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Towards Intercultural Pastoral Care for Catholic Migrant Couples and Intercultural Couples in Europe

Abstract

This article reports on four sub-studies on pastoral accompaniment and integration processes of Catholic migrant and intercultural couples, living in the Netherlands. The first is a literature study, which shows sustainable beneficial effects of Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) on relationship quality. A second, quantitative survey investigates the relationships between MRE and relationship quality. Thirdly, semi-structured in-depth interviews with migrant and intercultural couples have been held. Finally, by means of a SWOT-analysis, interviews and written responses with pastoral caregivers and diocesan staff members have been analysed. The article concludes with possibilities to improve intercultural pastoral care and a comparative analysis of Polish/Slovak responses to Ukrainian refugees.

Keywords: pastoral care, migrant and intercultural couples, integration, marriage and relationship education.

W kierunku międzykulturowej opieki duszpasterskiej wobec katolickich par migrantów i par międzykulturowych w Europie

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia cztery badania dotyczące duszpasterskiego towarzyszenia oraz procesów integracyjnych katolickich par migrantów i międzykulturowych mieszkających w Holandii. Pierwsze z nich to studium literatury, które pokazuje trwałe, korzystne efekty edukacji małżeńskiej i relacyjnej (*Marriage and Relationship Education* – MRE) dla jakości relacji. Drugie badanie, ilościowe, analizuje zależności między MRE a jakością związku. Po trzecie, przeprowadzono częściowo ustrukturyzowane, pogłębione wywiady z parami migrantkami i międzykulturowymi. Wreszcie, za pomocą analizy SWOT opracowano wywiady i pisemne wypowiedzi duszpasterzy oraz pracowników kurii diecezjalnych. Artykuł kończy się wskazaniem możliwości poprawy międzykulturowej opieki duszpasterskiej oraz analizą porównawczą reakcji Polski/Słowacji na uchodźców z Ukrainy.

Słowa kluczowe: opieka duszpasterska, pary migrantki i międzykulturowe, integracja, edukacja małżeńska i relacyjna.

From the total number of migrants in Europe between 1990 and 2020, it is estimated that 56% is Christian, 20% are religiously unaffiliated and 18% are Muslim¹. Of the total number of Christians in the Netherlands, 6.2 million in 2015, approximately 1 million have a migrant background, originating from Europe or from other continents². For example, since 2007 when the Netherlands granted Polish nationals access to its labour market, some migrants began to settle and the number of Polish nationals recorded in the Dutch population register increased substantially, from around 19,000 in 2007 to 186,000 in 2023, making them the largest immigrant group³. At a time when church attendance among Dutch Christians is declining, especially among Catholics, the number of Christian migrants who regularly attend church services is increasing, particularly in the big cities. These migrants are all trying to create a home in the host country where they settle, either temporarily or permanently. They are looking for ways to flourish, and many of them are starting families.

In this mixed-method study, our goal has been to answer the following central question: To what extent do the experiences of migrant couples and intercultural couples who have been married in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands between 1995 and 2022 show patterns of cultural or intercultural transition or cultural defence regarding their integration into the church community and society at large?

Migrant couples participating in this study consist of a man and a woman who have both migrated to the Netherlands and who intend to marry or are married in the Catholic Church. Intercultural couples consist of a migrant and a Dutch partner who want to marry or are married in the Catholic Church. After a migration experience, migrants go through a process of cultural transition (CT) as they seek ways to integrate into the host society, without completely losing their own culture of origin⁴. For example, they learn the local language, expand their social network among the native population, etc. A welcoming church community could ease such a process. In contrast to CT, religion and spirituality could also provide means for the defence of a particular migrant culture, when migrants resist certain influences of the host society that are seen as a threat to their culture of origin. This is called a pattern of cul-

¹ Pew Research Center. 2024. *The Religious Composition of the World's Migrants*. Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 13.

² Joep de Hart, Pepijn van Houwelingen. 2018. *Christenen in Nederland: Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid*. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 103.

³ Nasim Ahamed Mondal, Agnieszka Fihel, Weronika Kloc-Nowak. 2025. "The distortion of fertility due to migration: A comparative analysis of migrants in the Netherlands and stayers in Poland". *Demographic Research*, 53 (12) : 329.

⁴ Steve Bruce. 2011. *Secularization: in defence of an unfashionable theory*. Oxford: University Press, 49–52.

tural defence (CD). For example, migrants seek out a church community where their mother tongue is spoken, they socialise with members of their own ethnic community, etc. In our research, the terms CT and CD are used as dynamics of integration or lack of integration. This research provides a test case for theories about CT and CD among migrant couples and intercultural couples. During this research, a special form of CT was identified, namely that of intercultural transition (IT). We speak of IT when spouses in an intercultural relationship in the host country adopt certain cultural elements of their migrant partner, or when a hosting church community adopts cultural elements of its migrant members⁵.

This study is based on mixed-method empirical research into the experiences and pastoral care of migrants and intercultural couples. Mixed method means that both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been used. According to Dillen, practical theology aims to contribute to the improvement of religious and pastoral practices as an emancipatory and transformative discipline and method⁶. In her view, practical theology should strive to promote dialogue between the church, society and academia, or at least to reduce the divisions between them. In line with this, I believe that practical theological research could grow in its relevance to society when it contains recommendations for pastoral practice based on empirical data. For this reason, this article concludes with a discussion of pastoral implications of the various research results in the European context, particularly in the Netherlands and in relation to the welcoming of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and Slovakia.

1. Methods used

Our data collection took place in four phases. The first sub-study concerns an evaluation of existing research into pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after their church wedding, using an empirical-critical theological method⁷. This practical theological method integrates empirical data from the human sciences into a pastoral-theological vision and is aimed at renewing pastoral practice⁸.

⁵ Ward Biemans. 2025. *Towards intercultural pastoral care: Pastoral accompaniment of migrant and intercultural couples in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands*. Tilburg: Open Press TiU, 15–16.

⁶ Annemie Dillen. 2020. What is practical theology?. In *Discovering practical theology: Exploring boundaries*. Ed. Annemie Dillen, Stefan Gärtner, 66. Louvain: Peeters Publishers & Booksellers.

⁷ Biemans. 2025. *Towards intercultural pastoral care*, 25–42.

⁸ Emmanuel Agius. 2016. Clear as a teacher and tender as a mother: The interface between doctrine and pastoral care. In *Authentic voices, discerning hearts: New resources for the Church on*

Secondly, a quantitative study has been conducted by means of an online questionnaire among both migrants and Dutch people in intercultural relationships⁹. For this study in 2021, 198 pastors, student chaplains and contact persons from religious communities in the Netherlands were approached. They were asked to forward to migrant couples or intercultural couples an invitation to participate in our survey. Participants were married in the Catholic Church after 1995 or were preparing for marriage. In addition to a survey in Dutch and English, translations were available in French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Papiamentu, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish and Vietnamese. Results were analysed from a total of 223 participants, representing a response rate of 30%. The survey consisted of 60 closed and 2 open questions, including: 21 questions about general characteristics of the participants; 10 questions about the participants' assessment of their Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) and their self-perceived relationship quality; 23 questions about their current religious and spiritual activities and their wishes for future activities and experiences; 5 questions measuring the extent of their integration into the church community and the host society, as well as their wishes in this regard; and finally, 3 questions about their opinion on church life in the Netherlands.

A third, qualitative study was conducted among 12 married migrant couples and intercultural couples ($n = 24$), who were selected from the large group of participants for semi-structured in-depth interviews¹⁰. In selecting the 24 interviewees, the aim has been to achieve a diversity of countries of origin (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Eritrea, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Ukraine, Poland and Tanzania) and a mix of couples with the same ethnic background and intercultural couples. Questions were asked to gain insight into their migration history, their integration process into Dutch society and the local church community, their experiences with pastoral care, their religiosity and spirituality, and their prospects. The distinction between being 'religious' and being 'spiritual' has been taken from Jiexia Zhai and colleagues. They see 'religiousness' as 'often implying a connection with established institutional forms of worship, and a link with received theological doctrines and dogmas.' By contrast, the term 'spirituality' is 'widely perceived to be more individual and subjective, reflecting personal practices and experiences that may diverge from religious orthodoxy or convention'¹¹. By coding the interviews, we

marriage and family. Ed. Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi, Aldegonde Brenninkmeijer-Wehrhahn, 30–58. Zürich: Lit Verlag.

⁹ Biemans. 2025. *Towards intercultural pastoral care*, 43–64.

¹⁰ Biemans. 2025. *Towards intercultural pastoral care*, 65–86.

¹¹ Jiexia Elisa Zhai, Christopher G. Ellison, Charles E. Stokes, Norval D. Glenn. 2008. „Spiritual, but not religious: the impact of parental divorce on the religious and spiritual lives of young adults in the United States”. *Review of Religious Research* 49 (4) : 380–381.

investigated the dynamics of integration CT, CD and IT and the underlying values expressed by interviewees when they described their personal integration process into the local church community and Dutch society. The inter-coder reliability has been checked, with ca. 90% correspondence between coders.

In the fourth phase, qualitative research was conducted among migrant pastors and Dutch pastors and diocesan staff in the Netherlands, asking how pastoral strategies relating to migrant couples and intercultural couples and their families could be improved¹². In 2023, ten semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted: with seven Catholic pastors, of the Chaldean and Syro-Antiochian rites and from English-, Polish-, Spanish- and Ukrainian-speaking migrant communities; with two Catholic parish priests and a rector of three multi-ethnic, Dutch- and English-speaking communities. In addition to an interview with a Spanish-speaking pastor, an annual report from a welfare organisation for Spanish-speaking migrants in Amsterdam was also analysed. Finally, another interview was conducted and three written responses to a short questionnaire were collected from diocesan staff members. All eleven interviews and four written sources were examined using a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). The research design of the three quantitative and qualitative sub-studies has been approved by the Ethics Review Board of the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology¹³.

2. Results

The literature review focuses primarily on the practical experience of couples in Europe and the U.S. Several studies show that MRE has a lasting positive effect on the quality of couples' relationships and significantly reduces the likelihood of divorce¹⁴. MRE is often provided in a religious setting. Married couples who have participated in some form of MRE score significantly higher on relationship quality and mutual commitment, as assessed by the couples themselves, and lower on relationship conflicts. Other research shows that the risk of divorce for cohabiting couples is approximately twice as high as for

¹² Biemans. 2025. *Towards intercultural pastoral care*, 109–128.

¹³ Research data are available on request, in pseudonymised form, for the quantitative survey: <https://doi.org/10.34894/VLLBCE>; for the interviews with migrant and intercultural couples: <https://doi.org/10.34894/KGQRTE>; for the interviews with migrant and Dutch pastoral caregivers: <https://doi.org/10.34894/VABHJX>.

¹⁴ Ryan Carlson, Andrew Daire, Matthew Munyon, Mark Young. 2012. "A comparison of cohabiting and noncohabiting couples who participated in premarital counseling using the PREPARE model". *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 20 (2) : 123.

married couples¹⁵. The literature review also shows that adults after divorce and children with divorced parents generally have lower mental well-being than adults and children in intact families¹⁶.

The second part of the literature review aims to set out a vision of how pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after their church wedding could be further improved. Pope Francis has invited the church community to broaden its pastoral vision of accompaniment of couples and families¹⁷. Accompaniment should take into account the diversity of family life. It should be based on a supportive and welcoming attitude towards young couples from different cultural backgrounds, towards single parents and towards families who do not (yet) meet the Church's ideal image of married life. Regarding the latter group of families, a pastoral application of the principle of gradualness is necessary¹⁸. According to Barth, the Church can achieve this pastoral application through a threefold investment: in the formation of pastors, aimed at greater awareness of the diversity of spiritual experiences of couples, by listening to them and engaging in dialogue with them; through the development of tools for spiritual support, with the help of the couples themselves and of the new religious movements; and by offering MRE and other formation activities after marriage, in order to (re)vitalise the spiritual life of couples¹⁹.

During the third step, critical reflection is given to empirical research that could support a pastoral strategy for accompanying couples. An American study measures various effects related to religiosity, spirituality and relationship quality. According to the research results, attending church, praying together as a couple and personal prayer all contribute to a higher perceived marital quality²⁰. British evaluation research into the effects of various MRE programs has shown that participants report significantly higher scores in mental well-being or relationship quality, although this effect is of limited duration²¹. Lasting effects of MRE are more likely

¹⁵ Kirsten van Houdt, Anne-Rigt Poortman. 2018. "Joint lifestyles and the risk of union dissolution: Differences between marriage and cohabitation". *Demographic Research* 39 (15) : 448.

¹⁶ Juho Härkönen, Fabrizio Bernardi, Diederik Boertien. 2017. "Family dynamics and child outcomes: An overview of research and open questions". *European Journal of Population* 33: 166.

¹⁷ Francis. 2016. *Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*. Vatican: LEV.

¹⁸ Francis. 2016. *Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, 295.

¹⁹ Silvie Barth. 2017. "The path of elective love: towards a Christian spirituality of the contemporary couple". *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* 23: 15.

²⁰ Daniel Lichter, Julie Carmalt. 2009. "Religion and marital quality among low-income couples". *Social Science Research* 38 (1) : 180.

²¹ Thomas Spielhofer, J. Corlyon, L. Stock, M. Gieve, B. Durbin, M. Smith. 2014. *Relationship support interventions evaluation*. London: Department for Education.

if a pastoral care provider has a strong bond with a couple and shows sensitivity to the intercultural development of the church community²².

The main question of the quantitative research part was: To what extent can MRE and pastoral accompaniment before and after a wedding within the Catholic Church contribute to a higher relationship quality among migrant and intercultural couples in the Netherlands? After analysing the results of the survey, various outcomes were found:

- 1) Marriage preparation lasting more than 10 hours is rated more positively ($\mu = 2.49$ on a scale of 0 to 3) than marriage preparation lasting between 5 and 10 hours ($\mu = 2.16$; $p < 0.01$), as assessed by the couples themselves.
- 2) Marriage preparation using official course material is rated significantly more positively by participating couples ($\mu = 2.51$) than marriage preparation without course material ($\mu = 2.04$; $p < 0.01$).
- 3) Good cooperation between the person responsible for marriage preparation and the couple who want to get married is a significant factor in a more positive evaluation of marriage preparation by the couple ($\mu = 2.51$) than when the cooperation is rated as reasonable ($\mu = 1.88$; $p < 0.01$).
- 4) Marriage accompaniment with a welcome into the church community is evaluated more positively by participants ($\mu = 2.28$) than marriage accompaniment without such a welcome ($\mu = 2.04$; $p < 0.05$).
- 5) Striving for reconciliation after a conflict ($r = 0.361$) and the frequency with which forgiveness plays a role within the relationship ($r = 0.188$) are both significantly associated with a higher perceived relationship quality ($p < 0.01$). Church attendance, personal prayer, praying together, talking about prayer life, and appreciation of Sunday rest are not significantly associated with a higher perceived relationship quality. Given the chosen research method, no causality can be assumed for these correlations. Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile to pay attention to the values of forgiveness and reconciliation after a conflict in MRE and in pastoral accompaniment after the wedding. This can lead to a higher relationship quality and can strengthen the marriage bond.

In general, our findings indicate that MRE and other religious and spiritual activities can often provide support during the social and cultural transition from the migrant's home country to the host country; this can help migrants and intercultur-

²² Jesse Owen, Galena Rhoades, Scott Stanley, Howard Markman. 2011. "The role of leaders' working alliance in premarital education". *Journal of Family Psychology* 25 (1) : 53.

al couples to have a good start in their marriage and family life in the hosting society, while continuing to value their cultural roots.

During the third phase of our data collection, 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with married migrant and intercultural couples ($n = 24$). Questions were asked about their migration history, their integration process into Dutch society and the local church community, their experiences with pastoral care, their religiosity and spirituality, and their prospects. The first research question for this phase was: How do patterns of CT, IT, and CD evolve among the interviewed couples? The results, shown in Table 1, indicate that patterns of CT ($n = 86$) occur more frequently than patterns of CD ($n = 51$) or IT ($n = 22$).

Table 1. Frequency of patterns of CT, IT and CD in interviews with migrant and intercultural couples

Cultural Transition (CT) ($n = 88$)	Frequency
Migrant is discovering a new religious or spiritual experience in the host country	26
Migrant is giving up societal customs	23
Migrant is giving up native language	17
Migrant is trying to introduce cultural elements in the host country	9
Migrant is giving up religious or spiritual customs	7
Migrant is giving up familial customs	6
Intercultural Transition (IT) ($n = 20$)	
Native partner is taking over cultural elements from migrant partner	15
Children are taking over cultural elements from migrant parent	5
Cultural Defence (CD) ($n = 51$)	
Migrant is preserving religious or spiritual customs	26
Migrant is preserving native language	8
Migrant is preserving familial customs	5
Migrant is preserving societal customs	3
Migrant is trying to defend own cultural elements against the culture in the host country	3
Native partner is defending cultural elements from host country	2
Children are not taking over cultural elements from host country	2
Migrant is turning away from spirituality or religious experiences in the host country	2

The most common form of CT involves migrants discovering a new religious or spiritual experience in the host country, often within their Christian faith, for example when they visit a migrant church community or when they are introduced to a predominantly Dutch-speaking church community. Due to migration, they often

give up certain social customs (related to work, study, friends, etc.), as well as their mother tongue. Secondly, patterns of IT are mentioned, for example when Dutch spouses decide to visit a migrant or multi-ethnic church community together with their migrant partner. When interviewees mention patterns of CD, religion is by far the most frequently mentioned cultural element. This indicates that religious customs often remain intact, while other cultural elements such as language, family and social customs tend to change after migration.

The second research question for this third phase was: What values do couples express regarding their married and family life, their faith life, and their integration into Dutch society? Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Values mentioned by migrant couples and intercultural couples during in-depth interview (n = 24)

Values	Frequency
Values of faith (Christian identity, community building, faith education in the church, appreciation of liturgical style, voluntary work, ecumenism, hospitality)	242
Family values (love, togetherness, fidelity, equality, parenting, faith education and hospitality at home)	132
Societal values (personal responsibility, friendship, reconciliation after conflict, religious tolerance and religious freedom, voluntary work)	87

Several interviewees indicated that the experience of migration had strengthened their faith. In intercultural relationships, faith can be shared, especially in situations where a migrant partner has left their home country, family members and cultural customs behind. Some interviewees mentioned the value of ecumenism. These interviewees participate in various Christian communities and make use of their strengths in the areas of liturgy, catechesis and works of charity.

In the fourth part of the data collection, the central question has been: How could the pastoral accompaniment of Catholic migrant couples and intercultural couples and their families offered by pastoral caregivers be improved? Previous research has shown that migrant and multi-ethnic church communities contribute positively to the well-being of migrants, particularly in psychological and spiritual terms²³. In this phase, 11 interviews with Catholic migrant pastors, Dutch pastors and diocesan staff members and 4 written sources

²³ Phillip Connor. 2012. "Balm for the soul: immigrant religion and emotional well-being". *International Migration* 50 (2) : 143.

were analysed using a SWOT analysis. Table 3 shows the results of this SWOT analysis:

Table 3. Results of the SWOT analysis of 11 interviews, 3 written responses and 1 annual report

	Strength	Weakness	Opportunity	Threat	Total
Formation	86	30	38	26	180
Community building	27	32	13	14	86
Liturgy	48	7	13	7	75
Catechesis	38	17	14	6	75
Integration	27	11	13	18	69
Communication	23	21	16	7	67
Pastoral accompaniment	25	9	11	8	53
Maintenance of church buildings	11	10	2	3	26
Charity	13	2	6	2	23
Fundraising	3	6	4	2	15
Total	301	145	130	93	669

Migrant church communities and multi-ethnic church communities offer a wide range of services in the areas of marriage preparation, (adult) education and (children's) catechesis. These activities, as well as liturgy, are often cited as strengths. Many Dutch-speaking church communities are undergoing reorganisations, which can be burdensome for pastoral care providers and volunteers and can be at the expense of formation or community building. There are opportunities for cooperation in catechesis, formation and community building between migrant, multi-ethnic and native communities. Several diocesan staff members mention as a threat that communication with migrant communities is not well developed due to budget cuts or other priorities. Some priests working in large parishes have pointed to the heavy workload and the increased distance between them and their parishioners, both physically and spiritually.

Four possibilities for further development of pastoral practices can be distinguished: 1) Intercultural pastoral care, or how to grow in intercultural sensitivity. At the community level, intercultural pastoral care can be achieved by building bridges between migrant communities and multi-ethnic communities, for example in the areas of formation and charity. 2) Intercultural communication. There are opportunities for bilingual catechesis, simultaneous translation during liturgical celebrations, formation activities and a more effective use of modern means

of communication in contacts with newcomers. 3) Promoting well-being. Migrant and multi-ethnic church communities often play a supporting role in the integration process of migrants into the host society. Pastoral care can make a positive contribution to the mental health of people suffering from loneliness or depression. 4) Community building. There is often a lack of mutual knowledge of people, activities and cultural values and norms between migrant, multi-ethnic and native church communities. Diaconal and formational projects have potential for intergenerational, interdenominational and interreligious cooperation. It is recommended that both migrant and native church communities reflect on how pastoral practices can be implemented in these four areas.

3. Discussion and conclusion

Based on the results of our sub-studies, two theoretical implications can be distinguished. Firstly, in our research we used the distinction between CT and CD²⁴. During our analysis, we introduced a third dynamic of intercultural transition (IT), because we concluded that a binary model of CD and CT was too narrow to capture the diversity of dynamics that existed within couples and within church communities that welcome migrants into their midst. In our opinion, this addition does more justice to the actual situation in globalising societies, where more and more people of different ethnicities live together, which entails a mixing of cultures. Existing theories on IT tend to focus on the efforts of migrants to adapt to the new environment, rather than critically examining the receptivity of the host culture²⁵. Yet this receptivity is a crucial factor when it comes to successful integration. For intercultural couples, this process of intercultural transition ideally works in two directions. Migrants gradually adapt to the host culture, but a native partner also adopts certain cultural elements from a migrant partner, for example in terms of food, holidays in the migrant's country of origin, visiting a migrant church community, learning (a part of) the migrant's language, etc. In this way, both partners could grow in a simultaneous process of individualisation and universalisation of identity, which could give them a special kind of freedom and creativity²⁶.

²⁴ Bruce. 2011. *Secularization*, 49–52.

²⁵ E.g. Joshua Hoops. 2022. "Examining intercultural transition and history through service learning". *Communication Teacher* 36 (1) : 47–53.

²⁶ Young Yun Kim. 2000. *Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE Publications Incorporated, 195.

Secondly, and related to the dynamics of IT, it is necessary to recognise that pastoral care is increasingly intercultural in nature. Based on interviews with pastors and the SWOT analysis, we argue that in an increasingly globalised society, it could help migrant communities, multi-ethnic communities and hosting church communities to look more outward, build bridges to other communities and intensify cooperation. This conclusion, based in part on interviews with migrant couples and intercultural couples, corresponds with Emmanuel Lartey's analysis of current trends in pastoral theology, in which he sees a gradual shift from a classical-clerical paradigm, through the growing importance of a clinical-pastoral paradigm and the recognition of a communal-contextual paradigm, to an intercultural paradigm²⁷.

Our research results raise several questions regarding ecclesiastical and social implications. The first question is of an ecclesiastical nature: Looking at these findings, can we expect migrants to make a greater future contribution to activities in multi-ethnic or native religious communities? Previous research has shown that religiosity among migrants arriving in Europe, measured in terms of attendance at religious gatherings, daily prayer and self-perceived religiosity, is higher than among the native population²⁸.

In the Netherlands, migrants from outside Europe describe themselves as religious (63.7%), more often than Europeans (47.2%) or Dutch people (37.5%)²⁹. Furthermore, religiosity among Christian migrants arriving in a country where they form a religious minority remains higher, even for the second generation. On the other hand, Van Tubergen and Sindradóttir found that in countries where religiosity is relatively low, the religiosity of migrants decreases³⁰. Furthermore, we found that among migrants from Central/Eastern Europe and outside Europe, the level of CD is higher than among Western European people. This means, for example, that many non-Western migrants prefer to attend religious services in a language other than Dutch. The answer to the question posed above is therefore somewhat ambiguous and will largely depend on the future policies of migrant, multi-ethnic and native communities and their ability to build intercultural bridges in their religious activities. It could help if parishes and dioceses are willing to invest in the intercultural skills of their staff and

²⁷ Emmanuel Lartey. 2013. *Pastoral theology in an intercultural world*, Eugene (OR.): Wipf and Stock Publishers, 122–125.

²⁸ Frank van Tubergen, Jórunn Sindradóttir. 2011. "The Religiosity of Immigrants in Europe: A Cross-National Study". *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50 (2) : 281.

²⁹ Hans Schmeets, Marieke Houben. 2023. "Religieuze betrokkenheid in Nederland", Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2023/religieuze-betrokkenheid-in-nederland/4-religieuze-betrokkenheid-naar-achtergrondkenmerken> (20.01.2026).

³⁰ Tubergen, Sindradóttir. 2011. "The Religiosity of Immigrants in Europe", 286.

pastoral care providers, to the extent that they have the resources to do so. In this context, it is recommended that catechesis contributes to mutual knowledge between churches in the country of origin and in the host country³¹.

A second question concerns the social context of our findings. In a political climate of resistance to large-scale migration, can church communities be expected to encourage further integration of their members into the host society? Based on the results of recent Dutch and European research and our own findings, we tend to answer in the affirmative. A recent study shows that religious organisations, including migrant churches in the city of Rotterdam, contribute to the creation of social networks, offer a great deal of voluntary support and serve as meeting places³². The researchers also found that more than half of the religious organisations that participated in their study pay attention to both bonding (by creating connections within their own community) and bridging (by creating connections between different communities).

A European study shows that strongly religious people are less negative about immigration than non-religious people³³. Similarly, Italian Catholics with a high level of religious commitment have, on average, a more positive attitude towards immigrants than non-practising or irregularly practising Catholics³⁴.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the large exodus of refugees has had a tremendous impact in many European nations. Recent studies have appeared on the reception of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and elsewhere in Europe and on the attitude of the welcoming nations. At the moment of writing this article, around one million Ukrainian refugees stay in Poland, the largest number within Europe after Germany (1.3 million refugees)³⁵. Polish law guarantees some fundamental elements for the refugees from Ukraine, like legal residence in Poland, financial and non-financial aid to address basic needs, access to the job market and access to medical care. It also provides financial aid to Polish citizens who offer their homes to Ukrainian ref-

³¹ Francis, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. 2024. *For a synodal Church: communion, participation, mission. Final document*. Vatican: Secretaria Generalis Synodi, 145.

³² Jessica van den Toorn, Maarten Davelaar, Ahmed Hamdi, Leyla Reches, Milan van Keulen. 2020. *Omvang en karakter van de maatschappelijke activiteiten van levensbeschouwelijke organisaties in Rotterdam*. Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut, 73.

³³ Andrea Bohman, Mikael Hjerm. 2014. "How the religious context affects the relationship between religiosity and attitudes towards immigration". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37 (6) : 946.

³⁴ Riccardo Ladini, Ferruccio Biolcati, Francesco Molteni, Andrea Pedrazzani, Cristiano Vezzoni. 2021. "The multifaceted relationship between individual religiosity and attitudes toward immigration in contemporary Italy". *International Journal of Sociology* 51 (5) : 401.

³⁵ United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). 2026. Ukrainian refugee situation. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> (12.01.2026).

ugees³⁶. The Catholic Church's activities and support to Ukrainians are carried out on many levels: charitable (mainly material, financial and social housing assistance), psychological, educational, spiritual and medical³⁷. Still, it needs to be said that over the time, Polish residents became somewhat reluctant towards the Ukrainians, particularly because they feared they would lose priority to public services (health care, education)³⁸. According to one study, Polish women are particularly critical towards the refugees, which was explained by the mating market competition, since some 80% of the Ukrainian refugees are young women³⁹. However, in general the positive attitude towards Ukrainian refugees in Poland does not fundamentally differ from the situation in Western European countries⁴⁰.

Rafał Śpiewak and colleagues investigated the assistance to Ukrainian refugees in a Polish and a Slovak parish by interviewing 61 participants in two refugee assistance projects⁴¹. They found that around 60% of respondents had no previous relationship with Ukrainians. Over 60% of respondents indicated a link between their activity and the social teaching of the Church. Most of the assistance consisted of finding accommodation. Another important aspect was mediating with local government institutions due to the refugee's lack of knowledge of the Polish or Slovak languages and a lack of medical and educational assistance.

We can now resume the four above mentioned possibilities for further development of pastoral practices in the case of the reception of Ukrainian refugees.

- 1) Intercultural pastoral care. Indeed, there has been a growth in intercultural sensitivity. Śpiewak and colleagues conclude that the assistance 'changed the mentality of the people in the parish. It increased mutual bonds and positive relationships. Respondents indicated that people's involvement in charity events and fellowship among parishioners increased'⁴².

³⁶ Izabela Krasnicka, Charles Szymanski. 2023. "Polish Response to the War in Ukraine: The Protection of Refugees". *Syracuse Law Review* 73 (2) : 514–515.

³⁷ Franciszek Mróz. 2023. "Geographies of Care: The Catholic Church in Poland's Assistance to Refugees from Ukraine During Russia's Invasion of Ukraine". *Journal of Religion and Health* 62: 461.

³⁸ Andrzej Szeptycki. 2024. "Polish Assistance for the Ukrainian Refugees: Current State and Perspectives of Research". *Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny* 2 (192) : 62–63.

³⁹ Krzysztof Krakowski, Nicholas Sambanis. 2025. "Mating Market Shock and Gendered Support for Ukrainian Refugees in Poland". <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4404955> (12.01.2026).

⁴⁰ Alexandru D. Moise, James Dennison, Hanspeter Kriesi. 2024. "European attitudes to refugees after the Russian invasion of Ukraine". *West European Politics* 47 (2) : 365.

⁴¹ Rafał Śpiewak, Wiktor Widera, Denisa Jánošová, Tomasz Jobczyk. 2023. "The Roman Catholic Parish in the Face of the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis: A Case Study of St. Joseph Parish in Chorzów, Poland and Holy Spirit Parish in Kátlovce, Slovakia". *Religions* 14: 1048.

⁴² Śpiewak et al. (2023) "The Roman Catholic Parish in the Face of the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis", 12.

- 2) Intercultural communication. The researchers conclude that the communication system set up in the project was of the required level and fulfilled all the objectives that were set for it. It would be interesting in a further study to inquire if the Ukrainian refugees themselves are of the same opinion, or if they perhaps see other opportunities for intercultural communication.
- 3) Promoting well-being. It is obvious that the projects contributed to the refugees' well-being during their stay in Poland and Slovakia.
- 4) Community building. As a result of the projects, parish life has been revitalized, and representatives of the different peoples and Churches (Catholic and Orthodox) have been brought closer together⁴³. A possible topic for a further study would be if the projects have also led to patterns of IT on behalf of the Polish and Slovak parishioners. Further investigations could also take place on more specific categories of refugees and their integration, such as families with children, and on the ecumenical dimension of the projects.

Within the worldwide Catholic Church, the synod on synodality recently acknowledged that the governance of the Church has not always been conducted in a spirit of listening to others, particularly migrants and women, among other groups. It is recommended that all local church communities continue their daily activities using a synodal methodology of consultation and discernment⁴⁴. Migrants who have themselves experienced being welcomed into a host church community can often play a valuable role in welcoming other newcomers. Pope Francis and the 2024 synod have called on both host communities and migrants to build intercultural communities⁴⁵. Pope Leo has approved the guidelines for the implementation phase of the synod⁴⁶. At the same time, the synodal method can also be effectively applied by married couples and within families, by sincerely listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit in a prayerful setting⁴⁷.

⁴³ Śpiewak et al. (2023) "The Roman Catholic Parish in the Face of the Ukrainian Refugee Crisis", 15.

⁴⁴ Francis, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. 2024. *For a synodal Church*, 6, 9.

⁴⁵ Francis, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. 2024. *For a synodal Church*, 112.

⁴⁶ General secretariat of the Synod. 2025. „Pathways for the implementation phase of the Synod. 2025–2028”. Vatican: Secretaria Generalis Synodi, 5.

⁴⁷ Łukasz Borowski, Dariusz Lipiec. 2024. "The synodal method in building marital and family community". *Verbum Vitae* 42 (4) : 849.

Returning to our central research question, we can conclude that the experiences of migrant couples and intercultural couples show a stronger tendency towards cultural and intercultural transition than towards cultural defence. This demonstrates the willingness of migrants to adapt to the cultural circumstances in the host country, as well as the flexibility of their native partners in adopting cultural elements from their migrant partners. At the same time, couples have found that their faith has played a supportive role during the integration process in the host country. Faith is a value that can bridge cultural differences between the host country and the home country. This is true in the case of MRE among migrant and intercultural couples and in the case of parishes receiving refugees from Ukraine and elsewhere. Intercultural pastoral care is of growing importance in many places in Europe and it will most likely remain so in the future.

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