

Leading the Church through Institutional Change

Institutional Work during the Disestablishment of the State Church in Norway

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ABSTRACT

While institutional changes in the religious landscape of Norwegian society have received much scholarly interest in recent decades, less attention has been paid to the agency provided by actors within the Church of Norway. Among the many ecclesial actors, the role of Director General of the National Council of the Church of Norway has emerged as one of the more important in the process of disestablishing the Church of Norway as a traditional state church. In asking how the Directors General of the Church of Norway performed their institutional work during the disestablishment of the Church of Norway, the article reveals the manner in which three sequential Directors General provided institutional leadership while navigating the church through institutional change. Using theoretical perspectives on institutional work and leadership, the article analyzes the work undertaken by these three Directors General in relation to state–church matters between 1998 and 2021. By considering previous studies showing how institutional leadership engages in securing internal cohesion and external support while overcoming external opposition, the article shows how each of these elements played a pivotal role in directing the agency of the Directors General at specific points in the process.

Keywords: State church, institutional work, leadership, Church of Norway

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of a new act on faith and life stance communities in Norway in 2021 completed the judicial reforms disestablishing the Church of Norway (CoN) as a traditional state church, at least from the perspective of the government (Innst. 193 L, 2019–2020, p. 33). Following the alterations to the Constitution in 2012 and the establishment of CoN as an independent legal entity at a national level in 2017, these legal reforms have radically changed CoN's formal position within Norwegian society. As such, although the process of developing the church organization continues and discussions of CoN's role within society are ongoing, this is an appropriate time to visit and investigate the institutional work performed by church leaders during the process of disestablishing CoN as a traditional state church.

Institutional changes in the religious landscape in Nordic countries, and especially the altered relationship between the traditional majority church and the state in these countries, have been subject to a vast number of studies in recent decades, for instance, through books such as *Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere* (Furseth, 2018) and *Exploring a Heritage: Evangelical Lutheran Churches in the North* (Eriksson et al., 2012). While the former provides a thorough comparative insight into changes in the religious landscape of the Nordic countries, the latter offers a different approach in which scholars from each country were given an opportunity to contribute articles on subjects relevant to their context. In 2011, the *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* published a special issue on church and state in the Nordic countries. One of the contributors, Ulla Schmidt, provides valuable insights into church–state relations in Norway, and discusses the status leading up to the alterations in the Constitution. However, the article places little emphasis on the agentic efforts of the leaders within CoN during the process, only briefly mentioning an ecclesial skepticism toward the state's coercive interventions into the church's life and organization (Schmidt, 2011, p. 151). Now, with the benefit of hindsight, ecclesial agentic efforts emerge as a crucial element in the development of the new relationship between state and CoN (Nylenna & Sirris, 2023) and, by extension, in the new political regulation of religion in society as a whole.

Acknowledging the connection between church reform and leadership, Askeland and Schmidt edited the book *Church Reform and Leadership of Change* (2015) in which Nordic scholars presented different perspectives on how ecclesial leadership had changed in response to the current trends. While the book mainly emphasizes leadership at the local level, in one chapter, Andreas Aarflot (2015) presents the agentic efforts that have occurred within CoN, which for nearly 150 years has called and worked for greater independence from the state and the strengthening of self-determination. Through an analysis of the different reforms in CoN during recent decades, Ulla Schmidt concludes that such processes are not merely the result of organizational isomorphism or ecclesial agency alone. Rather, they must be understood as complex and multifactorial (2015, p. 54). Following these contributions and analyses, this article, while acknowledging social forces as a decisive factor in the alteration of the church–state relationship in Norway, delves more deeply into the agency performed by church leaders, using the lens of institutional work to facilitate this process.

Leadership in CoN is distributed through different positions and organizational bodies: democratically elected representatives, clergy, etc. However, acknowledging that the role of Director General of the National Council of the Church of Norway has emerged as a pivotal ecclesial figure in the process, this article asks: *How did Directors General of the National Council of the Church of Norway perform institutional work during the disestablishment of CoN as a state church?*

Understanding the period from the establishment of the Bakkevig Commission in 1998 until the introduction of the new act on faith and life stance communities as one decisive

process, the three Directors General (DGs) of this period—Erling Pettersen (1996–2006), Jens-Petter Johnsen (2006–2018), and Ingrid Vad Nilsen (2018–2024)—were interviewed for comment on their own agencies. By using their experiences and reflections on their involvement in the disestablishment of CoN as a traditional state church, and through discussion relating theories on institutional work and leadership to the process, this article provides fresh insights.

The analysis aims for a descriptive presentation of the DGs' work without making any value judgments or evaluating the success of the efforts made. Such normative claims are, to a great extent, subjectively developed and rest upon the perspectives of the evaluator. Rather, through using institutional theory, this study aims to provide a deepened understanding of the process by which CoN was disestablished as a traditional state church.

The article is structured as follows. First, a presentation of relevant theory on institutional work and institutional leadership is provided before methodological concerns are attended to. In approaching the material through a thematic narrative analysis, the DGs' own stories are presented as parts of the greater narrative: the disestablishment of CoN as a traditional state church. Following this analysis, the DGs' agency is framed within a macro perspective on the process and discussed in light of theoretical concepts, namely, institutional leadership and institutional caretaking. By pointing out how the DGs relied on the premises given to them at specific points of the process, while simultaneously exhibiting their own agency, the article provides an empirical study that extends current literature on institutional work and institutional leadership.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INSTITUTIONAL WORK

Institutions are understood as “comprising regulative, normative, and cultural–cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (Scott, 2014, p. 56). They are the social structures that guide the actions and ideas of individuals and organizations. Given this component of stability, institutional theory, in its early stages, was primarily concerned with explaining why and how organizations adapted to their institutional environments (Scott, 2014, p. 267). However, in recent decades, greater emphasis has been placed on how institutions change. Defining institutional change as the displacement of one set of institutionalized arrangements by another (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2009, p. 176), such change is assumed to be difficult and dangerous for organizations (Scott, 2014, p. 151), as set practices risk being delegitimized. Combined with the increased attention paid to institutional change, there has been an agentic turn within institutional theory, which focuses on how actors help shape institutions. Institutional work, defined as the purposive action of creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009), has become a leading theoretical strand when studying such agency.

Institutional work is, among other things, occupied with how social practices—in this article, “being church”¹—are upheld. Describing the institutional caretaker, Thomas Lawrence and Nelson Phillips (2019) write about actors who maintain institutions, and they conclude

¹ What the contents of “being church” consist of is multifaceted and contested. While it is out of the scope of the article to give a satisfactory discussion on the subject, “being church” is here understood as comprising activities, identity, and relations. For example, securing a continued legitimacy of the church as a positive contributor to society is dependent on the activities conducted by the church but also on a discourse highlighting these activities and interpreting their impact in society.

that such work takes form through discursive, relational, and material dimensions. While the maintenance of institutions was previously considered less interesting, as “institutions by definition were enduring” (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019, p. 209), the growing emphasis on institutional change has led to such institutional work being seen as increasingly relevant. This article argues that the leaders in CoN can be understood as institutional caretakers, as they performed the institutional work of upholding CoN’s position in Norwegian society, securing its legitimacy within a new societal and institutional order, while increasing the self-governance of the church. The interesting question, then, is *how* they performed such work.

As institutional work has, to a large degree, taken a micro-perspective, focusing on how bottom-up processes affect set institutionalized practices, it has encountered criticism for being too vague (Alvesson & Spicer, 2019). By putting the agency in focus, the actors *performing* the agency become less visible. Addressing this, Matthew Kraatz argues that individual organizations are important venues for institutional work (2009, p. 84) and that, because of this, one should also study the leaders of organizations. Leaders can be understood as powerful organizational members who can employ their privileged positions, power, and status to maintain and extend their interests (Hampel et al., 2017, p. 569), while also being recognized as institutional workers (Lawrence et al., 2013).

Connecting institutional work with leadership, Washington, Boal, and Davis (2008, p. 724) argue that institutional leaders do three things: they secure internal consistency, develop external support mechanisms, and engage in actions to overcome external enemies. Internal consistency refers to organizational members’ support for and identification with key values, myths, and visions inherent to the organization. Although all individual members take part in the formation of an organization’s life story, the institutional leader, through their formal power and authority, is equipped to provide a common narrative and point to preferred interpretations of the character and vision of the organization (Washington et al., 2008, p. 727). External supporting mechanisms are factors that relate to an organization’s legitimacy with external evaluators. Drawing on Richard Scott’s three pillars of institutions (Scott, 2014), Washington et al. (2008, p. 728) point to two such groups of mechanisms. The first are the regulative or normative mechanisms that support particular practices, and the second relate to the more cultural–cognitive elements that help secure widespread social acceptance for their organization. Finally, the institutional leader must overcome external enemies, that is, pressure on and threats to existing practices as generated by elements such as politicians or competitors. Additionally, as institutions are only legitimate to a given segment of society, the fragmentation of a population that originally institutionalized the practice can result in legitimacy decline (Washington et al., 2008, p. 729). Based on these three tasks, Table 1 presents the forms of institutional work performed by institutional leaders. Aiming to present an overview of the themes presented by Washington et al., the table is not an exhaustive list but systematizes the main perspectives.

Table 1: Forms of institutional leadership (based on Washington, Boal, and Davis, 2008)

Aim	Key concepts	Institutional work aimed at	Institutional work performed through
Secure internal consistency	Values, vision, strategy	Organizational members	Infusion of values, connection of life story to organizational story, preparation for changes
Secure external supporting mechanism	Regulative and normative legitimacy, cultural–cognitive legitimacy	Legislative authorities, society	Negotiation, lobbying
Overcome external enemies	Disruption of established practices, fragmentation of general support	Legislative authorities, technological advancements, society	Defense of existing practices

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHOD, AND DATA MATERIAL

Aiming to explain and interpret the DGs’ agency throughout the disestablishment of CoN as a traditional state church, this article approaches the material as a case study (Silverman, 2017), understanding the process of disestablishing the state church in Norway as a case demonstrating how big organizations relate to institutional change.

To clarify the period and the process that are subject to the analysis, certain delineations have been made: While one could argue that the ecclesial project of altering the relationship between church and state can be traced back, at least, to the 1960’s, the analysis starts with the establishment of the First Bakkevig Commission in 1998. The report of this commission launched the concrete political discussion that led to the Church Settlement in 2008 and to subsequent alterations to the Constitution in 2012. The process of altering the relationship between state and church also had direct implications for work being done on renewing the organizational structure within the church. However, while acknowledging the connection between these two processes, the organizational work follows logics and relations that are different from those of the institutional work relating to alterations in the regulative status of CoN. While the former is primarily intraorganizational, involved with the distribution of power and responsibilities within the church, the latter relates more to external stakeholders, and to the securing of legitimacy within the church’s institutional environment. There is also a need to stress that while this article emphasizes the role of the Directors General, the work done was a collective effort by many persons, both inside and outside of CoN.

The informants of this study are the three persons who held the position of Director General of the National Council of the Church of Norway between 1998 and 2021. In CoN, the Director General leads the national secretariat and works on behalf of the National Church Council. Their primary task is to prepare, effectuate, and implement resolutions made by the National Council and the General Synod. The three DGs concerned have all revoked the anonymity agreed upon when performing their first interviews. This was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT/NSD). The DGs have

agreed to be subject to an open and thorough analysis and discussion of their agency during the process of disestablishing CoN as a traditional state church.

The data material consists of interviews with the three informants, conducted separately during the first part of 2022 and each lasting about an hour. In addition, extracts were used from transcriptions (Nylenna, 2021) of witness seminars concerning the separation of church and state, held in the late summer of 2021, in which all the DGs participated. The witness seminar is a method for supplementing historical sources by gathering relevant actors involved in the process under discussion, and then giving them the opportunity to elaborate on what happened (Nicholls, 2022; Tansey, 2006). The witness seminars in question gathered influential church leaders who were central to the work of disestablishing CoN. In addition to the DGs, the seminars were attended by bishops, democratically elected church leaders, and governmental leaders, among others. Finally, Jens-Petter Johnsen provided the researcher with his personal notes, reflecting on his role as DG while working on state–church matters. When combined, this material provided 59 pages of raw material.

Through the interviews and witness seminars, it became apparent that the informants each presented disjointed fragments of a single narrative: the story of the disestablishment of CoN. Placing themselves and their efforts within a social and historical context, the story as told by each informant related to the others and to specific events. While the interview guide was not especially designed with a narrative approach in mind, the material was analyzed and interpreted through a thematic narrative approach, inspired by Riessman (2008). A thematic narrative analysis is concerned with ‘what’ is said, rather than ‘how’, ‘to whom’, or ‘for what purposes’ (Riessman, 2008, pp. 53–54). In this article, the ‘what’ refers to the institutional work and leadership performed by the DGs. Thus, the analysis presents their agency within the context in which it unfolded rather than extrapolating knowledge based on a categorization of themes through coding. Following the work done through the analysis, the narratives were presented to the informants, and the DGs were invited to elaborate and comment, a form of member validation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 222). This led to additional interviews with Pettersen and Johnsen in January 2023, while Vad Nilsen commented via email. Finally, the informants were given a draft of the entire article, with the possibility of commenting and suggesting alterations. Through this approach, the study aimed to secure validity for the narrative being presented. Allowing the informants to comment on the analysis could have made it possible for them to tilt the narrative to their own advantage. However, the lack of anonymity was a hindrance to such revisionism. The final analysis and conclusions are the responsibility of the researcher alone.

The extent to which informants’ narratives are trustworthy representations of historical events is contested and ambiguous (Alvesson, 2011). The material has thus been approached from a critical hermeneutical perspective, and it takes into account that all statements must “in principle be suspected of bearing the imprints of ideologies” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018, p. 187), that is, acknowledging that informants may have special positions to defend and justify. This perspective was adjusted for by the lack of anonymity, which made the informants more accountable for the presentation of their own narratives. In addition, the narratives were compared with policy documents and reports from the period, with the aim of detecting coherence between the two.

The analysis and discussion are guided by prior theory, as is common for narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). However, the analysis is not deductive, with the aim of detecting notions of institutional leadership within the agency of the DG. Rather, having gathered the data material, the interpretation was motivated by my reading of Washington et al. (2008). Recognizing that the presentation of institutional leadership by these authors harmonized with

the ecclesial agency, their chapter proved valuable as a source that facilitated an understanding of how the church leaders acted during the disestablishment of CoN as a traditional state church.

A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE DIRECTORS GENERAL'S WORK ON STATE AND CHURCH

The twentieth century saw a series of important events creating greater self-governance for CoN, including the establishment of ecclesial democratic bodies at all levels of the church, and the delegation of employer responsibilities for pastors and liturgic orders to these bodies. In 1996, a new governmental act on the church led to increased independence for the local church from the municipalities, establishing the parishes as independent legal entities. However, § 2 of the Constitution still stated that the Evangelical-Lutheran religion remained the official religion of the church, the king remained the head of the church, and on a national level, the government still appointed bishops, while the parliament provided detailed provisions for ecclesial legislation.

Simultaneously, as Norwegian society became more culturally and religiously diverse in the latter half of the twentieth century, the political and societal environment within which CoN operated altered. As such, the process analyzed below is a direct continuation of previous ecclesial, political, and societal processes and cannot be understood if considered outside of the context in which it occurred.

Erling Pettersen, 1996–2006

Reflecting on his tenure as DG, Erling Pettersen (b. 1950) described the period as one in which several projects saw the relationship between state and church as an underlying subject. In addition to securing sufficient economic support for the church's daily operations, Pettersen stressed that through these platforms with politicians, he was able to promote and discuss the need for a new organization of ecclesial affairs:

In that way, I would say that my meetings with politicians through the ten years were very much about getting to know them and their personal history with the church. I discovered that there was a strong commitment across the different parties to secure a church that had room for everyone, to put it simply.

Pettersen spent much time among politicians, stating that he spent almost as much time cultivating relationships with them as with the elected representatives of the church. In doing so, he continued a tradition among DGs that dated back to the establishment of the position in 1969, one of promoting the ecclesial agenda for an increased separation of church and state. Pettersen's presentation of the narrative is thus a story emphasizing relations and relational leadership. Understanding his presence in the narrative as a facilitator, he saw his strength lie in his ability to gather different people, stressing the DG's responsibility for securing good processes and allowing space for listening and dialog. These relational perspectives align with Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) notion of relational agency and with Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) contention that institutional work takes form through relational dimensions. Pettersen also emphasized his tenure as DG as being incorporated within a longer narrative that encompassed not only the history of the National Council but also the reform movement within CoN. Viewing himself as working within the legacy of previous DGs and the leaders of the

reform movement, such as DG and bishop Georg Hille, his retrospective look at his work was closely connected to the development of an increasing organizational self-awareness within CoN during the 20th century.

Two years into Pettersen's tenure, the National Council of CoN appointed the Bakkevig Commission in February 1998, tasking it with presenting a report on a future relationship between church and state. Commenting on this, Pettersen stressed that it was important that this commission could gather the different ecclesial traditions within CoN and, at the same time, add political weight to it. Pettersen stated, "It is correct that for the Director General, at that time, [it was important] to get diverse dioceses like Stavanger, Oslo, and Nord-Hålogaland to pull in the same direction." He acknowledged the diversity within CoN in relation to the question of a future relationship between church and state and implied agentic efforts by the DG in the promotion of ecclesial unity on the subject, what Washington et al. (2008) would term "securing internal consistency."

When the Bakkevig Commission delivered its report in 2002, recommending the disestablishment of CoN as a state church through thorough constitutional reform, the response to the report in the General Synod was mixed. In response, Pettersen took the initiative to "proceed, without losing the momentum," as indicated in the report. This initiative resulted in the document *The Church of Norway's Identity and Mission*, which was approved by the General Synod in 2004. Primarily a document intended to provide the government-appointed Gjønnes Commission² with a basis for the church's self-understanding, the process of its development was also intended as a way of increasing internal organizational self-awareness.

Identity and Mission articulated an organizational narrative for CoN, providing a history wherein CoN's relation to the people and society, as being through history and popular support and not through the state, was clearly promoted:

As a folk church, the Church of Norway is formed by and has helped shape culture, history, and society. Through different expressions, it has had close ties to King, Government, and other official public bodies. [...] As a folk church, The Church of Norway is not identical to the fellowship of all inhabitants but is a distinct community based on baptism and faith. (Kirkerådet, 2004, p. 4)

While presenting neither new ideas nor a new direction for the ecclesial agency, and drawing heavily on material promoted through the reform movement, this document provided a platform for subsequent discourse in political debates regarding state and church. The report, and Pettersen's role in the process, is an example of institutional work through discursive dimensions (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019).

Discursive elements have been the most widely recognized and developed form of institutional work (Hampel et al., 2017; Lawrence & Phillips, 2019, p. 200), and narratives are an integral part of these studies. As narratives can be used to "explicate situations, justify actors and defend courses of actions" (Hampel et al., 2017, p. 570), the disestablishment of CoN as a state church is not only a story of interactions in a chain of causality, but also a story of the articulation of a narrative, justifying the actions and agency from an historical and moral perspective. While Pettersen's emphasis on such work and on *Identity and Mission* were important, such works both preceded and followed the process: Bakkevig 1 and the reform movement also promoted a distinct narrative to justify their own positions.

² The Gjønnes Commission was a commission appointed by the Ministry of Church Affairs in 2002, tasked to present a report on the future relationship between state and church. It could be understood as a governmental response to the Bakkevig Commission's report.

The Gjøannes Commission presented its report in 2006, the same year Pettersen departed as Director General. When the General Synod gave its statement on this report, the policy dictating the Church's agency in the coming years was set. Although the call for disestablishment was divided between a majority and minority (63 to 19) in the Synod, the tenure of Pettersen saw the development of the ideas of disestablishment cement into official ecclesial policy, with a growing political acceptance of the ecclesial cause, probably mainly due to societal changes in the religious landscape.

The work on state–church relations had evolved from the establishment of the Bakkevig Commission in 1998 to the presentation of its report by the Gjøannes Commission in 2006, causing Pettersen to spend a great deal of his time on this work during his tenure. As this was the period of the commissions, Pettersen was highly involved in the various aspects, and his agency took its primary form through the cultivation of politicians and ecclesial representatives in preparation for the coming alteration of the church–state relationship. Although the work of the commissions, the council, and the General Synod is to be understood as the formal process, the DG's agency, although rooted in these formalities, was also expressed through more informal channels, such as dialog (discourse perspective) and lobbying (relational perspective). There were also established platforms—such as annual meetings between the DG, leader of the National Council, Minister of Church Affairs, and the Prime Minister—in which such agency took place.

Jens-Petter Johnsen, 2006–2018

Jens-Petter Johnsen (b. 1948) assumed the position as DG in June 2006, only weeks before the National Council of CoN gave its initial response to the Gjøannes Commission. One could thus argue that the ecclesial policy was determined before Johnsen became DG and that, as he was hired, he already understood that he would continue the process. He had himself been a part of the Gjøannes Commission and shared the views put forth by the majority, both in the commission and in the councils of CoN, namely, to work toward a statutory-based folk church. Throughout 2006 and 2007, Johnsen made presentations of the commission's work, aiming to strengthen support for an altered relationship between church and state at the grassroots level of the church:

I don't know if there was a strategy amongst others. That I had a strategy, selling the message of what we did in the Gjøannes Commission, that I must admit. I was engaged by this. As with Pettersen, Johnsen placed himself within the narrative of the reform movement: In both the interviews and in his personal notes, he refers to his personal formation regarding state church matters through the 1960's and 70's through his reading of and contact with the reform movement and the Sivertsen-commission. His role as DG is thus only a part of his story, in which, at a crucial moment in the process of disestablishment, he was tasked with the mission of proceeding with the political process. As noted by Washington et al., the institutional leader combines his own life story with the life story of the organization (2008, p. 727), and Johnsen's agency was not motivated by his job description alone but also by his personal beliefs, which harmonized with those of the majority of the Gjøannes Commission.

After the General Synod had made its principal stand on the matter in the fall of 2006, the form of the process altered: the commissions' time was over, and there was now a need for political action. Johnsen, in accordance with the National Council, approached the political parties in parliament and held meetings with the leadership of the parties, together with the elected leader of the National Council and CoN's presiding bishop, through the winter of

2006/2007. These meetings created a foundation for subsequent negotiations and for work in the coming years. The church aimed to secure broad support from all parties in parliament.

Johnsen states that he and the other ecclesial representatives had a good feeling after these meetings and that there was a parliamentary will to move forward to alter the Constitution. But his experience, and that of the National Council, was that nothing happened:

What happened is that we wanted, during the summer of 2007, to establish a commission to investigate the democratic structure of the Church of Norway. [...] We were prepared that this would happen. And it is also referred to in parliament, that such a commission would be established. But nothing happened, and when the summer passed and fall came, nothing happened. The Ministry had no publicity about any processes, and we had no impression that any process was on the way.

Consequently, Johnsen, in agreement with the National Council, sent a letter to the Prime Minister asking for a meeting. Importantly, he went to the media, calling for more engagement in ecclesial activities by the Minister of Church Affairs. This led to an important meeting of the top leadership in the church, the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Church Affairs in January 2008. Johnsen experienced the results of this meeting as producing a radical change in pace in governmental work on constitutional reform:

...as I remember it, the Prime Minister was asked by the the National Council of CoN: Does the Government want an alteration or not? And on that question, I vividly remember that the Prime Minister turned to Trond Giske [Minister of Church Affairs], who sat by his side, and said something along the line of “We do, don’t we, Trond?” and Trond Giske confirmed. From that moment, we saw another pace and push in the process from politicians, from the Ministry...

Through the spring of 2008, Johnsen participated in meetings with a committee that comprised ministers from all three ruling parties (Labor Party, Center Party, and Socialist Party), preparing for the coming negotiations in parliament. This work ran simultaneously with a joint ecclesial and governmental commission, Bakkevig 2, which was working on a proposal for democratic reform in the Church. In April 2008, a church settlement was presented on which all parties agreed. The settlement involved alterations to the Constitution, the transfer of the mandate to appoint leaders and set church legislation to the Church itself, and democratic reform.

Johnsen told of close to 50 meetings held with politicians through those years. The most important were held together with the elected leader of the National Council, but in many, he was the sole ecclesial representative. Although in continuous dialog with the elected leader, as was the case with Pettersen, Johnsen communicated the trust existing between the leader and the DG, which allowed the DG wide latitude to promote agency within the mandate given by the council:

I didn’t experience that I was challenged on the mandate I presumed to have. That could be because of my regular contact with Nils Tore [elected leader of the National Church Council], but it could also be... so, this almost concretizes the most when I sat ringside in these meetings in the Government. So, there are few things I feel were complicated in the process...

The relational dimension of Johnsen’s agency echoes that of Pettersen, although one could argue that the differences in the two DGs’ relations with the politicians were characterized by the status of the process: While Pettersen’s contacts with politicians were in the early stages of the disestablishment, where the main aim was to mature these discussions into a narrative

where CoN was not a traditional state church, Johnsen's contacts happened later, and as the narrative was now established, the aim became to find practical solutions so the disestablishment could proceed. Thus, Johnsen's agency reflects Washington et al.'s (2008) statement that the institutional leader secures external supporting mechanisms, in this case the regulative barriers, that is, the constitutional paragraphs that allowed for increased self-government within the church while simultaneously upholding the institutionalized role of CoN within society.

After the church settlement and the subsequent alterations to the Constitution in 2012, work on church and state entered a new era, during which principles were turned into practical politics. For the DG, this involved two major tasks: setting a new church order and working on the judicial and practical elements of establishing CoN as an independent legal entity. The work, as such, had new scenery, as it now moved from parliament to the Ministry and from the National Council of CoN to the secretariat. Johnsen stated that his own special competence lay in political processes, while a different expertise was necessary for working out the details. He also explained how the Ministry took the leading role in the work leading up to the new church legislation in 2017.

A consequence of the disestablishment was the need for a new organizational map for CoN. This had been thematized by the First Bakkevig Commission, and the General Synod had already made preliminary decisions in 2005. From 2011 on, with the Third Bakkevig Commission, reshaping the church's organizational structure, was moved to the forefront of Johnsen's work. Reflecting on this work, Johnsen mentioned how internal ecclesial disagreements on issues such as local or national employer responsibilities reemerged. While the leading forces within the church agreed in essence on the major principles regarding the disestablishment, this was not the case when the organizational power came to be redistributed.

Ingrid Vad Nilsen, 2018–present

Ingrid Vad Nilsen (b. 1957) was appointed DG close to the end of the era of legal reform. As a member of the First Bakkevig Commission and Director General of the Ministry of Church Affairs from 2008, she played a pivotal role in the Ministry's work following the church settlement. Her main contribution to the process was thus not from the perspective of the DG of the National Council of CoN and, as such, is out of the scope of this article. Additionally, while both Pettersen and Johnsen are retired, Vad Nilsen is presently working on the follow-ups from the reforms³.

Much of the work on preparing the new act on faith and life stance communities, which took effect in 2021, was completed before Vad Nilsen started her tenure as DG. Combined with an injunction restraining her from participating in meetings with the Ministry throughout 2018, her work in relation to the Ministry and politicians was more prominent when discussing the consequences of the new relationship between church and state, rather than in the reforms themselves. Crucial to this is the role of CoN within society and the current dialog with governmental bodies. In speaking of "standing up for the members of the church" and "equal treatment of different sizes," she hinted toward navigating in unknown territory: the traditional state church is abolished, and the practical consequences are still unclear. She illustrated this by pointing to the lack of attention paid to faith and life stance communities and dialog during the pandemic. Acknowledging that the close relationship that existed between the National Council of CoN and the Ministry in the past has been radically altered, she

³ Vad Nilsen will retire in the summer of 2024.

indicated that a new relationship is being formed but without the premises for it being fully stipulated through legal reforms:

When we were a state church, the Ministry paid close attention to all R-reports that were written on everything in this world, and if anything of what was written there had implications for the Church of Norway, they would notify the Minister [...]. We don't have anything of that anymore. So suddenly things happen without us being there... We don't pick things up early enough.

As Vad Nilsen entered her new role as DG just as the narrative of the disestablishment entered a new phase, her role differs from that of Pettersen and Johnsen. It could be said that Pettersen was part of the work of initiating and Johnsen part of the work of formalizing the disestablishment, while Vad Nilsen now has to work out how CoN is to relate to the state, given the premises provided through the new act on faith and life stance communities. Her relational agency thus involves the establishment of new forms of relationship between the church and governmental bodies.

Continuing the work on internal organizational structure, the Müller–Nilssen Commission was commissioned by the National Council in 2019, and it delivered its report in 2021. Through renewed and increased attention to this work, the DG must navigate between different stakeholders within the church. Although crucial elements of CoN's organization are specified through the act on faith and life stance communities, particularly prominent is the continuation of split financing between the state and municipalities. The practical elements of the distribution of power throughout the organization occupied much of Vad Nilsen's time leading up to the General Synod in August 2023.

Summarizing Vad Nilsen's first years as DG, one could argue that the main task has been to situate CoN within a new reality, promoting the interests of the church in relation to both governmental bodies and other faith and life stance communities. Simultaneously, negotiations between intra-ecclesial bodies striving for power in the new organizational structure have emerged as crucial.

DISCUSSION – LEADING THE CHURCH THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Based on the narratives presented in the analysis, the following discussion is in three parts. First, the three DGs' tenures are framed within a macro perspective on the process of disestablishment. Second, their work is discussed in light of Washington et al.'s understanding of institutional leadership. Third, the DGs' role as institutional caretakers is discussed.

Directors General through the process of disestablishing CoN as a state church

There has been a call for more process perspectives from within institutional theory (Reay et al., 2019). While this article has not applied such an analytical approach, time has emerged as pivotal when investigating the agency of the DGs. In the narrative analyzed, time can be seen as crucial during the process of disestablishing CoN. It was a process that stretched over decades, and each DG fulfilled their role and promoted agency within a distinct period in that process. Their actions are thus best understood against the broader set of events informing

them. Table 2 presents the major milestones, placing the DGs and their agency in relation to these events.

Table 2: Directors General’s institutional work disestablishing CoN as a state church

Director General	Main aim for institutional work	Main task for Director General	Milestones
Erling Pettersen 1996–2006	Secure internal ecclesial support for altered relationship between church and state	Secure that the diversity of voices on church/state-matters in CoN are represented in the process	The First Bakkevig Commission (2002)
	Define and articulate the church’s self-understanding	Gain support for an organizational identity not dependent on state affiliation	CoN’s Identity and Mission (2004) / The Gjønnnes Commission (2006)
Jens-Petter Johnsen 2006–2018	Secure external political support for altered relationship between church and state	Negotiate with politicians on possible solutions	The Church Settlement (2008) / The Second Bakkevig Commission (2008)
	Establish a new regulative order for the relationship between church and state	Anchor the process/result in the church organization	Constitutional reform (2012) / Establishment of CoN as an independent legal entity (2017)
Ingrid Vad Nilsen 2018–2024	Stabilize CoN as a disestablished folk church in society	Secure sufficient external support for CoN in a new societal context	The Act on Faith and Life Stance Communities (2021)
	Establish a new organizational structure within CoN	Facilitate for ecclesial discussions and provide solutions	The Müller–Nilsen Commission (2022)

As presented in the analysis, the DGs understood themselves as filling a role as DG, seeing themselves within a tradition and an ecclesial agency that was larger than themselves. While fulfilling their specific role, they also connected their work on the disestablishment of CoN to their own personal history and beliefs. The intertwining between personal beliefs and the aim for greater independence for CoN promoted by the reform movement resonates with Washington et al.’s (2008) description of how institutional leaders draw on their life stories: Johnsen recollected his personal development through the 60’s and 70’s, Pettersen drew on his formation through his early years while working in the secretariat of the National Council of CoN, while Vad Nilsen told of her upbringing with parents belonging to different denominations, although none implied a direct causality between their life history and work.

The DGs’ agency is thus not just motivated through their formal position in a specific time, but also by their own personal stories and understandings of the aims of the work. While this seems obvious for all forms of leadership, it is important to address this and bear it in mind, as the institutional leader assumes “personal responsibility for the well-being of the organizational ‘whole’, identifying himself with it, and reconceptualizing himself as its steward” (Kraatz, 2009). Through their conceptualization of their own agency, the DGs placed themselves within the framework offered through institutional leadership.

Washington et al.’s (2008) forms of institutional leadership (Table 1) provide analytical insight into the work performed by the DGs. While the narratives presented by the DGs make

it clear that all the DGs were concerned with all forms of leadership, the timing of each DG's tenure coincided with an emphasis on a different aspect.

Securing internal consistency

From Erling Pettersen's initiative to gather relevant people to discuss how one could increase internal ecclesial support for the disestablishment of CoN as a state church, which led to the document *The Church of Norway's Identity and Mission*, to Johnsen's presentations of the Gjønnes Commission and Vad Nilsen's strengthened emphasis on the organizational structure, the work of creating internal coherence has, throughout the period, been a task of importance for all the DGs. The question of whether to disestablish the state church was the most important issue during Pettersen's tenure. Understanding the work of internal coherence as building an autobiographical pattern of historical accounts of their organization to produce a coherent picture of an organization's identity (Washington et al., 2008, p. 726), *Identity and Mission* provides a good example of such work. While this document functioned as a synthesis of developments in CoN over several decades, the articulation of these perspectives into one narrative served, at least in the eyes of the DGs, as a pivotal tool in creating a common ecclesial basis for future alterations of the church.

Securing external supporting mechanisms

The institutional leader works to gain legitimacy for the organization by developing supporting mechanisms and by striving for widespread social acceptance (Washington et al., 2008, p. 728). The DGs' contacts and relations with politicians and the Ministry were important through all three tenures: Pettersen's cultivation of politicians, Johnsen's meetings leading up to the church settlement in 2008, and Vad Nilsen's work on clarifying the new legal status of CoN are all examples of how the DGs have worked to increase the legitimacy and status of the Church.

Making a distinction between the work of *developing supporting mechanisms* and *gaining widespread social acceptance*, Washington, Boal, and Davis (2008) write that the first is dependent on state or normative support for particular practices, while the latter relates to a broader cultural-cognitive perspective. Given the character of the different phases of the disestablishment of CoN, Johnsen's tenure is more characterized by the first perspective. As the ideas from the Bakkevig and Gjønnes reports were translated into formal policies, Johnsen's dialog with politicians became somewhat more formalized and frequent than those of the other two DGs. The alterations to the Constitution, wherein § 16 states that the new status of CoN is as "Norway's folk church" and that it will be supported as that, must be seen as creating a crucial supporting mechanism for all matters relating to the church's legitimacy. Meanwhile, the work performed by Pettersen and Vad Nilsen can best be explained through the social acceptance perspective. Pettersen, through his work in maturing the thinking around the coming disestablishment with politicians, helped to spread ideas about the disestablishment of CoN to other arenas. Vad Nilsen's work, on the other hand, seems to be guided by the need to communicate CoN's agenda in the new societal order, stressing that CoN's membership numbers and historical position call for arrangements that differ from those of smaller faith and life stance communities.

Overcoming external enemies

As society is filled with conflicting interests, an organization will, of necessity, have to confront attacks on its practices. Arguing that such attacks come from the *death of existing practices* and the *fragmentation of the population that originally institutionalized the practices*, Washington, Boal, and Davis (2008, p. 729) state that institutional leaders help ensure the organization's survival. While this perspective is less obvious for an understanding of the DGs' work than the first two presented, the recognition of external threats to the practices of CoN is important.

Approaching the disestablishment of CoN as a state church from a macro perspective, one can argue that the whole process is an answer to the death of a practice. As CoN no longer represents the religious dimension of a homogenous society, the practice and normative foundations of a traditional state church had become an anachronism and, as such, needed radical alteration. Delving more deeply into the matter, the DGs' work reflects the maintenance of the practice at a lower level. Throughout both Pettersen and Johnsen's tenures, a critical element was a reassurance of the continuation of the set practices of CoN, calming concerned politicians and others that CoN's identity would remain the same, even though its judicial status would become different. However, in 2024, discussions regarding what practices are still valid and what belongs to the past are vibrant.

The fragmentation of the population is important to the disestablishment of CoN, as noted above. While 95% of the Norwegian population belonged to CoN in 1970, this number was reduced to 85% in 2006 (NOU 2006: 2). At the end of 2021, the percentage was 65%. However, this drop in percentage does not reflect the full reality—the number of members, while slowly fading, remains quite stable, at around 3.5 million members. The argumentation promoted by Vad Nilsen thus follows a logic wherein the size of the organization, not the percentage, forms the foundation for the argumentation of “CoN as the largest actor within civil society in Norway.” As such, the DG has helped create a new narrative for CoN, its place in society, and its relations to the state and other faith and life stance communities, securing its legitimacy as the largest among equals.

Threats to an organization are not only external, and for this reason, overcoming disruptive elements also relates to securing internal consistency. This becomes relevant when including the intra-organizational processes that have become increasingly dominant in the DGs' work in the last decade. While not delving deeply into the complex material covering the reform of the church organization, the narratives of Johnsen and Vad Nilsen highlight the increased attention given to organizational structure.

Institutional caretakers

The analysis has shown how the DGs' agency took form through discursive and relational dimensions, key factors in institutional work (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). The material dimensions, while important in upholding CoN's position in society, for example, through the significance of the church buildings to the local communities, are less visible in the DGs' work. This could be explained through an understanding of their primary aim as being to alter the judicial status of the church and to develop new relations with the state and government.

As central actors within CoN, the DGs accordingly worked for a new relationship with the state, and this seemingly aligns more with the creation or disruption of institutional arrangements rather than what is implied through the notion of an institutional caretaker. However, when closely examining their agency, it is the maintenance perspective that becomes most prominent. Given the institutional changes in Norwegian society, the DGs worked to secure CoN's position in Norwegian society. Acknowledging that such work implied elements

of disruption to existing practices, for example, to the judicial status of CoN, their work consisted primarily of securing arrangements that would preserve a legitimate church within a new context. As institutional maintenance involves active work (Jarzabkowski et al., 2009, p. 309), such work need not encompass agency by upholding set practices only but may also include elements of creation and disruption (Jarzabkowski et al., 2009). Thus, the DGs emerge neither as institutional entrepreneurs nor as troublemakers, but as caretakers aiming to provide satisfactory legitimacy for CoN during a time of institutional change.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Understanding the disestablishment of CoN as a traditional state church to be a case of organizational response to institutional change, this article has analyzed the agentic efforts by the Directors General of the National Church Council in CoN during this period. Relating that agency to the theoretical concepts of institutional work and leadership, the article provides deeper insight into how leaders perform their institutional work during institutional change. Although there are overlaps and recurring themes throughout the period, there is a development in the agency of the DGs which, to a certain degree, harmonizes with the different phases of the process, the tenures of the DGs, and the categorizations of Washington, Boal, and Davis (2008).

While the first phase, coinciding with Erling Pettersen's tenure, was a period of commissions, a major occupation of the DG was to mature both internal and external stakeholders into accepting the premise that the separation of church and state was a necessary development. I argue that this period aligns with the task of institutional leaders in securing internal consistency, while simultaneously acknowledging that such work also includes external actors, namely, the politicians. The second phase, coinciding with the majority of Jens-Petter Johnsen's tenure, was a period of legal reform. Leading up to the church settlement in 2008 and the constitutional reform in 2012, a major occupation of the DG was to secure external support mechanisms. In the third phase, emerging in the latter part of Johnsen's tenure and becoming more present after Vad Nilsen took up the position, the element of overcoming external enemies has become increasingly present as CoN works to find its place and position within a new social structure.

As each of the DGs fulfilled their role in a specific period and faced distinct issues related to the process of disestablishment, there was a need for varying emphases on the different tasks. While this work encompassed elements of both creation and disruption, the main perspective was institutional maintenance, the upholding of a legitimate church despite institutional change in the religious landscape. The DGs were thus institutional caretakers, ultimately aiming to preserve CoN and its position in society.

While this article finds its strength in providing insight into ecclesial agency through institutional change, it has limitations in its small selection of informants, thus capturing only a small portion of the agency at work during the process of disestablishing CoN as a state church. As the DGs performed institutional work aimed at maintaining CoN's position within society, more research should be performed capturing agency from other perspectives, such as agentic efforts to disrupt these institutional arrangements by opponents of CoN.

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