



# Baptism and Church Growth in the Church of Norway

## Dåp og økt gudstjenestedeltakelse i Den norske kirke

Werner G. Jeanrond

*Professor i systematisk teologi. Det teologiske fakultet, Universitetet i Oslo*

[w.g.jeanrond@teologi.uio.no](mailto:w.g.jeanrond@teologi.uio.no)

### Abstract

This article discusses the results of a research project on the relationship between statistically significant church growth in four selected Church of Norway parishes and the practice of baptism in their Sunday service. While the frequency of baptisms may have increased overall attendance at Sunday worship, parishioners at times regret the impact of Sunday service baptism on the ordinary life and development of the congregation. Through the theological eyes of a newcomer to the Church of Norway, this article problematizes the concept of church growth and explores the theological tension between baptism and Eucharist in the life of the church. The overall argument is that it makes little sense to celebrate the sacrament of baptism while not being prepared to engage in a life-long journey with God and fellow disciples of Jesus Christ. Separate and public baptismal services in the church will make it possible to concentrate more fully on the sacramental nature, performance and vocational challenge of baptism – not only for the person being baptised, but for the parish as a whole.

### Keywords

Baptism, Church growth, Church of Norway, Sunday service, Sacrament

### Sammendrag

Denne artikkelen springer ut et forskningsprosjekt om økningen i gudstjenestedeltakelse i fire utvalgte menigheter i Den norske kirke. Den drøfter nærmere bestemt forholdet mellom økt gudstjenestedeltakelse og dåp. Mens antallet dåp har bidratt til økt gudstjenestebesøk, er det samtidig kirkegjengere som er kritiske til virkningen som dåp i høymessen har for menighetslivet. Artikkelen problematiserer kirkens fokus på økt gudstjenestebesøk, og utforsker den teologiske spenningen mellom dåp og nattverden i kirkens liv. Hovedargumentet er at det gir liten mening å feire dåpens sakrament hvis det samtidig ikke blir lagt til rette for at de som døpes blir del av en livslang reise med Gud og disiplerskap i Jesus Kristus. Egne offentlige dåpsgudstjenester utenom høymessen vil gjøre det mulig med bedre konsentrasjon om dåpen, dens sakramentale karakter og kallsutfordring – ikke bare for de som døpes, men for menigheten som helhet.

### Nøkkelord

Dåp, Gudstjenestedeltakelse, Den norske kirke, Søndagsgudstjeneste, Sakrament

## Introduction: Baptism in the Sunday Service – Personal Impressions

When visiting Sunday services at 11 a.m. in the Church of Norway, experienced churchgoers from abroad may be surprised to find themselves confronted with a more or less expansive baptismal liturgy within the service. In fact, in the Church of Norway, most Sunday services feature both baptism and Eucharist. During my first two years in Oslo I have experienced up to six children being baptised in a single Sunday service, but I know from others about even eight baptisms in other parts of the country. This custom has a number of implications for the life of the congregation and for the Church of Norway as a whole.

First, groups more or less accustomed to church, and families and friends accompanying the children to be baptised, normally sit at the front of the congregation. Thus, even spatially the ordinary Sunday congregation is subjected to the ad hoc influx of the baptismal group and pushed to the back of the church.

Second, depending on the parish, the baptismal liturgy threatens to dominate the Sunday liturgy, and, in the case of multiple baptisms within a Eucharistic service, even in terms of time tends to shift the sacramental balance between baptism and Eucharist in favour of baptism.

Third, although, understandably, regular congregations are expected to welcome the newly baptised children into their midst, everybody in the service knows that the likelihood of many newly baptised children and their families and friends returning to the liturgy on subsequent Sundays is not high.

Fourth, when measuring church attendance, parishes with many baptisms might appear to be more successful than those with fewer baptisms. In addition, well-known priests and well-liked church buildings tend to attract more baptisms than ordinary churches and lesser known ministers, and this further distorts any statistics that consider Sunday service attendance as the primary indicator of church growth or decline.

Fifth, in many Sunday services the complete sacramental provision of the Church of Norway is thus on offer. However, it is not necessarily accompanied by an explicit parish reflection on the challenges of Christian discipleship today and on the special vocation of parents, godparents and the parish as a whole to nurture the faith, love and hope of the newly baptised in the years to come. Even if such themes are taken up in pre-baptismal conversations, the clear-cut separation between the baptismal group and the ordinary Sunday congregation remains.

Sixth, in view of these impressions a theological inquiry into the baptismal praxis of the Church of Norway would need to take into account, and further examine, the theological understanding and self-understanding of particularly «successful» parishes and the vocation and sacramental awareness of the Church as a whole.

As a recent immigrant to Norway and equipped with professional theological curiosity, I am interested in understanding what is for me this surprising baptismal praxis in the Church of Norway. In this article I therefore wish to gather some empirical material about the current praxis of baptism in the Church of Norway and to develop and apply a set of theological criteria for interpreting these empirical findings. My theological interest in this article, however, is not to challenge and criticise any overarching ecclesiologies operative in the Church of Norway today. Thus, I am not concerned with the pros and cons of either the concept of the Norwegian folk church (*Folkekirke*) or the concept of a national church. Rather, I am keen to problematize the notion of church growth and its connection to the baptismal praxis in the Church of Norway.

## A Research Project on Parish Growth

A research project initiated and financed by the central offices of the Church of Norway provided an opportunity to explore the baptismal praxis in four parishes that were rated as particularly successful. The statistical benchmark in the Church of Norway for such success is the consistently high number of Sunday attendance. And all four parishes showed a substantial upward trend in terms of Sunday service attendance in 2013–2017 compared to the five previous years (2008–2012), while their overall parish membership levels remained stable. This research was undertaken in 2019 by nine scholars of the Faculty of Theology in the University of Oslo under the direction of Associate Professor Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen.

In this article, I first wish to examine approaches to baptism within the Sunday Eucharist as well as the related theological reflection among the leadership and membership of these four parishes on the role of baptism within the life of the church. Second, I shall offer a theological assessment of my findings in view of a set of questions that emerge from the empirical material itself.

The four parishes, named here *South Parish*, *West Parish*, *East Parish* and *North Parish*, were visited by members of the research team on 24 March 2019 when, in each service, however differently, the Feast of the Annunciation was celebrated. The four parishes are located in different parts of Norway and differ in their religious, social and geographical composition and outlook. North Parish showed an increase in Sunday attendance of 29.9 percent with an annual number of ca. 100 baptisms (130 in top year 2016). South Parish recorded an increase of 19.8 percent with an overall 10 percent decline in baptisms. West Parish experienced a Sunday attendance increase of 32.9 percent even though their baptismal number declined in the period by ca. 15 percent. East Parish had a staggering attendance increase of 45.1 percent, yet their baptism number was similar to South Parish and hence cannot account for this upswing in Sunday service attendance.<sup>1</sup>

The material gathered in each parish and referred to here consists of:

- One videoed Sunday morning service
- One taped group interview by two members of our research team with three members of the parish leadership, i.e. the parish priest, the leader of the church council, and the head of the parish administration
- One taped group interview with regular church attenders, immediately following the Sunday service
- One taped group interview with the persons in charge of the Sunday service, including the priest, the organist and lay church wardens, immediately following the Sunday service
- Visits to the parishes, including inspecting church buildings, offices, group rooms etc. and attending special arrangements during the days ahead of or following the videoed Sunday service
- Collected material produced by the parishes, including service sheets, invitations to parish functions, annual reports, parish strategic plans, additional specific interviews etc.

1. For a more detailed presentation, numerical analysis and discussion of the four parishes, see Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen, «Growth in a context of decline: Congregations in processes of change», *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology* (2020): 1–34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2020.1867635>

## Different Approaches to Baptism in the Sunday Service

On most Sundays and in line with current Church of Norway policy and custom, our four parishes include the baptism of one or more children in the first part of the service – between the Gloria and the proclamation of the Word. In the vision declaration of April 2018 *Mer himmel på jord* (*More Heaven on Earth*), the Church of Norway explicitly encourages an increase in the number of baptisms and in faith instruction.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, striking that the sacrament of the Eucharist is not mentioned at all in this vision document.

On this special feast of Mary in the liturgical calendar, when we visited the parishes, only two of our four parishes celebrated the sacrament of baptism – for two and three children respectively. In any case, baptism was discussed explicitly in the interviews which we were able to conduct in each parish.

South Parish was celebrating a festive service (*festgudstjeneste*) in honour of Mary and therefore decided to exclude baptism on that particular Sunday. In our interview with the parish leadership, we learned that a Sunday service without baptism was widely welcomed by leadership and congregation alike as it provided a rare opportunity for parishioners to concentrate both on the proclamation of the Word of God and on the Eucharist. The people who attended on this Sunday came for this very Sunday service and did not have to share the service with those who only attend because of their connection to the children to be baptised. Thus, this particular Sunday offered an opportunity to everybody present to participate in a «normal» – though in reality rather abnormal – Sunday service.

West Parish declined baptisms on this Sunday due to a service dedicated to confirmands, whereas East Parish and North Parish included baptisms in their services, even on this specific Sunday that focussed on Mary and her faith in God.

Our video recording documents that in East Parish the baptism of two children was celebrated in a minimalist liturgical mode featuring only the strictly necessary parts of the sacramental rite while abstaining from any additional aspects, such as the lifting of the newly baptised in front of the congregation and the following acclamation by the congregation. Hence, the baptismal liturgy took up only a relatively short amount of service time and thus allowed proper attention to the celebration of the Word of God, the sermon and the Eucharist. Moreover, as this parish normally counts around 200 Sunday morning attendees, here the baptismal parties did not dominate the congregation but appeared more organically as a part of the congregation as a whole.

In North Parish, three children were baptised on this Sunday. Here, the process of a triple baptism took a significant amount of time and, for each child, included both acclamation and additional baptismal hymn singing. Three-quarters of the congregation were members of the baptismal party. Only the regulars, about fifteen people sitting at the back of the church, came forward to receive the Eucharist. Thus, in this parish baptism played a major role in the Sunday service.

It is interesting to look at the reasoning behind allowing baptism to take on a more or less significant place in the Sunday service. The respective interviews with the leadership teams of each parish were enlightening in this respect.

In North Parish, the parish priest confirmed that the majority of baptisms in this church are not really connected to the parish itself but originate from other parishes due to the particular attraction of this specific church building. Moreover, the priest was delighted to

2. Den norske kirke, «Flere søker dåp og trosopplæring». [https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-kirken/slik-styres-kirken/planer-visjonsdokument-og-strategier/visjon\\_19\\_21\\_a3\\_liggende\\_bokmaal.pdf](https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-kirken/slik-styres-kirken/planer-visjonsdokument-og-strategier/visjon_19_21_a3_liggende_bokmaal.pdf)

emphasize that Sunday services in this church are very much characterized by the baptismal praxis. In fact, the parish had informally consulted some of its service attending members about the frequency of baptism in Sunday services with the result that these parishioners too considered baptism to be the highlight of the service. Hence, recently more baptisms have been encouraged – even for people from outside the parish. However, those coming from other parishes should have had the customary baptismal conversations in their respective parishes.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to baptism, a first-come, first-served rule had been established, notwithstanding the congregational origin of the baptismal party. In view of the strong baptismal interest, once a month this parish organises a special Sunday service without Eucharist in order to provide for up to six baptisms. The parish priest explained:

I love to baptise children... Hence, I am in the right place. And one of the things that I really consider positively or that makes me happy are the baptismal conversations and baptism itself, and preaching... And then I wanted to say that it feels very good to see not always the same faces, but there are very many new faces.<sup>4</sup>

The parish priest's enthusiasm was echoed also by the parish administrator who pointed to the new electronic application system in the parish for baptism and marriage. And the priest added that normally three voluntary helpers assist at each Sunday service: a church warden, a baptismal assistant and a co-liturgist.

Statistically, this parish enjoys more than a one hundred percent baptismal record, counting all baptisms. However, when counting baptisms only among the actual parish membership, the parish priest stipulated a baptismal frequency of about seventy percent.<sup>5</sup> When asked why Sunday service attendance had lately increased, the parish priest left no doubt that this was the result of the increase in baptisms.<sup>6</sup> The priest added that the attraction of the church building plays a role in this baptismal increase<sup>7</sup> as well as the baptismal conversations with the relatives of the children to be baptised<sup>8</sup>.

However, our interview with parishioners following the Sunday service shows their unease about baptisms during the service. Baptism disturbs their understanding of an ideal Sunday service experience. In the words of one: «I hope there will not be baptism, because then there will be running around and restlessness and such.»<sup>9</sup> Generally, they regretted that baptism divides the congregation into two halves: the ordinary church-goers and the baptismal parties.<sup>10</sup>

In East Parish, in accordance with an explicit parish strategy, baptism was fully integrated in the Sunday service and assumed neither liturgical nor spatial dominance. One of the voluntary helpers at the Sunday service, whose specific task it is to assist with baptism, stressed the joy and feelings associated with the baptismal part of the service.<sup>11</sup> Also the organ-

3. Interview with parish leadership, 22.03.2019, para. 97. All translations are mine.

4. *Ibid.*, 30.

5. *Ibid.*, 100.

6. *Ibid.*, 148.

7. *Ibid.*, 149.

8. *Ibid.*, 151.

9. North Parish post Sunday service interview with parishioners, 24.03.2019, line 54.

10. *Ibid.*, 64–72.

11. Cf. East Parish post Sunday service interview with persons in charge of this particular Sunday service, 24.03.2019, para. 247, 249 and 565.

ist agreed on how beautiful baptism was.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in our interview with the priest, the baptismal assistant and the organist, there was agreement on the fact that Sunday services that include baptisms clearly do increase service attendance.<sup>13</sup> However, as already indicated above, in this specific parish with a usual attendance of around 200 people every Sunday morning, the baptismal group does not stand out as prominently as in other parishes. Generally, baptism has become a self-evident but not a dominant part in the Sunday liturgy in this parish,<sup>14</sup> although the frequency of baptisms does affect Sunday service attendance.<sup>15</sup>

West Parish, although without baptism on the Sunday of our visit, showed equal commitment to getting baptism right in the work of the church. The priests even admitted to concentrating especially on the baptismal groups and their particular needs when preparing their Sunday sermon<sup>16</sup>, even according them special eye contact.<sup>17</sup> Both priests present confirmed the importance of the symbolic mediation in the service. For example, the baptismal water should not only be *seen* but also *heard* through the church's loudspeaker system.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of the baptismal ritual for this parish, also in view of the declining number of baptisms, was further underlined by its co-operation with one of their city's annual festivals. The church offered a special «happy baptism day» event at the festival. Delight was expressed about the appreciation accorded to the parish by the official festival programme and the related media attention. At these occasions, the aim was to lower the threshold for people to avail more easily of the church's rituals. In a special interview with the parish priest, the priest explained that the parish wanted to help people to approach baptism without the usual economic, social and other preparatory demands and hype, also in view of the fact that on the day of the baptism the couple's families often encounter one another for the first time. Hence, baptism has taken on additional significance in the life of both families.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, there was a choice at the festival between a drop-in baptism in the morning, resulting in five baptisms, and the grand baptismal service later in the day with nine baptisms. Interestingly, all who came for baptism had been in contact with the parish beforehand. Most were citizens of the town, though not necessarily members of this particular parish. The priest was keen to shift the theological focus from baptismal commitment to baptismal gratitude, emphasizing that this particular baptismal arrangement had no commercial undertones. Rather, this signified that the church was now identified and experienced in the middle of life and its contemporary manifestations.<sup>20</sup>

As already mentioned above, among the persons in charge of the Sunday service in South Parish relief was expressed that on the Sunday of our visit the service proceeded without baptism and was hence free from baptismal groups occupying the front pews of the church – usually without much knowledge of, interest in, or sensitivity to the actual service and the baptismal ritual.<sup>21</sup> Those preparing and leading the Sunday service were thus happy to have

12. Ibid., 576.

13. Ibid., 427–428.

14. Cf. *ibid.* 243.

15. Ibid., 244.

16. West Parish post Sunday service interview with persons in charge of this particular Sunday service, 24.03.2019, para. 46.

17. Cf. *ibid.*, 269.

18. Cf. *ibid.*, 588–589.

19. Interview with the parish priest of West Parish, 30.08.2019.

20. Cf. *ibid.*

21. South Parish post Sunday service interview with persons in charge of this particular Sunday service, 24.03.2019, line 174–188.



a «normal» service with only those who actually wanted to be there present. Moreover, the leadership reflected on the need to organise more baptism-free services and to restrict the number of baptisms in any single service to a maximum of four.<sup>22</sup> People were conscious of the fact that the baptismal groups had grown in number and therefore altered the statistics of Sunday attendance.<sup>23</sup> In fact, under a previous parish priest, the size of baptismal groups in South Parish used to be restricted, whereas the present parish priest had lifted such restrictions, and this led to a substantial increase in numbers.<sup>24</sup> The interviewed parishioners confirmed their feeling of relief to be able to sit quietly and to focus on the Eucharist when the Sunday service does not include baptism(s) and the related commotion in the church.<sup>25</sup>

Also, in this parish there is no agreement about celebrating the Eucharist at every Sunday service. While some people would not condone such a praxis, others have expressed a clear desire for it.<sup>26</sup>

### Different Approaches to the Praxis of Baptism

The approaches to baptism in our four parishes thus demonstrate a broad spectrum: in East Parish baptism was an integrated part of the liturgical and sacramental provision, whereas in North Parish baptism appeared to be the overarching focal point, at least from the perspective of the parish priest. In South Parish, baptism was undertaken as a necessary sacramental activity in the parish, though not always with great enthusiasm, while West Parish excelled in lowering the threshold to baptism by making it more widely available within the framework of a local festival.

Albeit for different reasons, all four parishes have been successful in raising their Sunday attendance, partially thanks to the number of baptisms and large baptismal groups. In North Parish, the intensive baptismal praxis has helped to increase Sunday church attendance. In South Parish, the increase in Sunday church attendance results from the lifting of restrictions on the number of people accompanying the child to be baptised. In West Parish, efforts are made to attract specific groups to participate in the service, e.g. choirs, confirmands, particular age groups, and even baptismal parties, whereas in East Parish the Sunday liturgy as such attracts a steady number of attendants. Thus, statistically, our four parishes could appear to be model parishes within the Church of Norway. However, as already indicated, the baptismal praxis and the resulting statistical implications do not necessarily reflect a deeper theological and spiritual renewal in the respective congregations, although some such features can be observed, not least in East Parish.

Moreover, the shifting approaches to the praxis of baptism in our four parishes echo some changes with regard to baptism within the wider Christian movement in Europe and North America. For instance, parental motives for seeking baptism for their children have developed and broadened significantly in recent decades.<sup>27</sup> Today, for some couples, baptism

22. Ibid., 239–257. Cf. also *ibid.*, 340–342.

23. Ibid., 1141–1142. Cf. also Interview with South Parish leadership, 22.03.2019, line 389–394.

24. Interview with South Parish leadership, 22.03.2019, 1381–1396.

25. East Parish post Sunday service interview with parishioners, 24.03.2019, line 410–419.

26. Interview with South Parish leadership, 274–285.

27. Cf. Kari Veiteberg, *Kunsten å framføre Gudstenester: Dâp i Den norske kyrkja* (Oslo: Det teologiske fakultet, 2006), 88–119; Christian Grethlein, «Taufe V. Praktisch-theologisch», in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th ed., vol. 8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 77–79; and Gordon Lathrop, «Dop, treenighet och dopets innebörd idag», in *Dopet i vår tid: Bidrag till en nutida dopteologi* (ed. H. Hartman, G. Lindström og K. Nordgren; Falköping: Ordbruket AB, 2008), 107–17, esp. 107–8.

offers a first public occasion for bringing the two families together, especially in the absence of any prior wedding gathering. For others, baptism responds to the parental desire for ritual accompaniment and the public presentation of their child, notwithstanding whether newly born or at a later stage of the child's development. For others again, baptism has developed into a public name-giving ritual. Hence, the non/connection between these and other motives on the one hand, and the respective biblical-theological perspectives and challenges on the other, need to be explored with the parents during the baptismal conversation prior to celebrating the sacrament of baptism. Such baptismal conversations between parish and parents have thus become ever more important.

Whereas in the past in Norway almost every child was presented for baptism, in 2017 only 54 percent of all new-born children were baptised.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, in 2019 the Church of Norway singled out baptism as a special focus area.<sup>29</sup> The urge in the Church of Norway to baptise as many children as possible affects all parishes – including our four parishes.

More generally, today we can observe a pluralisation of baptismal praxis, of baptismal age, and of baptismal understanding. Especially this last dimension confronts many parishes and parish leadership teams with new and tough challenges: how should the *sacramental* nature of baptism be understood and communicated? Should new approaches to baptism be welcomed in a spirit of ritual pluralisation? Is baptism necessary for salvation, and what does «salvation» mean today in the Christian church?<sup>30</sup> Is baptism primarily concerned with the presentation, name-giving, blessing and integration of the child into the life and traditions of a family (or clan), or is baptism primarily concerned with the spiritual development of the local Christian community and its membership? How does the newly baptised person relate to the local and the universal Christian church? How should the baptism of children from a multi-religious or from an only partly religious family be conducted? Should the sacramental nature of baptism be played down in such instances in favour of a pedagogically engineered ritual event? Should baptism be presented as a mere blessing of children in the name of a child-loving God and/or Jesus Christ? What is baptism expected to effect in the child to be baptised?<sup>31</sup> Who should be particularly responsible for the further accompaniment of the newly baptised children – the parents, the family, the godparents, or the parish? What is the legal or canonical position of baptism today?

From the interviews conducted in the four parishes, I wish to single out only a few of these challenges and explore some possible theological responses.

## Baptism and its Sacramental Significance

It is interesting to note that with two exceptions the sacramental nature of baptism did not come up in any of the interviews conducted by our team in the four parishes.

The first of these exceptions relates to one line in an interview in South Parish when the parish priest referred to the sacraments in general terms: «The service is, of course, the pulse of the parish where proclamation, the sacraments and the community experience are all important. We always hold the service together, even if one leads it.»<sup>32</sup>

28. Harald Hegstad, *Dåpen: En nådens kilde* (Oslo: Verbum Akademisk, 2019), 11.

29. Cf. *ibid* and [https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-kirken/slik-styres-kirken/planer-visjonsdokument-og-strategier/visjon\\_19\\_21\\_a3\\_liggende\\_bokmaal.pdf](https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-kirken/slik-styres-kirken/planer-visjonsdokument-og-strategier/visjon_19_21_a3_liggende_bokmaal.pdf)

30. See here Knut Alfvåg, «Er dåpen nødvendig til frelse? Om forholdet mellom dåpsforståelse og samtidskontekst», *Teologisk tidsskrift* 8 (2019): 172–182. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1893-0271-2019-03-03>

31. Here, I cannot discuss the special challenges associated with the baptism of older children, of youth, and of adults.

32. South Parish post-Sunday service interview with persons in charge of this particular Sunday service, 24.03.2019, line 122–131.



The second is found in an interview in East Parish. Here the priest explained that the parish aims to concentrate only on the sacramental act of baptism itself while avoiding all unnecessary additions. Hence, the aspiration to have a «very concentrated baptismal liturgy».<sup>33</sup>

Thus, while internationally and ecumenically the *sacramental* nature of baptism enjoys an increased theological appreciation<sup>34</sup>, the baptismal praxis in our four parishes tends to respond more to the demands of an all-inclusive understanding of church in the tradition of the Norwegian folk church.<sup>35</sup> Lowering the threshold for families to present their children for baptism seems more important than focussing on the education of the baptismal party and of the parish as a whole about the eschatological significance and promise of baptism within the horizon of God's emerging reign.<sup>36</sup>

The fact of ever new baptismal parties dominating Sunday congregations both in terms of space (they sit in front) and in terms of novelty (they are unlikely to return) presents the parish, every Sunday afresh, with a spectre of some sort of new beginning, albeit a new beginning that may not necessarily lead anywhere. Hence, on most Sundays the parishioners are invited to experience a new *ecclesiogenesis*, though not necessarily a deepening sense of what it means to become disciples of Christ and what the church means in today's world.

Of course, theologically speaking, it would make good sense to baptise children in the midst of the parish celebration of the Eucharist. The initiation of new members does concern the whole parish. However, this potential is diminished once baptism is reduced to a Sunday routine without consequences. For the normally non-participating baptismal party, it becomes a singular event or spectacle. Its sacramental significance may be lost on people who have no shared sense of God's transformative presence in this event, who do not appreciate the meaning of the age-old Christian symbolism of water and light and who do not expect the sacrament of baptism to offer orientation for and transformation of the persons baptised and of the entire parish witnessing this act. Moreover, in the absence of a shared and renewed understanding of the Christian mysteries, uninitiated newcomers may find it strange, if not even revolting, to witness the baptism of children and to proclaim that now these children «shall belong to the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ and to believe in him».<sup>37</sup> What does it mean to belong to the crucified and resurrected Christ? Why was he crucified and resurrected in the first place? Does belonging to Christ only focus on his death and resurrection or does this belonging involve participation in the life of a larger and dynamic eschatological community?

The priest proclaims that «the omnipotent God in baptism has given you his Holy Spirit, given birth to you anew and taken you into his believing congregation. Peace be with you.»<sup>38</sup> What does this mean: to be taken into God's believing community? How is that to take place?

33. Interview with East Parish leadership, 22.03.2019, line 239–241.

34. See, for instance, Hegstad, *Dåpen*, 51: «Blant kirker som tradisjonelt har hatt en mer symbolsk dåpsforståelse, har det i de senere år skjedd en nyorientering i retning av en mer sakramental forståelse, det vil si at dåpen forstås som en gudshandling. Dette har ført til en økumenisk tilnærming, der forståelsen av dåpen som et virkekraftig tegn har stått sentralt.»

35. Here is not the place to offer an in-depth discussion of the Norwegian Folk Church tradition, its potential and its problems. Instead, I am providing my empirical and theological observations from the perspective of a newcomer to both Norway and its ecclesial landscape.

36. Cf. also Alfsvåg, «Er dåpen nødvendig til frelse?», 176–79.

37. *The Church of Norway Order of Baptism*: «at du skal tilhøre den korsfestede og oppstandne Jesus Kristus og tro på ham».

38. *Ibid.*: «Den allmektige Gud har i dåpen gitt deg sin hellige Ånd, født deg på ny og tatt deg inn i sin troende menighet. Gud styrke deg med sin nåde til det evige liv. Fred være med deg.»

Only on this particular occasion? Are the Christian sacraments one-off events or do they empower a life-long discipleship of Christ on the way toward God's emerging reign?

Harald Hegstad recently emphasized the dual nature of baptism as both event and process. For him, it would appear dangerous to reduce baptism either to a mere act without implications for the whole life of the baptised or to a mere process of faith without the event character of a new beginning with God.<sup>39</sup>

When the theological significance of the sacrament of baptism recedes in favour of other motivations (not only statistical ones), the theological and ecclesiological dimensions of baptism may appear ever more opaque to ad hoc baptismal parties in the Sunday service. There is no question that the church's mission deserves to be blessed with and renewed by frequent baptisms. However, we might wish to ask if the exclusive praxis of Sunday morning baptism is good for the church in its present situation? Might it make more sense to organise separate baptismal liturgies in order to facilitate the Sunday congregation first of all to grow spiritually, theologically and ecclesologically while allowing the baptismal group to find its way into the parish and church at their own speed? I am not arguing for a prohibition of Sunday service baptisms, but I am arguing for a genuine effort not to hamper the spiritual life and growth of the congregation through a praxis of baptismal overkill on Sunday mornings.

As we have seen in East Parish, a well-functioning and organically built congregation is fully able to integrate a limited baptismal part into its Sunday service. However, not all baptismal parties may be well-served or encouraged by such forms of integration when they do not yet possess sufficient knowledge and appreciation of Christian faith praxis and related sacramental celebrations. Pastoral sensitivity can work in both ways: to protect the congregation against baptismal domination and to protect the baptismal group against a sacramental overkill.

## Sunday Service and Church Growth

The Sunday service is, of course, not the only occasion for Christians in the Church of Norway to get together. Our four parishes have been organising an impressive number of different activities throughout the week, ranging from hymn singing, baby singing, youth groups, language groups for refugees, family meals, concerts, exhibitions, weekday masses, and parish visiting groups to a host of further meetings of specific parish groups and sub-groups. Like elsewhere, also here the parish functions in terms of a broad «church» uniting different people and interests under the roof of a single congregation within the wider Christian church in and beyond Norway. Yet the Sunday service traditionally stands out as a central event within the weekly parish calendar. Nevertheless, we could observe some developments that either challenge or further support the privileged place of the Sunday service. I wish to mention and discuss two such developments.

First, in South Parish, on Friday evening we could witness a youth gathering that took place in the parish hall. Between twenty and thirty youth came together, first for a brief meditative service in the big room of the hall, featuring candle lighting, a biblical reading and hymn singing under the leadership of one of the youth workers employed by the parish. Thereafter, supported by some older youth, frozen pizzas were heated up, distributed and shared among the young parishioners. A 'pub' was opened in the basement, staffed by older

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39. Hegstad, *Dâpen*, 51–55.

youth, where soft drinks and small snacks could be purchased and consumed, accompanied by youth-oriented music. The mood during the meditation, the sharing of pizza and in the pub was excellent, and a good time was had by all.

However, two days later, on Sunday morning, we noted that not a single older or younger youth present on Friday evening attended the Sunday service in the local church. Thus, the parish offered two obviously significant gatherings without visible connection: a Friday evening sharing of prayer, pizza and soft drinks and the Sunday morning sharing of prayer, proclamation and the Eucharist. The pizza-sharing displayed some implicit Eucharistic features and took place in the church hall, while the explicit Eucharistic celebration on Sunday took place in the church. Both occasions were parish events, but they were not explicitly connected. The Eucharist was celebrated by a priest supported by a professional musician and a group of dedicated volunteers. The pizza evening was organised by youth group volunteers, supported by a professional youth worker and the parish caretaker.

Did the pizza experience satisfy the communal, physical and Eucharistic needs and aspirations of the youth? Why did they not feel attracted to attend the Sunday service? Should the pizza event be interpreted as a sign of church growth or as a sign of church decline? Are we faced here with a new and different kind of sacramentality outside the institutional boundaries of the Sunday service although within the institutional boundaries of the parish? Obviously, the once central significance of the Sunday service has lost some of its attraction while meaningful alternative sharing occasions have emerged and developed in the parish.

Second, East Parish prides itself (rightly) on its phenomenal cake display at the congregational coffee following the Sunday service. Each Sunday, a host of dedicated volunteers guarantees the success of this church coffee which has developed into a very special and widely known and appreciated parish occasion. This richly provided sharing prolongs the Eucharistic experience, celebrated minutes before, now beyond a strictly defined sacramental experience, though still in the very space of the church. This coffee event undoubtedly makes a valuable contribution to church growth in this parish and provides an important link between the Eucharist and the social life of the parish.

In this congregation, the usually well-attended Sunday service has maintained its traditionally central position in the life of the parish. This impression is clearly supported through our interviews. For example, in an interview with relatively recent arrivals in this parish, there was broad agreement on the centrality of the Sunday Eucharist, its proper liturgical conduct, its high-quality music, and «its unique church coffee». Moreover, the fact that the church coffee is served in the church building itself supports the feeling that it is «a prolongation or continuation of the Eucharist up on the altar».<sup>40</sup> It is interesting to note that for these regular service attenders in East Parish, baptism did not feature among the reasons for attending the Sunday service.

These two examples from our fieldwork around that single weekend in March 2019 illustrate the many facets to be taken into account when discussing church growth. While in one parish church growth is linked mainly to the Sunday Eucharist and all activities that flow from it, in another parish church growth is best exemplified by new kinds of service outside an exclusive Sunday focus.

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40. Cf. East Parish post-Sunday service interview with parishioners, 24.03.2019.

## Baptism, Eucharist and Church Growth

To be sure, there is no church growth without baptism. However, baptism alone does not yet produce church growth. Nor should the statistics of church attendance resulting in part from larger number of baptismal parties be interpreted as a self-evident sign of organic church growth. Rather, the Church of Norway, like any other Christian church, needs to decide if it wishes to be satisfied with the baptismally oiled statistics of church growth or if it feels called to facilitate sustainable church growth in terms of appropriate attention to the celebration of both baptism and Eucharist as sacramental highlights within the personal and communal discipleship and witness to the transformative presence of God in church and world.

While there are good theological reasons to include the sacrament of baptism into the Sunday service and into the Sunday Eucharist where the whole congregation is assumed to be gathered (although the above mentioned pizza-sharing on Friday evening proves otherwise), it might at times also be appropriate not to do so and, instead, at suitable occasions organise separate public baptismal services in the church. The advantage of separate baptismal services lies in the possibility to concentrate more fully on the sacramental nature, performance and vocational challenge of the sacrament of baptism – not only for the children to be baptised, but also for the parish as a whole. Moreover, there is no need to provide the church's entire sacramental provision at every Sunday Eucharist.<sup>41</sup>

Following Gordon Lathrop's encouragement of a deeper congregational reflection on several aspects of the praxis of baptism in our time and circumstances, I wish to conclude with the following reflections on the relationship between baptism and church growth.<sup>42</sup>

Children are baptised in the name of the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Few Christians today, notwithstanding whether old or ad hoc, feel able fully to relate to the symbol of the Trinity. Hence, I agree with Lathrop that today we need to teach the Trinity afresh. Rather than being some obscure patriarchal formula, the Trinity proclaims God's presence in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in this created universe and in each of our lives and in all of humanity – dead, alive and not-yet-born. God is present here and now and invites all to become God's friends and to respond to and get involved in the coming of God's reign in this, our universe. The church witnesses to this divine coming without, however, presuming to be in control of God's reign.

Baptism is and remains a gift from God who graciously invites all into the divine-human network of love: the love of God, of our neighbours, of God's creative and reconciling project with this universe, and of our own emerging selves.<sup>43</sup> God's gift of baptism invites adults and children into a life-long development and complex learning experience. Genuine growth in the church thus happens through human participation in this fourfold praxis of love which has been initiated by God's grace. Christian hope for salvation does not long for an escape route from God's project of creation and reconciliation into some sort of distant heaven; rather Christian hope desires to participate ever more fully in God's ongoing project.<sup>44</sup> God's grace empowers women, men and children to return to God's presence every day

41. Cf. Kari Veiteberg, «Kunsten å framføre/utføre dåpsgudsteneste' Hur (how) man firar/berättar vad (what) man tror», in Hartman, Lindström and Nordgren (ed), *Dopet i vår tid*, 95–106, here 99: «Kanskje skal ein ikkje ta 'alt' ut på ei einskild gudsteneste. Men det er uheldig om ein *aldri* feirar barnedåp på søndagens hovudgudsteneste. Ein kan og tenke dåp inn i kyrkjeåret: fastetid og påskennatt. Epifani søndagane med vatn-tekstane.» (Original italics.)

42. Cf. Lathrop, «Dop, treenighet och dopets innebörd idag», 115–16.

43. For a wider discussion of the theology of love, see Werner G. Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love*, London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010; for this fourfold network of love, see *ibid.*, 252–54.

44. Cf. Werner G. Jeanrond, *Reasons to Hope* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 51–72.

afresh and to recognise their sinful acts of turning away from God's graceful presence. All of these aspects of Christian life are celebrated in the sacrament of baptism. They demand the development of ever more adequate forms of personal and congregational prayer, spirituality and commitment to the needs of God's emerging reign. Hence, it makes little sense to celebrate the sacrament of baptism while not being willing to engage in a life-long journey together with God and all people of good will who respond to God's grace and love.

Notwithstanding its significant liturgical, sacramental and ecclesiological development over the centuries, baptism remains a revolutionary act: it changes the parameters of what is to be considered a good and successful life with God. It initiates a life-long journey of growth – in the persons to be baptised as well as in their respective communities.<sup>45</sup> In Christian understanding, baptism transforms a human *individual* into a *person* in relationships: with God, other human beings, God's creative and reconciling project, and his or her own emerging self. All of these relationships are brought together in the celebration of the Eucharist, where they receive a foretaste of what God is preparing for all of humanity and for God's entire creation.

Church growth, therefore, cannot be measured merely in terms of counting the number of individuals that may be gathered on Sundays. Rather, as we have seen, church growth refers to how many people have accepted to become persons within this dynamic fourfold relational network of divine and human love. Of course, we can count the number of baptisms and the number of people present at our Sunday morning services. However, no such statistics will ever be able to grasp the real growth in and among Christians who take their baptism seriously, embark ever afresh on their common journey with God, empowered by the sacrament of the Eucharist, and inspired by the hope to participate forever in God's emerging reign.

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45. See Marius Timmann Mjaaland, *Systematisk teologi* (Oslo: Verbum Akademisk, 2017), 296–98.