



LUND UNIVERSITY  
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# Leading by being led

A qualitative study of the relationship between authority and  
servant leadership

by

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# Abstract

This thesis aims to contribute to the discussion on the role of authority in servant leadership, by answering the following research question: *How do pastors perceive their servant leadership and how does this relate to authority?* The methodology of this study is based on a qualitative study, following an interpretive approach. The empirical material of this study consists of 10 interviews. All interviewees are pastors within Equmeniakyrkan, a Christian Protestant denomination in Sweden. The theoretical background of this study consists of literature about authority and servant leadership. It shows that within servant leadership, authority is often shared with followers. However, different views on this matter exist, for example that servant leadership is an alternative to authority or that authority should be eliminated. Hence, the role of authority in servant leadership is not clearly defined. Our research shows that pastors can be seen as servant leaders, and that authority in this context is shared. Our empirical material indicates that those subjected to servant leadership can influence leaders by using different types of authority. Hereby, this thesis agrees with the literature on servant leadership that argues that authority is shared, but it contrasts the literature saying that servant leadership is an alternative to authority or that it should be eliminated. Furthermore, this thesis displays how the presence of authority results in servant leadership being more complex than often described in the servant leadership literature.

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Authority, Organization and leadership, Pastoral Leadership

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# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>1.1 Origins of servant leadership</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>1.2 Research objective</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>1.3 Relevance</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>1.4 Thesis outline</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>2 Methodology</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>2.1 Research approach</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>2.2 Data collection</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>2.3 Data Analysis</b> .....	<b>15</b>
2.3.1 Transcribing.....	15
2.3.2 Sorting .....	16
2.3.3 Reducing.....	17
2.3.4 Arguing.....	17
<b>2.4 Critical considerations</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>3 Theoretical background</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>3.1 Authority</b> .....	<b>20</b>
3.1.1 Authority and power .....	20
3.1.2 Weber and Barnard on authority .....	22
<b>3.2 Servant leadership</b> .....	<b>25</b>
3.2.1 Criticism of servant leadership.....	28
<b>3.3 Authority in servant leadership</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>3.4 Conclusion of chapter</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b>4 Historical context</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>4.1 Free churches in Sweden</b> .....	<b>33</b>
<b>4.2 Equmeniakyrkan</b> .....	<b>35</b>
<b>4.3 Congregations of Equmeniakyrkan</b> .....	<b>35</b>
<b>5 Analysis</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>5.1 The pastors' relation to the congregation</b> .....	<b>38</b>

5.1.1 Community and togetherness .....	38
5.1.2 Leading together .....	39
5.1.3 The presence of informal leaders .....	42
<b>5.2 The pastors' relation to the board.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>5.3 How pastors relate to their role.....</b>	<b>46</b>
5.3.1 The pastoral profession as a calling .....	46
5.3.2 Pastoral leadership .....	47
5.3.3 Longing for more authority .....	50
<b>5.4 Conclusion of chapter .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>6 Discussion.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>6.1 The pastor as servant leader .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>6.2 Factors that influence servant leadership.....</b>	<b>54</b>
6.2.1 Legal authority within the board and the församlingsmöte .....	54
6.2.2 Charismatic authority of informal leaders .....	55
6.2.3 Traditional authority of congregational members .....	56
<b>6.3 Reflecting on authority within servant leadership .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>6.4 Conclusion of chapter .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>7 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>60</b>
7.1 Limitations and further research .....	61
7.2 Practical implications.....	62
<b>References.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Appendix A: Interview Guide.....</b>	<b>71</b>

# 1 Introduction

Over the last decades, a number of changes have occurred within the leadership literature (Hannah et al. 2014). Firstly, where leadership theory used to focus on the hierarchical and heroic leader (van Dierendonck, 2011), over the years it started to put more emphasis on followers and their well-being (Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber, 2009). Secondly, immoral behaviour and corporate scandals have created an urge for more ethical and moral reasoning among superiors, which has led to an increasing interest in authentic leadership (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Thirdly, leadership literature has continuously distanced itself from the notion of authoritarian leadership (Laub, 2018). Since the midst of the 20th century, the notion of authority in leadership has received a lot of negative attention, and can now be described as having a bad connotation (Spoelstra, 2018). This change of perspective can be visible in the contemporary leadership literature, where the leader is described as someone who ought to build personal relationships with followers, while focusing on a collaborative approach instead of an autocratic approach (Heyler & Martin, 2018). Amidst these changes, a range of leadership theories have emerged, including the leadership theory of servant leadership.

## 1.1 Origins of servant leadership

The origins of servant leadership are usually ascribed to Greenleaf (1977) who presented the term in his essay *The Servant as Leader*. In this piece, he explains how the novel *Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse had a major impact on him and the formulation of the servant leadership concept. In the novel, a group of people belonging to an Order are followed on a mysterious journey. The main character of the group is Leo, a servant who does not only serve the others practically, but also keeps up the good spirit up. One day Leo disappears and as a result the group starts to fall apart. In the end, it is revealed that Leo has been the leader of the Order for the whole time (Greenleaf, 1977). The book of Hesse made Greenleaf (1977) consider the idea of a person being both a leader and a servant, and this inspired him to formulate the concept. Spears (2004, p.8) explains how Greenleaf, after reading Hesse,

concluded that “true leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others”.

According to van Dierendonck and Patterson (2010), there are two central themes in servant leadership that make this theory unique. First, an essential aspect of servant leadership is to serve followers (Greenleaf, 1977). This is in contrast to other leadership theories, where often the organization’s mission is the primary focus (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Greenleaf (1977, p.27) argues that before becoming a leader, “[t]he servant-leader is servant first”. Hence, he argues that the followers should be a leader’s priority, and the leader needs to put them before the leader’s personal and organizational interest (Greenleaf, 1977). The genuine motivation to serve others is a prerequisite to become a servant leader (Greenleaf, 1977). Personal development is also considered to be important, and leaders should help the followers to "become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely ... to become servants [themselves]" (Greenleaf, 1977, p.27). Second, Greenleaf emphasizes the concept of “primus inter pares” (Latin for ‘first among equals’) which distinguishes servant leadership from other leadership theories by arguing for a team of leaders rather than one leader at the top (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010, p.8). Hence, equality seems to be more important than hierarchy. Greenleaf (1977) states a number of problems with the hierarchical structure, since it creates very few spots for leaders and makes being a leader very lonely. For this reason, he argues for “primus inter pares”, which is more focused on a leader leading a team of leaders instead of a leader working solely (Greenleaf, 1977). Furthermore, he argues that leaders should share the power to make decisions together (Spears, 2010). Within the concept of the first among equals, authority becomes more shared or delegated (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Greenleaf arguably was the first one to introduce servant leadership in an organizational context, but according to Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) it was the Biblical teachings of Jesus Christ that first taught servant leadership. The Bible describes how Jesus, both in his actions and teachings, taught his disciples about serving others (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). A clear example of this is found in a famous Bible story where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. After that, he tells them: "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one

another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (The Holy Bible, Gospel of John 13:13-15). For this reason, servant leadership has also been linked to the role of the pastor by a number of scholars (Scuderi, 2010). According to Scuderi (2010), a pastor can be described as servant leader for two reasons. Firstly, because he or she is a servant of God and recognizes a “higher authority” (Robinson, 2009 in Waterman, 2011, p.26). Secondly, a pastor can be seen as a servant leader because he or she serves the members of the congregation (Scuderi, 2010). In this sense, the pastor can therefore be described as a leader who is being led by God and the congregational members. Hence, besides servant leadership being present in contemporary leadership literature, it also influences leadership in the context of church (Laub, 1999).

Apart from tracing back the origins of servant leadership to Greenleaf or the Christian faith, there are other scholars who argue that the origin of this term can be traced back to many cultures in the world (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Bekker (2010) presents how servant leadership can be shown through other religious movements. The examples he mentions are the leadership of Jesus Christ, but also the leadership of Moses, Buddha, and Muhammad, in Judaism, Buddhism and the Islam (Bekker, 2010). More recent examples of servant leadership can be found in Martin Luther King Jr, Mahatma Gandhi (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018), and George Washington (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2010).

Providing a definition for servant leadership still proves to be challenging (Andersen, 2018). Greenleaf set the foundation for servant leadership in leadership theory, and he left a great legacy for the field of servant leadership (van Dierendonck, 2011). However, he also left a void in the field, when it comes to defining, researching and measuring it (van Dierendonck, 2011). Greenleaf did not provide a clear definition and there is still no consensus on how servant leadership is defined (Russell & Stone, 2002; van Dierendonck, 2011; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Andersen, 2018). This has resulted in a range of different interpretations (van Dierendonck, 2011; Grisaffe, VanMeter & Chonko, 2016). An attempt to define servant leadership is offered by Laub (1999, p.83): “Servant leadership is an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader”. In this definition, Laub (1999) only captures the very essential part of servant leadership, of placing

others first, which still leaves room for interpretation. Instead of providing a definition on servant leadership, other major scholars in the field described a number of characteristics that explain the term, in order to conceptualize and theorize it (e.g. Laub, 1999; Russell & Stone, 2002; Spears, 2004; Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). To define servant leadership in this thesis, we have chosen to describe two of the most influential models on servant leadership, provided by Laub and Spears (van Dierendonck, 2011; Parris & Peachey, 2013). These two models will be elaborately discussed in the theoretical background.

While studying the field of servant leadership, we noticed that when scholars mention authority in servant leadership, some scholars relate to it in a different way than others (e.g. Wong & Page, 2003; Liden et al. 2008; Parolini, Patterson & Winston, 2009). Since the servant leader is called to be a servant first (Greenleaf, 1977), this raises a question about the role of authority. The main body of literature argues that authority in servant leadership should be shared, instead of being centralized in a hierarchical way (Russell, 2001). However, other scholars describe that not all authority should be shared (Laub, 2018), or even that authority should be eliminated completely (Wong & Page, 2003). Meanings on the position of authority within servant leadership thus seem to differ.

Servant leadership has grown in interest both among practitioners and in academia. The mindset of the leader as a servant is increasingly visible in different organizations, for example in the organizations of Herman Miller, Ben & Jerry's (Mehta & Pillay, 2011), and Southwest Airlines (Spears, 2010). In academia, the increasing interest for servant leadership has led to a growing body of literature on the subject in the last decades (Spears, 2010; Heyler & Martin, 2018). Empirical research on servant leadership started over ten years ago (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018), but more empirical research has been requested (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Scuderi, 2010; van Dierendonck, 2011). One reason for this is that most research so far has been quantitative, while scholars would prefer to have more qualitative research in the field of servant leadership (Winston, 2010). According to Winston (2010, p.191) qualitative research is crucial, since it can "assist us in understanding the various components comprising servant leadership".

## 1.2 Research objective

As described above, there seems to be two areas within servant leadership that need to be further developed. First, scholars seem to relate differently to the role of authority within servant leadership (e.g. Wong & Page, 2003; Liden et al. 2008; Parolini, Patterson & Winston, 2009). Second, the main research on this subject is based on quantitative data and more insight in qualitative data on servant leadership is needed (Winston, 2010). In order to contribute to the discussion on servant leadership, this thesis aims to provide a qualitative study about the role of authority within servant leadership. Based on this, we formulated the following research question:

*How do pastors perceive their servant leadership and how does this relate to authority?*

From the research question it can be understood that this study will be conducted by investigating how pastors perceive servant leadership. We have chosen to perform this study within the context of a Christian Protestant church. As described above, pastors can be seen as servant leaders since there is a strong connection between servant leadership and leadership in church (Scuderi, 2010). Furthermore, we have chosen to study this topic within a church context because we both have work experience in church and we have a considerable amount of knowledge about how churches are being led. Therefore, this research will be conducted within Equmeniakyrkan, which is one of the biggest churches in Sweden. Equmeniakyrkan currently consists of 690 churches in Sweden, that adds up to tens of thousands of people visiting their churches every week (Equmeniakyrkan Om oss, n.d.). Moreover, Equmeniakyrkan has a history closely connected to authority, which makes it a suitable context for researching the role of authority in servant leadership. In this thesis we will use two church-specific terms that may need further elaboration. First, a *denomination* can be defined as “a religious group whose beliefs differ in some ways from other groups in the same religion” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Equmeniakyrkan is defined as being a denomination. Second, a denomination consists of different local churches or *congregations*, which can be defined as “a group of people gathered together for religious worship” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). The

pastors that will be interviewed for this study are all pastors within congregations of Equmeniakyrkan.

We are aware of performing a master thesis within the context of managing people, knowledge, and change, and not within the field of theology. Therefore, the main focus of this thesis will be on servant leadership and authority, and we aim to contribute to the leadership literature.

### 1.3 Relevance

This study first aims to be relevant for the general literature on servant leadership and its relation to authority. The topic of servant leadership is relevant, for this leadership style embodies many of the characteristics that other leadership styles have been criticized for lacking (Bekker, 2010) since it focuses on personal growth of followers, teamwork and ethical behaviour (Duren, 2017). In addition, Graham (1991, p.116) concluded how servant leadership had the advantage of being both inspirational and “enhanced moral reasoning capacity”. This proved to be lacking in theories about charismatic and transformational leadership (Graham, 1991). Even though there seems to be some overlap with other leadership theories “including transformational leadership, authentic leadership, ethical leadership, empowering leadership [and] spiritual leadership”, servant leadership thus has a unique character (van Dierendonck, 2011, p.1230) and is regarded as a valuable leadership theory (Hannah et al. 2014). By providing a qualitative study, this study contributes to the empirical data that is available on this subject in order to investigate the different types of authority that can influence servant leadership. Also, this study is relevant for those interested in the practice of servant leadership, and more specifically, servant leadership within a church context. For those who want to know more about how leadership takes place within a Protestant church, this study can provide new insights about the different positions and the role of authority within the church. Therefore, this study can offer new insights for Protestant pastors.

## 1.4 Thesis outline

The disposition of the thesis will be as follows: after this introducing chapter, the methodology of the thesis will be presented, in which we will explain how we collected data by using semi structured interviews. Furthermore, we describe how the data was analyzed in line with the interpretative tradition and more specifically, symbolic interactionism. Moreover, we will describe the theoretical background that is used for this thesis, which focuses on elaborating on the terms of servant leadership and authority and the relation between them. Following the review of this literature, we will briefly describe the historical context of the free churches in Sweden, since one of these churches forms the organizational background for this study. Thereafter, our empirical material will be described and analyzed in our analysis chapter, which focuses on the pastors' relation to the congregation, the relationship between the pastor and the board, and the perception of how pastors relate to their own role. Proceeding, we will relate our empirical findings to the theory chapter in the discussion. Here, we argue why the pastors in our study can be seen as servant leaders and how different types of authority affect them in their leadership. Also, we will reflect on what this means for the contemporary literature in this field. Finally, we will describe the main conclusions of this research, the practical implications and the suggestions for further research.

## 2 Methodology

After formulating the research question, this chapter will clarify the process of how this study has been carried out. Besides explaining the methods used to answer our research question, we will also discuss the choices and considerations that came with shaping this research. We will start by explaining our research approach, with a focus of the philosophical grounding of this thesis. Thereafter, our data collection method will be described. After that, we will explain how the gathered data was analyzed, before reflecting critically on the used methods in this research.

### 2.1 Research approach

The epistemological position of this study will be influenced by the human interpretation and reality being socially constructed. According to phenomenology, “experience of any reality is possible only through interpretation” (Prasad, 2018, p.13). Prasad (2018) explains this is a cornerstone in the interpretative traditions, where emphasis lies on how an objective reality is non-existing, since it is interpreted differently by every individual. In other words, the subjective meaning of how our interviewees perceive their reality is essential.

Within the interpretive tradition we were influenced by symbolic interactionism (Prasad, 2018). This interpretative sub-tradition emphasizes how people make sense of themselves and of others in social situations. Another key aspect of symbolic interactionism is the view of each social phenomenon being symbolic (Prasad, 2018). Therefore, we did not only investigate what the interviewee said but also consider the symbolic meaning of how they said it and how they experience their “lebenswelt” or lifeworld (Prasad, 2018, p.14). We tried to enter the lifeworld of the pastors “in order to comprehend their own processes of sensemaking” (Prasad, 2018, p.26). Within this tradition, this lifeworld is typically explored through qualitative research (Prasad, 2018). Therefore, we decided to research through conducting interviews with the aim of comprehending the subjective reality of the interviewed pastors and their lifeworld (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). According to Alvehus (2013), interviews are a way to

reach an understanding about the interviewee's lifeworld expressed through thoughts, feelings and experiences. In addition, within the symbolic interactionism tradition, individuals can also make sense of situations through role-taking, since they can use roles to guide their behavior (Prasad, 2018). This correlates well with our study since being a pastor could be seen as a role that may influence the pastor's perception of oneself and others.

## 2.2 Data collection

We followed a qualitative research design with the aim of deepening the knowledge of how pastors understand and make sense of their role as managers and leaders. Since we used the interpretative approach as epistemological foundation for our knowledge creation, we decided to use interviews as our data collection method. In performing qualitative research through conducting interviews, "knowledge is produced socially within the interaction of interviewer and interviewee." (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.82). During the conversation between interviewer and interviewee knowledge creation takes place.

The selection of interviewees was based on interest to participate. An email explaining our research project was sent to every main pastor in Equmeniakyrkan within a certain region in Sweden. Following, we called each one to ask if they had any additional questions and if they were willing to participate in this project. As a result, eight out of 13 main pastors agreed to participate. Besides that, we decided to interview a newly graduated pastor to get an insight in how he perceives leadership in his education, and we also interviewed a regional leader with a pastoral background. All interviewees are pastors, have been pastors or will be a pastor soon. For this reason, and also to guarantee anonymity for the interviewees that participated, in this thesis we will refer to all interviewees as 'pastor'. Additionally, all the names in the analysis section have been changed to fictitious names, in order to guarantee anonymity.

For the interview location, we wanted the setting to "encourage the interviewees to describe their points of view on their lives and worlds" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Therefore, we decided to base the interview location on the preference of each interviewee, so that they could feel as comfortable as possible explaining their lifeworld. Most of the interviews took place in the church of the interviewed pastor and two in the home of the pastor. Each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and all interviews were conducted from the 27th of March to the 5th of April.

To minimize the risk of missing important insights, both interviewers were present during all interviews. Since we did not divide questions between the two of us, the interviews resulted in a natural dialogue where if one of us asked a question, the other could deepen the conversation through a follow up question. Besides making notes during the interview, the interviewers also sat together after each interview in order to critically reflect on both what the interviewee said, how he or she said it, and also about their own ability to develop their interview skills. Both interviewers wrote down these insights and thoughts after each interview, in order to use this during the analytic process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

During the interviews we made use of an interview guide (appendix A) based on the thematizing idea of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). Before creating the interview guide, we discussed which themes might be interesting when it comes to leadership, also related to the contemporary leadership literature. These became the main themes we wanted to touch upon during the interviews, and additionally, we added some example questions regarding the themes. After creating the interview guide, we discussed the themes and questions with our supervisor so that we could improve it before the interviews started. We realized putting effort in creating an interview guide was important, since “the better the preparation for an interview, the higher the quality of the knowledge produced in the interview interaction, and the more the post interview treatment of the interviews will be facilitated” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.99). The interview guide was not meant as a script but rather as a support during the interviews. This means that during the interviews, we tried not to look at the interview guide, but we rather focused on the conversation and tried to understand the interviewee. At the end of the interview we used the guide only to see if we had elaborately discussed all themes. Our main objective was to have these themes in mind, but at the same time we aimed to have an “open attitude” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.41) to what the interviewee considered important and wanted to

direct the conversation towards. This open attitude also led to changes in the interview guide. At the beginning, the guide included questions about the distinction between management and leadership. However, after the first interviews we realized that the pastors either used these words intertwined or did not have a lot to say about management. Therefore, we decided to focus the questions on leadership instead, which developed into the focus on servant leadership in the analysis.

The structure of the interviews was funnel shaped, which means they started broadly and gradually came closer to the specific topic (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.131). In our case this focus was leadership. The interviewees did not know about the leadership focus beforehand, which gave us an opportunity to see if the pastors themselves brought it up and we got answers not shaped by them knowing about the topic.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

This section will explain how the empirical material gathered during the interviews was analyzed. We started thinking about the analysis during the interviews, because, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.190) mention: “it is too late to start thinking [about this] after the interviewing is done”. In our case, we started by looking at overarching themes that became visible during the interviews. Some of the themes were recurring, like the importance of consensus and the lack of authority among pastors. However, at this stage we were not able to connect these findings to each other and to possible theories. Therefore, we used the steps of transcribing, sorting, reducing and arguing to deal with the problems of chaos, representation and authority, as described by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018).

### 2.3.1 Transcribing

In order to be able to sort our material, we started with transcribing our recorded interviews. Transcribing is an interpretative process where oral language is transformed into text. The transcript results are our main empirical material, which is, according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) often the case within qualitative research.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argue that a discussion of the quality of this phase of the research process are too often lacking. However, in our research we focused on making the transcription as accurate as possible, by also describing body language in the transcript. The transcribing process started as soon as possible after every interview and was finished one week after the interviews had been conducted. We thought this to be important in order to use our memories of the interviews before they faded too much.

### 2.3.2 Sorting

In order to deal with the problem of chaos that characterizes empirical material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), we started by sorting our transcripts. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), there are many ways to sort empirical material. In order to use the most interesting parts of our material, we sorted it twice. The first method used for sorting the material is the analytical bracketing method from Gubrium and Holstein (1997, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We analyzed the interview transcription from the perspective of both what was said and how it was said. First, we explored what the interviewees said exactly, by highlighting these parts in the transcripts. Thereafter, we tried to discover how they said it by looking at their choice of words, examining how they talked about their role and trying to understand how they perceived their relation to the congregation. After that, we realized that there were a lot of interesting topics to write about, so we started reducing the material. However, while reducing the data we realized that we could not see where our specific focus should be on. Therefore, we decided to spend more time with the material. As Silverman argues: “researchers should spend more time analyzing material than collecting it” (Silverman, 2007, p.9, in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.47), which led us to believe that we should try this approach. While spending more time with the material, we sorted it again. This time, it happened through a more creative process meaning that we brainstormed about the trends we saw in the interviews, but we also brainstormed about possible theories that could be linked with these trends, while simultaneously taking into account the background of the church that we wanted to explain to the reader. Even though this process was messier, it gave us more insights in the meaning of how interviewees expressed themselves and helped us to start reducing again.

### 2.3.3 Reducing

Just like our sorting process, we also reduced our material twice. The first time reducing our material, we focused on how many times a certain ‘what’ or ‘how’ was mentioned. However, when reading Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, p.11) we came to understand that “The purpose of qualitative studies is not to measure how much and how many, but rather to understand processes, meanings and qualities”. After sorting the material for the second time, we reduced the material by writing down the main themes of authority and servant leadership on a whiteboard. While writing it down we discovered some contrasts in how pastors described their ideal situation and their current situation. An example of this is found in the pastor’s willingness to strive for consensus, while at the same time sometimes longing for more authority or hierarchy. Once we discovered this, we divided these contrasts and the different themes to create a structure for the analysis chapter. We divided the different themes into these paragraphs and made use of quotes from the interviews to clarify our main points. This all helped us to deal with the problem of representation (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

### 2.3.4 Arguing

After dealing with the problems of chaos and representation, the thing that remained was the problem of authority (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Our analysis chapter is based solely on our findings and is written through arguing about the interesting matters we found. However, in the discussion we wanted to link our findings to theories without “belittling” or “exaggerating” our findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.143). Therefore, when linking our empirical results to our theoretical background, we made sure to describe sentences like: “Our empirical material suggests that...”. This helped us to be humble in representing our material, but at the same time we could still be critical about how our findings relate to contemporary theories on servant leadership.

## 2.4 Critical considerations

During our last year as master students, we came to understand the importance of critical reflecting on one's own work. We are aware that this thesis has limitations and therefore we have tried to deal with these limitations in the best way possible, to still make this thesis relevant and reliable. In this section we will mention three aspects which potentially influenced our findings and the quality of this research.

Firstly, it is important to consider possible pitfalls in *us* doing this study. Since we are both Christians there was a risk for us to let our faith influence how we interpreted our empirical material. Since this is not a theological study and the focus of this study is not about faith, we tried to describe our findings and the background of the church as objective as possible by being critical to ourselves and each other about what we wrote. Furthermore, with this thesis we aimed to adopt perspectival subjectivity, which means that we tried to adopt "different perspectives and ... different questions to the same text" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.213). We have done this by discussing parts that might be faith based with our supervisor, proofreaders and others, so that we could be as open as possible to different interpretations and ideas. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.213), subjectivity will then not create weakness, "but testify to the fruitfulness and the vigor of interview research". This is also what we have experienced while writing the thesis. Having said this, we realized that being a Christian also worked as a great advantage for this study. Both of us are familiar with the church, the function of a pastor and different terminology that is used within a church context. This helped us to really understand the lifeworld of the pastors (Prasad, 2018). Combining this knowledge about church to the academic knowledge we have acquired during this master proved to be a valuable combination of skills in order to research this topic and write this thesis.

Secondly, we want to consider the possibility of generalizing our results. Due to the scope and the time span of this project, we only studied pastors working in one specific region in Sweden. One could thus argue that this is not generalizable. However, when thinking about using our results, one should realize that some experiences of the pastors may be similar to the experience of leaders in other

contexts, for they may experience the same difficulties when it comes to authority in servant leadership. With this in mind, the structure of the organization and organizational culture should still always be taken into account. This means that we call for contextualization rather than generalization, as also described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009).

Thirdly, we want to reflect on the possible language barrier that the pastors dealt with. For this research, we have chosen to conduct all interviews in English. For one pastor within this region this was a reason not to participate in the study, because this person believed their English not to be sufficient. Whether or not the results would have been different if we would have also interviewed that person, is impossible to say. Additionally, since for most pastors English was not their mother tongue, this could have influenced them not only in what they said but also in how they said it. This challenge became present when we were analyzing and using the analytical bracketing method from Gubrium and Holstein (1997, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). When investigating the 'hows' it was sometimes unclear if a pastor was pausing for a long time because of the theme or because he or she was trying to find the right words in English. However, we do think that it helped that our interviews lasted for quite a long time, since we did not rush the interviewees but instead let them take all the time they needed. Furthermore, since one of the interviewers is Swedish, when an interviewee could not find the English translation of the word, it was possible to say it in Swedish. With these methods we have tried to minimize the impact of the language barrier.

# 3 Theoretical background

As can be seen from the introduction chapter, servant leadership raises questions about the role of authority, since the relation between those terms is defined in various ways by different scholars. This chapter aims to elaborate on this, by describing the views of main scholars in the field of authority and servant leadership. As a result, this literature review will form the theoretical background that will serve as a foundation for the discussion chapter. More specifically, this chapter will start by describing authority relating to power, after which we will examine the definitions of authority as described by Weber and Barnard. Subsequently, we will elaborate on servant leadership through the eyes of Laub and Spears, and thereafter, we will describe criticism on servant leadership. Lastly, both topics will be contrasted and connected to each other by focusing on the role of authority within the servant leadership context.

## 3.1 Authority

The term authority can be explained in different ways. It can be understood to describe individual traits (e.g. ‘he *has* authority’), or can be used to describe a number of organizations (different authorities), and the term power is often used to explain it (Oxford dictionary, n.d.). This chapter will outline different approaches to authority, by mainly focusing on the authority theory of Weber (1947), which can be seen as most influential in this field. Before describing his views on authority, we will start by relating authority to power.

### 3.1.1 Authority and power

Greenleaf (1977, p.115) relates authority to power by saying that authority refers to “the sanctions that legitimize the use of power”. Hence, before trying to define authority, it is necessary to first examine the relation between authority and power, power being a topic which authority is often associated with (Haugaard, 2018). According to Greenleaf (1977, p.115) power can either mean “persuasion” or

“coercion”, depending on whether the response is voluntary or not. Steven Lukes (2005) explains power by proposing a more elaborate, three-dimensional view, which explains that person A can either influence, change or determine what person B should do. According to Lukes (2005), the distinction of whether authority may or may not be a form of power, is dependent on if there is a conflict of interest. He argues that authority is a part of influence and if there is no conflict of interest, influence is not regarded as power (Lukes, 2005). He explains this by saying:

“... power may or may not be a form of influence - depending on whether sanctions are involved; while influence and authority may or may not be a form of power - depending on whether a conflict of interests is involved. Consensual authority, with no conflict of interests, is not, therefore, a form of power.” (Lukes, 2005, p.35)

According to Lukes (2005), when there is no conflict of interest, authority cannot be described as power. Arendt (Arendt, 1961, pp.92-93 cited in Spoelstra, 2018, p.35) goes even further by saying “[s]ince authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence”. She continues by saying: “where force is used, authority itself has failed” (Arendt, 1961, pp.92-93 cited in Spoelstra, 2018, p.35). Hence, this would mean that authority and power can never go together, because if this would happen then it would not be called authority anymore. Kojève, an influential thinker of authority, agrees with this, by saying: “[r]educing authority to force is therefore simply to deny or ignore the existence of the former” (Kojève, 2014). He argues that one can only use authority over something or someone that can react to it (Kojève, 2014). Besides that, it belongs to the one affecting it, also described as the agent, and is seen as something active (Kojève, 2014). This brings him to the following definition of authority:

“Authority is the possibility that an agent has of acting on others (or on another) without these others reacting against him, despite being capable to do so” (Kojève, 2014, p.8)

From this definition we can see that authority and power are not the same thing, for if someone were to use power, the ones subjected to it would not be capable to react

against it. Since this thesis focuses on how authority relates to servant leadership, the explanation from Spillane and Joullié (2015) is also considered. They argue that when it comes to leadership, “authority refers to a relationship between leader and followers” (Spillane & Joullié, 2015, p.211). Within this relationship, authority is expressed through interpersonal relationships and is “sensitive to psychological factors” (Spillane & Joullié, 2015, p.211). When it comes to power, however, psychological factors do not play a role, because “[u]nlike authority, power is insensitive to psychological evaluation” (Spillane & Joullié, 2015, p.211). For this reason, it can be argued that authority is not the same as power, which is why we will consider them to be different in this thesis. However, this does not yet provide an answer as to how authority can be defined. In the next paragraph, we will provide an insight for answering that question.

### 3.1.2 Weber and Barnard on authority

One of the most influential thinkers about authority is Weber. Interestingly, when Weber wrote his book *Economy and Society* in German, he used the word “Herrschaft rather than Autorität” (Spoelstra, 2018, p.29). The word Herrschaft has been translated to authority, but originally has a broader meaning (Spoelstra, 2018). However, since the theories of Weber have been generally translated as being theories about authority (Spoelstra, 2018), we will also relate them to authority in this thesis. According to Weber (1947, p.46), “there are three pure types of legitimate authority”, being rational-legal authority, traditional authority and charismatic authority. These types will now be further explained.

First, legal authority means that the ones subjected to authority obey the person who is in charge legally (Weber, 1947). It is based on formal authority and only takes place within the context where a person has the formal authority (Weber, 1947). According to Weber, a main example of rational-legal authority is shown through bureaucracy (Houghton, 2010). Second, traditional authority implies that the ones subjected to authority obey the one who hold the position that is traditionally believed to be sanctioned (Weber, 1947). The obedience here is based on “personal loyalty within the area of accustomed obligations” (Weber, 1947, p.46). The third and final type of authority is called charismatic authority, and implies that the charismatic

leader is obeyed because individuals believe in his or her charismatic actions (Weber, 1947). The word “charisma” was originally used within a Christian context during the first century, where it referred to “the gift of God’s grace” (Potts, 2009, p.5). For centuries, the word charisma was mainly used within the Christian context, until Weber introduces charismatic authority within the broad society (Potts, 2009). Weber (1947, p.48) describes that for the individual considered as the one with charismatic authority, the most important thing is “how the individual is actually regarded by those subjected to charismatic authority”. The individual is only called charismatic as long as others regard him to be so, which can result in this form of authority being rather fragile.

The three authority types can be seen as individual types but they can also be combined (Spoelstra, 2018). When comparing the different authority types to each other, one could argue that both the legal and traditional authority are focused on routines and systematic acts (Weber, 1947). On the other hand, when looking at charismatic authority we can see the direct opposite of this, since it is “a typical anti-economic force, it repudiates any sort of involvement in the every-day routine world” (Weber, 1947, p. 53). For this reason, some argue that charismatic authority can also be seen as “the greatest revolutionary force” (Weber, 1947, p.53). As argued above, in this thesis we prefer not to view authority as a force. However, this statement still led us to believe that even though it can be difficult to maintain charismatic leadership, it can be considered as something which has a great influence on others. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that charismatic authority correlates a lot with what is described as ‘leadership’ in contemporary leadership literature. Spoelstra (2018, p.30) explains this by saying: “we tend not to use the term ‘leadership’ when charismatic authority is missing”. This again shows the great influence that charismatic authority can have.

Since charismatic authority depends a lot on how others view this authority (Weber, 1947), this can be related to the subjective authority as described by Barnard (1968). Barnard defined authority as:

“the character of a communication (order) in a formal organization by virtue of which it is accepted by a contributor to or "member" of the organization as governing the action he contributes; that is, as governing or determining what

he does or is not to do so far as the organization is concerned” (Barnard, 1968, p.163).

According to this definition, authority can be understood as having two aspects; a subjective and an objective aspect (Barnard, 1968). For something to be recognized as authority, an individual has to accept it, which is what makes authority subjective to their recognition (Barnard, 1968). On the other hand, the objective part of authority can be seen from how people communicate with each other, since the nature of communication can show whether someone accepts or denies authority (Barnard, 1968). From this we can see that the one subjected to authority has a great amount of influence, because he or she will either deny or obey to the authority. Barnard (1968, p.167) described this as “the determination of authority lies with the subjected individual”. This is also what Weber described when talking about charismatic authority. It only exists as long as it is recognized by the followers (Janowitz, 1968).

Both Weber and Barnard wrote their theories on authority in the first half of the 20th century. One of the things that characterized this century was the political upheaval, and the writings of Weber on authority “resonated with the temper of his time” (Houghton, 2010; Furedi, 2013, p.331). As a result, people started to link Weber’s theory of charismatic authority to the political leaders of that time (Lepsius, 2006). This led to people linking authority to what happened in the second world war, which is one reason why authority is described as having dangerous consequences (Spoelstra, 2018).

Contemporary leadership literature mainly describes authority in relation to power (e.g. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). Leadership is not described by using the term authority, possibly because of the negative connotations that influenced this word (Spoelstra, 2018). Therefore, one could argue that contemporary leadership discourse leaves no room for authority. However, according to Houghton (2010, p.451) “Weber’s ideas on authority are just as relevant today as they were 100 years ago, but in different ways and for different reasons”. He argues that Weber’s ideas influenced management and leadership literature a lot, and that mainly his ideas for charismatic authority would be good to consider during “today’s chaotic and rapidly changing environments” (Houghton,

2010, p.451). Furthermore, Spoelstra (2018, p.41) argues that without realizing, authority often already takes place in leadership, and that thinking about leadership without authority “proves challenging”. One could thus argue that instead of seeing authority as the opposite of leadership, it could still play a role in leadership within the twenty-first century. We will now describe some of the main models in servant leadership, before linking servant leadership to authority.

## 3.2 Servant leadership

As seen in the introduction chapter, Greenleaf’s writings ignited an interest in servant leadership in the 20th century (Spears, 2010). However, some found his texts difficult to understand and apply in reality (Spears, 2010). Furthermore, the famous essay *The Leader as Servant* is not academic (Greenleaf, 1977), which possibly made it difficult to include his writings in scholarly research. After Greenleaf, the second and third most cited servant leadership literature is written by Spears and Laub (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Therefore, in this section we will elaborate on their models. Since we found their models to have a significant amount of overlap, we will also describe how we found that they relate to each other.

Spears (2010) described ten characteristics of servant leadership, based on the writings of Greenleaf. His motivation was to make the concept more accessible to those who found Greenleaf’s book, *The Servant as Leader*, too conceptual (Spears, 2010). The mission was surely successful, and his interpretations of Greenleaf’s texts remain among the most influential (van Dierendonck, 2011). The characteristics he distinguished are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears, 2004; 2010). The first one is about being a good *listener*, but also about having the ability to discern the will of the group (Spears, 2010). He continues to explain that having *empathy* is about understanding and accepting people for who they are. When it comes to *healing*, Spears (2004) is referring to the attribute of being able to help and heal those who have experienced emotional brokenness. Spears (2010, p.18) explains further that servant leaders have *self-awareness*, and awareness of ethics. In addition, they have a “primary reliance on

*persuasion* rather than positional authority in making decisions within an organization”, which means that they value consensus and try to strive for it within a group (Spears, 2010). Subsequently, *conceptualization* implies that servant leaders should understand the day-to-day work while also providing a vision. They mediate between the board’s visionary and conceptual work and the staffs’ operational day-to-day work. The next characteristic, *foresight*, “enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future” (Spears, 2010, p.19). Moreover, it refers to the ability to have an intuitional feeling of the future (Spears, 2004). Additionally, *stewardship* is emphasizing the core of servant leadership by making others and their needs a priority. It goes hand in hand with the next characteristic of servant leaders being committed to and responsible for *growing people* in the organization, both in “personal, professional, and spiritual growth” (Spears, 2010, p.19). Finally, *building community*, the last characteristic, goes beyond serving the organization and its members and also focuses on the greater good for society in general (Spears, 2010).

In his dissertation, Laub (1999) presents the Servant Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA). It was developed as a tool to quantitatively measure the prevalence of servant leadership characteristics in an organization or group (Laub, 2005). However, Laub (2018) explains how the model also can be used to explain how servant leadership is exerted by practitioners. Being the first research-based assessment tool of servant leadership (Laub, 2018; Gandolfi, Stone & Deno, 2017) it has been used in 85 studies between 2000-2018 and is still frequently used (Laub, 2018). The model consists of six disciplines with three descriptors each, which will now be explained more in detail. Moreover, the disciplines will be related to the model created by Spears in order to pinpoint the most important characteristics on servant leadership.

### 1. Value People

The first discipline starts by explaining that servant leaders prioritize the needs of others before their own needs, and they see themselves as servants before leaders (Laub, 2018). Furthermore, servant leadership encourages to trust someone in an initial stage of a relationship, instead of trust needing to be earned over a period of time (Laub, 2018). Finally, a servant leader listens to and believes in followers to

show servanthood, so that others can take part in leading (Laub, 2018). Comparing this discipline to Spears (2004), this can be related to the characteristics of stewardship, where a leader feels responsible for the followers.

## 2. Develop People

Servant leaders should acknowledge both the “present value and the future potential” of the followers (Laub, 2018, p.85). They help others develop through first focusing on equality, since the goal is to have a culture where everyone can be both teacher and student (Laub, 2018). Besides that, the servant leader opposes the idea that he or she has all the answers and realizes that a mistake is not a failure, but an opportunity to learn (Laub, 2018). In addition, instead of giving commands, the servant leader behaves as he or she wishes others to behave, while focusing on encouragement and gratitude (Laub, 2018). Spears (2010, p 19) also describes this characteristic as the “commitment to the growth of people”.

## 3. Build Community

Both Laub (2018) and Spears (2004) claim that leadership is a process that cannot occur solitarily, and building a relationship with those that are being led is a prerequisite. Additionally, the relationships should be good and strong, and build on collaboration rather than competition. Finally, every person’s unique strengths are emphasized as an important contribution to the group and diversity is celebrated because of the acknowledgment of every individual’s value (Laub, 2018).

## 4. Provide Leadership

Laub (2018) claims that a common misconception of servant leaders is that they are weak and not able to make difficult decisions. He dismisses this and says that servant leaders will take action but based on a servant’s mindset (Laub, 2018). This is touched upon in the fourth discipline where servant leaders are said to provide leadership by “envisioning the future[,] ... taking initiative .... [and] clarifying goals” (Laub, 1999, p.83). Moreover, servant leaders are willing to be the one “to step into uncharted territory” even though resistance may occur (Laub, 2018, p.98). This discipline correlates with the characteristics of conceptualization and foresight, as described by Spears (2004). Both Laub (2018) and Spears (2004) consider the leader

to be visionary and forward looking, but also to be a mediator for the groups in the organization.

### 5. Share Leadership

According to Laub (2018), it is important to share leadership for a number of reasons. Firstly, a vision that is truly shared will create more engaged and motivated organizational members. Secondly, Laub (2018, p.102) claims that leaders who give their power away will “end up increasing their own level of power as well as the power of those they serve”. Thirdly, status symbols like leader privileges should not be of interest and a motivation for the servant leader, since it can create barriers between followers and leaders (Laub, 2018). Relating this to the model of Spears (2004), this discipline is similar to the characteristic of being a good listener, since it indicates that everyone’s opinion matters. In a similar manner, the characteristic of using persuasion rather than positional authority in decision-making implies that the decision-making power does not exclusively belongs to one leader, but that the goal is to share the power and find solutions through consensus (Spears, 2004).

### 6. Display Authenticity

The sixth discipline is that servant leaders display authenticity by “being open and accountable to others[,] ... a willingness to learn from others ... [and] maintaining integrity and trust” (Laub, 1999, p.83). The servant leader is an advocate for an honest climate and is open to receive feedback and advice on how to improve and learn (Laub, 2018). This discipline can be related to the characteristics of the servant leader showing self-awareness for his and her actions, as described by Spears (2004). Moreover, it relates to an awareness of moral and ethical behaviour in the organization (Spears, 2004).

### 3.2.1 Criticism of servant leadership

Over the years, servant leadership theory has received some critique (Lussier & Achua, 2001; Prosser, 2010; van Dierendonck, 2011). As described in the introduction, a first problem of servant leadership is the lack of consensus as to how the theory should be defined (Russell & Stone, 2002; van Dierendonck, 2011; Parris & Peachey, 2013; Andersen, 2018). This can be seen in the literature review of

Andersen (2018), where he describes around 50 different characteristics of servant leadership, found in different literature on the topic. A second critique of servant leadership is that it is too anecdotal and lacking empirical evidence (Prosser, 2010). Even though empirical studies have increased in the last decade (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018), most of it is quantitative research, whereas there is a need for more qualitative data about this subject (Winston p.191, 2010). A third critique is that servant leadership is seen as too idealistic in nature (van Dierendonck, 2011) and that the required selflessness is unrealistically high (Lussier & Achua, 2001). Van Dierendonck (2011) elaborates on this by saying that a significant amount of writings on servant leadership is presented in guides that explain how to be a servant leader, and are prescriptive in nature. In order to get more insight in how servant leadership works, he argues that “empirical descriptive research could not be more welcome” (van Dierendonck, 2011, p.1251).

### 3.3 Authority in servant leadership

When looking at servant leadership and reflecting on the models of Laub (1999; 2018) and Spears (2004; 2010), this raised questions about the role of authority, because authority seems to be present but is not explicitly expressed. First, Laub (2018) and Spears (2004) indicate that the focus on traditional and legal authority is not as relevant, for the main emphasis is on the willingness to serve and prioritize others. Second, by stressing the importance of persuasion rather than positional authority, Spears (2004) shows that servant leaders should not be dependent on legal or traditional authority. Third, Spears (2004) shows that another way to share authority is to embrace a participative approach to decision-making. Furthermore, Laub (2018) explains that a servant leader should ‘provide leadership’, however he does not describe the role of authority in this leadership. Finally, they also describe that servant leaders should share leadership, which can be understood as them sharing authority, but is not explicitly described. This made us wonder what role authority plays within this field. In order to elaborate on this further, we will now present the different perspectives we found on authority within servant leadership.

In line with how Laub (2018) explains sharing leadership as an essential aspect of servant leadership, the emphasis on sharing authority is a common way authority is talked about in servant leadership literature. Russell (2001) explains how an important characteristic of servant leaders is to empower the followers through trusting them and sharing responsibilities and authority with them (Russell, 2001). Hence, servant leadership differs from the hierarchical structure with one strong leader at the top and instead has the leadership authority distributed between more individuals (Russell, 2001). This can be related to the idea of “*primus inter pares*”, meaning that a group of leaders share the authority (Greenleaf, 1977). Van Dierendonck (2011) describes the role of authority in servant leadership in the same manner, by describing that it should be shared. One way authority can be shared is through providing the followers with autonomy in order to increase their motivation (Parolini, Patterson & Winston, 2009; van Dierendonck, 2011). Van Dierendonck (2011) stresses the importance of doing this, since it holds subordinates responsible for the goals you strive for as a team. A quantitative study from Parolini, Patterson and Winston (2009, p.289) recognizes this importance as well. They found that servant leaders can “influence [others] through unconventional service as well as through offering freedom or autonomy”. By giving subordinates more autonomy, they automatically are given more authority as well, for they now have the authority to make their own decisions. The view of Blanchard (1997, in Russell, 2001, p.80) correlates with this, for he describes that “[i]n essence, servant leadership involves turning the traditional organizational pyramid upside down”. Hence, instead of a leader having the main authority, we can see that contemporary servant leadership literature emphasizes that authority should be shared.

Besides the scholars that argue that authority in servant leadership should be shared, there are also those that describe another perspective. A first perspective that differs from the ones above is described by Barbuto and Wheeler (2006, p.307), who argue that servant leaders should use persuasion to influence others, rather than relying on “formal authority or legitimate power”. They argue that based on various studies, persuasion is shown to be more effective than the use of formal authority (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006). They explain that using persuasion is something else than using authority, by saying that persuasion is an “ability to influence others by means outside of formal authority” (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006, p. 307). However, this description

lacks in explaining if formal authority is still present and if so, in what form. Also, they do not describe if there are other types of authority present in servant leadership. A second perspective that differs from authority being shared, is provided by Laub (1999). Even though he also described that servant leaders should share leadership, in his dissertation (1999, p.28) he argues that “[s]ervant leadership is an alternative to the traditional power and authority model that is still most prevalent in our organizations today”. He continues by saying that servant leaders still hold a position of authority, but that instead of leading from that position, they should lead from their personal influence (Laub, 1999). The only time a servant leader should use his or her authority, is when this authority can benefit others (Laub, 1999). From this dissertation, it still remains unclear how much and what kind of authority the servant leader still possesses, and how much authority should be shared with those subjected to it. A third perspective is presented by Liden et al. (2008). They argue that servant leadership should contribute to building strong relationships with subordinates, by not only using formal authority, but also “by [using] formal social exchange” (Liden et al. 2008). This can be related to sharing authority, however Liden et al. (2008) still acknowledge the presence of formal authority. How these two relate to each other remains unclear. A final perspective is provided by Wong and Page (2003, p.13), who propose a more radical view by saying that authority can be seen as a barrier to servant leadership, and that servant leadership even has to “guard against the evil” of authoritarian hierarchy. They describe a contrast between authoritarian hierarchy (AH) and servant leadership, and say that servant leadership can only work in flat structures (Wong & Page, 2003). In addition, they say that: “when [servant] leaders cultivate respect, accountability and shared decision-making, there is no need to focus on AH” (Wong & Page, 2003, p.7). This shows that they also aim to focus on shared decision-making, but that they see authority as a barrier rather than something that could be shared, and that it should be eliminated rather than embraced.

In conclusion, we can see that some scholars agree that servant leaders should focus on sharing authority with those subjected to it. However, different views on this matter exist, which shows that there is no clear definition in how to define authority within servant leadership. With this study, we provide a qualitative approach to the relationship between authority and servant leadership, to see how this is visible within a particular organizational context.

### 3.4 Conclusion of chapter

This chapter provided a literature review on authority and servant leadership. In the first section, we elaborated on theories about authority. First, we argued that authority is seen as something different than power. After that, we described different theories of authority as provided by Weber and Barnard. Additionally, we described the rise of negative views on authority, since these still influence the contemporary leadership theories. After describing authority, we examined the concept of servant leadership by comparing two of the most influential models on servant leadership. Additionally, this section also described criticism about servant leadership, which entails the argument that it is far too idealistic and lacks empirical evidence. We ended this chapter by relating authority and servant leadership to each other, by first elaborating on which role authority has within the models of Spears and Laub. After that, we described that within contemporary servant leadership literature, there is a tendency to describe authority as something that should be shared. However, there are also scholars who argue that authority should have a different role, for leaders should not focus on their authority (Laub, 1999) or that authority should even be seen as a barrier to servant leadership (Wong & Page, 2003). In analyzing our empirical material, we will further examine on how authority relates to the servant leadership position that pastors have within their organization.

## 4 Historical context

This chapter will describe the historical context of the free churches for a number of reasons. First, the interviewees of this study work within the church, so this introduction is needed in order to fully comprehend our empirical material and analysis. Second, the historical context is also taken into account in the discussion of this thesis, which is why this background is considered to be important for the rest of the thesis. In this chapter we will first outline the Christian developments of the free churches in Sweden. Thereafter, we will give a description of Ekumeniakyrkan and how the congregations are organized.

### 4.1 Free churches in Sweden

According to Christian faith, Jesus died for all sins of humanity to show the love God has for the world and to make it possible to have a personal relation with him (Hill, 2013). This Christian faith came to Sweden during the Middle Ages (Hedin, 2017). The Roman-Catholic Church, led by the pope in Rome, shaped how the Swedish church developed, but the Swedish nationality also influenced it (Hedin, 2017). In 1517, the German Martin Luther started the Reformation in Europe by publishing 95 theses which questioned the teaching of the Roman-Catholic church and also the leaders of church having the main authority (Berntson, Nilsson & Wejryd, 2012). Through merchants and students, his teachings spread to Sweden and his ideas were preached in some Swedish trade cities already in 1520 (Berntson, Nilsson & Wejryd, 2012).

At a church meeting 1593, Sweden became officially Lutheran (Hedin, 2017). At the same time, the Lutheran Church of Sweden became state church, which it would continue to be until the year 2000 (Hedin, 2017). The Lutheran faith dominated the preachings and teachings in the Church of Sweden, which was generally accepted until the 16th century, when the religious expression became more diverse and individualistic (Hedin, 2017). Around that time, various groups of people started denying the sole claim on religion from the Church of Sweden, since they instead

wanted to acknowledge God as main authority. Therefore, they started criticizing the teachings of the Church of Sweden and proclaimed that they themselves preached the true Christian faith (Hedin, 2017). Movements of revival and reformation spread through Sweden in the 17th century and the differences in faith and expressions became even more distinguishable (Hedin, 2017). Because of this tension, these groups founded independent organizations separated from the Church of Sweden, and they called them “free churches”, for they were independent from the governance of the state church (Hedin, 2017, p.184).

The free churches worked in an environment where the Church of Sweden had absolute authority according to the law (Hedin, 2017). For example, until 1858 it was forbidden to have a religious gathering that was not led by a priest from the Church of Sweden (Hedin, 2017). Since the free churches did not recognize this authority and did not have priests leading their gatherings, the free churches at that time were considered to be illegal (Hedin, 2017). Another main difference between the Swedish and the free churches was the view on the individual, when it comes to freedom of religion. In the free church, the freedom of the individual and the freedom of religion was part of their manifesto (Bardh, 2008). They did not want the state to decide about their faith and instead, they stressed the importance of a personal faith experience and confession (Bardh, 2008). This was partly a reaction to how the priests had the majority of the authority in church and consequently leaving the common man with no mandate to participate in the congregational work (Bardh, 2008). Over time, this point of view clearly distinguished the state church from the free churches (Bardh, 2008).

The free churches were part of “folkrörelsen”, the peoples’ movement, that took place during the 17th century in Sweden, which resulted in an important legacy on the democratic principles of the country (Gustafsson, 1991; Berntson, Nilsson & Wejryd, 2012; Hedin, 2017). The movements were organized bottom-up as a protest to the authority structure of the Church of Sweden, which was clearly top-down and hierarchical. In the free churches, leaders and the board were chosen by the members (Hedin, 2017). The free churches have proudly kept this democratic structure over the years, except for the Methodist Church, Pentecostal Church, and the Salvation Army, who have had a more top down-approach from the beginning (Gustafsson, 1991).

During the 20th century, the free churches experienced a time of changes, with the growth starting to slow down around 1950 (Berntsson, Nilsson, Wejryd, 2012; Hedin, 2017). Different debates continued to separate groups, which led to the foundation of new churches and denominations until the 1980 (Hedin, 2017). After that, the free churches started to collaborate more, which led to a merger of some free churches in the beginning of the 21st century (Hedin, 2017).

## 4.2 Equmeniakyrkan

The denomination Equmeniakyrkan consists of three free church denominations which joined together during the first decade of the 21st century (Hedin, 2017). The three churches, *Svenska Missionskyrkan*, *Svenska Baptistsamfundet*, and *Metodistkyrkan i Sverige* have their roots in the reform movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and distinguished themselves by focusing on different faith related questions (Hedin, 2017). Nevertheless, their common roots became the foundation of a new joint church, which emphasizes God and Jesus Christ as the main authority (Equmeniakyrkan Theological Foundation, n.d.). Also, Equmeniakyrkan emphasizes the individual's freedom, responsibility of the congregation, democratic decision-making, and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (Equmeniakyrkan Theological Foundation, n.d.). Today, Equmeniakyrkan consists of 690 congregations in Sweden (Equmeniakyrkan Hitta Församling, n.d.). In Sweden, representatives of Equmeniakyrkan and other free churches are called pastors and representatives in the Church of Sweden are called priests (Svenska kyrkan, 2019).

## 4.3 Congregations of Equmeniakyrkan

According to the Christian faith, the main task for a congregation is to be part of the body of Christ and the worldwide church (Hill, 2013). Other than that, congregations are very different in character. Every congregation in Equmeniakyrkan is an independent unity, meaning they have the authority to make a decision independently of the denomination, in order to practice their faith in what they believe is the best

possible way (Equmeniakyrkan Vägen Vidare, 2009). Even though every congregation differs in how they organize their local church, the denomination Equmeniakyrkan provides guidelines (Equmeniakyrkan Församlingsstadgar, 2015). Generally, each congregation consists of a number of members and is financed through offerings and through government grants (Bidragsberättigade trossamfund, n.d.). A typical Equmenia Church has a Sunday service and a range of different activities during the weekdays. Examples of this are choirs, café for pensioners, language cafés, youth work, courses and discussion groups. At the same time it is common for the congregation to organize events, which sometimes means that they partner up with different churches or groups of society.

Most congregations have an annual meeting each year (Equmeniakyrkan Församlingsstadgar, 2015). Besides that, they have congregational meetings, which are called församlingsmöte, with the purpose of being a platform for decision-making during the rest of the year (Equmeniakyrkan Theological Foundation, n.d.; Equmeniakyrkan Vägen Vidare, 2009). The församlingsmöte is the highest decision-making authority of the congregation, and at these meetings, every congregational member has the right to speak up and vote (Equmeniakyrkan Församlingsstadgar, 2015). This structure is typical in Equmeniakyrkan, but every congregation has the right to decide how they prefer to organize, and variations exist (Equmeniakyrkan Församlingsstadgar, 2015).

Besides the församlingsmöte, a board with a chairman is responsible for leading, planning and organizing the church and its work (Equmeniakyrkan Församlingsstadgar, 2015). The chairman and the other board members are congregational members that are chosen on the congregation's annual meeting (Equmeniakyrkan Theological Foundation, n.d.). The board is also in charge of the financial management and has the employer responsibility for those employed by the church (Equmeniakyrkan Församlingsstadgar, 2015). Every congregation decides if they have the finances to hire, how many they want to hire, and whom to hire (Equmeniakyrkan Vägen Vidare, 2009). Typical positions are pastors, deacons, youth leaders and musicians. The congregation chooses a main pastor, which has the responsibility for being the spiritual leader of the local church (Equmeniakyrkan Församlingsstadgar, 2015). Together with the board, this pastor is also responsible for

executing the decisions made at the församlingsmöte (Equmeniakyrkan Församlingsstadgar, 2015).

# 5 Analysis

This chapter presents the results of our empirical material, together with our understanding and reflections. First, we will explain how the pastors relate to the congregation, by focusing on community and togetherness, leading together and the presence of informal leaders. Subsequently, we will explain how they relate to the board. Finally, we will outline how pastors relate to their own role, by describing the pastoral profession as calling, describing how they see themselves as leaders, and what role authority plays in this.

## 5.1 The pastors' relation to the congregation

### 5.1.1 Community and togetherness

One of the first things that the pastors expressed during the interviews is the importance of community and togetherness within the congregation. An example of this is described by Nick:

“When I think about the congregation, I think about a football team, with different positions, where you need different abilities, and you need to work together to do good work. And I think that God has created every one of us differently with different gifts and talents, and that we need each other. We need to listen to each other, and help each other to function well as a congregation” - Nick

As can be seen above, Nick first describes the church as a football team with members who need each other, help each other, and listen to each other. It indicates an awareness that congregational members can be seen as equals and that they are working together in the congregation. Interestingly enough, he was not the only interviewee using this metaphor. Two of the pastors expressed that the church should function like this. Others expressed the importance of togetherness and community in similar ways, by saying:

“The goal for church is to follow Jesus. And if you want to be more specific, I think the goal for the church is for us to grow together to be better humans, for the humanity, for the world ... Each individual person has to find their way to search for God's will in their life. And we don't it alone, but together, helping each other” - Luke

From this quote it can be seen that Luke wants to encourage congregational members to have an individual relationship with God, but at the same time he emphasizes that congregational members can help each other to grow, which shows a focus on togetherness and community. The reason these terms are mentioned simultaneously is because during the interviews, the pastors explained these terms as very similar. They stress the importance of spending time together so that the church can be a community where people help each other. In addition, the pastors also express a will to encourage the congregation to lead together. James expressed that pastors should share their leadership, by “equipping, enabling and empowering people in the community to be leaders”. Other pastors also emphasized the importance of creating a group of leaders, so that leadership is shared instead of centralized.

### 5.1.2 Leading together

Besides being together as a community, the pastors also expressed the importance of taking decisions together and working towards consensus. As we have explained in chapter 4, the congregations all work in a democratic way, with the församlingsmöte having the main authority. The pastors explained this as follows:

“And then the board has some authority, but församlingsmöte, as it's called in Swedish, where the congregation meets and decides things, that's the largest, the first authority” - Luke

“The most important thing is the members meeting or the church meeting. So that's the församlingsmöte meeting. That's where every member has a vote” - Peter

“We have those meetings with the whole congregation perhaps two three times a year. And basically, those meetings... If there are any decisions to be made, important decisions, they will be made by the whole congregation” - Mike

During the interviews, the pastors did not only explain how the församlingsmöte works, they also expressed how much they value it. In the quotes above we can see that they experience it as “the main authority”, and “the most important thing”. Most pastors really stressed the importance of leading together with the congregation. Not just because the church is regulated this way, but also because they truly believe in this. They expressed this by saying:

“I find it it's an excellent model. Because if you have this balance, this very delicate balance... out of it becomes a fantastic dynamic between the congregation and the pastors” - Mike

“That's also an aspect that... that I really believe in. Leading together with others” - James

James explains that leading together with others is seen as important, and as can be seen above, the församlingsmöte is a way to put this in practice. Additionally, in the quotes we can see Mike mentioning balance. Other pastors also mentioned this in a similar way, by saying there should be a balance between the authority of the congregation, the board and the pastors. However, even though the pastors stressed the importance of community, togetherness and consensus, during the interviews we found that this can also lead to frustration for the pastors. Some examples of this are:

“It's a little bit harder to do things in the congregation where everybody has a say in what they think” - Suzan

“Another challenge here is that you have community relationships and you have a lot more voices to contend with. That means you have to make time for communication. I feel like the best situation might be to work out when you should have a little bit of hierarchy to save time” - James

As can be seen above, the interviewees explain that even though they want to reach consensus, the process can be frustrating, because it takes time and energy for the pastors. Mike argues that he balances on this frustration as well, but he also adds:

“And sometimes I balance on the frustration because sometimes I wish I could say to people ‘do that and do that’. But in the end, I know that that's not the right way to do it. Because if people don't by themselves discover that this is the right way to do it, then it has much lower value for the kingdom of Christ I think. For the kingdom of God. And that means that consensus is very important” - Mike

This quote shows that even though Mike experiences the frustration that comes with striving for consensus, he still sees the inherent good in the consensus model as more important. He really wants the consensus model to work, which is why the frustration seems to bother him less.

At the same time the pastors are dealing with another ambiguity that comes with their employment. While they are employed by the congregation, they are also expected to lead the congregation to some extent. When asking them about this, the pastors responded by saying:

“So in a sense, they are my employers, but I'm also employed to serve them, to be a pastor for them ... So I try to lead them in the same direction and also support them with what they want. Try to navigate within that. That's a bit difficult” - Luke

This quote shows that there is some unclarity about the role of authority in leading the congregation, since the congregation is also the pastor's employer. When asking about this further, Suzan explained:

“Yeah, it's weird. But it is like this, so there is nothing to do about that. I think there are other ways, of course. The Methodist Church has another type of leadership. There the congregation is not the employer; the pastors are

employed by the denomination. But it's weird, but it's like this. So I have to live with it” - Suzan

Interestingly, when describing consensus in the congregation in the previous paragraph, Suzan explained that she doesn't see a problem with it. However, when asking further about this topic, she says she must “live with it”, which made us believe that actually she does see problems with it.

The general understanding when interviewing the pastors was that most of them really want to strive for consensus and togetherness, which can also be seen from Mike who is saying that “consensus is [still] very important”. They are passionate about it and still want it to work. However, we did find a contrast in this, since it is frustrating for them at the same time.

### 5.1.3 The presence of informal leaders

In the section above we described how the församlingsmöte has the authority to make the main decisions. However, from the interviews we can see that there are also other ways to make decisions, through ‘shortcuts’ and informal leaders. Most pastors recognized these, but their view of informal leaders differs a lot:

“Because in churches, I think there are many leaders who are elected for positions, but there are many informal leaders also, who are like respected, yeah. People go to them if they want to learn something” - Will

“Don't take it the wrong way. But you have to be manipulative when you work with people in some way. It's like when you work with the youth as well, if you get the leader of that group if he or she wants to join, well, the other would come along because they follow that person. You have to find the leaders. The formal and most important the informal leaders” - Luke

“[When talking about informal leadership, which he called unofficial leadership] So as we work in the future, we try not to have a separation between official and unofficial leadership, but try to just have one leadership,

which is the official leadership. And try to never use the unofficial ways, but just use the official ways” - Peter

From the quotes above we can see that both Will, Luke and Peter recognize informal leaders. However, there are some key differences in how each of them relate to informal leaders. Will explains that they are there to teach other congregational members, whereas Luke explains that from his perspective, he needs to engage the informal leaders to influence the community. Furthermore, both of their interpretations differ from the perspective of Peter, who is certain that in the congregation they have to get rid of informal leadership, for it undermines the formal leadership. Therefore, congregational members should only recognize formal leadership. Most interviewees use one of these three techniques in relating to informal leaders, but there is no clear answer when asked how to deal with this. Moreover, as discussed above, most pastors want to encourage people to be leaders, so that leadership can be shared, but they sometimes struggle with how this takes place in practice.

## 5.2 The pastors' relation to the board

Besides having the församlingsmöte, which the pastors explain as the main authority in the congregation, the board is making decisions as well. Mike explains this by saying: “In between the församlingsmöte, the board is leading, so basically my function is not that much authoritarian”. A possible reason for him saying this is because formally, a pastor is not allowed to vote on the board. When first asked about how pastors experience that, Suzan replied like this:

“Well, it's how it should be. I don't see a problem with it. The congregation is somewhat different from another organization or from a profit company.... A congregation is the body of Christ. So we have to work different here. Listen to more people, make the decisions ours and not one leader making the decisions and that everyone has to follow. So it has to be... everybody's decision when we do things” - Suzan

The way Suzan explains it is how most pastors explained it. They argue that this is the way the church should function, and consensus is very important. Since the congregation is formally the pastor's employer, you may also question to what extent a pastor has the opportunity to have a different opinion towards this attitude. We will describe this further in the discussion. When asking the pastors how they relate to the board, they answered by saying:

“In the script, the whole church is your employer. It's the whole church that is on the paper, that pays you. But that doesn't mean that the whole church has the right to tell you what to do, for example. That right belongs to the board” - Clara

“It's symbiotic in a sense. We serve each other” - Luke

“Yeah, they are the ones responsible. So they are the ones hiring and firing. And they're the ones setting the salaries of the staff. But it actually works. In all Equmenia Churches it looks like this” - Peter

From the quotes above it can be seen that the pastor is employed by the congregation, but they work most closely together with the board. Moreover, the relationship with the board is described as symbiotic. In order to reach this symbiotic relationship, a lot of pastors mentioned the importance of trust of the board on the one hand, and a good relationship with the chairman on the other hand. One example of pastors mentioning this is from Mike: “without trust, nothing works. It's very vulnerable”. Most of the pastors have a good relationship with the chairman now, which really helps them in their job, because part of their job is to present new ideas to the board. However, the way the pastors relate to the board and to the chairman differs a lot. The following quotes are some examples as to how pastors relate to the board:

“Interviewer: So how does it work? Are you a member of the board?”

Luke: I don't have the right to vote, because the board decides about my employment. But I can say my opinion. The board has never voted as long as I've been here. We talk until we agree” - Luke

“I relate as an ordinary member [to the board], they don't treat me in a special way. I have one vote. It's not a difference just because I'm a pastor. So when the other is saying something I'm not saying 'well, now I tell you the answer'" - Harry

“In this church it's like the pastor is a beggar. They can say to the board: 'I have this suggestion'. And then they can say: 'no, go do this instead'. And because they are your employer, all you can do is say, 'Okay'" - Clara

“I mean I do anyways [vote]. I mean my vote doesn't count but I mean... I'm part of the community, so yeah" - James

“I am in the board. Yeah, but I don't... I cannot vote in the board. I can say what I think, and they can listen to what I think, but it's the board that takes the decisions" - Suzan

As can be seen from the quotes above, almost all the pastors relate differently to the board. Whereas most of them agree that they cannot vote on the board, there are still a number of differences in how they deal with this. Luke explains that he still says his opinion, which is similar to how Suzan relates to the board. However, where Luke and the board talk until they agree, Suzan is not involved in the final decisions that the board makes. In addition, there is a considerable difference in how Harry and James relate to the board. Both of them vote, but where James is aware that his vote does not count, Harry only mentions that he has one vote. This led us to believe that the board in Harry's congregation allowed him to use one vote during the board meetings, which shows a significant difference with all other pastors we have spoken to. Finally, when talking about her relationship with the board, Clara used the metaphor of the 'pastor as a beggar'. She explains that in her congregation, the board does not allow her to have a lot of authority. Some other pastors also recognized this when talking about congregations where they were previously employed. With the board having this significant amount of authority, we understand that it may be crucial for a pastor to maintain a good relationship. This may even impact the way pastors speak with the board. If a pastor has a good relationship with the board, he or she may feel more comfortable with confronting them with an opposite view. However, when their

relationship with the board is more fragile, it may be difficult for them to express their true opinions and feelings.

## 5.3 How pastors relate to their role

### 5.3.1 The pastoral profession as a calling

When looking at the pastors job and responsibilities, most of our interviewees express that their decision to become a pastor was not only based on whether or not they would like to do this job, but also that it was something they felt that God called them to do. They explain this as follows:

“And when I was around 10 years old... Well I won't say it was like a vocation, but I knew that I would like to be a pastor” - Kate

“So more and more I realized that a pastor might be what God has called me for in my life. And then I applied to become a pastor in Equmeniakyrkan” - Nick

“But I don't see it as a job only. It's my calling. And I want to be here, even if I wasn't paid for it” - Suzan

As can be seen from the quotes above, most our interviewed pastors describe that God had something to do with their reason to become a pastor. Three other pastors, not mentioned above, explain that they felt that God wanted to show them they should be pastors. Most of them thus describe their job as also being a calling. Having this attitude towards work also seems to have a considerable amount of impact on the pastor's personal life. One interviewee says:

“If someone calls me on my free Monday to ask something, that's not a problem. It's kind of a strange job [chuckles]. And it's a bit hard sometimes to combine it with family life, but I also can have my family on my job. They can come with me to service and they can be here” - Suzan

Suzan describes the need for her to be flexible in her job, and this also came forward in other interviews we had. The job of a pastor is very varied. Besides preaching in the Sunday service, the pastors explain that they engage in a lot of other activities, such as: leading youth groups, organizing projects and activities such as language cafes for immigrants, meeting with elderly people, consulting people who are experiencing hardships in life, preaching at funerals, officiating at wedding ceremonies, and many more. This requires them to be available throughout the whole week, which demands a flexible attitude towards the work. Most of the pastors did not describe this as being something they are struggling with, but rather as something that gives them freedom and that they enjoy.

### 5.3.2 Pastoral leadership

When we asked the pastors about their leadership, most of them responded by emphasizing Jesus as an example for their leadership, which means they want to focus on being a servant:

“You know, that’s the example we have in Jesus Christ, that he himself called us to, it’s servant leadership” - James

“Even in our leadership, we should follow Jesus as an example. And I see that the humble leadership, the last should be the first, to lead from underneath” - Luke

“It's like that in the Bible, it says the leader should be the servant. So I am the leader of the church, but I'm also the servant of the church. So... the church is my... I am here for them. They are not here for me” - Suzan

From the quotes above we can see that the pastors perceive themselves as servant leaders and that they use a biblical perspective as foundation for this. When we asked them about how their leadership is positioned in church, they responded with:

“So as a pastor, I am a spiritual leader of the congregation, that’s how it is formulated, which means that I am ordained as a minister by the denomination” - Peter

“I’m not so focused on the organization and all the things that’s around. I want to be focused on the church and Jesus and the gospel” - Will

“But the main thing is that I can facilitate this place for growth and for maturing people” - Mike

As shown in the quotes above, the pastors believe that their focus should be mainly on the spiritual side of the congregation. This means that they should facilitate congregational members so they can grow in their Christian faith, which Will indicates by focusing on “Jesus and the gospel”. Moreover, Luke comes back to the importance of consensus while focusing on this spiritual side:

“I have to realize that even though I've studied theology, I've studied some leadership, church leadership courses and different things. I don't have all the answers. It's not my way that necessarily is the best way. I have to be humble in that. Because my job is mostly about helping the members to search for the truth. Search for God’s will” - Luke

From the quote above we can see that Luke also acknowledges that his main role is to focus on the spiritual side of the congregation. Furthermore, even though the pastor can be seen as the spiritually responsible person, he or she still needs a humble approach when interacting with congregational members. However, during the interviews, we also saw a different picture. We found that for the pastors, the challenge of spiritual leadership is often difficult to distinct from organizational topics. Even though they want to mainly focus on the spiritual side, sometimes this side can also influence organizational aspects of the church. To give some examples, the pastors mentioned this:

“What I will do is I will offer what I feel is the direction that God is calling us to as a church or is equipping us to, however you want to phrase it, but that's my responsibility” - James

“When you're trying to be a spiritual leader, take time for prayer and meditation. And at the same time, you want to be a leader for the democratic organization and push a vision and push people to do things. It's kind of schizophrenic way of doing it” - Peter

What can be seen from these examples is that even though the pastors aim to focus mainly on the spiritual side, they are also involved in the organizational or strategic aspects of the congregation. In order to help the congregation develop, they want to formulate visions and be engaged in the implementation process. Will talks about this even more, since he is in the process of launching a new vision for the congregation:

“We want to create a broader view of leadership in church. Not one elder, like the old way of thinking, but creating a team of leaders in church instead. A team of spiritual leaders. So it's not only one person who has the burden to lead the church” - Will

Will seems to be very engaged in this matter, which is of organizational and strategic character. This contradicts with what he said before, when he argued that he is not focusing on the organizational side of the congregation too much. Additionally, during the interviews Will expressed strategic thinking. An example of this is that he has been waiting for the right time to make these changes in the congregation, which shows that he is the one initiating ideas for a change project within the church. Interestingly, he was not the only pastor talking about how they initiated change. Even though the interviewers did not specifically ask about it, many pastors described a story in which they themselves were initiating change. Moreover, in these stories they did not focus on consensus, because they still wanted to initiate change even though they did not have the whole congregation on board. Even though the pastors described that their main focus was on spiritual leadership, through these quotes and their stories it seems that indirectly, the pastors want to focus on organizational topics as well.

### 5.3.3 Longing for more authority

During the interviews, most pastors showed signs of longing for more authority, by saying:

“[Metaphor about how he relates to congregational members] And sometimes I feel like the parent in the morning who gets frustrated when their children don’t want to put on the right clothes when it’s raining outside ... In some areas, it’s not about consensus. It’s not about educating. It’s actually doing it by yourself if you wish it to happen” - Mike

“Sometimes I really long for the Pentecostal way of things, where the pastor just decides, and thank you” - Clara

“Sometimes it gets tiring and I don’t want to do it anymore. Why can’t people understand that this is where we should go, this is good? But you have to stay humble and realize that I don’t have all the answers myself” - Luke

Even though the pastors aim to strive for consensus, they are still longing for authority as well. Mike uses a metaphor by describing a pastor as a ‘parent in the morning’, which explained that for him he sometimes would really like the congregational members to go in a certain way, but because of the consensus focus this can be a difficult and time-consuming process. This contradicts with when Mike mentioned that the current model is an “excellent model” in the section above. When looking at the metaphor of being “a parent in the morning”, this not only shows frustration, but also a sign of feeling superior and indicating that they believe they know best. Apparently, this model of consensus leads to longing for authority. Similarly, Clara and Luke also describe this frustration and would at times also prefer more authority. Interestingly, there was only one pastor who was not longing for more authority, and this was a pastor that already had a considerable amount of authority because of the background of his congregation. Since the churches only merged a couple of years ago, the impact of the old denomination is still present in a lot of churches. In the churches where the pastor used to have a lot of authority, he or she still has it. However, in churches where consensus had always been more present, we could see that pastors were longing for more authority.

## 5.4 Conclusion of chapter

This chapter presented the empirical material and analysis of this study, by examining the role of the pastor and relating it to the congregation and the board. More specifically, what we have found is that firstly, the pastors stress the importance of togetherness, consensus and community, which shows that they want to serve the congregation. However, at the same time this can lead to frustration in practice. Secondly, we have seen that all pastors recognize the presence of informal leaders in their congregation. Nevertheless, all pastors relate to these informal leaders in different ways, which shows the complexity of how a congregation should function. Thirdly, we described how pastors relate to the board. Even though most of them work well with the board, it was shown that the board has a considerable amount of authority, which emphasizes the importance for pastors to have a good relationship with the individuals on the board. Fourthly, we elaborated on how pastors relate to their own role, by describing that they perceive their job as a calling from God, and by explaining that they want to follow the example of Jesus in servant leadership. Furthermore, they want to focus on the spiritual side of the congregation, but they often also end up working on the organizational aspects. Lastly, our empirical material showed that pastors sometimes long for more authority. The reason for that, which will be elaborated further in the discussion, partly has to do with most of the authority being distributed among the board, the församlingsmöte and with the informal leaders.

## 6 Discussion

With this thesis, we aim to examine the role of authority in servant leadership. After examining how pastors relate to servant leadership in their congregation, this chapter will elaborate on this further by combining our empirical findings with our theoretical background. By providing a new perspective on authority within servant leadership, we aim to contribute to a refined understanding of servant leadership, through emphasizing the impact that followers have on servant leaders. After describing the pastor as servant leader, this chapter will elaborate on the role of authority within the context of our study. Thereafter, we will critically reflect on what this means for servant leadership.

### 6.1 The pastor as servant leader

As can be seen from the theoretical background, a number of scholars connected the role of the pastor to servant leadership (Scuderi, 2010). From our empirical material, we also show that the pastors perceive themselves as servant leaders. In order to see how our empirical data correlates with the literature on this subject, we will connect and discuss quotes from the pastors that can be combined with the characteristics of servant leadership as presented in the models of Spears (2004) and Laub (2018).

Firstly, in the empirical material it is shown how the pastors see their occupation as a calling, how they believe that they are called to serve God and the congregation. This shows that they recognize a higher authority, as described by Robinson (2009 in Waterman, 2011). They see the will of God and the will of the congregation as something that guides in leading. This is of major importance, since the primary motivation to serve is at the core of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2004; Laub, 2018). The will to serve can also be visible in how the pastors acknowledge and accept that the job can lead to inconvenient working hours. Moreover, it was concluded in the empirical analysis how the pastors value people and acknowledge their differences. They see themselves first and foremost as spiritual leaders with the mission to help the congregational members to grow

spiritually and personally. In addition, they want to encourage others to be leaders in how they help and serve others. Both models in our theoretical framework relate to this, by expressing the commitment to help people grow as characteristics of servant leadership (Spears, 2004; Laub, 2018). Moreover, the empirical analysis concluded that community and togetherness are important parts of pastors' job. The pastors acknowledge that being a church is a team effort, similar to a football team, and that everyone is needed. This can be related to both the model of Spears (2004) and Laub (2018), since both models recognize that building community, building strong relationships and enhancing collaboration are characteristics of servant leadership. Another finding in the empirical material shows how the pastors, besides being a spiritual leader, also expressed interest for organizational and strategic aspects of the congregation. This implies they want to possess the characteristics of conceptualization and foresight and they want to be involved in the visionary work of the church. When linking this to our theoretical framework, it can be seen that pastors want to provide leadership, as described by Laub (2018), and show the way by initiating projects even when they do not have the whole congregation on board. Finally, even though our empirical material showed that the pastors have a desire to provide leadership, they also clearly accept and embrace the collaborative style of leading together with the board and the congregation. According to our empirical material, the interviewed pastors seem to believe in the consensus model for decision-making. This line of thought corresponds well with Laub's discipline of sharing leadership and the characteristics of being a good listener and using persuasion rather than positional authority in decision-making (Spears, 2004). The pastors show a willingness to share the leadership responsibility with the congregational members, however, that does not mean that they sometimes struggle to do so. They express their leadership through listening and persuasion, but also express that at times, they long for more authority as well. Finally, the empirical material showed that the authority of others can influence the servant leadership of the pastors. This influence will now be further developed.

## 6.2 Factors that influence servant leadership

In the theoretical background chapter, we described that the main body of literature on servant leadership describes the role of authority as being shared. However, variations of this description exist, which results in unclarity about the precise role of authority. Our empirical material correlates with the theories that say authority in servant leadership is shared, and it contradicts the theories that suggest otherwise. Additionally, our empirical data provides more insights by not only showing that authority is shared, but also describing how it is shared. In this section, we will further develop three places where our interviewees described that authority is present: through the legal authority of the församlingsmöte and the board, through the charismatic authority of informal leaders, and through the traditional authority of congregational members.

### 6.2.1 Legal authority within the board and the församlingsmöte

As described above, the församlingsmöte and the board are the most official ways of how decision-making takes place, and can be seen as having legal authority (Weber, 1947). The pastors expressed the importance of this, first because they describe the församlingsmöte as main authority, but also because it contributes to being a democratic organization. Luckily, most pastors have a good relationship with the board, and they make decisions together. Nevertheless, the analysis showed that all pastors relate differently to the board, because some pastors vote, but others describe their role in the board as being more of a “beggar”. According to Barnard (1968), this can be described as the objective part of authority, since the way someone talks about authority can show how they relate to it. In addition, how the pastors relate to the board has a lot to do with how the board treats the pastors. The analysis showed that if the board is open for the pastors’ ideas and curious to hear his or her views, a pastor will relate differently to the board than when the board uses its power to make decisions without using the input of the pastor. Moreover, since the congregation is formally the pastor’s employer, they can use authority in which way they think is best. Hence, even though the pastor can strive to be a servant leader when dealing with the board and församlingsmöte, how this takes place in practice depends a lot on

how both the board and the församlingsmöte relate to the pastor. Saying that servant leadership is an alternative to authority or that eliminates authority, as some scholars argue, is not in line with what we found in our empirical material. Instead, this correlate with the view that authority is shared or delegated, for we can see that legal authority influences the pastors as servant leaders.

### 6.2.2 Charismatic authority of informal leaders

The analysis showed that most pastors experience the presence of informal leaders. Even though most formal decisions are made by the board and församlingsmöte, through so-called ‘shortcuts’ and informal leaders, decisions can be made too. As shown by our empirical material, all pastors relate to informal leaders in a different way. Some argue that they are there to teach people, whereas others say they want to work together with them to influence the community. Furthermore, other pastors were convinced that the formal leadership is the only leadership that should be recognized, and therefore the congregation is better off without informal leaders.

Even though all pastors relate to informal leaders differently, most pastors acknowledge their authority. When linking informal leadership to our theoretical framework, we argue for informal leaders to have charismatic authority. The reason for this is that they are able to influence others, and that their authority is only present if others recognize it (Weber, 1947). This can also be linked to theory of Barnard (1968) about subjective authority, for the only reason authority exists is because others, like the pastors, recognize it. The pastor in this sense is subjected to the charismatic authority, but at the same time he or she can influence the authority by either denying or obeying to it (Barnard, 1968). In the case of the pastors, we have seen examples of pastors working together with informal leaders to influence the community. As a result, this means that the pastors recognize authority of informal leaders and somehow obey to it. Therefore, the authority of informal leaders shows another way of authority influencing the servant leadership of the pastor.

### 6.2.3 Traditional authority of congregational members

According to our empirical material, the congregational members have two ways in which they can influence servant leadership by using authority. Firstly, congregational members are in the position to use traditional authority. In the guidelines of Equmeniakyrkan, it is written that the congregation should be run in a democratic way and decisions should be made by the whole congregation together (Equmeniakyrkan, Theological foundation, n.d.). This means that the Equmeniakyrkan continues the tradition of sharing authority, as commenced by the free churches. This type of authority can be related to the traditional authority as described by Weber (1947). Instead of believing in one person that holds the position of traditional authority, all congregational members are now invited to have that authority, which they can use by participating in the församlingsmöte and/or the board. Since this is how Equmeniakyrkan is organized, the pastor can only accept this by showing her or his “loyalty” (Weber, 1947, p.47) to the congregational members. Secondly, congregational members can respond to the authority of pastors by either obeying or denying to it. Since most pastors do not hold a strong position of legal or traditional authority, they only have authority when others recognize it. Just as pastors can thus obey or deny the authority of informal leaders, congregational members can obey or deny the authority of the pastor. From the empirical material we can see that even though pastors often strive for consensus, this can be time-consuming and can lead to frustration. Since everybody in the congregation has a say, they can help pastors but can also work against them. As a result, this shared authority means that all congregational members can use authority to influence the pastor.

## 6.3 Reflecting on authority within servant leadership

In the first section of this chapter we argued that when linking the pastors’ perspectives and the way they talk about their actions, they can be seen as servant leaders. Reflecting on the paragraphs about authority, we also see that servant leadership is heavily influenced by it. Authority is shared among followers, who can either have legal, charismatic or traditional authority, or a combination of those. In this section we will reflect on this by providing three different insights about our empirical material in relation to the implications for servant leadership studies.

First, our empirical material shows that authority within the congregation is shared, however, it seems unclear who decided to share this. Historically, we saw that in the Church of Sweden, the function of the priest had traditionally and legally a significant amount of authority (Hedin, 2017). However, the free churches emerged as a reaction to this (Hedin, 2017). When Ekumeniakyrkan was founded, they agreed on keeping the democratic structure and not giving the pastors too much authority (Gustafsson, 1991). This means that one could question whether it is the servant leader, or pastor, who is sharing authority, or if it is the organizational structure that made this possible. Since the pastors were not given a lot of authority from the beginning, it would not be possible for them to share it. Therefore, it seems like the concept of ‘sharing leadership’ as described by Laub (2018) and Spears (2004), is difficult to apply in this context, for it is unclear if it is indeed the servant leader who is sharing her or his leadership. Whether or not this would also be applicable to other organizational contexts, would be interesting for further studies on this topic.

Second, based on the impact of authority as mentioned above, one could even argue that pastors *have to be* servant leaders, because they are being influenced by what the congregation wants them to do. Since most pastors in our study did not receive a lot of legal or traditional authority, their authority is largely dependent on how others obey or deny their authority (Weber, 1947). According to Kojève, authority can be described as “the possibility that an agent has of acting on others (or on another) without these others reacting against him, despite being capable to do so” (Kojève, 2014, p.8). Authority in this sense is largely dependent on those subjected to it, and if those do not recognize the authority of a leader, this authority is non-existent. If the ones subjected to leadership only accept the pastors when they are focusing on the characteristics of servant leadership, one could question whether or not being a servant leader is a choice. If being a servant leader is the only way their authority is accepted, then pastors will realize that this is the only way how they can influence others. In our empirical material we did not find many signs that show the congregational members are controlling how the pastor should lead. However, as shown in this chapter, we did find signs that their position makes it possible for them to do this. This could be seen as a paradox in servant leadership, since one could question if it is still servant leadership when others influence the leader to take on this

leadership style, and serving does not come from an intrinsic motivation. However, we could not find contemporary studies or theories addressing this specific topic. It would be interesting to further study the effects on legal, traditional and charismatic authority on servant leadership in other organizational contexts. This way, there can be more clarity about how followers of a servant leader can use authority to influence or impact the decisions of the leader.

Finally, our empirical shows that being a servant leader can be more complex than described in the servant leadership literature. The explanation of servant leadership by Greenleaf, and the models provided by Laub and Spears show an idealistic picture of this topic (van Dierendonck, 2011). However, our empirical material showed that servant leadership is not only a matter of applying principles, but that it takes place in a particular context, and that this context can highly influence how servant leadership works. An example of this is when we asked the pastors how they related to the board. Whereas most of them described their relationship as positive, this relationship was also described as a pastor being a beggar. Most pastors agreed that the board has a lot of influence on the role of a pastor, and thus also on the pastor's leadership. The reason for this is because the servant leader can not always predict how others will respond to servant leadership. This example shows that explaining servant leadership through the use of models may give a slightly simplistic picture of how servant leadership takes place in practice. With this qualitative research, we provided some insight in how it takes place in the field of church, but further qualitative studies could elaborate on this by studying this in other organizations.

## 6.4 Conclusion of chapter

This chapter commenced by arguing why in this thesis, we see the pastors as being servant leaders. After that, we have described various ways of authority being present in the organization and how this impacted the leadership of pastors. As a result, we have argued that servant leadership is impacted by both legal, traditional and charismatic authority. Furthermore, we have reflected on our empirical material by saying that it is unclear if the leader shared authority, or if it was already shared beforehand. Additionally, we argued that authority may have more impact than it

seems, for it can also impact the decision of pastors to be servant leaders. Finally, we stressed that our research shows the complexity of servant leadership in practice. Instead of following the characteristics as described in the models of Spears (2004) and Laub (2018), servant leadership is highly context dependent and influenced by how others use authority. These insights show that even though pastors consider themselves as servant leaders, our empirical material shows that they are leaders who are also being led. Not only by the higher authority that they recognize from God, but also because of the authority of others, that influences how they can lead. By conducting more qualitative studies in this field, we may be able to get a better understanding of servant leadership, the role of authority in this and the development of leadership literature.

## 7 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the role of authority within servant leadership. Since the research field of servant leadership is missing empirical data (Scuderi, 2010), and more specifically a focus on qualitative research (Winston, 2010), we conducted a qualitative study in order to provide an answer to the following question:

*How do pastors perceive their servant leadership and how does this relate to authority?*

Our findings suggested that pastors perceive themselves as servant leaders. This is not only because they want to serve the congregation, but also because they see themselves as servants of God, and being led by God, which shows that they recognize a higher authority (Robinson, 2009). However, since authority in the congregation is shared with the congregational members, other types than divine authority were also seen to influence the servant leadership of the pastors. Our empirical material suggested a distinction between three types of authority that were found to influence servant leadership and the role of the pastor. First, we described the legal authority (Weber, 1947), that is present through the board and the församlingsmöte. Since the congregation is formally the pastors' employer, both of these formal authorities can use authority in which way they think is best. By doing that, they can influence the servant leadership of the pastor. Second, we described the charismatic authority (Weber, 1947), that can be described as being the authority of informal leaders within the congregation. Based on our empirical material we saw that all pastors worked differently with informal leaders, and that the pastors can influence their authority by either denying or obeying to it (Barnard, 1968). Third, we described the traditional authority that is visible through the members of the congregation. Based on the tradition of the free churches and the Equmeniakyrkan, decisions should be made by the whole congregation together, which gives all members some authority (Equmeniakyrkan, Theological foundation, n.d.). Additionally, all congregational members have the ability to either obey or deny to the authority of the pastors. As a

result, our empirical material showed that pastors perceive themselves as servant leaders who are being led by God, but also by the congregation.

This thesis contributes to contemporary literature on servant leadership for a number of reasons. First, by linking the perceptions of the pastors to the theories of Laub (2018) and Spears (2004), we can see that they can be perceived as servant leaders, which is also argued by Scuderi (2010). Second, we explained how authority plays a role in servant leadership by being shared. This correlates with the theories of some of the main scholars in the field (Russell, 2001; van Dierendonck, 2011), but counter argues other scholars who say that servant leadership is an alternative to authority (Laub, 1999) or that authority in servant leadership should be eliminated (Wong & Page, 2003). Furthermore, this study contributes to servant leadership literature by acknowledging that those subjected to servant leadership can influence it by using different types of authority, as described above. Finally, this thesis contributes to the servant leadership literature by stressing the complexity of the subject. Spears (2004) and Laub (2018) explained different characteristics of servant leadership, but this study shows the importance of contextualization in dealing with this, since servant leadership is highly influenced by how others make use of authority.

## 7.1 Limitations and further research

With this study, we believe to have provided some valuable insights when it comes to servant leadership and the impact of authority. However, we acknowledge that this thesis studied a small sample of servant leadership and that it has limitations. In our methodology chapter, we have reflected on several limitations that may impact this study. First, we discussed the possible pitfalls in doing this study, which is that it might be a challenge to not be influenced by our personal faith. However, we also found that our Christian background has been very helpful in writing this study, since we had a lot of knowledge about church beforehand. Second, we discussed the generalizability of our results, where we called for contextualization rather than generalization (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Finally, we discussed the possible language barrier that pastors had to deal with. However, since we let the pastors take

their time during the interviews, and one of the authors of this thesis is Swedish, our experience is that the interviewees could say everything they wanted to say.

Since most of the limitations as described above were mainly related to the methodology of this thesis, we will also discuss limitations that are related to the findings of this thesis and will relate these to further research. First, we recognize that this study provided a brief review of literature. Even though we believe to have included the main scholars and most cited studies in this field, a more extensive literature review could provide more insights in servant leadership and authority and how these two relate to each other. An example of this is that we used two of the most cited models on servant leadership, but that there are numerous other models which explain this term. It would be interesting to see the results of relating all these models to each other, in order to see if that would change the definition of servant leadership and the influence of authority on this. Second, we acknowledge that this study can be seen as rather small, considering that ten pastors were interviewed and the timespan of the study was five months. It would be interesting to see if other qualitative studies would also see that authority still plays a role within servant leadership. Moreover, the study could also take place within a different context, in order to see if the results will be similar in another organizational context. Third, due to the scope of this research, we have only studied authority in relation to servant leadership. As described in the introduction, there are several other contemporary leadership theories, such as distributed leadership and authentic leadership, that also tend to distance themselves from authority. For future studies, it would be interesting to see if this phenomenon of authority in servant leadership is also present in these other leadership theories. Finally, in this study we have argued that pastors can be seen as servant leaders. However, we have not reflected on whether servant leadership benefits pastors in doing their job, so we cannot argue if this is the best leadership style for them. It could be valuable to include this in future research about servant leadership.

## 7.2 Practical implications

After describing the limitations of this thesis, we will now reflect on possible practical implications of this study. First, we hope that this thesis can create awareness about

which role authority can play within servant leadership. As shown in our theoretical chapter, some scholars argue that servant leadership is an alternative to authority (Laub, 1999) or even that authority should be eliminated (Wong & Page, 2003). However, seeing authority as something that should be eliminated, might not help leaders to deal with authority in a constructive way. Through conducting this study, we have seen that the pastors not only appreciated to talk about leadership and authority, but that it also helped them to reflect on it more. We think it would be beneficial for practitioners to also talk about this with peers, colleagues, or managers, so that authority will not be seen as something necessarily negative, but rather as something acknowledged and most likely present in the organization. By doing this, the role or position of authority within their organization can be further explored and examined. Second, with this thesis we hope to encourage leaders to be critical towards their own servant leadership and the role that authority might have on this. For example, a leader could be a servant because he wants to be, but also because others, who have more authority, influence him to be. Being aware of this might help the leader to get more insight in her or his own leadership style. Third, as mentioned in the limitations section, this thesis focused on servant leadership in a context where the leaders have not been given a large amount of legal or traditional authority. In other organizational contexts, where leaders may have a very clear amount of legal or traditional authority, it is important for the practitioner to realize that the findings in this thesis may relate to their context in a slightly different way. One possibility is that when a leader has more legal authority, followers may have less legal authority at their disposal. As a result, followers could be unable to influence the leader as much as is possible within the context of this study. Furthermore, while this thesis is primarily focused on authority within servant leadership, it would be interesting to find out if authority plays a role within other leadership styles as well. By acknowledging that authority is most likely to exist in some form, practitioners may be encouraged to discover how it influences their role, team and organization.

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# Appendix A: Interview Guide

After introducing myself as interviewers, we started by discussing the pastors' role in general, after which we discussed the topic of leadership. Our interview guide is based on different themes, as described below. We have also included some example questions. The goal was not to ask them all the questions, but rather to focus on the themes and to make sure we discussed all themes elaborately.

Themes:

1. General information about their position (around 20 minutes to discuss this topic)
  - a. Example questions:
    - i. How long have you been a pastor?
    - ii. How would you describe your job?
    - iii. Have you worked in other churches as well? What are differences?
    - iv. How long have you been in this church?
    - v. Could you tell us about the congregation?
    - vi. How do you relate to the board?
    - vii. What is your position in the church?
    - viii. What are your main responsibilities?
    - ix. What do you spend most time on?
    - x. How do you view the church in general?
  
2. The role of a pastor (around 30 minutes to discuss this topic)
  - a. Example questions:
    - i. How do you see yourself as a pastor?
    - ii. What made you become a pastor?
    - iii. Can you highlight something that particularly motivated you in becoming a pastor?
    - iv. Is there something that keeps you going in your daily work? Something that motivates you?
    - v. What would you say is the more challenging part of your job? What are your struggles?

- vi. Who is your role model?
- vii. What influences you?
- viii. Is it important for you to develop your skills? How do you do this?
- ix. What is your position in church? (if they mention leadership: how would you describe yourself as a leader?)

3. Leadership (around 30 minutes to discuss this topic)

a. Example questions:

- i. What comes to mind when you think of leadership?
- ii. When you think of leadership and church, what comes to mind?
- iii. What is particularly interesting in church leadership to you?
- iv. Does leadership play a role in your life? If so, how?
- v. Would you call yourself a leader? What kind of leader would you say you are? Can you give an example of this?
- vi. Do you have any struggles in leading this congregation?
- vii. What/who inspires you when it comes to leadership and management?
- viii. Is it important for you to develop your skills? How do you do this?
- ix. What do you think of the role of God and Jesus in leadership?

In addition to these themes and example questions, we used follow-up questions. The purpose of this was to discuss a subject more elaborately or to gain more insights in a particular topic. Some of the follow-up questions were:

- What happened then?
- How did that make you feel?
- What did you do?
- What do you think about it?
- How did you experience it?
- Have you experienced this yourself?
- Can you elaborate on ...?
- Could you specify ...?

Furthermore, we summarized the answers of interviewees in order to clarify if we understand them correctly. Finally, before ending the interview we asked them if they wanted to share anything else or if they had any questions. The things they said at the end often proved to be valuable for the interview analysis.