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The Night of Churches: Tool for Creative Mission or Just a Cultural Event? A Case Study from Latvia

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ABSTRACT. Since 2014, The Night of Churches (*Baznīcu nakts*) has been celebrated annually across Latvia, inviting visitors to experience churches through art, music, and creative expression. By engaging multiple senses rather than relying solely on verbal proclamation, the event offers a distinctive form of Christian witness in the public sphere.

In 2025, 197 churches participated, making it one of Latvia's most visible church initiatives. While many participants describe the event as inspiring and spiritually meaningful, others question whether it continues to serve a missional purpose or has become a cultural event primarily.

This paper examines The Night of Churches as a case study of creative mission in a post-secular Central and Eastern European context. Using a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, it combines document analysis, theological reflection, and interpretive analysis of participant experience. Founding documents, promotional materials, and public reflections are analyzed through missiological perspectives, including holistic mission, public theology, and the theology of creativity rooted in the *imago Dei* and Trinitarian relationality.

The paper argues that The Night of Churches demonstrates both the potential and the ambiguity of creativity in mission. While it creates meaningful encounters between church and society, it also risks being perceived primarily as cultural entertainment rather than Christian witness.

Keywords: imago Dei, creative mission, missiology, Night of Churches, Latvia, art and mission, public theology, holistic mission, embodied witness.

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Introduction: Creativity and Mission in Public Space

In the field of missiology, Christian mission is too often confined to words that express doctrines. Mission, however, implies relationships - within the Trinity, among people, and between God and His creation. God, as a Creator, is creative; we, as His creatures, can also experience and explore this creativity. Therefore, we are all called into creativity.

One such creative expression of mission is The Night of Churches (*Baznīcu nakts* in Latvian, further in text NoC), which is a public and creative phenomenon in Latvia since 2012. It began as a creative mission project; however, in recent years, in some churches, it has become a purely cultural event, with the church building used solely as a concert hall, and the event is contested in some congregations. Therefore, the research problem for this paper is as follows: Is the NoC an expression of creative Christian mission or primarily a cultural event?

This paper employs a qualitative case study approach focusing on NoC in Latvia as an example of creative mission in a post-secular Central and Eastern European context. The study draws on document analysis, examining founding texts and media coverage of the Night of Churches to identify its articulated aims, values, and theological language. It also draws on theological reflection, interpreting the event through missiological frameworks such as holistic mission and mission as creativity, drawing on Trinitarian and incarnational perspectives. It also employs interpretative analysis of experience as reported in a survey of 88 representatives from 197 churches, as well as in a survey of 7 students of Luther Academy who participated in a "Church Planting and Administration course" in which the discussion of the NoC was raised.

The study provides contextual background on the NoC and a theoretical framework of mission as creative and relational praxis. It justifies a qualitative case study approach, providing the analysis and discussion, and it enables broader applications in Central and Eastern Europe, as we share the common post-socialist, post-Christian and by extension also post-secular context.

1. Contextual Background: The Night of Churches in Latvia

The Night of Churches in Latvia has been organized since 2014. The idea and tradition of NoC, however, originated in Germany, where several "*Lange Kirchennächte*" had already taken place in various German cities before 2005. In Austria, it is a nationwide event in which, since 2008, all dioceses have participated

in NoC, or "*Lange Nacht der Kirchen*" in German. In 2010, it began in the Czech Republic; in 2011, Slovakia joined; and in 2013, some churches in Estonia joined. In the same year as Estonia, the ideas of the NoC were spread to Latvia, but it was decided to postpone the participation till 2014, when Riga became the European Capital of Culture. NoC has also been launched in Hungary, Switzerland, and other parts of Europe. Since 2014, this event has been held in Latvia each year.[1]

Even though this event occurs in various places across Europe and the founding rationale is similar, I will focus on the case of Latvia, as I have the founding documents available. The founding rationale is as follows: "Night of Churches is a cultural event that takes place in Christian churches and invites people to learn about the cultural and spiritual heritage of the church and to engage in dialogue with its values." Its stated mission is: "to promote the cultural growth of the Latvian people. To introduce people to the cultural and spiritual values in the heritage of Latvian Christian congregations and churches. To strengthen the spiritual well-being, intellectual growth, cultural, and national self-confidence of society." Therefore, it is possible to see that the emphasis is on culture, on a cultural event, but at the same time on a higher goal: spiritual heritage and spiritual values.[2]

In Latvia, the values of NoC include hospitality, Christian spirituality, cultural heritage, and creativity. That also includes strengthening ecumenism, dialogue, freedom, and artistic expression in various ways, while keeping the sacred space of a church in mind.[3] This event offers unchurched people the opportunity to enter this space, enjoy the cultural event, and become more aware of their spiritual heritage.

To understand the growth and scope, see the chart 1 below (author's compilation from the available sources at NoC website – baznicunakts.lv/2025/ and other posts there).

[1] "Die Lange Nacht der Kirchen in Europa", 29.05.25. Lange Nacht der Kirchen, accessed January 3, 2026, https://www.langenachtderkirchen.at/ueber-die-lange-nacht/in-europa/.

[2] Jurģis Klotiņš et al., "Kultūras notikuma "Baznīcu nakts" nolikums", Baznīcu nakts fonda valde, February 9, 2016, 1.

[3] Klotiņš et al., "Kultūras notikuma "Baznīcu nakts" nolikums", 2.

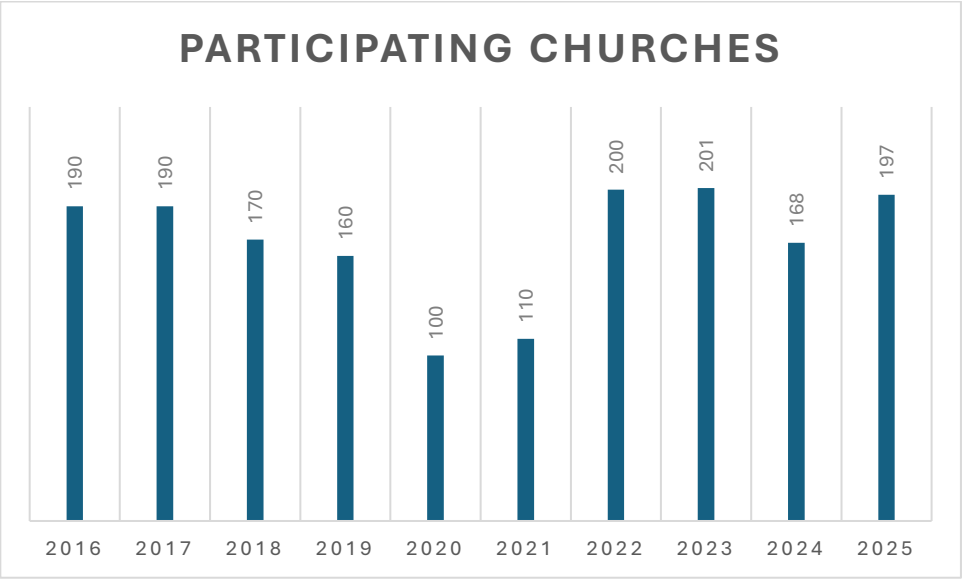

Chart 1

These numbers show consistent participation, with lower numbers during the Covid-19 pandemic and its restrictions.

Overall, the public reception of the event was very positive. There have been mentions on the national TV and radio networks over the years. In Latvian society, it has become an annual cultural event and has its place. In recent years, however, there have also been some critiques from Christian circles. In the paper, further details will be provided, but the main concern is that the NoC in some places has become just a purely cultural event and it has lost its Christian and missional facet. Therefore, the question about creativity as a mission will be discussed further.

Latvia has had Christian influence since the 13th century, initially with the majority Roman Catholic, and some Russian Orthodox churches on the eastern side. In the 16th century, cities in the Latvian territory adopted the Lutheran Reformation, but after the territory became part of the Russian Empire in the 18th century, Russian Orthodoxy began to play a more dominant role. This enabled the construction of numerous church buildings over the centuries. During the two World Wars and the Soviet occupation in the 20th century, many church buildings suffered destruction. To this day, Latvia has 13th-century church buildings and many buildings from the following centuries.

Overall, to understand the background of NoC, it allows Latvian society to experience architectural and historical inheritance. Is it, however, the only reason for the general public to go to church? Or to experience Christian mission in the form of art and Christian music?

2. Theoretical Framework: Mission as Creative and Relational Praxis

2.1. Theological Foundations of Mission as Creative and Relational Praxis

This study understands mission as creative and relational praxis grounded in the nature of God and humanity's participation in God's redemptive activity within the world.[4] The concept draws together three interconnected theological themes: the Trinitarian character of mission, the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, and humanity's vocation to participate in the ongoing development of creation.

Christian mission originates not in the activity of the Church but in the being and action of the Triune God. The doctrine of the Trinity reveals God as inherently relational and missionary. Divine life is not self-enclosed but characterized by movement toward creation.[5] Within this framework, the Father is understood as the initiating source of mission, the One who sends and engages the world.[6] Mission is therefore not a secondary function of God but an expression of God's very nature. The Son embodies and reveals the divine purpose in history.[7] Furthermore, God's authority over all creation is entrusted to the Son, confirming His central role not only in salvation history but also in the original act of creation and its ultimate fulfillment.[8] The Spirit animates, renews, and sustains creation.[9] Consequently, mission is participation in the dynamic movement of

[4] Michael Pocock et al., *The Changing Face of World Missions. Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Baker Academic, 2005), 31.

[5] Allen Yeh, "Asian Perspective on Twenty-First-Century Pluralism," in *The Gospel and Pluralism Today: Reassessing Lesslie Newbigin in the 21st Century*, ed. Scott W. Sunquist and Amos Young (IVP Academic, 2015), 229.

[6] Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission. Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Baker Academic, 2013), 187.

[7] Justo L. Gonzalez, *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology*, Rev. edition (Orbis Books, 1999), 29.

[8] Craig Ott et al., *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, Encountering Mission edition (Baker Academic, 2010), 58.

[9] Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission. Participation in Suffering and Glory*, 187, 249–50.

God toward the world rather than an activity independently initiated by the Church.[10]

This Trinitarian understanding is closely related to the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore possess capacities that reflect the Creator's own relational and creative nature. Although sin has distorted the divine image, it has not eradicated it. Human beings remain capable of creativity, relationships, moral responsibility, and cultural development. These capacities are not merely anthropological features but theological realities that point toward humanity's vocation within God's purposes.[11]

Human creativity therefore possesses profound theological significance. The capacity to imagine, design, build, organize, and create reflects humanity's participation in the creative work of God. Throughout history, human achievements in art, architecture, science, technology, and social organization have demonstrated this creative potential.[12] Such achievements should not be understood merely as secular accomplishments detached from God's purposes. Rather, they reveal the continuing presence of divine gifts within humanity and the ongoing possibility of human participation in the cultivation and development of creation.

The biblical mandate to cultivate and govern the earth provides an important framework for understanding this participation. Often described as the cultural mandate, this vocation entrusts humanity with responsibility for the development of creation. Creation is not presented as a static and completed reality but as a dynamic project in which human beings are invited to participate. Human history thus becomes the arena in which the possibilities embedded within creation are progressively realized. Creative activity, cultural production, scientific discovery, and social organization can therefore be interpreted as expressions of humanity's God-given responsibility to cultivate the world.[13]

This understanding is reinforced by theological perspectives that view creation as the beginning of a historical process rather than a finished product. Humanity was created with the capacity for growth and development toward deeper fellowship with God. Human creativity and cultural development consequently belong to God's original intention for creation.[14] The unfolding of culture is not external to divine purposes but forms part of humanity's participation in God's ongoing work.

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[10] Johanness Raimers un Dainis Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei: Sociāli nozīmīgas draudzes celšanas teoloģiskie pamati* (Parakletos, 2025), 181–82.

[11] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193.

[12] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.

[13] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.

[14] Gonzalez, *Christian Thought Revisited*, 29.

The relationship between creation and redemption is particularly significant within this perspective. Early Christian theology frequently emphasized that humanity was created according to the pattern of Christ, the incarnate Word. The incarnation is therefore not merely God's response to sin but is connected to God's original intention for humanity. Christ reveals both the true image of God and the ultimate destiny of human existence.[15] Participation in Christ consequently involves the restoration and fulfillment of humanity's creative and relational vocation.

Humanity's position within creation further illuminates this vocation. Human beings may be understood as a microcosm of creation, uniting material and spiritual realities through the combination of earthly existence and divine breath. This unique position grants humanity a mediating role within creation. Human beings are called to direct creation toward its intended relationship with God and to contribute to the flourishing of the created order. When humanity fulfills this vocation, creation flourishes; when humanity fails, the effects extend beyond individuals to social, cultural, and ecological realities.[16]

Importantly, this creative vocation is not restricted to believers. Because the image of God remains present in all people, creativity, wisdom, and cultural capacity can be found throughout humanity. Every culture bears traces of the divine image, even where these traces are distorted by sin. Cultural traditions, artistic expressions, social structures, and collective aspirations often reveal humanity's continuing search for meaning, justice, beauty, and transcendence. Such realities provide important points of contact for Christian mission.

Mission, therefore, should not begin with the assumption that God is absent from culture. Rather, mission involves discerning signs of God's activity already present within human communities.[17] The Church participates in a mission that precedes it because God is already at work within the world through the sustaining presence of the Spirit. The task of mission is not to create God's presence but to recognize, interpret, and participate in what God is already doing.

Consequently, mission as creative and relational praxis involves collaboration rather than domination. The Church is called to engage human creativity, cultural resources, and social aspirations as potential partners in God's redemptive purposes. Instead of positioning itself against culture, the Church seeks to enter into dialogue with culture, discerning both its distortions and its possibilities. Human creativity becomes one of the primary arenas through which God's mission unfolds in history.

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[15] Gonzalez, *Christian Thought Revisited*, 29.
[16] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.
[17] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei,* 194.

2.2. Holistic mission and public theology

The theological foundations outlined above find practical expression through holistic mission and public theology. If mission arises from God's engagement with the whole of creation, then mission cannot be limited to verbal proclamation alone. While proclamation remains an essential dimension of Christian witness, it forms only one aspect of a broader participation in God's redemptive activity.

Holistic mission emphasizes the integration of word and deed, proclamation and service, evangelization and social engagement. The Gospel addresses the entirety of human existence and therefore cannot be reduced to exclusively spiritual concerns. Human beings exist within social, cultural, economic, and political relationships that shape their lives and opportunities.[18] Consequently, Christian mission must engage these realities as part of its witness to the Kingdom of God.

A central concept within this framework is *martyria*, or total witness. Christian witness involves more than communicating doctrinal truths. It encompasses the totality of a person's life and character. Witness becomes credible when proclamation is embodied in visible patterns of living. The Gospel is communicated not only through speech but also through relationships, practices, decisions, and communal life. Words and deeds function together as complementary dimensions of a single testimony.[19]

Closely related to witness is the practice of *diakonia*, or service. Service reflects the character of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve. Acts of compassion, mercy, justice, healing, and solidarity are therefore not supplementary activities that accompany mission. They are integral expressions of mission itself. Through service, the Church participates in God's restoring activity within society and demonstrates the practical implications of the Gospel.[20]

This understanding expands the mission beyond individual conversion to include social transformation. The Kingdom of God concerns not only personal spirituality but also the conditions under which human beings live together. Mission therefore includes participation in efforts that promote justice, peace, dignity, reconciliation, and human flourishing. Educational initiatives, healthcare ministries, poverty alleviation, community development, advocacy for justice, and economic empowerment may all be understood as dimensions of missional engagement.[21]

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[18] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 181–82.
[19] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 180.
[20] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 181.
[21] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 181–82.

Public theology provides an important framework for understanding this social dimension of mission. The Church exists within society and cannot avoid engagement with public realities. Mission takes place within concrete cultural, economic, and political contexts rather than in isolation from them. Consequently, faithful witness requires active participation in the public sphere.

The example of the Apostle Paul illustrates this pattern. Paul's ministry extended beyond religious settings into marketplaces, civic spaces, and centers of public discourse.[22] Christian mission similarly involves entering the everyday spaces where people live, work, and interact. The marketplace, the university, the arts, the media, and civic institutions all become areas for missional engagement.

Such engagement requires a fundamentally dialogical posture. The Church participates in public life not as an isolated institution speaking from above society but as a relational community that listens, learns, and collaborates. Dialogue does not imply theological relativism. Rather, it reflects confidence that truth can be communicated through relationships characterized by respect, humility, and mutual engagement. This dialogical approach encourages cooperation with individuals and groups who seek the common good, even where religious commitments differ. Mission thus becomes relational rather than confrontational. Shared efforts toward justice, peace, reconciliation, and social well-being can become contexts in which deeper theological conversations emerge.[23]

At the same time, public engagement necessarily includes a political dimension. The proclamation of God's Kingdom carries implications for questions of power, justice, and social organization. The Church cannot remain indifferent to structures that produce exclusion, oppression, or inequality. Faithful witness requires attention to concrete social realities and a willingness to address situations in which human dignity is threatened. This political dimension should not be understood primarily in partisan terms. Rather, it reflects the conviction that the Gospel has public consequences.[24] The Church's responsibility is to bear witness to God's purposes within society, advocating for justice and reconciliation while embodying alternative patterns of communal life.

For this reason, the Church functions as a visible sign of the Kingdom of God. Through its communal practices, it demonstrates possibilities for social relationships grounded in reconciliation, solidarity, mutual responsibility, and hope. The Church becomes a contrast society, not through withdrawal from the world but through faithful participation within it. Its life offers a concrete example of how human relationships may be transformed by the values of God's Kingdom.

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[22] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.
[23] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 181–82.
[24] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 182, 188–89.

The mission as creative and relational praxis therefore finds public expression through integrated witness. Proclamation and service belong together. Evangelization and social engagement are not competing priorities but mutually reinforcing dimensions of participation in God's mission. The Church bears witness to the Gospel both by announcing God's redemptive purposes and by embodying them within the public life of society.

2.3. Art, Embodiment, and the Sensory Dimensions of Mission

The creative and relational character of mission becomes particularly visible through art, embodiment, and sensory experience. Human beings encounter reality not only through intellectual reflection but also through imagination, emotion, bodily presence, and aesthetic perception. A holistic understanding of mission must therefore account for these dimensions of human existence.

Because creativity belongs to the *imago Dei*, artistic expression possesses theological significance.[25] Art is more than decoration or entertainment; it constitutes a distinctive mode of human participation in creation. Through artistic practices, individuals interpret reality, express meaning, imagine alternatives, and communicate experiences that transcend purely conceptual language. Art therefore provides unique possibilities for theological communication and missional engagement.[26]

The universality of artistic expression further supports its missional significance. Throughout human history, cultures have produced music, visual art, poetry, dance, architecture, and narrative traditions that express fundamental human concerns. These creative forms reveal humanity's search for beauty, meaning, identity, and transcendence. Mission can engage these expressions as sites where questions of ultimate significance are already being explored.

Art consequently functions as an important bridge between faith and culture. Rather than rejecting cultural creativity, mission seeks to discern how artistic forms may become vehicles for theological reflection and communication.[27] This approach echoes the apostolic practice of engaging existing cultural resources in order to communicate the Gospel within particular contexts.

The sensory dimensions of worship provide a particularly significant example. Christian faith is communicated not only through propositions but also through symbols, images, sounds, gestures, and spatial practices. Worship engages the whole person, including imagination, emotion, memory, and bodily

[25] Pocock et al., *The Changing Face of World Missions*, 31, 68.
[26] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193.
[27] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.

perception. Through music, visual symbolism, ritual action, and aesthetic experience, theological truth becomes tangible and accessible.[28]

The use of culturally meaningful artistic forms is therefore not merely a matter of stylistic preference. It reflects the incarnational logic of mission. Just as God communicates through concrete historical realities, so Christian communities communicate faith through forms that resonate within particular cultural contexts. Artistic expression enables theological meaning to be embodied in ways that connect with lived experience.

The significance of embodiment extends beyond artistic communication. Human beings encounter others through bodily presence and relational interaction. Mission is therefore not simply the transmission of information but participation in relationships. Faith is communicated through visible practices, shared experiences, and embodied forms of life. This embodied understanding is evident in the concept of witness. Christian testimony is communicated through habits, relationships, gestures, and patterns of conduct. The body itself becomes a medium of theological communication. How believers live, serve, welcome, forgive, and relate to others shapes the credibility of their proclamation.[29]

Embodiment is equally important in understanding public witness as a form of living worship. Christian discipleship involves offering one's entire life in service to God. Everyday activities—including work, care, hospitality, and civic engagement—become expressions of faithful participation in God's mission. The distinction between worship and mission becomes increasingly permeable because both involve embodied responses to God's presence and activity. Hospitality illustrates this principle particularly well. Hospitality is not merely an abstract value but a material practice involving time, space, resources, and relationships. Through acts of welcome and generosity, the love of God becomes visible and tangible. Hospitality communicates belonging and reconciliation in ways that transcend verbal explanation.[30]

Similarly, dialogue involves more than intellectual exchange. Genuine dialogue requires shared presence, mutual listening, and participation in common life. Relational mission emerges through encounters in which people learn from one another, cooperate toward shared goals, and recognize the dignity of one another's experiences.[31] Such practices demonstrate that Christian mission is fundamentally relational in character.

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[28] Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 248.
[29] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 180.
[30] Pocock et al., *The Changing Face of World Missions*, 68.
[31] Raimers un Pandars, *Draudze - svētība pasaulei*, 193–94.

Attention to embodiment also requires sensitivity to human diversity and accessibility. Mission seeks communication that genuinely reaches people within their particular contexts and capacities. Effective witness, therefore, involves attentiveness to how individuals perceive, experience, and participate in communal life. Sensory, artistic, and relational forms of communication become important means of fostering inclusion and participation.

Taken together, art, embodiment, and sensory experience reveal dimensions of mission that cannot be captured through verbal proclamation alone. They demonstrate that mission is lived, performed, perceived, and experienced as well as spoken. Through creative expression, embodied practices, and relational presence, the Church participates in God's mission in ways that engage the whole person and the whole community.

In summary, mission as creative and relational praxis may be understood through three interrelated dimensions. First, it is grounded theologically in the Trinitarian nature of God, the *imago Dei*, and humanity's vocation to participate in creation. Second, it is expressed publicly through a holistic mission that integrates proclamation, service, social engagement, and dialogue. Third, it is embodied aesthetically and relationally through art, sensory experience, hospitality, and everyday practices. Together, these dimensions provide a coherent framework for understanding mission as participation in God's ongoing creative and redemptive work within the world.

3. Methodology: Qualitative and Interdisciplinary Case Study

This paper employs a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the NoC in Latvia as an example of creative mission within a post-secular Central and Eastern European context. A qualitative case study is appropriate because the research seeks to explore meanings, theological interpretations, and lived experiences rather than to measure quantitative outcomes. The aim is not generalization in a statistical sense, but in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon situated within its specific historical, cultural, and ecclesial setting.

The study draws on document analysis, examining founding texts and media coverage of the NoC to identify its articulated aims, values, and theological language. In addition, it incorporates theological reflection, interpreting the event through missiological frameworks such as holistic mission and mission as creative praxis, informed by Trinitarian and incarnational perspectives. Furthermore, the research includes an interpretive analysis of reported experiences, based on survey responses from 88 representatives of 197 participating churches and from

seven students of Luther Academy who engaged with the NoC in the context of a "Church Planting and Administration" course. Through this multi-layered qualitative approach, the study seeks to understand how NoC functions as an expression of creative and relational mission in practice.

The sources of this study also include the "Regulations of the cultural event "Night of Churches" from 2016, a practical handbook for organizing churches (2016), public news information from the organizers (2025), and the above-mentioned survey.

4. Analysis: The Night of Churches as Creative Mission

4.1. Art, Space and Sensory Experience

During the NoC event, churches in Latvia are presented not only as religious sites but as transformed cultural and spiritual spaces designed to engage visitors through art, atmosphere, and a variety of sensory experiences.

4.1.1. Churches as transformed spaces.

The event traditionally takes place from 18:00 to 24:00, a timeframe that naturally alters the perception of the church space as it transitions from day to night.[32] Several aspects of creativity are employed, including a welcoming atmosphere, sacred versus secular fluidity, and thematic redesign.

Churches are instructed to move away from "classic" or aggressive evangelism methods to create a space where guests feel free and unburdened. The goal is to let people experience the "mood" of the church undisturbed.[33] The space is intentionally organized to host diverse activities simultaneously, such as guided tours, concerts, and quiet meditation areas. Some churches even use their gardens or church towers as extensions of the sacred space.[34] Guidelines suggest using background music, incense, and "candle altars" to make the space feel open and attractive. Physical changes can include setting up exhibition stands for Bibles or historic vestments or creating "prayer corners" where guests can leave written petitions.[35]

[32] Klotiņš et al., "Kultūras notikuma "Baznīcu nakts" nolikums", 1.
[33] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2.
[34] Jurģis Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei" (2016), 10.
[35] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 10,16.

4.1.2. Role of music, light, and visual arts.

These elements serve as a "language" to express the Christian message and the beauty of creation. Music is a core component, ranging from sacred organ and choral music to popular spiritual songs and worship music. Taizé chants are specifically recommended for their simplicity and ability to touch the heart. Unique musical experiences mentioned include the use of the hurdy-gurdy (ratu lira) and experimental spiritual music.[36]

Light plays a crucial role in creating a meditative atmosphere. After sunset, churches are encouraged to use candlelight to foster a sense of peace and spiritual contemplation. Creative lighting includes torches in the garden, candle paths in decorated glass jars, and even sand cinema performances.[37]

The event highlights the artistic and architectural heritage of the buildings. This includes tours of sacred art, icon exhibitions, and photographic presentations of congregational history. Creativity (Jaunrade) is a core value, encouraging new artistic expressions such as theater, film, and even photographic frames that highlight the best views of the church tower.[38]

The survey of participants found that the organizers successfully implemented their planned programs, including music (concerts and choirs). There was an emphasis on hospitality, as the founding documents explained.

4.1.3. Embodied and sensory engagement.

NoC encourages visitors to interact with the environment using all their senses, moving beyond passive observation – movement, touch, physicality, creation, taste, fellowship, and inner sensory experience.

Visitors participate in guided tours through hidden parts of the building, such as climbing church towers for a panoramic view or taking "culture-historical walks" through church cemeteries.[39] Some programs include creative workshops, such as origami flower-making or drawing sessions for children and adults, allowing for a tactile connection to the event.[40] Sharing a meal or a drink is used to facilitate conversation and human connection. Many churches provide free tea, snacks, pancakes, or soup to their guests.[41]

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[36] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 11.
[37] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 13.
[38] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1–2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 12.
[39] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 9.
[40] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 10.
[41] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 11; Mārcis Romancēvičs, "Ziņas. Pateicība par dalību", Baznīcu nakts, May 20, 2025, https://baznicunakts.lv/2025/pateiciba-par-2025-gada-atverto-baznicu-dienas-un-baznicu-nakts-notikumu/, accessed May 25, 2026.

The "meditative guideline" emphasizes silence and prayer as a sensory experience of God's presence. Visitors can light their own prayer candles or pick "word slips" featuring Bible verses to take home, creating a lasting personal connection to the night.[42]

The survey acknowledged that excursions and guided tours were highly effective in engaging visitors, as was storytelling about the church.

4.2. Public Encounter and Relationality

Based on the sources, the NoC event in Latvia is framed as a significant exercise in public encounter and relationality, moving the church from a closed institution to an open participant in society.

4.2.1. Church - society interaction

The event is designed to bridge the gap between sacred spaces and the broader public through several layers of interaction, for example, as a "meeting" place, as a cultural and spiritual lighthouse, and as a possibility for community integration.

The sources define the night as a "meeting", inviting guests to rediscover the church and encouraging congregations to rediscover their role in the local community.[43] The church is viewed as a "spiritual lighthouse" for the people in its vicinity. Its mission is to contribute to the cultural growth, spiritual well-being, and intellectual development of the Latvian people.[44]

Interaction is not limited to the church building, however. It involves cooperation with local municipalities, tourism information centers, and regional media to integrate the event into the local social fabric.[45]

4.2.2. Hospitality, openness, and accessibility

Hospitality is explicitly listed among the event's four core values. In the context of the event, hospitality includes ecumenism, respect, dialogue, and freedom. This entails respecting diverse Christian traditions while welcoming everyone, regardless of background.[46] In practice, it means that as a minimum, participating churches must ensure their doors are open and that there are congregation members available to meet and greet guests. A welcoming atmosphere

[42] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 13,22.
[43] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1.
[44] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 4.
[45] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 5; Romancēvičs, "Ziņas. Pateicība par dalību".
[46] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1–2.

is created by having people at the entrance to greet visitors, ensuring they feel "expected".[47]

The event strives for physical and informational accessibility. Churches are encouraged to provide clear signage (e.g., directions from public transport), create suggested travel routes, and use a wide array of communication channels, from social media to physical flyers, to reach those who do not regularly attend church.[48]

The survey reveals that visitors experienced this practical openness and accessibility, as the churches were physically open. Visitors included individuals who were not regular church members, members of the local community, and new visitors from other parts of Latvia.

4.2.3. Mission without immediate conversional intent

One of the most distinctive aspects of NoC is its philosophy of non-intrusive mission, which prioritizes visitors' freedom over immediate proselytization. The emphasis is on avoiding "classic" evangelism, respecting freedom, prioritizing dialogue over monologue, and offering guidance on the "spiritual path".

The guidelines specifically instruct congregations to avoid "classic evangelization methods" that might be perceived as pushy, such as asking "Do you read the Bible?" or stating "You must come to church".[49] The focus is on allowing guests to experience the atmosphere of the church undisturbed. The sources suggest that it is preferable to wait for guests to ask questions rather than imposing a message.[50] In some of the congregations and among the Luther Academy students, this principle raises questions of validity of the event as a mission. As the theological framework described, though, it is important to celebrate creativity and give meeting points.

Instead of a sales pitch for faith, the emphasis is on simple sincerity and kindness. Recommended phrases include "It's nice that you came" or "We look forward to seeing you again," which leave a positive emotional memory.[51] While the long-term goal is to encourage a spiritual journey toward personal faith, the immediate objective of the night is to provide a hospitable space where that journey can begin at the individual's own pace. Mission is understood as "sharing the gifts we have received" rather than as a demand for conversion.[52]

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[47] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[48] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 15.
[49] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[50] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[51] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[52] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 4–5.

The survey reveals that the organizers mostly avoided the "Classic" evangelism and respected the freedom of visitors. The survey also reveals, though, the tensions for this approach which are discussed further.

4.3. Tensions and Critiques

While the sources do not explicitly use the word "critique," they proactively address several tensions and risks involved in opening sacred spaces for a large-scale public event, focusing on maintaining a balance between culture, mission, and practice.

4.3.1. Risk of culturalization

The sources acknowledge that NoC is positioned as a cultural event, which risks its being perceived solely as a secular or aesthetic experience. To lessen this, the organizers emphasize the balance of values, give guidelines of music standards, and encourage atmospheric integrity.

Organizers are instructed to align all activities with four core values: hospitality, Christian spirituality, cultural heritage, and creativity.[53] There is a clear tension regarding the type of music permitted. While popular spiritual music is allowed, the guidelines warn against "too much noise and drums" to preserve the church's meditative character. All music must be "suitable for a church".[54] Even without a formal program, churches are encouraged to use background music, candles, and incense to keep the space a spiritual environment rather than just a museum.[55]

4.3.2. Loss of explicit Gospel reference?

To ensure the Christian message is not lost in the cultural festivities, the sources implement specific "anchors". There are some mandatory initiatives and an emphasis on art as a language. Every participating church across Latvia is required to lead a collective Lord's Prayer at 21:00, serving as a unified spiritual focal point.[56] However, here a question can be asked, whether this really expresses the Christian message or is just a tradition.

Visual arts and tours are not meant to be purely historical; they are described as a "language" intended to express the Christian message and the

[53] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1.
[54] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 11.
[55] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 16.
[56] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 5.

sacred meaning of the heritage.[57] To ensure guests take a piece of the Gospel home, congregations are encouraged to provide free Bibles and "word slips" containing specific Scripture verses for various life situations.[58]

4.3.3. Who defines "mission" in public events?

The definition of mission is established through a hierarchy of authority and tradition. The "Night of Churches Foundation" (*Baznīcu nakts fonds*) defines the official mission: to promote the cultural growth and spiritual well-being of the Latvian people.[59] The event's character is defined by the "traditional denominations" (Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist, Orthodox, Methodist, and Adventist), whose historical and social contributions have shaped the Latvian identity.[60]

The organizers ultimately root the mission in the Great Commission, particularly from the Gospel of Mark 16:15 and the example of Nicodemus seeking Jesus at night, framing the event as a tool for "spiritual awakening".[61]

4.3.4. Purpose: to apply theory to practice.

The sources serve as a manual for translating theological concepts into practical ministry. The theological value of hospitality is practiced through smiling greeters at the door, offering free tea and snacks, and creating "prayer corners".[62] Beyond the theory of ecumenism, the bylaws require different denominations to cooperate and respect each other's unique traditions while remaining within their own confessional boundaries.[63]

The organizers also emphasize the power of simplicity, thereby encouraging more churches to participate. A recurring practical instruction is to avoid "saturated" or over-complicated programs. Instead, the guidelines emphasize "simplicity and sincerity" as the most effective way to reach the public.[64]

The survey reveals several concerns regarding mission during the NoC. Mission appears primarily framed as an invitation and a visibility rather than an explicit proclamation. Several responses highlight that "non-Christians entered the church," that visitors could "discuss questions of faith," and that people were invited to attend Sunday worship afterwards. This suggests that evangelism is

[57] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 2; Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 11.
[58] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7–8.
[59] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1.
[60] Klotiņš et al., "Nolikums," 1–2.
[61] Nodibinājums "Baznīcu nakts fonds," "Baznīcu nakts 2016. gada 10. jūnijā visā Latvijā," 2016.
[62] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[63] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 7.
[64] Klotiņš, "Baznīcu nakts rokasgrāmata draudzei," 9.

perceived less as direct preaching and more as creating access points and relational contact. The concern implicit here is not about aggressive proclamation but about whether contact leads to deeper integration into congregational life.

There is a recurring emphasis on opening the church building as a symbolic and practical act. The language of "opening doors" and the use of shared branding (logo, posters) show awareness of the public presence. However, the data do not strongly reflect structured follow-up strategies. The missional question that quietly emerges is: does visibility translate into discipleship, or does the event remain a one-night encounter?

Interestingly, multiple respondents explicitly state that they "did not see challenges." While this may signal satisfaction, it may also indicate limited critical reflection on evangelistic effectiveness. The absence of articulated tensions (e.g., theological compromise, superficial engagement, resource strain) could suggest either smooth implementation or a lack of evaluative missiological criteria.

There are, however, also hints of a developing evangelistic self-understanding. Phrases such as "opportunity to remind people about God" and hopes "to develop in this area" show that some participants view the event as formative for the congregation's missionary identity. The concern here is developmental: congregations may be in an early stage of articulating how creative public events relate to sustained evangelism.

In summary, the NoC reveals several tensions between culture and mission. As a public cultural event, it risks being perceived primarily as heritage rather than Christian witness; therefore, organizers establish theological anchors such as shared prayer, sacred atmosphere, Scriptural materials, and clearly defined core values to safeguard its spiritual focus. Mission is institutionally framed through denominational tradition and biblical mandate, and theology is translated into practice through hospitality, ecumenical cooperation, and programmatic simplicity. Survey data indicate that mission is often understood as an invitation embodied through presence and visibility rather than through explicit verbal proclamation, raising questions about follow-up and discipleship. While few challenges are explicitly named, this may reflect limited critical evaluation, even as some congregations show growing awareness of their developing missionary identity.

5. Discussion: Creativity, Mission and Ambiguity

Analysis of the open-ended responses reveals that participating churches primarily defined success in terms of active organization, visible hospitality, and visitor engagement. Many respondents emphasized successfully implementing

concerts, guided tours, and structured programs, as well as attracting visitors beyond regular congregants. The event was experienced as an opportunity for openness and public presence. In contrast, reported shortcomings were largely strategic rather than fundamental. Churches identified the need for earlier planning, stronger communication, greater involvement of congregation members, and more diversified programming. Overall, the findings suggest that while creative and public-facing practices were effectively implemented, there remains a desire for deeper relational participation and improved organizational intentionality.

Conclusion: Called into Creativity Today

This study has examined the NoC as an example of mission understood as creative and relational praxis within a post-secular Central and Eastern European context, using Latvia as a case study. The analysis demonstrates that creativity, public presence, and embodied practices are not secondary or decorative dimensions of mission, but integral expressions of it. The event reveals how proclamation, service, art, hospitality, and dialogue can function together as a holistic form of witness. At the same time, tensions emerge regarding culturalization, the clarity of Gospel articulation, and the transition from visibility to sustained discipleship.

The findings reaffirm creativity as a legitimate and theologically grounded form of mission. Rooted in the *imago Dei* and participation in God's creative work, human artistic and organizational ingenuity can serve as a meaningful medium of theological communication. When anchored in Trinitarian and incarnational perspectives, creativity becomes not a compromise with culture but a mode of engaging it faithfully. The NoC illustrates that opening sacred spaces, employing culturally resonant forms, and fostering embodied encounters can function as authentic expressions of *missio Dei*.

For local churches and mission organizations, this implies that creative public initiatives should not be viewed as peripheral or merely strategic tools, but as genuine sites of theological action. However, such initiatives require intentional reflection on follow-up, discipleship pathways, and the integration of proclamation and service. For theological education, the findings suggest the need to equip future leaders not only in doctrinal clarity but also in cultural engagement, aesthetic literacy, and public theology. Mission formation should include reflection on embodiment, creativity, and dialogue in plural societies.

Further research could explore the long-term missional impact of creative public events, particularly their influence on congregational transformation and sustained faith engagement among participants. Comparative studies across

different cultural contexts would also deepen understanding of how creative mission functions within diverse ecclesial and social settings. Additionally, empirical research on discipleship outcomes and follow-up practices would help assess the relationship between event-based visibility and lasting ecclesial integration.

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