

# Abstract

The study “Culture under the Church Tower” aims to identify the success factors and obstacles influencing cultural development in rural regions, with a specific focus on the church (actors and buildings). While previous research has already established general success factors for cultural engagement, a direct comparison with the factors affecting church-based cultural activities in villages has yet to be conducted. This research project, therefore, investigates the question: What role do church-related cultural actors and buildings play in the cultural development of rural regions?

In the conceptual part of the study, the church is examined as a change agent in rural areas, alongside numerous other functions. By organizing cultural events in sacred spaces, actors introduce innovation and creativity to these geographical areas, actively responding to ongoing transformation processes. The study follows empirically a qualitative research design, examining cultural activities and initiatives in rural areas of Germany that utilize church infrastructures. Semi-structured, guideline-based interviews were conducted with stakeholders from the fields of church administration (e.g., representatives of deaneries/church districts, church councils), culture (e.g., cultural associations, artists, cultural managers), and regional development (e.g., regional managers, district development officers, mayors). The focus within the cultural sector is on organizers of cultural events held in church spaces or designated cultural churches. The study employs a narrow definition of culture, emphasizing artistic disciplines such as literature, music, and the performing arts. Events may be organized both within and outside church-affiliated settings.

Additionally, egocentric network maps, which record relationships between actors and their connections to external stakeholders, as well as actor maps, are utilized to visualize relationship structures and cooperation dynamics. The selected churches are either still owned by the Protestant Church in Germany or continue to serve liturgical purposes while simultaneously hosting cultural events.

This interdisciplinary study integrates perspectives from social geography, regional science, and theology. It is divided into two sub-projects. Subproject I (Social Geography) examines the key actors in church-related cultural engagement and their network structures by addressing the questions: Who are the central ecclesiastical and cultural actors? How are they connected? Subproject II (Practical Theology) explores the significance of church spaces for cultural events in rural areas by asking: How are church spaces used? How are they adapted and developed in response to cultural engagement? For data analysis, the study employs a content-structuring qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018). The presentation introduces Subproject 1 from a socio-geographical perspective.

In total, four Protestant cultural churches and two cultural initiatives utilizing church premises in rural areas of central Germany were examined yet. The study regions were selected based on two key criteria: degree of rurality (classified as "highly rural" or "moderately rural") and socioeconomic status (classified as "socioeconomically disadvantaged"). The analyzed projects are located in Bavaria, Thuringia, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Lower Saxony.