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Characteristics of Growing Churches in Estonia: A Qualitative Study

Ago Lilleorg
University of Tartu

Kaido Soom
University of Tartu

Tõnu Lehtsaar
University of Tartu

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CHARACTERISTICS OF GROWING CHURCHES IN ESTONIA
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

By Ago Lilleorg, Kaido Soom, and Tõnu Lehtsaar

Ago Lilleorg is a PhD student in theology at the University of Tartu. He has practical ministry experience since 1993. His research fields are ethics and church growth.

Kaido Soom is a lecturer in practical theology at the University of Tartu and a priest of the Estonian Lutheran Church. His areas of research are sociology of religion and pastoral care. He is the theological editor at the newspaper *Church of Estonia*.

Tõnu Lehtsaar is a professor of the psychology of religion at the University of Tartu, Estonia. He is currently working as the staff counsellor chaplain at the University of Tartu. His main research fields concern the psychology of religious experience and religious issues in counselling. One of his interests is the theory and methods of social skills training for ministers.

Abstract

This is an overview of the characteristics of growing churches in Estonia. The study is grounded in semi-structured interviews conducted in 2019-2020 in nine Protestant congregations that have grown in 2003-2017. There were three to four interviewees from each congregation, a total of 14 being women and 18 men. The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed by combining both the open and the *invivo* coding model. No prescribed categories were used in the analysis. The results were formulated as characteristics of growing churches: spiritual life; inner climate; human focus; the minister of the church; relationships outside the church; and a collective self-image. The following conclusions may be drawn from the study. First, the main agent of a growing congregation is its minister, whose influence determines both the climate inside and the activities outside the congregation. Second, mission in the growing churches is done through need-based ministry, relationships and practical contribution to society. Third, it may be stated that growth is not the result of setting and pursuing goals for growth but above all that of loving, focusing on the needs of and serving people.

Keywords: church growth, mission, practical theology, Protestant churches

Introduction

Estonia has been considered one of the most secularized states not only in Europe but in the world.[1] A mere 14% of Estonians claims that religion has an important role in their

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[1] Ringo Ringvee, "Is Estonia Really the Least Religious Country in the World?" *The Guardian,* 16.09.2011, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/sep/16/estonia-least-religious-country-world (viewed on 23.07.2020).

lives.[2] The 2011 census of Estonia reveals that 71% of the Estonian population defines themselves as non-believers.[3] These figures put the Estonians first globally. According to a PEW research (2018), 7% of the Estonians claim religion to have an important role in their lives, and 10% attend a worship service once a month. By these indicators, Estonia shares the lowest ranks among the 34 European states.[4] Soom and Lehtsaar characterize the modern religiosity of Estonia as follows: "Estonia is a nation where Christians are in the minority: of the Estonian population, 36% regard themselves as Christians and 21% claim to be church members."[5] They also found that "the total of the Lutheran Church's membership dues payers decreased steadily during the Soviet era. This may be attributed to the state's restrictions and atheistic work. During the re-establishment of Estonia's independence, the tally of dues payers jumped due to a release from restrictions and a positive attitude to the church. Thereafter, the counts of membership dues payers fell down again, reflecting continued secularization in society."[6]

Ever since the re-establishment of independence in 1991, studies in the sociology of religion have been conducted in Estonia with a focus on the research of the religious worldview of the average resident of Estonia.[7] Insofar as is known, churches or, more precisely, the reasons behind the growing or dwindling of churches, have so far not been researched. The present article introduces a qualitative study conducted by Ago Lilleorg.

Church growth studies and related research is most extensive in North America, followed by West Europe and South Korea.[8] The bulk of the literature on the subject was

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[2] Elitsa Vucheva, "Estonians Least Religious in the World." *EUobserver,* 02.11.2009, https://euobserver.com/social/27587 (viewed on 05.03.2021).

[3] Ave Tampere, "Kas Eesti on kõige vähem usklik riik maailmas?" [Is Estonia the Least Religious Nation in the World?] *Eesti Päevaleht,* 01.07.2014, https://epl.delfi.ee/artikkel/67568424/kas-eesti-on-koige-vahem-usklik-riik-maailmas (viewed on 04.03.2021).

[4] Jonathan Evans and Chris Baronavski, "How do European Countries Differ in Religious Commitment?" *Pew Research Center*, 05.12.2018 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/05/how-do-european-countries-differ-in-religious-commitment/ (viewed on 04.03.2021)

[5] Kaido Soom and Tõnu Lehtsaar (2021), "Forms and Roots of Contemporary Religiosity in Estonia." *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol. 41, Iss. 2, Article 2, p. 15.

[6] Ibid., pp. 3-4.

[7] Based on these studies, the Estonian Council of Churches has issued collections of articles titled *Astu alla rahva sekka [Descend to the People]* (2012) and *Kuhu lähed, Maarjamaa? [Quo vadis, Terra Mariana]* (2016). The studies of 2010 and 2015 were supplemented with church- or congregation-related questions. At the Faculty of Religion of the University of Tartu, a number of doctoral dissertations have been defended that more or less overlap with the subject of the present article: Lea Altnurme, *Kristlusest oma usuni: Uurimus muutustest eestlaste religioossuses 20. saj II poolel [From Christianity to Own Faith: A Study of the Changes in the Religiosity of the Estonians in the Second Half of the 20th Century]* (2006); Kaido Soom, *Täiskasvanute leeritöö Eesti Evangeelses Luterlikus Kirikus ja selle arengustrateegia koostamine [Adult Confirmation Classes in the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Preparation of a Development Strategy therefor]* (2007) and Liina Kilemit, *Kristlike kogudustega liitumise põhjustest [Reasons for Joining Christian Congregations]* (2020).

[8] Church growth studies have spread worldwide to institutions of theological education, of which mention may be made of Asbury Theological Seminary (USA), Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (USA) and

issued in the second half of the 20th century, at a time when the topic of church growth peaked in popularity. The studies in the field focused primarily on precise numerical measurement of the increase or decrease of the church and on deductions from the data to establish the reasons for growth. Although the topic attracted extensive attention globally, foremost among the clergy of Protestant churches, the focus of the related literature presently, even before the turn of the millennium, shifted to the interpretation[9] of a new paradigm—church health.[10]

While the present article addresses the experience of churches growing in Estonia, its findings may also be of interest to the clergy of other countries' churches that are in similar situations, as well as to sociologists and religion researchers in general. The study of church growth is imperative for a number of reasons: 1) in order to understand the factors conducive or obstructive to people's conversion and affiliation with Christian churches; 2) in order to identify factors causing church growth; and 3) on account of the position of a church in a secular society. Church growth in a secular society serves as an indication of the broader influence of the Christian doctrine on both the life of an individual and the societal level.

The article first introduces the theoretical sources of church growth, followed by a qualitative study and its process and results. The findings of the study are presented and described through the primary and secondary characteristics that typify the churches that participated in the study. It is important to emphasize that the objective of the study is not to pass a judgement on the practice or theological orientation of particular congregations. Instead, it is to identify common features that characterize churches exhibiting membership growth. These characteristics may be manifested in beliefs, attitudes or activities.

Theoretical Background of the Study

An empirical analysis of church growth requires theoretical sources to provide a basis for a qualitative study. The present study is based on the mental framework of Donald

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Talbot Theological Seminary at Biola University (USA), the Anglican St. John's College in Durham (UK), Vrije University (the Netherlands) and Theological University Kampen (the Netherlands). Predominantly, however, church growth has been studied in North America. European and other countries serve rather as exceptions here.

[9] Ed Stetzer, *The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement from, and back to, Its Missional Roots*, *https://www.researchgate.net.* https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237450540_The_Evolution_of_Church_Growth_Church_Health_and _the_Missional_Church_An_Overview_of_the_Church_Growth_Movement_from_and_back_to_Its_Missional _Roots 2005, pp. 12-16 (viewed on 17.05.2020)

[10] The supporters of this concept wanted to stress the inner quality of the congregation, not its numerical growth. They believed that healthy congregations grow naturally. The primary protagonist of this view is Rick Warren, who said: "The key concern for a church should be its health, not growth." Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), p. 17.

McGavran, founder of the church growth theory. In general, the term *church growth* implies the study of churches within the confines of practical theology, which focusses on the identification of the reasons for, and obstructions to, growth. The foundation for research on church growth was laid by Donald McGavran (1897-1990).[11] Previously, the life of a church had predominantly represented the realm of practicians. The scientific nature of church growth studies, however, created the conditions for data collection, description, and analysis using scientific research methods. McGavran was convinced that church growth studies constitute a scientific approach.

Previously, the life and mission of a church were seen as separate entities. McGavran's greatest contribution is that he saw them as inseparable.[12] For him, mission and the church were synonymous. However, both Donald McGavran and his subsequent students were convinced that mission is the pivotal characteristic of growing churches.[13] The same is affirmed by his most famous collaborator Peter C. Wagner, one of the greatest proponents of the church growth movement in the 1980s.[14] He found that the primary task of church growth is to fulfill the Great Commission.[15] He refined and systematized McGavran's ideas. For

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[11] Donald McGavran worked as a missionary under the auspices of *United Christian Missionary Society*, being a lifelong member of *Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),* a Protestant denomination in the USA and Canada. It represents a religious movement built on the Reformed Church tradition (see Donald McGavran, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_McGavran, 22.02.2021 (viewed on 28.03.2021)). A more detailed description of the origins and operations of that missionary society is provided by Sakari Pinola in his doctoral dissertation (see Sakari Pinola, *Church Growth, Principles and Praxis of Donald. A. McGavran's Missiology*, (Åbo, Åbo Akademi University Press, 1995), pp. 36-59). Donald McGavran was a missionary to India in 1923-1955. In that period he started to investigate missionary-planted churches and measure the factors both conducive and obstructive to their growth. Thom Rainer says that McGavran's book *Bridges of God* (1955) consists of his personal observations and studies on mission and its efficiency in India and the world at large. The publication of the book is regarded as the starting point of the church growth movement as well as the event activating the movement (see Thom Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology and Principles,* (Nashville TN, Broadman&Holmann Publishing Group 1993), pp 19-25; 33-39). In the book *Bridges of God*, McGavran presented his findings proceeding from the mission context, and when he moved to the USA in 1958, the further development and studies of the church growth principles formulated by him also shifted to North America. Although he found that the general rules for researching churches and identifying the reasons for their growing or dwindling are universal and applicable in diverse cultures and confessions, he did not develop a unified church growth theory.

[12] McGavran's church growth prerequisites are summarised by Gary L. McIntosh as follows: 1. God wants people to convert and receive salvation in Jesus Christ. 2. The reasons for church growth can be identified, primarily by means of studies. 3. It is imperative to prepare an action plan that is based on the study data. Gary McIntosh, *Evaluating Church Growth Movement,*(Grand Rapids MI, Zondervan 2004), pp. 15-16.

[13] Thom Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology and Principles,* (Nashville TN, Broadman & Holmann Publishing Group, 1993), pp 19-25; 33-39.

[14] Wagner's best known books on church growth are: *Your Church Can Grow* (1976), *Leading Your Church to Grow* (1984) and *Strategies of Church Growth* (1987). As well, McGavran and Wagner jointly founded the *American Society of Church Growth* (1986), which is operative to this day.

[15] Peter C. Wagner, *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel: A Biblical Mandate* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR, 1981), p. 101; Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, p. 149.

instance, he deemed that arbitrariness needed to be reduced in ecclesiastical activity[16] and churches needed to be grounded in systematic growth. Wagner defined church growth as follows:

> Church growth is that science that strives to understand, through the Bible, sociology, history and behavioral sciences, the reason churches grow or dwindle. Authentic church growth happens when the disciples of the "Great Commission" are involved and show themselves as responsible church members.[17]

Both McGavran and Wagner deemed it important to ascertain the reasons for the increase and decrease of the church. However, even though professional literature on the church growth movement employs the term *church growth theory*, it is important to emphasize that there exists no conventional church growth theory.[18] Nevertheless, McGavran stresses that context be taken into account while performing research on churches: "Given that there are so many differences in churches and congregations, baptized memberships and reasons for growing and dwindling, it is not possible to employ a unified form. Each study shall employ its own selected tools. They shall be suited to the particular situation."[19] The study presented in this article focused on the identification and description of characteristics typical of growing churches.

Definition of the Churches Participating in the Study

In the secular cultural sphere of the West, many churches are dwindling;[20] this is corroborated by the statistics of Estonia's five largest Protestant denominations (see Table 1). Church growth can be measured in various ways, and it is occasionally rather complicated. Churches count their members variously; similarly, the affiliation requirements are different across denominations. Some churches count attending members, others active members, still others those joined through baptism. Accounts of individuals transferring from other

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[16] For instance, over the course of church history, church growth has occurred in extraordinary leaps, so-called awakenings, where the conversion of multitudes of people triggered an explosive church growth. An example thereof is St. Patrick's (385-461) influence on church growth in Ireland. Under his leadership, approximately 700 churches were planted and 100 000 individuals were baptized, and he himself ordinated hundreds of priests as spiritual leaders of new congregations.

[17] Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, p. 21.

[18] Jan Inge Jenssen, "Inspiration Sources of Church Development." *Scandinavian Journal for Leadership&Theology, II,* 2015, p. 10.

[19] Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth,* (Grand Rapids, MI, William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 79.

[20] Stefan Paas (2018)," A Case Study of Church Growth by Church Planting in Germany: Are They Connected?" *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, p. 40.

churches are kept in some but not all churches. The present study did not focus on the particulars of membership counts, the reasons for joining churches or transfers from other churches. In this case, such a generalizing study would not have been possible to perform. The present study focuses on data submitted by denominational centers. Adult membership change was selected as the best comparison criterion between churches. In the case of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC), the closest equivalent was the number of membership dues payers.

Table 1. Total number of congregations in Protestant denominations in Estonia in 2003-2017.

	Growing congregations	Dwindling congregations	Terminated congregations	Total (2003)	Total (2017)
Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church	14*	149	0	163	168
Estonian Methodist Church	2	22	0	24	24
Estonian Christian Pentecostal Church	3	27	1	30	35
Union of Estonian Adventist Churches	2	23	0	25	29
Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia	17	58	14	89	83

*For EELC, the number of membership dues payers are considered

In the opening phase of the study, the memberships in 2003-2017 of major Protestant denominations[21] in Estonia were compared. The comparison revealed growing churches in all the five largest Protestant denominations. Of these, two from each denomination (altogether 10) were selected. In several denominations, the selection was easy to make as there were just two churches that were growing. In the denominations with a greater number of growing churches, the choice was made based on three criteria: 1) the congregations that were growing the most; 2) the geographical location; and 3) the inclusion of both urban and rural congregations. Of the ten congregations selected, nine were willing to participate in the study.

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[21] Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, (EELC); Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia (UFEBCE); Estonian Methodist Church (EMC); Estonian Christian Pentecostal Church (ECPC); Union of Adventist Churches of Estonia (UACE).

Table 2. Memberships in 2003-2017 of churches participating in the study

	2003	2017	Change
Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church			
RISTI	126	325	+199 (157.9%)
ÜLIKOOLI-JAANI	82	201	+121 (147.5%)
Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches			
ANTSLA	34	61	+27 (79.4%)
OLEVISTE	1374	1873	+499 (36.1%)
Union of 7th Day Adventist Churches of Estonia			
ELVA	17	29	+12 (70.5%)
Estonian Methodist Church			
JÕHVI	80	181	+101 (126.25 %)
VÕRU	20	82	+62 (410%)
Estonian Christian Pentecostal Church			
KURESSAARE	85	123	+38 (44.7%)
PÕLTSAMAA	30	58	+28 (93.3%)

The next phase of the study focused on these churches (see Table 2) in order to identify their characteristics.

Data Collection Method

Semi-structured individualized interviews were conducted with the members of the participating churches (n=32). The minister and two to three active members of each church were interviewed. A total of eight interviews were conducted with the ministers and 24 with the church members.[22] Of the interviewees, 14 were women and 18 were men. The interviews were conducted from June to November 2019. The length of the interviews ranged from 21 minutes to one hour and 30 minutes. The average interview length was 45 minutes. The interviewer was Ago Lilleorg. In the interviews, the interviewee was first asked to speak of his/her church and of what he/she thought was important for their church, as well as of his/her church's achievements and challenges. In the body of the interview, the interviewees were inquired about the reasons they thought were behind their church's growth and about what the church had done for its part in order to grow. As it was important to identify the correlations between the church's mission and growth, it was investigated how the church did mission, why mission was important to them, and who in the church was responsible for mission. The last question in the interviews was: "Imagine a young minister comes to you

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[22] In one church, the minister had just assumed office and opted to not participate in the study.

and asks for your advice on what he should do for the church in his charge to grow. What advice would you give him?" The interview was structured to identify, by way of questions, the value concepts and characteristics shared by the interviewees.

Data Analysis Method

The interviews were transcribed by the software developed at the Laboratory of Phonetics and Speech Technology of the Institute of Cybernetics of the Tallinn University of Technology.[23] Then, the resultant texts were sorted out and analyzed. The objective was to note, firstly, what and how the interviewees said in connection with their church, and, secondly, meaningful sayings and key words concerning the subject of study. For the purposes of the present study, the content of the interviews—the topics, the main ideas and recurrent value concepts—was of primary importance. As well, it was essential to identify the recurrence of words, meanings, terms, concepts, etc., in the interviews. To that end, both the manifest and latent content of the interviews was observed.

During the analysis of the interview texts, the secondary characteristics and primary characteristics were formulated. To that end, inductive coding was employed[24] to comprehend what was said based on the interviewee's thought pattern. For the purposes of the present article, it is essential to emphasize that the goal was to identify similarities in the characteristics of these congregations. The interviews were analyzed combining both the open and the *invivo* coding model; no prescribed categories were used in the analysis. In the first model, the characteristics were derived directly from the text using the inductive approach. In the *invivo* model, the key words and value concepts were formulated in the closest approximation of the text of the interviews.

Study Results

The results of the study were formulated as summary characteristics. Before presenting the results, however, a few relevant remarks should be made in their regard: 1) the characteristics of the growing churches are generalizations, not necessarily those of the particular churches. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be automatically applied to any particular church; 2) the different characteristics define the participant churches with different emphases. Some characteristics may be noted to be more strongly manifested in some

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[23] Tanel Alumäe, Tilk Ottokar, Asadullah. *Advanced Rich Transcription System for Estonian Speech*. Baltic HLT. (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2018). pp. 1-8.
[24] Hsieh, Hsiu-Fang; Sarah E. Shannon. "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis." *Qualitative Health Research*, 2005, pp. 1277-88.

churches and less so in others. The goal of this study was not to scrutinize individual churches but to identify general characteristics; 3) since the goal of the study was to find characteristics typical of the participant churches, the results in a sense represent a symbiosis. In the course of the interviews, the words, concepts, descriptions, incl. emotions, narratives, and examples presented by the interviewees started to lead a shared life, so to say. It was from this symbiosis that the primary and secondary characteristics emerged. Hence, in processing the texts, consideration must also be given to the interaction between the transcripts of and the utterances in the interviews; 4) the study results shall be regarded as characteristics typifying the participant churches but not as reasons for growth. The study of reasons for growth requires different kinds of tools; 5) the results are not presented in the order of significance; 6) it may be maintained, however, that the results of the study are in interaction with one another, i.e., the primary and the secondary characteristics are mutually related and cannot be considered separately but as dependent on one other.

Accordingly, the plan of analysis yielded the following findings from the study as primary characteristics: spiritual life, climate, human-centeredness, the minister of the church, relations outside the church, and a healthy self-image. In the next section of the article, the findings are introduced in more detail and each primary characteristic is described separately. The objective is to help the reader to comprehend the aforementioned primary characteristics. In the process, secondary characteristics are presented, which are no less essential to the comprehension of the results. Again, it is important to emphasize that each formulated primary characteristic and secondary characteristic can be viewed as a part of the whole.

Spiritual life

Although it may be maintained, based on the present study, that the participant churches are in many respects turned towards the human person, it stands on the foundation of a firm faith in God. This is reflected in the interviewees' conviction that whatever happens in their churches is not merely due to the church's activity but to the work of God. The interviewees speak about God who works miracles, hears prayers, and introduces changes in people's lives. The majority of the churches under study hold regular prayer meetings or devotions where they pray both for individuals' needs and for their society.

The notion of God in these churches is not confined to a mere talk about God but also includes seeking, desiring and experiencing the divine presence. Part of the interviewees speak of God as if God is the One on whom everything in their church hinges. This is

expressed in such value concepts as "God acts; God uses us; the Holy Spirit changes lives." God is credited with the greatest success stories and accomplishments in their churches. The transformations of life that people experience in joining the church are definitively ascribed to God. *Spiritual life* is a characteristic summarizing the transcendental pursuits of these churches, which take the form of three secondary characteristics: a firm faith in God; the role of prayer in the lives of individuals and of the church, and stories of transformed lives.

> … that the most important thing is actually to also let God act. That sometimes it seems that everything is really such that you don't understand. Then you simply must hand it over to God in prayer. We strive and try to cope with everything, but sometimes the thing happens due to something else. In my opinion, the thing that keeps all the work going is the fact that we needn't be alone. We are in fact tools, and this is at times so liberating. That God actually uses us. (Minister 2)

The interviews allow the assertion that God's activity is closely combined with that of the church and that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. The interviewees indeed deem the reason for the church's growth to be God's work but at the same time speak of what they themselves are doing. For instance, when narrating God's miracles they at the same time talk about active praying by the church as well as about practical action taken, such as writing a project for raising funds for church repairs. Many of the interviewees consider the role of prayer to be essential, for they believe that nothing happens without prayer.

> But surely this is the thing with prayer that nothing comes about without that, I think. That the prayer groups operate in a stable manner all the time. That this has been, I trust, a kind of a strong support base for us. After all, God hears prayers and wakes up people through that, so to say ... This is, I think, an inseparable part of this growth process of the church. If prayer life in the church ceases, it is then very hard to imagine awakening coming. Straining and performing in one's own strength, well, it takes you some distance farther, true, but not very far. But I trust that the prayer chamber is still the center. It is important for prayer to be in the church. You seek God, then God speaks, and then you act accordingly. This is what is essential, I think. (Minister 4)

However, spiritual life, or, more precisely, firm faith in God, also finds expression in the church's practical life. Namely, material miracles are similarly ascribed to God. As it was important, for the purposes of the study, to comprehend the contents of the interviews—the main topics and ideas and recurrent value concepts—the value concepts and key words were first formulated from the interview texts. Their categorization led to the verbalization of secondary characteristics and thereafter of primary characteristics. Below, the churches' primary characteristics will be presented in the form of tables that contain information on the value concepts from which secondary and primary characteristics were worded.

Table 3. Primary characteristic: spiritual life.

Secondary characteristic	Key words, value concepts
Firm faith in God	- God and the work of His Spirit; the work of the Holy Spirit; - God's role in the lives of individuals and the church; - seeking God's presence; - genuine faith; - personal relationship with God; - God uses us; "if someone comes to the church, he wants the real thing."
The important role of prayer in the lives of individuals and the church	- The role of prayer for the life of the Christian to obtain inner security; - the role of prayer in the life of the church; - praying and seeking God; - the opening of a healing-through-prayer room in the city; "prayer is our strength and power"; - intercession for individuals and the community; - every morning prayer meetings in the church; - pilgrimage in the city; "our meetings end with prayer"; - praying and fasting.
Meaningful life changes	- stories of transformed lives; - contagious and inspiring life stories; - the greatest achievement therein is still the saved soul; - liberation from alcohol addiction; - quiet growth person by person;

While the mentality of the participant churches is different, they are all characterized by an active spiritual life. This consists in an active faith life that takes account of God but never neglects one's own practical contribution. Other results of the study show that the churches are not closed communities adhering to a single culture but ones that keep their doors open to society and other people. In this manner, these churches represent a good balance between the inward (spiritual) and outward (missionary) activity.

Climate

In the conversational interview, the interviewees were asked to speak of their church and what is important for it. The interviewees made considerable use of key words referring

to the church's climate. They portrayed their church as a hospitable place where people are heeded and the mood is enthusiastic, inspiring and inclusive. Furthermore, it was characterized by loving human relationships. Thus, the secondary characteristics under this primary one proved to be an enthusiastic and open atmosphere and loving relationships between people.

The interviews made the impression that people in these communities perceive themselves as being valued. It is highly probable that this is what fashions the church's climate, which generates a homely feeling wherein a person can be himself or herself. What and how the interviewees spoke about their church led me to the conviction that the church's climate, or, more precisely, the people's perception thereof, is very important. This is also confirmed by psychology. The key words and concepts employed by the interviewees point to psychology, particularly to organizational psychology.[25]

> I think the first word that comes to mind is a tremendous family feeling, such a fellowship and warmth. That I have grown up in this church, all my life, and have seen absolutely everything /.../ Love, caring are the first words that come to my mind in connection with my church. And, hence, naturally, the collective empathy or warmth. They always ask how you are doing? You are not ignored. The Estonians are kind of very shy, though, or somehow somewhat reserved. (Church member 14)

> For me, it is home. For me, it is home in the sense that if I am to say it kind of very, now, really, extremely personally, then it is home for me. That, after all, when I come here, I feel at home. Like home should be in a person's life in general, such a place of security, such a place of refuge. (Church member 7)

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[25] The term "organizational climate" originally read "social climate" (see Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt, Ralph K. White, "Patterns of aggressive behavior in experimentally created 'social climates.'" *The Journal of Social Psychology,* 1939, pp. 271-299). Organizational climate is a term that refers to the mentality, emotions and activities characterising certain members of an organization. Organizational climate is a sum of characteristics that describes a particular organization and distinguishes it from other organizations (see Garlie A. Forehand, Gilmer von Haller, "Environmental variations in studies of organizational behavior." *Psychological Bulletin*, 1964, pp. 361-382). An organization's characteristics are closely related to its subsystems that influence it from within (see Don Helleriegel, John W. Slocum, "Organizational Climate: Measures, Research and Contingencies." *Academy of Management Review*, 1974, pp. 255-280). As well, organizational climate reflects the acceptance of its defining characteristics by its members (see Willem Verbeke, Marco Volgering, Marco Hessels, "Exploring the Conceptual Expansion within the Field of Organizational Behaviour: Organizational Climate and Organizational Culture." *Journal of Management Studies*, 1998, pp. 303-329). An organization's climate is formed by the interaction between the common concept, emotions and attitudes of its members and on the basis of the organization's core characteristics that determine its norms, values, attitudes and culture as well as the impact of an individual's positive or negative attitude within the organization (see Monia Castro, Nico Martins, "The relationship between organisational climate and employee satisfaction in a South African information and technology organisation". *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 2010, pp. 1-9). Organizational climate is one of the most frequently researched areas in the field of organizational psychology. From the perspective of this study, a climate supportive of people's affiliation with the church and their integration in its life is one of the key characteristics of growing churches.

This prompts the question of what creates such an enthusiastic and open climate. What or who causes it? Following are some extracts from the interviews that suggest that the minister of the congregation has a huge role in creating and sustaining the church's climate. Among other things, his/her conflict resolution skills are important in case of dissents and misunderstandings. The churches under study seem to have managed to avert major misunderstandings and to have been able to advance their activities in a stable manner.

> What more is to be said to characterize the church? Well, the church also includes the minister. The minister is extremely warm and very open. Open sort of in the sense that he seeks contact with people, with someone who comes, or with someone who has long ceased to come to church. We see how he kind of goes, greets people with a handshake, hugs them. The minister is extremely warm and open and seeks contacts with people. (Church member 3) You do not think about that every day. I think that [he is] such, very much relationship-oriented. Well, perhaps, perhaps it is like that the church is like its minister. I think indeed that the relationships have been kind of important. In fact, it is important, for the church is, after all, people, and people in turn are in some mutual relationships. (Church member 7) There has been unity in our church. There are no such problems or finger-pointing. I am quite sure that there are dissents in every church. (Church member 25)

Concerning this characteristic, it is important to note that not the climate by itself but the way people perceive it makes the church a place people want to come to and be part of. This is manifested in the fact that people feel attracted, not compelled, to attend the church's worship services and other endeavors. Hence, it is natural that in such congregations people perceive it in the form of a desire to be included and to add value to the church's life by their contribution. It seems that a relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere is the secret weapon of the churches participating in the study that leads them to stable growth. It is no wonder then that people perceive it as positive, for their needs and problems are cared about. Attention on the part of the church may find different expression with different people. It may be prayer for health or intercession for liberation from an addiction. It may also be manifested in a small packet of humanitarian aid to take along from the church. In many cases, it stays on the level of the soul and spirit, where a person senses that the church is not disinterested in him/her and that he/she can turn to it if necessary, be it for help or for a counselling conversation with the minister.

Table 4. Primary characteristic: climate

Secondary characteristic	Key words, value concepts

Enthusiastic and open climate	• hospitality;
	• people are heeded;
	• a good-natured and welcoming atmosphere;
	• open to everyone;
	• innovation- and open-minded;
	• open to everyone, not embarrassing;
	• enthusiastic, inspiring, and inclusive mentality.
Loving relationships within the church	• feeling at home;
	• loving relationships;
	• valuing people;
	• a family feeling;
	• a place of refuge where one can be oneself;
	• human intimacy;
	• loving relationships;
	• relationships have a very important role;
	• acknowledging people is essential.

The participant churches may be observed to be oriented towards the person and her/his needs. These churches are friendly and open because they value people and attach importance to good relationships. Although it may be said, based on the other findings of the study that the church's minister has an important role in creating the climate of the participant churches and maintaining relationships with people, it appears from the interviews that the churches also offer people opportunities to establish caring and intimate relationships with one another.

Human-Centeredness

The center of attention of the churches that participated in the study is primarily on the human and her/his needs.[26] The interviewees describe their church as a place where an individual and his or her problems are heeded. And, the churches do everything in their power to reach people via meeting the needs. In the process, the different churches proceed from their inherent mentality and theological convictions. Yet the common denominator that characterized them is an active desire to address the person who today still does not know

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[26] People's needs that the participant churches are oriented to may be rather diverse: day-to-day financial straits; couple relationship problems; coping with mourning; dealing with disabled children; receiving refugees, etc.

God. In the course of the analysis of the interviews, an interesting fact was revealed. Namely, the outreach of the growing churches is not primarily about active proclamation ministry but about so-called mercy ministry. Instead of stressing the mission, the interviewees spoke about ordinary activities aimed at meeting people's needs.

> I think that the church has quite a strong social sensitivity. We kind of sympathize with our people. Our city is small, a typical town in Estonia, where all the troubles are right beside us, two meters away. Right here, when this window is open, I can hear how the next-door man, when tipsy, loudly advertises his troubles /.../ Oftentimes it happens that that tipsy individual comes to ask for food or something, as we are kind of close by. And, and I think we will not be startled when a needy person comes. Rather, we kind of consider it natural that the church must be for everyone. (Minister 8)

Human-centeredness also manifests itself in that the churches are outwardly oriented, in accordance with their opportunities.

> Well, the church has still grown, although we have tried to at least take part in such activities as concern the city as a whole; we have attended the city events here. Our church's choir participated for a long time in the city choirs' celebrations, for instance/.../ However, it is still my feeling and conviction that ninety-nine percent of this growth comes from personal contacts. (Church member 24)

The participant churches are characterized by the fact that the church does not focus only on their own needs but opens itself up for people in the society it ministers in. The following excerpt from an interview suggests that sometimes a church needs to be a pioneer in conquering the entrenched attitudes in society. A member of a participant church gave the following account:

> The greatest success story I myself have not so much been involved in. That I have kind of heard as a success story is that same issue of refugees. At one point all the village people were against some sort of refugees coming to us. Those letters and messages of threat, I have not received them but have seen them. But ultimately, the church's minister had a vision, so to say, and he did not take fright. Naturally, he consulted with the church's board before moving ahead. And currently, the situation is such that if you ask the village people what they kind of think of the refugees or so, I think that has totally altered. /.../ the public opinion has changed because they saw they were ordinary people /.../ that they are ordinary people, aren't they, who need help and support, and the family has established very good relations with the local school and local people there. That that is a tremendous success story that the situation in which was fear and anger has in a sense evolved into one of love and acceptance. (Church member 3)

As appears from the interviews, the churches participating in the study are characterized by being human-oriented. These churches believe that people are important to

God. Therefore they are not afraid to be open to people by taking practical action. They are empathetic both to those already in the church and those who yet are not.

> In the final prayer, God suddenly kind of prompts through the Holy Spirit that this is kind of your ministry or your area, that the church, it sis for everyone: a church for children and for parents, a church for the middle-aged, a church for the elderly. That the church for everyone. We want to be open to everyone. (Church Minister 5)

Table 5. Primary characteristic: human-centeredness.

Secondary characteristic	Key words, value concepts
Needs-based and practical ministering to people.	- Listening to the individual, empathizing with his/her problems and supporting him/her in life's struggles; - Heeding the needy; - A refuge for unborn babies; - Able to relate to people based on their problems; - Mission through social projects and events; - Ping-pong table by the church; - Building a children's playground; "people don't see God, but caring for them points them towards God"; visible on the local level; - Helping refugees;
Ministering to different generations	- Intergenerational church; - Different age groups; - Young families and children; - Something for each age group; - Work with different age groups in the church; - Family ministry; - Youth ministry.

This primary category was composed of value concepts under which the interviewees talked about their church's stances and attitudes that give consideration to people. The church is turned simultaneously towards its own members and society. Inside the church, it is expressed in the fact that people from different generations are involved in the church's activities, be they children's, youth or family ministry. As well, the church's elderly contribute to the church's ministries (e.g. social work, prayer meetings, choir or music ministry, etc.). Outside the church, the human-centeredness is manifested in that the majority

of the participant churches have initiated or been involved in a number of social projects attracting local or nationwide attention.[27]

Minister of the Church

The ministers of the participant churches have served in their particular churches for 15 years on average, more than half of them in excess of 15 years. Their work and activity have resulted in the growth of the church. In two of the nine churches, the minister had been ministering less than five years, one and four years respectively. In their case, it is highly likely that they will carry on the fruitful work begun by the preceding minister.

> What more is to be said to characterize the church? The church also includes the minister. The minister is extremely warm and very open, in a sense that he seeks contact with people. If someone comes, or if someone who has terribly long ago ceased to come to church comes, then we see how he kind of asks, how he goes and greets people with a handshake, hugs them. The minister is extremely warm and open, and seeks contacts with people. (Church member 3) I for one see that the minister in our church, the one we are having now, that currently a lot depends on him. That when the minister is not present, there is even a smaller attendance in the church. And we have such a minister who always has people beside him, who loves people. He thus attracts [people] to him. And what he gives to people is important. The minister's role is important. (Church member 18)

The ministers of the churches participating in the study make people feel at home in their churches, for people perceive that their minister loves them and cares about them. As well, the ministers help people to discover their strengths and motivate them to implement them. All the ministers spoke about their team and how they do the church's ministry together. The skills of the minister of working with people are mostly manifested through the way he involves the people, puts their strengths to use and sets them to work as a team. The

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[27] Oleviste congregation of the UFEBCE has given rise to MTÜ Oleviste Hoolekanne [NPO Oleviste Welfare Services], which has for years been turning attention to the least privileged and homeless people (https://oleviste.ee/leht/hoolekanne/ (08.03.2020)) and to MTÜ Hingesillad [NPO Mental Bridges] for child-bereaved parents (https://hingesillad.ee (08.03.2020)). The EELC Risti congregation houses a Haven for the Children of Silence intended for families whose child was stillborn or died in infancy. To organise the activities, the NPO Children of Silence (MTÜ Vaikuse lapsed) was founded (http://www.ristikirik.ee/vaikuse-laste-rahupaik/ (08.03.2020)). The EELC Risti congregation is one of the few to have received a refugee family in 2016 in the face of intense societal opposition (https://www.postimees.ee/3854097/esimene-kirikukogudus-pakub-pagulasperele-eluaset (08.03.2020)). The ECPC Põltsamaa congregation has given rise to the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) aimed at enhancing satisfaction in spousal relationships (https://prep.ee (08.03.2020)). The ECPC Kuressaare congregation initiated a Food Bank branch on the island of Saaremaa in 2014 (https://arhiiv.saartehaal.ee/2014/05/02/toidupank-sai-vajalikud-ruumid/ (08.03.2020)). The EMC Jõhvi congregation and the Jõhvi Rural Municipality jointly established the NPO Support Home Sunbeam for Disabled Children, where conditions have been created for children with disabilities to communicate and develop (https://sunbeam.ee (08.03.2020)). The EMC Võru congregation hosts the operations of the Võru branch of the Estonian Food Bank (http://lounaleht.ee/?page=1&id=18512 (08.03.2020)).

interviews allow the assertion that the ministers of the participant churches do a great deal through people. These ministers realize themselves through their team and church members.

> That it is super to do work with a team who are like stalwarts. Who say that once they have promised they will come, they will do and they will be. That I am personally grateful to God, for the team, for the people who are beside and behind me and support and help; this is simply super. This is as precious as can ever be, for it would be impossible alone. (Minister 5)

However, their ability to focus on the individual allows them to equally relate to people in society who are not yet members of their church. The minister as an influencer of people is the one in the church who creates the climate. His attitude towards people and his ability to connect to them appears to be crucial in the integration of people into the church. It is noteworthy that the interviewees used similar value concepts both when describing the church and when speaking of their minister.

> I would begin by stressing the role of the minister. Well, this is a kind of first impulse that should set the system in motion, keep it running, but, well, clearly, it cannot be done alone. That basically he also needs, say, the people who are around him. Who at least appreciate that. (Church member 2)

In the churches participating in the study, the minister has great social influence. However, it also has its dark side, namely, that too much in the church's life depends on the minister. That may result in the minister's spiritual burnout. In some cases, excessive influence of the minister may impede contribution from other church members with their strengths and weaknesses, although as a rule this was not observable from the interviews.

> I for one see that the minister in our church, the one we are having now, that currently a lot depends on him. That when the minister is not present, there even is a smaller attendance in the church. And, we have a pastor who always has people beside him, who loves people. And what he gives to people is important. That the pastor's role is important. This is the way I see it at the moment. Although to my mind, if he [the minister] is not present, the church should still be full, that people [should] go to God. But, well, right now it is this way, unfortunately. (Church member 18)

Table 6. Primary characteristic: the minister of the church.

Secondary characteristic	Key words, value concepts
Loves people and cares about them	- Loves people; - Is turned towards people; - Pastor is fascinated with his people – 'I like people'.
Available and close to people (does not detach himself)	- Actively socializes with people both inside the church and in the local community; - Is there beyond church services and functions;

	• Goes to people instead of waiting for people to come to him; • A good counsellor; • Available.
Helps people identify their gifts and motivates them to implement them	• Identifies people's talents and applies them; • Forms a team and develops it; • Is a good team player – "the church is the work of a team, not solely of a minister"; • A good delegator.
High social sensitivity	• 'Helps render meaning to what is going on in society from a spiritual perspective; • Shapes the direction and style of the church's mission; • Actively and purposefully develops relationships in the local community; • Identifies himself with the situations of the common people living in his community;

The role of the church's minister may be said to be bidirectional. He creates the climate inside the church (see the previous characteristic) through his skills of working with people, but also applies these skills with equal success outside the church. The first direction is characterized by the generation of a familial climate, inclusion of people and delegation. The other is characterized by the establishment of relations outside the church, or by being a representative figure, which implies taking heed of societal needs and guiding the church to meet them. The balance point of the bidirectional—inner and outer—spiritual role of the church is indeed its minister, who uses his/her *charisma* to cement all the other characteristics formulated based on the present study. Hence, it may be said that the church's minister is the architect of the organizational culture, which is substantiated by the literature on organizational culture. The example and communication skills of the church's minister have a key role therein.[28]

Network of Relationships Outside the Church

The churches participating in the study attach importance to relationships outside the church. However, they are not an end in themselves for these churches but an intentional and planned activity. The churches develop extensive relationships. It is first reflected in active

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[28] Kathy Driscoll, Margaret Mckee, "Restoring a culture of ethical and spiritual values: A role for leader storytelling." *Journal of Business Ethics*, 73, 2007, pp. 205–217 (see Stephen Campodonico, *Culturology: Using Organizational Culture for Strategic Growth* (Stephen P. Campodonico, http://www.culturologybook.com, 2011)

cooperation with the local government. The cooperation takes various forms, which are primarily aimed at solving social problems. As well, the churches do good cooperation with neighboring churches of other denominations. The participant churches are predominantly characterized by an open ecumenical attitude. As well, the churches are able to appreciate and cooperate with partner churches or organizations outside Estonia.

In the interviews, international cooperation was referred to in past terms. With regard to this study, it is important to note that fruitful cooperation took place in 2003-2017 and had a positive impact on church growth. This primary category is characterized by some attitudes typical of the churches: 1) they do not set themselves in opposition to society and other churches. Rather, they see themselves as a part of society and of the broader Kingdom of God. It is reflected in that the churches not only participate themselves in the local life but also invite representatives of the local life to their own events; 2) they are characterized by the conviction that the church is a natural part of the society it is situated in. They not only see themselves as a part of the local life but actually participate it; 3) the churches are characterized by the willingness to cooperate with all to whom they can add value and who in turn add value to their own ministry. The history of the Christian Church shows that cooperation could not always be taken for granted, in particular that with a church of the neighboring denomination.

From the above, a more general posture may be inferred—these churches do not consider themselves better than the others. This will be discussed under the next characteristic. May it just be said in advance that contrary to common logic, growing churches do not actually entertain any sense of superiority. We are living in an achievement-oriented world. Thus we might expect certain competitiveness from these churches. The interviews, however, imply the opposite. In the next section, we will address the collective self-image of these churches.

> Our church's vision of society and Christendom is that we are within society. We are not withdrawing from it as if they are two different things. Instead, we are within this society and want to change it somehow. Even if it be a small thing that God has entrusted us with, we would do it faithfully, and do it committedly. Be it the food bank or any other project. Or we would go and pray together with the municipal government; we would talk with the mayor and also share prayer requests. We want to be amidst this people. Even if we are a small community. (Minister 8)

> We do not speak for any glory that we should be there whenever there's the mayor's reception. But it is kind of good that they always invite [us], that our church's representatives are invited whenever there is an event somewhere. This shows that we are such a fully acceptable part of the community. That we are kind of viewed as a normal part. (Minister 3)

What strikes the eye from an analysis of the interviews is that outward relationships matter to these churches. These relationships are primarily practical. They are not afraid of taking initiative in the establishment and development of such relationships, without expecting rapid results. Mainly, however, these relationships are based on personal contacts, which have been invested in over the years.

> That it has been in our church that our people are rather open to [those] outside and we have a lot of good and close relationships with those outside too. That this is actually normal that people interact all the time with those outside too. That this is not any kind of achievement for us. This is kind of daily life. In our community or our city, street outreach doesn't work. We have tried it in the early days. We are a small town anyway, where everyone knows everyone. Even those poor LHV [Bank] boys who peddle that retirement insurance pillar in the food store, neither did they have a blooming business in our town. In a word, we have scrapped street outreach for us. That this is rather due to personal relationships and involvement in the community. (Church member 6)

In just one church, we might consider the main reason for growth to be the successful conduction of Alpha Courses over the years.[29] Predominantly, however, the interviewees mentioned the significance of good relationships and of cooperation with other social organizations. The cooperation is primarily characterized by the social dimension, which is centered on activities geared towards people's needs.

Table 7. Primary characteristic: The network of relationships outside the church.

Secondary characteristic	Key words, value concepts
Good relations with the community, incl. the local government	• Good cooperation with the rural municipality, particularly in the area of social work; • Participation in the city's events; • Very many personal relationships outside the church; • The church has a (big) circle of friends of the church who are not yet members; • Proclamation of the gospel through natural contacts;
Close and mutually supportive ties with neighboring churches	• The church does close cooperation with other Christian churches in the region or is very open thereto; • The churches' joint Food Bank in their city; • Joint worship services on national holidays;

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[29] The Alpha Course is a programme with international spread introducing Christianity (see Graham Tomlin and Sandy Millar, 'Assessing Aspects of The Theology of Alpha Courses.' *International Review of Mission*, 2007, pp. 256-262).

	• Other churches are not seen as competitors but as partners
Aid from international partners	• Cooperates with churches and organizations outside Estonia;
	• The role and support of partner churches;
	• Relationships with foreign partners have been very supportive and significant.

It may be concluded from this that the churches participating in the study find their way to people not through direct mission work but through activities that help an unchurched individual to better cope with their life. In this manner, what the churches have to offer is more comprehensible to a person outside the church than direct mission work. It may be said that for these churches, mission is manifested in active societal presence, the development of good relations and cooperation.

Collective Self-image of the Church

For the purposes of the present article, the church's self-image is understood as the members' picture or concept of their church, or, more precisely, their notion of themselves and their abilities on the collective level (see Table 8). An analysis of the interviews revealed that what is important is not only what they say about their church and its operations but also how they say it. Thus, it is important not only to formulate the primary category but also to describe the collective self-image that characterizes these churches. This is what I will do next.

> This church is, I would say, alive in the sense that it is kind of ready to act and kind of do something for the community. That it is not just about us coming together on Sundays but also that the church constantly tries to find opportunities /.../ that there is also a kind of outward-aiming attitude, not just that of self-centered ministry, that we also seek suitable opportunities to do something or to have a say in society. (Church member 3)

Seeing opportunities and focusing thereon appears to be characteristic of growing churches. I think *that success stories generally consist in that they seek and try to tap into the opportunities they see.* (Church member 21) This is manifested in a willingness to seize the opportunities that exist. Based on the interviews, no griping or obsession with obstacles was observable. Rather, a positive mindset shines through that even exudes certain self-confidence–we can overcome any challenge. For instance, the participant churches speak of challenges related to the renovation or extension of their church building. Their firm faith in God appears to directly impact their collective self-image.

> Now there is no shortage of those ideas. I have a head full of thoughts about development and advancement. First, of acquiring that building, expanding the hall part thereof, constructing the tower. In order for us to have more space. We have a Bible school that will again go into operation at the end of October; we need some extra room. (Minister 7)

With regard to self-image, a high and a low self-esteem is referred to. People of a high self-esteem are characterized by self-confidence and trust in their abilities. People with a low self-esteem fall short of trust in themselves and of courage to put their strengths into practice.[30] The same can be said about churches. The self-esteem of the participant churches tends to be high. This means that these churches have overcome obstacles, which has added inner security. No sense of superiority, however, could be observed therewith. The opposite was true.

> And the Lord knows the accomplishments. Wherever they have done well, the greatest accomplishment has always been consistency. Consistency, faithfulness in whatever you endeavor. The Word also says: 'good and faithful servant'. And this I have noticed, that often these projects and dazzling personalities, they come, they shine, they disappear, but what gives the church strength is when you have a consistent activity. People who are faithful in their capacity, and that gives such confidence. And this applies to any area of life. (Minister 6)

Table 8. Primary characteristic: collective self-image

Secondary characteristic	Key words, value concepts
Perceives itself as introducing positive changes in society	• Perceives itself as a catalyst able to introduce change in the local community; • Actively seeks ways of addressing the modern man; • Believes that the church has something to offer to community;
Sees challenges as opportunities, not obstacles	• Not afraid of new challenges – 'each year we develop, accept new challenges, and that, as we can see, brings people in'; • Openness to new challenges; • Opportunities are seen in problems.
Consistency	• 'At times we have done youth ministry biting the bullet'; • We are consistent; • We do not give up; • Persistency – 'consistent activity makes the church strong';
Humility	• People of a growing church predominantly do not notice their church's success stories;

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[30] Reiljan, Heidi. Enesehinnangust [On Self-Esteem]. *Kogutud materjalid [Selected materials]*, 1998-2001, http://tnk.tartu.ee/0enesehinnangust.html (18.04.2020).

- Growth is not pursued; it is a result, not a goal;
- Numbers are not an end in themselves;
- 'We do not compete with other churches';

This primary characteristic is formed by key words and value concepts that describe the church members' collective self-image. The churches participating in the study are characterized by an attitude that the challenges faced by the church are not necessarily obstacles but also opportunities. As well, the interviews reveal that things are done daringly in the church; they do not easily give up the endeavors they have begun. The high self-esteem of these churches is reflected in the belief that the church can introduce positive changes to society and has something to offer that is badly needed by the society and the people around them.

Summary

The study allows the assertion that although Estonia has been considered one of the most secular states, not only in Europe but in the world, there are nevertheless growing churches in each of the nation's major Protestant denominations. The objective of the study was to define these churches and identify their characteristic features. In the present article, we introduced the typical primary and secondary characteristics of these churches formulated on the basis of an analysis of the interviews. Based on the study, it may be said that the primary characteristics of growing churches are the following: spiritual life, climate, human-centeredness, the church's minister, relationships outside the church, and collective self-image. The essence of the primary characteristics is expressed through secondary characteristics.

The primary characteristic *spiritual life* describes the conviction that what is happening in the church should first of all be seen as God's work. They believe in God who works miracles, hears prayers, and introduces changes in people's lives. In the majority of the churches under study, regular prayer meetings or devotions are held, where prayer is made both for people's needs and for society. While other findings of the study show that these churches are active in society; this primary characteristic suggests that it is grounded in a firm faith in God.

The primary characteristic *the church's climate* describes interpersonal relationships and a positive atmosphere in the church. Important in this regard is the fact that people perceive the church's atmosphere as caring and inclusive—the church is not indifferent to

them. This primary characteristic represents value concepts under which the interviewees talk about their church as a home and a family. Interpersonal relationships are narrated in a positive vein, making the impression that these churches have managed to evade major conflicts. Other results of the study imply that the major agent for this primary characteristic is the minister of the church.

The primary characteristic *human-centeredness* is reflected in the fact that in ministering to people the churches proceed foremost from the individual and his or her needs. It is important to emphasize that the mission of the participant churches consists in need-based ministry to people: a financially less privileged person is offered food aid; a person with spiritual needs is offered Christian counselling; intercession is made for the sick to be healed. In addition, these churches value ministering to different age groups in the church, which also reflects regard for age-related needs of people. Other findings from the study suggest that this primary characteristic typifies the church's interaction with people both inside and outside the church.

The primary characteristic *the minister of the church* implies that the minister cares about the people, is available, helps people to discover their talents and motivates them to implement them. The interviewees emphasize that the minister has a very positive role in their church, which consists in both shaping the church's inner climate and cultivating relationships outside the church. The churches are socially active, for their ministers apprehend social needs and try to meet them, engaging the church for the purpose. Other findings of the study allow the assumption that this primary characteristic influences all the other primary characteristics formulated from on the study.

The primary characteristic *network of relationships outside the church* describes the consciousness of the growing churches and their developing close relations with social organizations both in the local community and beyond Estonia. It is important to emphasize that they see themselves as part of societal life, not in opposition thereto. The relationships are natural, not feigned or forced, for they have evolved over the years. On occasion, the relations of the church's minister and members with representatives of various organizations have developed into close and personal contacts. Other results from the study suggest that this primary characteristic springs from both good relationships and enthusiastic and open atmosphere within the church.

The primary characteristic *the church's collective self-image* describes the church's self-esteem, which indicates that its members believe the church is able to generate positive change in society. This is reflected in the conviction that problems are not obstacles but

opportunities. A high self-esteem is also revealed in that they are not afraid to swim upstream by using new methods in the church's ministry. In the light of other findings from the study it may be inferred that this primary characteristic is influenced by an active faith in God.

In conclusion, the following findings may be derived from the study. First, the key factor for the church's growth is its minister, whose influence determines both the church's inner climate and its outward-bound activity. His skills of heeding people, focusing on their needs and at the same time motivating them to implement their gifts has a major influence on the church's growth. Second, in growing churches, mission does not happen straightforwardly in the form of gospel proclamation but through everything the church does. Mission is deemed as need-based ministry, good relations both inside and outside the church and hands-on contribution in society. Third, it may be maintained that growth in these churches is not the result of setting and pursuing growth goals but that of loving people, focusing on their needs and serving them.

The findings presented in the article are based on a qualitative study. However, a qualitative study cannot answer the question of the extent to which the primary characteristics identified in the article are correlated with one another. The clarification of the correlation between the primary characteristics formulated in the article requires the conduction of a quantitative study. Preparations for a quantitative study have been commenced in the churches involved in the present study.