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Leading the church without knowing the way

The advantages of a stakeholder-centred leadership approach in a complex world

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Abstract

All institutions in Western Europe are facing increasingly complex societies and organisations. The elevated level of complexity has placed considerable strain on numerous church leaders, who are required to lead their congregations without knowing a likely successful way themselves. To meet this pressure, a paradigm shift in church leadership is necessary. In complex scenarios, leaders must act as sense makers and facilitators, helping people to collectively make sense of their incomprehensible experiences rather than being top-down leaders and providing answers. Solutions must emerge from the context, as the stakeholders are experts in their situation. Stakeholder-centred leadership is a crucial method in the business world today. This concept exhibits notable parallels to the concept of contextualisation within the field of missiology. In missiology, the majority of churches have already undergone a paradigm shift by acknowledging that attempts to address new societal and ethnic spheres without a contextualisation of the gospel are hardly conceivable. To be contextual requires an engagement with the stakeholders. This paper tries to emphasise that a similar paradigm shift in church leadership is necessary because in individualised societies, the unfamiliar is usually just around the corner. Stakeholder-centredness is the most promising way to deal with the increasing complexity in society. The principles of critical contextualisation could inform the guidelines for a stakeholder-centred approach to church leadership.

Keywords: stakeholder, leadership, church, complexity, contextualisation, uncertainty, pastor.

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THE EMERGENCE OF COMPLEXITY

All institutions in Germany and Western Europe are encountering an increasingly complex society (Fleßa, 2019, p. 211; Schweinsberg, 2020, p. 30). Complexity arises from the convergence of (1) multiple factors that (2) have intensive interrelationships and interactions with each other (Dittes, 2012, p. 3; Vahs & Brem, 2015, p. 53). (3) In social systems, this complexity is further increased by the fact that these interactions are usually not static, but are in constant processes of change (Fleßa, 2019, p. 211). It is a characteristic of complexity that it can never be fully dissolved and controlled (Häusling, 2020, p. 21).

The complexity we experience today is the result of modernisation. Modernisation involves, among other things, a trend towards individualisation, differentiation, and pluralisation of society (van der Loo & van Reijen, 1992, p. 31f). In modern times, uniqueness is becoming the norm (Enders, 2010, p. 78) and a desirable goal, rather than uniformity (U. Bosch et al., 2018, p. 23f). Western Europe`s once quite homogeneous societies (Casanova, 2018, p. 191) are now crumbling into a countless number of distinctive social spheres. Individuals become a unique intersection of the overlapping social spheres they are part of (Rosa et al., 2007, p. 98). Generally accepted societal or religious concepts of meaning are losing their significance, and thus, individuals and institutions are increasingly under pressure to develop their own identity and vision for the future that is meaningful and fulfilling (Degele & Dries, 2005, p. 89ff).

At the same time, society is facing various "disruptive change(s)", such as digitalisation and globalisation. They further enhance complexity by potentiating the possibilities for social interactions (Glatzel & Lieckweg, 2020, p. 24; Ott, 2015, p. 44) and at the same time, rapidly rendering proven knowledge, practical experience, and traditional methods ineffective (Barentsen & Wessels, 2016, p. 27f; Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006, p. 7ff). People are feeling increasingly uncertain about what to expect from the future and how they can effectively navigate it (Faix & Künkler, 2021, p. 271f).

A further element that serves to compound the situation is the acceleration of time (Rosa 2016:13). The rapid pace of technological and social change has surpassed our ability to fully adapt to these new opportunities (Kelly, 2016, p. 3). People and institutions are in an "ongoing state of becoming" (Kelly, 2016, p. 13). Thus, Rosa (2016:673) concludes that systems today need to stabilise dynamically. They need to realign themselves during ongoing operations because the periods of rest and stability in our living and working conditions, during which people and institutions have time to think and plan, are becoming shorter and rarer (Faix & Künkler, 2021, p. 272; Fleßa, 2019, p. 210). Institutions, including churches, must keep pace with the pace of societal change in order not to fall behind and become outdated and obsolete. And experts anticipate that the pace of change will continue to accelerate (U. Bosch et al., 2018, p. 20). For this reason, Baumann (2000) describes modernity as "liquid modernity", which, constantly changing form, slips through your fingers while you try to grasp it.

All of these developments affect churches. Unlike in the largely homogeneous societies in Western Europe in earlier decades (Casanova, 2018, p. 191) church leaders in Western Europe today are increasingly faced with the challenge of leading "superdiverse" and complex churches. This superdiversity is fuelled not only by the increasingly multicultural reality of many congregations, but also by the trend towards individualisation, which leads to diversity even within cultural and generational groups (Barentsen & Kok, 2017, p. 8f). Consequently, local churches and their leaders are having to deal with an ever-increasing number of different expectations and perspectives. These include varying styles of worship, musical tastes, more conservative or liberal interpretations of theology, worship times, language, media use, social or ecological engagement, lifestyle, clothing style, and many more.

Conversely, religious leaders have lost their exclusive influence on shaping the (religious) perceptions of their congregations. They are now in direct competition with a vast array of online content and opinions, which undermine the authoritarian, top-down claims to leadership that have long characterised many churches, and in some cases still do (Campbell & Bellar, 2023, p. 14ff; Karcher & Moselewski, 2020, p. 330; Schlag, 2021, p. 292). In the current digitalized and individualized world, "centralised heads" are increasingly replaced by "decentralised webs" (Kelly, 2016, p. 148) centred on personal preferences (Campbell & Bellar, 2023, p. 16). Suppose church leaders do not want to lose influence with their church members and people outside their churches. In that case, they will have to learn how to lead a superdiverse religious landscape and positively influence their stakeholders' online and offline networks.

Given this complex environment, many leaders feel pressured to lead increasingly diverse churches. As shepherds of the flock, they should provide direction to the congregation and keep it together while at the same time feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility of defining the way forward on their own (Elkington et al., 2015, p. 4; Hartmann & Knieling, 2016, p. 103). In view of the complexity and fluidity of society, and their diminished influence, it is burdensome for many of them to discern a probable successful trajectory for the future, whether based on subjective experience or objective research (Vahs & Brem, 2015, p. 32). In addition, not a few feel stretched by the pace of change they have to deal with (Grannemann & Seele, 2016, p. 6). Elkington et al (2015:3), therefore, describe the perception of many church leaders today as "vu jádè, the opposite of déjà vu". Whereas a déjà vu situation seems strangely familiar and known, "in vu jádè, leaders realise, I`ve never been here before, I have no idea where I am, and I have no idea who can help me." As a consequence, church leaders often experience the ambivalence of having to lead without knowing the way.

The purpose of this article is to facilitate a better understanding of how church leaders can more effectively lead their congregations during periods of significant complexity. It aims to adapt leadership approaches and corresponding insights from missiology to the field of church leadership. At the same time, it is intended to discuss the extent to which these leadership approaches can be applied to the church leadership sector because the church is not just any business, and faith is not any commodity.

THE CONCEPT OF ORGANISATIONAL LEGITIMACY

The social upheavals of modernisation and digitalisation that have increased the complexity of society have also changed our understanding of organisations and institutions and their functioning. In the early days of industrialisation and economic development, companies and organisations generally viewed themselves as separate entities that were solely accountable to their shareholders (Braun, 2019, p. 15f). In line with this, early institutional theory focused primarily on the processes within organisations (Scott, 2014, p. 51).

From the 1960s onwards, as society became more complex, this picture began to change as organisations began to see themselves as part of a system of customers, potential customers, legislators, employees, suppliers, shareholders and social interest groups that legitimised their actions and behaviour (Braun, 2019, p. 15f). This systemic thinking is also known as the "concept of organizational legitimacy" (Suchman, 1995, p. 571). The viability of an organisation now depends on aligning its approach with the expectations, values, and requirements of these stakeholders. Otherwise, if organisations ignore the stakeholders, there is a risk of losing customers, members, and employees or encountering social resistance, which could ultimately jeopardise the organisation's existence. In line with these developments, a "new

model" of thought emerged in institutional theory, which Scott (2014:51,67) calls "neo-institutionalism". In contrast to the "old model", which tended to look predominantly at processes within an organisation, the "new model" tends to look at processes that develop in the interplay of organisations and their social environment (Scott, 2014, p. 51). Consequently, Scott describes as a key aspect of neo-institutionalism the accentuation of the "cultural-cognitive" dimension of organisations, which exists alongside the "regulative" influence of government authorities and the "normative" influence of social norms and values (Scott, 2014, p. 64ff). The cultural-cognitive dimension highlights how the interaction between individual cognitive information processing and meaning construction, on the one hand, and the cultural framework, on the other hand, influences institutions and organisations. Organisational legitimacy and neo-institutionalism, therefore, both highlight the influence of the environment and stakeholders on institutions and organisations. Scott summarises that the search for legitimacy for organisations means "alignment with cultural cognitive frameworks" (Scott, 2014, p. 72). And this alignment is indeed taking place. DiMaggio and Powell (1983:149ff) describe how organisations working in the same environment tend to become "isomorphic" as they adapt to that environment.

This concept of organisational legitimacy is crucial to the functioning of modern organisations (Velte, 2022, p. 630). The significance of this concept has been evidenced in recent years, as illustrated by the growing number of companies and organisations that have been impelled to enhance the eco-friendliness and sustainability of their businesses in response to social pressure. Those who fail to consider the perspectives of their stakeholders run the risk of becoming irrelevant at best or socially ostracised at worst.

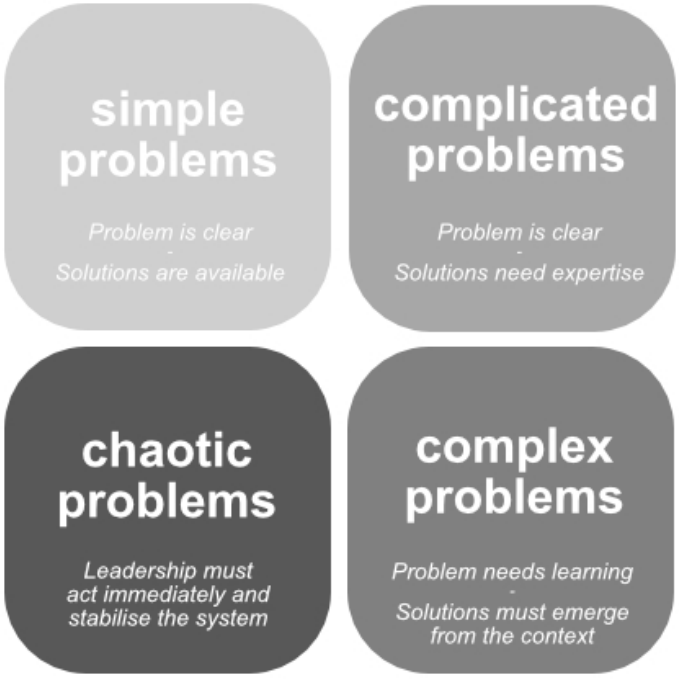
Over the past few years, various events have also highlighted that the concept of organisational legitimacy plays a role not only in companies but also in churches. One illustrative example that has been widely reported in Germany in recent years is the mass resignation of members of the Roman Catholic Church in some areas of Germany. This was due to the fact that the manner in which some dioceses addressed the issue of sexual abuse within their ranks was not aligned with socially established norms (Zoch, 2021). In modern times, churches are no longer positioned above society as separate entities, as they were in pre-modern times (D. Bosch, 2011, p. 260,309). They are now dependent on society's legitimacy, just like all other organisations. Suppose churches ignore the stakeholders and their sense of appropriate behaviour. In that case, this may result in a loss of members and a decline in the perception of religion as a viable option for many. When considering the concept of organisational legitimacy and neo-institutionalism, it becomes clear that the changed social framework conditions require organisations and churches to turn their attention to their stakeholders.

THE CYNEFIN FRAMEWORK:
A LEADERSHIP APPROACH TO COMPLEXITY

While the previous chapter described the impact of the increasing complexity of society on organisations and churches as a system, this chapter will focus on how leaders can address this increased complexity. In their "Cynefin framework", Snowden and Boone (2007) discuss what it means for leaders to deal with complex issues as opposed to simple or difficult ones. They distinguish four types of problems: (1) "simple", (2) "complicated", (3) "complex", and (4) "chaotic" problems. In the case of simple problems, the nature of the problem and the solution are both known. It is essential to categorise the problem accurately and select the most appropriate solution from the available options. To illustrate, one might consider the organisation

of a worship service in a church. Choose the right notes from the hymn book. Organise the musicians, and with a little practice, you will probably end up with a satisfactory service.

Figure 1: *The four types of problems (derived from Snowden, Boone, 2007)*



In the case of complicated problems, the problem is also evident, but the solution is not generally known and requires expertise. The involvement of experts is essential for a comprehensive analysis of the problem, which will then inform the choice or development of appropriate solutions. One illustrative example is that of a leadership team within a church that is characterised by a lack of cohesion and a tendency to engage in conflicting interactions. The team itself may lack the capacity to identify and resolve the issue accurately. However, a leadership coach could potentially identify different personality types or leadership styles within the group and assist the team in better understanding their differences and the potential for cooperation. This would facilitate the team's perception of each other as complementary rather than as obstacles, thereby enabling the development of new, more promising leadership processes. The expertise of a coach is needed to identify the issue according to existing leadership knowledge and to implement appropriate problem-solving strategies.

With complex problems, the issue itself is not fully comprehended. Consequently, identifying and resolving the problem necessitates a process of inquiry and the acquisition of new knowledge. The precise understanding of the problem and the solution must emerge from a thorough examination of the context and its stakeholders. The challenge of how to reach the growing number of secular or religiously indifferent people in Western Europe with the gospel is an example of a particularly complex problem. A multitude of factors are likely to be involved, and probably not all of which are known. The situation is fluid. What is effective in one context may not be so in another. Even experts do not have ready-made solutions to this kind of problem. They have to be explored in (each) context by looking at the stakeholders.

Chaotic problems are a distinct category of complex problems, characterised by the presence of a vital threat to the system. Here, leadership must first restore security and order before a permanent solution can be sought according to the principles of complex problem-solving. One illustrative example is an open conflict within a church between members of

significant influence. It is imperative that the leadership act without delay to prevent irreparable damage to the church and to ensure the potential for a shared future.

According to Hartmann and Knieling (2016:21), churches and their leaders are skilled at leading in simple and complicated terrain, but have limited problem-solving strategies for complex environments. This may also be because many churches were founded in the pre-modern era, and their church and leadership structures were never adapted to an individualised, digitalised, and globalised world. They (Hartmann & Knieling, 2016, p. 68) also critically note that addressing complex challenges is not a prominent research topic in any theological discipline.

As illustrated by the Cynefin framework, solutions to complex problems must emerge from the system, as they arise in highly interconnected and ambiguous social ecosystems. In order to gain an understanding of the specific system, it is necessary to examine the functioning and interaction of its constituent parts. To illustrate, if you want to understand the forest ecosystem, it is necessary to examine the individual trees, plants, and animals that constitute it. By studying these individual components of the system, one can gain insight into the symbiotic relationships and mechanisms that underpin the ecosystem as a whole. This, in turn, allows for the identification of imbalance or disorder within the system, as well as the identification of potential starting points for initiating change and achieving a new equilibrium. The same approach may also be considered appropriate when identifying and handling problems in social or organisational ecosystems. In order to lead a complex system, it is first necessary to engage with the relevant stakeholders.

STAKEHOLDER-CENTRED LEADERSHIP

Most classic leadership models view organisations as complicated constructs that can be controlled and directed. In reality, however, today almost all organisations and their environments are complex entities (Laloux, 2016, p. 139). Complex scenarios, as the Cynefin framework and the concept of organisational legitimacy have shown, require a turn towards stakeholders and a change in leadership style, from an authoritarian, top-down leadership style that tries to "direct change" and give answers, to a stakeholder-centred leadership style that encourages and guides an exchange between those directly involved and allows solutions to "emerge" from this exchange (Plowman et al. 2007:344; Glatzel & Lieckweg 2020:16f; Hartmann & Knieling 2016:34f; Laloux 2016:58f; Weiler et al. 2018:34; Heifetz & Laurie 2001). In complex scenarios, leaders are "acting as sensemakers" (Plowman et al. 2007:351). They enable systems to interact and, by considering the problem from the various perspectives of the relevant stakeholders, to collectively make sense of and derive solutions from the complex challenges they encounter. As a result, leaders are more likely facilitators rather than directors of change. It is evident that no single leader or a few decision-makers possess the capacity to fully understand complex scenarios, regardless of how well-educated they might be (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001, p. 132; Laloux, 2016, p. 58f). The solutions lie at the front (Schweinsberg, 2020, p. 99), within the experience of the stakeholders, who are directly affected by the problem (Plowman et al. 2007:341ff; Heifetz & Laurie 2001:132).

The idea of stakeholder-centred leadership was first introduced by Freeman (1984) in the 1980s. It was intended to be an alternative "way (…for institutions) to create value" and legitimacy in a "world where there is little stability and certainty" (Freeman et al. 2018:1). At the centre of stakeholder-centred leadership is the notion that, in a "society that allows full freedom of choice," stakeholders are free to make their own decisions about who to trade

with, who to work for and in which companies and institutions they want to invest their money (Freeman et al. 2018:5). Consequently, companies and institutions must actively engage with their stakeholders, treating them well and adding value to their lives in order to increase the likelihood that they will reciprocate by offering more "in terms of effort, commitment, sharing of important information, enthusiasm, and loyalty" (Freeman et al. 2018:6).

Today, stakeholder-centeredness as a strategy for developing environmentally relevant and legitimate products, services, and offerings is one of the key strategies of many commercial organisations in Western Europe (Pusler, 2019, p. 59). As a result, many modern leadership strategies and tools are based on a stakeholder-centred leadership approach. All these approaches, such as "Design Thinking" (Brown, 2009; stanford university - d.school, 2019), "Agile Management" (Hoffmann & Roock, 2018; Weiler et al., 2018), "Appreciative Inquiry" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), or "Adaptive Leadership" (Heifetz et al., 2009), to name but a few, have in common that they try to bring together stakeholders, both inside and outside of institutions, in different ways, in order to develop new ideas and create sustainable solutions for them jointly. Making decisions for people in complex scenarios without having dealt with them in depth is about as promising as planning projects to preserve the forest without ever having seen or examined it.

Stakeholder-centred leadership is less focused on implementing structural changes in leadership, as is the case with the "shared" or "collective leadership" approach, where leadership is divided or shared among several individuals (Contractor et al. 2012). Instead, it is more concerned with a shift in the attitude of leaders towards their stakeholders. This approach underscores the cultivation of an appreciative sensitivity towards stakeholders, emphasising the incorporation of their experiences, needs, and perspectives in decision-making processes. This attitude can result in alterations to classic leadership structures, as illustrated in Agile Management, where interdisciplinary teams collaborate with stakeholders in a dynamic and collaborative environment characterised by minimal hierarchical structures (Hoffmann & Roock, 2018). However, it can also be practised in traditional, hierarchical leadership structures, as described in the Adaptive Leadership approach, for example (Heifetz & Laurie, 2001). Stakeholder-centred leadership does not necessarily require a change in leadership structures, but a change in the leadership mindset and style.

PRACTICE OF STAKEHOLDER-CENTRED LEADERSHIP

The process for solving complex problems typically has three steps: (1) observing or interacting with people affected, (2) interpreting their perceptions, and (3) intervening to eliminate the problem (Brown, 2009, p. 49; Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 32). This is usually an exploratory process that is iterative, not linear (Brown, 2009, p. 16; Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 7), so that each intervention must be re-evaluated together with the stakeholders to see how well it solves the problem and where adjustments to the intervention may be necessary. Novel solution strategies must be continuously evolved through evaluation until they achieve optimal resolution or have finally shown that they are not a beneficial solution.

Heifetz et al. (2001:47,51) highlight the existence of two pervasive misconceptions in the context of complex problem-solving, which they identify as being prevalent within organisational contexts and among many leaders. Firstly, it is a mistake to cling to traditional behavioural patterns and problem-solving strategies because they have worked in the past. Since complex systems are fluid and unpredictable (Plowman et al., 2007, p. 341f; Snowden & Boone, 2007), a previously effective problem-solving strategy does not guarantee future

success. The fluidity of such systems explicitly reduces the half-life of problem-solving strategies. The second mistake identified is the premature implementation of a solution strategy in the absence of a comprehensive diagnosis of the problem and its categorisation. This approach often results in the provision of simplistic solutions to complex issues. Such an approach is unlikely to yield satisfactory and sustainable outcomes but rather may lead to increased frustration and uncertainty. I would add a third misconception, and that is linear thinking. Linear thinking in complex scenarios may result in promising solutions being prematurely discarded, rather than being subjected to evaluation and modification, due to their failure to yield immediate and comprehensive success. Consequently, a risk of change fatigue and frustration arises due to the constant introduction of new solutions, which have not yet resulted in tangible success. Since problem-solving in complex environments is usually exploratory, it requires iterative thinking involving trialling, evaluating, and modifying.

Furthermore, Heifetz and Laurie (2001:132) point out that this change in leadership style is often a significant challenge for established leaders because they have predominantly gotten into their positions due to their capacity to make decisions and provide solutions. This is probably true for church administrators as well. In the image of the shepherd, frequently used in churches because Jesus himself used it (John 10:1-30; John 21:15-19), the shepherd is also expected to chart the way and make decisions for the flock. Churches have operated in this manner sometimes for centuries, and many continue to do so today. As a result, many members of congregations naturally expect a leader who knows the way and provides direction. And many church leaders, pastors, and church administrators expect the same from themselves and their colleagues. In complex scenarios, leaders must learn how to lead the flock as a shepherd without knowing the way themselves. The act of focusing on and evaluating the experiences of stakeholders is of crucial importance in this process.

Stakeholder-centred leadership in the church context?

As shown in the previous chapters, the relevance of focusing on stakeholders can be clearly demonstrated from the leadership literature. The approach of stakeholder- or customer-centredness is one of the most essential concepts in the business world today (Pusler, 2019, p. 59). The question for churches is whether these approaches are applicable, as churches differ from companies, and faith is not just an interchangeable product. Companies have absolute flexibility in the design of their products, services, strategies, and processes. They can completely adapt them to customer needs and desires. Churches work on the basis of the Word of God, which comes from God and is unchangeable. As Kenneson and Street (1997:73), two outspoken critics of leadership and marketing influences in church leadership put it that the stakeholder-centred approach risks diluting and corrupting the faith through convergence with the desires of stakeholders. The pivotal question is whether or to what extent the church should adapt to people and context, as the idea of stakeholder-centredness suggests.

In order to respond to this question, it is important to recognise that stakeholder-centredness is not a novel issue for churches. It has been a topic of discussion within the field of missiology for some time, particularly in relation to the concept of "contextualization". Although contextualisation is the subject of ongoing debate, it can be fundamentally defined as: "the way the message is communicated so as to make the truth more accessible to the people of another culture" (Smith, 2015, p. 243). The following chapter will examine the

concept of contextualisation in greater detail in order to draw implications regarding stakeholder-centredness and, subsequently, church leadership.

Even though the topic of contextualisation gained momentum in missiology in the growing dialogue between churches in the global north and south, especially from the 1960s onwards (Flett & Wrogemann, 2020, p. 17; Sanchez, 2015, p. 283), contextualisation is already a biblical phenomenon at its core. In the parables, for example, Jesus uses imagery from 1st-century Middle-Eastern rural society to illustrate faith to his contemporaries (Flett & Wrogemann, 2020, p. 4). For us today, many of these parables are distant and in need of explanation. They are for his context. As another illustration, Paul addresses the topic of Jesus Christ in the synagogue of Antioch, among the Jewish community. He makes reference to the patriarchs and prophets who had shaped the people of Israel (Acts 13:13-52). In Athens, however, Paul speaks about him to Greek listeners and refers to their nameless God (Acts 17:16-34). It cannot be assumed that Paul preaches a different theology, but he does use different images and points of reference to engage with people from different contexts. He contextualised the message by being sensitive to his counterpart and building on their knowledge and experiences. These are just two of many examples of how contextualisation has already taken place in the bible. They suggest, as Flett and Wrogemman (2020:4) conclude, "that the gospel was never without context (…) it exists only in context".

Today, scholars of missiology largely agree that in a globalised, individualised world, mission without contextualisation is hardly conceivable (D. Bosch, 2011, p. 495; Wrogemann, 2019, p. 411). If faith does not reach others in an understandable and meaningful form, it has no relevance for them (Flett & Wrogemann, 2020, p. 215; Hesselgrave & Rommen, 2013, p. xi). The degree of comprehensibility is determined by the recipient of the message and not by the sender. Contextualisation, therefore, requires an engagement with and a sensitivity for the other person or group. Although today the fundamental question of the necessity of contextualisation is largely answered in the affirmative, there is intense debate about the relationship between God, his word, and the theology derived from it on the one hand and the context on the other hand. The main question is who holds authority over whom. In particular, there is a need to determine how to prevent contextualisation from opening the door to syncretism or arbitrariness (Sanchez, 2015, p. 291f).

Hiebert (2009:19ff), one of the most influential scholars on the topic of contextualisation, distinguishes three ways of contextualisation: (1) "Non-contextualization", (2) "uncritical contextualization", and (3) "critical contextualization". Non-contextualisation views truth as objective truth detached from social context, making cultural understanding seem unnecessary. It is the path that the colonial churches have taken, in which they have built exact copies of their home churches in the new colonies. The result typically involves either the rejection of the belief by members of the other culture because it is deemed irrelevant, or its acceptance with the original culture or faith persisting in parallel underground as a syncretic faith (Hiebert, 2009, p. 290). However, this attitude is also prevalent in very conservative Christian circles today, where a "bunker mentality" often emerges due to the assumption that one's faith is synonymous with objective divine truth and must therefore be defended against the perceived negative influences of the world (Mueller, 2006, p. 140). In this case, faith also often becomes irrelevant or even invisible to others.

Uncritical contextualisation, on the other hand, denotes a completely uncritical receptivity to cultural influences and expectations. This approach is primarily grounded in the pragmatism of postmodernism (Hiebert, 2009, p. 290). The decision-making process is based on the practical benefit and relevance of an opportunity in question. All life options, including God and faith, are fundamentally equal, and people freely choose what they find useful and make them authentic (Root, 2017, p. 132). Syncretism is thus a kind of program.

The process of critical contextualisation begins with the Word of God, which serves as the foundation of faith. The Word of God is distinctly different from theology. The former is divinely given and thus constitutes the "norma normans" of faith. The latter is a human interpretation of the former, taking into account its context, and is therefore "norma normata" (Pöhlmann, 2022, p. 66). Starting from this core of faith, the *norma normans*, forms must be discovered and evaluated within the social sphere where the Word of God is meant to be relevant (Hiebert, 2009, p. 29), in order to understand how it can become relevant and legitimate. Critical contextualisation has become a standard approach in the majority of churches today (Sanchez, 2015).

In his "praxis cycle", the South African missiologist Kritzinger (2002:149) describes how critical contextualisation can succeed. He outlines five steps of contextualisation: (1) "involvement", (2) "context analysis", (3) "theological reflection", (4) "spirituality", and (5) "planning". The German missiologist Reimer (2018:72) proposes a three-step contextualisation process. It consists of (1) analysis of reality, (2) hermeneutic interpretation of this reality according to the criteria of faith, and (3) development of focal points for church work. As with the aforementioned approach of stakeholder-centred leadership, both cycles place considerable emphasis on the significance of focusing on stakeholders, or at the very least, the recipients of the mission. Kritzinger addresses the importance of stakeholder involvement and the necessity of contextual analysis. Reimer places considerable emphasis on the necessity of analysing the reality of the situation in question, exploring and seeking to gain an understanding of the ecosystem in which one is seeking to be relevant. The findings from these analyses of stakeholders serve as the foundation for the formation of novel mission strategies tailored to the target group in question. In both models, the newly acquired insights are then subjected to a test against one's own theological convictions. Both models, therewith, advocate critical contextualisation, emphasising the importance of including stakeholders in the planning of missionary activities, while also ensuring that the resulting plan must align with the theological foundation of faith. Furthermore, both models demonstrate a striking resemblance to the concept of stakeholder-centredness.

CONTEXTUALISATION IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

As previously stated, an examination of the concept of contextualisation reveals that a focus on stakeholders in the church context is not a novel idea. The critical contextualisation approach is now widely accepted in missiology as a means of engaging with unfamiliar social and ethnic groups (Rodriguez, 2021, p. 133; Sanchez, 2015, p. 290f). In the context of missions and long-existing religiously homogeneous societies in Europe (Casanova, 2018, p. 191), contextualisation was only considered necessary when the church encountered new social and ethnic groups abroad. In the contemporary context of crumbled, individualised, superdiverse and complex societies and organisations in Europe, the unknown is not solely confined to unreached groups in other countries; increasingly, it can also be found within the very institutions that should be the most familiar and accessible, such as one's own church. Contextualisation in mission is therefore also a necessity today in one's own churches and society. But contextualisation should not be confined to mission; the complex, superdiverse churches of Western Europe also necessitate the contextualisation of leadership to create a meaningful and relevant space for the increasingly diverse and multicultural flock within churches and thereby foster cohesion and commitment for God and his gospel. Thus, the tenets of critical

contextualisation in the field of mission can be adapted and applied to the domain of (stakeholder-centred) church leadership.

Furthermore, the boundaries of critical contextualisation can inform the guidelines for stakeholder-centred church leadership. Stakeholder-centred leadership under the conditions of critical contextualisation would mean charting the way into the future in empathetic and sensitive dialogue with stakeholders and at the same time constantly testing the emerging solutions and ways against one's own religious convictions. In this testing, the Word of God is the *norma normans*, and all emerging solutions to a complex and superdiverse ecclesial reality in Western Europe are the *norma normata*. In missiology, most churches have already undergone a paradigm shift towards paying attention to the stakeholders and letting them inform mission strategies. It is essential that church leaders adopt this empathetic approach towards the stakeholders, while simultaneously upholding the teachings of the Bible as the *norma normans*.

In light of the prevalence of the concept of stakeholder-centredness in contemporary business and the corresponding counterpart of critical contextualisation in missiology, it is pertinent to ask why these concepts appear to be relatively unknown and underutilised in the context of church leadership. This is despite the fact that both are methods that attempt to address precisely the problem of complexity that church leaders are facing today. In order to pave the way for the church of tomorrow, it would be beneficial for church leaders to learn from leadership and missiology. This is particularly relevant in light of the fact that the majority of missiologists agree that a focus on stakeholders according to the principles of critical contextualisation is not only required when entering new social spheres but also supported in the Bible (Sanchez, 2015, p. 290f).

CONCLUSIONS

As described in the introduction, today (church) leaders face a highly complex, superdiverse church reality in Western Europe. This environment often leaves (church) leaders feeling that they have to lead their flock without knowing the way. The aim of this article is therefore to understand better how church leaders can effectively lead their congregations in complex, superdiverse environments. It also aims to discuss how and to what extent approaches from the fields of leadership and missiology can be helpful in the area of church leadership.

At the beginning of this article, the concepts of organisational legitimacy and neo-institutionalism introduced the idea that organisations and institutions today need to engage with individuals and the cultural environment to understand and address the cultural-cognitive influence of stakeholders. The Cynefin framework supported this idea by illustrating that leaders are likely to find sustainable, viable solutions to complex challenges only by engaging with stakeholders. It also showed that stakeholder-centred thinking has come to be taken for granted in many companies in Western Europe today.

As it turned out, stakeholder-centredness is not a new invention in church history. The idea can already be found in the bible and has long been discussed in missiology in the concept of contextualization. It has been shown that in the area of mission, most churches today have adopted the model of critical contextualisation, which makes it possible to bring together biblical grounding and attention to stakeholders. It affirms the attention to stakeholders so that the mission reaches people in an understandable form, but at the same time it requires that all newly emerging ideas be tested against the *norma normans* of faith. Since not only mission today faces an increasingly complex reality, but also church leadership, it seems

reasonable to apply the principles of critical contextualisation not only in the area of mission, but also in the area of church leadership.

Thus, the conclusion from the approaches presented is that the stakeholder-centred leadership approach, derived from the field of business leadership, under the premises of critical contextualisation, derived from the field of mission, can help church leaders in complex environments to identify sustainable solutions and perspectives that are relevant and legitimate for the stakeholders. This necessitates a transition from a hierarchical leadership style, wherein decisions are made in private by a select few with implications for numerous stakeholders, to a leadership style that values the perspectives and needs of stakeholders and incorporates them in the decision-making process. This does not necessarily require a change in organisational structures. First and foremost, this denotes a shift in leadership's attitude towards stakeholders, along with a transition in the manner in which decisions are made. The more perspectives of stakeholders are embraced in the decision-making process, the more promising the process becomes in complex environments (Hoffmann & Roock, 2018, p. 16f; Kluge & Kluge, 2020, p. 41) and the faster and more flexible it is (Glatzel & Lieckweg, 2020, p. 24; Hoffmann & Roock, 2018, p. 16f).

Pastors, local congregations, and churches need a paradigm shift in church leadership, similar to the one that missiology underwent from the 1960s on with its turn towards critical contextualisation. Those in church service and their respective churches must recognise that uncertainty regarding the way forward is not indicative of weakness, but rather a common occurrence in times of complexity. Furthermore, the development of solutions for complex problems in collaboration with stakeholders is not a means of transferring accountability; rather, it seems to be the sole viable avenue for making sense of many incomprehensible experiences of the present and charting a course toward a promising future. This enables church administrators at all levels to lead the church without knowing the way themselves. This can reduce pressure and increase the likelihood that processes will produce viable solutions. Ultimately, this is what leads church members to conclude that they have effective leaders.

In practice, this means that church leaders must learn to empathise and understand the experiences and needs of their stakeholders. They can do this by accompanying people in their tasks or relevant situations, entering into a detailed, empathetic dialogue with them, or perhaps observing them in the situations in question. They must try to see situations or challenges through the eyes of the stakeholders, grasp their emotions, and approach a holistic understanding of their needs and desires. With these insights in mind, they can derive solutions and offerings that really meet their needs. It is important that leaders do not think they already know what the other person needs and develop something for them without them. Instead, they need to really involve the perspectives of other people in decision-making processes so that what they are offering really meets their needs and is relevant and legitimate. As in other qualitative methods, it is not necessary to have talked to everyone in a system. If no more new insights emerge in conversations or observations, this is referred to as "saturation" (Creswell, 2014, p. 189), and it is assumed that all relevant perspectives have been captured.

The solutions that emerge from this process must then be constantly reviewed to ensure they are appropriate. Firstly, they must be evaluated against the *norma normans* of faith to ensure that new approaches do not compromise the foundations of one's own faith. Furthermore, it is crucial to solicit feedback from stakeholders also following the implementation of new solutions, in order to ascertain whether they are achieving the desired results, and to enable any necessary optimisations. Anyone who ventures into unknown territory, which in an individualised, digitalised, and superdiverse world can be found just around the corner, needs to look at both the stakeholders and the word of God as *norma normans*. Only those who keep

both in mind can open up new worlds, in church leadership, ecclesiology, or mission, and at the same time have a firm footing and a guideline that gives you certainty and consistency.

As in the practice of stakeholder-centred leadership, future research needs to evaluate how the approach itself can be modified to maximise support for church leaders. This also requires deeper, empathetic engagement with affected pastors and church administrators to allow improvements to the approach to emerge from these encounters. At the same time, future research must survey the extent to which there are different needs and expectations in different church traditions, cultures, or generations, which may also require adjustments or variations to the approach.

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