

# Exploring the limits of the pastoral profession

Discursive boundary work in interactions between pastors and deans in the Church of Norway

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## ABSTRACT

Two discourses frame the pastoral profession in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway: one is the professional, which emphasises religion, while the other is organisational and foregrounds management. This article explores interactions, between pastors and a dean, that are situated on the boundaries of these two discourses. From the theoretical perspective of institutional boundary work, I analyse a case study that highlights observational data, and in particular, meetings and performance appraisal interviews with pastors. The research question is as follows: *How do interactions between pastors and deans serve as spaces for discursive boundary work by the pastoral profession?* As the church aligns itself with modern work organisations, the findings show how the clergy construct themselves and their work by drawing on both discourses. This article discusses how pastoral work is perceived discursively as both a modern occupation and also a religious profession through efforts that can be described as competitive, collaborative and configurational boundary work. Interactions constitute a space where the actors work for, at and through these boundaries by negotiating their core work, relationships and theology.

**Keywords:** discourse, boundary work, pastors, church, profession, management, interactions

## INTRODUCTION

The pastoral profession is in transition. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, pastors balance their traditional autonomy with the requirement that they adjust to new organisational demands (Sirris & Andersson, 2023). This article explores how professional and managerial discourses manifest and are negotiated between pastors and deans—who are simultaneously both professionals and managers. I analyse these interactions as an illustrative case of working on the boundaries of discourses. The Church of Norway provides an interesting context for this phenomenon since the position of pastor can be described as a classic profession in which a high degree of autonomy is enjoyed, despite the fact that the bishop, who heads the diocese, is formally in leadership over them (Sirris, 2023). In 2004, a deanery reform restructured local ministry and played a crucial role in precipitating a process of transition (Schmidt, 2016, p. 38).

The deanery reform strengthened managerial roles within the church by increasing the administrative dimension and decreasing the space allowed for pastoral self-determination. This precipitated a change in the balance between managerial and professional concerns. Initially, the reform aimed to improve working conditions and promote collaboration. The continuous development of the clergy was enhanced by strengthening their right to supervision and to specialization through further education and courses. At the same time, the pastors maintained their attachment to a local parish. However, the reform also increased the leadership dimension by appointing deans as formal managers, representing a middle level of authority between the parish and the diocese. Traditionally, the dean was the first among equals, often the eldest pastor in the deanery, which is a geographical area consisting of several parishes. Since 2004, deans have formally served as middle managers, executing the responsibilities of an employer on behalf of the bishop. Deans typically oversee 15–25 pastors within their deanery. Thus, the reform has subtly centralized leadership, as the deanery has replaced the parish as the district of employment.

Importantly, the reform revised the work instructions for both deans and pastors. The deans carry an employer's liability (§4) for the clergy employed in their deanery (§1). These paragraphs state that the dean is obligated to execute the goals and strategies of both the diocese and the Church of Norway. The dean is supposed to motivate the clergy to fulfil their work through supervision and by stimulating them to increase their competences. The other employees of a local church are led by the church warden, at a municipal level, and with them, the dean is expected to facilitate collaboration and coordination (§3). The instructions convey the Church's high and broad-reaching expectations of deans: they must gain holistic managerial competence, safeguard the profession and fulfil their employer's liability (Sirris, 2018).

In 2013, an evaluation of the reform identified the spiritual, relational and administrative roles of the dean (Stifoss-Hanssen et al., 2013). The pastors interviewed reported that the deans played less of a spiritual role and generally behaved like managers with administrative duties. Nevertheless, the deans themselves did not view this situation as problematic. A two-fold categorization of theological and functional pastoral leadership emerged from this evaluation (Askeland, 2016, p. 111). First, within a theological framework, the clergy lead by word and sacrament. They carry a holistic responsibility for the life of their congregation, based on their ordination, and according to which they build the congregation and teach and foster a life of faith. Second, in terms of their functional responsibilities, clergy take the lead in worship services, and they work through strategies, goals and planning for congregational life. Furthermore, they pursue collaboration with the parochial church council to strengthen a holistic approach. Lastly, they work relationally by seeing, listening and following up with other church employees and volunteers.

This duality within pastoral work resembles the conceptualization pinpointed in Blizard's (1956) seminal study on how clergy combine both organisational and spiritual tasks and priorities in their work. Balancing the sacred and the secular is described as 'the pastor's dilemma'. The parallel structures of the spiritual and organisational realms can eventually lead to internal secularisation, whereby religious authority becomes less important. Increased management can reduce religious authority and promote a societal organisation that integrates non-religious templates and rational structures (Chavez, 1993). Traditionally, leadership in the church context has been framed as professional, not managerial. Management emphasises generic competences, transferable to various contexts, whereas professional skills and training are considered less important. A conceptualization of this duality in clergy work is mostly an analytical distinction since the pastors' practices blur this divide as they constantly balance theological, professional and public values (Sirris, 2018, p. 44).

Against this background, this article provides new insights into the inherent duality in pastoral leadership by analysing observational data of interactions between pastors and a dean. These interactions are open to both discourses that frame pastoral work. How the discourses emerge and are used as tools helps to define the boundaries and connections between pastors and their dean, who can also be perceived as employees with a manager. Their interactions are spaces that involve direct communication and dialoguing. They can be understood as discursive involvement where employer and employee share information and contribute to joint decision-making. This article contributes both empirically-based data and a conceptualization of what is happening in such direct encounters. Consequently, I utilise an approach that enables the fine-grained dynamics of practices to be studied. Practice theory foregrounds the centrality of situated interactions based on an ontology that considers the world to be a processual and ongoing accomplishment (Nicolini, 2012). The overall research question is thus: *How do interactions between pastors and deans serve as spaces for the discursive boundary work of the pastoral profession?*

The article prioritises pastors and the tensions they experience emerging from the intersection of the two discourses. Its structure is as follows: I present the theoretical framework of the article, institutional boundary work on the intersection of two logics: professionalism and managerialism. The method section describes how the case study and analysis were conducted. The main findings are then analysed as empirical themes, showing how the interactions occurred *in situ*. These findings are then discussed before I conclude and point out the limitations of the study, its practical implications and suggestions for further research.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### The logics perspective

Institutional logics constitute one trajectory in the broad stream of institutionalism, which is central to organisational and management studies (Scott, 2014). The logics, or 'rules of the game', are defined as 'socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality' (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). In keeping with this research tradition, I capture two ideal-typical logics—professionalism and managerialism—as manifested in the interactions. Professions are closed expert occupations, characterized by self-governance and discretion (Molander & Terum, 2008, p. 20). Professionalism, or professional logic, is characterized by

formal competence, collegiality and professional managers who serve as firsts among equals. However, professionals are generally reluctant to adopt new methods of organising that challenge their autonomy. The deanery reform strengthened the managerial logic within the ecclesial organisation, which had traditionally been governed by professionals. Organisations have, in general, seen a transition in their work life away from traditional professional leadership and towards organisationally driven management (Evetts, 2011). Managerialism, or managerial logic, consists of market elements and bureaucracy, and it is characterised by efficiency, hierarchy, line management and budgetary and managerial controls (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003). The two ideal typical logics inherent in my research context are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1:** *Ideal typical logics* (based on Sirris, 2023, p. 17)

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Professional logic</b>	<b>Managerial logic</b>
<i>Framing</i>	Religious calling and state official	Modern secular occupation
<i>Organising</i>	Collegium and hierarchy	Hierarchy and line management
<i>Focus</i>	Spirituality	Work conditions
<i>Pastor</i>	Independent colleague and fellow state official	Employee
<i>Dean</i>	First among equals	Employer
<i>Formalisation of leadership</i>	Elected and appointed leader legitimized by ecclesial and state authorities	Employed manager with organisational mandate
<i>Leader role</i>	Self-leadership	Separate leader role
<i>Competencies</i>	Contextual and disciplinary	Administrative, relational, strategic
<i>Organising principle</i>	Autonomy and discretion	Regulations and standardisation
<i>Conversational space</i>	Colloquium and pastoral counselling	Formal meetings
<i>Tasks</i>	Theological	Functional

This article enhances our knowledge of how theology is present and talked into being in the dialogue between dean and pastor within organisationally standardised and yet, simultaneously, unique and individually adapted practices. It is not a given that such interactions are characterised by religious semantics; nevertheless, pastors might be expected to include religious language when talking about prosaic work-related issues. I examine how the actors identify and are identified as pastors or employees or as both. Accordingly, the balance of the sacred with the secular is expressed through core pastoral work.

Recent research among Norwegian deans portrays their unease with their new role, according to which they must integrate the organisational discourse (Sirris 2018, 2019; Stifoss-Hanssen et al., 2013). Traditionally, pastors approached their dean or bishop when they wanted counselling: a personal conversation about spiritual matters (McClure, 2014, p. 270). Thus, counselling differs fundamentally from appraisals. I assume that these discrepancies will be present in the data, both in terms of its content and as a historical legacy. These discourses do not necessarily replace the earlier ones, nor are they mutually exclusive. Instead, they are multi-layered and have an additive effect (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). They represent two distinct ways of talking about and understanding the pastoral profession. Tensions between these discourses will surface at their boundaries and must somehow be handled by the actors. However, ideal typical conceptualizations need to be nuanced since a dichotomy could create a pitfall. Essentially, negotiating this duality raises questions about definitions and boundaries. I studied these agentic efforts as discursive boundary work, to which we now turn.

## Boundary work

To analyse clergy interactions as they relate to the two discourses, I applied the theoretical lens of boundary work, defined by Langley et al. (2019, p. 704) as ‘the purposeful individual and collective effort to influence the social, symbolic, material or temporal boundaries, demarcations and distinctions affecting groups, occupations and organizations.’ This emerges from institutional work: the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). In organisational and management studies, institutions denote patterns of enduring elements in social life that affect actors’ behaviours and thoughts, for example, through rules, shared meanings and guidelines for actions and interactions (Scott, 2014). This definition of institutional boundary work reveals a constructivist view of boundaries in a process of flux rather than being cemented in place (Langley & Tsoukas, 2016). Such efforts imply that a given institution is ‘worked upon’ (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012), which, within this article, is the profession of pastor.

Considering professions as institutions implies acknowledging both extrinsic changes and the professionals’ agentic capacities in shaping the institution and the context that environs it (Murray, 2010). This position contrasts with a static and essentialist perspective, where the nature of a profession is taken for granted (Muzio, Brock, & Suddaby, 2013). Boundary work is well suited to study practices involving professionals and managers (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). The concept of boundary work was first used by Gieryn (1983, p. 781), who understood it as foregrounding continuous rhetorical and discursive demarcations and opposing the opinion that a phenomenon could be defined once and for all. It follows that boundary work is subject to human agency; it involves the capacity to act and work with boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Meier, 2015). More precisely, this article focuses on intra-organisational boundaries between deans and pastors. The previous section provided insights into the conditions that have triggered boundary work for the clergy. I follow Langley et al. (2019), who, from an extensive review of the literature, proposed a tripartite conceptualisation of boundary work as competitive, collaborative and configurational.

First, competitive boundary work mobilises boundaries to establish a position of advantage relative to others. This is a working *for* boundaries, and it focuses on the efforts of actors situated on one side of the boundary, which often implies a rhetorical demarcation between ‘us’ and ‘the others’. Here, the focus is on how people create, defend or contest boundaries to distinguish themselves from others, thereby defining an exclusive territory, for example, through the notion of a profession. This work has a self-oriented nature and relates to power and social position. Actors discursively construct themselves as superior and distinct on critical dimensions (Garud, Gehman, & Karunakaran, 2014). The discourse captures the differences between the group and others. Boundary relations can thus be constructed as a dichotomy, delineating the profession from the organisation. A well-known area of research is how professionals perform boundary work to defend, extend or maintain their jurisdiction. For professions, boundaries are not only of symbolic importance but also a constitutive feature (Abbott, 1988). Many contributions within the study of professions focus on jurisdictional questions, or what Anteby et al. (2016) denote ‘doing jurisdictions.’ Langley et al. (2019) underlined that competitive boundary work, somewhat paradoxically, often involves blurring and bridging in combination with the demarcation. This finding opposes Gieryn’s (1983) and Abbott’s (1988) position that perceived boundaries clarify differences and divisions, thus creating impermeable boundaries.

Second, collaborative boundary work, *at* the boundaries, involves aligning boundaries to facilitate collaboration in three ways: negotiating, embodying and downplaying boundaries. This work focuses on how the actors on both sides of the boundary negotiate, blur or realign

their boundaries through their interactions with others to coordinate and to get the mundane work done. Such efforts emerge in the give and take of everyday life. This might mean downplaying the differences between groups and emphasizing similarities. For example, teams consisting of several professions may use their time to explain and debate their differences or they may choose to focus on the tasks and on the voicing of innovative ideas. This enables them to build a shared identity (Meier, 2015). Quick and Feldman (2014) underlined how boundaries are often considered barriers, yet they are also junctures that enable collaboration. This stream of research draws on the literature on boundary spanning—that is, how people work across existing boundaries. Such studies are mainly functionalist and assume that boundaries are fixed in advance. In contrast, the practice perspective on boundaries holds that they are socially constructed through practice:

Studies of everyday collaborative boundary work negotiated in the moment are particularly rich and revealing because they show exactly how boundary work is accomplished in specific interactions and practices in the workplace, e.g., through activities or conversations among occupational groups. (Langley et al., 2019, p. 30)

Third, configurational boundary work involves working *through* boundaries and reshaping the boundary landscape. In doing so, individuals and groups draw on both competitive and collaborative boundary work. This third category includes three sub-types: the arranging, buffering and coalescing of boundaries. It concerns manipulating differentiation and integration patterns among groups so that people can work together and their activities are brought together. These efforts ensure that certain activities are integrated while others are separated, thus orienting activities in relation to the domains of competition and collaboration. Consequently, new spaces and novel configurations of practice can result. Langley et al. (2019, p. 42) reviewed how actors can reconfigure boundaries by suggesting new framings for how people construct problems and solutions. Often, such discursive practices constitute a free space, away from dominating groups, where interactions and the development of ideas may flow in innovative ways. Spaces and boundaries are reshaped to facilitate organised activity. This means emphasising ongoing organising practices in which organisational classifications are reproduced. There is a possibility of divergence between discourse and practice in the orientations towards competition or collaboration. Members of cross-occupational teams, for example, might emphasize differences and competition in their private discussions with researchers or with members of their own group, while at the same time, disregarding them in practice and collaborating by performing, or helping with, each other's work.

To conclude this section, boundary work captures how the formal lines that demarcate discourses are, at the same time, worked for, at and through by intentional actors. Boundary work is inherently about processes, practices and interactions. As analytical concepts, competitive, collaborative and configurational boundary work will often intertwine in negotiations regarding everyday work (Langley et al., 2019).

## METHODS

### Data collection

Interactions between employers and employees strengthen the quality and effectiveness of work by increasing involvement in decisions, enabling participants to voice their concerns and fostering cooperation and support (Meinecke, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Kauffeld, 2017, p. 56). There is a call for rich descriptions of interactions *in situ* rather than retrospective

recollections of their content or second-hand accounts of effects as provided by questionnaires (Clifton, 2012). Rather than merely relying on interviews, observation of how embedded dialogical interactions occur is increasingly used in organisational and management studies (Sirris, Lindheim, & Askeland, 2022). The data reported in this article stem from a case study conducted in one deanery, and it concerns leadership in the Church of Norway. The selected deanery is positioned in the suburban outskirts of a large Norwegian city. It has 12 parishes, with a total of 22 pastors. Data were collected over four months, and included observations, interviews and document analysis (Table 2). The documents listed provided contextual background information, which was read in advance and provided input for the design of the interview guides and for planning observations.

*Table 2: Overview of empirical material*

<b>Observation</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Documents</b>
5 appraisal interviews; 5 hours	2 with dean	Minutes from meetings with the pastors' union last year: 18 pages
2 pastors' meetings; 12 hours	1 group interview with 8 pastors, 1 interview with one senior pastor	Webpages of the deanery, parishes and the diocese: 60 pages
2 meetings between dean and pastors' union; 4 hours	1 with dean's secretary	Strategy plan and documents of the diocese: 15 pages
3 full days of office work, informal interactions; 18 hours	1 with church warden	Handbook for deans: 25 pages
<i>39 hours</i>	<i>5 individual interviews, 1 group interview</i>	<i>118 pages</i>

Once he consented to participate, the dean and I planned which activities to include so I could get insights into his interactions with the pastors. The dean had already scheduled five dyadic appraisals with pastors in his deanery. Together with the meetings listed in Table 2, they constituted a significant data source for this paper. Shadowing granted me direct access to both actions and interactions. It is a type of participant observation that involves following a person around as they perform their daily work (Sirris et al., 2022). A semi-structured method, it offers proximity as well as the chance to ask questions and engage in incidental conversations. However, it is time-consuming, especially given that managers are busy and have hectic workdays. The appraisals lasted, on average, 55 minutes and were audiotaped and transcribed. I also made additional field notes from my observations of these conversations. In advance, the dean asked the pastors for their consent to my observation. They all agreed. The dean was the closest employer and immediate supervisor to all the participating pastors. All the appraisals took place in the office of the pastor, whereas the other meetings happened in the office wing of the church where the dean resided. I present information about the dean and the five pastors in Table 3.

Interviews are retrospective, and the production of knowledge in interviews is contextual, narrative, pragmatic and relational (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 37). Furthermore, because I observed the participants, I was better equipped to understand the issues they discussed in the interviews. This helped me to develop a critical distance from their opinions as expressed in the interviews. This is one example of how both observations and interviews with people close to the dean helped me interpret their responses. The interviews were aided by a semi-structured interview guide, which began with open questions about tasks, responsibilities, roles and interactions between the pastors and dean. I also asked questions on relations and, specifically, on the profession and management. I tweaked the guides according to managerial

levels. All six interviews were conducted in Norwegian, either in an office or in a meeting room at the participant's workplace. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim by me.

**Table 3:** *Participants in the case study*

	Dean	Pastors in appraisals	Inter-viewed pastors	Senior pastor	Church warden	Dean's secretary
<i>Age (average)</i>	53	48	44	63	61	49
<i>Tenure (average)</i>	3	7	6	19	9	2
<i>Gender</i>	Man	Three men, two women	Five men, three women	Man	Woman	Man
<i>Duration in minutes (average)</i>	73+92	53	110	51	49	55
<i>Transcription (pages)</i>	18+20	30	20	11	10	12

Ethical concerns were safeguarded by granting the participants anonymity. In addition, they were informed and gave their consent. They openly and freely discussed the issues in the interviews, and I noted no controversial problems. Sikt, the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), granted permission for the study to be conducted (reference number 45841).

### **Analytical strategy**

The analysis involved an open-ended iterative analytic process that moved between data and tentative theories. The preliminary analysis consisted of reading the material, guided by a thematic search for similarities and differences, covering what I regarded as relevant data given the research question. I used NVivo software for the systematic processing of inductive thematic content analysis, as well as for manual coding (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). These steps were useful for identifying emerging analytical themes. I then systematically compared the narratives using matrixes to display the patterns among the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). The data provided access to two main patterns of interaction between the dean and pastors. First, informal interactions were ad hoc contact, when needed, by e-mail, phone calls or conversations in person. Second, there were also formalized interactions in planned meetings, such as the pastors' gatherings in the deanery, either weekly or monthly, annual performance appraisal interviews and meetings between the dean and the pastors' union. Five main categories emerged from the data. These were related to the three forms of boundary work. Some of them were closely connected and blurred in practice, yet they were analytically helpful. For instance, when the clergy negotiated tasks, they usually included relations since much work was cooperative and involved others.

Following Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013), my analytical process moved from narratives to theory-informed concepts. The first-order concepts present emic terms emerging from the data, while the second-order concepts and themes are etic, which I distilled to aggregate the categories. These were then related to Langley et al.'s (2019) boundary work conceptualisation. Table 4 exemplifies the analytic steps from concepts to categories and themes. The aggregated categories provide the structure for the analysis section.



*Table 4: Examples of thematic coding*

1 <sup>st</sup> order concept	2 <sup>nd</sup> order concepts	Categories	Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time use and workload</li> <li>• Services, funerals, weddings</li> <li>• Confirmands, counselling, parish work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tasks</li> <li>Priorities</li> </ul>	Deducing priorities and identifying core work	Competitive boundary work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibilities</li> <li>• Information about the pastor's situation</li> <li>• Phase of life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Showing interest and care</li> <li>Regulating advice</li> </ul>	Balancing professional autonomy and managerial jurisdiction	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Conflicts</li> <li>• Church staff, parish council, volunteers</li> </ul>	Relations Communication	Improving work conditions through pragmatic cooperation	Collaborative boundary work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studies, courses and seminars</li> <li>• Theological and spiritual literature</li> <li>• Spiritual growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development</li> <li>Collegiality</li> </ul>	Reflecting on role patterns	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenges and solutions</li> <li>• The independent pastor's limitless job</li> <li>• Theological and professional discursive resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The employed professional</li> <li>Contradictions</li> </ul>	Crafting a new organisational professionalism	Configurational boundary work

## ANALYSIS

### **Competitive boundary work**

The first theme in the analysis, competitive boundary work, refers to efforts *for* boundaries—that is, maintaining or developing them. Competitive boundary work might reinforce professional or managerial distinctions. The analysis shows how the dean and pastors maintained the boundaries through two distinct efforts: deducing priorities in tasks and time use from the overall values of the profession and then balancing professional autonomy and managerial jurisdiction.

### *Prioritising core work*

All participants in the study emphasised time as a limited resource in their pastoral work. In an agreement from 2016, the working hours for Norwegian pastors were formally regulated to 35.5 hours weekly. A recurrent issue in the data was workload and reflection about priorities among tasks since pastors had to plan and report their work through a digital programme. The

focus on time-use and tasks particularly emerged in the appraisals, as illustrated by the following excerpt.

Pastor 1: Many pastors have feelings about counting hours. The system subtly ranks between tasks—expressing what is important and real work. Other tasks are not valued, the small e-mails back and forth, shopping groceries... Much of a workday is spent on little things not easy to register. It is not reckoned as proper pastoral work.

Dean: I am your closest employer. Have I expressed any of these things?

Pastor 1: This is not outspoken but demotivating. It is difficult to plan all things in detail. What is proper pastoral work?

The conversation continued with the dean emphasizing the pastor's freedom: he did not decide whether the pastors should shop for groceries. A dilemma was pinpointed between prioritized core tasks, such as services, funerals and weddings and other things, which, according to the dean, were not unimportant: 'I do not believe this is double communication.' The pastor and dean did not fully agree on what counted as proper pastoral work. Although shopping for groceries is not strictly part of professional pastoral work, it does facilitate voluntary work and meetings in the church with young people. Hence, it has a religious motivation and could be framed as pastoral due to its aim and wider context. The dean discursively argued by admitting there were boundaries within the church as a work organisation; that is, the work-hour regulations had to be respected. They drew a line concerning what can be expected of pastors and what is included in their work. Planning and counting hours constituted a novel phenomenon when first introduced to the clergy. In a meeting with the pastors' union to discuss workload, the dean clearly identified as a pastor:

There is no contradiction between being a pastor and counting hours. I also count hours and use the digital system, even if deans are not expected to do so. I want to experience myself the regime pastors are part of. It is about identification. I cannot supervise or give advice if I don't know the systems.

The boundary work in these examples concerns what falls within or outside of the definition of pastoral work. The boundaries were thus negotiated in the conversations between pastors and dean, indicating that the formal work instructions failed to give sufficiently clear answers in all cases. In such settings, the dean supported the pastors, yet pointed to the organisational boundaries as explicated in the work-hour regulations. This raised the question of having many tasks, limited time and how to prioritize. Generally, the dean encouraged the pastors to decide for themselves, which could be interpreted as empowering and supporting the pastors' autonomy. These examples illustrate how prioritizing time and tasks was an imminent theme in the interactions, which were open-ended and marked by real discussion and reflection.

### *Balancing autonomy and jurisdiction*

The interactions were characterised by the balancing of professional autonomy and managerial jurisdiction. The dean often reminded the pastors of their responsibilities. In an interview, the dean talked about his own role: 'I do not give detailed orders; rather, I link to our vision as church. Being an employer, I am entitled to command the pastors to what I like, within their instructions and regulations, but not what they should say.' The church warden explained how the dean supervised by reading the minutes from the parochial church council meetings, which

kept him informed about life in the parishes. The dean's secretary related this to the dean's work instructions concerning giving advice. In addition, the pastors said the dean enhanced the quality of their professional work through his own profound professional and organisational knowledge and know-how.

In several instances, the pastors asked the dean very concrete questions. While observing the dean in his office work, he was asked, 'Can we go back and add an extra godparent in the church register?' This reflected his special interest in church law, and he was frequently asked about rules and regulations. The pastors asked when they were unsure or wanted backing. In this case, he said that you cannot change history, but the new godparent could be reckoned from a particular date, thus distinguishing between law and pastoral discretion. Such questions would frequently pop up, and the dean's attention to them was simultaneously a display of interest and care. The dean stressed, 'I respond quickly if I notice something they have to be aware of.' However, in his experience, very few approached him to discuss theology or if it was legitimate to do something based on a theological argument: 'Often, they have decided in advance. My job is to challenge and ask if they think this is clever, considering... have they thought about the consequences for...?'

However, the data indicate how autonomy and jurisdiction also involve power, negotiations and even struggles, as illustrated by the following sequence from an appraisal. Due to the economic situation of the diocese, it was demanding to hire substitutes for pastors. This triggered the question of whether laypeople could lead the Sunday services, thus entering the traditional domain of the clergy.

Pastor 2: Let's ask laypeople; they are unpaid volunteers.

Dean: Well, occasionally we can. The pastor in the neighbouring parish does this twice a semester. The question is if this is the responsibility of the local senior pastor.

Pastor 2: Yes, it is. I would like lay Sunday services regularly. You know, the Lutheran notion of the priesthood of all believers...

Dean: If I really disagreed with you, we might have discussed it. However, that discussion I am not interested in having. Lay services are valuable, but I would prefer an evening service for this arrangement. I cannot promise anything.

The dean did not enter this discussion, which might have led to a conflict; rather, he offered regulating advice. This could also be seen as an expression of power. The impression was that while topics might invite theological reflection and semantics, this possibility was seldom grasped. It was a rare example of different theological positions meeting, but not really interacting. In my opinion, the conversation had a sense of uneasiness. The pastor used the established Lutheran notion of the priesthood of all believers in support of lay-led Sunday services. The dean did not fully disagree but expressed another opinion about the frequency of such services and about their time of the day. This was boundary work in which consensus was failing and yet the dialogue was maintained. Interactions were most often, but not necessarily, characterised by a harmonious relationship between pastors and dean.

### **Collaborative boundary work**

While the notion of competitive boundary work establishes that there are recognized boundaries, collaborative boundary work involves working *at* and *across* these boundaries. Essentially, collaborative boundary work focuses on how boundaries are negotiated and

overcome by working together and building alliances at the boundaries. This was achieved in two ways in this study: by reflecting on role patterns and by improving collaboration.

### *Reflecting on role patterns*

Reflections on role patterns, and not least whether to regard the dean as a boss or a colleague, triggered questions regarding the number of meetings. In the group interview with the pastors, they explained how the previous dean had spent three full days each term with all the pastors. In addition, the senior pastors had one full day each month with the dean: 'It was honestly experienced as a waste of time. Much information could have been e-mailed instead', commented a senior pastor. The pastors appreciated that, when the current dean started, he openly asked the pastors about their need for meetings. The pastoral gatherings had been reduced to one day each term, with no additional meeting with senior pastors. A pastor emphasised, 'Even if there are less meetings, we experience that the dean is more available now. We interact when needed.' The dean, in speaking of the full-day pastoral meeting, said, 'Having 22 pastors here six hours adds up to a month of work. It is crucial that they feel it is worthwhile being here.' This meant that the meetings had to be relevant to all participants. This ideal was mirrored in the day's programme, which included a worship service, the pastors' sharing of their experiences around a theme, followed by the dean's addressing of administrative issues.

When commenting on the gathering in retrospect, the dean said, 'A dilemma is that the pastors want me to facilitate for them, but not interfere too much. I use the expression, giving signals rather than commanding.' In the interviews, the pastors spoke about the planning: 'We are involved and get ownership. We contribute with our resources.' In advance, the dean would discuss the theme for the gathering with the pastors' union. Here, suggestions for presenters and time slots were put forward. Observation of the meeting indicated that it started with a service, during which the dean delivered a sermon. After coffee and mingling, three pastors each delivered a prepared talk on the day's theme: 'Pastor today, yesterday and tomorrow,' highlighting transitions in the profession. The presenters represented both genders and different age groups. The floor was then opened to comments. In this session, the dean presented the contributors but did not act as a supervisor. After lunch, the dean presented a historical account of pastoral work and the new regulations in which he openly identified as an employer. In the interviews, the pastors contrasted the dean with his predecessor, who would occasionally correct the pastors: 'He had all the right answers, and we did not feel we could freely speak our mind. Now, the atmosphere has changed.' Interestingly, the nature of the dean's involvement reflects the boundaries between professionals and managers. The dean described how, in a pastoral gathering, he sought to confirm more than comment on the presenters. As a result, many became engaged in the conversation. The dean commented, 'Showing care and interest also means that people can get a feeling of being observed. Showing attention and interest is crucial'.

### *Improving collaboration*

The dean was central to improving work conditions. Generally, the pastors perceived the dean as 'our man' in encounters with the diocese. One example was when a parish applied for a new order of service and the bishop did not at first approve it: 'There was a local reason that the dean saw, and he supported our suggestion.' In the data, improving collaboration not only involved the pastors and dean, but was also internal, within the congregation, affecting employees, the parochial church council and volunteers. In the appraisal with Pastor 3, the

dean and pastor conversed about cooperation in the parish, first among the employees and then with the parish council:

Pastor 3: Good people, well-functioning and agreeable. However, the leader of the council is not functioning. He is a wonderful volunteer but cannot keep time!

Dean: I am crystal clear about time when visiting the parish councils. I look at the leaders and say, 'You have two jobs: Arriving at a decision so that everyone knows what we have agreed upon and keeping time.' The last time I said so was yesterday [laughs].

Pastor 3: I had to control myself to avoid exploding... I do not want to get arrested afterwards. I want to handle things in the appropriate way. I am a pastor representing God.

Dean: Have you ever exploded before? Maybe, for once, he ought to experience that this does something with you? Because his grumpy, ill-timed and odd behaviour affects others! Let him sometimes see that this impacts you. Do you get my point?

The pastor and the parochial church council leader are mandated differently within the church organisation. Yet, both carry leadership responsibilities. This excerpt was basically about cooperation and conflict. It had a generic character and might have been taken out of any work context if it were not for the explicit church structures. The entire appraisal did not address theology, except for the phrase 'I am a pastor... representing God'. This statement occurred somewhat abruptly when the pastor was talking about a meeting. This was due to her motivation to control her temper and not show an outburst of anger. She received guidance regarding her role. The pastor had elaborated on a situation in which she was challenged by the need to control her temper. This might be due to her role, and she was searching for appropriate behaviour. The dean did not respond directly, but grasped her metaphor of exploding. This sequence was about appropriate role behaviour and thus about the boundaries of being a pastor. The pastor apparently felt that she had to control herself and not become too emotional. She considered 'exploding' to be inappropriate behaviour, an opinion that was questioned by the dean.

### **Configurational boundary work**

Configurational boundary work is working *through* boundaries towards the shaping of novel configurations of actors, objects and ideas. This concerns innovations such as new mind-sets, framings, understandings of problems and solutions and even new boundaries. Data falling within this theme were categorised as crafting a new organisational professionalism.

#### *Crafting organisational professionalism*

This first sequence is taken from an appraisal in which the dean met Pastor 4 in his office at the church, where they sat by a corner table with a candle burning. Above, on the wall, there was an icon of Christ. Early in the conversation, after initial small talk, the pastor turned to what emerged as a burning issue: a lack of time and too big a workload.

Pastor 4: We pastors are vulnerable! Days are flying. The unity in all things is God, job and home.

Dean: Are these related. Do you see any connections?

Pastor 4: I am always a bit too late, and in fact, I forgot to bring the appraisal form you sent me last week.

Dean: Always late, you say... Does this irritate other people? Are you a mess?

The conversation then circled around different tasks and explored the pastor's workload. He also spoke of criticism from the organist for sending the programme for the Sunday service too late. After being silent and listening to the narrative, the dean summed up:

I believe this is the first important matter in the life of a pastor—we ought to feel that we could always do more. If not, we would be too laid back. Our mission is to get people to heaven so we cannot be too laid back. In addition, the second aspect is that when we have a family and raise kids, the hours simply do not add up. We must reconcile with this insight for our own sake. Moreover, we must realise what the consequences are for other people. I agree with the organist that sending information for next day's service on Saturday night is far too late. You said you also agreed. Now is your chance to explore your vulnerability and how it affects others.

In the remainder of this appraisal, the dean explicitly identified as a peer by using 'we' and 'our', and he used his own professional experiences as examples in a supportive way. The conversation then addressed the entanglement of work life for pastors, and both parties agreed that it was not atypical that pastoral work is without boundaries. The dean commented that appraisals serve as a juncture for many interrelated issues and expressed that it was useful for him to get an overview of the totality of the pastor's situation. The above excerpt carries an explicit reference to God, which was not isolated but was related to family and job. The pastor interpreted this as a vulnerability, which one might have assumed was a theme for pastoral counselling. The dean mirrored the narrative as an expression of a lack of respect for the boundaries of co-workers and the need to give central information way past regular working hours. The dean followed up and acknowledged the concerns of the pastor by using a theological statement about the mission of the church. This motivated the pastor's efforts in the church, which can appear to be without limits. The dean recommended that the pastor realise his shortcomings and reconcile with the boundaries. This was apparently a very difficult challenge for the pastor, who felt that all was interrelated. This sequence demonstrated how the interactions concerned the totality of pastoral work and the connection between 'God, work and family', as the pastor phrased it.

Often, the boundary work was about acknowledging the limits that condition all pastoral work. This is particularly challenging in a profession that, in principle, transcends boundaries. In a meeting with the pastors' union, the dean said:

When studying theology, you don't learn much about being a good employee. If pastors regard the work environment as a problem, *they* have a dilemma—I don't. Likewise, democracy is not a problem; it is part of the conditions framing the church today. Traditionally, people thought pastors to be idealistic.

The next example concerned a lengthy talk about work conditions with an elderly pastor. He felt the position was adjusted to his senior life phase, and he was living close to the parish. The theologically based similarity in the profiles of the congregation and the pastor was commented on. The conversation was mostly about frames and conditions, and they talked about the statistics of people attending services and the staffing in the church. The dean did not interfere or meddle too much with the actual content; rather, he seemed to keep at a distance compared to the appraisals observed prior to this one. This appraisal exemplified how theology was kept tacit and out of the conversation. The background appeared to be that different theological

positions were held by the pastor and dean. This parish had a charismatic profile. The dean commented on a vacant position and asked whether the pastor intended to apply for it:

Pastor 4: I am staying here.

Dean: Regarding the profile of both you and the congregation, you cannot do better than here. Unless you receive a calling for something else. Other expectations towards me as an employer?

Pastor 4: As you know, we are a bit short staffed with two instead of three pastors.

The conversation touched upon whether parishes could develop as they wished. The dean responded, 'Plurality is a gift. They should be respected within the broad stream of our vision as a folk church.' The two also reflected on another dilemma, as framed by the dean:

We have adopted a governance by objectives, where numbers, statistics and the measurable are asked for. It is not easy reporting how good the sermon is and the Christian life in the parish. Yet, it impacts the focus. It is not Our Lord or I who decide what is important in the parishes; it is plan documents, internally and from above.

After this appraisal, the dean told me that he experienced it as demanding: 'I give him time, attention, support. Yet he is a bit talkative.' Another dilemma was between caring for and considering the individual and ensuring that the work was done in an effective way. During my observation of the dean, a pastor called and talked about his or her exhaustion and need for leave. The balance struck by the dean was between confirming the leave and the challenge of finding a substitute.

## DISCUSSION

Researchers have widely noted the transitions occurring within professionalism due to increased managerialism and the strengthening of organisational identification (Evetts, 2009, 2011; Meyer & Bromley, 2013). In highly institutionalized religious organisations, similar trends are being observed as cultural trends (Hinings & Raynard, 2014) or as the introduction of new institutional logics (Askeland, 2016; Sirris, 2019). This meeting of logics triggers questions regarding the boundaries of the pastoral profession and explicates how delineations are drawn and discussed. However, merely noting that such dynamics exist is not the equivalent of observing how they play out *in situ*. The merit of this article is that it moves beyond the identification of ideal types to provide in-depth knowledge regarding how actors engage in influencing the demarcations forming their professional boundaries. Accordingly, this article answers the call of Langley et al. (2019), who emphasised the need to study exactly how boundary work is accomplished in specific interactions and practices in the workplace. Thus, the study extends our knowledge of how boundary work is performed in a distinct institution, the pastoral profession, by asking: *How do interactions between pastors and deans serve as spaces for the discursive boundary work of the pastoral profession?*

The perspective of boundary work enables this study to provide new insights into how interactions are practiced. Not least were the appraisals, which provided a particularly interesting locus in which to examine the discursive duality environing the pastoral profession. My study illustrates how boundary work is both tactical and situated, as the findings emphasize the discursive efforts of purposeful individuals working to influence the social, symbolic and temporal boundaries that formed their context and activities (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). The

tripartite distinction of competitive, collaborative and configurational boundary work (Langley et al., 2019) is analytically helpful, yet cannot be sharply separated; rather, they are three dimensions that permeate the data.

### **Negotiating core work**

This article shows that professional boundaries are pivotal because they are contested when a new organisational discourse is faced. In my study, the empirical material shows some interesting tensions between the religious–professional and managerial–organisational discourses. These issues particularly surfaced in discussions about what falls within or beyond the purview of pastoral work. Despite the work instructions provided for pastors and deans in everyday life, these boundaries are not given. The analysis shows how both dean and pastors maintained the boundaries through two distinct efforts: deducing priorities in tasks and time use from the overall values of the profession and balancing professional autonomy with managerial jurisdiction. Empirically, this pattern occurred in all interactions. Importantly, the mundane examples from everyday clergy work highlight the need for an ongoing exploration of boundaries for the profession. Thus, this article provides insight into the dilemma pastors and deans encounter. Prioritising tasks is not left entirely to the pastors but also involves their leader. In the appraisals, the dean confirmed the centrality of the mission and the core work and simultaneously reminded pastors of the working hours regulations. However, professional identity is nourished by core professional work and semantics (Muzio et al., 2013).

To argue convincingly for prioritizing, managers will benefit from knowing the values of a profession (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Much of the negotiation concerned prioritising, which reflected the tasks and time use of the professionals. The work conditions of pastors in the Church of Norway were discussed in another observational study (Sirris, 2016). The nature of the challenges facing a traditionally autonomous profession in a church that is developing as an organisation were described in terms of tasks and time use. Work activities and patterns were characterized by a high tempo, frequent interruptions and short intervals. In that study, the pastors used one-third of their time individually and two-thirds to relate to others. Hence, both autonomy and a relational orientation were combined with a strong internal focus on the church staff. Importantly, only 13% of the time was spent on core work such as preaching, liturgy and counselling.

Working in an organisation means giving attention to collaboration, which is time-consuming, not least in a setting of growing organisational professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2015). My study adds to the research on discursive strategies and practices, which generally provides ample evidence of competitive boundary work (Langley et al., 2019). In summary, competitive boundary work is evident in my study, but it is not antagonistic, as a struggle for advantages. This active work serves to separate one space from the other. Both professionals and managers joined their efforts to achieve this collaborative venture rather than winning advantages over the other. However, such harmonious negotiations about core work clearly benefit from the presence of good relationships.

### **Negotiating relationships**

Boundary work not only concerns tasks and time use but also involves relationships. It enabled the redefining of boundaries in terms of regulating the autonomy of the individual pastor in relation to the jurisdiction of the dean concerning organisational demands. This aspect was reflected in the different understandings of the relations between the dean and pastors. The dean was still understood within the duality of being both a boss and a colleague. This duality permeated the boundary work throughout the interactions and exemplified competitive



boundary work (Langley et al., 2019). The professionals did not enter into deeper conversations with their manager. Rather, they kept him at a distance to safeguard their own professional autonomy. Such competitive boundary work influences the dynamics of interactions between parties and concerns inclusion and exclusion. In the case of professions or occupations, symbolic demarcations are linked to social boundaries, which include certain people and exclude others by regulating power relations among groups (Bucher et al., 2016). During the conversations, the dean authorised the pastors by encouraging them, expressing his support and giving advice and guidance. He underlined the responsibility of the pastors and only occasionally told them what to do. However, the boundaries were largely upheld by the empowering efforts of the dean. There was an identification in which the dean, not only as a professional but also as a pastor and, therefore, a member of the same profession as themselves, redefined what was central and emphasized common ground or goals in their shared identity (Kreiner et al., 2015).

Collaborative boundary work was pivotal in the interactions, and it concerned pragmatic cooperation. In this formalized setting between professional and manager, it appeared as a joint effort in the ongoing collaboration. Langley et al. (2019) pointed to unavoidable connections across boundaries, as all boundaries exist in relation to others. My study provides insight into how such work emerges in a desire to get the work done, in a pragmatic sense, as suggested by prior research (Bucher et al., 2016; Meier, 2015; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). As noted above, the relations between the two parties were both collegial, expressing their shared professionalism and, simultaneously, an employer–employee relationship, where an organisational discourse was revealed. This duality underpinned the entire practice of appraisals, which situated the appraisal at the juncture of boundaries, which is to be expected in the genre of appraisals (Meinecke et al., 2017). It was collaborative in the sense that they worked together to sort out the issues.

### **Negotiating theology**

Configurational boundary work transcends both the differentiation of competitive boundary work and the alignment of collaborative boundary work (Langley et al., 2019). A particular issue in the context of the pastoral profession is the role of religion in such interactions. In my data, this was essentially done by combining the theological dimension with mundane working conditions and relationships, as described above. To get their job done, both parties depended on cooperation with the other, and they utilized both discourses. As something was at stake for the professionals, they also evoked a religious discourse. In the interactions, the pastors initiated ideological themes, which were followed up by the dean. In these situations, the dean primarily embodied the organisational discourse, which drew a demarcation in relation to the pastors' professional discourse.

The appraisals that I observed could not be characterised as discussions between two theologians; instead, they were more in keeping with a meeting between employer and employee, in accord with an organisational script. Although the appraisal interviews were performed in a religious setting, they expressed the realm of management, and their content was largely secularised (Beckford, 1985). This was underpinned by the practical content of the appraisals. The dean's role was to facilitate the development of the pastors and to ensure a reasonable workload. I interpret this as an example of collaborative boundary work since the participants, in principle, considered appraisals to be a space for both professional and spiritual issues. However, in practice, an organisational discourse dominated the appraisals, offering the pastors a space for talking about their workload, how they used their work hours, relations with staff and volunteers and the challenges or problems experienced in their jobs. Hence,

pragmatic cooperation and respecting of differences implied that the boundaries had blurred and were negotiated (Langley et al., 2019).

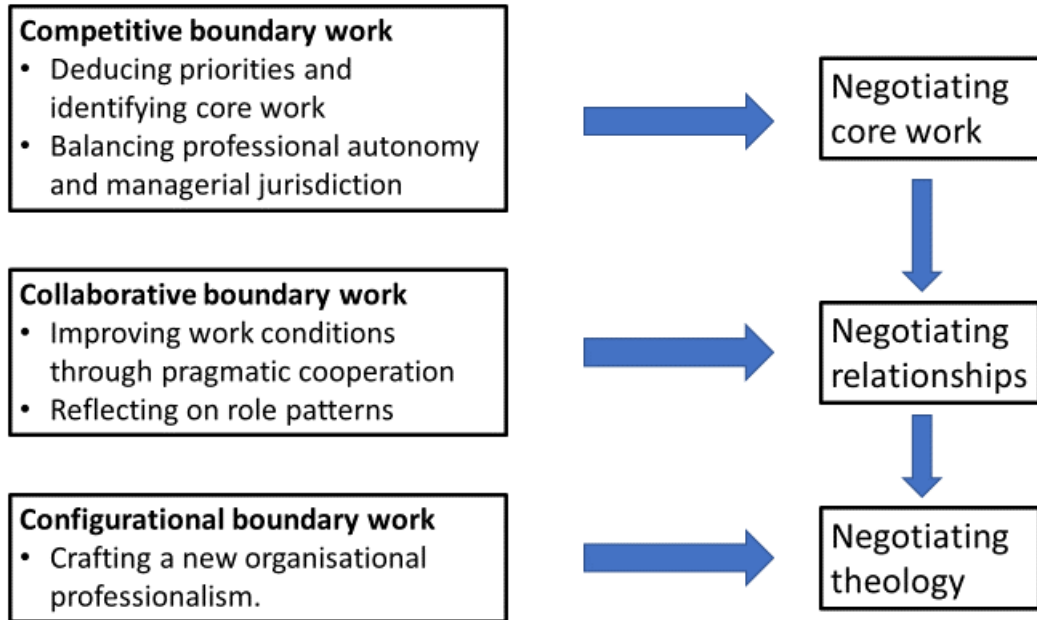
Religion was less apparent in the interactions but emerged when the appraisals were demarcated from a similar template, namely pastoral counselling. For example, appraisals have at least 30 years of history within church organisations. My study shows that appraisals are a distinct genre and yet ambiguous. The appraisals were not understood as an arena for theological disputes. In fact, my study indicates that beliefs, faith and doubts were not extensively discussed in this particular conversational space; nonetheless, they were indirectly significant. The dominant themes in the appraisals focused on actions and work rather than on the ideological underpinnings motivating pastoral work (Sirris, 2023). This did not contrast with religious values, but what was highlighted were the expressions or performances of such values rather than the values themselves. The dean respected the pastors' own religious spaces.

It is indeed a bit surprising that faith was not more explicit in these conversations. There are various perspectives that might explain why this was so, which, in my view, reflect the organisational professionalism pertaining in this context (Noordegraaf, 2015). This is an expression of configurational boundary work at the intersection of the professional and managerial discourses, as outlined. On a macro level, this is a sign of the inner bureaucratisation and professionalisation of the church, as well as the secularisation of contemporary society (Hinings & Raynard, 2014). The church is gradually becoming understood as an organisation. This, in turn, has implications for understanding the relations between actors. They are no longer only colleagues, or leader and followers, but employer and employees. The framing of the appraisals fits within the organisation of modern work. This reflects the development within professionalism towards organised professions (Evetts, 2011).

Even if the participants, both dean and pastors, displayed an understanding of the appraisal interviews in terms of professionalism, they nevertheless turned out to be a matter of prosaic management. The reasons for this are twofold: given the prominence of a generic organisational discourse with reference to other work life in society, the avoidance of theology and God in the appraisals was paradoxically considered the *professional* thing to do. On the one hand, the dean, concerned with being a proper employer, seldom followed up on invitations from pastors that could lead to conversations that were more substantial and all encompassing. On the other hand, not all pastors would talk confidentially about deeply personal matters of faith and their life situation with the dean in this setting, marked as it was by management, and they therefore kept the conversation at a mundane level. This can be explained as a matter of balancing trust and authority (Chaves, 1993).

To sum up, the boundary work examined in the case study is illustrated in Figure 1.

*Figure 1: Discursive boundary work in the interactions of pastors and deans in the Church of Norway*



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has analysed how interactions serve as spaces where the boundaries of managerial–organisational and religious–professional discourses can be worked on by both parties. These boundaries are not fixed but are worked on *in situ*. Five categories of such efforts emerged from the analysis: deducing priorities and identifying core work, balancing professional autonomy and managerial jurisdiction, improving work conditions through pragmatic cooperation, reflecting on role patterns and, finally, crafting a new organisational professionalism. In terms of the conceptualisation proposed by Langley et al. (2019), I found that competitive and collaborative boundary work were more prominent than the configurational. Further, I have discussed how boundary work can be understood as continuous negotiations on three core topics in the interactions between dean and pastors: First, core work, as the impact of boundary work, creates a better work life for the individual pastor. This includes both conditions, such as working hours, and workload. Second are the relationships that foreground collaboration between the various actors, as well as personal issues. Third, a crucial question is why religion is not more clearly vocalized. One explanation is that the contextual dimension is important. Formal interactions with the dean constitute a practice that differs from pastoral counselling. However, even if appraisals are initially understood as organisational and managerial, the profession’s characteristic religious semantics are still evident. This reveals that formal interactions are multilayered and serve as nexuses for professional issues, both practical and ideological.

A clear limitation of the study is the amount of data, as data were drawn from only one out of 100 Norwegian deaneries. An apparent weakness is that only one dean was observed. Deans will interact differently, which calls for this study to be replicated in more deaneries and denominations, as well as in other professional contexts. However, a case study that includes both observations and interviews with several actors does provide in-depth granulated data. The boundary work of the clergy would benefit from being explored on a wider scale

and by also employing quantitative methods. This study has shown the continuous need for clergy to talk and discuss their work-related issues. In this context, the above figure can be used as a means of metacommunication in encounters between deans and pastors. This could help them to identify what they are doing and to reflect on how they could improve their practices.

These insights from boundary work can facilitate the identification of limits and the regulation of boundaries. These boundaries include profound themes such as core work, relationships and theology, which often co-exist in an intricate mix. It is therefore important for churches to have arrangements that will safeguard and develop the clergy in order to optimise their professional and organisational resources.

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