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On the transformation of Lutheran worship in Germany Empirical perceptions - insights – perspectives

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Abstract: The article analyzes the change in Lutheran worship in Germany using empirical data, in particular the 6th Church Membership Survey of 2023. After a look at Luther's emphasized diversity of forms of worship and today's lifeworld-oriented design of worship services, the latest developments in worship practice, as well as the effects of the Corona pandemic on worship behavior, are presented on the basis of empirical studies. The article concludes with reflections on the role of the worshipping community in the face of dwindling church membership.

Keywords: Lutheran worship; Germany; Participation in worship; Pandemic

Lutheran worship has always been subject to *semper reformanda*. The following paper traces the transformation of Lutheran worship in Germany based on empirical perceptions. In particular, reference is made to the 6th German Church Membership Survey, the first results of which were published in November 2023.² Insights and perspectives are then examined. At the center of the considerations is the conviction that forms of worship and church attendance should be perceived and appreciated in the plural.

Forms of worship and church attendance in the plural with Luther

The later reformer Martin Luther sang the Liturgy of the Hours as a monk, as a priest he celebrated the Roman mass and as a Christian, worship was omnipresent for him. For Luther, worship was one of the central starting points for reformatory criticism and ultimately the place where all his theological insights were explicated. Consequently, there is not so much a reformatory theology of worship, but rather Luther's theology is determined by (the experience of) worship. This seems to be an important first insight.

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² www.kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung.de



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If we look at the diversity of church services in Luther's days, it is astonishing that even back then there were church services for pupils on weekdays, evening services, Sunday services at 5 and 6 o'clock for the peasants, who had to return to work later, and a Sunday evening service that focused on the Gospel of John to strengthen faith. In addition, Luther intentionally did not abolish the Latin service as part of his reform of worship because he kept the university scholars and students in mind as his target group.³

For Luther, there were three forms of worship, as can be seen from the Wittenberg practice: Firstly, the Latin Mass, which he considered suitable for the school and university context. Secondly, the so-called German Mass, which is primarily intended for the 'simple-minded people', as he calls it, and has a catechetical character. And thirdly, there are Luther's statements that there should be an opportunity for worship (house) gatherings for people who "seriously want to be Christians" - this was later taken up by Spener and the Pietism in particular.

Beyond that, the church service as a communion service was an expression of the experiential dimension of religious practice. For Luther, the words of institution - as he put it in 1520⁵ - formed the core of the Mass: The promised and - however you want to interpret this theologically - bodily presence of Christ.

Thus can be stated: Plural forms of worship were already present in Luther's time. Throughout the history of the denomination, however, this was gradually narrowed down to the so-called "main service" on Sunday mornings.

Back to the future: lifeworld-oriented, context-sensitive church services

In the Protestant sector in Germany, efforts have been made for years to develop church services in a lifeworld-oriented, i.e. milieu-sensitive way in order to meet people's various expectations.⁶ This also takes into account the insight that the time of the service, the location and other aesthetic and atmospheric aspects are of central importance for church-going behavior. In

³ Helmar, Junghans, Luthers Gottesdienstreform – Konzept oder Verlegenheit, in: Ratzman, Wolfgang / Morath, Reinhold (Hg.), Herausforderung: Gottesdienst (Beiträge zu Liturgie und Spiritualität 1), Leipzig 1997, 77–92, 89.

⁴ Luther's Introduction to the German Mass 1526, WA 19, 75, 5.

⁵ WA 6, 355, 3f.

Heinzpeter Hempelmann/Ulrich Heckel/Karen Hinrichs/Dan Peter (Hrsg.), Auf dem Weg zu einer milieusensiblen Kirche. Die SINUS-Studie "Evangelisch in Baden und Württemberg" und ihre Konsequenzen für kirchliche Handlungsfelder. Göttingen 2019.



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this way, the focus shifts to the needs of the worshipping congregation, which was equally important to Luther.

This becomes clear in Luther's Formula missae et communionis pro ecclesia Wittenbergensi (1523). This order of service, which was written specifically for Wittenberg, joins numerous other orders of service from the Reformation period. Luther, who wrote this order for his Wittenberg congregation, was reluctant to see it copied, but wanted the local background to be taken into account. This once again highlights the 'contextual sensitivity' that Luther was very concerned about. In a different manner, he emphasizes this by giving the congregation its own voice through German chants to be sung here for the first time. Although the mass itself was still in Latin, the initial participation of the congregation provided an impetus that remained central to the Reformation from then on. In the German Mass (1526), Luther prolonged this tendency and strengthened the participation of the congregation in a way that had never been seen before in the Middle Ages. In this order, he reinforced congregational singing and, for the first time, the German language as the main language of worship.

In addition to context sensitivity, the participation of the congregation is crucial for Luther, in this case through the singing/music and the language in which the service is held.

Divine service - what for? On the declining everyday relevance of church services

For a long time, the Sunday service was considered the center of the congregation and attending a church service "as proof of compliance with church standards". In the meantime, however, Sunday services are referred to as the 'problem child'. It is not uncommon normal Sundays to be a "service with few people". For many, according to a prevailing thesis, the Sunday service seems to be a format that is no longer relevant for the everyday life and is therefore, in their view, a outdated model. Correspondingly, the image of 'empty churches' as a symbol of the decline of the churches is constantly conveyed by the media.

Ingrid Lukatis, Der ganz normale Gottesdienst in empirischer Sicht. Praktische Theologie 38 (4), 255-268, here:

⁸ Christof Hartge, Gottesdienst mit Wenigen. Deutsches Pfarrerblatt 12/2005. 619-622, here: 619.



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One insight that supports the thesis that Sunday services are no longer the format relevant to everyday life for many is the question asked in the 6th Church Membership Survey of the EKD (KMU VI) as to whether going to church is part of being a Christian. This question was asked to all those surveyed with a denomination as well as those without a denomination. In KMU IV in 2002, still 33% of the Protestants in the West and 53% in the East stated that going to church was part of being a Protestant. In 2022, only 11% of the Protestants in the West and 19% in the East answered the slightly different question of whether going to church is part of being a Christian in KMU VI. That is a decrease of 22% in the West and 34% in the East.

The data from the church membership surveys also show a decline since 2002 in the self-assessment of "frequent" (-14%) and "occasional" (-11%) church attendance and an increase in "infrequent" church attendance (+19%). The number of people who "never" attend a church service is also on the rise (+5%). For fewer and fewer people, going to church is a habit, for more and more people it is the exception. This shows the phenomenon described by Peter Cornehl as early as 1985 of the "structural dichotomy" between a minority of Sunday churchgoers and a majority of annual or life-cycle churchgoers, which had already emerged in the Age of Enlightenment with regard to Sunday services. 9

Protestant Sunday services in the light of official church service statistics 1990 to 2021

Despite all the disillusionment about Sunday services, it should not be forgotten that attendance at church services has always been subject to fluctuations, as the official church statistics reveal. Looking at the development since 1953, it can be seen that the average attendance rate at church services rose from 2.6% (1953) to 3.3% by 1979 and was at around 5% in the 1980s. Since 1990, Sunday church attendance has been falling continuously, although the decline did not actually begin until the mid-1990s. Until then, church attendance had risen from 4.2% in 1990 to 4.9% in 1995. It is therefore reasonable to ask what image of church service attendance is currently held and cultivated by both the public within and outside the church, that 'suffers' from this image when

Peter Cornehl, Art. Gottesdienst VIII. Evangelischer Gottesdienst von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart. TRE 14, 54-58, here: 64.



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evaluating current church service attendance. Could a rational look at the long-term perspective contribute to a certain adjustment of existing narratives of decline with regard to church service attendance?

As far as the 50% reduction in church service attendance from 2019 to 2021 is concerned, this is due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as in 2021 church services could still only be celebrated in many places with restrictions, i.e. under strict hygiene and distancing regulations. The same is likely to apply to the expected church service attendance figures in 2022, when the European shortage of energy supply resulted in unheated church rooms, which is likely to have kept many churchgoers from attending services.

Worship (life) during the pandemic

The Evangelical Church in Central Germany conducted a survey during the COVID-19 crisis and asked its members about church services, among other things. ¹⁰ According to the survey, 63% "very much missed" the communal singing in the service, 51% found it "regrettable" that communion was not offered and 59% said that the sermons gave them guidance and comfort.

A study led by the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, which was carried out in several regional churches,¹¹ also showed that the church services were perceived as predominantly friendly, encouraging and inviting during the COVID-19 period.

The studies conducted by "midi" (Evangelische Arbeitsstelle für missionarische Kirchenentwicklung und diakonische Profilbildung) on digital preaching formats during the pandemic¹² have revealed that three times as many people used digital services during the first lockdown than would have attended the average Sunday church service in person. What midi was able to trace with a comparative study in 2021 on the development from the first lockdown in 2020 to June 2021 was that the "new normal" was initially the analog, digital-asynchronous church

¹⁰ https://www.ekmd.de/aktuell/corona/umfrage-der-ekm-zur-corona-krise (17.8.2020)

Ralf Peter Reimann/Holger Sievert, Studie zu Online-Gottesdiensten. Ausgewählte erste Ergebnisse der Studie. Düsseldorf 2020; id., "Rezipiententypologie evangelischer Online- Gottesdienstbesucher*innen während und nach der Corona-Krise". Düsseldorf 2021.

Daniel Hörsch, Digitale Verkündigungsformate während der Corona-Krise. Eine Ad-hoc-Studie im Auftrag der EKD. Ergebnisse und Rezeption. Berlin 2020; Daniel Hörsch, Gottesdienstliches Leben während der Pandemie. Verkündigungsformate und ausgewählte Handlungsfelder kirchlicher Praxis – Ergebnisse einer midi-Vergleichsstudie. Berlin 2021.



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service. In other words, a return to the familiar, even under more difficult conditions with distancing rules and hygiene and precautionary measures, using a way of digital distribution that comes closest to the analog, the asynchronous. In the meantime, the vast majority of congregations have returned to the analog face-to-face service.

Viewed realistically, what we can see in terms of digitalization in the church is the use of digital infrastructure to distribute analogue formats of proclamation. Nevertheless, 20 to 25% of congregations continue to offer formats which are based on the logic of digitality. This also highlights the challenge that the Protestant churches in Germany still have to face with regard to digitalization in the field of worship.

In the qualitative long-term study "Lebensgefühl Corona" (Corona attitude to life) published by the Evangelische Arbeitsstelle midi¹³, the extent to which faith, religion and the church have played a role in coping with COVID-19 was also investigated. In addition, insights were also gained into people's individual attitudes towards Sunday church services. Religious services play a role in four of the eight types of attitudes to life that were modeled in the study. The midi study shows that attitudes and motivations with regard to church services are extremely disparate and diverse.

Type: the mindful

"Yes, and I'm not a believer at all, it's not that I go to church on Sundays, or Christmas, I don't find the institution of church particularly important."

Type: the exhausted

"I don't have to go to church to believe in God."

Type: the indignant

"Church services (TV) were hollow, not realistic, they should have taken away the fear."

Type: the confident

"Or if we simply feel the need, for example me now, I get up on Sunday morning and say to myself, ok, I have to go to confession. Then I go to my church, have my service and listen and take my communion and then I go to confession. Or whatever. If I feel the need to go to church, then that's what I want to do."

¹³ Ulrich Lilie/Daniel Hörsch (ed.), Lebensgefühl Corona. Erkundungen in einer Gesellschaft im Wandel. Eine qualitative Langzeitstudie. Berlin 2021, 103f.



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Type: the contributors

"If we continue the Zoom services, we will reach more members of the congregation [...]. It was a very mixed audience, people who were over 80, over 60, younger people with children who sat in front of the screen and took part in the service. And with the elderly, the grandchild was operating the device, which made me very happy."

Type: the undemanding

"But it gave her a lot of strength, not the services that took place again later, but the devotions, small devotions that were completely different to the liturgical services."

Type: the thinkers

"I also don't feel any support when I go to church."

Type: the burned out

"We also listened to one or two Sunday services here on the radio."

Recipient-related dimensions of the worship experience

The following recipient-related dimensions of the worship service experience are based on the respective expectations of worship services of those denominational and non-denominational respondents in the 6th Church Membership Survey of the EKD who attend church at least once a year, as well as the *reasons* given for attending worship services. When the dimensions of worship experience are the focus below, this means, following Uta Pohl-Patalong, "the subjective, emotionally grounded perception of the phenomenon of worship, whereby worship can be experienced in a certain direction or from a certain point of view and a person can experience several dimensions at the same time."¹⁴

At 81%, the experience of the "church space, the music, the whole atmosphere" received the highest level of approval. It relegates the top answers from previous church membership surveys (2002: sermon (70%), 2012: modern language (63%)) to second and third place. The items "strengthening faith" (54%) and the desire to "indulge in one's own thoughts" (59%) received majority approval. "Meeting friends" (45%) and "interrupting everyday life" (42%) were articulated much less frequently as people's

Uta Pohl-Patalong, Gottesdienst erleben. Empirische Einsichten zum evangelischen Gottesdienst. Stuttgart 2011, 93.



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expectations, as well as "experiencing something sacred" (25%) and "being told what to think and how to live" (9%).

In summary, five dimensions can be distinguished:

- a.Dimension of the aesthetic experience
- b. Dimension of the homiletic experience
- c.Dimension of religious experience
- d. Dimension of the experience of contemplation and interruption
- e.Dimension of the social experience.

More denominationally common than dividing factors

This KMU VI also allows us to look at the worship service in terms of what is - supposedly or actually - typically Protestant or Catholic in it. The Catholic image of worship is often characterized by the idea that through the Holy Mass people participate in the objective vividness of the sacred and that this is manifested in the celebration of the liturgy and the Eucharist. For Catholics to this day, attending Holy Mass on Sundays is actually compulsory. The image of worship among Protestants, however, is different. Here, the voluntary decision to participate in the service is in conflict with the necessary gathering of the faithful in worship as the characteristic of the church. In addition, Protestant worship is often accused of emphasizing a subjective inwardness. Correspondingly, Catholic worship is said to work from the outside in, while Protestant worship is said to work from the inside out.

Forms of worship and church services in the plural

The German Liturgical Conference's church study in 2019 had already revealed the diversity of worship life:¹⁵

Sunday morning services based on the general liturgical orders

Services based on the liturgical year - e.g. Christmas, Thanksgiving

Liturgische Konferenz der EKD (ed.), Kirchgangsstudie 2019. Erste Ergebnisse, unter: https://www.liturgische-konferenz.de/download/Kirchgangsstudie 2019. Ergebnispapier.pdf



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musically or aesthetically profiled church services, e.g. cantata services, movie services, services with Gospel-worship

Devotional practices - e.g. midday prayer, Passion devotion

Alternative church services - e.g. 'Go Special', St. Thomas Mass, motorcyclist service

Biography-related services - classic and new religious services, e.g. first-day-of-school, 50th wedding anniversary

Institution-related church services - e.g. in retirement homes, daycare centers

Socially relevant church services - e.g. for city festivals, after a terrorist attack

Age group-related church services - e.g. toddler and youth services

Parish or congregation-related services - e.g. blessing of new church leaders

Services for temporary congregations - e.g. pilgrimage, confirmation camp, church congress.

Unfortunately, there is no overall statistical survey of the number of people attending all of these church service formats. However, this in turn also says something about the extent to which the perception within the church, or better: the perception by church authorities, is narrowed down to the Sunday service.

The 6th Church Membership Survey has acknowledged the majority of these formats, so that in addition to the normal church service on Sunday, church attendance in the plural comes into view.

Church attendance for family occasions (religious services) 89%

Occasional services, i.e. services for baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals, are attended by an overwhelming majority of respondents who go to church at least once a year (89%). It is striking that even three quarters of religiously unaffiliated respondents (73%) attend these church services.

Church attendance on public holidays (Christmas Eve/Christmas 81%, Easter 49%, Good Friday 27%) Among the high holidays, it is also noticeable in KMU VI that Good Friday (27%) is significantly lower than Easter (49%) and Christmas Eve/Christmas (81%). The findings of KMU VI on Christmas Eve/Christmas services show that these have a relevance even for people who only



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attend a church service once a year (77%), as well as for those without a religious affiliation (71%). Compared to church attendance at Christmas, attendance at Easter services is significantly lower (49%). Similar to special family services, regular church attendance has a significant influence on attendance at an Easter service. For example, 93% of those who attend a weekly church service state that they also go to church at Easter, whereas the lower the frequency of church attendance on Sundays, the less frequently they attend Easter services (monthly churchgoers: 81%, annual churchgoers: 37%). For non-denominational people, going to church at Easter plays no role (12%).

Attendance at family church services (38%)

In contrast to the occasional services, going to church regularly has a significant influence on attendance at special family services. Only a third of those who attend church services at least once a year or several times a year also attend family services. Among those who attend church services monthly, on the other hand, the figure is 59% and 74% among those who attend church services weekly.

Attending church services with classical music (30%) and modern music (27%)

There are hardly any differences between church services with classical and modern music, which is why they were combined into a "church service with music" cluster in KMU VI. Weekly (58%) and monthly (61%) church attendance also influences participation in church services with special music.

Blessing and dedication services are attended by 22% of respondents who go to church at least once a year. Here too, going to church on Sundays has an influence on attendance behavior: Over half of those who go to church weekly also attend a blessing service (55%), compared to 43% of those who attend services monthly.

A similar picture to the blessing service can be seen in *alternative forms of worship (25%)*. Around a third of Protestants attend these. Alternative forms are less attractive for the religiously unaffiliated (10%).

Church attendance at *praise and worship services* also corresponds to Sunday services. 48% of visitors to praise and worship services state that they go to church weekly, 27% do so monthly.



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Worship services on special themes (28%) are primarily a format to bind very connected members, whereas alternative forms of worship have a member-oriented reach into the realm of fluid-distanced membership.

What prevents you from going to church?

In KMU VI, a distinction was made between reasons that generally speak against attending church services, based on people who attend church services not more than once a year, and reasons that speak against attending certain church services, based on people who attend church services at least once a year. Two-thirds of Protestants state that they "have other things to do on Sundays", that they are "not religious" (43%) or that they "don't consider themselves to belong to the people at church services" (40%). "Because I cultivate my spirituality without a church service", say 56% of the Protestants. The fact that "I don't like the style of church services" applies to 57% of Protestants. The person "who leads the service" is a much rarer obstacle for Protestants (18%).

Communion services

In 2019, 209,363 communion services were celebrated in the EKD. If we compare these communion services with the number of services on Sundays and public holidays in total (934,812), we can see that 1/5 were services with communion and 4/5 were services without communion.

Regarding Holy Communion, the findings of SME VI also appear disillusioning, with 76% of respondents stating that Holy Communion is not necessarily part of being a Christian for them.

Insights and perspectives

The empirical research has clearly shown that it is a mistake to assume that masses of church members would have attended church services 60 years ago. Statistically, the same percentage of Protestants attended church services in 2019 as in 1953. So isn't it much more the case that the empirical reality reflects what is actually theologically self-evident: that the worshipping community is always also a representation of everyone?



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This seems even more evident given that in Germany in 2024, Christians will be in the minority, meaning that less than 50% of people in Germany will belong to one of the two mainstream churches, due to people leaving the church and natural demographic developments.

The idea that being a Christian also means going to church was not true in earlier times; the KMU VI has clearly shown that this is not the case today either. Only for a small minority, going to church on Sunday morning is still part of being a Christian. As early as 1969, Werner Jetter was forced to conclude in his survey "What will happen to the church?" that "attending church is no longer the universal, obligatory and valid characteristic of Christianity today". ¹⁶ This finding corresponds, among other things, with the result that more than half of those attending church services state in KMU VI that church services are not important for their own spirituality. However, the question then arises as to how Christianity manifests itself and what the central characteristics of Christianity are.

In fact, for a long time now, the Sunday service has been an astonishingly stable focal point for a few, mostly highly connected people with a certain style of piety. The diversity of church services that has developed over the past decades reflects a broader spectrum of participants. 50% of church services are not celebrated on Sundays. The growing number of church services at different rhythms and times requires further empirical analysis, as already begun in the Liturgical Conference's 2019 church attendance study.

Going to church on a voluntary basis

As far as the past is concerned, we can certainly speak of a traditional Christianity in many respects, which was shaped by institutionalized forms that to a certain extent led to a culture of self-evidence. However, today's society is rightly described as a society of singularities, as the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz has accurately described for Germany. The previous culture of taken-for-grantedness is becoming more fragile and questionable, which is why we are now talking more about a Christianity of choice and a church of free will. Each individual decides what seems conducive to their own endeavors and what gives their own life meaning. It is therefore

Werner Jetter, Was wird aus der Kirche? Stuttgart 1969, 177.

¹⁷ Andreas Reckwitz, Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten, Frankfurt am Main 2017.



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reasonable to assume that formats of preaching and worship as an expression of an institutionalized structure of plausibility are also subject to this dynamic change. As a result, subjective needs are becoming more important, such as a pleasant atmosphere in the church service or the need for it to be a place of strength for one's own faith. Value is also placed on the sermon, music, the pastor, appealing and understandable language and the opportunity to meet people. These subjective needs are independent of age and are likely to apply equally to both analog and digital services.

Today, people are self-determined and equally self-confident in deciding whether or not they want to take part in worship, and if so, on what occasions, in what places and at what times.

Attending church in the 21st century requires a plausibility for those who attend, which is not just a matter of habit. KMU VI has shown that other responsibilities and activities often interfere with going to church. Consequently, this means that the church service must be plausible for people's understanding of life, orientation in terms of life's purpose and coping with daily challenges, otherwise they will decide in favor of other leisure activities. The church service in the plural offers sufficient opportunities for this, which must be used creatively and developed further.

Casualization of the church service

It is reasonable to assume that the more or less unquestioned ecclesiastical-dogmatic background of churchgoing has been replaced by a deliberate integration of churchgoing into family traditions of celebration. In other words, casuality and family traditions have replaced the ecclesiastical-dogmatic background of going to church. The hidden possibilities to arrange church services for special and family occasions are still far from being fully explored.

Renaissance of the Lutheran understanding of worship?

From the perspective of confessional history, it is astonishing how far Protestant worship has moved away from Luther's original understanding of worship (e.g. with regard to the self-evident character of going to church). It therefore seems worthwhile to repeatedly reassess Luther's original understanding of worship (in all its plurality). Much of what has to be laboriously fought for today was already laid out back then.

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