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**Growth in a Context of Decline. Congregations in Processes
of Change**

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Growth in a Context of Decline. Congregations in Processes of Change

Abstract

Churches all over Europe are experiencing decline within a larger context of religious decline. One under-researched field concerns the consequences this decline has at a local organisational level. This article examines congregations experiencing growth in attendance at their regular Sunday worship services, and asks: What has caused growth in attendance among these congregations? What are the consequences of the attendance growth according to parish leadership, staff, committed volunteers and regular churchgoers? The empirical material for the study is interview and observation material from four congregations in the Church of Norway. These congregations have witnessed an increase in attendees of between 15.5% and 31.6% the last five years (2013–2017) compared to the previous five years (2008–2012). The ecclesial ideal in the Church of Norway, as in other national majority churches, has been to balance between “the core congregation” and “the folk church”. However, the Nordic pattern of “belonging without believing” or “believing in belonging” is not as strong as it used to be, and this has made “vicarious religion” more contested within congregations. A more polarised neither-nor understanding of the Sunday service can explain why the studied congregations have been able to grow within a context of decline.

Keywords: religious decline, congregations in Europe, ecclesiology, vicarious religion, believing in belonging, marketisation, empirical practical theology

Introduction: Congregations in a context of decline

Congregations in the Church of Norway

Many congregations experience decline within a larger context of religious decline. To study the consequences of decline for congregations is an important research agenda, according to Mark Chaves, one of the most influential sociologists of religion.¹ Research on how decline has consequences at a local organisational level is by and large an under-researched field in Europe. Generally, the scholarly interest in congregations has been quite limited, but is set to rise among European scholars.² This article investigates how congregations experience *growth* in a context of decline. Decline is most definitely the overall picture, but not the whole picture. Some congregations, even within national majority churches, are growing against the trend. The overall research questions addressed are: What has caused growth in attendance among these congregations? What are the consequences of the attendance growth according to parish leadership, staff, committed volunteers and regular churchgoers?

The article analyses empirical material from four congregations in the Church of Norway (CoN), which was the state church until 2017, and still has strong juridical and economic ties to the state.³ The CoN has witnessed a similar decline as other Nordic majority churches, but the

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3 membership decline in Norway is lower than in Sweden and Finland. As of 2018, 70% of the
4 Norwegian population were members, and the membership rate has only dropped by 3.8% since
5 2008. Still, there has been a consistent decline in attendance. The attendance at Sunday worship
6 services from 2008–2018 declined by 19.5%, and the number of baptisms fell by 31.9%. Of the
7 total number of new-borns in Norway, 70.4% were baptised in 2008, while 51.9% were baptised
8 in 2018.⁴
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11 This context of decline makes congregations with a pattern of growth particularly interesting.
12 The four studied congregations, North, South, West and East,⁵ have experienced a considerably
13 higher number of attendees at their worship services, particularly at their traditional Sunday
14 morning worship service. Is it part of an intentional strategy, merely the result of factors that are
15 not easily controlled, or something imposed on them from the national church level? What kind
16 of changes has it caused within the congregations? How is growth in attendance at Sunday
17 services experienced by parish leaders, staff, volunteers and regular churchgoers?
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20 Much contemporary sociological, religious and theological research takes place either on a
21 societal macro level or on an individual micro level.⁶ However, practical theological research on
22 an organisational meso level, such as research into congregations, is crucial in order to
23 understand complex processes of religious change.⁷ Congregations have to deal with policies
24 from the national church level, and they constantly interact with how ordinary people relate to
25 religion in their everyday lives. The Sunday morning worship service is often regarded one of the
26 major tasks of congregations, and baptism is usually part of this service in the Church of
27 Norway. Thus, a study of how congregations solve their Sunday services can provide concrete
28 knowledge about religion in “a secular age”.⁸ The primary finding of this article is that people
29 attending due to particular life events, such as baptism, have caused growth in attendance in
30 three of the four studied congregations. This may confirm the Nordic pattern of “believing in
31 belonging”,⁹ but the study reveals that “vicarious religion” is more contested and about to
32 change.
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37 Selection, methods and material

38 The article is part of a contract research project financed by the Church Council at Church of
39 Norway with eight scholars from the Faculty of Theology (TF), University of Oslo.¹⁰ The
40 announced research call asked for a project “able to illuminate why some parishes have increased
41 participation at their Sunday worship services, while the participation rate is dwindling in other
42 parishes”. The call specified that the research project should explain such a development without
43 “focusing on obvious demographic changes such as increase in church members and newly
44 erected church buildings”. We found the request for other explanations than traditional
45 sociological interpretations interesting and designed a study that identified Sunday services in
46 congregations with a substantial increase as its object of study. Though contextual factors such
47 as demographics, socioeconomics and urbanisation are definitely important for understanding
48 why participation rates increase in some congregations and dwindles in others, our contribution
49 aims differently. Based on a qualitative analysis of how parish leaders, staff and volunteers plan,
50 perform and reflect on services in four congregations, we argue that internal and organisational
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3 contextual factors contribute to explaining why some congregations grow despite a general
4 tendency of decline.
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6 The call for research from Church of Norway is one minor part in a broad national church
7 strategy. The Synod and the Bishops have agreed on a wide range of different steps in order to
8 prevent further decline, such as commercial campaigns advertising for the church as “a folk
9 church for all” and for baptism.¹¹ Apart from theological reasons, these efforts have an economic
10 dimension. The Church of Norway has a position as “folk church” in the Constitution, but the
11 national budget states that the church has to prove that it “has an attendance that confirms its
12 character as folk church”.¹² Thus, to help congregations grow is necessarily at top of the national
13 church agenda. To slow down the decline in attendance concerns the existence of the church as a
14 state-funded organisation.¹³
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18 The one-year contract period offered us by the Church of Norway limited our project to
19 developing knowledge about congregations that have succeeded in increasing their attendance
20 rate.¹⁴ The congregations we decided to study are selected from a database owned by the Church
21 of Norway and administered by NSD Norwegian Center for Research Data.¹⁵ The database
22 contains annual data about church activities and attendance rates from 1998 onwards. The
23 selection started by ranking congregations with the highest participation increase in the last five
24 years (2013–2017) compared to the previous five years (2008–2012). The selection was a two-
25 step process. First, we excluded congregations with more than ten per cent growth in formal
26 members, merged parishes, and newly erected church buildings.¹⁶ Secondly, we included only
27 congregations with more than 3000 members, and chose a sample with only one congregation
28 from a diocese.¹⁷ The selection criteria provide a sample where we have sorted out extraordinary
29 events or circumstances. The sample allows us to study attendance growth at places where one
30 could expect them to be part of the regular picture of decline. The empirical material from all
31 four congregations consists of comparable documents, participant observation and interviews.
32 The NSD dataset has two main categories for worship services: 1) worship services on Sundays
33 and festive days, and 2) other worship services.¹⁸ Our selection criteria is not based on a gradual
34 increase during these years. The project measures growth considered as the difference between
35 the total number of participants at services in one period (2013-2017) compared to the total
36 number of participants in the second period (2008-2012). To compare two five year periods is a
37 short timeline, and as the analysis will show, small changes have a quite large effect.
38 Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how the figures depend on human and material resources in
39 the congregations.
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46 The time constraint made it impossible to conduct extensive fieldworks. However, we wanted to
47 study more than documents from the selected congregations. Thus, even if Sunday services in a
48 congregation vary during the year, single snapshots can provide valuable information about the
49 profile of a congregation. We decided to conduct short “field visits” combined with a number of
50 interviews and document analysis. Two researchers travelled to each of the four congregations,
51 and shared the material within the research group afterwards. The main observation took place at
52 the Sunday worship service 24 March 2019 in each congregation. The researchers observed
53 according to a detailed observation guide containing points of interest to the different researchers
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3 involved.¹⁹ The interview material consists of semi-structured focus-group interviews.²⁰ Three
4 kinds of interviews were conducted in each congregation, comprising 42 persons in total.²¹ First,
5 interviews with the parish leadership: the parish pastor, the parish manager and the chair of the
6 congregational board, 12 interviewed persons. Secondly, interviews taking place immediately
7 after the observed Sunday service. One researcher interviewed the church personnel: both
8 employed staff and committed volunteers. The other researcher interviewed people who had
9 been to the service, regular churchgoers.²² The interviews with church personnel comprised 19
10 persons, and nine of them were volunteers. The interviews with churchgoers included 11
11 persons. Everybody signed letters of informed consent, and understood that the congregations
12 might be recognised or published with names. All the informants have had the possibility to read
13 a late draft of this article.
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17 Empirical-Theoretical Perspectives on processes of growth and decline

18 This article investigates why some congregations experience attendance growth, and how
19 employees and some active members within the congregations experience this growth. Empirical
20 scholarship discussing changes within concrete congregations within national majority churches,
21 particularly Lutheran, and in the Nordic countries, is the most immediate research context of this
22 study.
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26 Overall, previous research show that questions about decline and subsequent attempts to grow
27 the attendance have been a recurring theme within congregations. Two significant empirical
28 studies in this respect are “Troskollektivet” by the sociologist Knut Lundby from 1986²³ and
29 “Folkekirke og trosfellesskap” by the theologian Harald Hegstad from 1996.²⁴ Despite being
30 rather old, these studies are still relevant because they portray empirically how specific
31 congregations have solved their task of Sunday worship services, and because their theoretical
32 contributions still are part of scholarly, and particularly ecclesiological, discussions related to
33 national majority churches as ‘folk churches’. The historical distance also reveals how the
34 conditions have changed since Lundby and Hegstad conducted their studies. Lundby’s
35 sociological study focuses on how a group of born-again Christians in the Tøyen parish in Oslo,
36 named by Lundby as “the faith collective”, achieved massive growth in attendance during the
37 pietistic revivals of the 1930s, ending with the closure of the congregation in 1986. Hegstad has
38 conducted what he calls “a church-sociological and theological study” of three named
39 congregations. Each of them have been through processes of growth and decline, some partly
40 caused by pietistic revival movements.
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45 Lundby concludes with a warning against strong faith collectives within congregations. He
46 argues that such groups polarise and impair the folk church because they keep people away from
47 ordinary participation in the Sunday worship service environment. However, the premise for this
48 claim is a situation in which a considerable number of people attend Sunday services regularly
49 without being organised in some sort of faith-oriented community. Only one of the congregations
50 analysed in this study accommodates this characteristic. The majority in East are churchgoers
51 attending regularly without commitment to a particular faith community within the congregation.
52 However, this congregation might be more an exception than the rule. Generally, the number of
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3 monthly churchgoers has dwindled, and baptism has lost some of its taken-for-granted
4 character.²⁵
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6 Somewhat contrary to Lundby, Hegstad ends by acknowledging that the church consists of two
7 different forms of religious life existing within congregations, “the faith-community”, also called
8 “the core congregation” and “the folk church”. He argues theologically against a polarised
9 understanding of the two. Identifying the church in neither-nor categories, as folk church or faith
10 community/core congregation, is seen as inadequate. It is, according to him, necessary to
11 interpret these two groups as part of a totality where both belong.²⁶ Similarly, mutual
12 dependency between ‘Church-Christians’ and ‘Culture-Christians’ are stated in more recent
13 research by scholars like Hans Raun Iversen in a Danish context.²⁷ Grace Davie has famously
14 coined a situation in which an active minority performs and facilitates religion on behalf of a
15 much larger, and approving, majority as “vicarious religion”.²⁸ However, this study provides
16 nuances of this description, showing that the minority does not experience the majority as
17 understanding and approving. The relation between these two forms of religious life has become
18 contradictory and conflictual since Davie originated her concept and Hegstad conducted his
19 study. It might be that a willingness towards a more polarised neither-nor understanding of the
20 Sunday service can explain why the congregations have been able to grow within a context of
21 decline.
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27 Per Pettersson’s “Kvalitet i livslånga tjänsterelationer” (2000) is another relevant study, even if
28 it was conducted twenty years ago. Pettersson analyses how members in the Church of Sweden
29 understand their relationship to the church. He finds that how the church staff met them,
30 particularly the pastor, was the single most important factor influencing how the informants
31 evaluated the quality of their meeting with the local congregation.²⁹ His respondents were
32 generally affirmative to the Church meaning something special to them, particularly related to
33 major life events such as baptism. Pettersson concludes that there is a mismatch between what
34 the Church, nationally and locally, understands as primary, and what most members expect from
35 the Church. The Church emphasises the Sunday worship service, the relation to God, and
36 enhancing regular attendance, while most members want the Church to be a place that exists
37 when they need it, requesting that it is able to communicate safety, tradition, and festivity.³⁰
38 Pettersson argues that the Church needs to move on from logics developed within agricultural
39 and industrial societies. Opting for a reorientation, Pettersson argues that the Church should
40 rather see itself as part of a service society. Organisations in a service society cannot demand
41 behaviour, but have to offer services that individuals choose. He suggests that a service-
42 theoretical approach to the term “customer” in church can be understood as equivalent to the
43 church as diaconal, defined as “to whom this institution exists”, a term I will bring into the
44 discussion about the congregations we have studied.³¹
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50 Recent research has confirmed Pettersson’s claim that those who make use of the Church
51 primarily request safety, tradition and festivity,³² but disaffiliation from the Nordic majority
52 churches make claims about the Church being an important part of people’s life generally more
53 contestable today.³³ As pointed out by Kati Niemelä, understandings of Nordic religious life as
54 “belonging without believing” is about to change fundamentally. Particularly young people “do
55 not want to belong to the Church if they do not believe.”³⁴ In addition, the mismatch Pettersson
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3 describes, repeated in a recent publication,³⁵ is much more disputable today, as shown by Marcus
4 Moberg, who has studied official documents from seven Lutheran majority churches, thereby
5 three of the Nordic majority churches. These church documents are, according to Moberg
6 permeated by the logic of a service society and a customer-oriented logic. Moberg claims that the
7 discourse of decline has impinged upon the churches' self-understanding. He finds, as does Jes
8 Rasmussen³⁶, that these churches have adopted secularised views on themselves as organisations
9 in deep crisis, which have made them particularly vulnerable to logics of marketisation.
10 According to Moberg, "a marketization- and new media discourse" has become part of their
11 search "for 'solutions' to the problems that they are currently facing".³⁷ Moberg has not studied
12 the Church of Norway, but as mentioned in the introduction, his findings about marketization are
13 evident at the strategic level within this church as well. Generally, official church documents
14 reveal that the Nordic majority churches, including the Church of Norway, have been early
15 adopters of the Internet and that they are eager to present themselves as oriented towards the
16 needs of their members, similar to that which Pettersson called for twenty years ago.³⁸
17 Nevertheless, Moberg ends by pointing to the need for research on how marketisation "actually
18 plays out and is negotiated in real life situations at different levels of day-to-day church and
19 parish operations",³⁹ which is where this study contributes.

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24 Other contemporary studies contributing to research on how marketisation plays out in day-to-
25 day parish life are limited. Marie Vejrup Nielsen has studied baby hymn singing in the Church of
26 Denmark, which has become a very popular activity both in Denmark and in Norway. Nielsen
27 finds that the participants are very pleased with the activity, will recommend it to others, and
28 come again if they get another child, but hardly any express that they will attend the church more
29 in the future, for instance Sunday worship services.⁴⁰ This correlates well with Jens
30 Schlamelcher's study of "city churches" in Germany, which have developed a variety of "low
31 threshold offers" to attract people from all over town, and particularly outsiders not religiously
32 active in other churches.⁴¹ Most participants attending church offers such as yoga, meditation or
33 lectures had no intention of proceeding to "core activities" such as attending Sunday services. To
34 them, the threshold was not something preliminary, but religious services they made use of in
35 their everyday life.⁴² Schlamelcher found that creeds and dogma, expressions with theological
36 truth claims, were more or less absent in the activities offered by the city churches.

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41 However, low-threshold church activities as such do not necessarily imply a market orientation
42 within congregations. Nielsen and Kirstine Helboe Johansen have studied how congregations
43 advertise two newly invented worship services related to Halloween and Valentine's Day.⁴³ They
44 find that congregations engage in a subtle and complex interaction with the wider popular culture
45 in order to attract loosely connected majority members to church. It is not a straightforward or
46 easy adoption of Halloween and Valentine's Day, but a careful interaction creating new events,
47 presented as more serious and diverse than of retail stores and popular culture. Conscious efforts
48 to attract some particular members to church is clearly an expression of "customer orientation".
49 Still, the ways in which Halloween and Valentine's Day are transformed into church activities
50 render claims about churches being permeated by a market logic more open to discussion at a
51 congregational level. Nielsen and Johansen argue that to adapt a cultural trend is different from a
52 simple adjustment to it.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Nielsen and Johansen, and to some degree Schlamelcher,
53 have studied the consequences of low-threshold activities within congregations. Two of the
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3 congregations we study are located in two of the biggest cities in Norway. “West” has a low
4 threshold approach, similar to the one Schlamelcher describes, while “East”, the congregation
5 with the absolutely highest growth in attendance within our sample, has actively raised their
6 thresholds.
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9 The subsequent analysis will identify possible explanations for why four congregations are
10 growing against the trend, and how leadership, staff, volunteers and regular churchgoers
11 experience the attendance growth. It will keep close to the empirical material from each
12 congregation first, and then discuss the findings across the congregations in the concluding part.
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14 Analysis

15 North: Baptism as opportunity

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17 “North” is on the outskirts of a university city in Norway, and has the lowest attendance growth
18 within our sample of four. It had a total increase of 15.5% in 2013–2017 as compared to 2008–
19 2012. However, the increase in attendance only on Sunday and Festive days is as high as 29.9 %.
20 This congregation baptises more children than any other congregation in our sample,
21 approximately 100 baptisms annually since 2008. This figure increased to 130 in 2016, the top
22 year thus far, and the congregation has had a total increase of baptisms of 18.2 % in the last five
23 years (Chart 3).⁴⁵
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27 The parish leadership mentions several times during the interview that they used to restrict the
28 number of baptisms in each Sunday service, and particularly from outside the parish, but that the
29 congregation decided some years ago to turn baptism into an opportunity rather than a problem.
30 Increasing the number of baptisms is clearly part of an intentional congregational strategy in
31 North. Over time they have worked to make baptism as accessible as they can. The annual
32 reports from North from 2012–2017 provide detailed information about how the congregation
33 board and the parish personnel have worked actively to promote and strengthen their old church
34 as a popular ceremonial church for baptisms. The pastor is in no doubt when asked about the
35 causes of the attendance increase:
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39 This is not what we *think*, but something we *know*. We allow more baptisms now, and
40 baptism has become more important to us (North, interview, parish leadership).
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42 They link their efforts in promoting their church as well suited for baptisms to regional and
43 national reports about baptism decline. The annual report from 2014 states that the board and the
44 employed staff have discussed “recruitment and media strategy in light of the reports about
45 dwindling baptism numbers from the Bishop and Church Council (...)” (North, annual report
46 2014). The annual report from 2015 shows that about 50 baptisms, half the number of baptisms
47 in North, live outside the parish (North, annual report 2015). This means that more or less every
48 Sunday service has several baptisms in North. The pastor describes that he “loves to baptise
49 children”. He also underlines that he prefers not “to preach for the same faces all the time”
50 (interview, North, parish leadership).
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53 One concern about how the more regular churchgoers experience this influx of baptism led the
54 board leader and the parish pastor to reflect:
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3 The board has been worried that the large amounts of baptisms, with the accompanying
4 number of baptism attendees, are about to dominate the Sunday service, and that this may
5 cause a reduction in number of regular churchgoers (North, annual report 2015).
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7 The parish pastor refers to this reflection in the interview and to the fact that no one they asked
8 was tired of baptisms. “Baptism is the highlight,” they said. One volunteer confirms this in the
9 interview:
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11 Well, it’s natural, I suppose, that I think the baptism is really, in a way, the highlight for
12 me. Of course it’s because I am so involved. It’s just, it’s like, an “eternal moment.”
13 That’s how I would describe it. I think it is so powerful (North, interview, staff and
14 volunteers).
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17 Responses like this made the parish leaders “confident about opening up even more for
18 baptisms” (North, interview, parish leaders). The annual report from 2015 formulates it as a
19 guiding principle for the whole congregation:
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22 Principally, the congregation board wishes everyone who wants baptism in North to feel
23 welcome. The board wants to perceive the influx of baptisms as an opportunity and a
24 priority area rather than a problem, and has asked the pastors [...] to develop a strategy
25 for developing “the ceremonial-church” further (North, annual report 2015).
26

27 Concrete action followed from these principal and strategic considerations in 2016, which is the
28 year when the number of baptisms peaked at 130. One of the initiatives was additional baptism
29 services on Saturdays, described as a success with “the five services ‘fully booked’ with 5–7
30 baptism children in each” (North, annual report 2016). Another initiative was a final removal of
31 the old the rule where people living in the parish were given priority, to “a first come, first
32 served” procedure. In the interview, the daily manager reports that they try to find solutions
33 when people want baptisms on particular dates, and that they offer the new congregation house
34 as a facility for baptism celebrations. “It’s a challenging puzzle to get every piece in place”, but
35 they do their best to “show good service to everyone contacting us” (North, annual report 2013).
36 The attendance rate decreased a little in 2017 in North as a direct result of a reduction in the
37 number of baptisms. The board’s ambition is to find new ways to offer baptism – both additional
38 services on Saturdays and the drop in baptisms are mentioned – in order to grow the number of
39 baptisms again (North, annual report 2017).
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44 However, the interviews show that the way the leadership and board prioritise baptisms has some
45 burdensome consequences. The pastor reports that he hardly gets to talk to people who are not
46 part of the baptism families after the services. They have left church when the pastor is finished
47 with the photo sessions with the baptism families. He also admits that it is difficult to recruit new
48 volunteers to assist as assistant/lay liturgist and baptism hosts. The pastors spend a good deal of
49 time calling and sending messages in order to bring enough volunteers to each Sunday service.
50 This is also a concern in every annual report. The report from 2013 is an example:
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53 The volunteers that are baptism hosts and lay liturgists are tremendous and do a faithful
54 job. It means a lot that more voices “are heard” during the service. However, we still
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3 need more volunteers in order to prevent the “burden” on those that we have getting too
4 heavy (Annual report 2013).
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6 Parish personnel directly involved in baptisms describe baptism as a highlight, but regular
7 attendees without liturgical tasks respond differently.
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9 Well, this is where I attend [services on Sundays] because it’s close to where I live. I
10 always hope that there won’t be baptisms. You get running around and all kind of noise
11 and stuff (North, interview, churchgoers).
12

13 Another churchgoer reports that the number of people attending due to baptism is so huge that
14 “it’s sometimes hard to get a place to sit if we arrive late”, and one claims that “this is the reason
15 why NN decided yesterday that ‘it won’t be church for me tomorrow’”. Another churchgoer
16 expresses that she really likes the sermons of one of the pastors, and this makes her attend
17 regardless of its baptism or not. She is “a true supporter of church as a place for children” but
18 prefers Sunday services with more room for contemplation (North, interview, churchgoers).
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21 In sum, both the statistics and the interviews confirm that the growth of baptism has caused the
22 increase in attendance in North. This development has been part of a strategy decided on by the
23 council and actively supported by the parish leadership in North. The baptism numbers in North
24 are quite high, but the leadership perceives it as their task to join the regional and national efforts
25 to slow down the general decline. However, strategies for growth in North are not directly
26 economically motivated. The reinforcement of their position as ceremonial church is not being
27 done in order to compete in a religious market. Baptising children from families with a
28 relationship to the church and the church building gives the staff and volunteers quite a lot of
29 extra work and no immediate economic benefits or for instance new volunteers. In short, the
30 parish leadership and the committed volunteers favour vicarious religion and the folk church
31 form of religious life. Those visiting church on special occasions are seen as primary by the staff,
32 while the small minority of regular churchgoers have started to question their own attendance.
33 The influx of baptism attendees in North have made the interviewed regulars stay more often at
34 home and seek alternatives.
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39 South: A huge number of baptism visitors

40 “South” is a small town with agrarian and industrial traditions, now transformed into a
41 community where most people work in service and welfare-related businesses. The congregation
42 has witnessed an increase at 24.3 % in the last five years, as compared to the five previous years.
43 The increase must have taken place at the Sunday service, including Festive days, because they
44 hardly arrange any other services.⁴⁶ The congregation has increased their number of services by
45 19.8 %, but the number of baptisms in South has declined by 10 % in the same period. Thus, the
46 cause of the increase in South cannot be more baptisms, as is the case in North. They have more
47 Sunday services, less baptisms, and a substantial increase in participants (chart 1 and 3).
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51 The interviews explain the growth as caused by the increased number of people accompanying
52 every baptism. One staff member stipulates that two-thirds of those present at Sunday services
53 attend due to baptism. This is described as a rather new situation in South. The parish pastor
54 explains it as caused by a decision she made when she began as pastor:
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3 Previously, before I came, parents were told [in the baptism conversation] that children
4 weren't welcome, and that it [the service] was only for the closest family. I, yes, I, said
5 that children are welcome, and allowed to walk around a bit, and to be children. I tell
6 them [the parents] that everyone is welcome... and the number of baptism visitors per
7 baptism child is huge (South, interview leadership).
8

9
10 Her argument is that the congregation has an obligation to “to embrace all at all times because
11 we have been, and still are, a folk church” (South, interview, staff and volunteers). The
12 interviews with the leadership, staff and volunteers confirm that the number of people attending
13 Sunday services with baptism has increased. The council leader credits the pastor for how she
14 prepares the families.
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16
17 The church, I think, has become much better at receiving baptism families now. They are
18 many more and feel much more welcome. They are all over. On every pew. The pastor
19 talks with them very nicely. They are welcome and have all the information needed in
20 advance. We can almost see it when they arrive. It's a real festive day for them. They
21 aren't as embarrassed as they used to be, not knowing what to do. It has changed, and
22 there are many more of them (South, interview, leadership).
23

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25 This explanation of the attendance growth correlates well with the statistics from South. The
26 attendance growth in South starts in 2013, which is the same year as the parish pastor started
27 working in the congregation. There might be other explanations for the increase as well, but a
28 modest calculation is that every family brings 20 people each. The number of Sunday services
29 from 2013–2017 in South was 315, giving a stipulation of 6300 persons attending due to
30 baptism, a number close to the total attendance growth in the last five years.
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32
33 Is this practice of actively welcoming everyone in the baptism families to participate in the
34 Sunday service part of an intentional strategy within the congregation? The annual reports from
35 South have titles such as “This is where we belong” (2015), “New possibilities” (2016) and “A
36 church for everyone in the local community” (2017). These titles indicate a similar interest as in
37 North in finding ways to connect with the majority members of the church. However, the content
38 of the reports signals that South aims at something else than being a ceremonial church. One
39 repeating topic in the reports and the interviews is that the congregation needs “more people
40 attending the Sunday service more regularly” and “new volunteers” (South, annual reports 2016).
41 Reports from South explicitly express that they want to recruit people attending in baptisms,
42 weddings and funerals to enter into a more committed relation to the congregation.
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45
46 The church meets people related to baptism, funerals and weddings; this is our big
47 possibility to win them for the church and to make them part of a good relation and a
48 good way of belonging (South, annual report 2015).
49

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51 Parts of the parish leadership underline that it is “important to have baptism, because the regular
52 core has become smaller” (South, interview, parish leadership). This hope of recruiting new
53 regular churchgoers and volunteers is different from North, where they have minimal
54 expectations for future commitments within the congregation. However, neither the annual
55 reports nor the interviews signal that South has experienced this kind of growth. The staff and
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3 parish leaders were unable to identify new regular churchgoers, and certainly not among those
4 attending due to baptism.
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6 The annual reports from South emphasise “the baptism ceremony seems to work well for those
7 having baptism” (Annual report, South 2015). However, the church staff and volunteers are
8 reluctant for people coming to church mainly to attend baptism. They have baptisms in most
9 services, but try to keep at least one service a month free from baptisms. One expressed that the
10 increased number of people coming because of baptism is “choking other things off” (South,
11 interview, staff and volunteers).
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14 The service today was without baptism, and that made it easier to feel the pulse. Not as in
15 services where three-quarters are baptism attendees (...) not even interested in trying”
16 (South, interview, staff and volunteers).
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18 The pastor interfered, and argued that it is their task as a folk church to make baptism families feel at
19 home, but acknowledged that the consequence might be that more of their faithful churchgoers will
20 drop out of their services:
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23 Eventually, this focus [on the baptism attendees] will inhibit those who enjoy services from
24 attending. The participation [in services] will drop because the emphasis on those who are
25 actually very remote is so overwhelming (South, interview, staff and volunteers).
26

27 Services where the majority are baptism attendees feel, according to one in the staff, “like
28 smashing your head against the wall” (South, interview, staff and volunteers).
29

30 The interviewed regular churchgoers voiced similar opinions and concerns about the influx of
31 baptism attendees. One of them said that the most important thing about services is “that it is
32 peaceful and a good place to sit in silence”, and that this possibility is removed in services with
33 several baptisms. Services with baptisms feel as though they are done in a hurry;
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36 ...as if, sort of, we have to get things done here... children are getting bored. Services
37 without baptisms such as the one today are ... great... and it...it is very good that it takes
38 time when there are no baptisms (South, interview, churchgoers).
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41 Another troubling consequence of the influx of baptism attendees is that some of the faithful volunteers
42 have started to attend Pentecostal churches in the neighbouring town. It is, according to the parish board
43 leader, “no big thing to swap congregation any longer (...) People just say ‘Never mind, we’d rather
44 attend a meeting or service in NN” (South, interview, parish leadership). The leadership who were
45 interviewed express that they cannot count on the upcoming generation:
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48 Our young people, youth we could count on as future volunteers in previous years, they
49 have started to go to Nor-Church and Hillsong. The fellowship they find there is bigger,
50 more action. You name it (South, interview, leadership).
51

52 Another in the parish leadership adds:

53 .. and Nor-Church and Hillsong have more families with children too. They [the regular
54 churchgoers] get a social meeting place around it, the social part of it...and they talk
55 about the style of music as better there (South, interview, leadership).
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3 This has caused the congregation board to introduce new activities, such as Soul Children, a
4 concept developed by Nor-Church. Thus, South exemplifies how historical Protestant
5 congregations having successful mega-churches in their surroundings adopt elements from the
6 mega-church culture in order to compete and remain viable.⁴⁷
7
8

9 Overall, people who attend Sunday services due to baptism have most probably caused the
10 growth in attendance in South. The number of people attending has increased even if the total
11 number of baptisms has declined. This kind of growth is similar to the one they have witnessed
12 in North, but it has not been part of a congregational strategy in South. The annual reports and
13 interviews have short comments about the declining baptism rate in their own congregation, and
14 in the church as such, but their repeated worry is the declining the number of regular churchgoers
15 at their Sunday services. The facilitation of vicarious religion is something towards which the
16 pastor, primarily, feels a particular obligation. However, the pastor's arguments, echoing
17 Hegstad's argument against an understanding of the church in neither-nor categories,⁴⁸ do not
18 have much impact on the other parish employees. They do not experience the baptism attendees
19 as people who "quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing", as Davie describes it.⁴⁹
20 Rather, to show no interest in the Sunday service is experienced as something that undermines
21 the quality of worship of the service.
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26 West: Something for everyone

27 "West" is in the centre of a major city where the population is financially and culturally diverse.
28 The increase here is 28.3 %, but the increase on Sundays and Festive days is as high as 32.9 %,
29 even though they have reduced the number of services on Sundays by 23 %. The increase can
30 hardly be directly linked to baptism since their baptism rate has dropped by 15.5% in the last five
31 years. Hitherto, West increased their number of other services by 15.5 %, and the attendance rate
32 at these services has increased by 12.1 % (chart 3). Thus, the number of participants in West has
33 increased most where the offer has been largely reduced. Other services have expanded in
34 number, but without a comparable growth in terms of people present.
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38 In the interview, the parish pastor reported that the congregation has five to eight services a
39 week. They try to "lower every threshold" and to "have something for everyone" (interview,
40 West, parish leadership). The annual reports from 2013–2017 describe a variety of service
41 concepts, some weekly, others monthly, and some once or twice a year, such as everyday
42 services, café services, Taizé services, jazz services, city mission services, evensong services,
43 thematic evening services, gospel services and praise services. Those attracting most people are
44 praise services taking place regularly, but gospel services twice a year are also popular, with
45 400–600 people present. Their everyday services gather rather few attendees, but they prioritise
46 them as part of their diaconal work (West, annual reports 2014–2017).
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48

49 West has been encouraged to develop their diversified service offer by the Bishop, the top level
50 in the Church, which gives the project a high degree of legitimacy:
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53 The Bishop's visitation in December 2013 gave the congregation a challenge to continue
54 to develop worship services that differ from the services in the neighbouring church. Few
55 guidelines were given. The congregation was given the freedom to try alternative
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3 concepts. We solved it by inviting different organisations in as partners (West, annual
4 report 2014).
5

6 The interviewed parish leaders thought the growth in attendance in West was mainly a result of
7 the newly created services concepts, but the statistics show that their Sunday services account for
8 most of the growth they have had. However, attendance growth at Sunday services has also been
9 part of a strategic plan in West. The Bishop's report from 2013 from West is specific on what the
10 parish board would attempt in order to stimulate people to attend more regularly. Examples
11 include providing more church ushers to make people feel welcome, activities for children to
12 make the regular services more children and family friendly, lead vocals on hymns to make them
13 easier for people to sing, and light candling sessions to make space for silence and to include
14 more people as co-liturgists (West, visitation report 2013). However, the subsequent annual
15 reports express that the number of people who have begun to attend more regularly is low. The
16 report from 2014 describes some families starting to attend more regularly, but for these families,
17 "regularly" mean once a month or even more seldom. Hence, it seems unlikely that the board and
18 staff have succeeded in attracting new regular churchgoers able to account for the attendance
19 growth in West.
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24 However, the reports from 2012–2017 show that West systematically targeted children in
25 different age groups and activities within the congregation to specific Sunday services
26 throughout the year. One example is that the children's choir connected to the congregation sang
27 at least twice a year in a Sunday service. Another example is that the church personnel involved
28 confirmands in the liturgy at several services throughout the year. To invite groups of children
29 and youth to sing or to be otherwise involved was an effective way to grow the attendance. A
30 large number of parents and family will attend services where they otherwise would not be
31 present. Most probably, the growth in West was caused by Sunday services with specially invited
32 groups.
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36 The parish leaders, staff and volunteers express that they hope some of those who get involved in
37 services through their children or youth will become regular churchgoers. One of the volunteers
38 reported that this was the case for him:
39

40 I think it started when I had a confirmand myself...I got into it a bit more... or I was
41 invited or encouraged to participate or contribute, and now I'm active in the congregation
42 and a member of the parish council (Interview, West, staff and volunteers).
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45 To get people involved in Sunday services is one of the tasks that really gets the parish pastor
46 engaged:
47

48 The most enriching thing is to work with the Sunday service. And, this Sunday
49 confirmands are going to take part. It's incredibly exciting to engage the broad strata...to
50 get mothers and fathers involved in the church coffee, and hear them say that they've
51 never ever made church coffee before. I really enjoy when people see that it is natural to
52 contribute... (West, interview, leadership)
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3 However, involving new people into the many different services increases the work pressure.
4 One has to “go hunting for new volunteers all the time”, as the board leader puts it. The staff has
5 to work continually to attract people to all their different services, both as volunteers and as
6 attendees.
7

8
9 ...so, it is, when we've got so many services it is a major challenge to make people come
10 to all these different services. (...) It can be really challenging, you have to mobilise by
11 sending out messages, “Café service this Sunday at the congregation house. Are you
12 coming?”. And then send new reminders.
13

14 Neither management nor staff describes it as something that makes them exhausted. People often
15 say yes when asked. However, the expectations for future commitment and engagement are
16 rather limited. As one of the volunteers expressed: “If people stay for church coffee and actually
17 spend half an hour more, I really feel that we have succeeded! (West, interview, church staff and
18 volunteers). Another consequence of the highly diversified service offer in West is that people
19 expect to find services that are adaptive to their needs and wishes. One of the new churchgoers
20 with small children expressed that Sunday services without a program for children is unthinkable
21 for him. “I just don't bother tormenting my kids for an hour and a half in the pews. Why should I
22 do that?” (West, interview, churchgoers).
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26 In sum, West is similar to North in how they intentionally try to facilitate attendance from people
27 with a rather loose connection to the congregation and the church as such. Both congregations
28 actively support and embrace vicarious religion. The difference is that West has expanded the
29 number of “special occasions” that make people come more often than they would otherwise do.
30 The long-term strategy in West is not much different from South. The parish leaders and staff
31 hope that invitations to special Sunday services will make some interested in a more committed
32 relationship to the congregation, and possibly become new, regular churchgoers. However, as
33 Nielsen⁵⁰ and Schlamelcher⁵¹ point out, only a few are interested to become more regular
34 churchgoers, and some of these new churchgoers expect services that meets their individual
35 needs. Trying to convert occasional churchgoers to become regular churchgoers is strenuous and
36 demands, as Pettersson⁵² states, a lot more than a standardised offer.
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41 East: People from all over town

42 “East” is also in a big city, located in an area both of high income and high level of education.
43 The total increase in the last five years is 31.6 %, but the increase is as high as 45.1% on
44 Sundays and Festive days compared to the five previous years. The number of people attending
45 other services is also higher in East than in any of the other congregations (chart 2). The number
46 peaked in 2016 with 6424 participants in other services, and nearly 20,000 at Sunday services.
47 This means that the number of participants at each service, particularly on Sundays and Festive
48 days, is higher in East than in any of the other congregations. The number of services has
49 increased by 19 %, but the baptism rate is similar to South and cannot account for the large
50 increase they have witnessed.
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54 Each Sunday service in East has more than 200 persons coming from all over the city (East,
55 annual report 2016, 2017). Most people who attend do not do so due to a special life event. The
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3 interviewed parish leaders stipulate that about 70 % are regular churchgoers (East, interview,
4 staff and volunteers). The profile in East is not “lowering every threshold”, but rather the
5 opposite:
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7 As the previous pastor used to say... we don't lower the threshold here in East, we raise
8 the threshold. (...) I think he is right. Actually, we tried those new liturgies, but the
9 standard wasn't good enough, so we decided to keep the old ones instead (Interview,
10 East, staff and volunteers).
11
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13 Thus, the threshold they raise in East is the standard or quality of the services, and particularly
14 on Sundays. East distances itself from attempts to meet the preferences people might have.
15

16 We don't have what people might like or not in mind, but what *we* think of as important
17 to preach and share, and then most of the time people experience that they want what we
18 have, even if they didn't know it in advance (East, interview, staff and volunteers).
19
20

21 The church personnel describe Sunday services in East as “liturgically seamless”, and
22 “recognisable from week to week” throughout the year. The parish pastor refers to other
23 congregations trying to be welcoming by providing some directing comments, but states that “the
24 ideal here is no small talk during baptism” (East, interview, management). Compared to other
25 congregations, the baptism liturgy in East is short. However, as underlined several times during
26 the interviews: “We celebrate Eucharist properly” (East, interview, staff and volunteers). That
27 means, for instance, that they only allow Eucharist with alcohol in the wine. “This is something
28 with proper substance”. Likewise, artificial flowers and recorded music – and popular music in
29 particular – are out of the question. The 2017 report summarises their services as “high-quality
30 preaching, a strong liturgical presence, church music with choir and instrumentalists in addition
31 to our distinguished cantors and a lot of volunteers” (East, Annual report 2017). Several reports,
32 as well as the interviews, also emphasised that they have “the best church coffee in town”,
33 always with homemade cakes, made by some of their many volunteers (East, annual report
34 2016).
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39 There is a very pronounced expectation in East that the sermon and the music in every Sunday
40 service should keep a high standard. They have refused to implement music from the last
41 liturgical reform in Church of Norway, simply because “they were dissatisfactory and lacked
42 substance” (East, interview, staff and volunteers). Music as the medium that carries the service is
43 also quite specific in East. The annual reports from East describe a congregation with a steady
44 growth in attendance for at least ten years, except for a drop from 2011 to 2012 when the organ
45 was being renovated, followed by an even stronger increase in the years after (East, annual
46 reports 2008–2017). There are many intertwined explanations for the growth in attendance in
47 East, but the church music they offer is probably a determining factor.
48
49

50 The interviewed churchgoers confirm that the sermon and the music are important. They will not
51 attend services in East if the quality drops. They will go somewhere else if “something happens
52 to the liturgy” or “the sermons turn bad” (Interview, East, churchgoers).
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3 What irritates me the most in services are the sermons. There's so many bad sermons.
4 But, it is quite good here. It is actually very good (Interview, East, churchgoers).
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6 A high standard in sermons and liturgy is also important for the staff and volunteers:
7

8 Let's say, if the quality of the music became drastically impoverished, or if we got a
9 pastor that don't think preaches well, then I wouldn't have bothered to attend. I would
10 have found myself another place (Interview, East, staff and volunteers).
11

12 Changes in the Eucharist liturgy would lead to them resigning their posts and voluntary
13 engagement:
14

15 As for me, to be precise, if one starts to say "body" and serve lemonade instead of wine,
16 I'd rather find another church.
17

18 I quit too (Interview, East, staff and volunteers).
19
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21 These statements about quitting refer most probably to a discussion they have had recently. One
22 of the staff members reported that the Eucharist wine had been an issue within the parish board.
23 The religious educators had appealed to the board not to have wine containing alcohol in the two
24 services a year when the congregation invite all children aged 8 and 11 to attend the service as
25 part of the Christian education program. The educators argued against alcohol in the wine
26 because many of the children attend without their parents, and they had seen that the wine part
27 occupied a major part of their attention. The board discussed the proposal from the educators in
28 three meetings. Their conclusion was that wine with alcohol is important to safeguard the
29 authenticity of the Eucharist, and that no services should be exempted (West, Field note June
30 2019).
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34 This understanding of authenticity and quality is probably one reason why the staff and
35 volunteers communicated their opinions about each other's performance openly in the interview.
36 One of them expressed dissatisfaction about the sermon of that day: "... I'm not sure how to say
37 it, but the sermon today was unfortunate, if you get me". Another claimed that one of the pastors
38 "communicates well, but doesn't have the strength to mediate the message properly" (East,
39 interview, staff and volunteers). However, it is underlined that music can compensate for weak
40 preaching; "...a lot of things can carry it [if the sermon fails]. We have the liturgy" (East,
41 interview, staff and volunteers).
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44 The pastor admitted that she had never worked harder with her sermons in any other
45 congregation.
46

47 I always get comments on my sermon. I've never got so much feedback elsewhere in my
48 whole life. It is, well, it is fantastic, but it is...you have to endure very many different
49 opinions... but, that's okay (Interview, East, staff and personnel).
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52 To sum up, the large number of people who attend regularly has led to the growth in attendance
53 in East. In contrast to North and West, the parish leaders, board and staff seem to focus more on
54 regular churchgoers than on people who attend due to baptism. Reform initiatives from the
55 national level have had limited impact. East has refused to implement the liturgical music
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3 initiated by the national church level in order to increase the attendance at Sunday services.
4 Orientation towards the folk church and its implicit marketization discourse found by Moberg⁵³
5 has been avoided. The growth has been intentional in terms of offering high-quality services,
6 including at the church coffee afterwards. Still, it is mostly likely that the attendance growth will
7 decrease quite quickly if East is not able to uphold the quality expected by the churchgoers. East
8 offers in some sense a standardised service, their churchgoers demands high quality every
9 Sunday in order to stay.
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12 Discussion: For whom congregations exist

13 The aim of this article is to illuminate consequences of growth in an overall context of religious
14 decline in four congregations. More research is needed about why some congregations grow in a
15 overall context of religious decline, but the analysis has shown that growth in North, West and
16 South, three of the four congregations, is related to an influx of people attending due to particular
17 occasions, primarily baptisms. It is only in East where the growth is not related to baptism or
18 similar occasional attendance. The analysis has shown that the influx in North and West has been
19 targeted strategically. The situation is different in South, where the influx of baptisms is
20 contested and not part of an overall strategy within the congregation. However, North, West and
21 South have experienced that the number of regular churchgoers has declined. People who attend
22 due to the service as such occupy only a few pews in the back. These attendees express that the
23 space for them has become smaller. Some turn back at the entrance door because the church is
24 full when they arrive; some stay at home when they know it is a baptism; and others have started
25 to visit other congregations with more regular attendees and fewer baptisms.
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28 Thus, the situation described by Lundby is almost turned upside down. What makes “ordinary”
29 local churchgoers withdraw from the Sunday worship service is not a dominant faith collective.
30 Rather, the presence of many attendees showing no visible signs of interest in the Sunday service
31 has led more regular attendees to question their own attendance at the Sunday worship service in
32 their local congregation. This withdrawal can partly be explained by the baptism attendees acting
33 as so-called ‘free-riders’. Most secular clubs – for instance sport clubs – expect some kind of
34 payback in order to have access to common goods. Using what is on offer without being willing
35 to invest time, money or commitment to collective projects can lead committed members of a
36 club to protest.⁵⁴ Some of those employed, particularly the pastors, and the parish council
37 leaders, oppose this logic. They argue that they, as a folk church, have to make everybody feel
38 welcome and at home. The regular churchgoers and several of the parish employees, on the other
39 hand, prefer Sunday services without baptism. It is not that they are against baptism attendees
40 and all the accompanying children.
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43 Contrary to Davie,⁵⁵ the small religious minority does not experience the way the presence of the
44 majority as an approval and understanding of what they do. To show no visible interest in what is
45 going on, except for the baptism, might be related to Niemelä’s finding that the Nordic
46 “believing in belonging” is not as strong a norm as it has been.⁵⁶ A high level of visible non-
47 participation makes it harder for the few in the back to engage fully in the liturgy and the hymns.
48 In addition, adapting Sunday services to fit the needs of unaccustomed service attendees impairs
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3 the quality of the Sunday services. Those who are at services regularly experience baptism
4 services as intellectually and spiritually conflated and rushed.
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6 Similarly reluctant attitudes to baptism attendees are absent in a Danish study. Nete Helene
7 Enggaard finds that churchgoers in folk-church parishes in Denmark are not irritated by the
8 baptism attendees; the presence of children is particularly highly appreciated.⁵⁷ The influx of
9 baptism attendees may explain the discrepancy between her findings and the congregations we
10 have studied. It might be that the level of dissatisfaction increases when situational attendees
11 heavily outnumber the regulars. Hence, in East, we did not find similar negative attitudes, where
12 regular churchgoers occupied most pews while the baptism attendees only took a few in the
13 front. Additionally, the discourse on increasing the attendance at Sunday services and slowing
14 down the decline in baptism has been massively promoted from the national level in recent years.
15 This official discourse can make it harder to voice counter-discursive opinions, as some of the
16 regulars and some staff members did. Only informants at a distance to the policy level in church
17 addressed critical comments.
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22 Hegstad argues theologically that these two forms of religious life should not be polarised in an
23 either-or discussion. South struggles to find place for their small core congregation in the midst
24 of baptism attendees. It is a somewhat conflictual and inharmonious situation. The three others
25 have a more either-or profile. As phrased by Pettersson, the parish leaders, employees and
26 committed volunteers know for whom this congregation exist. The profile in North and West is
27 clearly in favour of baptism attendees and similar situational attendees. The outlook of their
28 Sunday services exemplifies congregations where conscious and strategic decisions have been
29 made to grow against the trend. A less distinct profile that attempted to balance the needs of the
30 two groups against each other would probably make it harder to grow in a context of decline.
31 The number of services inviting particular groups and baptisms has to be high in order to
32 continue the growth in attendance. Sunday services designed to fit the needs of the few in the
33 back rows would rapidly have a negative effect on the statistics. Such a prioritising of the folk
34 church way of religious life, sometimes at the expense of the faith community, can be perceived
35 as partly caused by the Church's national strategy offered by the synod and the bishops. North
36 and West exemplify polarised congregations implementing strategic recommendations requested
37 by the national and regional church authorities.
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42 East, however, has refused to follow many of the strategic suggestions offered by the national
43 church body. Their growth in regular churchgoers is contrary to North and West, and the growth
44 would most probably decline if they allowed more baptisms into their services. The informants
45 from East report that many of those attending Sunday services come from all over town, and are
46 not ordinary, local churchgoers, similar to Schlamelcher's finding. He observed that most people
47 visiting city churches in Germany were well-educated middle-class people with elite preferences
48 in terms of music and style.⁵⁸ We have not studied the demographic composition of East, but the
49 reported high level of classical music, liturgy and sermons indicates a composition similar to that
50 described by Schlamelcher. Hence, the growth in East can be people from all over the city who
51 are interested in a faith community not dominated by baptisms. Hence, the growth in East might
52 have reduced the number of regular churchgoers in other parishes. The profile in East renders
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3 baptism a short sequence, and this gives the other elements of the service – the sermon and
4 Eucharist in particular – higher priority. Thus, East is also an example of a polarised
5 congregation not attempting to balance the two groups of religious life against each other.
6 Vicarious religion is accepted in East, but regular attendees are primary. It is for the regulars
7 from all over town that this congregation exists.
8
9

10 North, West and East have made strategic choices in terms of what kind of congregation they
11 would like to be, and for whom. Pettersson's differentiation between three societal logics is
12 highly relevant, but his argument about a mismatch between what the church perceives as
13 primary and what most members find meaningful in church is more contestable. There are traces
14 of all three logics in the four congregations we have studied, but South comes close to a
15 paradigm dominated by agrarian and industrial logics. North and West, on the other hand, come
16 close to Pettersson's description of a service-providing organisation. North has done whatever
17 they can to make baptism available to everyone who contacts them. The removal of parish
18 borders, hospitality in every encounter, additional baptism services on Saturdays, and specific
19 efforts to allow baptism attendees to experience safety, tradition and festivity during the Sunday
20 service all align well with a service-minded orientation. Similarly, West's diversified offering of
21 different services on Sundays and during the rest of the week exemplifies a service-oriented
22 congregation. To organise five to eight services a week in order to fit individual needs, is well
23 beyond the traditional, standardised offering. North and West act according to a logic close to the
24 service society. East, on the other hand, strongly refuses to have what most people want as their
25 criteria, but their high threshold profile is also far from a standardised offering. Their distinct
26 emphasis on liturgical quality and congregational community signals that this congregation
27 might be even more service oriented than North and West, probably because the Sunday service
28 attendees in East are far more selective. The growth in attendance in North, West and East
29 depends heavily on their ability to be chosen by those for whom they exist. North needs people
30 to choose them a couple of times in a lifetime, while East needs people to choose them once a
31 week. Some of their attendees and staff would leave if the Eucharist liturgy was impoverished by
32 a more profane wording, or the sermons lost their quality. Hence, Pettersson's claim that the
33 church is struggling with its historical past rooted in the logic of agricultural and industrial
34 societies is not the case in three of the congregations we have studied. They have adjusted to the
35 logic of the service society, and their adjustments can largely explain why they have been able to
36 grow in a context of decline.
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44 To adjust to the logic of the service society can be interpreted as an expression of marketisation.
45 Moberg argues, as mentioned, that official church documents in seven Protestant churches are
46 permeated by a marketisation discourse. However, Moberg and Martikainen specify that to
47 highlight some loose similarities between religion and marketing is not enough to claim
48 marketisation. They restrict claims about marketisation to religious communities that
49 purposefully create and promote religious "products" or "services" in ways that will generally be
50 recognisable as marketing by marketers themselves.⁵⁹ By and large, though, this is not the case
51 for any of the four congregations. West is the congregation that comes closest. Their newly
52 invented service concepts are purposefully created to attract more people to church, but the
53 information initiatives they reported would not qualify as marketing campaigns. Similarly, North
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3 had made few initiatives to publicise their extra baptism services, except upon request and
4 through traditional information channels, such as their newsletter. East was also very restrictive
5 in terms of initiatives recognisable as marketing. Their strategy was to make their services
6 known through the informal network of people already attending. South did not report anything
7 close to marketing of their Sunday services. The influx of baptism attendees was not something
8 they had purposefully tried to achieve. However, North and West reported that the marketisation
9 discourse on the national level had made an impact on them. It was a Bishop's report that led
10 West to develop new service concepts, and it was a regional and national report about the decline
11 in baptism that acted as the trigger for North to develop an active strategy to attract more
12 baptisms.
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16 This gives some support to Moberg's hypothesis that marketisation at the top affects the meso-
17 level in a church organisation.⁶⁰ However, the studied congregations show few signs of direct
18 marketisation. Rather, they operate within the society of which they are part, trying to find new
19 solutions to one of their primary tasks, the Sunday services. South is in a troublesome phase of
20 negotiating between different logics, while the others are closer to Nielsen and Johansen's study
21 of congregations as active agents negotiating and transforming elements from popular culture.
22 North, West and East have been through a process in which they have adjusted, invented, and
23 adapted their Sunday services to fit into the lives of those for whom they primarily exist. Some
24 of the experienced consequences of these choices are coming to light now. The employees in all
25 four congregations report that they feel satisfied about the changes they have been able to make.
26 A church filled with baptism attendees is really a joy for the pastor, the staff and the committed
27 volunteers in North. To manage to make some parents of confirmands stay a little longer after a
28 service motivates the personnel and volunteers in West. Being able to be a place where so many
29 people requesting quality come to attend services makes those working in East proud. At the
30 same time, making these changes and transforming themselves into congregations in a late-
31 modern society has its costs. It is increasingly difficult to get new volunteers to assist in the
32 Sunday services in North. The employees and volunteers in West do not complain, but they work
33 long days in order to get enough people to all their services. East is in many respects in a
34 privileged position, but the pressure to provide quality every time is also something that makes
35 them vulnerable.
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42 Conclusion: Contested vicarious religion

43 This study of four congregations in the Church of Norway shows that growth in a context of
44 decline have contributed to make the congregations more distinct and polarised. One of the
45 congregations tries to balance between expectations from baptism attendees and regular
46 churchgoers. This causes a high level of tension within the congregation. The growth in this
47 congregation is more accidental than a result of strategic actions at a congregational level. The
48 growth in the other three congregations is largely a result of their willingness to achieve a
49 distinct profile. They offer Sunday services primarily to one specific group of church attendees.
50 Two of the studied congregations exist primarily for baptism attendees and other occasional
51 attendees. Vicarious religion is their calling, but it has made regular churchgoers question their
52 attendance. The fourth exists for regular attendees eager to experience Sunday services
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dominated by high-quality music, liturgy, and preaching. Occasional attendees are welcome, but the parish leadership and staff prohibit their influence on the service.

In conclusion, the Nordic pattern of “belonging without believing” seems to be changing. The combination of a smaller religiously active minority and a bigger but less approving majority has made “vicarious religion” more contested within congregations. The ideal of every congregation as a local parish for all, alongside strategies for growth in a context of decline, is counter-productive. Growth in a context of decline seems to presuppose a process in which congregations decide for whom they primarily exist.⁶¹ By our way of selecting congregations and the established data-material, we have been able to analyse in some depth how leaders, staff, volunteers and churchgoers in four congregations approach and react to growth in the participation rate at services. We have thus uncovered dynamics that are scarcely studied. Though the findings might be relevant also to congregations that undergo decline in participation rates, more research is necessary to establish whether our findings are valid on a more general basis. Still, our small-scale qualitative research project provide insights into the complexity of growth in a context of decline.

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¹ Chaves, "Congregations in Europe"

² Monnot and Stolz, *Congregations in Europe*.

³ As Furseth et.al describe more in detail, the church-state relation in Norway has changed over a period of 30 years. A political agreement between all political parties represented in the Parliament was reached in 2008, with a final constitutional amendment of 2012 and a full implementation in 2017. Coordinated with the church leadership, the agreement includes a position of CoN as a legal entity and a definition of CoN as the 'Established Church of Norway in the Constitution, § 16 (Furseth et.al 2018:87-90).

⁴ Statistics provided by Statistics Norway https://www.ssb.no/en/kirke_koetra. In comparison, the Church of Sweden has 57.7 % of the population as members and 40.6 % of new-borns are baptised (2018) (<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/statistik>). In Denmark 75.3 % of the population are members and 59.9 % of all new-borns are baptised in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark in 2017.

<http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/> (downloaded 19.12.02). See Furseth et.al for analysis of the developments within each of the Nordic majority churches (Furseth 2018).

⁵ The anonymised names of the congregations indicate, very roughly, where they are located geographically.

⁶ Tveitereid, "Making data speak"

⁷ Vejrup Nielsen and Helboe Johansen, "Transforming churches"

⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*

⁹ Davie, "Studying religion in the Nordic countries"

¹⁰ I have been the project leader of the project "Sted, rom og praksis. Gudstjenester folk vil ha"; the scholars involved are from different theological disciplines. Many of their articles are published in Teologisk tidsskrift <https://www.idunn.no/tt>. See project description: <https://www.tf.uio.no/forskning/prosjekter/sted-rom-praksis/index.html>, (accessed 02.03.2020).

¹¹ Vision document for the Church of Norway 2019-2021: <https://kirken.no/nb-NO/om-kirken/slik-styres-kirken/plandokumenter/visjonsdokument/> Mobilising document for baptism: <https://kirken.no/nb-NO/om-kirken/for-medarbeidere/dapsloftet---mobilisering-til-dap/> YouTube films about baptism: <https://kirken.no/nb-NO/d%C3%A5p/>. Commercial campaign for folk church: <https://kirken.no/romfordeg> (accessed 02.03.2020).

¹² Similar formulations in the national budgets from 2017-2020 state that the government demands attendance in order to support the church as folk church: <https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/aktuelt/filer-2017/statsbudsjettet-2017---tilskudd-til-den-norske-kirke.pdf> (accessed 02.03.2020).

¹³ Compared to the other Nordic majority churches, CoN has the most extensive state support. The primary source of funding is direct state funding over the state and municipal budgets, via the general tax revenue (Furseth 2018:92).

¹⁴ The project received its assessment from NSD Norwegian Centre for Research Data 10.03.2019. (Notification Form 481198).

¹⁵ NSDs kirkedatabase <https://nsd.no/data/kirke/> (accessed 10.12.02)

¹⁶ Growth in terms of members is mainly a result of population growth in the area. Several parishes have merged during the last ten years, and this affects the participation statistics. We also considered newly erected church buildings as a factor that causes growth, and excluded these churches in order not to study this special phenomenon.

¹⁷ The criterion of 3000 members was not part of the initial research design. We contacted the congregations at the top of the list (after excluding parishes with population growth, merged parishes and new church buildings). These congregations had a low number of members, and small changes in participation rates had a large impact on the statistics. The church personnel in these congregations had not noticed increased participation at their Sunday worship services. This information led to us expanding the inclusion criteria to 3000. We asked two other congregations to participate, but they declined to take part in the study.

¹⁸ "Festive days" include Christmas Eve, confirmations and other Festive days in the liturgical calendar. "Other services" include evening services, services in institutions and for schools and kindergartens.

¹⁹ The observation material also includes participant observation of activities taking place in the days prior to or after the Sunday service.

²⁰ Roest, "The Focus Group Method in Practical Ecclesiology".

²¹ Information about gender and age is not included due to anonymity of the informants. The questions from the interview guide particularly addressing my research interest: What makes you engaged in the services in this congregation? How would you describe this service in relation to other services in this congregation? What would make you attend more services? What could keep you from attending? Why do you think this congregation has seen an increase in number of participants? (Interview guide, my translation). The management were given the same questions, but we included additional questions: How would you describe this congregation? What do you experience as the most rewarding and most challenging aspect of working in this congregation? How is the

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4 cooperation between employed staff and volunteers? How do you recruit volunteers? What kind of activities do
5 you prioritise financially? What kind of activities do you consider as competitors? Do you experience other
6 Christian congregations or organisations as competitors? (Interview guide, my translation).
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8 ²² These informants were recruited in advance through the pastor in each congregation.

9 ²³ Lundby, *Troskollektivet*.

10 ²⁴ Hegstad, *Folkekirke og trosfelleskap*.

11 ²⁵ Furseth, *Religious Complexity*, 45-46.

12 ²⁶ Hegstad, *Folkekirke og trosfelleskap*.

13 ²⁷ Iversen, "Gudstro i den danske religionspark"

14 ²⁸ Davie, *Vicarious religion*, 22

15 ²⁹ Pettersson, "Kvalitet i livslånga tjänsterelationer"

16 ³⁰ Pettersson, "Kvalitet", 350-351.

17 ³¹ Pettersson, "Kvalitet", 150

18 ³² Johansen, "Does Generation Matter?"

19 ³³ Furseth, *Religious complexity*, 47

20 ³⁴ Niemelä, "No longer believing in belonging"

21 ³⁵ Pettersson, "From Standardised Offer to Consumer Adaptation"

22 ³⁶ Rasmussen, "The marketization of church closures"

23 ³⁷ Moberg, *Church, market, and media*, 76.

24 ³⁸ Furseth, *Religious complexity*, 224-225.

25 ³⁹ Moberg, *Church, market, and media*, 154.

26 ⁴⁰ Vejrup Nielsen, "Changing Patterns?"

27 ⁴¹ Schlamelcher, "The Decline of the Parishes"

28 ⁴² Schlamelcher, "The Decline of the Parishes"

29 ⁴³ Vejrup Nielsen and Helboe Johansen, "Transforming churches"

30 ⁴⁴ Vejrup Nielsen and Helboe Johansen, "Transforming churches" 522-523.

31 ⁴⁵ Other services not taking place on Sunday morning in North had a negative growth of -13.1 %. The total number
32 of services has increased by 16.8 % in the last five years (291 vs. 340). Their number of other services was also
33 quite high (158 vs. 153), but the total number has reduced a little (3.6 %).

34 ⁴⁶ The congregation had reported a high number of worship services other than on Sundays in the last five years.
35 The increase at 353% was so high that we asked the parish leadership how they completed the statistics. The
36 services registered as "other" should have been registered as "Sunday- and Festive days".

37 ⁴⁷ Ellingson, "Packaging Religious Experience"

38 ⁴⁸ Hegstad, *Folkekirke og trosfelleskap*.

39 ⁴⁹ Davie, "Vicarious religion", 22.

40 ⁵⁰ Nielsen, "Changing Patterns?"

41 ⁵¹ Schlamelcher, "The Decline of the Parishes"

42 ⁵² Pettersson, "From Standardised Offer to Consumer Adaptation"

43 ⁵³ Moberg, *Church, market, and media*

44 ⁵⁴ Brekke, *Faithonomics*, 50-51.

45 ⁵⁵ Davie, "Vicarious religion"

46 ⁵⁶ Davie, "Studying religion in the Nordic countries"

47 ⁵⁷ Engaard, "Højmessen set fra kirkebænken"

48 ⁵⁸ Schlamelcher, "The Decline of the Mainline German Churches"

49 ⁵⁹ Moberg and Martikainen, "Religious change in market and consumer society"

50 ⁶⁰ Moberg, *Church, market, and media*

51 ⁶¹ Several have responded to drafts of this article. Words of thanks go to the members of the research group, the
52 empirical research group at Aarhus University led by Kirstine Helboe Johansen, as well as Marie Vejrup Nielsen, Per
53 Pettersson, Nete Helene Engaard, Jens Schlamelcher, Marcus Moberg and the two anonymous reviewers.
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Chart 1:

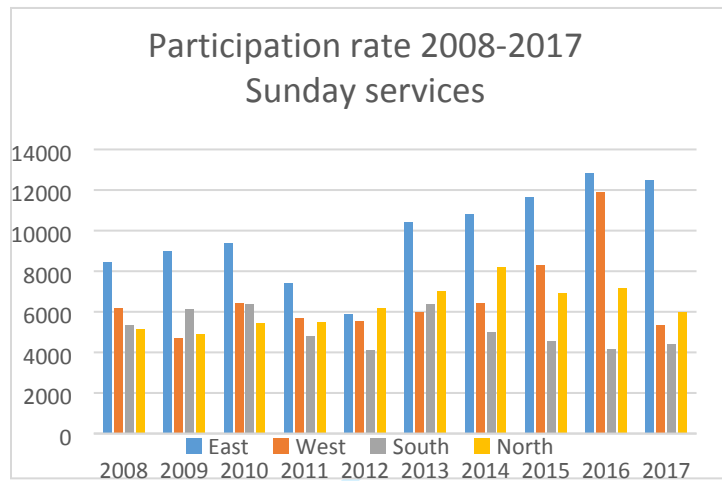


Chart 2:

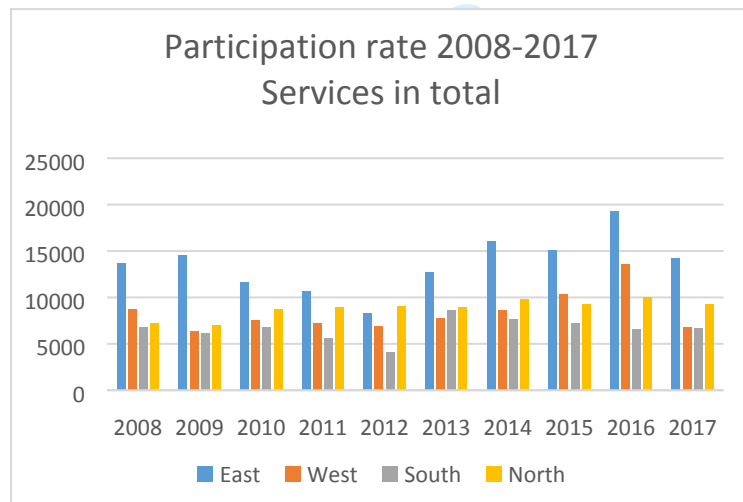


Chart 3:

