Miracle of the Mundane: The Continuing Legacy of Interdependence in The Estonian Baptist and Free Church Union

Matthew Edminster

Matthew Edminster is pastor of the Rapla Evangelical Free Church in Rapla, Estonia, and a doctoral candidate in the Vrije Universiteit Department of Religion and Theology.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8346-530X
Doi:

Abstract:
This article examines the origins of interdependence in the formation story of the Estonian Union of Evangelical Christian and Baptist Churches (EECB) and demonstrates how ongoing commitment to interdependence in the form of congregational partnership enables EECB congregations to pursue their missional calling. The consistent choice to embrace the tensions and challenges of what historian Toivo Pilli characterises as a 'mosaic movement' have provided the Union with a rich theological legacy and an untapped well of strategic advantage for vibrant witness in challenging times.[1] Evidence of this strategic advantage is presented by introducing a novel approach to the study of inter-congregational partnership networks. Closing remarks address critical concerns associated with network methods and weigh the promise and limitations of viewing and actively developing baptistic interdependency using relational network analysis.

Keywords:
Interdependence; fellowship; partnership; network analysis

Introduction

Former rector of the International Baptist Theological Seminary (Prague) Dr Keith Jones has argued that one of the key characteristics of baptistic identity is a vibrant ecclesial interdependence expressed at local, regional, international, and ecumenical levels, particularly in the European context where he served.[2] One of Jones's key observations is that the church's paradoxical commitment to both local autonomy and

[1] Toivo Pilli, *Usu Värvid ja Varjundid* [Colours and Shades of Faith] (Tallinn: Allika, 2007), p. 85.
[2] Keith Jones, *The European Baptist Federation: A Case Study in European Baptist Interdependency 1950–2006* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009). In 2014, the seminary became the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, based in Amsterdam.

covenantal fellowship is best described as a web of organic connections rather than the more familiar organisational structure of a hierarchical pyramid or concentric circles of association. I find Jones's vision for baptistic interdependency inspiring and elegant, and in short order I will demonstrate how this vision has borne itself out in the small Baltic country of Estonia. But I am also quite sure that his vision is not uncontested. There may be isolated congregations or national bodies that have little experience of fellowship outside of their walls or borders. Certainly, the myriad Baptist conferences populating the North American scene where I grew up would suggest some internal limit to the scope of Jones's argument. It may be that the distance afforded by a birds-eye view, or a retrospective gaze, is required to see beyond the everyday toils and tensions that can characterise inter-church relationships. For this reason, consideration of interdependence can only benefit from the illustration of positive examples. There are places in the world in which ecclesial interdependence can be perceived in the day-to-day realities of congregational life and missional action. Examining these instantiations can help to bring a seemingly unattainable goal within reach of any committed body.

One such place where interdependence can be witnessed in situ is the Baltic country of Estonia. I count it as one of the privileges of my missionary career to have witnessed first-hand the unique fellowship which connects the congregations comprising the Estonian Evangelical Christian and Baptist Church (hereafter EECB) Union and shapes their missional pursuits. Indeed, I count the phenomena of Estonian free church partnership to be nothing less than a miracle, given the circumstances in which it was formed and the transformational impact it has had on Union life and function. It may well be that the mundane (in the sense of pragmatic or everyday) nature of this partnership is one reason why it tends to go unrecognised and largely uncelebrated on Estonian soil. It must also be said that the Estonian brand of baptistic interdependence is no panacea. Not all churches contribute to the wider fellowship, and significant differences of theological emphasis or spiritual practice keep EECB unity in a state of constant negotiation. But generally, despite the difficulties and imperfections, partnership between EECB churches has become a practised means of worship (in

the words of Eugene Peterson, 'a long obedience in the same direction') and a testimony to the watching world.[3]

The story of how this interdependence developed in the EECB Union can be traced through its formation story. Estonian church historian Toivo Pilli has investigated the history of the EECB at length and my comments here are drawn from his extensive investigations appearing in both Estonian and English.[4] A simplified sketch of the Union's history can be built around the years of Soviet occupation (1941–1991), in which formerly distinct Baptist, Free Revivalist (*priilased*), Evangelical Christian, and Pentecostal traditions were forced to coexist quite literally 'under one roof'.[5] Repressions associated with the forced unification were arguably designed to constrict and suppress Christianity's ability to function effectively, but in the case of Estonia served to forge a refined alloy of resilient fellowship from the EECB's diverse theological traditions. When Estonia declared independence

[3] Inter-ecclesial cooperation is not limited to the EECB Union, but also occurs frequently between churches from distinct confessions. The story of Estonian ecumenical partnership is equally deserving of celebration and this effort may benefit from some of the investigative methods I will be proposing in the latter half of my discussion. However, even though the cooperative spirit is widespread among Estonian churches, I would maintain that the EECB Union is unique in its persistent choice for conscientious interdependence and because of this has deeply influenced Estonian ecumenism for the better. For a historical discussion of EECB contributions to Estonian ecumenism, see Riho Altnurme, ed., *History of Estonian Ecumenism* (Tartu/Tallinn: Estonian Council of Churches, 2009), pp. 83–105, 171–193. The words of Eugene Peterson are taken from the title of his book*: A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1980).

[4] I have relied heavily on Pilli's works in Estonian: *Usu Värvid ja Varjundid* [Colours and Shades of Faith] (Tallinn: Allika, 2007); Üllas Linder and Toivo Pilli, eds, *Osaduses Kasvanud* [Formed in Fellowship] (Tallinn: Eesti EKB Koguduste Liit, 2009). However, Pilli develops much of the same content in following English language sources: 'Baptists in Estonia 1884–1940', *Baptist Quarterly*, 34, no. 1 (2001), 27−34; 'Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of Estonia, 1945–1989: Survival Techniques, Outreach Efforts, Search for Identity', *Baptist History and Heritage*, 36 (2001), 113–135; 'The Forced Blessing of Unity: Formation of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Estonia', *Teologinen Aikakauskirja*, 6 (2003), 548−562; 'From A Thunderstorm to Settled Still Life', *Baptist Quarterly*, 41, no. 4 (2005), 206–233; *Dance or Die: The Shaping of Estonian Baptist Identity under Communism* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008); 'The West Coast Revival in Estonia, 1873–1884', *Baptistic Theologies*, 10, no. 1 (2018), 1–17.

[5] This unification of Evangelical Christian and Baptist churches was implemented across the Soviet Union. At the start of the reform, the Oleviste Church in Tallinn was assigned to house eight distinct congregations. However, rather than crumbling under the weight of division, Oleviste became a beacon of evangelical witness and in the late 1970s was the site of an astonishing outpouring of the Holy Spirit in revival and renewal.

from the Soviet Union and the Iron Curtain began to rend from north to south, the pressure of forced co-existence was relieved. In other former Soviet countries, such as Russia and Ukraine, similar unions resolved into their constituent parts. But the EECB was unique in its commitment to seek a unified path and to continue forging a common identity and mission, even in the absence of external pressure.[6]

We might summarise this brief storyline in three periods: foundation (pre-World War Two), formation (Soviet occupation) and freedom (1991 onward). The story of the EECB Church Union's development over all three periods is fascinating and well worth presenting to a wider audience. But in this article, I want to draw attention to three elements from across the narrative that in combination inform the EECB's ongoing practice of congregational interdependence: movement identity, unity in diversity, and 'in-tensioned fellowship'.

Foundational Elements of Estonian Baptistic Interdependence

The first contributing element to the EECB's eventual interdependence is *movement identity*. The language of movement originates in the formative experiences of each of the EECB's four constituent traditions and has continued to be favoured (e.g. in official development plans) over against the language of institutional identity.[7] Each of these traditions began as revival or renewal movements and as such were initially relegated to a minority position in the landscape of Estonia's established churches. However, this minority position was also coupled with a strong sense of prophetic voice calling the established denominations to repentance or to an increase of commitment and fruitfulness. As such, attendance, participation, and committed discipleship marked identification with these movements long before ecclesial structure or official recognition provided any context for

[6] Pilli, *Usu Värvid*, pp. 14–15.

[7] Estonian Evangelical Christian and Baptist Union, '2012–2017 EECB Development Plan', <https://kogudused.ee/dokumendid/eesti-ekb-koguduste-liidu-arengukava-aastateks-2012-2017> [accessed 30 July 2021]; '2018–2023 EECB Development Plan' <https://teek.ee/teemad/50-liit/2204-ekb-liidu-arengukavast-2018-2023> [accessed 30 July 2021].

membership. Eventually, each tradition developed a recognisable ecclesial structure replete with meeting houses, clergy, and distinct bylaws. But before these forms became clear, the revival movements were — like the brackish waters of the Baltic Sea — a mix of religious backgrounds, conversion stories, spiritual experiences, and doctrinal convictions. All of this eventually had to be navigated on the path to distinct identity. But the fluid nature of movement identity appears to have instilled a combination of relational and theological flexibility coupled with firm conviction. It was arguably this combination which enabled these distinct revival movements to identify as churches in the foundational era, for those churches to combine under duress and for the EECB Union to transform into a missional fraternity in the formational era, and for that fraternity to continue to choose movement identity over institutional security in the freedom era.[8]

The second element contributing to the EECB's interdependence is a dual commitment to *diversity and unity*. The diversity side of this equation has been referenced above but deserves further elaboration. Each of the EECB's founding evangelical traditions were distinct in their experience and expression of faith but also were each sparked by a distinct foreign influence in geographical locations removed from the seats of power. Taken together, this may indicate a common desire for a counterpoint to the dominant religious voices of the day.[9] Whatever the initial attraction was, each movement took root

[8] In 2009, following a season in which other free church denominations made moves to establish institutional legitimacy, former EECB President Joosep Tammo reaffirmed the roots of the Union's movement in his admonition to embrace an identity based in an 'independent congregational network' and to avoid at all costs 'the temptation to become a [C]hurch'. (Joosep Tammo, 'Pilk tulevikku', in *Osaduses Kasvanud*, ed. by Üllas Linder and Toivo Pilli (Tallinn: Eesti EKB Koguduste Liit, 2009), 55–64 (p. 56).

[9] The Free Revivalist movement was initiated by Swedish missionaries Thure Emmanuel Thoren and Lars Österblomon on Vormsi Island in 1873 and spread over the entirety of the western maritime region. This revival was in full swing when German Baptist Adam Schiewe arrived from St Petersburg in 1884 and founded the first Baptist church in Haapsalu. The Evangelical Christians were founded by Jewish Lutheran convert Johannes Rubanovitsch, who held open-air revival meetings on Stroomi Beach in Tallinn, beginning in 1905, and appealed particularly to Lutheran Brethren. The Pentecostal movement traces its roots to Narva, on the opposite side of the country, and to the influence of Finn Pekka Hakkarainen who began preaching there in 1907. See Ringo Ringvee, 'Charismatic Christianity and Pentecostal Churches in Estonia from a Historical Perspective', *Approaching Religion*, 5, no. 1 (2015), 57–66 (p.58).

within the Estonian population, growing numerically both by means of transfer and conversion, and gaining internal definition as indigenous leadership championed the cause. Over time, each movement developed its own distinct theological and spiritual emphases and character traits which later were combined to form the 'mosaic movement' Pilli describes in his discussion of EECB history and identity. In Pilli's estimation, the Free Revivalists contributed zeal and immediacy of personal experience, the Baptists contributed programmatic development and theological education, the Evangelical Christians brought a readiness to cooperate, and the Pentecostals lent a broad conception of God.[10] Each group might have continued to develop over against the others were it not for an unexpected providence appearing in the combination of Soviet restrictions on independent religious expression and the willingness of each tradition to actively pursue a common path in spite of obvious difficulties and limitations.

While the will to pursue this common path was growing well before the 1940s, and was likely well in hand by the time circumstantial pressure began to be applied,[11] the way ahead would prove to be challenging indeed, not only because of the political pressures of life under Soviet authority but also because of the significant differences between the four traditions. The path to eventual unity would require continual navigation.

The Evangelical Christians experienced an early form of this tension when infant-baptised Lutheran Brethren, who had happily attended open-air meetings, resisted the call to be re-baptised. The commitment to believer's baptism was maintained of course, but baptismal hospitality was extended to Lutherans who claimed their previous baptism as legitimate, a compromise which continues to the

[10] Pilli, *Usu Värvid*, pp. 222–236.

[11] Pilli indicates that the desire for unity was present before the imposition of Soviet reforms, though earlier attempts never achieved widespread success. See Toivo Pilli, 'Ecumenical Relations of the Free Churches', in *History of Estonian Ecumenism*, ed. by Riho Altnurme (Tartu/Tallinn: Estonian Council of Churches, 2009), 83–105 (pp. 90–93).

present day.[12] Similar tensions continued to arise in the early years of unification, particularly when distinct worship styles were combined into one meeting. As a condition of their unification, Free Revivalists had insisted on the ability to continue 'jumping in the Spirit' and Pentecostals on the freedom to practise and teach speaking in tongues. Both requests were honoured.[13] But Baptist pastor Oskar Olvik and theologian Osvald Tärk were driven to distraction when believers from these diverse expressions attempted to worship together in the thunderous stone halls of the iconic Oleviste church.[14] These difficult accommodations proved successful, persisting and deepening as EECB leaders guided their flock through the troubled waters of the Soviet occupation. In 1954, a distance study programme was established to provide theological education and essential fellowship to pastors from all around Estonia. This was certainly one of the ways in which unity was reaffirmed even in difficult circumstances. The programme lasted until 1960 when it was closed down under Kruschev's atheistic reforms.[15] These reforms resulted in spasms of dissent across the All Union ECB, but the Estonian fellowship was able to hold together while the unions in Russia and Ukraine fell apart.[16] The calm following this storm eased some of the pressures placed on the churches, and the EECB's nascent unity solidified under council-based leadership and was deepened by the affirmations of international visitors.[17]

What emerges from this picture is that the EECB consistently chose for the harder path of a tensioned existence, particularly at historical inflection points but also quite clearly as a matter of course. This is the third element I discern from the EECB story: what I would call 'in-tensioned fellowship'. One might argue that the current unity is only a combination of historical circumstances conspiring to produce a foreseeable result. Circumstances combine rival movements, external

[12] Peeter Roosimaa, 'Eesti Evangeeliumi Kristlaste Vabakoguduse moodustamine', in *Osaduses Kasvanud*, ed. by Üllas Linder and Toivo Pilli (Tallinn: Eesti EKB Koguduste Liit, 2009), 33-45 (pp. 40–42).
[13] Pilli, 'Forced Blessing', pp. 552–53.
[14] Pilli, *Usu Värvid*, p. 33.
[15] Ibid. pp. 23–32.
[16] Pilli, 'Thunderstorm', pp. 210–11.
[17] Ibid., pp. 211–18.

pressures forge new relationships, a minimal threshold of commonality is reached, differences are minimised in the context of opposition, and eventually a new body is formed. But it needs to be kept in mind that ecclesial disunity was the intended result of the Soviet reforms and lasting unity after freedom was hardly a foregone conclusion for unions in other soviet republics. Unique in the case of Estonia, when fifty years of cold east wind were finally blown away by a warm westerly front, EECB congregations decided against re-establishing their independent movements and decided for continuing together on the tensioned path.

In addition to the efforts at inclusion and unification mentioned above, we can trace this intentionality along theological lines. This commitment can be observed in the perennial effort to articulate EECB identity and doctrine. In contrast to the multi-volume doctrinal statements and polity manuals I studied for ordination in my tradition, EECB statements are terse and concise, highlighting only that which is both essential and common to all. Joosep Tammo and Peeter Roosimaa's *Teachings of the Bible* (*Piibli Õpetus)* is a good example and has become the EECB's classic theological handbook for pastors.[18] *Teachings* combines orthodox Christian doctrine and free church distinctives, relying heavily on passages from the Bible to illustrate its positions. It is accessible for the young, instructive for the mature, complete in naming the essentials but discerning in what is left to be defined by the reader. Reading *Teachings*, one gets the sense that nothing is said without holding competing views in tension.

Theologising in the EECB is not simply a matter of clarifying positions but about learning to inhabit theological tension between competing views. To my mind, this is the unique legacy of EECB doctrinal life and also a distinct mark of interdependence: a constant theological negotiation between constituent positions. Pilli characterises this legacy as 'bipolar' in the sense that EECB doctrine and unity is not defined by one stance over against another as much as by a tensioned space inhabited between essential viewpoints.[19]

[18] Joosep Tammo and Peeter Roosimaa, *Piibli Õpetus* [Teachings of the Bible] (Tallinn: Eesti EKB Liit, 1998).
[19] Ibid., pp. 41–45.

These elements of EECB interdependence have something in common with reinforced concrete. By virtue of its chemical composition, concrete powder mixed with sand, gravel, and water will harden into a rock-like crystalline structure able to withstand immense compressive forces. The essential elements of EECB commitment to movement, diversity, and unity likewise have combined to create an incredibly resilient ecclesial compound that holds together even under immense external stress. But just as concrete without the reinforcement of iron rebar will crumble as it stretches under tensile forces, the EECB's unity might also have eventually crumbled (as did other Unions elsewhere) were it not for their consistent choice for a tensioned existence. The choice to embrace tension creates resilient fellowship.

I propose that this *in-tensioning* — that is, the purposeful creation and celebration of relational and theological tension, and the commitment to coexist within that tensioned space — lies at the heart of EECB interdependence. Paul Fiddes' treatment of covenant is particularly helpful in understanding how God creates space for relationship with us and enters that space cognisant of the trouble this will entail.[20] It is on the basis of God's covenant with us that we can enter into such in-tensioned relationships with one another and thereby extend God's grace over the spaces between us and beyond. However, I find that Fiddes' pastoral theology of 'participating in God' elevates ecclesial interdependence from a state of being to a functional partnership in which mundane practices are indeed made miraculous.[21] As a disciple of Jesus, I know that the life of faith must entail a transformation of the mundane into the sublime. This is the miracle we crave, whether it be visible and external or intimately personal and private. But as a pastor and a missionary, I am equally convinced that the sublime (transcendent truth) must also become mundane, earthen, and tillable. What is interdependence if only a theory or a memory? Where can we perceive interdependence in action today? In the next section I illustrate some of the important ways that interdependence

[20] Paul Fiddes, Roger Hayden, Richard L. Kidd, Keith W. Clements, and Brian Haymes, *Bound to Love* (London: Baptist Union, 1985); Paul Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology,* Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2003).
[21] Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Paternoster, 2000).

plays out in the contemporary Estonian context by referencing a longitudinal study of EECB congregational partnerships.

Interdependence as Partnership

I made reference earlier to my conviction that the interdependence exhibited within the EECB constitutes a miracle of the mundane. The reason for this turn of phrase is that there are some elements of our spiritual transformation that seem so common as to be unremarkable. And yet when viewed in a new light, they prove foundational for so much of what directs our attention. I believe that in addition to being an essential feature of baptistic ecclesiology and a distinct form of imaging God, interdependence forms an innervated substrate upon which an entire ecclesial biome can grow and prosper.

A fascinating discovery from the forests near my childhood home in the Pacific Northwest may help to illustrate the real importance of this observation. Dr Suzanne Simmard from the University of British Columbia observed early in her career that even in ideal circumstances, cedar seedlings were more susceptible to disease when other tree species in the area were removed from the local ecology. When she began investigating the forest soil on a hunch, she discovered a hidden network of mycorrhizal fungi whose thread-like strands connected the entire forest in a vast web. By tracing the transmission of radioactive carbon through this underground network, Simmard discovered that trees could communicate across great distances and even between species, exchanging resources, signals, and transferring important resistance in case of disease. This discovery has sparked something of a revolution in botanists' understanding of forest ecology, suggesting that trees are not lone organisms competing for light and nutrients but rather parts of one large, connected organism.[22]

I share Simmard's hunch that what we tread underfoot is just as essential to the church's sustained ministry and missional effectiveness

[22] Suzanne Simmard, 'How Trees Talk to Each Other', *Ted Talks:* <https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_simard_how_trees_talk_to_each_other> [accessed 29 July 2021].

as all that towers above and around us. But how do we communicate this? How can we illustrate the amazing potential of this mundane miracle?

Introducing the Relational Survey

In 2012, I had my first opportunity to sift through the detritus of the EECB's forest floor while serving as secretary of the Mission Council. Under the leadership of President Meego Remmel, the board of elders had been examining questions of missional engagement through the lens of regional development. Our thinking was that administrative regions not only divided the Union into geographically manageable portions, but that the churches in each region shared culture and circumstances that would help to define their mission more closely. We noticed that in administrative regions where churches were well connected and collegial, congregations were able to sustain their ministry in a variety of circumstances, leaders were optimistic about their prospects, and missional initiatives were quick to bear fruit. Conversely, regions marked by strife or competition felt like rocky soil: churches lived or died on their own merits and the seeds of evangelism seldom found root, even in situations of abundance.

In order to develop a better sense of the ways in which our congregations were relating, we decided to include a set of relational questions in our annual statistics drive. These questions were worded as broadly and simply as possible in order to elicit a wide response and engender personal reflection: 'Name up to three churches you would consider your most active partners in the last year.' This question format was repeated for ecumenical, organisational, and international partnerships. These relational questions have been included in our Union's statistics drive every year and now provide us with a wealth of data, not only on the relationships between congregations and the dynamics they contribute, but also importantly in terms of raising questions about the content, quality, and motivations embedded in those relationships.

A wide body of interdisciplinary research on network dynamics and analysis has assisted us in analysing this dataset.[23] There is such a wealth of potential within the dataset — from the nature of relationships to the dynamics they help to engender, as well as changes on both levels over time — that it would be foolhardy to attempt to describe them all in this limited setting. But I hope to offer an overview of network insights and applications and provide a handful of examples which will demonstrate the promise of viewing partnership in this way.

Dynamics of the Partnership Network

Before moving into a discussion of partnership network dynamics, it is important to offer clarity on what I mean by partnership. As I mentioned above, partnership was intentionally left undefined in our original survey in order to elicit a wide response and to gather insight into the respondents' own definitions. Unsurprisingly, there are different kinds of partnerships reported in our survey. I have not yet conducted formal qualitative research on the nature of the relationships listed in our annual survey and so my comments here should be taken with some caution. But based on the results of eight years of data and numerous informal conversations with regional leaders, pastors, and their congregations, I can propose four general categories of relational types that are reported in our survey: fraternal, associative, occasional, and promotional.

Fraternal partnerships are very strong and tend to follow a pastor from one congregational assignment to another. These relationships are often forged in seminary cohorts where personal formation and shared theological vision naturally spill over into the formation of lifelong friendships. Kinship relationships within pastoral dynasties also fall into this category, and we will sometimes see clear connections crossing the corners of Estonia that fall along known familial lines.

[23] Good introductions to the field can be found in the following: Garry Robins, *Doing Network Research* (London: Sage Publishing, 2015); and Silvia Dominguez and Betina Hollstein, *Mixed Methods Social Networks Research* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Associative partnerships between geographically or ethnically related churches form the majority of the Union's partnerships. Like collegial relationships, these associative relationships are typically quite strong but are forged by common circumstances (most often geography). One of the marks of a strong administrative region tends to be a relatively high percentage of associative relationships within its ranks, though the patterns in each region will suggest unique strategic emphases.

Occasional partnerships also play an important role in the Union by connecting congregations with similar missional interests on a temporary basis. These project-based relationships provide a space for focused collaboration involving an exchange of insights, perspectives, and experiences as well as the discipline of cooperative action with all the mutual submission that this entails. While occasional relationships may shift from one year to the next, they play a very important role in exchanging information across the entire network and generating overall goodwill across associative boundaries.

The final category I have provisionally named *promotional partnerships*. The most common of these relationships is the prayer partner system advocated by former Mission Secretary Indrek Luide, whose vision was to create a network generated each year at random that would serve to familiarise congregations that might not otherwise relate with one another. These promotional relationships seldom last longer than a year, but they send important impulses across the network and keep the lines of communication open and stimulated.

Each church leader who completes the relational survey may list up to three partners.[24] The resulting table of relational pairs can then be

[24] The limitation to three partners is designed to force respondents to evaluate their relationships and report only those they deem most active. This limit is in some ways arbitrary, but in my experience reflects a threshold beyond which only the most gregarious partners are able to maintain their relationships. In truth, some respondents have found this limitation to be far too constricting and insist that it is impossible to choose between their dear friends. Some have nominated more partners than are allowed by reporting 'all neighbouring churches' or by listing additional partner churches under the 'ecumenical' rubric. In my experience, the churches that go to these lengths do in fact relate more actively. The Island of Hiiumaa is a good example, where churches across the island's denominational spectrum meet weekly to pray with one another and collaborate. Here, the number of active relationships maintained by the regional

standardised, coded for privacy, and compiled into an elegant network map for visualisation and analysis.[25] As can been seen, in the network map (figure 1) churches are indicated by dots coloured according to region and roughly located according to geographical position, and relationships between churches appear as arcs connecting two dots. The partnership network is said to be directional because we recognise a qualitative difference between nominating a partner and being named as a partner. A mutual relationship would thus appear as a double-headed arrow between churches who identify one another as partners. With this basic understanding of relationships in mind, we can consider levels of network dynamics and the associated applications for mission. There are four levels of network dynamics that I have focused on in my investigations of the partnership network: partnerships themselves (dyads), pathways of partnership, communities, and the system in its entirety.[26]

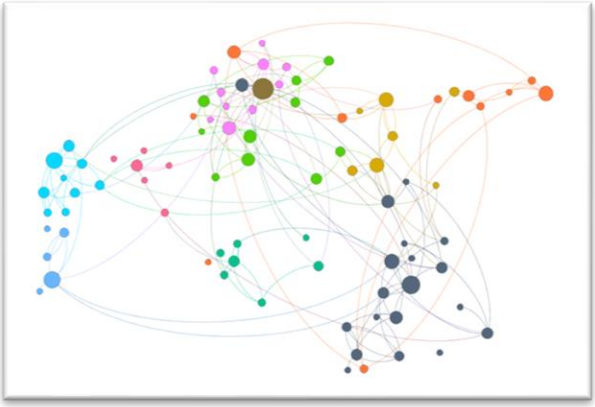

Figure 1: 2020 EECB Partnership Network Map. Congregations are represented by dots sized proportionally by membership, coloured according to administrative region, and arranged approximately as they would be distributed geographically.

director's church far exceed those of the most active mainland churches. Still, for the purposes of this study and standardisation of network metrics, the limitation of three must remain.

[25] I recommend Gephi <https://www.gephi.org/> [last accessed 19 April 2022] for early forays into network visualisation and analysis. A more accessible model, though a more limited option, is available online at *Polinode* https://www.polinode.com/> [accessed 26 January 2022].

[26] For the purposes of this article, I focus only on partnerships between churches in the EECB Union and exclude our data on ecumenical, international, and organisational partnerships.

Network insights at the level of the relationship

The basic unit of any network is the relationship (a dyad) which consists of two actors and a connection between them. Once we aggregate the dyads which house these relationships, we can begin to speak of a system or network with its own set of relational dynamics.[27]

I have described the kinds of dyadic relationships reflected in our survey but more can be said about the relational dynamics that these partnerships reveal. A key to uncovering these insights is the distinction between nominating (active) and nominated (passive) partners. A survey respondent (usually the church's pastor or elder) names other churches as partners and therefore can only be a nominator in the context of their survey, though their church may be nominated in the surveys of other churches. We can argue, then, (and this is indeed part of our intent) that the relational survey encourages *connectional initiative* in the form of partner nominations.

Be that as it may, for some in the Union, three partnerships are consistently three nominations too many. These churches appear as isolates and occur for a number of reasons. Some are simply 'lone-wolves' who would prefer to be left to their own devices. Of these, some are strong enough or large enough to function in this way and still maintain their effectiveness, while others are clearly in the process of dying a lonely death. We also find pariahs among the isolates, which is to say that they are being isolated by potential partners for one reason or another. In a voluntary network, isolation can be an effective means of enforcing constraint without having to legislate. Finally, we also find as-yet unregistered church plants in this group, since they are not yet able to submit an official church survey. This may highlight an area of

[27] I have found the relational principles underlying network analysis to be very helpful in a number of theological applications. While this article focuses on networks of churches, the same approach can be applied to any set of actors whose activity must be described in terms of their relationships. For example, I have employed this approach to helpful effect in the setting of congregational consultation where member interactions can be said to function as an unfolding relational narrative. The same logic applies well to biblical criticism, a good example of which can be found in my analysis of integration and survival strategies in the Book of Ruth (www.edminsters.com/series/ruths-solution). Alexander-Kenneth Nagel provides a fine article explaining potential applications and methods in 'Measuring the Relational: How to Collect Data on Religious Networks', *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, 3 (2012), 181–205.

strategic focus for regional leaders intent on nurturing new churches and gaining access to their insights and innovations. If we want our youngest churches to become integrated into the greater whole, it would benefit us to explicitly impart the value of interdependence both to those who are being sent as well as to those from whom they have been sent.

Most respondents nominate somewhere between one and three active partnerships (an overall average of 1.89 nominations per church in 2020). Once all these nominations have been tabulated, we can see that most churches will have some combination of outgoing and incoming connections. In past years I have analysed where *connectional initiative* tends to originate and have discovered that a majority of the network's total connections come from the EECB's smaller churches. It seems reasonable to assume that in general, as a church grows in number, its ministerial focus may turn more to the development and execution of programmes and services. If churches in this position can maintain receptivity to partnership and are actively sharing their resources and opportunities, they may be named as a partner by other churches and attain a degree of *connectional prestige*. Larger churches in urban centres often register high prestige, and the iconic Oleviste Church (large brown node, top-centre of network map, figure 1) in Tallinn's Old Town is the classic example of a prestigious nominee. The connections attributable to Oleviste (in a typical year) are exclusively incoming and exceed the combined incoming and outgoing connections of all but the most active partners in the network.[28] But importantly, the web connecting our churches would disappear into a simple association were it not for the connections provided largely by small and mid-sized churches whose *connectional initiative* links the majority of the network and creates the pathways enabling the exchange of partnership, resources, and goodwill.

[28] It is fascinating to note that this year for the first time, a related but independent free church outside of our denomination achieved the same level of prestige as the Oleviste Church. For this reason, churches seeking some degree of network influence would be well advised to engage actively in the network and not rely on passive nominations to establish their importance.

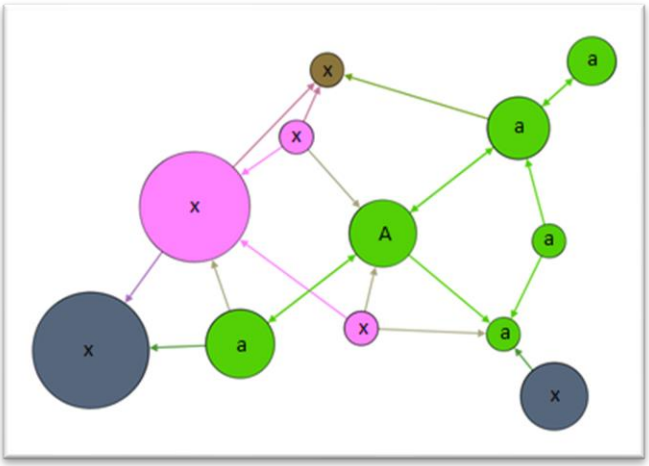

Figure 2: The author's church (A) and its neighbourhood network. Note mutual ties within the region, incoming and outgoing partnerships shared across home (a) and neighbouring (x) administrative regions, and indirect access to churches further afield.

The direction implied in partnership nominations leads to another important insight into the structures contributing to a denominational network. Perhaps the strongest dyadic relationship indicated by this model is a reciprocal relationship, in which parties nominate one another in the same year. The relationships that persist in this form from one year to the next generally indicate 'real partnerships' and provide immense stability to the clusters and regions in which they occur. Figure 2 illustrates the occurrence of directional and mutual ties among the author's congregational partnerships. Regions containing multiple mutual partnerships seem to have a kind of skeletal structure upon which relational muscle and sinew can be attached in various permutations from one year to the next. The regions of Southern Estonia (including the city of Tartu and the rural areas surrounding it; dark grey in all figures), Viru (a rural region surrounding the city of Rakvere; yellow in all figures) and the Island of Hiiumaa (light blue in all figures) all display a high degree of these mutual dyadic relationships and also tend to be stable, even in the face of geographic isolation, lack of resources, or seasons of crisis. This local strength is even more stable when relationships form a triangle (called clustering), though at some point this stability can limit motivation for outreach.

Partnership pathways

The partnership network is constructed on the foundation of a church's nominated partners. As partnership connections accumulate, pathways across the network enable the transmission of resources, ideas, theology, and encouragement from one side of the network to another. Graph visualisation software makes it possible to reconstruct this tangle of connections such that closely connected nodes are located nearer to one another and strategic gaps are easier to recognise. At this point, it is possible to see areas in which nodes are embedded in dense nests, and holes or sparse patches appearing between the nests. How might we assign influence on such a map? If a church enjoys high prestige but is located in an area of redundant and overlapping pathways, their absence might be an inconvenience for their partners but the other pathways in the area would redirect traffic to account for the disruption. This hints at another important measurement of influence in relational networks referred to as betweenness. Partners with high betweenness are like central intersections in a regional hub city: almost all traffic from one location to another passes through that point. Churches with high betweenness have enormous access to resources and ideas not only from local sources but also from across the network. But they also connect geographically, theologically, or culturally disparate parts of the network. The maps in figure 3 illustrate the difference between nodes sized by membership, prestige, and betweenness. Unsurprisingly, the churches of regional administrators or hub churches frequently have a high betweenness score because of their important bridge-building role between their region and the rest of the Union. But remarkably, a very small church in a distant corner of the country (Käina Church on Hiiumaa Island, or the Rakke Church in Viru for example) can also enjoy increased access to partners across the EECB simply by virtue of the number of pathways that pass across its radar and rely on it as a relay station.

Figure 3: Comparative methods of measuring influence by (L–R) membership, prestige, and betweenness. Note that the Oleviste Church (large brown node in the leftmost map) is dominant in terms of relative betweenness, i.e. signal transmission across the network.

Toward a partnership model of missional effectiveness

At this point, we have the basic tools necessary to formulate and test an initial hypothesised link between missional effectiveness and partnership. If we posit that missional effectiveness involves an aspect of innovative potential and that innovation requires (at least in part) access to both ideas and resources, then we can employ regional averages of betweenness (access to fresh ideas or creative potential) and clustering (local resilience or cooperative potential) to see what regions are likely to have high innovative capacity.[29]

Figure 4 shows the relationship between creative and cooperative potential at the level of regional averages. I interpret these charts as innovation strategies rather than scoring. For example, the Oleviste Church (large brown bubble, lower left-hand corner) ranks low on network-based innovation scores because all of their connections are inwardly directed. Oleviste's innovative potential is not network-based, but rather internal to their high-membership church. Their high prestige ranking (discussed earlier) indicates that their role in the network is to receive partnership nominations from smaller churches and to share the innovations internal to their system. This receptive network strategy seems entirely appropriate for a mega church managing enormous

[29] I admit to conceptual holes in my experiment, including a rudimentary understanding of innovative potential and the inability (as yet) to correlate it with the real missional effectiveness of local churches. But this early approach at least illustrates a possible path using network modelling.

internal resources and potentials. Conversely, Hiiu Island (turquoise bubble, upper right-hand corner) is on the opposite end of the spectrum with high average scores in both cooperative and creative potential. The combination of a long legacy of partnership between the Hiiu churches and strong partnerships with the mainland allows Hiiu to persist in saturating its landmass with tenaciously persistent albeit very small congregations.

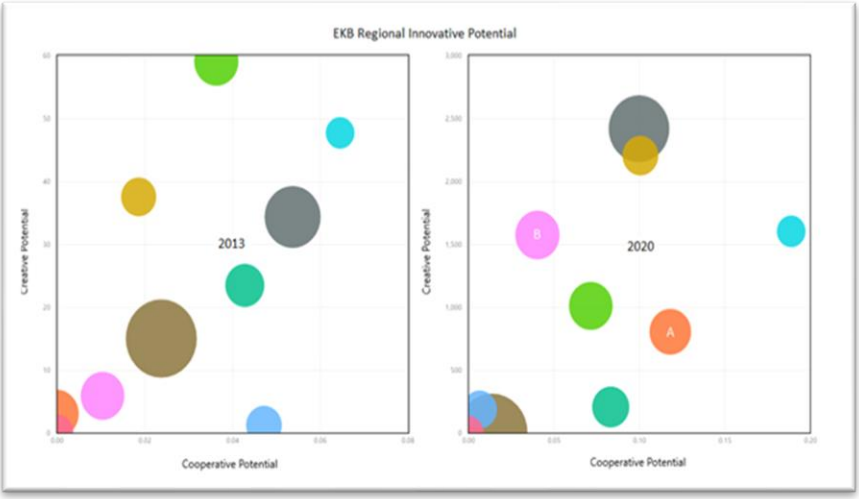

Figure 4: Innovation as cooperative and creative potential (2013 vs 2020). Movement between quadrants is notable. Regions A and B have increased cooperative and creative potential respectively as a result of more active partnership nominations. Innovation graphs are colour coded to match regions in the previous network maps. Bubbles are sized according to total membership of all churches in a region and positioned vertically by the creative potential and horizontally by cooperative potential. Notice that scale of x and y axes has increased dramatically based on an increase in the average number of connections.

Partnership dynamics across the system

Two tests of the innovative capacity hypothesis can be observed across the network: missional extension and strategic contraction. Church planting provides us with a test for missional extension. In the early 2010s, the city of Tartu was the site of multiple successful church plants, most of which trace their lineage to Tartu's relationally rich Salem Baptist Church. During the same period, Tallinn — a far more prosperous city — also saw attempts at church planting, but with fewer

successes. Those that did succeed had significant backing from resource rich partners. Why was Tartu so fertile when Tallinn seemed such hard ground? The partnership model suggests that high innovative potential might provide an explanation. Indeed, all successful church planting activity in Estonia from 2010 to 2020 occurred in regions with consistently high creative potential and moderate to high cooperative potential (including Hiiu Island). The exception is Tallinn, which saw a burst of successful church planting in recent years when a team from the Oleviste church matched the efforts of satellite groups extended from Tartu. In all of these cases it seems clear that a potential source of church planting success is access to a resource rich nest of supportive partnerships. When Tallinn lacked those connections, church planting struggled (with the early exception of Oleviste's Laagri church plant). The tide turned when relational strength was lent from Southern Estonia and extended from Oleviste's internal abundance to create a virtual nest where a local nest was lacking. It is significant that Tallinn's average innovative potential has increased dramatically from 2013 to 2020, possibly partly due to the increased connectional culture accompanying new church plants and to the connectional influence of church planter and former missionary to China Tõnis Roosimaa.[30] It is notable among church plants across Estonia that in their formative years they typically report multiple organisational and international partners while nominating only their sponsoring church as an EECB partner. If it were not for the fact that this combination seems to persist for up to five years, one could argue that this is simply a slow build to network fellowship. But I submit that this instinct allows church plants to exist in the innovative space on the periphery of the EECB fellowship where they can exploit the network's porous border.[31] In this way, they avoid the behavioural constraints experienced by established churches deeply embedded in the network, are able to maintain a vital link to the

[30] It must also be said that a combination of camaraderie between Tallinn's successful church planters, their connections to the M4 church planting network, and strategic connections with international church planting actors have helped to 'pad the nest'.

[31] On porousness as a mark of baptistic identity, see Keith Jones, 'Gathering Worship: Some Tentative Proposals for Reshaping Worship in our European Baptistic Churches today', *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 13, no. 1 (2012), 5–27; and a rejoinder by Parush Parushev, 'Gathered, Gathering, Porous: Reflections on the Nature of Baptistic Community', *Baptistic Theologies*, 5, no. 1 (2013), 35–52.

resources their sponsors provide, and, by that means, contribute their successful innovations to the network. Our second test case, *strategic contraction*, has recently featured systemically across the EECB partnership network in response to the Covid-19 crisis. This crisis response is observable in the network when relationally active churches temporarily reassign their three nominations from a mix of local and disparate partners to very close partnerships nearer to home. The result is a visible increase in mutuality chains corroborated by higher-than-normal mutuality scores (a 20% increase between 2013 and 2020, see figure 5) and a consequent decrease in other measures of connection. This seems to indicate that in times of crisis, EECB churches which have accrued a relational network around them and developed some skill at navigating it will re-appropriate relational focus according to their needs. When a significant number of churches narrow their focus in the same way, the system appears to temporarily contract.

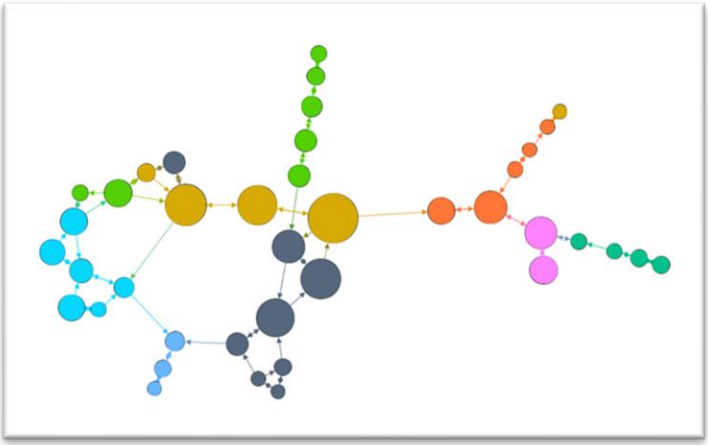

Figure 5: 2020 mutuality chains (20% increase from 2013).

Concluding Remarks: Caution, Promise, and the Sublime

This introduction must suffice to illustrate both the ongoing importance of interdependence in Estonia's EECB Union and the obvious explanatory strength of network analysis methods for relational ecclesiology. I believe that relational questions and relational modelling

will become increasingly important for ecclesiology in our ever-more networked, fluid, and viral world. As I have demonstrated, relational modelling of the EECB partnership network illuminates missional insights in a variety of settings at local, regional, and systemic levels. The insights and methods I have presented in this article are somewhat provisional and need to be tested and refined, but they demonstrate only a small fraction of the practicable wisdom that could be mined for the benefit of Christian gathered life and mission.

Despite all this potential, I acknowledge that some will baulk at this seemingly reductionistic approach to complex human relationships. I am sympathetic to this view as my theological interests are driven not by maps and statistics but by the content of our relationships and their potential to be swept up into the purposes of God's relational self. Paul Fiddes has demonstrated that beginning with relationship as the fundamental unit of divine society opens both our theology and practice to dynamic movement, radical openness, and an extended invitation for human beings to participate in, and be transformed by, divine communion.[32]

The real promise of network modelling for ecclesiology is not its predictive power but rather the invitation to reflect on the way relationships order and fill our worshipful 'long obedience'. Organisational scientist Starling Hunter has shown the way in which network analysis of movie scripts reveals how 'structure encodes meaning' even in the relationships between word pairs.[33] This deeply embedded structural meaning may only register subconsciously, but it leads viewers to engage actively with some films while finding others flat. Modelling brings these subterranean resonances to the surface, allowing the critic to analyse the film's artistry at the level of the felt-unseen. But modelling on its own could never approximate the artistry it describes. When structurally encoded meaning becomes an invitation

[32] Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God*. For an application of Fiddes' theological insights to the emerging field of relational sociology see my article, 'The Space Between: Considering the Church as a Relational Subject', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 19, no. 2 (2019), 9–20.

[33] Starling Hunter, 'A Novel Method of Network Text Analysis', *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 4 (2014), 350–366.

for reflection and transformed practice, we can assert further that structural reflection refines and reifies culture.

I maintain that reflection on EECB congregational partnership has the potential to refine and reify the astounding in-tensioned fellowship our churches have inherited from previous generations. The process of recognising, reflecting on, and reifying the mundane miracle of interdependence is vital to both the missional success of the EECB Union in Estonia and to a full-bodied understanding of our unique contribution to baptistic identity. As Toivo Pilli has said, 'The fellowship and identity that the Union has attained — a commitment to unity while respecting differences — is not only a striking example of the value of consensus but carries a theological message of harmony exemplified in the Trinity to a world threatened by fragmentation.'[34]

[34] Pilli, *Usu Väärvid*, p. 15.