

# EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF DENMARK: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND TERRITORIAL-ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECTS

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*The study exemplifies the use of an institutional-territorial approach for a comprehensive description of a national denominational landscape. The article aims to provide such an account by analysing relevant official data and performing statistical processing using computational tools. The focus is on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark and its administrative-territorial structures. The study places emphasis on the financial aspect, one seldom discussed in academic discourse. The denominational landscape of Denmark is a multicomponent system, with the National Lutheran Church holding a distinctive legal status as a dominant entity. Its historical and social significance, along with the ability to preserve functions that mirror those of the state, allow the Church of Denmark to maintain its civilisational and culture-building role for the populace, especially the indigenous one. However, Denmark is not exempt from the secular trends prevalent in the Nordic countries. One notable tendency is the decline in adherents of the Evangelical Lutheran Church observed over recent decades. This decline is most evident in the capital region, where the proportion of migrants in the population is higher and daily life is more vibrant than in other areas. Territorial variations in religiously motivated behaviour are evident, with the highest percentages observed in the country's peripheral regions (despite the overall figures showing a negative trend). These areas also boast the most significant proportion of registered members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Exploring non-Christian religions in Denmark presents a promising avenue for future research.*

## Keywords:

religion in Denmark, denominational space, religious organization, Evangelical Lutheran Church

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## **Introduction**

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The study of the denominational space of countries and regions is important due to the significant influence that religious institutions have on cultural, socio-economic, and political processes. Traditional Christian denominations continue to predominate in Europe, despite the secular trends, observed especially among the indigenous population. Religious organizations not only own and manage religious and cultural infrastructure in residential areas, but they are also characterized by the active implementation of social responsibility [1; 2]. Moreover, there are examples of countries and regions where the church partially duplicates government responsibilities and functions.

At the same time, there has been a decline in the number of adherents of traditional Christian denominations in Europe, along with a decrease in the activity of religious behaviour. Transformational shifts are occurring in the religious structure of the population at different levels as well, which can be attributed to changes in the ethnic composition due to the implementation of policies promoting multiculturalism.

The functioning of religious institutions and denominational space, as well as various processes within it, can be studied by providing a comprehensive, objective overview at both the national and regional levels. An analysis of representative data provided by official religious and non-religious organizations is necessary.

In practice, studying the experience of European countries and borrowing it is of great interest for involving the capabilities and resources of religious organizations in the development of Russian regions that have similar social, demographic, and religious characteristics.

Denmark is an example of a Northern European country, where the denominational space is dominated by the Evangelical-Lutheran Church (National Church), but is also characterized by a variety of other structural components. The religious organization has state status in the Kingdom and is endowed with a number of powers and responsibilities, affecting the socio-economic development of the country and its regions.

The purpose of this study is to identify the socio-economic features and characteristics of the territorial and organizational structure of the Church of Denmark. There are several slightly different definitions of the term '*denominational space*' in scientific circulation. One of the attempts to synthesize the main approaches was made by V. S. Dementiev in 2021 [9]. The results of the mentioned study are used in this article. Therefore, the denominational space can be understood as "the system of several interconnected elements, namely the religious population, religious and cultural infrastructure, and associated attitudes and practices. This

concept is connected with different aspects of population geography and reflects the unique characteristics of the territory, including its physical features and spatial relations at different levels” [9, p. 118].

## **Materials and methods**

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Data necessary for further analysis was provided by the national statistical authority of Denmark (Statistics Denmark), the Ministry for Ecclesiastical Affairs of Denmark, the Church of Denmark, and its structures on the official websites.

The collected data was processed using a combination of cartographic methods, analysis and synthesis methods, including content analysis, as well as quantitative methods typically used in regional studies, such as concentration index.

These methods were employed within the framework of a territorial-institutional approach to studying denominational space, which involved selecting various units of the church administrative division as the basis for chronological research. An alternative option could be the religious landscape as a whole. However, given the strict structure of the Church of Denmark, which consists of hierarchically subordinate elements, the mentioned approach appeared suitable.

## **The extent of previous research on the subject and the review of sources**

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Scholarly interest in issues related to the denominational space and its characteristics is high, as demonstrated by a number of publications both internationally and in Russia. Notable researchers in this field include Gorokhov, Dmitriev, Zakharov, Agafoshin [4; 5], Manakov [6; 7], Myazin [8], Dementiev [9], Gravchikova [10], and others. The latest trends in the transformation of the denominational space are reflected in the works of Lunkin and Filatov [11] and others, as well as in the research of foreign scholars. These scientists emphasize the importance of religion and its role in promoting sustainable development goals [12], forming social capital within countries and regions [13; 14], and contributing to specific economic sectors [15; 16], including religious tourism [17; 18].

There has been an active academic discussion regarding the transformation of European denominational space due to migration processes [19—21].

Such significant attention to the issue is caused by the civilization-building role of religion and the implementation of social responsibility by religious organizations, which has been repeatedly highlighted by researchers [22—24].

The denominational space of Denmark has been a subject of research conducted by Eidemiller [25], Stepanova [26], Talalaeva [27], and others. The authors

have either focused on specific regions of the country [28] or particular aspects of religious life [29]. The articles of foreign scholars, such as Christensen [30], Haugen [31], Reeh [32], and Jensen and Geertz [33], should be mentioned as well.

However, works devoted to the general overview of the Church of Denmark based on relevant data could not be found in academic literature.

## Results

The Church of Denmark, also known as the National Church or Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Denmark (ELCD), has been the dominant religious organization in Denmark since its official establishment in 1536. Since 1849, it has had state status, which imposes certain obligations and provides certain privileges. It is subordinate to the monarch and the Folketing (Danish parliament) and cannot participate in government policy decisions. The relationship between the religious organization and the state is mediated by the Ministry for Ecclesiastical Affairs, which has control functions over the activities of the Church and was separated from the Ministry of Culture in 1916.

The Church of Denmark encompasses the entire territory of the country except for Greenland and the Faroe Islands, where there are independent Evangelical-Lutheran religious organizations.

The church administrative division is hierarchical. The Church is divided into 10 dioceses. Each diocese is governed by a bishop and a diocesan council, with the bishop of the capital diocese being referred to as *primus inter pares* (first among equals), which does not confer special privileges. Dioceses are divided into deaneries. At the beginning of 2023, there were a total of 102 deaneries in the country. The lowest level of territorial division is represented by parishes. There are 2,159 of them in total, each governed by a parish priest and a parish council. To improve the efficiency of social activities, parishes can unite and form pastorates.

The parishes not only work in religious and liturgical areas, but they also provide an alternative form of civil registration for members of the Church. Additionally, they offer opportunities for participation in various cultural, educational, and social events, which are often open to everybody. Therefore, the distribution of diocesan units (deaneries and parishes) across the country must be even.

It can be assessed by using the concentration index calculated as follows:

$$\text{Index} = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^n |O_i - S_i| : S,$$

where  $O_i$  represents the quantitative measure of a particular characteristic (the number of deaneries and parishes) within territorial unit  $i$  (diocese  $i$ ),  $O$  stands

for the total number of deaneries and parishes across all dioceses,  $S_i$  represents the area of each territorial unit  $i$  (diocese  $i$ ), and  $S$  stands for the total area of all dioceses combined.

The resulting value is close to the lowest bound of the tolerance range, indicating a highly even distribution of deaneries and parishes throughout mainland Denmark (Table 1). It means that the services provided by the parishes, whether delegated by the state or initiated by the religious organization itself, are easily accessible to the population of the country.

Table 1

**Concentration index of deaneries and parishes  
of the Church of Denmark, 2023**

Diocese	Area, km <sup>2</sup>	Number of deaneries	Index	Number of parishes	Index
Viborg	6,474.8	11	0.043	271	0.025
Copenhagen	771.7	9	0.070	94	0.026
Lolland-Falster	1,787.3	4	0.002	94	0.002
Aalborg	6,754.8	14	0.020	296	0.020
Aarhus	5,366.7	14	0.012	336	0.031
Ribe	6,478.4	8	0.072	200	0.058
Roskilde	5,439.1	12	0.009	313	0.018
Funen	3,481.2	10	0.017	234	0.027
Haderslev	4,601.6	7	0.038	173	0.027
Helsingør	1,791.4	13	0.086	147	0.026
<i>Total</i>	42,947.0	102	0.185	2,158	0.130

Source: compiled by the authors based on: Land use accounts, *Danmarks Statistik*, URL: <https://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/emner/miljoe-og-energi/areal/arealopgoerelser> (accessed 01.10.2023) ; Organisation, *Folkekirken.dk*, URL: <https://www.folkekirken.dk/om-folkekirken/organisation> (accessed 01.10.2023).

The high demand for church-organized events is confirmed by both the number of adherents and the degree to which religious behaviour is exhibited. Despite secular trends, voluntary membership and church tax, almost 4.3 million people (72.1 % of the country's population) are members of the Church as of the beginning of 2023.

Territorial disproportions should be noted. The leaders in terms of the share of adherents are the peripheral dioceses of Viborg (83.1 %), Ribe (82.1 %), and Aalborg (81.9 %). The diocese of Copenhagen stands out with a 55.5 % share, which is due to the capital factor and its association with secular values and a more dynamic pace of life. The concentration of migrants and younger residents in a big capital city contributes to this difference as well.

The changes in the share of adherents over the last 15 years are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

**Share of members of the Church of Denmark by dioceses, %**

Diocese	2007	2022	Change, %
Viborg	90.5	83.1	- 8.18
Copenhagen	67.1	55.5	- 17.29
Lolland-Falster	86.1	79.7	- 7.43
Aalborg	89.1	81.9	- 8.08
Aarhus	84.6	76.0	- 10.17
Ribe	90.2	82.1	- 8.98
Roskilde	84.8	76.8	- 9.43
Funen	85.8	78.1	- 8.97
Haderslev	87.3	78.3	- 10.31
Helsingør	76.6	65.4	- 14.62
<i>Average</i>	82.6	73.2	- 11.38

*Source:* compiled by the authors based on: Folkekirkens medlemstal, *FUV*, URL: <https://www.fkuv.dk/folkekirken-i-tal/medlemstal> (accessed 01.10.2023).

Over the last 15 years, the Church of Denmark has lost more than 11 % of its adherents due to natural causes and voluntary withdrawal, which is a common trend in European countries.

Interesting results are obtained from examining the ethnic background of adherents. The formal membership in the Church of Denmark continues to be significant among the indigenous population of the country. However, its attractiveness to migrants from non-Western countries and their descendants was unexpected (Table 3), since there are no Lutheran traditions present in most countries of their origin. The relative popularity of membership among migrants from Western countries and their descendants can be attributed to their ethnic background. As of the beginning of 2022, 5.1 % of migrants in Denmark identified as Germans, 2.4 % as Norwegians, 2.3 % as Swedes, 1.2 % as Icelanders, and 0.6 % as Finns.<sup>1</sup>

Table 3

**Ethnic background of adherents of the Church of Denmark, %**

Category	2008	2022
Indigenous population	89.0	84.3
Migrants from Western countries	32.3	13.6
Descendants of the migrants from Western countries	39.1	20.6
Migrants from non-Western countries	3.3	3.1
Descendants of the migrants from non-Western countries	2.2	3.2

*Source:* compiled by the authors based on: Population 1. January by deanery, ancestry and member of the National Church, *Danmarks Statistik*, URL: <https://www.statbank.dk/statbank5a/SelectTable/Omrade0.asp?SubjectCode=1&ShowNews=OFF&PLanguage=1> (accessed 01.10.2023).

<sup>1</sup> Population 1. January by sex, age, ancestry, country of origin and citizenship, *Danmarks Statistik*, URL: <https://www.statbank.dk/statbank5a/SelectTable/Omrade0.asp?SubjectCode=1&ShowNews=OFF&PLanguage=1> (accessed 01.10.2023).

All members of the Church of Denmark who have tax capacity are responsible for its maintenance through the payment of church tax. The rate of it is set by the municipalities and varies between 0.4 % and 1.3 % with an average of 0.97 % for dioceses (Table 4, Fig. 1).

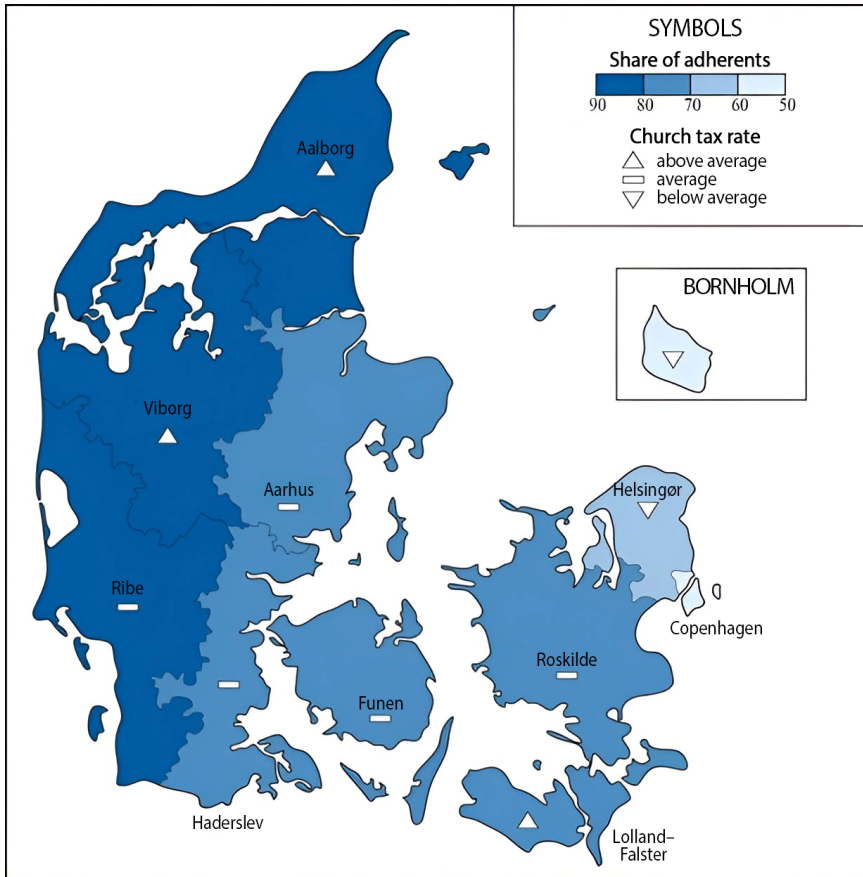


Fig. 1. Share of members of the Church of Denmark and church tax rate by dioceses, 2022, %

Source: compiled by the authors based on: Kirkeskat, *By-, Land- og Kirkeministeriet*, URL: <https://www.km.dk/folkekirken/oekonomi/kirkeskat> (accessed 01.10.2023).

Table 4

Church tax rate by dioceses, 2022, %

Diocese	Average	Maximum	Minimum
Viborg	1.07	1.27	0.93
Copenhagen	0.69	0.93	0.50
Lolland-Falster	1.20	1.23	1.16
Aalborg	1.16	1.30	0.98
Aarhus	0.96	1.22	0.81
Ribe	1.00	1.16	0.81

The end of Table 4

Diocese	Average	Maximum	Minimum
Roskilde	0.97	1.10	0.73
Funen	0.99	1.14	0.68
Haderslev	0.93	0.98	0.88
Helsingør	0.72	0.96	0.40
<i>Average</i>	0.97	1.30	0.40

Source: compiled by the authors based on: Kirkeskat, *By-, Land- og Kirkeministeriet*, URL: <https://www.km.dk/folkekirken/oekonomi/kirkeskat> (accessed 01.10.2023).

The church tax rate appears to have no significant impact on membership in or withdrawal from the Church of Denmark. On the contrary, dioceses with the largest share of adherents tend to have higher average tax rates. Additionally, these dioceses typically have a relatively smaller population, meaning that the financial burden on an individual level is even greater.

The taxes collected are distributed by the Ministry for Ecclesiastical Affairs, which is also responsible for overseeing the consolidated budget of the Church.

Reports on the economic activities of the Church are available to the public and provide an overview of its financial operations. Income from various sources is grouped into local budget, General Fund, and state grants (subsidies).

The structure of revenues and expenditures of the consolidated local budget in 2019, based on the most recent publicly available information, is presented in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5

#### Incomes of the local budget of the Church of Denmark, 2019, million DKK

Source of income	2011	2019
Church tax	5.348	5.850
Religious services	721	685
Subsidies	30	5
Other income	298	346
<i>Total</i>	6.328	6.858

Source: compiled by the authors based on: Den lokale økonomi, *By-, Land- og Kirkeministeriet*, URL: <https://www.km.dk/folkekirken/oekonomi/lokaloekonomi> (accessed 01.10.2023).

Table 6

#### Expenditures of the local budget of the Church of Denmark, 2019, million DKK

Type of expenditure	2011	2019
Salaries, including	3.233	3.342
personnel responsible for the operation of cemeteries	1.224	1.142



The end of Table 6

Type of expenditure	2011	2019
Other operating expenses, including related to the operation of cemeteries	2.235	2.231
	506	527
Capital expenses, including related to the operation of cemeteries	1.122	1.156
	172	146
<i>Total</i>	6.590	6.729

Source: compiled by the authors based on: Den lokale økonomi, *By-, Land- og Kirkeministeriet*, URL: <https://www.km.dk/folkekirken/oekonomi/lokaloekonomi> (accessed 01.10.2023).

The local budget balance of payments resulted in DKK 129 million in 2019, with income and expenditure totalling DKK 6,858 and 6,729 million, respectively. The primary source of income for the Church was church tax, accounting for 85.3 % of total revenue, with ritual and religious services contributing only 10 %. The reason for this disproportion is the free performance of religious services (rituals and sacraments) for the members of the Church in the parishes they are assigned to.

The General Fund operates as a common treasury, collecting funds predominantly through the church tax. In 2019, income amounted to DKK 802 million. Expenditures, mainly on salaries for clergy and other staff members, totalled DKK 1,196 million.

As a part of the total income in 2019, government subsidies received by the Church amounted to DKK 843 million (9.5 %). They were primarily used for the payment of clergy salaries and pension benefits.

In addition, the Church Development Fund has been operating since 2007, from which approximately DKK 2 million is allocated annually for the needs of the Church. From the moment of its creation, the Fund has provided financial support for 205 socially important initiatives of the Church. In 2022, the focus areas included encouraging the transition of church structures to resource-saving technologies, as well as assistance provided to young people affected by COVID-19. In its support, the Fund takes into account the Church's partnership with local communities, geographic reach, innovativeness, and high levels of volunteerism.

The Church of Denmark has several tax benefits. It is exempt from corporate and property taxes. Voluntary monetary donations made by adherents are also tax-deductible.

Church funds are largely spent on social responsibility, including the maintenance and management of cemeteries. This responsibility is delegated by the government, and the Church is fully responsible for it. However, it does not pay taxes for these territories and, on a reimbursable basis, can provide burial services and sites for non-members of the Church.

Another shared responsibility between the Church and government agencies is civil registration. Since 2002, it has been carried out through the use of a unified national electronic system. The Church has the right to perform weddings, and approximately one third of all weddings in Denmark are legalized by the Church.

However, religious behaviour manifests most actively at funerals. Although there has been a slight increase in the popularity of funerals and burials led by non-religious organizations outside church cemeteries, the Church still accounts for more than 80 % of such ceremonies (Table 7).

Table 7

**Church weddings and funerals in the Church of Denmark, 2006 and 2019**

Sacrament	2006	2019
Church weddings, share of all weddings	41.3	32.5
Funerals, including	53.224	53.549
church funerals outside of the Church of Denmark	820	861
secular funerals	4.801	8.547

Source: compiled by the authors based on: Folkekirken i tal, *Folkekirken.dk*, URL: <https://www.folkekirken.dk/om-folkekirken/folkekirken-i-tal> (accessed 01.10.2023).

Baptism and confirmation ceremonies remain popular. Approximately half of all newborns were baptized and more than half of the 14-15 year olds were confirmed in 2020. The remote dioceses lead in terms of religious activity of adherents, with the diocese of Viborg having the largest share of baptized infants (69.9%) and confirmed adolescents (81.5%). The diocese of Aalborg is characterized by the largest share of people who were baptized and confirmed at the same time, whether as teenagers or adults (27.8%). In the capital diocese, where the ethnic background of the population is most diverse, the shares are the lowest and amount to 31.9, 40.5, and 11.3 %, respectively.

Due to state status, the Church has the right to assist foreign clergy in obtaining a temporary residency permit in Denmark and certify their activities.

The Church is actively engaged in education. It operates three music schools in Vestervig, Løgumkloster, and Roskilde, as well as branches in several other cities, providing a variety of courses related to playing musical instruments, conducting, and singing. Special attention is paid to inclusive education.

Since 2014, the Centre for Pastoral Education and Research has been operating in Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Løgumkloster. Its work includes training for pastors and mandatory additional training for students pursuing theological spe-

cializations and applying for ordination. In addition, it conducts research into the relationship between the Church and society and organizes scientific, practical, and educational events.

The Church of Denmark also actively helps those in need by quickly responding to difficult socio-political situations. However, due to the volume of the article, we are unable to discuss this aspect further.

Outside mainland Denmark, Lutheranism is represented through the Evangelical-Lutheran Churches of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. They are doctrinally linked to the Church of Denmark but operate independently.

Christianity was first introduced to Greenland at the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia, but it was not well-received among the local population. The institutionalization of Lutheranism began in 1905, following the incorporation of Greenland into the now-abolished diocese of Zealand. In 1923, it fell under the jurisdiction of the diocese of Copenhagen. The episcopal see of Greenland was re-established only in 1980. In 1993, the diocese gained autonomy and equal status and rights with the other dioceses in Denmark.

Since then, political and religious leaders of Greenland started working to further expand and strengthen independence, the main reason for which was the isolation of the Eskimos and Greenlandic Danes, their unique cultural identity and heritage due to historical circumstances and geographical location. The separation of the Church of Greenland from the Church of Denmark coincided with the region gaining autonomous status within the Kingdom of Denmark in 2009. The religious organization became financially and legally subordinate to the Inatsisartut (Parliament of Greenland). It is divided into 3 deaneries and 17 parishes, with a cathedral located in the capital city of Nuuk.

Unlike the Church of Denmark, the Church of Greenland does not publicly record the number of its adherents. The religious composition of the island's population can only be roughly estimated by experts. According to the World Religion Database<sup>1</sup>, as of 2020, approximately 96 % of Greenland residents are Christians. Two-thirds of these identified as Protestants.

The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of the Faroe Islands is autonomous as well. From the end of the 10<sup>th</sup>—beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries until 1538, the archipelago was a Catholic diocese. After the Reformation, it existed for some time as an independent Lutheran diocese and was then incorporated into the diocese of Zealand of the ELCD.

Since its independence in 2007, the Church of the Faroe Islands is the smallest state church in the world. It consists of 16 parishes and has a cathedral in the capital city of Tórshavn (Fig. 2).

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<sup>1</sup> National profiles, *World Religion Database*, URL: <https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=94c> (accessed 01.10.2023).



Fig. 2. Church administrative division of the Church of the Faroe Islands<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Prestagjöld í Føroyum, Fólkakirkjan, URL: <https://www.folkakirkjan.fo/um-folkakirkjuna/prestagjoeld-i-foeroyum> (accessed 01.10.2023).

The number of churches, adherents, and personnel is officially recorded by the national statistical authority of the Faroe Islands. According to it, the Church is losing its members (the share of adherents is 78% of the archipelago's population). At the same time, the number of priests and objects of religious and cultural infrastructure has increased. The data available in the public domain are not as comprehensive and detailed as that provided by the Church of Denmark, but it is still possible to calculate the concentration index for parishes and churches. The resulting values (0.144 and 0.132, respectively) confirm a highly even distribution throughout the region, which is particularly important because of the geographical location of the archipelago and the lack of reliable transportation links between the islands. However, the distribution of the population itself must also be taken into account. Assuming that there is no territorial differentiation in the share of adherents, there are 1,355 of them per church in the region of Strey-moy. At the same time, the number is 8 times less than that in sparsely populated Sandoy.

Lutheranism, represented by several religious organizations with a special status, undoubtedly dominates the denominational space of Denmark and plays a significant role in the development of the country.

## **Conclusion**

The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Denmark and its island autonomous divisions dominate the denominational space of the country. All of them have state status within the respective regions of the Kingdom and are granted rights, privileges, and responsibilities, including the responsibility for maintaining and operating cemeteries and keeping statistical and vital records. The main privilege is the ability to receive funding through the church tax. In addition, the Churches carry out a variety of voluntary and socially important activities and functions.

The civilizational, historical and cultural importance of the leading Christian denomination (Lutheranism) in terms of the number of adherents and other indicators, as well as the widespread distribution of religious infrastructure, allow religious institutions to position themselves as influential and significant. They have the authority, resources, capabilities, and powers to participate in the development of society, and do so successfully.

It should also be noted that, in contrast to the Church of Denmark, which has been active in social and economic areas, the Churches of Greenland and the Faroe Islands, are trying to replicate this experience and adapt it to regional and ethnonational specifics and needs, rather have political influence and power at the moment.

Further research prospects on this topic are related to other components of the denominational space of Denmark, represented by non-traditional religions in the country.

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