

# **Baptist Pastor's Assessment of Candidates for Membership in Norway**

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# Abstract

The Baptist's way of understanding membership is seen as a mark of its identity, though it is common to find variations in interpretation and practice in different contexts. The purpose of this research is to observe a practice on membership among the Norwegian Baptist churches and for this, a group of five pastors were interviewed on their method for assessment of candidates for membership.

This research was done using tools from Qualitative Research and Practical Theology, under a model called "Mutual Critical Conversation". Following this model, we looked at the history of this practice, as well as different theories and dynamics that may affect it. The interviews were analysed and discussed, and suggestions were developed from them.

What became apparent with this research was that Norwegian Baptist pastors evaluate a candidate's faith through conversations where expressions of a personal conversion experience are identified. The relationship between the candidate and the church is also taken into consideration but not necessarily their responsibilities.

This research concludes with a call for reflection assisted by studies and observations from two different scholars, and suggestions on how to avoid weaknesses of such practice.

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# INTRODUCTION

For the Baptist tradition, the principle of independence of the local church is one of the most valued, generally maintained across the centuries. It was one of the changes done by the radical reformers (where the Baptist theology finds itself), for they saw the church as a community of “people standing in voluntary covenant with God” (Grenz, 1994, p. 611).

This principle allows for a wider range of diversity for, unlike other Christian denominations, it is not controlled by any national or international organisation. This diversity can be beautiful and even fascinating, but it can also lead to confusion and disfiguration from a shared Baptist identity, not out of a conscious choice but by a lack of reflection and pragmatism. Due to this possibility, theological reflection should be seen as a fundamental tool for the Baptists, exercised periodically, to avoid going beyond whom they want to be. But for theological reflection to happen, one must define, observe, and analyse a specific practice/principle, and that is the primary goal of this present research.

Though my own interpretations and suggestions are included in this paper, the intention is to bring to light a practice, in this case, located in Norway, allowing me and other readers to interpret and reflect on it.

The practice analysed is the assessment that Baptist pastors do of candidates for church membership. The aim is to hear from the pastors the standards they are setting for membership and how they identify them in people who desire to belong to the church.

## MY PERSONAL SITUATION

I grew up in a Christian Baptist family in Portugal, growing in contact with different pastors and churches, and getting to know the Portuguese Baptist community.

I moved to Oslo at the beginning of 2017, where I started to congregate in a local Baptist church. In my personal experience and with the contacts I came to make, I realised that the Baptists in Norway had different practices for church membership. Although differences are expected and seen in other contexts (I have come in contact with Brazilian, Spanish, Angolese and American Baptists), some differences were more challenging to understand.

As I got to know this context, my curiosity led me to many dialogues with local Baptists, trying to understand how the Baptist church operated in Norway and why. It became fascinating to find explanations in the Norwegian Baptist history and to learn from the cultural differences. The reason why a church chooses some direction over another can teach us about their culture, but it teaches about ours as well. There is still a lot to discover, and I understood that to do a fair analysis and grow in understanding, I needed to go beyond the casual conversations and conduct proper research.

## THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Among the differences I found, one that was especially intriguing was the treatment of members compared with believing and non-believing visitors, how people were integrated and the church's hierarchical structure. As I tried to make sense of it, I wondered how pastors assess candidates for membership. It seemed that this practice could explain many of the differences.

In the Portuguese context, each person that comes forward wanting to become a member of the church goes first through a process of instruction. The idea transmitted was that baptism is not something one does lightly; it's a public expression of a life-long commitment. In addition, to be a member means that one can participate in the churches' decisions (in the church assembly, p. e.). So, it's seen as necessary to be conscious of the responsibility and be sure of the fundamental doctrines that rule the church before joining it.

Coming to Norway, my integration process was a conversation. Though they knew I was an active member of my previous church, the process would have been different in Portugal.

This furthered my curiosity about this practice in Norway: are all churches doing the same? Why so simple? Is there a real need to give more instruction? What are the consequences? Is there something Portugal can learn from this?

Naturally, the complexities of such practice, motivations, and possible consequences cannot be fully grasped in a small research such as this. So, in order to be more focused, the research question is resumed to the practice: “How do Baptist pastors assess candidates for membership in Norway?”.

## SIGNIFICANCE AND AIM OF THIS RESEARCH

The importance of this issue is that the definition – clear or not – of who constitutes a church profoundly changes its dynamic. There is a difference between having a community of believers who have a similar level of commitment to each other and Christ and having a community of people very different in their commitment to God, who cannot contribute in the same way to the church’s development.

We can usually identify two different tendencies. Using Hiebert’s<sup>1</sup> terminology, we find the “well-formed set” where there is “clear boundary between things that are inside and things that are outside”, and the “fuzzy sets” that “have no sharp boundaries. Categories flow into one another.” (1994, p. 111).

In the “well-formed set” or “bounded set” church (or “purity church”), to become a member, one needs to give solid evidence of not only their salvation and commitment but

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Paul G. Hiebert (1932-2007) was a missiologist and anthropologist, and author of several books on anthropology and mission.

knowledge of the foundational doctrines (Leeman, 2010). One of the problems that emerge with this view commented on by Paul Fiddes is that the restriction of baptism (and membership) to professing believers is not very hospitable to people that are in a process of faith. Fiddes comments:

“The point is surely that we need two pictures of mission to those around us. The first is that familiar to those who speak of a “gathered church”: the mission field of those who need wholeness in life seems to lie outside the sharply-drawn boundaries of the church (...). But there is another picture, in which the sphere of mission lies at least partly inside the blurred boundaries of the community of the church, and it overlaps with society as a whole” (2007, p. 132).

The blurred-boundary church is less demanding when it comes to new members and assumes that there is a mission field inside the church. This view provides a more hospitable arena to those in the process of believing. The problem is that the more one blurs the distinction between “inside” and “outside”, the less there is of something to “belong”. As Westerhoff<sup>2</sup> says (in Neff, 2004), “If belonging is without obligation and accountability, then we finally have not joined much of anything at all.”

As mentioned above, these two different ecclesiologies have consequences in the way hierarchies and structures are developed, how the leadership manages the dynamic between members, how the identity of the local church is built, etc., and certainly, other consequences could be identified.

But aren't churches conscious of where they position themselves and aren't they reflecting on its consequences for their leadership? The answer is that people are not always aware of their most deep beliefs. For that reason, my approach is not to ask the pastors where they stand between the two extremes – to ask about theology – but to see how pastors define the

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<sup>2</sup> Caroline Westerhoff is the author of “Good Fences: The Boundaries of Hospitality”, published in 2004.



boundaries of their churches through the way they examine and accept new members, i.e. through their practice.

The result of this research can help pastors and leaders to have a clearer understanding of their theological position, its weaknesses and adjust their ministry accordingly.

## SUMMARY

The model chosen to guide this research is the “Mutual Critical Conversation”. In line with this model, the structure of this paper follows four points: 1) identification of the practice, 2) cultural and contextual analysis, 3) theological reflection and 4) suggestions for improvements.

Already here in the introduction, we have 1) the identification of the practice and some brief comments and impressions about it.

This introduction is followed by the literature review. Here the studies written around the research question and the books used as a reference are analysed according to their relevance and contribution.

The third chapter is a 2) cultural and contextual analysis, where we look at some of the dynamics that assist and surround this practice. We first take a brief look at the Baptist history to see what its principles around membership are. We also talk about how some Baptist principles have contributed to variation and ambiguity. We then look at some theories of our contemporary western society as dynamics that possibly affect this practice.

The following chapter explains the methodology used for this research. I will explain the need for tools taken from the field of Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, and the use of the “Mutual Critical Conversation model” and semi-structured interviews. To complete this chapter on method, I also comment on the role of the researcher and the ethical considerations taken in the process of this research.

In the fourth chapter, we analyse the data collected in the interviews and see what codes and categories transpired. The fifth chapter is the 3) discussion, reflection and some interpretations of the information retrieved from the interviews.

Finally, in the final chapter – 4) the conclusion – I will share three brief texts: the different church borders by Paul Hiebert, Maria Rizzuto's study on representations of God, and some information about the immigration phenomenon in Norway. These texts were present in my thinking as I analysed the interviews, and they helped me guide and justify the suggestions that I share that can be considered in assessing candidates for membership in the Baptists churches in Norway.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Several books and articles were consulted and analysed in the process of this research. As expected, one can find a multitude of opinions on who the Baptists are, what are their views on membership and what is important to know about this context. The authors I resorted to were discerned based on their background, studies, and published works, how they related to other materials, and the academic quality of their writing. Here I share studies that I found that are close to this topic and a brief review of the publications I used the most.

## **Baptist Tradition**

Paul S. Fiddes is a British Minister and Professor of Systematic Theology at Oxford, his research is in the fields of Historical and Systematic Theology. He has been the author, editor and co-author of dozens of books and has written almost 150 articles (University of Oxford, 2022).

The publication used in this research is “Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology”, published in 2003. This book gives a thorough theological explanation of the different doctrines of the Baptist tradition from Church, Ministry, Baptism, Lord’s Supper to salvation, mission and ecumenism, always relating them to their historical background.

It also addresses the challenge of defining an identity for the Baptists and is especially interesting in its analysis of the role of the covenant in the Baptist tradition, and the link it has with the covenant of the Holy Trinity.

Stanley J. Grenz (1950-2005) was an American Professor and Baptist Pastor, Pioneer McDonald Professor of Theology at Carey Theological College in Vancouver. He has authored or co-authored twenty-five books and dozens of articles. He held several positions, including

participation in Doctrine Commission and the Theological Education Committee of the Baptist World Alliance.

In his “Theology of the Community of God (1994)”, a volume of 873 pages, he addresses the six vital areas of study: theology, anthropology, Christology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology and Eschatology, having “community” as the central topic. This is a very comprehensive volume on Baptist doctrine, addressing some contemporary dilemmas and founding his position with the use of exegesis and the history of theology.

John S. Hammett is an American, senior professor of Systematic Theology and John Leadley Dagg Chair of Systematic Theology, pastor and missionary. He is also a published author of several publications including the book “Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches”.

In this book, Hammett writes about the Baptist Church’s nature, composition, government, Baptism, Lord’s Supper and activity and the next steps for the Baptists in a changing society.

He writes as a response to the new cultural shifts, from the context of the United States. He defends his arguments not only with exegesis but by referencing a community of Baptist scholars. He approaches the question of regenerate membership with a clear goal of reforming current practices in a return for more defined church boundaries.

### **Norwegian Baptist History**

Peder A. Eidberg (1933-2013) was a professor at the Norwegian Baptist Theological Seminary, and founder of the Norwegian Baptist Historical Union (The Baptist Times, 2003).

His publication “Set Folk som Kalles Baptister” is a very detailed investigation and description of the origins of the Baptist denomination in Norway, with final comments on the influence that the Baptist had on believer’s baptism principle in Norway, and a brief description of the variations and developments of the Norwegian Baptists.

Eidberg also published other articles on Baptist History in Norway, including “Baptist Developments in the Nordic Countries during the Twentieth Century”, published in 2001. Here he walks us through a brief history of the arrival of Baptists in Scandinavian countries, and the struggles they faced with the State church and laws. He also speaks about changes in their views on Baptism and Membership, how they progressed and how they were handled.

Within the Norwegian Baptist History is also important to note that in the last decades the Norwegian Baptist Union (DNB) has published different booklets and brochures on Baptism and Baptist theology.

There was a publication entitled “Baptist Ene: Tro og Liv” (1976) with basic instruction on Baptist history and theology, where we find described the need for personal repentance and faith in Christ, and of Baptism with confession of faith as the door into membership. These same values are also found in their published translation of “What are Baptists” of the European Baptist Federation in 1995, and the translated “Radical Christian” by Paul Beasley-Murray in 2000. In this last publication, Paul Beasley-Murray defends a covenant between members and shared responsibilities and privileges.

In 2005 DNB authored and published brochures on baptism, with bible studies on the New Testament texts and the Baptist doctrine around it (with an ecumenical goal as well). This brochure speaks briefly about the definition of church and the commitment people ought to have if they become members.

## **Baptist History**

David Bebbington is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Stirling in Scotland (Baylor University, 2022). He is the author of many publications in the area of religion, history, and society in Britain.

His publication “Baptists Through the Centuries” describes very thoroughly the developments of the Baptist denomination: from the beginning to the twentieth century. From his book, we get a very interesting and detailed exposition of the Baptist’s adaptations to time and context, the variations in thought, the redefinition of values, changes in identity, etc.

He also comments on some relevant contemporary issues like women in ministry, religious liberty, and the spread of the Baptists outside of Europe and America.

Billy J. Leonard (1999-2018) was a professor of Church History at Wake Forest University, School of Divinity, author, and editor of several books on Church and Baptist History.

His “Baptist Ways” give a very detailed description of the history of the Baptist church from the context where it originated to the twentieth century. It holds an extensive report on the Baptists in USA and the movements, organisations, and missions that they started, but also speaks of the Baptist movement in the rest of the world. His introduction deals with the problem of a definition of the Baptist Identity where he contributes with his proposition of the Baptist’s distinctive marks.

## **Baptist Membership**

Before the beginning of this research, I searched for studies of a current practice of preparation for membership.

I found different PhD dissertations, theses, and projects around membership in Baptist churches, concerning specifically the defense and development of pre-membership preparation and regenerate membership<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Scherer’s “Training Members at Central Baptist Church in Paris, Kentucky, with a Biblical Understanding and Practice of Church membership” (2018); Joseph Duncan’s “Equipping Parents and Children with a Biblical Theology of Conversion prior to Baptism at Mambrino Baptist Church in Grandbury Texas” (2018); Alan McCullough’s “Recovering the Historical Practice of Delayed Baptism and Pre-Baptismal Instruction for the Purpose of Restoring the Standard of a Regenerate Church

Though these projects and articles are certainly interesting and informative on different perspectives on Baptist membership, they start from the premise that pre-baptismal instruction is the method to be implemented and could not assist me further in my analysis of current practice.

Darrell Richard Jackson, on the other hand, wrote his PhD Thesis on “The Discourse of ‘Belonging’ and Baptist Church Membership in Contemporary Britain: Historical, Theological and Demotic Elements of a Post-Foundational Theological Proposal” (2009). He performed Practical Theological research on both the covenantal, denominational, and relational discourses in the Baptist community and the tension between them. He notices how the demotic discourse focuses on relationality, and hasn’t received proper attention [in contrast with a historical-theological and constitutional discourse] and needs to be invited into the theological discussions and developments on membership and belonging.

### **Western Society**

Charles Taylor is a Canadian philosopher and Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at McGill University (McGill University, 2022). He is author of several books including “A Secular Age”. In this book, Charles Taylor does a very interesting analysis on the developments that led to the secular shift in the western society and its implications, i.e. from the change from a religious society to a society where God is one of the options. However, this new “immanent frame”, as he calls it, is not fully satisfying and he addresses how the need for the transcendent is still very present.

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Membership in Southern Baptist Churches” (2020); Kaylan Paxton’s “Implementing Biblical Church Membership at First Baptist Church in Cordele, Georgia” (2022).

Paul Heelas is a British anthropologist and sociologist in the field of spirituality and religion (Heelas, 2022). Linda Woodhead is F.D. Maurice Professor in Moral and Social Theology and Head of Department of Theology & Religious Studies at King's College (King's College, 2022). They both did an extensive study on the new forms of spirituality and their place in society, and the shift in western society from traditional religion to subjective spirituality. Their observations and conclusions emerged from their research on religion and spirituality in the city of Kendal (UK) and were published in "The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality" (2005).

Fredrik Wenell is a Professor on Systematic theology at Academy för Ledarskap och Teologi in Sweden (ALT, 2022).

Wenell has developed research in the fields of Religion, Free Churches, Society and Youth ministry. He made a study on a Baptist movement called Örebro Mission and from its findings he identified an ecclesiological shift within the Baptists in Sweden and the influential role of the Charismatic Movement and the Swedish Welfare state.



# CULTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

To better understand this practice, we need to look at its context, and that is why the second stage of the “Mutual Critical Conversation” model states the following:

“At this stage we begin to engage in a disciplined investigation into the various dynamics (overt and covert) that underlie the forms of practice that are taking place within the situation.” (Mowat and Swinton, 2016, p. 91).

There are two primary contexts that are relevant to this practice: the Baptist tradition and Norwegian society.

First, by looking at the Baptist history and its value system, we can understand how membership is usually perceived. We then broaden our context into the Nordic countries, going through the history and characteristics of the Baptists in Norway and looking at Wenell's study of the Baptists in Sweden, a culture that is very close to the Norwegian.

Finally, we will take a look at Heelas and Woodhead research on religion and spirituality, and the observations of Charles Taylor on our contemporary culture, which reveal social dynamics that could be influencing our practice.

## BAPTIST CONTEXT

### **Baptist History**

The Baptists emerged in a context of reaction to the reformation of the English Church with separatists desiring a deeper reformation and in search of the “true church” (Leonard, 2003).

John Smyth (1570?-1612), an ordained Anglican preacher, left the church for a separatist congregation due to this same frustration (Leonard, 2003, p. 23). This congregation later split, and Smyth's group (including Thomas Helwys) moved to the Netherlands in 1608. In 1609

Smyth formed the first Baptist congregation (Freeman, McClendon Jr. and Velloso da Silva, 1999, p. 75). Smyth – from early on – defended principles that today we call “Baptist”, which included the rejection of infant baptism and identification of church as the community of believers who had expressed their faith through baptism<sup>4</sup> (Leonard, 2003, p. 24).

Smyth later joined the Mennonites while Helwys, in disagreement, returned to England and formed the first English Baptist congregation in 1612 (Freean, McClendon Jr. and Velloso da Silva, 1999, p. 83). Helwys defended<sup>5</sup> the regenerate church membership based on personal conversion and believer’s baptism, the independence of the local church, and support for complete religious liberty (*Ibid*, p. 15).

These views spread and other Baptist congregations appeared in UK, both General and Particular Baptists<sup>6</sup> (Weaver, 2008, p. 18). In 1650 there were 47 congregations of General Baptists, and 146 in 1715, and held their first national assembly in 1654 (*Ibid*, p. 21).

The next centre of Baptist growth and development happened in the American colony. Some Baptists travelled there, being the most famous one Roger Williams who founded the first American Baptist church in Rhode Island in 1639 (Freeman, McClendon Jr. and Velloso da Silva, 1999, p. 33).

Churches multiplied and grew, even if by splits based on theological differences (like Calvinist and Arminian), and soon para-church organisations emerged in America as well (Freeman, McClendon Jr. and Velloso da Silva, 1999).

In Europe, the Baptist church continued to spread appearing in France in 1820 and Germany in 1830. Soon missions were organised, and the Baptist movement spread across the globe.

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<sup>4</sup> In Smyth’s “The character of the beast or The False Constitution of the Church” of 1609.

<sup>5</sup> Written in “A Declaration of English People Remaining at Amsterdam” in 1610.

<sup>6</sup> The general Baptists were called as such due to their adoption of the Arminian theology of general atonement (Leonard, 2003, p. 26) while Particular Baptist held Calvinistic views.

Today, the Baptist focus of growth is not on Europe or America but on other continents like Asia and Africa. The most recent numbers published by the World Baptist Alliance say that it is formed by 245 conventions and unions, across 128 countries and territories, with 49 million baptised believers, attending 173 000 churches (BWA, 2021).

## **Baptist Distinctives**

Paul Harrison, a late professor, and author on Baptist history said: “It is clear the Baptist history is freighted with ambiguity, and those who strive to establish the singularity of the tradition are on a weak foundation” (1959 in Leonard, 2003, p.1). So, it may sound rather odd that in this chapter, that is my purpose.

As I was challenged by the inexistence of a solid and single Baptist tradition, I was also challenged by the idea that there is nothing one can proclaim as a universal Baptist principle and compare a current practice to.

Bebbington (2018, p. 11) explains that there is no single type of Baptist but a plurality of them. The main characteristic that allows such diversity is the principle of church independence, explained here by Fiddes (2006, p. 6):

“The liberty of local churches to make decisions about their own life and ministry is not based in a human view of autonomy or independence, or in the selfish individualism, but in a sense of being under the direct rule of Christ who relativizes other rules.”

This direct rule of Christ allows the Baptists to adapt and re-invent themselves as they come into other lands and cultures (Fiddes, 2006; Bebbington, 2018).

Nevertheless, there is a pressure to settle on some distinctives, to avoid, among other things, the neglect of lessons one could learn from the past (Fiddes, 2006, p. 21). For this purpose, Fiddes resorts to church confessions, used to defend Baptist beliefs and practices to

others, and sees them as resources to synthesise a theology of the Baptist community (Fiddes, 2006, p. 8 and pp.10-15).

Leonard, on the other hand, collects the Baptist distinctives viewed by different scholars and theologians. Assembling all of them, we have a clue about what the Baptist values are: the supreme authority of scripture, membership based on confessed faith [believer's baptism], personal accountability to God [soul competency], religious freedom, the autonomy of the local church and the concept of a covenant community. Leonard adds the Baptist view on ordinances, Confessions of Faith, and theological and ecclesial diversity (2003, pp. 2-9).

From all these distinctives, we take a closer look at three that are informative on practices around membership in a Baptist church.

### **Baptism of the Believer (or Regenerate Church Membership)**

One of the Baptist distinctives that has upheld a high degree of perseverance and consistency is the believer's baptism (Bebbington, 2018, p. 125).

In contrast with other traditions such as the Catholic, Lutheran or Orthodox, Baptist churches are not comprised of people baptized as infants who live in a certain region but are voluntary organisations made by those who freely recognise Christ as their personal saviour and are baptised based on this confession (Bebbington, 2018, p. 125).

The founders of the first Baptist church pursued the concept of a "true biblical church". For John Smyth, the true church was "sayntes only"<sup>7</sup> (in Bebbington, 2018, p. 125). Helwys also wrote in his confession (1611) that "The church of Christ is a company of faithful people (1 Cor 1:2. Eph 1:1), separated from the world by the word and Spirit of God (2 Cor 6:17) being

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<sup>7</sup> Saints as in the New Testament concept of the word, i.e., real believers that gave evidence of an authentic experience of regeneration (Bebbington, 2018, p. 125)

knit to the Lord, and one to another, by baptism (1 Cor 12:13)...” (Chute, Finn and Haykin, 2015, p. 331).

This principle continued to be central in Baptist ecclesiology as the first Confessions of Faith started to be published. The First London Confession (1646)<sup>8</sup> spoke of the church as “a company of visible saints, (...) and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement in the practical enjoyment of the ordinances commanded by Christ their head and king.” (Chute, Finn and Haykin, 2015, p. 331).

Early on, the Baptists wanted to protect this principle. The Somerset Confession of 1656<sup>9</sup> states, “in admitting of members into the church of Christ, it is the duty of the church, and ministers whom it concerns, in faithfulness to God, that they be careful they receive none but such as do make forth evident demonstration of the new birth, and the work of faith with power.” (In McCullough, 2020, p. 269).

This principle continued through the ninetieth and twentieth centuries to be claimed as indispensable and central to the Baptist identity (Leonard, 2003; Hammett, 2019). Though this belief is not particular to the Baptist denomination, the relevance placed upon it, and the conclusions that were drawn from it, is what distinguishes them (Fiddes, 2003, p. 230)

## **Church Covenant**

Another tradition that became popular since the early Baptists was the use of a covenant between members. This covenant was “the agreement taken and signed by church members

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<sup>8</sup> According to Chute, Finn and Haykin, this confession was published by the Particular Baptists in an effort to clarify their differences from the anabaptists, refute accusations, and explain their Calvinistic views (2015, p. 331). The authors also comment that “It is no exaggeration to say these articles set forth the basic channel in which Particular Baptist thought about the church would run well into the nineteenth century.” (2015, p. 26).

<sup>9</sup> This Confession was written by the Particular Baptists Association of churches in the western region of England, as a response to a conflict with the Quackers (Leonard, 2003).

when a particular local church was founded, and subsequently by new members on entering it.” (Fiddes, 2006, p. 29).

Smyth’s church definition was “a visible communion of Saints is of two, three or more Saints joined together by covenant with God and themselves...”, and he was explicit that this meant a literal covenant: “the outward part of the true forme of the true visible church is a vowe, promise, oath, or covenant betwixt God and Saint... This covenant hath 2 parts. 1. Respecting God and the faithful. 2. Respecting the faithful mutually.” (*Ibid*, p. 29).

This tradition continued among the Baptists and during the seventeenth century, covenants published by Baptist churches were shared around and gained influence. They were adjusted and adopted by many General and Particular Baptists to the point that it was assumed that it was “the usage of all organised Churches of the faith of Jesus Christ” (in Fiddes, 2006, p. 30).

However, with time this practice declined. Hammett (2019, p. 126) believes that is due to the pressure on growth, secularization, and the avoidance of accountability and calls for a recovery. In Britain, there is also a call from theologians to recover church covenants in recent decades but Jackson (2009, p. 73), in his thesis about discourse on membership in the British Baptist, says that their propositions were never implemented in the local churches due to the pragmatic pressure for growth.

## **Baptist Diversity**

As commented before, with the principle of church independence and without an authority that would keep diversity under control, different theologies and ecclesiologies soon developed. One of the most dominant tendencies is to swing the pendulum between the value of personal freedom and pastoral/church authority.

David Bebbington (2018) explains that in the beginning Baptists valued and elevated their view on communion, ministry, church and baptism. Nonetheless, starting in the eighteenth

century and into the twentieth century, Baptists started to set these values as marginal. This was due to different factors and pressures from society that led the Baptist's defence and development of doctrine to focus on certain principles – like believer's baptism and soul competence – at the expense of others.

In 1908, a very influential publication by Edgar Y. Mullins<sup>10</sup> united for many years the American Baptists around the value of personal experience. Bebbington comments that “the Baptists tended to lay so much stress on personal experience that they had little time for questions of ecclesiology, allowing great variations in church administration and patterns of ministry.” (*Ibid*, p. 136).

Criticism started to emerge saying that this view compromised Bible's inerrancy. During the 1960s and 70s, the American Baptists started to be split between Conservatives, who valued the authority of the Bible, ministers and church, and Moderates, who accentuated freedom and soul competency. In the end, the conservatives won, losing some moderate members, and the split crossed over the ocean into other countries (*Ibid*, p. 221).

To this day this tension between a more “conservative” and “moderate” view still exists. Between the extremes of both poles, one can find a multitude of views and churches of many shapes and forms.

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<sup>10</sup> Mullins was by then President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

## NORDIC CONTEXT

### **The Norwegian Baptist**

The Baptists made their first appearance in the 1830s in Norway with the preaching of the Norwegian Enoch Richard Haftorsen Svee but due to his early death (at the age of 27), his work did not go beyond his testimony (Eidberg, 2003, pp. 53-54).

The history continues with the Danish Fredrik L. Rymker who converted to the Baptist denomination in the USA in 1845 [he was there due to his work as a sailor] and moved back to Denmark to work as a Baptist missionary (*Ibid*, p. 62). Rymker starts to consider moving to Norway and with the support of the American Baptist Publication Society and the Swedish pastor Anders Wiberg, he moved to Skien in 1857 (*Ibid*, p. 69). After some struggles and opposition from different denominations – including the Lutheran church – Rymker baptises the first believers and in 1860 founded the first Baptist church in Porsgrunn (*Ibid*, p. 82).

In the following years, other churches were formed<sup>11</sup>, and in 1879 the Norwegian Baptist Union was founded. Today, this Union has 104 congregations, 6,700 baptised members, with the different congregations accumulating around 12,000 people (DNB, 2022).

The Baptists made a mark in the Norwegian Christian scene by being the denomination with the strictest view on baptism; they were pioneers in insisting on baptism by immersion of all the new members, and rejecting other practices (Eidberg, 2003, p. 247).

At the start, there was variation in the theology among the churches but not in a contradicting way, but this variation increased in recent decades (*Ibid*, pp. 252-53).

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<sup>11</sup> The church of Larvik was formed in 1860, Kragerø in 1862, Eidsvold in 1864, Melum in 1865, Arendal in 1867 and in the next following ten years thirteen more churches were formed (Eidberg, 2003, p. 557).



Different positions on membership and communion (previously reserved for baptized believers) started to emerge in the 1960s (Eidberg, 2001). Norway started to accept children in communion, a shift that happened with “no theological and ecclesiological study” (*Ibid*).

In addition, different opinions appeared in Scandinavia on open membership (membership for those who have not been baptized as believers). In 1987 this question came to Norway where there was an effort to discuss it in conferences, and the Theological Seminar was invited to study this and present their work in 2001 (*Ibid*). However, it did not manage to do so due to the lack of agreement, and this issue was never completely resolved<sup>12</sup>. Today, there are six churches that practice open membership and variations continue to emerge, also due to the introduction of immigrant churches.

## **The Case of the Örebro Mission**

Fredrik Wenell’s (2014) research on the Örebro Mission can be a valuable contribution to our understanding of the Scandinavian Baptist context. According to it, conversion in the Swedish Baptists went from an experience mediated by the local congregation to an “individual’s datable experience” (p. 39). He traces this change back to the emergence of free churches in Sweden.

Free churches were initially gathered around a “spiritual experience of conversion” (p. 44) but still met within the Swedish Lutheran Church (p. 43). The Baptists shared the value of the experience of conversion but set their congregations apart from the Swedish Church. Their *telos* was of “the gathered and redeemed congregation”, and conversion meant integration with

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<sup>12</sup> This information could not be confirmed in time and was shared orally by a Doctoral student currently studying the Norwegian Baptists.

the church community under a covenanted relationship, a principle seen as a threat by the Swedish “Lutheran nation” (pp. 43-44).

However, the influence of the revivalist movement started to increase within the Baptist community, and things began to change. Wenell credits the success of this shift to the role that the Swedish welfare system played in society and churches. He uses a quote from Trägårdh and Berggren<sup>13</sup> (2010) to describe the welfare state:

“Sweden is not first and foremost a warm *Gemeinschaft* composed of altruists who are exceptionally caring or loving, but rather a hyper modern *Gesellschaft* of self-realizing individuals who believe that a strong state and stable social norms will keep their neighbor out of both their lives and their backyards.”

This Swedish welfare system was built on Christian values in a “Lutheran Sweden” so, naturally, Swedish people saw their cultural milieu as essentially Christian (p. 51). The state welcomed different Christian organisations to join the effort of including people in this Swedish “Christian” welfare society and away from drugs and other vices. The churches went along with the mission (p. 47):

Personal conversion as an emotional experience became an instrument for reaching the same goal as society in general. Not even the Baptists, who upon their emergence in Sweden were founded on new ideas and knowledge, could resist the idea of folkhemmet. (...) The goal of an emotional personal conversion becomes the same as being a good citizen in the Swedish welfare state. (p. 53).

The emerging revivalist ecclesiology was more in sync with the notion of *folkhemmet*<sup>14</sup>, since it gave a greater value to the individual experience of conversion than with the competing principles of the Baptist tradition (p. 48). So naturally, in a Baptist community influenced by

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<sup>13</sup> Authors of “Pippi Longstocking: The autonomus child and the moral logic of the Swedish welfare state” in “Swedish Modernism: Architecture, consumption and the welfare state”, published in 2010.

<sup>14</sup> “Folkhemmet” means “the people’s home”, and it is a vision adopted by the Social Democrats in the 1920, of “a nation characterized by unity, consensus, and equality” (p. 8), its the vision behind the welfare system of Sweden.

revivalism, where two different views on ecclesiology exist in tension and the revivalist one is more compatible with the values of society, the revivalist view ended up being the leading one:

The revivalist ecclesiology became dominant because it was easier to adjust to a nation which created an autonomous individual, guaranteed by the ideology of statist individualism, a state that was also supposed to be built on stable Christian values. In the Swedish Free churches, conversion has therefore primarily become a matter of an emotional experience, and does not entail another way of seeing and valuing the world. It is the depth of feelings that characterizes the revivalist conversion, not the *telos* or content. (pp. 53-54).

The Baptist movement of Örebro Mission absorbed this new ecclesiology, and the church became a place to promote a personal experience of conversion instead of a redeemed community (p. 48).

Wendell explains that today, conversion is a salvation prayer that ought to contain the correct arrangement: “confession of sin, faith in Jesus and the individual’s receiving of salvation”. It’s seen as an “individual experience with God; or as it is often framed, a personal relationship with Jesus” (p. 40). This spiritual experience is split from the church’s covenant; it can be done without relation to any church. It is the individual the one with the authority to say whether or not he experienced an authentic conversion (p. 54).

## WESTERN SOCIETY CONTEXT

### **The Age of Authenticity by Charles Taylor**

Charles Taylor, a Catholic philosopher, shares his insights on the phenomena of the secularisation of western society in his publication “A Secular Age” (2007).

Taylor explains that this secular shift in society changed “conditions of belief” (*Ibid*, p. 473), making expressive individualism the rule of today:

...each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside. (*Ibid*, p. 475)

Authenticity is how Taylor coins our current age, and choice becomes the central value (Smith, 2015, p. 85). The need for self-expression has conquered a fundamental place in society, and in how someone develops a sense of self, replacing the need to belong to big institutions (in Smith, 2015, pp. 86-87).

If self-expression is the rule of today, then tolerance is the main virtue, and the idea that someone can restrain the person's way of expressing themselves becomes absurd. There are less and less limitations on the individual's fulfilment (Taylor, 2007, p. 485). Today, "The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, (...) ...the focus is going now to be on my spiritual path." (*Ibid*, p. 486).

He draws a line between the reaction to the rational modernity [the "buffered identity", unsusceptible to something transcendental] and this contemporary focus on feeling and emotion, and adds that this shift in emphasis will only increase (*Ibid*, p. 488). The expected consequence is that "the intensity of the passion becomes a major virtue, well worth some lack of accuracy in theological formulation." (*Ibid*, pp. 488-489). Besides, in order to get this "passion" the language of faith needs to resonate with the person, so it makes no sense to conform to some exterior pattern (*Ibid*, p. 489).

One last thing I want to mention about Charles Taylor, is his warning to the reaction that traditionalists can have, despising this shift and trying to go back in time. On one hand, this new order does not mean the end of traditional religion, on the other, to go back in this present age is to possibly choose forced – and fake – conformity (*Ibid*, p. 509-513).

## **The Subjective Turn**

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead study goes side by side with Taylor's observations. In this study done in Kendal, UK, they concluded that the phenomenon called "spirituality" has been growing and taking the centre stage in the field of faith, while traditional religion has been declining.

They say this change comes as a consequence of the "subjective-turn" in western society. This turn is explained as a turn from a life that is lived in compliance with authority and other external constraints – coined as "life-as" – to a "subjective-life" where "the subjectivities of each individual become a, if not the, unique source of significance, meaning and authority" (Loc. 95-97).

This is claimed to be "the defining cultural development of modern western culture" (Loc. 114). People today are more attracted to the freedom of practice and exploration, and the cultivation of the "unique" (Loc. 1179-1181):

Because the inner 'You' knows you, it is experienced as truthful, real, reliable, effective. When the sacred flows from within subjective-life, it offers "inner solutions" which are uniquely appropriate to the challenge and opportunity of becoming fully alive in the here-and-now. (Loc. 1174)

Religion is facing a crisis today because it is perceived as a typical "life-as" mode of life and people will prefer a form of faith that correspond with their new system of values and beliefs: "people are simply no longer willing to submit to the roles, duties, rituals, traditions, offices and expectations which these institutions impose" (Loc. 1613-1614). They will be more attracted to spirituality that "is without the baggage" religion has (Loc. 1277).

Heelas and Woodhead suggest – based on other studies as well – that if the "traditional Religion" wants to succeed in this new subjective-turn, they can combine their traditional

strictness with the individual's subjective quest, allowing people to experiment and have some independence and freedom in their practice of traditional faith (Loc. 1724-1725).

## CONCLUSION

This research focuses on the assessment Norwegian Baptist pastors make of candidates for membership. In other words, I intend to see what standards pastors are setting for their membership and how they identify them in the candidates.

We see now that there is a history of identity where believer's baptism has a central focus for the Baptists. We also noticed that there are values that facilitate diversity.

But these pastors do not exercise their practice in a Baptist context alone. They do it in a Norwegian society that has its own history and influences. In addition, new shifts happening across the western world bring new pressures and challenges to Christian churches.

So, the question remains: How (and in light of their tradition and current context) are the Norwegian Baptist pastors assessing candidates for membership?

# METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH METHODS

For the purpose of this research, a model from the field of practical theology called “Mutual Critical Conversation” was chosen as the most appropriate. As part of this model, ethnographic research was done using semi-structured interviews to gather data.

In this chapter, I will explain the logic behind this choice and other important aspects that influenced the method and how it was processed. In addition, I also speak of the ethical issues that were taken into consideration and the role of the researcher.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### **Ontological and Epistemological Positions**

The choices made for the research method depended on my personal ontological and epistemological positions.

There are different beliefs regarding reality and how we can grasp it. Positivists would argue that they can acquire knowledge through observation and that they can find universal rules and laws, believing that the reality observed is the same everywhere (Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 9). Constructivists would be found on the other end of the spectrum, emphasising our capacity to interpret, and the impossibility of a value-free research. The reception of reality is altered from research to research; knowledge is always constructed and not just observed (*Ibid*, p. 12).

I neither believe that knowledge nor the perception of reality is done in complete neutrality, neither I understand that there is no possibility of acquiring knowledge about reality and identifying consistent elements.

My position could be called “Critical Realism” (*Ibid*, p. 21); there is a reality independent of our perceptions, but our perceptions and interpretations play a role in how we understand it. However, there is the possibility of reaching something universally true.

In this sense, interviews with the people are chosen as a valid method of research. The participant’s opinions, experiences and stories are useful and valid in understanding and acquiring knowledge of the social reality.

## **The use of Qualitative Research**

As we’ve seen, the aim of this research is to look at a practice within a distinct culture, understand its specificities, and interpret it well. Qualitative Research was the chosen method for it is a "naturalistic, interpretative approach, concerned with exploring phenomena “from the interior”” (Flick, 2009, in Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 3).

As someone coming from another context who wants to understand a new practice, it would be futile to try to look at it from the distance of my Portuguese experience. Because I am curious, I need to talk with the agents first-hand. One needs to be close to the practice and analyse it within its context if one wants to conduct an honest and fair research.

Another option is the quantitative method. However, the aim is not to know the number of hours a pastor uses to assess candidates, or the number of topics chosen (something that quantitative research could answer). The intention is to look at the nature of such processes which tend to be organic, and the motivation behind it.

In addition, the world is too complex and inhabited by complex interpretive creatures and Qualitative Research starts from those assumptions (Mowat and Swinton, 2016). For example, I could have come to a very immediate interpretation of how this practice is done and why. To



avoid this, qualitative research helps us to examine reality while honouring its complexity and being conscious of ours, thus avoiding presuppositions.

I, as the researcher, am also aware that qualitative research will not give me *the* answer to my question. Nevertheless, all the evidence and information one can gather can help discern what is different and why it is important.

## **Practical Theology Methods**

In addition to qualitative research methods, I looked at how perspectives related to Practical Theology could assist me.

Pritchard and Ballard, authors of "Practical Theology in Action", explain that practical theology "raises theological issues of meaning and truth in relation to the living out of the life of faith. It brings together theory and practice" (1996, p. 5). Pete Ward, Professor of Practical Theology, puts it simply as "any way of thinking that takes both practice and theology seriously" (2017, p. 5).

When a Christian practice, done in a specific context, raises curiosity and invites reflection, practical theology approaches can guide an exercise of reflection and development of suggestions.

Mowat and Swinton (2016, p. 73) expand on the definition of practical theology, commenting that it is hermeneutical, correlational, critical and theological: Practical Theology recognises the importance of interpretation in the perceptions of human beings; it tries to correlate Christian tradition with other sources of knowledge to improve its understanding; it approaches practices with a hermeneutic of suspicion for it acknowledges the human tendency for

weakness, and it sets itself in the Christian narrative believing in Truth and the possibility for it to be recognised.

This research aims to look at Christian practice seeing it also as a window into the theological principles that drive it. As commented before, I could have asked the pastors direct questions about their theology on membership. However, as people living in specific contexts, we are vulnerable to sources of influence that affect our perceptions. What we do may feel so natural and logical that one may see it as intrinsically human or label it – in a Christian context – as biblical and faithful (and they can simultaneously be so), the fruit of inspired scripture and not of their social contexts.

Under this reality, the analysis of practice, more than theology, can give more accurate insights and pave the way for a more precise theological reflection and development of suggestions.

Practical theology also assists me in understanding that just like practice is influenced by its contexts, so is my point of view. One cannot look into practice without some amount of pre-defined interpretations and values (*Ibid*, 2016).

## **The Mutual Critical Conversation**

As explained above, the challenge with practical theology is that it is hermeneutical, correlational, critical, and theological (*Ibid*, 2016). It is then a challenge to find a research method that has all these dimensions accounted for.

There has been a development of methods that aim to face this challenge. Tillich, a German-born American theologian, and philosopher (Unhjem, 2022), attempted to connect human experience with theological answers from Christian tradition. He developed a method that contributed to practical theology by making Christian tradition and theology dialogue with

contemporary culture, called “The method of Correlation” (Mowat and Swinton, 2016, p. 74). However, it had challenges. If theology is a human discipline that studies God, faith and practice (Theology, n.d.), then it's a discipline that can be questioned and contested. With Tillich's method, theology and Christian tradition could question the practice but not the other way around.

In response to this, different scholars developed other methods from Tillich's to include a dialectical element that allowed interaction between all the dimensions: Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason (Mowat and Swinton, 2016, p. 75).

Stephen Pattinson's “Mutual Critical Conversation” uses the metaphor of a conversation between friends: the Christian tradition, the social sciences and the particular situation that is considered (*Ibid*, p. 76). However, this method is revised by Mowat and Swinton using Husinger’s “Chalcedonian Pattern” to secure that revelation from God is taken as authoritative and is not discussed at the same level as the other “friends”.

Under Mowat and Swinton’s revision, this model has four stages:

- 1) Identifying a current practice worthy of being studied and initial comments on it.
- 2) The enhancement of the initial impression with the exploration of hidden dynamics and the assistance of other disciplines. This includes searching for the best qualitative methods to help understand the practice.
- 3) Reflection on the theological significance of the data that was collected.
- 4) Finally, the elaboration of suggestions.

With this method, the researcher can use the data gathered to question particular theological interpretations and faith traditions, assisting them in being more authentic and faithful to Scripture (*Ibid*, 2016).

While this research follows the “Mutual Critical Conversation” model, it does refrain from a deep theological analysis of the practice since it would request a definition of the biblical view on membership standards and possibly go into the field of the hierarchy of doctrines. This discussion would go beyond the size and time limit of this research. In this case, the focus is more on what information the data gives us, what interpretations one can make about it and what suggestions one can develop, resorting to the history of the Baptists and insights from other research and theories.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Within qualitative research, there are several methods and sets of methods researchers can use. Some common ones are ethnographic research, grounded theory, reflexivity, and phenomenology. For this research, the method used is best framed within ethnography.

Phenomenology was considered for its inquiry into how participants understand and experience their practice (Mowat and Swinton, 2016, p. 149). However, the research is not focus on this personal interpretation but on what practice can tell us.

Ethnography is regarded as a methodology that aims at the “understanding the social world or culture – the shared behaviours, beliefs and values – of particular groups, typically via immersion in their community” (Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 13). Though often related to the observation method, ethnography can incorporate other methods. Harrison<sup>15</sup> (2014, p. 224) argues that it’s more correct to see it as methodology than a method. For this study, the choice was semi-structured interviews.

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<sup>15</sup> The author of “Ethnography” on the “The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research”, edited by Patricia Leavy.

## **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The goal of this research identifies with Rubin's (in 2012, in Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 178) explanation of in-depth interviews: “researchers talk to those who have knowledge of or experience with the problem of interest. Through such interviews, researchers explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own.”

Having chosen the interview method, I considered whether it could be done with focus groups. But in this field, there can be pressure to maintain status among colleagues, and that could restrain the participants from being authentic. I weighted the chance of such pressure to happen and damaging the research and considered it higher than the benefit that focus groups could have brought to the research.

I decided on personal interviews since this topic has the potential to become sensitive and to lead the participants to feel exposed. Individual interviews allow for a confidentiality that benefits this research and allows for more time to share all they wish to share on the subject. Also, in the case of a deviation from the topic, as could easily happen, it is easier to correct the course with a one-on-one interview (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 289).

Naturally, the disadvantages of personal interviews were also taken into consideration. Nunkoosing (2005, in Gubrium et al., 2012) spoke in his article on the problem of power, i.e., that there is always a hierarchical difference in the relationship between interviewer and participant. He also questions the authenticity of the interview for the participant will always try to give an account where he will be well portrayed. Nunkoosing also brings consent as an issue, for when consent is given to do the interview, there is never a real notion of the information one might share.

These points were taken into consideration, and some efforts were made to decrease their damage. More will be spoken about it in the chapter on ethics and the researcher's role.

The interviews were done digitally through the Zoom platform. Although this type of interview interface tampers with the communication between the two parties (not allowing good observations of things like position, movements, and posture) the benefits outweigh the cost. The low need for resources, immediacy, and closeness between geographic distances of the digital interface made it possible to interview pastors from different parts of Norway. It also helped to gather the amount of data needed and analyse it within the time frame of this research.

In addition, the digital platform also allowed the participants to choose their location, providing extra comfort that could facilitate a more candid interview.

The interviews were semi-structured, instead of structured or unstructured. One reason is that they “make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee; as well, the interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide” (Birkmann<sup>16</sup>, 2014, p. 287).

Semi-structured interviews allow the participant to talk and share his experiences without leading answers, are more flexible and allow deviations to happen that could be relevant to the research.

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<sup>16</sup> Author of “Unstructured and semi-structured interviewing” on the “The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research”, edited by Patricia Leavy.

The main ideas that led the interview were:

- Number of new members being integrated in the last 3 years.
- The procedure for a candidate for membership.
- The resort to any specific topic or instruction.
- The role of participation in church in the process.
- The role of church expectations.
- The core goal of the process.

The first question was an effort to understand the situation of the church they were leading: if it has seen some growth or if it has stabilized.

The second question is at the heart of the research. What are their usual practices when assessing a candidate's faith and its authenticity? Though the goal was not only to hear about their processes but to understand what information – if any – that they try to take from and/or share with the candidates before they become members.

A challenge with such a process is that it is the pastor's role to assess if the person is a new-born believer or not. But how can one know that? Mark E. Dever, American theologian and Pastor, writes the following in "Believer's Baptism":

How the candidate's spiritual state is to be determined will vary somewhat due to circumstances. The candidate's desire is itself necessary but not sufficient evidence. Regular attendance at meetings of the church is still more evidence. Certainly, the church should observe the person's life to help ensure that he is not self-deceived. "Time will tell" is the point of many of Christ's parables... (2006, p. 333):

Using this suggestion on the identification of conversion, I wanted to see if the pastors would also hold it as a valuable aspect in their assessment, even if intuitively.

The covenant between each member of the local church has been described as an essential element in the Baptist church and is still mentioned as foundational by some Baptist theologians (Fiddes, Hammett, Leonard). By asking about the expectations surrounding the church's covenantal dynamic, I aimed to see if that aspect of the Baptist origins was still present and, if so, in what shape or form.

Finally, different pastors can have different objectives, can be driven by different fears and avoid different pitfalls in their assessments. I tried to understand how pastors see the primary goal of such processes.

### **The Selection of the Sample**

The sample selection was criteria-based, and the features I searched for were ethnicity, age/experience, region, and congregation size.

I selected Norwegian pastors that have been leading Ethnic Norwegian Baptist churches. To clarify this choice is important to mention that the Baptist community in Norway is also composed of other ethnical groups formed by immigrant communities like Tamil, Chin, Korean, Vietnamese, Ethiopian, etc. These immigrant churches usually bring their culture with them, doing church services in their mother tongue with the liturgies and practices they used in their home countries. Although the comparison between the assessment of candidates in these different churches (and to see if they have adopted any Norwegian practice) could be a fascinating research, it is not the goal of this thesis. For this research, I choose to focus on the Norwegian culture.

The sample was selected from pastors with relevant age/experience (more than five years) instead of young or inexperienced. This was to secure that the participant not only had the opportunity to go through several assessment processes but to try, test and learn from them. This could lead to a better reflection and definition of the process. For the same reason, the



sample was selected from pastors who lead or have led big churches (around 30 or more members).

The selection also considered different regions of Norway, aiming to have some representation of the country.

Due to the limitations of this research, the sample was of 5 participants, allowing a more in-depth research process within the timeframe.

I should note that the sample was picked from pastors and not candidates. The intentionality behind these processes is part of the research goal, which could not be taken from the candidate's standpoint. However, their interviews could be very useful for a future research.

### **The Process Following the Interviews**

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. After several detailed readings, themes began to emerge, not only in each interview but common themes between them as well.

The themes were then classified, and categories were identified. The data analysis that was done from the emerging categories follows in the next chapter.

### **Researcher's Role**

The researcher has an essential responsibility due to their influence on every research stage and so its role must be addressed and monitored.

One of my responsibilities as the researcher was to exercise honesty, considering my expectations and bias. As someone from another country, my reflections could potentially give more credit to the practices of my culture. Though this research is purposefully an exercise to contradict this, cautious measures were taken. Those included discussing my ideas with professors of the master's program and with the supervisor of this thesis to restrain any favouritism that would affect the research.

It was also taken into consideration that as a Baptist residing in Norway with personal relations with people with a relevant position in the Baptist Union, I did this research as – more or less – an insider. This has its positive aspects (p.e. it was easy to access information on the churches and find its pastors), and negative aspects. So, I tried to select pastors with whom I have little social interaction, as they would feel that their reputation would not be so affected allowing for a more honest interview.

In addition to these efforts, my experience and development of the thesis was done with the supervisor's guidance, and by taking personal notes throughout the process, monitoring ideas and reactions.

To decrease my inexperience, some pilot interviews were done before where not only the line of questioning was tested but also my posture in an effort to be impartial yet comforting, not intimidating nor leading answers.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In accordance with the ethical guidelines for research projects in Norway, approval from the Norsk senter for forskningsdata was sought before contacting the different participants.

The application for this approval included an information sheet on the research and the consent form later sent to the participants. The application was approved on 28th March 2022, Ref. 692116.

Maintaining a good ethical process, the participants were contacted via mobile phone with an oral explanation followed by an e-mail with the information about the project, its goal, contact details, the participation procedure, and the explicit statement that their participation was free and they could withdraw from it at any point.

This gave plenty of opportunities to ask questions and have a more informed conversation about the project in case they desired to.

Immediately before the interviews, the information about their freedom of withdrawal was repeated, and they were ensured that there were no wrong answers, giving them comfort to say what they would like to say.

They were given plenty of time for their answers, the questions aimed to be clear, and any doubt was promptly clarified.

After the interview, the participant's personal information was stored securely in a cloud system, preventing the loss of the data due to technical issues. This specific cloud system stores its information on servers in Norway or in other countries that have equal privacy laws guaranteeing that the information in it will not be shared. The transcripts and sound recordings were stored in another cloud system, avoiding crossing information which could compromise anonymity.

## SUMMARY

The research method can make research useful or invalid. This chapter described the steps taken to choose the most appropriate method, considering the alternatives and their contribution for the research question.

In this case, qualitative research tools were chosen such as semi-structured interviews, used in a mutual conversation with theology and social sciences. This is an exercise done within the field of practical theology, with the purpose of doing an honest interpretation of practice so it can be further developed.

# DATA ANALYSIS

## INTRODUCTION

Summarizing, when asked about how they assess candidates for membership, the participants all shared the same method: personal conversations. These conversations were used to get to know the person and the nature of their decision: whether it was their own decision, if they were willing to follow Jesus, if they wanted to belong to the community, etc. They use multiple meetings to talk to try, in an intuitive way, to identify the authenticity of their faith.

When it came to the question of what exactly goes on in those conversations and how they discern genuine faith, it was complicated for them to be specific. However, one must admit that it is a challenge to recall with detail spontaneous conversations that happened, possibly, years ago.

Though I, as a researcher, tried to stir the conversation into membership (that may or may not involve baptism), many candidates tended to treat the interview as referring to baptism.

It was interesting as well to see how all of them had stories of candidates that were more challenging; whether it was to work with immigrants, young teenagers, people who had abandoned their previous church, or cases that were off the norm.

An important note to add was that the questions were asked in English but the participants had the opportunity to answer in English or Norwegian. When they chose to answer in English, one can see how they struggled with it though they were able to express themselves. Once it was too challenging, they changed to Norwegian and continued the answer.

## THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

From the initial thematic framework suggested by the questions asked, the data analysis allowed us to recognize themes and sub-themes.

Initially, five themes were identified prompted by the questions: 1) How do they assess a candidate for membership; 2) How much consideration do they give to the relationship of the candidate with the church; 3) What is their fundamental goal in all the process; 4) Situations where they did not want to continue with the process; and 5) Final comments.

Under these initial themes, sub-themes were formulated to help the analysis of the interviews:

Concerning the process of assessment of a candidate: 1) How structured was it? 2) What information/insight do they try to retrieve? 3) How they categorised candidates and the different processes they applied to them?

Concerning the candidate's relationship to the church: 1) Is their church attendance considered? 2) Is their relationship with other members considered? 3) Is there any mention of future responsibility towards the church?

Here we have a summary of the information they shared about these themes.

## DATA SUMMARY

### **1. The process of assessment of a candidate**

As mentioned before, all the participants described personal conversation as their process for assessing a candidate for membership. It was through conversations that they tried to figure out if the person was qualified to become a member. The process usually started with the person

reaching out to them and asking to join as a member, but in a couple of cases, a challenge was made directly at someone who has been coming consistently to the church:

And and sometimes. The most, most of the times they kind of. They kind of take the initiative themselves, but sometimes I'll or we in a church high or something in the church would kind of bring up the question "What about being a part of this church?" (Participant D)

Young man/woman... 16, 17, 18... yes, I speak about it, not...uh..., not very very much, but I speak much, uh..., I speak it in concerning "what do you think? You can join in? What?... What?... Where is your place in this fellowship?" (Participant A)

### **1.1 How structured was it?**

In all the cases, the participants were purposeful in arranging meetings and engaging in conversation. However – except for one participant – they did not have a pre-made set of topics to discuss. They did have a set of elements, more or less organised, that they tried to identify in the candidate:

I don't have a checklist. I will sometimes... I think, why don't I have a checklist I could check, check, check... (Participant A)

The duration of the conversations or the amount of meetings varied. Four out of five mentioned that they took time and try to arrange different meetings until they felt confident to proceed to membership:

You can wait one month, or maybe I wait two and three weeks. Then I have a conversation with them. And then then it maybe goes some few weeks more maybe a month or two. And then, uh, I'm it's time to take them into the church as a member. (Participant D)

However, as one of them said, “each case is one case”, and they try to understand them and proceed according to the confidence the candidates showed, and to the confidence the participants were gaining.

In most cases the conversations didn’t have a structure but were an informal walk through the candidate’s motivation to be part of the membership and their faith statement. In one of these cases, the participant mention that he gave room for the candidate to ask questions, inquire on theology and assist them in being confident about their decision:

...all those, uh, conversation all from “what with my friends or family or something say if I if I become Baptist?” From... til... “What do I think about the sin and that kind of breakdown we had in the Garden of Eden and so on?” (Participant D)

Only one out of the five wanted to talk about specific topics beside having a conversation. We will talk more about this case later.

## **1.2 What information/insight do they try to retrieve?**

All participants shared the goal of identifying expressions related to salvation. I will go briefly through each participant to take a closer look on how they described what they wanted to identify:

Participant A mentioned that it is important for him to see that the candidate understands what Jesus has done – forgiveness of sins, God’s grace – that he loves Jesus, wants to have a relationship with Him, “grow in Christ” and follow Him.

Participant B mentioned that he prepares material for the youth with what membership is and underlines that to be a Christian one must submit his will to God’s will. It was not clear that other ages received this material as well.

Participant C wanted to see if the candidates were “born-again” Christians, what Jesus meant for them, that they believed in Jesus, saw Him as Lord, considered themselves as Christians and wanted to belong to a fellowship.

Participant D tried to identify – with the help of the Holy Spirit – a moment where he could lead them in a “salvation prayer”, and to see that they repented, believed in Jesus as Lord and Savior and became children of God. Also mentioned several times the importance of having a relationship with Jesus.

Three of the five participants mentioned that they try to see if the decision is a personal decision, i.e. not a decision made out of pressure from parents or peers, nor emotional and volatile, but a conscious decision.

Their relationship with the rest of the community of the church was also a point discussed by them; some brought it up even before my question on church expectations. Because it became a theme with sub-themes, it is developed further down.

As said before, only one of the participants had different topics prepared in advanced to discuss with the candidate. Participant E not only tried to identify that the candidate was saved, that “believes in Jesus with their heart and confess with his mouth”, but he also went through the bylaws and vision of the church and talked about the church’s position on what he called “difficult questions”:

...I want people to know what they will meet in the teaching and the preaching in the church. Yeah, so that's the most important thing, but I... I want to mention the... the difficult questions that we have today. With..., yeah. Homophily and those kind of thing, uh... we want to say, well, very clearly what we think the word of God is saying about these things. So uhm..., yes, because. I... I think we it will protect the church.



He mentioned that he wanted to avoid people becoming members and even assuming an influential position, to later found out that they did not share the church's position on these matters, making it a complex case to solve.

### **1.3 How they categorised candidates and the different processes they applied to them?**

All the participants mentioned different “categories” of candidates. One of the largest ones is the teenager category. Teenagers often go through instruction, and many make the decision to be baptised and become a member after the course is completed. Participant B mentioned that he also tried to see if the decision of the “konfirmant”<sup>17</sup> was their own conscious decision; they need to stand on their own or else they might leave church later. Some spoke as well of the age limit that they place for membership and baptism, preferring not to baptise young children (6-12 years p.ex.).

Another category that three participants mentioned was candidates with previous church experience. All five participant asked the candidates about it. This church experience could also be categorised into belonging previously to a Baptist church, a Lutheran church, coming from a church the candidate left in tense circumstances, or no church experience at all.

One of the participants mentioned that the transition from a Baptist church to another was quite simple and direct, with little conversation needed. Participant A mentioned that before, it was better because there was better communication between Baptist churches and the same understanding about membership and that today things are more complicated.

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<sup>17</sup> “Konfirmant” is the Norwegian term for the teenagers that go through the “konfirmasjon”, or “confirmation” in English. Confirmation, in this case, is the lutheran ritual of “coming of age” where the participants have the opportunity to go through a course about the Christian faith, confirm the faith of their baptism publicly, and are then welcome to participate in the eucharist. Though the term “konfirmant” is connected with the Lutheran tradition, it is widely used in the Baptist churches as well. The Baptist churches also use this stage of “coming of age” to give elementary teaching on the Christian faith and perform a ceremony similar to the Lutheran confirmation. To many, the end of the “confirmation course” coincides with a decision to be baptised.

The change from a Lutheran church to a Baptist church was seen by one of the participants as usually more challenging:

...if you come from a very strong tradition from the Lutheran Church, they have to have to speak a little about the... uh... or little or much... About baptism as a child or as grown up and they kind of have to be led through the call it the Baptist theology about this baptism. And the tradition is very strong in some of those people, so they need kind of or time to... to think over to pray. (...) So... so those, those is the people that would need most time to kind of be led through, not through the... the gospel, but through why baptism, as after I've become a believer, and so on... (Participant D)

Two of the participants were clear on how septic they were with people who had left their last church due to problems or tensions. They wanted to have a more specific discussion about the situation, trying to understand the circumstances in which they left the previous church, and participant B commented how in some cases, he advised them to return to their original congregation:

...I always want to interrogate to check on what. How did they leave? And what? What reputation do they carry from where they left off? And that... It has also happened that I said that "I don't think you should become a member here. I think you should rather go back to the church community that you have left and try to clean up after yourself".<sup>18</sup>

Participant E also mentioned that he had previous negative experiences from the past and he sees that he is not the only one:

I have seen very many times that people come, meet God, get excited, drop out of a church want to join your church. And then there are so many things that you don't know, and when they have been going to church for a few months-half a year, then it becomes a

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<sup>18</sup> Computer assisted translation from the Norwegian: "Da vil jeg alltid ha en undersøkelse for å sjekke om hva. Hvordan har de forlatt? Og hva? Hvilket rykte har de på seg der de forlot? Og det. Det har også vært at de noen gang har sagt at jeg tror ikke du skal bli medlem her. Jeg tror heller du skal gå tilbake til menighets fellesskapet som du har forlatt og prøve å å rydde opp deg etter deg."

problem. Then it becomes two problems, then three problems. And if you then call a pastor, he can tell you that it was exactly like this in his church as well.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, they were very sceptical and preferred to further inquire the candidate and slow down the process.

One participant mentioned specifically situations where someone who was evangelised, with no previous church experience, attended the church and eventually asked to be joined as a member. In this case, the participant tries to hear how the process of the decision to become a Christian happened and that after some time, the candidate moves on to be baptised and join the membership of the church.

## **2. How much consideration do they give to the relationship of the candidate with the church**

The candidate's relation to the rest of the church was relevant for the participants in different ways and degrees. From the initial theme, some sub-themes emerged.

### **2.1 Is their church attendance considered?**

Four out of five mentioned how the time the person has been attending the church is relevant to help evaluate the commitment to the church they want to be part of.

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<sup>19</sup> Computer assisted translation from the Norwegian: "Jeg har sett veldig mange ganger at folk kommer, møter gud, blir begeistret, melder seg ut av en kirke vil melde seg inn i din kirke. Og så er det så mange ting som du ikke kjenner, og som når de har gått i kirken noen måned, halvt år, så blir det et problem. Så kommer det 2 problem, så kommer det tre problem. Og hvis du da ringer til en pastor, så kan han fortelle at det var akkurat slik i vår kirke også."

It is important because when people who do not belong to the congregation regularly come again and again, it is an indication that they want to be part of the community.<sup>20</sup>  
(Participant B)

They also mentioned it as relevant in evaluating the person's faith:

We, uh, we want to see them in the churches... church... on Sundays and we want to see that they, uh..., actually love the fellowship and... uh... and after maybe a month or two or three. If they was going... often. Yeah, it was no problem for to be baptized. But we don't baptize the people the first day they come to church, not the second neither, and not the first month. (Participant C)

For participant D, church attendance didn't affect the process but was recognised as important in the candidate's faith development and decision for integration.

Yes, uh. Uh, some of the people. Attend our meetings for a time. For some time, short or long time. And then they can thinking of becoming a member be a part of of our church and then and so so that. That don't kind of affect the... the process, but it sometimes initiate the process that they go through. (Participant D)

## **2.2 Is their relationship with other members considered?**

The participant that was not specific on the importance of the candidate's attendance spoke of the importance of seeing signs of loyalty to the fellowship:

That's that's one, thing they want to grow in Christ and be faithful to... to the fellowship. I... uh... almost every time ask if they have any idea, or, "What do you think your... your?... What is your task in the congregation? With what can you contribute to the fellowship?"<sup>21</sup> Because I think that one of the most important thing to be a Christian and stay as a living Christian is to start serving the Lord. Umm... and if you start serving the

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<sup>20</sup> Computer assisted translation from the Norwegian: "Det er jo viktig fordi at når persone som ikke tilhører menigheten regelmessig kommer igjen og igjen, så er det jo en indikasjon på at de ønsker å være en del av fellesskapet."

<sup>21</sup> Computer assisted translation from the Norwegian "Hva er din oppgaven I menigheten? Hva kan du bidra med i fellesskapet."

Lord, you need to understand you have to serve the church. You have to serve your members. (Participant A)

Participant A is one of the four who expressed that the relationship between the candidate and the community of the church played an essential role in their assessment. They were sceptic if someone wanted to be baptised but did not want to connect with the church.

Participant A elaborated that he preferred that the candidate develop a relationship with the community before becoming a member. Participant E also said it was important to develop friendships in the church. Being able to be together with other Christians was seen as a vital sign and gave confidence that the candidate's commitment was real. For Participant B it was more important to see that the candidate felt a part of the community than being an official member in the paper.

### **2.3 Is there any mention of future responsibility towards the church?**

There were different answers on whether the responsibilities that come with membership in a Baptist church were part of the assessment process.

Participants C, D and F, said that it is talked about but usually after the person becomes a member. They pointed out different reasons for that: participant C explained that the financial contribution would possibly drive away members and give an impression that this is what the church wants from them. At the same time, some are students and cannot contribute. Participant F mentioned that he is careful when talking about contribution to the church, for it can lead the candidate to think that he is only seen as a human resource. In addition, it could be problematic to give responsibilities to people in such an early stage.

Participant A, on the other hand, does include in the conversations the idea that they can contribute with something – some talent or gift – challenging them to think of what this could be, or what they believe their place can be in the church.

Participant B shared how his ideas on this matter changed through time:

Yes, this is something that has been a development for me, also because when I started out as a Baptist pastor, I did not put much emphasis on what the congregation expected of new members. But through my experience, I have learned that... I think it is important in an early phase to be able to tell a little about what the congregation is, what we want to be and the expectations that the congregation has for the new ones who come. (...) And I have experienced that very positively, that there are some expectations for... what the congregation expects from its members. And that, and I believe that it creates frameworks and security and good communication when, in an early phase, you can express this, which many people wonder about. Because... because no matter which organization you become a member of, people know that there are expectations involved.<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting to see how the experience of this candidate led him to be less hesitant in talking about expectations and witnessed it as a reinforcement of the candidate's sense of belonging.

Finally, there is only a situation where the candidate consistently receives instruction on the implications of membership before joining a church, and that is when he is a "Konfirmant", a young person. Participant B commented that it's part of the curriculum.

### **3. What is their fundamental goal in the process**

When it comes to their fundamental goal in the assessment, the answers vary, with just two sharing some similarities.

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<sup>22</sup> Computer assisted translation from the Norwegian: "Ja altså dette er jo noe som har vært en en utvikling hos meg, også. fordi at når jeg startet ut som Baptist pastoren, så var det ikke så mye jeg la vekt på hvilke forventninger menigheten har til nye medlemmer. Men gjennom min erfaring, så har jeg lært meg til at... Jeg tror altså det er viktig i en tidlig fase å kunne fortelle litt om hva menigheten er, hva vi ønsker å være og forventninger som menigheten har til de nye som kommer. (...) Og det har jeg opplevd veldig positivt at det finnes noen forventninger til... til hva menigheten forventer av sine medlemmer. og det, og jeg tror at det skaper rammer og det skaper trygghet og det skaper en god kommunikasjon når man i en tidlig fase kan uttrykke dette som mange folk lurer på. for... fordi at uansett hvilken organisasjon du skal bli medlem av, så vet folk at det følger noen forventninger med."

Participant A wants to see that the candidates understand what Jesus has done for them, want to follow Jesus and need Jesus in their lives. Participant B spoke that the main thing for him is that people are well integrated into the fellowship, and he pursues that more than the official registration of a new member:

Yes, to be completely honest, I'm not too keen on them becoming a member. In other words, that we... and... and with that I kind of think that they will officially become members, that they will... will be allowed to enter them in the church registry and that we will get state support for them and so on. I'm not really into that. I am much more concerned that they should become part of the community, that they should experience that the congregation is their congregational community.<sup>23</sup>

Participants C and E main concern is with people who search for Christ in a moment of crisis or join too quickly but whose faith does not survive in the long run. Participant E spoke of the issues that this instability can bring to the church and the bad experiences he had in the past. But though he cannot fully know if the person will persevere in the church, he would not refuse someone who confesses Christ as Lord to become a member of the church. Still, he is cautious in giving them responsibility:

But at the same time, we cannot refuse people to become part of the congregation if we experience that they have faith in Jesus and in some way. Yes, live in the light with your life, then we can't deny them, but... Then comes the next period, when they have become members, we don't give them a lot of responsibility right away. They are welcome to stand at the door and welcome people and such, but do not take them into the leadership. We don't have to place them on the stage the Sunday after.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Computer assisted translation from the Norwegian: "Ja for å være helt ærlig, så er jeg ikke så veldig opptatt av at de skal bli medlem. Altså at at vi... og... og med det tenker jeg liksom at de offisielt skal bli medlem, at de får... skal få skrive dem inn i kirkeboken og at vi skal få statsstøtte for dem og sånn. Jeg er ikke veldig opptatt av det. Jeg er mye mer opptatt av at de skal bli en del av fellesskapet at de skal oppleve at at menigheten er deres menighetsfellesskap."

<sup>24</sup> Computer assisted translation from the Norwegian: "Men samtidig så kan vi jo ikke nekte mennesket å bli en del av menigheten hvis vi opplever at de har troen på Jesus og på en måte. Ja leve i lyset med sitt liv, så kan vi jo ikke nekte de, men. Da kommer jo da den neste perioden, at når de da har blitt medlem ikke gir de stort ansvar med en gang. De kan gjerne stå og ønske velkommen med døren og sånt, men ikke ta de inn i menighetsrådet. Vi trenger ikke være på plattformen søndagen etterpå.»

Participant D mentioned his fear of rushing through the process, forcing the person to decide on membership, and not walking alongside them in their own pace giving them time to mature on their decision.

#### **4. Situations where they did not want to continue the process**

Not all spoke of cases where they put a stop to someone wanting to become a member. Most situations revolved around people who were too eager to join, and for fear of that eagerness being shallow and emotional, they slowed down the process, so the person had more time to get to know the church and ponder on their decision.

Participants A and B mentioned that they had stopped a process before. One reason A shared was that the candidate wanted to be baptised and join membership because someone close to him/her was going to be baptised (peer pressure). Both of them shared that they have encountered people wanting to join, but that their theology was clearly odd or deeply different.

Participants D and E never cancelled a process. Still, they had situations where they preferred to slow down, whether the person was unsure and needed more time or wanted an immediate entrance, and the pastor advised them to take more time:

Pausing yes because. There people have been. You have been communicating, and I've been speaking to people and then OK... they, among others issues, they think they go too fast. They are kind of insecure according to their own relationships outside the church and so on. So need to pause and give them time to think more about it. (Participant D)

Participant C never cancelled or paused any assessment process. He mentioned the influence of the Lutheran Church as a possible cause. He explained that there are no demands for membership in the Lutheran church [other than infant baptism and confirmation], and he felt that the Baptist church has adopted this position:



And many of us who grew up in Norway. And we have probably, in many ways, imported that lethargy into the church. That as long as you are a member, you can be so. But... but there is no obligation. We have no demands. We do not require you to attend a church meeting: “You must come to the church service”, “You must come to the community meeting”. We do not require it, and it is very similar to how it is in the church. The Norwegian [church] is the great carrier of culture in Norway when it comes to the Christian faith. So in the Baptist congregation in Norway 100 years ago. Then it was much more obliging because they dare to be different from the church.<sup>25</sup>

He goes on into mentioned that in the past, the Baptist church would exclude members, but that brought problems of its own when the exclusion of one family member meant another one stopped coming. Conflicts arose from that. He commented on this as another possible cause for why the Baptist church does not exclude members anymore, and why he places no stops into someone wanting to join the church.

## 5. Final comments

As final comments, both A and C mentioned the issue of churches being independent. Participant A spoke about how the churches are very different now, and some practice open membership (no baptism required or acceptance of infant baptism), making things more complicated. Participant C mentioned the lack of guidelines from the national organisation:

I have missed more guidelines. I have missed that we as Baptists in Norway have this and that is how we do it. We have a recipe for how we welcome new members. We have a follow-up plan that we do if people no longer come to church. We may have a joint Bible school that you must attend in order to be baptised. That I think in the Norwegian

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<sup>25</sup> Computer assisted translation from the Norwegian: “Og mange av oss som vokst opp i Norge. Og vi har nok kanskje på mange måter importert den sløvheten Inn i kirka. At så lenge du da er medlem, så kan du være det. Men men det er Ikke noe forpliktelse. Vi har ikke krav. Vi krever ikke at du skal komme på menighetsmøte. Du skal komme på gudstjeneste. Du skal komme på fellesskaps samlingen. Vi krever ikke det, og det er veldig likt sånn som det er i kirken. Den norske som er den store kulturbæreren da i Norge når det gjelder kristen tro. Så i Baptist menigheten i Norge for 100 år siden. Så var det mye mer forpliktende. Fordi at de våger å være annerledes til kirken.”

context, there is far too much individualism. It depends on every pastor, every congregation, every... every congregation meeting around the whole country. So, when it comes to membership again with the Christian congregation, I believe that in the time we live in today, we should be careful not to open the doors too wide. But that burden when it rests on the pastor alone. Then the pastor gets really scared. Because he sits with a lot of power and authority. But, if the pastor had... had denominations and other congregations behind him that "that's how we Baptists in Norway do it". You, then, will have a much stronger community that could help the pastor make difficult decisions.<sup>26</sup>

Participant D comment was that the most important thing in this process is that you guide people to Christ, to repentance, to know Jesus as Lord and Saviour and help them get into the church. There is no checklist he used about their faith, but he gets together with people and helps them. He also mentioned how this is the most important thing; he could postpone other tasks but not this one.

Finally, participant C commented on how it can be challenging to be strict, but that church must stand on its theological ground and not fall into populism:

I want the church to be what I see in the Bible, that the church should be Light and salt in this world, and therefore we have chosen a model where we want to be a little careful when we take people in as members in church.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Computer assisted translation from the Norwegian: "Jeg har savnet mere retningslinjer. Jeg har savnet det at vi som Baptister i Norge har sånn og sånn gjør vi. Vi har en oppskrift på hvordan vi tar imot nye medlemmer. Vi har en oppfølgingsplan som vi gjør hvis mennesker å ikke kommer til kirken lenger. Vi har kanskje en felles bibelskole som du må gå på for at du skal bli døpt. Det, jeg synes dere i den norske kontekst, så er det altfor mye individualisme. Det kommer an på hver pastor hver menighet hver... hvert menighetsmøte rundt omkring i hele landet. Så, når det gjelder medlemskap igjen, med kristen menighet, så mener jeg, at i den tiden vi lever i dag, så bør vi være forsiktige med å åpne opp dørene for bredt. Men den belastningen når den ligger på pastor alene. Så blir pastoren veldig skummel. Fordi at han sitter med mye makt og autoritet. Men, hvis pastoren hadde hatt kirkesamfunn og andre menigheter bak seg at "sånn gjør vi Baptister i Norge det". Du, så vil du ha et mye sterkere fellesskap som kunne hjelpe pastoren til å ta vanskelige avgjørelser."

<sup>27</sup> Computer assisted translation from the Norwegian: "Jeg ønsker, at kirken skal være det, som jeg ser i Bibelen, at kirken skal være Lys og salt i denne verden så, og derfor så har vi valgt en modell, der vi ønsker å være litt forsiktige når vi tar folk inn som medlem i kirken."

## DOMINANT TOPICS

Though it is important for this paper to have an overview of the content of the interviews, it is also revealing to see the space that some topics took. Though some issues were naturally prompted by the questions, the way the participants lingered on them contributed to the research.

There were three clusters of topics that were the most dominant ones. The first was related to the conversations – the process itself – the participants had. Their description and discussion around what these conversations entail occupied the most space in the interviews.

Within this main topic, there was another space-consuming topic that I underlined as being especially relevant, and that was what the participants described as the “must-have” of the candidates: that they repented, were saved by Jesus, spoke of Jesus as Lord, wanted to be part of the church, etc. Some participants were repetitive on these points, underlining the importance that was to hear these small statements of faith.

The second one was the sum of topics related to their interaction with the church; the time they attended church, the relationships they established and the discussion of future contributions.

The third was related to the cases that were problematic and challenging for them, which led them to pause or cancel the process, or to take other routes. They shared their struggles and discomfort and it appeared that those stories were the ones they could easily remember.

We shall look more into the relevance of these topics and discuss them in light of the research question in the next chapter.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, when it comes to the main research question, we have a winning method: pastors use personal conversations to assess candidates for membership. There was some light variation on how they became positive that the candidate was a newborn believer. Still, for four out of five, this conversation was sufficient, leaving just one that had specific topics to share with the candidate.

It was also common to all the importance of the candidate's relationship with the community of the church, gathering scepticism if the person had left their previous church in a controversial manner, or if there was no desire to participate in the fellowship, and confidence if the person was regularly attending services.

They also shared challenges with the same categories of candidates: former Lutherans, teenagers, immigrants and the members that left their former church.

Much more could be asked but these interviews gave interesting topics for discussion and reflection that shall be addressed in the next chapter.

# DISCUSSION

The interviews provided with relevant information on how the pastors get to know a person that wants to become a member, what is important for them to find out, and what are the most common situations that they encounter, as well as some of the lessons they have learned in their ministry.

There is variety in the way they understand the relationship between the candidate and the church which also means that there is variety in how they perceive the relationships between church members.

We noticed as well how within five participants, none had the exact method and standards but they all, in some way, tried to identify regeneration in the candidate. This variation is normal to find within congregationalists like the Baptists, but it also comes with its fragilities.

From what was shared, we could start to draw a definition of membership in the Baptist churches in Norway, and the implications that come with this definition. In the next section, I look closer into some of the things that were said and what they can mean.

I will focus on the conversation and the role that the church played in the assessment process, as well as smaller notes on the youth situation and other interesting pieces of information we got from the interviews.

## WHAT DO THE RESULTS MEAN?

### **Personal conversation as the chosen method for Pastors**

We use conversations every day to get to know the person we are with and to let ourselves be known by them. Birkmann (2014, p. 278) shares how conversation has been used as an essential tool among humans “in order to learn about how they experience the world, how they think,

act, feel, and develop as individuals and in groups.” It was the method I chose myself to conduct this research. So, naturally, a conversation is expected to be used in understanding another one’s faith.

The conversation is a crucial part of the ministry of any pastor, and many authors have addressed it, not only as a tool for the pastor-teacher but also for the members of the church. Authors like R. J. Allen and O. W. Allen<sup>28</sup> have highlighted the power that conversation has in building the spiritual maturity, and how it helps the teaching ministry of the pastor. Andrew Root<sup>29</sup> has also written about relationships as the core goal in ministry and not just a means to an end. Books on discipleships often speak of one-on-one conversations and relationships as playing an irreplaceable role in the discipleship development<sup>30</sup>. Jim Putman, author of “Real-Life Discipleship” (2010) says that:

Making disciples takes much more than listening to a lecture and knowing right theology. Discipleship requires real teaching and real learning. It requires conversation, modeling, encouragement, debriefing, and practice, all of which need to happen in the context of relationship. Without relationship between believers, there is no model to follow, no authenticity, no accountability, no application, and no support for the journey. These things come through personal contact. (p. 19)

However, though conversations are fundamental for ministry, they can also be misleading and be manipulated or manipulative. Its use should be measured according to the goal in question.

From what the participants shared and remembered, there are a few points worth paying attention that will help us see the fruits and weaknesses of such a method.

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<sup>28</sup> Authors of “Under the Oak Tree: The Church as Community of Conversation in a Conflicted and Pluralistic World”, 1995, and “The Sermon without End: A Conversational Approach to Preaching”, 2015

<sup>29</sup> “The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing” was published in 2013

<sup>30</sup> One can find chapters on one-on-one relationships in the context of discipleship on books like “The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ” by Bill Hull (2006), “Discipleship that Fits: the five kinds of relationships God uses to help us grow” (2016) by Alex Absalom and Bobby Harrington, “Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches That Make Disciples” () by Jim Putman.

## The “Checklist” Pastors use

In these conversations was interesting to notice how, without a structure, and even with some saying that “they don’t use any checklists’, pastors still enumerated different beliefs that they searched for in these conversations, like a checklist.

Across the five interviews, they try to identify things like “repentance”, “believing in Jesus as Lord”, “be saved”, “wanting to follow Jesus”, “grow in Jesus”, “having a personal relationship with Jesus” and “being a new believer”.

Are these elements representative of a Baptist perspective? Grenz’s (1994, p. 529) using the Gospel of Mark (Mark 1:14-15), summarizes conversion in two elements: repentance and faith. Grenz (1994, p. 534) resumes it this way:

Conversion occurs as an individual responds to the gospel. In repentance, we see ourselves as sinners: as alienated from God, justly condemned, and enslaved by sin. We acknowledge that our life’s direction is misguided, we feel remorse for this condition, and we desire to follow a new direction. (...)

Faith works hand in hand with repentance. We become aware of the good news of God’s action in Christ: Jesus, God’s son, dies for human sin and rose again by God’s power. We acknowledge this gospel message as true, not only in some general sense but also as applicable to our situation. Finally, we appropriate the work of God in Christ, trusting Jesus alone for salvation and confessing him as Lord.

The informal list the pastors use in the conversations includes repentance, acceptance of Jesus as Saviour, and the prospect of a new life under the lordship of Christ; points that are also found in the definition above. It reveals that, even if without structure, pastors are working with this Christian and Baptist understanding of conversion.

Not all participants mentioned all these points. Still, it is possible that the lack of a specific belief/value in their description is due to an effort to summarise the candidate’s belief and not a different concept of salvation.

### **The search for a personal conscientious decision**

If the “checklist” mentioned above reveals that the participants searched for a Christian confession of faith, the fact that 3 out of the 5 participants were explicit on how they wanted to confirm that the decision was made out of the candidate’s own conscience. This principle is traditionally Baptist: “The basis of our membership in the church is a conscious and deliberate acceptance of Christ as Saviour and Lord by each individual” (in “The Baptist Doctrine of the Church”<sup>31</sup>).

If we also account for the participants that wanted to hear the story behind the decision (which would reveal if the person made it out of their own conscience or not), then, for all of them, this was an important aspect, reflecting a Baptist way of thinking.

### **The choice for an intuitive, unstructured conversation**

As mentioned before, there is no denying that conversations and relationships are fundamental in getting to know the person and assisting them in their spiritual path.

However, in this case, these conversations seem to be led more by the candidate than the pastor; their progress was dependent on what the candidate said.

One can question whether an unstructured conversation – without approaching different themes and issues of Christianity – will be enough to catch all the red flags and reveal misunderstandings. Is the amount of time used in these meetings enough to go deep into what the person is experiencing and believing? It can take a long time until the defective theology of a member of the church comes to light and is able to be addressed. Putman (2010, p. 78), in

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<sup>31</sup> “The Baptist Doctrine of the Church” was a document approved by the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain in 1948.



his defence of a purposeful discipleship ministry for what he called “spiritual infants” [a.k.a. new believers], explains the following:

“When spiritual infants stick around long enough to become a part of the church culture, they can pick up the Christian lingo and eventually mimic the behaviors of more mature believers — at least while they are in public. When this is the case, there is little substance or depth behind their words and actions. They will do the “right” things — they will look mature — but for the wrong reasons. As soon as life gets tough — and it will — infants will wither away. Until then, the church becomes a pageant, a place to put on the “perfect” face so that they look like everyone else. But inside, their lives are rather empty.”

It is not difficult to find stories of active members of the church who revealed fundamental flaws in their faith and perceptions of God that went unnoticed for decades. So, the question remains: is the unstructured and informal conversation enough to recognise inauthentic faith or critical misunderstandings?

Whether the conversation is enough, it can depend on the purposes behind it. As mentioned before, there is a positive point mentioned by 4 of the 5 participants, that was the initiative to ask about the story of the decision for Christ. This can help identify if the decision was their own, and also if a transformation – a new birth – has taken place.

This element of the transformation is pointed out by Fiddes (2003, p. 229), quoting Henry W. Robinsons, explaining that conversion can vary in time but...

“What is essential is that there comes a moment when someone can say “‘Whereas I was blind but, *now* I see’. However, it happens, and in whatever timescale, there has been “an *awakening* of human personality to the presence and power of the divine.”

None of the candidates was explicit about this element in conversion [i.e. transformation/before-after/new birth] that helps to identify regeneration. Nevertheless, the question of how the decision of faith came to be can be enough.

How the pastors scrutinise these conversations to see if there is an account of transformation could also depend on their perception of regeneration. Sam Emadi, a Baptist Pastor, comments in an article for a reformed ministry called 9Marks, that if the pastor believes that the confession of faith is enough demonstration of its authenticity, then the pastor will not inquire beyond. However, if the pastor believes that there is no salvation without a change of life and heart, then this will lead the pastor to ask more questions to hear about the changes God made in the candidate's life.

As we have seen, only one participant purposefully spoke about “hot topics” as a way to avoid later feelings of being deluded into a church that does not “match them”, but also with the goal of protection of the church from people that don't follow its values and, for instance, could end up in leadership. It is also worth noting that for this pastor, the member's perspectives on topics like homosexuality and cohabitation were important enough to make it a problem if someone – in an influence position – is found to have an opposite view. While others mentioned that they already had “liberal” members and that they were not able to do much about it, this participant had a clear goal to avoid this: the issue of ethics was important enough to be mentioned before the person became a member.

This is a complicated matter to take in this brief research – maybe in a future one – but an important one to notice and to make us reflect.

### **The sense of protection of the church**

Participants A and B mentioned how they were sceptic about people with “baggage” that came from other churches, running from some sort of conflict.

Perhaps, this means that they do want to avoid a – possibly – conflict-oriented person. One was explicit in saying that the person is challenged to go back and make amends.

This could also be done out of brotherly respect for the previous church, and with the intention of avoiding conflict with it. But can also mean that they wanted to protect their congregation. So, though there is no active search for theological misunderstandings, contradicting views and positions on ethics, there is a protective instinct for this situation. There is an impression that “this is not good” and needs to be addressed.

Perhaps there is confidence from the pastors that they know the Christian milieu and do not expect any surprising theology from other Christians, so there is no strong instinct in that area, but factual conflict sparks their protective instinct.

## **The candidate and the fellowship**

### **The candidate’s relationship with the church**

It is also relevant to see how time was considered. Three out of five participants mentioned that they took time to see the person associating with the church. That wait was purposeful, not wanting to rush into membership someone that was too new.

Intuitively or not, the participants identified this element as important, and as we have seen it mentioned by Mark Dever<sup>32</sup>, it can be an important element to identify true regeneration. With time one gets to know better the character of the person and identifies fruits of the spirit.

In addition, Christian faith places great importance on the relationship one has with others from the church. Passages such as 1 John 4:8 “*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.*” (NIV), and verses, 20-21 “*Whoever claims to love God yet hates a*

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<sup>32</sup> Author of “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” a chapter in the book “Believer’s Baptism” (2006)

*brother or sister is a liar. Whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen*”, are examples that in the context of community and relationships, salvation can be “tested” and revealed as authentic or inauthentic.

### **The candidate and church expectations**

Another revelation that was significant was how four of the five participants preferred to talk about church expectations after the candidate became a member. After the membership process, they had – potentially – conversations about spiritual gifts, their service to the church, or financial contribution. The reasons they presented was that they did not want the candidate to feel that he was only a “human resource” or were interested in him for the financial aspect.

There is this hesitation from the pastors to talk about expectations and duties. It seems that while faith in Christ as Lord and Saviour is essential for membership, church service and contribution are not. It is not worth it to “scare away” a possible member with these issues, and they can delay them with no consequence for the membership of the candidate.

Fellowship was valued and considered. But there was no requirement for that friendship to take more committed steps. In addition, since, as one participant explained, there is no expectation of expulsion of members, the new member could decide to never contribute in any way and remain a member of the church.

However, this is at odds with the Baptist tradition of the covenant between members. Written or not, it was the expectation that people, before joining the community, would assume their responsibility in assisting the church and being assisted by it.

One can argue theologically that conversion should imply service and willingness to give sacrificially. High demand is placed on the followers of Jesus as we can see in passages like *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and*

*sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple”* (Luke 14:26, NIV), or *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* (Mark 8:34, NIV). Some then could argue – like one of the participants – that if someone professes faith in Jesus but is not willing to serve the church, then that faith could be seen as shallow, or at least could be questioned.

Is this a theological issue then? Perhaps though there is agreement on the need for salvation to join the church, there are different perspectives on what salvation implies. While some might expect the conversion to come with commitment and willingness to serve, others might believe that the willingness to serve takes time to be developed. There would be this expectation that as they mature in faith, they will be more involved, identify their gifts, and be more generous with time and money.

One of the participants mentioned that it is with the teaching of the church and the Holy Spirit that the person will understand their responsibilities, giving the idea that it should happen naturally and without intervention.

However, it might be that this is not a theological issue but a cultural-historical one.

The Lutheran Church became the country’s official religion in 1537 and lost this official title in 2012 (Church of Norway, 2015). During hundreds of years citizenship and church membership were one and the same. To come to church was not necessarily a consequence of someone's faith and personal conversion, but a matter of being part of Norwegian society. And that come with the single duty of being present on Sundays and taking the sacraments. In 1845 the Norwegian State accepted other denominations and free churches – including the Baptists – started to emerge (Eidberg, 2003). Nevertheless, – as mentioned by one of the participants – hundreds of years of the Lutheran’s monopoly of faith leaves an imprint on concepts of membership that lingers and may not be easily identified.

It could be as well that this lack of pre-membership instruction on the responsibilities of a member is to avoid imposing practices.

We have already seen Charles Taylor's explanation of our contemporary age calling it "the Age of Authenticity" where for the contemporary secular man religion must be according to his choice and make sense to him personally (2007, in Smith, 2015, p. 88).

Heelas and Woodhead (2005) also spoke about the subjective turn in spirituality where people prefer a spirituality that "matches them" and allows freedom and flexibility. Wenell (2014) also mentioned in his research how the emotional understanding of conversion became the dominant one and the community the enabler of conversions.

The changes that these researchers and philosopher saw in society could explain the hesitation in conversations about responsibility. It might be a way of offering a more "open and flexible church", giving priority to the experience of conversion and minimizing the "external constraint" that is the responsibility of membership.

I will speak more about the implications of this in the conclusion.

## **A different case for the youth**

Another note to underline is how the conversation-method used by the pastors does not apply to youth. The Baptists were influenced by the Lutheran tradition of "Konfirmasjon" and adopted something similar. Young people, when they get to 14-15 years of age, are invited – and often desire to do so – to join a course and to have a celebration at the end of it. Baptist pastors often wait until they have successfully finished this course to baptise them (upon a personal confession of faith). During this course, the young people receive a clear idea of what

are the fundamental Christian values, what Christian life looks like and what is expected of a member of the church.

Interesting how one of the participants noted this contradiction during the interview when asked if the relationship between the candidate, and the church was part of the assessment process:

Yeah yes. I mostly, uh... Those topics are not very, very... That very usual before the baptism, but I speak with them mostly after the baptism about that. And then you have... You have, it could be... This could be a kind of opposite way with the young people who are having 14-15 years, we have, uh, bring them through a, uh, a program for Young Christians and that could be a lot of aspects.

Adults of even young people (older than the confirmation age) receive no pre-membership instruction, while the “konfirmanter” receive the whole package.

Could there be an assumption that everyone has been through the confirmation course so that even if some years have passed, there is no need to repeat it? Is that question asked in the assessment process?

Or could it be that is just not something the Baptist pastor would think about, accepting with naturalness that they need to give this course to young people, not because they believe they need preparation for membership, but because it's part of the culture? That is what they have always known.

### **The cases off the norm**

A point that may not be completely part of the scope of this research but that I believe is worth mentioning is the different cases that were described as “special”, or “rare”. The reason why it goes beyond this research is that they are cases of baptism: people being baptised without any

plan of joining the membership of the church but joining another, or without any affiliation to any church, or baptism done without the witness of the church.<sup>33</sup>

So, though they all spoke of elements that are normative for them, three of the five also mentioned cases where they went against their norms in order to include or please someone (with a sense of contribution to someone's walk with Christ).

It could be interesting to look at these cases "off the norm" in another research.

### **A glimpse of the membership reality**

Something that I came to notice during the interview was how the participants spoke more about youth, transfers from another church, Lutherans, or immigrants, than new believers.

There is a crisis in growth in the European Christian churches, and Norway is no different. Most new members were already part of a Christian community, from a different town or denomination, or children of the members who became older and at the age to make their own decision.

It is a glimpse of the demographics of the Norwegian Baptists worth noticing, and that can lead to more surgical support of the pastor's ministry.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE RESULTS**

It is important to mention again that it is complicated for the participants to have a clear memory of the different conversations they had in their years of service, and to be detailed in

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<sup>33</sup> Perhaps we can see here as well a link between this case and what Wenell spoke on this research: that the Baptist church has progressively disconnected conversion from the community of the church.



the description of what they usually do. As consequence, without being present at these conversations, it is challenging to do a fair analysis of them.

# CONCLUSION

I started this research having as background my experience with the Baptists in Portugal where the norm for candidates for baptism is to go through a preparation class.

When I came to Norway, from my own experience and the descriptions that I've heard, I noticed that the process was different. I also noticed differences in church structure and wondered if the method by which pastors were assessing candidates for baptism could offer some explanations for the (sometimes) great disparity between these two Baptist communities.

Wanting to go beyond an initial impression, I decided to do this research and ask the agents behind such a process – Pastors – how they carry it, and how the church is involved. Basically, what are their standards and how do they identify them in future members?

The research could inform us of how Norwegian Baptist pastors perceive church membership, and how they understand and identify salvation in others.

This research also tried to see if these pastors that are leading *Baptist Churches* are following beliefs and practices that could be identified as Baptist, though we know that there is no simple and closed definition of what Baptist is and has always been variety in this denomination.

Though one should not draw absolute conclusions, this research provided different impressions and insights that can be very useful as a starting point for other questions and reflections, but also a clue on the – perhaps otherwise unnoticeable – developments of Baptist ecclesiology in Norway.

The first insight that I shall mention is that the fundamental tradition of the Baptist church of believer's-only membership is still practised: to become a member one must be born-again, be regenerate and show evidence of that.

I found as well that Norwegian pastors try to see that evidence in a one-on-one conversation. The way the candidate described their experience of conversion, their intentions with the church and their relationship with Jesus provided the pastors with confidence, or suspicion, in the authenticity of their faith.

It also showed that they persisted in the Baptist principle of soul competency and searched for a conversion unassisted by others and in full personal conscience.

We could see how fellowship with the church was valued and even taken as an essential condition for membership, but a fellowship with little strings attached. The pastors had a general hesitation when it came to delineating responsibilities for the future member. This however is distant from the covenants made between members that characterised the beginning of the Baptist denomination.

In addition, we saw that though conversation is the common method, there is variety among pastors. This variety is expected – to some degree – and part of the pros and cons of congregationalism. Some of the cons were even mentioned by the pastors, sharing how the lack of guidelines from a national organisation, and lack of accord on these matters, made things more complicated and stressful.

Before sharing any suggestions, I restate that one of the goals of this research is to facilitate reflection on the present practice. If the pastor chooses to assess their candidates through dialogue, then it is important to consider the positive and negative implications.

A positive aspect – that the Portuguese Baptist could learn from – is the simplicity of the process which makes less intimidating to join a church and continue a process of spiritual development within the community.

Another positive aspect is the relational component. While the relationship between teacher-student (as in a pre-baptismal course) can lead the teacher to think that he knows the

student, it is not as effective as a personal conversation and it can hinder a real understanding of the relationship student has with their faith. In addition, these pre-baptismal courses may rely too heavily on a cognitive aspect of faith, focusing on the person's understanding and reception of different doctrines as truth, but neglecting other aspects that are revealed with time and in conversation.

We could find other positive and negative aspects of conversation as method for assessment of members, but it is useful to take into consideration insights from social sciences and anthropological studies. To assist in this reflection, I selected different ideas I considered pertinent: the issue of the boundaries of the church, the different God representations, and the immigration phenomena of Norway.

### **The boundaries of the church**

Paul G. Hiebert, an American missiologist that we have already presented in the Introduction, wrote about the definition and consequences of “bounded sets” and “fuzzy sets” in his book “Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues” (2001). Bounded and Fuzzy sets concern how strict is the boundary in the church that separates members from non-members.

In a Bounded set, things do or don't belong to it, there is no middle ground, the boundary is sharp and clear (pp. 113-14).

Christianity as a Bounded Set will try to see if the person is inside or outside from external characteristics (one cannot see inside the person), this would presuppose some test to the person: the verbal testimony, the affirmation of the belief of Christian doctrines, the right orthopraxy, etc. (p. 115). For this, there must be a list of doctrines. This could also lead to a gap between conversion and baptism in order to be sure that the person is adopting all the doctrines.

Once the person is inside, it is fully-Christian, and there are no inside hierarchies for all members are seen as the same. Meetings are reserved for members-only where everyone has an equal voice, young or old (p. 116). There could be a tendency to treat it as a corporation (p. 117).

The conversion would be defined as a one-moment experience that changes the person from a non-Christian to a full-Christian. This becomes the main goal of mission, leaving sanctification as something secondary (p. 116).

In a Bounded set church, theology – as the definer of the categories “in” and “out” – is constant and universal, untouched by its context. Everything that is not part of the faith is seen as pagan and false, and there would be a high suspicion of anything that could resemble syncretism (p. 117).

Fuzzy sets have no sharp boundaries, and there are different degrees of inclusion (p. 118). In the fuzzy sets, like in the bonded sets, membership is according to what members are, but they can be it in different degrees. The consequence is that there is a continuum from “is” to “is not” (p. 119).

In Christianity as a fuzzy set, membership has degrees: one can believe in all the doctrines or can believe in half of them. Conversion is not necessarily seen as a one-moment event but a continuous process that entails the gradual adoption of the practices and beliefs (p. 120). There would be no need for a membership list, for the effort would be on attracting the ones “outside” or “on the way” so they could have the opportunity to grow in faith as part of the church (p. 122). That would mean a higher tolerance of different views and beliefs inside the church.

Likewise, this would lead to a distinction in members where authority is given only the ordained or the “full in” elders, concentrating in them the responsibility to guide the practice and faith of the church. The church is seen as a community of believers so there would be a focus on fellowship (p. 122).

In a fuzzy set, missionaries would see truth in all faiths and be more hesitant in affirming Jesus as the only way of salvation, though affirming the superiority of the Christian faith. This set would be hunted by the danger of relativism and nihilism (p. 122).

The point that I intend to make by sharing Hiebert's description is that our definition of the boundaries of the church will lead to very different churches with different structures, hierarchies and different weaknesses.

### **The different representations of God**

Another point that I introduce here for its relevance in a reflection around conversation is the different representations that people carry of God.

Dr. Ana Maria Rizzuto (1932-), is a psychoanalyst who ran a clinical study on the origins of people's representations of God, published in the book "Birth of the Living God" in 2011.

Rizzuto's first of the central theses of her book is that:

"God is a special type of object representation created by the child in that psychic space where transitional objects—whether toys, blankets, or mental representations—are provided with their powerfully real illusory lives" (p. 178)

The representation one has of God is created by the individual very early on. The process and the influences that form the God representation are extremely complex "ranging from the deepest biological levels of human experience to the subtlest of spiritual realisations" (p. 182). There are many "Gods" as there are individuals. The God representation is created through experience and fantasy, filled with parental traits but with the addition of other traits (pp. 208-209). It's a representation that is adequate for the child's deepest needs and so it changes according to the challenges the child faces as he grows and matures (pp. 179-180).

This representation is never abandoned; “God” can be tossed away when it’s too much to handle, ignored, set as unnecessary, or recovered and embraced (p. 180).

Though this study is quite complex, it is important to notice that it was not a religious study but a psychoanalytic one. People develop representations of God even without experiencing a conversion – an encounter with a real God. My comment to this study – and belief – is that God [the Christian God] does not exist only in the mind of its believers but has a real existence. God has the power and will to let Himself be known by us, through scripture and experience, and power to correct our misunderstandings about Him.

Nevertheless, the point I intend to make by bringing this study is that, until Chris’s coming, there will always be a side of “our God” that is made by us. We will never fully know God, so we “co-create” him in our minds. This implies that when a Pastor hears someone say “I Love Jesus”, chances are that this person does not have the same idea of Jesus as the pastor. There can be many different “Jesus”’: it can be a Jesus very close to the biblical description, or it can be a Jesus that was made to fill a deep emotional and psychological need. Further questions could clarify if their representation of God matches the biblical God or not.

### **The increased multiculturalism of Norway**

Immigration has always been a part of the Norwegian History with immigrants coming from neighbouring countries to find work (Gursli-Berg, Myhre and Tønnessen, 2021). In the 1960s immigration changed with a new wave arriving from distant countries and cultures (Brochmann, 2015).

In SSB statistics, we see a constant increase of immigration from the 1950s reaching a peak in 2011. The immigrants came mostly from Asia [including Turkey], West Europe and Africa.

In 2013, around 13% of the population of Norway were immigrants and from 2003 to 2013 the number of immigrants and second-generation immigrants more than doubled (Brochmann,

2015). The Statistisk sentralbyrå [Statistics of Norway] tells us that today the number is around 820 000 immigrants, composed of people who come for work, for family reunion, education and as refugees (SSB, 2022A).

There is a projection that by 2060, immigrants and second-generation immigrants will be a quarter of the population of Norway (SSB, 2022b).

This brings new challenges to pastors, who will meet more and more people coming from distant cultures. Even second-generation immigrants, though speaking Norwegian and partly adopting Norwegian culture, are still influenced by their parent's culture and worldview.

Pastors need to be aware of the challenges for membership that this phenomenon is bringing – and some have already been dealing with such challenges. Can pastors apply the same process of membership assessment as they do to Norwegian believers?

## SUGGESTIONS

In light of the information retrieved from the interviews and taking into account the contribution of the studies and data mentioned above, I delineate some suggestions that can be considered:

The first is concerned with what type of church Norwegian pastors what to build. Where in the spectrum of “bounded set” and “fuzzy set” do they want to place their congregation?

From the interviews, we could see that their view of the church gathers characteristics from both sets. But where does the pendulum swing the most? And is that a conscious decision?

One could say that, traditionally, the Baptist ecclesiology is located more in the “bounded set” (but perhaps not on its extreme) while other churches that are emerging in the Christian arena are closer to the “fuzzy set”. As we have seen, there are pros and cons to each one of them. Hiebert defends that:



“As Christians, we need to know these worldviews and how they cause us to understand and to misunderstand the Scriptures. As missionaries, we need to know how the categories people use affect such questions as the nature of Christianity, contextualization, and the relationship between religions.” (p. 111).

It is not the intention of this research to dictate which one is the best and the theological discussion on this issue for it would certainly go beyond the size limit. It is up to the leadership of the church to reflect and conscientiously position themselves. After a clear definition of their ecclesiology, pastors can then define what is expected of each member in the community of the church: what level of compromise they ought to have, their contribution and their responsibility towards other members.

Whatever level is defined, it must be cleared with the person before becoming a member, and it may be naive to believe that that understanding will happen naturally through time.

Perhaps it is good advice to look back at the Baptist tradition of the covenant between members. They didn't necessarily have to be extensive and detailed signed documents, but were at least a clear statement of the member's responsibility to the church and vice-versa.

Different authors have suggested a return to the practice of covenants. Fiddes (2006) elaborated extensively on the role of covenant in the Baptist tradition and ends (p. 47) with a recommendation to develop contemporary confessions of faith. Hammett (2019, p. 125) also encourages the return of the church covenant explaining that they did not require perfection from the candidate but made clear that there was a commitment taken by becoming a member that a regenerate person should have no problem making.

The participants did have some intuitive list of affirmations and beliefs that they tried to hear from the candidate. Including the story around their decision and their relationship to Christ.

There is potential for misunderstanding in fundamental theological issues like “who is God” or “what is salvation” not only due to different God representations but to different

cultural backgrounds. Considering this, I suggest that pastors could improve and clarify what information they search for in the candidates. More than listening to a story, there should be more questions about the individual's idea of salvation, church and God.

Pre-membership instruction could identify many issues and confusion. This would benefit not only the integrity of the church but the person's relationship with it and with faith in itself, avoiding surprises and disappointments (McCullough, 2020). However, every practice should be contextualised, and pre-baptismal instruction does not come without weaknesses.

Perhaps there could be a compromise between a more experience and conversation-based approach, and a more teaching and cognitive-based approach, trying to gather the best of both worlds.

Another suggestion that came from comments made by two of the participants was the importance of inter-church collaboration and guidelines.

In Norway, the Baptist Union plays an important role in the collaboration between member-churches and has produced different publications across time around Baptist identity, ecclesiology, and baptism practices<sup>34</sup>.

One of the participants shared that in the past there was a bigger degree of normativity among member-churches and that facilitated membership transitions. However, today each church is more independent and develops its own positions, feeling no obligation to be in accordance with other churches.

To republish books and articles with orientation concerning baptism and membership could cause some tension. We saw before that different views on membership have been allowed in the recent decades and so, to go back to publish *one* Baptist view on them, could be

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<sup>34</sup> We commented briefly on some of these publications in the Literature Review.

problematic. Before implementing guidelines, the organisation could collaborate in the production of reflections and articles that deal with the emerging challenges in the field of ecclesiology and boundaries on membership, as it has done in the past.

Theological Education can also be an important tool in preparing future leaders to be reflective on their practices and ecclesiology.

It is also relevant for this suggestion what Jackson (2009, p. 154) concluded from his thesis: there is a gap between what scholars promote and what the local church members believe. For many, theological and historical discourse is not relevant. This study was a brief window into what Pastors think and do, but wider research on how members view the boundaries of the church is pertinent for an ongoing discussion on this topic.

## SUMMARISING

This research had as goal the observation of a current practice within the Norwegian Baptists – the way pastors assess candidates to membership, an analysis of the practice and the development of suggestions, following the “Mutual Critical Conversation” model.

The findings of this study revealed to us important aspects of this practice: Baptist pastors in Norway use an experience and testimony-based approach – in a conversation – for their judgment of someone’s salvation. They don’t feel the need to resort to theological teaching at this point. We learned that they try to identify in the person’s testimony signs of conscious and personal faith, belief in Jesus as Lords and Saviour and a commitment to Him that prolongates into the future, in light with what we can call a Baptist identity. There is also value given to the person’s integration in the church fellowship.

We also found that there is a reluctance on talks about responsibilities before the person becomes a member preferring to delay that discussion. This is a deviation from the Baptist tradition that valued the covenantal relationship between members.

They also struggle with the same groups of candidates: people coming from a Lutheran background, people transferring from another church, and young people.

There are different suggestions that I propose in light of the results and from the contribution of different studies. The first is a call to re-evaluate the sufficiency of a conversation in the assessment methods: conversation is essential, but its weaknesses need to be considered, especially in light of recent social phenomena.

The pastor's ecclesiological views can be clarified and reaffirmed considering that though they identify as "Baptists", there are deviations from the "Baptist Tradition" that may or may not be assumed. Their ecclesiology should have repercussions on the internal structure of the church and standards for membership.

Finally, an inter-church organization and theological education can have a helpful role and organize solutions of support now that we see that Pastors have common struggles and doubts in the selection of membership.

I conclude by saying that due to the implications that standards for membership have in the Baptist Churches in Norway, and the influences society is facing, there is room for further research that can help Pastors reflect and decide on their practices, avoid weaknesses and misunderstandings, and clarify the path forward.

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