

1b Abstracts

1. Management of meaning in major organizational change – the case of Malmö parish

The Swedish Lutheran Church in Malmö has recently implemented a major reorganization. Six parishes consisting of altogether sixteen congregations in an economic community has become one parish with six congregations. These should be kept together in a whole, led by a so-called “super vicar” and with one joint church council. In a longitudinal research project that started in the autumn 2013, the process is studied through regular interviews with leaders at three levels; the super vicar, a parish vicar, and two assistant vicars with supervisory functions. Meaning making is seen as a key factor in leadership and the linguistic tools as a central resource (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011) – that is “leadership as the management of meaning” (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Meaning, in this study, is the way in which church leaders and politically elected council representatives understand and talk about the new organization as well as the process of organizational change in the Malmö parish.

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2. Discernment as spirituality en route: the case of change management in church context

In the “real” world of business, politics, law, medicine and other matters, firm decisions based on clear criteria for the sake of positive results are often required. These are, despite the acknowledgement of grey areas, the measures of measured success. This kind of world requires certainties; hence a language has been developed that conveys clarity: “hard sciences”, “targets”, “goals”, “outcomes”, “strategic plans”, etc. At times, such “business models” are adopted within the church world too. In such a world, philosophy, psychology, spirituality and other dimensions of being human are soon seen as being unclear, unreliable, changeable, with people-related matters at times therefore called “soft issues”. In such nomenclature, matters religious are notoriously “soft”. No firm, clear “policies” can be adopted. (Where dogma had at times been raised to supra-human levels, the results were too often inhumane practices.) In seeking to align one’s life with an awareness of the presence of the divine, however, given the Otherness of the divine, the only attainable language is “soft”. Even then, such language is acknowledged at most to be metaphorical, and in approaching the holy, becomes ever more powerless to convey awarenesses, senses and encounters, until language itself flows into a sea of nothingness. The unsayable Other is formulated by silence. This world, mystic as it may seem, is even more concrete to those touched by it than the “real” world could ever be; it in fact seeks to transform the “real” world into a more humane, caring place. This world of faith, unworldly in its mystic orientation as it may seem at first glance, is thus always en route - not only in itself and among its adherents, but also fully in this world. This journey of faith is moreover never arrived; always unfolding. Its “outcome” is not a destination, but the journey itself; i.e., the journey with the Holy. This leads to the question, cruel to those touched by faith but crucial in a “real” world dominated by its modernisms and positivisms, also as this relates to change management within church context: can these “two worlds” co-exist?

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3. Framing, meaning and normative control in church leadership dilemmas

One of the most powerful tools in leadership is framing i.e. the relation between leadership and constructing reality. A leader that manages framing offers convincing and meaningful proposals on a common understanding of reality. "Reality is a social construct and language it's primary vehicle. What is real is often what we say is real" (Fairhurst). The attempts to influence a common understanding in a team are part of a normative control directed at the employees' perception of reality.

In this presentation we look closer at a few texts on dilemmas in a church leadership context. The texts are written by participants in a church leader course, compulsory for pastors aiming for vicar positions. On one hand these papers reveal an ideal of distributed, communicative, sensitive and open-minded leadership. On the other hand, in the conclusive parts of the texts we find leaders exercising a more persuasive form of normative control. How can such a dissonance between leadership ideals and leadership actions be understood? To discuss this question we use the concepts of heroic and post-heroic leadership (Eicher).

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