



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

This is the published version of a paper published in *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Lundgren, L., Fransson, S. (2023)

The differences between actions and desires: The role of religious congregations in national crises and disasters

*Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 31(3): 441-450

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12450>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-119380>

# The differences between actions and desires: The role of religious congregations in national crises and disasters

Linnea Lundgren<sup>1</sup>  | Sara Fransson<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Civil Society Research, Marie Cederschiöld University, Stockholm, Sweden

<sup>2</sup>Department of Research and Analysis, The Church of Sweden, Uppsala, Sweden

<sup>3</sup>Department of Political Science, Linneaus University, Växjö, Sweden

## Correspondence

Linnea Lundgren, Centre for Civil Society Research, Marie Cederschiöld University, Stockholm, Sweden.

Email: [linnea.lundgren@mchs.se](mailto:linnea.lundgren@mchs.se)

## Funding information

The Swedish Civil Contingency Agency; The Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities

## Abstract

During the last few decades in the handling of ongoing crises and preparing for future crises, governments and other public authorities increasingly emphasize the important role religious organizations can play in crises and disaster management. Considering this development, it is appropriate to ask whether the expectations by policymakers are mirrored by the religious organizations themselves? This article aims to answer this question by studying both the organizations' desired role in time of national crises and disasters and the actual role taken by local congregations in Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also aims to study whether this differs in relation to organizational differences and religious affiliation. The study clearly shows that 8 out of 10 congregations believe they have an important role to play in the event of a disaster or crisis. However, despite the high level of willingness, the role congregations take may not always mirror the governments expectations. In terms of differences between congregations, although cross-religious differences are noted, the size of the organization is the critical factor. The article concludes by discussing the disparity between policymakers' expectations and the willingness of organizations as well as the complexity of policymakers assuming that non-profit organizations will help unequivocally.

## KEYWORDS

Covid-19, crises, crisis management, disasters, religion, religious communities, Sweden

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Crises and disasters are both reoccurring events throughout human history and expected to increase (Kuipers & Welsh, 2017; Pörtner et al., 2022). In the wake of both handling ongoing and preparing for more complex future crises and disasters, governments and other public authorities increasingly emphasize the vital role of non-profit organization and community participation (Kapucu, 2007; Sheikhi et al., 2021). While previously often being neglected, this now also often includes the importance of collaboration with religious

organizations (Joshi, 2010; Lundgren, 2021; Shinn & Caretta, 2020; Wisner, 2010) and the role of religion in regard to disaster risk reduction has become increasingly highlighted in research (Samson & Warganegara, 2021; Schipper, 2010; Sun et al., 2018). The increasing emphasis on religious actors coincides with a general trend, seen in both European and North American contexts, in which policymakers view religious actors as important civil society participants and central resources in tackling different problems facing society (Beckford, 2010; Dinham, 2009; Hurd, 2015). However, while there is a growing awareness of how governments and other public

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

authorities use religious organizations in combating social problems in different parts of the world little is still known concerning if and if so how, when and in what way religious communities are important actors in the preparedness and responses to different crises and disasters.

In this article Sweden will be discussed as an interesting European example. In Sweden, government and public authorities have since the turn of the century increasingly highlighted the important and central role religious organizations could play when a disaster has occurred (Lundgren, 2019, 2021). Particularly minority religious communities are being highlighted as governmental instruments in reducing risks, solving social problems and responding to disasters and crises—not only by offering existential support but also by offering practical support such as providing shelters for victims and reaching out with information to their communities (SOU 2018:18). Most recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Swedish authorities highlighted religious communities, particular minority groups, as central actors in reaching out with official information to people both regarding the pandemic and regulations but also, at a later stage, regarding the importance of vaccinations (The Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities, 2022a).

Yet, still very little is known whether the increasing hopes and expectations by policymakers are mirrored by religious communities. Whilst some desired actions, such as providing shelter and support, can be seen to be closely related to the foundations of religious practice, spreading information on behalf of a government may not be. Therefore, the disparity between the policymaker's expectations and religious communities' desires may be greater compared to in relation to other roles. The aim of this article is consequentially to examine the perceived role and the actual role taken by local congregations from a number of different faith traditions in Sweden during Covid-19 pandemic and what different explanatory factors on an organizational level can explain differences between different congregations in both their desires and actual roles. The study attempts to answer two underlying research questions. The first is whether the expectations of the governments and other public authorities regarding congregations connected to minority religious communities assisting the state in times of crises and disasters are mirrored by the congregations? In other words, is there an underlying perception that they have an important role to take in the event of a disaster or during crises? The second question is whether local congregations are willing to assist the government in the way that is desired?

## 2 | ROLE OF RELIGION IN CRISES AND DISASTERS: RESEARCH GAPS

Despite the growing expectations on religious communities and organizations in tackling future and current crises, there is still limited research regarding what role different religious organizations have taken in crises and their willingness and desire to respond to future disasters and crises. Some recent studies, mainly from Asia and

the United States (Sheikhi et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2018), have been published; predominantly focusing on how religious organizations have interpreted disasters in light of cultural and religious beliefs such as if the event can represent an 'Act of God' (Gaillard & Texier, 2010; McGeehan & Baker, 2017; Stern, 2007) and how individuals' religiosity can work as a coping mechanism in response to disasters (Lim et al., 2019). Several have also focused on how religious groups act, recover and prepare to reduce future risk (Muller et al., 2014; Ngin et al., 2020; Rivera & Nickels, 2014), particularly how religious organizations have responded to disasters triggered by natural hazards such as hurricanes (particularly Hurricane Katrina), earthquakes, wildfires, but also pandemics and terror-attacks (Cheema, 2012; Joakim & White, 2015; Paulson & Menjivar, 2012; Sheikhi et al., 2021). In these contexts, religious communities and organizations have been highlighted for their deliverance of both immediate disaster and long-term relief by providing social support to the community in the shape of food and shelter provision as well as counselling (Sheikhi et al., 2021). Although all these studies provide some insight into the roles taken by religious communities in crises, two gaps have been identified that will be focus of this article.

First, in both research and in the expressed expectations from policymakers on religious communities a homogeneity among them is often suggested, despite the inherent diversity among religious organizations—a diversity that we know little of in terms of the effect on different religious actor's desired and actual actions. Indications are that differences exist between different religious communities and scholars have highlighted that there is a lack of cross-religious work, that is, little is known concerning how different religious groups act in times of crises and disasters (Sun et al., 2018) and thereby a vital topic to study further. In Sweden for example, some faith traditions (such as minority protestant churches) generally have a greater knowledge of the Swedish context and are more integrated and long-standing relationship with the state whilst others (such as Muslim organizations) are more often viewed with suspicion, which in turn may affect the willingness to act. However, although the underlying religious traditions may result in different responses from different religious communities and organizations, there may also be other organizational factors that may explain differences between different religious communities. In studies analysing the disaster preparedness amongst companies, it has been shown that larger organizations have better preparedness than smaller organizations (Chikoto et al., 2013; Quarantelli et al., 1979; Sadiq & Graham, 2016; Tyler et al., 2020) and may also be attributable to religious organizations. Yet, in terms of nongovernmental organizations—such as religious organizations—there's a need for distinctions to be made between different measurements of size. Specifically, studies have found a positive relationship between the number of employees and the level of preparedness (Chikoto et al., 2013). Likewise, studies have shown that social networks and volunteers are great resources in disaster management (Aldrich, 2017; Brennan et al., 2005). Therefore, the size of a religious communities not only needs to be put into the context of the number of members but also the number of employees and volunteers.

Second, as mentioned above, previous research has been performed in Asia and the United States. In a recent study it was highlighted that most studies concerning religion and disaster have focused on the global south (often conducted by scholars from the global north, focusing on 'the other') and that there is limited research conducted in Europe (Sun et al., 2018). Whether similar attitudes and responses to those seen in Asia and the United States are also observed in a highly secular country such as Sweden is more uncertain. In fact, there are several reasons why these previous studies cannot be easily translated to a European context. To start, religion often plays a far greater role in the lives of citizens in the United States and Southern Asia than for people in most European countries (Norris & Inglehart, 2011). Also, European societies are organized in a different way. Particularly in the Nordic countries, the state is traditionally expected to take a greater role in welfare deliverance and the provision of social services by nonprofit organizations and religious organizations has been limited (Bäckström et al., 2016; Lundström & Svedberg, 2003). Disasters caused by natural hazard have also historically been rarer occurrences in the Nordic countries (Nadim et al., 2008; Van Well et al., 2018) meaning that the results from Asia and United States may not be relevant. As such, before turning to the methodology and results, Sweden will be discussed as an interesting European example of proposing religious communities as governmental instruments in reducing risk, solving social problems and responding to disasters and crises.

### 3 | RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS EXTENDED ROLE IN DEALING WITH CRISES: THE CASE OF SWEDEN

While there are new and growing expectations on religious communities in Sweden it is important to note that there is an ambiguity concerning their role, in Swedish society today. Although Sweden is one of the most secular countries in the world, it is also becoming one of the most religiously diverse in Europe because of immigration. Since the turn of the century (and coincidentally during the same period in which the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden was formally separated from the state) the Swedish government has become increasingly engaged in the management of minority religious communities that receive government grants (Lundgren, 2021; Pettersson, 2011). On the one hand the Swedish government has highlighted how religious communities can function as a resource and solve many of the problems facing society. However, on the other hand, they have also been highlighted as a risk that can be the cause of social problems, such as security concerns (Lundgren, 2021). As such, when it comes to the handling of crises, minority religious communities are seen both as a resource to be included in collaboration but also as a risk that needs to be managed. During Covid-19, for example, there was a fear that religious meetings would be major super-spreader events and that some would not follow the restrictions (and thereby the possibilities for congregations to stay open was limited and only eight people were allowed to meet).

Simultaneously, the Swedish government also highlighted how central religious communities could be in reaching out to people with information.

Historically, because of the strong relationship between church and state in Sweden, the Swedish government has highlighted the Church of Sweden as a resource in the handling of national crises such as disasters and public health crises. It has been argued that the first event that introduced a new role for the Church of Sweden and that showed that despite being a secular country the role of the church could have a central role in disaster and crises management was the Estonia disaster (Bäckström et al., 2004). On the 28th of September 1994, the passenger ferry MS Estonia sunk as it was crossing the Baltic Sea from Tallinn, Estonia, to Stockholm, Sweden. Of the 852 people lost their lives, over 500 were from Sweden and triggered a national grief and crisis reaction. In this national crisis the Church of Sweden gained a central and visible public service function and churches and parish homes were identified as important public resources where people could be comforted and have their ritual needs covered, with priests being seen as national experts in mourning (Bäckström et al., 2004; Pettersson, 1996). Since then, the Church of Sweden has been recognized as a central resource in handling national and local crises and disasters and are often a central part of the local authorities' crises organizations. Another major national crisis—a nightclub fire in Gothenburg in 1998 in which 90 young people died, many with foreign backgrounds—highlighted the role of minority religious communities as a resource and central actor given their support to youths in the aftermath of the crises (Middlemiss Lé Mon et al., 2022). Following 2000, when the state separated from the Church of Sweden an increasing recognition has occurred from public authorities and municipalities in terms of minority religious communities as important actors in preparedness, response and recovery efforts in both crises and disaster.

Predominantly through the government agency The Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (SST) the Swedish government has highlighted a number of roles minority religious communities could play during crises; highlighting both how they can offer spiritual support to victims as a way to help them through traumatic experiences, but also by providing practical support such as providing food and warmth in times of disaster and crises. Importantly, in contrast to the Church of Sweden, minority religious communities have been highlighted as central actors in relation to the growing part of the Swedish population that are not native Swedes by providing information in their native language and having knowledge of their original culture. In light of this the Swedish government has emphasized how minority religious communities can support public authorities by conveying correct (i.e., official) information in the event of a disaster. For example, on the SST website, set up to encourage municipalities to collaborate with minority religious communities, it is stated that;

In today's communication-intensive society with fast information channels, minority religious communities can also be a safe and secure channel for reaching out

with correct and verified information to victims in difficult situations. Especially when information can be conveyed in the victims' mother tongue. (The Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities, 2022b)

This desire to use minority religious communities in the event of a national crisis, particularly for nonnative Swedes, is well illustrated by the reception crises in 2015—when Sweden received the highest number of refugees per capita in Europe and the public authorities could not handle the situation themselves (Lundgren, 2019). Despite this, the limited number of studies that have been performed in Sweden regarding the role of religion in national crises and disasters have mainly focus on the majority church—the Church of Sweden—despite the religious diversity that exist in Sweden (Bäckström et al., 2004; Idestrom & Linde, 2019; Pettersson, 1996). As such, this study will focus on religious communities from a variety of faith backgrounds consisting of Buddhists, Muslims, non-Protestant Christians, and Protestant Christians outside of the majority church.

## 4 | MATERIALS AND METHOD

The results in this article are based on a survey sent to minority religious communities<sup>1</sup> in Sweden. The collection of data was conducted in the autumn of 2021 and with the help of 18<sup>2</sup> national minority religious communities the survey was distributed to 2100 congregations connected to the national organizations. In the email with the survey it was stipulated that one person in each congregation (with sound knowledge, preferably in a leading position, given that respondents were asked how they perceived the situation in the own congregation) should answer the questionnaire. Two reminders were sent out during the collection period and all answers were anonymised.

In total, 562 local congregations (from six different faith traditions) responded to the survey. In terms of representativity, as seen in Table 1 the respondents were predominantly representatives from minority protestant churches (including both so-called Free Churches and Lutheran churches, though not the Church of Sweden). Despite only accounting for approximately a quarter of the total

number of congregations, as seen in Table 1, in relation to the actual number and types of parishes, the survey's representativeness is relatively good.

In terms of size, most responding parishes were smaller parishes (56 percent of the responding congregations had fewer than 100 members). In turn, this is associated with the type of congregation given that minority protestant congregations have few members per congregation while Catholic, Orthodox/Eastern and Muslim congregations are fewer but have more members per congregation. For example, over 90 percent of the Orthodox/Eastern and Catholic congregations have more than 250 members.

### 4.1 | Data and measurements

In this article three different dichotomous variables were used to measure the underlying aspiration to assist during a crisis and the practical actions taken during the pandemic in response to the governments and other public authorities' desire. The underlying aspiration to help was measured in terms of whether the local congregation believed that they had an important role in the handling of national crises, disasters, and accidents. The practical actions taken by the congregation during Covid-19 in response to the state's desire, was measured using two different variables: whether the congregation mediated information about Covid-19 during the pandemic, and whether they mediated information about Covid-19 vaccines. These different perspectives were then assessed in relation to the congregation's denomination and organizational factors. We defined organizational factors as the number of employees, the degree of voluntarism<sup>3</sup>, and the number of members.

## 5 | RESULTS

Starting with overall descriptive data the question of underlying aspiration, the results show that 84% of all responding congregations believed they had an important role in the handling of national crises, disasters and accident. However, in terms of the practical actions taken in relation to the role Swedish policymakers desired, the result

**TABLE 1** Distribution comparison with the total population and response rates.

	Distribution in the population (%)	Distribution amongst sample (%)	Response rate (%)	Number of congregations in sample (n)
Minority protestant congregations	90.6	88.1	25.7	495
Muslim congregations	4.2	2.7	17.9	15
Orthodox congregations	1.9	3.7	52.5	21
Buddhist congregations	1.0	1.7	40.1	9
Catholic congregations	2.1	3.6	45.5	20
Jewish congregations	0.2	0.4	50.0	2

differs. Although 65% provided information regarding Covid-19, fewer than 25% provided information about vaccinations.

In terms of the different explanatory factors, there are cross-religious differences (Table 2). In terms of the aspiration to help, very little variation is seen. In terms of assisting with information about Covid-19, only one group (minority Protestant churches) differentiated themselves in relation to all other groups. The same is true in relation to information about Covid-19 vaccinations where minority Protestant churches differ to both Muslim and Orthodox communities.

Although Table 2 indicates that there are cross-religious differences, these could be due to factors outside of religious affiliations. To explore this possibility, we included organizational differences in the multi-regression analyses for each investigated question. As seen in Table 3, although the type of congregation (i.e., religious denomination) is associated with mediating information in Models 1–3, when the number of employees, volunteers and number of members in the congregation are taken into consideration, the results show that the mediation of information about Covid-19 is associated with the number of employees and the number of members within the congregation. In other words, although religious denomination has some explanatory power, the number of employees and members has a greater power of explanation.

A similar sentiment is seen in Table 4 regarding the spreading of information about Covid-19 vaccines given that it is predominantly the larger congregations that have spread information. However, in terms of denomination there is also a slight difference to the practice of spreading general information about Covid-19. In terms of information about vaccines, although practically all denominations were less willing to perform this task compared to the willingness to

spread general information (as seen in Table 2) the minority protestant churches were much less inclined than other denominations.

The same models were used to study the factors that affect the underlying aspirations and desires to contribute to national crises or disasters. As seen in Model 4 in Table 5, the size of the congregation (i.e., defined as the number of members) is the factor that has the greatest explanatory power.

Given the concurrent explanatory power of size, the graphs in Figure 1—based on Model 4 in Tables 3–5—reiterate several of the point put forth above. First, in accordance with the bottom-right graph, for all sizes of congregations, there is a higher probability to want to help than the probability to spread information. Second, all congregations see themselves as having an important role in the handling of national crises, accidents and disasters, although this is significantly lower amongst the smallest congregations with under 50 members. Third, in terms of spreading information there is a continuous increase in line with the congregation's size, thereby reiterating the importance of congregation size in the probability of spreading information.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

This study shows several interesting results. First, the results suggest that a large majority (84%) of the congregations that have responded to this survey declare that they want to take an active role in the event of a crises, accidents or disaster. Given that this is one of the first studies investigating the desires of local congregations to respond to national crises or disasters in Western Europe, this result

**TABLE 2** Result from one-way analysis of variance over the three dependent variables.

	Mediated information about Covid-19	Mediated information about vaccination	My congregation has an important role in the handling of national crises, disasters and accidents
Minority protestant churches	0.62 (0.57–0.66)	0.17 (0.14–0.21)	0.83 (0.79–0.86)
Muslim communities	0.88 (0.69–1.00)	0.69 (0.43–0.98)	1 (---)
Orthodox communities	1 (---)	0.67 (0.4–0.94)	0.93 (0.79–1.00)
Catholic communities	0.88 (0.71–1.00)	0.41 (0.15–0.67)	1 (---)
Jewish Communities	1 (---)	1 (---)	1 (---)
Buddhist communities	0.70 (0.35–1.00)	0.40 (0.03–0.77)	0.80 (0.50–1.00)

Note: For post-hoc-test, the Tukey's method was used for comparing possible group pairings. Confidence interval in parentheses (95%).

**TABLE 3** Mediated information about Covid-19 (logit regression).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Congregation (0–1)	1.57*** (0.41)	1.65*** (0.48)	1.87*** (0.56)	0.32 (0.71)
Number of employed during the pandemic (0–7)		0.32*** (0.08)	0.31*** (0.10)	0.17** (0.09)
Number of volunteers during the pandemic (0–50)			0.01 (0.01)	–0.01 (0.01)
Number of members in the congregations (1–5)				0.63*** (0.16)
Intercept	0.48*** (0.09)	0.02 (0.15)	–0.13 (0.20)	–0.79*** (0.26)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.08	0.10	0.13
N	547	472	382	382

Note: Coefficients and robust standard errors (in parentheses) for Models 1 through 4.

\*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 4** Mediated information about Covid-19 vaccines (logit regression).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Congregation (0–1)	1.80*** (0.28)	2.00*** (0.34)	2.05*** (0.37)	1.21** (0.55)
Number of employed during the pandemic (0–7)		0.22** (0.06)	0.16** (0.07)	0.09 (0.08)
Number of volunteers during the pandemic (0–50)			0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Number of members in the community (1–5)				0.33** (0.17)
Intercept	–1.57*** (0.12)	–1.96*** (0.17)	–1.96*** (0.23)	–2.36*** (0.30)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.07	0.10	0.11	0.12
N	547	472	382	382

Note: Coefficients and robust standard errors (in parentheses) for Models 1 through 4.

\*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 5** My congregation has an important role in the handling of national crises, disasters and accidents (logit regression).

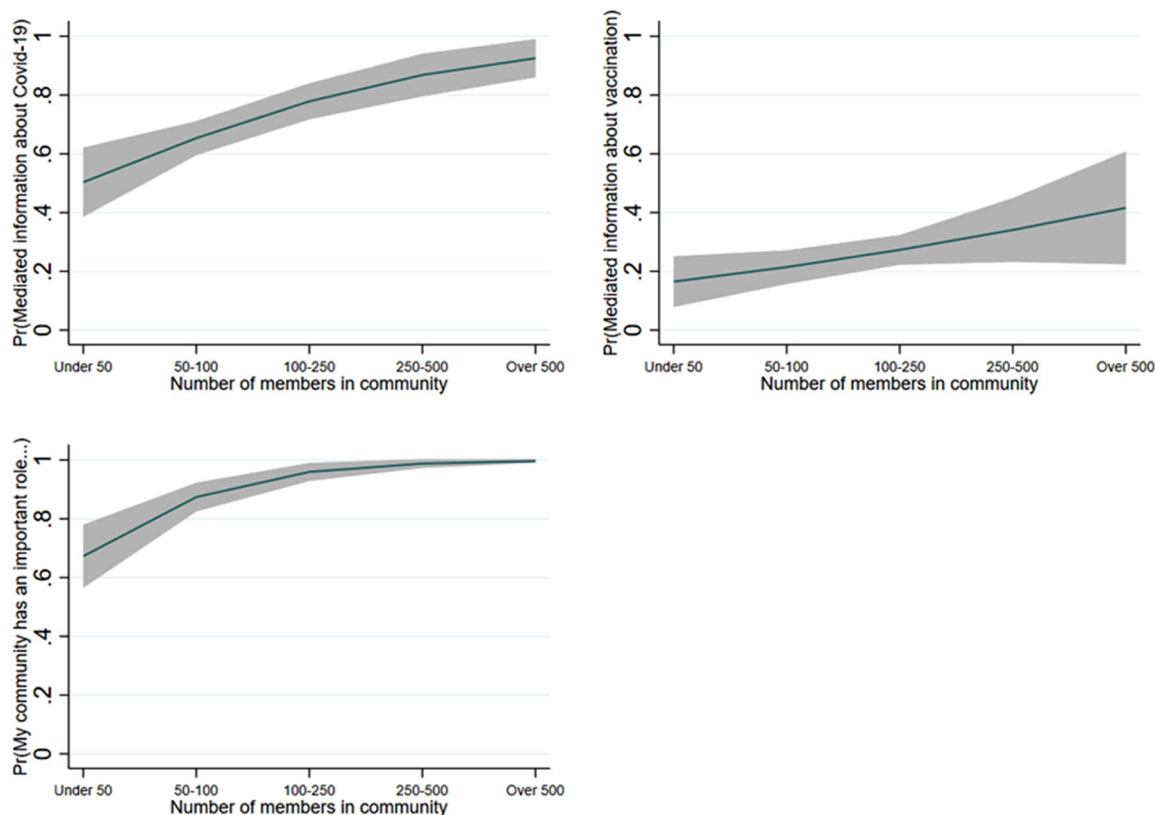
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Congregation (0–1)	1.41** (0.60)	2.26** (1.01)	Omitted	Omitted
Number of employed during the pandemic (0–7)		0.45*** (0.45)	0.42** (0.19)	0.16 (0.15)
Number of volunteers during the pandemic (0–50)			0.01 (0.01)	–0.02 (0.01)
Number of members in the community (1–5)				1.24*** (0.25)
Intercept	1.55*** (0.12)	1.00*** (0.20)	0.83*** (0.26)	–0.33 (0.37)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.09	0.07	0.15
N	547	472	335	335

Note: Coefficients and robust standard errors (in parentheses) for Models 1 through 4.

\*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

is important, not least as the traditional role of a religious congregation is to be a place for worshipping and prayer, not crisis and disaster response. The second major finding is that while there are differences in the willingness to act, where minority protestant

congregation seem to be less willing to take such a role, when taking the size of the organization into account it is revealed that the larger congregation is, the more likely it is to view itself as having a central role. Interestingly, this result is in line with other studies involving



**FIGURE 1** Adjusted predictions, Model 4 in Tables 3–5.

nonreligious groups regarding preparedness on an organizational level that have also shown that it is the size of the organization that matters the most in explaining the level of preparedness (Chikoto et al., 2013; Quarantelli et al., 1979).

Although the size of the organization was the most important factor and indicates that in certain respects religious congregations could be compared to nonreligious organizations, there are still reasons to look at cross-religious differences—as this is an element that has been highlighted by other researchers but rarely studied (Sun et al., 2018). A dominant discourse in Sweden, as in many other countries in Western Europe, is that many minority religious communities are not fully integrated in mainstream society and Muslim organizations in particular are often viewed with suspicion. However, the results from this study show that all the responding Muslim organizations were willing to contribute, as was true for other ‘newer’ religious groups in Sweden such as Orthodox and Buddhist congregations.

However, despite a very high level of wanting to help and assist, in terms of the willingness to perform the roles that the Swedish government wanted them to perform, that is, spread official information and work in accordance with the expectation of the Swedish government, the results show that considerably fewer were willing to conform. This is interesting from several perspectives. First, the requested help was central for the Swedish government as it struggled to reach out with information—not least to areas where many nonnative Swedes lived—a problem that was widely discussed

throughout the pandemic in media outlets. As such, there would likely have been no question amongst the leadership of the congregations of the public authority's need for help. These public discussions—that often focused on nonnative Swedes—could also explain some of the cross-religious differences. Minority protestant congregation (Lutheran and Free Churches) have more native Swedes as members and may not have felt the need to provide information as they may have believed that their members obtain the correct information themselves. However, this is not known and considering the government's and other public authorities' specific requests, the fact that congregations despite this were considerably less interested in this role compared to the general desire to act is clearly noteworthy.

Second, a greater proportion of the congregations in the study were willing to provide information about the pandemic compared to providing information regarding vaccinations. This difference may have a rational, practical explanation. For example, it may be that information about Covid-19 was spread because of restrictions on religious meetings, that is, that to explain the restrictions for one's members, information was also spread about the pandemic. However, there may also be other reasons. Previous studies have shown that there is a growing public health challenge among some religious minorities because of so-called anti-vax sentiments (Kasstan, 2021; Pelčić et al., 2016) and a recent study showed that outbreaks of measles and coronavirus were seen more frequently in Orthodox Jewish neighbourhoods in Israel and North America

(Kasstan, 2021). Simultaneously, other studies have shown how confidence in vaccines is higher in more religious countries (Eriksson & Vartanova, 2022) meaning that the relationship between vaccine attitudes and minority religious communities in secular countries needs to be studied further to better understand how these elements interact.

Third, and connected to the first point, the differentiation between the desire to help and the desire to perform the state's duties, this study shows that the Swedish government cannot expect minority religious communities to unflinchingly perform duties for them, even though there is an underlying desire to help. In fact, an interesting comparison can be made to the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 when many religious communities took a considerable (and voluntary) role in managing and solving the crisis by offering food and shelter (Asp, 2017; Ideström & Linde, 2019; Lundgren, 2019). Although further studies are needed, the difference between these two crises and the results from this study clearly indicate that whilst there is a desire and willingness to help the society, what religious communities, do in a crisis can perhaps not be governed by the state. The underlying reasons behind this dichotomy need to be studied further. However, two hypotheses can be identified; that initiatives need to come from the congregations themselves in order for willingness to change to action, or that there is a willingness to help society, though perhaps not be a governmental instrument.

Regardless of the underlying reasons, it is important that more studies in this field are produced. There is a strong consensus that the number of disasters—both natural and man-made—are expected to increase (Pörtner et al., 2022). This will most likely lead to governments and other public authorities in Western countries continuing—and perhaps increasingly emphasizing—the role of non-profit organizations. Given the multi-cultural nature of many Western countries it is likely that the religious organizations will be highlighted as important partners— especially if policymakers only understand these actors as willing to help unequivocally. However, if there are considerable differences between what these organizations want to do and what the state wants them to do this could result in controversies.

## 7 | LIMITATIONS

Although the results in this study are based on, to our knowledge, one of the largest surveys ever performed concerning congregations connected to minority religious communities in Sweden, there are several limitations that need to be highlighted. First, there are two points regarding the response rate. Of the 48 registered minority religious communities in Sweden with around 2700 congregations, 18 minority religious communities, containing 2100 congregations, agreed to help with distributing the survey. Clearly, the fact that some refused to assist the collection of data is problematic. However, as is clear, the 30 minority religious communities that did not distribute the survey accounted for only 600 congregations (22.2%) whilst the 18 that did distribute the survey represented 77.8% of the

congregations. As such, the non-participants were clearly a minority and were smaller organizations (given the relationship between organization and congregations). How this nonparticipation has affected the results is difficult to ascertain but readers should be aware of this fact and analyse the results with this in mind. In terms of the response rate amongst the participants, a response rate of 42% is lower than desired but at a level commonly observed in larger survey studies. Also, the response rate was relatively similar in relation to faith denomination. However, it cannot be disregarded that the non-responders may have a differing opinion to the responders. We have attempted to assess this risk by presenting the results to representatives of the 18 minority religious communities. The response from the representatives was that they recognised the sentiments put forth and believed these were representative. Second, data collection for this study was performed during the autumn of 2021. When the survey was sent out the opinion of the Swedish Public Health Agency was that the need for restrictions was over and that the need for societal interventions (such as information on Covid-19 in general and vaccines in particular) was less. In hindsight this was not entirely the case given that several booster vaccines were required during the autumn of 2021 and during 2022. However, although the timeline of the pandemic could affect the answers, it is probably more likely that more congregations would want to act if the urgency of public health interventions remained than if the opposite were true. As such, we deem it as unlikely that the rates regarding the willingness to spread information are too low.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

There are few, if any, national studies regarding the organizational desire and willingness to respond to national crises or disasters by religious organizations in Western Europe. This study clearly shows that local congregations in Sweden are not merely places for worship. Rather, local congregations want to take a role in the event of a disaster or national crisis. While there are slight religious differences in this willingness, the most important factor in determining whether they want to help seems to be the size of the organization. Importantly, despite this high level of willingness, the role congregations take may not always mirror the government's expectations. Considerable fewer local congregations were willing to take part in spreading information during the Covid-19 pandemic therefore clearly indicating that the willingness to respond to crises is not unconditional. The results provide important insights for the future handling of disasters and crises and indicates that governments probably need to discuss what type of help religious (and other) organizations want to offer in times of disasters and crises and not assume that they will help unequivocally.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was supported by a research grant from The Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities and The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ORCID

Linnea Lundgren  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5184-3767>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In this study, the term 'minority religious communities' refers to national umbrella organizations that receive state funding and have several local member-based congregations with their own premises where religious services take place on a regular basis.
- <sup>2</sup> There are 48 registered minority religious communities in Sweden with around 2700 congregations connected to them. The 18 minority religious communities that agreed to take part in the study represent around 2100 congregation.
- <sup>3</sup> The pandemic affected the possibility for especially older people to be involved in the community, leading to a professionalization within the religious communities. By comparing the results using the degree of potential volunteers before the pandemic, the operationalization using the degree of volunteers before the pandemic, shows the potential if another type of crises would occur not hitting the core of volunteers as during the pandemic.

## REFERENCES

- Aldrich, D. P. (2017). The importance of social capital in building community resilience. In W. Yan & W. Galloway (Eds.), *Rethinking resilience, adaptation and transformation in a time of change* (pp. 357–364). Springer.
- Asp, V. (2017). Voluntary resources during the refugee situation: Voluntary defense organizations and faith communities' ability to meet society's needs in autumn 2015.
- Bäckström, A., Davie, G., Edgardh, N., & Pettersson, P. (2016). *Welfare and religion in 21st century Europe: Volume 1: Configuring the connections*. Routledge.
- Bäckström, A., Edgardh Beckman, N., & Pettersson, P. (2004). *Religious change in Northern Europe: The case of Sweden*. Verbum.
- Beckford, J. A. (2010). The return of public religion a critical assessment of a popular claim. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 23(2), 121–136.
- Brennan, M., Barnett, R. V., & Flint, C. G. (2005). Community volunteers: The front line of disaster response. *Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 23(4), 52.
- Cheema, A. R. (2012). *Exploring the role of the mosque in dealing with disasters: A case study of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan*. New Zealand. Massey University.
- Chikoto, G. L., Sadiq, A.-A., & Fordyce, E. (2013). Disaster mitigation and preparedness: Comparison of nonprofit, public, and private organizations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 42(2), 391–410.
- Dinham, A. (2009). *Faiths, public policy and civil society: Problems, policies, controversies*. Springer.
- Eriksson, K., & Vartanova, I. (2022). Vaccine confidence is higher in more religious countries. *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*, 18(1), 1–3.
- Gaillard, J.-C., & Texier, P. (2010). Religions, natural hazards, and disasters: An introduction. *Religion*, 40(2), 81–84.
- Hurd, E. S. (2015). *Beyond religious freedom*. Princeton University Press.
- Ideström, J., & Linde, S. (2019). Welfare state supporter and civil society activist: Church of Sweden in the "refugee crisis" 2015. *Social Inclusion*, 7(2), 4–13.
- Joakim, E. P., & White, R. S. (2015). Exploring the impact of religious beliefs, leadership, and networks on response and recovery of disaster-affected populations: A case study from Indonesia. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 30(2), 193–212.
- Joshi, P. (2010). *Faith-based and community organizations' participation in emergency preparedness and response activities*. Institute for Homeland Security Solutions Chapel Hill.
- Kapucu, N. (2007). Non-profit response to catastrophic disasters. *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal*, 16(4), 551–561. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09653560710817039>
- Kasstan, B. (2021). "If a rabbi did say 'you have to vaccinate,' we wouldn't": Unveiling the secular logics of religious exemption and opposition to vaccination. *Social Science & Medicine* (1982), 280, 114052.
- Kuipers, S., & Welsh, N. H. (2017). Taxonomy of the crisis and disaster literature: Themes and types in 34 years of research. *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 8(4), 272–283.
- Lim, J. R., Liu, B. F., Egnoto, M., & Roberts, H. A. (2019). Individuals' religiosity and emotional coping in response to disasters. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 27(4), 331–345.
- Lundgren, L. (2019). A diversity of roles—The actions taken by religious communities in Sweden during the "Refugee Crisis" in 2015. In R. G. Strachwitz (Ed.), *Religious Communities and Civil Society in Europe Analyses and Perspectives on a Complex Interplay* (Vol. 1, pp. 189–220). Oldenbourg De Gruyter.
- Lundgren, L. (2021). *A risk or a Resource?: A study of the Swedish state's shifting perception and handling of minority religious communities between 1952–2019*. Ersta Sköndal Bräcke högskola.
- Lundström, T., & Svedberg, L. (2003). The voluntary sector in a social democratic welfare state—The case of Sweden. *Journal of Social Policy*, 32(2), 217–238.
- McGeehan, K. M., & Baker, C. K. (2017). Religious narratives and their implications for disaster risk reduction. *Disasters*, 41(2), 258–281.
- Middlemiss Lé Mon, M., Lundgren, L., & Leis-Peters, A. (2022). Religjosa organisationer och civilsamhället [religious organisations and civil society]. In M. Lövheim & M. Nordin (Eds.), *Sociologiska perspektiv på religion i Sverige* (Vol. 2, pp. 75–92). Gleerups Utbildning AB.
- Muller, V. M., Burke, R. V., Berg, B. M., Lin, A. C., & Upperman, J. S. (2014). A mixed-methods pilot study of disaster preparedness and resiliency among faith-based organizations. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, 29(2), 127–133.
- Nadim, F., Pedersen, S. A. S., Schmidt-Thomé, P., Sigmundsson, F., & Engdahl, M. (2008). Natural hazards in nordic countries. *Episodes*, 31(1), 176–184.
- Ngin, C., Grayman, J. H., Neef, A., & Sanunsilp, N. (2020). The role of faith-based institutions in urban disaster risk reduction for immigrant communities. *Natural Hazards*, 103(1), 299–316.
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2011). *Sacred and secular: Religion and politics worldwide*. Cambridge University Press.
- Paulson, N., & Menjivar, C. (2012). Religion, the state and disaster relief in the United States and India. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 32(3/4), 179–196. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01443331211214758>
- Pelčić, G., Karačić, S., Mikirtchan, G. L., Kubar, O. I., Leavitt, F. J., Cheng-Tek tai, M., Morishita, N., Vuletić, S., & Tomašević, L. (2016). Religious exception for vaccination or religious excuses for avoiding vaccination. *Croatian Medical Journal*, 57(5), 516–521.
- Pettersson, P. (1996). Implicit service relations turned explicit: A case study of the Church of Sweden as service provider in the context of the Estonia disaster. In E. Bo & M. Sven (Eds.), *Service Management*. Nerenius & Santérus förlag.

- Pettersson, P. (2011). State and religion in Sweden ambiguity between disestablishment and religious control. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 24(2), 119–135.
- Pörtner, H.-O., Roberts, D. C., Adams, H., Adler, C., Aldunce, P., Ali, E., & Biesbroek, R. Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. *IPCC Sixth Assessment Report*.
- Quarantelli, E. L., Lawrence, C., Tierney, K., & Johnson, T. (1979). Initial findings from a study of socio-behavioral preparations and planning for acute chemical hazard disasters. *Journal of Hazardous Materials*, 3(1), 77–90.
- Rivera, J. D., & Nickels, A. E. (2014). Social capital, community resilience, and faith-based organizations in disaster recovery: A case study of Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church. *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, 5(2), 178–211.
- Sadiq, A. A., & Graham, J. D. (2016). Exploring the predictors of organizational preparedness for natural disasters. *Risk Analysis*, 36(5), 1040–1053.
- Samson, M. G. M., & Warganegara, A. (2021). A post-tsunami sea change? Towards post-secular disaster response in Indonesia. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 61, 102371.
- Schipper, E. L. F. (2010). Religion as an integral part of determining and reducing climate change and disaster risk: An agenda for research. In M. Voss (Ed.), *Der klimawandel* (pp. 377–393). Springer.
- Sheikhi, R. A., Seyedin, H., Qanizadeh, G., & Jahangiri, K. (2021). Role of religious institutions in disaster risk management: A systematic review. *Disaster medicine and public health preparedness*, 15(2), 239–254.
- Shinn, J. E., & Caretta, M. A. (2020). If it wasn't for the faith-based groups, we wouldn't be where we are today. *Southeastern Geographer*, 60(3), 235–253.
- Stern, G. (2007). *Can God intervene?: How religion explains natural disasters*. Praeger Pub Text.
- Sun, L., Deng, Y., & Qi, W. (2018). Two impact pathways from religious belief to public disaster response: Findings from a literature review. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 27, 588–595.
- The Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities (2022a). Retrieved August 8, 2022, from <https://www.myndighetsst.se/krisberedskap/om-covid-19.html>
- The Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities (2022b). Retrieved September 7, 2022, from <https://www.myndighetsst.se/krisberedskap/trossamfundens-betydelse-for-krisberedskapen.html>
- Tyler, J., Sadiq, A. A., & Chikoto-Schultz, G. L. (2020). Variations in employees' perceptions of organizational disaster preparedness. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 28(1), 2–18.
- Van Well, L., Keur, P., Harjanne, A., Pagneux, E., Perrels, A., & Henriksen, H. J. (2018). Resilience to natural hazards: An analysis of territorial governance in the Nordic countries. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 31, 1283–1294.
- Wisner, B. (2010). Untapped potential of the world's religious communities for disaster reduction in an age of accelerated climate change: An epilogue & prologue. *Religion*, 40(2), 128–131.

**How to cite this article:** Lundgren, L., & Fransson, S. (2023). The differences between actions and desires: The role of religious congregations in national crises and disasters. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 31, 441–450. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12450>