

Resource materials for the keynote paper

I was a
stranger

and you
welcomed me

When congregations become international ...

Being church together with migrants

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The issue and why it is worth exploring

“The best thing is that we are learning to talk about our faith again” – this remark was made at a presbyter conference in Wittgensteiner Land in Westphalia. We were discussing the question of refugees from Iran and Afghanistan who had asked to be baptised in the congregations. We had talked about church services at which Bibles were available in different languages so that everyone could read the text for the sermon in their native tongue. And we had shared our ideas about how to create a welcoming culture, where refugees are appropriately received and included in Westphalian parish life.

“The best thing is that we are learning to talk about our faith again.” It almost sounds as though congregations were finally returning to their wellspring after a long period of drought. As though all talk about Christian faith had taken place in secret for a while and was now coming out into the open.

This development became possible and necessary through when new members started arriving in the congregations. Since 2015 refugees have been coming to the local churches with fundamental questions about faith. They need support for their everyday life and to put down roots in their new country. But they also need to understand Christianity better, which they have hitherto known only from a Muslim point of view, if at all. Their questions are often not easy to answer: What does it mean that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit at the same time? How does confessing oneself a Christian impact on daily life? What happens in baptism?

When church members talk about this in baptism and faith courses they sometimes have enlightening insights. The encounters with new people in parish rooms bring changes – and enable the newcomers to ask when they need assistance. It is important to gather suggestions for baptism courses and multilingual prayers, but also for intercultural pastoral care and confirmation classes.

Meanwhile there is also a Persian-speaking pastor serving in the Westphalian church. He gathers together Christians from Iran and Afghanistan, gives them pastoral care and helps them to find a home in the EKvW.

Talking with migrants is not new. Migration churches have existed in North Rhine-Westphalia for a long time. Their number can only be estimated – perhaps there are 600 in the area of the Westphalian and Rhineland churches. They come from African, Asian or Latin American contexts, bringing cultures from their home country, the language of their mothers and liturgies from Presbyterian, Lutheran, Reformed and Pentecostal traditions.

More than 100 of these churches and congregations are organised in the International Church Convention (IKK), where – together with the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland and the Evangelical Church of Westphalia – they have formed a forum for mutual support. At the annual gathering songs of praise to God are sung in many languages and there are discussions about the joy of faith and the opportunities for being the church in this age.

Sharing in Bible-reading, holding moving communion services and trusting that God is also at work in the others – that is what ties us together in the International Church Convention. Ecumenism happens here on the doorstep; it revives and inspires the conversation between the Westphalian and Rhineland churches and the migration churches. At the same time, we discuss differences as well. For example, migration churches particularly emphasise their trust in the Holy Spirit and practise extemporary prayer. When it comes to services of faith-healing the Westphalian and Rhineland churches are often critical. Questions of morality and ethics can also lead to discussions.

And sometimes there are also conflicts. When the praise service is broadcast via loudspeakers into the neighbouring rooms and the verger living next door can't enjoy a quiet Sunday afternoon as he would like. When the Korean congregation in the German church centre would like to live with the host congregation as friends on an equal footing – and is ultimately treated like a tenant. When the children are noisy and the smells of food linger after the service – all this can create problems for those living together under one roof.

And yet – “The best thing is that we are learning to talk about our faith again.” Where that happens, close relations with Christians of the most varied origins become very enriching.

Propositions and text modules from the keynote paper

- All of chapter 3 “Practical ideas for the church and congregations” (PDF pages 32–40)
- 4.1 (PDF page 45 f.) “Ensuring the intercultural opening of the church – diversity is a gift that needs to be preserved. That also applies to the diversity that people of different origins and cultural backgrounds would mean for our church. If this diversity is regarded as enriching, there are strong arguments for systematically recruiting staff and volunteers with a migration background. Practically speaking, that could look like this:
 - Congregations discuss the issue with the aim of making acquaintance, approaching and the systematic involvement of Christians of other languages and origins living in the area of their parish and/or with contact to the parish through the kindergarten, youth work etc. Presbyteries develop a strategy to promote diversity in local church bodies. This approach is then included in parish policy and put into practice step by step.
 - Church districts take up the matter in the district synod board and develop a strategy to raise the share of migrants on the staff and foster voluntary participation in decision-making bodies. The strategy should be decided by the district synod and included in the principles of staff planning.
 - The church executive board and Westphalian synod decide a strategy that aims to systematically promote the hiring of staff with a migration background. Furthermore, voluntary work is promoted from the angle of diversity management.”
- The online version of the keynote paper contains many interesting background resources:
 - in-depth information on Lydia parish with its strategy “Becoming an International Congregation” is to be found in the yellow links in 3.1.
 - background articles on Persian-language pastoral care in Westphalia and Lippe, and information on migration churches (ibid.)
 - information about the International Church Convention in 3.2, the various links marked in yellow. In addition, you can find materials for international worship.
 - a meditation from the study day “Being church together” on 18 April 2018
 - Ecumenical Bible Sharing in 3.3, with helpful suggestions for dealing with Bible passages from an ecumenical perspective

Questions for group discussion

- What (spiritual and biographical) home do I have?
- What stories of faith do I bring with me from my home country?
- Are stories of faith visible in my congregation? Have they anything to do with migration?
- What differences do we perceive in the spiritual practice of others? Are we as a church open to Christians with different languages and origins?
- How can we develop / promote a culture of welcome for people with different languages and origins?
- What nationalities are represented on our membership roll?
- Are there any Christians with different languages and origins near where I live whom I would like to get to know?
- Are there theological questions that I would like to discuss with them – e.g. with respect to the power of the Holy Spirit?

Materials and media

- Film: Lydia parish
- Film: Persian-language pastoral care
- EKD Text “Gemeinsam Evangelisch” (Protestant together)
- EKvW guide to baptism in the asylum procedure
- “Showing what I love”: a guide to interfaith conversation

Practical ideas

- Visit migration churches.
- Invite refugees to discussions on faith.
- Use multilingual worship materials.
- Learn international hymns.
- Get to know the International Church Convention and invite representatives to attend groups and worship services.

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