

# Performing Female Identity in a Minority Religion: Female Agency and Leadership in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church without Female Ordination

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## ABSTRACT

The Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church is a religious minority organisation dating back to the Reformation in which historically women have performed important roles such as priests' wives, church organists, choir leaders or members, and religious and musical educators for children. Unlike most Lutheran organisations, the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church does not ordain women, although one woman, Tamara Schmidt, was ordained and served as a priest in Vilnius in the 1990s. Despite the lack of ordination, Lithuanian Lutheran women continue to embrace their historical roles. This research demonstrates that these women often assume multiple leadership roles in different areas, including church activities, professional careers, family and personal life, and the public sphere. Nevertheless, their narratives reveal that actively participating in church activities holds particular significance in their lives and constitutes a key part of their Lutheran female identity. The goal of this article is to analyse how Lithuanian Lutheran women, self-identifying as practising, perform their Lutheran minority and female identities through various leadership roles and how such performativity influences their agency within an organisation in which women are not ordained.

## KEYWORDS

agency, identity, leadership, Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran women, religious minority.

## Introduction

Scientific research reveals that women play important leadership roles in religious groups, though these are often rendered invisible despite requiring creativity, innovation, flexibility, adaptability, and other leadership qualities (Ališauskienė 2021; Day 2017, 8; Mahmood 2005). According to the Pew Research Centre (2016), Christian women are more religious than Christian men. Moreover, research shows that religious women are responsible for the functioning, vitality, and even survival of their churches (Day 2017, 6-8). However, in traditional religious organisations and more conservative societies, official religious leadership positions such as the priesthood are occupied exclusively by men (Day 2017, 25; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016, 56). This article explores the case of female exclusion from ordination in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, a minority religion in the relatively conservative country of Lithuania, one of the few members of the European Union (EU) that has yet to legalise LGBTQIA+ civil partnerships or marriages (ILGA-Europe 2024). It aims to highlight the efforts of Lithuanian Lutheran women to strengthen their religious communities and contribute to their societies.

Leadership, agency, identity, and the lived religion of Lithuanian religious women have been under-researched, and this topic requires close scientific inquiry. The last two decades have seen limited but pioneering work on these topics. Indrė Karčiauskaitė (2007) analysed Roman Catholic women's empowerment and engagement in political and public life in interwar Lithuania during the first wave of feminism. Ramonaitė, Klumbys, and Kukulskytė (2015) revealed the extraordinary role Catholic women played in four samizdat networks of Soviet Lithuania, including participating in the most successful underground publication in the Soviet Union, "The Chronicle of the Catholic Church of Lithuania", published between 1972 and the collapse of the regime in 1989. Milda Ališauskienė (2021) discussed the agency and characteristics of women's religious leadership in the neo-pagan group "Romuva" and neo-Hindu movements in contemporary Lithuania. Other scientific studies have mentioned the role of women in new religious movements and various minority religions in Lithuania (Aleknaitė 2014; Lankauskas 2012, 109; Pažeraitė 2014a; Pažeraitė 2014b; Pažeraitė 2014c; Pranskevičiūtė 2014). New research analyses the variety of ways pious Muslim women exercise their agency to navigate between religion, gender, and human rights in dynamic post-Soviet Baltic societies (Vidūnaitė 2023) or understand and negotiate gender equality through their search for a "true" Islam (Vidūnaitė, Babash, and Grung 2025). Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rozners (2025) discuss Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Catholic and Lutheran women's attitudes towards female ordination. Nevertheless, there remains a lack of research on women's roles in traditional religious (particularly minority) organisations in Lithuania, such as the Evangelical Lutheran or Orthodox churches.

Unlike most Lutheran churches (LWF 2016b), the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church does not ordain women – with a notable exception in the 1990s when Tamara Schmidt was ordained and another woman, Kristina Ivanauskienė, aspired to become a priest but was not allowed<sup>1</sup> (Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rozners 2025; Hermann 2000; Hermann 2003b). This article not only looks at some circumstances and attitudes related to female (non)ordination in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church but also further investigates different leadership and other roles practising Lithuanian Lutheran women play in their church.

The article aims to analyse how Lithuanian Lutheran women, self-identifying as practising, perform their Lutheran female identity through various leadership roles and how such performativity influences their agency within a minority religion where women are not ordained. *Firstly*, it defines the concepts of charismatic leadership, subjective agency, and the performative identity of religious women as applied in the analysis. *Secondly*, it presents a brief sketch of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church and its demographics. *Thirdly*, the article details the research methodology. *Fourthly*, it describes the practise of female (non)ordination in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church and Lithuanian Lutheran women's attitudes towards female ordination. *Fifthly*, the article shows how participation in church activities relates to Lithuanian Lutheran women's professional and personal lives, potentially as a "third

<sup>1</sup> In the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, ordained ministers are historically called priests, not pastors as in Lutheran churches in many other countries.

shift” that they take on in addition to these other areas. *Sixthly*, it depicts how Lithuanian Lutheran women, in the context of a religious minority organisation that does not allow female ordination, perform their female identity in a variety of leadership roles (and other ways). *Seventhly*, it explains where the charismatic leadership of Lithuanian Lutheran women lies. *Eighthly*, the article discusses the concept of subjective agency within the framework of this fieldwork data. *Finally*, the conclusions reflect on the major findings.

## **Charismatic Leadership, Subjective Agency, and the Performative Identity of Religious Women**

Women’s opportunities to obtain religious leadership positions remain limited, especially in traditional religious organisations and more conservative societies (Day 2017, 25; Furseth and Repstad 2006, 187; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016, 56), as represented here by the case of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church. Historically, religious women have had to rely on charisma, expressed through personal characteristics, the observation of moral norms, divine inspiration, mystical experiences, etc., in their search for power, influence, and leadership in religious communities (Van Osselaer, Rossi, Smeyers, and Graus 2019). They have had to employ creativity, innovation, flexibility, adaptability, and other leadership qualities to become leaders in patriarchal (religious) organisations (Ališauskienė 2021; Day 2017, 8; Mahmood 2005). Max Weber’s theory of charismatic leadership explains that the basis of its authority lies in the relationship between the extraordinary qualities of (or constructed by) the leader and the recognition and attribution (or construction) of such qualities by their followers (Weber 1968; 1991). This conceptualisation of charismatic leadership is useful in explaining how practising Lithuanian Lutheran women pursue and achieve leadership roles in various areas of life, especially at church.

This article employs an open and subjective concept of agency that questions the secular liberal and second-wave feminist notion of agency as located “in the political and moral autonomy of the subject” (Mahmood 2005, 7), as well as the binary model of subordination and subversion, repression, and resistance to social norms (Mahmood 2005, 14), to reveal how women can be empowered even in patriarchal religious organisations. As Saba Mahmood (2005, 15) argued, “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms”. The article follows her idea of “alternative ways of thinking about agency, especially as it relates to embodied capacities and means of subject formation” (Mahmood 2005, 7). It challenges the notion of false consciousness that has been used to characterise religious women (Mahmood 2005, 2; 6) with religion cast in the role of the sole oppressor (Burke 2012; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005).

Agency here is understood as emotions, attitudes, choices, and behaviours, which encompass different subjective self-realisation experiences (Burke 2012; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005). It can be based on both religious goals (such as piety, submission, morality, the observance of religion, care for others, fulfilling relationships) as well as secular, liberal, and feminist ambitions (Abu-Lughod 2013; Avishai 2008; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005; Ozorak 1996; Vidūnaitė 2023, 8). This conceptualisation encompasses the various benefits of being religious, i.e., how women build on, expand, and transform such benefits (Vidūnaitė 2023, 8). Defying the paradigmatic dichotomy between “religious” and “secular” notions of agency dispels the image of the religious “as irrational, backward, and associated with the private and female sphere” and the secular “as rational, progressive, and associated with the public and male sphere” as defined by classical secularisation theory (Asad 2003; Knibbe and Bartelink 2019; Vidūnaitė 2023, 5).

Abby Day coined the neo-Durkheimian concept of “performative belief”, “where belief is not pre-formed but a lived, embodied performance, brought into being through action and where the object of worship is (...) the experience of belonging” (Day 2011, 194). She refers both to religious identities as being performed (Day 2011, 69) and beliefs that are performed to create and sustain social and cultural identities (Day 2011, 194). Similarly, Orit Avishai’s study of Orthodox Jewish women in Israel (2008) explains how women are “doing” religion through observing, negotiating, and making sense of regulations around marital sexuality. This article is based on research that showed how practising

Lithuanian Lutheran women in leadership positions assign particular importance to their church activities, which is why these concepts are especially useful for this analysis. “Doing” religion enables these women to “perform” – and affirm – their female identity and signify their belonging to the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church in a predominantly Catholic country.

## **A Brief Sketch of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church: History and Demographics**

The Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church is a religious minority in Lithuania that was founded during the Reformation, around 1536 (Lukšaitė 1999). Lutheranism in Lithuania is credited with the publication of the first book in the Lithuanian language, the Protestant “Catechism” by the Lutheran priest Martynas Mažvydas in 1547, as well as the first Lithuanian translations and publications of psalms, hymns, gospels, and the Bible in the 16-17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Lukšaitė 1999; 2003). The Counter-Reformation drove many Lithuanian Lutherans out of the country, leaving mostly German Lutheran communities in the area formerly referred to as Lithuania Minor, which includes the present-day Klaipėda region (Juška 1997; Lukšaitė 2003). The contemporary Lithuanian Lutheran community continues to be concentrated in this area, living in cities such as Klaipėda, the historical Lutheran capital of Tauragė, Jurbarkas, Šilutė, as well as the largest Lithuanian cities of Vilnius and Kaunas.

During the interwar period, Lutherans in Lithuania were divided owing to disagreements between Lithuanians, Latvians, and Germans (Hermann 2003a) and were around 5 to 7 percent of the total population, with approximately two-thirds of them residing in the Klaipėda region (Hermann 2003a; Juška 1997). After WWII, many Lutherans left Lithuania to move to “the West” (Hermann 2003a). Under Soviet occupation, Lithuanian Lutherans experienced double discrimination due to their religiosity and alleged German origins (Lukaitytė 2010); this was referenced by the participants in this research.

Based on census data, the number of Lutherans in post-Soviet Lithuania has decreased from approximately 19,600 in 2001 to 18,400 in 2011 to 15,700 in 2021 (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas 2001; 2013; Valstybės Duomenų Agentūra 2021). In 2021, 74.2% of the Lithuanian population self-identified as Roman Catholic, whereas only 0.56% self-identified as Evangelical Lutheran, 0.2% as Evangelical Reformed, 3.8% as Orthodox, 0.7% as Old Believers, 6.1% as non-religious, 0.9% as belonging to other religious communities, and 13.7% did not indicate their religion (Valstybės duomenų agentūra 2021).

## **Methodology**

This article is based on micro-sociological ethnographic, lived religion research aimed at analysing whether, how, and why religion empowers (i.e., enhances the agency of) Lithuanian Lutheran women via their leadership at church, in their professional careers, family, personal and public lives, and elsewhere. I conducted qualitative fieldwork research from May 2022 to August 2024, including participant observation in Lutheran ceremonies and other church events, as well as semi-structured and informal interviews with practising Lutheran women.

In total, 20 Lithuanian Lutheran women who self-identified as practising or observing and had (formal or informal) leadership positions or qualities were interviewed. When selecting interviewees, the following criteria were controlled: age, place of residence, marital and familial status, whether a person became Lutheran through birth or conversion, and the area of female leadership (church or church-related institution or organisation, professional career, family and private life, public life, etc.). Interviewees were selected based on convenience, snowball, and purposeful sampling. Some potential participants were individuals I had met during other projects or during the participant observation for this project; most came through other religious women, priests, other Lutheran individuals, and scholars who had previously conducted research on Lithuanian Lutherans or knew Lutheran women personally or professionally.

Of the 20 women interviewed for this project, 16 said they inherited their faith and 4 said they were converts. Their ages varied: 5 in their 20s-30s, 10 in their 40s-50s, and 5 in their 60s and older. They resided in different places in Lithuania, including Vilnius, Kaunas, Telšiai, and historical Lutheran centres such as Klaipėda, Pagėgiai, Palanga, Šilutė, and Tauragė; one had emigrated to London. The women had different marital statuses: 12 married, 1 divorced, 2 widowed, 1 engaged, and 4 single. Among the 15 women who were or had been married, all but 1 had children. It is interesting to note that all 20 of the interviewed women had or were in the process of gaining some form of higher education: 16 with a university degree (4 with PhD degrees), 2 with a professional education, and 2 students.

To investigate whether, how, and why religion provides agency to Lithuanian Lutheran women, the semi-structured interviews focused on personal faith history, religious identity, and daily religious practice, as well as their image of and personal relationship with God. We discussed broader topics like the benefits, shortcomings, and ambiguities of being religious. The women were asked to describe their leadership roles at church, in their professional, public, private, or family lives, or elsewhere, and to explain how they balance their different roles and how faith in God influences their life and leadership. The interviews covered questions about the diminishing or changing role of religion in their individual lives, church, and society. Finally, for the conceptual purpose of challenging the paradigmatic dichotomy between religious and secular and determining where these women stand on the ideal-typical axis of conservative and liberal values, these women were asked to share their opinions on female ordination, abortion, LGBTQIA+ issues, the role of women in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, and gender roles in their career and family.

This fieldwork data was analysed according to the research questions and major themes that appeared in the interviewees' narratives. Conceptually, this analysis employed the theory of women's charismatic religious leadership (Van Osselaer, Rossi, Smeyers, and Graus 2019; Weber 1968; 1991), the subjective notion of agency (Mahmood 2005), and the idea of a performative religious identity that reinforces other social and cultural identities, referring to Day's (2011, 194) "performative belief". In this article, the fieldwork analysis of Lithuanian Lutheran female leaders is presented with particular emphasis on the unique strategies these women, as members of a religious minority, used in order to perform their Lutheran female identity in a predominantly Catholic society.

## **Female (Non)Ordination: The Practices and Attitudes of Lithuanian Evangelical Lutherans**

More than 80% of Lutheran churches around the world ordain women, according to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF 2016b). The Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, like that in neighbouring Latvia, has a policy against female ordination (Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rozners 2025; Hermann 2000). In 2016, the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church's synod officially ruled that women cannot be ordained as priests, arguing that the Bible's apostolic tradition allows only men to become priests (Balode 2003; Briede 2023). This decision reversed a Soviet-era policy that had been in place since 1975, which allowed women to become ordained and serve as priests (LWF 2016a). The decision on female ordination was postponed by the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church synod twice, in 1990 and 1995, probably owing to the fear that it was unacceptable to most Lithuanian Lutherans, especially among rural congregations (Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rozners 2025; Hermann 2000). Weakening ties with the German Lutherans contributed to the rejection of female ordination in Lithuania (Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rozners 2025; Rohtmets 2015). In 2001, the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church signed an agreement with the conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and began to follow its position of female non-ordination (Rohtmets 2015).

Before this decision, Tamara Schmidt, a German Lutheran of Lithuanian origin, was ordained in 1990 and served as a priest in Vilnius from 1995 to 1999 (Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rozners 2025; Hermann 2003b; "Liuteronų balsas" 1995c). She held regular services in the Vilnius parish ("Liuteronų balsas" 1995c). According to informal participants in this research, until her premature death from illness at the



age of 64, Schmidt put enormous effort into restoring the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church's buildings throughout the country, which had been damaged during the Soviet occupation.

Though Schmidt was the only female priest to serve in Lithuania, there is another case worth examining: Kristina Ivanauskienė (b. 1949) aspired to become a priest in the 1990s (Kurklietytė 2005) but was unsuccessful. She was interviewed for this research and agreed to be non-anonymised due to her recognisability. According to her account, in her 40s, with two teenage children left in Lithuania, she finished the two-year post-graduate ministerial training aimed at practical preparation for ordained ministry and leadership in local churches at Oxford's Wycliffe Hall in 1995 ("Liuteronų balsas" 1995b). Ivanauskienė explained that as a lay minister, she held services in the Vilnius parish in the late 1980s and 1990s and in the International Church of Vilnius in the late 1990s and early 2000s ("Liuteronų balsas" 1995a).

Ivanauskienė believes that the eventual decision of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church not to ordain women was strongly influenced by the abandonment of female ordination in the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1993, which itself was due to the appointment of the conservative Janis Vanags as the archbishop of Riga after the sudden death of his predecessor Kārlis Gailītis. According to her, the officials probably reasoned that if the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, a majority religious organisation, decided against ordaining women, then the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, as a minority religious organisation, should follow suit. During an informal interview, one member of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church's consistory said that such a "quiet" decision on female non-ordination was a reflection of the broader trends towards conservatism in 1990s Lithuanian society.

New research by Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rosiners (2025) provides further insight into the attitudes of Lithuanian Lutheran women towards female ordination. As their research shows, women who oppose female ordination often employed arguments such as the Biblical apostles were only male, it is part of church tradition, it is the official position of the current Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church authority, and there are psychological gender differences such as women having a "seductive element" (Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rozners 2025). Women who support female ordination argued that the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church should take a step towards gender equality and allow female ordination as do the churches in most other countries (Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rozners 2025). They mentioned the conservatism of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church and Lithuanian society, as well as the influence of the conservative Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church, as factors working against female ordination (Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rozners 2025).

In the current research, among the 20 participants, 9 supported female ordination, 9 were opposed, and 2 had no clear opinion, although they leaned more against it. The interviewees employed several arguments against female ordination. They similarly referred to the supposedly male-only apostolic tradition in the Bible or historical tradition: "It is a tradition and why change it". Women whose husbands or fathers were or are priests used this argument, with one exception: according to Ugnė (42), she and her priest husband support female ordination, and he tells her that she would make a better priest than him. Other women mentioned so-called psychological gender differences, mostly characterising women as being too emotional for the priesthood and explaining that men are rational and, therefore, better suited to this role. Additional arguments against female ordination included "the Christian vocation is more important", "men have more authority than women", "women priests still look strange", "women have enough space for self-realisation in church without priesthood", or "women have children to take care of".

Supporters of female ordination argued that it is not necessarily true that women would make worse priests than men; they explained that women would be equally as good and competent. Some even said that since women are more caring and empathetic, they would make better priests than men. Ona (48), PhD, argued that female ordination is inevitable in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church for two main reasons: first, because of the need for progress, and second, because in the future, fewer men

will be willing to become priests. Other women who support female ordination employed arguments of gender equality and female ordination in the Lutheran churches in other countries.

Two of the women interviewed expressed their disappointment and even hurt regarding the female non-ordination policy in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church. Ivanauskienė described the heavy atmosphere surrounding her unsuccessful bid to become a priest after returning from her studies at Wycliffe Hall, although she was still regularly asked to hold a service at the church when the Vilnius parish's priest was away. She said that she had received a lot of criticism and pressure from the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church authorities after the feminist film "Kristina Kristuje" ("Kristina in Christ") (Kurklietytė 2005) about her story was aired. Karolina (46), with a degree in theology, held some church services during her studies. She recalled the lack of support for female-led services among the Lutheran community and some priests saying, "Women will not climb the altar here". She explained that she regrets not being afforded more opportunities to use her diploma at church or for religion-related purposes.

Nevertheless, the Lithuanian Lutheran women who support female ordination seem to form a quiet opposition to the firm position of the current Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church authority against female ordination. Since the endeavours of Kristina Ivanauskienė, there has been no apparent effort to promote or seek female ordination in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, a situation acknowledged by Ivanauskienė herself. One member of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church's consistory said in an informal interview: "Priesthood is not so attractive to women anymore because it is less about theology than fixing a church roof in a village parish". This view is reflected in the research by Aleknaitė, Kull, and Rozners (2025), with quotes from supporters of female ordination saying they "wouldn't be prepared to fight for it" or that women priests are still strange or unusual. Considering that any leaders promoting female ordination would probably experience a backlash, as in the case of Ivanauskienė, women seem to have no prospect of becoming priests in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church at any point in the near future.

The absence of women's resistance against female non-ordination in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church can be related to the experience of Soviet authoritarianism, the lack of historical protest culture in Lithuania and the fact that Lithuania did not experience second-wave feminism during the Soviet period (Leinartė 2010; Praspaliauskienė 2006).

## **Church Activities as a "Third Shift" for Lithuanian Lutheran Female Leaders?**

Practising Lithuanian Lutheran women who participated in the semi-structured and informal interviews for this research or whose church activities were noted during participant observation tend to play multiple leadership roles in different areas (career, family and personal life, public life, or elsewhere) and within the church. These women work in the private sector (such as marketing or human resources), academia, education, translation, law and politics, music, theatre, and culture, and two study art or beauty. A few have or have had more than one career. Some, because of their leadership at church or in professional life, hold prominent but informal positions in the local community. Ona, 48, PhD, with 2 children, has an academic career, runs a small business, is involved in her local parish council, organises Lutheran children and youth camps, represents the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church internationally, etc.

The research reveals that for these Lithuanian Lutheran women, playing a more active role at church or having regular input in its daily activities seems to have a particular significance in their lives. All but one of the 20 women interviewed are involved in (various) church activities. For most, views on female ordination do not affect these activities – they all remain involved. However, Karolina (46), who said she was previously active, withdrew from church activities after her children were born. Additionally, she stated that she was disappointed with the lack of prominent positions for women in the church. After giving up her efforts to become a priest, Ivanauskienė redirected her energy to international (female) church activities, including at the Lutheran World Federation and elsewhere. In her interview,

she expressed her intention to resign from active involvement in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The interviews reveal that if a Lutheran woman is employed by her church, in most cases, she will have another part- or full-time job or a small (family) business. Solveiga (39), with one child, works at her church's charity and social organisation, participates in other daily church activities, and is involved in a small family business. It seems especially evident that if a woman is officially employed by the church, she will have multiple roles there, and they will overlap or be complementary. Luiza (66) works as her church's bookkeeper, but she has many other organisational responsibilities beyond her official role and is politically active. These women do voluntary church work, particularly those who work with children at the numerous summer camps organised by Lithuanian Lutherans. Tamara (40), PhD, works at her local parish with children, at a university and a school, and volunteers in the summer camps during her holidays. Only a few of the research participants claimed to do volunteer work outside of the church, which signals its importance in their lives.

During the Soviet occupation (1944-1990), Lithuanian "women became both paid employees and household labourers as a result of the Soviet state's gender equality policy, working two daily shifts, one at work and one at home" (Ališauskienė and Maslauskaitė 2021, 5). This notion of multiple "shifts" is applicable here. The life stories of these Lutheran women (especially those who are older and remember or have heard stories about their mothers or grandmothers during that period) speak about a "third shift" at church. This interpretation is supported by the significance they attribute to church activities among their other leadership roles at work, home, or elsewhere.

When discussing Lutheran women role models, the research participants referred to the wives of the archbishops Jonas Viktoras Kalvanas Senior (1914-1995, archbishop from 1976-1995) and Junior (1948-2003, archbishop from 1995-2003), both from the historical Lithuanian Lutheran capital of Tauragė. Marta Kalvanienė (1923-2011), the wife of Kalvanas Senior, was the mother of 6 children and a schoolteacher who was the centre of church activities (Naujokaitytė 2023; Sabutienė 2023). She organised and led the choir, secretly prepared children for their confirmation under Soviet rule, and was busy with both extraordinary and daily activities at the church. Tatjana Kalvanienė (b. 1955), the widow of Kalvanas Junior, mother of 2 children and a former teacher, ran the children-related services at the local church after her husband's death and still serves as an organist (Kalvanienė and Pečienė 2018). Grėtė (44) mentioned her grandmother, who, during the Soviet period, worked in the kolkhoz, served as the chair of the local parish, sang in the choir, performed many daily church chores, and took care of her grandchildren.

This research confirms that Lithuanian Lutheran women continue to be engaged in the historically female areas of church activities, such as music and children's education. Of the 20 interviewees, around half said they were involved in the church choir; these (and other) women assume (inter-generational) music-related leadership roles as choir leaders, singers, organists, or organisers of musical events. Katarina (67), with two children, worked as a teacher and has served as a church organist and choir leader for most of her adult life. Grėtė (44) explained that she had witnessed female organists and choir leaders while growing up, so she sang in the church choir and learned to play the organ as a young girl. Kotryna (42), whose mother is the organist at her church, sings in the choir. Elzė (20) has sung in the local parish choir with her parents since her childhood.

Some of the women have prominent musical careers outside the church or combine their church-related music services with motherhood and their careers. Some notes from the participant observation can serve to illustrate this: "I went to the Good Friday worship at the Vilnius Evangelical Lutheran Church. It was mainly an adoration performed by the Lutheran mixed choir 'Adoremus', whose members stood in a semi-circle on the right side of the church. Suddenly, a baby started crying. I thought it was somebody's from the congregation. But a young choir woman, who later appeared to be the choir's leader, took the baby girl, who was around 1 year old, into her arms and began comforting her with her eyes, her smile, and her hands. With a baby in her arms, she kept on like this for more than



half an hour, for the rest of the service, while, at the same time, conducting the choir with one hand”. It was Renata Moraitė-Kreimerė, a professional choir conductor and daughter of Reinholdas Moras, Klaipėda’s parish priest (Sabutienė 2024b). This seems to be an excellent illustration of the ideal modern Lithuanian Lutheran woman: she adheres to her faith and her family’s tradition of church service, but at the same time, she fulfils her professional vocation and is a caring mother who is not afraid to prioritise her motherhood at church.

The Lithuanian Lutheran women who participated in this research described the importance of female roles in religious and musical education for young people. These roles encompass Sunday schools, Lutheran or ecumenical summer or confirmation camps, children's choirs, bands, singing festivals like the traditional “Giesmių giesmelė” (“The Little Hymn of the Hymns”), and organ classes. Some of these women have been devoted to these activities throughout their lives. Urtė (20) went to these summer camps as a child and later, as a teenager, became a volunteer and camp leader, and she continues to devote her time to such activities during the summer. Some women specifically mentioned how they witnessed the positive impact these summer camps had on children from vulnerable social backgrounds.

Being a priest’s wife is another historical and complex Lutheran female leadership role. Four participated in this research. Their narratives reflect that being a priest’s wife is an ambivalent endeavour. On the one hand, it is a very visible role, “like being under a magnifier”, especially in the local community, as Ugnė (42) described. On the other, the role carries many responsibilities that can be invisible from the outside, which can range from liturgical tasks (like the translation of hymns) to traditionally female music-related tasks (leading/singing in the choir or playing the organ) or children’s education-related tasks, to the church’s communication, to daily organisational activities in the local parish, aimed at assisting husband’s work. Grėtė (44) is immersed in church life: she heads the Sunday school, translates religious texts, and is busy with a range of other church activities. The other women who participated in this research acknowledged the influence of priests’ wives not only on their husbands’ lives and services but also on the church’s theology and liturgy.

The fieldwork revealed that Lithuanian Lutheran women occupy other official positions at church, such as sacristans, secretaries, or administrators in local parishes or their church’s charity and social organisations, as well as members of the consistory and local parish councils. They take on many unofficial church roles, from more spiritual acts (reading the Bible during services, organising monthly meetings with the archbishop for young people, etc.) to more mundane chores (cleaning, decorating, serving tea or coffee after the service, etc.).

Older women play a prominent role in keeping Lutheran churches around Lithuania functional and viable, putting in this “third shift” in a way. Tatjana Kalvanienė, the organist and choir leader, has remained an important figure in Tauragė’s church community life even since her husband’s death. She is still involved in the church’s major social and charitable activities (LRT 2018; “Lietuvos liuteronų kelias” 2022). Additionally, she leads Tauragė’s church choir, whose members are mostly older women. This choir is famous and well-respected among Lithuanian Lutherans. The formal and informal interviews during this fieldwork indicated that Kristina Ivanauskienė continues to represent a figure of female leadership, feminism, and resistance to patriarchal norms in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church.

## **Performative Female Identity in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church**

The previous section has described the various church activities and roles Lithuanian Lutheran female leaders can perform to assert and preserve their unique religious minority and female identities. Beyond participation in these activities, this research reveals that they express these performative identities in other ways. These include being proud of their Lutheran identification, seeing church activities as a part/way of practising their religion, and appreciating belonging to their community via active engagement in church activities at the local, parish, and national levels.

Both the women who were raised in the Lutheran faith and those who converted expressed that they are very proud of their Lutheranism. Solveiga (39), a convert, said she is proud of the church and her choice to become a Lutheran; she proclaimed her happiness with the warmth and care she experiences in the different parishes she visits. The fieldwork conducted for this research has revealed that being proud of being a Lutheran is also performative: for these Lutheran female leaders, it is “a way of life”, acting or behaving in a certain way or “doing things” that Lutheran women historically do, i.e., going to church and participating in church activities. Some of the Lithuanian Lutheran women indirectly referred to Lutheran or Protestant ethics such as doing your best and being “your best self”. As Grètė (44), a priest’s wife, explained: “Do the best you can in life. If you want to learn, do it the best you can”. Gabija (25) explained that her observance of Lutheranism had been declining, but then, after meeting her practising Muslim boyfriend, she re-asserted her Lithuanian Lutheran identity and strengthened her observance.

These women’s narratives show that taking on (female) leadership roles at church forms an important part of their identity as part of a unique historical and cultural religious minority. Evelina (55), PhD, explained that, for her, practicing Lutheranism and involvement in church activities is both an obligation to her family and the historical Lithuanian Lutheran tradition. Involvement in church activities thus seems instrumental: in this way, women can have an input in preserving Lutheran traditions and keeping the small and shrinking church alive in Lithuania. It is instrumental in the sense that being a part of a religious minority is a way of asserting their own personal uniqueness – as members of an exceptional community in a predominantly Catholic Lithuania. They speak of feeling different from the Catholic majority and most Lithuanians because of either their Lutheranism, i.e., being a religious minority, or their German origin (and these are often interconnected).

Moreover, involvement in various church activities can be a form (or a part) of their religious practice. Evelina (55), when describing her religious observance, listed attendance at church services in her local parish and stressed that “the major practice is all kinds of events related to our Lutheran faith, where I participate or give a speech”. Similarly, Ugnė (42), when speaking about her observance, first mentioned the morning and evening prayers and then brought up family events, such as lectures about the faith, that she and her (priest) husband organise. While these seem more explicitly religious, it is difficult to distinguish between these and other church activities, such as musical ones (playing the organ or leading/singing in the choir). Doing these can be considered both a part of their religious practice and more social activities. This lack of clear boundaries in the Lutheran women’s narratives might reflect the importance of cultural aspects in performing religious and female identity.

In fact, many of the participants underlined the importance of music for the cultural and historical Lithuanian Lutheran identity and, correspondingly, for them personally. Martyna (50), a church choir singer, stated that Lutherans call singing hymns a “double prayer”. Sofija (68), a professional organist with both Lutheran and Catholic family roots, explained that she was ultimately brought to Lutheranism by her vocation as an organist. Many women articulated feeling part of a larger Lutheran musical heritage, referring to J. S. Bach and other great composers of church and choir music. Thus, through performing music, as either (or both) an act of religious observance and a social/professional activity, these women perform their female identity within a minority religion.

The church community (at local, native parish, and national levels) was very important to these Lutheran female leaders. They all described how they observe religion at home: reading the Bible, praying individually or with their family, etc. For them, attending church services represents more of a collective rather than an individual act of religious observance. Church is where they can collectively observe their religion (take part in the services, sing hymns together, participate in the Holy Supper, etc.) or engage in local, native parish, or national activities together. As Grètė (44) described: “We, together as the community, confess our faith, and it is not that I am just living in my head, but this [collective confession] is a great opportunity to practise my own faith”.

At the national level, the women organise, lead, or participate in organising events, for example, the national children’s event, “Giesmių giesmelė” (“The Little Hymn of the Hymns”) (Sabutienė 2024a).

There are historical and religious commemorations, such as the 2017 events surrounding the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation in Lithuania or the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lutheran books of worship in 2024 (“Lietuvos evangelikų kelias“ 2017; Sabutienė 2024a).

Even if some of these Lutheran female leaders live or work in bigger cities, they tend to stay actively involved in the parish where they grew up. Ona (48), PhD, lives and works in a city, but her major church activities take place in her small village parish. Evelina (55), PhD, works in a city, but she lives in and devotes her energy to her native parish nearby. Many women described returning to their native parish for the unique Lutheran cemetery festivals (Petkūnas 2023).

At the local level, Lutheran women participate in choir rehearsals, various church events like celebrations or cemetery festivals, and children’s summer camps. They organise or participate in cleaning or decorating their church. Another important activity is arranging tea or coffee for the congregation after services, which, as Ugnė (42) described, unites the community.

## **On the Charismatic Leadership of Lithuanian Lutheran Women**

This article rests on the theoretical assumption that with limited opportunities to occupy official leadership positions in patriarchal religious organisations, women must rely on charismatic authority, expressed through various personal characteristics, the observance of moral norms, divine inspiration, etc. (Van Osselaer, Rossi, Smeyers, and Graus 2019; Ališauskienė 2021; Day 2017, 8; Weber 1968; 1991).

In the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, women can become members of the consistory and local parish councils, but their ordination opportunities have remained without any prospects since the early 2000s. This research reveals that despite this situation, Lithuanian Lutheran women can still assume multiple leadership roles within the church, interpreted here as a “third shift”. These positions are wide-ranging, from formal responsibilities in local parish councils to music- or children-related roles to serving tea after the service, and women are often involved in many of these activities.

Moreover, my intention is not to hierarchise these activities, which would diminish them, but instead to celebrate these women, who carve out a space for their leadership even in patriarchal religious organisations (Furseth and Repstad 2006, 193). Thus, this research expands the definition of religious female leadership to make the roles women play more visible and appreciated. As Day states: “[Women] attend the mainstream churches every Sunday, polish the brasses, organize fund-raisers, keep the church open on weekdays, bake cakes, and visit vulnerable people in their homes. Their often invisible labour not only populates the physical space of the church but helps ensure its continuity and enriches surrounding communities” (2017, 8).

Where does the charismatic leadership of Lithuanian Lutheran women lie? The multiple leadership roles outside and inside the church, as well as the other aspects interpreted here as part of the performance of female identity in a minority religion, point to the extraordinary qualities of these women, which could be characterised as charismatic. These include adaptability, ambition, care, hard work, perseverance, resilience, strength, and other qualities that characterise their competence to work “three shifts”, perform a variety of roles, and uphold their female identity in a minority religion.

Regarding Weber’s (1968; 1991) definition, which requires followers to recognise charismatic leadership qualities, in this research, most Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran women, including those who support female ordination, indicated that their activities in the church were valued and they had enough opportunities for leadership despite the lack of female ordination. They listed other advantages, such as belonging to a unique religious minority, preserving Lutheran traditions, and affirming their personal religious minority and female identities in a predominantly Catholic country. These are characterised as performative in this article. Nevertheless, some Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran women expressed discontent with the miniscule leadership opportunities based more on charismatic qualities or with

the lack of appreciation for their efforts by their community. Those who strongly supported female ordination seemed especially disappointed that the leadership opportunities in their church were limited because of gender.

## **How Lithuanian Lutheran Female Leaders Acquire Agency in a Minority Religion without Female Ordination**

According to the concept of subjective agency employed in this article, religious women can be empowered even in patriarchal religious organisations. They can derive their agency not necessarily from feminist goals but, as Mahmood (2005, 7) noted, also from inhabiting norms, including a variety of religious goals, which religious women can see as the subjective benefits of being religious. Such a theoretical approach prevents normative judgements on religious women. This research reveals the complexity of religious female agency as well as their positionality on the ideal-typical axis of conservative and liberal values, mirroring the complex interplay between the religious and the secular.

The Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church does not ordain women, but that does not mean that the other leadership roles religious women perform in this church are not valuable or that religion cannot provide them with agency. The analysis of fieldwork data in this research reflects that Lithuanian Lutheran women can be more liberal or more conservative, but their narratives speak in similar ways about how faith in God empowers them by giving a meaning, basis, and moral guidelines for life, peace of mind, joy, security, and stability, improvement of their character and relationships in life and work, comfort and support during hardships, etc. For some women, religion transcends the strictly religious and enhances agency in all arenas of life. Others see their career or public life as a separate entity, not very influenced by their faith. For many women, religious values seem to play a key role in personal or family life.

For most women in this research, leadership at church is a source of empowerment, as their narratives reveal that it holds a particular significance in their lives and constitutes a key part of their Lutheran female identity. However, their agency lies in both so-called religious and secular sources. On the one hand, Lithuanian Lutheran women cannot be ordained, but they are involved in many other formal and informal religious leadership positions. Additionally, they identify other benefits of being religious and active in the church, such as finding a meaning to life or a feeling of belonging to the historical Lutheran community in a predominantly Catholic Lithuania, respectively. On the other hand, through their performative female identity in a minority religion, these women claim their agency via autonomous deliberate action in the more secular liberal or feminist sense, despite not identifying themselves with feminism.

Such individual autonomy is manifested through multiple leadership roles, performing religion, or affirming their unique Lutheran identity through various church activities. Paradoxically it can be explained both by the Protestant ethic and the Soviet heritage of “three shifts”. For Lithuanian Lutheran women, “being a Lutheran” is performative and agentive, as some of them described, “doing the best you can”, enriching your own life with music and other cultural activities, with involvement in collective decision-making and action at various levels in the church. Being active in the church or involved in “three shifts” can also be explained by the particularities of Lithuania’s Soviet-occupied and feminist histories: women were forced to work because of the labour shortage after WWII; they did not fight for the right to work like second-wave feminists in western Europe (Caven, Astor, and Urbanavičienė 2021; Klumbys 2020).

From the point of view of second-wave feminism, a “third shift” could be interpreted as a part of the undesirable heritage from Soviet rule or being a priest’s wife as taking a subordinate position. However, this article uses the ideas of third-wave feminism, which restore the agency of religious women and reject the argument that they have a “false consciousness” (Hawthorne 2011; Mahmood 2005). Therefore, in my research, being a priest’s wife is considered a multifaceted and important leadership role, contributing to the agency of these women, who wield influence in different arenas, from the liturgy



to the attitudes of church members. Among the four priest's wives interviewed, Ugnė (42) stands out as a rebel, supporting female ordination and LGBTQIA+ rights. She is critical of the traditional priest's wife's role and innovative in merging her cultural activities with her responsibilities as a priest's wife, which further evidences the complexity and significance of the role.

If we look closer at individual beliefs on gender and sexuality, these women's positions on the ideal-typical axis of conservative and liberal values appear rather complex. Some women who were against female ordination and LGBTQIA+ rights supported abortion rights. Many women support the right to abortion, saying that while they would not personally have one, they would not judge others who did. Regarding LGBTQIA+ rights, the women expressed various opinions on civil partnerships and marriage. Many argued that LGBTQIA+ people "must be loved and accepted" but "should not parade/advertise" their sexuality. Age does not seem salient here, as in each age group, a minority of women are more liberal than conservative. Among the more liberal Lutheran women, some expressed a concern that the lack of progressive change is related to the diminishing size of their church, but others accepted the decline in the number of Lutherans as part of wider societal changes.

Based on this data, I would argue that female non-ordination has become a part of Lithuanian Lutheran (female) identity, while the more conservative position of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church on the ideal-typical axis of conservative and liberal values is just an element of the bigger picture connected with the status quo-conservatism in Lithuanian society and the influence of the Lithuanian Catholic Church on issues of gender and sexuality. Lithuanian society seems resistant to progressive change, as demonstrated by the election of a new parliament (October 2024) where a strong agenda for LGBTQIA+ rights is lacking. Paradoxically, the threat of Russian hostility has brought many Lithuanians to consider traditional values as a safe haven, which can be related to the Lithuanian Catholic Church's dissident role during Soviet period (Ališauskienė 2018; Nalivaikė 2021).

As a researcher who considers herself a feminist, I have had to employ reflexivity to reconcile my beliefs and my chosen methodological and theoretical approach while engaging with the conservative beliefs of the women in my research. This reconciliation lies in my intention to make the important work that religious women do in their church more visible and appreciated. Without this reflexivity, I would fall into the same position as many researchers before me: trying to "convert" them to western feminism or "save" them from religion. Yet, my research reveals that these women acquire their complex and rich agency through their performative religious and female identities as well as through finding a meaning in life, stability, peace, moral guidelines, etc. in religion.

## Conclusions

This article analyses how Lithuanian Lutheran women, through their charismatic leadership and performative female identity, find agency in a minority religion without female ordination. It shows that, *firstly*, they are divided on female non-ordination, but even those who support female ordination seem to form a quiet opposition. Considering that the current Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church authorities hold a firm and majority-supported position against female ordination, women have no prospects of becoming priests in the church at any point in the near future.

*Secondly*, practising Lithuanian Lutheran female leaders tend to play multiple leadership roles in different areas of their lives (professional, familial, personal, public, or elsewhere) and within the church. The research reveals that playing leadership roles at church seems to be particularly significant for them as a way of affirming and preserving their unique religious minority and female identities in a predominantly Catholic Lithuania.

*Thirdly*, the involvement of Lutheran women in various church leadership roles seems to form a "third shift", an addition to those of their career(s) and family or personal responsibilities. These church leadership roles include organists, choir leaders or members, youth educators, the complex and multitasking role of priest's wife, as well as various other positions, both official (such as members of



the consistory and local parish councils) and unofficial (from organisational activities to cleaning to serving tea after services).

*Fourthly*, this research reveals some ways in which practising Lithuanian Lutheran leaders perform their female and religious minority identities, namely through involvement in the activities listed above. They additionally express their performative identities through being proud of being a Lutheran, seeing church activities as contributing to their religious observance, and actively engaging with, thus further affirming, their communal belonging at the local, native parish, and national levels.

*Fifthly*, the multiple leadership roles outside and inside the church and other aspects, interpreted here as the performativity of female identity in a minority religion, reveal that Lithuanian Lutheran leaders express qualities that could be characterised as charismatic. This research does not hierarchise female leadership roles at church and therefore expands the definition of religious female leadership to bring these roles to light.

*Finally*, the policy of female non-ordination does not mean that the other leadership roles are not valuable or that religion cannot provide these women with agency. Through the concept of subjective agency, this research reveals the complexity of religious female agency as well as their positionality on the ideal-typical axis of conservative and liberal values. Regardless of where these women stand on this axis, their narratives similarly describe how faith empowers them in life and their leadership at church. Furthermore, they help identify the perceived benefits of being religious and active at church, like finding meaning or a sense of belonging. And, despite not identifying themselves as feminists, these women claim their agency via autonomous deliberate action – in a more secular liberal/feminist sense – through their performative female identity in a minority religion.

This article reflects the lack of and need for gender equality in the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church vis-à-vis historical (post)Soviet experiences (like the lack of second-wave feminism) and the general conservatism of Lithuanian society. Nevertheless, in a European context, it signifies certain particularities of Lithuanian religious women, whose qualities and source of agency might be different from women in countries with a stronger historical influence of feminism, but it does not make their experiences less valid.

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