"The church must always be reformed" –
Visitation projects as decision program in the Protestant Church

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Abstract
This paper explores how the Protestant territorial churches in Germany deal with the so-called "visitation" – an instrument aimed at developing and inspecting the church and its local parish. We analyze (1) how and to what extent the visitation is used for program development and improving the church, (2) how church officials (ministry) and volunteers (lay ministry) are involved in the visitation process, and (3) how these people communicate with each other. After presenting an organization theory perspective on churches and church communities, we illustrate our arguments using case studies in four selected territorial churches – "Landeskirchen" – in Germany. The findings reveal that the visitation serves as a multifunctional instrument for both the church as an organization as well as the church community as an interaction system. The dual nature of the visitation as a tool for inspection and organizational development produces "useful insecurities", which can create room for informal, trusting exchange among church members. Some unintended side effects also occur, including "window dressing" and a sense of "artificial naturalness" during the visitation. Our findings suggest that the different functions of the visitation are the result of shifting expectations as the visitation is imbued with new functions. While this increases organizational opportunities, it also leads to a further increase in expectations. The findings are potentially of interest to other organizations rooted in a community and personal beliefs.

Keywords: church development, decisions, empirical study, Luhmann, programming, Protestant Church, systems theory, visitation project.

1. Introduction

"Visitation" is an inspection instrument used by church leadership in both the Protestant and the church. "Visitation is an institutionalized and regulated visit by a church superintendent or

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his/her deputies in church communities, church districts or church institutions" (Müller 2003: 151). The visitation has a long tradition dating back to late antiquity and the early Middle Ages and is one of the oldest organizational routines within the church (Peters 2003: 151). Over the course of time, the visitation has developed two main – sometimes conflicting – functions: a cybernetic function (leadership and control of the church) on the one hand, and a collectivization function for building and strengthening belief on the other.

In recent years, the visitation has been subject to reform and renewal. Churches currently face a number of challenges, including secession from the church, demographic developments, funding shortfalls (Schlamelcher 2008, 162; Björnsdottier 2017) and managerial pressures (Simpson 2012, 284, Meyns 2013, Råmunddal & da Silva 2016). As these challenges grow, churches are being forced to respond to changing expectations and adapt their structures accordingly. Alongside these general developments, the functions of the visitation itself have also changed. In particular, expectations have risen regarding the measurable effects of the visitation for church development as well as the opportunities it offers for presenting the church to its environment. In other words: the instrument increasingly follows an output-oriented model – at least on a rhetorical level. According to Held (2009: 261), the visitation is now also propagated as a management instrument that can stimulate learning and change processes within the church. Thus, the church must address expectations associated with the visitation that originate outside the church context. In addition, the visitation itself is increasingly considered an instrument that needs to be continuously developed (Svenska kyrkan 2019).

Fundamental organizational change is problematic in any organization, as it interrupts the existing order and causes a "liability of newness" (Stinchcombe 1965: 142). In administrative institutions in particular, reforms "promise a clear direction for the better, and one can almost assume that the word reform is used so often because the evidence is lacking" (Luhmann 1971: 203). In her historical study, Esposito (2005: 52) explores the evolution of major social institutions – schools, churches and state administration. Modern society tends to "portray the world as full of defects and mistakes and reform as a solution to them. The world is presented poorly to make the prospective future all the more attractive."

Churches have been portrayed as being particularly vulnerable to conditions of decreasing societal demand (Schmidt 2016). This is a momentous opportunity for change, because according to Luhmann (1972), churches can only be partially organized. In times of high social acceptance, this organizational weakness may not be a problem, but it becomes more critical in difficult times. A significant part of what we understand as church is unorganizable (or undecidable) – namely the church community in the form of a local parish which enacts the church in practice. This is particularly true of the Protestant Church, which can be characterized as a parochial church, i.e. a church that operates mainly "bottom up" with democratic boards of participation and mostly laypersons in official functions.

While the church *administration* can be characterized as an organization consisting of typical *decided* elements such as membership contracts and rules, formal goals, hierarchies and communication channels (Kühl 2013: 17-85), the parish community as a denomination resembles an *undecided* or *not decidable* loosely-connected network held together by trust and common belief among its members (Lehmann 2008: 125). At its center lies shared and appropriately conveyed belief along with collective experience. The parish is part of the global church community, but at the same time a completely discrete and small-scale event. The coordination instruments often applied to organizations are not applicable to the church community, or at least not to the same extent. For example, "actively practiced" membership in a church community is informal and not contractually agreed upon.

The visitation is part of the formal organization of the church. It is based on legal grounds and numbers among the church's organizational routines. However, the instrument also involves church members who belong to the informal network of the church community. Visitations attempt to bring together – and even change – two different types of social systems: the church as a formal organization and the church community as an informal interaction system. This creates a multi-level interdependence that is difficult to untangle. This article aims to explore how the church as an organization and the church community as an interaction system deal with the visitation. Is the visitation used as a means of developing and improving the church? Who takes part in the visitation process? How do the people involved communicate with each other during the visitation? Finally, how do the ambivalent goals of the visitation as a process that stresses both inspection and development translate to the church organization and the church community? In order to explore these questions, we combine theoretical ideas with empirical data. We begin by providing background information on visitations. Second, we construct a research framework for religion and organizations using a systems approach, specifically a Luhmannian perspective. Next, we present the methodology of the empirical study we conducted in four territorial churches in Germany. We end by discussing the results and the implications of these for the future of the visitation. From this, we derive a theoretical reform analysis.

2. Visitation projects in the Protestant Church

German territorial churches deviate from the geographic borders of the 16 German federal states (known as "Bundesländer"). Their origin dates back to Martin Luther's Reformation in the 16th century, when Germany was divided into kingdoms, principalities and counties (the churches were *state churches* until the Revolution of 1918 in the Protestant monarchies and aristocracies). The twenty territorial churches in Germany (which together form the federation of the "Evangelical Church in Germany", EKD) developed different church constitutions. Each territorial church is led by a synod – its parliament – consisting of professional and voluntary members of the church communities. The synod is able to take decisions on all aspects of church life. Each territorial church is divided into different districts (the medium level of the territorial church; other levels are the provost, or "Propstei", and deanery, or "Dekanat"), which are themselves composed of the individual parishes ("Kirchengemeinde") where actual church life is practiced.

The planning of visitation projects involves unique resources with regard to time, human resources and content (Szinovatz & Müller 2012, pp. 11-13). They purposes are typically twofold: on the one hand, visitation is an institutionalized, historically rooted and legally stipulated act in which a church authority visits a church or church community to review legal and property-related issues (Müller 2003: 151). On the other hand, visitation aims to strengthen the church members' belief in and solidarity with the church (Held 2009: 257), which has traditionally meant spiritual-collegial support for the parish pastor – in essence pastoral care for pastors (Müller 2003: 151). Although the 20 territorial churches vary in the way visitations are conducted and conceptualized, there are some recurring core elements. Visitations can be undertaken at different levels of the church: in the local church community, at the intermediary level of the church district, or on the level of the territorial church with its central services and institutions. In some state churches, visitations can also be conducted as a "partnership visitation" or "peer visitation", in which two units on the same level visit each other and exchange information and experiences. Beyond mere exchange, the visited unit is encouraged to initiate change processes based on the feedback and target agreements, which can be developed before, during or after the visitation. Visitation projects involve church employees as well as voluntary members of church communities. Both employees and volunteers can be part of the visitation team (which visits other units) or the visited unit (such as a church community, a church district or a territorial church institution).

Depending on the territorial church, the visitation is carried out either directly by church leadership (in *Lutheran* churches, the bishops) or by middle service levels (in other *non-Lutheran* Protestant churches: regional superintendents, provosts or deans). Visitations can be seen as incremental (reform) *projects* due to their particular organizational structure, which encompasses team building, professional roles, lateral leadership, and work packages. The visitations are usually carried out every six to eight years. Each visitation is conducted by a visitation team, which typically comprises a chief visitor (theologian with managerial functions) and assigned assessors who visit and observe the church community for several days (up to two weeks). The team talks to official and voluntary members of the visited units, looks at official documents, and attends services. The visitation ends with final conversations, a written report and a divine service. As in scientific or school contexts, the visitation is at least partially a "peer review" procedure, because trained pastors are assigned to examine the work of their colleagues in other communities. It can take several years for all communities within a territorial church to be visited by a visitation team.

3. Church and organization from a Luhmannian perspective

Niklas Luhmann published an instructive, but rarely discussed article "The Organizability of Religion and Churches" in 1972. The distinctive quality of the paper is "that it sheds light on both the organizational-theoretical conditions of the churches and the related religious and theological aspects" (Blanke 2017: 1). Luhmann refined Talcott Parsons' systems theory into his theory of a functionally differentiated society. Luhmann (2013; 2017) distinguished between three types of social systems: *interaction* systems (face-to-face, communication by presence), *organizational* systems (based on membership, goals, hierarchy) and *society* as an overarching social system. Society is divided into functionally differentiated subsystems operating on the basis of binary codes that distinguish them from their environment. For example, the legal system follows the code legal/illegal, the economy uses the code payment/no payment, and politics follows the code government/opposition. Religion distinguishes between immanence/transcendence.

In addition to identifying *features* of organized social systems (membership, goals, hierarchies), Luhmann developed a decision-oriented definition of organization. This approach specifies the prerequisites for decision-making, which are called "decision premises". The two concepts of organization and decision premises are closely intertwined in systems theory, as decisions are considered the "final elements" (Baraldi, Corsi & Esposito 1997: 129; Baecker 2008, p. 45) of all organizations. In the following section, we firstly use systems theory to describe church organization; secondly, introduce decision premises in the context of visitation projects; and thirdly, apply these concepts in order to structure our empirical study.

3.1 Characteristics of the church and the church community

Luhmann (1972) transfers the aforementioned levels of social systems in modern society to the religious system as follows: on the first and most general level we find *societal systems,* which deliver "ultimate, well-grounded reductions and therefore social order" (Luhmann 1972: 246), such as values, norms, interpretation schemes or language. On the societal level, religion has the function of mediating between the here and now and the beyond (or immanence and transcendence). A core belief in Christianity is that the church is more than a visible organization (Ratzinger 1968). Religion offers society the ultimate rationale for its existence; it disguises the contingencies of the world and makes them bearable for members of society (Daiber 2008: 28).

The second level comprises *organizations,* which have gained enormous importance in modern societies and exist all over the world. According to Luhmann (1972), organizations operate according to a unique mechanism that distinguishes them from other social systems: the "non-contingent combination of contingent circumstances: the decision on membership (entry and exit) and the determination of structural features (e.g. goals, hierarchical arrangement […]), which have to be accepted in the case of membership" (Luhmann 1972: 247). In other words: "Only those who recognize the rules of the organization can enter the organization at all. Those who no longer want to follow them must leave" (Luhmann 2005: 50). The emergence of the modern economic system "pushes organization in almost all functional areas of society and moves between the social system and its interaction systems" (Luhmann 2017: 211). The first instances of organization took place in late antiquity – namely in the church (!) "of early Christianity with a coupling of entrance/exit and creed" (e.g. baptism as an entrance criterion, HR/MS, Luhmann 2017: 210).

At the third level, Luhmann identifies simple social systems (*interactions*), which involve face-to-face-contact and depend on reciprocal attention and thematic concentration. This form of social exchange is widespread in church communities, in which church members interact with one another more or less spontaneously. The church year is punctuated by liturgical-ritual interactions, such as church celebrations, church holidays, and the weekly Sunday service. Lehmann (2008, 125) describes the church community as a series of encounters or communicative work among network members that does not necessarily need fixed structures or a permanent identity.

Another unique feature of the church is the different modalities of membership. Luhmann (1972) distinguishes three types of church membership: 1) church employees (e.g. priests, secretaries, etc.), 2) actively engaged persons, and 3) paying church members (especially in countries with state-organized church taxes) who remain rather passive in church life. The coordination of these three membership groups follows different patterns. For church employees, the classical coordination instruments for organizations apply. These are rooted in a contract between the church and employee, which combines entry and exit decisions with unique organizational decisions (e.g. program, hierarchical structure). When priests sign a work contract, they accept the church's hierarchy as well as the duties and tasks to be performed. Moreover, the church has even higher expectations of its staff than "normal" organizations: the church's Biblical foundation places specific demands on their moral lifestyle and requires a high level of commitment from "(wo)men of god".

The second group comprises actively engaged church members, who attend services, perform voluntary work and are active in the church community. This social system can be at least partially characterized as a simple interaction system that cannot be centrally controlled or governed from the top (Luhmann 1972: 259). The third group – inactive paying members – cannot be directly managed either. They only offer general support to the church, which according to Luhmann (1972) depends on "a certain publicity of church activities" (e.g. church buildings, public church communications, etc.). Inactive paying members often have the diffuse feeling that the church is "a good thing" (Schulz 2008: 121). While the church does not need to directly engage with its inactive paying members, they constitute a constant threat (Schulz 2008: 101). Their motives are unspecific, complex, multifaceted and sometimes contradictory, but it seems to be exactly this ambiguous goal structure that binds inactive paying members to the church (Schulz 2008: 105). Clear target group orientation and specific goal formulation by the church could possibly undermine the integrative power achieved by plurality and ambiguity (Schulz 2008: 115). Hence, the church faces contradictory demands and challenges: diverse and diffuse interests among its members as well as the decoupling of membership and decision-making.

According to Henkel (2009), the church system is stabilized by the interplay between religion, the church as a formal organization, and the church community. As already mentioned, religion on the societal level (system level), the formal church organization (organization level) and individual church communities (interaction level) operate according to different systems of logic and are structurally independent from one another (Stöber 2005: 44-45).

Religion seeks to provide a community rooted in reflection (salvation, the Old and New Testaments), and its integrative and community building potential is manifest primarily in mental/spiritual terms, while the church as an organization involves a deliberate combination of programs, personnel, and organizational structures. In addition, the church as an organization provides an important framework for the functioning of the church community. On a formal level, it provides recurring structures, such as church services, baptisms, wedding ceremonies, etc. Hierarchical structures within the church (bishop, dean, priest, ...) also create stability. On the level of the church community, personal relations and presence are of central importance. Engaging in church-related activities and voluntary services strengthens trust and self-confidence within the community, which further reinforces church engagement as well as a willingness to pay church taxes (Henkel 2009, Henkel 2012).

3.2. Decision-making requirements in organizations: Expectations and decision premises

The aforementioned interplay between formal and informal organization is not only typical of churches, it is also one of the core themes in organizational theory (e.g. Gulati & Puranam 2009, von Groddeck & Wilz 2015). This particularly applies to temporal structuring or project-based formats. Recent research also emphasizes the interesting and often neglected interplay between formal and informal activities in organizations (e.g. Soda & Zaheer 2012, Diefenbach & Sillince 2011).

In systems theory, both the formal and informal elements of an organization are based on a social structure (Kühl & Schütz 2018: 298). In organizations, the term social *structure* is equivalent to *expectations*, which are followed by specific decisions: "One has to act within certain predetermined and acceptable paths that are imprinted by certain expectations" (Luhmann 1964: 272). Disregarding or ignoring these expectations is likely to result in disruptions, incomprehension and denial (Luhmann 1964: 272). Standardized decision procedures, such as a visitation, an inspection, or a review committee, can accentuate and imprint the development of expectations in a unique way. During the visitation process, the church has the opportunity to evaluate existing expectations and resulting decisions; the church may be able to identify possible limitations or compatibility in its expectations. In this sense, *visitation* is primarily a *validation* of expectations.

The relationship between the formal and informal aspects of an organization can be further specified with the concept of *decision premises* (Luhmann 2018: 181-209; Kühl 2013: 101-113). Organizations are considered systems that are shaped and characterized by decisions. An organization's *decision structure* encompasses everything that has already been decided upon (= officially/formally communicated). It is of little surprise that "informal communication" – including "personalization" and "micropolitics" (Luhmann 1998: 839/fn. 436, 840) – also occurs within organizations (Luhmann 2013: 82). In systems theory, informality comprises everything that has not officially been decided or should not be decided. In other words: either the organization cannot decide (reason: hindrance) or it does not want to decide (purpose: usefulness).

An important reason for non-decisions relates to the organizational culture, which is based on unsettled conventions resulting from repeated modes of interaction among organizational members (Kühl & Schütz 2018: pp. 298). Since organizations relate most incidents (including informal communication) to decisions, they confront a downright "maelstrom of decisions" (Baecker 2008: 45). In other words "any [unspecific] communications [organizational culture] can almost always be interpreted as decisions" (Baecker 2008: 45; parentheses HR/MS). Both the formal and the informal sides of organizations can be traced back to three basic decision premises: programs, personal, and communication (Kühl 2018).

Premises can be understood as the origin of an organized order (Luhmann 2018: 181-209). *Programs* define the rules for acceptable decisions, and also affect the two other premises. The origin of every organization begins with the formation of a program from which further programs are derived and that defines the organization's order. Decision premises provide the possibilities for decision making in every organization. Specifically, decisions are based on three premises, including programs, personnel, and communication. Decision premises work at the formal level or at the informal level of the organization (see figure 1).

Decision programs comprise administrative inspections, investigations, hearings, official visits or church visitations. Programs are organized collectively and interactively following certain procedural rules. This makes it possible to reflect on past, present and future decisions as well as further development. In other words, visitations as programs must explore whether and how the church considers its formal (= decided) order appropriate. The premise *personnel* defines who is able and allowed to make decisions. *Communication* defines the procedures – or hierarchies – that need to be taken into consideration in decision-making.

Programs, personnel and communication in turn generate stable expectations, which allow the organization to pursue its goals – i.e., to come to decisions by following a predetermined order (Baraldi, Corsi & Esposito 1997: 130). Decision premises need to be distinguished from individual decisions or episodes of decision-making. The very function of premises is to *not* have to decide upon the appropriateness of every single decision. Ultimately, "the three premises condense into jobs" (Baraldi, Corsi & Esposito 1997: 130): "Each job is provided with tasks (*program*), belongs to an organizational unit (*communication*) and is staffed by one *person*." (italics HR/MS; Luhmann 1998: 834). Our theoretical framework is summarized in Figure 1.

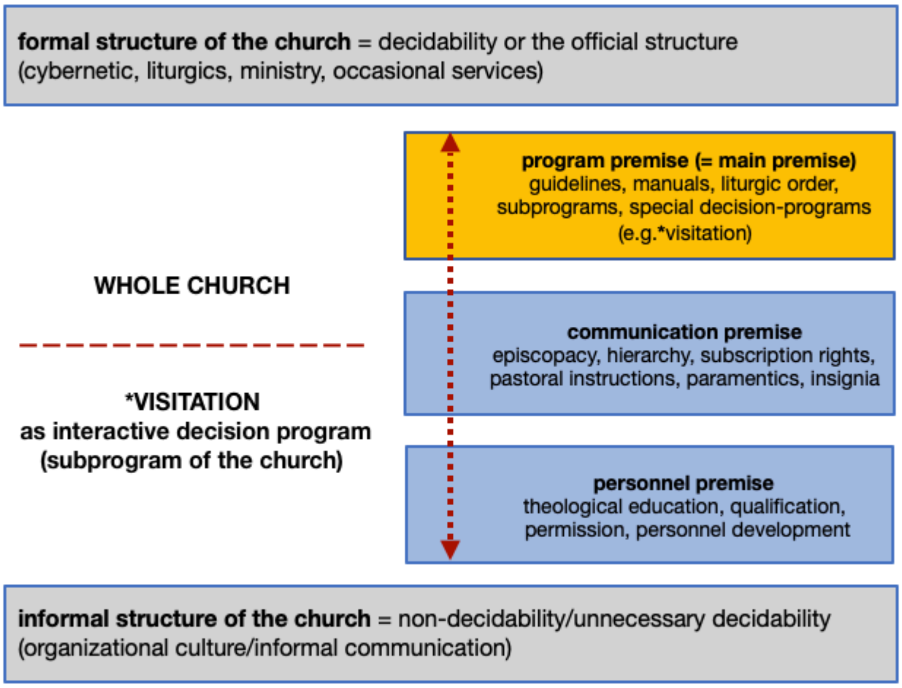

Figure 1: Theoretical model of visitation as a specific decision program in the Protestant Church.

4. Methodology

In order to examine visitation as a decision program, we conducted a multiple case study utilizing semi-structured interviews. A qualitative research design is particularly useful when the concepts of interest have not yet been fully identified, are poorly understood, or are underdeveloped (Flick et al. 2004). Qualitative case studies were considered most appropriate for shedding light on formal and informal processes during church visitation: as the viewpoints, experiences, expectations and emotions of church employees and community members are difficult to detect with standardized instruments, an exploratory qualitative approach allows us to elaborate new concepts and insights grounded in a number of in-depth interviews. Additionally, a qualitative approach to collecting data enables researchers to gather rich accounts of participants' interpretations of their environment (Flick et al. 2004), which is particularly important when it comes to the informal, less visible and less understood elements of an organization.

The first step in the data collection process involved gaining access to interesting cases of church communities that had recently taken part in church visitations. We asked each of the selected churches to send us a list of at least 30 people involved in the recently conducted visitation. From these contacts, 25-30 interviews were conducted in each territorial church, resulting in a total of 110 interviews with church employees and volunteers in local parish councils who directly participated in a visitation. The interviewed persons were either part of the visitation commission or part of the visited unit. Each interview consisted of open, nondirected questions to stimulate the interviewees' thoughts. We also included experts from church leadership in the development process to ensure that our research instrument was contextually appropriate. The interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes. Although an initial semi-structured interview guide was composed, it evolved further during the interviewing process to reflect the responses, diverse experiences and backgrounds of the different people involved in visitation.

After fully transcribing the interview material, we analyzed the interviews using an inductive data analysis approach. The codes that emerged were compared, discussed and revised by the authors. Afterwards, we derived a categorial scheme that was subdivided into three broad categories, namely (1) program premise (organizational principles and development), (2) personnel premise (staff, roles and involvement) and (3) communication premise (channels and interaction).

5. Results

This section presents the results of our exploratory case studies in the selected territorial churches. We summarize the main ideas within each category and use selected direct quotes to illustrate distinct issues.

Visitation as a decision-making program — presentation and development

Organizations use a variety of process-oriented instruments to maintain or develop their basic programs further, thus evaluating the "correctness of decisions" (Baraldi, Corsi & Esposito 1997: 129). However, there are some constraints when applying this concept to churches: "To illustrate, in Protestant churches (…) one can observe that an important component of the *program*, namely, reference to the Old and New Testaments (…) is treated as sacrosanct and has therefore been *immobilized* as a decision premise" Kühl (2013: 112, italics HR/MS). Churches may be reluctant at first to be measured with programs developed for secular, "profane" organizations (Petzke & Tyrell 2012: 276). Programs provide information about the objectives of decision-making (goal programs) or conditions under which decisions should be made (conditional programs; Kühl 2011: 102-103). Typical programs in the Protestant church encompass liturgical services and the official functions of a pastor (occasional services). In addition, the liturgical year, service book, and confessional scripts specify the way in which a pastorate should be realized.

Most respondents did indeed see benefits for both the visited unit and the visiting team because the visitation provides room for reflection and scope for improving or changing church programs. They valued the "review of the situation of the community" and that the visitation "brought everybody closer together". Others appreciated the "opportunity to learn something new" and the "comparison with other units". One person emphasized that visitation can lead to changes in visited units "as long as they get really involved in the visitation".

Others mentioned "the opportunity to reflect on what is going on. A positive benefit is ... that the visitation helps people get out of their daily routines".

Despite clearly mentioning perceived benefits in terms of possible program revisions, the respondents also noticed some negative side effects of the visitation. The downside that was mentioned most often concerned ceremonial activities and the facade that was constructed during the preparation and realization of the visitation project. It is well known from the literature on institutionalism (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell 1983, Meyer & Rowan 1977) that organizational structures — as elements of ideas and beliefs — are not solely designed to improve an organization's programs. Organizations sometimes have to use certain structures (such as evaluations, inspections or visitations) to demonstrate legitimacy to important stakeholders (Hasse & Krücken 2005: 22-27).

Under such circumstances, organizations engage in "ceremonial activities" that buffer the actual core of the organization from conflicting external demands (Meyer & Rowan 1977). This decoupling of formal structure and actual work activities is especially widespread in organizations with few opportunities to measure or demonstrate the effectiveness of their decision programs with respect to economic and "technical efficiency" — for example, schools, universities, and other non-profit institutions. Organizations that cannot be judged on the basis of measurable evidence can gain legitimacy and acceptance through social evaluations (Baldridge 1975), which is also what a visitation provides. Therefore, one central function of the visitation as a decision program based on interaction may be to demonstrate conformity with the norms and expectations of relevant church stakeholders.

This widespread phenomenon also applies to the four cases in this study. Nearly all respondents were aware that the visited unit had to somehow present itself in a positive light that may not necessarily correspond to its actual situation or behavior. The people involved are aware that the visitation is a process for assessing the "correctness" (Baraldi, Corsi & Esposito 1997, p. 129) of the local organization in light of certain "rules of the game". The rules of the game are literally meant to be realized in the course of play. One member of a visiting committee remembered:

> My impression was that the community in question presented a quite nice, sociable program, which mainly showed us their best side. Sometimes, I felt a little like a tourist in a nice environment taking a look at the sights … and wondered whether we were being diverted – in a rather charming way – from all the hot topics. But it is not our job as the visiting team to rub it in – we work with what they present to us.

Others described the visitation as a "skating exhibition" with "sugarcoated reports" or as "pure show". One member of a visitation committee suggested that the main task of the committee was to "filter the normal information out of the diverse and favourable impressions presented by the visited unit". It seemed to be quite common for the visited unit to avoid mentioning critical issues. The process-based interactions, which involve striving to present one's own activities to others in a favorable light, give rise to a certain skepticism. Solid preparation and explanations by the parish is indeed desired; however, too much anticipatory compliance with the scheduled program can become suspicious. For example:

> Some communities built Potemkin villages where everything was a little bit better … some even started a couple of things from scratch, projects that were somehow integrated into the report and were wonderfully polished up later on.

Another visitation committee member remembers:

> I had the impression that the community was keen on presenting everything in the garden as rosy – although they had serious problems. And our attempt to question their presentation and point out new directions was not so easy.

It was not just the visited unit that only scratched the surface; sometimes, the visiting team was perceived as shallow as well:

> The commission did not take us seriously. They said: Yes, yes. No problem. You just need to talk to each other.

One volunteer in a visiting team stated:

> I don't think we were very useful. In the end, we developed target agreements which the visited community had already prepared in advance … Compared with the effort invested I found the target agreements a little on the weak side.

Another volunteer emphasized that the short time frame in which the visitation takes place is not suitable for providing strong impulses for change. Suggestions or tips may be given for further development, although they are not part of the actual rules of the game:

> We only scratched the surface a little ... but we also provided some impulses. But those were not the themes, which received approval from the community. They were already busy with other topics and could not make use of the short impulses we gave them during the visitation.

If the visitation is conducted primarily to demonstrate the visited unit's strengths and conformity to external expectations (i.e., those of the visitation team), it is unlikely that the suggested impulses or target agreements will ultimately be transferred into the activity structure of the church or the church community. In such circumstances, the visitation is a literal "performance of the program". It merely answers the expectations placed on this type of organization – or "which action can be treated as a decision" (Baecker 2008: 46) according to the rules of the visitation (program). This is mainly due to the local concentration of the visitation event, which requires people to come together in a single location and to symbolically express a "world society" (Heintz 2014: 246) through their collective presence. This collective decision-making process fosters social "entanglement" – not least because participants are pressured to participate in the program (Heintz 2014, p. 246). As a consequence, participants are linked together and have to assign duties to themselves.

After the visitation, the visited unit is likely to return to business as usual. In this case, the visitation is also likely to be perceived as an additional burden without any real consequences. A variety of statements by interviewees stress the "*high effort*", "*meager results*", "*energy-sapping process*", "*nothing new*", and "*lack of measurable effects*". The visitation was also compared with a "*nice student exchange: we saw something different, but it had no impact on us*" – or to put it more bluntly, as an impression of "something". One church employee described the process as superficial and compared it with a visit to a patisserie: "*You pick the raisins and slices of cake, just like you do at the patisserie*". One church employee mentioned the tension between seeking legitimacy and the actual results of the visitation:

> […] all church communities have substantial problems. But we are insanely unwilling to name these conflicts, so much so that we invest huge effort in suggesting to the outside world that 'Yes, the church may be declining, but our community is flourishing'. That is pure self-delusion. And for this reason, the cost-benefit ratio is, in my view, not ok.

In cases where the legitimizing function of the visitation is emphasized, the respondents are rather pessimistic about the visitation's effects and cost-benefit ratio. Similarly, employees who expected more visible changes and results were often disappointed after the visitation.

Generally, the respondents value the presence of and interaction between the church as an organization and the community as well as between different communities. Some would even favor more visits, but in a less formalized manner than an official visitation. In contrast to the efforts made, which seemed quite easy to measure, the perceived results and benefits remained vague and ambivalent. These results point to a number of tensions that are inherent in the visitation itself as well as in the interaction between the church organization and church community.

The personnel premise: Visitation in the field of tension between professional work and community engagement

The personnel premise comprises the selection, placement, and development of persons (Luhmann 2018, pp. 230-249) — in other words: the lifecycle of the organization's members. Additional criteria can also be taken into consideration "thanks to certain contacts, to certain abilities or reputations that the individual has gained from his own experience and training" (Baraldi, Corsi & Esposito 1997, p. 130). However, in the church context, the personnel premise needs to be modified. Typically, the personnel premise is applied to the organization's employees. Volunteers, by contrast, are either completely excluded from the personnel premise or are included in order to have them take over certain church-related activities. However, although their activities are typically unpaid, volunteers *participate* in 'church office' in the sense of *permission/admission*. Interest organizations such as churches, political parties or associations make considerable use of volunteer labor. Such organizations typically rely on strong intrinsic motivation, while motivation in industrial organizations is usually tied to economic incentives (Schütz & Bull 2017, p. 7).

In particular, the Protestant church emphasizes the participation of laypeople in church services, thus promoting purposeful motivation. As a consequence, the roles of church employees and laypersons blur together. The visitation necessarily involves personnel from both the organization itself as well as the community or district. Almost all respondents noted that a visitation "is highly people-intensive" before, during and after the visitation event itself. How the volunteers are integrated, prepared, motivated and managed depends on the particular local constellations. The patterns range from rather structured and formalized to rather open and informal patterns of cooperation. Two personnel-related aspects seem relevant in this respect: qualification/admission and motivation.

Qualification and admission of participants. Typically, the church employees in the visiting teams and visited units are considered to be quite professional, and it is no surprise that the volunteers are perceived as less professional during the visitation. Among the professionals, opinions on how to deal with volunteers' qualifications vary. While some professionals wish to increase the level of professionalism among volunteers, the majority still sees great value in spontaneous interactions with volunteers. As the following quotations indicate, some church employees extensively prepare the volunteers and "make them fit" for the visitation process:

> We have to and want to give our voluntary members a clear task, and I can only do that when they know what they have to do during the visitation … or at least what we as a church expect from our community during the visitation. Everything else does not make sense … and that requires a clear approach.

Other church employees are more critical of this structured and controlled approach. One minister observed:

> The visitation was very, very much steered by the responsible pastor. Only in very few cases were the volunteers allowed to intervene in the process. In my view, that limits the perspective of the visitation.

Another minister stated:

> Volunteers are our greatest asset in the church, but they are increasingly being repressed by professionals because they are supposedly not capable. I am opposed to this. The charm of the church are its volunteers, and when something is not running very well, the church should be able to deal with that … we should accept people how they are – as qualified people.

On the whole, the voluntary members feel well-prepared prior to the visitation. Typically, they had several meetings with other team members to discuss the visitation process and goals. They also received written material and documents providing important background information on the visitation. This tendency may be interpreted as an attempt to formalize an informal interaction system in order to meet the formal requirements of the visitation. However, this formalization is limited by other factors that are more difficult for the church organization to control.

Motivation. It is frequently a challenge to find motivated volunteers willing to offer their spare time and participate without remuneration in a variety of meetings before, during, and after the visitation. As mentioned above, while visitation projects require additional personnel, churches often have difficulty in finding people who are willing and interested in supporting the visitation process. The church, particularly the Protestant church, cannot recruit visitation team members among ministers alone. This would go against their claim to be a "people's church". The idea of the *community* focuses more on the *movement* of people than on business operations. However, both the interaction system and the limits of a community's organization become visible in this process:

> One disadvantage is that the visitation commission also consists of people who work voluntarily, who do not have the time and who are not paid for the work … Very often people are not prepared and it is then difficult to give well-grounded feedback that helps to improve the church community.

A voluntary member of one visitation commission remembered:

> One negative aspect was that the partner community [that we visited] was even less motivated than our community … I also contacted the partner community via email asking for an exchange of information … and they wrote back … that they would prefer to do only what is absolutely necessary and would not be interested in more exchange between the communities. I found that rather disillusioning.

The ability and willingness of church communities to communicate with each other is a prerequisite for using the visitation as a platform for reflection and change. This is not an easy undertaking due to a generally perceived lack of time, lack of motivation and lack of organizability in the community. A lack of "professionalism" in writing the report was also mentioned. Voluntary members are required to participate in writing the report, which is generally appreciated but can cause frustrations for both sides, especially when the style and content of the volunteers' written contributions do not match the professionals' expectations. There is also the risk that participants will use the visitation as a platform for their own issues and agendas, which can sidetrack or even eclipse the typically broader mission of a visitation:

> We had one volunteer in our visitation team who was just keen on seeing the provost in order to tell him how badly managed this church is … he was really a difficult person with a very special and narrow focus. Our focus in our community should actually be much broader and more holistic.

This statement indicates that, despite the presence of formal qualifications, church activities may also be affected by personal preferences rooted in informal considerations in the community: "Anyone who has worked in organizations knows the high degree of personalization of observations, especially in the context of job evaluations and careers" (Luhmann 1998: 839). It seems reasonable to suggest that the church community, which is particularly dependent on voluntariness and benevolence, is likewise affected by personalization – just like private-sector firms, the army or public administration.

These statements highlight a problem that can be seen as typical for the Protestant church: expectations related to the "service community" in which paid employees with official church functions are on par with voluntary work. The Protestant church is characterized by participation and co-decision-making from the local parish council to the synod and finally the church authority. This also legitimizes the visitation projects, which can be seen as explorations among equitable partners. However, due to limited resources, diffuse permissions, and admission issues, visitation projects are confronted by several challenges. It seems that the visitation itself brings such limitations to the fore because it relies on participation that cannot take place within formal structures.

Communication channels: supervision and leadership

In this section, we address all issues related to church leadership, including pastoral as well as disciplinary components (support and direction). The Protestant church in Germany still uses the term "cybernetics" (= steermanship). Organization science, in turn, defines cybernetics as the structure and processes of an organization (Kühl 2011: 102-103), which are described as "communication" – or simply as the "organization of the organization" by Luhmann (2018: 250-72): "Organizational rules are formal rules (…) They refer to the *communicative aspect* of human behavior (…) and ensure the meaningful interconnection and amplification of selective events" (Luhmann 1970: 7; italics HR/MS).

In systems theory, communication denotes leadership or hierarchical aspects – in short: "channels" of communication. The premise of communication "is the typical case in which organizations differentiate internally themselves. The selection of decisions is directed so that they *cannot* easily affect the whole organization" (Baraldi, Corsi, Esposito 1997: 130, italics HR/MS). Communication includes direction, guidance, supervision, official rights, insignia, determining the mode of working, etc. Bishops wearing a robe or miter is also part of the communication premise. The aforementioned expectations concerning leadership and control are reflected in the interviews. The three subcategories that emerged were visitation as a dialogue facilitator, visitation as a supervisory instrument, and supervision as a leadership instrument.

Visitation as a platform for dialogue. A number of responses from both church employees and volunteers consider the visitation to be an important platform for facilitating exchange among all church members: the community, church employees and church authorities. The visitation process is considered as an objective of its own with little or even no instrumental rationale behind it. In this interpretation, opportunities for exchange and learning are acknowledged and appreciated: the visitation is associated with "*great encounters*", "*fruitful exchange*" and "*respectful interactions*". It is seen as appreciation, as "*broadening the hori-*

zon", and as "*searching for assets, not for mistakes*". In some cases, the persons involved appreciate the honest and trustworthy communication and support among like-minded people, who can encourage each other:

> It was an illuminating moment. Look, they have essentially the same problems as we do, and we are all striving for mutual support and conversing with each other.

The visitation can also provide solace and motivate the visited unit in difficult situations:

> I believe the visitation can help church communities with a lack of perspective or who are in deadlocked situations … in areas where we had a lack of perspective, the appearance of the visitation team … and the target agreements were quite useful for us.

Although the visitation is a facet of the church organization, it proves to be quite well connected to the needs of the community as an interaction system as well. If the community faces challenges and ambiguities, the visitation's interaction-facilitating character may support team cohesion and a feeling of stability within the church despite an increasingly turbulent environment. It thus seems that one important function of the visitation is the process of exchange itself (including developing target agreements); the actual achievement of goals is secondary. Such indirect effects of reforms have previously been studied by organizational researchers. There is a clear connection between communication and leadership: The process-led 'Reformation' of the church "assumes important functions – regardless of whether the reform succeeds or not" (Jung 2008: 227). Reflection on the programmatic core of the Protestant church takes place during the visitation as an instrument of church leadership. The premises of communication and program overlap with each other.

Visitation as a supervisory instrument. At the same time, visitations also include a supervisory component that may temporarily throw social interactions within the community and the church out of balance. A number of statements revealed rather mixed feelings and sometimes also strong worries and anxieties:

> It is an opportunity to show our work, but it also has a certain controlling character.
> The visitation is a little bit like an examination.
> The official message of the visitation is that you are not going to be judged. That's how it was communicated. But, of course, it happened anyway.

These statements stress the supervisory elements of the visitation, which are typically associated with unpleasant feelings. These negative feelings may be heightened if the visited unit is confronting particular challenges, such as drastic cost savings or mergers with other communities or institutions. If the instrument is used to enforce difficult decisions, conflicts are inevitable:

> If a church unit is facing resource constraints, the visitation commission may be perceived as forcing them to adapt to ideas from the top. This can set up a situation in which the visited community feels like it has to resist the visitation team.

The historical supervisory element of visitation remains present and becomes particularly salient in difficult circumstances, such as resource constraints in the church unit. Although the new rhetoric of the visitation stresses its dialogue-facilitating character, it simultaneously produces a feeling of control, which is further reinforced by the need to define target agreements and write reports. Another group of respondents would like to use the visitation as a systematic leadership instrument; however, this has not yet been realized.

Visitation as a leadership instrument. One group of respondents would prefer the visitation process to have significantly stronger leadership from the top. One employee requested "*more authority*", and "*points that are more hard-hitting ... it must also hurt a bit*". Others would appreciate more specific feedback and indications of a clear direction in which the church or the community could evolve: "*We still don't know how we could change*". They are not averse to more structure and control and would favor a "*more effective visitation process*" with more "*measurable effects*", especially with regard to reviews of target agreements. One respondent considered target agreements to be quite a "blunt weapon":

> The target agreements … well, I think they're a little too soft, non-binding suggestions that we could just as easily give a miss … I doubt that these agreements could lead to real actions … and good developments.

Another observer stated:

> I would have preferred the visitation team to have been a little more authoritarian, asking us things like: 'What are you doing there?' Their solely cooperative approach was insufficient for me.

Other respondents expected more advice and more impulses or inspirations from the visitation team. One minister put it as follows:

> The commission was far too weak. They spent too much time in the observer role, und too little in the role of the impulse generator. … If we develop a program for a whole week … we expect more than what we got. … I expected more qualified feedback than the general adulation we heard. Given the large amount of effort we put into it, the output was too meager.

All in all, the respondents seem to have quite different expectations concerning the goals of the visitation and the way the visited unit and the visited team should communicate with each other. It seems that the different ideas and metaphors underlying the visitation also depend on each unit's particular local constellations. In more well-endowed churches, the development and dialogue components are emphasized more, and the ambivalent character of observing and controlling was discussed and accepted. In church communities in a more challenging financial situation, the visitation was more likely to be perceived as supervision or as an inefficient leadership instrument that did not provide enough direction for the future.

In summary, the local communicative situation influences the development of additional expectations as well as the local church unit's willingness to get involved in the visitation process. Thus, the church cannot please every local parish. The representatives of the local communities actively contribute to the opportunities as well as hindrances. They use the visitation communication (or leadership) structure to address their own concerns and promote their own point of view. In the end, the visitation is what the community leaders make of it. Since it is difficult to avoid the visitation, even demonstrative non-participation will have an impact.

6. Discussion of the results

Before coming to the discussion of our results, we would like to point out some limitations to our research approach. Firstly, our study was limited to only four case studies. A larger sample or a different set of territorial churches might have painted a different picture. In addition, we were not able to dig more deeply into the confessional idiosyncrasies in the different territorial churches' unique traditions. Protestant churches in Germany can either be Lutheran, reform/Calvinist or mixed (united Protestant church). It seems reasonable that these different denominations follow unique visitation logics; we would expect to see a more disciplinary, supervisory mode in Lutheran churches and a more participatory mode in reform churches. However, making such a comparison would require more cases and greater research focus on similarities and differences in the visitation processes. For example, cases could be selected based on the final visitation reports. However, this was not the purpose of our project.

We also acknowledge that qualitative interview studies have several methodological limitations. The interviewees could have answered in a socially desirable manner or selectively provided or withheld information. However, since most interviews lasted longer than one hour, we had time to make probing and critical inquiries. At the outset of the interviews, the respondents were encouraged to be open and frank. We also told our participants that there are no right or wrong answers to our questions and emphasized our independent status as researchers. It should also be mentioned that the interviews were translated from German into English. In order to avoid possible biases during the translation process (Bogner, Litttig & Menz 2014, pp. 43-47), a native speaker assisted in the translations.

When selecting the interview material, we paid attention to possible discrepancies, inconsistencies, and contradictions expressed by the interviewees. This "conflict approach" (see Preisendörfer 2011, 115-118) stands in opposition to the classical ("mechanical") view that organizations successfully perform their activities and achieve their purposes. If we were to only focus on the organization's optimistic self-descriptions, the research results would run the risk of being "rapidly transformed into primarily application-oriented management philosophies" (Preisendörfer 2011, p. 117). In our approach, we tried to shed light on less visible, more latent decision processes in the church. The identified structures could indicate decision-making problems "beneath the surface". The use of this kind of research is not to tell practitioners what to do or how to decide, but to provide opportunities for expanding perspectives and viewpoints. Organizational researchers do not *know better*, they *know differently* (Hechler & Pasternack 2012, p. 86).

Having stated these limitations, we would like to come back to our results. We started our article by reflecting on visitation projects from the perspective of sociological systems theory and decision premises. These arguments were illustrated and elaborated with selected case studies in four territorial Protestant churches in Germany. Decision premises are often discussed in connection with organizational change. Formal activities aiming at initiating changes or developments are basically "decisions about decision premises" (Kieserling 1999: 371; Luhmann 2017: 56). Reform processes aim at exploring the scope for additional, new decisions (Jung 2008: 228). In the case of large bureaucratic organizations, top leadership typically makes such decisions. In other types of organizations, change decisions are made via interactive processes, which are typically more complex and difficult to control. This also applies to churches. Visitation projects can be considered interactive, repeated decision-making processes for initiating changes. The goal of our analysis was to observe this interactive, varyingly controllable continuous change process through the perspective of decision premises.

In our study, we wanted to shed light on the question of how and to what extent the visitation is used for the church's program development and improvement. We found that the visitation is more than these things. It seems to be a multifunctional instrument for both the church as an organization as well as the church community. Its various functions are simultaneously related to both the program and the communication premise. On the one hand, the respondents identify opportunities for reflecting on the development of the church community (or other visited unit) (= program). On the other hand, church leadership is expected to define the future direction and supervise the progress of the visited unit (= communication). Visitation happens at the intersection of church organization and leadership and the community's local network structure, with each having expectations about the other. Every visited unit faces unique challenges depending on local constellations. Furthermore, church communities can be characterized as interaction systems with limited possibilities for control. All of this naturally limits the capacity for top-down control and supervision. Therefore, the visitation combines the requirements of the world church and the church authorities with those of the local community. It can be argued that this multifunctionality of the visitation produces "useful insecurities" which may create more room for informal, trusted exchange among church members, thereby accentuating and reinforcing the church as a community of believers.

The material also revealed that the visitation as the decision program can also help to legitimize the church administration within church society – and vice versa. The visitation provides opportunities for exposure, self-presentation, "window dressing", "facade maintenance", "prestige advertising", etc., in order to address different expectations. Under such circumstances, the visited unit is keen to outwardly communicate a sense of harmony. It seems that the visitation welds together participants from the church organization and the church community, because ordinary daily work activities need to be articulated in detail and in a positive way. The people involved need to find compromises between what can be communicated to the outside world and which aspects are better swept under the rug. By the same measure, the visitation may foster cohesion in the church organization and the church community by requiring them to act in a concerted manner before, during, and after the visitation process. Although visitation seems to be a comparatively short incident (according to a German saying: visitors come … and visitors go) that temporarily throws the church unit out of balance, and in the long run it contributes to stabilizing the visited unit as a cohesive group. Specific interactionist processes can be assumed to be of particular relevance for collaborative and voluntary organizations. The visitation is a good example of this. On the one hand, it has a long tradition in the church, but on the other hand, the visitation has been newly conceptualized to have an organizational development focus, which aligns with societal expectations of what constitutes a modern organization. This creates strong recognition for external stakeholders.

Concerning the results of the decision program, some critical voices in the interviews pointed to a lack of clarity and to ineffective target agreements. Some respondents expressed hope that the visitation could serve as an instrument for improving how they deal with the daily complexities and ambiguities of the church. They frequently found the visitation too vague and ambiguous and were disappointed by it. On reflection, however, we argue that the visitation process must be vague and ambiguous. A highly structured decision program based on managerial planning logic would probably be counterproductive given the specific organizational features of the church. The potential of the visitation process is as an implicit rather than an explicit decision program. In such a program, the participants can see the limitations of the visitation – but also perceive and make use of the opportunities resulting from the program.

In addition, we analyzed how official (ministry) and voluntary (lay) church members are involved in the visitation process. The personnel premise is particularly relevant when it comes to qualifications for and admission to visitation processes. On a rhetorical level, the differentiation between laypeople/volunteers and church employees is weak. At the same time, the idea of the "service community" in the Protestant church is emphasized during the visitation process. Interestingly, the attempt to engage in interactive decision-making processes seems to highlight the opposite: the differences between volunteers and church employees (in knowledge, methodology, routines) come to the forefront. For example, the volunteers are informed (or even instructed) by the local pastor about their duties and roles. In another case, participants wait until the superintendent has given his evaluations (because "he should know better") before communicating their own ideas.

Nevertheless, we observed that church-related decision processes based on legitimation via interaction promote a certain *diffusion* of roles between laypeople and church employees. The image of "evangelical equality" among all believers is employed to create useful insecurities. This could also be fostered by the fact that the Protestant church does not have an exclusive priest-like status, which makes the clear separation of roles and competences more difficult. This also has consequences for the decision program: As the variety of actors involved rises, the probability increases that a diffuse body of knowledge, experiences and opinions within the church will come to the surface. While this may increase the legitimacy of the program, the participants make different observations and bring different contextual understandings to the visitation. *Collective* decisions – decisions that are organized by programs and (!) interaction – are conglomerates of different experiences and knowledge. The inevitable consequence is that the *same facts* can be observed but *prioritized and evaluated differently* (Seidl 2009: 49).

Finally, we observed the communication premise and analyzed the way in which the participants communicated during the visitation process. The visitation provides a space for dialogue among all participants, where both sides of the church – the organization and the community network – are partners and seen as indisputably key parts of the church. During the visitation, the participants can express their expectations and problems – i.e., they can be "seen" (the semantic similarity is no coincidence: *visitation produces visibility, and perhaps also functional invisibility*) in a manner that is harder to incorporate into the daily routines of the church. Visitation 'makes visible' the local parish as an integral part of the church organization. The term "visit" itself is noteworthy in that a "visit" sounds riskless, although that may be precisely the risk. However, visitation is not, or no longer, about the domination of the church community by the church authorities or vice versa. Instead, it entails a reciprocal striving for acceptance – and sometimes also internal and external legitimation. Both sides – the church organization and the community – can present themselves as competent, which is often not the case in daily work activities. It seems that the initiation of the visitation has an important – perhaps even the most important – function for the church. What is important is not the actual achievement of target agreements, but the provision of additional decision situations and options that help ensure the organization's survival (Jung 2008: 227).

However, the visitation also has limitations. One central challenge concerns the duality of interaction and inspection. The attempts to avoid communicating a feeling of inspection produce a certain artificiality. The respondents also mentioned this. Officially, the visitation is not about control but unofficially, a sense of control remains. The participants hope to present a natural setting during the visitation process (and everybody is prepared to "behave naturally"), which ironically results in an unnatural situation – an *artificial naturalness*. Dealing with this challenge requires a certain level of professionalism among the responsible church personnel, especially the pastors. They need to deal with the complexities and ambiguities within their own organization during the visitation process. The visitation needs to be managed, and conflicts and disagreements may need to be overcome and ignored.

In summary, visitation simultaneously addresses the needs for both program development and communication among church members. It is a variable instrument that provides room for alternative interpretations, which need not be considered as contradictory but can coexist alongside one another. To secure the future of the visitation, we recommend that it not be overburdened with additional reform ideas and other management instruments. With this comes the risk "that relatively unimportant, but easily accessible standards come to the fore and important, but difficult-to-verify factors fall out of focus", as Meyns (2013: 236) observes in his study on the implementation of management programs in the church. According to Brunsson (2006), reforms promise to be beneficial for the organization's future, which can raise expectations of what can be achieved through reform. If a church is not able to come up with solutions for a number of pressing problems, it is easy to overburden the process and disappoint the people involved. Specifically, the Protestant church as an organization has only a very limited ability to change its program (the "essence of the Reformation", according to Ronchi 1983: 10-14), limiting the room for development. Instead, it could be more useful to retain and emphasize the function of the visitation as an institution for communication. The visitation itself provides a platform for encounters – a central element for the church and the church community (Lehmann 2008). The church is "a network of believers", which cannot – and should not – be organized or optimized in a managerial manner. Nevertheless, development of the church and the church community is possible, albeit in a more incremental, less purposeful fashion. As a result, incremental reform of the church may not provide fundamental answers to all its heterogeneous problems, but "give more ability to act when finding solutions" (Bernet 2018: 17). This is also supported by Luhmann's (2002: 246) notion with regard to the progress of church reforms: "One can, on the contrary, better judge reforms if you make realistic judgments based on their level/in their context, recognize their ability to function like a lightning rod, and finally note that the loops of reflection trigged by reforms fulfill some kind of function even though they might not change the way things are done." The beginning of the Protestant church was a "reform of the head and limbs" (Ronchi 1983: 25) and thus against Rome and the Pope. Change today is primarily an adaptation of the (inner) administrative organization (Kaufmann & Pollack 2013), not an adoption of new forms in opposition to other actors. In this way, the motto of Protestantism since its founding 500 years ago is no coincidence: *Ecclesia semper reformanda est.* The church must be reformed – always.

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