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Theological Wiggle Room as a Resource in Ordinary Theology: Significance for Ecclesiology, Leadership, and Personal Development

Abstract: Ordinary theology is often described as unrefined and imprecise in comparison to academic theology. A recent ethnographic study of vital youth ministries discovered a similar pattern, which the study coined "theological wiggle room." This article discusses how a lack of precision may serve as a possible resource for theology in the ordinary, and thereby why theological wiggle room may be of significance. The article argues that a certain theological wiggle room engages centripetal and centrifugal dynamics. In other words, the lack of precision should not be interpreted as a shortage or deficiency alone, but as a significant quality of theology in the ordinary – in particular with regard to ecclesiology, leadership and personal development.

Keywords: ordinary theology, theological wiggle room, ecclesiology, leadership, personal development

Zusammenfassung: Das Theologietreiben der Ordinary Theology gilt vielen als grobschlächtig und unpräzise. Sie bewahrt mehr Ambivalenzen und schleift ihre Begriffe weniger scharf als die wissenschaftliche Theologie. Diese Eigenart begreift der vorliegende Aufsatz nicht nur als Nachteil, sondern unter bestimmten Bedingungen als eine Chance der Ordinary Theology. Denn sie eröffnet Spielraum ("wiggle room"), der für eine besonders zielgruppenorientierte Passung kirchlichen Handelns genutzt werden kann.

Stichwörter: Ordinary Theology, Spielraum, Ekklesiologie, Führungsaufgaben, Persönlichkeitsentwicklung

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Theology outside the academy – in the ordinary – is for obvious reasons less precise, stringent, and coherent when compared to academic theology. Jeff Astley, the originator of the term "ordinary theology," has for instance argued that ordinary theology, both in form or style, is likely to be aphoristic, anecdotal, and unsystematic; and rich in affect-freighted story and metaphor.[1] Still, from an academic point of view, the lack of precision, stringency, and coherence is easily interpreted as a shortage or deficiency. But is it necessarily so? What if the lack of precision also functions as a resource rather than a mere shortage?

A recent ethnographic study focusing on leadership dynamics in youth ministry (2016–2019) seems to suggest that the shortage of academic stringency and coherence *enables* theologizing in the ordinary. The study coins the term "theological wiggle room" in reference to the kind of open-ended, rough, and naïve theology one might find in ministry settings.[2] In an intriguing way, the study describes the phenomenon empirically (see below). It claims that wiggle room is of significance for theological discursive practices in the ordinary. The study does however not qualify this claim theoretically and leaves a number of questions open.

In other words, as much as the initial study concludes *that* theologizing in the ordinary is in need of wiggle room, it does not, at any length, discuss *how* such theological wiggle room might be of significance. Drawing on the empirical basis established in the previous study, the constructive aim of this article is to discuss the significance of theological wiggle room in light of theoretical perspectives.

The structure of this article is therefore as follows: first, we position the empirical observation in the academic discourse on ordinary theology. Secondly, we perform a series of three abductive moves where the initial empirical observation of the wiggle room is brought in contact with theories of Ecclesiology, Leadership, and Personal Development. As much as the three theories are far apart, they all express the necessity of wiggle room in order to develop churches, leadership and people. Through the abductions we try to demonstrate how theology needs to embrace the idea of wiggle room in order to function in ordinary ministry.

1 Jeff Astley, "Ordinary Theology as Lay Theology: Listening To and Learning from Lay Perspectives," *INTAMS Review: Journal for the Study of Marriage and Spirituality* 20, no. 2 (2014): 183.
2 Bård E. H. Norheim and Knut Tveitereid, "Ildsjeler og ildsteder : En etnografisk studie av ledelsesdynamikker i vitale ungdomsarbeid i Den norske kirke," *Tidsskrift for praktisk teologi* 2, no. 37 (2020).

Empirical Basis for the Idea of Theological Wiggle Room

The original ethnographic study observed patterns of rough, naïve, and open-ended theological discursive practices among leaders in vital youth ministries and coined the phenomenon "theological wiggle room." At least on some levels these patterns appear commensurable to characteristics of ordinary theology described by John Astley and others (see below). The phenomenon emerged in both formal settings (preaching, teaching, etc.) and in more informal settings (interviews, conversations, talk, etc.).[3]

The study observed how "theology expressed in these ministries not appears to be oriented towards academic precision. It is rather coarse-meshed, generous, and oriented towards everyday life, and hence not very theoretical." Further, the study links theological wiggle room to the making of space for creativity, and observes how experimentation, taking risks, and exploring new options are regarded as something positive in all the three youth ministries. The study also describes how theological teaching in these ministerial settings are far from dogmatically streamlined, but "receive many and varied impulses." Finally, the study relates theological wiggle room to cultures with room for errors, quoting a catechist: "There is no ceiling of blunders in the kingdom of God."[4]

The purpose of the ethnographic study was to identify and describe leadership dynamics in vital youth ministries. The study concluded by highlighting three main dynamics:
−　A centripetal dynamic – metaphorically described as "the fireplace (culture)"
−　A centrifugal dynamic – metaphorically described as "the enthusiast (culture)"
−　A centripetal-centrifugal tension, a fluid and ongoing dynamic in which the centripetal and centrifugal dynamics mutually charge each other[5]

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3 This finding has several parallels to David Bailey's notion of *Theological Shorthand in Youth Ministry*. As the discussion will prove, the concepts differ in focus and interpretation. David Bailey, *Youth Ministry and Theological Shorthand : Living Amongst the Fragments of a Coherent Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2019).

4 Norheim and Tveitereid, Ildsjeler og ildsteder (n. 2).

5 Conceptualizing this third dynamic, we draw on Mikhail Bakhtin`s idea of a centripetal-centrifugal dialectic tension, as central in understanding communication (dialogue) between human beings. Bakhtin`s concept differs significantly from a Hegelian-Marxist view of dialectics as thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Rather, Bakhtin emphasizes that the centripetal-centrifugal tension represents a dynamic, fluid and ongoing process which may vary depending on time and place. Bakhtin`s understanding of this mutual, liquid dynamic corresponds well with the findings of the initial

What was surprising in the study was how the theological wiggle room was involved in all these three dynamics, expressed in the way these ministries deliberately safe-guarded unrefined theological discursive practices. Older leaders did not correct younger leaders. Academically trained theologians did not rectify the more subjective and unqualified utterances of the youth. The youth ministries in this study belonged to the Evangelical-Lutheran tradition, but Lutheran theology was never used as blueprint truth claims. And despite being youth ministries in a particular church tradition with a very specific view on for instance baptism, conversations between young leaders with differing baptismal views (and life-stories) unfolded seemingly undisturbed. The study revealed multiple examples of a very light doctrinal regulation, with one exception, already mentioned above: the insisting on the living Jesus.

The meaning of the term "wiggle room" itself opens a vivid imagery of spatial relationality – a room, space or gap *between* something and its regulating surroundings – a room which allows something to wiggle. If taken by an avalanche, for instance, a skier left with wiggle room would possibly be able to free oneself from the snow. Without wiggle room between the skier and the covering snow, the skier would be trapped. Wiggle room, then, represents a refuge from the more coercive forces of the surroundings. Such a room is a more or less unregulated, enabling movement and change.[6] This article uses and understands the term "wiggle room" related to terms like "flexibility," "leeway," "elbow room," and "maneuvering room."

Based on this understanding of wiggle room, the main research question of this article is: *Why is theological wiggle room significant for theology in the ordinary?*

Ordinary Theology

The fact that ordinary theology is described as "rarely as precise, coherent, systematic or dispassionate as the academy expects," makes it a fruitful conversation

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ethnographic study of youth leaders in vital youth ministries, which also revealed similar ongoing processes and dynamics of mutuality. For further details, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1981), 272.

6 A lexical definition would often include a *capacity* or *scope* (Lexico, Collins), a *freedom* or *opportunity* (Cambridge, Macmilland, Oxford) in order to *modify* (Lexico), to *do* or to *understand* something differently (Advanced American, Cambridge, Oxford, Macmillan), to *make alternative decisions* or *pursue other courses* (wictionary), or *maneuver* (Random House) ones *statements* (Lexico), *mind* (Macmillan), or *situation* (Wictionary).

partner.[7] The aim of this article is to develop the understanding and communicative significance of why ordinary theology appears to be less precise, coherent, systematic etc. There are many aspects of ordinary theology that could be worthy further inquiry: its relation to lay theology, to more ecclesial theology, to the priesthood of all believers, its relation to other forms of theology in the lived, to name a few. However, the scope of this article is both focused and constructive: We aim to explore the purpose of imprecision in ordinary theology – theological wiggle room as a resource.

Addressing this issue is a central part of the practical theological enterprise. Practical theology is by definition occupied with the relationship between theology *and* practice, theoretical reflections *and* empirical observations, education for ministry *and* ministry in action. Questions raised by ordinary theology are therefore central to the practical theological discourse. Pete Ward has argued the resemblance of ordinary theology to other concepts which have influenced practical theological scholarship over the last decades: "lived religion," "everyday theology," "the four voices of theology," and "theology in the lived."[8] As much as we recognize similarity to these concepts, in this discussion on theological wiggle room we stick to ordinary theology as this term is more focused on lack of precision etc. Even in *The International Journal of Practical Theology* this theme has surfaced.[9]

Jeff Astley formally defines ordinary theology as "the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind."[10] Astley underscores that "in its form or style, ordinary theology is more likely to be aphoristic and anecdotal, autobiographical and unsystematic; and rich in affect-freighted story and metaphor."[11] Its models are not yet qualified and clarified to concepts apt for drawing academic inferences and creating academic systems, Astley argues.[12] However, at times he hints at a possible function inscribed in this lack of precision: "Be it ever so inchoate, un-

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7 Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology : Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology. Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empireical Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 1; 55–57; 140–145.

8 Peter Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 17; 54.

9 See for instance: Rebustillo, Rowan Lopez. "BAHALA NA: In Search of an "Ordinary Theology" for the Filipino Diaspora," *International Journal of Practical Theology*, vol. 22, issue 2 (2018), 234–252 and Ward, Peter, and Heidi Campbell, "Ordinary Theology as Narratives: An Empirical Study of Young People's Charismatic Worship in Scotland," *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 15, no 2 (2011): 226–242.

10 Astley, *Ordinary Theology : Looking, Listening and Learning* (n. 7), 13

11 Astley, "Ordinary Theology As Lay Theology" (n. 1), 183.

12 Ibid.

systematic and even confused, ordinary theology is a theology to live by."[13] It has been argued that this is linked to a posture of kneeling (prayer), more than sitting (studying), a voice closer to the conversations of the mother tongue over the analytical father tongue and located in the everyday situations of life – not the auditorium.[14] Still the unrefined characteristic of ordinary theology is often explained negatively, as something missing, as a deficit. To us, this is not the entire picture. One should not for a moment suspect that Astley, or any other advocate for ordinary theology, think less of ordinary theology than of academic theology.

What Astley describes as a shortage, we interpret as a potential resource. On the level of definition, Astley is predominately concerned with the relation between academic theology and ordinary theology. Our main concern in this article is to explore the potential significance in the lack of precision for theologizing in the ordinary.

In the following, we will be relating the concept of theological wiggle room to three dynamics in the initial ethnographic study *and* adjacent theory. By doing so we create a threefold hypothesis that may offer a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of a certain theological wiggle room for ecclesiology, leadership, and personal development. Hopefully, this hypothesis will offer a nuanced interpretation of why ordinary theology may be unrefined by intention, not mistake.

Our use of theory draws on Umberto Eco's concept of "undercoded abduction." According to Eco, undercoded abduction is to let a number of different theories, in turn, cast light on a phenomenon or event observed. This happens, Eco claims, whenever there are multiple general theories to be selected from. The researcher is interested in the differences that each theory makes, and which one(s) explain or interpret the phenomenon of interest the best. The researcher can also compare, combine, and integrate abductions of different theories.[15]

In our case we performed three abductions: first, in light of Paul G. Hiebert's centered-set theory, we will interpret *centripetal* dynamics in theological wiggle room. Secondly, in light of Ronald Heifetz et al.'s theory of adaptive leadership,

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13 Ibid., 182.

14 Anthony Lees-Smith, Ordinary Theology as 'Mother Tongue' (Abigdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2003), Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church. Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 23–32.

15 Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce. Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 206. For more, see also: Knut Tveitereid, "Making Data Speak: The Shortage of Theory for the Analysis of Qualitative Data in Practical Theology," in *What Really Matters*, ed. Jonas Ideström and Tone Stangeland Kaufman (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2017).

we interpret the *centrifugal* dynamics out of theological wiggle room. Finally, in light of Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural learning theory, and in particular his notion of the zone of proximal development, we interpret the *centrifugal/centripetal* tension that unfolds in theological wiggle room. Hereby we identify significance for ecclesiology, leadership, and personal development.

These theories were selected among many for the following reasons: firstly, they all draw on spatial metaphors (room or zone). Hiebert's space is not defined by boarders, but by a shared center. Heifetz et al. explores leadership outside the comfort zone, in uncertainty. Vygotsky identifies a proximal zone of development. Secondly, the three chosen theories describe motion. Hiebert's notion of motion is centripetal, towards a center. Heifetz et al.'s motion is centrifugal, into the unknown. Vygotsky's motion is more of a tension between a learner's expanding capabilities (centrifugal) and the care and guidance of a more capable peer (centripetal). Thirdly, the three theories share an understanding of the spatial motion to be low on control and regulations.[16] As these discussions unfold, it will be increasingly clear why the unrefined characteristic of ordinary theology should be interpreted as theological wiggle room with significance for practice, and not as a shortage.

Abduction I: Ecclesiology and theological wiggle room: A centripetal significance

The ethnographic study of vital youth ministries discovered a radical practice of *welcoming*, which was interpreted as a centripetal dynamic, metaphorically described as "the fireplace." The informants underscored in multiple ways how they valued the fellowship, how they once had been "seen" and "included" unconditionally, and how they now strived towards giving others the same warm welcome.[17] There was a pull toward being together, with room for everybody. Our focus here is on the pull towards the centre, not the precise description of the centre (fireplace) itself.

This inviting practice of welcome seemed to shape a theological discourse that was *intentionally* theologically unrefined. On one hand, the youth leaders were eager to talk about Jesus, grace and the welcome as key characteristics for

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16 The focus in this article is not to offer a critical examination of these theories. We use the theories constructively, in order to shed light on what might be the purpose of an element in ordinary theology: theological wiggle room.

17 Norheim and Tveitereid, Ildsjeler og ildsteder (n. 2).

a Christian life and a Christian fellowship, but they were also equally hesitant in developing more detailed theologies when challenged to do so, either while preaching or in the interviews. Christian faith was kept simple: Jesus is present – everyone is included. Jesus died and rose and lives – grace is available. This unrefined Christology and the practice of welcome blended together: Jesus was radical in his welcoming, so should we be. In this way, imitation of Christ became a social pattern shaping a centripetal dynamic – a gravitational pull of welcoming grace.

Paul Hiebert, a missional anthropologist, is most often credited as the first theologian to draw on the mathematical concept of set theory.[18] He argues that churches are often organized as "bounded set" groups – the counter part of "centered set" groups – with a clear understanding of "in" and "out." Centered set theology does not focus upon boundaries, but the center, or more precisely, the motion towards a centered point. Hiebert's full exploration of the four characteristics in theory goes as follows:

First, a centered set is created by defining a center or reference point and the relationship of things to that center. Things related to the center belong to the set, and those not related to the center do not.

Second, while centered sets are not created by drawing boundaries...the boundaries emerge automatically. Things related to the center naturally separate themselves from things that are not. In centered-set thinking, greater emphasis is placed on the center and relationships than on maintaining a boundary, because there is no need to maintain the boundary in order to maintain the set.

Third, there are two variables intrinsic to centered sets. The first is membership. All members of a set are full members and share fully in its functions. There are no second-class members. The second variable is distance from the center. Some things are far from the center and others near to it, but all are moving toward it. They are, therefore, equally members of the set, even though they differ in distance from the reference point.

Fourth, centered sets have two types of change inherent in their structure. The first has to do with entry into or exit from the set. Things headed away from the center can turn and move toward it. Or, to switch metaphors, a person may be adopted by a couple and become their child, or he or she may form a relationship with another person. We can call this change a conversion, because it is a radical transformation in the relationships of the person. [19]

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18 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994).

19 Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections* (n. 18), 122–131.

Centered set theology has in the last decades found its way into ecclesiological discourse, most notably in and through the Emerging church movement.[20] Phyllis Tickle, for one, has argued that "centered set understanding of membership allows for a clear vision of the focal point, the ability to move toward that point without being tied down to smaller diversions, a sense of total egalitarianism with respect for differing opinions, and an authority moved from individual members to the existing center."[21]

Hiebert's theory describes how a set can maintain its identity and function without sharp outer boarders. Instead of boarders, a set can rely on a centre as the organizing force. People that relate to this centre and move towards this centre is part of the set. The *relating* to- and the *moving* towards- is therefore the decisive mark of belonging.

The ethnographic study of youth leaders discovered that many of them told stories that were narratively best understood as "conversion stories": Coming into youth ministry, and particularly becoming a leader in youth ministry, marked a transformation in their lives, with the experience of being welcomed as the tipping point. There was, as one would expect, little talk of repentance as the result of a personal decision. Still, the Christian story was understood as a story of change and transition. Even those who had less dramatic life stories to tell, would try to meld their story into the implicit, paradigmatic model stories of change and transition. Fundamentally, the story of being or becoming a Christian was interpreted as a story of change, a change that was invoked by the centripetal dynamic of the welcoming. The practice of welcome seemed to define and be defined by the understanding of grace. For the youth leaders "grace" was another word for a community where there are no demands to achieve or perform anything in particular, and with a second chance if you mess up.

Although the conversion stories constructed a before *and* after, it never constructed an inside *and* outside-structure – similar to Hiebert's first and third idea of a set. This was not a community for a hard core of born-again Christians. Things were deliberately kept approximate. People were given the room to take part in a process of relating and moving at their own terms and in their own tempo. The more senior leaders with overall pastoral responsibilities – and even the trained theologians – contributed to the safeguarding of a certain theological wiggle room. They obviously saw their role as keeping the room open – socially and

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20 See for instance Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

21 Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

spiritually – safeguarding it from strict orthodoxy or detailed rigour that would threat the set-members' relating and moving.

Critically, one could argue that such a safeguarding of theological wiggle room, over time, could leave the youth ministry open and vulnerable to heresy and detachment from the rest of the church. However, the study did not report any *fear* among the senior youth leaders and paid staff of such unwanted side-effects that might occur by allowing too much wiggle room. Quite the opposite, the leaders seemed to rest assured that in their youth ministry – and in the church as a whole – you could trust in some kind of over-all centripetal dynamic force that would eventually make the youth relate to and move "in the right direction," if only given time and space. This resembles Hiebert's definition that although sets are not created by drawing boundaries, the boundaries will emerge automatically. Perhaps this implicit belief in a sort of order after all, advocated and practiced among senior leaders and paid staff with theological training, was rooted in the rather strong position the liturgical *ordo* holds in this particular church tradition but exploring this possible dynamic would require further research. Anyway, the balance appeared to be found in how theology seemed to be negotiable, while the welcome narrative was not. Similarly, what was understood to be at the centre – the Jesus-narrative – was woven together with the non-negotiable welcome and the conversion narratives.

Abduction II: Leadership and Theological Wiggle Room: A Centrifugal Significance

The vital youth ministries in the study were not dominated by one key enthusiast. Rather, they were all characterized by a number of leaders in what may be called an enthusiast culture. Many leaders did more than what could be expected of them. There was not one main leader, or a *guru*, if you like. Leaders who could have easily ended up in such a role, managed to authorize others to share in responsibilities.

Theological wiggle room seemed to play a key role in enabling the dynamics of change and pursuing new challenges that made this enthusiast culture thrive. Concurrently, the enthusiast culture functioned as a trademark or a living legacy in these youth ministries. Similarly, the longstanding recruiting strategy bore witness to how a "culture of enthusiasm" was passed on from worker to worker, from volunteer to volunteer. Theological wiggle room enabled the interplay between youth leaders and paid staff members to be relaxed and rooted in a mutual sense of trust.

Research on enthusiasts and enthusiast cultures highlight that enthusiasts operate with a certain impatience, and they are often open to change and taking on new challenges. Enthusiasts of this kind are less interested in detail and precision and more focused on tackling challenges and promoting the purpose or entity they are leading.[22] The leadership needed in an organizational culture which values change, experimentation and risk-taking may be described as *adaptive*.[23] The theory of adaptive leadership points to a pragmatic organizational culture,[24] realizing that the complexity of leadership requires experimentation, and that adaption relies on a certain diversity, or wiggle room if you like.

The notion or metaphor "wiggle room" connects well with the idea of adaptive change, which describes challenges that require adaptive leadership. According to Heifetz et al., an adaptive challenge is to be distinguished from a technical challenge, in that the adaptive challenge is characterized by a problem definition that requires learning and a solution that requires learning. Where dealing with a technical challenge often leans on a locus of work rooted in control and authority, tackling an adaptive challenge involves a distribution of power and ensuring wiggle room to work with both the problem definition and the solution, by involving the stake holders, see figure below:[25]

Kind of challenge	Problem definition	Solution	Locus of work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority and stakeholders
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	Stakeholders

In the youth ministries, risk-taking and experimentation was valued. New ideas and fresh approaches, like young leaders offering less measurable outcomes, were rewarded.[26] Most challenges were handled as adaptive challenges. Senior

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22 Guri Mette Vestby, Frants Gundersen, and Ragnhild Skogheim, *Ildsjeler og lokalt utviklingsarbeid: Gløden, rollen og rammevilkårene*, (NIBR-rapport, 2014), 2, https://distriktssenteret.no/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/NIBR-rapport-2014–2.pdf.
23 Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2009).
24 Ibid., 15f.
25 Ibid., 20f.
26 Ibid., 174.

leaders often chose to include the younger leaders (the stakeholders) in defining both the problem and solution.

It seems reasonable to conclude that these youth ministries for a large part operate with leadership dynamics that resemble what Heifetz et al. call adaptive challenges – not by subscribing to a distinct plan or vision for the future, but by authorizing stakeholders. In these enthusiast cultures, wiggle room enabled leaders to support and encourage the risk-taking, experimentation, and critical learning needed to address the adaptive challenges that the future holds. The ministries in many ways operate in a *zone* – where "business as usual" is not the operational mode, rather they seek innovation and exploring new frontiers. Leadership was therefore understood as a "border activity."[27] Senior youth leaders recognized the liminal spaces and invited younger leaders to join in the border activity. This approach to leadership resembles what is described as adaptive leadership, which includes involving stakeholders and sharing authority, and strengthening a generous culture of enthusiasm, which is open to risk-taking and experimentation.

The adaptive leadership task of the senior youth leaders is therefore all about going "in-between," ensuring that the younger, volunteer leaders have necessary *wiggle room* – theologically and practically – to experiment within a given framework. Going "in-between" essentially meant encouraging independent judgement through distributed leadership, which in these youth ministries was expressed through the structure of transparent leadership hierarchies (see abduction iii for more details).[28] The wiggle room that strengthened the culture of independent judgement in these hierarchies is also a hallmark of leadership in an adaptive culture, according to Heifetz et al. Leadership as "going in-between" is even described as shifting your perspective between a "dance floor-view" and a "balcony-view."[29] In other words, wiggle room in an organization or a culture is secured by the leader shifting his or her perspective from the more inductive approach – the "dance floor view," to a more deductive approach – the "balcony view."

Altogether, theological wiggle room seems to be rooted in an ordinary theology presupposing that the future is fundamentally open-ended and unpredictable, particularly as we engage in a complex world in new ways.[30] Wiggle room represents a centrifugal capacity – an outward bound and future-oriented dynamic which enhances the adaptive enthusiast culture. This forward leaning dynamic is the more or less regular mode of something as fluid as youth ministry.

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27 Paul Otto Brunstad, *Klokt lederskap – mellom dyder og dødssynder*, (Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk, 2009).
28 Heifetz el al., *The Practice* (n. 23), 169
29 Ibid., 280–282.
30 Ibid., 175.

The call for leadership is therefore to demonstrate commitment to ongoing adaptability. In order to ensure a centrifugal culture with wiggle room it is therefore key for leaders to adopt an experimental mind-set[31] as leadership is an experimental art.[32] All in all, to secure theological wiggle room you need to build up your tolerance for disorder, ambiguity and tension.[33] Therefore, the enthusiast culture is never coercive. It is always voluntarily construed.

Abduction III: Personal development and theological wiggle room: A centripetal / centrifugal tension

As mentioned above, the initial empirical study observed *hierarchies* among the youth leaders. Obviously, the hierarchies were not flat, nor egalitarian structures, but they were formal hierarchies of *responsibility* and *accountability* to enable the operative mode of activities within the different youth ministries. At the same time the hierarchies were not first and foremost hierarchies of power or status, but they represented means of expressing *care* and *trust*, much due to their perceived *transparency*. Ultimately, the hierarchy as such had several functions. For the ministry as a whole, its function was to organize leaders in teams. For each youth leader the hierarchy functioned as a trajectory of personal development, as steppingstones for personal growth. Gradually, with trust and competence, came responsibility. With getting to know your own talents and preferences, came vocational understanding. In terms of development, the hierarchies established fellowships of learning where more senior youth leaders trained the juniors: what I did last year, I now train someone else to do this year.

The leadership hierarchies took on various forms in the various youth ministries but had a common feature in that they were transparent, made visible and acknowledged throughout the fellowship of leaders. Especially the younger youth leaders expressed comfort in always having someone "above" you look after you, someone more experienced to go to. For the older youth leaders, the hierarchy represented a channel to distribute and share enthusiasm and workload. All in all, the structured leadership hierarchy served as an arena for social interplay, not only among peers, but across age groups.

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31 Ibid., 36.
32 Ibid., 43.
33 Ibid., 206.

For Lev Vygotsky, all development is the result of such social interplay. In the following sections we will look at how Vygotskian pedagogics cast light on theological wiggle room in these hierarchies of leaders as a centripetal/centrifugal tension.

It is fundamental in Vygotskian pedagogics that a child/young person is more successful in problem solving when performing tasks collaboratively compared to when working alone:[34] "Human learning proposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them," he states.[35] He famously identified a zone of development between actors in a learning process. The "zone of proximal development" was defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers."[36]

The zone of proximal development is *proximal* in that it is found in the immediate proximity of someone's capabilities. It is a *zone* in that it marks the extension of where an individual is capable of reaching under assistance. Finally, it marks *development* as something beyond learning. Learning, for Vygotsky, resembles imitation, whereas development marks the ability to use the acquired knowledge in an independent manner.[37] "Developmental processes do not coincide with learning processes. Rather, the developmental process lags behind the learning process; this sequence then results in zones of proximal development."[38]

For Vygotsky, "what is in the zone of proximal development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow-that is, what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow."[39] This way, development is always oriented towards a tomorrow and leaves yesterday behind.[40]

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34 Michael Grimmitt, *Pedagogies of Religious Education: Case Studies in the Research and Development of Good Pedagogic Practice in RE* (Great Wakering, Essex: McCrimmons, 2000), 209.
35 Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 88.
36 Ibid., 86.
37 One of Vygotsky's colleagues – Leont'ev – described the process of the individual building knowledge through this form of social interaction as *appropriation in* contrast to Piaget's explanation of assimilation. Grimmitt, Michael, *Pedagogies of Religious Education: Case Studies in the Research and Development of Good Pedagogic Practice in RE.* (Great Wakering: McCrimmons, 2000).
38 Vygotsky, *Mind in Society* (n. 35), 90.
39 Ibid., 87. This is the reason why Vygotsky argues that people should not be assessed based on what they are able to do unassistently, but (also) based on what that person is capable of doing if assisted by a competent other.
40 Gunn Imsen, *Elevens Verden: Innføring i pedagogisk psykologi. 4. Ed.* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2005), 259.

Development also relates to challenge. Vygotsky stated that teaching is only good when it precedes development. The "adult guide" or "the more capable peer" is for the reason mentioned above vital in mediating development, having a double role: On one side creating the challenge and on the other side, offering assistance to handle the challenge created.

Theological wiggle room could be understood in terms of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. It is *proximal* in that it is found in the immediate proximity of someone's present theology and belief. It is a *zone* in that it marks the extension of where an individual is capable of reaching under assistance. Finally, it marks *development*, beyond mere imitation. The aim is that the youth leader next year will grow out of imitation, doing the same task, but independently, and in becoming someone's more capable peer – a guide in the zone of their proximal development.

According to the initial ethnographic study of leaders in vital youth ministries, theology permeates every aspect of the personal development in the leadership hierarchies. In fact, these hierarchies are zones charged with a tacit ordinary theology, constituted of Christian life and practice. Christian faith is never objectified and isolated elsewhere. The hierarchies are never separated from the Christian ministry or compartmentalized as something that precedes it. The leadership hierarchy is the ministry, and the ministry is utterly theological.

A crucial part in this seems to be how the youth leaders in the study interpret this hierarchy as a non-coercive structure. The structure leaves room to wiggle, and the theology is no exception. With a strong authorization "from above," one could expect feeling of control, but this does not seem to be the case. It is in this non-coercive zone, that *theological development* as a youth leader is played out.

This zone – or liminal space – for personal development appears in the interconnectedness between the centripetal dynamics of the welcome (care) and the more centrifugal dynamics of the enthusiast (development). From the viewpoint of the more capable / older leaders the hierarchy functions as a place for centripetal ministry. From the viewpoint of the learner / the young leader it is experienced as a centrifugal growth in faith. One should however not for a minute think that this creates a divide between the younger and the older, between the capable and the uncapable. Most, if not all, actors in the hierarchy are learners *and* more capable peers simultaneously.

A certain wiggle room is fundamental to uphold and regulate the centrifugal / centripetal tension in the interplay between the actors in the hierarchy. If leeway and flexibility is lost, the leadership hierarchies will implode into either anarchistic or authoritarian zones. As a fundamentally theological zone, the leadership hierarchy offers proximal zones of theological development.

Conclusion

Our aim in this article has been to address and elaborate on *why* ordinary theology is unrefined and lacks precision. Often this feature of ordinary theology is interpreted as a shortage in comparison to academic theology. We have explored this as a potential resource, drawing on the findings of a recent ethnographic study among youth leaders, which coined this feature of ordinary theology "theological wiggle room." In this article, we have investigated the significance of a certain theological wiggle room. To understand the constructive significance of wiggle room we have performed three different abductions, trying to uncover how the unrefined character of ordinary theology may serve as a resource, perceivable on the level of ecclesiology, leadership, and personal development.

The first abduction, focusing on the significance for ecclesiology, made use of Paul Hiebert`s set theory. The second abduction utilized Ronald Heifetz et al.'s theory of adaptive leadership to interpret the significance of theological wiggle room for leadership. In the final abduction, we explored its significance for personal development in light of Lev Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development.

By the help of these three abductions we have offered a more comprehensive understanding of *why* ordinary theology is unrefined and lacks precision. We have tried to warrant the claim that the unrefined characteristic of ordinary theology should be interpreted as a resource, not as a shortage. With the help of Hiebert's set theory we found that a certain theological wiggle room serves as a resource for ministry in that it does not create sharp outer boundaries but relies on a centre as the organizing force. In a "wiggle room culture" the *centripetal* movement of *relating* to and *moving* towards this centre is the decisive mark of belonging. With the help of Heifetz et al.'s theory on adaptive leadership we explored wiggle room as a *centrifugal* capacity – an outward bound and future-oriented dynamic – enhanced an enthusiast culture. Theological wiggle room seemed to play a key role in enabling an enthusiast culture to thrive, supporting and encouraging risk-taking, experimentation, and critical learning that fosters a culture of independent judgement. With the help of Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development we found that theological wiggle room is a fundamental resource in upholding and regulating a *centrifugal*/*centripetal* tension that supports the interplay between the actors in a hierarchy. Such a zone for personal development appears in the interconnectedness between the *centripetal* dynamics of the welcome (care) and the more *centrifugal* dynamics of the enthusiast (development). Altogether, theological wiggle room is experienced as a surplus for ecclesiology, leadership and personal development, not a deficit.

Fundamentally, wiggle room signifies a constructive and creative potential for theology in the ordinary. The same creative openness towards change and development created by a certain wiggle room is simultaneously a risky enterprise. Things may go wrong, particularly when no clear boundaries are established and experimenting and pursuing new challenges becomes a prominent operational mode. Still, non-coercive, inclusive enthusiast leadership dynamics seem to dominate or even rule out any attempt to lead by control.

In conclusion, all the three abductions, within the three different theoretical "areas" of research – ecclesiology, leadership, and personal development – bear witness to how theological wiggle room serves as a resource for theology in the ordinary. Through the use of theory, we have described *how* theological wiggle room may be a resource for theology in the ordinary. The *significance* of a certain theological wiggle room is therefore that it may be unrefined by intention, not mistake, which is simultaneously a response to our initial research question, which focused on *why theological wiggle room is significant for theology in the ordinary*.

For further research, it would be interesting to investigate the factors that contribute to the *flexibility* that theological wiggle room both creates and requires. One possible factor may be that theological wiggle room bears witness to Christianity`s more general cultural flexibility.[41] Interpreting Christianity as an adaptive religion connects well with how Heifetz et al. find that the secret of evolution to be adaptation.[42]

Another avenue for further research would be to reflect on whether theological wiggle room implicitly presupposes a more solid structure.[43] Common for all the three youth ministries is that they belong to a rather traditional (Evangelical-Lutheran) church with a solid structure and rather set and established, operative modes. It is fascinating to discover how a "wiggle room culture" seems to hold together a rare combination of a solid structure (the church and its regulations, creeds and liturgies) and a more loose and liminal approach to the distribution of power and leadership. An implicit factor in all the three youth ministries is there-

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41 Cf. Rodney Stark finds this to be a key factor in the success of Christianity: "Perhaps the most essential aspect of Christianity that has facilitated its globalization is its remarkable culture flexibility. Wherever it goes, the faith is adapted to the local culture – made possible by its universal message." See: Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement became the World`s Largest Religion* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 412.

42 Heifetz et al.,*The Practice* (n. 23), 15f.

43 Cf. Victor Turner`s distinction – and dynamic – between *soliditas* and *communitas*, see: Victor W Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), and Pete Ward`s distinction between liquid and solid church, see: Pete Ward, *Liquid Churc* (Peabody, MA: Paternoster Press, 2002).

fore that they do not have to invent their own creeds. The leaders know that they do not have to become "popes" or "bishops." It is also remarkable how the academically trained theologians of these youth ministries refrain from exercising dogmatic control and academic rigour, but rather safeguard theological wiggle room to ensure space for a centripetal ecclesiology, a centrifugal culture of leadership and a zone for centripetal/centrifugal personal development. It would be interesting to explore further how such an operational mode of safeguarding theological wiggle room may become part of theological training for ministry.

The notion of theological wiggle room, explored in this article, exists and operates within the more solid tradition of a confessional church, which leans on a liturgical rhythm or an *ordo*, if you like. Maybe theological wiggle room needs or even requires a solid structure (a set liturgy, established creeds) to wrestle with (direction, liturgy, creeds) in order to operate as a dynamic that enables development and change? This could be a theme for further research, as we are not sure how theological wiggle room would appear and operate in a non-denominational setting with few established creeds. Maybe a solid structure is a requirement for a wiggle room dynamic?