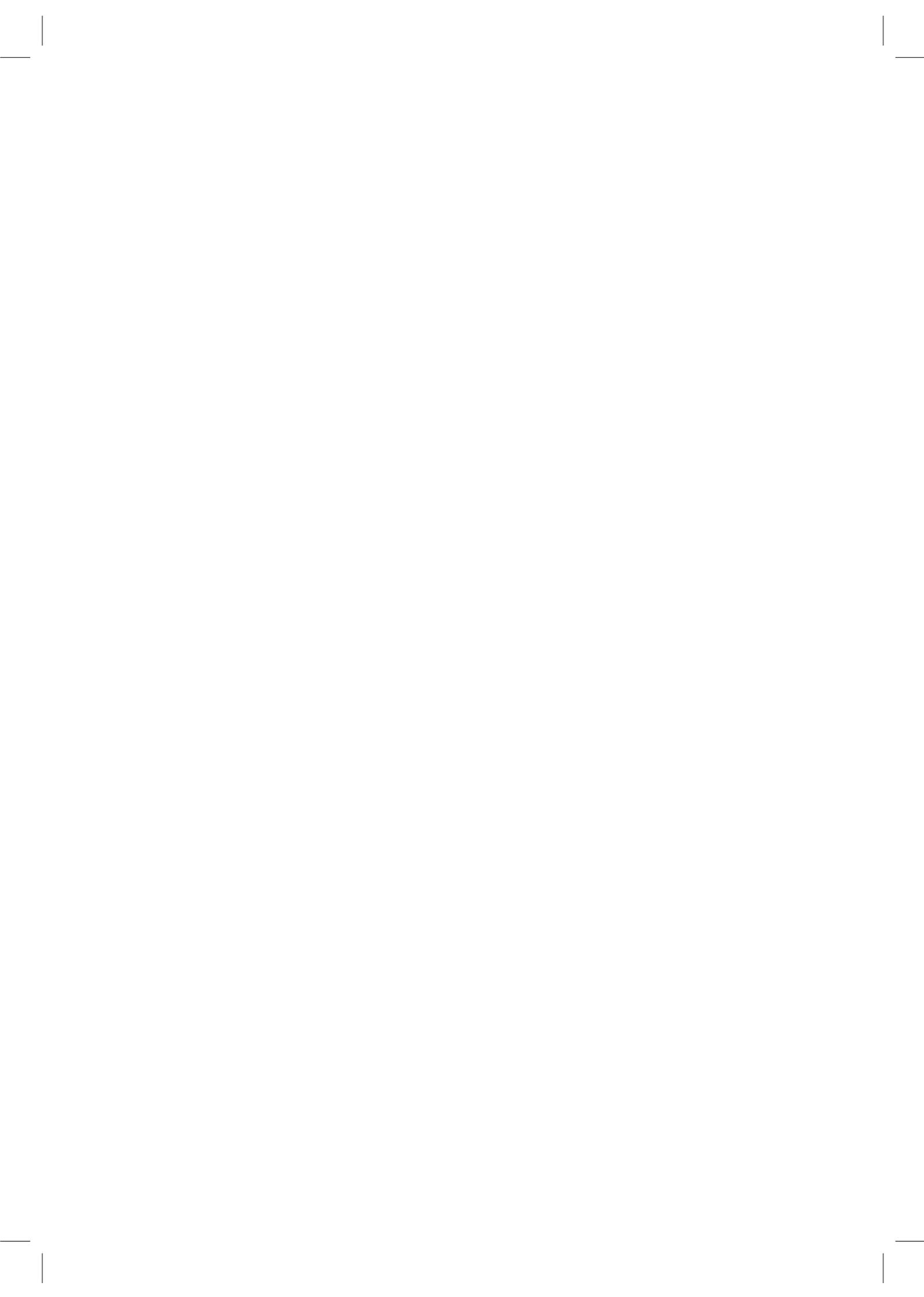


Transforming into an
Intercultural Church
in Multicultural Europe

Theological Roots & Practical Reflections
from Central Europe and Finland

Editor: Jorma Kuitunen



Content

Acronyms	8
Preface	10
Acknowledgements	11
Introduction	13

PART I

The Intercultural Mission of the Church - Theological Roots and Reflection	19
---	----

1a. The Intercultural Essence of the Early Church – the Model for Today	21
<i>Jorma Kuitunen</i>	

1b. The Kingdom of God as the Ideal Culture of the Church	31
<i>Jorma Kuitunen</i>	

2. Intercultural Theology – What Can We Learn from Christians in the Global South?	69
<i>Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen</i>	

PART II

Challenges and Opportunities for Churches in Multicultural Europe	77
--	----

3. What Do Asylum Seekers and Refugees Signify to the Pentecostal Churches in Europe?	79
<i>Arto Hämmäläinen</i>	

4. The Opportunities of the German Church in Intercultural Transformation .	89
<i>Iris Schültzke</i>	

5. The Vienna International Church as Part of the Austrian Pentecostal Movement.	105
<i>Riku Turunen</i>	

6. Cooperation Between European Churches as a Resource in Building an Intercultural Church.	115
<i>Marja-Liisa Laihia</i>	

PART III

How to Become an Intercultural Congregation -

Cases and Lessons from Finland 129

7. How Do Christians with Immigrant Backgrounds Integrate into Our Church Community? The Case of Turku Pentecostal Church 131
Kristiina Raassina

8. From Immigrant Ministry to Strategic Core of the Church –
Lessons from Tampere Pentecostal Church 139
Lea Raittila

9. The Learning Path Towards an Intercultural Church in
Lahti Pentecostal Church 149
Timo Kekolahti

10. Unity in Diversity! Intercultural Ministry in Jyväskylä Pentecostal Church 161
Sandesh Roberts

11. Cross-Cultural Communion in the Church's Strategy –
The Role of Leadership 171
Jyrki Palmi

PART IV

Key Aspects of an Intercultural Church 181

12. A Welcoming Church – How Do We Relate to Our Neighbour from
a Foreign Culture? 183
Timo Keskitalo

13. What Should We Understand When Building an Intercultural Church? .. 189
Marja-Liisa Laihia

14. Children and Youth of Immigrant Families and
the Tension Between Two Cultures. 203
Katja Castillo

15. Volunteer Work in a Multicultural Church –
How to Promote Good Practices and Prevent Burnout? 213
Lea Raittila, Ulla Dahlen, and Jorma Kuitunen

16. How to Relate to Migrants in the Media? 227
Leevi Launonen

17. Inclusive Diakonia in the Church – Principles and Good Practices 233
Lea Raittila and Jorma Kuitunen

PART V

The Local Church: A Home for All Peoples -

Recommendations of the Pentecostal Church of Finland 253

1. The Church Across Cultural Boundaries -
Theological and Missiological Starting Points 255

2. Early Faith Support, Baptism, and Promotion of Christian Growth 259

3. Unity in Diversity – Promoting Integration 263

4. Immigrants and Multiculturalism in Church Leadership and Organization 269

5. Safety and Communication in a Culturally Diverse Church 275

6. Networking, Cooperation and Coordination 281

Authors. 290

Acronyms

AoG	Assemblies of God
AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
APMF	Africa Pentecostal Mission Fellowship
PAM	Pentecostal Asia Mission
BFP	Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden - Association of Pentecostal Churches in Germany
AIG	Association of International Churches
BEFG	Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden - German Baptist movement
CEC	Conference of European Churches
CCME	Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe
ECF	Ecumenical Council of Finland
ECRE	European Council on Refugees and Exiles
FEG	Free Evangelical Church
FEIC	European Network of International Churches
ICMC	International Catholic Migration Commission
ICP	Intercultural Church Planting
JICF	Jyväskylä International Christian Fellowship
KotoDia	Training, Guidance and Mentoring in Support of Integrative Diakonia
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PEF	Pentecostal European Fellowship
PEM	Pentecostal European Mission
PICUM	Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants
PWF	Pentecostal World Fellowship
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VCC	Vienna Christian Centre

4. The Opportunities of the German Church in Intercultural Transformation¹

Iris Schültzke

Introduction

God meant for the Church to be an intercultural community from the very beginning. People from all parts of the Roman Empire came to faith at Pentecost, a finance minister from Ethiopia came to faith² and God sent Peter to the Roman centurion Cornelius³. In Antioch the newly founded church was intercultural right through to its leadership.⁴

Looking back, God prepared the ground for the arrival of many refugees in 2015. A lot has been learned since then. As Germany continues to grow in cultural and ethnic diversity, the Church is invited to respond in ways that reflect this new reality. Transforming existing churches to become more intercultural is necessary in this changing landscape. Moreover, intercultural church planting is not just an option, it is a crucial task.

Intercultural churches reflect biblical principles, create communities shaped by mutual respect, and implement shared leadership and spiritual growth across cultures. They are a witness to their communities. This article looks at how God prepared the ground in the past, shares examples of how existing churches can be

1 Writing this article benefited from the feedback of Stefan Henger (Greater Europe Mission) and Roy Barak (MosaiX Multiply).

2 Acts 8.

3 Acts 10.

4 The intercultural model of the Early Church has been dealt with in the article 1b in this book.

transformed to become more intercultural and explores why intercultural church planting is crucial in Germany today. By pursuing this vision, German churches remain relevant and are being transformed to meet the needs of an increasingly culturally diverse society.

God preparing the ground in Germany before 2015

Integrating migrant churches, qualifying migrant leaders, and embracing second generation migrants was important for the arrival of the refugees in 2015. Migrant and German churches built stronger ties with each other as we can see from the examples below.

In the German Pentecostal movement (BFP) The Association of International Churches (AIG) was started in 2007 and enabled migrant churches (mostly African, but also Russian, German, or Latin American) to join the BfP. A three-year pastoral training program geared towards meeting the needs of these churches was developed. More than 340 people have participated and 200 have been officially ordained as pastors.⁵ Additionally, a growing percentage of students at the Erzhausen Theological Seminary come from these migrant churches, preparing the movement for a future that will be much more culturally diverse.

The German Baptist movement (BEFG) has developed a pastoral training program for Farsi-speaking pastors. Their website has an extensive list of international churches and pastors dating back to the 1990s. The Free Evangelical Churches (FEG) have 60-70 migrant churches associated with them. They have also developed an intercultural church planting approach called the *Kairos Projekt*.

Additionally, initiatives like *Christ for Afghans*, *Christ for Arabs*, *Christ for Farsi* have been spearheaded by the Evangelical Alliance of Churches in Germany that reached out to different immigrant groups. The *Liebenzeller Mission* have started work among migrants in Germany and planted migrant churches. The Lutheran Church in Germany has also welcomed migrant churches. One of the examples of this is the *International Kirchen Konvent Rheinland Westfalen* the *Rheinland* district.

The arrival of refugees in Germany – responses 2015 and beyond

With the arrival of a great number of refugees interested in Christianity something new transpired. Even though migrants and refugees had joined German churches before, they now did this in increasing numbers. Iranians especially decided to go

5 Miteinander trotz unterschiedlicher Sprache und Herkunft 2024.

that route, as part of the process of distancing themselves from their own religious background.⁶

Many churches and their volunteers welcomed and helped these people. The impact has changed existing churches and kicked off transformation processes in these communities to become more culturally sensitive. The way to plant new churches has been impacted as well. Looking at one example of what happened in many of these churches will help to understand the unique challenges and lessons learned.

Credo Kirche - a German Pentecostal Church in Wuppertal

In 2012, my husband and I returned to Germany from serving in the Middle East in church planting. Our church (Credo Kirche) in Wuppertal began to receive an influx of refugees. Local church members helped by providing clothing, German classes, and assistance with official matters. We personally started out that way but over time our focus shifted to pastoral care, baptism classes, establishing small groups, and developing leaders. We baptized around 60 refugees, primarily from Iran and Afghanistan. They participated in different areas of ministry. They joined small groups and received training to lead these groups. During the Covid 19 pandemic Farsi online services took place to meet the needs of this community. Eventually only a smaller group returned to active participation when the church reopened. In order to rekindle engagement, special services for Farsi speakers and Latinos were offered in this phase.

In all, *Credo Kirche* emerged as a culturally more diverse church. Currently, the campus in Wuppertal-Elberfeld offers an English language service. Translation of church services is an integral component of church life, and individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds are actively involved in various church ministries. Another way *Credo Kirche* followed its intercultural mandate was to plant a new intercultural church.

An intercultural church plant in Duisburg-Marxloh

In 2021 my husband and I moved to Duisburg-Marxloh, sent out by *Credo Kirche*. This area is the home of 90 different ethnic groups. In the new intercultural church plant, various languages are used in every area of church life.

While we use a small group approach for multiplication, it has been modified. Lay people are being trained to be facilitators using the Discovery Bible approach. This does not require them to receive extensive theological training. The *Al Mas-sira* course is being offered to seekers with a Muslim background. While German is the language that everyone can speak to some degree, there is freedom to

6 Research on this topic and its impact should be made, as there isn't enough statistical information available on this dynamic.

express oneself in his or her mother tongue. Translation is provided where necessary. Right from the beginning the leadership team has been intercultural. People from Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Uganda, and Bulgaria attend our church. Our small group meetings include children and they are an integral part of our bi-weekly Sunday gatherings.

Other denominations have similar examples. One is The *Kairos Projekt* in Haiger with Pastor Piero Scarfalloto (Free Evangelical Church, FEG). They have a shared intercultural identity that has been combined with distinct ethnic expressions of faith and have inspired many.⁷ Scarfalloto has shared his learnings in *Intercultural church planting* (ICP) gatherings in Germany.

Another intercultural church is *New Life Church* (Baptist, BEFG) in Düsseldorf with Pastors Richard and Sigrid Aidoo. Here a migrant church became intercultural.⁸ They too consist of different ethnic groups expressing faith in a variety of ways and simultaneously moving forward as one church. A lot can be learned from this church regarding their focus on prayer. They have a strong culture of prayer and are part of prayer initiatives that impact the wider region.

The arrival of refugees, many of whom are from unreached people groups, has occurred through the divine move of the Holy Spirit. Churches had not prepared a strategy for a situation like this. Nevertheless, they rose up to meet the various needs of refugees. These churches were not intentionally planning to become international, multi-ethnic, or intercultural. Nonetheless, they were changed and impacted through the welcoming of refugees into their communities. To what extent that happened varied and was influenced through different factors, and the next chapter is going to look at some of them.

Learnings from the experiences and obstacles to overcome

The examples from the previous chapter clearly demonstrate that churches can implement change and become more intercultural. Now is the time for churches to reflect and learn from the experiences of 2015 and beyond. The lessons learned can be adapted and help existing churches to improve on their intercultural journey. How to move forward with new approaches will be the topic of the next chapter.

One of the blessings of 2015 was that churches learned to extend hospitality on a much larger scale than is customary in Germany. Additionally, the testimonies from persecuted Christians strengthened the faith of believers and renewed their focus on evangelism and reaching the unreached. A new understanding of missions evolved as not only happening in remote areas but also at our doorstep. Furthermore, church growth took place in churches whose numbers had stagnated in recent years.

7 More details: Scarfalloto 2025.

8 The New Life Church <https://www.newlifechurch.de>

In order to maintain these blessings, there are obstacles that need to be addressed and overcome. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and suspicion of “asylum-motivated conversions” are some of them. Additionally, volunteer burnout and lack of intercultural competence were factors too. Additionally, people invested in the lives of refugees and weeks and months which became years of dealing with their needs. Let us look at some of the obstacles in more detail.

All-rounder approach. Pastors and leaders rolled up their sleeves and started doing the work that was required. While there were a lot of good things that came out of this, there were some potential negative issues as well. In this context, intercultural misunderstandings occurred. For example, the presentation of the humanness of Christ, if not done in a culturally sensitive way, can be immensely offensive to a Muslim audience.

Thus, it would be advisable to get on-the-job training on topics like this. Asking cross-cultural workers, returned missionaries, and migrant faith leaders for feedback and support would also help. We understand the trained specialist approach when it comes to our vehicles. We take our car to a garage when the carburettor needs to be replaced, while we might change the tires or oil ourselves. So, why hesitate to apply this reasoning to intercultural work?

Concept of hospitality. The German understanding of hospitality is very different from that of cultures from the Middle East, Asia, or Africa. Even though German visitors may comment on the great culture of hospitality in a particular church, immigrants and refugees alike note that hospitality in their culture goes far and beyond what German culture would define as being hospitable. There are German churches that offer a great variety of Barista coffee and have a nicely decorated cafe on the church premises. For German visitors this would indicate great hospitality. For many cultures in the Global South hospitality would include a generous meal after church and not “only” coffee.

Training of leaders. The refugee experience caused major disruptions in people’s lives. University studies or professional qualifications couldn’t be transferred into the German educational system easily. Spiritually mature leaders were identified within the refugee community. But the obstacles of qualifying them as pastors are quite challenging. Questions, such as how they can support their family need to be answered. Another important aspect to consider is how to train people from a relational culture to work in a task-driven environment. And there is no time to waste as the need for mature and qualified leaders is now, not in 4-5 years.

For the migrant believers, the language barrier to attend regular-theological programs is high as they are not available in their mother tongue and their German is not sufficient to attend these programs. In many churches, leadership is mostly German, not providing role models for refugees. There might be requirements in place to qualify for leadership in your church that go beyond biblical qualifications. These might be cultural or economic requirements that hinder potential migrant leaders to be considered. German faith leaders need to learn to

listen to migrants that have experienced racism. This is vital in order to discern whether racism occurs in the church.

Established churches - a different pace for change. In an established church with a larger congregation change happens at a slower pace. In general, people tend to prefer existing formats. Change requires them to step out of their comfort zone. Moreover, fear can be a driving factor impeding change as well. There is a fear that the church will not be a typical German church any longer and they might not feel part of it. These types of struggles need to be considered and addressed so that people are willing to welcome change. For example, installing leaders from a variety of ethnic backgrounds on all levels of leadership can be one of the changes that take time and intentionality.

Challenges for Christians of a refugee background. Christians from refugee backgrounds face obstacles that also need to be considered. Some of these challenges are inherent to being an immigrant or refugee. It is my observation, that a many immigrants get to a point where their status is secured (being accepted as a refugee, obtaining a work permit). At this point they start focusing on obtaining a similar or better standard of living as the one they left behind. As a result, they might not allocate as much time to church attendance, fellowship, or personal spiritual disciplines as they did before.

Working life comes with challenges of its own. One could say that they go through another culture shock when they start working in Germany. The workplace is very results driven, time-sensitive, and not a lot of time is allocated to personal interaction with colleagues. Transport to and from the workplace as well as meals are the sole responsibility of the employee.

Additionally, refugees coming from collective cultures struggle with event-driven church programs. In my experience they want to be involved on a personal level, not just invited to an event. For example, are they invited to attend people's birthday parties, or are they only asked to help with cooking for church events? Do people talk to them after church meetings? Or are people busy organizing church related activities, or are they only interacting with their own close-knit circle of church friends? This might lead to disappointment, as their wish is, to be integral members of their faith community. Moreover, there are others that continue to follow Christ, but are not an active part of a church anymore. There are most likely several factors at work in this situation.⁹

In conclusion, learning from other cultures to become more hospitable, embrace a more community driven approach, and focus less on events can help churches on their intercultural journey. Refugees and migrants can also benefit from these learnings. Opportunities to reflect on these challenges and frustrations should be created to overcome these obstacles.

⁹ Further research is required in to determine the reasons and possible solutions for this development.

The way forward: transforming towards intercultural churches

The future is intercultural

The biblical perspective of how God sees the Church helps to put the learnings from the last chapter into perspective. Using the definition of an intercultural church helps us to look at the factors necessary to move forward. The aim is to transform churches so that they become intercultural and plant churches that are intercultural from the start.

The future of the Church in eternity is intercultural, as Rev 7:9-10 reads:

“Then I saw a huge crowd from every tribe and nation, people of every language and culture, so many that no one could count them. Clothed in white robes, they stood before the throne and before the Lamb, holding palm branches in their hands and shouting with a loud voice: ‘Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!’”

In eternity there will not be separate spaces for different people groups. All followers of Jesus will praise God together. Obviously, their origins are still recognizable (from every tribe and people, language and culture’). Logically, that indicates that our close future in Germany should be intercultural.

What is an intercultural church - a definition

In a monocultural community, the members are from a single ethnic group (e.g. German, Russian, Korean, or Vietnamese community). In a multicultural community, the differences between the cultures of origin are levelled out; the community is then something like a ‘melting pot’. In an intercultural congregation, the cultures of origin of the congregation members are still recognizable: everyone can and should contribute something from their culture of origin to the whole. But everyone must also leave something behind of their familiar and accustomed culture of origin, to be able to practice life intensively in the new community.¹⁰

Another way to put it is: *“An intercultural church is a community that reflects, embraces and enjoys the diversity of its context, and by the power of the Gospel transcends these diversities. The ultimate goal is, that a new community in Christ will be formed, where unity within diversity is celebrated.”*¹¹

10 Engelmann 2024.

11 Visser 2021, 14.

Transforming existing churches (German and immigrant) into intercultural churches

In the general population of Germany, the percentage of people with a migrant background has increased. Whereas it is 28% in the general population, among under 15-year-olds, the percentage is 38.2 % (2022).¹² Looking at these numbers it is obvious that the population in Germany has strongly changed and is becoming increasingly culturally diverse. Thus, it is vital for churches to build up long-term strategies toward intercultural competence.

As of 2025, Christian refugees—particularly those from Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria—continue to be active members of evangelical churches across Germany. These include Free Evangelical Churches (FEG), Baptist congregations (BEFG), and Pentecostal communities (BFP). Even though this is an encouraging development, numbers have dropped perceptibly (some factors were mentioned in the previous chapter).

The task of the churches is to become more intercultural to stay relevant. To succeed with this, one important goal should be to re-engage those migrant followers of Christ that have stopped coming to church. For this change to happen there are certain steps that need to be taken and factors to be addressed as listed below.

1. In order to succeed **church leaders must be intentional about this shift**. If they understand that being an intercultural church is part of God's plan for the body of Christ, they are to be willing to put in the work that is involved in the transformation process needed to get there. They need to be willing to invite people with intercultural backgrounds into their leadership team. If the leadership team of the church is culturally diverse and the people that are seen in front of the congregation come from different ethnic backgrounds, people feel appreciated. Moreover, it encourages them to get involved as well.
2. There are certain **groups of people that can be of great help in this process**. Missionaries who have lived abroad for a long time, have usually undergone training in intercultural communication, and can capably help others to deal with cultural differences. Bicultural couples need to daily agree on what it means to create their own new family culture. Even people who have been abroad for a short time short time as volunteers, pupils, students, or businesspeople can help make a community intercultural.
3. Receiving **support through reverse missionaries from the Global South** may be a way to go forward as well. They are potential bridge builders to reach different people groups. Moreover, they can help to change perspectives from a Eurocentric view of the body of Christ to a global viewpoint. Reverse missionaries can also help navigate intercultural tensions, especially in urban contexts. They've gone through cross-cultural transitions themselves and are uniquely equipped to lead culturally diverse faith communities through intercultural learning processes. They can be models of how to successfully

12 Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund nach Alter 1.1.2022.

integrate into the German culture instead of assimilating it, as many may have lost hope that this is even possible. The refugees who live among us have usually not received any training on how to get along in a different culture and need to learn how to do so.

4. **Distinctly different identity.** Second or third-generation immigrants have a clearly defined identity. Third culture kids (children of bicultural parents or where the parents were born in a different country than the children) can move naturally between different cultures. This experience is different from that of people raised mono-culturally. If you assume they are just like the rest of the people in your youth group or young adult ministry, they might not feel at home in your church. But if you are open to listening to them and have them sit at the table, they'll have a lot of suggestions on how to incorporate parts of their immigrant identity in the churches they belong to.
5. **Inclusive identity.** Some believers wrestle with feeling like they must leave parts of their culture at the door to be “fully Christian.” But the Kingdom of God, as described in Revelation 7:9, is beautifully intercultural. Churches can model this by integrating different languages, musical styles, and cultural expressions into their worship and events. Intercultural Sundays, food fellowships, and culturally diverse worship sets are more than a novelty—they are declarations that God’s family includes all nations and tribes.
6. **Representation is powerful.** When adults with immigrant backgrounds never see themselves in leadership, worship, or on the platform, the message can be subtle but clear: this church is not for us. But when churches intentionally invite them to lead, share testimonies, or participate in visible roles, the community begins to say, “You are a vital part of us.” Churches flourish when every member brings their voice, not just their presence.
7. **Built bridges through relationships.** The fastest way to make someone feel like an outsider is to ignore him/her. The most powerful inclusion happens through relationships. Mentorship, small groups, and discipleship spaces that are intergenerational and intercultural create opportunities for real connection.
8. **Living in two worlds:** Young immigrants and children of immigrants often live in two worlds. They want to continue their family’s heritage, while at the same time feel the pressures to conform to their surrounding culture. In church, they may struggle with identity and belonging or questions about how faith fits into their everyday lives.¹³
9. Inclusion does not stop at welcome—it leads to empowerment. Because young adults are the future of the Church, they are a vital part of shaping its direction. You could Invite them to plan events, give input on outreach, and help design discipleship pathways that reflect their world. If they were invited to sit at the leadership table, they could provide great insight about their needs. Can you find ways to **include young adults of immigrant backgrounds** so that they don’t just feel tolerated but treasured?
10. Many ethnic groups are characterized by so-called “**ethnocentrism**”, where people think that their own ethnic group is superior to others and that the church must also fight against “foreign influence”.

13 Katja Castillo is elaborating on this in her article 14 in this book.

In the current political climate in Germany there is a strong anti-immigrant climate. This doesn't stop at the doors of our churches. Many immigrants already face a lot of discrimination in their everyday life. Being faced with similar situations in a church can be disappointing and painful. Church leaders and members should deal with this sensitively. Generalizations such as „all X's are...“ should be avoided. For example, migrants using church facilities have faced being told not to have left everything in order or clean enough. One occasion that I witnessed should serve as an example: the youth group used the kitchen after the migrant group and didn't clean up the room. Unfortunately, the immediate response of the person in charge was to assume that the migrant group had caused the issue. If these types of encounters happen regularly it destroys trust. Moreover, this kind of response, fed by prejudice, is offensive and off-putting especially for people from non-confrontational, indirect cultures. Churches should do better and be an example of how to treat each other with love and respect even though we have very different cultural backgrounds.¹⁴

Summarizing the aforementioned factors, churches can move forward through intentional changes, a more culturally diverse leadership structure, intercultural faith expressions in church meetings, and input through intercultural experienced people. Third culture kids can bring their unique experience to this process. Creating a Christ-like attitude is crucial in light of the anti-immigrant climate.

Some other things churches can do better at in the future is to emphasise the community aspect of the church. Additionally, our view of discipleship as a program should be amended. Discipling should happen in a relational space with lots of interpersonal interaction. Sitting down and listening to community leaders is another vital aspect to be observed. If Germans decide on what another ethnic group needs or doesn't need, they might misunderstand the needs. This can be avoided when needs are identified by people from other cultures.

Change for an existing church with an already well-established identity requires more effort than that starting a new church. The church community and leadership must be willing to commit to a transformation process. Through an intentional transformation process they can become a more culturally inclusive church. Reforming an existing church can place a long-term emotional and spiritual burden on leaders and members from minority backgrounds. Because the process towards a more intercultural church is something which church leaders usually have no previous experience with, it may be beneficial to ask experienced practitioners for support and mentoring on the topic.

14 Ethical and biblical guidance for using respectful language at church and in media can be found from the article 16 in this book.

Planting new intercultural churches

While the change process is still ongoing in existing church plants, new intercultural churches is an important option. It is not about division but about creating space for spiritual growth and effectively reaching unreached ethnic groups at our doorstep and providing a home for them.

This strategy has several advantages but may also raise new types of challenges as well. Hence, there are some criteria to be met in order for an intercultural church plant to succeed. The church planter(s) should be interculturally competent and have bridge building qualities. The start-up team needs to be truly intercultural and should come from at least two to three different cultures. The following aspects explain success factors and pitfalls to be avoided in more detail.

Qualities of intercultural church plants

Freedom to build a new culture from the ground up. Transforming an existing church often means navigating in deeply ingrained traditions, power structures, and unspoken cultural norms. In contrast, a church plant can intentionally design a new culture, one that weaves intercultural values into its DNA—rather than retrofitting it into an old structure. The advantage would be that everybody works together to achieve a common goal. Reforming an inherited culture can be challenging.

Shared ownership of the church plant from day one. In this case the start-up team is intentionally intercultural from the beginning. Intercultural is more than multi-ethnic. It means serving together instead of functioning as separate entities next to each other. In church plants, everyone is a co-builder—regardless of their background. This creates an environment where immigrants and majority-culture members can shape the church together. In established churches, immigrant-background believers often remain guests in someone else's house—even with good intentions. In a new plant, no one's voice is "added later"—every voice is foundational.

Attractional to the next generation. Younger generations, both immigrant-background and native German, increasingly seek inclusive, justice-minded, and globally aware expressions of faith. An intercultural church plant, started with these values in focus, can speak more directly to their dual identities and multi-focal worldviews. Young people long to belong to something that reflects the world they live in.

Greater missional flexibility. New churches can innovate freely: experimenting with worship styles, languages, service formats, leadership models, and discipleship rhythms. This agility allows them to effectively contextualize the realities of diverse populations. Old wineskins often resist new wine. A new church provides a flexible container.

Escape from cultural hierarchies. In legacy churches, the dominant culture's assumptions—about time, leadership, aesthetics, and communication—are often invisible but powerful. New intercultural church plants have the potential to disrupt these hierarchies intentionally, creating space for mutual learning and flattened power dynamics. Nevertheless, this only happens if this is worked on and reflected by all of those in the new church plant.¹⁵

A church plant can normalize being intercultural instead of making it an exception.

A prophetic witness to the community of how the future can look like. A newly planted intercultural church sends a visible message to the community: This is what the Kingdom of God looks like. It becomes a living example of reconciliation, unity, and shared purpose across lines of difference. That witness is sometimes harder to offer from within older structures tied to the past.

Challenges of intercultural church plants

Planting a new church also comes with challenges that should be addressed. Finances can be a strain on a new church plant. Leaders might have to work part-time to pay for their living expenses. Many church members continue to support their families in their country of origin. Moreover, many first-generation migrants and refugees work in menial jobs receiving minimum wage. This all limits their ability for church giving.

Communication can be difficult due to language differences and cultural nuances, leading to misunderstandings. It is essential to get people involved that have a good grasp of the language represented in your church and that have a reputation of being bridge-builders or peace makers. When this happens, having invested in relationships and establishing trust can help to navigate these issues.

People often bring varying expectations about leadership, worship, and community life, which can result in tension or disappointment. Consequently, more time at the beginning of starting a church plant to discern the preferred way to move forward is necessary. Worship styles may clash, making it hard for everyone to feel at home. It is wise to allow experimenting and using different styles. Building trust and deep relationships takes longer, as different cultures relate in different ways.

There is also the risk of one culture unintentionally dominating, leaving others feeling excluded. Leadership becomes more complex especially when people expect different models of leadership. Theological differences can lead to tension and disagreement as well. It is necessary to be aware of possible power differences. A church planter that is a full-time employee of their denomination combined

15 Lidstone 2019.

with bi-vocational migrants in the leadership team can be an example of this. But even owning a car, speaking the language as a native speaker, or not being in debt may sometimes cause a power imbalance. If these types of risks are addressed and the church planter has received training on them, the power differences can be counter-acted. One of the ways to do this is to be generous with one's own resources and not use them to push the own agenda.

Conclusions

In 2015 with the arrival of a large number of refugees, churches in Germany experienced lots of changes. These experiences have shown the need for communities that reflect the unity-in-diversity of the body of Christ.¹⁶

A broadened understanding of hospitality along with adapted approaches to leadership training and awareness of the migrant experience are some of the lessons learned. Inviting culturally diverse voices to the leadership table to learn from them and receiving outside expert help are vital steps. Churches also learn to implement shared leadership across cultures, worship that incorporates different styles, and discipleship that is more relational. Benefiting from diverse bridge builders and learning-by-doing, faith communities have become more culturally sensitive than previously.

By reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of the past decade and learning from them, it is possible to move on to a more strategic long-term approach for intercultural transformation. Two possibilities present themselves: transforming existing churches into more intercultural ones and planting new intercultural churches. These two complement each other. This is demonstrated by *Credo Kirche*, which continues to transform in various ways to become more intercultural. At the same time, it has sent my husband and me out as church planters in order to establish an intercultural church called *Internationale Kirche Duisburg-Marxloh*.

Whereas change in existing churches might be slower, newly planted churches have to navigate other factors such as finances, misunderstandings due to cultural differences, and tensions about leadership styles. Both approaches share and are united by a common goal that the emerging churches might reflect the original model of the first church in more depth and become more vibrant.

Consequently, churches become places of mutual transformation, where all can contribute, grow, and share a sense of belonging. They can thrive when they are rooted in the gospel and are open to the gifts of many cultures. In doing so, they reflect the vision of Revelation 7:9—a worshipping multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language.

The future of the Church in Germany will depend in part on its willingness to change—not by abandoning its foundations, but by widening its tent. Church

16 1 Cor 12.

transformation with a focus on becoming more intercultural, as well as intercultural church planting, is a long-term opportunity, not a short-term project.



Key lessons from the past decade

- ▶ Expertise matters: Confidence is good, but intercultural ministry requires trained support to avoid bias and mistakes.
- ▶ Hospitality & learning: German norms of hospitality are challenged—being open to learning from other cultures is vital.
- ▶ Migrant leader training: Training spiritually mature migrant leaders is complex—language, economic pressures, and cultural differences require flexible and relational approaches.
- ▶ Pace of change: Established churches often need more time and courage to adapt. Change requires intentional leadership diversity and a willingness to leave comfort zones.
- ▶ Refugee challenges: Stability can shift priorities. Balancing work, faith, and fellowship is often difficult in a task-driven society.
- ▶ Event vs. relationship: Churches overly focused on events risk missing true connection—relationships are key to inclusion.

Lessons for existing churches

- ▶ Intentional inclusion: Leaders must actively pursue intercultural transformation, rooted in God's vision. Invite diverse voices into leadership.
- ▶ Key partners: Collaborate with people who have intercultural experience—missionaries, bi-cultural couples, trained refugees, etc.
- ▶ Understanding identity: Support 1st and 2nd generation migrants in navigating their dual identities. Don't assume mono-cultural perspectives.
- ▶ Worship & representation: Blend languages, music, and traditions in services. Let migrants lead and testify visibly.
- ▶ Relationship first: Build inclusion through small groups, mentoring, and discipleship—not just events.
- ▶ Youth & empowerment: Listen to young adults from immigrant backgrounds. Help them integrate their faith across cultures.
- ▶ Counter ethnocentrism: Promote humility and mutual respect across cultural groups.

Lessons for new church plants

- ▶ Fresh start: New plants can intentionally create intercultural communities from day one, with shared ownership and voice.
- ▶ Next-Gen appeal: Intercultural churches resonate with younger generations seeking justice, inclusion, and global awareness.
- ▶ Flexibility: Church plants can innovate in worship, leadership, and discipleship to better reflect cultural diversity.
- ▶ Flattened hierarchies: Plants can disrupt cultural power dynamics, fostering mutual learning and equity.
- ▶ Kingdom witness: Intercultural church plants reflect the unity and reconciliation of God's Kingdom.
- ▶ Real-World challenges: Expect financial constraints, language barriers, and part-time leadership. Invest in trust, relationships, and peacebuilding.

Tips for application

Individuals

- ▶ Identify people from unreached groups in your surroundings.
- ▶ Practice hospitality, especially toward cultures with strong hospitality traditions.
- ▶ Use resources like Al Massira to connect across cultures.
- ▶ Build respectful relationships—ask questions like “Help me understand your culture...”
- ▶ Be open to learning, challenge your assumptions and possible prejudices, and avoid quick judgments.

Local church leaders

- ▶ Identify the main ethnic groups in your area.
- ▶ Seek guidance from those with intercultural experience—missionaries, third-culture individuals, or migrant faith leaders.
- ▶ Utilize resources like:
 - » Intercultural Church Planting Network (ICP), Germany [Contact: iris.schueltzke@globemission.org]
 - » Theo Visser's ICP Manual – A practical guide for building intercultural churches.
- ▶ Involve migrant leaders in shaping your church's intercultural transformation.
- ▶ Rally members who support this vision.
- ▶ Consult cross-cultural experts.
- ▶ Define the transformation process—identify barriers and necessary changes.

National denominations

- ▶ Theological training: Continue training migrant leaders and ensure that the pastoral training pipeline remains relevant and accessible.
- ▶ Be flexible with church planting strategies to meet the needs of intercultural church planting, including experimental, grassroots, and migrant-led approaches. Create a new category for them in your statistics to ensure better visibility.
- ▶ Facilitate learning communities and create relational spaces. These spaces should allow them to meet each other and people from the larger denomination

Sources:

Bevölkerung mit Migrationshintergrund nach Alter 1.1.2022. <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/zahlen-und-fakten/soziale-situation-in-deutschland/150599/bevoelkerung-mit-migrationshintergrund-nach-alter/>

Engelmann, Horst 2024. Die Kirche der Zukunft ist interkulturell. <https://root-ed-deutschland.de/2024/03/die-kirche-der-zukunft-ist-interkulturell/>

Lidstone, Julyan 2019. Give Up the Purple: A Call for Servant Leadership in Hierarchical Cultures. Carlisle: Langham Creative Projects.

Miteinander trotz unterschiedlicher Sprache und Herkunft 2024. <https://www.bfp-aktuell.de/details/miteinander-trotz-unterschiedlicher-sprache-und-herkunft>

Scarfalloto, Piero 2025. Interview in January 2025. <https://juenger-macher.de/podcast/>

The New Life Church. <https://www.newlifechurch.de>

Visser, Theo 2021. ICP Manual, Planting Churches Through Missional Communities.