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Discernment and Responsibility of Laity in the Eastern and Western Churches: Reality and Inspiration¹

Abstract: The article presents the theological basis for lay participation in discernment and responsibility for the Church. A proper understanding of baptism, the universal priesthood of believers and the *sensus fidei* are the source of all activity in the community and the realization of its mission. The authors also present a wide range of solutions for the structural involvement of believers in the Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental, Old Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, and Evangelical (including Baptist or Pentecostal) Churches. The very display of different perspectives and configurations leads to reflection on the prospect of mutual inspiration (keeping one's identity intact) and the challenges posed by the chosen solutions.

Keywords: laity, clergy, Catholicism, Eastern Churches, Old Catholicism, Protestantism, Evangelicalism, synodality, governance, discernment

¹ In Catholic, Orthodox and Oriental theology, the term “Church” is used to describe those communities that legitimize themselves with a sacramental episcopate and sacramentally understood apostolic succession. In Catholic terms, denominations that do not fulfill this condition are referred to as “ecclesiastical communities.” Such principles are not applied by Protestant communities. Given the ecumenical nature of this article, the term “Church” will also be applied to non-Catholic and non-Orthodox communities, especially if they use such nomenclature for themselves.

The co-responsibility of laity and clergy for the Church is an important aspect of the life of Christian communities. In the denominations of the Protestant current, the participation of the laity is obvious and has been visible since their very beginning. In the Catholic, Orthodox and Oriental Churches, with the monarchical episcopate playing a key role, involvement of laity is about action or discernment, although final decision-making, especially on doctrinal issues, belongs to the bishops. The Old Catholic and Anglican Churches combine the ministry of bishops, based on episcopal ordination, and the broad powers of synods and various councils. Such structural diversity is extremely interesting and can be a source of valuable inspiration for Churches and denominations with different sensibilities and previous experience.

In view of the above, it is first of all necessary to identify the biblical-theological basis of community that is key for Christianity. It is primarily about baptism as a source of commitment (despite differences in its understanding between denominations) and the sense of faith (*sensus fidei*). Then the theological and legal issues of participation of laity in co-responsibility in different currents of Christianity will be shown. Finally, opportunities for inspiration and challenge will be identified. Such mutual learning between the Churches can help deepen their own experience and revitalize toward dynamizing existing solutions, while respecting their own doctrinal boundaries.

1. The constitutive role of baptism and the *sensus fidei*

The involvement of the laity (non-ordained) does not derive from the powers granted to them by the clergy (ordained) and does not constitute a functional pastoral solution. Their place in the Church grows out of their faith, accepted baptism and inclusion in the community of the baptized. This issue can be seen as a common nominative among all denominations, despite theological differences in the understanding of baptism itself.² Regardless, all Churches and Christian communities maintain that,

² Historical Churches emphasize the fact of the ontic transformation taking place in the person receiving the first sacrament and its importance as a source of further faith. Among Evangelicals, on the other hand, the very experience of conversion and confession of

in addition to the spiritual dimension of baptism, this ecclesial aspect is important: participation in the community, rights and duties, shared responsibility in the broadest sense. It is a practical translation of the theological category of the common priesthood of believers,³ which does not mean that everyone does all the work. It is common for the baptized to grow in faith, bear witness and undertake service and live out their co-responsibility for the Church. Some of the tasks involve an act of authorization granted by relevant church agendas. In the case of the Catholic, Orthodox, Oriental, Old Catholic and Anglican Churches, this involves being ordained to the presbyterate or episcopate.⁴ In Protestant Churches, it is all about ordination,⁵ although depending on the denomination, the meaning of this act takes different forms (e.g., in the celebration of the sacraments, preaching and pastoral ministry).

In addition, being baptized entitles Church members to participate in responsibility for the community, in discerning its matters or in governance. It is realized through the functioning of various councils, agendas, and diaconia. Synodality has a special place, although it is variously understood and practiced by individual Churches.

Discernment in the Church cannot be reduced to a mere horizontal activity, as it based on a spiritual dimension. This fact is particularly expressed in the *sensus fidei* (*sensus fidelium*, *sensus ecclesiasticum*). The Catholic Church defines it as follows: "The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They

faith (the experience of God and one's own transformation), accompanied by the outward sign of immersion in water, becomes crucial. See P. SAWA: "Dynamika chrztu w kontekście ekumenicznym. Teologia, duszpasterstwo, wyzwania." In: *Odkrywać dar chrztu świętego*. Eds. S. SUWIŃSKI, Z. WANAT. Toruń 2017, pp. 119–146.

³ M. LUTHER: *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate*. Trans. C. A. BUCHHEIM, <https://media.bloomsbury.com/rep/files/primary-source-74-martin-luther-address-to-the-christian-nobility-of-the-german-nation.pdf> [accessed 9.10.2025]. Within the Reformation tradition, one cannot speak of a division into estates, but rather of a diversity of ministries within the Church.

⁴ See CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH: *Declaration "Inter Insigniores" on the question of admission of women to the ministerial priesthood*, 6.

⁵ "Of Ecclesiastical Order they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called." EVANGELISCHE KIRCHE IN DEUTSCHLAND: *The Confession of Faith of Augsburg*, art. XIV; "There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel; that is to say, baptism, and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained." EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN ENGLAND AND WALES: *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chap. 27, 4.

manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith [...]. Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints, penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life.”⁶ In Catholicism, an important aspect of this is the conformity of discernment with the rulings of the Teaching Office of the Church. A similar situation is in the Eastern (Byzantine and Oriental) Churches, where bishops play a key role, and doctrinal issues are normalized by the rulings of universal councils.

In Protestant denominations, on the other hand, it is difficult to look for the equivalent of the Catholic Magisterium of the Church. However, even there, proper interpretations of the faith are important (e.g., the Lutheran Confession of Faith, the Westminster Confession of Faith, other declarations of faith). In no case, then, is it a matter of free or occasional confession. Regardless of theological provenance, it is necessary to listen to the Word of God and accept what it brings. Therefore, the *sensus fidei* cannot be understood in a democratic key. A spiritual context is necessary: knowing Revelation, living a spiritual life, abiding in the church community.⁷ It is in agreement with the ecclesiology of the New Testament: The Holy Spirit leads to the truth (John 16:13), the sheep follow the Shepherd's voice (John 10:3), God works in the lives of believers who accept His word (1 Thess. 2:13), the baptized are to discover God's will, grow in knowledge (Col. 1:9–10), adopt Christ's way of thinking (1 Cor. 2:16), sense God's will (Phil. 1:9; Eph. 1:18), bring God's word into the community (1 Thess. 2:13), abide in the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42a), and keep God's commandments (2 Pet. 2:21). Such a Church is a pillar and mainstay of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).⁸

⁶ VATICAN COUNCIL II: *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* “*Lumen gentium*”, 12.

⁷ “The *sensus fidei* implies then by its nature a profound agreement of spirit and heart with the Church, *sentire cum Ecclesia*.” CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH: *Instruction “Donum veritatis” on the ecclesial vocation of the theologian*, 35.

⁸ On the biblical source of *sensus fidei*, see M. SZTREJA: “Aspekt wspólnotowy *sensus fidei* w pismach Nowego Testamentu.” *Roczniki Teologiczne Warszawsko-Praskie* 14 (2018), pp. 81–98.

2. Within the structure of the Catholic Church and the Eastern Churches

The Catholic Church and the Eastern Churches (Byzantine, Oriental) see the ordination of the presbyterate and especially the episcopate as a constitutive element of their structure. In governance and discernment, the role of bishops and their co-workers, namely presbyters (especially pastors), is crucial. It does not exclude the involvement of the laity, provided that it remains subordinate to the hierarchy and is not in any way democratic.

Catholic Church

The Catholic Church assumes the co-responsibility of all the baptized, but the role of the bishops, seen as successors of the apostles, is particularly prominent. It is the bishops who are the teachers of the faith and judges in matters of faith and morals, especially at a universal council, and they alone are members of the council, although others may participate according to papal decree.⁹ Also key is the person of the Bishop of Rome, who has special authority and prerogatives (the primacy of Peter), such as convening and dissolving the council, establishing church law, and being the supreme shepherd.¹⁰

In Catholicism, the day-to-day collegiality of the bishops is important. A particular form of it is the Synod of Bishops, established by Paul VI, which is convened every few years to deliberate on predetermined issues, formed by representatives of episcopal conferences elected for given sessions and appointed by the Pope. The laity were allowed to act as auditors or consultants.¹¹ It was not until Pope Francis changed the formula of the Synod of Bishops. He first introduced a consultation stage in the dioceses to involve as many of the faithful as possible. Each diocese prepared a synodal synthesis, then each episcopal conference – a synthesis covering its subordinate area, and then there were deliberations by representatives in

⁹ The Code of Canon Law [hereinafter: CCL], can. 339 § 1; can. 339 § 2.

¹⁰ CCL can. 338 § 1; The Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches [hereinafter: CCEC], can. 51 § 1.

¹¹ CCL can. 346 § 1.

continental groups. In addition to the bishops, the Rome sessions (October 4–29, 2023, October 2–27, 2024) were attended by representatives of the clergy, consecrated and laity. In no way does this formula depreciate the role of the bishops, but empowers all the baptized in the process of discernment and working out decisions and real co-responsibility for the life and mission of the Church. Francis' proposal thus implies a distinction between the process of discernment (decision-making) and the decision itself (decision-taking), which is ultimately made by the pope or the bishops together with him at the universal level or the bishop in the diocese.

Synodality is also implemented at the level of episcopal conferences (plenary synods) and metropolises (provincial synods).¹² In dioceses, on the other hand, there is the possibility of diocesan synods convening as an aid to the bishop, with representatives of the clergy, consecrated and laity. In Catholic reality, however, it is not the synod but the bishop who is the legislator in the diocese.¹³ There may also be various types of councils or commissions with the active participation of the laity, especially diocesan pastoral councils and diocesan economic councils.¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that the final decisions at the diocesan (eparchy) level are made by the bishops, who in the local churches are the first to teach, responsible for liturgical, disciplinary and pastoral matters, and exercise supreme governance and judgment.

At the parish level, the responsibility of the laity is carried out under the guidance of the pastor by parish pastoral councils and economic affairs councils.¹⁵ Of course, the involvement of the faithful in various areas of pastoral care, such as the functioning of church communities and movements, the conduct of various meetings, preparation for the sacraments, school and parish catechesis, is extremely important.

Non-Catholic Eastern Churches

The Church is the Body of Christ, a figure of the Trinity, born of Pentecost. By its very nature it is theandric, meaning that the divine and human dimensions are important. This understanding of the Church is founded

¹² CCL can. 439 § 1. 440 § 1.

¹³ CCL can. 460. 463 § 1; can. 466.

¹⁴ CCL can. 492–493.511–514. CCEC can. 238.263.272–275.295.

¹⁵ CCL can. 536–537; CCEC can. 295.

on the truth of the Godmanhood of Jesus Christ and the Christological definition of Chalcedon. The spiritual aspect reveals the ultimate goal of the Christian life: divinization, into which the faithful enter by the power of the Holy Spirit, through participation in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, developing the inner life. The Divine Liturgy, and within it participation in Holy Communion, is ecclesiological in nature, so that ecclesiology must be viewed eucharistically. Viewed in this way, ecclesial reality also generates a vision of power and authority: “The authority of which we are speaking, since it expresses divine authority, cannot subsist in the Church except in the love between the one who exercises it and those subject to it. It is, therefore, an authority without domination, without physical or moral coercion.”¹⁶ This is also how Orthodox synodality (conciliarism) should be understood. Thus, in the structure of the Eastern Churches, there is no single bishop with overall jurisdiction. Unity is created by the bishops’ abiding faith and sacraments, and the faithful are in unity with their bishops and thus belong to the universal Church.

Eastern synodality primarily involves the co-responsibility of the bishops (collegiality referred to as conciliarism), which is embodied in a universal council or, within autocephaly, a local council. In these assemblies, in addition to the bishops, representatives of presbyters and deacons, monks, theological schools, and the faithful participate. The participation of the laity is particularly noticeable in autocephalous Churches, where the legislation stipulates that not only bishops, but also other members of the local council participate in the election of the superior (patriarch, metropolitan, archbishop). In some Orthodox Churches, it is the local council that constitutes the supreme legislative authority. Such a model operates in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.¹⁷ But even then, the bishops have

¹⁶ JOINT INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH: *Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity, and Authority* (13.10.2007), 14, <https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-di-tradizione-bizantina/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese.html> [accessed 9.10.2025].

¹⁷ БЪЛГАРСКА ПРАВОСЛАВНА ЦЪРКВА: *Устав на Българската Православна Църква – Българска Патриаршия*, art. 8, <https://bg-patriarshia.bg/statute> [accessed 6.09.2025]. The Ecclesiastical Council consists of bishops, three clergymen serving in parishes and three lay people from each diocese, the chief secretary of the Holy Synod, one representative of each stauropegial monastery (elected by the respective monastery council), two representatives from each diocese of diocesan monasteries – one monk and one nun (appointed by

the deciding vote on matters of doctrine. The Bulgarian Patriarchate operates as follows: “Decisions of the Ecclesiastical Council on doctrinal (dogmatic), canonical and liturgical matters are valid if, within 15 days of their adoption, the Holy Synod does not issue a statement that they are contrary to the teaching and tradition of the Holy Orthodox Church. Contested decisions are submitted for reconsideration by the next ordinary or extraordinary Ecclesiastical Council” (own trans.).¹⁸ At the same time, the Local Council or Ecclesiastical Assembly (various names function) are important instruments for building unity and shared responsibility of the faithful for the Church.¹⁹ Clergy and laity should divide between themselves the management of church property; for example, to this end, the Holy Synod of

the relevant diocesan metropolitan), one representative from each secondary theological school (selected by the relevant teaching council), five clergy with higher education and five lay people – social activists (proposed by the Holy Synod and selected by the Church Council in an open vote). Ibidem, art. 15.

¹⁸ Ibidem, art. 28.

¹⁹ In the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Church Assembly, composed of the Patriarch, bishops, and clergy and lay representatives of each eparchy, has the following prerogatives: to promote the rights and activities of the Romanian Orthodox Church; to approve the regulations implementing these statutes in the areas of activity delegated to it by the Holy Synod; to elect the members of the National Church Council upon the proposal of the Patriarch; to adopt general measures to support the cultural, social, charitable, economic and foundation activities of the Church; to determine the means of support for the central ecclesiastical bodies and institutions; to analyze and approve the general annual report of the National Church Council on the activities of the Church; to decide on the measures to be taken to ensure the proper functioning of ecclesiastical life; to approve the budget execution report and the financial and accounting balance sheet of the Patriarchal Administration, the Bible and Mission Institute and the central church institutions; to approve the overall budget of the Patriarchal Administration, the Bible and Mission Institute and the central church institutions; approving unified measures for the management of movable and immovable property owned or used by Church-wide worship units, as well as foundational units; approving social, cultural, educational and communications projects; establishing measures to assist Romanians living outside of Romania; and performing other tasks assigned by statutes, Church regulations or the Holy Synod. BISERICA ORTODOXĂ ROMÂNĂ: *Statutul pentru organizarea și funcționarea Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, art. 22, https://arhiva.patriarhia.ro/images/pdf/statutul_bor.pdf [accessed 7.10.2025].

In the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church. “1. The supreme authority of the Church is its Local Council (II, 2), consisting of bishops and representatives of the clergy and faithful, convened by the Metropolitan on the basis of a resolution of the Holy Council of Bishops, as necessary. 2. The purpose of the Local Council is to give fundamental direction to the life of the Churches in accordance with Scripture and Holy Tradition, and in particular: a) to preserve and develop the ecclesiastical and spiritual life, b) to meet the spiritual and moral needs of the faithful of the Church, c) to take care of the needs of the functioning of the Church” (own trans.). POLSKI AUTOKEFALICZNY KOŚCIÓŁ PRAWOSŁAWNY: *Statut*

the Albanian Orthodox Church appoints a Church Council of Clergy and Laity, composed of bishops and 12 clergy and non-ordained faithful.²⁰ In the Armenian Apostolic Church, on the other hand, the supreme body is the National Ecclesiastical Assembly, composed of clergy and laity, but the ordinary executive authority in the Church is vested, together with the catholicos (head), in the Armenian Church Representative Assembly, composed of clergy and laity. Also assisting is the Supreme Spiritual Council (composed of Catholicos of all Armenians, the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, high-ranking clergy and lay members).²¹ At the eparchy level, on the other hand, the bishop is assisted in governance by the eparchial council.²² In the parish, on the other hand, the parish assembly and the parish council that emerges from it (formed by the pastor, other clergy, and lay representatives) are important.²³

Wewnętrzny Polskiego Autokefalicznego Kościoła Prawosławnego, § 4, https://woskresienska.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Statut_PAKP.pdf [accessed 7.10.2025].

The Church of Cyprus has a Throne Committee of the Holy Archdiocese of Cyprus (composed of clergy and laity) to support the ministry of the Archbishop of New Justinianiana and all of Cyprus. ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΚΥΠΡΟΥ: Διοικητική Διάρθρωση και Στοιχεία Επικοινωνίας, https://churchofcyprus.org.cy/diikitiki_diathrosi [accessed 8.10.2025]. The Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia has two Metropolitan Councils, in Prague and Prešov, composed of bishops, representatives of the clergy and laity. PRAVOSLÁVNÁ CIRKEV NA SLOVENSKU: *Ústava Pravoslávnej cirkvi v Českých krajinách a na Slovensku*, art. 13, <https://orthodox.sk/pravoslavna-cirkev/ustava/> [accessed 8.10.2025].

²⁰ KISHA ORTHODHOKSE AUTOQEFALE E SHQIPËRISË: *Statuti i Kishës Orthodhokse Autoqefale të Shqipërisë*, art. 11–12.29, <https://orthodoxalbania.org/2020/en/2015/03/24/statuti-i-kishes-orthodhokse-autoqefale-te-shqiperise-d62/> [accessed 7.10.2025].

²¹ THE ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC HOLY CHURCH: *Armenian Church*, <https://www.armenianchurch.org/en/Overview> [accessed 8.10.2025].

²² БЪЛГАРСКА ПРАВОСЛАВНА ЦЪРКВА: *Устав...*, art. 11.

²³ “The deliberative body of the parish is the parish assembly. (2) The parish assembly shall consist of the adult faithful of the parish, men and women, who by their faith, deeds and moral conduct profess devotion to the Orthodox Church, its teachings and institutions. (3) The chairman of the parish assembly shall be the pastor, or in his absence, a priest delegated by the pastor from among the clergy of the parish or another neighboring parish. If the parish assembly is also attended by the pastor or a priest delegated by the Diocesan Center, he shall preside over the meeting. (4) Priests and deacons actively serving in the parish, as well as retired priests who have permanent residence in the parish, are *ex officio* members of the parish assembly” (own trans.). BISERICA ORTODOXĂ ROMÂNĂ: *Statutul...*, art. 54. “The Parish Council exercises all the powers of the Parish Assembly when it is not convened, as well as the following powers: (a) appoint a delegate from among the members of the Parish Assembly to elect lay members of the Diocesan Assembly from the district; (b) draw up the parish budget and supervise how it is implemented; (c) prepare a report on the implementation of the budget and the financial and accounting balance of

It must be remembered, then, that while synodality is a reality that encompasses how the episcopal ministry functions, it cannot be carried out in isolation from or in contradiction to the entirety of God's people, for it is that people who are the guardians of piety and faith. And while in terms of doctrine and the life of the Church the mission of the bishops is inalienable,²⁴ the reception of conciliar or synodal decisions becomes crucial.²⁵ Therefore, the faithful constitute the conscience of the Church (Greek *ekklesiastike syneidesis*).²⁶ The Christian East sees the participation of the whole Church in study and discernment, but not in isolation from the Word of God and the Tradition of the Church, which must be guarded. Understood in this way, the model is clear: all the faithful carry the faith (liturgy, abiding in the living Tradition, piety and spirituality), representatives of the laity can participate in various bodies (councils, synods, councils, especially parish councils). However, it is the bishops who

the parish; (d) prepare an annual report on the activities of the Parish Council, which it submits to the Parish Assembly for approval; (e) appoint 2 auditors to audit the Parish Committee's finances; (f) receive and review the Parish Committee's annual financial statement; (g) approves the pastor's proposals for equipping the church with liturgical vestments, icons, objects and liturgical books necessary for the celebration of services and the operation of parish institutions (cultural, social, foundation), and allocates appropriate funds; (h) ensure that the supply of the parish store with candles, calendars, worship items and books, as well as printed spiritual materials, is made exclusively from the Diocesan Center, in order to support the missionary activities of the diocese concerned; (i) in cases where there is more than one altar servant, entrust, by protocol, the parish store to a servant other than the pastor, who assumes all material responsibility and management of it" (own trans.). Ibidem, art. 61.

²⁴ For example, the Holy Synod in the Romanian Orthodox Church guards dogmatic, liturgical, legal, pastoral matters, cares for unity with other autocephalous Churches, canonizes saints, determines the Church's position on various state law projects relating to religious affairs and cultural heritage, and on socially important issues, approves the Church's statutes and bylaws, creates and abolishes eparchies and other organizations, elects the patriarch and bishops, deals with the canonical affairs of the clergy, undertakes inter-Church, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, establishes the principles of religious instruction and all other legal aspects of pastoral activity, elects 4 commissions (pastoral, monastic and social; theological, liturgical and didactic; (c) canonical, legal and disciplinary; for the external communities, inter-Orthodox, inter-Christian and inter-religious relations). Biserica Ortodoxă Română: *Statutul...*, art. 14–15.

²⁵ In the Eastern understanding, a council does not end with the signing of the council resolutions, as these demand reception by the entire Church, which sometimes takes many years.

²⁶ JOINT INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH: *Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences*, 7.

make decisions that are binding on the whole Church,²⁷ forming the Holy Council or the Holy Synod of Bishops of the autocephalous Church (these bodies are formed by all bishops or representatives, depending on the size of the Church and internal regulations).²⁸

3. Within the structure of the Old Catholic and Anglican Churches

The subjectivity and co-responsibility of the laity is clearly present in the Old Catholic Churches, which have an episcopal-synodal system. This expresses the communitarianism of the Church. It is not only

²⁷ ПРАВОСЛАВНА ЦЕРКВА УКРАЇНИ: *Статут Православної Церкви України*, II.1–2, <https://www.pomisna.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/statut-ptsu.pdf> [accessed 22.06.2022]. In the case of the Orthodox Church of America, the highest legislative and administrative authority in the Church is the All-American Council, which consists of: Metropolitan and members of the Holy Synod, auxiliary bishops, a pastor and ministering priests from each parish and an equal number of laymen from that parish, military chaplains, a deacon from each parish, one delegate from a parish without a permanent pastor, members and deputies of the Metropolitan Council, members of the Church Review Commission, one priest or deacon and one layman from each theological institution, bishop-accredited superiors of monasteries, members of the Pre-Conciliar Commission. THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA: *The Statute of the Orthodox Church in America*, art. III, <https://www.oca.org/files/PDF/official/2018-0724-oca-statute-final.pdf> [accessed 15.06.2022]. “In doctrinal and canonical matters, the final decision belongs to the Holy Council of Bishops as successors of the Holy Apostles and exponents of Holy Tradition” (own trans.). POLSKI AUTOKEFALICZNY KOŚCIÓŁ PRAWOSŁAWNY: *Statut...*, § 5.

²⁸ See ПРАВОСЛАВНА ЦЕРКВА УКРАЇНИ: *Статут...*, III.1, V.1; СРПСКА ПРАВОСЛАВНА ЦРКВА: *Свети Архиепископски Синод*, <http://www.spc.rs/sr/sinod> [accessed 10.06.2022]; БЪЛГАРСКА ПРАВОСЛАВНА ЦРКВА: *Устав...*, art. 6–7.9. Holy Synods also function in Oriental Churches: THE ASSYRIAN CHURCH OF THE EAST: *Holy Synod*, <https://news.assyrianchurch.org/holy-synod/> [accessed 8.10.2025], THE SYRIAN ORTHODOX PATRIARCHATE OF ANTIOCH: *Holy Synod of Antioch*, <https://syriacpatriarchate.org/holy-synod-antioch/> [accessed 8.10.2025], THE MALANKARA ORTHODOX SYRIAN CHURCH: *Holy Synod*, <https://mosc.in/holysynod> [accessed 8.10.2025], THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH: *Holy Synod members*, <https://copticorthodox.church/en/holysynod/synod-members/> [accessed 8.10.2025], THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES: *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church*, <https://www.oikoumene.org/member-churches/ethiopian-orthodox-tewahedo-church> [accessed 8.10.2025], THE ERITREAN ORTHODOX TEWAHDO CHURCH: ምኅደራ ቤተ ክርስቲያን, <https://www.lisantewahdo.org/index.php/2019-10-17-10-56-42/2019-10-25-15-14-29/item/416-2019-11-23-10-47-21> [accessed 8.10.2025].

about discernment and governance, but also about the spiritual dimension. It is before the community that candidates for ordination make a pledge to keep the deposit of faith, an examination of faith and a declaration of acceptance of ordination from legitimate ministers. But it is the whole Church that realizes the common (baptismal) priesthood, which is expressed in co-responsibility, including with regard to the deposit of faith. This is related to the concept of the Church as a space of continuous common finding of truth, decision-making and action. The episcopal ministry, on the other hand, is to enable the realization of this vocation of the baptized.²⁹

On the one hand, the ministry of bishops is crucial, based on the reception of the sacrament of Holy Orders at the episcopal level, and on the other hand, synods are the supreme legislative authority, and synodal councils co-govern with bishops.³⁰ In these bodies, clergy and laity have equal rights. At the parish level, the parish assembly and parish council are important. The purpose of these arrangements is for the Church and its parts to function without one-man governance.³¹ Noteworthy is the arrangement in the Christian Catholic Church of Switzerland, in whose National Synod two-thirds of the members are laypersons, and the bishop and members of the Synodal Council (six laypersons, including the chairperson, and four

²⁹ THE UNION OF UTRECHT OF THE OLD CATHOLIC CHURCHES: *Ministry and Leadership*, https://www.utrechter-union.org/page/162/ministry_and_leadership [accessed 8.10.2025]; U. KÜRY: *Kościół starokatolicki. Historia, nauka, dążenia*. Trans. W. Wysoczański. Warszawa 1996, pp. 284, 314–317; P.-B. SMIT: *Old Catholic Theology. An Introduction*. Leiden–Boston 2019, p. 30.

³⁰ KATHOLISCHES BISTUM DER ALT-KATHOLIKEN IN DEUTSCHLAND: *Die Synode*, <https://www.alt-katholisch.de/unsere-kirche/das-bistum/synode/> [accessed 10.10.2025]. Synodality does not exclude the bishop's explicit prerogatives, including conferring ordination and confirmation, blessing the oil for liturgical actions, consecrating churches and altars, admitting persons to teach, promoting unity and diakonia, advocating cooperation with other Churches, accompanying clergy in ministry, overseeing the implementation of synod resolutions, and visiting parishes. KATHOLISCHES BISTUM DER ALT-KATHOLIKEN IN DEUTSCHLAND: *Leitung unter Mitwirkung und Mitentscheidung*, <https://www.alt-katholisch.de/unsere-kirche/das-bistum/bischof/> [accessed 10.10.2025]. See ALTKATHOLISCHE KIRCHE ÖSTERREICHS: *Unsere Organisation*, <https://altkatholiken.at/altkatholischer-glaube#organisation> [accessed 10.10.2025].

³¹ KOŚCIÓŁ STAROKATOLICKI MARIAWITÓW W RP: *O Kościele*, <https://www.mariawita.pl/htmls/kosciol.html> [accessed 10.10.2025]; STAROKATOLICKÁ CÍRKEV V ČR: *Zřízení*, <https://www.starokatolici.cz/zrizeni/t812> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Synodní rada*, <https://www.starokatolici.cz/synodni-rada/t1816> [accessed 10.10.2025]; OUD-KATHOLIEKE KERK VAN NEDERLAND: *Bestuur*, <https://oudkatholiek.nl/organisatie/bestuur/> [accessed 10.10.2025].

clergy) have no vote, except for the election of the bishop.³² One important dimension of governance is also material issues.

In summary, in the Old Catholic Churches, the co-responsibility of the faithful (organizational, economic and financial) is fundamental, which harmonizes with the ministry of bishops and presbyters.³³

Also in the Anglican tradition, the issue of co-responsibility of the baptized is important. Even though this idea is generally present in the Protestant family, in the Churches of Anglican Communion the ministry of bishops is important (Anglicanism adopts the three degrees of ordination). The mission of the bishops themselves is carried out collegially. At each level of the Churches, however, the interaction of the ordained of all ranks and the laity is essential. However, this is not democracy in every aspect. The limit of decision-making is fidelity to the Word of God. Therefore, the decisions of synods cannot be assigned the attribute of infallibility: "General Councils may not be gathered together without the commandment and will of Princes. And when they be gathered together, (forasmuch as they are an assembly of men, whereof all are not governed with the Spirit and Word of God,) they may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God. Wherefore things ordained by them as necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of holy Scripture."³⁴

In the Church of England, the laity are involved in the General Synod, which includes, in addition to the House of Bishops and the House of Clergy, the House of Laity, elected by diocesan synods and religious communities. Structured in this way, the Synod is the most important legislative, pastoral, and financial body. At the same time, at the central level, the faithful are involved in the National Church Institutions: the Archbishops' Council (leadership, strategy, executive responsibility), Lambeth

³² CHRISTKATHOLISCHE KIRCHE DER SCHWEIZ: *Nationalsynode*, <https://christkatholisch.ch/wir/organisation/nationalsynode/> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Synodalrat*, <https://christkatholisch.ch/wir/organisation/synodalrat/> [accessed 10.10.2025].

³³ BISSCHOPPELIJK BUREAU OUD-KATHOLIEKE KERK VAN NEDERLAND: *Statuut voor de Oud-Katholieke Kerk van Nederland*, Amersfoort 2025, art. 130–150.159–181; KATHOLISCHES BISTUM DER ALT-KATHOLIKEN IN DEUTSCHLAND: *Kirchliche Ordnungen und Satzungen*, III. STAROKATOLICKÁ CÍRKEV V ČR: *Ústava Starokatolícké cirkve v České republice*, § 1.4–8.10.14–18.22–30; HRVATSKA STAROKATOLIČKA CRKVA: *Kratka Sinteza Stava Hrvatske Starokatoličke Crkve*, <https://hrvatska-starokatolicka-crkva.com/nase-misljenje-o/> [accessed 10.10.2025].

³⁴ THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND: *The Articles of the Church of England*, art. 21, <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/articles-religion> [accessed 10.10.2025].

Palace (the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury), Bishopthorpe Palace (the office of the Archbishop of York), the Church Commissioners (financial matters), the Church of England Pensions Board (pension services for Church employees), the National Society for Promoting Religious Education, the Church of England Central Services (HR, finance, IT, law, archiving). In dioceses, however, diocesan synods, deanery synods, and in the parochial church meetings and parochial church councils are important.³⁵

The responsibility of clergy and laity is implemented in other Anglican Churches. In the Church of Ireland, the General Synod, composed of the House of Bishops and the House of Representatives (clerical and lay), diocesan synods and diocesan councils and, in each parish, general vestries and parochial councils are important.³⁶ In the Episcopal Church, the General Convention, composed of the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies, has supreme authority. Between sessions of the Convention, the mission is carried out by the Executive Council. Each diocese has a diocesan synod, and a Standing Committee.³⁷ In the Anglican Church in North America (this Church is outside the Anglican Communion) the highest body is the Provincial Assembly composed of laity and clergy with Archbishop and bishops, the Provincial Council, the Executive Committee, the Provincial Tribunal (composed of seven members, both laity and priests), and in the dioceses Standing Committees, in the parishes, aside from parish priests, governing boards.³⁸

³⁵ THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND: *General Synod*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/about-general-synod> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Leadership and Governance*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Church Representation Rules online – part 2*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-services/church-representation-rules/part-2> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Church Representation Rules online – part 3*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-services/church-representation-rules/part-3> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Church Representation Rules online – part 4*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-services/church-representation-rules/part-4> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Church Representation Rules online – part 9*, <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/legal-services/church-representation-rules/part-9> [accessed 10.10.2025].

³⁶ THE CHURCH OF IRELAND: *The Constitution*, chap. I–III, <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/about/the-constitution/the-constitution-in-full> [accessed 10.10.2025].

³⁷ THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH: *Constitution & Canons 2024*, art. 1.4, can. 1, https://www.episcopalarchives.org/files/publications/2024_CandC.pdf [accessed 10.10.2025].

³⁸ THE ANGLICAN CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA: *Constitution and Canons 2025*, art. I–II.V–VI.XI, <https://anglicanchurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ACNA-Constitution-and-Canons-June-2019.pdf> [accessed 10.10.2025].

Other churches in the Anglican tradition have arrangements parallel to those indicated above. In these structures, we can see the coexistence of the ministry of bishops, presbyters, deacons and laity in discernment, governance, accountability and ecclesiastical justice. This broad involvement also leads to Anglican diversity. The Holy Scripture and *The Book of Common Prayer*, the basic book of prayer and guidance for Anglican spirituality (balancing the extremes) is to be everywhere at the center.³⁹ It should be noted, however, that democratization in Anglican churches sometimes leads to controversial decisions, causing much tension in the Anglican Communion.⁴⁰

4. Within the structure of the historic Reformation Churches

The 16th-century Reformation and its later iterations brought greater empowerment of the laity and their active involvement in the life of the Church, including in decision-making and governance. The head of the Church is Christ, and the Church itself is a community united by the pure proclamation of God's Word and the due administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁴¹ Other aspects of ecclesial life, such as structure or liturgical orders, may differ from one Church to another. Fidelity to the Word of God is crucial. Aids to maintaining an understanding of the Bible and abiding in the right faith are *The Book of Concord* (for the Lutherans), *The Three Forms of Unity* (for the continental Reformed) and *The Westminster Standards* and *The Scots Confession* (for the Scottish Reformed and Presbyterians) or *The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church*, *John Wesley's Explanatory Notes Upon the New*

³⁹ *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to use of the Church of England*. Cambridge 2012, p. V.

⁴⁰ Examples include the introduction of same-sex marriage or allowing people living in such unions to be ordained in the Episcopal Church in USA and the United Church of Canada.

⁴¹ "The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught, and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church, it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike." *The Augsburg Confession*, art. VII, <https://bookofconcord.org/augsburg-confession/> [accessed 10.10.2025].

Testament and *Forty-Four Sermons by John Wesley* (for the Methodists). In all of these strands of the Reformation, based on the Word of God, the basis for the participation of the ordained and non-ordained is the truth of the universal priesthood of the baptized. Thus, all Christians are called to divine service and freedom of faith through the work of the Holy Spirit. This is expressed in the daily living of the Gospel, but also in taking joint responsibility for the Church, including in governance. This is expressed primarily in multidimensional synodality: within local churches (Synod of the Church), in dioceses (diocesan synods) and in parishes (parish assemblies and councils).

Thus, the Synod is the epitome of the Church and “the expression of all the rights vested in the Church.”⁴² The Synod deals with doctrinal, liturgical, pastoral and legal matters. Among Polish Lutherans, the laity participate, alongside the Church Synod, in the Synodal Council and the Consistory, in dioceses in diocesan synods and diocesan councils, and in parishes they form parish assemblies and appoint parish councils. In these councils, the laity together with the ordained discern, decide, and govern.⁴³ The analogy is the same in other Churches. In the union Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD), the synod is made up of representatives of member churches; 14 members make up the EKD Council. The EKD Church Conference, composed of theologians and lawyers, and various committees also have an important place.⁴⁴ In the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (VELKD), there is a General Synod and a Church Council (with a Presiding Bishop, another bishop and representatives of the synod).⁴⁵ In the Church of Sweden, the equivalent

⁴² KOŚCIÓŁ EWANGELICKO-AUGSBURSKI W RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ POLSKIEJ: *Zasadnicze Prawo Wewnętrzne Kościoła Ewangelicko-Augsburskiego w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* (15.10.2022), § 58, <https://bik.luteranie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2022-10-15zpw-tekstujednolicony.pdf> [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁴³ KOŚCIÓŁ EWANGELICKO-AUGSBURSKI W RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ POLSKIEJ: *Zasadnicze Prawo Wewnętrzne Kościoła Ewangelicko-Augsburskiego w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* (15.10.2022), § 27-35.44-48.49-51.58-72.

⁴⁴ EVANGELISCHE KIRCHE IN DEUTSCHLAND: *Synode der EKD*, <https://www.ekd.de/synode-der-ekd-10772.htm> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Rat der EKD*, <https://www.ekd.de/Rat-10774.htm> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Kirchenkonferenz der EKD*, <https://www.ekd.de/Kirchenkonferenz-10783.htm> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Kammern der EKD*, <https://www.ekd.de/Kammern-10782.htm> [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁴⁵ VEREINIGTE EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE KIRCHE DEUTSCHLANDS: *Generalsynode*, <https://www.velkd.de/velkd/generalsynode.php> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Bischofskonferenz*, <https://www.velkd.de/velkd/bischofskonferenz.php> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Kirchenleitung*, <https://www.velkd.de/velkd/kirchenleitung.php> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Der Leitende Bischof*

of the synod is the Church Council, which interacts with the Meeting of Bishops under the direction of the Archbishop.⁴⁶ In the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, laity participate in all key legislative and governing bodies: in the Church Assembly, in the Church Council and the Commission for Church Employers. In each diocese, shared responsibility is carried by the Synodal Assembly and the Diocesan Council, in the parishes by the Church Councils.⁴⁷ In turn, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is divided into synods (dioceses) composed of representatives from each congregation (parish). In each synod there are a Synod Assembly and a Synod Council. The most important body of the Church as a whole is the Churchwide Assembly (representatives of the synods) and the Church Council (legislative authority and Churchwide government). The laity also participate in committees and offices.⁴⁸

The Danish National Church, on the other hand, functions differently. It has no centralized organization. The Church is headed by the Queen of Denmark, and the bishops decide on pastoral and administrative matters. The faithful, however, are involved in councils, especially parish councils. They can also appoint structures other than the parish.⁴⁹

Full lay involvement in decision-making processes is a feature of Reformed denominations. Most of them have a synodal-presbyterial system, although some are congregationally formed. The laity thus participate in all areas of church life. A peculiarity of the Reformed in Poland is that laity head ecclesiastical bodies, including the Synod, the Consistory, the Church College, and the congregation of members in the parish.⁵⁰

oder die Leitende Bischöfin, <https://www.velkd.de/velkd/leitender-bischof-der-velkd.php> [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁴⁶ SVENSKA KYRKAN: *Kyrkomötet*, <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/kyrkomotet-hogsta-beslutande-organ> [accessed 10.10.2025]; *Biskopsmötet*, <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/biskopsmotet> [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁴⁷ SUOMEN EVANKELIS-LUTERILAINEN KIRKKO: *Kirkkojärjestys*, III, § 26–39, IV, §8–17, V, § 1–16, <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/lainsaadanto/saaduskokoelma/2023/657> [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁴⁸ THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA: *Constitutions, bylaws and continuing resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, chap. 9–12.14–16, https://resources.elca.org/office-of-the-secretary/constitution-bylaws-and-continuing-resolutions-of-the-elca/?_ga=2.166535678.1166015347.1760192396-25538295.1760192316 [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁴⁹ FOLKEKIRKEN: *Om folkekirken*, <https://www.folkekirken.dk/om-folkekirken> [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁵⁰ KOŚCIÓŁ EWANGELICKO-REFORMOWANY W RP: *Prawo wewnętrzne Kościoła Ewangelicko-Reformowanego w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, art. 5.19–26.50–54.62.67, <https://www>

There is no one-person decision-making in any Reformed Church. The key to Reformed identity, therefore, is communitarianism. This is realized through councils, committees, ministries. This is also how the World Communion of Reformed Churches functions.⁵¹

Situated between the historic and Evangelical Churches is Methodism, which originated in the Church of England. As the principles of the faith state, “the visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”⁵² The Church thus understood is realized in its synodal form, in which the non-ordained actively participate in central and local bodies of shared responsibility. The proclamation of the Word of God, however, should only be undertaken by those called to do so, especially the ordained,⁵³ although all the baptized share in the mission of the Church. Thus, they take responsibility for local communities, participate in synods or conferences of the Church, in various types of church committees, district (diocesan) councils, parish councils, and conferences. In Polish Methodism, the Council of Superintendents and the Clergy Assembly, sitting non-publicly, are important. The role of the ordained is emphasized in this. In the United Methodist Church, on the other hand, central authority is distributed among various bodies: the General Conference, the Council of Bishops and the Judicial Council. Representatives of the laity and ordained carry out communal responsibility also in the World Methodist Council, for instance, in the Steering Committee and in other bodies.⁵⁴

.reformowani.pl/index.php/czytelnia/26-prawo-wewnetrznegosciola-ewangelicko-reformowanego-rzeczypospolitej-polskiej [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁵¹ See THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA): *What makes us unique*, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/what-makes-us-unique/> [accessed 10.10.2025]; WORLD COMMUNION OF REFORMED CHURCHES: *Constitution and By-Laws*, <https://wcrce.eu/about/governance/> [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁵² THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH: *The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church*, art. XIII, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/articles-of-religion> [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁵³ “The offices which the Holy Spirit performs for the Church of Christ are that He calls and qualifies the ministry, renders their preaching effective for the conviction and conversion of sinners and the edification of believers, is present in her ordinances, and gives direction and power to her work.” THE METHODIST CHURCH, CANADA: *Catechism*. London 2017, no. 73.

⁵⁴ THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH: *Our Structure*, <https://www.umc.org/en/who-we-are/structure> [accessed 10.10.2025]; THE WORLD METHODIST COUNCIL: *Steering Committee*, <https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/steering-committee/> [accessed 10.10.2025];

In summary, in the historic Churches of the Reformation, ordination is important, which gives certain prerogatives (performing pastoral functions, officially preaching the Word of God, administering the sacraments, presiding over the liturgy and the community). However, non-ordained people also have an inalienable place. From the very fact of baptism grows their responsibility for the Church and the right to decide on its functioning.

5. Within the structure of Evangelical Churches

Evangelical Protestantism is one of the most dynamic religious phenomena of contemporary Christianity. As Tadeusz Zieliński points out, it is a movement that combines features of personal spirituality with missionary and social activity, while at the same time creating a distinctive religious culture centered around the experience of personal faith.⁵⁵ Evangelicalism draws on both the heritage of the Reformation and Pietist, Methodist, and Pentecostal influences.⁵⁶ This encourages the development of private spirituality and personal forms of religiosity. Theologically, this means a shift in emphasis from ritual to relationship, while in terms of the sociology of religion, a gradual shift from ecclesiastical religion to invisible religiosity.⁵⁷ Taking into account the diversity of spiritual experiences and interpretive

Headquarters Office Staff, <https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/headquarters-office-staff/> [accessed 10.10.2025].

⁵⁵ See T. ZIELIŃSKI: *Protestantyzm ewangelikalny. Studium specyfiki religijnej*. Katowice–Warszawa 2014. The distinctive features of this trend are defined by the Evangelical quadrilateral: personal choice of faith (conversionism), reliance on the Bible (biblicism), Christocentrism (cross-centrism), and commitment (activism). See D. BEBBINGTON: *The Evangelical Quadrilateral: Characterizing the British Gospel Movement*. Waco 2021.

⁵⁶ A particularly active part of Evangelicalism is its Pentecostal flank, which is among the most growing strands of Christianity in the world. At the same time, the Pentecostal movement appears to be the most fluctuating part of Evangelicalism sensitive to changes in the intensity of theological views and prevailing ritual fashions.

⁵⁷ Z. PASEK: *Pstrokatę piękno. Szkice z historii duchowości chrześcijańskiej*. Kraków 1999. In each iteration of the Evangelical movement, the essence remains a personal intimate relationship with God acquired through a religious experience referred to as new birth. From the perspective of the social sciences, this phenomenon can be described by the term “Church of Choice.” See N. MODNICKA: *Małe świąty polskiego ewangelikalizmu. Studium z antropologii interpretatywnej*. Łódź 2013. Cf. A. MCGRATH: *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*. London 1994, p. 51.

differences on theological issues, it can be said that at the core of the Evangelical mindset is an intense experience of the presence of God. Such experience is actually indispensable to them in translating the credo into concrete behavior in their lives.⁵⁸ One of the key aspects of transforming the daily life of Christians is the idea of the universal priesthood of believers, which models the communal and personal experience of faith.

Understanding spirituality in this way also shapes the way the communities function. For the Evangelicals “[...] the church is fundamentally a ‘polycentric community’ that allows members to participate...”⁵⁹ This is realized on several levels. First, the pastor in charge of the local community, devoid of priestly functions (in the Catholic or Orthodox sense), plays the role of a community theologian who interprets doctrinal issues through his own reading of the Bible. He is thus faced with the task of making a theological interpretation of passages of Scripture and the religious experiences of church members. The role of the ordained (clergy) is also emphasized in the legal acts of individual Churches,⁶⁰ for example, *Prawo Wewnętrzne Kościoła Zielonoświątkowego w RP*, *Zasadnicze Prawo Wewnętrzne Kościoła Chrześcijan Baptystów w RP*, *Statut Kościoła Wolnych Chrześcijan w RP* czy *Statut Kościoła Chrześcijan Wiary Ewangelicznej* [The Domestic Law of the Pentecostal Church in the Republic of Poland, the Fundamental Domestic Law of the Baptist Church in the Republic of Poland, the Statutes of the Free Christian Church in the Republic of Poland and the Statutes of the Evangelical Faith Baptist Church].⁶¹ In the quoted

⁵⁸ A. MIGDA: *Mistycyzm pentekostalny*. Kraków 2013, p. 184.

⁵⁹ T. PILLI: “The Baptist Way of Being the Church. Presentation at the EBF Council held in Tallinn, Estonia, 29 September 2016.” In: THE EUROPEAN BAPTIST FEDERATION: *Baptist Identity*, <https://www.ebf.org/post/baptist-identity> [accessed 19.10.2025], p. 3.

⁶⁰ It is impossible to discuss the legislation of all denominations. In Poland, for example, the government register of denominations lists 45 Evangelical Churches and communities that do not have their own particular law. However, separate laws apply to the Pentecostal Church in Poland and the Baptist Church in Poland.

⁶¹ KOŚCIÓŁ ZIELONOŚWIĄTKOWY W RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ POLSKIEJ: *Prawo Wewnętrzne Kościoła Zielonoświątkowego w RP*, <https://kz.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/PrawoWewne%E2%84%A2trzneKZ-2023-tekst-jednolity--.pdf> [accessed 18.10.2025]; KOŚCIÓŁ CHRZEŚCIJAN BAPTYSTÓW W RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ POLSKIEJ: *Zasadnicze Prawo Wewnętrzne Kościoła Chrześcijan Baptystów w RP*, <https://old.baptysci.pl/images/home/Zasadnicze-Prawo-Wewnetrzne-KChB.pdf> [accessed 18.10.2025]; KOŚCIÓŁ WOLNYCH CHRZEŚCIJAN W RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ POLSKIEJ: *Statut Kościoła Wolnych Chrześcijan w RP* (2019), https://kwch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Statut_KWCH_2019.pdf [accessed 18.10.2025]; KOŚCIÓŁ CHRZEŚCIJAN WIARY EWANGELICZNEJ: *Statut Kościoła Chrześcijan Wiary Ewangelicznej*, https://kchwe.pl/akty-prawne/statut/iv-duchowni-kosciola/?utm_source=chatgpt.com [accessed 18.10.2025].

constitutional acts, the terms of clergy appear, but it follows that all Polish Evangelical Churches define clergy by listing the offices recognized as clergy. In the Pentecostal Church these are deacons and presbyters, in the Baptist Church: pastors, missionaries, deacons, and vicars, in the Free Christian Church: superiors, elders, preachers, missionaries, evangelists, chaplains, deacons and deaconesses, in the Evangelical Faith Baptist Church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, presbyters, and deacons. In these and similar communities, a clergyperson is a lay person ordained or appointed to perform spiritual service, with the right to perform religious acts on behalf of the community and in accordance with religious law, subject to the protection afforded to clergy.

In addition to pastors, “church elders” play an important role in the local community. These collegial bodies oversee the local communities and, together with the pastor, make important decisions for the life of the Church. Their collective decisions model how the spirituality and ritual of the local communities are implemented. Their role depends on individual church statutes, but they usually oblige pastors to interact with the Council of Elders. Therefore, decision-making requires the laity to have the competence of spiritual discernment. Referring to the biblical model of the Church as the Body of Christ emphasizes that the Holy Spirit gives each believer specific charisms that serve to build up the community. This shifts the emphasis from hierarchy to endowment (anointing), or spiritual gifting. This theological conviction has sociological consequences – it changes the way authority and power are understood within the community. In practice, this means that authority in the Charismatic Church is diffuse. It does not derive only from the office (e.g., pastor), but also from recognizing the spiritual authority of the person through whom the Holy Spirit works. This is why lay prophets, teachers, worship leaders or healing prayer leaders often play a real leadership role, even though they are not formally members of the church council or clergy. Especially in communities belonging to the Pentecostal movement,⁶² one can see how the role of the laity is not limited to functions related to the organizational dimension of the Church’s activities, but includes spiritual, prophetic and missionary dimensions. This creates a synergistic space in which elements of institutional authority are intertwined with charismatic reality. In such an expanded model of networked leadership, the pastor often plays a coordinating

⁶² See *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 Years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal, 1901–2001*. Ed. V. SYNAN. Nashville 2012.

role and his authority is based on credibility, relationships and the spiritual fruits of ministry. However, it is important to remember that under most statutes, however, it is the pastor who represents the Church to the outside world, and consequently, it is the pastor who is charged with responsibility and the need to sign off on decisions laden with civil liability.

The participation of the faithful in discernment and governance is also fulfilled at the level of interaction between the individual Churches that make up the larger church body. This is expressed in the synodal form – the synod “the highest legal body of the Church as a whole.”⁶³ Polish Evangelical Churches function in such a structure. Synodality is also a form of other communities of the Evangelical current. For example, in the Southern Baptist Convention, which, while respecting the autonomy of the Churches, is a network of church cooperation, and in the service of unity the mission is undertaken by: a president, a first and a second vice president, a recording secretary, a registration secretary, and a treasurer, the Executive Committee, the general boards of the Convention and other commissions and committees⁶⁴; in the Assemblies of God serve the General Council (ordained and licensed ministers, representatives of Churches with certificates of membership), the Executive Leadership Team, the Executive Presbytery, district councils, local bodies of co-responsible persons in congregations⁶⁵; in the Church of God the highest authority holds the International General Assembly (lay members and ministers), but the International General Council is made up of bishops; lay people are members, together with ordained, of the International Executive Council’s various committees.⁶⁶ A synodal-episcopal structure, on the other hand, functions

⁶³ KOŚCIÓŁ ZIELONOŚWIĄTKOWY W RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ POLSKIEJ: *Prawo wewnętrzne Kościoła Zielonoświątkowego w Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, art. 1 p. 1, <https://kz.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/PrawoWewne%E2%84%A2trzneKZ-2023-tekst-jednolity-.pdf> [accessed 18.10.2025]. The synod is composed of presbyters, pastors, acting pastor, assistant pastors, delegates of Churches, and representatives of church agencies. *Wprowadzenie do nauki o Biblii oraz doktryny i praktyki ruchu zielonoświątkowego*. Eds. E. BEDNARZ, R. TOMASZEWSKI. Warszawa 2010, p. 290.

⁶⁴ THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION: *Constitution*, art. IV–VII, <https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/legal-documentation/constitution/> [accessed 18.10.2025].

⁶⁵ THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD: *Constitution of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, art. VII–XI, https://cdn1.acdn.io/sites/agorg/Constitution_Bylaws/2023/2023_AG_Constitution_and_Bylaws.pdf [accessed 18.10.2025]; *Bylaws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, art. II–V, https://cdn1.acdn.io/sites/agorg/Constitution_Bylaws/2023/2023_AG_Constitution_and_Bylaws.pdf [accessed 18.10.2025].

⁶⁶ THE CHURCH OF GOD: *Bylaws*, <https://churchofgod.org/beliefs/bylaws/> [accessed 18.10.2025].

in the International Pentecostal Holiness Church – the General Conference has the most important prerogatives, but between its assemblies the highest authority and power is exercised by the Council of Bishops and the Executive Committee of the Council of Bishops.⁶⁷ In the Church of God in Christ (USA), the General Assembly (composed by ordained and lay people) has the highest authority, and in day-to-day functioning the General Board composed by twelve bishops. Ordained and lay people are members of the Judiciary Board in the Supreme Court of the Church of God in Christ. In addition to this, the faithful realize co-responsibility through involvement in various central and local ministries and departments.⁶⁸

Interaction between ordained and non-ordained and synodality exist in the international structures of Evangelical denominations, among others the World Evangelical Alliance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the Pentecostal European Fellowship (although essentially it is an association of church leaders, ordained), the Baptist Bible Fellowship International, the European Baptist Federation or the World Baptist Alliance.⁶⁹

In summary, shared responsibility in Evangelical communities reflects the transparency of governance and the maturity of the community. The natural tension between structure and charism is an inherent aspect of communities where the Holy Spirit and the institution coexist in dynamic harmony. As a result, Evangelical communities become a space where the laity actively participate in the life of the church, shaping its spiritual and organizational development. From a sociological point of view, they can be described as a “grassroots religious elite,” whose influence does not

⁶⁷ THE INTERNATIONAL PENTECOSTAL HOLINESS CHURCH: *Bylaws*, art. I, <https://iphc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IPHC-Manual-2017-2021-English.pdf> [accessed 18.10.2025].

⁶⁸ THE CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST (USA): *The Executive Branch*, <https://www.cogic.org/about-us/the-executive-branch/> [accessed 18.10.2025]; *The Legislative Branch*, <https://www.cogic.org/about-us/the-legislative-branch/> [accessed 18.10.2025]; *The Judiciary Board*, <https://www.cogic.org/about-us/the-judicial-branch/the-judiciary-board/> [accessed 18.10.2025]; *How We Serve*, <https://www.cogic.org/service/> [accessed 18.10.2025].

⁶⁹ THE WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE: *International Council*, <https://worldea.org/who-we-are/international-council/> [accessed 18.10.2025]; *Leadership*, <https://worldea.org/who-we-are/leadership/> [accessed 18.10.2025]; THE PENTECOSTAL EUROPEAN FELLOWSHIP: *Presidium*, <https://www.pef.eu/presidium> [accessed 18.10.2025]; THE PENTECOSTAL WORLD FELLOWSHIP: *Leadership*, <https://www.pwfellowship.org/leadership> [accessed 18.10.2025]; *Ambassadors*, <https://www.pwfellowship.org/ambassadors> [accessed 18.10.2025]; THE BAPTIST BIBLE FELLOWSHIP INTERNATIONAL: *Constitution and By-Laws*, art. V–VIII, <https://www.bbf.org/constitution-and-by-laws> [accessed 18.10.2025]; THE WORLD BAPTIST ALLIANCE: *Constitution and Bylaws*, art. III–VIII, https://baptistworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/BWA-Constitution-and-Bylaws_Adopted-July-2024-FINAL.pdf [accessed 18.10.2025].

rival the authority of the clergy but complements it by creating a new culture of shared responsibility.

6. Conclusions and inspiration

The multiplicity of structures in different Churches and denominations, when coupled with respecting each other's doctrinal identity, can be a valuable source of mutual inspiration. At the same time, it can provide an opportunity to deepen the theology of individual currents, which will translate into new forms of life and activity of the Churches. In the context of the analysis carried out, it is right to formulate the following conclusions:

a) The Catholic, Orthodox (Byzantine) and Oriental Churches have a clear sacramental-hierarchical structure, which means the inalienable role of the ordained, primarily the bishops, who, being the successors of the apostles, have a pastoral, sacramental-liturgical and teaching function. In the process of discernment and decision-making has the synodality and collegiality of the bishops; in the case of the Catholic Church always in subordination to the Bishop of Rome. In pastoral care, presbyters, especially those serving as parish priests, have an important role. The structure thus understood does not exclude the interaction of the laity and the consecrated. In the Catholic Church, taking into account the nuances between rites, the laity participate in various councils, committees and other bodies, supporting bishops (at the diocesan level) and pastors (at the parish level). They can also perform various stewardship functions, but always, in accordance with ecclesiology, in unity with and subordination to the bishops (pastors). The necessity of the co-responsibility of the laity has been highlighted by Pope Francis, expanding the formula of the Synod of Bishops and including non-bishops in the process of discernment and working out decisions.

For the Catholic Church, familiarity with the solutions of other churches and even greater empowerment of the laity could serve for pastoral revitalization. Sharing in the election of bishops and pastors or in control bodies, as well as real participation in governance at the level of the universal Church and local churches (dioceses), would not mean a violation of hierarchical identity.

Also in the Eastern non-Catholic Churches, the mission of bishops is central. However, representatives of presbyters, deacons, monks and laity participate in local councils or synods, in various councils and places of service. Depending on the law of the individual autocephalous churches, they participate in the process of selecting the superiors (patriarch, metropolitan or archbishop).

- b) The Old Catholic Churches combine a sacramental-hierarchical structure with synodality. Representatives of the clergy and laity have a real influence on the broad shape of the Church. This experience indicates that the participation of the laity in discernment and governance does not detract anything from the office of the bishop and can additionally protect the Church from abuses of power. On the other hand, the competence of members of synods and councils, especially in the field of theology, remains a challenge. Nevertheless, Old Catholic synodality demonstrates the communal nature of the Christian community.

The Anglican experience is similar. In the churches of this current, defining themselves by a middle way between Catholicism and Protestantism, the function of the bishop is important. However, synodality presupposes the extensive involvement of other clergy and laity in Church responsibility, in the discernment of important theological and pastoral matters, as well as in the judicial sphere. The experience of these churches, especially in Britain and North America, shows that the synodal configuration does not offset tensions, controversies and even schisms. On the other hand, it is an illustration of the attempt to preserve unity while respecting diversity, not only spiritually (the shape of spirituality), but also organizationally (e.g., parallel structures). The challenge remains, however, to preserve doctrinal unity and to work out local solutions in such a way as to strengthen the real unity of the Anglican Communion.

- c) The Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist Churches are characterized by a constant interaction of ordained and non-ordained members. The ministry of bishops (superintendents) and presbyters is not insignificant, nevertheless it cannot be compared with the role of bishops and presbyters in the Catholic and Eastern Churches. The bishop in a diocese and the pastor (parish priest) in a parish are responsible for the teaching of the faith, the equitable celebration of the sacraments and pastoral practice. However, he does not perform his function in isolation from the laity. They are the ones who are an essential part of church synods, diocesan synods or parish councils. In this way, the ordained

and non-ordained carry responsibility for the Church. Undoubtedly, for other Christians, such an arrangement can be inspiring, though not without concerns about excessive democratization, especially when people without proper theological training decide doctrinal, pastoral or legal matters.

- d) Evangelical Churches bear witness to functioning in a model of real shared responsibility of the baptized for the local Church and broader structures. This does not negate the importance of the role of ordained persons, especially those serving as pastors. However, the key is the participatory model of functioning of the local Church or larger structures, in which councils or synods are effective forums for governance. This is all the more understandable when communities have tens to hundreds of members. This general Evangelical principle finds different solutions in terms of the authority of different structures. The differences between denominations mainly concern the degree of centralization and the role of churchwide bodies (this is clearly seen in the Pentecostal Church in the Republic of Poland), but in each denomination the uncoordinated faithful have a real causal and controlling mandate. Likewise, legal categories, such as “clergy” as defined by the law, do not overturn the secular nature of many ministries, but provide them with protection and recognition in the state.

The said participation of the faithful also carries certain dangers. On the one hand, a community functioning strongly democratically with the participation of a subjectively chosen authority (pastor or leader) may not be a sustainable structure. This is illustrated by observing the process of movement of believers between churches or denominations. On the other hand, the lack of a clearly defined doctrinal authority (the equivalent of the Catholic Church’s teaching office) generates tensions in theology and pastoral practice, a great deal of freedom of opinion even within a denomination, and a tendency toward separation. However, this does not diminish the very testimony of the power of shared responsibility. Undoubtedly, Evangelical Churches are characterized, relative to historic Churches, by identification with the mission of the community and involvement in multiple ministries. Such value is still expected in other strands of Christianity.

- e) The multifaceted solutions to ecclesial structure and the shape of ordained and lay participation in discernment and governance can provide valuable mutual inspiration between Churches and communities. To achieve this goal, however, it is necessary to understand one’s own

theological identity and knowledge of history, so that the preferred views and solutions are consistent with the biblical message, but also rooted in the earlier experiences of Christians, regardless of how they approach the Church's tradition.

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