

Sense of belonging in Oudega: the role of the church



Figure 1: St. Agathakerk, Oudega. Photo: Peter Veenema.

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Summary

This paper presents a research regarding the influence of the local church for the sense of belonging in Oudega (municipality of Smallingerland). The significance of religion in the Netherlands has been in decline for several decades. In 2022, just 43% of the Dutch population considered themselves to be religious, compared to 54% in 2012. The statistics regarding active church participation are even lower, with only 12,1 % of Dutch adults regularly visiting church in 2022. At the same time, research indicates that churches can still play an important role in Dutch communities, creating a feeling of connectedness among their members and contributing to social welfare in their local community. This raises questions about the relevance of churches in the Dutch society of today. Existing literature on this topic indicates that churches do influence one's sense of belonging, both on the personal level, by organising religious activities which makes participants feel connected to each other, and the community level, by contributing to social welfare. Still, little knowledge is available on this effect on communities in the Dutch countryside and therefore, this research aims to contribute to this discussion by doing qualitative research in the village of Oudega, conducting eight interviews with nine respondents who consider themselves involved in local church life. The respondents were asked about the extent to which the local church has influence on their personal sense of belonging with the village. The results of this research indicate that the target population does feel a sense of belonging with Oudega, which is partly caused by their life in the church. The church can make them feel part of a community and connected with fellow inhabitants of Oudega. Moreover, the church plays a role in involving vulnerable groups into the community. However, it is not the sole way to find belonging with the village. Belonging can also be developed without the church. In conclusion, it seems the respondents value the idea of a community highly and for them, the church community is the one that suits them the most. A recommendation for the future could be a quantitative study investigating the influence of the church on a small town community and covering the views of non-religious residents. Such a research could discover the views of other residents of Oudega towards the church and displaying how they would describe the value of a church for their sense of belonging in the village. Secondly, a qualitative study discussing alternative ways to achieve a sense of belonging with a small town community, using the experiences of non-religious residents, would be interesting to investigate.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The role of religion in Dutch society has undergone many changes in the past decades. While in 1960, 80 percent of the Dutch population were either Catholic or Protestant, the situation nowadays is different (CBS, 2020). According to CBS (2023), in 2022, only 43% of the Dutch population aged 15 or older considered themselves to be part of a religious denomination or philosophical group, compared to 54% in 2012. This decline is part of a steady decrease in religious participation in the Netherlands, beginning during the start of the 20th century (CBS, 2020).

The decline of religious involvement is even more apparent when considering the participation rate in religious services of Dutch citizens. In 2022, merely 12,1% of the 15-plussers visited a religious service on a regular basis (at least once a month), while 83% of the population seldom or never did so. This, too, is a decline compared to statistics of a decade earlier, when still 17,2%

of the 15-plussers declared to be a regular churchgoer. These numbers indicate that a significant portion of the population considers themselves to be religious, while not actively engaging in church life.

Although there are multiple causes for this phenomenon, such as an increase in diversity of religious movements – caused partly by the entrance of immigrants after World War II – the main reason for this shift is the ongoing secularization: the declining impact of religion on society as a whole (Berger, 1967, cited by Kregting et al. 2018, p.60).

During the period following World War II, several social and cultural developments occurred. Citizens became less dependent on restrictive community structures and the Dutch society transformed into a more individualistic one (Kregting, 2018). This shift had effects on the way social groups interacted with one another and had implications on religion as well, with secularization as one of the aftermaths.

The low amount of religious involvement is visible in Oudega as well. Oudega (municipality of Smallingerland), is a small Frisian town of approximately 1600 inhabitants (Allecijfers, 2023). In the town, two church buildings are actively operating under one organization. The church organization in Oudega is part of the Protestantse Kerk van Nederland (PKN), or in English, the Protestant Church of the Netherlands.

While statistics on the town itself are not available, South-East Friesland, the region where Oudega is part of, state an average religious population of 37,5% between the years 2012 and 2021 (CBS, 2023), below the national average of 49,3% during that period.

Despite the fact that the influence of religion is becoming increasingly insignificant within the Netherlands, research indicates that churches and religious organizations can still play a role in the lives of people. According to CBS (2020), this influence is evident in multiple aspects of Dutch society, such as one's financial position and the rate in which organ donation occurs. One of the aspects mentioned, is religion's impact on the social cohesion in society, where the focus in this research will lie, particularly on the personal sense of belonging of individuals.

According to Gallet (2016), churches traditionally have a role of building a sense of belonging where people feel valued and can build relationships with each other. This can be referred to as social capital. A way in which churches contribute to social cohesion, is through volunteering. Gallet (2016) explains how studies exist that have concluded that the level of volunteering from religious people is higher than that of others.

This narrative is in line with what Beaumont (2012) describes in his paper. Beaumont argues that so-called Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) in The Netherlands act as a tool for the national government in order to put social welfare into practice. FBOs strive to fill gaps that governments leave regarding social welfare, focusing on working with people and increasing social cohesion, according to Beaumont.

The local church in Oudega seems to act in line with previously mentioned statements. On their website, the Protestant commune of Oudega state that they strive to be a significant factor within the creation and retainment of social cohesion. In their policy plan 2020-2024 (Beleidsplan van de Protestantse Gemeente Oudega, 2020), the Protestant Commune of Oudega states that their organization is one that lies within the core of the local community and pursues to bring the people of Oudega together and connect them with God, each other and the world.

1.2. Research problem

The figures discussing the role of religion in the Netherlands indicate that the importance of churches and religion is declining. On the other hand, literature shows that churches can be of

great value to a community's social cohesion and individuals' sense of belonging. This raises questions about what role a church in the Netherlands can still play for people who are part of the church community. Is a church still relevant to such a person's sense of belonging with the town they live in? Investigating this will be the aim of this research. This will be done by interviewing residents of Oudega who consider themselves involved in church life and asking them if the local church impacts their personal sense of belonging with the town.

This leads us to the central research question of this study: *How do active participants within the Protestant church of Oudega perceive the influence of their church on their personal sense of belonging with the town of Oudega?*

This research question will be followed up by three sub questions, namely:

- How would one perceive their personal sense of belonging with the religious community?
- How would one perceive their personal sense of belonging with the town of Oudega?
- To what extent are one's sense of belonging with the religious community and their sense of belonging with the town related?

Although sense of belonging and its relationship to religion has been researched thoroughly already, there is little knowledge on how this relationship exists in villages in the Dutch countryside. This gap in the literature will be filled with this research and thus, an attempt to contribute to the existing literary discussion on this topic will be made.

1.3. Structure

This paper is divided into five sections. The first one, the introduction, has been displayed above. Subsequently, the theoretical framework is the part where the concepts of this research will be discussed and their interrelations. Thereafter, the research methods, analysis methods and ethical considerations are elaborated in the methodology. Lastly, the results of the empirical research will be discussed, together with their connections with the literature. The conclusion completes this paper.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Framework

The central concept of this research is **sense of belonging**. There are various ways in which the concept of sense of belonging can be described. In essence, 'sense of belonging' consists of the feeling of a social connectedness and mattering to others and these perceptions are based on positive connections to a place or to other people (Lindqvist, 2023). In the literature, research has been conducted in order to give practical meaning to the concept. Strayhorn (2019) researched sense of belonging in the context of college students. He argued that students perceived sense of belonging as a feeling of connectedness and feeling valued by the campus community.

One's sense of belonging can be influenced by a **church community**, the second concept of this research. In this case, the focus lies on the Protestant Commune of Oudega, a Christian organization part of the PKN. This Commune contains two church buildings, the St. Agathakerk and It Ljochtbeaken, both located in Oudega. In the remaining of this paper, the term 'church' will

be used on its own as well. This will refer to the church as a community, not as a building or institution.

On the personal level, a church can impact sense of belonging through building **social capital** (Gallet, 2016). The most commonly used definition of social capital reads ‘features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam, 1995, cited by Conrad, 2007). There are two versions of social capital that Gallet describes. Firstly, bonding social capital refers to the enduring connections that similar people within a group build with one another. According to Gallet, churches have a traditional role in creating an environment where people feel valued and can build trusting relationships. A church is a place where people can connect with others and receive assistance. The relationships built during **religious activities**, such as meetings and parishes are examples of bonding social capital.

Moreover, Zhang et. al (2019) stated how ideologically homogeneous religious groups, as the Protestant Commune of Oudega is expected to be, feel benefits regarding their feelings of comfort and belonging. The fact that a group has religious homogeneity, results in a higher sense of belonging in participants, as such a group structure can determine who belongs to the group and who doesn’t and thereby increasing solidarity between group members (Zhang et. al, 2019). Furthermore, solidarity within a religious group results in members being more certain about their beliefs. Participants in this study, who were part of a religious homogenous group, reported feeling comfortable about voicing their opinions and feeling belonging to something and not alone.

Secondly, churches have impact on bridging social capital (Gallet, 2016): contributing to social bonds with networks outside of their own community, increasing the sense of belonging of a community, also known as **social cohesion** (Manca, 2014). Beaumont (2012) argues that so-called Faith Based Organisations (FBOs), such as a church, are involved in putting **social welfare** into practice. FBOs operate as formal institutions that represent vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities and homeless people, and mediate between these groups and the national government (Beaumont, 2012). Furthermore, the involvement of religious communities in social welfare can be a source of volunteers for public purposes.

Gallet’s (2016) arguments are in line with this narrative. Gallet (2016) explains how studies exist that have concluded that the level of volunteering from religious people is higher than that of others. Schmeets (2013), too, concludes that Protestant communities are the most active regarding volunteering, compared to other religious groups and non-religious people.

2.2. Conceptual model

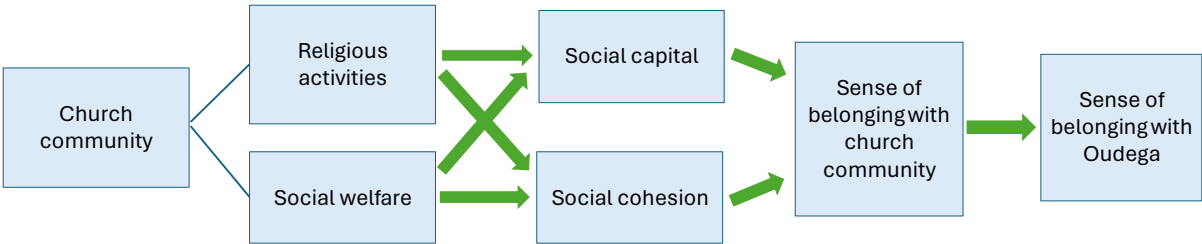


Figure 2: conceptual model

This conceptual model is a visual framework to display how the relevant concepts discussed in the theoretical framework relate to each other. This model should be read from left to right. On the left side, the first concept “church” is located. The church influences “social capital” and “social cohesion” through “religious activities” and “social welfare”. The latter two act as tools which the church can use to influence the concepts on the right side. Moreover, religious activities also influences social cohesion and social welfare influences social capital. Social cohesion and social capital then influence the sense of belonging with the church community and eventually, the combination of all the concepts impact one’s sense of belonging with Oudega.

There are two different connections visible in the model. The ones on the left side are lines indicating a connection, but not more. These line are meant to display the fact that a church uses the connecting concepts as a way to influence the concepts shown on the right side.

The other connections consist of green arrows. The arrows are used to clarify that one concept is an influence of the other. The green colour represents a positive, increasing connection.

2.3. Expectations

The theoretical insights will shape the expectations for the empirical research, done by conducting interviews. In terms of sense of belonging, it is expected that the Protestant Commune of Oudega will impact those of the target population. Given that the target population is ‘residents actively engaging in church life’, the social capital the church provides should be present in their views. Secondly, the theory suggests that a church, like the one in this case, is active in creating and sustaining social welfare. Therefore, it is expected that residents engaged with the church community mention ways in which their church expresses these ideas.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection method

The central question of this research *“How do active participants within the Protestant church of Oudega perceive the influence of their church on their personal sense of belonging with the town of Oudega?”* demanded a qualitative research approach. The question revolves around the idea of perception, which indicates that people’s personal feelings and experiences are central to this research. Therefore, a qualitative research method, in the form of conducting in-depth interviews, is the most suitable one to discover those feelings.

During in-depth interviews, respondents receive the opportunity to express themselves regarding the topic of this research. Responding to questions related to their position within the church community, their relationships towards their peers and their feelings of belonging with the town will demand some effort and therefore, it is crucial to give respondents the freedom to express their thoughts thoroughly.

In order to conduct interviews in a scientific manner, using a data collection instrument is necessary. The instrument used for this study is an interview guide (see appendix 1). This guide consists of a list of questions and probing questions that guides the researcher and the respondents during the interview. Moreover, it serves as a ‘cheat sheet’ during the interviews. In this way, the researcher is able to keep a semi-structured interview and hold multiple interviews with a similar build-up, which helps during the analysis of the results. The interview guide is in Dutch, as the interviews themselves have been as well, for the most part. Three of the interviews

conducted were in Frisian, the regional language of Fryslân, the Dutch province where Oudega is located. The guide has served as a tool for the researcher to determine the perceptions of respondents about their sense of belonging with Oudega and to what extent the church contributes to this. With questions such as:

“*Voelt u zich thuis binnen de gemeenschap van de kerk?*” (Do you feel at home within the community of the church?) and “*Zou u, zonder de kerk, nog steeds onderdeel zijn van de gemeenschap in Oudega?*” (Would you, without the church, still be a part of the community in Oudega?), the sense of belonging of respondents and the reasons for that have been discovered. Although an interview guide can give an interview structure, the aim of this research was not to completely shape the interviews into one fixed build-up, but to create semi-structured interviews. It is expected that all the respondents will have unique personal stories, and their own ways of expressing them. Thus, it is important, as interviewer, to be able to adapt to different situations. Accordingly, the data collection instrument should not be followed unthinkingly, but only used when needed.

The choice of when and where to conduct the interviews have been chosen by the respondents. As the respondents are adults, it was expected that they are mostly available during evenings and weekends. It was important that the researcher based their schedule on the one's of the respondents, so sacrifices to the researchers own time have been made.

To make respondents comfortable within the research environment, letting them choose the interview place was preferable. All respondents chose to hold the interviews in their homes.

3.2. Data analysis method

After finishing the interviews, the data needed to be analysed. As a first step, the interviews have been transcribed. Thereafter, these transcripts were analysed. This has been done by hand: rereading the transcriptions, identifying valuable quotes and drawing conclusions from the described experiences by respondents.

Certain words or concepts, or ‘codes’ have been highlighted and using the transcriptions, these words can aid in discovering patterns within the data results, in order to draw sufficient conclusions about the results. Perceptions such as “the church is important for my social ties” or “the church helps vulnerable villagers with their struggles” could be codes that indicate certain patterns. The codes have been defined beforehand using insights from the literature. The list of codes and the code tree can be find in appendix 3.

3.3. Ethical considerations

Considering the ethical aspects, obtaining informed consent from respondents is essential. They have the right to know what the research consists of, and what their position is. The respondents stay anonymous, to safeguard their privacy. If a respondent refuses to answer a question, or feels the need to stop or pause the interview, they have the right to do so. A consent form (appendix 2) has been created and via that document, the aspects surrounding this research and the interview are displayed, so that the respondents knew what to expect and thus, be able to give informed consent.

The interviews have been recorded on a smartphone during the interview where they are safely stored on an application that is only accessible through my personal smartphone. After the research has been completed and there is certainty that the data will not be needed to use again, the data will be destroyed.

My positionality as researcher is important to highlight as well. Taking into account the fact that Oudega is the town where I have spent years living and where my parents still live, I cannot consider myself a complete outsider. Although I personally do not have connections to the local

church, and that I am not familiar with the respondents, the possibility remains that they have a relationship with either one or both of my parents. This could alter the research process, as the approach towards the interview by the respondents could be influenced through connections they have with my parents. Thus, it is crucial to clarify to the respondents that my interactions with them will be solely formal.

Secondly, the respondents were Christian people, who valued their personal connections to their religion highly. I as the researcher am barely acquainted with Christianity and have no experience regarding engaging in church life. Therefore, the assumptions that could have been made could be wrong and perhaps offend a respondent. Being cautious on this manner is crucial to assure a respondent feels respected and understood, which, too, has effects on the extent in which the interviews can obtain valuable information.

3.4. Data collection process

The collection of empirical data has been finished and this was a smoothly executed process. As the target population resides in the town the researcher has spent years living, the recruitment of respondents could have been either more or less difficult than otherwise would have been. In this case, it made the recruitment process easier, as people were more willing to partake due to the familiarity the researcher had with the town. The first step that was taken was attending a church meeting. This resulted to be a suitable way to become more accustomed with the local church community. At the service, the author got introduced to the first respondent, who was an active member of the church and arranged an interview with them. In consequence of this, other church members contacted the researcher to organize interviews with them as well.

Secondly, an article for the local church newspaper was written, requesting respondents for this research and hereby sending this message to the whole community. From that, one other interview was arranged. The manner of recruiting participants was a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling involves sampling participants that are conveniently located around a location or internet service (Edgar & Manz, 2017), in this case, Oudega. Beforehand, no specific target group was chosen, other than residents of Oudega with an active church connection. As a result of this, it occurred that participants reached out themselves, and recommended possible respondents from their social network. This process is an example of snowball sampling: asking participants to assist the researcher in recruiting new potential subjects (Oregon State University, 2010).

In total, eight interviews have been conducted, with nine respondents in total. This implies that one of the interviews has been conducted with two residents simultaneously. Beforehand, some doubts existed whether this structure would result in the preferable outcomes, however, both respondents were able to express their individual experiences and points of view. The respondents all lived in or around Oudega, on walking or cycling distance from the two church buildings. Five men and four women were interviewed, from which two were married to each other. The age range between them is not large: they were all between the ages of 54 and 84. It is also important to note that there are vast differences between respondents in terms of their role within the church. Some of them have been or are currently active as a volunteer and therefore have influence on the positionality of the church. On the other hand, there were respondents who considered themselves a more distant individual from the church. Their position could lay a foundation for their feelings towards the church and this is apparent in their personal stories.

All of the in-depth interviews were between 45 to 90 minutes long and therefore, the researcher believes that enough empirical data has been collected, in order to draw sufficient conclusions. Below, a table containing the pseudonyms, genders and ages of the respondents has been displayed in order to give more meaning to their stories.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age
Hermien	Female	72
Klaas	Male	65
Aukje	Female	71
Maaike	Female	54
Sytze	Male	78
Douwe	Male	64
Hylke	Male	84
Gerben	Male	67
Maartje	Female	65

4. Results

All of the interviews have now been transcribed and therefore, the results of the interviews have been analysed and are displayed in this section. With this elaboration of the interviews, an attempt to answer the research questions aforementioned will be made. This section is divided into four sub sections: the first one covering the sense of belonging of respondents with the church environment, the second section involves the respondents' sense of belonging with Oudega and the third section discusses the relationship between the sense of belonging with Oudega and that of the church. Lastly, comparisons of the results to the literature has been described in the discussion. The structure of the results follows the structure of the interviews.

4.1. Sense of belonging with church community

This part of the results refers back to the first sub question: *How would one perceive their personal sense of belonging with the religious community?*

All of the respondents expressed that they felt a personal sense of belonging with the religious community, as expected. However, their personal reasons and motivations for this feeling were highly diverse. The roles that they fulfilled within the church community ranged from being part of the board, to not attending church services at all. This is something that contradicted the expectations. Before conducting interviews, it was foreseen that considering oneself an 'active church member' would indicate somewhat similar experiences from all members. However, the respondents stated that being Christian and expressing one's faith can come in multiple approaches, which had influences on their reasons for their sense of belonging as well. On the one hand, a belief in Jesus Christ and God appeared to be a highly valued part of the motivation to engage with the church and the local Christian community. A quote from Hylke, an 84 year old male respondent, who has lived in Oudega his entire life:

"Faith is everything in my life and that is why I am also connected to the church of Jesus Christ in Oudega."

Noticeable from this quote is that he considers the church to be an institution that belongs to Jesus Christ himself. He feels that believing in Jesus is everything and feels that to be the foundation of church life as a whole. This argument was unique within the target group. Although Hylke's focus lies on believing in Jesus and seeking connection with God, the church community

still plays a valuable role within his personal Christian faith. Another quote from Hylke reads as follows:

“I talk to others, I drink coffee after the service. And then the community looks after each other like: “How are you?” and “I heard your brother broke his foot, how is he?””

This quote stems from a question regarding whether he attends church for himself, or for the community. The anecdote he gave is an example of the value the community holds towards him. He argues that he feels the need and the ambition to engage with peers and look after each other, which is also a core part of being Christian, according to him. This part is in line with what other respondents expressed as well.

Most of them argued that the community of the church of Oudega was the main source of motivation for their personal participation, as well as the element that provides a sense of belonging. Manners of which sense of belonging are demonstrated, include visiting members that undergo a rough time, or sending flowers to elderly members on their birthday. Small gestures, but they provide a feeling of being connected to others in the community and solidarity. Respondents acknowledge that they value these gestures, and that the church acts as a motivation to contribute to those feelings of solidarity. After being asked if one would have made those gestures without the church, respondent Maartje articulates this as follows:

“In your mind you want to do it. But you don't always know.”[...] “And after such a church service, that bouquet of flowers has to go straight away and that is no problem. Then you do that immediately.”

Maartje, a 65 year old woman, has been part of the church since she and her husband moved to Oudega. Her view clarifies the role that the church can play for her and others in the village: serving as a way for members to look after each other and assuring that fellow members feel heard and understood.

Although respondents thought the community is of value, they do make distinctions within. Most of them expressed that the rate of their sense belonging with others differed between members, meaning that not everyone is equally close to each other on a social level. This is partly due to the way different members approach their belief. What respondents indicated as well, is that the Protestant Commune of Oudega is actually a pluriform community, meaning that people from all sorts of background gather in the church environment, especially in terms of belief. Some members are more dogmatic, valuing the Christian rules highly, while others would disagree with that approach. Sytze, a 78 year old male and former physics teacher, argued the following:

“Then I became a science teacher and explained the Big Bang and never had any comments. [...] and now they will tell me in church that it is also fine to pretend that it is ‘seven days of creation’. That’s going backwards.”

However, his faith in Christianity is still a core part of his daily life. The ideas of Christianity inspire him in the way he thinks one should treat his fellow man. A quote:

“[...] But I think it is very important that there is a church. And the ideas I know come from there. So it remains worth it. [...] Nonviolence, doing something for someone else, it's not about money. You get that through the church. Standing up for the weak, if we don't do that as a church, then it's wrong.”

In addition to Sytze, there were more respondents who focus their motivations more on the church as an inspiration: they mentioned that for them, the services the church organises and the messages those services spread, are motivations for regularly attending church. Hermien (72), a woman who is currently active as a church warden, worded this feeling in the following way:

“I think it’s a moment of inspiration, most of the time. There, you can gain motivation again to engage with things. [...] If it goes well, matters are being discussed that are important for people to think about.”

The matters that she mentions are, for example, how to engage with others, how to respond to others’ behaviour and how to deal with money and possessions. To conclude, the respondents all feel a sense of belonging with the church, while having different reasons for this. In general, the respondents value the community aspect that the church provides to be their main source of motivation for participation.

4.2. Sense of belonging with Oudega

This second section refers to the sub question regarding the respondents’ sense of belonging in Oudega: *How would one perceive their personal sense of belonging with the town of Oudega?*

Again, all of the respondents stated to have a feeling of belonging with the town. The reasons behind this seem to be more straightforward than the ones connected to their church belonging. As all of the respondents live in or around Oudega, their source of ‘feeling at home’ stems, at least partly, from the fact that they live there. Things such as being able to have small talk with neighbours, or feeling comfortable cycling around in the area are examples of motivations of belonging. A quote from Douwe (64), who lives in a house on the edge of the village:

“...here, you have a whole community. Of course, I only know a fraction, but the feeling: when I go to the store here, you always have a nice story or a joke, or you meet someone, I just really like that.”

On the other hand, the town does not seem to have a perfectly inclusive community. When asked about their personal connection to the community of the town, respondents argue to have it, but not with everyone. Moreover, some of them indicated that Oudega is not one single community. This is an aspect that was surprising. From the researcher’s point of view, Oudega seems like a small town where roughly everybody knows each other. Nonetheless, the interviewees stated to have their own group of people where they feel belonging, while that feeling is weaker towards other groups.

Although the rate in which the respondents feel belonged to Oudega is quite similar among them, their approach to this matter are more diverse. On the one hand, there are respondents who view belonging in Oudega to be a more natural phenomenon. To them, creating their ‘being at home’ feeling arose by itself. Although they did make the choice to become active at the church, they did not consider something like that to be a conscious attempt to engage with the town community, but just an automatically driven process.

On the other hand, there were respondents who did declare that residents should actively try to participate in the community. They stated that not everyone in the town is part of a community and that such a thing results in isolation for someone. They believe that an individual should make efforts to engage with fellow inhabitants and should keep making efforts too in order to stay in the community. Hylke used a football metaphor to explain himself:

“I am a fan of a football club, because I love football a lot, I go to the club. But then I also have to be at the training sessions, otherwise it will drop and the enthusiasm will disappear. So make sure you stick with it.”

In summary, there are both similarities and differences between the respondents' senses of belonging in Oudega and what that sense should mean in a town like theirs. Respondents all feel at home in the village, but some of them see that as natural, while others argue that inhabitants themselves should make efforts to create that feeling.

4.3. Relation between sense of belonging with Oudega and the church

Progressing to the third section, covering the sub question: *To what extent are one's sense of belonging with the religious community and their sense of belonging with the town related?*

This part will contain the views of respondents regarding the extent to which the church is responsible for their personal sense of belonging with Oudega.

Not all of the respondents gave similar answers to questions about this topic, but there seems to be an overarching theme. Namely, most of the respondents declared that the church definitely contributes to their sense of belonging, but it is not alone. To be more specific: they all value the church community highly, but simultaneously, they acknowledge that there are more ways for them to seek a sense of belonging in the town. Currently, the church plays a large role in the lives of most of the respondents. But, if the church would disappear, the search for belonging in Oudega would continue. Klaas, a male respondent who has lived his whole life in Oudega and is currently a volunteer for the church cemetery, worded this in the following way:

“Then things would probably be different if the church were not there. But then the work I now do for the community would still be the same, only no longer for the church, but for a public cemetery.”

In terms of social cohesion, the opinions of the respondents differ highly. This is an aspect where the different positions within the church community become visible. Although all respondents acknowledge that the church should be a core institution within the village, the rate in which that currently happens, is seen differently by them. According to Aukje, who is active for the church as an elder, argues that the church makes efforts to engage with residents of the village:

“I am an elder myself, even now, I am almost saying goodbye. And the church knows a lot of people here in the village, so it also knows a bit about their ups and downs, so to speak. So the involvement is high, many visits are made. Lots of contacts.”

An other respondent, Sytze, disagrees with these opinions:

“I'd like to see people open that up a bit more. Just make working groups of some people from the village and people from the church. Come plan and discuss it. In the atmosphere of listening to each other. That is being tried to some extent, but within the church community.”

Generally, the respondents view the Protestant Commune of Oudega as their personal approach of seeking a sense of belonging, but that is mostly because that is the community available for them. The general narrative my respondents expressed was a need to be active within the community that surrounds them. If the church would disappear, that need would remain and

would result in them finding other ways to stay active members in the town community. Summarized, the church is a way of finding belonging with the town, but not the way.

4.4. Discussion

How do these results compare with the findings in literature? On the one hand, the concepts described are in line with the points of view gathered in the empirical research. The idea of social connectedness by Lindqvist (2023), can be seen in the manners of the local church of looking after each other and finding social value in attending church services, for example. Secondly, Beaumont's (2012) argument of the role of FBO's in aiding vulnerable groups, is displayed in the fact that the church makes effort in supporting members who need help, by visiting them and sending flowers. Moreover, Gallet's (2016) description of the role of the church in building social capital is apparent here, as all respondents acknowledge the influence of the church of Oudega for their social ties.

Nevertheless, the idea that so-called 'ideological homogeneity' (Zhang et al., 2019) contributes positively to a sense of belonging, does not seem relevant in this case. Namely, several respondents mentioned that the Protestant Commune of Oudega is actually a 'pluriform community', meaning that the church has a diverse member group, which has many ways of, for example, experiencing the Christian faith. Therefore, it would not be justifiable to label this community homogenous and thus, this contradicts the literature. Thus, this case has some connection to the literature, but it is not completely in line with it.

5. Conclusion

This research has conducted interviews with residents from Oudega who consider themselves active in the church community and has made an attempt to create an indication on their sense of belonging with Oudega and to what extent that is related to their church.

Respondents mentioned that they all feel a sense of belonging towards the church, and that it plays a role in their daily life. Moreover, the church indeed makes efforts to engage with inhabitants. However, the church is not always crucial for their personal sense of belonging with the town. The church is their way of finding that, but alternative ways are available and would have been relevant if the church would not be the way it currently is. Therefore, it can be said that the church is partly responsible for the sense of belonging of local church members. The outcomes of this research are partly in line with insights from the literature. Existing findings on the link between a church and building sense of belonging as well as contributing to social cohesion were visible in the results of this study. However, the idea regarding ideologically homogenous groups and sense of belonging is not relevant in this case. With this, the research question '*How do active participants within the Protestant church of Oudega perceive the influence of their church on their personal sense of belonging with the town of Oudega?*' has been answered.

A flaw of this research is the lack of representation of the entire town community. Only nine respondents were given the opportunity to express themselves, which is sufficient for qualitative research, but not to draw conclusions about the whole church community, let alone Oudega itself. A recommendation for future research would therefore be doing quantitative research investigating the involvement of the church in a small town community, with including the opinions of residents who are not active in church life. Hereby, the views of other residents of Oudega towards the church and the value it holds for their sense of belonging with the town can be discovered. Moreover, a qualitative study with non-religious residents describing alternative ways to achieve a sense of belonging with Oudega, would also be interesting to research.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Part one: Introduction

- Goedemiddag, hoe gaat het met u?
- Ik ben Hans Overmaat, student Sociale Geografie aan de Rijksuniversiteit van Groningen. Ik doe een onderzoek naar de kerk in Oudega en de rol daarvan in het gevoel van verbondenheid bij inwoners.
- Vandaag zal ik met u een interview afnemen over uw ervaringen bij de kerk en binnen het dorp.
- Als u vragen heeft, hoor ik die graag. U kunt gedurende het hele interview vragen stellen en als u het interview wilt stopzetten of pauzeren, kunt u dat aangeven.

Part two: Respondent's position within the church

- **Wat betekent de kerk in Oudega voor u?**
Wat is uw rol binnen de kerk?
Hoe uit zich dit in uw dagelijks leven?
Bent u tevreden met uw positie/bijdrage aan de kerk?
Is er iets wat u hieraan wilt veranderen? Zo ja, wat?

Persoonlijke verhaal bij de kerk

Hoe bent u betrokken geraakt bij de kerk? Al uw hele leven, met uw familie? Heeft u uw kinderen ook kerkelijk opgevoed?

Rol van kerk in dagelijks leven

Wat voor rol speelt de kerk in uw leven? Komt u er vaak, neemt u deel aan activiteiten?

Bent u actief binnen de kerk? Zo ja, hoe en waarom?

Persoonlijke doel van kerkelijke betrokkenheid

Wat probeert u daarmee te bereiken? Wat is volgens u de functie van de kerk (binnen het dorp)? Wilt u dat ook? Wat is uw persoonlijke doel?

Part three: Respondent's sense of belonging within the church

- **Voelt u zich verbonden met de kerk in Oudega?**
Voelt u zich thuis binnen de gemeenschap van de kerk?
Waar blijkt dat uit? Op wat voor momenten merkt u dit?
Voelt u zich gewaardeerd door andere leden van de kerk?
Wat doet de kerk om bij te dragen aan uw gevoel van verbondenheid (sense of belonging)?
Wat doet u zelf om u verbonden te voelen binnen de gemeenschap van de kerk?
Bestaat er een gevoel van solidariteit binnen de kerkgemeenschap?
Zo nee, waarom niet?
Zo ja, wat voor invloed heeft die solidariteit voor uw persoonlijke ervaringen in de gemeenschap?

Gevoel van verbondenheid met de kerk

Hoe voelt u zich verbonden met de kerk van oudega?

Met wat voor gevoel gaat u naar de kerk?

Kerkgemeenschap van Oudega

Komt u er vooral voor uzelf, of voor de gemeenschap?

Wat voor gemeenschap is de kerk van oudega eigenlijk?

Voelt u zich thuis binnen de kerkgemeenschap? Waarom wel/niet?

Organisatie van kerk

Hoe wordt de organisatie bestuurd? Is dat vooral vanuit een centraal bestuur, of meer vanuit de leden zelf?

Solidariteit in kerkgemeenschap

Bestaat er een gevoel van solidariteit binnen de kerkgemeenschap?

Zo nee, waarom niet?

Zo ja, wat voor invloed heeft die solidariteit voor uw persoonlijke ervaringen in de gemeenschap?

Zo ja, hoe ver gaat dat? Is die solidariteit ook zichtbaar buiten de kerk of het dorp?

Part four: Role of church in respondents' sense of belonging within the town of Oudega

- **Heeft de kerk invloed op uw gevoel van verbondenheid met het dorp over het algemeen?**

Voelt u zich thuis in Oudega?

Voelt u zich thuis in de gemeenschap van Oudega?

In hoeverre is dat te danken aan de kerk? Zou u, zonder de kerk, nog steeds onderdeel zijn van de gemeenschap in Oudega? (Of, op een andere manier betrokken?)

Waarom wel/niet?

Is de kerk actief binnen het dorp?

Bereikt de kerk ook dorpsgenoten die geen lid zijn?

Speelt de kerk een belangrijke rol voor de algemene sociale cohesie in Oudega?

Om samen te vatten, heeft u het idee dat uw leven bij de kerk een bijdrage heeft bij uw gevoel van verbondenheid in Oudega?

Intro: wonen in Oudega

Hoe lang woont u al in Oudega?

Waarom bent u in Oudega gaan wonen?

Thuisgevoel in Oudega

Voelt u zich thuis in het dorp? Kunt u uitleggen waarom?

Voelt u zich ook thuis binnen de gemeenschap? Wat voor gemeenschap is Oudega? Past u daar goed tussen? Waarom?

Invloed van kerk op persoonlijke thuisgevoel

In hoeverre is uw gevoel te danken aan de kerk? Wat voor invloed heeft de kerk gehad op uw gevoel van verbondenheid aan het dorp?

Zou uw leven binnen Oudega anders zijn als de kerk er niet was? Hoe?

Invloed van kerk op algemene thuisgevoel

Is de kerk actief binnen het dorp? Hoe is dat te zien?

Worden niet-leden uit het dorp ook betrokken? Waarom wel/niet?

Wat is de boodschap die de kerk probeert te brengen?

Op welke manier is de kerk betrokken bij de algemene sociale cohesie in Oudega?

Part five: finishing questions

- **Zijn er dingen binnen dit onderwerp die u graag zou willen veranderen? Zo ja, wat?**
- **Heeft u zelf nog vragen?**
- **Zijn er nog dingen die u kwijt wilt, die nog niet besproken zijn?**
- **Kent u nog mensen die mogelijk ook mee willen doen aan dit onderzoek?**

Appendix 2: Consent form interviews

➤ Waarom ontvang ik deze informatie?

Wij nodigen u uit om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek omdat u lid bent van de Protestantse kerk in Oudega. Dit onderzoek maakt deel uit van een scriptie van de bacheloropleiding Human Geography and Planning aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. Daarnaast kunnen de resultaten gebruikt worden voor wetenschappelijke doeleinden. Dit onderzoek loopt gedurende de maand februari tot en met juni 2024 en wordt uitgevoerd met goedkeuring van de Ethische Commissie van de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

➤ Moet ik meedoen aan dit onderzoek?

Meedoen aan het onderzoek is vrijwillig. Wel hebben we uw toestemming nodig. Lees deze informatie goed door. U kunt uw vragen stellen aan de onderzoeker, als u bijvoorbeeld iets niet begrijpt. Pas daarna besluit u of u wilt meedoen. Als u besluit om niet mee te doen, hoeft u niet uit te leggen waarom, en zal dit geen negatieve gevolgen voor u hebben. Dit recht geldt op elk moment, dus ook nadat u hebt toegestemd in deelname aan het onderzoek. U kunt op ieder moment stoppen met uw deelname aan dit onderzoek door het interview stop te zetten.

➤ Wat vragen wij van u tijdens dit onderzoek?

Eerst vragen we uw uitdrukkelijke toestemming voor deelname. Vervolgens krijgt u verschillende vragen voorgelegd, en vragen wij uw antwoord op deze vragen, gebaseerd op uw persoonlijke ervaringen en mening. Omdat ik geïnteresseerd ben op de ervaringen van deelnemers op een bepaald onderwerp, krijgen alle deelnemers dezelfde vragen. Het kan echter voorkomen dat sommige interviews anders lopen dan anderen, afhankelijk van de antwoorden die een deelnemer geeft. In de meeste gevallen duurt deelname ongeveer een half uur, maar dit kan langer of korter zijn. Zorg ervoor dat u genoeg tijd vrij maakt om aan dit onderzoek mee te doen.

➤ **Hoe gaan we om met uw gegevens?**

Nadat de interviews van alle deelnemers verzameld zijn, zullen de antwoorden samengevoegd worden in één databestand, welke samengesteld zal worden door de onderzoeker zelf. In principe is deelname anoniem en zal er geen gedetailleerde informatie over respondenten bekend worden gemaakt. Mocht u dit toch graag willen, is dat alsnog mogelijk. Er zal naar de antwoorden van individuele deelnemers gekeken worden, om zo conclusies te trekken over het onderzoek.

Uw toestemmingsformulier zal gescheiden worden van de rest van het interview om uw anonimiteit te garanderen. De interviews zullen ter plekke worden opgenomen met een smartphone en zullen achteraf worden verplaatst naar de persoonlijke laptop van de onderzoeker, waar alleen hij toegang tot heeft. De opnames worden vervolgens getranscribeerd en geanalyseerd.

➤ **Wat moet u nog meer weten?**

U kunt op elk moment vragen stellen over het onderzoek. Nu, tijdens het onderzoek, en na het afnemen van het interview. Dit kan door vragen te stellen aan de onderzoeker, of te mailen naar hem (j.k.overmaat@student.rug.nl). Heeft u vragen of zorgen over uw rechten als onderzoeker deelnemer? Neem dan contact op met de supervisor van de onderzoeker: k.salemink@rug.nl. Heeft u vragen of zorgen over uw privacy, of over hoe met uw persoonlijke gegevens wordt omgegaan? Neem dan contact op met de Functionaris Gegevensbescherming van de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen: privacy@rug.nl. Als deelnemer heeft u recht op een kopie van deze informatie over het onderzoek.

Uw toestemming

Ik heb de informatie over het onderzoek gelezen. Ik heb gelegenheid gehad vragen te stellen. Ik begrijp waar het onderzoek over gaat, wat er van mij gevraagd wordt, welke gevolgen mijn deelname heeft, hoe er met mijn data wordt omgegaan, en wat mijn rechten zijn. Ik begrijp dat deelname aan het onderzoek vrijwillig is. Ik kies er zelf voor om deel te nemen. Ik kan op elk moment mijn deelname stoppen. Als ik stop, hoef ik niet uit te leggen waarom. Stoppen zal geen negatieve gevolgen hebben voor mij. Hieronder geef ik aan waar ik mee instem.

Toestemming om deel te nemen aan onderzoek:

Ja, ik geef toestemming voor deelname aan dit onderzoek.

Nee, ik geef geen toestemming voor deelname aan dit onderzoek.

Volledige naam van de deelnemer	Handtekening deelnemer	Datum
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Volledige naam van de onderzoeker	Handtekening onderzoeker	Datum
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De onderzoeker verklaart dat de deelnemer uitgebreid geïnformeerd is over het onderzoek.

U heeft het recht op een kopie van dit toestemmingsformulier.

Appendix 3: List of codes & code tree

Codes:

- One's function within church
- Role of church in their life
- Feelings when going to church
- Feeling belonged to church community
- Feeling valued by church community
- Feeling solidarity to others in church community
- Period of living in Oudega
- Sense of belonging in Oudega
- Connection with community in Oudega
- Belonging in Oudega related to church
- Role of church within town
- Role of church regarding social cohesion

- Codes regarding basic personal stories
- Codes regarding personal sense of belonging in church
- Codes regarding personal sense of belonging in Oudega
- Codes regarding social cohesion

Code tree:

