

INSIGHTS INTO MIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES IN ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN CHURCHES IN EUROPE



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The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) is the ecumenical agency on migration and integration, asylum and refugees, and against racism and discrimination in Europe. Members are Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant Churches and Councils of Churches as well as church-related agencies across Europe. CCME formally cooperates with the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches.

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BACKGROUND

Do migrants integrate in Europe? Do migrants integrate in churches? Do Europe and churches integrate with migrants? What are the processes behind migrants' involvement? To what extent can churches be tools of integration for migrants even in the wider society? In order to find answers to these questions the report looks into some of the issues related to migrants' integration in both traditional and migrant-led churches.

This research, based on the research methodology of the POLITIS project¹ seeks to understand migrants' experiences through interviews carried out in each of the countries involved in the project². For this purpose – and in consultation with CCME partner organisations - interviewers identified immigrants active in churches who arrived in Europe as adults, to be interviewed. Interviews were then carried out among active migrants in mainline churches as well as those who are active in migrant-led churches.

At the beginning of the MIRACLE project CCME has identified some key terms - first generation of immigrants, active participation, mainline and migrant-led churches - which needed to be defined and set in the context of this specific study. First of all, in the limited framework of this project, we are exclusively interested in 'first generation immigrants', persons who migrated as adults, and possess a personal migration experience in the sense that their cultural and social frame of reference changed due to geographical relocation. The term 'first generation immigrant' refers only to persons who were born abroad - outside the country under study - and immigrated as adults (over 18 years old) in Europe. Thus, we only focus on persons who moved across borders, no matter which citizenship they hold. Within this frame of reference, the research then specifically looked at people born outside the current European Union (of 27 Member States). Certainly the experience of internal EU migration is also very interesting, but we did not want to mix issues of EU integration and migrant integration in our study.

¹ For more information regarding the POLITIS project, its aims, its publications please visit <http://www.politis-europe.uni-oldenburg.de/>

² Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden



Another key term is 'active civic participation' which is used in the literature with different meanings, including different types and levels of activity. For the purposes of this study we understand the term 'active' in a broader sense which includes not only being a leader or having a specific task in a church but also actively participating in the life and ministry of the congregation. With respect to the level of activities, we have looked for persons who continuously and substantially devote time and energy to their church.

Finally, we wanted to clarify what we meant by mainline and migrant-led churches. The mainline churches, sometimes called mainstream or traditional churches, are those historical churches well established in the country³; while, migrant-led churches are those churches, ethnic or international ones, established by migrants, mainly for migrants.

METHODOLOGY AND CHALLENGES

This study has involved different actors: CCME and its partner organisations, ten interviewers (two per country, with the exception of France and Italy where there was only one person) and twenty-two interviewees. The interviewers, who were generally coming from a migrant background themselves, received a training course on qualitative interview methods and they were given the interview guidelines⁴, with samples of main and secondary questions to use for their own interviews (see appendix A). Interviewees were granted anonymity and the information contained in the interviews has been used only for the purpose of Miracle project. Even if not all interviews figure in the quotations reported in the study, they have been all equally valuable to its development.

Interviews were analysed seeking recurring themes from the migrants' experiences with European Churches. Before moving forward, it is highly important to underline the nature of the study and the methodology used to analyse the data. This research is based on the experience of the above mentioned POLITIS project. It is a qualitative research⁵, and, therefore, it does not aim nor claim to being statistically representative of the active participation of migrants in general in the country involved in the project or in Europe, but it aims at looking at processes behind migrants' involvement (i.e. how and why migrants decided to become active) building on the experiences shown in the data. The data consists in a collection of twenty-two semi-

³ For the purpose of this study we did not analyse the different Christian denominations in Europe and their respective roles in developing and implementing integration strategies.

⁴ The training and the material given to participants were based on and adapted from the POLITIS material.

⁵ For more information regarding qualitative research methods see: Rubin, H. J. and Rubin, I. S. (1995) *Qualitative Interviewing. The art of hearing data*. A Thousand Oaks, London: Sage; Fielding, N. and Thomas, H. (2001) 'Qualitative Interviewing', in N. Gilbert (ed), *Researching Social Life*, London: Sage, pp. 123-144



structured interviews. To analyse those interviews the narrative analysis⁶ was used, a method which gives prominence to subjective meanings and interpretation while taking into account discourses about integration, participation, and religion belonging. Key themes emerging from the narrative are objects of reflection in this study and a prominent space will be given to migrants' voices.

Among the challenges arising from this methodology lays the fact that ten different people have conducted the interviews. This was certainly an enriching element for this research, as it gave the possibility to conduct the interviews at least in the mother tongue of the country of residence of the interviewees. However, it presents some challenges as interviews have inevitably styles, length and structure that change according to the interviewer and to the place where the interview was held.

Despite having defined in the terms of reference what we mean by migrant-led churches, it emerges that there is a universe behind that definition. Sometimes migrant churches are mainly ethnic churches – where people of the same nationality, speaking the same dialect or language, decide to come together for worshipping God – or they can be international churches – where people from different nationalities, languages and background worship together. Furthermore, migrant churches are referred to as new churches in some countries while their denomination may be present in the country of residence. All these definitions (migrant, ethnic, international and new churches) present limits and carry stereotypes towards people worshipping in these places. For instance if we look at the label 'migrant church': when does it stop that a congregation present in a country for twenty years or even more is referred to as a 'migrant' church?

In addition, to make the scenario more articulated, the landscape of mainline churches in Europe has its own challenges. In each country the balance between different Christian denominations and their relationship among each other and with the state is diverse. Thus, different churches and denominations can play different roles as tools for integration for migrants in the various countries.

⁶ See Riessman, C. K. (1993) *Narrative Analysis*, London: Sage Publications; and Riessman, C. K. (2008) *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, London: Sage Publications.



DEFINING THE CONTEXT

Migration is changing the ecclesial landscape of Europe⁷. Theories of secularisation and decline of religious beliefs in Europe have been criticised long before the phenomenon of migration shifted the discourse around religion in Europe. Davie's theory of believing without belonging has characterised the historical churches in the Old Continent, especially among Protestant Churches (i.e. UK)⁸. The arrival of migrants has had an impact on the old balances of the churches, which had to re-think their structure, their way of expressing their spirituality, and their position on the national and local level. For instance, in situations where churches are minorities, the large presence of migrants can represent enrichment for the church and, at the same time, a 'threat' to its identity. Furthermore, migration has also given birth to new realities and new churches led by migrants. These churches have been attracting many migrants supporting them in re-establishing their collective religious belonging with familiar language, symbols and in building up transnational relations with migrants' countries of origin. In some cases, migrant-led churches have the clear agenda of delivering the true Gospel to Europe – this concept is often referred to as 'reversed mission'⁹.

This study aims at looking at processes behind migrants' involvement to ultimately analyse to what extent churches can be tools of integration for migrants even in the wider society. To do that, it is important to problematise the concept of integration which is a contested concept, open to different and conflicting interpretations¹⁰. To be more specific, it is not the term itself that is

⁷ For more information see for instance Davie, G. (2002) *Europe: The Exceptional Case*, London: Sarum Theological Lectures; Davie, G. (2007) *The Sociology of Religion*, London: Sage; Jenkins, P. (2002) *The Next Christendom: The coming of the Global Christianity*, New York: Oxford University Press; Ekué, A. (2008) 'Negotiating Vulnerability and Power. The construction of migrant religious identity, in CCME, *Theological reflections. A CCME reader*, Brussels: CCME; Jackson, D. and Passarelli, A. (eds.) (2008) *Mapping Migration, Mapping Churches' Responses*, Brussels: CCME.

⁸ Davie, G. (2007) *The Sociology of Religion*, London: Sage.

⁹ The concept of reverse mission is widely spreading among academics and in mission circles but not without questions. Adogame explains that 'the rationale for reverse mission is often anchored on claims to divine commission to 'spread the gospel'; the perceived secularization of the West; the abysmal fall in church attendance and dwindling membership; de-sacralisation of church buildings; liberalization; and on issues around moral decadence.' However he continues highlighting that so far it is unclear 'whether 'reverse mission' is simply operating as rhetoric, and or what shape, structure and dynamic will emerge through this process in the long run.' (Adogame, A. (2010) *Reverse Mission: Europe - a Prodigal Continent?*, p. 1). For further information see also Adogame, A. (2000) 'Partnership of African Christian Communities in Europe' in *International Review of Mission*, Vol. 89 Issue 354, p291; Adogame, A. 2003 'Betwixt Identity and Security: African New religious movement and the politics of religious networking in Europe, in *Nova Religio*, Vol 7, Issue 2, 24-41; and Ugba, A. (2007) 'African Pentecostals in twenty-first century Ireland: Identity and integration' in Fanning B., (ed.) *Immigration and Social Change in Ireland*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

¹⁰ See Baubock, R. (1994) *The integration of Immigrants*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe; and Parekh, B. C. (2006) *Rethinking multiculturalism: cultural diversity and political theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.



under question but the different interpretations and moreover the way in which it can be measured. How newcomers become part of the society is for Castles¹¹ a good way to begin with. This leads to analyse the process of migrants' participation in public life at various levels (political, cultural, and religious): how, for instance, they obtain access to services (health and education) and employment. In this study we will look at the complex issue of integration in the churches through individual experiences, considering factors promoting and inhibiting their participation.

Why a study that looks into the role of churches in the integration journey of migrants? First of all because churches are among the first places migrants turn to upon arrival in the new country¹². Migration can be a traumatizing experience even in modern times when communication has become easier and travel relatively inexpensive. In fact, being in a strange land, coping with own and others' expectations, missing family and friends whose support can no longer be taken for granted can be causes of trauma. 'Even the most routine activities of everyday life - shopping for food, working, and leisure time pursuits - can be alienating experiences for many new immigrants who find themselves in strange settings that require constant mental strain to navigate and to be understood'¹³.

Secondly, because religion may serve as a bridge between the old and the new environment; and churches may provide spiritual as well as material support to migrants. Levitt and Hejtmanek¹⁴ point out that, for instance, in the USA historical religious institutions, across denominations, have played a major role in providing social services and support to immigrants: becoming neighbourhood centres of charity, serving the sick, the unemployed, and people with disabilities.

Thirdly, because being active in a congregation is an empowering tool for migrants. Through their active participation and their role in the community – be it as leaders, ministers, translators, or counsellors – migrants work on their self-esteem and on rebuilding their identity. Furthermore migrants consider their activism as moral obligations towards other brothers and sisters who can

¹¹ Castles S., Korac M., Vasta E., Vertovec S. (2002) *Integration: Mapping the field*, Report of a Project carried out by the University of Oxford Centre for Migration and policy Research and Refugee Studies Centre, contracted by the Home Office Immigration Research and Statistics Service (IRSS), Home Office Online Report 28/03

¹² See Levitt, P. (2007) *God Needs No Passport: Immigrants and the Changing American Religious Landscape*, USA: New Press; and Ugba, A. (2007), *op. cit.*

¹³ Hirschman, C. 'The role of religion in origins and adaptation of immigrant groups' in A. Portes and J. DeWind (eds) (2007) *Rethinking Migration*, New York: Berghahn Books, p. 395.

¹⁴ Levitt, P. and Hejtmanek, J. (2009) 'Constructing religious life transnationally: Lessons from the U.S. experience' in P. Bramadat and M. Koenig *International Migration and the Governance of Religious Diversity*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.



benefit from their experience or support. According to Kasic¹⁵, who studied motivations behind migrants' activism, this sense of moral obligation is particularly strong if migrants have suffered themselves and are now in a better position, and it can be an important and dominant motive for their activism.

The next sections present the data analysis according to four main themes emerging from the interviews: (a) first encounter with the church in Europe; (b) factors behind migrants' activation; (c) the role of the church from migrants' perspectives; and (d) experiencing integration.

FIRST ENCOUNTER AND CHOICE OF AFFILIATION

You know, the great difficulty for a migrant Christian is to find quickly a church that resembles the church he comes from.

(Male, Central African living in France, Pentecostal, lay)

Religious connections are often among the first social relations people form upon arriving in a new country as it emerges from different respondents in different countries:

Actually for me the first thing I was planning to do after settling up was to go to the church. Because I am born in a Christian family and I have been active in church for many many years. So, for me, being in a country without going to the church would have been a problem. And, I knew I could join the Lutheran church because I am a Presbyterian back home...

(Male, Togolese living in Finland, Presbyterian, lay).

I was here maybe 3 months or 4 months, so I started missing to go to church and I started to realize that I needed the church for myself and... so I went to the service one Sunday and ... it was ... it was like this, I missed the church.

(Female, Brazilian living in Sweden, Anglican, lay/studying to become a minister)

Going to church has always been part in my life. Since I was born, my parents brought me to church because they have a strong faith. I think that the right question should have been: when did I first meet the Lord? Because my conversion took place later on when I was a teenager.

(Male, Central African living in France, Pentecostal, lay)

¹⁵ Kasic, A. (2008) 'What motivates Civic Participation of Immigrants? Antecedents and experiences' in D. Vogel *Highly Active Immigrants* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang), p. 101.



The choice of affiliation presents challenges. The situation is not necessarily as smooth as the Togolese respondent in Finland highlighted: 'I knew I could join the Lutheran church because I am a Presbyterian back home...'. In fact, in another case, in France, a Togolese stressed his difficulties in finding the place that really reflected his spirituality and met his needs as believer:

When I came here, I did not know in which church I should be going, but luckily I found one of my cousins here who knew better than I and guided me. We started to go to a church in Croix which was rather evangelical. It was not quite what I was looking for but I returned several times. Then we went to a church in Roubaix. This time, it was a little bit more of what I was looking for. Then we went to a church in Villeneuve d'Ascq after my A-levels; there were lots of students and also a good atmosphere. It was not easy for me because it was somehow too spiritualized and I was not used to it (...) but it really is in the reformed church that I already knew I found what suits me the most. A church which allows me to work my mind freely, that gives importance to the word of God, a church that welcomed me. There were some African people who gave me a good reception and the church proposed me to become a Sunday school teacher, so I started to serve again doing what I was used to do in Togo where I was very committed to youth groups and where I organized Christmas celebrations. So really, it was in Calais that things started again for me.

(Male, Togolese living in France, Reformed, lay)

In addition it is also important to remember that a majority church in the country of origin may be a minority church in the new country, and vice versa. Therefore the church structure, its relations with the outside world, can consequently be different and this can have a repercussion on the activity held, on its visibility and, in some cases, on the relations vis-à-vis other churches and the government:

I am born in Christian family, my father and mother they were church members that time, I grew up in this atmosphere and everything was clear from that time until now. All my relatives belong to Catholic Church (...). Here in Finland it's different I ask many people on the street where is Catholic Church but they don't know where is Catholic Church that was in 1995. (...) The church here is the same like in Lebanon but there not in the same level of activities.

(Female, Lebanese living in Finland, Roman Catholic, lay)

Furthermore, interviewees reported how the first encounter is vital to determine whether to stay or the leave the church. Being welcomed is a first step in the integration process for migrants:



As many Catholics do, I went to services on big holidays, like Easter, and sometimes in between. But something was missing. Nobody ever came and said “oh, hi! Nice to see you, where are you from?” I just went there, attended mass and went home again, and nobody ever took notice.

(Female, Zimbabwean living in Germany, Roman Catholic, lay)

My first encounter was around 1989 to 1990 and it was in a Pentecostal church in Conegliano. I've visited the church for about 18 months to be exact. What happened was that nobody came to greet me, nobody welcomed me. I didn't know them and they didn't know me. So, I was always going there and I went purposely to worship God, but for that people there was no feeling of fellowship or social activity. We were two different worlds. (...) I come from the Assembly of God background. Everything they were doing was the same. I could sing the songs because of the way the hymn goes. Even though I couldn't speak Italian I could recognize they were singing some hymns that I already knew, and I could understand the preaching by following the Bible. I was present at everything they did but actually what was lacking was that they didn't speak my language, I didn't speak theirs. They could have come and salute me, shake hands but they did not.

(Male, Ghanaian living in Italy, Pentecostal, pastor/leader)

As a result of their experience both interviewees opted for another congregation. Although the language is an issue, the Ghanaian interviewee rightly suggests that the language cannot become an excuse for not taking care of the newcomers in the congregation. In fact a similar story happened to the Togolese respondent in Finland:

When I first came, I tried to attend the service in Finnish. And, at that time, my Finnish was nothing. I did not even have the basics. So for me, it was difficult. I did not get anything. And, I don't know if I was the one who did not approach anybody or if it were the people in the church who did not approach me (...)...ok I did not understand anything but I tried to follow and as I knew the time when they were preaching, praying and all those stuff so I did everything on my own. And I went home. But it was not a good experience for me. There was no one to translate for me.

(Male, Togolese living in Finland, Presbyterian, lay)

The data shows also positive examples of migrants who have been welcomed in the congregation since their arrival and who have decided to remain and actively participate ever since:



When I arrived here, I was immediately surrounded, integrated, and encouraged by the pastor as if he knew that I could bring something to the church. And I think that for a migrant Christian like me all this was very meaningful.

(Male, Central African living in France, Pentecostal, lay)

A Cameroonian in Sweden stressed the importance of receiving a warm welcome but also of going beyond that: being invited to activities and events outside the community helped him for instance to strengthen his ties with the church. It seems, however, that not all migrants who approached the same congregation have the same experience and according to the respondent it has to do with the migrants approach too:

...when you are immigrant somewhere you should not just come there and still live like you are in your own country, it is two countries, two different cultures, especially when you are not from the European circle.

(Male, Cameroonian living in Sweden, Pentecostal, lay)

SUMMARY

Data shows that migrants look for a church which resembles as much as possible the church in the country of origin. However, the first impression is decisive to stay or to go somewhere else. Changing or looking for another congregation is not merely related to the welcoming received, but it is also related to more liturgical and theological issues. In addition, it appears that being welcomed is the first step in feeling part of the community and building up the basis for beginning the journey towards integration. Migrants, on their side, also need to first understand the new environment, which might be the opposite of what they were used to, and secondly, once welcomed, take an active role in the church. In the next section we will explore what are the factors which can either promote or discourage migrants' active participation in the church.

FACTORS BEHIND MIGRANTS' ACTIVATION

'In my family in Togo, being active in the church is a normal thing. There is no other way.'

(Male, Togolese living in France, Reformed, lay)

The data reports that very often previous involvement of individuals in their country of origin is an important factor promoting active participation of migrants in congregations.

I can find the motivation in my past experience. I was very active in the Evangelical Church of Congo in a youth group (...) There I had some responsibilities and in the objectives of this group there was the will of



being witness everywhere. Once you learn something, you have to bring it outside and be helpful for the nation.

(Male, Congolese living in Italy, Reformed, Lay)

No doubt and wondering why we should go to the church. The church is, it has been our life, for many, many years...

(Female, Assyrian living in Sweden, Syrian Orthodox Church/Church of Sweden, lay)

Along with the previous involvement, the character, the charisma and the personal choices/aspirations play a major role in the activism.

Actually I was an evangelist before coming here. (...)Based on a prophecy that I was called to speak to the nations, I left and came here to spread the gospel.

(Male, Ghanaian living in Italy, Pentecostal, pastor/leader)

The Ghanaian interviewee is not an isolated case; among the respondents there are other situations where previous involvement and personal aspirations merged. For instance in the Netherlands we have two cases: a South-African male came to the Netherlands when he was already ordained and an Indonesian female minister in the Netherlands who came as trainee minister and who was ordained as the first migrant woman in the mainline Church in the Netherlands in 1995.

Along with a history of active participation of migrants in their country of origin, there are factors that foster or inhibit it in the new country. The Cameroonian interviewee from Sweden talks about the first impression congregants have and the care they have for each other and for the newcomers:

It's the first impression, the first day they go to the church that is the impression they have, this I mean, what they are going to do in the future... (...)The second factor is the care... many churches miss that part, to care about people, I use to say there are people, nobody has said to them during the week, "how are doing in the school, how are you doing in your job", it is like nobody cares... and when (newcomers) come to church they expect people to ask them such questions to care about them (...) when you live in Sweden, I live in a flat but I don't know my neighbours...

(Male, Cameroonian living in Sweden, Pentecostal, lay)

There are also attitudes and behaviours that instead of fostering participation and integration inhibit them. Language appears as one of the factors perceived as a barrier as the example below shows:



... (Language) can be a big barrier for many immigrants to be devoted in the church activities. Most of the time the tools used for translation are not in good condition or may be the interpreters are not competent. (...) It happens that we have service in English when the guest is an English speaker. I understand Swedish it means it is not a problem for me.

(Male, Cameroonian living in Sweden, Pentecostal, lay)

In addition to the language barrier, another discouraging element can be identified in the lack of empowerment of the congregants from the side of the minister. If there is only one person doing everything people can lose the motivation not only to be active but also to attend the church. Below the considerations of a Ghanaian leader, in Italy, to this regard:

When I came here, I visited many churches and I noticed that the pastor did everything, the sermon, the liturgy, the choice of the songs. So we just sat and listened. This was discouraging. I suggested something about this but the suggestion did not get well. When we started this ministry, I did it the way we do in Africa: every single part of the worship is being organized by someone. We are all humans and sometimes something can bring us down but I love the verse of the Bible that says that anyone who puts his mind on God will never be shaking.

(Male, Ghanaian living in Italy, Pentecostal, pastor/leader)

Therefore it emerges that the cultural differences – if not properly addressed and dealt with - might push migrants away, or they can also have negative repercussions on their participation in the church. To this regard the experience of an Ethiopian interviewee in Germany is also emblematic who reflects on the differences between the worship life in Ethiopia and in Germany and how it has had a negative impact on participation of migrants in the church:

The problem is (...) that even if we belong to the same denomination the way we exercise our service is completely different. So, people sometimes say it is not very encouraging and not very attractive so even some of the members who were active members back in Ethiopia, they are not as active as they used to...they say the environment is not attractive, they say when they go to church it is not...the usual thing.

(Male, Ethiopian living in Germany, Lutheran, Ordained)

The respondent explains that the difference consists in music, prayer and quality of the sermon. The experience is, however, diverse if you find yourself alone, as a migrant, in the church. The Congolese interviewee in Italy explains how the attitude of congregants had influenced his participation:



It wasn't easy for me to integrate in this community (...) when I started attending the church assemblies I was the only African and, at the time, it was rare to see even a stranger standing in front of the community reading the bible on Sunday. I also thought to renounce. You know God is everywhere, so I could even pray and meditate in another place.

(Male, Congolese living in Italy, Reformed, Lay)

According to the interviewee, the difficulties may lie in the supposed cold attitude of the church congregants who come from the region – Piedmont – in the North-West; and, in the historical background of the Waldensian Church, which is a minority church. Despite these difficulties, the respondent recognizes the benefits of the church as a channel for integration while, at the same time, pointing out the crucial role played by national policies:

The church is a very interesting channel for integration but we can't forget the other aspect (the political context). (...) Politics for me is everyday life, it is the society but for migrants is very hard to get engaged in the social life (...) Migrants need stable jobs to renew their permission to stay (in Italy), so they don't have time for social life. If you don't work you won't renew your permission. Many people say that it's impossible to be involved in all these activities without earning money from them. I understand their point of view, maybe it's the Italian context.

(Male, Congolese living in Italy, Reformed, Lay)

SUMMARY

The first consideration to be drawn from the data is the existence of relations between migrants' previous involvement in the church in their country of origin and their activism in the church in the new country. However, interviewees suggest that there are factors promoting or discouraging their participation in church as well as in society. A welcoming environment followed by an involvement of the newcomers in church and extra-church activities does foster an active participation of migrants. On the other hand, a cold reception along with the language barrier discourages migrants' participation, not only active participation but participation in general. However, what is perceived as a 'cold reception' may be related to cultural differences and in the journey towards integration migrants have also their role to play. Finally it emerges that the legal status of migrants' in the new country and laws regulating migration and integration issues influence the possibility of individuals to take an active role in churches as well as in civil society. The next section will analyse the different approaches that churches have in serving as an integration tool for migrants.



ROLE OF THE CHURCH FROM THE MIGRANTS' PERSPECTIVES

'The only thing I can say about my experiences all over the world is that, as far as immigrants are concerned, the church is extremely good basis for providing immigrants with the stability.'

(Male, English living in Finland, Anglican, ordained)

In a migration situation people find themselves in more vulnerable situations characterised by high voltages of insecurity, instability and uncertainty¹⁶. The respondents identify a key role played by churches in supporting migrants in the new environment as highlighted by the experiences below:

The churches, all the churches, all the denominations have to be in a positions to help those who come from abroad and those who are seeking help.

(Male, English living in Finland, Anglican, ordained)

I think that the church played an important role in my stability in this country; I really do need God. And since I am far from my family I know that He strengthens me and guides me in everything that I do. In my personal life, I need God more than anything else.

(Male, African Central living in France, Pentecostal, lay)

Stability is, in fact, a recurring theme in the interviews. However, for respondents stability is a concept that goes beyond being fully part of a religious community. It can be reached by finding a job, friends, and family and, the church connections can play a prominent role in this. It can be achieved through: becoming a priest, deacon, working for the church in general.

For people like me, when you graduate from school and it's getting difficult for you to get job that is really in your field then if the church could have some kind of relationship with some company or tries to introduce you to a kind of job that can really help you then it could be really okay. So you know that you belong to like a family and you have certain expectations.

(Male, Togolese living in Finland, Presbyterian, lay)

For a Russian interviewee in Finland, the church is the place that gives access to different networks:

In general I got the feeling that in the church I can find anything that I really need: like friends, activities, and work. (...) I can say that the church is always near to immigrant, the church is open for immigrant:

¹⁶ Ekué, A., *op. cit.*



(...) If you are active you can have your position inside the church because they need us and we need them. Having a multicultural group in the church is something good in my opinion.

(Female, Russian living in Finland, lay)

Churches do also play a role in building up a community that resembles the religious and cultural context that migrants had back home. To this regard the analysis of the Indonesian minister in the Netherlands is inspiring as she describes the positive and negative sides of the migrant- led churches:

Let me start with being critical to us as migrants, I mean the Migrant churches in Holland. Many migrant churches are still very much isolated and look to their own groups, to their own business. Of course that is very much understandable because they are small and they are just new here. But it has been like this for a long time and that is not good because the church has to look outside. Most migrants are not very positive at the idea of being integrated into the society because they are either afraid or they feel that the Dutch society is less moral than us (migrant society). They drink a lot of alcohol. They accept homosexuals. They accept euthanasia here in the society. So, migrants are to be, to formulate it more positively, the migrant Christians must be more positively open to the Dutch society. I don't mean to say that they have to accept all their moral ethical things, no... But they can try to understand the standpoint of the other. To be in dialogue. They mostly judge first and then they say Dutch society is evil. That is not good of course. The positive way is that there is a lot of cooperation in local church in the migrant churches.

(Female, Indonesian living in the Netherlands, Protestant, Ordained)

The church can indeed be a space where people from the same nationality or, even more specifically, from the same ethnic group gather together to maintain their cultural traits along with their religious tradition.

We have lots of traditions in our church. Traditional celebrations and festivals, and I like them very much. It is very impressive and magnificent in the Syrian Orthodox Church. You feel how the atmosphere and the congregation live up, as if for you, God is for you, the theological in the altar in the church, it is beautiful. Not everything is wasted, or negative. But, personally, to accept that woman is not welcome in the altar as much as men are is a problem. Why only priests, male deacons, male choir are welcome?

(Female, Assyrian living in Sweden, Syrian Orthodox Church/Church of Sweden, lay)



According to the Assyrian interviewee in Sweden, the encounter between the traditional church and the mainline church in the new country raises some questions, creates challenges as presented in the example above in relation to gender roles in the different church traditions. However, it appears possible to attend both – mainline and migrant-led churches as they absolve to different roles as she further explains below:

(Being part of the Swedish church) has its advantages. (...) here there is not so much contact with Swedish families. (...) In this area, in this neighbourhood, there are no Swedish families, unfortunately, which we are in contact with. Then the church becomes the only place of contact with Swedes. Otherwise I would not meet my co-workers, for example, and almost all of them are Swedes. That does a lot! You hear, a lot, you learn a lot when you discuss...

(Female, Assyrian living in Sweden, Syrian Orthodox Church/Church of Sweden, lay)

In this case being part of the ethnic church is a way to maintain and nourish cultural and religious tradition, while being part of the mainline church gives migrants the opportunity to weave a net of relations with the receiving society that is crucial for the integration process. Another interviewee sees the differences between migrant-led and mainline churches laying on cultural issues but he provides another solution:

I think the thing there is that people tend to stick together culturally. It's from both sides. Migrants often want to stick to their group. They have their way of praying or worshipping. And mainstream have their way. It is not always with bad motives or discrimination, it is cultural. But I always think that we must be open for one another. We really encourage if people of another background whether from Africa or China, whoever wants to join us are most welcome.

(Male, South African living in the Netherlands, Protestant, Ordained)

Albeit migrant churches often utilize buildings of the mainline churches for their worship and activities, there is not always communication and exchange between migrant-led and mainline churches:

The Oromo congregation is here and the German congregation is here. So people either go to the German congregation or they go to the Oromo congregation. So there is no dialogue on how to change the German way of worship, but parallel we are conducting our own worship-programme in our language, and this is a big powerful compared to the German way.

(Male, Ethiopian living in Germany, Lutheran, Ordained)



For a Nigerian living in the Netherlands the only way forward to survive as a church is 'being church together' which is not assimilation but valuing diversity:

So, any church that is not ready to be 'church together' will die. I am telling you, whether immigrant or mainline we have to come together to be effective. That will make the church very rich like the one described in revelation I think chapter nine, all people worshipping God from all nations. That is the vision of God to bring people from different nations to worship him. There are challenges there. Because if we study the concept of multi-cultural churches, there are real challenges. But there can be unity in diversity which the Bible really preaches. So, we have to find a way to make it work.

(Male, Nigerian living in the Netherlands, Maranathan Christian Assembly, Ordained)

In line with what is expressed by the Nigerian interviewee, the Togolese respondent in France has similar hopes and expectations. Moreover, he delineates a possible way to be followed:

Every one of us has to find his place. Within the church we try to encourage Africans so that they feel involved and welcomed in the church. We need to make room for everyone. The migrants are asked to participate to the activities of the church. We wrote an article which goal is to help us welcome the stranger and to work within a context of great diversity. We do not have rigid orientations but good will. Rigid orientations gave priority to individuals. Now on the contrary the collective movements are claiming. Since our actions speak for us, I always say that the migrants must get involved first. Africans need to take their place. We must manage diversity with what unites us the most: our faith. That's why we organize one service a year which is a service of sharing in which we take down barriers. We have to pass through faith to know what diversity is. We had a synod about the place a protestant takes in the reception of foreigners.

(Male, Togolese living in France, Reformed, lay)

Finally, being church together for the Assyrian respondent is 'all about people' as the church is composed of people:

Without people the church is just empty, an empty house. And it is so important to me to work with people, to meet people and be together with them. (...) Irrespectively of male, female, old, young – meet them at their level according to their needs. (...) To me this is church.

(Female, Assyrian living in Sweden, Syrian Orthodox Church/Church of Sweden, lay)



SUMMARY

Churches as institutions have a role to play for supporting migrants. Drawing from the data it is clear that the church acts as bridge-builder for migrants – to link the old and new realities. Churches provide migrants with stability: spiritual as well as material. Through the religious communities it is possible to establish links and connections which can lead to friendship and to employment. Migrant-led churches, especially those with a *strong* ethnic component serve not only to maintain religious beliefs - which might not be present in the new country - but also their cultural identity. It emerges that migrant-led and mainline churches can have different roles in the integration process of migrants and this is one of the reasons why some of the respondents found themselves attending (both) two congregations. Sometimes migrant churches use the buildings of mainline congregations for worships and other activities but not always there is a real exchange or communication between them.

EXPERIENCING INTEGRATION

Well, actually, integration... I don't know how to express myself, but anyway, irrespectively of the matter, where you are, it must be a mutual cooperation.

(Female, Assyrian living in Sweden, Syrian Orthodox Church/Church of Sweden, lay)

When facing diversity people find themselves caught in positive and negative stereotypes, which, even if led by good will, can result in creating conflicts. To this regard I would like to report the experience of the Zimbabwean interviewee in Germany:

People often want to know what I think about this country, they want to hear about things I don't like (...) or (about) cooking, they want to know about our food (...) they only ask „do you have rice where are you from? Do you have apples? Do you have potatoes?“ That's such nonsense. (Conversations are) very shallow, superficial. And I believe, rice is everywhere, you know. We eat very much the same things. (...) But I recognise when somebody is really interested in a topic, or if they just ask me because I look different. It also happens that when we're in a group with Germans, many Germans have a lot of questions for me, they like to ask a lot of questions, but they don't like to share and tell about themselves. Maybe they think it is self-evident or natural or not interesting, but then, I always feel like I'm being made a poster child or showcase, you know?

(Female, Zimbabwean living in Germany, Roman Catholic, lay)



Another interviewee reported that the language used and the jokes are not always appropriate as they might hurt the other person or be misunderstood:

Once a member of the church with an important role said to me: “You are becoming dangerously Waldensian”. When I heard this I reflected and then I went to talk to a deacon (...) explaining to her what happened. She told me: “I’m so happy to have you here because I think you have something to bring us. I know that this society is not easy, but your presence makes me happy, I know this person and if you need mediation you can count on me”. But I prefer talking face to face, so I asked the person (...) for an encounter. I told him that for me a pastor is like a landmark so I don’t expect to hear every kind of thing from a similar figure, because for me what he said was totally out of context. He answered me that it was a joke, and that the Italians used to do it friendly and frequently. But I thought it was not so funny, because the word dangerous translated in French and in my own dialect becomes a heavy word. Anyway he apologized.

(Male, Congolese living in Italy, Reformed, Lay)

Along with stereotypes and misunderstanding migrants are also confronted with racism in the new country. Sometimes it can be traced in violent or verbal actions but at other times it is more hidden in people’s behaviours and attitudes. According to the South African interviewee in the Netherlands, the skin colour, for instance, does play a role in migrants’ integration:

South Africans are usually quite well integrated in the Dutch society because we have a lot in common. I don’t think they are like Ghanaians or other people from other countries. I think for us it is quiet easy to integrate here.

(Male, South African living in the Netherlands, Protestant, Ordained)

The integration journey as a two way process requires the active involvement of both migrants as well as the receiving societies. Interviewees stressed that to be integrated migrants must be helped and supported, however in this process migrants have their role to play, they cannot entirely depend on the help from the outside (be it the church or the government), they have to be able to articulate their needs, and to be willing to engage in the process.

In Africa, we often have a mentality of begging - we must be helped. I think migrants are able and capable enough to do their thing. (...) You must give them the opportunity to that. (...) They are not stupid. They can take care of themselves. That is one of the things in Holland that people very much tend to be ‘the state must do things’. I’m not so much interested in the state. I will do my own thing and that is what



migrant churches must do. Get your things organized, do it in a positive way and the things will work out.

(Male, South African living in the Netherlands, Protestant, Ordained)

...but you have to offer something yourself. You cannot expect everything to be served upon a silver plate, that won't do. That won't happen even to Swedes living in Sweden. You have to fight for it. (...)

(Female, Assyrian living in Sweden, Syrian Orthodox Church/Church of Sweden, lay)

Knowledge of each other's culture, perspectives, and expectations is a recurring theme among interviewees and it is an important requisite to overcome prejudices and stereotypes. The Surinamese interviewee highlights that mainline churches should go beyond the assumption that people in migrant-led churches are good at singing, dancing; according to her both churches can learn from each other:

There is fear for things that are different and strange, people are afraid of mingling with strangers. (...) I think it is important that we show who we are, that we contact the non-migrant churches, that we make it feel at ease and that they shouldn't be afraid of us (migrant churches). I think that because we don't deal with each other ensures that we don't get to know each other, we don't know each other. (...) I think that the non migrant churches have to be open, to step outside their comfort zone and take a look at we do things. They shouldn't only see us as people who are good at singing or cooking but also because they (non-migrant churches) are sent a good message and because there is a lot we (migrant churches) can learn from them.

(Female, Surinamese living in the Netherlands, Moravian, ordained)

SUMMARY

Data shows that experiences of integration are diverse; they are influenced by the migrants' attitudes as well as by the cultural and political context in the receiving societies. In their everyday life migrants are confronted with racism, stereotypes – both positive and negative - and prejudices. Another important issue arising from the interviews is the risk of dependency on the support provided by churches or by civil society in general. Finally, respondents highlight the importance of 'getting to know each other' as a crucial step towards overcoming prejudices, stereotypes, racism and setting the basis for integration. To conclude, it appears evident that migrants' active participation is crucial in fostering their integration process in churches as well as in society.



CONCLUSIVE REFLECTIONS

From the experiences of the migrants interviewed in the Miracle project some more general considerations can be made. First of all, when discussing migrants' participation in both mainline and migrant-led churches, it is crucial to understand the place that religion occupies in their life. Ugba¹⁷ points out how Western forms of worship are not holistic as it is the case in other parts of the world, including Africa. Even if in Europe there are religious influences in public life, for private citizens, religion, theology and faith are not so intertwined with their daily life as it is for some migrants. This can create misunderstandings and problems as it is often not simply a matter of different liturgies or different theological approaches. However, it is important to keep in mind how diverse the Christian landscape in Europe is with the presence of different confessions, denominations and sensitivities; furthermore, it appears evident that the perception of what is a holistic worship and what forms of expressions it requires is heavily influenced by culture.

Secondly, migration is often a traumatizing experience to the extent that some of the interviewees were not comfortable in talking about it after years, to avoid going through painful memories. Once in the new country, churches are one of the first places migrants turn to. Ebaugh and Chafetz¹⁸ point out that the benefits of religious practices for migrants are not only psychological but that churches – and religious organisations in general - serve the material needs of immigrants. Furthermore Hirschman, who studied the American situation, believes that religion can have a more central role in their lives after immigration than before. 'The certainty of religious precepts can provide an anchor as immigrants must adapt and change many other aspects of their lives and habits. Religious values can also provide support for many other traditional beliefs and patterns - intergenerational obligations, gender hierarchy, and customary familiar practices - that are threatened with adaptation to the seemingly amoral American culture'¹⁹.

This leads us towards the third point of this reflection: re-building the sense of belonging. We have discussed the role religion plays before and after arrival in the new country and Handlin²⁰ underlines that religion for migrants can indeed be considered a bridge linking the old and the new environment. However, it can be deduced that different church structures may lead the bridges towards different endings. Putnam distinguishes between social capital that is bonding and social capital that is bridging: bonding refers to the

¹⁷ Ugba, A. (2007) *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Ebaugh, H.R. and Chafetz, J. S. (eds) (2002) *Religion Across Borders: Transnational Immigrant Networks: Transnational Immigrant Networks*, (USA: Altamira Press).

¹⁹ Hirschman, *op. cit.* p. 396.

²⁰ Handlin, O. (1975) *The uprooted*, USA: Little Brown and Company.



value assigned to social networks between homogeneous groups of people and bridging refers to that of social networks between socially heterogeneous groups.²¹ From the interviews a parallelism emerges between migrant-led churches as social capital that is bonding and mainline churches as social capital that is bridging. Choosing to be part of a mainline church can provide bridging by guaranteeing access to services and networks supporting migrants in their integration process in the receiving societies. On the other hand, migrant-led churches can provide bonding, a strong sense of belonging, often reinforcing religious and cultural ties, without opening up to a social network that goes beyond the migrants' community.

Sometimes, even if the different agents agree on the concept of integration as a two way process, in their everyday practice they may differ on the actions required in order to foster it, hindering their integration potential. However, there are churches, both mainline and migrant-led, which are able to provide bonding and bridging networks for migrants. Ultimately, it depends on what role individuals give to the church, what type of understanding of integration people as well as churches have, and on the level of migrants' active participation. In this light, we can conclude going back to where we started: churches can be, and in fact often are, agents and places of integration.



²¹ Putnam, R. D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster.



FROM THE INTERVIEWS WITH ACTIVE MIGRANTS EMERGES:

(a) First encounter with the church in Europe

- There is a tendency to look for a church that resembles the church where migrants come from;
- Receiving a warm welcome plays a key role in migrants' participation;
- The warm welcome has to be followed by migrants' involvement in church activities.

(b) Factors behind migrants' activation

- Personal attitudes;
- Previous involvement in migrants country of origin;
- Welcoming environment in the receiving church;
- Migrants' legal status in the receiving country.

(c) The role of the church from migrants' perspectives

- Acting as bridge-builder for migrants;
- Providing migrants with spiritual as well as material stability;
- Maintaining religious as well as cultural ties with the migrants' country of origin.

(d) Experiencing integration

- Influenced by migrants' attitudes;
- Influenced by the cultural and political context in the receiving societies;
- Migrants are faced with racism, stereotypes and prejudices;
- The risk of dependency on the support provided by churches or by civil society in general.



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APPENDIX A:

MAIN QUESTIONS AND PROBES

Questions for migrants active in mainline churches and migrant-led churches

1. PERSONAL DESCRIPTION OF THE CURRENT ACTIVITIES:

I would like to interview you for the MIRACLE project because I understand that you are an immigrant who is actively involved in your church. I would therefore be grateful if you could first describe shortly your current activities and role in the church and also other areas of activism.

2. QUESTIONS ON HOW THE INDIVIDUAL BECAME INVOLVED IN THESE ACTIVITIES:

I would like to learn more about how you personally became involved in your community. How did you become active?

What was your first encounter with the church(es) in general? How was your first encounter with church in this country? Does the church you are active in belong to the same denomination of your own country? Can you remember any particular circumstances that motivated or caused you to first become active in the life of this church?

Trajectories: Have there been any important changes in your role? Do you remember any particular circumstances or events that led to these changes?

Biographical genesis of engagement: Can you tell me briefly your migration story? Were you also active in the church in your country of origin? Were there any particular circumstances that influenced you to become active at that time?

3. QUESTIONS ON SUPPORTIVE AND DISCOURAGING CONDITIONS IN THIS COUNTRY:

Can you discuss who or what supports or discourages you and your activities?

Supporting conditions:

You spent a lot of time, energy, and perhaps money for your engagement.
Family and friends: What do your family and your friends think/say about your involvement?

The state: Is there any support given by state/Church authorities? (question particularly for migrant-led churches)

The community: What is your personal impression? Does your church acknowledge and reward active participation of immigrants? What is the



strategy of the church to deal with diversity? Have you sensed that there is a difference in the level of 'social acknowledgement' assigned to mainstream/ host country associations when compared to immigrant groups? (latest question for migrant-led churches)

Discouraging conditions:

Do you sometimes feel discouraged? When and why? (Example)

In general: What do you see as the main factors that discourage engagement in the church? Which conditions are particularly detrimental for actively taking part in the life of the church?

Which are the challenges faced by the church? Which are the challenges faced by migrants?

4) FINAL QUESTION:

Supposed you could decide in church administration: What would you do to support participation of immigrants in church life?

Is there anything else that you think is important for us to know? Any story you would like us to make public?

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