
A values-conscious facilitator lacking a cohesive strategy

Leadership practices and volunteers in the Church of Norway

CECILIE MIDTTUN

Assistant professor, VID specialized University

cecilie.midttun@vid.no

STEPHEN SIRRIS

Adjunct professor, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society

stephen.sirris@mf.no ORCID 0000-0003-0764-8195

ABSTRACT

Som andre sivilsamfunnsorganisasjoner, engasjerer Den norske kirke mange frivillige. Denne artikkelen presenterer funn fra en spørreundersøkelse blant kirkeansatte som leder frivillige. Målet er å kartlegge hvilke lederpraksiser som benyttes, om ledelsen utøves på en verdibevisst måte, og utbredelsen og bruken av strategiske planer for frivillig arbeid. Forskningsspørsmålet er: *I hvilken grad benytter ansatte i Den norske kirke lederpraksiser identifisert i Sporsheim og Sirris' (2018) modell for kirkelig frivillighetsledelse?* Totalt 89 ansatte i Oslo og Stavanger bispedømmer besvarte et spørreskjema. Våre data viser at praksiser som å tilrettelegge og informere prioriteres fremfor ledelse og motivasjon. Vi finner en høy grad av verdibevissthet, noe som gjenspeiles både i utbredelsen av menighetens kjerneverdier og i respondentenes evne til å formulere og uttrykke dem. Planer og strukturer som tilrettelegger for frivillig arbeid er mindre utviklet og mangler en helhetlig profil. Det er kun små variasjoner mellom bispedømmene og yrkesgruppene som har deltatt i undersøkelsen.

KEYWORDS

Volunteering. Voluntary work. Church. Leadership practice. Values. Strategy.

Introduction

Volunteering is a hallmark of civic organizations, where it constitutes a valuable resource (Enjolras & Eimhjellen, 2018, p. 13). Definitions of volunteering, which is a worldwide multifaceted phenomenon, include four core elements (Dekker & Halman, 2003, p. 1): “It is non-obligatory, it is carried out (among other things) for the benefit of others, society as a whole, or a specific organization, it is unpaid, and it takes place in an organized context.” Civic organizations offer a wide range of opportunities for different volunteers to express their values, pursue their interests, and develop competencies when doing voluntary work. In a competitive setting, such organizations must foster volunteer engagement when recruiting and facilitating. Organizations strive to energize volunteers’ involvement by communicating the importance of voluntary work and bolstering its rationale (Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2013). Leaders and employees are expected to facilitate, support, and lead voluntary work (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Sirris, 2023c). Importantly, given the diversity of civic organizations and the array of tasks available to volunteers, there is no absolute answer to how voluntary work can best be led.

Changes in volunteering over the last decades have led to increased scholarly attention to voluntary work as such, and in terms of studying leadership vis-à-vis volunteers. The notion of a new, reflexive volunteering was coined by Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003). Their conceptualization described the shift from a collective and externally guided monitoring of volunteers to the autonomous, active, and continuous self-monitoring of individual life paths. However, collective and reflexive elements are often combined, resulting in a highly personalized blend of volunteering (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). This new volunteering signifies a transition from a collectivistic engagement towards an individualized and rational “what’s in it for me” mentality. It is characterized by a looser attachment to specific organizations and indicated by a higher degree of turnover. For example, parents volunteer in the activities of their children only while their children are involved (Fisher et al., 2019). Nonetheless, volunteers may want to be recognized and cared for similarly to an employment relationship. Their need for meaningful activities and altruistic expressions has not ceased (von Essen, 2020). Importantly, the transition towards reflexive volunteering implies greater demands for efficient recruiting and professional follow-up of the volunteers, underpinning the importance of leadership (Sirris, 2023b).

Since volunteer leadership practices differ to accommodate contextual factors, research on specific empirical contexts is required (Musick & Wilson, 2007). In this article, we draw on an empirical study of leadership of voluntary work as practiced by employees in two regional dioceses within the Evangelical Lutheran

Church of Norway. Volunteering is an essential characteristic of religious organizations and can be an expression of people's faith (Cnaan & Curtis, 2013; Cnaan et al., 2016; Harris, 1995). This is also the case in Christian congregations, which include clergy, other professionals, and volunteers (Sirris & Askeland, 2021), that bring together people for spiritual and social purposes (Torry, 2017).

By analyzing survey data, we contribute new knowledge about leading volunteers in the Church of Norway. While most research on Norwegian church volunteering is qualitative, our quantitative study of staff in several congregations allowed us to gather information from a relatively larger population than those in qualitative studies, except a qualitative study that included 93 interviewees (Sirris, 2023a). The article thus extends previous research and quantifies how leadership practices towards volunteers are performed and patterned. The perspective of this article is drawn from the employees, not only those with a formal leadership position in the congregations, but all staff with responsibility vis-à-vis volunteers. The survey aimed to capture how volunteers are led, both in daily operations and in a strategic context. In addition to leadership practices, we also analyse the extent to which the leadership is values conscious, and the extent to which the leadership practices are a part of strategic planning. Our survey and analysis are informed by the leadership practices identified and categorized in a study by Sporsheim and Sirris (2018). Thus, the overall research question guiding the article is: *To what extent do employees in the Church of Norway utilize leadership practices identified in Sporsheim and Sirris' (2018) model for church volunteer leadership?*

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: We first review literature on leading volunteers and outline a specific theoretical model of volunteer leadership that is fundamental for our survey. Then, we describe the methods in our study before presenting our main empirical findings. Lastly, we discuss key insights, present concluding remarks, and suggest directions for further research.

Research on leading volunteers

Much research on volunteering has dealt with volunteers' motives for getting involved (Wollebæk et al., 2015). Rather than studying such inner motives, our approach is to examine how professionals position themselves towards volunteers in terms of leadership. On the backdrop of an increased attention to the importance of voluntary work, and the shift towards reflexive volunteering (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003), we address the need for further research on leadership. Do staff respond reactively when volunteer initiatives arise and when volunteers take responsibility, or do employees take a more initiative-taking role in motivating, facilitating, and leading volunteers? There are intermediate forms between

these two positions. Thus, rather than a general answer, this question must be answered in the settings where volunteering unfolds.

Leading volunteers requires a somewhat different approach than those exercised in work-life (Løvaas et al., 2019). In a standard transactional employment relationship, there are incentives and sanction options available, which are absent when leading volunteers. Volunteers are not on contract. Instead, they can in principle choose not to show up or to end their engagement whenever they please (Farmer & Fedor, 1999). By its very nature, volunteering involves more symmetry and equality than is common in general work-life. Therefore, alternative incentives, such as strengthening volunteers' inner motivation, should be cherished to foster the bond between the volunteer and the organization (Dwyer et al., 2013). Literature on volunteer leadership is relatively limited and has often been based on general management theory applied to a given context, often resulting in an import of theories developed in business schools (Løvaas et al., 2019). This includes, for example, transformational leadership, which has been applied to the leadership of volunteers (Elstad, 2010). We follow researchers who hesitate to uncritically import leadership and managerial ideals into civic organizations (Framgarden, 2024; Løvaas et al., 2019), and agree that leadership and organizing practices benefit from being contextualized to the specific features of religious organizations (Sirris, 2023b).

The leadership practices of voluntary work are a heterogeneous field that combines applying work-life principles while maintaining the unique character of volunteering (Rochester, 2013). A particular focal point in this balancing act is how church staff and volunteers perceive one another's roles (Fretheim, 2014; Tappel & Sirris, 2024), extending prior research that has investigated task distribution and interactions between volunteers and employees via roles and responsibilities (Nesbit et al., 2016). Other studies explore various aspects, such as motivations (Rubin, 2010; Yeung, 2004), organizational structures (Harris, 1998; Sirris, 2023b), and effective leadership practices (Sirris, 2015; Sporsheim & Sirris, 2018). Researchers also consider factors like welfare (Middlemiss Lé Mon et al., 2014), organizational culture (Sirris, 2023a), a theological perspective (Felter et al., 2025; Fretheim et al., 2016), and local conditions (Framgarden, 2024; Kappelgaard et al., 2016). Several of these publications provide practical advice on recruiting, training, and supporting volunteers, while others assess diaconal and social aspects of church volunteering (Højlund & Espersen, 2023).

Turning to our research context, the congregations in the Church of Norway, the responsibilities of volunteers and employees are not formally regulated in any strict sense. The purpose clause in the service regulations of the church professions includes pointing to a shared responsibility for recruiting, equipping,

and guiding volunteers. This is an open formulation, which can be practiced to a greater or lesser extent and in several ways. We agree with Tappel and Sirris (2024), who find that such practices are negotiated and shaped by context, especially in terms of the relationships between local congregation members and staff. In their studies on volunteering in Norwegian congregations, Fretheim (2014) as well as Sporsheim and Sirris (2018) noted informal organizing, which can “refer to the central position of the actor, most often an employee who is key in voluntarism and works informally through relationships” (Tappel & Sirris, 2024, p. 93). Its drawback is the lack of systematic thinking or joint understanding. We find similar insights in international studies (Rimes et al., 2017).

From the perspectives of leadership studies and practical theology, a recent monograph by Sirris (2023a) delves into the understanding of volunteering by examining its nature and significance in areas like community and culture, recruitment and follow-up, and organization and management. The study examines the Church of Norway and concludes that volunteering in Norwegian congregations is not a given and requires nurturing to thrive. Sirris (2023a) calls for research to enhance church structures and improve understanding among employees and volunteers, emphasizing responsibility, interaction, and conflict management. His study also explores how churches can engage with local communities to foster innovation, civic engagement, and community strength, as well as how the church’s values can influence organizing volunteering. Another recent study (Framgarden, 2024) explores volunteering by examining the characteristics of church volunteering. It addresses the volunteers’ motivations, the tasks they perform, and the organizational dynamics between the volunteers and staff.

To sum up, the leadership of volunteers does not appear as a unified field of knowledge. Instead, it has been a practical phenomenon that is scarcely theorized. This insight relates to the diversity in the nonprofit sector with very differing contexts and the breadth of leadership practices. This is a gap in the literature that this article addresses by providing new empirically based insights. Collectively, the relevant body of literature emphasizes the importance of staff members cultivating a positive volunteer culture. For the sake of this article, we understand such cultivating efforts as distinct leadership practices, which we examine guided by a specific conceptualization (Sporsheim & Sirris, 2018), to which we now turn.

Theoretical perspectives

We extend existing research by employing a model for church volunteer leadership that was proposed by Sirris (2015) and developed by Sporsheim and Sirris (2018). The model is based on two theoretical traditions within the field of leadership. First, institutional leadership emphasizes that the leader’s task is to articulate

the organization's purpose and identity (Selznick, 1957), which is essential in religious organizations (Hustinx et al., 2015). We understand values as mental maps and preferences that influence attitudes and behaviors. Identity development and values consciousness, "reflection on intentions, patterns of action, consequences, and interpretations of values" (Sirris, 2023b, p. 151), are relevant to how church employees lead volunteers. Second, the model draws on the theoretical tradition of managerial work behavior, which is based on empirical observational studies of leadership practice (Mintzberg, 2009). Here, leaders work on three levels: the information level, the leadership level, and the action level. Mintzberg's theory forms the model's practice-oriented aspect, which is relevant for the interaction between employees and volunteers. While this theoretical direction appears descriptive, Selznick's theory is normative. Both theories' impact on the model results in four leadership dimensions, which we briefly outline: developing identity and creating value consciousness; managing or administering; leading or mobilizing; and doing (Sirris, 2015).

The leadership dimension of *developing identity and creating value consciousness* is the constitutive and normative element in volunteer leadership (Sirris, 2015, p. 9). This permeates the other leadership dimensions so that the organization functions according to its purpose. Shared values provide direction and create trust that enables interaction. The main task of leaders is to appeal to and raise consciousness about the organization's purpose or mission. Through values and identity development work, organizational actions and decisions are motivated by desired values. A defining trait of volunteers is that they are often motivated by one or more personal values, and leaders must respond to this. A characteristic of volunteers in religious contexts is that they are more focused on values than volunteers in other contexts (Wollebæk et al., 2015). Leadership that is based on values, such as transformational leadership and values-conscious leadership, is thus relevant in the volunteer sphere (Elstad, 2010, p. 201). The leader's role is to maintain vision and trust in the personnel and their intention to assist in achieving the organization's goals

The second leadership dimension, *governing or administering*, challenges the nature and characteristics of volunteering, as management primarily belongs to the work-life sphere. Volunteering has examples of written agreements as compensatory measures in the absence of management rights, but there are few sanctioning possibilities. Conflicts can arise when some are paid, whereas others are not. Furthermore, it can be difficult to criticize people who work for free with an idealistic motive. The leader's role occurs through setting goals and tasks by structuring and delegating tasks and allocating resources. Information is

a management tool. Well-functioning volunteer leadership contains management elements through coordination and administration.

In the third leadership dimension, *leading or mobilizing*, leadership occurs in the relationship between the leader and volunteers. Interaction and relationships permeate the church. Thus, we understand volunteer leadership as maintaining and developing relationships. Leaders motivate voluntary efforts through dialogue. Such mobilization contrasts with management. Volunteer leaders then come closer to volunteers than management allows. One becomes more dependent on trust and legitimacy to succeed. The volunteer leader resembles a supporter who facilitates freedom and security and maintains motivation.

The fourth leadership dimension, denoted as *doing*, is where the volunteer leader comes even closer to volunteer work. Leadership occurs at the action level. The leader has first-hand knowledge of the operational level and is often close to and involved in practical tasks with others.

Importantly, the model does not show the strength or quantity ratio between the leadership dimensions. However, all four dimensions ensure dynamics by capturing a broad repertoire of leadership practices. Leaders should not exclude themselves from any of the leadership dimensions, and Sirris (2015) argues that leaders prefer one of them but should strive for a balance. Analytically, the dimensions are separable, but in practice, they often overlap. For example, motivating and creating values consciousness can blend into one leadership practice. The model connects two main perspectives within the field of leadership. Institutional theory, with its contextual and values-laden perspective, is well-suited to the church as a normative and religious organization (Sirris & Askeland, 2021).

Sporsheim and Sirris (2018) empirically investigated and theorized the model coined by Sirris (2015). Their study presents data from group interviews with staff members in three congregations. A total of fourteen professionals participated, including pastors, deacons, catechists, and church musicians. Central themes in the interviews were volunteering and employees' leadership practices, roles, and relationships with volunteers. The study showed that church employees' understanding, and practice of volunteer leadership were normatively anchored. This relates to the model's first dimension, developing identity and creating values consciousness. Being volunteer leaders, church employees were bearers of community values that are theologically grounded and strongly present in the church employees' identity. Further, the employees understood themselves as volunteer leaders and collectively had the responsibility to build the congregation by involving volunteers and including them. Based on the empirical findings, Sporsheim and Sirris (2018) revised the model previously proposed (Sirris, 2015).

This updated version (Figure 1 indicates central types of interaction, roles, and relationships in volunteering.



FIGURE 1 Leading volunteers (Sporsheim & Sirris, 2018, p. 69)

The investigation in the congregations showed that employees paid more attention to recruitment than follow-up. Church employees led volunteers by establishing and maintaining relationships. This way, voluntary engagement and effort were motivated and mobilized. As volunteer leaders, they invited volunteers to partnership and led the work by being visible, accessible, and participating alongside the volunteers. The study also showed that leadership responsibility was tied to facilitating practical tasks. According to the interviewees, volunteers could not be left to themselves if the congregation were to appear as a cohesive community. The model will need to be adjusted, considering empirical data, and provide new theorizing that shows the connection between leadership and volunteering.

Method

As noted above, we chose a quantitative approach that builds on and supplements a body of qualitative research on leading volunteers in congregations. A pre-coded questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire was based on the conceptualization of volunteer leadership described above (Sporsheim and Sirris, 2018) and visualized in Table 1.

<i>Sirris (2015)</i>	Identity development and values consciousness	Governing and managing	Leading	Doing
<i>Sporsheim & Sirris (2018)</i>	Building community and co-working community Take and give responsibility	Informing and facilitating Recruit and follow up Develop strategies and goals	Being visible and available Motivate and inspire	Motivate and inspire
<i>Midttun and Sirris (2025)</i>	Values consciousness	Develop strategies and goals		
		Leadership practices		

TABLE 1 Conceptualizations of volunteer leadership (based on Sirris, 2015)

The questions were developed by the authors based on the conceptualization of the seven leadership practices identified by Sporsheim and Sirris (2018). Each of the seven practices was operationalized into multiple questions with answer options. The questionnaire was created digitally using the Netigate tool. The survey contained 18 questions. Questions 1–5 concerned information about the informants, whereas questions 6–9 were questions about the congregation and volunteers. Questions 10 and 11 dealt with overall strategy in the congregations, while questions 12–17 concerned the specific leadership practices from the model for volunteer leadership (Sporsheim & Sirris, 2018). Question 18 included 15 statements about values and attitudes towards the work with volunteers, indicating the degree of value consciousness in congregations. We conducted a pilot to capture any ambiguities and deficiencies, which were answered by five respondents from a parochial church council where the first author worked. Feedback from the test respondents indicated that the questions were relevant in relation to both

working methods and challenges associated with volunteer leadership. Informants for the actual survey were selected based on the aim to compare different regions and professional groups, while hopefully obtaining a large enough sample to generalize.

Church employees are a large and varied group, and everyone who works with volunteers in congregations, regardless of formal leadership position, was the target audience for the survey. In 2018, the questionnaire was sent to a total of 844 persons, 487 from the Oslo diocese and 357 from the Stavanger diocese. The choice of these dioceses was due to several reasons. They are both large dioceses with a high number of congregations, which hopefully would increase the answer rate. The first author worked in a congregation in the Stavanger diocese and knew local church and volunteer traditions. The diocese is influenced by the layman culture and is placed in the Norwegian “Bible belt” with extensive voluntary work. In contrast, the Oslo diocese is influenced by a high folk church tradition and is marked by multicultural and multireligious traditions, given the high density of inhabitants from various ethnical backgrounds. We received assistance with the distribution of the questionnaire from one contact person working in each of the diocesan offices in Oslo and Stavanger, who conveyed information about the survey and the link to the questionnaire to the relevant informants.

Out of 844 potential respondents, 111 individuals answered some of the questions, and 89 individuals completed the entire questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 10.5 percent. This is a low answer rate, and the findings cannot be generalized. The field of church volunteering is complex, both regarding the various individuals and their different approaches to being a volunteer, and regarding the many variations of local church culture that mark the Church of Norway. This complexity may be reflected in how the survey questions were understood. Since the survey was quantitative, there was no possibility to explain or answer any questions the recipients may have had. Also, the results of the survey would have been strengthened if there were a higher response rate. We do not know if results would have been different with additional recipients; the results appear unidirectional, but it may affect nuances and would give a stronger result. All professional groups requested in the questionnaire are represented in the sample, and additional professional groups beyond those asked for have also responded.

	Oslo	Stavanger	Total
Gender			
Male	14	26	40
Female	33	38	71
	47	64	111
Age			
18-30	9	3	12
31-40	13	9	22
41-50	13	18	31
51-60	5	24	29
61-70	7	10	17
Profession			
Manager	7	15	22
Pastor	12	12	24
Deacon	10	6	16
Volunteer manager	0	1	1
Faith educator	7	8	15
Musician	2	6	8
Catechist	3	7	10
Other	6	9	15
Tenure			
0-5	20	21	41
6-11	14	16	30
12-15	5	4	9
16-20	2	9	11
20-	5	14	19

TABLE 2 Respondents

Table 2 shows the respondents' gender, age, profession, and tenure. There are several reasons for the low response rate. The respondents could have been unavailable due to vacation, illness, or other hindrances. Another reason could be that the survey topic was not grasped as sufficiently relevant. Some may not consider themselves volunteer leaders as they do not have a formal leadership role in the congregation. Additionally, some of the non-responses could be explained by a busy workday or a part-time position. To limit non-response, we formulated questions with checkbox options, with only a few questions allowing for free-text answers. We also strived to make clear and relevant questions. We focused on not making the survey too long, estimating and informing that it would take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

We notified Sikt, the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, about the project, and we conducted the study in keeping with standard ethical guidelines. We did not anonymize the dioceses involved in the research because both dioceses are large with little likelihood of identifying individuals. Additionally, no questions about specific congregations were asked, preventing tracking back to individuals in this manner. Data were processed using the SPSS analysis program. The figures and diagrams presenting the results are calculated and created in Excel. Decimal numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number. We assess the validity of this survey to be good. The topics of the questions in the survey stem from findings from previous research, thereby anchoring the project in the field being studied.

Findings

Our findings are closely linked to the concepts of Sporsheim and Sirris (2018), who qualitatively derived seven distinct leadership practices used by church employees in leading volunteers: *community building, take and give responsibility, inform and facilitate, develop strategies and goals, recruit and follow up, being visible, available, and participative, and motivate*. In our survey, these leadership practices were operationalized into various activities relevant to leadership vis-à-vis volunteers. To design a questionnaire that was operationalized into concrete tasks within the seven leadership practices, some questions were naturally more detailed than the seven leadership practices. For the sake of this article, we emphasize findings on 1) leadership practices that were emphasized by the respondents, 2) values consciousness, and 3) strategic planning for voluntary work.

Leadership practices

We investigated the extent to which different leadership practices were regarded as important. Figure 2 presents the four practices of *building community: to give relevant information, to facilitate making tasks as easy as possible, and to do tasks together*. *Building community* is commented on in the subchapter on values consciousness.

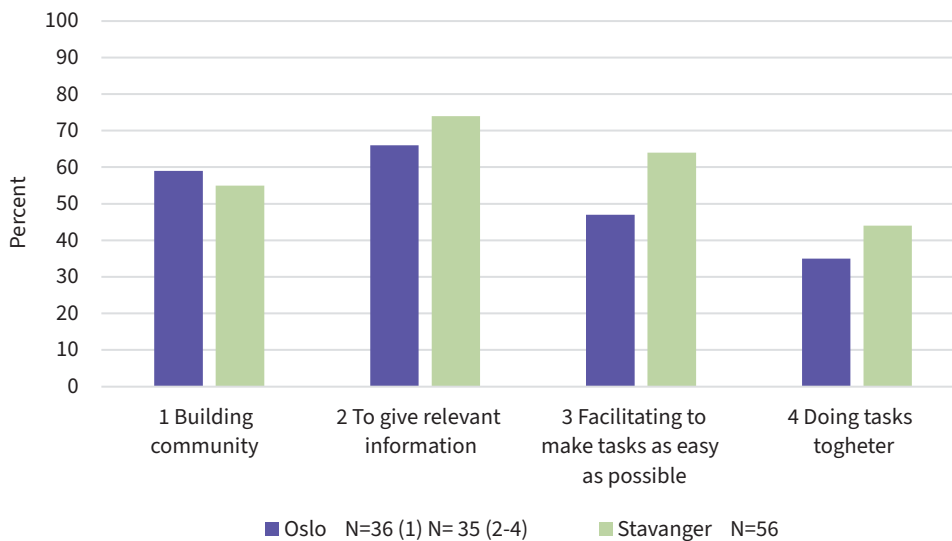


FIGURE 2 Leadership practices

Figure 2 is based on the question *How do you emphasize following leadership practices in your work with volunteers?* The answers were given on a Likert scale from 1 low to 5 very high. Figure 2 shows the percentages for rating four and five combined, from each of the two dioceses. The practice emphasized the highest in both dioceses is *to give relevant information*, with a score of 66 percent in Oslo and 74 percent in Stavanger. *Facilitating tasks as easy as possible* was given a score of 47 percent in Oslo and 64 percent in Stavanger. *Doing tasks together* is rated respectively 35 percent in Oslo and 44 percent in Stavanger. We presupposed that giving information was the most common leadership practice since much voluntary work depends on information and facilitation. The score on *doing tasks together* was lower than expected based on the findings at Sporsheim and Sirris (2018). *To facilitate* can hold several meanings, and to make the question as straightforward as possible for the questionnaire, we chose *facilitating to make tasks easy*. Given the prevalence of reflexive volunteering, indicated by a high turnover and participation in tasks that do not require too much effort (Fretheim, 2014), the question captured

whether there was an emphasis on making tasks easier to maintain volunteers' engagement. The result showed a somewhat higher emphasis in Stavanger than in Oslo, both approximately at and above the middle of the scale. In an open text option, one respondent wrote:

Facilitating tasks to make them as easy as possible can be both a benefit but also something that might cause volunteers to lose motivation. My experience is that many volunteers want to take on a significant part of the work so that what they do has value. They don't want me to facilitate too much, as it might make them feel less needed.

In addition to exploring how different leadership practices were emphasized, we asked how much time was spent on specific tasks.

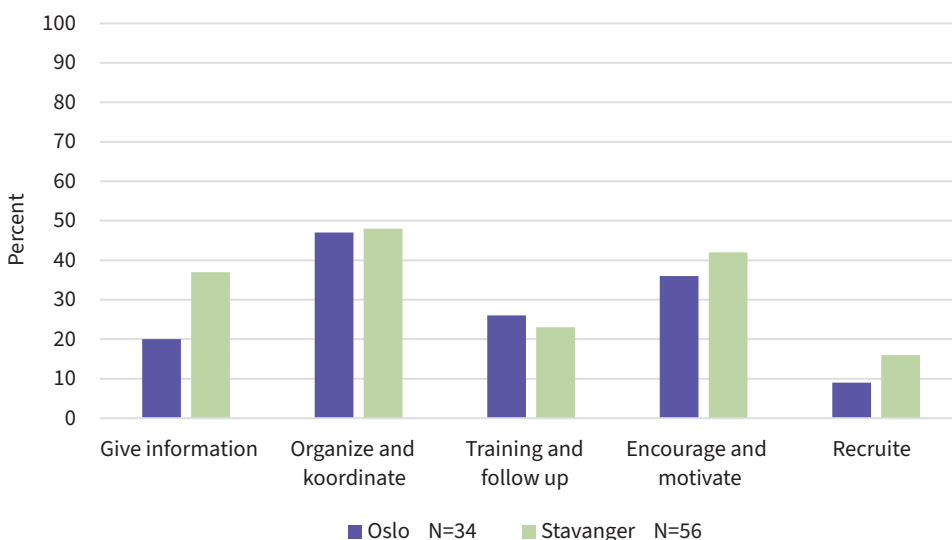


FIGURE 3 Time used on leadership practices

The question asked as the basis for figure 3 is: *To what extent do you use time on doing the following tasks?* The answers were given on a Likert scale from 1, *a little*, to 5, *very much*. Figure 3 shows the percentage range of respondents who gave scores of four and five on the time spent on each leadership practice. 47 percent of the respondents from Oslo and 48 percent from respondents in Stavanger ranked *organize and coordinate* on top and *encourage and motivate* were ranked second by 36 percent in Oslo and 42 percent in Stavanger. The dioceses are quite similar in each task; however, *give information* shows both a quite low score and the most

distinct difference, where 20 percent of Oslo ranks this as high, in contrast to 37 percent in Stavanger. This finding deviates from what we expected since information work is ranked at the top in both dioceses in terms of importance.

In an open text option about time spent on volunteers, two respondents wrote how volunteers are independent, take responsibility to train other volunteers, as well as delegating training to other coworkers. Another respondent wrote:

The time pressure in this work is too high. Volunteers come to the back of the line because it is one of the few things that is not imposed from above. A lot is going well, even if it would have been better if one had given it a little time. But we do not have that time in this parish. That is sad.

This shows that the situation in the different congregations is varied and that the challenges in the volunteer work may differ.

Further, the questionnaire investigated how motivational work was performed, with the question *How do you and/or the congregation work regarding volunteer motivation?* Options for answers were 1, never, to 5, often, on a Likert scale and are shown in figures 4 and 5. The figures show the answers for each diocese.

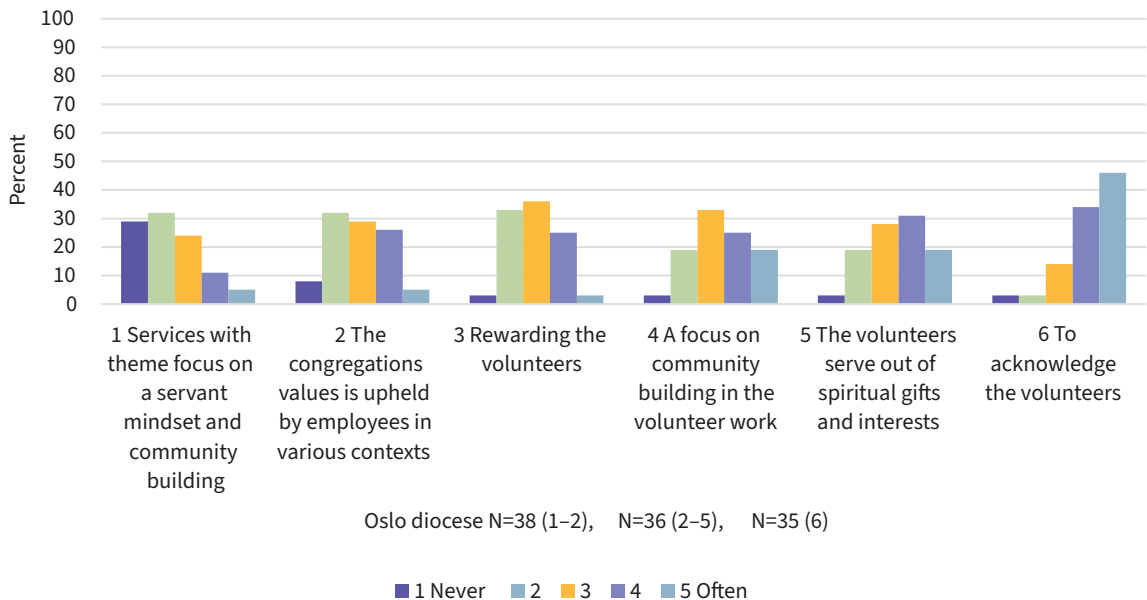


FIGURE 4 Motivational work in the Oslo diocese

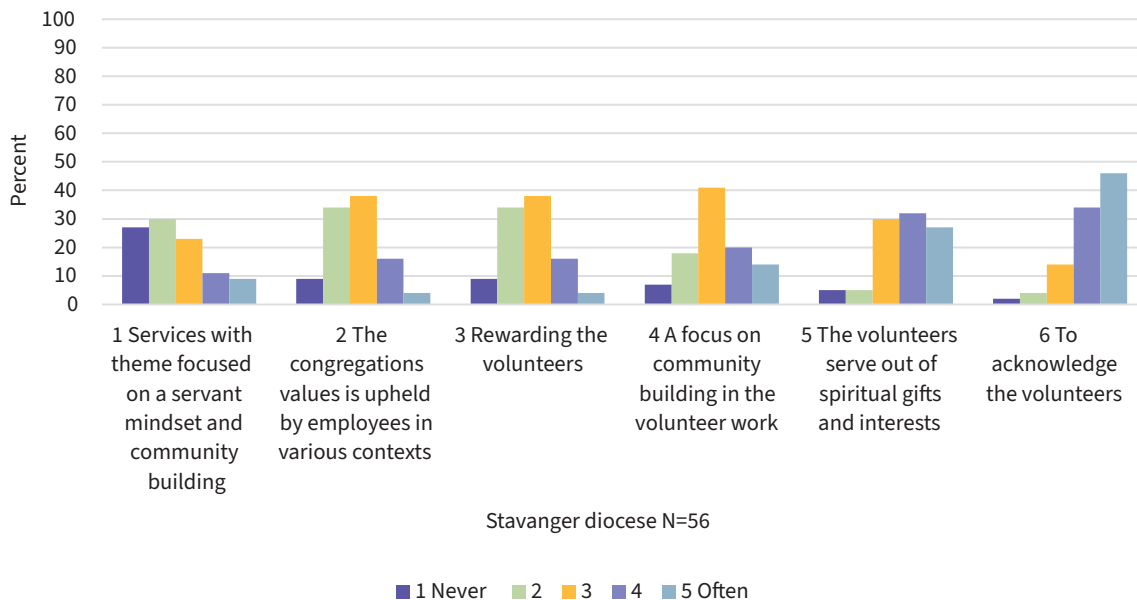


FIGURE 5 Motivational work in Stavanger diocese

Motivating has a great significance in leading volunteers, given the values-focused nature of volunteering, as well as experiencing that voluntary engagement in The Church of Norway is not a given and will need nurturing to thrive (Sirris, 2023a). Motivational work comes in many forms depending on local culture, and the question suggested six possible motivation options. In both dioceses, the most frequently used motivational option was *to acknowledge*, with 80 percent score on values 4 and 5 in Oslo, and 79 percent in Stavanger. Second, *servicing out of gifts and interests* reaches a score on values 4 and 5 respectively 50 percent in Oslo and 59 percent in Stavanger. There are many other ways to motivate than the options in this question, and in the free text option, both arranging courses and seminars for volunteers, and parties to celebrate the volunteers, were used to motivate and reward. One respondent wrote:

We want to acknowledge our volunteers. If we manage to do that, has to be answered by someone else. But most importantly, we recognize the weekend gathering and the annual feast for church volunteers as very central moments in our acknowledgement and praise of our volunteers.

Interestingly, in both dioceses, there was quite a high score in value 3 in almost every option. This shows that motivational work was something volunteer leaders recognized as a part of the leadership practices.

Further, our findings revealed that little time was dedicated to recruiting volunteers. In total, 51 percent of the respondents combined reported spending little or very little time on this practice, while only a total of 17 percent reported spending much or very much time on recruitment. Figure 6 shows how time spent on recruiting was reported by pastors, managers, deacons, and catechists/faith educators. We choose to present these four professions due to the formal leadership of pastors and managers and the assumed relatively high number of volunteer's deacons, and faith educators who are in contact.

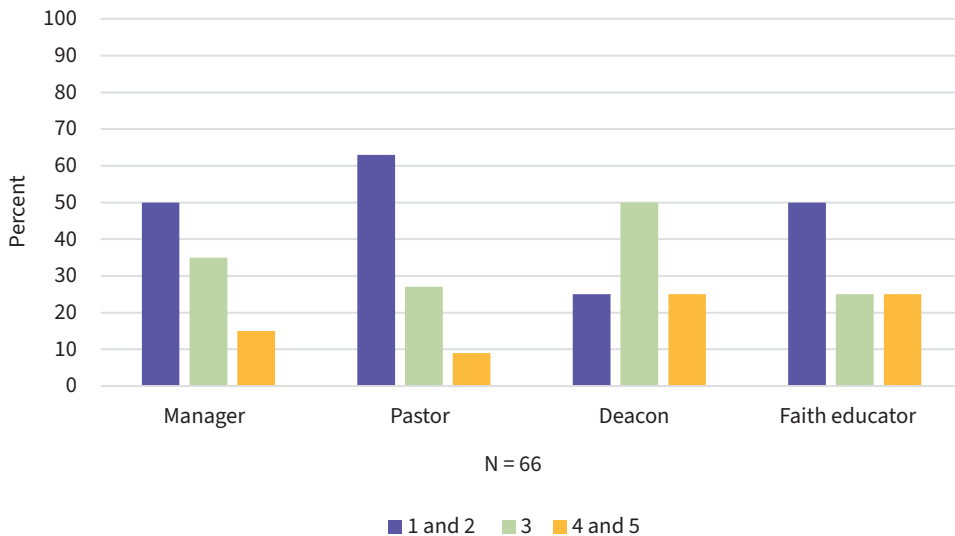


FIGURE 6 Time used to recruit per profession

The bar on the left shows that the response is *very little* and *little time* combined, where three of the four professions are most frequently represented. The bar in the middle shows the value 3, or *some time spent*, where deacons replied 50 percent, managers replied 35 percent, pastors 27 percent, and faith educators 25 percent. The bar on the right shows the responses *much* and *very much* time spent combined. As we can see, deacons and faith educators rank this the highest among the professions; however, with only 25 percent each.

Values consciousness

To explore if and how volunteer leadership was based on values consciousness, we asked: *Has the congregation developed local values for its work?* Figure 7 presents the responses distributed according to the size of the congregations' number of volunteers. We chose to show this to see if the number of volunteers had any influence on the development of local values.

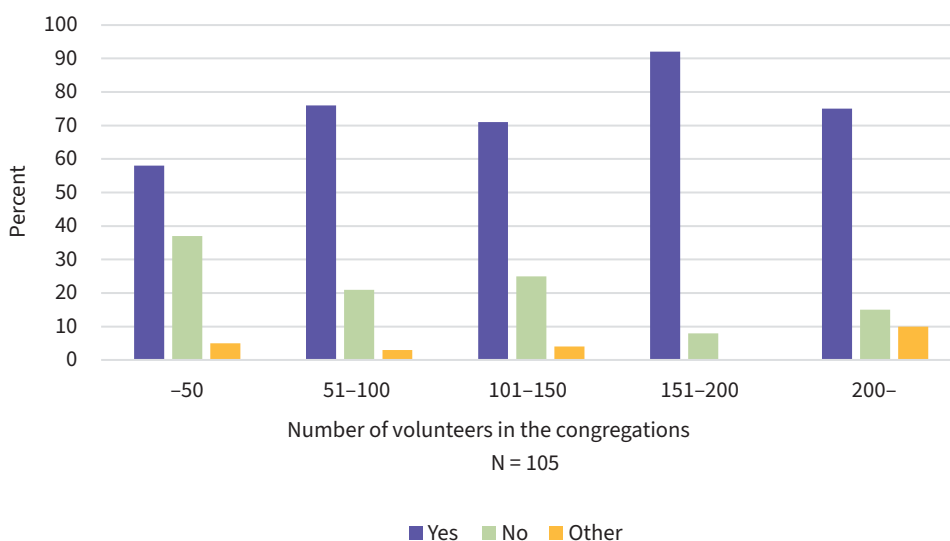


FIGURE 7 Core values in congregations

As shown in Figure 7, there is a high percentage of respondents, independent of the number of volunteers in the congregation, who state that local values have been developed. The strong focus on values was something we presumed, given the church' values-based nature.

Building community is a leadership practice linked to identity development and values consciousness in the model for volunteer leadership (Sporsheim & Sirris, 2018). Regarding the leadership practice of *building community*, our survey showed, presented in Figure 2, that this practice is considered important or very important by 59 percent of respondents from Oslo and by 55 percent of the respondents from Stavanger. *Building community* is thus ranked lower than *giving relevant information*, but higher than *doing tasks together* (Figure 2).

In terms of values consciousness, the questionnaire additionally asked the respondents to consider three assertions. These were: 1) *It is important that I, as a leader of volunteers, convey the congregational values*, 2) *It has little significance if the*

volunteers have other values than those of the congregation, and 3) *Voluntary work has an intrinsic value beyond the task performance*. The answers are shown in Figure 8.

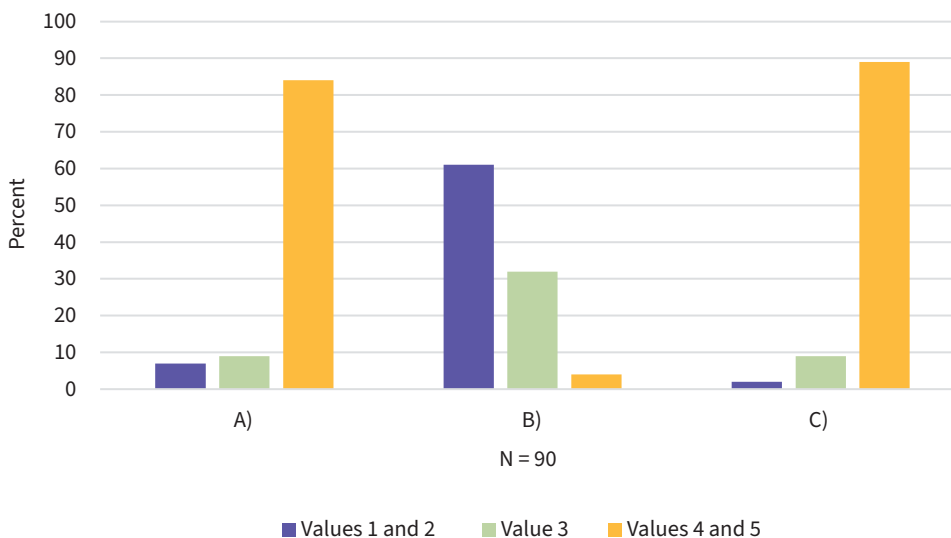


FIGURE 8 Considerations about values

Our data revealed that 84 percent of the respondents believe it is important or very important that those who lead volunteers convey the congregation's values (column a), and only 7 percent believe it does not matter if the volunteers have values different from the congregation (column b). Additionally, 89 percent agree or strongly agree that volunteering has intrinsic value beyond tasks being performed (column c). This helps indicate the significance of the volunteer community as its own value, as such, and relates to community building. The finding is further strengthened by 91 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that a good volunteer structure is important for the congregation's growth and community.

Strategic planning for voluntary work

Strategic or planned volunteer leadership was investigated through two main questions: one regarding strategic plans and one regarding common goals among the employees. In addition, strategy occurs in question 18, where various assertions were given for the respondents to consider. Figure 9 shows the response to the question *Has the congregation adopted its own plan for organizing volunteers?* The answer options are shown in the figure.

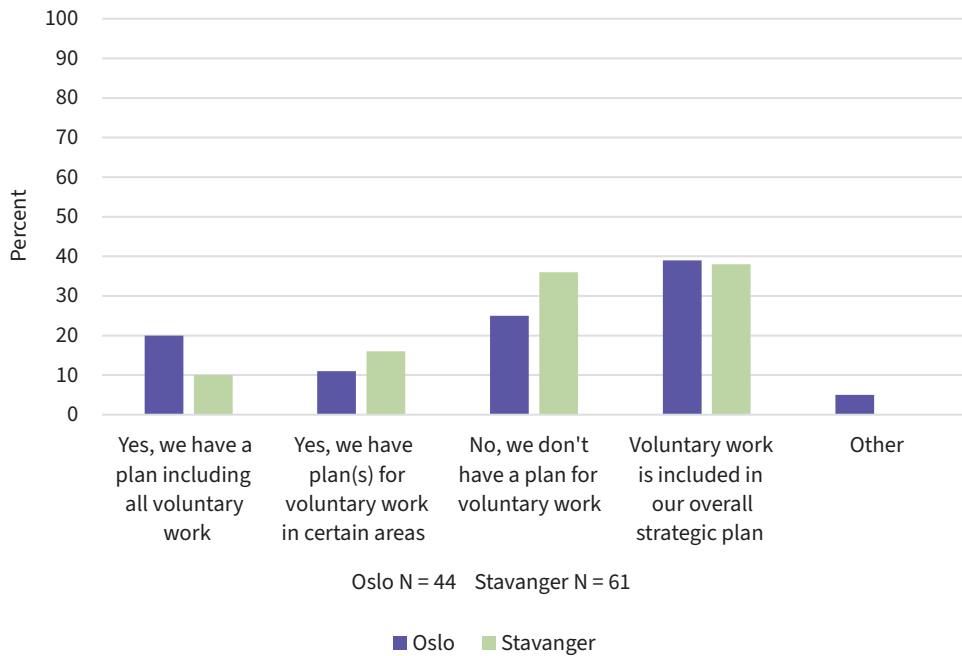


FIGURE 9 Planning for volunteering

In the diocese of Oslo, 20 percent of the respondents stated that the congregation indeed had developed a plan for organizing voluntary work, 11 percent stated that there were plans for certain areas of voluntary work, and 39 percent stated that voluntary work is included in an overall strategic plan. Only 25 percent stated that they did not have any forms of plans for voluntary work. In the diocese of Stavanger, 10 percent responded that there was a plan for voluntary work, 16 percent that there were plans in certain areas, and 38 percent that voluntary work was included in the overall strategic plan. A total of 36 percent responded that there is no plan for voluntary work. There was also a high extent of common goals among leading volunteers amongst the staff, as shown in Figure 10.

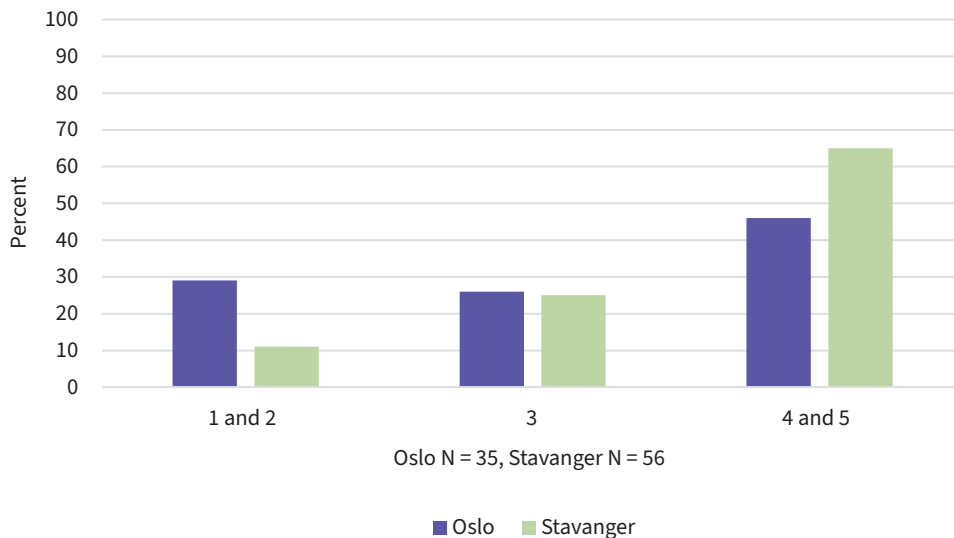


FIGURE 10 Common goals

We asked: *To what extent would you say there is a common understanding and common goals for voluntary leadership amongst the staff?* As figure 10 shows, both Stavanger and Oslo rank the values 4 and 5 (high extent) highest, with 65 and 46 percent, respectively. Overall, the findings show that there is seemingly a higher degree of common understanding and goals amongst the staff in the Stavanger diocese.

In addition to these questions, three different assertions were given regarding strategy and planning. The respondents were asked to consider how they regard the statements of a) *It is important for the congregational community that volunteers contribute to forming the congregational strategy*, b) *Facilitating a good volunteer structure has an impact on congregational growth and community*, and c) *Predictability is of great importance for the thriving of the volunteers*.

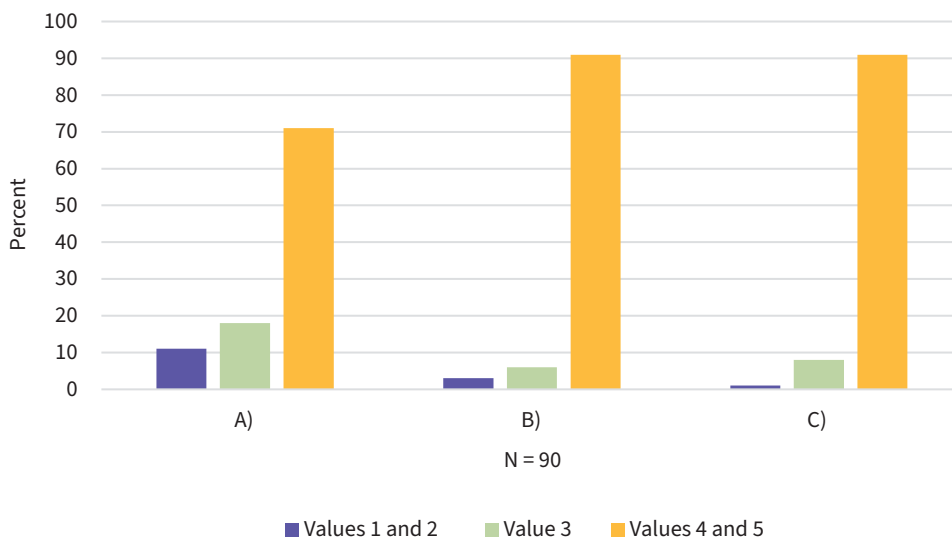


FIGURE 11 Considerations on strategy and planning

The figure shows a significantly high degree of agreement on these statements, which can tell us that strategy and planning are recognized as important; however, the assertions were stated in a positive manner, which can also influence or lead the responses in a certain direction.

Discussion

Our study makes a threefold contribution by investigating the extent to which specific leadership practices are applied vis-à-vis volunteers in congregations, the degree to which leadership is informed by values consciousness, and how volunteer leadership is part of strategic work. Thus, this article provides new quantitative data concerning volunteer leadership in the Church of Norway on a broader scale than previous studies – with the exception of Sirris’ (2023a) case study of church volunteering that included 93 participants.

Facilitating is the prioritized leadership practice

The practical facilitating role is essential to the organization of voluntary work (Sirris, 2023b, s. 36). It is thus natural that these leadership practices achieved high scores in the survey. Overall, the survey showed that leadership vis-à-vis

volunteers emphasizes governing and managing rather than leading and mobilizing. More precisely, the respondents prioritized giving information and facilitating above building community and doing tasks together (Figure 2). This finding is supported by time spent on the various practices, that is, most time was spent organizing and coordinating (Figure 3). The respondents prioritized mundane practices to make voluntary work function daily.

This finding shows that the leadership practices of facilitating and informing, placed in the second leadership dimension of governing or administering in Sirris' model (2015), are prioritized. The model does not show a strength or quantity ratio between the dimensions, but Sirris argues that leaders should strive for a balance between them (2015). Further, the dimension of governing or administering contrasts the very nature of volunteering, given its many elements taken from the work sphere. The lack of incentives from formalized employment requires other types of incentives, like strengthening inner motivation so that the bond between the volunteer and the organization can be strengthened (Dwyer et al. 2013).

Our survey exhibits the leaders as organizers and facilitators, also because of their emphasis on and use of their time. This practical facilitator role is also stressed indirectly in our data through the weak attention towards strategic planning, although some state that plans for specific voluntary areas were incorporated in other plans (Figure 9). The managing, facilitating role is not a mere drawback in leading volunteers. Leading and managing are like two sides of a coin, in direct relation to and dependent on each other (Sirris 2023b). The church employees know how to organize, manage, and inform the volunteers, and can also use this knowledge to lead and motivate. The new reflexive voluntarism requires a neat administration throughout the volunteer's engagement, and a structured organization will provide predictability and security (Sirris 2023b). Facing a larger extent of turnover and shorter volunteer engagements, information work is crucial, both for addressing goals and values, but also in terms of communicating clearly about routines and rules. The positioning can thus be established from leading through values and by managing alike.

A strong values consciousness

Values-based motives to do voluntary work are a strong force, especially within religious and social organizations (Sirris, 2023b, p. 105). Previous research is quite univocal that volunteers need motivation to engage and to persevere in their engagement (Steensnæs, 2014; Løvaas, Sirris & Kaasa, 2019; Sporsheim & Sirris, 2018). Voluntary work in a religious context cannot be taken for granted and needs to be cultivated to be upheld (Sirris 2023a). Our data reveal a high inclination towards consciousness, indicated by the fact that many congregations had

formulated core values to guide their work (Figure 7), and further how important the employees and the volunteers regarded the articulation and expressions of values (Figure 8). This served to motivate the employees and the volunteers alike.

This survey implies that motivational work is on the agenda; however, it appears to be performed spontaneously rather than in a formalized or strategic manner with common goals. Some of the response options in the question on motivation represented motivational efforts that take place at a broader level and where the motivation will apply to volunteer work as a whole. This includes, for example, services where the sermon, choice of songs, and any other elements revolve around a selected theme. Such services require long-term planning and a shared understanding among the staff and, preferably, the parish council regarding the value of volunteerism. Focusing on community building and highlighting the congregation's values in volunteer work are also collective efforts that are difficult to carry out alone. Such motivation efforts may benefit from a unified strategy. However, recognizing, rewarding, and allowing volunteers to serve based on their spiritual gifts and interests are options that can be implemented more spontaneously and do not require the same level of long-term planning.

A relevant question thus is whether the leaders should take a more active role in stimulating the volunteers' motivation by using the advantage of values consciousness and emphasize building even stronger communities? How this active role could be acted out will depend on local conditions, but a main source relates to the articulation of values. According to Selznick's (1957) theory on leadership, articulating values is the core of a leader's responsibility to ensure that goals and visions permeate the organization. The volunteers need to be reminded of values and to have the community of others who share these. Framgarden (2024) points to how volunteers highlight values such as belonging to a community, to do something for the community or for others, to achieve joy and well-being, and spiritual or faith-based motivations as reasons to contribute. Such values need nurturing; however, in everyday life can be taken for granted. A stronger attention to how and where values can be articulated by further developing the staff's joint goals for volunteer leadership can help the leaders to a more active role.

Weak strategic planning

Working together on setting goals and strategies supplement consciousness on values (Aadland & Askeland, 2017, p. 118). Developing strategies can help define areas of responsibility, and they can help new employees and new volunteers navigate the culture of the congregation. The field of church volunteering is complex, both regarding the various individuals and their different approaches to being a

volunteer, and regarding the many variations of local church culture that mark the Church of Norway.

Acting on the identified attention towards values and more attention towards building community could be beneficial to applying the role of a more active leader, guiding and helping the volunteers to maintain their engagement. Former research displays the leading of volunteers as informal (Fretheim 2014; Sporsheim and Sirris, 2018) and thereby often founded on relationships with the employee. Recruitment is often based on personal connections between employees and their acquaintances, especially when the employee works in their local congregation. Voluntary work, hence, is loosely organized. This informal organizing can cause a lack of systematic thinking among the staff members, and thereby a lack of joint understanding regarding goals and strategies for voluntary work (Tappel & Sirris, 2024).

Overall, volunteer planning appears to be inadequate according to the results, as noted in previous research. While there are plans, they largely pertain to specific parts of the work. Here, we could further question the reasons behind the creation of these plans. Is it due to mandates from the central authority or from a desire and need for a better volunteer structure? This question is not answered by the survey and could be a relevant topic for further exploration. We highlight that having a comprehensive plan supporting volunteer work would be beneficial and suggest that some form of volunteer coordination could be a solution, in line with findings from previous research. The softer leadership practices, such as recognition and community building, rank highest. Organization and information work also top the list among leadership practices. Professional task execution aspects, like recruitment, training, and follow-up, do not reach the highest rankings.

The structure of the church staff and the diversity of congregational work can be challenging to systematic thinking and strategic planning (Sirris & Askeland, 2021). There are several professions with responsibility for specific volunteers and tasks. For example, the youth leader is responsible for the volunteers of the youth club, the church musician is responsible for the volunteers in the choir, and the administrative leader is responsible for the volunteers in practical tasks. Besides, congregations most often have a diversity of smaller age-specific communities, from small children to elderly people. The responsibility for the volunteer engagement is decentralized as it is shared between the employees and shaped by the various contexts it belongs to and the different demands of required task performance and age group.

Conclusion

This study aimed to attain better empirical knowledge of how church employees perform leadership vis-à-vis volunteers by utilizing leadership practices identified in the model for church volunteer leadership (Sporsheim & Sirris, 2018) and whether and how such practices were linked to values and plans. By building on former research and leadership theories, we have discussed key findings emanating from the survey data, particularly that leaders of church volunteers use more time being facilitators and administrators than leading and motivating. Our survey documents that church volunteer leadership encompasses all four dimensions of the volunteer leadership model proposed by Sirris (2015) and Sporsheim and Sirris (2018), albeit with varying representation.

The leadership practices most frequently used pertain to administration, especially in information and facilitation work. Our study documents a broad consensus on the importance of values, both in leaders promoting these values and volunteers sharing the same congregational values. At the same time, the data suggests that there is room for developing values-based work and applying more varied methods to make this work more holistic, both through services and gatherings for volunteers. Through our research, we found that values-conscious work is more robust than expected, both in terms of established core values and the various attitudes reflected by the respondents. Concerning strategic planning, our research indicates a broad spectrum of specific tasks executed in volunteer leadership despite the lack of a systematic plan guiding this work. In sum, the church employees leading volunteers can be identified as values-conscious facilitators lacking a cohesive strategy.

The Church of Norway has longstanding traditions of volunteering and involvement, possessing valuable experience. At the same time, the church is in a transitional phase where it is finding its role as an actor from a new perspective and with new challenges. Austerity and a lack of recruitment to the pastor role, with the merging of congregations, and employees who are given more than one congregation to work in, demand new ways of organizing. In addition, the Church of Norway experiences a decreasing number of members, increased competition from other faith communities, especially amongst young people, and is being challenged on its set of values.

All these challenges may affect the recruitment of volunteers and the ability to make volunteers stay and flourish. There is a need for knowledge and consciousness about church volunteering. In our view, the church would benefit from becoming capable of utilizing its existing knowledge while also learning anew about volunteering in contemporary times. Existing knowledge of the importance

of values can be an area of cultivation. Through strategic use of values, volunteers can be recruited and retained in the community. Also, the knowledge of organizing and facilitating can be used to create that suits new, reflexive volunteers. Further, some of the challenges regarding finances and fewer employees may give room for volunteers in more areas than before. Our study provides the field with a comprehensive basis for describing how volunteer leadership is practiced and thereby identifying areas for further research and development. In this manner, attention can be directed towards the areas requiring action to empower and foster voluntary work in congregations, such as identifying challenges of recruiting and maintaining engagement, challenges in building community, and investigating effects on developing long-term volunteer strategies.

References

- Aadland, E. & Askeland, H. (2017). Verdibevist ledelse i praksis. In E. Aadland & H. Askeland (Eds.), *Verdibevist ledelse*, (pp. 113–136), Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Cnaan, R. A., & Curtis, D. W. (2013). Religious congregations as voluntary associations: An overview. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 42(1), 7–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640124607>
- Cnaan, R. A., Zrinčak, S., Grönlund, H., Smith, D. H., Hu, M., Kinoti, M. D., Knorre, B., Kumar, P., & Pessi, A. B. (2016). Volunteering in religious congregations and faith-based associations. In D.H. Smith, R. A. Stebbins & J. Grotz (Eds.). *The Palgrave handbook of volunteering, civic participation, and nonprofit associations* (pp. 472–494). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-26317-9_23
- Dekker, P., & Halman, L. (2003). *The Values of volunteering: cross-cultural perspectives*. Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-0145-9>
- Dwyer, P. C., Bono, J. E., Snyder, M., Nov, O., & Berson, Y. (2013). Sources of Volunteer Motivation: Transformational Leadership and Personal Motives Influence Volunteer Outcomes. *Nonprofit management and leadership*, 24(2), 181–205. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21084>
- Elstad, B. (2010). Ledelse og styring av frivillig arbeidskraft. In G. Ladegård og S.I. Vabo (Eds.), *Ledelse og styring*. (pp. 191–203). Fagbokforlaget.
- Enjolras, B., & Eimhjellen, I. (2018). Nye former for samfunnsengasjement og kollektiv handling. In B. Enjolras & I. Eimhjellen (Eds.), *Fra kollektiv til konnektiv handling? Nye former for samfunnsengasjement og kollektiv handling i Norge* (pp. 7–30). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.45.ch1>
- Farmer, S. M., & Fedor, D. B. (1999). Volunteer participation and withdrawal: A psychological contract perspective on the role of expectations and organizational support. *Nonprofit management & leadership*, 9(4), 349–368. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.9402>
- Felter, K. D., Berg, B. W., & Hansen, H. L. (2025). Make space! Creating Church with Newcomers. *Ecclesial Practices*, 11(2), 128–143. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22144417-20240203>

- Fisher, J., Lawthom, R., Mitchell-Smith, Z., O'Neill, T., & McLaughlin, H. (2019). 'Neither a professional nor a friend': the liminal spaces of parents and volunteers in family support. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 8(2), 249–266. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674318x15233473046566>
- Framgarden, G. K. (2024). *Frivillighet i Den norske kirke. En kvalitativ undersøkelse av seks menigheter i Stavanger og Hamar bispedømmer*. (PhD dissertation). VID Specialized University.
- Fretheim, K. (Ed.). (2014). *Ansatte og frivillige. Endringer i Den norske kirke*. IKO-forlaget.
- Fretheim, K., Mogstad, S. D., Lorentzen, H. (Eds.). (2016). *Fellesskap og organisering. Frivillig innsats i kirkens trosopplæring*. IKO-forlaget.
- Harris, M. (1995). The organization of religious congregations: Tackling the issues. *Nonprofit management and leadership*, 5(3), 261–274. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.4130050305>
- Harris, M. (1998). A Special Case of Voluntary Associations? Towards a Theory of Congregational Organization. *The British journal of sociology*, 49(4), 602–618. <https://doi.org/10.2307/591291>
- Højlund, H., & Espersen, H. H. (2023). Frivilliges samarbejde med medarbejdere i kirken-med hvilket engagement? *Tidsskrift for Professionsstudier*, 19(36), 60–73. <https://doi.org/10.7146/TFP.v19i36.140047>
- Hustinx, L., & Lammertyn, F. (2003). Collective and Reflexive Styles of Volunteering: A Sociological Modernization Perspective. *Voluntas (Manchester, England)*, 14(2), 167–187. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023948027200>
- Hustinx, L., Von Essen, J., Haers, J., & Mels, S. (2015). *Religion and volunteering: complex, contested and ambiguous relationships*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-04585-6_1
- Kappelgaard, D., Carlander, T. B., & Eskildsen, S. (2016). *Ledelse og involvering af frivillige i folkekirken*. Forlaget Ingerfair.
- Kreutzer, K., & Jäger, U. (2011). Volunteering versus managerialism: Conflict over organizational identity in voluntary associations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 40(4), 634–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764010369386>
- Løvaas, B. J., Sirris, S., & Kaasa, A. (2019). Har ledelse av frivillige noe å tilføre ledere i kunnskap-sorganisasjoner? *Beta*, 33(1), 22–42. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1504-3134-2019-01-03>
- Middlemiss Lé Mon, M., Strømsnes, K., Dinham, A., & Cameron, H. (2014). *Frivilliga i välfärden? En introduktion till diskussioner om kyrkan, socialt kapital och ideellt arbete*. Ideellt forum.
- Mintzberg, H. (2009). *Managing*. Prentice Hall Financial Times.
- Musick, M. A., & Wilson, J. (2007). *Volunteers: A social profile*. Indiana University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2979/3590.0>
- Nesbit, R., Rimes, H., Christensen, R. K., & Brudney, J. L. (2016). Inadvertent volunteer managers: Exploring perceptions of volunteer managers' and volunteers' roles in the public workplace. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 36(2), 164–187. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371x15576409>
- Rimes, H., Nesbit, R., & Brudney, J. L. (2017). Exploring the dynamics of volunteer and staff. Interactions from satisfaction to conflict. *Nonprofit management and leadership*, 28(2), 195–213. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.21277>

- Rochester, C. (2013). *Rediscovering voluntary action: The beat of a different drum*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137029461>
- Rubin, L. (2010). *Engagemang och sammanhang Varför arbetar man frivilligt och hur kan fler bli aktiva?* Ideellt forum.
- Selznick, P. (1957). *Leadership in administration: A sociological interpretation*. Row, Peterson.
- Sirris, S. (2015). Hvordan lede frivillige i kirken? En verdibasert og praksisorientert modell for kirkelig frivillighetsledelse. *Scandinavian Journal for Leadership and Theology*, 2. <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2367037>
- Sirris, S. (2023a). *En god frivillighetskultur : organisering, ledelse og utvikling av frivillighet i Den norske kirke*. IKO-forlaget.
- Sirris, S. (2023b). *Frivillighet og ledelse av frivillige*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Sirris, S., & Askeland, H. (Eds.). (2021). *Kirkelig organisering og ledelse: Et verdibasert og praksisorientert perspektiv*. Cappelen Damm Forskning. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.129>
- Sporshheim, A., & Sirris, S. (2018). Frie og villige? Ansatte som frivillighetsledere i Den norske kirke. *Tidsskrift for praktisk teologi*, 35(1), 57–71.
- Studer, S., & Von Schnurbein, G. (2013). Organizational factors affecting volunteers: A literature review on volunteer coordination. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 24(2), 403–440. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-012-9268-y>
- Tappel, E. A., & Sirris, S. (2024). Formal and informal: Two patterns of organizing voluntary work. *Scandinavian Journal for Leadership and Theology*, 11, 78–98. <https://doi.org/10.53311/sjlt.v11.126>
- Torry, M. (2017). *Managing God's business: Religious and faith-based organizations and their management*. Routledge.
- von Essen, J. (2020). The art of making sense of volunteering. In H. Askeland, G. Espedal, B. J. Løvaas, & s. Sirris (Eds.), *Understanding Values Work: Institutional Perspectives in Organizations and Leadership* (pp. 245–264). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37748-9_13
- Wollebæk, D., Sætrang, S., & Fladmoe, A. (2015). *Betingelser for frivillig innsats. Motivasjon og kontekst*. Senter for forskning på sivilsamfunn og frivillig sektor.
- Yeung, A. B. (2004). *Individually together : volunteering in late modernity. Social work in the Finnish church*. The Finnish Federation for Social Welfare and Health.