

Friendship, followership, and leadership

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates church members' understanding of leadership and the follower–leader relationship in local congregations. The main problem is: How do followers in three Lutheran free churches in Norway describe the follower–leader relationship, and how can this relationship influence the leadership process? The material is constructed from qualitative interviews with followers; as such, it is the followers' perspective on the leadership process.

The informants in this study associate leadership with responsibility. This is a responsibility given and monitored by the congregation. Leadership is understood as socially and relationally constructed. It is a process co-created by leaders and followers in the congregation. This relationship between leaders and followers is described with friendship terminology by the informants. The pastors are described as close or personal friends of the informants.

This understanding of the follower–leader relationship as friendship means influence is connected to equality. Moreover, pastoral friendship has implications for the accessibility and expectations of leaders, whereas money becomes more of a challenging matter in relationships understood to be friendship. Finally, findings suggest that the pastor also is seen as representing friendship with God.

Keywords: followership, leadership, friendship, responsibility

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates church members' understanding of leadership and the follower–leader relationship in local congregations. Based on the followers' description of the follower–leader relationship in their congregations, I will discuss potential implications for the leadership process. Research on the leadership process in the church has largely focused on the pastor and staff with leadership responsibility (Henson, 2021, p. 10). Regular church members have been included in studies as receivers of leadership (Carroll, 2011; Sirris & Askeland, 2021). Common to this research is a focus on pastors and how leaders should behave in relation to the church members and the volunteers (Fretheim, 2014; Løvaas & Kaasa, 2015; Sirris, 2015, 2023). This resembles generic research on leadership. According to Bastardo and Vugt, only a small percentage of research on leadership focuses on followers (Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019, pp. 81–82). However, Northouse argues there are indications that followership and follower perspectives on the leadership process are receiving more research attention (Northouse, 2021, p. 353). This article aims to contribute to this development by focusing on followers' perspectives on the leadership process in local congregations.

The main problem of the article is: *How do followers in three Lutheran free churches in Norway describe the follower–leader relationship, and how can this relationship influence the leadership process?* Two research questions have guided the investigation of the material: How is leadership described by the followers? How do the followers describe their relationship with the congregational leaders? The research questions cover the first part of the main problem and will be the focus of attention in the chapter “Findings”. Based on the findings the second part of the main problem will be the focus of the discussion. The material in this article is constructed from interviews with followers; as such, it is the followers' perspective on the leadership process. The article is part of a research project on followership in local congregations and is a contribution to practical theology and church leadership.

The central term in the article is *leadership process*. This term means leadership is understood as a “process that is co-created in social and relational interaction between people” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 83). There are two roles or behaviours that constitute leadership: leader and follower. Without leaders, there are no followers, and without followership, no leadership. Understanding leadership as a process means distinguishing between the leader as a person and leadership as a process (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 88). Followers are “individuals who adopt the leader's goals temporally (e.g., following someone's direction to a restaurant) or structurally (e.g., accepting the authority of a parent, manager or president) and freely accept the influence of leaders” (Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019, p. 82). Followership is defined as “the characteristics, behavior and processes of individuals acting in relation to leaders. [...] For a construct to qualify as followership it must be conceptualized and operationalized: (a) in relation to leaders or the leadership process, and/or (b) in contexts in which individuals identify themselves in follower positions (e.g., subordinates) or as having follower identities” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 96). In the context of the local congregation, followership relates to the term *laity*. The laity is persons who are not ordained and not holding an ecclesial office; they are ordinary church members (Stevens, 2000, pp. 24–25). The informants in the study were asked to participate because they did not have leadership responsibility or because they identified themselves as subordinate in relation to a leader.

The main problem identifies two contextual features relevant to the findings and the discussion: Norway and Lutheran free churches. Norway is characterised by an egalitarian culture, a trust-based society, and an ideal of equality (Velten et al., 2016, pp. 23–36). Moreover, the Scandinavian leadership model is characterised by a short distance to power and a belief in competence and involvement from coworkers, whereas leaders are expected to be humble,

listening, and action-oriented (Velten et al., 2016, p. 28). Lutheran free churches in Norway grew out of the revivals in the 19th century. Historically, the churches have been influenced by a pietistic spirituality and an ideal for the leadership process emphasising lay involvement. The Lutheran free churches, particularly those with a low-church ecclesiology, find theological warrants for their emphasis on lay involvement and an egalitarian ideal in the doctrine of the universal priesthood. This cultural and theological context makes the material in this study a particular and, in my view, an interesting starting point for research on the leadership process.

THEORY

The starting point for this article is the followers' understanding of the leadership process in local congregations. The theories applied fall into the three categories followership, leadership, and friendship. The common denominator of the theoretical perspectives is the focus on the follower-leader relationship.

The abovementioned Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, p. 89) define the study of followership as “an investigation of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process.” Theories of followership can be divided into two main categories: role-based and relational-based. A role-based approach sees followership as a role occupied by individuals in formal or informal positions. Typically, the approach is used to study followership in the context of hierarchical systems. The focus is on follower characteristics, styles, schemas, and behaviour (Carsten et al., 2010, p. 545). In a relational-based approach, followership is not tied to a role but rather to behaviour. A relational approach views followership as socially and relationally constructed, which means that leadership can only occur when leadership influence attempts are met with followership behaviour (Northouse, 2021, p. 354; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 89). In other words, a person in a leadership role “may not actually be a leader if subordinates do not grant them a leader identity and claim for themselves a follower identity” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 94).

A theoretical perspective on followership that falls within a relational approach is authentic followership (de Zilwa, 2014, p. 53). De Zilwa's conceptualisation of authentic followership comprises three components: the individual's capacity for authenticity, the dyadic relationship between leader and follower, and institutional and organisational characteristics. The second component, the dyadic relationship, of de Zilwa's conceptual framework is of particular interest in this article. This refers to a secure pattern of attachment to the firm and its leaders. Referring to research on leaders as attachment figures for followers, de Zilwa (2014, p. 55) argues a “secure pattern develops between followers and leaders in firms when followers are confident, they develop trust that the leader will provide a secure base for them, be available and responsive to their needs.” This link between authentic followership and leadership is at the heart of both Gardner et al.'s and Avolio and Reichard's conceptualisation. Gardner et al. (2005, p. 346) argue that authentic leaders are role models for followers, and leaders show behaviour patterns required for authenticity. Avolio and Reichard (Avolio & Reichard, 2008, pp. 327–328) have identified the three psychological attributes of *ownership*, *trust*, and *transparency* in their conceptualisation of authentic followership. The attributes of trust and transparency refer to the relationship between followers and leaders.

In leadership theory, the interaction between leaders and followers is the focal point of relational leadership theories (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 655). The leader–member exchange (LMX) theory makes the leader–member relationship the centrepiece of the leadership process. A basic idea in LMX theory is when “leaders and followers have good exchanges, they feel better

and accomplish more, and the organization prosper” (Northouse, 2021, p. 162). According to Yukel and Gardner (2020, p. 256), “most leaders develop a high-exchange relationship with a small number of trusted subordinates.” These trusted subordinates are referred to as the in-group, whereas the other subordinates are referred to as the out-group. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1991, pp. 36–37) have argued that leaders should develop high-quality exchanges with all their followers and make all followers feel as if they are part of the in-group. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1991, p. 33) have identified three stages in the development of a high-quality relationship: the stranger stage, the acquaintance stage, and the mature partnership stage. Yukel and Gardner (2020, p. 268) discuss the follower attributions about leader competence and explain that followers make more positive attributions about leaders who appear to be “one of them”.

The informants in this research used the term friendship to describe the leader–follower relationship. In *The Philosophy of Friendship*, Vernon discusses the possibility of befriending “bosses”. Vernon points out that the imbalance that lies at the heart of the relationship makes friendship difficult. Based on Aristotle’s division of the relationship between leaders and followers into two parts, a contractual part and a goodwill part, Vernon argues befriending a leader is difficult because these are confused (Vernon, 2005, pp. 19–20). In *Friendship: Exploring Its Implication for the Church in Postmodernity*, Summers has taken the study of friendship to church. He connects friendship to hospitality and community and argues it offers the best in human relationality: “seeking the good of ‘the other’ and encouraging the friend to be another self” (Summers, 2011, p. 193). Summers describes a specific Christian friendship rooted in a theology of friendship with God, and he argues this friendship is well suited for a postmodern search for authentic relationality. From a pastoral theological perspective, Nesson applies the term friendship both to describe the relationship between members of the congregation and to pastoral ministry. He argues the “pastor is called to embody the friendship of God in relationship with members of a congregation” (Nesson, 2010, p. 89).

METHOD

The material is constructed from qualitative interviews with 15 church members in three different congregations. The interviews aimed to construct material that illuminates church members’ understanding of followership and their relationship to their leaders and the leadership process. I wanted detailed and complementary knowledge on how they view followership, leadership, and the congregation as context for the follower–leader relationship. The questions in the semi-structured interviews were open-ended and addressed their view on, and ideal for, the congregation, the leadership, and their behaviour in relation to the leaders and other members of the congregation. I wanted the informants to speak as freely as possible and elaborate on salient issues.

The three congregations in this study are located in three populous cities, two in the eastern part of Norway and one in the southwest part of Norway. The informants were recruited via mutual acquaintances. In addition, I contacted the congregations directly and asked for help to get in contact with members of the congregation. The first informants introduced me to other church members. In each congregation, I aimed at a balance in gender and a distribution in age. I had little previous knowledge of the congregations. I have, however, researched other Lutheran congregations in Norway that share some of the theological and cultural legacy of the pietistic revival tradition. The congregations each have more than 500 members, as such they are relatively large by Norwegian standards.

The three congregations were organised with a staff that included administrative employees, faith educators, and pastors. In addition, the congregations have many volunteers involved as coworkers. The target group is church members without main leader responsibility in the congregation. Main leader responsibility is identified as pastors, elders, and congregational board members. The group of informants includes both church members who do not participate in ministry with designated tasks and individuals involved as volunteers in ministry. This includes Sunday school teachers, worship leaders, technicians, and more. I interviewed six women and nine men, aged between 20 and 75.

Two interviews were conducted in person, and the other 13 interviews were conducted on Teams. On average, the interviews lasted 50 minutes. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and coded using the qualitative data analysis and research software Atlas.ti. The codes were developed inductively. After the initial coding, I wrote summaries that reflected the content of the quotes relevant to the research questions. These summaries linked to the quotes were categorised and organised given the main themes in the material. Based on the two research questions in this article and the process of coding and categorisation, four themes emerged, which are presented in the findings. In the discussion, I interpret the findings in view of theory.

The informants received written information on their rights and the purpose of the study and gave their informed consent. The project was reported to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The participants and their congregations are anonymised in the article.

FINDINGS

Responsibility

The informants associate leadership with responsibility. A leader is described as a person with responsibility for others. One informant said: *“What do I associate with leadership? Responsibility.”* Another informant said: *“I think that I associate it [leadership] with responsibility, to set the course and lead the way.”* Typically, the informants’ first answer was a short statement about leadership being associated with responsibility. This first statement was often followed by an explanation where they connected responsibility with leadership skill, as seen in the following two quotes: *“A leader is someone with more responsibility, who shall lead the way”*; *“I think about responsibility [...] Being like a shepherd, having the responsibility to lead his sheep where you are going. That is a big responsibility.”* From the followers’ perspective, the responsibility associated with leadership was connected with helping to find the way and to be someone to lean on. Comparing followership to leadership, one informant said: *“It’s less responsibility. [...] I can lean on the leaders that I trust.”* This quote also shows that for the informants, the difference between leaders and followers could be outlined in terms of the amount of responsibility. A leader is a person with more responsibility, and a follower, a church member, is a person with less responsibility. This way of talking about followership and leadership was often expressed when asked about the benefits of being a follower. *“It is very nice not having to make decisions and take responsibility.”*

The followers interviewed connected responsibility and leadership in two main capacities. A leader is a person who “takes responsibility” and a person who could be “held responsible”. Talking about the importance of leadership, one informant said:

The benefit is, of course, that when there are leaders, there is someone who could be held responsible. I feel that if everything was decided by the congregation without any leadership involved, it would easily lead to a disclaimer of liability. In a way, it is a security having someone taking responsibility, someone being a leader.

From the follower's perspective, a leader is someone who takes on responsibility, and this is viewed as a help, meaning that the follower does not have to take on as much responsibility. The responsibility is not taken away from the followers; it is taken to help the followers. Moreover, the leader is an individual who can be held responsible. Again, from the follower's perspective, this contributes to creating security for the follower. If the circumstances require, leaders are there to step up and help.

Whereas responsibility is a term applied to describe leaders positively, power seems to have negative connotations. Power was largely used by the informants related to misuse of power, or to describe poor leadership. Poor leadership is connected to concentration of power and self-willed leaders reluctant to involve others. *"This isn't a one-man show. The leader shouldn't have all the power in a congregation. I think that would be very wrong. I've seen how things have gone wrong in congregations. The leaders must understand their role, let others contribute, and support people with different gifts."* The informants want powerful congregations, but the power must come from below. *"I find strong leaders frightening. Although I do want powerful congregations. [It is negative] if it is one strong man on top, whom we must follow. I think the power should come from below."* Poor leadership was also connected to a lack of involvement. A few, mainly older informants, expressed dissatisfaction because they did not feel as involved in the ministry as they wanted.

Personal Relationship

The close relationship between leadership and responsibility also relates to the informants' reluctance to describe the pastors as leaders to them as individuals. (Alternatively, their reluctance to view themselves as subordinates.) The informants describe the pastors as leaders in the congregation, but not as leaders to them personally. A pastor is a person with leadership responsibility in the congregation, whereas the relationship between the pastors and the non-leaders interviewed was described as friendship. The followers who described the pastors positively either used the word friend or referred to their relationship with the pastor as personal or private. *"[Pastor name] and I are buddies"* and *"I know [pastor name] from private settings."* Typically, the informants explained how the relationship with one of the pastors has developed over time and now is a relationship that goes beyond a leader–follower relationship. Often the informants described their relationship with the pastor as special or different from others in the congregation. Answering a question involving the pastor, they took a reservation that others in the congregation not so close to the pastor might see things differently. A few of the informants maintain all members have friendship-like relationships with leaders. *"In total, I think they [the pastors] know all the members on a personal level, and I think that is important."* Some of the informants argued that the personal relationship between leaders and followers enables the non-leaders to speak up and give feedback to the leaders. Other informants explain how close friendship with the pastor, in the past, has been difficult because of disagreement. In that case, both friendship and followership were harmed.

The informants described the friendship-like relationship between church members and pastors as an ideal. Some of the informants see the ability to establish personal relationships as the most important characteristic of congregational leaders. Asked what they see as the most important characteristic of a good leader, one informant said: *"It must be establishing*

personal relationships. As a member of the congregation, I need to believe in the person talking and leading; if not, it is hopeless.” The importance of close personal relationships is also expressed by an informant who argued the pastor must be involved in the youth ministry because this is the only way the children can establish a personal relationship with the pastor. In line with this, poor leadership is described as a gap between leader and follower. *“I’ve previously felt that leaders in the congregation were so different from me that cooperation has been difficult.”* The informants want to cooperate with their leaders, and they want the leaders to be role models, but that presupposes a sense of similarity or closeness. *“Leaders should be on the same level [as followers]; it shouldn’t be top-down [attitude]. [...] I think people trust someone on their level, someone they can identify with.”*

Trust and loyalty

Trust is fundamental to the friendship-like relationship between pastors and church members. *“I think a good leader is someone we trust; someone who is confident, open, and present; someone we can come to. I need to know that I can come to this person, knowing that is okay.”* This trust needs time to develop. *“We trust because we have experienced who that person is.”* Talking about the most important characteristics of leaders, one informant said: *“The person must be trustworthy; he must have trust. Without trust, it is difficult to lead. But that trust is not something you get [for free]; it is something you must earn.”* Trust is earned through information sharing. The church members want to know the pastors on a personal level, which means the pastors must share personal views and things from their personal life. Moreover, trust is developed when the church members experience that the pastor sees and listens to them. Trust is developed when the pastor shares information about him or herself and when the pastor seeks information about the individual church members.

Several informants expressed a closer and stronger connection to individuals in the congregation with leadership responsibility compared to regular church members. *“To put it simply, I feel a stronger loyalty to the leadership and the leaders. I think so. Even though I see myself as a follower, at least now, I do not have any leadership responsibility.”* This sense of primarily loyalty to the leaders may have some connection with the selection of this study, but it may also tell us something about the follower role and relationships in congregations. Although the informant in the quote above described himself as a follower, most informants in this study were reluctant to do so. When asked about the term, an informant said: *“I think that I to a larger extent am a follower of Jesus than a follower of the pastors. [...] However, the pastors and others in leadership roles help, support, and guide me in my walk with Jesus.”*

Summary

This article aims to investigate what characterises the follower–leader relationship in three Lutheran free churches in Norway and how these characteristics influence the leadership process. The two research questions guiding the investigation were: How is leadership described by the followers? How do the followers describe their relationship with the congregational leaders? First, the findings display that the church members interviewed associate leadership with responsibility and trust. The leader takes on responsibility and could be held responsible. Second, the findings show that the church members’ preferred description of the leader–follower relationship in the congregation is friendship. They are reluctant to describe themselves as a follower of the pastor; instead, they see the pastor as a (personal) friend. In the discussion, I will focus on how these characteristics influence the leadership process.

DISCUSSION

The main problem of the article is: How do followers in three Lutheran free churches in Norway describe the follower-leader relationship, and how can this relationship influence the leadership process? Based on the findings presented above, which cover the first part of the main problem, the discussion focuses on the second part of the problem. The discussion is organised given the three perspectives of the followers' understanding of the leadership process, the follower-leader relationship, and the follower's use of friendship terminology.

Understanding Leadership

Responsibility was the informants' key term explaining their understanding of leadership. The leaders take responsibility and show responsibility, whereas the followers give responsibility and hold the leader responsible. As such, responsibility is associated with the behaviour of both the leaders and the followers in the leadership process. The way the informants talk about leadership and responsibility displays that leadership is understood as a process co-created between leaders and followers. Although churches and congregations have a distinctive leadership role, in the pastor position, leadership is described as socially and relationally constructed. This aligns with Uhl-Bien et al.'s description of the relational approach to followership. They argue that leadership can only occur when leadership attempts are met with followership behaviour (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 89).

The material in this study is constructed from interviews with regular church members, the followers. Pastors and leaders in the same congregations might have a different understanding of the leadership process. We could, for example, expect the pastors to emphasise roles and positions to a larger extent. From a follower perspective, however, the leadership is understood to be co-created. Although the pastor is recognised as a formal leader role, the followers describe themselves in the interviews in a way that suggests they view their own behaviour as fundamental to the leadership process. In accordance with the theoretical framework developed by Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, p. 94), the informants describe a process in which followers grant their pastor leader identity and claim for themselves a follower identity.

Leader and follower identity and the dynamic of leadership attempts and followership behaviour have the term *responsibility* as the pivotal point. Northouse (2021, p. 354) describes the relational approach as "the interpersonal process and one person's attempt to influence and the other person's response to these influence attempts." In this study, the equivalent of such leadership or influence attempts is taking responsibility. However, according to the church members interviewed, before the leadership attempt in the form of taking responsibility is the church members giving responsibility. According to followers, they have the initiative in the leadership process. They give an individual the opportunity to take on responsibility and, by it, leadership. Asked what they associate with leadership, an informant said: "*It must be responsibility, for the congregation, for the activities, for us, for the preaching. This is connected to the trust, which they get from us. [...] We call our pastors. It is the congregation who decide if we give someone a letter of calling.*" This understanding of taking and giving responsibility aligns with Carroll's (2011, p. 27) distinction between formal and informal recognition. Formal recognition is when an individual is given a role or position (e.g., being called a pastor), and informal recognition is when a group agrees that a person has won the right to lead (e.g., a congregation recognising the leadership of an individual). The church members interviewed in this study describe the calling of leaders as followership behaviour. This aligns with Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, p. 99), who explain that "following behavior can be those that 'grant' power and influence to another. These

behaviors are associated with an individual ‘claiming’ a follower identity or granting a leader identity.”

The leadership process described by the informants also includes what could be described as a system of checks and balances. The church members give responsibility to individuals for them to take on responsibility. This does not mean the responsibility is given away in the sense that pastors have all the power. The congregational leaders do not own but manage the responsibility given. In their ministry, they are expected to both show and share responsibility. The informants’ description of power shows that misuse of responsibility, and the power that comes with it, is closely monitored by the followers. The church members interviewed explained that they hold the leaders responsible, what we may label accountability. Included in the informants’ description of the following behaviour are scrutinising and challenging the leader’s behaviour. Moreover, the relational approach to the leadership process in the congregations could lead to a loss of trust and non-followership. Non-followership, explains Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, p. 99), “occurs when one’s leading attempts are not responded to with following behavior.”

The Leader–Follower Relationship

The informants described their relationship with the pastor as personal. Moreover, they maintained this was ideal for every member of the congregation. Some of the informants believed every church member had a personal relationship with one of the leaders in the congregation, but most of the informants seemed to believe their relationship with the leader was special. The descriptions of the leader–followership relationship in this study, and the expectations towards the leaders, align with the leader–member relationship described in the leader–member exchange (LMX) theory. Most of the informants describe their relationship with the pastor as they are part of an in-group. Over time, they have developed what the LMX theory labels “high-quality exchange” with their pastor. And in line with this, they describe their relationship with the pastor as unique (Northouse, 2021, p. 166). As in-group members, they expect the pastor to keep them informed about what is going on in the congregation and to share personal information about the pastor’s private life. In exchange, the followers interviewed offer loyalty and support towards the pastor.

In the LMX theory introduced above, there are two perspectives on in-groups. Yukel and Gardner (2020, p. 256) argue most leaders develop high-exchange relationships with a small number of trusted subordinates, whereas Graen and Uhl-Bien (1991, p. 36) argue leaders should develop high-quality exchanges with all followers. In the material in this study, both of these understandings apply. On the one hand, most of the informants describe their relationship with the pastor as special, suggesting they see themselves as one among a small number of trusted in-group subordinates. On the other hand, the informants describe an ideal for the pastor–church member relationship that aligns with Graen and Uhl-Bien’s ideal. The material in this study only covers the followers’ understanding of the follower–leader relationship. It is their experience that they have a special relationship with the congregational leader and belong to an in-group. This could be an exaggeration; nonetheless, it is their reported experience and what they see as an ideal for all church members. This could be interpreted as it is not the exclusiveness of being part of a small group, but the relationship with the leader that is at the heart of the ideal. If this interpretation of the informants’ description is correct, the ideal is relational rather than elitist.

Not all informants described their relationship with the pastor as ideal. Although most of the informants described their relationship with the congregational leader as good, a few

informants described a negative change in this area. They used to see the pastor as a close friend, and they reported to be closely involved in what happened in the congregation. At the time of the interview, this was no longer the case. Two reasons for such a negative development are found in this study. One informant, referred to above, described a close friendship with the congregational leader and his family that broke down. This caused the informant to withdraw from the congregation for some time, and although the informant now is back, he/she describes him/herself as more of an outsider. A second example is connected to age. The congregations in this study emphasise youth and family ministry. One informant, whose children are grownups, expresses some frustration in not being as involved as before. The informant is grateful for the focus on family ministry but wants to be more involved and get more information about this ministry. The informant describes an experience of being left out of the information loop and as such no longer part of the in-group of the congregation. Although very different, the two examples point to a development in the leader–follower relationship that goes the opposite way of the stages described by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1991, p. 33). The informants describe development from a past experience of being at what Graen and Uhl-Bien label a “mature partnership stage” towards a present experience of the “acquaintance stage.” This suggests that the stages describing the follower–leader relationship in the LMX theory are a two-way street. There is such a thing as in-group and out-group in congregations, and church members can move both in and out. Graen and Uhl-Bien’s use of the term *acquaintance* is of further interest in this study, referring to a relationship that is less intimate than a friend. This is particularly suitable for the informant who experienced a loss of friendship and subsequently a change from the in-group to the out-group of the congregation.

Friendship Terminology

The congregations represented in this study are cases of a particular context for followership and leadership; these are volunteer organisations with religious values. Gardner et al. (2005, p. 362) argue, from a leadership perspective, that “volunteer organizations represent a relatively unconstrained context since leaders and followers are free to choose whether or not they want to work together.” In such unconstrained contexts, the motivation to form relationships is greatest when there is high commensurability between the follower and the leader. Gardner et al. (2005, p. 363) identify three sources for intimate and trusting relationships: actual, ought, and ideal selves. The actual refers to an experience of being like the leader, the feeling of reassurance and familiarity. Ought selves means the leader is seen as someone with the same standards. The ideal self means the leader is seen as a role model, representing what the follower should be like. To the informants in this study, it was the experience of being like (similar to) the leader that was emphasised as important. They wanted leaders to be “on the same level” as the church members. The informants connect trust and intimacy between leaders and followers to egalitarian structures and relationships between equals.

In the theory developed by Gardner et al., the different sources for relationships are connected to authentic relationship and the leaders’ opportunity to inspire authentic followership. De Zilwa (2014, p. 53) has defined authentic followership in connection to high levels of organisational identification, commitment, and engagement. It occurs when followers serve the collective interests and objectives over their own and when followers partner with their leaders in decision-making and feel safe and secure to challenge the views of leaders. This aligns with the informants’ view on power and their ideal of power from below. The informants want the followers to be involved and contribute to the congregation. Informants do describe the leaders as potential role models, but that presupposes similarity. It is the sense of

being equal that enables the leader to be a role model, someone who can inspire authentic followership. Hence, to influence, the leader must show or establish an understanding that leaders and followers are alike.

The informants' use of friendship terminology in their descriptions of follower–leader relationships further underlines this emphasis on equality. However, the ideal of equality between leaders and followers must take into consideration the imbalance that lies at the heart of leader–follower relationships. Based on the Aristotelian philosophy on friendship, Mark Vernon (2005, p. 19) has identified three issues that relate to friendship between leaders and followers. The first relates to the contractual part and friendship part of the relationship. Second are the issues of distinction between reward and self-rewarding in work tasks. Third is the issue of working for a friend. The issue of contractual and friendship is apparent in the church members' expectation of leader accessibility. Several informants explained they could contact the pastor at any time because there is no such thing as business hours in friendship. One informant said: *"In this case, I called [pastor] because a couple of us wanted to know more. I called even if it was Saturday evening. Then it's up to [pastor] whether he wants to answer or not."* This is one of several examples of how church members who see themselves as close personal friends of the pastor are eligible to contact the leader at any time. The pastor is not, by contract, expected to be available at any time of the week; a friend, on the other hand, is.

The second issue introduced by Vernon relates to reward. Again, from a follower perspective, the congregational ministry is seen as self-rewarding. The church members are volunteering, whereas congregational leaders are employees. Both volunteers and employees, followers and leaders, are committed to the values of the congregation. This, argues Vernon (2005, p. 21), may lead to assumptions that friendship flows more freely since utility is less important. That is not the case, explains Vernon. Even though congregational ministry is rewarding in itself, one of the friends, in follower–leader relationships, is paid to be there and to some extent motivated to be there because of this payment. The third issue introduced by Vernon relates to the issue of working for a friend. In the volunteer sector, this is somewhat more complex compared to the leader–follower relationship in work relations. In the congregations in this study, the leader (pastor) is employed by the congregation and paid through volunteering gifts from the church members. This means money is a factor in the relationship, and to some extent, one friend is working for another. Writing on friendship in regular workplaces, Vernon (2005, p. 21) argues that "the money that will necessarily change hands has an inexorable ability to draw all value to itself, sapping the goodwill of even the strongest friendship." The understanding of follower–leader relationships as friendship is, although well intended, accompanied by issues that corrupt both the friendship and the leadership process.

The material in this study is constructed from interviews with non-leaders in congregations. It is the followers who use friendship terminology to describe their experienced and ideal relationship with congregational leaders. According to the informants, building trust and establishing a personal relationship enable the leaders to lead. However, the material in this study does not include the leaders' understanding of the follower–leader relationship. It is not known whether the leaders in a similar way will use friendship terminology to describe the relationship between congregational leaders and church members or interpret the relationship as a friendship in the same way as the followers do.

The Lutheran theologian Craig L. Nesson recognises the misunderstandings that may follow describing congregation members as friends. According to Nesson, the problem is an understanding of friendship based on appeal and utility. However, instead of discarding ecclesial friendship, Nesson argues that the Christian tradition has resources for a different understanding of friendship. In church, argues Nesson (2010, p. 84), one "must learn to think

Christologically about friendship.” A Christological understanding of friendship is to see oneself in the company of all those who live as Jesus’ disciples. Building on this understanding of friendship, Nesson (2010, p. 89) suggests the pastor could be viewed as a “public representative of the friendship of God among the people.” As such, the pastor is called to proclaim and embody the friendship of God in relationships with church members. This idea of the pastor as a representative of the friendship of God may be seen in the quote from the informant who wanted the pastor to be involved in youth ministry so that the children too could develop a personal relationship with the pastor. This also aligns with de Zilwa (2014, p. 55), who observes that “leaders often function as attachment figures for followers.” De Zilwa’s observation sheds light on the informants’ description of primary loyalty to the leaders. As such, the strong loyalty to the congregational leaders could be interpreted as a loyalty to the public representative of the core values of the congregation, or even to God.

To interpret the pastor as a representative of friendship with God challenges the egalitarian ideal observed in the congregations. Whereas the friendship terminology on the surface suggests an egalitarian ideal, a Christological understanding of friendship with the pastor implies the pastor, intentionally or not, is given the position as an intermediary between the Christian and God. Moreover, the idea of the pastor as a representative of friendship with God, or an attachment figure, raises the question of non-friendship. Given the emphasis on friendship, what happens to those not able to establish friendship with the pastor or another person with leadership responsibility in the congregation? Similarly, what is lost when friendship with the pastor ends? Potentially, this means the church member also loses his or her point (or figure) of attachment to faith and fellowship. What is questioned here is not the idea of pastors as figures of attachment nor the emphasis on congregational friendship; it is the combination of the two that might influence the leadership process in a suboptimal manner.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The informants in this study associate leadership with responsibility. This is a responsibility given and monitored by the congregation. Leadership is understood as socially and relationally constructed; it is a process co-created by leaders and followers in the congregation. This relationship between leaders and followers is described with friendship terminology by the informants. The pastors and leaders of the congregations are described as close or personal friends of the informants. The friendship terminology is used to describe both the individual informant’s experience of a special relationship with the pastor and the ideal relationship between leaders and all members of the congregations.

This understanding of the follower–leader relationship as friendship has implications for the leadership process. First, it means influence is connected to equality. The individual with leadership responsibility must establish or make visible the connection or likeness between leader and follower to be a role model and a leader. Second, friendship has implications for the accessibility and expectations of leaders. Unlike leaders, friends do not have office hours and restrictions on availability. Third, a Christological understanding of the follower–leader friendship implies the pastor is more than a friend. The indications of a Christological understanding of friendship imply that the pastor represents or is viewed as an embodiment of the followers’ friendship with God. This gives the pastor a particularly strong position in the leadership process. As a representative of friendship with God, the pastor, on the one hand, is a mediator between man and God. On the other hand, the understanding of friendship

blurs (or hides) the power that comes with a leadership position that includes divine representation.

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