

# Church Followership and Power

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates followers' influence on the leadership process in congregations. A working hypothesis is that in church, people without formal leadership roles have considerable power. The main question in this article asks: *What are characteristics of follower influence on the leadership process in local congregations?* The article is a theoretical discussion of the problem guided by three questions: How are followers influencing leadership? What is a follower in church? What characterizes the leadership process in congregations? The theoretical perspectives applied in the first part are on followership and upward influence, seeking to understand how followers exercise influence. The second part of the article asks what a follower in the church is and what characterizes the leadership process in congregations. I have identified three characteristics relevant to the leader-follower relationship in congregations, i.e., voluntarism, an egalitarian push, and a commitment to theological values and purposes. These characteristics I have structured as organizational, cultural, and theological. In the discussion, I have related these identified characteristics of congregations to the theories of how followers influence leaders. The findings in the discussions suggest that the identified characteristics of congregations increase follower influence on the leadership process.

**Keywords:** congregation, followership, leadership process, influence, power, church

## INTRODUCTION

This article investigates followers' influence on the leadership process in local congregations. As such it seeks to integrate perspectives on followership, church leadership, and distribution of power. A working hypothesis is that in church, people without formal leadership roles have considerable power. Power is here understood as the capacity or potential to influence (Northouse, 2021, p. 10). Within the field of leadership, there has been a development from an understanding of followers as subordinates who dutifully carry out orders from their leaders, to a relational understanding of leadership as a co-constructed process between leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, pp. 84 and 89). This shift in leadership power is described by Kellerman (2012) in her book *The End of Leadership*. According to Kellerman, power used to be the domain of leaders but now it is shifting to followers. A similar point is made and applied to the church by Berger (2014, p. 49). He argues that pluralism has two important consequences relevant to the laity in the church. First, religious belief is now based on personal decisions. Second, the faith of the individual is institutionalized in the form of voluntary association. Pluralism, Berger argues, changes the relationship between clergy and laity: "An uncoerced laity inevitably gains power over against religious authorities and clergy." (Berger, 2014, p. 49)

The main problem in the article is: *What are characteristics of follower influence on the leadership process in local congregations?* The article is a theoretical discussion of followers' influence on leadership in congregations and how this influence is affected by characteristics of the leadership process in congregations. The discussion is guided by three questions: How are followers influencing leadership? What is a follower in church? What characterizes the leadership process in local congregations? The theoretical starting point of the investigation is guided by the question: how are followers influencing leadership processes? In this first part, I will apply theories on power, followership, social impact, and resource dependence. In the second part of the article, I will focus on the church and the second and third research questions. In connection with the second research question, the follower will be situated in an ecclesial context, drawing on theological literature and the terms laity and universal priesthood. The third research question focuses on the leadership process and draws on generic and context-specific literature on leadership. In the third and final part of the article, I will discuss the main findings from part two in view of the theories introduced in part one. The article is a contribution to practical theology and church leadership.

### Applied terminology

The term *follower* is connected to the leadership process and followership. As suggested in the term *leadership process*, leadership is understood as a "process that is co-created in social and relational interaction between people" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 83). This means there are two roles or behaviors that constitute leadership, i.e. leader and follower, and if either of these is missing there is no leadership. Followership, then, "is the characteristics, behaviors and processes of individuals acting in relation to leaders. (...) For a construct to qualify as followership it must be conceptualized and operationalized: (a) in relation to leaders or the leadership process, and/or (b) in contexts in which individuals identify themselves in follower positions (e.g., subordinates) or as having follower identities" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 96).

Understanding leadership as a process means distinguishing between the leader as a person and leadership as a process (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 88). The leadership process comprises of both leaders and followers, and leadership can take place only when both are present. Hollander (2008, pp. xxii and 6) has described leadership as an *influence relationship*, which means

it is understood to entail a reciprocity in influence. Leaders and followers influence each other. In addition, the leadership process is shaped by its context. Kellerman (2012, p. xxi) has argued that context is equally as important as followers and leaders. Similarly, Carsten et al. (2010, p. 546) argue that context influences how one socially constructs roles (leader and follower) and how these individuals enact such roles. The outcome of the leadership process is shaped by the mutual influence of leaders and followers, and by the context in which these meet. This article focuses on followers and context, i.e. two of the three components in the leadership process.

The context of the leadership process studied is the local congregation. The term *local congregation* is a concretization of the church. This is done not to relativize other depictions of the church, such as universal, national, or confessional, but to approach the problem in a way that could apply to different church traditions. Most Christian traditions “are composed largely of such local churches and depend for their existence on the vitality and health of these grass-root communities” (Kearsley, 2009, p. 2). Moreover, the local congregation is a social unit that, according to Kearsley (2009, p. 1), “proves particularly apt as a framework for a study of power dynamics”. The decision to approach the problem in a way that could apply to different church traditions means context-specific features, such as leadership processes in state churches or multisite megachurches are left for a different study.

The term *influence* is connected to power. Power was described, above, as the capacity or potential to influence. Northouse (2021, p. 10) explains that people “have power when they have the ability to affect others’ beliefs, attitudes, and courses of action”. The idea that followers in local congregations can influence the leadership process presupposes that power is a capacity or potential also for others than individuals in leadership positions. Moreover, the word *influence* suggests that power is more nuanced than an understanding of power as just another word for dominance or force.<sup>1</sup>

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES INFLUENCE AND FOLLOWERSHIP

### Power

In an influential study, French and Raven (1959, p. 155) have identified five bases or sources of power that can help us understand why someone (A) has power over another (B). These are reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, and referent power. Raven (1965) later added *information* as a sixth base of power. Kessler (2010, p. 540), writing about power in a theological and ecclesial context, split the referent power into two different power bases: *relations* and *charisma*. In a continuum from personal to positional power, Kessler's charisma and relations are personal, and power by legitimation is positional. The last four (punishment, rewards,

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<sup>1</sup> Kearsley (2009, p. 25) has highlighted this nuance by connecting power to different prepositions. Drawing on the insights of Foucault, he distinguishes between power over, power with, and power to. In addition, in connecting Foucault's ideas to the local congregation and theology Kearsley adds the combination of power from and power through. Kearsley's power prepositions highlight the complexity and multitude of power.

information control, and expert knowledge) are a combination.<sup>2</sup> In the same period as French and Raven, Etzioni (1964, p. 5) made a classification of organization types that draws on different kinds of power, and relevant to this research, different kinds of involvement in organizations. Etzioni distinguishes between coercive, utilitarian, and normative organizations. According to Etzioni leader-follower relationships depend on the organizational type. The church is a normative organization characterized by normative power and moral involvement (Etzioni, 1961, p. 40).

Jackson W. Carroll connects power with authority in his book on leadership in ministry. Carroll (2011, p. 27) defines power as a “resource that enables individuals or groups to achieve their purpose, with or without the consent of others who are affected by its use”. Authority is legitimate power, i.e. when groups or individuals consent to the directions given or to the leader’s right to give directives. According to Carroll (2011, p. 27), a congregation accepts a leader’s directives when they acknowledge and “accept the leader’s opinions or directives as consistent with and contributing to the church’s mission”. This means authority, i.e., legitimate power, is relational in character. The basis of authority is a recognition of the use of power as legitimate. This could be a formal recognition as when an individual is given a role or position (e.g., being called as a pastor) or informal as when a group agrees that a person has won the right to lead (e.g., a congregation recognizing the leadership of an individual). Carroll (2011, p. 28) points out that in congregations formal and informal recognition often are combined. After a formal assignment the pastor is informally recognized, sometimes referred to as a second ordination, grounded in demonstrated competence and or spirituality.

## Followership

Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, p. 89) define the study of followership, as “an investigation of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process”. Research on and theories of followership can be divided into two main categories, namely relational-based and role-based. A relational approach to followership understands both followership and leadership as constructed in social and relational cooperation between individuals. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, p. 89) argue that a relational approach considers that leadership can only occur when leadership influence attempts or claims are met with followership behavior. It also means a person in a leadership role “may not actually be a leader if subordinate do not grant them a leader identity and claim for themselves a follower identity” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 94). In a relational approach, this means followership is not tied to a role but to a behavior. Rather than focusing on roles, a relational approach “focuses on the interpersonal process and one person’s attempt to influence and the other person’s response to these influence attempts” (Northouse, 2021, p. 354).

A role-based approach sees followership as a role occupied by individuals in formal or informal positions. The role-based approach studies followership in the context of hierarchical systems (Northouse, 2021, p. 354; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 90). Research on the follower role has developed typologies, identifying and grouping followers according to style or type. An early example of this is Zalesnik (1965), who categorized followers in a matrix that identified their behavior along the axes dominance-submission and active-passive. Kelley (1988, 2008) emphasizes the power of followers and sees effective ones as a key to organizational success. Whereas Zalesnik focused on personal traits, Kelley emphasizes motivation,

<sup>2</sup> Yukl and Falbe (1991, p. 420) distinguish between eight sources of power, these are categorized as positional and personal. Position power is legitimate, reward, coercive, and information; personal power is expert, persuasive, referent, and charisma.

categorizing followers along the axes of active-passive and independent-dependent. Chaleff's (2009) key term is courage, and in his typology he distinguishes between high and low on support and challenge. In terms of power and influence, the courageous follower in his typology scores high on both support and challenge. Power and influence are at the heart of Carsten's and Kellerman's one-dimensional typologies as well. The key term in both typologies is engagement. Kellerman (2008) distinguishes between five levels of engagement, and Carsten et al. (2010) between the three levels *passive*, *active*, and *proactive*. In terms of influence and power, a passive follower means more power access to the leader, whereas a high level of engagement means the follower seeks opportunities to influence the organization and its members.

### **Social impact theory**

Baruk Oc and Michael Bashshur build on theories of followership when they offer a theoretical perspective on the impact of followers on leaders. With reference to French and Raven (1959, p. 155), they have clustered the basis of power into two main categories, personal and positional power. Leaders have, by their position in an organization's hierarchy, a stronger positional power compared to followers (Yukl & Falbe, 1991, p. 419). This means upward influence, that is followers' influence on leaders looks somewhat different from leaders' influence on followers. Investigating what Oc and Bashshur (2013, p. 922) call "the power of followers in the influence tactics", they turn their attention toward social impact theory. The determinants in this theory are the *number of individuals*, *strength*, and *immediacy*. According to Oc and Bashshur (2013, p. 922), the most basic formulation of social impact theory is "that the power of social setting to shape an individual is a function of the strength (i.e., status, age, prior relationship with, or future power over target), immediacy (i.e., closeness in space or time and absence of intervening barriers or filters) and the number of the sources impact (i.e. number of people)." This initial formulation of the theory was later broadened to take the context and group dynamic into account. In terms of context, individuals are both shaping and shaped by their social context, in our case the local congregation. In terms of group dynamics, the followers are not necessarily a uniform group, as there are often different groups within the groups with competing influential goals.

The theory of upward influence developed by Oc and Bashshur (2013, p. 923) is based on individual-level determinants and group-level determinants of social influence. In addition, they include a category labeled moderators of social influence. The individual level determinants contain the two above-mentioned determinants, strength and immediacy. The strength of followers is operationalized as positional or personal power and as persuasive or supportive behavior. The immediacy of followers is categorized into three types: perceived psychological or social distance, physical distance, and perceived frequency of leader-follower interaction. The group level determinants in Oc and Bashshur's theory also refer to strength, the group strength is determined by group size and group unity. In addition to the individual and group-level determinants, Oc and Bashshur have identified moderators of social influence. First, the group-level determinants (size and unity) have a moderating effect on the individual-level determinants. Second, a leader's dependence on information and effect moderates the effect of strength, immediacy, and group-level determinants of social influence. Information dependence, explain Oc and Bashshur (2013, p. 927), "occurs when someone depends on others for important information about the environment while effect dependence occurs when someone depends on others for fulfillment of their personal needs (e.g., being part of a group, affiliation)." This moderating effect of resource dependence is at the heart of Tripathi's theory, to which we now turn.

## Resource dependence theory

Neha Tripathi (2021, p. 1) has developed a theoretical framework of upward influence and leadership construction by drawing on resource dependence theory. First, Tripathi categorizes human resources in two forms: psychological (i.e., knowledge, skills, ability, and other characteristics) and relational (e.g., social capital). Second, Tripathi distinguishes between firm-specific and generic resources. In terms of dependence this, according to resource dependence theory, is a function of resource criticality and the availability of alternatives. Third, the power balance between leader and follower is described as either asymmetric or joint. An asymmetric interdependence means either a leader or a follower is dependent on the other. Joint interdependence means the leader and the follower need each other or neither needs the other. Fourth, Tripathi describes leadership as a context-dependent phenomenon contingent on the team and organizational structure. In terms of team structure, we can distinguish between specialist and uniform teams. A “specialist team comprise of team members who possess unique firm-specific tacit knowledge complementary to other team members, while uniform teams comprise of members who possess supplementary or equitable expertise” (Tripathi, 2021, p. 2). Organizational structure is described as mechanistic or organic. Mechanistic organizations are bureaucratic and characterized by stable and routinized work, while organic organizations, according to Tripathi (2021, p. 2), “adapt to dynamism and instability by calling for agile management.”

## FOLLOWERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

### Followers in church

In a congregational setting, the idea of followership is associated with the term *laity*. As a theological term laity signifies people who are not ordained and do not hold ecclesial offices. They are ordinary church members. This understanding of laity as unordained highlights to some extent the challenge in investigating followership in church. Whereas numerous books have been written on church leadership, the laity are understood based on what they are not – namely the non-leaders. Steven has argued that *laity* is a slippery term to define. It seems easier to say what a lay person is not than positively state what a lay person is. Depending on the church context, Steven explains (2000, pp. 24–25), lay is defined by *function* as a person that does not administer the sacraments, by *status* as those who are not priests or pastors, by *education* as the one without a theological education, by *remuneration* as a person not in full-time or paid ministry, and finally, when defined by *lifestyle* the laity are those not occupied with religious but secular life.

A more positive designation connected to followers in the church is the doctrine of the universal priesthood or priesthood of all believers. According to Skjevesland (1984, p. 71), this doctrine belongs to the core of Luther’s theology. For Martin Luther, an important issue with the Roman Catholic Church was that all ecclesial power was situated in its ecclesial hierarchy. Luther argued in his *Appeal to the Christian Nobility* (1520) that in baptism all Christians are part of the spiritual estate and carry a common responsibility for the church. As such, in principle every Christian has the same power (Avis, 2002, p. 104). Following up on this topic, in *The Babylonian Captivity*, Luther stresses that no one should use this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. Luther sees a priest or pastor as a called and elected officeholder. Moreover, a person chosen for a position of church leadership could be relieved of this power by the fellowship (Avis, 2002, p. 105).

The two designations *laity* and *universal priesthood* show that a follower in the church is a theological entity. However, neither *laity* nor *universal priesthood* is a common designation of followers in everyday language. More often a follower in the church is referred to as a volunteer, co-worker, staff member, church member, worship participant, or simply a Christian. In the literature on ecclesiology and church leadership, the term *congregation* refers in many instances to a group of followers. It should also be noted that the term *follower*, in a Christian context, is generally associated with following Christ (i.e., being a Christian) and not a pastor or other church leader. However, in our case a follower in the church is first and foremost an individual in a congregational context who identifies oneself as having a follower position in relation to someone with a leading position in the congregation.

To have a follower position in relation to someone with a leading position in a local congregation is for most people a voluntary relationship. In local congregations, only a few are, and to a large extent the ministry is conducted as unpaid labor. This means followers are motivated by something other than money. Research on volunteerism shows that values, learning, and social relations are stated as important dimensions of motivation for volunteers (Wollebæk et al., 2015, p. 87). Each of these dimensions of motivation is relevant to volunteerism in local congregations. Moreover, research on church leadership suggests that religious organizations are characterized by a strong commitment to and focus on values and norms (Sirris & Askeland, 2021c, p. 47). As such, given the church's character as a community of values, we may expect values to be of particular importance to followers in local congregations. Given this, we may describe followership in local congregations as value-conscious followership. This description reflects an understanding of church leadership as value-conscious (Sirris & Askeland, 2021b).

Another feature of being followers in the church is that not all participate in visible tasks. Depending on how ministry is defined, one could argue that a person can be a church member and view the pastor as a leader without being involved in ministry. This means that being a follower in the church is not identical to being involved in ministry as a coworker. In *Medarbeiderskap* (Collegiality), Velten, Tengblad, and Heggen (2016, p. 56) argue that every member of a workplace is a co-worker, and some of the co-workers have leadership responsibility. In a congregational context we could further develop this idea, arguing that although in church everyone is a member, some are co-workers, and some of the co-workers have leadership responsibility. Råmunddal (2017) has identified three theological features of congregational affiliation in the New Testament, namely identity, affiliation, and participation. *Identity* is expressed as discipleship; *affiliation* is connected to the local congregation; and *participation* refers to ministry in the local congregation. Followership in a local congregation is connected to the features of affiliation and participation, i.e., to members who participate in ministry as co-workers and to members affiliated with the local congregation who do not participate in ministry.

Thus far I have argued that a follower in a local congregation actualizes both theological and sociological perspectives. Theologically a follower relates to the term *laity* and the doctrine of the universal priesthood. Not least since the Reformation, these ideas became central to the development of ecclesiologies and church leadership. Followership in local congregations is also associated with volunteerism and membership. Volunteerism suggests followership in the local congregation could be described as value-conscious. The characteristic of membership highlights the possibility of being a follower without being involved as a coworker. What has not been mentioned so far is the dependency relationship between followers and leaders. For someone to identify as a follower in church, others must identify as leaders or at least assume leader behavior. Hence, for someone to be a follower in a local

congregation someone else must be a leader, and the one following must either by self-identification or behavior recognize this. This dependency relationship takes us to the leadership process and the question: what characterizes the leadership process in congregations?

### **The leadership process**

How leadership is defined depends not only on whom one asks but also on when one asks. Northouse (2021, pp. 2–5) has outlined what he describes as the evolution of leadership definitions from the start of the twentieth century. He traces a development from an emphasis on domination in the first decades towards the emergence of moral approaches and inclusive leadership after the turn of the twenty-first century. This evolution is also identified by Uhl-Bien et al. who distinguish between leader-centric, follower-centric, and relational views in their research. Leader-centric research has been the lion's share of the research on leadership, with a focus on the traits and behavior of leaders. "Follower-centric research arose as a response to leader-centric views and drew attention to the role of the follower in constructing leaders and leadership" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 86). In relational approaches to leadership, the dynamics between leader and follower are addressed. "These approaches view leadership as a mutual influence process among leaders and followers" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 87). Although most research on leadership and the leadership process focuses attention on the leader, there has been an increasing focus on the follower and a growing understanding that leadership is best understood if the role of followers is taken into consideration. The development in how leadership is defined also shows a change in focus from traits to interaction, and increasingly leadership is understood as a process.

The leadership process in local congregations is characterized by influence from generic ideals for leadership and a distinctive theological and value-based identity and purpose. In terms of generic ideals for leadership, the development described above asserts itself in the literature on congregational leadership. In a Norwegian context, Sirris and Askeland (2021b) have outlined the development and demonstrated a movement towards more focus on the importance of non-leaders to leadership in congregations. In their anthology (2021a, p. 24) this is expressed by the focus on *interaction* and a basic value-based approach to leadership. In such approaches, the coworker (non-leader) is included in decision-making processes and is thus recognized as part of the leadership process. Sirris and Askeland (2021c, p. 47) underline this correspondence between generic and congregational leadership by referring to Peter Drucker, who argues that only 10 percent of leadership is context-specific. The similarity between ecclesial and generic leadership and the development identified by Sirris and Askeland suggest that the leadership process in local congregations is influenced by the same movement towards an increased focus on non-leaders.

This shift towards more non-leader, or follower, influence is further strengthened by some of the characteristics of the leadership process in local congregations. Jackson Carroll has identified four factors contributing to what he calls a crisis of authority. Two of these, voluntarism and egalitarianism, relate to the relationship between clergy and laity. Carroll (2011, p. 17), writing with North American religiosity as a point of departure, argues that voluntarism increases lay authority and creates a competition among clergy to win the support of the laity. Moreover, he argues a cultural climate characterized by expressive individualism, whose center is the autonomous individual, thinks of commitment (e.g., religious involvement) not as a moral imperative but as a way of developing and expressing oneself. Research on voluntarism in Norway shows the same development (Fretheim, 2014, p. 54; Wollebæk et al., 2015, pp. 113–114). Volunteers are increasingly motivated by individual rather than



organizational needs. Fretheim (2014, p. 133), describing the relationship between employees and volunteers in the Church of Norway, argues that given the church's character as a volunteer association, it seems that the employees are the helpers of the volunteers and not the other way around. This realizes the ideal formulated by Hans-Ruedi Weber: "The Laity are not the helpers of the Clergy so that Clergy can do their job, but the Clergy is the helpers of the whole People of God, so that the Laity can be the Church" (in Hans Raun Iversen [2018, p. 452]).

Carroll's second factor that relates to the relationship between clergy and laity is egalitarianism. Carroll (2011, p. 20) points out that a "growing sense of interdependence and a corresponding new relationship to authority characteristic of postmodern culture", make any kind of hierarchy "profoundly suspect". In an ecclesial context, this means one rejects the idea that someone has a privileged position or a special contact in relation to God. A similar point is made by Kessler (2010, p. 543), who argues that the effectiveness of power bases may change when culture changes. Kessler argues that networks of trust are increasingly replacing hierarchies of command. Trust becomes crucial, and consequently personal authority becomes more important than positional, formal authority. Etzioni (1961, p. 6) distinguished between two kinds of power in normative organizations, such as the church. A vertical normative power of esteem, prestige and ritualistic symbols is common in vertical relationships. The second is a horizontal normative power, between coworkers, of allocation and manipulation of acceptance and positive response. An egalitarian push suggests that the power relationship between leader and follower shifts to what Etzioni described as horizontal normative power. Carroll (2011, p. 21) argues egalitarianism finds theological warrant in the doctrine of the universal priesthood. Moreover, easy access to information that the internet provides further lessens the "dependence on authority figures, including clergy, or authoritative institutions, including the church". Increased levels of education and easy access to information affect the authority of pastors and the relationship between leaders and followers in the church.

How egalitarianism affects the leadership process in local congregations is related to ecclesiology, i.e., the organization and structure of the church. Skjevesland (1998, p. 23) maintained that before we can discuss church leadership we must establish an ecclesiology. Ecclesiology and ecclesial structures affect the leadership process. Being a church member in a hierarchically structured congregation is in many ways different from being a member of a low church congregation. Dulles (2002, pp. 154–164), in his book on church models, has shown how his ecclesial models actualize various perspectives of congregational leadership. The point made by Skjevesland and Dulles is that the leadership process might look very different in various ecclesial contexts. Be this as it may, the cultural push of egalitarianism identified by Carroll and Kessler is likely to affect the expectations of church members. In local congregations, the cultural trend of egalitarianism can affect followers to expect more influence in the leadership process. However, not all react in the same way to cultural trends. To some, church or the local congregation may be perceived as one of the few places where the cultural push of egalitarianism is less influential. Potentially someone might seek a congregation to experience traditional hierarchical structures reasoned from theological convictions.

A third characteristic of the leadership process in the church is the religious factor. Congregations have distinctive theological and value-based identities and purposes. Carroll (2011, p. 92) argues that "the *primary* task of leadership, ordained and laity, is that of preserving the congregation's identity as Christ's body." Authority and identity in congregations are in one way or another connected to a spiritual realm. This affects the leadership process in

congregations, both in terms of sources of authority and influence<sup>3</sup> and in terms of the purpose of the fellowship. In the church, God is believed to be the ultimate source of legitimate power and authority. “People grant authority to Scripture and the church’s tradition(s) – and to those who interpret them – because they believe, in last analysis, that these authorities are grounded in God and God’s purpose for the world” (Carroll, 2011, p. 34). In congregations leadership is assessed according to this conviction by the followers, and a leader is granted authority to lead because the leader “is believed to represent, interpret, and exemplify the group’s core values and beliefs and thus contribute to their realization” (Carroll, 2011, p. 33).

### Summary

Voluntarism, egalitarianism, and a commitment to theological values and purposes are identified as characteristics of the leadership process in local congregations. Given this, the follower influence on the leadership process in local congregations can be structured in three levels, namely organizational, cultural, and theological. Organizationally the local congregation is characterized by voluntarism, culturally by an egalitarian push, and theologically by the understanding of God as the ultimate source of power, the doctrine of the universal priesthood, and a value-conscious fellowship. Each of these characteristics, although they do not assert itself with the same force in all ecclesial contexts, affects the influence of followers on the leadership process. In the next and final part of this article, I will investigate the theories on how followers exercise influence in relation to the identified characteristics of the leadership process in congregations.

## DISCUSSION

### Followership in local congregations

Research on the follower role has developed several typologies that distinguish different kinds of followers. The ideal follower is in some typologies described as courageous (Chaleff, 2008, 2009) and in others as effective (Kelley, 1988, 2008). Both effective and courageous followership are associated with clear purpose and value consciousness. According to Kelley the effective follower is committed to the purpose of the organization, whereas Chaleff (2009, p. 12) argues that the courageous follower first and foremost serves a cause, not a leader.<sup>4</sup> The above identification of followership in the local congregation as value-conscious followership suggests that the congregation is a kind of organization that facilitates courageous and effective followership. Individuals, to a large extent, associate themselves with congregations because they know and identify with the core theological values and purposes of the congregation. This aligns with Etzioni’s (1961, pp. 10–11) description of moral involvement. This involvement, typical for churches, is based on the internalization of norms. Moral involvement and value-conscious followership enable the follower to work with the leader to realize the purposes and to hold the leader accountable to the values of the congregation.

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<sup>3</sup> A similar point is made by Kearsley (2009, p. 25), who includes power from and power through when writing about power in church and theology.

<sup>4</sup> A similar point is made by Kirkhaug (2018, p. 149), who argues that if the follower is loyal first and foremost to the leader, the core values of the organization are given less attention.

The second pair of follower typologies relevant to the influence of followers in local congregations are Carsten (2010, p. 546) and Kellerman (2012, p. xxi). The key term in both of their typologies is engagement. Distinguishing between passive and active followers, they argue that influence is connected to engagement. This perspective on the follower role relates to the organizational characteristics of the local congregation. Voluntarism facilitates engagement and involvement which in turn facilitates influence. In ecclesial studies, church members are sometimes categorized into different levels of participation and involvement. Aileen Zahl (2013, pp. 46–48), in her master's thesis on worship in the Church of Norway, developed a classification of six levels of involvement, i.e. in fellowship, as a participant, by movement, in groups with specific tasks, by assigned tasks, and involvement by planning and implementation. Zahl's categories highlight the correlation between involvement and influence. Voluntarism facilitates influence, and the emphasis on volunteerism in local congregations strengthens the possibility for follower influence.

The third identified characteristic of local congregations refers to cultural change and an egalitarian push. Strong positional power by virtue of role is less important compared to personal power (Carroll, 2011, p. 20; Kessler, 2010, p. 543). This points to the limits of studying followership with a role-based approach. The leadership co-created process view leadership as an interaction between leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, p. 99). The key terms in this framework are *leading behavior* and *following behavior*. According to Northouse (2021, p. 364), *leading behavior* means influence attempts that are using power to make an impact on others. *Following behavior* involves granting power to others. This aligns with Carroll's (2011, p. 33) description of authority in local congregations, and followers' assessment of leaders in view of the group's core values and beliefs. Although a leader is recognized by the congregation as being in a leadership role, the individual church member may decide that he or she will not grant power to a congregational leader by assuming follower behavior. Follower identity, explain Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, p. 94), is something individuals claim for themselves, not the least in voluntary organizations such as the local congregation. Moreover, the egalitarian push towards personal power implies that followers value leading behavior based on charisma or loyalty and friendship (power by relationship) (Kessler, 2010, p. 541). This suggests that followers make their assessment of leaders' attempt to influence in view of values, beliefs, and leaders' ability to connect with them on a personal level.

### **Upward influence in local congregations**

Oc and Bashshur (2013, p. 924) have outlined their theory of upward influence in a list of propositions. These can be grouped into three categories, namely strength, proximity, and number. The first propositions refer to the strength and the behavior of the individual follower. In terms of strength, the congregational members with higher positions or personal power exert greater social influence on leaders. Follower strength in the church can come from various sources. To a large extent, they are similar to characteristics associated with strength in non-ecclesial settings, such as professional prestige, high education, age, and gender. To some extent, an ecclesial context may alter or strengthen the perception of such characteristics. In some contexts, being male is not only socioculturally beneficial but is also understood as a theological requirement for certain influential positions. Characteristics associated with strength that are more distinctive for ecclesial settings could include spiritual gifts or volunteer capacity. In terms of behavior Oc and Bashshur (2013, p. 924) argue that a persuasive approach increases the influence at a given moment, whereas supportive behavior increases influence over time.

Given the three characteristics of local congregations, it was pointed out above that the egalitarian push suggests that positional power is less important compared to personal power. Carroll also connects the egalitarian push to easy access to information and to education attainment, a development that levels the relationship of strength between leaders and followers. Moreover, theological values in local congregations may alter or strengthen certain sources of power. This alteration could either favor the leaders, drawing on the idea that pastors are chosen and granted power by God, or favor the followers, drawing on the doctrine of universal priesthood and an understanding of every believer as equal, regardless of role and position.

In terms of proximity, the second group of propositions refers to the relationship between leaders and followers. According to Oc and Bashshur (2013, p. 925), individuals with close contact and interpersonal similarities with their leader exert greater influence than those with less contact. The proximity between leaders and followers in local congregations relates to the egalitarian push and voluntarism. An egalitarian push diminishes the psychological and social distance between pastor and congregation, i.e., between leader and follower. Thus, follower participation in ministry causes more interaction between leaders and followers in church and diminishes physical distance. This increased proximity between leaders and followers increases the potential for follower influence.

The third group of propositions, which refers to group-level determinants, highlights the dynamic of minority and majority group members. The majority group exerts greater influence. However, individuals belonging to it, e.g., a mother in a family with small children, have less individual influence. Her influence is not autonomous but connected to the group. A member of a recognized minority, e.g., a single father, could as an individual expect to exert greater social influence on leaders compared to the above-mentioned mother. Speculating on how this theoretical perspective on follower influence relates to the characteristics of the local congregation, one could argue that value-consciousness fellowships, such as the church, are more prone to take the minority perspective into account. On the other hand, as suggested by Carroll (2011, p. 17), voluntarism increases follower authority and can create competition among clergy to win the support of the laity. In such a competition the concern of the majority is likely to be emphasized.

The fourth group of propositions refers to the moderating effect of leaders' needs. A leader who needs something from his congregation is more open to influence than is leader with fewer such needs. This moderating effect of resource dependence lies at the heart of Tripathi's theory, to which we shall now turn.

### **Resource dependence in local congregations**

Resource dependence theory, explains Tripathi (2021, p. 5), argues that person A will be dependent on person B if person B possesses some resources that are needed by person A. Translating this resource-dependence logic into a leader-follower relationship suggests that followers will have greater influence on their leader in case the followers possess resources that are needed by the leader. The power imbalance in favor of a follower refers to the dependence relationship that emerges when followers hold critical resources needed by the leader and the leader lacks alternatives (Tripathi, 2021, p. 6). Tripathi (2021, p. 8) continues to identify the power relationships between leaders and followers by on the one hand using the distinction between firm-specific and uniform teams, and on the other hand that between organic or mechanic organizational structures. According to Tripathi (2021, p. 9), the context combination of organic and highly specialist teams increases the influence of followers. By

contrast mechanical (i.e., hierarchical) organizations and uniform teams increase the leader's influence. Applying this to a local congregation, we may ask if followers possess resources needed by the congregational leader. Moreover, to what extent are leaders dependent on followers, and to what extent is it the other way around?

A fundamental change in the relationship between clergy and laity, pointed out by Berger and quoted in the introduction of this article, is a voluntary association. According to Berger (2014, p. 49), "an uncoerced laity inevitably gains power over against religious authorities and clergy." This represents an important empowerment of the non-leaders and a displacement of the balance of power in such religious institutions as the local congregation. A changed understanding of commitment and volunteerism actualizes two further issues relevant to resource dependence and upward influence. The first is an identified development in the relationship between leaders and volunteers where the leaders increasingly are understood to be the helpers of the volunteers. The second is the expectation of follower involvement and lay participation which expands the activity of the local church and makes the congregation increasingly dependent on followers to maintain activity levels.

Congregations' dependence relationship is also affected by the "firm-specific" character of ecclesial voluntarism. In many local congregations a volunteer, e.g., a musician, not only needs to master an instrument but is also expected to profess a particular set of theological values and be familiar with the local and confessional music tradition. This suggests that in congregations "firm-specific" might be very specific, thereby limiting the alternatives for the congregational leaders and increasing the potential influence of the follower who matches the firm specifics. In other words, the value-conscious character of local congregations could limit the alternatives of leaders and increase the potential influence of followers. The egalitarian push further increases this potential. Tripathi (2021, p. 2) points out that organic organizational structure strengthens follower influence, compared to mechanical (hierarchical) structures. The above-identified cultural characteristics of local congregations are an egalitarian push towards organic structures and increased follower influence.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The main question posed is this: *What are characteristics of follower influence on the leadership process in local congregations?* This article is a theoretical discussion of followers' influence on leadership in congregations and how this influence is affected by characteristics of the leadership process in congregations. The theoretical perspectives applied are on followership and upward influence, and they seek to understand how followers can exercise influence. The second part of the article asks what a follower in the church is and what characterizes the leadership process in local congregations. I have identified three characteristics relevant to the leader-follower relationship in local congregations, i.e., voluntarism, an egalitarian push, and a commitment to theological values and purposes. These characteristics I have structured as organizational, cultural, and theological, respectively. In the discussion, I have connected these identified characteristics of local congregations to the theories on how followers influence leaders. The findings in the discussions suggest that the identified characteristics of local congregations increase follower influence on the leadership process.

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