for vulnerable children, and in Mustamäe, the Mission shop, a Marta group, and more traditional activities in the form of a Mission choir. In Saku, there is very systematic work with volunteers, a large home-visiting program, which is run in cooperation with the municipality, the systematic renewal of music, and an inclusive liturgical and fellowship culture that expresses joy and life. It would seem that both congregations have succeeded in creating an integrated spirituality that is rooted in prayer, Bible study, and sacramental, liturgical life, and which stimulates outreach to people in the community.

Both projects, especially Saku, have been able to provide a relevant congregation for children and youth.

Saku may be facing a challenge in relation to involving the older generation, who are increasing rapidly in number in the community, which is an attractive living area for retired people. In Mustamäe, the greater challenge is to be relevant to the large number of Russian-speaking people. Given the developments in the region due to the war in Ukraine and the subsequent influx of refugees, old tensions between Russian-speaking people and the rest of the population are at risk of being reawakened.

Central to both congregations during the congregational development phase, was the work of constructing a church building with modern architecture and multi-purpose functionality. According to the archbishop, the church building in Mustamäe is designed as a center to serve the wider community, while the church building in Saku is more visible and is designed more around the needs of its congregation.

In Mustamäe is the congregation strongly rooted in the local community and municipality with activities in the church building organized also by other actors; in Saku, more emphasis on the activities of the members of the congregation.
(Archbishop, interview 2023)

In both congregations, women play crucial roles in the initiative, governing, and leadership of the congregation. In Mustamäe, the project leader is an Estonian female priest, and the board leader is also a woman. In Saku, the Norwegian male missionary is the project leader and priest, but the leader of the board and one of the key leaders in the initial group are women. In a church where some circles are still critical in relation to female priests and female leadership, this strong female representation in the leadership of congregations is, in itself, a sign of renewal.

In both congregations, leadership is conducted in a consultative and team-oriented way within the order of the established church structure. Both project leaders are credited with providing inspiring spiritual leadership and a relational leadership style, thereby mobilizing participation. The potential complication with the project leader in Saku being an employee of the NMS and having a line of authority that is outside of the church organization seems not to have created any significant tensions.

It still remains to be seen whether the national church can scale up these experiences, both vertically to the national level and horizontally to other congregations.

The projects have laid the basis for significant growth once the church buildings are finalized and all of them can be fully used. The church building in Mustamäe has great potential as a community center, with a clear sanctuary and a depth of spirituality. Hopefully, the national church and the expatriate partners will recognize the importance of this kind of church building in heavily secularized Estonia.

Both congregations face the financial challenge of sustaining their level of activity once the NMS closes the projects. It is a good sign that both congregations have other sources of income. The Saku congregation is already financing its activities with funding from sources other than the NMS, with a large portion of the funding coming from own members' voluntary support, but it is still heavily dependent on input from the missionaries financed by the NMS. Mustamäe already has 70% of its funding from outside of the NMS, and this also includes their project leader. On the other hand, Mustamäe is still in a critical phase regarding its capacity to finalize the construction, but this is not primarily a financial challenge, given the support from the municipality.

The NMS gets very positive feedback from the leadership of the national Estonian church:

We have different mission organisations. NMS has done the work in a very systematic, organised way. There have been a couple of meetings every year. I give very positive feedback on the cooperation. My feelings are good. The NMS is the only organisation that regularly supports church planting/development which includes construction of a church building. (Archbishop in interview)

However, the prospect of the NMS ending its support to Mustamäe and especially of its taking the missionaries out of the Saku congregation are matters of concern:

Recognized that in both congregations, very good project leaders, but also that they are imbedded in teams, not depended on the leader alone. But when a new leader/missionary comes in, and if (s)he leaves, everything could collapse. I hope and believe that this will not be the case with this project because there are teams set up. (Archbishop in interview)

The projects have also influenced the national church:

We have learnt that congregational life must start before construction of church starts. We learned that cooperation with the local government is important. Important are the local people for whom we are creating this congregation. (Archbishop in interview)

In terms of organizational work, the projects are examples of both innovation and organizational development. The main challenge is whether the national church can secure an upscaling of the experiences, and the most important points formulated by the project leader in Saku are as follows:

- How can volunteers be involved in a pastor-driven church culture?
- How can traditional and modern music be combined in the services?
- There is a need to focus on the congregation as a body, as a fellowship of people where the pastor is a part of the body, working in a team with other parts of the body.

6. Points of Learning and Recommendations

6.1 Conceptual clarification

Central to all organizational development and project design is the formulation of a clear concept of what the project wants to achieve. The evaluation shows that the NMS had not developed a clear and consistent concept of “church planting.” This allowed space for flexibility, but it also created the potential for confusion and lack of clarity in the projects. Although we use the concept of “church planting” in line with the assignment from the NMS, we find that “congregational planting” is a more accurate concept and it connects better with the activities in the projects, which largely involved congregational development. This also underlines that the projects were embedded in partnerships with established national churches. To maintain the flexibility, congregational planting may include both the establishment of an organized unit under a mother congregation, for example, a student fellowship, or it may be a fully-fledged, independent congregation within the national church structure, as in the other three projects, and most evident in the projects in Estonia.

In accordance with the mission strategy of the NMS, every church planting project must have a holistic understanding of mission, which includes evangelism, worship in services and groups, and diakonia, as expressed by the NMS as fighting poverty and promoting justice.

6.2 The role of the missionaries: blessings and challenges

The role of the missionaries in Estonia and France was not the same, but in three of the projects, the two in France and one in Estonia (Saku), they played a significant and central role. This was more evident in France than in Estonia, where the work had started before the missionaries arrived, and the congregational councils already seemed quite strong and mature. In the two projects in France and in one in Estonia (Saku), the missionaries were the main actors in the establishment and running of the project, a reality that is not always visible in the project descriptions/reports. The costs of their input were, as far as we have seen, not made visible in the project reports. The contribution of the missionaries was seen, by both local and national actors, as key to the success of the respective projects, with the exception of Mustamäe, where the missionaries’ input was limited and the project leader was a local pastor, although with strong links to the NMS.

It seems necessary that the NMS and its partner churches should discuss on what level the input of any missionaries should be made. It could be that the roles played by the missionaries could produce even greater outcomes if their assignment were to scale up the experience, to give advice, to organize learning, and to inspire a missional culture both regionally and on the national level.

It seems that the missionaries provided a crucial link between local actors and the international network, and even with the national church leadership. This creates a vulnerable situation and, when the missionaries move on, these linkages are likely to become weaker. In future, the NMS should include more local decision-makers within its network to secure more sustainable development after the missionaries have left.

In France, the salary level of the missionaries made it impossible for them to be regarded as priests in the church and to be part of the line management of the church. They were seen as staff of the NMS with high salaries and a strong agenda. At the same time, the projects were part of the established church, with its own structure and culture. This double structure is demanding, and it makes it necessary for the NMS to be extremely sensitive to tensions that might arise between different stakeholders in the projects. The open conflict in the project in Critéil had several elements, which this evaluation is not digging into deeply, but it is likely that the lack of clarity concerning the role of the missionaries was one element of the conflict concerning which the NMS could have acted more proactively. The NMS must be very clear when creating job descriptions for its missionaries and in the formation of agreements with partners.

6.3 Local rooting and commitment to partnerships with the national church

In France, the projects seemed more rooted in the national church and in the NMS than in the local community, although local involvement was present and the projects were appreciated. The benefit of this strong anchoring in the national church is that the church was inspired to create national guidelines for future church and congregational planting.

In Estonia, the projects were strongly rooted in local groups and their initiatives but also in the overall strategy of the national church. Both the planting and the renewal in the new congregations were appreciated by the national church, but it is not clear whether the experiences were carried any further by the regional and national leadership. For the NMS, it is important that they clarify with a partner church how the experiences and learning from the projects will be scaled up, both vertically and horizontally, in the national church.

Of the four projects, the project in Mustamäe stands out for its relationship with the local community and the municipality. The concept of the church building becoming a spiritual, cultural, and social venue for the whole community is exciting. This may prove to be an example for future planting projects by providing a strong element of service to the whole community as an expression of its holistic mission.

6.4 When church planting creates conflicts

In the project in Critéil in France, tensions developed between the congregations through which the work was done. The conflict included different views on diaconical work, the use of the building, the growth in participation in the new unit in Critéil, and a lack of clarity regarding roles.

Development, change, and innovation often precipitate tensions with established structures and activities. Tensions in such congregational planting projects are thus to be expected. However, the challenge is to ensure that such tensions are used to create energy and further progress. A special responsibility thus rests with the leadership, in this case, both the church in France and the NMS, to handle the tensions in such a way that they express respect for the established work and also include the leadership of the established congregation in the spiritual and strategic discussions and deliberations. The solution found in Créteil was to change the project and to establish it as an independent congregation within the church. It might be that this is the natural aim of most planting

projects occurring within an established church, but it would be wise to clarify this as a possible outcome when the project is first started.

It appears that the process in Saku handled the tension between the new congregation and what they called the “mother congregation” in a more constructive way, to the benefit of both congregations and in a manner that led to cooperation in various activities.

6.5 How unique was the “church planting” in the way the congregational work was done?

Most informants underlined, with great appreciation, that the missionaries and the projects brought new ways of working into the culture of their respective churches. The focus was on prayer, on open invitation outside of the established camp, on closeness to people’s longings and needs, with a willingness to accompany them, on renewal in music and liturgies, and on systematic work with volunteers. The emphasis on children and youth was strong and introduced new ways of working.

On the other hand, it can create a problem if the spirituality and working methods of the planting projects are portrayed as so unique that their relevance for other congregations in the church is reduced. From the perspective of the Church of Norway, a careful look at the working methods indicates that the projects were well run and achieved a lot, but the actual methods used are found in many “ordinary” congregations of the Church of Norway, as in other main-line churches all over Europe. For the NMS, it is important to communicate to the national church leadership that the spirituality and activities of the projects are entirely possible to implement in any other congregation in Estonia or France. This is not to deny the success of the projects and the renewal that they have achieved, but rather to increase the relevance of the projects and to highlight the possibilities that are present in many congregations.

6.6 Financial sustainability

According to several of the project’s documents, the projects were all characterized by a timeframe and by the ambition that they would become sustainable, which included financially. However, it was not always clear what was meant by “financial sustainability.” The use of the term “project” when planting and developing a congregation is also not without tension. As one of the informants expressed it, “A congregation is not a project.” The way financial sustainability was implemented was different in France and Estonia, partly due to the financial situations of the national churches and partly due to different understandings of church planting. In Estonia, the establishment of the congregation as an independent entity was completed after two years; thus, the rest of the project is best described as “congregational development,” which included the construction of modern, multifunctional church buildings. Both congregations drew significant financial resources from outside of the NMS project, but they were still dependent on the NMS funding. The projects in France seemed to be financially independent from the NMS funding.

The learning is that, while the issue of financial sustainability is contextual, it is also important for the NMS to encourage, as an integral part of all projects, the capacity to secure financing, both from participants in the congregation, and more importantly, from other external sources, whether the local community, the national church, or international networks.

6.7 The NMS is a highly appreciated partner, network facilitator, and center of competence

The NMS network was highly appreciated and seemed to be the most important place for learning in the projects, although this was not exclusive. In Estonia, other relationships were also mentioned as being important for learning and development.

The attitude of the NMS was seen as relational and flexible, with a longstanding commitment and willingness to adjust to local realities, as seen both in Lyon and in their readiness to include the construction of church buildings in the projects.

It seems that the NMS has potential for expanding participation in its learning networks to more participants in its projects and for linking up more with the other partners of the churches, including both the specialized ministries and the ecumenical organizations of which they are members; for example, the Conference of European Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and the World Conference of Churches.

6.8 Living spirituality

All the actors understood prayer and regular church services to be the most important “success factors“ in the projects. The commitment to a living spirituality, with prayer, services, sacraments, Bible studies, and the interpretation of the Gospel in the given context, to all kinds of people, was at the core of all the projects.

This living spirituality involved both clergy and lay people, employees and volunteers, and in this way, it reflected the Lutheran ideal of a dynamic relationship between clergy and laity. The living spirituality is owned by the whole congregation and is the foundation for all development.

6.9 Clarify frames, organizational roles, and authority

The findings point to the necessity of clarifying lines of authority, roles, and decision-making processes in order to avoid time-consuming and energy-draining discussions and insecurity during the projects. Issues linked to the economics, work descriptions, and relevant use of buildings should be addressed in writing. The issue of power relations has to be taken seriously. The NMS needs to be especially aware of the tendency for tensions to evolve into conflict in the projects. Financial issues should also be as clear as possible from the start. This need for clarification is not contrary to maintaining a flexible and spirit-guided culture in such innovative projects, but it does provide a framework within which Spirit-guided innovation is given the freedom to develop.

6.10 Sharing of competence

The projects have all shown the importance of building networks and arenas for the mutual sharing of experiences and competencies. The NMS should continue to develop this part of its mission and expand its network, both in terms of participation by the projects and linking up with other networks, especially other international mission organizations involved in the same countries, and ecumenical organizations the partner churches are members of. This would be an important element in the strategy to upscale experiences from innovative projects, both horizontally and vertically.

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