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The vitality of religious communities—A contribution model based on the sociological and theological discourse

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Abstract The article elaborates a concept of the vitality of religious communities. Defined on the basis of previous research, it enables an identification of the determinants that make a (religious) collective vital. An examination of the theoretical discourse and recent studies on religious vitality reveals two distinct discussions. On the one hand, the sociology of religion that disregards the mesolevel; on the other, theology typically lacks a scientific foundation. This paper integrates the strength of both disciplines: the former's explicit operationalization and abstract reflection along with the latter's sensemaking and proximity to the field. In doing so, we provide a definition of the vitality of religious communities on the basis of the discussion of the vitality of species and ecosystems in life science. This definition is further refined with a view to organizational studies. Here, the vitality of religious communities can be described and measured in four dimensions: (operative) functionality, (shared) identity, (situational) performance, and (transformational) impact. Theological discourse and recent research point to four attributes of a (religious) community that are expected to influence vitality: professionalism, spirituality, contextuality and intentionality. Finally, the contribution model brings together the vitality dimensions and its influence factors in a coherent framework, offering concrete hypotheses for further research in both disciplines and guidance for empirical research.

Keywords Secularization · Rational choice theory of religion · Church growth · Religious organizations · Notae ecclesiae

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Die Vitalität religiöser Gemeinschaften—Ein Wirkungsmodell auf der Grundlage des soziologischen und theologischen Diskurses

Zusammenfassung In diesem Aufsatz wird ein Konzept der Vitalität religiöser Gemeinschaften entwickelt, das auf der Grundlage bisheriger Forschung definiert wird und zudem wichtige Einflussfaktoren identifiziert, die ein (religiöses) Kollektiv vitalisieren. Die Reflexion des theoretischen Diskurses und neuerer empirischer Studien zu religiöser Vitalität zeigt zwei getrennte Diskussionen in der Religionssoziologie, mit einem Desiderat auf der Mesoebene, und in der Theologie, in der es oft einer wissenschaftlichen Fundierung der Arbeiten fehlt. Dieser Text integriert die Stärken beider Disziplinen, die explizite und klare Operationalisierung sowie abstrakte Reflexion der Soziologie sowie die inhaltliche Bedeutungszuschreibung und Nähe zum Forschungsfeld der Theologie. Auf Grundlage der Erkenntnisse in den Lebenswissenschaften zur Vitalität bestimmter Arten und ganzer Ökosysteme sowie von Organisationen in der Organisationsforschung wird eine Definition der Vitalität religiöser Gemeinschaften angeboten, die in vier Dimensionen beschrieben und gemessen werden kann: in ihrer (operativen) Handlungsfähigkeit, ihrer (geteilten) Identität, ihrer (situativen) Performanz sowie ihrem (transformierenden) Einfluss. Der theologische Diskurs und neuere Studien weisen dann auf vier Merkmale (religiöser) Gemeinschaften hin, von denen erwartet wird, dass sie wichtige Einflussfaktoren für religiöse Vitalität darstellen: Professionalität, Spiritualität, Kontextualität und Intentionalität. Schließlich, führt das Wirkungsmodell der Vitalität religiöser Gemeinschaften die Vitalitätsdimensionen und ihre Einflussfaktoren zu einem kohärenten Gefüge zusammen, das konkrete Hypothesen für weitere Forschung in beiden Disziplinen bereitstellt und empirische Forschung anleiten kann.

Schlüsselwörter Säkularisierung · Religiöses Marktmodell · Kirchenentwicklung · Religiöse Organisation · Notae ecclesiae

1 The vitality of religious communities[1]

What is a vital church community? What characteristics can we use to identify vital congregations? And, how can local parishes be influenced to flourish? These questions simultaneously concern local religious leaders as well as pastoral planers, theologians and sociologists. Vitality is not just an abstract theoretical concept; most people, in fact, at least have an intuitive idea of what it means to be a vital organism or community. Capturing the concept as a whole in its complexity, however,

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[1] It is also interesting to note the context in which the concept is not used. For example, the National Congregations Study (NCS) does not work with the concept of vitality. The vitality of religion or a religious group is not a descriptive category; it is an ascription and interpretation based on selective empirical data. Therefore, it is not surprising that the concept of (religious) vitality is particularly used by religiously affiliated institutions. They discuss the definition and meaning of the concept as well as its operationalization. Descriptive researchers of religion also sometimes have problems with the concept of vitality because it always implies a value-based judgement about what is vital and what is not, or, put differently, would is good and what is not.

is a challenge. Attempts have been made to identify, measure and conceptualize religious vitality on the basis of all the aforementioned practical and theoretical interests. Some concepts have proven to be effective in local contexts, while other aspects of the discussion seem to be just at the beginning or not (yet) validated.

This paper aims to formulate a theoretical construct that defines an approach for identifying the "vitality of a religious community" and to propose indicators that show the degree and particular form of vitality of a certain religious community, project or group. Furthermore, we seek to find out which critical factors lead to vitalization. Ultimately, the construct should hypothesize about causal interaction of influence factors on vitality. The construct can be used to guide empirical research in different quantitative and qualitative studies, whereby the findings of the studies, in turn, can evaluate and enrich the theoretical assumptions.

Since the 1970s, there has been a discourse about the conditions of church communities and their developments, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. At first glance, it can be noticed that different concepts are used in the literature. Depending on the researchers interests in the respective studies, they speak of "religious vitality", "church growth", "church health", "church vitality", "parish vitality" and "congregational vitality". The different notions make it more difficult to identify the development of the concept and general findings. A brief literature review shows the theoretical and empirical roots of the vitality concept, previous work in capturing its complex structure, as well as the state of the research in terms of defining the concept, its dimensions and influence factors as well as indicators and empirical measurement.

2 Religious vitality as a key concept in central theories in the sociology of religion

In the sociology of religion, religious vitality is conceptualized in different theoretical debates as an individual attribute of a population. It can be found especially in the two prominent theoretical strands about modern development of religion in the Western world: secularization theory and religious market theory.

Secularization theory states a negative relation between a pluralism of beliefs and religious vitality in a society. In his groundbreaking book "The Sacred Canopy" Peter L. Berger describes how different worldviews make religiosity contingent and a subject of choice (Berger 1969). Accordingly, one central assumption of the secularization thesis is that pluralization (and modernization) turns religiosity in a matter of individual choice and, therefore, as a collective effect, decreases the religious vitality of a population (see e.g. Dobbelaere 1985; Tschannen 1991; Swatos and Christiano 1999).

In religious market theory, a sub-discourse of the rational choice theory of religions, religious vitality is also a key concept. However, in contrast to the secularization approach, this theoretical strand argues that religious vitality depends on the supply side of religion, the offers from religious organizations. Religious organizations are seen as the suppliers of religious goods. In this context, religious vitality increases when the religious supply is diverse and responds to the multiple religious

Table 1 Indicators used in the Centrality of religion scale (Krech et al. 2013, p. 8)

Core Dimension	Item
Intellectual	"How often do you think about religious issues?"
Religious ideology	"To what extent do you believe in God or something divine?"
Public practice	"How often do you participate in religious services/synagogue services/congregational prayer/temple rituals/spiritual rituals or religious acts?"
Private practice	"How often do you pray?"
	"How often do you meditate?"
Experience	"How often do you experience situations where you have the feeling that God or something divine intervenes in your life?"
	"How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that you are at one with everything?"

needs of a population. This is achieved when a field of diverse and competing religious organizations meets religious demands with multiple suitable religious goods (see e.g. Finke and Stark 1988, p. 42; Stolz 2018, p. 107).

In both approaches, the secularization theory and the religious market theory, religious vitality is conceptualized as an attribute of the population (a whole society of a distinct or territory) by measuring individual religious belief and practice. It is not seen as related to a single religious group or organization. The two hypotheses have been investigated empirically in a large number of studies. But, David Voas et al. (2002) have found that a statistical interrelation between the dependent and independent variable in these studies made the results meaningless. To date, there is no evidence of the connection of religious pluralism and religious participation. Recently, Daniel Olson et al. found a pronounced negative effect between religious diversity and participation rates in U.S. counties, which supports the secularization theses (v.a. Olson et al. 2020). In all these survey-based studies, religious vitality is measured according to participation at religious services. Critics, however, remark that just the participation in worship ceremonies does not reflect the whole picture of religious vitality, especially with a view to showing that modernization processes lead to more individualistic or private forms of religiosity (see e.g. Luckmann 1991). For our purposes, participation at worship services is a useful indicator for the vitality of a religious community, since individually experienced religiosity does not make a congregation vital. At the same time, a congregation is more than just a weekly worship service. So, the question remains: How can the vitality of a religious community be adequately measured?

Responding to the statistical problem identified in Voas et al., Volkhard Krech et al. (2013) used different statistical indices, based on the five dimensions of religiosity by Charles Glock, to measure diversity in the religious field and religious vitality. Employing the new measures, the "[...] results suggest that religious diversity is related to religious vitality. However, the nature of this association differs across subgroups" (Krech et al. 2013, p. 2). The connection of the two variables is less interesting in the present review than the new measurement of religious vitality itself. Krech et al. no longer measure religious vitality by means of classic measures like participation and membership in religious organizations. They utilize the centrality of religion scale (CRS) (Huber and Huber 2012), which measures how

religion influences a persons' feelings, cognitions and actions. The CRS refers to the widely known five dimensions of religiosity by Stark and Glock (1968). The CRS is used as an instrument "to measure the influence of religious meanings on an individual's feelings, cognitions, and actions. More precisely, religious vitality is operationalized by the extent to which religious meanings shape people's mental, attitudinal, motivational, and behavioral characteristics" (Krech et al. 2013, p. 7). The various items of the CRS are depicted are follows (Table 1):

The results of their study finally suggest that there exists a negative connection between religious diversity and vitality, but just for minority religious groups of a local population. "For religious minorities that have a relatively high level of centrality [of religion], the secularization potential is greater than that for the population group that is not affiliated with any religious organization." (Krech et al. 2013, p. 17).

This classical debate in the sociology of religion reveals several insights into the discussion of religious vitality. Vitality, in this context, is always either an attribute of individuals or of a whole population. Just the latest contribution of Krech and his colleagues demonstrates, that vitality and its determinants depend on a closer look into specific groups and their contexts. This contribution also yielded a new way to measure vitality. The multidimensional method of the CRS, which encompasses more facets of a religious life, was added to the traditional simple measures of participation or membership.

In this strand of research, however, no attempt has been made to measure religious vitality on the mesolevel. Religious communities can be more active and vibrant or lethargic—which not only depends on the individual religiosity of its members. We therefore think of the vitality of a religious community not just as the sum of the religiosity of its members, but as an indivisible property of the religious community itself. Properties that belong to a religious community as a whole include the atmosphere in the gatherings, the attractiveness for newcomers and potential partners, the reputation in the local community and its potential to realize ambitious projects. Similarly, the conditions that lead to a certain form of vitality of a religious community need to examined at the community (meso) level, not just at the individual (micro) level. It is conceivable that religious individuals might leave a community if they perceive a lack of engagement to affiliate with another congregation. On the other hand, structural, spiritual or communal qualities of a religious community could attract congregants and lead to increasing group vitality. We therefore argue that religious communities have vitality dimensions and influence factors that go beyond the religiosity of their affiliated individuals and have to be investigated in the communities themselves.

In the following section, we depict how several empirical studies operationalized the vitality of religious groups.

3 Early concepts of religious vitality

As the sociology of religion long focused on the micro- and macrolevel for their investigations on religion, the concern with religious groups and organizations on the mesolevel primarily came from the religious field itself. Theologians and repre-

sentatives of religious organizations in the late twentieth century increasingly raised question of what indicates a vital and healthy church community. They justified this interest with reference to the demands of the Bible itself.[2]

3.1 Church growth and church health

Church growth in attendance or affiliates was identified as an unidimensional indicator for a healthy or vital church (see Bobbitt 2014, p. 468; Powell et al. 2019, p. 4f.). The sociologists Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen (1979) had already argued that church growth depends on four categories of determinants—national factors, local community factors, local historical factors and denominational factors—of which only the latter can be influenced by the congregation itself (Hoge and Roozen 1979). Later, numerous empirical studies identified several influencing factors for church growth (see e.g. Powell et al. 2019, p. 5). Nonetheless, the problem of the mere quantitative concept of church growth remained: It did not say anything about the quality of lived religion—i.e. the vitality—of the congregation.

In the late 1990s, the strong concentration on counting people was therefore questioned by many researchers. This resulted in the notion of church health (see Powell et al. 2019, p. 6; Bobbitt 2014, p. 468f.), which emphasizes that quantitative growth is not the only significant factor of a vital church community. The assumption here is that "not all healthy churches grow and not all growing churches are healthy" (Bobbitt 2014, p. 468). Another significant consideration is what is happening within the community and with its members (Steinke 1996). Advocates of the church health concept proposed multiple attributes for measuring the healthiness of a congregation (see McKee 2003, p. 34). For example, "McKee concludes that the spiritual development of individuals within the congregation is a critical mark of vitality for congregations" (Bobbitt 2014, p. 469).

The early studies of church growth and church health focussed on the mesolevel community, seeking to measure their performance as well as to identify critical factors. The underlying problem to the diverse concepts of church growth and church health is that multiple empirical studies on their connection show different, partially contradictory results. At issue is the specific conceptualization of health of a religious community (see Powell et al. 2019, p. 6). As a result, more recent studies try to integrate the different approaches to come up with a more robust concept of vitality.

3.2 Natural church development

In the 1980s, Christian Schwarz, a German Lutheran pastor, developed the Natural Church Development (NCD) programme. On its website, several publications, tests and assistance tools are available in multiple languages for congregations worldwide. The aim of the programme is to help church communities grow qualitatively (!) "in a way that can be measured and monitored. Following that path, it is claimed that the

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[2] In this movement, several religiously grounded handbooks for church growth and church health were also published which have not been scientifically validated (e.g. Dever 2013).

numerical growth follows 'all by itself'" (Schwarz 2007, pp. 25–27).[3] NCD works with eight theologically grounded principles, which the programme continually tries to refine:

- Empowering Leadership
- Gift-oriented ministry
- Passionate Spirituality
- Functional Structures
- Inspiring Worship Service
- Holistic Small Groups
- Need-oriented Evangelism
- Loving Relationships (see Schalk 1999, p. 19)

To assess the success of the strategy, Christian Schwarz and Christoph Schalk developed a survey to measure the eight factors in the communities. They designed a lay workers' questionnaire and a pastors' questionnaire which measure the eight dimensions using a total of 70 items. The statistical reliability of the survey was tested in 1999 (see Schalk 1999).

The approach of the NCD programme can be ideal-typically classified in the church-growth and church-health movement. Schwarz aims to promote congregation growth in a qualitative sense and thereby produce healthy church communities and members. He also delivers a strategy to get there: by improving the eight principles. Judging by accounts of participating congregations worldwide and the production of publications, the programme seems to be working well. However, the actual effect of the programme has not been scientifically proven (cf. Powell et al. 2019, p. 9f.).

## 4 Actual multifaceted vitality concepts

After this wave of theologically inspired attempts to measure and improve a congregations' condition with the concepts of church growth and church health, a new wave of studies emerged which researches the concept of vitality. It combines scientific and theological interest in more targeted way. These studies measure the vitality of religious communities through quantitative survey research mainly with church attendees or affiliates and try to develop a well-grounded theoretical construct. Therefore, they include multiple aspects pointing to the complexity of church vitality, in which it is both empirically proven and statistically validated. Furthermore, while these studies normally come from the study of a single religion or congregation, they aim to be applicable to all kinds of congregations/religious communities and thus not one-sided.

4.1 Church vitality in the church life survey

Since 1991, the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) has measured every five years the condition of Australian congregations of several denominations. Recently, the

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[3] See: http://www.ncd-international.org/public/natural_church_development.html.

Fig. 1 Nine Core Qualitites of church life from NCLS. (See: https://www.ncls.org.au/planning/measuring-church-vitality)
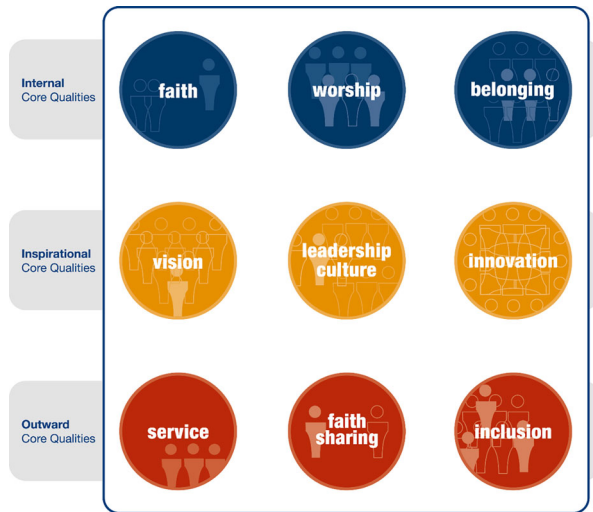
NCLS questionnaires have also been employed in the USA, UK, New Zealand, South Africa and the Netherlands (see Powell et al. 2019, p. 6). The methods of NCLS have been adjusted over the last thirty years to account for research developments, societal changes and the requirements of the diverse religious communities. The NCLS is therefore probably the most elaborate instrument to measure the vitality of religious communities worldwide.

The NCLS uses the concept of Church Vitality (CV) for local congregations/church communities. It employs four types of questionnaires: The attendee survey, the child survey, the leaders survey and the operations survey. The data can be aggregated according to different levels of interest: the local community level, the denominational level as well as the national level (see Powell et al. 2019, p. 7).

The vitality of a local religious community is measured in terms of nine core qualities, as shown in the Fig. 1. The nine core qualities contain three core quality groups. First, the internal core qualities, refer to the faith and the relationships among the members of the community: Alive and growing faith; Vital and nurturing worship; Strong and growing belonging. The second group of core qualities is named inspirational core qualities. It focuses on the direction and qualities for change of the community: Clear and owned vision; Inspiring and empowering leadership culture; Imaginative and flexible innovation. Finally, the third part of the core qualities is called outward core qualities. It centres on the connection of the religious community to their broader local community. It is divided into Practical and diverse service; Willing and effective faith sharing; Intentional and welcoming inclusion.[4]

In 2010, Robert Dixon enriched the NCLS methods with social theory. To determine the level of vitality, he used social capital theory to investigate if Catholic parishes in Australia are able to generate social capital by producing religious goods

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[4] https://www.ncls.org.au/planning/measuring-church-vitality.

Table 2 Powell et al. (2019, p. 9)

| NCLS Dimension	NCLS Core Quality	Social capital type
Inward core qualities	Alive and growing faith	Bonding social capital
	Vital and nurturinq worship	
	Strong and growing belonging	
Inspirational core qualities	Clear and owned vision	Transformational or catalytic social capital
	Inspirinq and empowerinq leadership Imaginative and flexible innovation	
Outward core qualities	Practical and diverse service	Bridging social capital
	Willinq and effective faith-sharinq Intentional and welcoming inclusion	
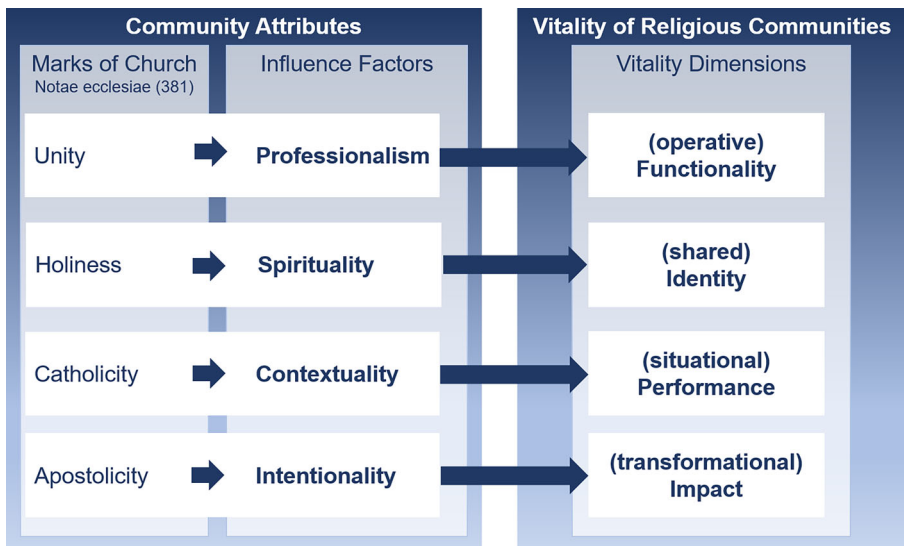
Fig. 2 Contribution Model for the Vitality of Religious Communities

(see Table 2). Here, he used the NCLS framework of the three dimensions and nine core qualities (see Dixon 2010).

Dixon's study describes four central findings:

1. The functioning of parishes is affected by the local context and its characteristics: "Context is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage; it is a fact." (Dixon 2010, p. 12).
2. Empowering Leadership is a strong influence factor for parish involvement in urban parishes: "[...] people will tend to get involved if they are encouraged to do so, and if they feel their contribution is appreciated" (Dixon 2010, p. 12).
3. Sunday evening mass in urban areas has a significant influence.

4. Fringe attendees play an important role: "[...] they contribute to the creation of a parish's social capital through their generally positive view of the parish, a view that they take to the wider community" (Dixon 2010, p. 12).

In her research, Trudy Dantis, investigated the vitality of ten vital Australian Catholic parishes with an in-depth qualitative study (Dantis 2014, 2015). On the basis of the NCLS vitality concept and measures she defines parish vitality as well as expected determinants as follows: "A vital parish, therefore, is one based on an ecclesiology of communion, where baptised members form a strong faith community centred on a meaningful celebration and experience of the Eucharist; where parishioners are welcomed and empowered in actively living out their faith; and where diverse outreach initiatives are practised and a commitment to mission is witnessed and encouraged. The vitality of a parish is dependent on the quality of leadership, the adaptability of the parish and the ways in which planning processes are employed to facilitate growth and change." (Dantis 2014, p. 53) Furthermore, she indicates eight measures, that apply specifically for Catholic Parishes to identify parish vitality, closely connected to the NCLS Core Qualities (Dantis 2014, p. 54).

As a result of her study, Dantis mentions five contributors to parish vitality that can shortly by summarized as diversity in activities, empowering leadership, strong inclusive bonds among parishioners, various opportunities for lay involvement and a network of lay leadership (Dantis 2014, p. 308f.). She also indicates that parish vitality profiles are different based on the parish context, demographics as well as resources and needs of the community (Dantis 2014, p. 310).

In an overview of the empirical research on vitality (Powell et al. 2019), Powell et al. identified 15 features of church vitality. With a factor analysis, the researchers analysed two underlying concepts: "collective positivity" and "individual commitment". The concept of "collective positivity" in particular refers to a meso-characteristic of the local congregation or church community as an important factor for vitality. It is described as "a positive experience of the collective endeavour that is the church, its activities and leaders." (Powell et al. 2019, p. 14). The study shows that the vitality of a religious community depends on the mesolevel factors of the community.

Furthermore, the article mentions that the research on religious vitality does not elucidate which factors are seen as indicators of religious vitality and which are influence factors that contribute to it (see Powell et al. 2019, p. 16). This leaves the topic open to the distinct interest(s) of researchers and their work.

4.2 Congregational vitality

Between 2010 and 2012, Linda Bobbit developed the Congregational Vitality Survey (CVS) for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In her article, Bobbit recommends distinguishing, on the one hand, between the (intended) outcome—the vitality itself—and, on the other, the factors associated with vitality (see Bobbitt 2014, p. 470). She aims to develop a "statistically sound outcome measurement tool" that connects qualitative dimensions of vitality with numeric growth measures (Bobbitt 2014, p. 469). To create the measurement tool, she employed

items from the US Congregational Life Survey (USCLS) (see Bruce 2006) and the Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey (see Roozen 2009; Bobbitt 2014, p. 470). The questionnaire, which contained 29 items, "included questions from two perspectives: descriptions of the congregation from the third person perspective and descriptions of the respondents' own experiences of the congregation" (Bobbitt 2014, p. 471). It was given to members and staff of Lutheran Congregations in the US.

A factor analysis showed that the perceptions of vitality differed significantly between the lay members and the pastors. Thus, where three scales could be identified among the lay members—connect with each other; connect with the world; connect with god—only two scales appear among the pastors in the factor analysis: inner strength and faith in action. Bobbits study provides a valid outcome measurement tool for a congregations' vitality. Furthermore, it indicates that perceptions between members and pastors can differ significantly. For the sake of a greater utility, Bobbit afterwards tested and used two shorter versions of the questionnaire with 15/5[5] items to measure a congregations' vitality (Bobbitt 2016, 2015). Interestingly, Bobbitt et al. (2018) discovered that pastors tended to overrate the vitality of their communities. When investigating this result more closely, they realized that the pastors were not in denial about the congregations' real vitality. They were in fact aware of the situation, but probably intentionally misrepresented the vitality in the questionnaire because of the feeling of "personal responsibility, shame and helplessness. [...] they did not think that their efforts could improve the situation." (Bobbitt 2018, p. 424).

To explore the role of the leaders in congregations further, Bobbit also conducted qualitative inductive research with about 65 congregational leaders from different faith traditions[6] concerning their view on congregational vitality. Remarkably, in their overall definition of congregational vitality, the leaders agreed: "Spiritually vital congregations are places where people come together for a *common purpose of divine origin*. [...] [they] further agreed that in spiritually vital congregations, people experience the divine in ways that are transformative. **The common divine purpose and transformative experience compel the people to authentically engage both within the congregation and the world around them**" (emphasis from present authors; Bobbitt 2018, p. 2). Only the engagement between the congregation and the world differed between the different faith traditions (see Bobbitt 2018, p. 3).

In this study, Bobbit also describes the key influence factors for vitality mentioned by the congregation leaders. They identified three central factors: 1. "Building strong, respectful and loving relationships" between members, leaders and members as well as within the local community; 2. vision sharing, motivating, supportive, experimenting and spiritually exemplary leadership; and 3. participation in faith,

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[5] The items of all three questionnaires (fullsurves, 15 items, 5 items) can be reviewed in the documentation, see Bobbitt 2015, p. 11.

[6] Bobbit addressed leaders from congregations which participated in the Faith Communities Today—Cooperative Congregations Study Project (FACT/CCSP). The survey on US congregations was actually conducted in six phases (2000, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2015 and 2020) and measures various aspects of community activities of faith communities. One item also addresses the self-perception of the congregation's vitality with a 5 point Likert scale. https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Faith-Communities-Today-2015-Final-Survey-with-Frequencies.pdf.

cultivating actions like spiritual practices and/or social volunteering (see Bobbitt 2018, p. 4f.).

The main contribution of Bobbit's research is her conceptual differentiation, in which she separates the (intended) outcome, vitality, from associated factors. She defines vitality itself in more detail with qualitative dimensions and numeric growth, which is reflected in the CVS and the qualitative leaders' study. She formulates concrete indicators and utilizes them as survey items. In the qualitative study, she also identifies first inductive insights relating to probable influence factors (relationship, leadership and actions), which can be further developed.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) likewise developed a survey in 2001 to measure the vitality of its congregations and to help them to improve their activities, the U.S. Congregational Life Survey (USCLS).[7] In 2018, the USCLS servers broke down and all the data that has been collected by then, was gone. A completely revised version of the survey was designed in 2019: the new U.S: Congregational Vitality Survey (USCVS).

The main questionnaire addresses participants in a congregation's worship service and asks them about how they view the congregation's life and vitality. The USCVS's concept of congregational vitality is biblically and theologically grounded on "the seven marks of congregational vitality" (Presbytarian Mission 2019):

- Lifelong discipleship formation
- Intentional authentic evangelism
- Outward incarnational focus
- Empowering servant leadership
- Spirit-inspired worship
- Caring relationships
- Ecclesial health

The USCVS stresses the genuine religious intention of vitalization and provides another approach on how to conceptualize vitality from the theological-religious viewpoint. However, the seven marks in the publications of the programme are merely illustrated by passages from the bible and the concept lacks a genuine theological foundation. Furthermore, the authors of the survey did not make a scientific reflection of the survey methods and its results available that would validate it for further research.

4.3 Parish vitality as an inductive concept

Marti R. Jewell and Mogilka (2020) conducted a study on parish vitality for the Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities (FADICA). Recognizing that there is no clear definition of parish vitality, the researchers investigated parishes in the US that are known and commended for their vitality. The study includes a survey with over 200 US-American initiatives and 65 interviews with pastoral leaders and innovators (see Jewell and Mogilka 2020, p. 3). The researchers found that these apparently vital parish communities have eight indicators in common: They

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[7] https://uscongregations.pcusa.org/resources/.

are innovative; have excellent pastors; work in leadership teams; promote a holistic, compelling vision; place a priority on the Sunday communal experience; foster spiritual growth and maturity; live faith in service; and utilize online communication tools (see Jewell and Mogilka 2020, p. 4). These eight attributes therefore can be seen as qualitative components or indicators of vital church communities. The study also identified four major influence factors that contribute to vitality in parish communities: leadership: engaged, relational pastoral teams; worship: welcoming communities, well-developed homilies, and inspiring liturgical music; word: internet outreach, intergenerational events, sacramental preparation and faith-sharing groups; service: outreach to the community and care for the world. Every element contributes to an increase or decrease of church vitality; they overlap and influence each other (see Jewell and Mogilka 2020, p. 9).

Though rudimentary, Jewell and Mogilka clearly divide between the eight characteristics of parish vitality and its four influence factors, which are directly related.

5 Summarizing the actual discourse on vitality

The depicted discourse shows an obvious interest in describing and comparing religious groups according to their capacity to thrive. Scholarly research as well as practical reflections have already led to different vitality models and characteristics. Nonetheless, there remains a lack of agreement or shared knowledge among the discourse's participants. The researchers from NCLS represent an exception insofar as they refer to Linda Bobbits research and earlier approaches. Some general findings can be observed, however.

There is a discrepancy between the theoretical sociological debates and the practical interests of real churches and theology. In the main sociology of religion discourse, a mesosociological measurement of vitality is missing. Religious vitality is usually empirically measured based on individual survey data to generate insights on the vitality of the population. This may help to explain why religious sociological discourse is mostly separated from the discourse on church growth and church health, which arose from the practical interest in the improvement of church life. In these studies, leaders and members were asked about individual and community factors. Later studies mostly lack a scientific conceptualization; the concepts and methods are rather mostly theological, or religion based.

More recent vitality studies integrate theological knowledge with valid empirical measurement. They provide useful insights into critical vitality factors and constructs. They also measure community attributes alongside individual factors, although they still lack a mesolevel theoretical foundation. None of these studies seriously reflects on the special attributes of a mesolevel entity like a group, movement, or organization. Consequently, the results do not capture the interplay between individual religiosity and religious investment and the vitality of religious groups. This disregard for the social mesolevel constitutes another weakness in the research. The relationship between the dimensions of vitality and its determinants is still vague. A clearer definition of vitality is therefore needed which demarcates high

and low vitality or different vitality levels, which, in turn, is clearly differentiated from any underlying influence factors.

By constructing a contribution model, the following approach offers a mesolevel measure for vitality of religious groups and organizations that integrates sociological and theological reflections on vital religious communities. It further clearly differentiates between vitality dimensions and determinants.

6 A sociological approach to the vitality of religious communities

On the basis of the broad and diverse discourse on religious vitality, the competence centre of pastoral evaluation at the University of Bochum developed a threefold integrated approach on the vitality of religious communities. On the one hand, it relates theological reflection to the discourse in the sociology of religion and is therefore interdisciplinary in nature. On the other hand, it specifies in a causal model the theoretical assumptions by differentiating vitality dimensions and determinants. Furthermore, it makes empirical operationalizations possible, transparent, and therefore lends itself to continuous empirical validation.

The mesolevel concept of the vitality of religious communities is meant to cover heterogenous forms of human collectives. For the purpose of studying the Christian religion, it is applicable to parishes as well as projects, initiatives, small prayer groups, and also organizations, religious orders and social media channels. Community is therefore understood in a broad sense as any collective entity with a certain shared identity.

The vitality of a religious community here describes the capacity of such a collective to thrive, reproduce and have an impact (see also Mason and Fenenessy 2008, p. 112). Originally the notion of vitality was used in life sciences like ecology, biology, and medicine. In this context, vitality is understood as the ability of an individual or population to live in a certain environment, whereby the vitality of an individual or population can be compared to other groups or species.[8] Later, the concept was applied to other disciplines like psychology (Ryan and Deci 2008; Nix et al. 1999; Martela et al. 2016; Stern 2010a, b; Ryan and Frederick 1997) and mesolevel entities like ethnolinguistic groups (see Smith King et al. 2017; Giles and Bourhis 1994; Yagmur and Ehala 2011; Ehala 2011, 2015). Recently, it has also been applied in organizational studies (see Bishwas 2011, 2015; Vicenzi and Adkins 2000; Sushil 2005, 2007; Bishwas and Sushil 2016). The mesolevel concepts of vitality derived from organizational research see organizations as living entities similar to individual organisms.

In his well-received book, *The Living Company: Habits for survival in a turbulent business environment*, Arie de Geus conceptualizes organizations as living entities that are more than just the sum of their individual members. "*Like all organisms, the living company exists primarily for its own survival and improvement: to fulfil its potential and become as great as it can be*" (de Geus 1997, p. 11). He also identifies four factors in his research that contribute to companies' long-term survival.

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[8] See https://www.spektrum.de/lexikon/biologie/vitalitaet/69732.

A successful company would: 1. be able to learn and adapt through its *sensitivity to the environment*; 2. have the capacity to build a community which is expressed by its *cohesion and identity*; 3. create tolerance by *decentralization* as well as internal and external networks; and 4. govern its finances in a conservative manner (de Geus 1997, p. 9). In this concept, vitality is assessed according the four determining factors with a view to the company's survival and growth.

Richard Vicenzi and Gary Adkins see vitality in "organizations ... where creativity and innovation thrive" as opposed "to where control (rigidity) or turbulence (fragmentation) impede the conditions for innovation" (Vicenzi and Adkins 2000, p. 105). In their comparative research on technological enterprises, they found four "building blocks" for organizational vitality: organizational purpose and values, leadership and trust, diversity and innovation as well as empowerment and containments of anxiety (see Vicenzi and Adkins 2000, p. 106f.). Vicenzi and Adkins define vitality, in contrast to de Geus, as an organizational culture where creativity and innovation thrive. However, it is not clear if the four building blocks are seen as aspects of vitality or influence factors that contribute to this status, particular since innovation is relevant in both instances.

Sushil and Sumant Kumar Bishwas describe the organizational vitality of companies in a complex environment composed of three aspects: survival, growth and performance. As vitalizing processes, they identify the so-called "LIFE" mantra (Learning, Innovation, Flexibility and Entrepreneurship) (see Bishwas and Sushil 2016, 2015). In a previous article, Sushil also contemplated additional emotional and spiritual LIFE dimensions of organization vitality (Love, Inspiration, Fun, Enlightenment). These contributions explicitly define the vitality of an organization (survival, growth and performance) as well as processes that support it by providing a structural process model.

The contributions from organizational studies share the insight that vitality is rooted in survival and growth. Moreover, it also becomes evident that other, qualitative, dimensions like performance, innovation and creativity are crucial vitality indicators, especially in a changing or uncertain environment. These findings can be adapted to a variety of different mesolevel groups. To capture the concept of vitality of religious communities more precisely, we derived four vitality dimensions.

6.1 Four dimensions of the vitality of religious groups

The previous studies identified different aspect of vitality using intuitive and deductive approaches. The vitality concept from the life sciences and organizational research can be further developed into a mesosociological vitality model that accounts for collective actors like groups, communities, movements or organizations. To this end, previously mentioned vitality factors can be condensed into four crucial dimensions that constitute their vitality: 1. internal functionality, 2. shared identity, 3. situational performance and 4. transformational impact.

The *internal functionality* describes how a group or organization is able to solve its inherent tasks and how internal mechanisms and processes work together. In life science, it describes how an organism or a species is able to transform resources and use them for its survival. For collectives, internal functionality means that a group or

organization is able to make decisions, solve tasks, organize itself and reach goals. Functionality can be quite focused on one specific goal, which can overwhelm the organism or collective and provoke its destruction or it can be oriented toward long-lasting maintenance by a sustainable use of resources and mechanisms for recovery. Internal, operative functionality can be established through routines and their steady reproduction or through the installation of organizational tools and management practices, especially in changing times and unstable environments (see e.g. Rebenstorf et al. 2015, p. 174).

The second dimension that directly effects the sustainability of a (religious) collective entity is its *shared identity*. This dimension describes the shared values and beliefs of a collective. It concerns how members communicate with each other, how they relate to the community, their level of personal involvement and the strength of their mutual bond. It also relates to how the shared narratives and beliefs shape the members' identities by integrating group identity patterns into personal identity constructs. This shared identity also establishes the atmosphere—the spirit—which is the emotional aspect of identity. It can be directly perceived by outsiders and forms the invisible glue between the individuals of a certain collective. There is also a deeper level of meaning behind such phenomenological observations, referring to the core identity attributes of a collective. Following Stuart Albert and David A. Whettens theory of organizational identity (see Albert and Whetten 1985; Whetten 2006), these core identity attributes are central for the collective, as they endure over time and are distinct from other collectives (see Albert and Whetten 1985, p. 265). The identity of a group can strongly align with the surrounding social context; on the other hand, it may just connect to the culture of a specific part of the environment or be strictly differentiated.

The third dimension of the vitality of a religious group is *situational performance*, which describes the actual effects in a concrete situation and outcomes of certain actions. This dimension refers to the relations the collective builds with different actors, the capability to adapt, to use and survive in a certain environment; to thrive and being able to compete with others. This dimension focuses on the relational mode (friendly, competitive, reciprocal, adaptive, etc.) and the intensity of relations as well as on the kind of actors the collective develops relationships with. In life science, the adjustment of an organism or population to their environment ensures their survival. In organizational theory, open-system theories stress that an organization's success and survival greatly depends on its relations to the environment (see Scott and Davis 2016 (2006)). In the same sense, the vitality of a (religious) group depends on its integration into and interrelation with its (social) surrounding. This does not mean that a group must fully adapt to its environment to be successful; sometimes the opposite is true. The dimension of situational performance describes *how* a collective is perceived by its surroundings and how these relations contribute to reproduction.

The fourth and last vitality dimension describes the *transformational impact* of a (religious) group resulting from its actions in its environment. While all species influence their ecosystems to different extents, the desire to create an *impact* on something beyond the own scope is characteristic of human beings. The manner and extent to which a (religious) collective affects its surroundings can vary signif-

icantly. It can be deliberate or indirect. With regard to religious groups, evidence of a transformational impact can be found in the members themselves (daily habits, lifestyle, self-concepts, etc.), in their immediate relations (families, neighbourhoods, friendships, etc.) as well as in the group's broader environment (local district, city, congregation, etc.). Transformational impact implies that the group not only maintains the status quo of its ecosystem but contributes to changing it. Most religious groups seek to improve the world in some way. The dimension of transformational impact reflects the quality (mode) and extent of their impact on the world.

While all four vitality dimensions describe a separate aspect of vitality, together they paint a picture of the overall condition of a (religious) community. All four dimensions can be measured using empirical methods (qualitative and quantitative) and be compared among different collectives. The various specifications of the dimensions are not just unidirectional (e.g. high or low), but present a spectrum. The final assessment of vitality showing the interrelation and mutual influence of the four dimensions can therefore reflect a very specific composition of the functionality, identity, performance and impact of a collective.

6.2 Four determinants that lead to vitality

At this point, we need to introduce a theological reflection. After all, the theological self-description of the Christian church also falls back on a four-field scheme (see also Dantis 2014). And, although this is done deductively and normatively on the part of theology, it is nevertheless striking how fruitfully this four-field logic serves the dimensions described in the previous sections, on the basis of empirical and phenomenological analysis, as the vitality dimensions of organizations.

In our research, both strands, empirical induction and theological deduction, converged, so that one can speak of an abductive discovery of knowledge (cf. Szymanowski 2023). Both procedures will be needed especially for religious organizations, since they are seen as communities of conviction. If one follows the approach of Karl Gabriel (1999), the latter do not only have to consider logics of influence and membership, but also follow a logic of origin. They are committed to it. The religious origin becomes a mission at least for Christian communities and is, therefore, directly relevant for its organization. Without an explicit reference to their normative origins, it is not possible to comprehensively describe the vitality of religious organizations.

Our research interest in the vitality dimensions of religious communities thus led us into both the realm of empiricism and ecclesiology. The concept of ecclesiology is used for the dogmatic self-description of the Christian Church.

The four-field scheme of the so-called "notae ecclesiae" in its most famous formulation dates from the 4th century. It permits a way of thinking of and about the church that predates the confessional division into Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox. The "notae ecclesiae" describe in a normative way, which has a high chance of being recognized by all Christian denominations and confessions.

"Notae ecclesiae" stands for "marks of the church". The search for these marks arises from the question of how to remain the immutable Church of Jesus Christ amidst all cultural and social change. At the Council of Constantinople (381), agree-

ment was reached on what the forming church wanted to recognize as its consistency, identity and continuity.[9] The so-called "Great Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed" of 381, which is still recited as a prayer, states: "We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." (Denzinger 2007, no. 150). With these four adjectives, a normative horizon was opened that allowed for measuring one's actual practice against the ideal.

These four "notae"—unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity—have a checkered history, especially since the Reformation. The ancient church understood these four attributes less as exclusionary marks (notae) than as essential properties (proprietates). Thus, they originally had a differentiating, not an exclusive identity function. Together, they made a normative horizon possible. However, in the controversies of the 16th century and the schism of the church, the notae were caught up in the maelstrom of apologetics. They were henceforth used to proclaim the identification of the Roman Catholic Church with the now exclusively understood church marks and, in reverse, the heresy of the other churches (cf. Döring 1998: p. 918f). In the context of a causally and logically conceived demonstratio catholica, a kind of checklist of legitimate ecclesiasticism was drafted, which posed the question of the ideal and true church and, in a kind of ontological institutionalism, distanced itself completely from empiricism.

The recent ecclesiology, especially under the influence of the ecumenical movement and the Nouvelle théologie (Yves Congar deserves special mention here [cf. Congar 1972]), but also the theology of liberation and the recent fundamental theology have revealed how the notae were accordingly discredited. For the pastoral-theological question concerning an innovative church, this development is epochal. In the latest discussion, the contribution of Hermann-Josef Pottmeyer and Karl Rahner has been highly influential. In fact, both clearly manage to dynamize the question about the marks of the ecclesiastical.

Pottmeyer (1986) does this by shifting the normative framework for the question of true ecclesiasticism. He first elaborates that the visible figure of an institutionalized church cannot actually be dispensed with for the sake of its own truth. The well-known number 8 from "Lumen Gentium" also directly refers the four notae to the visible form of the Church of Christ as it resides in the Catholic Church. True ecclesiality is thus measured by visibility and credible practice; its normative horizon, however, is not the factual form of the post-Tridentine Roman Catholic Church, but the message of Christ's Kingdom of God. Thus, the question that has become static, "Who and where is the true church?" is transformed into the future-oriented formulation: "How is and does the church become true?" (ibid., 212f). Pottmeyer states: "To be the true Church is also for the Catholic Church a gift and a duty." (ibid., 219) In accordance with this program, he interprets the four notae in terms of how unity, apostolicity, catholicity and holiness can be signs of the dawning Kingdom of God.

Karl Rahner (1976, pp. 336–357) succeeds in a second dynamization of the notae by means of an existential-theological examination. This grounding is also indispensable for pastoral theological work. Rahner takes up an old 16th century

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[9] Note, however, that in terms of church history, the issue at stake was precisely the problem of the mesolevel, of the development of organization in late antiquity, which is the concern here.

determination on the notae, which states: What is asserted about the truth of the church must also be accessible to the common man. Rahner thus proceeds from the perspective of "one's own, concrete, lived Christianity" (ibid., 336). On the basis of this practice, it will be possible to assume, first of all, that each Christian recognizes his own church as the true church. Three questions, however, become immediately evident precisely because of this existential starting point—and they form the criteriology of a church that remains true to its original logic. Question 1 seeks to know whether one's church is in close, tangible continuity with early Christianity. Question 2 inquires whether what one experiences as grace is not a coincidence but is assured in the essence of one's own church. Question 3 wants to know whether this church also endures independently of my own subjectivity and thus does not encounter me as having been made by me or as being dependent on me. The four notae can be easily related as possible answers to these questions.[10]

A first conclusion can be drawn: The orientation to the notae ecclesiae can function as a matrix for church development. After all, the dynamizations that have taken place toward the Kingdom of God make any suspicion of exclusivism, confessional triumphalism and static apologetics appear unfounded. Rather, the four notae provide normative markers that not only open up new horizons of consensus in ecumenical dialogue, but also respond productively to the question in ideologically plural societies, including their secular option (Charles Taylor): What does the church want to exist for? First, the four-fold matrix can establish what any pastoral innovation would have to adhere to at its core.

But, secondly, the notae are not only somehow satisfactory again theologically, but even offer the possibility of becoming a hermeneutically stable framework for new, innovative church formation. This is unmistakably the consensus of recent ecclesiology, explicitly in the wake of Congar, Pottmeyer, or Rahner. Heinrich Döring (1998, p. 920), for example, speaks of a "hermeneutical quadrilateral" of relational concepts, all of which have to lead to the question of how the church can represent the Kingdom of God in a symbolic way. In this sense, they are "heuristic principles" and "formative characteristics" of the Church that is always only becoming. With Gregor Hoff's performative ecclesiology, the notae become the indications of pending plenitudo, completeness: The ideal of unity sensitizes one to the de facto lack of unity and universal ecumenism; the ideal of holiness sensitizes one to de facto individual and collective structures of sin; the ideal of catholicity sensitizes one to de facto fragmented particularism; the ideal of apostolicity sensitizes one to the de facto forgetfulness of one's origin (Hoff 2011, pp. 293–295). The "theology of liberation" interprets the notae in terms of a just becoming of the Christian people in the service of a just common good (Werbick 1994, pp. 144–147). Moreover, Medard Kehl has interpreted the notae theologically in terms of the Trinity and thus communio-ecclesiologically (Kehl 1994, pp. 125–131, 387–457). He also does this with ecclesiogenetic intent: The "unity" comes into view pneumatologically as the tension between charism and institution. "Holiness" is interpreted Christologically as a form of solidaristic substitution for others. "Catholicity" is interpreted in creation theology as a claim that every local presence of the church must always be

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[10] Question 1 on "apostolicity"; Question 2 on "holiness"; Question 3 on "unity".

preliminary to its universal extension and that in all presence it should act as ferment and sacrament for the entirety of humanity. Fourthly, "apostolicity" in Kehl is a reason to search for a new office structure of the church.

The sheer abundance of recent interpretations of the notae can only be touched upon here. However, it should already be apparent that our hypothesis is not only not negated, but even ecclesiologically affirmed. In stronger terms, one might even claim: The four "notae" are not only signs that assure us of the past, but they are also future-oriented sources of inspiration. From a spiritual-ascetic point of view one could say: The will of God is accompanied by the strength to fulfill it. Expressed in terms of the theology of grace: The truth of the church is always also its promise. Moreover, this promise is concretized in its areas of growth. The truth of the church proves itself in its provenance and its currency.

For our targeted vitality model of religious communities, we now only need an intermediate step that retranslates the normative deductive dimension of theology into one of empirical utility—such as the possibility of measurement. Our model, of course, is intended to measure vitality, guide concrete project planning and specific church development. This step requires four translations of the notae into terms that remain in the outlined theological tradition, but that trigger more concrete dispositions for action and precise touchpoints for evaluation.

This is where the amazement mentioned at the outset—which, by the way, is typical for abductive cognition—comes into play. It turns out that the four notae can be closely aligned with sociological determinants of vitality described above. In our view, the following matrix is both sociologically and ecclesiologically coherent:

6.2.1 Unity, newly understood as 'professionalism'

By dynamizing the church mark "unity" in the direction of organizational capacity to act, it can be conceived as a dimension of internal, operational functionality. In our model, we refer to "professionalism". Those who work through the team using the power of its people, harness the vitality of "professionalism".

All *notae ecclesia* should be understood as dynamic. Thus, Catholicism is a comprehensive commonweal, holiness is a vital relationship to God and apostolicity concerns developing a perspective for the future from the worldly wisdom of yesterday. The aspect of unity is perhaps the most vulnerable to seeming static. In general, it is about not simply assuring a separate identity or even excluding others. Instead, a new and innovative understanding of unity emphasizes the power to act in a unified and coordinated way, as "one spirit" as Paulus calls it. Unity is coordinated agency and appearance vis-à-vis the outside. We translate this with the term "professionalism" to indicate the actual vigor of the internal organizational unit. This is characterized in equal measure by planned and coordinated action as well as by the internal hierarchy. The unity of a group or a team thus becomes a resource for others.

The theoretical construct of professionalism contains diverse organizational factors. These include the internal structure of the collective, management and an inspirational, relational leadership style (see Dantis 2015, 2014; Mason and Fenenessy 2008; Boyatzis et al. 2011; Dixon 2010) type of decision making, division of work/

roles, participation, diversity of backgrounds, use of moderation tools, media and foreign expertise as well as clear goal communication and the strategic aim of a religious group. The presence and forms of these individual factors can be observed and measured in the actual projects, activities and events of a religious collective. The specification of these factors and the theoretical construct of professionalism make it possible to empirically study their influence on vitality.

6.2.2 Holiness, newly understood as 'spirituality'

Dynamizing the church mark "holiness" in the direction of organizational culture, it can be conceived as the dimension of a shared, common identity. In our model, we refer to "spirituality". Those who work deeply within the power of spiritual sources, harness the vitality of "spirituality".

The church's understanding of holiness has always been informed by the tension between aspiration and a decisively divergent reality. This understanding of holiness leads a congregation to a self-concept as a community of repentance and forgiveness. Good pastoral care is based on the resources of spiritual life. The spiritual foundation of its conduct and it hallmark is a conscious, shared and always refined search for holiness.

Whereas the concept of professionalism offers universal criteria for the structure and processes of human collectives, the concept of spirituality seems to specifically pertain to social forms of Christianity. However, in consideration of organizational research, it becomes obvious that every group, movement, organization or network share a common spirit or culture. These cultural elements constitute the second influence factor, spirituality, and can be equally observed in secular or other religious collectives. The discourse on organizational culture (see Schein 2010) builds the referential theoretical framework for this category, which entails the values, traditions, beliefs, rituals and myths of a (religious) group. Members can be closely bound to a specific tradition or embrace a wide range of cultural artefacts from different belief systems. The concept of organizational culture can be supplemented by a mesolevel adaption of the religious studies concept, the five dimensions of religiosity by Charles Y. Glock (1962) (ideological, ritualistic, experiential, intellectual, consequential). Collective culture can be deliberately created or unwittingly reproduced; in either case, it is perceived by its members, especially newcomers and strangers, and can be observed and elucidated by researchers.

The concept of spirituality is also measured with a set of indicators. These include the use of symbols or symbolic actions, the invention of frequently repeated narratives or stories, special experiential (religious) practices and performances, references to iconic persons or situation or the emergence of (religious) rules or taboos. In the vitality dimension of (shared) identity, the primary questions are what are the shared beliefs, rituals, (remembered) experiences and knowledge and how do they result in actions? According to the contribution model, these factors and the concept of spirituality as a whole influence the vitality of a collective, especially regarding the identity dimension.

6.2.3 Catholicity, newly understood as 'contextuality'

Dynamizing the church mark "catholicity" in the direction of the organizational relation to the environment, it can be conceived as a dimension of performance. In our model, we refer to "contextuality". Those who work towards expansiveness through the power of their environment harness the vitality of "contextuality".

The understanding of Catholicity has always taken the church beyond its institutional horizons. The Second Vatican Council purposely no longer equated the universal church with the Catholic Church. At the same time, it stressed that the church needed to overcome social and cultural barriers. Faith and church are therefore constitutively bound to inculturation and a moving beyond the drive for self-preservation drive in favour of the commonweal. Good pastoral care is adapted to the social environment. The hallmark is Catholicity is contextuality.

In recent organizational theory, an undertaking can only be understood with a view to the multiple relations and influences exchanged with its natural, social, geographical and cultural environment. Social groups intentionally choose their reference environment or unintentionally through the members preferences and routines. In a diverse society, different connections can be pursued, alliances can be forged and bonds can be severed. Different indicators have been identified to measure contextuality of a collective: relevant social environment and discourses, the form of identification, observation, sense making, integration into individual processes and the building of connections to certain environmental actors and aspects. These habits of relationality can be observed in specific factors like references to certain discourses and public debates, collaborations with other collectives, the pursuit of certain lifestyles, the handling of special requirements of a social group or territory, the use of prominent locations, people, music etc.

6.2.4 Apostolicity, newly understood as 'intentionality'

Dynamizing the church mark "apostolicity" in the direction of the organizational mission, it can be conceived as a dimension of transformative effect. In our model, we speak of "intentionality". Those who work within the mission using the power of its history, harness the vitality of "intentionality".

For the Catholic Church, its reconnection with the first eyewitnesses of the Gospel was identity-establishing. It is, in a manner of speaking, always supported by its forbears. Apostolicity is as much a standard orientation as a critical counter-reading, assuming one creating the future in loyalty to the origins. This also means that the current vision of pastoral care always has to be an expression of the current understanding of God. Here, the concept of intentionality refers to the greater mission of the church. Due to its apostolic origin, it is always situated at the crossroads of innovation and tradition. Intentionality expresses the comprehension of the mission, the narrative, the view of the church as well as the church-political idea of a project or group. Intentionality describes the greater vision of how the church should evolve under contemporary circumstances.

For the Roman-Catholic Church, it is important that the latest official and, in a context of the world-church, incisive actualization of this mission was achieved by

the Second Vatican Council. This reference is formal, but also coherent; after all, the council signals an impending future based on the power of the past. In this context, intentionality involves a shared greater vision as well as the creativity and courage to try out new things. The theological concept therefore reflects the development of this idea of Church. Thus, one central question that derives from the criterion of intentionality is: How does a religious group retell the church history of the Second Vatican Council with its activities? While spirituality defines the spiritual home tradition and relation to god which is lived and practiced, intentionality connotes the church directive concerning developmental and social change—the very vision that shapes activities and projects of a religious collective.

Although intentionality is not necessary, it is important for the sustainability, growth and multiplying of a human collective. It imparts momentum and helps to focus power and resources on what really matters to the group. The definition, which is theologically grounded above, can also be applied to other collective actors like social movements. The members refer to a shared ideological tradition and a greater good. Significantly, they also create a desirable concrete vision for the future, which is seen as the group's common purpose (see Collins and Porras 2009, 1996). Furthermore, they develop specific ideas and approaches for achieving them. Indicators of the actual type and amount of intentionality of a (religious) group can be identified by the following factors: ideas of the future, innovative practices and new efforts, explicit imperatives/messages, intentions to influence participants, intentions to be effective beyond one's own group/to change society or parts of it, references to previous knowledge and interpretations for a new way of doing things. From an internal perspective, intentionality circumscribes the dynamic relations between processes and activities for a common purpose. It denotes the common vision of a collective (if it exists), as well as the effort expended to achieve such a collective intention. To grasp this factor, the illuminating question is: "What for?"

An organism or a group does not necessarily have such a overarching intentionality; it may just be engaged in the maintenance and reproduction of a status quo. In the deliberate pursuit of greater ideas, the vision and invested energy toward this end can differ significantly between groups. Without a collective drive towards a greater societal vision, it is expected that the self-sufficient human collectives will be able to survive until their natural members leave the group or die as with natural ethnic communities. It is only when they have such a higher ambition, they are able to attract new members, to adapt specific goals to current and changing contexts, to influence their environment and, finally, to sustain the collectives' raison d'être.

These four determinants and the four vitality dimensions make up a contribution model, see Fig. 2, which provides numerous impact hypotheses on the vitality of religious communities. The validation of the construct and factors takes place in the empirical investigations. With the empirical research, the constructs and hypotheses of the model can be tested, adapted and concretised. A first glimpse at the vitality discourse shows that the FADICA study identifies similar determinants for vitality (Leadership, which is a part of professionality; Worship, which can be subsumed within spirituality; Service, which is a more religious term for contextuality; and Word, which can theologically identified with intentionality).

7 Conclusion

The proposed contribution model for the vitality of religious groups responds to the unresolved challenges and desiderata in the current discourse. It provides a mesolevel concept of vitality that is applicable to different social entities. It is constructed for religious groups, partly on the basis of theological reflection. It is also helpful in studying other collectives (political, social, cultural, etc.) with a focus on their vitality.

The contribution model also clearly differentiates between vitality dimensions that reflect the status quo of a (religious) collective's vitality, its indicators and crucial influence factors that are assumed to lead to certain forms of vitality. The presumed causality and the whole construct have to be proven by ongoing and future empirical investigations. The model will likely be developed further, becoming more specific and differentiated through actual qualitative and quantitative research.

Finally, the model meets the challenge of integrating sociological and theological discourses with theoretical and practical demands. Since the model has not been validated yet and must be further developed, the reflections and the model itself contribute to all four debates. In the theoretical sociology of religions debate, the model adds a concrete mesolevel perspective that focuses on qualitative aspects of religion (beyond just church members and mass attendance) and simultaneously allows for empirical validation. For the theoretical discourse in theology, the model challenges theologians with its novel interpretations of the four notae and inspires further examination and interpretation in the light of actual requirements. For the more practical discourse in organizational sociology, this mesolevel approach attempts to construct broad, global perspectives on human collectives and their drivers. It further makes it possible to differentiate several mesolevel forms on the basis of the manifestations of the four vitality dimensions. Finally, for practical theology and pastoral research, the contribution model provides concrete ideas on how to improve the vitality of religious communities and how to evaluate the effects of activities and projects of pastoral care.

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