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Diaconal Work in Church of Sweden During the Pandemic

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From Community to Distribution

Diaconal Work in Church of Sweden During the Pandemic

TORBJÖRN HJORT AND STIG LINDE



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*Diaconal Work in Church of Sweden During the
Pandemic*

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Abstract

This study seeks to explore how the challenges posed by the pandemic which spread 2020 were managed in Church of Sweden. In many sectors of society, responses to the pandemic were characterized by a top-down approach. However, within the parishes, where there is a longstanding tradition of autonomous decision-making based on local circumstances, the situation appears to have been different.

The study is based on interviews with deacons in three parishes. Among the congregations involved in the study, there was a general consensus that, aside from the recommendations issued by the Public Health Agency, they had no specific policies to follow. The parishes were largely left to design their activities in a local way that suited the circumstances of the pandemic.

Common parish activities – low-threshold gatherings with devotions, hymn singing, coffee, conversations – were canceled, as were soup lunches, services, and even choir activities. The pandemic hit at the heart of the church's core activities. One of the fundamental components of civil society, fostering community where people meet, was shut down. A logic of “assembly” and community transformed into what we call a “distribution logic”. Two particularly clear expressions of this during the pandemic were digital broadcasts of services and delivery of groceries, especially to the elderly who were initially advised against going out. Unlike a “horizontal” community logic, as around a table, a distribution logic can be understood as “vertical,” where static roles as givers and receivers were established. Competing logics create tensions that drive transformation: community becomes service distribution.

Abstract in Swedish

Studien undersöker hur församlingar i Svenska kyrkan hanterade de utmaningar som pandemin 2020 gav upphov till. Till skillnad från många andra samhällssektorer, där pandemihanteringen präglades av ett top-down-perspektiv, visar studien att församlingarna i stor utsträckning agerade självständigt utifrån lokala förutsättningar. Studien bygger på intervjuer med diakoner i tre församlingar, där det framkom att Folkhälsomyndighetens rekommendationer utgjorde de huvudsakliga riktlinjerna, medan specifika kyrkliga policys i stort sett saknades. Pandemin ledde till inställda församlingsaktiviteter och slog därmed mot kyrkans gemenskapsorienterade kärnverksamhet. I stället trädde vad studien beskriver som en distributionslogik fram, tydlig bland annat i digitala gudstjänster och utdelning av matvaror till behövande. Analysen visar hur spänningen mellan gemenskapslogik och distributionslogik bidrog till en omvandling av församlingspraktiker under pandemin.

Introduction

In December 2019, a previously unknown coronavirus called COVID-19 began to spread worldwide. The Swedish Government decided to apply the provisions of the Infectious Diseases Act regarding threats to public health and dangers to the community. On 29 March 2020, restrictions on public gatherings were introduced, which also affected gatherings for religious worship. The number of people allowed to attend public meetings was reduced several times during 2020. When the limit was changed to eight participants in November 2020, funeral ceremonies were exempted, allowing up to 20 people to attend under safe conditions (Lundgren, 2022).

How to best manage the pandemic and its consequences became a major and controversial issue. At the same time, extensive efforts were made in all areas of society – public, business, households and civil society – to deal with and, as far as possible, solve the problems caused directly and indirectly by the pandemic. The pandemic had a significant impact on the congregations of the Church of Sweden, leading to radical decisions, not least regarding core activities. Worship services had to be held with ever smaller numbers of people, unless they were cancelled or broadcast digitally. Children's activities were not affected in the same way, as the restrictions did not apply to school activities, which were not closed in Sweden. However, few activities remained unchanged.

In a study of three parishes in 2015-2016, *Decentraliserad diakoni. Research Reports in Social Work 2020:5* (Hjort & Linde 2020), we noted that diaconal work in the Church of Sweden is highly decentralized, with congregations having considerable autonomy. The Church Order only states that diaconal work should be practiced. What activities and projects the more than 1,300 congregations initiate and carry out is largely up to them. The considerable autonomy granted to each congregation, coupled with limited central governance, entails both opportunities and constraints. This autonomy enhances the ability to tailor activities to the specific needs and context of the local community, in terms of both the composition of the target group and different types of local cooperation. At the same time, there has been a desire for clearer guidelines, i.e., some form of direction concerning what the

Church of Sweden should be aiming for in its congregations' diaconal work.¹ This limited governance can lead to a vague understanding of the Church of Sweden's ambitions and further hinder the ability of deacons to carry out their work professionally, as their roles are often poorly defined.

In the study conducted during 2015–2016, our focus was on how congregations responded to and managed two distinct social issues: loneliness among the elderly and begging. Loneliness among older adults has long been a concern that the Church's diaconal work has, in a sense, come to be strongly associated with. The broader society tends to rely on the Church in this regard, and the issue is often perceived as one that the Church "owns." However, despite its significance, this issue does not necessarily contribute to increased visibility or public exposure for the Church of Sweden. Begging, by contrast, emerged as a more publicly debated and contested issue, engaging multiple actors within civil society. The Church of Sweden was one among several stakeholders, and our interest lay in understanding how congregations navigated this terrain – both in terms of their approach to the issue itself and in relation to broader aspects such as collaboration with other organizations.

The study revealed considerable variation in how congregations acted. While work with socially isolated elderly individuals remained important, it appeared to have been somewhat deprioritized. In the case of begging, congregations adopted diverse strategies: some chose to withdraw, while others actively engaged in cooperative efforts with external actors. These differences were, in part, attributable to previously established forms of collaboration and networks. Given the absence of centralized directives, it was largely left to individual congregations to determine, based on their local context, how they would address these issues.

Given these conditions – specifically, a distinctly decentralized organizational structure with minimal central governance, this study seeks to explore how the challenges posed by the pandemic were managed. In many sectors of society, responses to the pandemic were characterized by a clear top-down approach. However, within the parishes, where there is a longstanding tradition of autonomous decision-making based on local needs and circumstances, the situation appears to have been different. How, then, were the directives issued by the Public Health Agency of Sweden interpreted

¹ At that time, 2015-2016, at least in a specific issue - i.e. begging EU-migrants.

and implemented? Were they adapted to local conditions, or was there an attempt to formulate a more unified strategy? Furthermore, how were decisions regarding appropriate courses of action made at the local level?

Following its separation from the state in 2000, the Church of Sweden faces the challenge of positioning itself among other civil society organizations – entities that may serve as both partners in collaboration and competitors for resources and public attention. Within this transformed landscape, a critical question arises: how does the Church of Sweden choose to navigate these dynamics? Building on our previous study, where we examined the Church of Sweden's diaconal work with a focus on issues such as governance, cooperation with the surrounding society and views of the future, in the present report we aim to understand the significance of the pandemic for the congregations' life and work. This study focuses on how these issues are addressed from the perspective of the local parish. While the inclusion of national and central levels would undoubtedly have added further analytical depth, the scope of this investigation is confined to the local level.

The report has two main aims. The first concerns overarching central governance and its articulation at the local level during the pandemic. During the pandemic, society as a whole was subject to guidelines from central and national authorities, which prescribed how local agencies and organizations should address the crisis and its consequences. Our first question is: How did the local parishes studied respond to the challenges of the pandemic?

The second aim is to study how the pandemic affected congregational activities, especially diaconal work. Congregational diaconal work can be described using the concept of institutional logics. Congregations are characterized by a natural logic of community, reflected in practices and in the terms that denote these: community, communion, congregation (Linde 2017). The risk of getting infected during the pandemic meant that a large proportion of activities based on community, especially those largely dealing with relationship-building and empathy, could not be conducted as before without adaptations and changes. We know from other studies that digitalization came to play a central role in how different congregations managed the pandemic (Fransson, Gelfgren & Jonsson, 2021; Garpe & Idestrom, 2022).

2. The Church of Sweden as an Organization

In the law on the Church of Sweden enacted by the Swedish Parliament, it is stipulated that “The Church of Sweden is an Evangelical-Lutheran denomination that is manifested through parishes and dioceses” (§1). The same act defines the parish as the Church’s local unit, comprising individuals who are members of the Church of Sweden and reside within the geographical boundaries of the parish. These individuals are obligated to pay the church fee.

The Church of Sweden is a democratic organization where members appoint representatives to decision-making assemblies at three geographical levels: local, regional and national. In addition to, and intertwined with, this democratic system, there is a chain of control that consists of the office or the ministry, made up of bishops, ordained priests and, since 2000, ordained deacons. The legislation characterizes the Church of Sweden as an “open folk church,” representing a collaboration between a democratic organization and the ordained ministry of the Church.

According to the Church Ordinance, which has served as the governing framework for the Church of Sweden since 2000, three criteria define a parish. First, the parish must hold worship services, with the general rule being that a principal service is to be celebrated every Sunday. Second, there must be a consecrated church building. The third criterion is that there must be individuals who take responsibility for carrying out the parish’s duties and who are willing to take on positions of trust. This “minimalist” description is of an ecclesiastical legal nature and is intended to serve as a basis for assessment, for example in decisions concerning the merging of parishes.

The Church of Sweden can be viewed as a hierarchy, while at the same time it may be described as “flat” and highly decentralized (Linde 2010). The parishes of the Church of Sweden do not constitute a federation, neither in the sense of local associations united under a central organization, nor as a main association divided into subordinate branches. Nor do the parishes and dioceses of the Church of Sweden form a corporate group in which a parent

company exercises controlling influence over subsidiaries through ownership.

Each level of authority within the Church of Sweden possesses a relatively strong democratic legitimacy due to the direct elections to its decision-making bodies. Both dioceses and parishes clearly emphasize their autonomy. This results in the national level having a comparatively weak identity in relation to that of the parishes and dioceses. It also creates ambiguity regarding where the center of power within the organization lies and how control is exercised (Linde 2010).

Regarding diaconal work, the national level of the Church of Sweden expresses itself ideologically. In programmatic texts, the diaconal mission is described as advocating for and directing efforts toward particularly vulnerable groups in society. However, the handbooks and guidelines outlining how this is to be implemented are lacking. The sociology of religion scholar Charlotte Engel has, in a critical dissertation 2006, examined the rhetoric surrounding the Church of Sweden's diaconal work in relation to its actual practice. When the economic crisis of the 1990s confronted parish deacons with greater – and in some cases new – needs, it became evident in several places that it was difficult at the local level to respond in line with the intentions set out in the programmatic texts. Local priorities diverged from national rhetoric.

2.1 Deacons and diaconal work

Deacons are ordained employees, usually with a social science education. Sixty percent of pastorates in the Church of Sweden have at least one employed deacon (Babajan, 2019). However, these are unevenly distributed across the country's congregations. More than 80 percent of congregations in rural areas have no deacons. In total, just over a thousand deacons serve in the Church of Sweden (Svenska kyrkans matrikel, 2022). A deacon can never hold the highest office in a parish, that of the vicar. It must be a priest.

Diaconal work takes many forms. Open meeting places (soup lunches, cafés, open preschools, meeting places for the elderly) are the most common activity category, followed by outreach work (often in care institutions) and psychosocial support (individual and group counselling) (Hollmer, 2020).

Material support (such as food parcels and funds from foundations and fundraising activities) ranks fourth in the measure of the most common activity categories. In recent years, employment and internship opportunities focusing on vocational and language training have become more common. Open meeting places are particularly important in reducing feelings of loneliness and counteracting isolation among older participants (Wulff Hamrin, Kusterer & Lundberg, 2022).

3. State of Knowledge: The Church's Diaconal Work at the Outbreak of the Pandemic

The diaconal work in its various social forms, which this report focuses on, was reorganized in several ways. We will, based on several studies and reports, highlight some themes that characterized the congregations during the pandemic: collaboration and reorganization.

3.1 Collaboration between Civil Society Organizations and National Authorities

At the end of March 2020, an agreement was signed between the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR), and five major civil society organizations: Red Cross, Save the Children, National Sports Confederation, City Missions in Sweden, and the Church of Sweden.² The purpose was to coordinate efforts – at the national and local levels – to support municipalities in helping "elderly people and others in risk groups (in accordance with the Public Health Agency of Sweden's recommendations) in their own homes, for example with grocery shopping and other services."³ The Red Cross took on a coordinating role at the national level. Which organization would take on a local coordinating role was to be agreed upon locally, in dialogue with the municipality.⁴ After two months, it turned out that the Church of Sweden coordinated support efforts

² *Avsiktsförklaring gällande samarbete med anledning av Covid-19-utbrottet under 2020.* MSB 2020-03-24. A similar agreement was concluded with the Svenska Civilförsvarsförbundet (Swedish Civil Defence Association), which holds responsibility for training within Frivilliga Resursgrupperna (FRG) (Voluntary Resource Groups), comprising members from the voluntary defence organizations

³ Op.cit. Punkt 3.1.1.

⁴ Op.cit. Punkt 3.1.5; 3.1.6.

in 70 municipalities, the Swedish Red Cross in 20, and Volunteer Resource Groups (FRG) in 48 municipalities.⁵

A report from the Diocese of Lund describes that many diaconal workers in the diocese's congregations had already begun organizing shopping assistance for their parishioners before the agreement became known.⁶ The so-called "MSB assignment" in the Church of Sweden was followed up by the consulting firm Ramböll on behalf of the Church of Sweden. In a report from December 2020, it was found that the most common services performed involved grocery shopping, pharmacy errands, and various types of deliveries, such as meals or loaned books.

According to survey responses gathered by a consulting firm on behalf of the Church of Sweden, the implementation of local coordination proved to be a considerable challenge.⁷ Cooperation with the municipality worked well according to many respondents in congregations (n=45), but several municipalities "were uninformed about the assignment or showed a lack of initiative and willingness to cooperate."⁸ The fact that municipalities were not aware of the Declaration of Intent is confirmed by a regional study in the North of Sweden. The authors also assess that municipal administrations often lack "robust tools, resources, or structures to convene the local civil society."⁹

In the Church of Sweden's own surveys, six out of ten vicars reported that the congregations delivered grocery bags and medicine as part of their work during the period from March to June. Most did this independently, with their own resources. Only a small part did this in cooperation with, for example, the municipality, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, or the Red Cross.¹⁰ Ramböll's follow-up also included feedback from the dioceses. They expressed support for the national level entering into an agreement but also valued their autonomy and preferred that the national level consult with the dioceses before agreements are made or that the dioceses' participation be voluntary.¹¹

⁵ Starke 2021, p. 266

⁶ Lunds stift 2020, p. 5

⁷ Ramböll 2020

⁸ Ramböll 2020, p. 26

⁹ Larsson & Kandelin 2021, p. 30

¹⁰ Fransson et al 2021, p. 79

¹¹ Ramböll 2020, p. 19

3.2 Reorganization

The limitations based on messages from the Public Health Agency of Sweden came to dominate the diaconal work of congregations in the spring of 2020. In a study of activities in civil society, follow-up interviews were conducted with four deacons in southern Sweden from March 2020. It became apparent that many meeting places, especially for older people (categorized as a risk group), including worship services, were closed, excursions were canceled, and visits to care institutions eventually ceased completely. The study describes how the guidelines issued by the congregation's leadership focused on limitations but provided little information about alternative ways of continuing activities.¹²

When the fundamental practice of parish diaconal work, namely gathering people, proved impracticable, the interviewed deacons devised alternative approaches. In one city, a deacon devoted time to being present in a church reported to be open during the day. In a smaller community, the deacon started walking around "the village" to meet people for "good conversations at a reasonable distance."¹³ The telephone became another way to contact older individuals. Here, questions about home delivery of food also arose (see below).

A report from the Diocese of Lund attests to similar adjustments. When the weather permitted, congregations organized outdoor cafés, sometimes called "Café with distance." Activities where food was distributed had to be reorganized, and staff were equipped with protective gear, and the diaconal reception areas with plexiglass. Despite the limitations, the study describes one congregation that maintained its language café and clothing distribution, even though several older volunteers were unable to participate. A deacon's motivation for this is quoted: "Some of our newly arrived have told us that we are the only ones they have met all week."¹⁴

The report from the Diocese of Lund presents good examples but also criticism. Not all decisions to shut down were anchored in the staff teams. Work tasks changed in volume and focus, which could create tensions in the workplace. Another factor affecting the work environment was, of course, the

¹² Hansson 2021, p. 94

¹³ Hansson 2021, p. 96

¹⁴ Lunds stift 2020, p.11

fear of the disease. A similar situation is described from the Diocese of Borgå in Finland.¹⁵ The lack of routines and insufficient management, combined with the uncertainty of the situation, contributed to stress and fatigue, although new working methods and collaborations created new opportunities.

A central and significant component of the congregations' diaconal work consists of the contributions made by volunteers. Church statistics in the Church of Sweden show a decrease in the number of volunteers in diaconal activities, from 32,000 people in 2019 to 20,000 people in 2021. The statistics do not differentiate by age, but it is reasonable to assume that many older volunteers could not, did not want to, or were no longer allowed to participate in the social contexts that parish diaconal work usually consists of. In a qualitative study in two pastorates, focus group interviews describe how the committed volunteers were not involved in decisions on how to reorganize activities, which is described as having caused negative feelings.¹⁶ One of the coordinators in the spring of 2020 made a critical comparison between the Church of Sweden's and the Red Cross's handling of volunteers.¹⁷ A crisis often mobilizes volunteers. This "recruitment window" was described as used by the Red Cross to recruit volunteers to their circles. Congregations, on the other hand, are described as having utilized their staff, some of whom had less to do due to the restrictions. This might seem like an unfortunate strategy if the congregation thus avoided engaging dedicated individuals. However, this picture is not entirely clear. In survey studies in 2020, it appears that some, one in ten, congregations also recruited new volunteers during the spring of 2020, particularly in contexts related to food and medicine deliveries, in cooperation with other actors.¹⁸ However, for most congregations that did not engage in cooperation, there was no influx of volunteers; the work was mainly managed by employed staff.¹⁹

¹⁵ Hellöre 2021

¹⁶ Hagman 2022

¹⁷ Starke 2021, p. 268

¹⁸ Fransson et al, 2021, p. 39

¹⁹ Fransson 2022, p. 209

4. Method and theoretical perspective

Digital interviews were conducted with three deacons from three congregations previously described in the above presented report (Hjort & Linde 2020). We aimed to select three types of congregations that could illustrate the overall variation in the Church of Sweden. However, we chose not to include smaller rural congregations, as they generally do not have employed deacons.

One congregation is located in a small Swedish municipality. The second congregation is situated in a suburb of one of Sweden's three major cities. The third congregation is located in a medium-sized municipality not within commuting distance of a major city. In the report (2020), we interviewed the deacons, the vicar, and an elected member of the church council from the congregations during 2015 and 2016. The semi-structured interviews began with questions about work with begging and loneliness, and then moved on to topics such as focus, priorities, governance, and visibility.

When the pandemic broke out in 2020, we wanted to capture reflections of the same congregations on how a congregation manages such a crisis. This time, we interviewed only one deacon from each congregation. The interviews took place in May 2021, digitally via Zoom, for obvious reasons. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. We then searched for central and significant themes relevant to the research questions.

The interviews have been analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), i.e., familiarizing oneself with the data through transcription of interviews and repeated reading, then generating initial codes and searching for themes, further looking for data specifically related to these themes and sometimes revising the themes in relation to all empirical material and the initial codes.

Using the concept of *Institutional Logics* is a way to discern the duality of social structure and action. Institutional logic is a standard for what a certain organization must do, a historically based order providing organizational identity, rooted in material practices and symbolic systems (Friedland & Alford 1991). It is also a theory of change: how actors create and modify

elements of institutional logic, shaping both new practices and meanings (Maguire & Lawrence, 2004). This could be the case when organizations seek new arenas or pursue internal reforms – or when the context is radically changed, like during a pandemic.

Loosely coupled systems are a common phenomenon in human service organizations and are characterized, first and foremost, by the fact that the tasks that make up the organization's core activities are only minimally coordinated (Hasenfeld 2003). Loose couplings can also be observed between goals and means within an organization. As an illustration, one can mention the often extensive commitments Church of Sweden makes regarding its diaconal mission in its policies and parish instructions (Engel 2006). A wide range of human suffering is expected to be managed by a very limited work organization. A second characteristic is that control over employees' work is minimal. A deacon's meeting with a confidant is seldom observed by anyone else. A third characteristic is that leadership tends to be weak and fragmented. A divided authority structure refers to situations in which, for example, nurses are simultaneously subordinate to both administrative management and the directives of physicians. In the context of the church, this is reflected in the coexistence of a democratically elected governing board and the hierarchical clerical line consisting of the ordained ministry.

The fact that different parts strive for independence, based on their own understanding of their tasks, is not merely a symptom of self-willed and headstrong officials. The concept of loose couplings describes how an organization manages externally imposed demands. These demands can also be of various kinds, and since they may come from different actors, they can, in practice, be incompatible (Hasenfeld 2003). However, the fact that a part of the organization can make an adaptation to its specific task, without having to negatively affect or be held back by the rest of the organization, can be seen as a positive form of flexibility.

Loose couplings challenge the idea of organizations as strictly rational and hierarchically governed (Weick 1976). Instead, they reveal that organizations often operate within a field of tension between external demands and internal practices, where loose coupling can be a deliberate way of managing complexity and conflicting expectations.

5. Results

The number after the quotes specifies the congregation from which the quote is sourced. C1 represents the small Swedish municipality congregation, C2 represents the suburban congregation and C3 represents the congregation in a medium-sized municipality.

5.1 Local-Level Governance and the Management of the Pandemic

How did the congregations choose to respond to and manage the pandemic? One might expect that the central Church of Sweden would have been more active in providing more uniform advice and guidance to the regional and local parts of the organization. However, even during a global pandemic, this study shows that the Church of Sweden is a decentralized organization with significant local autonomy for individual congregations. Organizationally, most decisions regarding restrictions and other changes were handled by ordinary management teams, while the suburban congregation activated a crisis group formed for extraordinary situations.

How did this decentralization manifest itself during the pandemic? Among the congregations included in the study, the consensus was that, apart from the recommendations from the Public Health Agency, there was no direct policy to adhere to. The congregations largely had to design their activities in a way that aligned with what worked in relation to the pandemic. The suburban congregation mentioned that directives eventually came, but they were delayed:

"And then eventually it did start also from the church, from the diocese and from the national level. But initially, it was very much our own decision from the authorities, what we had heard in press conferences from the authorities and such" (C2).

Thus, the forms of the church's diaconal work, just like before, were largely a matter of local conditions concerning target groups, activities, and the

competence available in the congregation. The suburban congregation had to consider the limited access to wi-fi among residents, while other congregations had to adapt to the fact that a large proportion of very elderly people are unfamiliar with digital solutions. Regarding collaboration with other congregations on various solutions, this did not seem to change significantly compared to the pre-pandemic situation, i.e., congregations mainly work based on their internal conditions and tend not to look at other congregations. However, it did happen that congregation members participated in other congregations' activities when these other congregations took a somewhat more liberal approach, for instance concerning the celebration of the communion.

The Church of Sweden, along with several organizations, was part of the agreement made with the MSB (the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency) to collaborate in helping certain groups, such as the elderly who were particularly vulnerable during the pandemic. A national study show that, from the Church of Sweden's perspective, this collaboration generally did not have a significant impact (Ramböll, 2020). Regarding the three congregations studied, different pictures emerge. Overall, the national-level agreement had less impact in the local context. There was awareness of it and some knowledge of what other organizations, especially the Red Cross, contributed.

In one studied congregation, the diocese requested contact persons from the congregations who could be liaisons and act as a hub in relation to the MSB's collaboration initiative. The congregation felt they could not take on this role, and there was no collaboration.

"And we thought that all congregations are sovereign, they are in their context, and they work from that, and sure, you can coordinate and such, but with us, I think it passed by quite unnoticed, actually" (C1).

In one of the other congregations in the present study there was already an agreement between the municipality and the Red Cross. There were opportunities for the congregations to participate, but it would have meant a financial commitment that the congregation did not dare to take on. For the third congregation, contacts were ongoing between the Red Cross and the management team. However, this did not result in direct collaboration.

The MSB's collaboration initiative clearly illustrates how the Church of Sweden's decentralized organization manifests itself at the local level. Each congregation is autonomous, apart from more nationally regulated practices such as church records, financial transactions from the state, the funeral service regulated by law, and the common handbook with Church of Sweden service orders. The local congregations can largely decide how to organize their activities. Despite the agreement with the MSB, there was uncertainty about what this agreement entailed in the studied congregations. The agreement was not fully implemented in any of the congregations studied, extending at most to limited collaboration with one of the organizations included in the agreement.

Consequently, changes in the environment were primarily handled by the congregations, which are independent and can choose the strategies they deem best. As previous studies have shown, this approach has both advantages and limitations. On the one hand, there was uncertainty and a call for guidelines and coordination. The Church of Sweden is a unique organization, and there may have been a need for more central directives and a national interpretation of the Public Health Agency's guidelines on how the organization should handle the pandemic in relation to various activities. On the other hand, there were also benefits, as the Public Health Agency's guidelines could be interpreted locally and adapted to the conditions under which the activities were conducted. For example, if there was already an established collaboration, it could continue or be reactivated.

5.2 Local Organization During the Pandemic

A motto within the Church of Sweden, as well as in other organizations, became: "We do not cancel, we adapt." "And we have had to adapt gradually all the time, actually, depending on new guidelines that have been issued," one interviewed deacon said.

The interviewed deacons described certain groups as being more vulnerable than others. The very elderly belong to such a group, not only due to age but also because they are less accustomed to digital media, which in many cases had to replace physical meetings. The neighborhood itself could also be described as vulnerable, with many people falling ill and the need to

improve information and communication about the infection. The pandemic also deprived people of opportunities to support themselves:

"...more and more people have such insecure employment, project positions, hourly jobs, lack permanent employment. So it had already started before, and now it was their hours that disappeared first during the pandemic" (C1).

The pandemic initiated a need for new thinking. In two of the congregations studied, a temporary "Corona Line" was established "for people who needed to talk." Calls to this phone number were answered by priests and deacons:

"A lot connected to this isolation, that people don't feel so good in it, and what they carry in their life's backpack, which might be from further back in time but still something they've gone through, somehow comes up again during the pandemic."(C1).

One significant issue was that many volunteers engaged in congregational diaconal work were also identified as belonging to a risk group due to their age. A challenge for the congregational staff was maintaining contact with these volunteers. One congregation organized a phone list to keep in touch methodically, but as someone said, "It petered out..." (C3).

Prioritizations were made visible in several ways. Regarding food distribution in one parish, it was not the deacons who took charge but the parish staff member who usually handled food service tasks. This allowed the diaconal team to focus primarily on pastoral care, where increased demand was noticed.

In a couple of the congregations studied, food distribution was organized in collaboration with local retailers. This involved initiating collaboration, advertising the possibility of getting help with grocery deliveries, and where needed, delivering the food. For a period, furloughed professionals from the car industry in one congregation helped deliver food and did similar tasks, but they soon returned to their regular work.

5.2.1 The Church is Closed – but not everywhere

Still, not everything was adapted. Activities were also canceled. "Open low-threshold gatherings with devotions, hymn singing, coffee, conversations,

sometimes a guest, those types were canceled." In another congregation, cancellation of "much of the community-promoting activities, such as soup lunches and services and such things" was described. Because it was unclear how the infection spread, one congregation questioned whether it was possible to serve food at all. Until this knowledge became clear, they initially did not have any communal meals together. Because the elderly were a risk group, many activities aimed at the elderly (sometimes referred to as retirees) were canceled; these activities included soup lunches, cafes, as well as birthday parties and similar events and meeting places. Visits to nursing homes were also stopped. Even family camps were called off. When the secondhand shop and café, which were mainly run by people in job training, closed, these opportunities for work and language training also disappeared. An exception was made for trainees in preschool activities, as preschools remained operational during the pandemic.

An open café with room and devotions for people with special needs continued during the pandemic. The meeting place was deemed particularly crucial ("super important") for the participants, some of whom were part of the LSS (Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments) group. The activity was not advertised, and the participants took care of themselves and each other, allowing the activity to continue. Additionally, a work rehabilitation activity in collaboration with a folk high school²⁰ and other nonprofit organizations for job training remained in operation. "And it has been ongoing, but everything has involved fewer people."

The congregations involved in spiritual care within healthcare under the Hospital Church framework reported the need for support for the heavily strained healthcare staff. Some congregational activities with vulnerable groups also maintained contact with healthcare infection control officials.

5.2.2 Spatial Changes

The adaptations made in the studied congregations particularly involved changes in form, which had significant spatial expressions. Given the Public

²⁰ A folk high school is a form of adult education institution in the Nordic countries, primarily Sweden, Denmark, and Norway.

Health Agency's message to "Keep your distance," there were consequences for both diaconal work and worship life. Church buildings were not closed and, in some cases, kept open more frequently than before the pandemic, sometimes staffed with a priest and deacon to enable conversations.

"...just to meet those who, yes, many came in and lit candles, and through those meetings, I received quite a lot, which then came up in individual conversations afterward. So, it was a way to meet those we perhaps hadn't met much before."(C1).

However, the frequency and volume of worship services decreased (partly replaced by digital broadcasts). During services, the distance between seats was marked on the benches, and hand sanitizer was available.

"Yes, you can come in and light a candle, and the church is open every day, and people do come"(C2). In the suburban church, which many visited both on weekdays and Sundays, they had to limit the influx:

"It has been very clear how people can come in, going through a small tent outside, one by one. So, we haven't had open doors like before; we've had to have someone at the door to let people in, to make it work"(C2).

Some activities moved outdoors. Deacons worked with the "Walk and Talk" model, or what one deacon called "pastoral care walks," to the extent that the Public Health Agency's guidelines, the weather, and the person's mobility allowed. Walks also occurred in groups and could end with coffee in an open space, "like a carport with seating"(C3).

Activities were adjusted to fit the situation; pilgrim walks and garden activities were suitable during the pandemic period. Open preschool was transformed into stroller walks. Homework help was provided digitally, and in some cases, the congregation provided access to wi-fi and quiet rooms. Information and assistance with grant applications were centralized to appropriately equipped rooms.

5.2.3 Challenging Digitalization

Because a large part of church operations transitioned to digital formats, it is essential to examine the support provided during this transformation.

Shifting from a personal to a digital approach in a relatively short time naturally involves various types of challenges. Among other things, it meant learning new technology. It also meant that employees performed parts of their work from home. This could involve difficult conversations where the absence of a physical meeting might be an even greater challenge. Providing comfort and care for people in vulnerable life situations is perhaps primarily associated with physical meetings; lacking proximity to a person in these situations can be difficult.

Therefore, it is reasonable to ask what support individual employees received when adopting a digital approach. The study asked questions about IT support, both in individual parishes and more broadly, e.g., at the diocesan or national level:

“Yes, I haven’t had any contact with the diocese at all regarding this. I haven’t seen them send anything about it either. It’s just, it’s learning by doing. We’ve had to learn the different tools, Zoom and all those, Teams and others” (C1).

The previously described pattern of decentralized parishes is also evident in this area. Different parishes had their own IT solutions, which seem largely connected to individuals. For example, if there was an IT manager or a parish priest with an interest in IT solutions, that parish may have advanced further than one in which this interest did not exist (Fransson et al. 2021, p.46 f.).

5.3 Navigating the Interplay Between Outreach and Core Operations

Imbedded in the material on pandemic-related organizational and activity changes, we could also identify challenges. When the interviewees discussed reorganization and defined their identity in society beyond the pandemic, they pulled in slightly different directions. One direction concerned the aim of broadening the activities, trying to find new forms and activities. Another emphasized the importance of meeting people within the context of the Christian faith. One deacon referred to this as "a treasure," meeting people from a specific perspective.

"We have a treasure in the church, and so few know about it, so we want to spread it and actively promote it. And then, it should be called a pastoral care center, not a counseling center, because it's pastoral care, and we exemplify what that means. We think it's important to retain words that are the church's words, so to speak, or our hallmark" (C1).

As shown above, different strategies were used to ensure that the church would be seen as relevant and important. This may have been linked to a concern about how to reach out more when there is less expectation that people will turn to the church after the pandemic.

"How do we restart after such a long time? It's like we need to create some kind of rehab plan to get going. And what should we start with?" (C2).

The interviews demonstrate that there was uncertainty about what might lie ahead and how the Church of Sweden would face and manage future challenges. How do you create a broad organization that is open to many different groups and issues, while at the same time trying to hold on to the basic idea of the organization? These questions involve thinking about identity and relevance, something that is central and important to the Church of Sweden's future. It is possible that the pandemic forced the Church of Sweden to face these challenges earlier than expected.

6. Conclusions

The first aim of this study is to get a picture of how the studied congregations managed the consequences of the pandemic.

Among the congregations involved in the study, there was a general consensus that, aside from the recommendations issued by the Public Health Agency, they had no specific policies to follow. The congregations were largely left to design their activities in a local way that suited the circumstances of the pandemic. This can be described as a loosely coupled system. Thus, not surprisingly, the agreement on national collaboration between the major civil society organizations was not implemented in the three studied congregations.

Apparent risks are associated with the Church of Sweden's decentralized way of organizing the faith community. Interpreting the absence of guidelines for diaconal work – or pandemic-related guidelines in this study – suggests that internal support structures are unprepared and thus weak. The strength of a decentralized – in organizational theory terms “loosely coupled” – organization is local flexibility. One does not have to wait for orders “from higher levels of organizational authority.” This may be a strength but may also mean that vulnerable parts of the organization do not receive the support from the whole that local vulnerability can reveal. It also means that the overarching organization can evade responsibility for local work. The pandemic has exposed both strengths and weaknesses in the management of the Church of Sweden.

The second aim in the study was to discern how the pandemic affected the organization of congregational work.

Common parish activities – low-threshold gatherings with devotions, hymn singing, coffee, conversations – were canceled, as were soup lunches, services, and even choir activities. When a parish congregation cannot assemble, what justifies its existence? The pandemic hit at the heart of the church's core activities. One of the fundamental components of civil society, fostering community where people meet, was shut down. The essence of what can be described as the Christian church's DNA since the early church – gathering around a table, both the altar and the dining table – was disrupted by the all too often deadly spread of the COVID-19 virus.

This can be understood in terms of transformed logics. A logic of “assembly” and community transformed into what we call a “distribution logic” (Linde 2017). Two particularly clear expressions of this during the pandemic were digital broadcasts of services and delivery of groceries, especially to the elderly who were initially advised against going out. Unlike a “horizontal” community logic, as around a table, a distribution logic can be understood as “vertical,” where static roles as givers and receivers are established. The interaction between these roles will be characterized by one-sidedness (Garpe & Idestrom 2022, p. 60). Competing logics create tensions that drive transformation: community becomes service.

Another notable impact of the pandemic on how parishes shaped their mission was the utilization of spatial resources. A unique asset of the Church of Sweden’s parishes is their church buildings. Although services could not always serve as a physical meeting place as they used to, the churches remained open. Large spaces could accommodate people even during times of infection. Open church buildings provide people with room without crowds, for lighting candles, prayer, and private contact if desired. Here lies an interesting spatial aspect of religious communities’ assets. In the studied parishes, there was an increase in the presence of deacons and priests in the church buildings and extended opening hours in the case of centrally located city churches. This "spatial turn" also included organizing outdoor meetings, a notable factor in the interview material: "Walk and talks," stroller walks, and coffee in a carport-like open outdoor space – if the weather permitted.

6.1 Discussion

The low degree of formal governance is somewhat appreciated but also problematic. The appreciation lies in the possibility of pursuing "self-governance" and shape activities based on local conditions. A more problematic stance is related to perceptions that the diaconal mission of the Church of Sweden is indistinct, with deacons potentially finding it challenging to assert their professionalism when tasks and competencies are considered unclear (Jeppsson Grassman, 2001).

Sometimes a crisis can be used as an opportunity for reevaluation. The pandemic-induced societal disruption led to contemplation in the studied

parishes, prompting a review of parish work. In one parish, the time gaps that emerged were dedicated to reflection and prioritization work, presented in a document entitled Diaconal Pastoral. Both in the Diaconal Pastoral and in the interview with the responsible deacon, prioritization of pastoral care was mentioned. Pastoral care was described as a "treasure in the church" that few know about.

At the time of writing, we see even more societal challenges than the migration events of the 2010s and the 2020 pandemic outbreak. We have faced the war-induced migration of 2022, a polarization in society, constraints in welfare systems and the ongoing climate crisis. To what extent can the loosely coupled Lutheran Church address these emerging challenges?

7. References

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