

## Pastors without Borders

# The Reception of a Reform Initiative in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the reception of a reform program, establishing Cooperation Areas in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (ELCI). According to the program, the clergy and other staff were asked to organize cooperation within each area. The main research questions are: What results can be seen in the early attempts and what are the possible explanations of these results? Looking for answers, I focus on the role of pastors and deans in establishing the Cooperation Areas.

This is a qualitative case study based on documents from the ELCI's General Assembly and other public documents, as well as questionnaires to two selected groups, deans in the ELCI and pastors in one cooperation area. Additional research material came from ten qualitative interviews that had been conducted for a previous research. The documents are analyzed using basic analysis (Sarantokos, 2005) and the questionnaires and interviews using thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings indicate that participation in the cooperation project was limited. Possible explanations are: first, the very structure of the cooperation project, which relied on voluntary participation without clear instructions on who should be in charge of completing it; second, cooperation, which was made difficult by the fact that the clergy are hired by the central church and receives salaries from a special church fund, whereas other staff is hired by the parish, often in part-time roles; third, the church structure, where each parish is independent financially and administratively and the pastor has a lot of independence in the office regarding the organization of his/her work. However, in an area where the Cooperation Area project was active to some extent, it had a positive effect on the working environment of the pastors.

The cooperation attempt can be seen in context of reform projects in Nordic churches. It is the first study on this project and adds to the limited amount of studies on the ELCI's structure and reform projects. This study focuses on the role of the clergy. For further studies the involvement of parish councils in reform processes instigated by the Central Church Authorities needs to be explored.

The limitation of this research lies in the qualitative methodology and size of the study, analyzing the answers of a sample of clergy. The conclusions drawn from interviews and questionnaires are to be read in that light.

**Keywords:** Iceland, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, church and change, cooperation, clergy.

## Introduction

In 2010, the General Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (ELCI) adopted a proposal to create Cooperation Areas in the church, across the borders of parishes and pastorates. According to the proposal, the clergy and other parish staff in each area should work together and plan their work to ensure the best use of human resources and make certain that the same level of service was offered everywhere. In early 2011, deans were asked to introduce this process in their deaneries. The proposal for Cooperation Areas did not result in any formal changes in the church structure and did not abandon pastorates, but it stipulated change in how church work should be carried out.

Ideas of increased cooperation and different use of human resources are well known in corporate management and public management. In the ELCI these ideas met ecclesiology that has emphasized the traditional role of the pastor as the shepherd, looking after his flock day and night and ideas about the independence of each parish – and parish pastor – vis-à-vis the church's central authorities. This case study looks at the reception of this reform of the Cooperation Areas 2011 - 2017. It shows that the program had limited success in the and looks for possible explanations for those results.

The program of Cooperation Areas can be seen as a reform project. Its aim was to enable the church to improve its service and, simultaneously, to ensure a more equal work-load of the staff. This should primarily be carried out through changing the work habits and thus the roles of pastors and staff.

Morten Huse and Catherine Hansen studied the first stages of the Deanery reforms in the Church of Norway (Huse, 1999; Huse & Hansen, 2002). Their analysis model is used in this study and results compared to some extent. This particular stage of that reform is chosen, as it was a trial period and relied on voluntary participation. In Norway, the first stages later led to changes in legislation. As a result of these changes, pastorates were abandoned and the clergy were instead appointed to one or more parishes but also required to work on deanery basis, that is, across the “borders” of pastorates, organized by the deans (Hans Stifoss-Hanssen et al., 2013). This has not happened in Iceland.

The main research questions are: What results can be observed in the early attempts and what are the possible explanations of these results? Looking for answers, I focus on the role of the pastor and ask whether the pastoral identity can explain the results in Iceland.

This study adds to the research on church reform and change in the ELCI as the first attempt to evaluate and explain the fate of these reforms. It contributes to the more extensive field of research in practical theology in the Nordic context by offering a perspective from Iceland, highlighting to some extent the similarities and the differences between two Nordic Folk Churches. In

this study, Norway is chosen as a main comparison, as the idea of Cooperation Areas shares some commonalities with the Deanery reform in Norway, especially during the first phase of that reform.

## Previous Research

The Nordic Lutheran majority churches share many similarities and all of them have gone through major changes during the last two decades. Some changes were directly linked to structural changes in legislation, such as changed relations between church and state in Iceland in 1997 (Björnsdóttir, 2012; Hugason, 2010; Pétursson, 2011), in Sweden in 2000 (Bäckström, Edgardh Beckman, & Pettersson, 2004), and in Norway, a new church legislation in 1996 and changed relations with the state effective from 2017.

In addition to changes in State-Church relations, several organizational changes have taken place. Relevant in this context (but not an exhaustive list) are the changes in parish leadership with new church legislation in Norway in 1996; the merging of parishes in Sweden after 2000, where, for example, from 2000 to 2007 the number of parishes in the Churches of Sweden dropped by approximately 700 (Statistiska Statistiska Centralbyrån 2007, p. 104); and a change in pastorates in Sweden in 2014, when pastorates became defined as cooperation form for congregations (“samverkansform för församlingar”) instead of service areas for the senior pastor or rector. This included changes in financial management, where the pastorate now has the financial responsibility for the parishes (Ordinance), 2016; Rosenius, 2015, pp. 82-83). In Norway, The organization of parish service of the church changed with the deanery reform (Huse et al. 2002; Hans Stifoss-Hanssen et al., 2013) . In Finland, changes in parish borders and merging of parishes followed changes in municipality structures, where changes in parish structures affected more than half the parishes in the first decade of this century (Ketola, Niemelä, Palmu, Salomäki, & Kirkon tutkimuskeskus, 2013; Palmu, 2012). The development in the Church of Denmark has been slower but a significant structural change was the establishment of Diocesan councils in 2009, giving dioceses a formalized structure with operational power (Kirkeministeriet, 2014, pp. 91-94).

Various reform projects for congregational work were instigated during this period as well. An example, though not an exhaustive list, are three large reform processes in the Church of Norway; on liturgy, on Christian education and an effort to increase church democracy (Schmidt 2016, Haga 2016); the strategy titled Our Church - a Participatory Community outlining the Church's operation, was approved by the Church of Finland in 2008 (Palmu et al., 2013). In ELCI, the church's central authorities initiated a strategic planning process in 2003, followed by a series of projects and strategies in various fields of church work (Björnsdóttir, 2016).

## Management Theories and Church Reform

Norwegian theologians Kjetil Haga (Haga, 2016) and Ulla Schmidt (Schmidt, 2016) have both argued that the recent reforms in the Church of Norway are influenced by institutional reforms in the

public sector of society in Norway and many other countries often labelled as “New Public Management” (NPM), which stresses that the public sector should be governed and operated along the same lines and principles as the private sector and businesses (Schmidt, 2016:44). NPM sees the private sector as a role model for public administration and defines public administration as a provider of services to citizens, who are redefined as clients and consumers (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2002, p. 17). The model is adapted differently in different countries (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2002, p. 34). Among the characteristics of NPM is strategic planning and management (Gruening, 2001, p. 2). Discussing both the education reform and the deanery reform in Norway, Ulla Schmidt states that even if the changes are influenced by external factors such as NPM, they are adapted to church settings to reduce conflict with church identity and history (Schmidt 2016: 53). Schmidt notes that the many reforms undertaken by the Church of Norway in the last two decades also coincide with increased independence of the church with the establishment of a Church Synod in 1984 and a new Church Act in 1996. This increased independence coincided with a decline in membership and demographic changes in society (Schmidt 2016:39). These demographic changes were also felt by the majority churches in other Nordic countries.

Several research Networks have published research surrounding the structural changes in Nordic Churches, as well as changes in work conditions of pastors and leadership in churches and religious institutions (Hansson (ed.) 1997, Huse (ed) 2000, Askeland et al. (eds) 2005, Niemela (ed) 2012, Askeland et al. (eds.) 2016). Catherine Hansen and Morten Huse studied the early stages of what led to the deanery reform in the Church of Norway (Huse & Hansen, 2002, 2003) and several studies have been carried out on the later stages (Askeland, 2016; Hans Stifoss---Hanssen et al., 2013). In this study, I focus on the early stages of the deanery reform, as that period is more comparable with the attempt to establish active Cooperation Areas in Iceland. For the comparison, I will rely on Huse and Hansen’s study on the early attempts (Huse & Hansen, 2002).

In Iceland, the relations between state and church changed in 1998, giving the church autonomy and making the General Assembly its highest decision making body within the constraints of the law (Lög um stöðu stjórn og starfshætti, 1997). The Cooperation Areas can be seen as the last project connected to a strategic planning process carried out at the request of the General Assembly in ELCI in 2003. The models used were those known in the business world, and advisors came from the department of Economics at the University (Björnsdóttir, 2016). In this respect, the ideas behind the Cooperation Areas can be traced to ideas on management. The church was not alone in this in Iceland; institutional reforms in the public sector of society, including strategic planning and policy making, has been influential in Iceland, as well as other Nordic countries (Hlynsdóttir, 2012; Kristinsson, 2013; Kristmundsson, 2003)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Icelandic political scientist Gunnar Helgi Kristinsson studied the preparation of public policy by the parliament and the executive power in Iceland and compared them to the process in three Scandinavian states. The policy preparation was assessed in light of the theory of bounded rationality, which “regards rational policy making as a process which fulfils certain requirements with regard to agenda setting, fact finding and analysis, and decision making which fulfils minimum requirements”(Kristinsson, 2013, p. 258). Kristinsson found that Iceland deviates from the other countries on various levels, including less systematic analysis of policy alternatives and setting of priorities. At

## The Pastoral Office, a Lifestyle or a Job?

The Cooperation areas are an attempt to modernize parish work and the work environment of the clergy in the ELCI. It is therefore helpful to look at the development of the pastoral office, especially where the traditional ecclesiology meets modern demands of work and family life.

The traditional view of the pastoral office (Icelandic: *Embætti*) in Iceland is that, while it gives the holder the freedom to organize and prioritize his or her work, s/he should also be available at all times. This understanding can be seen in the Letter of Ordination<sup>2</sup> in the ELCI, which states that the pastor should be on call to assist the parishioners in matters concerning their salvation, *at any time* that they may need it and ask for guidance. This emphasizes the understanding that to be a pastor is to be on call 24/7; it is a lifestyle, not a job. Research in Norway and Denmark shows that this view is changing amongst pastors (Felter, 2016; Stangeland Kaufman, 2016), and these changing views can also be observed in Iceland (Björnsdóttir, 2013; Hörpudóttir, 2015; Petersen, 2012). In Norway, this change is most clear in the changed working environment for pastors in the Church of Norway, where new legislation requires planning and counting the hours that pastors work and payment for overtime. It means also that instead of having an independent office where they can organize and prioritize their own work and working hours, pastors now have more limited freedom.

Norwegian theologian Tone Stangeland Kaufman argues that there is a change in the attitude of pastors towards boundaries between work, leisure and family life and that this change is a compromise between viewing the pastoral office as a calling, being available for the congregation at all times, and being a 9 to 5 job. The emerging pastoral type is a pastor who sets boundaries and is not on call 24/7, while respecting that the pastoral office is a calling and has spiritual dimensions (Stangeland Kaufman, 2016).

In a recent qualitative study on pastors in the church of Denmark, Kirsten Donskov Felter (2016) stresses that they see their vocation as a lifestyle, where there are unclear boundaries between work and time off. Living in a rectory emphasizes the idea that being a pastor is not something one does but something one is. There is however, a marked effort to steer the tasks that can be controlled into an 8 to 4 schedule, whilst acknowledging that some tasks need to take place outside of office hours. The Danish pastor has the freedom to organize his/her work within the limits

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the decision stage, “departures from the conclusions reached during the preparatory phase are much more common in Iceland than in the other states” (Kristinsson, 2013, p. 258). The main conclusion is that policy making in Iceland deviates more from the premises of the theory of bounded rationality than in Scandinavia. The strategic planning process in the ELCI was not part of Kristinsson’s research. He claims that the limited research that has been carried out on strategic planning in Iceland indicates that the general emphasis on research, analyses and acceptance found in the Nordic countries, does not exist in Iceland (Kristinsson, 2013, p. 260). My study differs from Kristinsson’s research and the two are not comparable, as I look at the reception of the documents while Kristinsson is concerned with the making of the strategy. Kristinsson’s assumptions, however, raise the question whether strategic planning in public institutions in Iceland shares some commonalities in inadequate preparation.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Ordination (Icel. *Vígslubréf*) is given to the pastor at ordination and states that s/he has been called and ordained to holy service of word and sacrament, listing the general duties of the office.

of these expectations and can therefore take time off during weekdays to counteract long working hours. (Felter, 2016).

In this respect, the Icelandic understanding of the office and working environment is similar to that in Denmark. Rectories are still common in the countryside, even if they are slowly being abandoned. In some areas, pastors take turns with a duty phone for emergencies, which can be reached, for example, by the police and health authorities if a pastor is needed outside office hours. This can take the pressure off being on call at all times, as stated in the Letter of Ordination. The pastoral union has repeatedly discussed working hours and the understanding of the pastoral office as a 24/7 presence. There is tension in finding the balance between the work and the vocation. A committee on working conditions of clergy in 2004 found that the statement in the Letter of Ordination should be understood in terms of the vocation of the office but not as a description of working hours (Haraldsson, 2005; Pastoral Union, 2004, 2006; Stefánsson & Magnússon, 2011). The conclusion is that pastors are not regular employees but have a pastoral office where the working schedule, hours and tasks are set by the pastor. The independence of the office also means that the clergy have certain freedom regarding working hours and can also divide the work amongst themselves and cover for each other on their weekly day off. (Sigurbjörnsson, 2008; Stefánsson & Magnússon, 2011)

In Kaufman's study, the change in attitude towards working hours is related to age. Younger pastors are more interested in setting boundaries. A quantitative study by Icelandic theologian Hildur Björk Hörpudóttir (2015) on pastors' attitude to change, however, does not find differences regarding age, gender or other factors, when asked about the need for change in work procedures in their own pastorates, deaneries or regarding the church governing organization. This study does not ask specifically about working hours but gives the possibility to add comments. When asked about how they feel in their work, some mention isolation and the pressure on family life. Comments included the view that the Letter of Ordination reflected a different reality from modern times, where both partners work and share responsibility for the family. Regarding work environment, there are comments about the need for increased cooperation, merging of parishes and Cooperation Areas (Hörpudóttir, 2015).

## Data and Methods

This case study explores how implementation of the Cooperation Areas fared in the ELCI and tries to offer explanations for the results. Three types of material forms are used; written material, two questionnaires sent to two different groups, and answers from ten qualitative interviews with clergy in the ELCI. Written material is official documentation of the process from the ELCI, both from the General Assembly, the executive council and the strategic planning process. These include progress reports to the Executive council and the General Assembly and reports from meetings of the cooperation committee, as well as proposals, resolutions and statements for the Assembly.

A proposal for resolution in autumn 2013 stated that the implementation had not been successful. To follow up on that, I sent a questionnaire to all nine deaneries in the ELCI in 2014 to find out how much had been implemented. Seven deaneries replied. The questions were both open and closed, simple yes and no answers. The questionnaire also offered the opportunity to elaborate on the answers. In the introduction, I told the deans that deaneries or pastorates would not be mentioned by name. I therefore explain the type of deanery in the text but not location. These documents and the questionnaire to the deans are analyzed using basic analysis (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 293). Open answers from that questionnaire are also analyzed using thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 77-101).

In 2017, I sent a questionnaire with open questions to six pastors, who all work in a Cooperation Area where cooperation has been active to some extent. All six pastors replied. Those six pastors are aware that their identity as a group and even as a person might be visible to church people, and they read the text relating to their answers, affirmed it and gave permission. These answers were analyzed using thematic analyses, looking for explicit and latent answers.

Thematic analyses are also used for analyzing material collected for an earlier study on the strategic planning programs of the ELCI (Björnsdóttir, 2016). This consists of ten qualitative interviews with pastors, five male and five female. At the time, women pastors were approximately 30% of the total number, but they are 50% of respondents, as I hoped to limit a possible gender bias by having even numbers. At the time, 48 of the 122 pastors working in parishes worked in the capital area. The sample for interviews included five pastors in the capital area, two in larger towns, one in a small town and two from predominantly rural areas. The interviews were performed in 2008-2009 and focused on participation in other fields of the strategic planning process. Eight interviewees were rectors or senior pastors (*sóknarprestar*), two were junior pastors.

The ten interviews precede the formal launch of Cooperation Areas and are used here as a resource material regarding each pastor's thoughts on cooperation and on the identity of the pastoral office. As they were conducted, the idea of increased cooperation was being discussed at the General Assembly, and increased cooperation and different methods of working was voiced in some of the interviews. I do not draw any quantitative conclusions from the responses. They do, however, give insight into the thoughts of those pastors and can, as such, offer some interpretation both for the possible need for increased cooperation and the reluctance to increase it. When these pastors were interviewed, they were told that confidentiality would be ensured and printed information would not be traceable. In the small community of pastors in Iceland, this is not easy and can in this case only be carried out by leaving out gender (I use s/he) and position.

## The Position of the Researcher

In any qualitative research, one of the primary tools is the researcher herself. (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 58). In addition to shaping the research, the position of the researcher can affect the research subject. I worked in the ELCI's diocesan office from 2003 – 2012, was a project manager for the Strategic planning process in 2003 and 2004, and a secretary for the committee that introduced the Cooperation Areas in 2007-2010, called Committee on the Comprehensive Services of

the Church. The benefit of the involvement is good knowledge of the process, but at the same time, there is a clear risk of bias in interpreting results. As the researcher, I was aware of this conflict. Since 2012, I have worked in parish ministry in the capital area, first in an area where the Cooperation Areas are most active and later in an area where they are not implemented at all. Bearing in mind the need for reflexivity (Willig, 2001, pp. 59-61) and danger of bias (Yin, 2014, p. 106), I have tried to be aware of any tendency to internal editing of the material because of the connections with this program and with the diocesan office, as well as bias in questions and response bias from the respondents. The background of working in two different Cooperation Areas has given me added insight into the practical aspects of the program.

## **Cooperation Areas**

Pastors have long cooperated to some extent in the ELCI, especially in serving for one another during summer holidays. In many areas, there is cooperation with confirmation camps or other special events. This has mostly been informal and based on the interest of the pastors themselves. Establishment of special Deanery Funds in 1985 created possible financing for events like camps, concerts or other common events. The idea behind the specific Cooperation Areas goes further than voluntary informal cooperation. It is formal cooperation where all pastors in the area and other parish staff shall work as one to guarantee that people in the area have access to the basic service of the church, regardless of the size of the parish. A resolution defining the service of the church as a whole and proposing the Cooperation Areas as a working model was adopted by the General Assembly in 2010.

Increased urbanization in Iceland had resulted in many rural congregations getting smaller. The General Assembly had encouraged parishes and pastorates to merge (Framtíðarskipan sókna, 2000; Kirkjuráð, 2001), but those plans were met with resistance at the grass root level. By proposing cooperation instead of mergers, the Church's Central Authorities would be opting for a softer version, possibly making mergers easier later. In the original proposal, the focus was on the pastors, and the proposal was to reorganize pastoral service, including to distribute workload more evenly. In the General Assembly, the focus shifted and instead of focusing on the working conditions of pastors, the focus was on the service of the church as a service provider.

Deans in the ELCI were asked to organize meetings and introduce this new form of work in early 2011. The rules of procedures for pastors, as amended in 2011, already mention the Cooperation Areas (Starfsreglur um presta, 2011). Cooperation Areas have also been cited since 2012, when positions for clergy began to be advertised. Clergy are called to work in a pastorate but also in a certain cooperation area. Other staff positions advertised by the parishes do not mention Cooperation Areas.

Three years from the introduction of Cooperation Areas, they had still not become active units of work. A resolution to strengthen and formalize the Cooperation Areas was put to the General Assembly in November 2013. The report stated:



'It seems the Cooperation Areas start slowly and in many places, very little has happened. The reason is not clear, but perhaps, as in many other cases, this can be explained by lack of follow-up, no one feels he or she has the responsibility to do so and there are not enough resources to hire someone to do that, which often seems the best solution.'

(Kirkjuþing, 2013)

The resolution proposal from 2013 proposes that pastors and deans should be sent new terms of reference, stating their obligations in terms of cooperation. Furthermore, the legislation and procedures should be changed to strengthen the existence of Cooperation Areas (Gerðir kirkjuþings, 2013, pp. 66-91). The proposal was not accepted, and in 2014, the General Assembly combined this proposal with another on the strategic planning process of the management of the ELCI (Gerðir kirkjuþings, 2014, pp. 141,166). The matter has not been taken up in the General Assembly since then. The Cooperation Areas still exist but without any further attempts to strengthen them.

### Wish for Cooperation

My earlier study on the fate of other projects instigated by church authorities in relation to the strategic planning process shows the programs have not been met with enthusiasm. Qualitative interviews with ten pastors in the ELCI, conducted in 2008 – 9, showed that they were important actors in enabling changes in the parishes, but pastors did not feel obligated to follow the programs suggested by the diocesan authorities (Björnsdóttir, 2016). However, a desire for more cooperation was evident in many of the qualitative interviews.

Pastor 2 works in a large parish in a town in the countryside. S/he felt strongly that the pastors were too isolated in their own parishes. "Pastorates should be larger and more pastors should be [working together]..."

Pastor 6 works in the capital area but shares the colleague's concern: "... There are too many one-man-shows in the church. The areas need to be larger, where people work together and [...] different talents can flourish [...] It is a generational change [...] It is definitely to some extent linked to the increase of women pastors."

Another pastor in the capital linked this to age: "I am one of the younger generation and I want cooperation." (P4)

*Casualia* (funerals, weddings, confirmation classes and baptism outside of regular service) is paid extra in the ELCI and can boost income significantly. This was mentioned as another possible hindrance to cooperation the view that pastors are not prepared or trained for cooperation.

My dream would be to have two pastors here, dividing the work on basis of equality - I have my strengths, he has his, and we would not be competing [...] For this to happen the

church authorities need to prepare the pastors much earlier - that being a pastor is not about being in competition with other pastors. (P10, a large parish in a town)

More pastors mentioned the collegial competition. Not all agree that pastors want to work together, and one stipulated that this was a job for soloists.

In the interviews, a wish is expressed for increased cooperation, but at the same time, there is recognition of the possible hindrances in payments for *casualia*. The comment that women want increased cooperation finds some support in a quantitative research among ordained women by Hörpudóttir, but it is not conclusive (Hörpudóttir, 2015). These comments can also be reviewed in light of the traditional view of the office of the pastor, where young people and women are the newcomers (women entered the ordained ministry in Iceland in 1974). While many of the interviewees express the wish for increased cooperation, they do not seem to see it as being in their power to change it.

### Response from Deaneries

I sent a short questionnaire to all nine deaneries in May 2014 to follow up on the emphasis by the ELCI's General Assembly on Cooperation Areas. I received answers from seven deaneries. One deanery in the capital area and one in the countryside did not respond. The other two deaneries in the capital area responded, as well as five deaneries in the countryside. In all those deaneries, a meeting to introduce this resolution had been held, as requested by the church central authorities, although not all in 2011, as proposed.

In no deanery were the Cooperation Areas a reality to the extent that they are meant to be, but many reported increased cooperation in various fields. In three deaneries, there was no interest in further cooperation akin to the model of the Cooperation Areas. Reasons varied. One dean, whose deanery is in a mostly rural area, said the pastors were simply not interested and the model cannot be enforced. According to this dean, Cooperation Areas do not work, as there is nothing in the ELCI's legislation or rules of procedure that supports this idea. The church as an organization is based on parishes and most of them are small. Several small parishes form a pastorate, usually served by one pastor.

The pastorate is the real Cooperation Area for a pastor. If the General Assembly wants to create larger Cooperation Areas, it will have to merge the pastorates in the cooperation area. As it is, pastors can simply say that they are not interested in teamwork and no one can do anything about it. (D1)

This dean noted that the duty phone was used in one area of his deanery but did not really work, as people preferred to call their own parish pastor. Another dean (D3) said that in his deanery there was growing cooperation in many fields of parish work, but this was not organized along the lines of the Cooperation Areas and there was no interest in doing that. The reason seemed partly due to suspicion related to other structural changes in the church, namely the merging of deaneries and

pastorates. In the last decade, deaneries have been merged<sup>3</sup> and some now cover large areas with difficult roads. Changed demographics, with increased urbanization and fewer people in rural areas, have led to merging of pastorates and fewer pastors serving the same area. Similar developments can be observed in health care and other social services in the rural areas. The dean (D3) felt that the idea of Cooperation Areas, the merging of deaneries and of pastorates, and the reduction in the number of pastors serving the area, were all falsely introduced as having the aim of better serving the people and securing basic services.

I have never experienced that cutting down staff increases service and quality. [...] Quite the contrary. There is perhaps some financial advantage, but no increased quality or service in any way. (D3)

With the challenge of organizing the work with ever fewer pastors and the threat of losing more positions, the new idea of Cooperation Areas was not welcomed by staff in the deanery and not carried through. One rural dean observed that the idea of Cooperation Areas simply did not apply in the deanery.

There has always been cooperation in this area since 1985. [...] [Our cooperation] has been flexible and between deaneries, pastorates and parishes and there has never been a problem [...] Therefore, this idea about Cooperation Areas [in our deanery] which was started by the Church Central Authorities, has been completely meaningless in our context. (D5)

The comment indicates that there is a limit to the acceptance, at least for this dean, to the extent that he accepts the resolutions of the General Assembly and the authority of the Church's Central Authorities.

In 2014, Cooperation Areas were active to some extent within three deaneries. In one deanery in the capital area, cooperation had been growing, and a specific fund was set aside by the deanery to strengthen cooperation.

The areas are not all alike and neither is the cooperation, and I think that is good, that the cooperation is shaped by the needs and situation in each area. (D6)

In another deanery in the capital area, the idea was introduced but nothing else happened. The dean says this is partly because there is uncertainty about the Cooperation Areas, and it is unclear who should initiate the change, whether it is the dean or the senior pastors.

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<sup>3</sup> In 2009 from 15 to 12 and in 2010 from 12 to 9.

## Experiences from an Active Cooperation Area

In one municipality in the capital area, Kópavogur, a Cooperation Area has been active to a greater extent than in other places. The cooperation involves a duty phone, sharing responsibilities for the care institutions in the town and organizing summer holidays and common services in summer. A questionnaire sent to the pastors in 2017 reveals that their cooperation had started before the formal Cooperation Areas were activated and was at the initiative of the pastors. This is felt to be one of the reasons for its success, as well as geographical circumstances, as this is one municipality consisting of four parishes near one another, and good leaders who want to overcome hindrances.

All the pastors feel that the cooperation has increased their quality of life. The duty phone (present before 2011) relieved the pressure to be always on call, which was good for family life. They mention that collegiality increased, they help each other out, and respect each other's strengths.

All are friends and no one seems worried that the colleagues are taking anything away from them. (K1)

When the pastors are confident and content in their work, the will to cooperate increases. (K2)

All the pastors felt that further cooperation was feasible. They mentioned better use of both money and human resources, for example in office work, education and youth work, making use of the different talents. Asked what they thought the biggest hindrance in other areas was, they named mostly geography and differences in workload. The advantages need to be clear if someone is changing or increasing his/her work. Additionally, if the actual work in the pastorate was limited, a pastor might feel less inclined to cooperate. Others, furthermore, might understand their vocation as such that they themselves needed to be on call for the parishioners. Three of the pastors in the cooperation area wanted to go further and merge the four parishes into one pastorate, which would make all cooperation easier.

## Evaluating the Cooperation Areas

Norwegian KIFO researchers Morten Huse and Catherine Hansen did an empirical research on the early stages of the reorganization of pastoral service in Norway, or the deanery reform, in Norway. Behind the evaluation were visits to ten areas where different attempts could be studied (Huse & Hansen, 2002). These early stages, or trial period, of the Deanery reform in Norway provides a comparison with the Cooperation Areas. I will therefore describe them briefly and list the main findings of Huse and Hansen. In this trial period, the Ministry of Church Affairs in Norway stipulated that participation should be voluntary. The presupposition for the trial stage was that this

should not increase cost. However, where this was enacted there was some compensation for increased work, as all pastors became senior pastors (sogneprester). Another precondition was that everyone had to agree to participate. A single pastor could veto participation in their area. A lot was, therefore, hanging on motivation, both for pastors, deans and bishops who should oversee the attempts in their dioceses.

Looking at some of Huse and Hansen's findings, one significant challenge was the lack of ownership of the experiment. The attempt was initiated by the ministry, and few in the church, either central or local, felt ownership of them. Different work conditions, family situations, etc., affected the interest in participation. Geography also played a large part. Some pastors felt isolated and in need of fellowship, but the distance was a challenge and meant added work. Some felt that increased cooperation impinged on their independence in office. Many pastors clearly wanted to be able to organize their own time. Motivation was a keyword, and cooperation was established where interested actors – bishops, deans or pastors - led the way. Most of the pastors who participated felt that the collegial spirit became better. Distribution of *casualia* affected the work of the pastors. Some of the pastors worried about losing oversight over their main parish and worried that they might lose their position in the parish and simply become functionaries of clerical acts. Others felt that this change was positive. The congregation no longer owned them.

In Norway, the development later led to pastorates being abandoned and deaneries strengthened. As of 2011, all pastors are hired to the deanery with one or more parish as their core service area.

The main findings of Huse and Hansen find resonance in the response to the Cooperation Area reforms. There is lack of ownership, interest in preserving the independence plays a part and motivation is important. Those who participated felt that it increased collegiality.

Evaluating the early steps of the process in Norway, Huse and Hansen look at five aspects: organization and leadership of the pastors, results based on the work situation of the pastor, results for the office of the pastor, congregation and staff, key actors and how they fulfil their role and the role of geography (2002:59). This approach or model is helpful to assess the first attempts at Cooperation Areas in Iceland. Direct comparison is not possible, as Huse and Hansen's evaluation is carried out in areas where the reform was tried and there is some participation. Analyzing the fate of the Cooperation Areas in light of the model can help distinguish the different factors in the process and possibly compare the concerns expressed. I will look at organization and leadership, results regarding work situation of pastors, results for the pastoral office, key actors and geography.

## Organization and Leadership

The plan for the Coordination Areas stipulated that certain pastorates should work together in organizing their service. The work should be introduced by the deans. The pastors in the stipulated areas should then take over and choose among themselves or from the lay staff someone to lead each year. The cooperation was expected to be inclusive of all church work that affects non-clergy staff, such as organists, youth workers, etc. It should be noted that many congregations have no

full-time staff other than the pastor. Organists are often in part-time positions outside of the largest towns. Deacons and youth workers in paid positions can only be found in large parishes. Clergy is hired by the ELCI, not by parish councils, but other staff are usually employees of parish councils. The cooperation would therefore depend on the willingness of the parish councils. In this, the structure stretches over two groups of employees with very different working conditions. This can clearly complicate cooperation.

The guidelines were not very concrete, and in responses from the deaneries there is a complaint as to who should lead the work. The role of the dean was simply to introduce this resolution, not to follow up on the work. No financial or other type of compensation was expected for the organizers, even though organizing the cooperation could result in much work for them. The leadership point is therefore weak, relying on good will and not acknowledging the fact that leadership is a skill and that leading a group of equals to divide work, giving some of them more to do, requires experience, commitment and a clear mandate.

### The Work Environment and the Office of the Pastor

The arguments behind the deanery reform (Huse and Hansen, 2002:20) to improve working conditions for pastors also have a reflection in the argumentation behind the Cooperation Areas, which originally focused on the pastoral service and distribution of workload but was changed by the General Assembly to include all services of the church (Heildarskipan þjónustu kirkjunnar 2006).

The prerequisites for the Cooperation Areas were based on the idea of participation, which had to be voluntary. It should affect the quality of the service and the working conditions but not salaries of pastors or other staff. Evaluating answers from the deanery questionnaire shows that relying on voluntary participation does not work. If the clergy do not find it in their interest to increase cooperation, it does not happen.

One of the aims in Norway was to distribute the workload of pastors, including *casualia*. In the ELCI, *casualia* is paid extra. As a result, more equal distribution would affect the income of the clergy in some cases. It is among the things mentioned by pastors in Kópavogur as a possible hindrance to further cooperation. This can possibly explain why *casualia* is not part of the discussion or recommendations or seen as a motive regarding the Cooperation Areas. Icelandic pastors are officials, both in the traditional understanding of having the office of the word and the sacraments and as a formal position within society, defined by employment legislation as different from the status of an employee. By comparison, the clergy in the Church of Norway ceased being officials of the state with new Church legislation in 1996. The independence that the office enjoys is sometimes defined further by the clergy as giving independence from the Church authorities (Björnsdóttir, 2016), defined by one respondent as “where each pastor is his/her own bishop” (K3). Replies from the deaneries to my questionnaire indicated that clergy members do reserve the right to ignore proposals or encouragement from the Church central authorities if they do not agree with the content. In this the pastor is identifying strongly with the office and what is perceived as its independence.

## Key Actors

Looking at the decision makers in the project, it is evident that it had the support of the General Assembly and the diocesan authorities. However, in 2014, the plan for further and more concise implementation was not adopted and the proposal was merged with a new proposal for strategic planning. In 2015, the Committee introduced ideas in an interim report on increasing the independence of the deaneries and proposed that deaneries could decide more about workload distribution within the deaneries. The General Assembly did not give clear guidelines on how to proceed, and no decision has been made. This could be interpreted as lessening commitment by the General Assembly to the Cooperation Areas.

The deans were asked to introduce the idea in 2011 but were not made responsible for the implementation. It is clear from their answers to the questionnaire that not all the deans agreed with the program, and this affected their support. Pastors were asked to take it further but no-one was given a specific mandate. The Cooperation Areas are part of the rules of procedure for clergy since 2011, thus formally involving the clergy, but instructions are not specific. Both deans and pastors can ignore the cooperation ideas if they see fit, as was evident from the answers to the questionnaire. Involving staff hired directly by the parishes relies on the good will of that staff and the parish council. This can be further complicated by the fact that staff is often in part time positions and/or with defined work areas, and cooperation is usually about more work, not less.

## Did Geography play a Role?

The participation in the Cooperation Areas was so limited that we cannot assume anything about the role of geography. However, participants in the active Cooperation Area Kópavogur felt that geography helped, in other words, that this was one municipality and the churches are not too far from one another.

## Conclusion

The evaluation of the Cooperation Areas shows that the organization and structure of the project is dependent on interest in cooperation and voluntary participation, including volunteering to organize and lead. Given the structure of the church and the independence of the parishes, this was a necessary approach, and a more forceful implementation would have meant further changes to the rules of procedure of parishes and/or change in legislation on the church.

Deans and pastors were expected to play a significant role in introducing and organizing the cooperation. Considering the structure of their respective offices, the dean cannot order the pastor to participate and given the independence of the office of the pastor, s/he can decide not to do so. The qualitative interviews cited and the research on pastors (Hörpudóttir, 2015) show an interest in cooperation and it is clear that pastors often initiate cooperation in various fields where they themselves see the benefit. It is also clear that some want further cooperation and see the merging of

pastorates as a solution, but at the same time, there is visible reluctance to do so. *Casualia* may play a part, but the reluctance seems rather to manifest itself in the fact that there is not enough reason to possibly take on more work without any guaranteed benefits. In Norway, cooperation on deanery basis was enforced by abandoning pastorates. Given the structure of the ELCI and the results of the first attempt at Cooperation Areas, my conclusion is that Cooperation Areas would only become reality if they were enforced by change in legislation and structure of the ELCI.

Given the limited success of the Cooperation Areas, little can be assumed regarding the effect on pastors' attitude to work. Replies from the area where cooperation had increased list positive aspects, such as being part of a team and the benefit of team work in sharing the load, the positive effect of a duty phone in setting boundaries and thus on family life. This can imply that the attitude of the pastor towards his/her office can both affect participation and be affected by participation.



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