

Realizing church

Parish pastors as contributors to leadership in Church of Norway congregations

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Main research question

The thesis asks how parish pastors contribute to leadership and collective learning in and around congregations.

Methodology and field

The thesis is an empirical single case study, employing ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews. I conducted fieldwork in three Church of Norway parishes. In each, I observed how the leading pastor interacted with activities. The sites of observation were: 1) Worship services, 2) Parish Council meetings, and 3) staff meetings. Each site positions the parish pastor differently: In the worship service, he or she is the formal leader, relating to all members. In the strategic body of the Parish Council, the pastor is *ex officio* member among elect members; representing the ordained ministry, but not chairing the meetings. In the staff meetings, pastors take part with the other employees, and do not usually chair the meetings.

Theory and concepts

The thesis' main theoretical perspective is Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Representing a practice-theoretical approach, CHAT sees humans as fundamentally relational, situated in embodied practices. Activities are seen as mediated by tools and signs, which leads to attentiveness towards the affording and constraining role of materials and language. Activities are constituted by work on "object". Object is a complex concept; it refers to the material that an activity processes, but also the horizon it works towards. Object is articulated, but also emergent, "fuzzy" and contested. CHAT is sensitive to diversity and tensions within and between activities. Activities face contradictions that are threatening, but also may facilitate changes and expansion.

In addition to providing a general theoretical perspective, CHAT helps to conceptualize the thesis' core interests: Learning, leadership and religious activity.

Material and analysis

The empirical material constructed through fieldwork is analysed thematically. A pattern emerges around two themes: Firstly, pastors are seen as community workers. I analyse how they negotiate between communities, how they facilitate trajectories of learning and increased participation, and how they negotiate boundaries and liminal zones between the church activity and other activities. Secondly, I consider how pastors negotiate their subjects in the activities, and how they contribute to negotiation of object.

Contribution

1. Pastoral leadership can be described as “realizing church”. This means that strategic leadership contributes to more than the direction of a given activity, but that it works to clarify what the activity is about in the first place, and to constantly project the activity into the future. I argue this position in a critical discussion with Jackson Carroll’s notion of pastoral leadership.
2. I argue that “leader subject node” is a useful heuristic concept that captures key challenges connected with pastors as leaders: The subject node is identified neither with the person nor with the role of the pastor. Rather, it is viewed as an interrelational space, and the analytical task for the researcher is to see what is going on in the subject node, and between the node and the overall activity. I argue that the extensive and multi-layered subject of the pastors represents possible affordances as well as constraints for the mediation of interaction and movement in church activities.
3. The view of pastoral leadership as contributing to realizing church is coherent with a strong programme of practice theory. I view the congregational practices and my own practice as a researcher as symmetrical. The thesis’ ambition is to create a dialogue between the normativity and theorization taking place in the interaction of the pastors, and the normativity and theories represented by research literature. I argue this position with several practical theologians.