

**Resource materials
for the keynote paper**

**I was a
stranger**

**and you
welcomed me**

What do my neighbours believe?

People with different religions live in our town

by Ralf Lange-Sonntag, Institute for Mission, Ecumenism and Global Responsibility (MÖWe) / central church office

The issue and why it is worth exploring

“A large share of the migrants in Germany come from countries in which non-Christian religions form the majority or at least a substantial minority” (4.1 Deepening the dialogue – developing a more intercultural church, PDF page 45).

Even if there are no exact figures and only estimates: in the last few decades Westphalia has become not only more intercultural, but also more interreligious. Not only Christians of the most diverse denominations have migrated to Germany, but also Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Yazidi, Aleviti, Baha'i, Sikhs and believers from other religious groupings. That is particularly visible in kindergartens and schools. For this reason, when asking what role the church has to play in a migration society we must also talk about religious pluralism.

Propositions and text modules from the keynote paper

- The breadth of the term 'stranger': in her foreword the Praeses Annette Kurschus points out that this concept has to be understood very broadly and must also include representatives of other religions. “‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’ This verse from the Bible stimulates us to see strangers as more than merely people needing help. They are people from other cultures, with other religions and languages, coming from another political context.” (PDF page 4)
- Biblical witnesses of interfaith encounters: the Bible also records the meeting of different religions. What was true for the people of Israel in Babylon is also a challenge for religious migrants in Germany: “Besides the actual hardship, there was the spiritual and religious challenge in the foreign land to keep their own beliefs alive and sustainable, so literally to rethink everything about ‘God and the world’.” (1.1 The Bible – density of experience, PDF page 12)
- Religions as questions and examples: through a person of another faith, Christians can come to question their own faith and action, or even acknowledge the other to be a role model. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–36) is the most famous example of what God calls us to do – love our neighbour (3.4 Shouldering responsibility, PDF page 41)
- Religious persecution as a reason for migration: this is one of the many reasons why people flee their home countries (2.2 Germany as a society shaped by migration, PDF page 24). This applies to Christians from countries like Syria, Iraq or North Korea. But Muslim migrants, too, have experienced religious discrimination in their home countries, e.g. the Uighurs in China.
- Diversity of migrants: it is too simple to just perceive Muslim migrants as refugees or industrial workers. Migrant families now live in Germany in the third and fourth generation; they have acquired German nationality, are doctors, teachers, business people or cultural workers (see comments in 2.4 Opening ways towards integration, PDF page 30).
- Increasing integration: this brings conflicts, however, because migrants call for societal participation and want to practise their religion publicly in an appropriate way. One example is the conflict around building the mosque in Hörde and the way it was settled by the interplay of social groups (2.3 Growing diversity, PDF page 27 f.).
- Religious diversity as a challenge: this is a challenge to all concerned as the groups with different cultural and religious backgrounds come into contact with one another, sometimes even into conflict or open competition: “The religions and religious communities are challenged to say how they understand the coexistence of their view of faith, life, the world and God and put them into practice. It is necessary to be able to give information about your own faith and, at the same time, share views on the connecting, but also dividing claims to truth” (PDF page 29).

- Freedom instead of limiting the public presence of religion: on the basis of religious diversity, more and more people are arguing that the public presence of religions should be restricted. A supposed neutrality in religious questions is, however, in contradiction with Germany's constitutional freedom of religion, which is not just an individual right but involves the collective, public practice of religion (e.g. building the mosque in Hörde, PDF page 27).
- Conversion as part of comprehensive religious freedom: the test of religious freedom is being able to freely choose your faith and, if desired, to change it. Conversion to Christianity, or from Christianity to another religion, must be accepted as a free decision. The keynote paper presents a number of people who have taken the step towards Christianity (3.1, 3.2, 3.3, PDF pages 32, 36 and 37). By the same token, we should seek to dialogue with people who have changed from Christianity to another religion.
- Consequences for diaconal ministries: this is a field in which religious pluralism calls for creative thinking from the churches, above all respect to interculturally sensitive nursing and counselling or the hiring of non-Christian employees (3.4, PDF page 41 ff.).

Questions for group discussion

- Where do I encounter people of other faith? In the family, at work, at school, in shops, on holiday ...?
- What feelings do I have when I meet people of other faith? Joy, curiosity, mistrust, anxiety...?
- Are there institutions of other religions in my neighbourhood / in my town?
- How would I explain my Christian faith to representatives of other religions?
- What experiences, stories and convictions would I like to contribute at all cost to an interfaith dialogue?
- Where do I see a challenge around me that should, if possible, be tackled in cooperation with other religions?
- Most church districts have synod coordinators for Jewish-Christian or Christian-Muslim dialogue. Find information on this and other contact persons at judentum-dialog.ekvw.de

Materials and media

- Christlicher Glaube und religiöse Vielfalt in evangelischer Perspektive. Ein Grundlagentext des Rates der EKD, Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2015 (EKD document on Christian faith and religious diversity from a Protestant perspective)
- Dialogue advice to promote encounter between Christians and Muslims in Germany, published by the EKD and the Coordination Council of Muslims in Germany (KRM)
- EKD position paper on Christian-Muslim dialogue
- Welcome to the German Protestant Church, published by EKvW (in bilingual editions with German and Arabic, English, Persian and Turkish)
- Christians and Muslims. A guide for Protestant congregations in Westphalia, published by the EKvW
- Interreligious calendar "Together. Jews – Christians – Muslims", published by the EKvW's Institute for Church and Society and MÖWe

Practical ideas

- Visit synagogues, mosques and other religious houses of prayer, and invite them to visit the church and parish rooms. Many mosque communities invite the public to the Mosque Open Day on 3 October each year.
- Meet with individuals or groups of other religious, e.g. a meeting of confirmation candidates and Muslim youth:
- Issue invitations to Christian festivals (e.g. Advent, Easter breakfast), sending best wishes to members of other religions to mark their festivals, e.g. the Muslim Feast of the Sacrifice or Jewish New Year. In many towns it is already a tradition that e.g. Muslims invite others to join them when they break their fast, or Jews invite others to their Hanukkah festival.
- Initiate multifaith events like prayers for peace or pilgrimages, either within existing structures (Intercultural Week/Week of Brotherhood) or independently in terms of place and time.
- Initiate common projects: collecting garbage, old Christmas trees, donations for disaster victims...
- Cook together and enjoy the results at a festive meal.
- Explore the interfaith history of your city/district.

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- Most church districts have synod officers for
Jewish-Christian or Christian-Muslim dialogue.
For more information and contact go to:
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