

CODE Forum 2026

Introduction to the Papers and Workshops

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When Care Is Not Enough Recognition, Trust and the Diaconal Credibility Gap of Churches in Polarized Societies

Christian affiliation continues to decline in many European countries (Pew Research Center 2025). Writing from a German perspective, where declining church membership and church exits are visible, this paper raises the question of whether the reason is not primarily a problem of relevance, language or communication, although these aspects undoubtedly matter, but rather a question of trustworthiness (EKD 2026; Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2026; FOWID 2024).

This is not a new debate, but it remains especially relevant in societies facing increasing polarization, institutional mistrust and a possible need for renewed practices of belonging. The paper suggests that the deeper challenge may be a gap between the church's self-understanding as a place of solidarity and belonging and the perception among parts of wider society that some of its teachings and positions communicate only conditional recognition and belonging. It therefore asks how churches perceive and respond to this situation and what kind of rebuilding work may be needed. For international partners, the paper raises practical questions about recognition, participation and solidarity in diverse societies.