

# Formal and informal

## Two Patterns of Organizing Voluntary Work

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### ABSTRACT

Volunteering is a pressing concern in civic organizations. This article explores how voluntary work can be best organized by using a case study from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, which is characterized by both voluntarism and professionalization. Drawing on interviews and observations in congregations following different modes of organizing, we investigate the roles of volunteers and professionals. The findings highlight how actors distribute their work tasks and interpret functional and moral responsibility. The patterns of roles and responsibilities reflect two ideal-typical forms of organizing. We discuss the degrees of formalization in each context and propose a new categorization, which we conceptualize as informal and formal organizing of voluntary work. The first places emphasis on the individual employee, who works through personal relationships, and task distribution is scarcely regulated. The latter is formalized by explicit mandates and responsibilities shared systematically. We conclude that congregations, professionals, and volunteers can benefit from a formal approach to organizing voluntary work.

**Keywords:** volunteers, professionals, organizing, roles, responsibility, church

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES: TWO PATTERNS OF ORGANIZING VOLUNTARY WORK

Voluntary work is the backbone of civic organizations (Henriksen et al., 2018; Maier et al., 2016). A volunteer “freely chooses to make an unpaid effort that benefits others more than themselves and their own family” (Habermann, 2007, p. 43). In Norway, 63% of the population engages in volunteering at least once annually. Their efforts are equivalent to those of roughly 150,000 full-time employees and amount to 80 billion NOK in value.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the substantial value of this resource, organizations are keen to recruit more volunteers to maximize productivity in the face of reduced budgets, hiring freezes, and other constraints. Beyond practical benefits and monetary value, the presence of volunteers increases organizational legitimacy by garnering public support, enabling service delivery, and enhancing competence (Brudney & Kellough, 2000). While organizations are advised to communicate the importance of volunteers and the rationale behind their involvement (Faletehan et al., 2021; Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2013), leaders are expected to tailor and support voluntary work (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Sirris, 2023b). Across organizations, the desired outcome of such voluntarism is improved efficiency and engagement and minimized volunteer turnover (Haldane, 2014). This turns the spotlight on how voluntary work is organized.

Given the diversity of civic organizations and the wide range of tasks available to volunteers, there is no definitive answer to how voluntary work can be best organized. Plurality is a hallmark of civic organizations, which offer various opportunities for volunteers to express their values, pursue their interests, and expand their horizons by developing competencies (Enjolras & Eimhjellen, 2018, p. 13). Since organizing patterns differ to suit contextual factors, research on specific empirical contexts is both valuable and necessary (Musick & Wilson, 2007). Accordingly, we examine how voluntary work is practiced using case study data from two Norwegian congregations. Volunteering is characteristic of religious organizations (Cnaan & Curtis, 2013; Cnaan et al., 2016; Harris, 1995), not least in congregations that bring together people of Christian faith (Torry, 2017). Congregations include volunteers, clergy members, and other professionals (Sirris & Askeland, 2021). In this study, we focus on how the organizing of voluntary work influences the dynamics and task distribution between employees and volunteers. This research focus is especially relevant given that civic organizations are witnessing increased professionalization of traditionally voluntary domains (Seel, 2010). A key issue in this process is the roles and responsibilities of professionals, hereafter used interchangeably with employees or staff. Our study illustrates how role theory advances the understanding of responsibility in organizing voluntary work.

This study is guided by the following research question: *How can roles and responsibilities in voluntary work be understood as formal and informal organizing?* This study contributes to the literature on organizing voluntary work in two ways. First, we empirically analyze the distribution of tasks and responsibilities between volunteers and employees and explore how role patterns emerge between these groups. Second, we distinguish between moral and functional responsibilities and theorize this distinction in terms of formal and informal organizing—a conceptualization that can be applied to non-religious organizations.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We first review literature on roles, responsibilities, and formalization and highlight relevant findings. We then explicate the methods applied in our study before presenting our main empirical findings based on the case

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.frivillighetnorge.no/fakta/n%C3%B8kkelfakta-om-frivillighet>

descriptions of the two congregations. Lastly, we discuss key insights, present concluding remarks, and suggest pathways for future research.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

### The Role Concept

A *role* is defined as “bundles of norms and expectations” associated with a social position (Leung et al., 2014). The sum of expectations from others and oneself adds to a role. Biddle (1986) emphasized a functional perspective that considers the behaviors of individuals who occupy positions within social systems. This approach assumes predictability and stability, which are particularly relevant to professional roles that are formalized and scripted (Barley & Tolbert, 1997, p. 98). Workplace roles are formally drafted and regulated by contracts. However, volunteer roles tend to be more improvised, as they are, by their very nature, less regulated. Thus, the expectations of staff and volunteers can be incongruent and result in unclear and ambiguous volunteer roles. This, in turn, can lead to conflicts and even decreased role performance (Tubre & Collins, 2000). Interestingly, the role concept has been criticized for being too static and resistant to creativity and change (Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari, 2016). In view of this critique, we consider Simpson and Carroll’s (2008, p. 43) approach rooted in social interactionism, which defines role as “a vehicle that mediates and negotiates the meanings constructed in relational interactions, while itself being subject to ongoing reconstruction in these relational processes.” Roles are thus not exclusively linked to a social position; they are simultaneously being performed and open to being filled with meaning and interpretations (Järventie-Thesleff & Tienari, 2016, p. 240). This conceptualization is highly relevant to empirical studies of situated and embedded practices, including voluntary work in congregations.

Echoing this viewpoint, many studies on the interactions between employees and volunteers in various contexts have demonstrated the usefulness of role theory (Pearce, 1993; Schulz & Auld, Nesbit et al., 2016). A key aspect of this study pertains to the uniqueness of volunteers, as volunteering in most organizations is understood in the context of paid staff (Hager & Brudney, 2011). Researchers have critically commented on the tendency to perceive volunteers as unpaid labor supply or an affordable means to an end (Nesbit et al., 2016). However, volunteers are motivated to make a difference and not simply check off the tasks allocated to them by the organization. This normative stance, warning against volunteer reductionism, was highlighted by Fretheim et al. (2016, p. 15) who distinguished between organic volunteering, which emphasizes the volunteer’s self-fulfillment and freedom, and instrumental volunteering, which focuses on the need for labor in addition to paid efforts.

Although volunteers are, in principle, unique and different from paid staff (Cnaan & Cascio, 1999), civic organizations tend to regard them in the same manner as human resource management teams in modern organizations. Such *functional organizing* is characterized by a top-down approach, coordination, and a linear system (Studer, 2016, p. 690). It is also denoted as the “workplace model” (Rochester et al., 2010) within the sphere of voluntarism. In contrast, *interactional organizing* refers to adapting to the characteristics of volunteering rather than a blind import of managerialism. Another approach that foregrounds the distinct roles of volunteers and staff is the study of managers’ and volunteers’ identities (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011). Linked to this theme is the psychological contract theory used by Farmer and Fedor (1999, p. 353),

who distinguished between transactional aspects—mutual profitability and balanced reciprocity—and relational aspects—emotional currency and mutual investments. They found that psychological contracts in voluntary work are relational rather than transactional.

Thus, the organizing of voluntary work is a heterogeneous field that involves applying work life principles while maintaining the unique character of voluntarism. A particular focal point in this balancing act is how staff and volunteers perceive one another's roles. For instance, Nesbit et al. (2016) studied the roles of volunteer managers in libraries in the United States (US) and found that they lacked prior experience and had been given little training. Typically, volunteer managers are not perceived on par with regular managers or accorded the same respect (Machin & Paine, 2008; Seel, 2010). Another area of conflict concerns how professional values and quality can be challenged by volunteer roles (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008), not least when volunteers have to comply with high professional standards and task performance as well as ethical considerations. Viewing volunteers as a threat (Nesbit et al., 2016, p. 170) can lead to turf battles, conflict, and eventually aggressive behavior or exit (Macduff, 2011). To avoid such conflicts between groups, it is imperative that organizations clarify roles (McCurley & Lynch, 2011) and reduce role ambiguity by defining the role-associated behaviors and responsibilities. Research has shown that lack of training, limited support, bad communication, and infrequent feedback can lead to role ambiguity and, eventually, conflict (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 750).

Insights into the roles of employees and volunteers can also be drawn from studies on volunteer motivation although they seldom explicate managerial or organizing implications. In Studer's (2016, p. 691) quantitative study of 399 Swiss civic organizations, role clarity emerged as a central factor. The data analysis showed that the paid staff did not regard volunteers as competitors, and they were familiar with the roles and responsibilities of volunteers. The volunteers, too, knew how their roles differed from those of the paid staff. In terms of role organizing, the volunteers expected a balance of interest and persuasion, participation and co-determination, strategic commitment, coordination across organizational boundaries, clarity, a sense of team spiritedness from the paid staff, respect, and informal recognition (Studer, 2016, p. 706). The absence of these factors, which both the paid staff and the volunteers deemed to be good organizing, results in turnover and staff frustration. Conversely, taking volunteers seriously and treating them with respect can decrease frustration, turnover, burn-out, and growing negative attitudes toward the organizations (Fernandez & Kim, 2013; Rehnborg, 2009).

## Responsibility

The other key concept of this study, *responsibility* overlaps partly with the concept of role. Responsibility can be understood as a set of functional and moral obligations associated with a role (Bivins, 2006). Since Aristotle, responsibility has been regarded as dependent on moral agency and autonomy—being able to think and decide free of external pressure (Johansson, 1998). To be deemed responsible, one must hold some agency and be able to make decisions for oneself. In our view, responsibility resonates with the core tenet of volunteering, which presupposes free will and choice of actions (Musick & Wilson, 2007). Furthermore, it aligns with a reflexive mode of volunteering, underlining the volunteers' deliberations about why and how they should volunteer (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). Accountability is also an aspect of responsibility (Bivins, 2006). Often considered retrospectively, it denotes the ability to explain or justify one's intentions and actions to others by planning or reporting. We deem that

responsibility, since it expresses choice, agency, and freedom, is a more central concept than accountability in the context of volunteering.

Volunteer motivation, which is closely related to meaning-making (Faletehan et al., 2021; Musick & Wilson, 2007), is a prominent area of research in the Nordic region (Habermann, 2007; Wollebæk et al., 2015). In this study, which focuses on Norwegian congregations, we consider that a theological discourse influences the notion of responsibility. As “members of the body,” everyone is assigned a task in the congregation (1 Cor 12:12). Although volunteers and employees are distinct categories, they are all equal members of the church. According to the Norwegian Church Act § 1 (Kirkeloven, 1996), the purpose of the church is “to create the conditions for an active commitment and a constant renewal in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Norway.” Haers and Von Essen (2015, pp. 30, 39) explain that Christian volunteering “arises out of the faith and trust in God’s promise as the natural thing to do.” While, on the one hand, the church encourages active commitment and renewal, on the other hand, there is a recent shift toward short-term and project-based volunteering within the church (Sirris, 2023a).

Importantly, in the congregations of the Church of Norway, the responsibilities of volunteers and employees are not strictly regulated. Rather, they are negotiated and guided by context, especially by the relationships between local congregation members and staff. For example, Fretheim (2014, 2016) examined the interactions of employees and volunteers in annual Christian education reform activities and found that interactions and responsibilities were performed in various ways that functioned well in the local context. However, the execution was left to the local congregation to be tailored to local resources and conditions. Thus, patterns of task distribution and responsibility are influenced by interpersonal dynamics and relational competencies. As noted above, these conditions are governed by informal understandings and psychological contracts rather than formal organizing through explicit mandates and established structures (Vantilborgh et al., 2012). Sporsheim and Sirris (2018) explored the leadership of volunteers in three congregations, with a focus on continuous congregational activities. Although church employees exercised leadership within their work areas and over the volunteers, the systematic understanding among the professionals in terms of organizing was weak.

## Formalization

The above discussion highlights that roles and responsibilities can be understood as formal and structural as well as informal and relational. In other words, roles and responsibilities can be empirically patterned in various ways. We suggest calling such patterns of organizing *formalization*. Bodewes (2002, p. 221) perceives formalization as a continuum and defines it as “the extent to which documented standards are used to control social actors’ behaviors and outputs.” Formalization emerges in work practices, including volunteering (Bodewes, 2002, p. 214). Juillerat (2010, p. 217) agrees with Weber, who describes formalization as “the extent of written rules, procedures and instructions” that provide competencies to organizations, including speed, efficiency, and reliable and consistent performance. Thus, Weber conceptualizes formalization as a rational ideal, pivotal in the realm of bureaucracy, in accordance with a functional understanding of roles (Biddle, 1986).

Some scholars have criticized this view of formalization as limiting flexibility, adaptation, innovation, and motivation—the features that constitute informal organization (de Wit et al., 2019, p. 57; Juillerat, 2010, p. 218). Acknowledging the criticism, we believe that the idea of formalization should be expanded to include relational and motivational perspectives.

Similar ideas have been expressed in a study of voluntary work, where Musick and Wilson (cited in Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2013, p. 421) have argued that bureaucracy and formalization levels should be adjusted to avoid alienating volunteers. Kaufman et al. (2004) have shown how formal and hierarchical structures and management combined with small, informal working groups and a family atmosphere can be successful. We believe that organizations benefit from clear task distribution that aligns with volunteers' responsibilities. Doing so enables volunteers to adapt to their organizations by performing tasks and engaging morally.

In summary, prior research has investigated task distribution and interactions between volunteers and employees via roles and responsibilities. By its very nature, volunteering involves more symmetry and equality than general work life. Taking formalization into account, all organizations balance their formal and informal organizing efforts. However, actors who misunderstand their roles, do not know their formalized tasks, or do not take responsibility risk being a hindrance to organizational mission and goals. Thus, much is at stake when it comes to the organizing of voluntary work.

## METHODS

We used the case study method (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to collect in-depth data about how voluntary work is organized in terms of formalized roles and responsibilities within a specific context. We analyzed organizing models in two different settings, and instead of comparing all the factors between the settings, we focused on selected dimensions of this phenomenon.

### Research Context

Disestablished as a state church in 2017, the Church of Norway now functions as a civic organization, with volunteers permeating congregational life (Nylenna & Sirris, 2022). It presents an interesting research setting for several reasons. First, recent ecclesial reforms for Christian education, worship, and democracy have indirectly promoted voluntarism. Currently, the Church of Norway has about 8,000 employees and 75,000 volunteers participating in all spheres of congregational life. Second, the strengthening of the church's organizational features, or professionalization, has challenged the role of volunteers (Sirris & Askeland, 2021). With an increase in the number of employees, tasks have been transferred from volunteers to employees. However, it must be mentioned that this shift is not unidirectional; tasks have also been transferred from professionals to volunteers (Hegstad, 1999).

In everyday church life, volunteers interact with professionals. Deacons, catechists, and church musicians have leadership responsibilities related to recruiting, equipping, and guiding volunteers. Although such responsibilities are not explicated for the clergy, they are implied, as Sunday services and other tasks require interactions with volunteers. However, little is known about how these roles and responsibilities are understood and performed.

The Church of Norway is territorial and divided into 1,164 geographical parishes staffed by clergy, organists, catechists, deacons, churchwardens, and others. The clergy is led by the dean and the bishop, and the remaining employees are in a democratically elected line. For sampling, we selected two congregations based on their differences and ability to shed light on the research question. Specifically, one parish had an established structure, while the other one did not. We anonymized the congregations by naming them Midtown and Riverside (Table 1).

*Table 1: Congregations*

	Midtown	Riverside
Members	7,000 (13,500 residents)	10,000 (16,000 residents)
Employees	12	12
Volunteers	350	90
Location	Suburb in the “Bible belt”	Eastern part of the inner city
Demography	Large supply of volunteers Long-term residents	Students, social challenges, short-term residents
Church service participants annually	7,200	2,800
Baptisms	65	50
Confirmands	65	25
Funerals	80	50
Weddings	10	10
Individual interviews	7	6
Group interviews	4	5

### Data Collection, Analysis and Ethical Considerations

In the spring of 2022, the first author conducted 13 individual in-depth interviews with volunteers, professionals, and parish council members, and 9 group interviews with a total of 44 volunteers and employees. The individual and group interviews, which lasted an average of 60 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. The first author spent five days at each congregation, conducting interviews and making observations. Supplementary observational data were recorded in field notes and narratives.

After the data collection, we jointly analyzed and discussed the empirical material, using conventional thematic analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which is an abductive method. It combines an inductive approach—given our interest in understanding informants’ experiences—with a deductive approach informed by theoretical concepts. Knowledge is constructed through interactions between theory and empirical material. Setting the two in a continuous dialog, the abductive approach relies on the researchers’ “cultivated position” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 173). First, we formed an overall impression by reading all the material and noting the words in a preliminary code list. Second, we identified meaningful units in the text that illuminated the studied phenomenon. We adjusted the preliminary codes based on theory and categorized the data. Third, we reduced the number of meaning-bearing units. In addition, we used NVIVO to reduce the number of transcribed pages from 287 to 50. Next, we created a table with columns for quotes, subcategories, categories, and themes. During this process, we went back and forth between the data and theory. We then revised the categories and placed the data into subgroups. As a starting point for the fourth phase, we put the pieces back together and re-contextualized them to reveal patterns and connections. We summarized the relevant data from each category and subgroup and created an analytical text for each code group. This analysis process is detailed in Table 2, which also presents the data structure that we elaborate on and explain in the next section.

*Table 2: Main Findings*

Theme	Category	Subcategory	Exemplary quote	
<b>Formal organizing of voluntary work</b>	Organizing	A well-functioning sector model	<i>The success of the structure model is not that the employees escape responsibility but [that they] trust it to the volunteers.</i>	
		Employees entrusting responsibility to volunteers	<i>It is mostly the board I relate to; they inform the rest and are the point of contact.</i>	
	Task distribution	Following up with volunteers	<i>The volunteer sector leader is responsible for following up with volunteers.</i>	
		Understanding professionals and volunteers	<i>Some are professionals; others are involved as volunteers.</i>	
	Employees' responsibility	Employees facilitating for volunteers	<i>I sometimes feel that the sector leader should facilitate, even when not formalized.</i>	
		Contacting the employees	<i>Volunteers don't contact the staff all the time.</i>	
	Volunteers' responsibility	Volunteers fostering character	<i>I engage as a volunteer because I want to build character in our children.</i>	
		Organizing	Depending on relational actors	<i>The deacon is responsible for volunteers, not the parochial council.</i>
	<b>Informal organizing of voluntary work</b>	Task distribution	A sense of belonging	<i>Volunteers should have a sense of belonging and ownership, not only working.</i>
			Volunteers are responsible, employees facilitate	<i>Volunteers experience both responsibility and freedom.</i>
Employees' responsibility		Undefined responsibility	<i>It's not defined. The deacon has the maximum volunteers and is responsible for them.</i>	
		Undefined employee responsibility	<i>Many volunteers don't know what happens in the church. We help create a feeling of belonging to a community.</i>	
Volunteers' responsibility		Employees lead	<i>It is very good that employees take the lead. You depend on that for this to work.</i>	
		From organic to instrumental volunteering	<i>I had organic volunteering. Instrumental volunteering is also important.</i>	

The participants gave informed consent, and their details were anonymized. This study is part of a larger research project on voluntary work in religious organizations and has been approved by the Sikt (Norwegian Center for Research Data).



## FINDINGS

Findings from our analysis of the organizing models adopted by the anonymized congregations—Midtown and Riverside—are presented according to the categories developed in the abductive coding process: 1) organizing, 2) task distribution, and 3) responsibility (see Table 2).

### **Formal Organizing: Midtown Congregation**

#### *A Sector Model That Empowers Volunteers*

Midtown had 20 years of experience with formal organizing, which was implemented through a sector model. Each of the nine sectors of the congregation had a voluntary leader who followed up with the volunteers in that sector. The leader's main responsibility was strategizing, overseeing the sector, inspiring, motivating, and managing the volunteers. Each sector leader met with the parochial church council once a year to discuss work-related matters. To ensure quality interactions between employees and the volunteer leaders, the congregational leadership and all sector leaders met twice a year. These meetings were marked by excitement and collaboration, inspiring sectors to help each other in innovative and creative ways. Such beneficial interactions would be difficult to realize if the nine sectorial committees met separately.

Before the sector model was introduced, many volunteers wanted better follow-up. For instance, Vilhelm, a volunteer, said, "The volunteers were not followed up with or appreciated, and they received little recognition for the work they did. They were unsure of how to coordinate cross-border activities." Pastor Paula described the success of the sector model in these words: "The whole success of this organizing model is that you let go of responsibility. Not that you get away with it, but I pass it on, delegate responsibility to volunteers. If not, it wouldn't have worked." An example of this delegation was preparation for the Sunday service, where the presiding pastor led a meeting with the participating volunteers and talked them through all the service-related tasks assigned to them. Under the organizing model, the staff entrusted responsibilities to the volunteers, who performed several liturgical tasks. The staff members, in turn, attended the Sunday service, oversaw the work of the volunteers and fostered good relationships.

The sector model granted responsibility and autonomy to Midtown volunteers. The voluntary sector leaders were responsible for involving the employees in the activities of the sector and using them as resources. At the same time, the employees were free to contact the volunteers as needed. Several interviewees pointed out that in Norwegian congregations, one may assume that the employees had more power given the full-time nature of their jobs, their job descriptions, decision-making authority, and attendance at staff meetings. Volunteers have another job during the day and perform voluntary work during their free time.

#### *Role Clarity*

The sector model was initially perceived as a threat by some employees. For example, Everett, an employee, was concerned that volunteers would consider themselves on par with the employees or forge in symmetrical relationships with employees. He said, "It concerns role understanding; some are professionals, and others are involved as promoters and helpers and, of course, are welcome to have ideas." As such, the congregational leadership had several

conversations with individual employees and the parish council to gain support and build consensus for the sector model. The interviewed employees described a recent change in how the Norwegian pastors exercised their role—from having a clear leadership role to earning or negotiating their role.

Although the new structure encouraged increased commitment to the congregation by clarifying the responsibilities of employees and volunteers, the interviewees expressed frustration over the distribution of responsibilities. Also within the sector model, employees wanted stronger written clarification of their own roles and those of voluntary sector managers. They believed that the congregational leadership was responsible for the volunteers, especially when the volunteers did not act according to their designated roles. In addition, they believed that volunteers and employees should be managed separately. In fact, before the new model, the employees expected that they would be responsible for managing the volunteers. However, under the sectorial structure, volunteers and employees interacted often, and the congregation was managed less by the staff and more by the volunteers. Referring to § 9 of the Church Act (1996), the employees felt that the new structure emphasized the overall responsibilities of the parish council. The Midtown parish council had a responsibility toward the voluntary sector leaders, and the leaders' decisions, in turn, influenced the work of the volunteers. Moreover, several interviewees believed that the structural change had led to a gradual cultural shift within the congregation. This, in turn, affected how the actors behaved and worked together.

### *Employees' and Volunteers' Responsibilities*

Some employees felt a greater moral responsibility toward the voluntary sector managers, even though their work descriptions did not include any such formalized expectations. They felt that optimal volunteering was largely about independent volunteers and a strong parochial church council. At the same time, Pastor Patrick highlighted certain volunteer-related problems that a congregation should be aware of:

You can have two problems with grown-up volunteers. On the one hand, they do not relate to the congregation's structures or culture but comply because they believe that 'God said so.' The parochial church council directs spiritual life within the parish and tames these 'volunteer cowboys.' On the other hand, volunteers may be passive or lack ownership. The sectoral organizing model clarifies that the congregation was owned by the congregation itself, and not by the volunteers or employees.

In summary, some employees felt a strong moral responsibility toward the voluntary sector managers, and some believed that successful volunteering required independent volunteers and a strong parochial church council. One of the pastors felt that volunteers who had been part of the congregation for a long time would not align with the congregation's new structure and culture or may display a lack of commitment. To address this potential challenge, the sectoral model emphasized that the entire congregation was responsible for managing the work, with the parochial church council leading and guiding, for instance, volunteers who may have become complacent.

The volunteers, on their part, enjoyed working under a responsible volunteer sector leader. A volunteer named Vivian said, "You do not need to contact the staff all the time. We depend on the volunteer sector leaders, and they help develop the work and come up with new ideas and seek our opinions." Another volunteer, Vilfred, compared the structural model with the situation in his small village, where, again, the volunteers carried out most of the tasks on the card and at Sunday school. He believed that the sector model would work in his village

even though there were fewer volunteers because it was scalable. It would also ensure that the volunteers in his village received better follow-up, he added.

The volunteers felt morally responsible, given their baptism obligation, for raising children in the Christian faith and spreading Jesus's message, especially from the New Testament. They also wanted to manage, use their abilities, and belong to a place. Some volunteers wanted to create an environment in the church where children could be themselves, without any pressure to perform. One volunteer expressed this sentiment as follows: "In the children's choir, they can just come and be, and they are allowed to sing solos if that is what they want."

Midtown volunteers were given leadership tasks via appointment as sector leaders, and the leaders had the freedom and autonomy to shape the activities they led, such as the children's choir. The congregation did not follow a staff management approach, in which everything had to be organized, followed up, and controlled by the staff. The sector leaders followed up with the volunteers, who knew and understood the structure of the congregation.

## **Informal Organizing: Riverside Congregation**

### *Depending on Relational Actors*

Unlike the Midtown congregation, the Riverside congregation did not have a formal structure for following up with volunteers. Instead, it relied on the relational organizing style employed by most congregations in the Church of Norway. Under this style, employees informally interpret their service expectations. Riverside employees, for instance, took on the responsibility for voluntary work. Charlotte, a parochial church council member, described her perception of the council's responsibility as follows: "We do not have any responsibility toward the volunteers. That's the deacon's responsibility." The council members' lack of awareness of their responsibilities indicated an instrumental approach to volunteering. According to § 9 of the Church Act (1996), the parish council has an overall responsibility for the congregation as well as for adopting strategies and allocating money for voluntary work and other purposes.

The employees, especially the deacon, were primarily responsible for following up with volunteers. In the interviews, the employees acknowledged the value of voluntary work by saying that the volunteers helped improve the level of their work performance. However, one employee, Edgar, shared a concern about perceiving volunteers as simply those who carry out tasks: "I think we have a wrong starting point. We immediately start talking about volunteers to reduce the cost of running the church. When you think about volunteering, it means that the volunteers should have a sense of belonging."

The deacon at the Riverside congregation welcomed prospective volunteers with an introductory talk. This offered the attendees an opportunity to interact with each other, acquire different types of information, and ask questions. Before the talk, the attendees were given a tour of the premises and introduced to various voluntary activities. Each prospective volunteer filled in a registration form, signed a nondisclosure agreement, received instructions for fire safety, and possibly for accessing the language café.

Volunteers were involved in most activities within the congregation and were often assigned tasks by the employees. Volunteers liked having an employee on whom they could lean, and they enjoyed interacting with and being led by an employee. Overall, they experienced both responsibility and freedom. Employees, on their part, felt great responsibility for the volunteers. The general manager had an indirect leadership role but little contact with the volunteers. He considered it important to address volunteering: "It's not really defined who is

responsible for the volunteers. The deacon connects with most volunteers and has the main job of following them up. She has a key role.” One pastor who had some contact with the volunteers felt a sense of responsibility toward those who volunteered in the Sunday service.

### *Undefined Responsibility*

Many of the current activities and the organizing style followed at the Riverside congregation were developed by zealous employees more than ten years ago, when the congregation was lying fallow and was ripe for innovations. Before that time, the congregation had followed a traditional church structure, and many of the church members were old or passed away. In addition, the Riverside congregation experienced a high residential turnover rate. Most residents were students and had families with small children, who only lived in the area for a short period.

In the interviews, several employees highlighted the importance of looking after volunteers in a supportive sense; for example, they felt a moral responsibility toward children with special challenges. The employees noted that each volunteer had to have the right skills for their task so that the task assignment was justified. Many employees underlined that the volunteers in one group did not know those in other groups and that many volunteers were not aware of all the activities of the congregation. Therefore, the employees wanted to foster a sense of belonging and a feeling of being part of a larger fellowship and community. Meanwhile, the employees struggled with the fact that their responsibilities were not defined, and they described the organizing process as slightly chaotic.

When discussing their functional responsibilities, the volunteers noted that the overall responsibility for the organization was with the employees. A volunteer named Valerie shared the following: “It is excellent that employees take the lead; you depend on that for this to work. The deacon decides when we will come. Further, the deacon welcomes us and sees us; it makes you want to join as a volunteer.” When it came to recognizing their moral responsibility, some volunteers expressed a responsibility to serve in God’s kingdom, as expressed by Jesus’s mission command (Matt. 28). At the same time, they felt that their tasks and abilities could change over their lifetimes. Veronica, a retired volunteer, emphasized, “I did some organic volunteering for several years. Now, I think it has been good to make the practice more instrumental. I hope that I am volunteering for our Lord after all, and then I feel very good.” The volunteers also felt a moral responsibility toward certain disadvantaged groups in society with whom they were familiar because of their previous employment in the police force. According to the volunteers, employees had a more functional responsibility, whereas the volunteers had a moral responsibility to serve Jesus’s mission command as well as the disadvantaged groups.

## DISCUSSION

We studied the impact of roles and responsibilities on organizing voluntary work by analyzing the work structure of two religious congregations in Norway. The findings revealed how elements such as (1) organizing style, (2) division of tasks, and (3) responsibility was formalized to result in two ideal-typical patterns. Interestingly, these patterns for voluntary work are not fixed but a matter of negotiation. Ideal types are a systematic collection of elements that constitute a model, a mental image emphasizing some core characteristics of a given phenomenon. Since reality is endlessly rich and partly contradictory, ideal types challenge empirical case-specific material and serve as tools for structuring a complex reality. We label

the two ideal types formal and informal organizing of voluntary work, which are respectively exemplified by the Midtown and Riverside congregations. Table 3 presents the two ideal-typical patterns of organizing work, which we discuss in the section below.

*Table 3: Ideal Types of Informal and Formal Organizing*

	<b>Formal organization (Midtown)</b>	<b>Informal organization (Riverside)</b>
Characteristics	Formalized sector-based organizing	Relational organizing dependent on actors
Strengths	Volunteers know how they are organized, their points of contact, and how to access information	Responsibility is individually perceived. Employees hold introductory talks and provide general information to volunteers
Weaknesses	Employees express a need for clearer procedures, especially in cases of conflict. Some employees disapprove of formal organizing	Activities depend on employees. Unclear responsibilities between the volunteers, employees, and the parish council
Task distribution	Employees delegate responsibilities to volunteers and follow up	Responsibility is not defined. Volunteers have responsibility and freedom.
Employees' functional responsibility	Employees earn or negotiate their roles	Responsibility depends on individual initiative
Employees' moral responsibility	Some employees feel that they should facilitate, help, and follow up with the volunteers	Employees foster volunteers' sense of belonging.
Volunteers' functional responsibility	Volunteers are more responsible and only need to contact their sector leader	Employees take the lead and oversee the volunteers. Employees have an overall organizational responsibility.
Volunteers' moral responsibility	Volunteers feel a moral responsibility because of the baptism obligation	Volunteers feel a moral responsibility to serve in God's kingdom, and they want to shift between organic and instrumental volunteering.

### **Role Patterns**

Established wisdom suggests that informal organizing has a greater mobilizing effect on volunteers (Cnaan & Cascio, 1998; Studer, 2016). Volunteers understand that they must take responsibility themselves instead of relying on employees. Essentially, the informal organizing pattern corresponds to the core principle of Christian volunteering, described in Haers & Von Essen's (2015, p. 39) work as "performed out of free will." However, our findings suggest that a formal organizing style with more systematic follow-up leads to better volunteer mobilization and recruitment. Rimes et al. (2017) has similarly argued that formalization facilitates increased volunteer motivation and satisfaction. Moreover, our findings suggest that increased

formalization could work well in conjunction with a moral motivation focused on self-realization (Bivins, 2006). For example, before sector-based organizing was introduced in Midtown, many volunteers desired better follow-up, as they received little attention for the work they did and were unsure how to coordinate cross-border activities. All these issues were significantly improved with the formal organizing style explicating volunteers' tasks, responsibilities, and autonomy in a systematic way.

With the tailoring of roles to individual needs replacing standardization, there has been a transition from an old, collectivist form of volunteering to a new, reflexive pattern of volunteering (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Løvaas et al., 2019). In these circumstances, informal organizing may be less challenging to implement than a formal style. Accordingly, employees have been encouraged to identify volunteers' motivations and closely manage volunteers through personalized relationships rather than from an administrative level (Løvaas et al., 2019). However, in our data on informal organizing, we noted a strong emphasis on the functional need for labor rather than relationships (Studer, 2016, p. 706). In their studies on voluntarism in Norwegian congregations, Fretheim (2014, 2016) as well as Sporsheim and Sirris (2018) noted a drawback of the informal style of organizing: the lack of systematic thinking or joint understanding. Similar insights have been shared by studies conducted internationally (Rimes et al., 2017). It is important to understand that *informal* does not necessarily mean relational or motivational; it can, in a critical sense, imply a lack of explicit roles and responsibilities. Our study highlights that informal organizing relies heavily on a small number of employees and volunteers and in an unsystematic manner. This, in turn, perpetuates a vicious circle with scarce recruitment and heavy work burdens for the few dedicated volunteers.

These findings make us critical of studies that blindly warn against applying general human resource management tools (Rochester et al., 2010) to volunteering. In fact, little attention has been paid to volunteer management in organizations overall (Nesbit et al., 2016, p. 17). Further, in a congregational context, there has been a tendency to oppose organizing volunteers in a highly formalized manner because of the nature of volunteering as well as an ecclesial preference for disorganization (Sløk, 2009), thus eschewing hierarchy and formal organizing (Sirris, 2018). Cooper and Kempner's (1993) work offers a possible explanation for the lack of formal organizing in religious congregations. They claimed that internal tensions in organizations can be understood as organizing or disorganizing. Here, disorganizing refers to a lack of respect for formal structures or even resistance to the organization's formal order. In a Lutheran church, informal organizing based on ideological values could promote disorganization, as universal priesthood implies that all are equals. Sløk (2009, p. 58) studied such tensions in the Danish Evangelical Lutheran church and noted that "theology actually rules out other possible semantics, like democracy or even managerialism." Universal priesthood, equality, responsibility, autonomy, and individually attained knowledge are counterforces to the hierarchization of the church. The distribution of roles and responsibilities in informal organizing depends on good relationships and continuous communication. In fact, employees are expected to downplay their roles as leaders of volunteers, as it is a contested topic and can express control (Sirris, 2023b).

This explains the prominence of informal organizing in a Lutheran church setting, where volunteering is a key characteristic, along with decentralization, absence of governance, and flat structures. These features are clearly linked to network organizing, which may have looser ties and is characterized by flexible and changing roles and relationships that, to some degree, escape formal organizing. Under informal organizing, employees are expected to assume the responsibility of managing and supervising volunteers, training them, and recruiting and supervising them (Nesbit et al., 2016, pp. 29, 166). While this represents considerable

work, it is questionable whether employees prioritize such efforts in their busy work lives. Thus, in a way, informal organizing is less demanding for the employees.

The reluctance to organize volunteering formally and systematically is typical of our research context, as exemplified by Riverside. In such settings, employees and volunteers describe informal organizing in terms of continuous contact and meeting points, which help improve the interactions between staff and volunteers. Previous studies on informal organizing have also emphasized training and support to reduce stress and clarify roles (McCurley & Lynch, 2011; Nesbit et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2014, p. 750). In contrast, formal organizing, as illustrated by Midtown, involves working with an explicitly organized model that places responsibility on both employees *and* volunteers. As a result, the Midtown congregation went from being an employee-run congregation to a congregation that was largely run by volunteers.

These distinctions between the two ideal types, however, mask the “messiness” of reality. Our data revealed heterogeneity in the actors’ preferences for organizing, even within the same congregation. For example, in informal organizing, employees and volunteers displayed a sense of responsibility. Some employees held introductory talks and shared information with new volunteers, highlighting the importance of good “team spirit” (2016, p. 706) and a good relationship between volunteers and employees (Rimes et al., 2017). On the other hand, despite formal organizing, Midtown employees expressed a need for clearer written materials, especially when the volunteers did not function according to their roles. This also confirms the importance of clarity (Studer, 2016, p. 698). When employees do not agree on how the congregation should be organized in terms of the roles and responsibilities of professionals and volunteers, it can worsen the interactions between them. Our findings also correspond with previous research that emphasizes divergent antecedents as the cause of conflict in volunteer–staff relations (Rimes et al., 2017).

As previously mentioned, part of the purpose of formalization in an organizational structure is for the actors to fit in and adapt to the organization. If the actors misunderstand or are unaware of the formalized tasks, it will be an obstacle to the organization (Bodewes, 2002, p. 214). The pastors and, to some extent, the employees of the Norwegian Church have moved away from clear leadership roles to having to earn or negotiate their roles. Likewise, employees and managers in today’s Scandinavian society must, to a greater extent, negotiate and earn their roles (Sirris, 2019). Our study underpins that it is not enough to simply focus on functional responsibility and formal organization. Volunteers appreciate autonomy, relational aspects, *and* leadership (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Løvaas et al., 2019; Studer, 2016, p. 698). Importantly, we underscore, more than in previous studies, the importance of formal structure and sufficient role clarity (Studer, 2016, pp. 691, 698). We find that such formalization gave the volunteers a sense of belonging (Studer, 2016, p. 705) and empowerment. This finding confirms Weber’s observation that the structure and procedures that govern actors’ actions facilitate effective coordination of work (Juillerat, 2010, p. 217).

### **Patterns of Responsibility**

A key insight of our study concerns the basic asymmetry in the patterns of responsibility in civic organizations. Volunteers in such organizations are free to quit in case of a conflict, if they are not heard, or when their notion of responsibility is not respected. We observed several negotiations in both congregations targeted at avoiding role ambiguity and conflict (McCurley & Lynch, 2011). However, unlike volunteers, employees are present every day in these organizations. The staff meeting, for example, is a powerful tool for decision-making that is used when most volunteers are away at their respective places of employment.

Within formal organizing, as illustrated by Midtown, responsibility is not held by a few individuals. This shows the importance of relational contact with volunteers. Farmer and Fedor (1999, p. 353) also reported that psychological contracts in voluntary work are more relational than transactional. In the Midtown case, though, it was somewhat unclear how the employees followed up with volunteers. Some employees felt a great sense of responsibility toward the volunteers and prioritized following up; others did not feel that sense of responsibility to the same extent (von Essen et al., p. 39). Such ambiguities can create frustration, conflict, and stress and should be clarified, as recommended by previous research scholars (McCurley & Lynch, 2011; Nesbit et al., 2016, p. 170). At the same time, the voluntary sector leaders in Midtown felt that they had clear expectations and responsibilities regarding the volunteers. This clear formal expectation and structure motivated the voluntary leaders, supporting what earlier studies have confirmed: role clarity is central to a volunteer's motivation (Butcher & Einolf, 2017; Studer, 2016, p. 691).

Moral responsibility implies dedication and extensive effort, which is characteristic of "souls of fire" (Hager & Brudney, 2011). Such responsibility is deemed important in congregations when functional responsibilities are not sufficiently clear. Fueled by moral responsibility and driven by various beliefs and motives, volunteers want their organizations to succeed (Johansson, 1998). This is a salient feature of our research context and corresponds to Haers & Von Essen's (2015, pp. 30, 39) emphasis on Christian volunteering as "the natural thing to do."

Within informal organizing, as illustrated by Riverside, some employees are expected to shoulder the specific responsibility of volunteers. The advantage of a formal organizing structure is that such responsibility can be shared and distributed, and this can lead to greater empowerment and belonging because of shared trust and responsibility. This finding of ours somewhat contradicts the results of previous studies, which have indicated that delegating responsibility and giving a great degree of freedom/ and autonomy within a looser structure lead to more empowerment among actors and volunteers (Johansson, 1998; Løvaas et al., 2019). The findings in our study assert the importance of the employed actors "taking responsibility and initiative" (Nesbit et al., 2016, p. 166). Fayol (cited in Johansson, 1998, p. 68) noted that "He who courageously takes responsibility and bears its consequences wins everyone's respect because the courage to take responsibility is valued everywhere [...] The fear of taking responsibility often paralyzes initiative and destroys many good qualities." In the formal organizing structure, volunteers were happy with the arrangements made for them by the staff and with the fact that the staff had overall organizational responsibilities (Nesbit et al., 2016, p. 166). At the same time, there was a need for more structure and role clarity among employees and volunteers (Studer, 2016, p. 698). Furthermore, volunteers wanted to be able to alternate between instrumental and organic volunteering, where those who led the voluntary work facilitated tailoring and life adaptation (Sirris, 2023b, p. 43).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In civic organizations, congregations included, volunteers and employees relate to and cooperate with each other. Since a multitude of factors influence how such volunteers and employees are organized, great variations can be seen across organizations. Our study identifies specific patterns of organizing structures: two empirically based ideal types of formalization. Informal organizing places the actor in a central position, typically an employee who manages voluntarism and works informally through personalized relationships with volunteers.



Previous research has confirmed the importance of freedom and autonomy for volunteers. Our empirical data show that unclear and ambiguous volunteer roles can lead to stress and conflict, and in such cases, a formal organizing structure can be beneficial for both volunteers and employees.

Organizations can transform from being employee-led to volunteer-led institutions. Moreover, many organizations demonstrate features derived from both types of organizing, which makes them hybrids that fall between the two extremes. Drawing on our case study of voluntary work, we have promoted a deeper understanding of the patterns and distribution of responsibilities in organizations. However, there are some limitations to our study. Although we acquired in-depth data, our study was restricted to two congregations. While the data served as the basis for theorizing, our conceptualization will benefit from being tested in more organizations, preferably also quantitatively. Further, we did not investigate potential volunteers located on the fringes of the organization or how they could be recruited. There is also a need to explore the degree to which leaders prioritize leading volunteers and the amount of time employees should spend with volunteers. Lastly, we call for studies that address how volunteers engage in innovative processes in their congregations. Here, Christian moral commitment must be organized in a good way so that the volunteers can grow both in learning and belonging. When congregations integrate volunteers into an organizing structure aided by role clarity and the entrusting of responsibilities, more motivated volunteers are likely to join and promote the mission of the congregation.

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