1 Introduction

One of the central questions of practical ecclesiology is what social forms lived religion takes on. Since the 1970s, this question has caused much debate in the German-speaking academic world. The debate has been spurred by social changes that have affected membership in the two mainline German churches: the Catholic and the Protestant church. Particularly, these churches have seen a significant decline in membership, which they are now seeking to address through church policy. Church leaders in the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) have a strong interest in research that considers the causes for this as well as ways they can influence future developments. Thus, they are in support of this research field of practical theology both financially and ideationally by expressing interest in the research results of practical and systematic theology and by inviting researchers to lectures and consultations. The Church Membership Surveys, which the EKD has conducted every ten years since 1972, are a prominent example of how church itself engages as a research actor and incorporates scholars in the conceptualization and interpretation of data.

On the level of broader scientific reflections, sociological theoretical concepts that combine empirical methods with theory formation have proven stimulating and garnered much acclaim during this time. Practical theology draws heavily on the sociology of religion in developing its theoretical impulses. In addition to classic concepts by Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Émile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Niklas Luhmann, contemporary scholars have also introduced important recent developments such as the role of media and network theory. Examples for these contemporary scholars are Andreas Hepp, Markus Hero, Christian Stegbauer, and Roger Häußling. They provide theoretical concepts that relate to the sociology of technology as well as the sociology of religion. By considering and collaborating with sociology, practical theology has developed impulses that are not limited to the level of theory but have also found expression in empirical methodological approaches, both quantitative and qualitative. Therefore, concepts of sociality and empirical studies that consider various forms of religious community formation interact closely. In this way sociological approaches are helpful lenses through which scholars can perceive religious sociality.

During the fifth Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung (Church Membership Survey; short: KMU) conducted in 2012, I was part of the scientific advisory board which investigated the concept of church as a network. In my view, this conceptualization is an obvious choice based on practical ecclesiology, since it acknowledges how transformative processes of digitization have been. Furthermore, practical ecclesiology heuristically benefits from representing relationality in various forms (Her-
melink and Weyel 2015; Roleder and Weyel 2019; Weyel 2016, 2018). In addition to working on the 5th KMU, I supervised three Ph.D. students in a doctoral network together with my two practical-theological colleagues Peter Bubmann (Erlangen) and Kristian Fechtner (Mainz). On behalf of the church, we conducted research on the concept of a ‘temporary congregation’ (Bubmann et al. 2019; Weyel 2019). This involved actors from within the church who helped to consult and to evaluate the results of this collaborative research (de Roest 2020). The experiences and findings of these two projects significantly shape my approach in this field. In the following, I will first establish contextual background by outlining social transformation processes (2.). Then, I will lay out the organizational role the church holds when faced with the recent membership developments (3.) to develop new perspectives on religious community formation through networks. This is also the focus of my reflections (4.) and synopsis (5.), which again hark back to the role of religion as a social practice. In the conclusion, I will touch on the implications this holds for practical theology within the current discourse (6.).

2 The Institutional Nature of the Protestant Church Faced with Processes of Social Transformation

Since the end of the 1960s, German churches have seen a decline in membership occurring in waves. In response to this trend, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) initiated a membership survey, which they conducted for the first time in 1972 and every ten years since then (Hild 1974; Bedford-Strohm and Jung 2015). When considering the twentieth century as a whole, the number of members leaving the Church at the end of the 1960s was significantly lower than, for example, during the Weimar Republic, when, following World War I, the church ceded to exert governmental sovereignty in Germany and church and state separated on an organizational level. Many also left the church during the National Socialist era (Hanselmann, Hild, and Lohse 1984, 36). However, even with these earlier trends, the decline in membership since the end of the 1960s shook the self-perception of the Protestant Church. In 1956, 96% of the total population in the German Federal Republic were members of one of the two Christian churches; only a minority of 4% claimed another religion or no religion at all. The Protestant Church held a slight majority over the Catholic Church with 50.1% Protestants compared to 45.9% Catholics (Eicken and Schmitz-Veltin 2010). These statistics underline that the Christian churches understood themselves as people’s churches in the sense of Churches of the people of the Federal Republic of Germany (West). In a period of 65 years the membership statistics have since changed dramatically. As of 2020, Protestant and Catholic church members represent a combined 51% of the German population (both West and East); another 2.9% of Germans identify as Christians that belong to other Christian communities like the Baptists, the Methodists, and Orthodox churches (Russian, Greek, etc.).
The Catholic Church holds a slight majority over the Protestant Church: They make up 26.7% of Germans whereas Protestants make up 24.3% (Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland 2021). A major factor for this development can be found in the way the communist regime in East Germany broke with church tradition. After the reunification, the developments in East Germany greatly impacted religious ratios in unified Germany. Other factors include waves of migration from predominantly Catholic (Italy, Spain, etc.) and Islamic countries (e.g., Turkey). In addition, demographic changes, i.e., changes in gender roles, declining birthrates, and more women in the workplace, must also be considered as a significant factor. In recent years (2021/22), church membership has again drastically decreased. While the motives for this cannot be boiled down to a single event, this new trend has surely been significantly spurred on by the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. By handling this crisis inappropriately, the church has revealed an unwillingness for transparency and self-criticism as well as a tendency to systematically isolate clergy. For the Protestant Church, on the other hand, it seems like the institution has lost its relevance and become more alienated from modern Germany. As of now, there have not been sufficiently detailed analyses on how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the relationship to the church. Overall, however, we can observe complex transformation processes that have considerably influenced the relationship Germans have to the church, which cannot be summed up by secularization alone. It should be noted that federal German statistics do not provide information about individual parts of the country. In fact, there are significant religious-cultural differences between federal states, regions, and state churches. In some regions (e.g., Brandenburg), the popular structures of the Protestant Church are thinning out in such a manner that the church can barely uphold the comprehensive system of parochial congregations. Kristian Fechtner has thus diagnostically declared that the people’s church is currently undergoing the late stages of its transition (Fechtner 2011, 207), whereby its future social form remains open. However, although the church is losing its institutional character as a people’s church, it is still able at present to incorporate different forms of religious sociality. Eberhard Hauschildt and Uta Pohl-Patalong therefore speak of the church as a “hybrid” (Hauschildt and Pohl-Patalong 2013, 218). As a result of the transformation processes outlined above, however, the organizational character of the church is becoming more prominent whereas its institutional character is losing importance.

3 The Church as an Organization

Coming from sociology, the concept of organization, developed by Niklas Luhmann, was made strong in practical ecclesiology. Within a plural and differentiated society communally exercised interactions of a congregatio sanctorum not only depend on but also presuppose organization. “Specifically, functional systems and organizations must create opportunities for interactions, that is, they must provide appropri-
ate temporal, spatial, social, and, not least, thematic arrangements.” (Hermelink 2011, 112; o.t.) Religious practice remains dependent on the frameworks of church organization. Past and present criticisms of the church as an organization therefore come to nothing if generally directed towards character of the Church as an organization. It would be more precise to criticize the church as an organization only when it dysfunctionally relates to the enabling of religious practice. Tensions in the concept of church are to be kept alive for the benefit of enabling religious practice, because critical and constructive potential can be found in it in the determination of the relationship between organization and religious practice. Against the background of the previously outlined processes of social change and the accompanying decline in church membership, the EKD is increasingly presenting itself nationally to the regional churches and to the public as an organization. The thesis paper *Kirche der Freiheit* (English: *Church of Freedom*) (Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland 2006) has become a symbol of the church’s increased development into an organization (*Organisationswerdung*) and how this comes into tension with the self-understanding of the church as an institution by threatening to call into question the latencies of a public church. The paper assesses the actions of church leadership according to organizational-sociological paradigms, such as quality and personnel management, in other words, business management tools (Meyns 2013). In view of the decline in membership and staff resources this is an obvious approach. The paper appeals to pastors, volunteers, and full-time staff to change their mentality in order to set free a willingness to reform and a spirit of optimism within the congregations. There have been many criticisms of this from a practical theology perspective (Karle 2011). I would like to emphasize two aspects.

First, according to the Protestant understanding, the task of the church is functionally determined by the proclamation of the gospel (Confessio Augustana Art. 5 in Dingel 2014, 100 – 101). A self-preservation of the church as an organization, on the other hand, cannot be justified theologically. The organizational character must be kept in contact with this function, otherwise there is a danger that the functional logics of business will gain the upper hand in the church.

Second, church members could be turned into consumers who are viewed by the means of market research. In the logic of supply and demand, the religious subject and the church are pulled apart. Here the church as *congregatio sanctorum* remains hidden; both the individual and the congregation itself bear responsibility for their church life within the framework of the theological concept of a *priesthood of all baptized Christians*. Church life includes, in addition to church services, a variety of other occasions, public and private, in which religion is practiced.

The self-understanding of church as a business enterprise orientates church organization towards an economic concept of organization designed for businesses, “which see themselves under pressure to compete and perform.” (Hermelink 2011, 90; o.t.) Church membership, which is institutionally supported by occasional participation in worship, is measured by the church against the idea of involvement. This notion originates in the theory of volunteerism and leads to commitment to church
community life becoming the norm for the church concept. The expectation of the church as an organization towards its members changes by differentiating between commitment and indifference. This distinction reflects a critique of how most church members participate (or do not participate) in church life. The statement of Thies Gundlach, Vice President in the Church Office of the EKD regarding the 5th Church Membership Survey entitled “Engagement and Indifference” is an example of how the church considers the ways church membership is lived out as deficient:

The “extremes” are being strengthened, members are either actively committed or predominantly passively involved through their biographical situation. This means, however, that the mild, moderate form of evangelical piety and church involvement – the so-called majority religion for which our church is widely designed – is on the wane. Accordingly, what is expected from the church is increasingly diverging: some want clearly recognizable communities shaped by religion, while others want situational pastoral care that is reliable and individually oriented. Are these mutually exclusive expectations towards the church on the part of different groups increasing? Do the actions of church leadership increasingly get caught in a quandary of irreconcilable polarities? (Gundlach 2014, 130 – 131; o.t.)

From my point of view, Gundlach’s dramatization of the situation in the final sentence can only be understood against the background of perspectives led by organizational theory. As a matter of fact, the polarization within the church stated here is produced rhetorically and cannot be reconstructed from the survey data. Church membership has always been diverse, and participation in church life has always been affected by the current biographical situation of its members. The intrinsic plurality of the church is, in fact, a characteristic of the church as a people’s church. The organization of the church, however, casts a devaluing view of popular church life and the diversity of its membership forms because membership numbers are declining.

With the decline in church tax revenues and membership, reform processes that target the church as an organization and demand further organizational processes have become necessary: Congregations will have to merge, church buildings will have to be used alternatively, staff numbers will have to be cut, and areas of work will have to be closed down. In any case, there is a need for church leaders to respond to the decline through organization. However, a central question of practical ecclesiology is whether the churches will reflect their organizational actions in such a way that allows different social forms of lived religion to be integrated (Gräb 2006; Gräb 2016).

4 The Church as a Network

The concept of the network brings another way of perceiving and describing sociality into view, which complements previous approaches instead of providing an alternative. In general terms, the ‘network’ is a transdisciplinary concept, which needs to be
investigated by considering more or less complex phenomena as relational entities. In the theories of sociology, the concept is not limited to constellations of people. A key element of actor-network theory is that it also includes things (objects) that take part in social processes through the interaction of people and things. This hybridization of actants is one of the pivotal components in Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (short: ANT). I understand his famous text *We Have Never Been Modern*, published in French with the subtitle *Essais d’anthropologie symétrique*, as a critique of a modern style of thinking, which is characterized by a paradox. On the one hand, modernity is associated with practices of “translation” (Latour 1993, 10), in which new mixtures – hybrids – emerge, not only but especially through technological innovations. On the other hand, modernity is associated with practices that aim to distinctly separate the spheres of the human and the non-human. Latour calls them purification practices. Mixtures (or ‘translations’) and separations (or ‘purifications’) are closely related to each other.

The hypothesis of this essay is that the word “modern” designates two sets of entirely different practices which must remain distinct if they are to remain effective, but have recently begun to be confused. The first set of practices, by “translation”, creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids od nature and culture. The second, by “purification”, creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand, that od nonhumans on the other. Without the first set, the practices of purification would be fruitless or pointless. Without the second, the work of translation would be slowed down, limited, or even ruled out. The first set corresponds to what I have called networks; the second to what I shall call the modern critical stance. (Latour 1993, 10–11)

At this point, I quote Bruno Latour at length to show that his network theory is a very comprehensive critique of modernity and has far-reaching consequences for a theory of the social. In light of this the agency of things and the role of technologies in social processes come into view. This becomes more plausible considering not only but especially the digitization of the workplace and daily life. Beyond that, however, the critique is also a dialectical critique of critique itself, because critical thinking is always connected with separation and differentiation. Thus, there cannot be an exit from modern thinking *en passant*.

I also refer explicitly to Bruno Latour at this point to hint at the depth of the theory’s background when using the concept of the network in practical ecclesiology. A network theory of religious community formation can go further than just incorporating the relations between humans into practical ecclesiology. It is also a self-critique of a style of thinking whose research-practical and theory-flexive implications are at least hinted at when the material dimension of religious practices is considered. However, in my view this does not exhaust the theoretical potential of Actor-Network-Theory. The use of the network category to describe religious community formation is, in my view, of heuristic interest.

A first aspect is the option of looking at social interactions and relational structures in the cultural transmission of religion with the help of the theory design. So-
ciality processes, friendship networks, etc. become visible as social structures in which religiosity emerges and is lived. Religious communication, which needs to be defined in more detail, can be traced online and offline in the context of social networks. Online practices form part of the connections found in everyday life, resulting in fluid transitions. In other words, the separation between online and offline practices seems less and less plausible. Research must react to this through a “conceptual shift” (Przybylski 2021, 4) that focuses on the “in-between”. “The main attraction of digital sociology is precisely that it enables the development of experimental forms of inquiry that cut across the divides between the sciences and the humanities. It may develop and inform richer approaches to ‘data interpretation’, more adventurous ways of introducing social theory into the space of digital research” (Marres 2017, 6).

Secondly, the entry point of network research can also be reversed by examining the role of religious practices in the formation of social networks. The interdependencies of religious communication and sociality come to the fore. Thus, the way religion is socially embedded comes into view. Lived religion can be understood through social links both within and outside the church as an institution. According to this understanding, the religious network is not a specific form of sociality, but rather joins sociality concepts such as institution and organization as an empirical and theoretical model of description. Moreover, the network has already been established as a descriptive model for online communities.

The impulses that arise from network theory are therefore on several levels. On the one hand, the impulses are on a methodological level, which investigates the relationship between the individual and sociality under conditions that include trans-local mediatized communication. These interdependencies have been described in a differentiated way for the friendship networks of young people (Hugger 2018, 16–17). According to this description youth scenes can be considered as thematically focused networks that are constituted through mediatized communication. They are thereby dependent on permanent communicative self-assurance through processes of assignment and delimitation (Krotz and Schulz 2014, 34). Further impulses also arise from terms and theoretical concepts associated with network analysis. Network theory can build on classics of interpretative sociology. Christian Stegbauer’s work, for example, builds on Georg Simmel’s theory of social circles. Stegbauer’s reception of Simmel offers an explanatory model for the development of culture from the concatenation of situations (Stegbauer 2016, 79–90). Situations enable interactions and their correlating processes of negotiation that are needed for behavioral assimilations or deviations. Here, negotiation is referring to “the process that aligns behavior with the situation and its specific requirements on the one hand, and with the other attendants on the other, thereby making them compatible with each other.” (Stegbauer 2016, 82; o.t.) Through the concatenation of situations culture develops. At the same time, relationships are formed “which provide the materials for determining structures in network research” (Stegbauer 2016, 83; o.t.).
In the context of network research, the nodes of the links, the ties, can be determined as social actors. The concept of networks thus aims at representing the socialities that are found at the meso level. The concept of a network can also be used to capture and describe small social structures. A classic example can be found in conversion research, which can show how specific changes in a person’s relationship constellation can favor or impede conversion (Roleder 2019). The concept of networks also makes it possible to analyze the structure of individual social occasions in detail (Roleder and Weyel 2019). In this case the analysis is on the micro level: the personal network of relationships of an individual person which is characterized by friendship and kinship is represented. It is also possible to survey very large networks. An example of this are global flows of communication on social-media platforms (Merle 2019, 330–351). Network research has its heuristic value for practical ecclesiology at the meso level, i.e., in the ‘in-between’ space between close contacts (such as family and friends) and large organizations (such as church, political parties, etc.). Community formation through regular face-to-face communication as well as communication via social media, the regular use of cell phones, IP telephony, computer games and mobile broadband can be considered with the network paradigm. It brings a key factor of communicative practices into the picture: online and offline forms of sociality can be considered together and as crossovers. Andreas Hepp and others have coined the concept of “communicative figurations” (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018, 31) for this purpose. It takes up the developments of “deep mediatization”. “With deep mediatization, the very elements and building blocks from which a sense of the social is constructed become themselves based on technologically based processes of mediation. In such a sense, deep mediatization is an advanced stage of mediatization.” (Hepp, Breiter, and Hasebrink 2018, 6; see also Hepp 2020) Hepp and others focus primarily on the trends of a changing media environment in their cross-media research approach. They list the following as possible consequences for individual social domains: optionality, opportunities for social contingency and participation, spatial expansion, the blurring of boundaries, acceleration and immediacy, concealment of agency, stabilization of sociality, social surveillance and segmentation, and exclusion and division. It should be noted that this overview outlines possible consequences that still need to be empirically investigated and described for social fields such as religion (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018, 31).

In a study of religious online communities, Anna Neumaier has shown that the characteristics of community classically assigned to traditional communities by Max Weber and Ferdinand Tönnies can also be found in online communities. Neumaier mentions the symbolic sense of belonging but also refers to characteristics of communities that are ‘action-related’ such as shared rituals, internal interaction, and support (Neumaier 2019, 24). Neumaier presents a differentiated picture of community formation in her work as she highlights that online communities do not exhibit characteristics of post traditional community formation per se. Both the attributes of community formation that Ferdinand Tönnies ascribes to the traditional village community, as well as the characteristics assigned to post traditional, deterritorialized
forms of religious community formation in media sociology can be found in online communities. This description of Neumaier can also be understood to support the notion that community building in networked communities does not have a fundamentally different quality to other networks, such as e.g., Campbell and Sheldon suggest. “Rather than living in a single, static religious community, the study of religious online community shows many people in contemporary society live among multiple religious networks that are emergent, varying in depth, and highly personalized.” (Campbell and Sheldon 2022, 76)

5 Summary: Religion as a Social Practice

The manifestations of sociality and the terms and theoretical concepts for sociality are to be distinguished on the one hand, but also to be related to each other on the other hand. Institution, organization, and network are concepts of sociality that relate to different logics of the functioning of the church and can be complemented by further concepts. In my view the relational approach to processes of religious community formation is a key field of research for practical theology because it allows the relevance of mediatized communication for religious practice to be considered. Concepts of sociality always have theoretical implications that make statements about the emergence of socialities, their integrative power, the relationship to the environment, and their modes of functioning.

The church structures religious communication and many other church and non-church activities. This relationality-orientated research approach perceives the respondents in their interconnectedness with others, i.e., with the social roles they hold. Moreover, the structure of institutional places that provide opportunities for (religious) interactions can be made visible. Such places can be understood as situations in which culture emerges and relationships are developed.

In this way, the inner diversity of a Protestant church congregation and its communicative densification and structural gaps, as well as its interconnections with structures outside of church organization can be shown. The results cannot be presented in detail here, but examples can be found in the following in Roleder and Weyel (2019). The network survey clearly showed that the community of the church is embedded in its social environment. It was demonstrated that the wider community of the church consists of a multitude of more or less densely interconnected communities in which religious communication takes place but that it also transcends its own boundaries and is part of trans-local networks of relationships.

This method calls for an important change of perspective in practical ecclesiology. Religion can be located in multiple areas of life; faith is communicated, in, but also beyond the church community. As Volker Drehsen has stated building upon Max Weber, religion has its own social value (Drehsen 2009). Church members are actors that carry their religious interest and their religious knowledge with them in many places. Their main role is not to present the church with motives and expectations
it must react to. Church members do not form a counterpart to the church as an organization but rather play their own part in forming the church.

The idea of network formations in the church also has rhetorical value. It suggests that ‘the church congregation’ (singular) represents a polycentric entity, which, put pointedly, consists of many congregations as social microcosms. With the help of network theory, we can speak of ‘the church congregation’ as an organizational unit and at the same time see the diversity of different communities. The church congregation does not appear to be distinctly delimitable, even to the outside world: It is ‘open at the edges’. Various events, associations, and groups, etc. are linked to each other through joint participation: The community food bank and the sports club, the support association for a children’s home and the music club. These informal, everyday situations, have their own occasionality, but naturally remain related to the organization of the church, because they tie to their congregation.

6 Concluding Remarks: The Role of Practical Theology and Practical Ecclesiology

Concepts of sociality, empirical perceptions, practical-theological church theory and church-guiding strategy drafts have all been closely related to each other in this discourse over the last 50 years, sometimes in a tense way. The sociologist Herbert Kalthoff aptly writes in his introduction to the volume *Theoretische Empirie: Zur Relevanz qualitativer Forschung* (English: *Theoretical Empiricism: On the Relevance of Qualitative Research*):

The theories [...] open up different approaches to the observed empirical world. Thus, they stand in a complementary as well as in a competitive relationship to each other. Complementary relationship means that the approaches complement each other in explaining the social world and are also used to break down its empirical data. At the same time, which theory is referenced in qualitative research is determined by both the data collection method and the empirical data. The interplay of research question, methods, and data collected generates plausibility for particular theoretical approaches. (Kalthoff 2015, 19; o.t.)

This is also true for practical ecclesiology. I wanted to make clear that empirical perceptions both presuppose and present very different images of the church. When methods are proven in the field their implications are reproduced. They offer possibilities of perception, but they also have limits. Therefore, it seems important to me to make the interactions between empirical perceptions and images of the church more explicit in the process, and especially in the presentation, of research by

- making the theoretical backgrounds and their assumptions about the social world more transparent to recipients;
- highlighting the methodologically conditioned one-sidedness of the approach to ecclesiastical reality more strongly;
fanning out the ambiguities of both quantitative and qualitative research, and
relating the perception of church and the conceptual-strategic images of church
to each other without confusing them.

Bibliography


