

Towards intercultural pastoral care

Pastoral accompaniment of migrant and intercultural couples in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands

Ward Biemans



OPEN
PRESS
TiU

Towards intercultural pastoral care

Pastoral accompaniment of migrant and intercultural couples in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands

Ward Biemans SJ

Towards intercultural pastoral care

Pastoral accompaniment of migrant and intercultural couples in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands

Author:	Ward Josephus Adrianus Biemans
DOI:	10.26116/tst.5304718
ISBN:	9789465151526
Publisher:	Open Press TiU, Tilburg, 2025
Cover image:	<i>Migrant family sculpture</i> . Photo: Richard Croft
Sculpture by Neil Hadlock at Humber Quays, U.K. Source:	https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Migrant_family_sculpture_-_geograph.org.uk_-_5246031.jpg
Lay-out:	proefschrift-aio.nl
Printed by:	proefschrift-aio.nl

This is an Open Access book published under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-NoDerivatives International license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). This license allows reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator, see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Towards intercultural pastoral care

Pastoral accompaniment of migrant and intercultural couples in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands

Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan Tilburg University

op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof. dr. W.B.H.J. van de Donk, in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties aangewezen commissie in de Aula van de Universiteit

op vrijdag 24 oktober 2025 om 13.30 uur

door

Ward Josephus Adrianus Biemans,

geboren te Gilze en Rijen

Promotores:

prof. dr. J. Loffeld (Tilburg University)

prof. dr. M.C.H. van Dijk-Groeneboer (Tilburg University)

Leden promotiecommissie:

dr. J.M. van Deursen-Vreeburg (Tilburg University)

prof. dr. K.J. Glombik (University of Opole)

prof. dr. F. Pesce (Istituto Superiore di Scienze Religiose Giovanni
Paolo I)

prof. dr. M. Sarot (Tilburg University)

Table of Contents

General introduction	11
Chapter 1	
Pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after marriage	23
Abstract	24
1.1 Introduction	25
1.2 Investing in sustainable conjugal relationships	27
1.2.1 Marriage versus cohabitation	27
1.2.2 Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) and marital quality	28
1.2.3 Consequences of divorce	28
1.3 A pastoral vision for the accompaniment of couples	30
1.4 Towards a more effective pastoral accompaniment of couples	33
1.4.1 The relationship between religiosity, spirituality and marital well-being	33
1.4.2 The efficacy of Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE)	35
1.4.3 The role of forgiveness within couples	37
1.4.4 The role of pastoral leadership	38
1.5 Conclusion	39
Chapter 2	
Marriage preparation, pastoral accompaniment, and relationship quality among migrant and intercultural couples in the Netherlands	43
Abstract	44
2.1 Introduction	45
2.2 Theoretical background and objectives	46
2.3 Method of quantitative survey	52
2.4 Descriptive analysis of participants	54

2.5 Main results of quantitative survey	58
2.6 Conclusion	62

Chapter 3

Dynamics of integration processes into the Netherlands of migrant and intercultural couples who have been married in the Catholic Church	65
--	----

Abstract	66
3.1 Introduction	67
3.2 Theoretical framework	69
3.3 Method of qualitative research among couples	71
3.3.1 Data-analysis	73
3.4 Results of qualitative research among couples	74
3.4.1 Cultural Transition (CT)	75
3.4.2 Intercultural Transition (IT)	76
3.4.3 Cultural Defence (CD)	76
3.4.4 Values	77
3.5 Discussion and conclusion	82
3.5.1 Implications for pastoral care	83

Chapter 4

Married couples' need to be reconciled with one another, with society and with God	87
--	----

Abstract	88
4.1 Introduction	89
4.2 Anthropological foundations of the sacrament of Reconciliation	90
4.3 Empirical studies on the sacrament of Reconciliation	92
4.3.1 Reflections on the current state of the sacrament of Reconciliation	94
4.4 Sin and reconciliation within marriage	96
4.4.1 The social dimension of sin	97
4.5 Methodological aspects	98
4.6 Results from interviews with couples	100

4.6.1 Reconciliation with God	100
4.6.2 Reconciliation with one another	101
4.6.3 Reconciliation with society	102
4.7 Conclusion: increasing the attractiveness of the sacrament of Reconciliation	104

Chapter 5

Chances for intercultural pastoral care - A SWOT-analysis of interviews with pastoral caregivers in Catholic migrant and multi-ethnic church communities in the Netherlands	109
---	-----

Abstract	110
5.1 Introduction	111
5.2 Theoretical framework	112
5.3 Method of qualitative research among pastoral caregivers	114
5.4 Results of the SWOT-analysis	116
5.4.1 Strengths	117
5.4.2 Weaknesses	119
5.4.3 Opportunities	120
5.4.4 Threats	122
5.5 Conclusion and discussion	123
5.5.1 Intercultural pastoral care	124
5.5.2 Intercultural communication	124
5.5.3 Promoting well-being	125
5.5.4 Community building	125

Chapter 6

General discussion and conclusion	129
6.1 Synthesis	130
6.2 Theoretical implications	134
6.3 Ecclesial and societal implications	136
6.4 Methodological considerations	138
6.5 Conclusion	139

Summary	143
Samenvatting	151
List of abbreviations	159
Bibliography	161
Biography	173
Dankwoord	175

General introduction

From the total number of Christians in the Netherlands, 6.2 million in 2015, ca. 1 million has a migrant background, from either Western or non-Western countries.¹ At a time when church attendance of Dutch Christians is decreasing, especially among Catholics, the number of Christian migrants who regularly attend a church community service has risen.² These migrants all try to make a home in the host country where they settle, albeit temporary. They seek means to flourish and many of them create or have created a family.

For the last ten years I have lived in the city centre of Amsterdam, where I have witnessed a growing, English speaking church community, consisting of people with many nationalities. Together with my Jesuit brothers in the priesthood, we minister both to a multi-ethnic community and to a native Dutch community who gather to celebrate the sacraments, seek formation and receive many visitors from all over the world. Since my main tasks are in academic and priestly formation, I have been able to reflect academically on the accompaniment of migrants and their ways to integrate into the Dutch society. For this reason, I have visited or have been in contact with other migrant and multi-ethnic Catholic church communities in the Netherlands, where the common language is Arabic, English, German, French, Indonesian, Italian, Papiamentu, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Ukrainian or Vietnamese. From these visits and in-depth interviews with couples and pastors, I have learned how important it is that people are properly welcomed and accompanied in the host country. Although most migrants really want to integrate into the host country, many also value to keep some of their home culture amid all the challenges they face.

Despite political tendencies which point to the contrary, papal and other Church documents call on churches and societies to be more open towards migrants. Pope Francis mentions integrating as a fourth stage in the whole process of the migratory experience, besides welcoming, protecting and promoting – or empowering - migrants and refugees. In his view, integration ‘concerns the opportunities for intercultural enrichment brought about by the presence of migrants and refugees’.³ Still, after migration to the Western world, one can often see patterns of secularization, when migrants give up elements of their own culture of origin including church attendance

-
1. Joep de Hart en Pepijn van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland: Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid*. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2018, 103. ‘Christians with a migrant background’ include those who have at least one parent born in a country other than the Netherlands. The term ‘migrant’ in this thesis is reserved for people who themselves have had a migration experience.
 2. Ibid., 37-40; Joris Kregting and Jorien Copier, *Het gebruik van gebedshuizen door migrantenkerken*. Nijmegen: Kaski, 2021, 23.
 3. Francis, *Message for 2018 world day of migrants and refugees*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2018; Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* (The love of Christ towards migrants), Vatican, Holy See Press Office, 2004.

and integrate into the dominant culture of the host society. However, sociologist Yassine Khoudja also shows that levels of personal prayer remain stable among Christian migrants after their arrival in the Netherlands.⁴

In July 2024, when I was finishing this research, a new Dutch government had just been installed, who wanted to restrict asylum, labour, knowledge and study, and family migration. In the meantime, the status of this government has been changed into a caretaker government after the collapse of the cabinet, in anticipation of new national elections.⁵ In the government agreement little attention has been paid to promoting participation of asylum seekers or creating job opportunities.⁶ This brings along a bigger responsibility for societal organisations and church communities to care for migrants who are visiting them and to pay attention to others in need of support. The question of how church communities can contribute to the societal integration of migrants by means of pastoral accompaniment has motivated me to conduct this research.

Another motivation to start this research, is that in my surroundings I have seen young people postponing a decision to marry or struggling to maintain their married life. Decisions to break up often cause a lot of sadness and disadvantages, not in the least when children are involved. At the same time, young couples do not always receive the proper support from a neighbouring church community on their way towards marriage. In *Amoris Laetitia* (the Joy of Love), Pope Francis is inviting the ecclesial community to reassess the complex situations in today's family relations and to develop a more supportive and welcoming attitude towards couples, both before and after marriage.⁷

Over the last half-century, in the Western world the institution of marriage has gone through considerable sociodemographic transformations, including a declining marriage rate, an increasing age of first marriage, increasing divorce rates, an increase of various types of cohabitation and of singlehood.⁸ These trends have an impact on

4. Yassine Khoudja, 'Religious trajectories of immigrants in the first years after migration', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 61(2), 2022, 507-529.

5. Scheduled on 29 October 2025.

6. Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, *Reflectie op het hoofdlijnenakkoord Hoop, lef en trots*. The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2024, 4.

7. Francis, *Post-synodal Apostolic exhortation Amoris Laetitia*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2016, 205-230.

8. Gary R. Lee and Krista K. Payne, 'Changing marriage patterns since 1970: What's going on, and why?', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 41, 2010, 537-555; Nora Sánchez Gassen and Brienna Perelli-Harris, 'The increase in cohabitation and the role of union status in family policies: A comparison of 12 European countries', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 25(4), 2015, 431-449. doi: 10.1177/0958928715594561; Lonneke van den Berg and Ellen Verbakel, 'Trends in singlehood in young adulthood in Europe', *Advances in Life Course Research*, 51, 2022, 100449. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2021.100449>

perceived relationship quality, mental health and children's educational results, as we will see in chapter 1.

This practical theological research focuses on the experiences of migrant and intercultural couples with the sacrament of marriage in the Catholic Church and in particular on marriage preparation and pastoral accompaniment during the first years of marriage. Two meta-analyses with studies from all over the world have shown that for married persons, investing in the enhancement of marital quality is related to a positive effect on physical and mental well-being.⁹ Other research from the U.S. has shown that people who have done Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) score significantly higher on marital quality and commitment, as assessed by the couples themselves, and lower on marital conflict and divorce.¹⁰ It needs to be said that empirical practical theological studies on pastoral care for migrant and intercultural couples mainly come from the United States, but are scarce in a European context and practically absent for the Netherlands. Further, in two previous studies on dynamics of integration among migrants taking part in Catholic church communities in the Netherlands, the spiritual dimension in the lives of couples does not receive much attention.¹¹ Also, a practical theological analysis of pastoral accompaniment to migrant and intercultural couples is missing in both studies. Our study aims to gain insight in both religious and spiritual experiences and in pastoral accompaniment of migrant and intercultural couples.¹² Khoudja did look at the level of (subjective) religiosity of migrants who have arrived in the Netherlands, which tends to decrease after their arrival, but he did not look at the values they adhere to.¹³ In our study, both faith values, family values and societal values are investigated by ways of in-depth interviews.

The overarching question of this research is the following: *to what extent do the experiences of migrant and intercultural couples who have been married between 1995 and 2022 in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands, show patterns of cultural*

9. Theodore F. Robles, Richard B. Slatcher, Joseph M. Trombello and Meghan M. McGinn, 'Marital quality and health: A meta-analytic review', *Psychological Bulletin*, 140(1), 2014, 140–187; doi:10.1037/a0031859; Christine M. Proulx, Heather M. Helms and Cheryl Buehler, 'Marital quality and personal well-being: A meta-analysis', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69(August), 2007, 576–593. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00393.x

10. Scott M. Stanley, Paul R. Amato, Christine A. Johnson and Howard J. Markman, 'Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey', *Journal of Family Psychology* 20, 2006, 117–126. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.20.1.117; Pew Research Center, *U.S. Catholics open to non-traditional families: 45% of Americans are Catholic or connected to Catholicism*. Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2015, 55.

11. Naomi van der Meer, *Believers in the universal Church: Processes of self-identification among Catholic immigrants of African descent in the Dutch religious landscape*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010; Jan Eijken, *Strijd om betekenis. Discoursanalyse van een beleidsmatig experiment interculturele kerkopbouw in de Schilderswijk, Den Haag 2000 – 2010*. Nijmegen: Radboud University, 2018.

12. The difference between religious and spiritual experiences will be clarified in part 1.4.1.

13. Yassine Khoudja, *op. cit.*, 2022.

or intercultural transition or cultural defence regarding their integration into the church community and the society at large?

In this study, participating migrant couples consist of a man and a woman who have both migrated to the Netherlands and who have the intention to marry or who have been married in the Catholic Church. Intercultural couples consist of a migrant who wants to marry or has married a Dutch man or woman in the Catholic Church. After an experience of migration, migrants go through a process of cultural transition (CT) when they seek ways to integrate into the host society without entirely losing their own culture of origin.¹⁴ For instance, they learn the local language, they enlarge their social network among natives, etc. A hosting church community could facilitate such a process. Contrary to CT, religion and spirituality could also provide resources for the defence of a certain migrant culture, when migrants resist certain influences of the host society that are perceived as a threat for their culture of origin. This is called a pattern of cultural defence (CD).¹⁵ For instance, migrants seek a church community in which their native language is spoken, they engage with members of this community, etc. It needs to be mentioned that in policy and legal studies, the term CD is also used to indicate nation state policies which have as a purpose to resist multiculturalism. For instance, Liav Orgad describes how CD takes place using legal mechanisms such as citizenship tests, language requirements, etc.¹⁶ In the juridical domain, CD is sometimes used as a contested term which could signify a consideration of cultural background in criminal or civil cases.¹⁷ These latter two interpretations of CD are not further elaborated upon in this research.

The British sociologist Steve Bruce uses the terms of CD and CT as retarding tendencies of secularization.¹⁸ Here, both terms will be used in a neutral way, as dynamics of integration or lack of integration. This study provides a test case for theories of CT and CD of migrant and intercultural couples who are living in the Netherlands. During this research, a special form of CT has been distinguished, that of intercultural transition (IT). We speak of IT when spouses in an intercultural relationship in the host country take over certain cultural elements from their migrant partner, or when a hosting church community takes over cultural elements from their

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

15. Ibid.

16. Liav Orgad, *The cultural defense of nations: A liberal theory of majority rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 85-134.

17. Alison Dundes Renteln, *The cultural defense*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, 14.

18. As will be discussed in chapter 3.

migrant members.¹⁹ By doing so, processes of individualization and universalization can take place at the same time. As a result, both migrants and natives 'are better able to see the oneness and unity of humanity, feel greater compassion and sensitivity toward others who are different, and locate the points of consent and complementarity beyond the points of difference and contention.'²⁰

This study has been built upon mixed method empirical research on experiences and pastoral accompaniment of migrant and intercultural couples. Mixed method means that both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been used. According to Annemie Dillen, as an emancipatory and transformative discipline and as a method, practical theology aims at a contribution to the improvement of religious and pastoral practices.²¹ Practical theology seeks to further the dialogue between church, society and the academy, or at least to narrow the divides that separate them.²² In this line, I think that practical theological research can grow in its relevance to society when it includes recommendations for pastoral praxis, based on empirical data. For this reason, all chapters in this study will be concluded with a discussion of pastoral implications of the various research results.

We have chosen to restrict the sample of participants to individuals who have chosen to get married in the Catholic Church, for theological and practical reasons. In the Catholic Church, marriage is considered a sacrament, a covenant between a man and a woman which is regulated by canon law. Mainstream Protestant and Reformed Christians - the main non-Catholic denominations in the Netherlands - generally do not regard marriage as a sacrament.²³ The same goes for Muslims, members from other religious groups and non-believers. Opinions on the nature and the indissolubility of marriage differ between these various groups. This would complicate a comparison of MRE and accompaniment after marriage between these groups. A second reason has to do with the ecclesial structure of migrant church communities. Within the Catholic Church, migrant church communities are officially integrated within the parochial and diocesan structure.²⁴ This means that there are checks and balances regarding liturgy and the organisation of the church community.

19. This definition is partly based on Young Yun Kim, *'Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation'*, Thousand Oaks, CA., SAGE Publications Incorporated, 2000, 183-199. Although this communication theory focuses on the experiences with adaptation of newcomers in a host country or host culture, intercultural transformation processes can also be looked at from the point of view of hosting individuals or communities, who may adapt to cultural patterns introduced by newcomers.

20. *Ibid.*, 193.

21. Annemie Dillen, 'What is practical theology?', in: Annemie Dillen and Stefan Gärtner (Eds.), *Discovering practical theology: Exploring boundaries*. Louvain: Peeters Publishers & Booksellers, 2020, 63-92, at p. 66.

22. *Ibid.*, 70.

23. Joep de Hart and Pepijn van Houwelingen, *op. cit.*, 2018, 37; on the two sacraments in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), see <https://protestantsekerk.nl/verdieping/het-sacrament-van-het-heilig-avondmaal/>, accessed 5-7-2025.

24. Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care for Migrants and Itinerant People, *op. cit.*, 2004, no. 91.

This is different in the case of Protestant migrant church communities, who often have a more independent position. A third reason has to do with the focus of this research, which is on cultural and intercultural transition and cultural defence of migrant and intercultural couples. Participants in this research show a great ethnic variety. If we would also have included an even bigger religious variety, things would probably have become too complex to analyse. A fourth, practical reason has been the relatively wide access I have to a network of Catholic pastoral caregivers, who have forwarded the invitation to participate in the survey to migrant and intercultural couples, or who provided an open invitation to potential participants. Data collection took place in 2021 during the Covid crisis. Investing time and energy in building up new contacts with pastoral caregivers from other Christian denominations or other religions would have complicated data collection considerably.

We have also decided not to create an experimental research design with a control group, for ethical and practical reasons. It would not be considered morally acceptable to divide participants who want to get married in different groups with various forms of MRE or without MRE. Above that, inviting couples to participate who have a Catholic or other background, but who were preparing a civil marriage without a church wedding would probably not lead to further insights into their integration in the local church community, which is an essential element of the main research question. It would further be practically impossible to find Catholic or other participants who were preparing for a civil marriage without a church wedding, due to privacy restrictions from municipalities or from wedding planners.

Chapters 1 to 5 of this dissertation are based on published or accepted articles in peer reviewed journals. Some headings have been changed, to create more internal coherence for this book. In the first chapter, the results of a literature review on pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after marriage will be presented. For this review, we have used the ‘empirical-critical-theological’ method developed by Emmanuel Agius and others, which is an example of a practical theological method aimed at an improvement of the current pastoral praxis.²⁵ In this chapter, the aim is *to get an insight in current studies on the pastoral praxis of accompanying couples before and after marriage*. Existing American and British studies show that church attendance, praying together as a couple, praying for one’s partner, investing time in MRE and the willingness to forgive one’s partner are all associated with a higher perceived marital quality. Like our research, some of these studies are largely aimed at couples with different ethnic minority backgrounds. Further, it has been found that

25. Emmanuel Agius, ‘Clear as a teacher and tender as a mother: The interface between doctrine and pastoral care’, in: Thomas Knipps-Port le Roi and Aldegondé Brenninkmeijer-Wehrhahn (Eds.), *Authentic voices, discerning hearts: New resources for the Church on marriage and family*, Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2016, 30-58.

lasting effects of pastoral accompaniment of couples are more likely to be expected if pastoral caregivers have a strong working alliance with a couple. However, so far all these results had not been tested among migrant and intercultural couples living in the Netherlands.

A survey, presented in chapter 2, has been held among 235 individuals, mostly migrants and their partners, who were preparing their marriage or have been married in the Catholic Church and who were living in the Netherlands in 2021, the year the survey took place. For this survey, participants could choose between eleven languages. In the survey they have been asked about their experiences with MRE, with prayer, worship, and other religious and spiritual activities. The sub-question for this chapter has been formulated as follows: *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?*

We did not undertake a pre- and post-intervention to test the effectivity of marriage programs, as has been done by Thomas Spielhofer and colleagues with a survey among believing and non-believing couples living in the U.K.²⁶ Our focus is not on the programs itself, but on the experiences migrant couples and intercultural couples have with pastoral accompaniment before and after marriage. Therefore, we have first measured the participants' appreciation of the MRE and the pastoral accompaniment they received. We have looked at several dimensions of MRE: 1) the length of the MRE program; 2) the use of official course material; 3) the cooperation between the couple and the course leader and 4) the presence or absence of a welcoming of the couple in the local church community during the MRE program. Then, fifthly, we have looked at which of the following activities are associated with a higher perceived relationship quality among participating couples: seeking reconciliation after a conflict; granting and receiving forgiveness; church attendance; personal prayer; praying together; speaking about prayer life; maintaining Sunday rest. Sixthly, we have analysed if migrants with a non-Western background score higher on CD / lower on CT than migrants with a Western background or Dutch people in an intercultural relationship. Thus, we get more insight into the diversity of migrants who arrive in the Netherlands, their experiences with MRE, their religious, spiritual and social customs and the dynamics of integration processes of these different groups of migrants.

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

From this large group of participants, 12 married migrant and intercultural couples (n = 24) have been selected for semi-structured in-depth interviews (chapter 3). Two selection criteria have been a variety of countries of origin and a mixture of couples from the same ethnic background and intercultural couples. As first sub-question in this chapter, it has been investigated *how patterns of CD, IT and CT evolve in the lives of the interviewed couples*. We looked at the extent to which migrants have discovered new religious or spiritual experiences in the host country, if they have given up certain societal, religious or spiritual customs, their native language, etc. This makes it possible to see how dynamics of CT and CD may facilitate or complicate the integration process of migrant and intercultural couples. The second sub-question explores *which values couples express regarding their married and family life, their faith life, and their integration into the Dutch society*. An analysis of the main values and implications for pastoral care will be presented in this third chapter.

A remarkable and unexpected outcome of the survey and the interviews was that participants indicate that after a conflict, seeking mutual reconciliation and granting and receiving forgiveness from one another are important factors which positively influence their perceived relationship quality. Other activities like personal prayer or praying together did not show a significant association with relationship quality. This outcome made us decide to investigate further how migrant couples and intercultural couples seek reconciliation, in three different ways: with one another, after a conflict has occurred; with the host society, in which they start a new phase in their lives; and with God, who has accompanied them on their entire journey, but who may sometimes feel further away in their new surroundings. In chapter 4, the focus will be on experiences with the sacrament of Reconciliation, as one of the available instruments for couples who seek to be reconciled with God, with one another and with the host society. Sub-question for this chapter is *how the attractiveness of the sacrament of Reconciliation could be increased, for couples in general and in particular for migrant and intercultural couples*. Data have been analysed from the same interviews with migrant and intercultural couples as in the previous chapter.

A third qualitative research part has been a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with migrant and Dutch clergy and diocesan staff members in the Netherlands (chapter 5). These interviews and a few additional written sources have been analysed by means of a SWOT-analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). The main question for this research part is formulated as follows: *how could the pastoral accompaniment of Catholic migrant and intercultural couples and families offered by pastoral caregivers in the Netherlands be improved?* Based on this SWOT-analysis of migrant and multi-ethnic church communities, opportunities for

further development of pastoral practices will be distinguished. Results of this research part are presented and discussed in connection to the wider societal and political context. More insight in the current pastoral accompaniment of migrants brings more clarity in the role of pastoral caregivers and migrant church communities in the integration process of this specific group of migrants into the Dutch and other Western societies.

Finally, in chapter 6, the main conclusions of all research parts are taken together, to answer in a comprehensive way the central research question and to offer recommendations for both the academic field of practical theology and the practice of pastoral care in migrant, multi-ethnic and host church communities.

Chapter 1

Pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after marriage²⁷

27. Published by Ward Biemans under the same title in *Marriage, Families & Spirituality (INTAMS Review)*, 27(2), 2021, 196-212. doi:10.2143/INT.27.2.3289974.

Abstract

In this article, following the ‘empirical-critical-theological’ method, research on the pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after marriage is evaluated in the light of some recent magisterial documents and with the purpose of indicating ways of improvement. In the first part, recent empirical research on the investment in sustainable conjugal relationships by couples living in Western countries is analyzed. Premarital education, which is often provided in a religious setting, has a sustainable beneficial effect on the relationship quality of couples and reduces the chance of divorce. The risk of separation for cohabiting couples is about twice the risk for married couples. Adults after divorce and children with divorced and separated parents have lower mental well-being than adults and children in intact families. Against this background, the second part sets out a vision of how pastoral accompaniment for couples before and after marriage could be improved. There is an analysis of the ways Pope Francis, in *Amoris Laetitia*, is inviting the ecclesial community to broaden its pastoral vision on the accompaniment of couples and families. This is illustrated by a number of recommendations for a renewal of marriage preparation and education. In the third part, empirical research which could support a pastoral strategy for the accompaniment of couples is critically reflected upon. Most of this research has taken place in the United States, and European studies are scarce. Several effects are measured in relation to religiosity, spirituality, and marital well-being. Church attendance, praying together as a couple, praying for one’s partner, investing time in Marriage and Relationship Education, and the willingness to forgive one’s partner all contribute to a higher perceived marital quality. Sustainable effects of marriage preparation and education are more likely to be expected if a clergy or lay leader has a strong working alliance with a couple and shows a sensitivity towards an intercultural building up of the church community. In the final part, ways towards a more effective pastoral accompaniment of couples and recommendations for future research are presented.

1.1 Introduction

In *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), Pope Francis has pointed to the urgency of pastoral accompaniment of couples, both before and during marriage.²⁸ This appeal makes sense not only for the couples themselves and the vitality of the Church community but for society as well. In the Western world, the attractiveness of church marriages seems to have diminished significantly. Within the European Union, the percentage of couples choosing cohabitation is increasing.²⁹ Elisabetta Ruspini has aptly described the change in the way Western ‘Millennials’ appreciate the institution of marriage.³⁰ Millennials (birth year between 1982 and the late 1990s) are postponing marriage and parenting. Also, a growing percentage of them are living as single parents or in other family-types. On the other hand, Millennials seem to be more child-focused than the previous generations, in the sense that they spend more time with their children. This is especially true for fathers, but also for mothers. Mothers still spend about twice as much time with their children as fathers do.³¹ The fact that Millennials are postponing marriage does not imply that they have lost interest in marrying. The number of (civil) marriages within the European Union from 2000 first decreased with 24%, but from 2013 to 2019 it increased with 15%, after which it temporarily dropped again during the Covid pandemic.³² The number of divorces has increased with 15% between 2000 and 2015. Still, this is rather different from the trend between 1965 and 1982, when the divorce rate in the 27 current member states of the EU almost doubled.³³ Asked if they consider marriage an outdated institution, a minority of some 30% of Western European adults and some 20% of Eastern European adults agree.³⁴

Another aspect, when we look at the situation within which many Western Millennials live and make their life choices, is that of cultural diversity. For instance, in the

28. Francis, *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2016, chapter 6.

29. Sophie Ponthieux, ‘Intra-household pooling and sharing of resources: a tentative “modified” equivalised income’, in: Anthony B. Atkinson, Anne-Catherine Guio and Eric Marlier (Eds.), *Monitoring social inclusion in Europe*. Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2017, 175-190, at p. 176.

30. Elisabetta Ruspini, ‘Families in uncertain times: Sociological perspectives on family formation’, *Marriage, Families and Spirituality* 24(2), 2018, 164-178. doi: 10.2143/INT.24.2.3285669.

31. Pew Research Center, ‘Modern parenthood: Roles of moms and dads converge as they balance work and family’, Washington D.C., 2013. Cf. www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/03/14/modern-parenthood-roles-of-moms-and-dads-converge-as-they-balance-work-and-family/, accessed 5-7-2025.

32. Eurostat, *Marriage indicators*, Luxembourg, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_nind_custom_13606689/default/table?lang=en, accessed 5-7-2025.

33. Eurostat, *Divorce indicators*, Luxembourg, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_ndivind_custom_13605890/default/table?lang=en, accessed 5-7-2025.

34. Ruud Luijkx, Loek Halman, Inge Sieben, Evelyn Brislinger and Markus Quandt, *European values in numbers. Trends and traditions at the turn of the century*, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 133.

Netherlands, out of a total population of 17 million, the number of Western and non-Western Christian migrants is about one million.³⁵ This brings up questions of integration within the Church community and in the society at large. Here, on the one hand, we see that migrant Church communities tend to value the retention of the identity of their members. On the other hand, it is argued by theologians like Robert Schreiter that cultural identity is always hybrid, developing and sometimes being a source of tension, which could also be true within couples.³⁶ What matters when people with different cultural identities relate to one another is a willingness to self-understanding and a learning process to understand the other.³⁷ An adequate pastoral accompaniment could facilitate such a process.

In this article the three steps of the ‘empirical-critical-theological’ method will be followed, as has been described by Emmanuel Agius and others.³⁸ This practical theological method seeks to integrate empirical data from the human sciences within a pastoral theological vision and is directed at a renewal of pastoral praxis.³⁹ The starting point of this method is the practical experience of couples. In part 1.2, the relationship between Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) and marital quality is looked at within the context of a secularized, Western society in which the choice for marriage has lost its obviousness. At the same time, some of the main consequences of this tendency will be considered, regarding relational sustainability and mental well-being. The aim of this first step is to clarify why an investment in pastoral accompaniment for couples before and after marriage is needed. The method chosen here is ‘critical and hermeneutical since it seeks to judge and evaluate human experience with the specific aim of its renewal’.⁴⁰

Part 1.3 aims to set out a vision of how pastoral accompaniment for couples before and after marriage could be further improved. Pope Francis has given various important guidelines for a renewal of the pastoral praxis in AL. But it seems that in the ecclesiological and theological reception of AL, these guidelines have been

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

36. Robert Schreiter, *The new Catholicity: Theology between the global and the local (faith and cultures)*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, 74.

37. Jan Eijken, *Strijd om betekenis: Discoursanalyse van een beleidsmatig experiment interculturele kerkopbouw in de Schilderswijk, Den Haag 2000 – 2010*. Nijmegen: Radboud University, 2018, 209.

38. Emmanuel Agius, ‘Clear as a teacher and tender as a mother: The interface between doctrine and pastoral care’, in: Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi and Aldegonde Brennkmeijer-Wehrhahn (Eds.), *Authentic voices, discerning hearts: New resources for the Church on marriage and family*. Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2016, 30-58.

39. These three steps largely correspond with the three steps of observing, evaluating and stimulating, described as characteristic for practical theology in: Annemie Dillen and Stephan Gärtner, *Discovering practical theology: Exploring boundaries*. Louvain: Peeters Publishers & Booksellers, 2020, 8.

40. Emmanuel Agius, *op. cit.*, 2016, 35.

overshadowed in many places by the intense debate on the possible integration of the divorced and remarried within the Church community.⁴¹

Part 1.4 aims at describing the transformative process from the present situation of pastoral accompaniment of couples towards a more proactive pastoral approach. This will be illustrated by some examples of empirical research on recent practices of pastoral accompaniment of couples, which will be critically reflected upon from a practical theological perspective. Finally, in part 1.5 recommendations will be given for the renewal of pastoral practice and for further research on pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after marriage.

1.2 Investing in sustainable conjugal relationships

In this part, results from three categories of studies on sustainable conjugal relationships are looked at: research on the consequences of marriage versus cohabitation on relational sustainability and relationship quality (1.2.1); studies on the relationship between MRE and marital quality (1.2.2); studies on the consequences of divorce on adults and children (1.2.3).

1.2.1 Marriage versus cohabitation

Since the second half of the previous century, a growing percentage of young people in the West are choosing cohabitation rather than marriage. Several studies show that this trend has consequences for the sustainability and the quality of the relationships themselves. In 2018, Kirsten van Houdt and Anne-Rigt Poortman conducted a survey on the differences in lifestyle between cohabiting and married couples in the Netherlands.⁴² They found that the risk of separation for cohabiting couples between 2002 and 2014 was about twice the risk for married couples in the same period. Further, a European comparative study by Kenneth Aarskaug Wiik, Renske Keizer, and Trude Lappengård investigated the relationship quality among currently married

41. For instance, in 2016, the Bishops of Buenos Aires Pastoral Area issued a letter called 'Basic criteria for the implementation of chapter VIII of *Amoris Laetitia*,' in which they focus solely on the discernment of possible access to the sacraments for the divorced remarried. This letter has been officially endorsed by Pope Francis in his '*Epistula Apostolica* to Mgr. Sergio Alfredo Fenoy, delegate of the Buenos Aires pastoral region, cf. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 108(10), 2016, 1071-1074. See also, Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi (Ed.), *A point of no return? Amoris Laetitia on marriage, divorce and remarriage*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2017.

42. Kirsten van Houdt and Anne-Rigt Poortman, 'Joint lifestyles and the risk of union dissolution: Differences between marriage and cohabitation', *Demographic Research*, 39(15), 2018, 431-458.

and cohabiting individuals between the ages of 18 and 55 in eight European countries (Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Romania, Russia, and The Netherlands). Their results showed that in all countries, cohabiters without the intention to marry were significantly less satisfied than those married ($p < .05$) and more often had breakup plans. The relationship quality gap is smaller in countries where cohabitation is most widespread.⁴³

1.2.2 Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) and marital quality

Other empirical research has shown that premarital education, which is often provided in a religious setting, has a sustainable beneficial effect on couples. Scott Stanley and colleagues asked couples if they had received premarital education, in the form of educational classes, workshops or counselling, designed to get a good start in marriage.⁴⁴ They randomly contacted more than 3,000 adults in four middle American states. One of the main results they found is that people who reported premarital education scored significantly higher on marital quality and commitment, as assessed by the couples themselves, and lower on marital conflict. Further, couples who received premarital education are significantly less likely (31%) to divorce. A difference from many earlier studies is that Stanley and colleagues showed that the beneficial effects couples have from premarital education are independent of race or educational level. Their results are consistent with other studies from the United States, Germany, and South Africa.⁴⁵

1.2.3 Consequences of divorce

Many studies have concluded that those who are divorced exhibit more symptoms of depression and anxiety, more substance use (for instance drinking, other drugs use, excessive eating), more health problems and a greater mortality risk in comparison to those who are married. Associations between divorce, health problems, and mortality

43. Kenneth Aarskaug Wiik, Renske Keizer and Trude Lappegård, 'Relationship quality in marital and cohabiting unions across Europe', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74(3), 2012, 389-398.

44. Scott M. Stanley, Paul R. Amato, Christine A. Johnson and Howard J. Markman, 'Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey', *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 2006, 117-126.

45. Cf. Ryan G. Carlson, Andrew P. Daire, Matthew D. Munyon, and Mark E. Young, '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), 2012, 123-130; Jason S. Carroll and William J. Doherty, 'Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research', *Family Relations*, 52(2), 2003, 105-118.

appear to be stronger for men than for women.⁴⁶ The decline in general well-being after divorce is stronger for parents than for couples without children.⁴⁷ Still, in the medium term (ca. 6 years) it seems that parents largely adapt to the new situation, although the decline in economic well-being for mothers remains also after this period. Evidence for the negative consequences of divorce on well-being does not contradict the fact that in some cases, for instance where domestic violence exists, temporary or permanent separation may be inevitable.

Similarly, many well-designed studies point out that children with divorced and separated parents have lower mental well-being and more behavioral problems than children in intact families.⁴⁸ Again, it must be said that this is not always the case. Several scholars have argued that growing up in a high-conflict, but stable, family could have more negative effects on the child's well-being than separation.⁴⁹ Indeed, children may feel relieved after parents in a high-conflict relationship separate. But, in recent years the number of low-conflict family breakups has increased in most European countries. This has resulted in a more negative average effect on children's performance, associated with parental separation.⁵⁰

Given the growing complexity of today's family composition, people who accompany couples and young families must be sensitive to the very different circumstances in which children are presently growing up. In the next part, we enter the second phase of our practical theological investigation, which implies the development of a vision and a desired praxis for the pastoral accompaniment of couples.

46. Paul R. Amato, 'Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72(3), 2010, 650-666, here 658; see also Daniel Brüggmann, 'Work disability and divorce', in Michaela Kreyenfeld and Heike Trappe (Eds.), *Parental life courses after separation and divorce in Europe*. Cham: Springer, 2020, 289-308.

47. Thomas Leopold and Matthijs Kalmijn, 'Is divorce more painful when couples have children? Evidence from long-term panel data on multiple domains of well-being', *Demography* 53(6), 2016, 1717-1742.

48. Juho Härkönen, Fabrizio Bernardi and Diederik Boertien, 'Family dynamics and child outcomes: An overview of research and open questions', *European Journal of Population* 33, 2017, 163-184; Michael Gähler and Eva-Lisa Palmtag, 'Parental divorce, psychological well-being and educational attainment: changed experience, unchanged effect among Swedes born 1892-1991', *Social Indicators Research* 123, 2015, 601-623; Jornt J. Mandemakers and Matthijs Kalmijn, 'Do mother's and father's education condition the impact of parental divorce on child well-being?', *Social Science Research* 44, 2014, 187-199.

49. Juho Härkönen, Fabrizio Bernardi and Diederik Boertien, *op. cit.*, 2017, 166.

50. Martin Kreidl, Martina Štípková and Barbora Hubatková, 'Parental separation and children's education in a comparative perspective: Does the burden disappear when separation is more common?', *Demographic Research* 36(3), 2017, 73-110, at 89-91. doi: 10.4054/DemRes.2017.36.3.

1.3 A pastoral vision for the accompaniment of couples

A second step in the application of the empirical-critical-theological method entails an integration of a pastoral vision concerning the accompaniment of couples, as has been expressed in Church documents, with input from theology, and helped by insights from the human sciences.

When in 2014 and 2015 bishops from all over the world convened in Rome to discuss the pastoral needs of families in our times, they seemed keenly aware of the urgency of the situation. In AL, Pope Francis has developed a pastoral vision for the accompaniment of couples and families, in reply to the synodal analysis. This vision is summarized by Emmanuel Agius:

‘Pope Francis is inviting the ecclesial community to broaden its pastoral vision, priorities and perspectives to become empowered to rethink, re-evaluate and reassess the complex situations in today’s family relations from a new horizon of theological meaning and significance which takes into account all the different facets and dimensions of human experience. This pastoral approach does not require a change in church doctrine on the indissolubility and unity of marriage, faithfulness and openness for life, or the theology of Eucharist and Reconciliation.’⁵¹

Pope Francis acknowledges that, in the past, pastoral guidance given to young married or engaged couples by members of the Church has been deficient and has sometimes been characterized by an ‘excessive idealization’ of marriage, for instance by a disproportionate emphasis on procreation.⁵²

Church teaching has for a long time emphasized the importance of a stable married life for the well-being of the family. It is clear that, in the past, this emphasis has not always contributed to a just distribution of tasks and responsibilities within households, nor to equal opportunities for the development of the talents of women. On the other hand, today there is also a danger of individualism, ‘which weakens family bonds and ends up considering each member of the family as an isolated

51. Emmanuel Agius, *op. cit.*, 2016, 41.

52. AL 36.

unit...⁵³ The 2014 Synod of Bishops stated in this regard that separation and divorce may lead to ‘serious consequences for adults, children and society as a whole, weakening its individual and social bonds’.⁵⁴

Broadening the Church’s pastoral approach takes place in a more concrete way through an encounter with a diversity of family life rather than by having one centralized, idealized interpretation of what family life should entail. It requires a more supportive and welcoming attitude towards young couples from various cultural backgrounds, towards single parents and towards families that are not (yet) fulfilling the ideal picture of married life. Regarding this last group of families, a pastoral appropriation of the principle of graduality is needed. This implies a step-by-step pastoral accompaniment, which aims at a gradual fulfilment of the divine law of love which can be found in the Gospel.⁵⁵ In this way, the Church could fulfil her missionary task of evangelizing the world, given to her by Christ.⁵⁶ This could be done in a more effective way if the Church learns to listen more carefully to the concerns of today’s couples and families who are part of the faith community. At the same time, in her communication to couples and families the Church should be more aware of the value of her primary proclamation, which is the message that Jesus Christ has come to save us and that He is still doing so. By doing this, her pastoral approach should be more characterized by the application of a hierarchy of truths, as the Second Vatican Council has taught.⁵⁷ Pastoral accompaniment of couples should be seen in this light and in this way be able to reach everyone without exclusion.⁵⁸ This could mean, for instance, that the pastoral approach towards young people is primarily focused on an exploration or a deepening of their personal relationship with Christ, rather than on a teaching of doctrinal principles. Similarly, it is important that young people are encouraged to reflect on their faith experiences and share them with one another, rather than being overloaded with instructions on how they should live as Christians. A more effective way of reaching out to couples and young families could also be attained by integrating insights in a more ecological way of life or by more project-based cooperation in works of charity.

In AL, Pope Francis makes several more specific recommendations for those who are involved in (pre)marriage education, such as: the improvement of marriage preparation within parishes, for example through the involvement of more experienced couples and families (206); stimulating an open conversation between the

53. Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Relatio synodi*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2014, 5.

54. Ibid. 10.

55. Ibid. 41-43.

56. Cf. Matt. 28, 19-20.

57. Second Vatican Council, Decree on ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 1964, 11.

58. Cf. Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelium Gaudium*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2013, 35.

future spouses about what each expects from married life (209-210); the accompaniment of married couples during the first years of their married life, along with the help of experienced couples (217 and 223); participation of families in retreats (227); attention to families in crisis by providing pastoral care in, for example, diocesan specialized counselling centers (241-242); including and supporting divorced parents who have entered a new union in their efforts to bring up their children (246); considering a pastoral approach towards people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried, or who are simply living together (297), etc. From this overview of recommendations, it becomes clear that such pastoral outreach is not only meant for couples who are married in the church. Pope Francis calls for an integration of other family-types into the church community. (299)

As part of the theological reception of AL, Sylvie Barth has made an interesting attempt to view the contemporary 'elective couple' and their spirituality in a positive light.⁵⁹ Her analysis is worth mentioning because it combines a deep insight into the signs of the times with a proposal for how the Church might respond to this situation. She pleads that the Church, in her pastoral approach, should be more open to couples of 'good will', who may not fulfil all the ecclesial regulations at once, but who sincerely try to live a life with love, who strive to build their common existence and eventually raise their children in the best way they can. The Church can fulfil this aim by a threefold investment in formation: first, the formation of pastors, aimed at a greater awareness of the diversified spiritual experiences of couples, by listening to them and by opening up places for dialogue and exchange; then, the development and allocation of resources for spiritual support, with the help of couples themselves and of new religious movements; thirdly, to provide 'after-sale service', in the form of marriage education and other ways to vitalize or revitalize the spiritual life of couples.

Of course, a tension remains between on the one hand the model of the 'elective couple' as Barth describes it, which includes the possibility for couples to dissolve their union and to reconstitute a relationship as a new couple, and on the other hand the ecclesial vision on the indissolubility of marriage. Within the ecclesial community, this tension could be lived as a positive tension, when people, married or not, are willing to learn from one another without prejudice. It is important that pastoral accompaniment start with an acknowledgment of the positive aspects in the lives of the people that are accompanied, regardless of whether they find themselves at the center or on the peripheries of the Church community.

59. Sylvie Barth, 'The path of elective love: towards a Christian spirituality of the contemporary couple', *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* 23, 2017, 215-235, translated into English from the French by Daniele Dechamps.

1.4 Towards a more effective pastoral accompaniment of couples

The third step in the empirical-critical-theological method should bring about a transformative process from the present pastoral accompaniment of couples towards a desired practice, supported by thorough empirical evidence. So far, empirical studies on how clergy provide marriage preparation to couples and pastoral accompaniment after marriage are scarce, especially in Europe. Evidence mainly comes from the United States, where a number of studies have provided valuable insights on how to attain a more effective pastoral accompaniment of couples. It needs to be said beforehand that findings from American studies are not necessarily transferable to other contexts. In this part, we will consider some of the available evidence on four different issues: (1) the relationship between religiosity, spirituality, and marital well-being; (2) the effectiveness of marriage preparation and marriage education; (3) the role of forgiveness for couples and (4) the role of pastoral leadership. All four factors may have a particular relevance for the quality and sustainability of marital relationships.

1.4.1 The relationship between religiosity, spirituality and marital well-being

In part 1.2.2 we have seen that (pre)marital education can have a sustainable beneficial effect on marital quality. Of course, many reasons could be given to explain this relationship. Couples could have developed better communication skills, more balanced role patterns, better relationships with the extended family, etc. However, in this article the focus is on the religious and spiritual dimensions in the lives of couples. Before we look at some results from studies in this domain, a preliminary remark needs to be made. The distinction between being ‘religious’ and being ‘spiritual’ is 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.’⁶⁰

60. Cf. Jiexia Elisa Zhai, Christopher G. Ellison, Charles E. Stokes and Norval D. Glenn, ‘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), 2008, 379–394, at 380–381.

According to Kees Waaijman, spirituality is ‘a relational process which constitutes an original whole in which God and man are reciprocally related.’⁶¹

Several studies have demonstrated positive relations between various measures of religiosity and relationship quality. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas Wolfinger conducted a large study among newly married and unmarried parents in big American cities.⁶² They theorized that when couples share religious social capital, they could reap the benefits for their relationship in terms of shared social networks. By this the authors mean networks that are helpful for the maintenance of a good quality relationship. Their results show that couples who on a regular basis attend religious services in a church tend to have a higher appreciation of marriage, a stronger adherence to values like fidelity, more moderate alcohol and drug consumption, and more supportive behavior in their relationships, with less domestic violence. In a similar study among American low-income couples, Daniel Lichter and Julie Carmalt also found that when couples pray together or attend religious services together, they report a higher marital quality.⁶³ Wilcox and Wolfinger conclude that more frequent church attendance is associated with a higher perceived relationship quality, by both men and women. This association between religion, spirituality, and relationship quality has been found among both married and unmarried parents.

Reflecting on these results, a question which inevitably comes up is that if church attendance is indeed beneficial for the relationship quality of couples, then why do they so often choose not to attend the regular offering of church communities, even when they are married in the church? An obvious answer is that, probably, the expectations young couples have of ecclesial life do not match the current offering of church communities. Further research is needed on young couples’ interest in the ecclesial and spiritual life of their local community and how these communities could better respond to the needs the couples have. To bring about a transformation of pastoral praxis, a more listening approach, by clergy and lay collaborators, is required. A lot could be learned from experiences of other couples who live their conjugal life with all its ups and downs, how they manage to find their place in the church community, how they organize their spiritual life in combination with raising children, etc. In some more extreme or complex cases, it would be helpful if clergy and their lay colleagues could suspend their judgment on the so-called desired

61. Kees Waaijman, ‘What is spirituality?’, *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 8, 2006, 1-18, at 14.

62. W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, ‘Living and loving “decent”: Religion and relationship quality among urban parents’, *Social Science Research* 37, 2008, 828–843.

63. Daniel T. Lichter and Julie H. Carmalt, ‘Religion and marital quality among low-income couples’, *Social Science Research* 38, 2009, 168-187. They measure seven dimensions of marital quality: commitment of the couple, overall satisfaction, communication, intimacy/emotional support, commitment to the children, positive conflict resolution processes, and positive conflict behaviours (172).

behavior of young persons and find an inspiring example in the welcoming attitude of the prodigal son's father.⁶⁴

1.4.2 The efficacy of Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE)

In this part, the efficacy of marriage preparation and education will first be looked at using a British study, before then reviewing a global meta-study in order to draw some more general conclusions.

In 2014, the Department for Education in England undertook an evaluation of relationship support interventions.⁶⁵ The UK government had invested £30 million in relationship support and wanted to know the effectiveness of various religious and secular programs in marriage preparation, relationship education, and couple counselling. One part of their mixed method study was a pre- and post-intervention survey with 235 individuals who had followed marriage preparation programs provided by the Catholic organization Marriage Care. The two programs Marriage Care offers are Preparing Together, a group program for couples and FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding, and Study), a program in which every couple has their own facilitator. Many British parishes require participation in one of the two programs before couples can be married. The people who had used Preparing Together had a significantly higher score in mental well-being (effect size $d = 0.20$) after the program. Those who used FOCCUS had a significant positive change in relationship quality ($d = 0.22$) after the program. A cost and benefit analysis was also part of the research, which showed that every pound invested in the FOCCUS program had an estimated benefit of £11.50 for British society, because of an avoidance of costs associated with relationship breakdown.⁶⁶ Because of their effectiveness, it was recommended that marriage preparation programs should be more widely advertised, including advertising in registry offices for civil marriages.

At the same time, the report acknowledges that the duration of improved communication for couples after marriage preparation is limited. This brings us to the question of how marital quality can be sustained during the first years of marriage and beyond. Of course, this is a very broad question with many possible answers. This search is limited to the efficacy of marriage education programs provided by

64. Cf. Lk. 15, 11-32.

65. Thomas Spielhofer, Judy Corlyon, Laura Stock, Matthew Gieve, Ben Durbin and Marjorie Smith, *Relationship Support Interventions Evaluation*. London: Department for Education, 2014.

66. Ibid. 16.

clergy or other ecclesial organizations. Therefore, we will not look at the effects of individual, couple, or family therapy or various forms of self-help on marital quality.⁶⁷

Alan Hawkins and his colleagues undertook a meta-analysis of 148 reports on the effectiveness of MRE programs.⁶⁸ This meta-study is not focused exclusively on research regarding married couples, but it includes studies on the enhancement of other relationship types. Studies have been divided into control-group studies and one-group pre/post studies. The most used evaluation criteria were relationship quality or satisfaction and various forms of couple communication. Studies were conducted between 1975 and 2009. Hawkins et al. did not mention the countries of origin of these studies, except for the fact that five studies were written in another language than English. One of the main results they found was that MRE programs with 9 to 20 contact hours had a much higher effectivity than programs with 1 to 8 contact hours, both in terms of communication skills and in relationship quality or satisfaction. On average, programs of more than 20 contact hours did not seem to be more effective than the programs with 9 to 20 contact hours.

In comparison to MRE programs in a laboratory or university setting, MRE programs in a religious setting are specific because of two focal points: first, the issue of church attendance, as we have seen above, and second, the dimension of (personal) prayer. In order to detect the role of prayer in MRE, Steven Beach and his colleagues investigated the efficacy of a prayer-focused relationship enhancement program, based on the frequently used program for couples called CPREP (Christian Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program), but adapted for an African American context.⁶⁹ This culturally sensitive program (CS-PREP) focuses on communication, listening, and problem-solving skills. The prayer-focused program (PFP) developed by Beach and colleagues adds to this program 'a particular emphasis on learning how (and why) to pray for one's mate'.⁷⁰ For the testing of both programs, married couples from various Christian denominations, as well as Muslim couples, were welcomed. Both programs had the same duration of three days and used the same working method. A

67. An example of this type of research is an article by Henk Jan Conradi, Pieter Dingemanse, Arjen Noordhof, Catrin Finkenauer and Jan H. Kamphuis, 'Effectiveness of the "Hold me tight" relationship enhancement program in a self-referred and a clinician-referred sample: An emotionally focused couples therapy-based approach', *Family Process* 57(3), 2018, 613-628. Although the 'Hold me tight' program analysed by Conradi and his colleagues deals with the issue of forgiving and building of trust for couples, there is almost no attention to the relationship with God or with the church community.

68. Alan J. Hawkins, Scott M. Stanley, Victoria L. Blanchard and Michael Albright, 'Exploring programmatic moderators of the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education programs: A meta-analytic study', *Behavior Therapy* 43, 2012, 77-87.

69. Steven R. H. Beach, Tera R. Hurt, Frank D. Fincham, Kameron J. Franklin, Lily M. McNair, 'Enhancing marital enrichment through spirituality: Efficacy data for prayer focused relationship enhancement', *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 3(3), 2011, 201-216. On CPREP, see: Stanley, S. M., Trathen, D., McCain, S., & Bryan, M., *A lasting promise: A Christian guide to fighting for your marriage*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

70. Steven R.H. Beach et al., *op. cit.*, 2011, at 202-203.

control group received a self-help book on how to enhance marriage and communication skills. Data was collected after the intervention, after six months, and after twelve months. The results showed that both husbands and wives in the CS-PREP group and in the PFP group scored significantly higher than the control group on the combined analysis of variance (ANOVA) which measured communication skills, marital satisfaction, and positive intentions. The PFP group showed a significantly greater positive change than the CS-PREP group and may be more efficacious for wives than for husbands, although on the whole participants were satisfied with both programs. These outcomes make clear that prayer could positively influence the relationship quality as experienced by the couples themselves. Therefore, these results could be an encouragement for church and other faith communities to invest in this sort of programs. This is in line with Pope Francis's recommendation in AL 227 for the participation of families in retreats and the encouragement of regular, shared prayerful moments at home.

1.4.3 The role of forgiveness within couples

Another dimension which could be influential for the communication between partners and for relationship satisfaction is forgiveness. Research demonstrates a strong link between religiosity and forgiveness.⁷¹ The power of forgiveness is one of the issues which is being addressed in current MRE-programs in Europe and elsewhere.⁷²

Building on the results of earlier studies on the relation between religiosity and marital well-being, Jonathan Olson and his colleagues focused on three aspects of religiosity within relationships: religious homogamy, forgiveness, and prayer.⁷³ They defined religious homogamy as the 'self-reported level of spousal agreement on broad religious issues'.⁷⁴ With regard to forgiveness, participants were asked to what extent they experienced their spouse as forgiving towards them. The experience of forgiveness could of course also be relevant for persons in a relationship who are not actively involved in a religious community. In relation to prayer, participants were asked how often they prayed for their spouse's well-being. Data was collected from a random sample of more than 1,500 heterosexual married individuals from three separate American states: Arkansas, Utah, and Vermont. A majority of the participants

71. Daniel Escher, 'How does religion promote forgiveness? Linking beliefs, orientations, and practices', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52(1), 2013, 100–119.

72. See for instance for the Netherlands, www.marriagecourse.nl/, accessed 5-7-2025; Gary Chapman, *Things I wish I'd known before we got married*, Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2010, chapter 6.

73. Jonathan R. Olson, James P. Marshall, H. Wallace Goddard and David G. Schramm, 'Shared religious beliefs, prayer, and forgiveness as predictors of marital satisfaction', *Family relations* 64(October), 2015, 519–533.

74. *Ibid.*, 523.

belonged to a Christian denomination. The results showed that all three aspects of religiosity contributed to a significant improvement in marital quality. Of the three aspects, the experience of forgiveness has by far the greatest impact on marital quality. Forgiveness may also have protective effects against known risks to marital functioning, such as parental divorce or marital stress. Only in high-risk situations, such as abusive relationships, forgiveness may have a detrimental effect.⁷⁵ Olson and his colleagues conclude that these findings could be relevant for marriage education and prevention programs. Since their study is limited to married couples, it would be interesting to investigate the relation between religiosity and relationship quality in other family-types. They also recommend that future studies pay attention to other dimensions of religiosity and spirituality in addition to the three they examined. One can think of active participation in faith communities, specific religious practices such as retreats, pilgrimages, or personal prayer, and faith community support. Obviously, these practices are open to all kinds of family-types and may vary according to religious denomination.

1.4.4 The role of pastoral leadership

We have seen that (pre)marital and relationship education has a clear positive effect on couples' relationship satisfaction and their interpersonal skills. However, the way clergy and lay leaders provide MRE does make a difference. Jesse Owen and colleagues found that the working alliance clergy and lay leaders establish with couples whom they prepare for marriage influences the couples' positive and negative communication.⁷⁶ Their results showed that if a leader has a strong working alliance with a couple, then both the increase in the couples' positive communication and the decrease in their negative communication are significant. Also, leaders who have been trained in giving premarital education by using skills-based programs show better results in the couples' communication skills than leaders who are not trained.

Regarding the formation of pastoral leaders and volunteers, Jan Eijken points to the growing importance of a sensitivity towards an intercultural building up of the church community.⁷⁷ Today, pastoral leaders must be able to understand the differences in the spiritual and religious practices of various cultural groups and individuals within the church community and sometimes indeed of the couple. They must also develop skills to bring together people from different cultures. Their pastoral approach should

75. James K. McNulty and Frank D. Fincham, 'Beyond positive psychology? Toward a contextual view of psychological processes and well-being', *American Psychologist* 67(2), 2012, 101–110.

76. Jesse J. Owen, Galena K. Rhoades, Scott M. Stanley, and Howard J. Markman, 'The role of leaders' working alliance in premarital education', *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25(1), 2011, 49–57.

77. Jan Eijken, *op. cit.*, 2018, 238.

be based on an appreciation of these differences, rather than making efforts to dilute them.

So, pastoral leadership has a lot to do with the leader's attitude. On various occasions during his pontificate, Pope Francis has stressed that church's ministers need to know how to dialogue, to be merciful, and to search for a prudential moral judgment by taking seriously into consideration the various faith journeys of the persons they accompany.⁷⁸ In this regard, it is remarkable to see that with the current interest in parish renewal in Europe and North-America, pastoral leadership is regarded as a crucial aspect for successful revitalizing.⁷⁹ At the same time, the role of the whole community in welcoming the newlyweds should not be underestimated. Here, clergy and lay leaders have a facilitating role to play, stimulating spiritual and social support for couples.

1.5 Conclusion

In this final part, recommendations for future research and ways towards a more effective pastoral accompaniment of couples will be given. From the previous part, it has become clear that on the one hand, there is substantial evidence that MRE has a positive effect on relationship quality as experienced by couples themselves. On the other hand, there is a lack of empirical data on the way in which pastoral accompaniment of engaged and married couples could be improved. Stanley and colleagues demonstrated that premarital education has a positive effect on couples' marital satisfaction, but they did not focus on the question of how these effects could be sustained later in married life, nor did they deal with the way in which marital education could be provided.

The issues of church attendance and participation in the church community are challenging, especially regarding Millennials in a European or American context. Based on their research, Wilcox and Wolfinger conclude that church attendance and common prayer have a positive effect on perceived marital quality, but they did not investigate how couples could be inspired to participate more actively in the life of a church community or how they could be stimulated to develop their own spiritual

78. For instance, Antonio Spadaro, S.J., 'A big heart open to God: The exclusive interview with Pope Francis', *America*, 30.09.2013, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis, accessed 5-7-2025; Emmanuel Agius, *op. cit.*, 2016, 52.

79. Cf. James Mallon, *Divine renovation: Bringing your parish from maintenance to mission*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2014, chapter 7.

practices. The ways marriage preparation and education interrelate with church attendance and spiritual practice need to be further explored.

The British evaluation report by Spielhofer and his colleagues shows the promising effects of two Catholic marriage preparation programs on mental well-being and relationship quality. However, these effects are of limited duration and the same is true for other marriage preparation programs. It is encouraging to see that, after the publication of AL, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales (CBCEW) issued Guidelines for the Preparation of Couples for Marriage.⁸⁰ These guidelines propose a more process-oriented approach towards MRE. Marriage preparation is considered a journey of faith, comparable to the model of formation offered in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. The CBCEW acknowledges that 'the Church has a responsibility to help people prepare for the great commitment of marriage and to support them throughout their married lives'.⁸¹ From a practical theological perspective, it would be worthwhile investigating the extent to which married couples are interested in a follow-up program in the local community after their wedding and, also, the extent to which parish couple mentors could play a supporting role, in addition to MRE. It could also be beneficial to analyze the current strategies by which parishes, dioceses, or religious institutions try to attract more married and non-married couples for MRE programs. Beach and colleagues showed that a marriage preparation program with a focus on prayer had an even higher score on communication skills, marital satisfaction, and positive intentions than a culturally sensitive program. Similarly, Olson and colleagues demonstrated the efficacy of prayer and, in particular, the experience of forgiveness in relation to marital quality. Future research could usefully explore the extent to which couples express a desire to develop these two dimensions of married life. It is also worthwhile testing the value of prayer and forgiveness in marriage in a European context.

Further research in these areas could support the development of an effective pastoral strategy for couple and family ministry. A pastoral strategy which takes on board the recommendations from AL must be more proactive in reaching out to couples who may have drifted away from the Church community, especially in a secularized society. The empirical evidence shown above makes clear that couples could profit from such a proactive pastoral strategy. Their own well-being and their relationship quality may increase and that would undoubtedly have a positive effect on their children's well-being, too.

80. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales, Department for Christian Responsibility & Citizenship, *Guidelines for the Preparation of Couples for Marriage*, Stockport: Matthew James Publishing, 2016.

81. Ibid. 11-13.

When it comes to a more effective pastoral accompaniment of couples, several roads may be followed. In the first place, it is important that church leaders and communities see it as their task to truly ‘welcome couples, help them discern their vocation, and then to walk with them, throughout the seasons of married life, supporting them as they gradually discover the dignity and beauty of their calling.’⁸²

These days, local churches, especially in urban regions, have great opportunities to discover once more the true meaning of catholicity, in the sense of universality. This is clearly illustrated in various case studies by Naomi van der Meer on migrant parishes in a secularized country like the Netherlands.⁸³ Many African Catholics living in cities like Amsterdam and The Hague, who were interviewed between 2000 and 2002, stressed the universality of worshipping the same God across different cultures.⁸⁴ Their faith ‘helped to bring together Catholics of different cultures in organized occasions at the inter-parish level.’⁸⁵ This is less evident than it seems. In many places, marriage preparation is still organized separately in different migrant communities. Because migrant parishes often have a great cultural diversity, the vibrant atmosphere in their communities could be an inspiring example for merging parishes in more rural areas. In a secular context, it could be enriching for couples to be able to share and deepen their spiritual and religious experiences. More specifically, couples from different cultural backgrounds can learn from one another when they reflect on the spiritual dimension of their married life, or on the way they educate their children in the Christian faith.

In part 1.3 the principle of graduality has been mentioned as a pastoral approach by which couples are stimulated to gradually fulfil the divine law of love. The application of this principle implies that pastoral accompaniment is needed during marriage as well. Thus, couples could grow in their understanding of belonging to the Church community and find their proper role and responsibilities in it.

Finally, for a successful pastoral accompaniment it is of great importance to make young couples feel that they are appreciated in the Church community. This means that their cultural and spiritual diversity is respected and also that facilities are available for families with small children. It is more than likely that, in the future, the diversity of young couples in Europe will increase further. This provides a real opportunity for Church communities to develop a new vitality.

82. See the CBCEW website <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/marriage-preparation/>, accessed 5-7-2025.

83. Naomi van der Meer, *Believers in the universal Church: Processes of self-identification among Catholic immigrants of African descent in the Dutch religious landscape*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010.

84. Ibid. 176.

85. Ibid. 250.

Chapter 2

Marriage preparation, pastoral accompaniment, and relationship quality among migrant and intercultural couples in the Netherlands⁸⁶

86. Published by Ward Biemans under the same title in: *Family Forum* 2023, 153-172. doi: 10.25167/FF/5085.

Abstract

This quantitative survey among migrant and intercultural couples in the Netherlands investigates the relationships between marriage preparation, pastoral accompaniment and relationship quality. Relationship quality may be negatively influenced by a process of cultural transition, by instability of the relationship itself or by underdeveloped communication skills between partners. Participants ($n = 223$) have been married in the Catholic Church between 1995 and 2021. Correlations between various religious and spiritual activities and relationship quality have been calculated through linear regression analysis. Results show that overall, migrant couples and intercultural couples appreciate a more intensive, professional, and welcoming Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) and pastoral accompaniment after marriage. It is also concluded that seeking reconciliation after a conflict ($r = 0.361$) and experiencing forgiveness from one's spouse ($r = 0.188$) are significantly associated with a higher perceived relationship quality. Finally, data indicate that migrants with a non-Western cultural background show a significant pattern of cultural defence ($\mu = -0,375$) in comparison to Dutch people.

Keywords: marriage accompaniment; migrants; intercultural couples; relationship quality; integration

2.1 Introduction

It is a well-known phenomenon that in recent decades, more and more young couples in Europe are choosing cohabitation rather than marriage. On average, this choice has negative consequences for the quality and sustainability of the relationships themselves.⁸⁷ The relationship quality gap between married and cohabiting couples is smaller in countries where cohabitation is most widespread. Persons who choose for long-term cohabitation usually do not follow programs in Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE), which is often expected from couples who want to marry in the church. Persons who have done MRE score significantly higher on marital quality and commitment, as assessed by the couples themselves, and lower on marital conflict and divorce.⁸⁸ When relationships end in divorce, this may have at least temporary negative consequences for the mental well-being of the adults and children involved.⁸⁹ In recent decades, in most European countries the number of low-conflict family breakups has increased. This has resulted in a more negative average effect on children's educational attainments, which is associated with the separation of their parents.⁹⁰

Migration is another factor which may contribute negatively to the emotional well-being of adults and children, because, for various reasons it can be experienced as a stressful event. This can also be the case for children remaining in the home country. For example, Polish children experiencing separation from an emigrating parent or parents lasting from 6 months to 1 year experience a significantly higher level of anxiety than children from families who went to the Netherlands for permanent residence.⁹¹ On the other hand, when adult migrants have a negative appraisal of their situation in the host country, but can articulate their spiritual needs, this has a positive effect on their mental well-being.⁹² Participation in a religious community in the host

87. Kenneth Aarskaug Wiik, Renske Keizer and Trude Lappegård, 'Relationship quality in marital and cohabiting unions across Europe', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74(3), 2012.

88. Pew Research Center, *U.S. Catholics open to non-traditional families: 45% of Americans are Catholic or connected to Catholicism*. Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2015, 55; Scott M. Stanley, Paul R. Amato, Christine A. Johnson and Howard J. Markman, 'Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey', *Journal of Family Psychology* 20, 2006, 117–126. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.20.1.117.

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

90. Martin Kreidl, Martina Štípková and Barbora Hubatková, 'Parental separation and children's education in a comparative perspective: Does the burden disappear when separation is more common?', *Demographic Research* 36(3), 2017.

91. Irena Pufal-Struzik, Barbara Sordyl-Lipnicka and Małgorzata Duda, 'Parents' economic migration and the psychological well-being of their Polish children', *Family Forum* 2021, 115-128, at 120. doi:10.25167/FF/3507.

92. Kathrin Maier, Karol Konaszewski, Sebastian Binyamin Skalski, Arndt Büssing and Janusz Surzykiewicz, 'Spiritual needs, religious coping and mental wellbeing: A cross-sectional study among migrants and refugees in Germany', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19/3415, 2022, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063415>.

country may thus give a sense of belonging, could give rise to a deeper self-reflection and to take up social responsibility. This study focuses on migrant and intercultural couples who live in the Netherlands. They want to marry or are married in the Catholic Church and thus have followed some form of MRE. From a well-being perspective, it is interesting to investigate to what extent MRE and pastoral accompaniment might help couples to sustain their relationship quality, both before and after marriage.

From the total number of Christians in the Netherlands, 6.2 million in 2015, ca. 1 million have a migrant background. At a time when church attendance of Dutch Christians is decreasing, especially among Catholics, the number of Christian migrants who regularly attend a church community service is rising.⁹³ For the Netherlands in 2023, the majority of migrants is coming from other European countries. According to CBS Statistics Netherlands, the top four migration background countries in 2023 are Ukraine, Poland, Turkey and Germany.⁹⁴ This has changed considerably compared to 2021, when Polish migrants formed the biggest group who arrived in the Netherlands. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine has led to a great shift in migration across Europe. In the last fifteen years, labour, family, and study are increasingly mentioned among both EU and non-EU migrants as the main motives for migration to the Netherlands; non-EU migrants also mention asylum.

2.2 Theoretical background and objectives

MRE has been used as an instrument not only to prepare couples for their wedding, but also to increase their relationship quality. Meta-research in the field of cognitive and behavioural sciences shows that, if well designed and completed, most relationship education programs aimed at an improvement of the quality of communication and conflict management early in a relationship lead to a higher quality and health of the relationship, at least for a period of 0-5 years.⁹⁵ The period of preparation and the first years of married life could be used to develop communication skills and possibly to prevent future relationship problems. One recent study on MRE in three Catholic dioceses in Germany showed that around 90% of the

93. Joep de Hart, and Pepijn van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland: Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke geloofsgemeenschap*. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2018, 103-104.

94. CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek), 2023, *Immigration to the Netherlands*, <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/dossier/asylum-migration-and-integration/how-many-people-immigrate-to-the-netherlands->, accessed 1-7-2025.

95. Howard J. Markman and Galena K. Rhoades, 'Relationship education research: Current status and future directions', *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 38(1), 2012, 169-200.

themes which are considered important by participating couples – relationship quality, communication skills, and meaning of the marriage promises – are treated ‘just rightly’.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, this study did not distinguish between native couples and migrants. It also needs to be said, that the prerequisites for MRE vary considerably between countries. For instance, in the Diocese of Płock in Poland, before being admitted to an MRE-course, it is expected that couples have followed school-based premarital catechisation. If they have not done this, the parish priest will provide additional catechetical material to them and conduct a relevant examination before the start of the MRE.⁹⁷ For Dutch couples in the Netherlands, this would be pretty unthinkable, since school-based catechisation has almost disappeared.

When migrant couples come to a host country, they are often facing cultural differences, which could make them more vulnerable for relationship distress. Intercultural couples, for this research defined as a couple consisting of a migrant with a Dutch partner, face challenges of blending different cultural and sometimes also religious backgrounds within their relationship. Migrants may experience unease in their contacts with people in the host society, for instance because of the high degree of secularity in the Netherlands.⁹⁸ At times, migrants may suffer from feelings of loneliness or incomprehension. Church communities can help migrant and intercultural couples to enhance their relationship quality, to support them in their faith and to develop their social network, both within their own ethnic group and in relation to other ethnic minorities and to the hosting community. It is expected that their relationship quality could be increased by an intensification and more personalized form of MRE, with space for developing communication skills, both within the relationship and in their contacts with the host society. On the other hand, a negative appraisal of MRE could have negative effects on their relationship quality and integration process. In this study, migrant and intercultural couples who planned to get married or have been married in the Catholic Church are asked about their experiences with MRE, with prayer, worship, and other religious and spiritual activities. Most existing research on the relationship between MRE and relationship quality are of American or British origin, European studies in this area are scarce.⁹⁹ Focusing on migrants in the Netherlands, we have formulated the main question of this study as follows: *To what extent can MRE and pastoral accompaniment before*

96. Rupert Scheule, ‘Schönster Tag, undeutliches Sakrament. Was Brautleute denken’, *Stimmen der Zeit* 2, 2023, 119-130, at 123.

97. Jarosław Kamiński, Ks., ‘Przygotowanie do małżeństwa i życia w rodzinie na przykładzie diecezji Płockiej’ (Preparation for marriage and family life, at the example of the Diocese of Płock), *Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny*, 19(2), 2011, 119-136, at 131. doi:10.34839/wpt.2011.19.2.119-136.

98. Freija Derks and Srdjan Sremac, ‘Negotiating the sacred: the lived religion of Eritrean newcomers and their process of integration in the Netherlands’, *Practical Theology*, 13(6), 2020, 594-608, at 600. doi:10.1080/1756073X.2020.1792638.

99. Ward Biemans, *op. cit.*, 2021, cf. chapter 1 of this thesis.

and after a wedding within the Catholic Church contribute to a higher relationship quality among migrant and intercultural couples in the Netherlands?

With the increasing secularisation of the Dutch society, the influence of Christian religion in schools has been strongly reduced. In the previous century, when religious education was still a normal part of the educational program of primary and secondary schools, many Catholic parishes did not have a thorough, multidisciplinary, interactive MRE-program for couples. As Pope Francis admits, at times MRE has been characterized by an excessive idealization of marriage, for instance by an insistence on the duty of procreation and not on the formation of consciences.¹⁰⁰ MRE as provided by Dutch parishes was and often still is restricted to an introduction of the couple to the local priest, some elementary catechesis on marriage and a preparation for the wedding ceremony. Recently, the Vatican Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life has pleaded for a broadening of MRE, comparable to the baptism catechumenate.¹⁰¹ The dicastery document points at the following elements to be included in the marriage preparation (without excluding any of them): formation, reflection, dialogue, liturgy, community, prayer, and celebration.¹⁰²

In the context of the Dutch Catholic Church province, nowadays most marriage preparations have a length of 5-10 hours. When MRE would be restricted to basic catechesis and preparation of the wedding ceremony, this would be a missed opportunity to deepen the couples' relationship. A longer duration of an MRE program can have a positive effect on communication skills and relationship quality or satisfaction, although in earlier research this finding did not apply to programs of more than 20 contact hours.¹⁰³ MRE can also have a positive effect on mental well-being of the participants.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, a first hypothesis has been formulated as follows:

1) Marriage preparation with a length of more than 10 hours has a more positive evaluation than marriage preparation with a length of 0-5 hours or a length of 5-10 hours.

Because of a more solid religious education in schools, often the previous generation of Dutch parish priests would not consider it a necessity to provide a couple who

100. Francis, Post-synodal Apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2016, no. 36-37.

101. Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. *Catechumenal pathways for married life: Pastoral guidelines for local churches*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022.

102. *Ibid.*, no. 16.

103. Alan J. Hawkins, Scott M. Stanley, Victoria L. Blanchard and Michael Albright, 'Exploring programmatic moderators of the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education programs: A meta-analytic study', *Behavior Therapy* 43, 2012, 77-87.

104. Thomas Spielhofer, Corlyon, J., Stock, L., Gieve, M., Durbin, B. and Smith, M., *Relationship support interventions evaluation*. London: Department for Education, 2014, at 45.

wants to marry in the church with an official marriage preparation course. Nowadays, several Catholic Bishops' conferences, for instance in Poland or in England and Wales, have issued guidelines for the preparation of couples for marriage.¹⁰⁵ In the Netherlands, such diocesan guidelines do not exist. Still, programs which clergy and lay leaders use while providing MRE can make a difference. If MRE-programs with a systematic attention to improve communication skills are used, this could have a positive effect on the relationship quality after marriage. Also, leaders who have been trained in using skills-based programs when they give premarital education show better results in the couples' communication outcomes than leaders who are not trained.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, if no such material is used, the chances on a remaining effect are strongly reduced. A second hypothesis which will be tested is the following:

2) Marriage preparation which made use of course material has a more positive evaluation than marriage preparation without course material.

If MRE as provided in a local parish is of short duration and mainly a formal and administrative preparation for the wedding, then the relationship between the MRE-leader (for instance the parish priest, a deacon or lay leader) and the couple will probably not develop into a warm, personal, and constructive relationship. If on the other hand there is a time investment into the relationship between the couple and the MRE-leader(s), this could foster a further integration into the parish community. During the marriage preparation, it is important that migrants feel understood and that their cultural background is respected. Regarding the wedding itself, it can be particularly important for migrants that certain cultural elements are included into the wedding liturgy, for instance some passages in their native language, certain musical or devotional elements. The working alliance clergy and lay leaders establish with couples whom they prepare for marriage influences the couples' positive and negative communication.¹⁰⁷ Results showed that if a leader has a strong working alliance with a couple, then both the change in the couples' positive and negative communication are significant. Therefore, our third hypothesis is:

3) Marriage preparation characterized by a good cooperation with the preparation leader(s) has a more positive evaluation than marriage preparation without a good cooperation.

105. Konferencja Episkopatu Polski, (Conference of Polish Bishops, KEP). *Dyrektorium Duszpasterstwa Rodzin (Directory of Family Pastoral Care)*. Warsaw: KEP, 2003; Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales (CBEW), *Guidelines for the preparation of couples for marriage*. London: Catholic Trust for England & Wales, 2016.

106. Jesse J. Owen, Galena K. Rhoades, Scott M. Stanley, and Howard J. Markman, 'The role of leaders' working alliance in premarital education', *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25(1), 2011, 49–57.

107. Ibid.

Fourthly, MRE can gain strength if it is accompanied by a welcoming of the couple within the local church community. The importance of welcoming migrants within church communities has often been stressed by Pope Francis and others.¹⁰⁸ Young couples could develop a social network and they could for instance learn from other married couples who are more experienced in what it means to sustain a marriage and build a family. Especially for migrant and intercultural couples who are relatively new in the host country, a welcoming into the local community could be of great importance, also after the wedding. However, in many Dutch parishes a formal welcoming by the community before, during or after the marriage preparation does not take place. We will investigate how couples who prepare for marriage evaluate the involvement of the local church community, by testing the fourth hypothesis:

4) Marriage accompaniment with a welcoming by the church community has a more positive evaluation than marriage accompaniment without such a welcoming.

Several American studies have demonstrated positive relations between various religious and spiritual activities and relationship quality. Couples who frequently go to church tend to report significantly better relationships, a stronger adherence to values like fidelity, a higher incidence of supportive behaviour within relationships, more moderate alcohol and drug consumption and less domestic violence.¹⁰⁹ Shared social networks with people who adhere to the same values could be helpful for the maintenance of a good quality relationship. In another study among low-income couples, it has been found that when couples pray together and have a shared religious faith, they evaluate their marital quality more positively.¹¹⁰ However, so far these results have not been tested in a European context.

Elaborating on the results of previous research on the relation between religiosity and marital well-being, Jonathan Olson and colleagues focused on various aspects of religiosity within relationships, with forgiveness as the most important of these.¹¹¹ The value of forgiveness within relationships is of course not limited to couples who share the same religion. Both religious and not religious participants were asked to what extent they experienced their spouse as forgiving towards them. Their results showed that granting and receiving forgiveness contributed to a significant improvement in marital quality. Therefore, it could be important that during MRE,

108. Francis, *Message for 2018 world day of migrants and refugees*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2018; René de Reuver, Dorottya Nagy et al., *Van migrant tot naaste. Plaatsmaken voor jezelf*. Utrecht: Kok Boekencentrum, 2018.

109. W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas Wolfinger, 'Living and loving "decent": Religion and relationship quality among urban parents', *Social Science Research* 37, 2008.

110. Daniel Lichter and Julie Carmalt, 'Religion and marital quality among low-income couples', *Social Science Research* 38, 2009.

111. Jonathan R. Olson, James P. Marshall, H. Wallace Goddard and David G. Schramm, 'Shared religious beliefs, prayer, and forgiveness as predictors of marital satisfaction', *Family relations* 64(October), 2015, 519-533.

attention is paid to dealing with conflicts and mutual forgiveness. A fifth hypothesis has been formulated to assess the relationship between various religious and spiritual activities and relationship quality:

5) The following activities are associated with a higher perceived relationship quality: Seeking reconciliation after a conflict; Granting and receiving forgiveness; Church attendance; Personal prayer; Praying together; Speaking about prayer life; Maintaining Sunday rest.

An earlier Europe-wide analysis of differences in religiosity between migrants and the native born showed that migrants have a higher self-assessed religiosity, a higher frequency of praying, and a higher church attendance.¹¹² Scholars in religion science state that 'a vast majority of non-Western Christians will be more biblical than their Western sisters and brothers in the faith'.¹¹³ Still, among most migrants who have arrived in the Netherlands from Central and Southern Europe, the frequency of church attendance in the host country is less than pre-migration.¹¹⁴

The question of how to strengthen pastoral accompaniment before and after marriage fits in a wider perspective of cultural defence (CD) or cultural transition (CT) after migration. On the one hand, religious activities could provide resources for CD, by creating connections between people from a common nationality in the new, host society and by offering services in the migrant's own language, according to their cultural customs and answering to their social needs. Research shows that for instance for African-American women, migrant church communities can be a place of hope in their struggle against economic insecurities, social displacement or discrimination.¹¹⁵ Within intercultural relationships, partners from an ethnic minority group sometimes face criticism, rejection, and racism in the host country. However, their majority host partners could also have such an experience when they are in a foreign context in their own country.¹¹⁶

After migration one can often see patterns of CT, when migrants give up elements of their own culture of origin and integrate in the host society and church community.¹¹⁷ They would for instance often use the English or Dutch language in their contacts

112. Mariya Aleksynska and Barry R. Chiswick, *Religiosity and migration: Travel into one's self versus travel across cultures*. Bonn: IZA, 2011, 15-17.

113. Frans Wijsen, 'Global Christianity: A European perspective', *Exchange* 38, 2009, 147-160, at 148.

114. Yassine Khoudja, 'Religious trajectories of immigrants in the first years after migration', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 61(2), 2022, 507-529, at 517.

115. Gemma Tulud Cruz, *An intercultural theology of migration: Pilgrims in the wilderness*. Leiden: Brill, 2010, 193-195.

116. Dharam Bhugun, *Intercultural parenting and relationships: Challenges and rewards*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019, 68.

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

with their colleagues, neighbours, and parishioners. It is presupposed, that migrants with a Western background (defined as Western and Southern Europe, the U.S.A., Canada and Australia) who migrate to the Netherlands, more often show a pattern of CT, because of the similarities of their home culture with the Dutch culture, whereas non-Western migrants (defined as Central / Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and South America) more often show a pattern of CD, because of the bigger differences between their home culture, including their language, and the Dutch culture. Therefore, our sixth hypothesis is the following:

6) Migrants with a non-Western background score higher on CD / lower on CT than migrants with a Western background or Dutch people.

2.3 Method of quantitative survey

In 2021, the total number of Roman-Catholic parishes in the Netherlands was ca. 431.¹¹⁸ Among these parishes are some 20 official migrant parishes, of whom 8 are Polish speaking. Further, some 54 migrant Catholic communities have been registered, most of which do not have the official parish status.¹¹⁹ Of these 54 migrant communities, 21 are (partly) Dutch speaking, 10 speak English, 11 Indonesian, 5 Ukrainian, 4 Spanish and 3 Portuguese. 17 other languages are registered; many parishes have indicated more than one language. The database does not contain numbers of participants.

The total number of marriages in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands has decreased from 7,700 in 2003 to 730 in 2023.¹²⁰ It needs to be remarked that these numbers do not include couples who married in their land of origin and have migrated to the Netherlands. In fact, many couples prefer to marry in their land of origin, so that their family and friends can be present.

For this survey in 2021, 198 parish priests, student chaplains and contact persons of religious communities in the Netherlands have been contacted. They have been asked to forward the invitation to migrant or intercultural couples who were preparing for marriage or have been married in the Catholic Church after 1995, to participate in our online questionnaire. In some cases, they provided e-mail addresses of couples to us,

118. *Pius Almanak: Jaarboek katholiek Nederland 2021*. Baarn: Adveniat Geloofseducatie B.V., 2021.

119. Katholiek Documentatiecentrum (KDC). *Database Catholic migrants*, 2021, <https://www.ru.nl/kdc/database-katholieke-migranten/>, accessed 5-7-2025. To this date, the database is only accessible on request.

120. Joris Kregting, *Kerncijfers Rooms-katholieke Kerk 2021*. Nijmegen: Kaski, 2022, 17 and Joris Kregting, *Kerncijfers Rooms-katholieke Kerk 2023*. Nijmegen: Kaski, 2024, 15.

so that we could ourselves invite the couples to participate. Besides a questionnaire in Dutch and English, survey translations have been made available in French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Papiamentu, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese. This approach resulted in a total number of 351 invitations. From this group, 118 individuals filled in the questionnaire. Further, circa 400 flyers were distributed among different migrant communities who gathered for a Catholic Mass, with an open invitation to take part in the survey. This resulted in another 117 responses. Participants have given their informed written consent to participate in this research. A total number of 235 participants completed the survey. Those participants received a gift card of 10 euros by e-mail. Five individuals were taken out from the list of results, because their marriage took place before 1995. Another six individuals were removed from the list, because at the moment of filling in the survey, they did not live in the Netherlands and neither they were married in the Netherlands. Finally, results from one person were taken out, because no nationality has been filled in. So, results were analysed from a total of 223 individuals, which means a response rate of 30%. It is noted that Dutch people who participated in the survey, were preparing for marriage or have been married within an intercultural relationship with a migrant spouse.

The survey consisted of 60 closed and 2 open questions, including: 21 questions on general characteristics of the group of participants; 10 questions on participants' assessment of their MRE and their perceived relationship quality; 23 questions on their current religious and spiritual activities and experiences and their desires for future activities and experiences; 5 questions measuring the assessment of their integration in the church community and in the host society (see below) and finally 3 questions regarding their opinion of church life in general in the Netherlands. For this survey, the participants' mean evaluation scores of the marriage preparation programs are compared with various characteristics of these programs, using F-tests and T-tests. We did not undertake a pre- and post-intervention to test the effectivity of marriage programs, since the focus of this research is not on the programs itself, but on the experiences migrant couples and intercultural couples have with pastoral accompaniment. In the Dutch Church province, there is no prescribed MRE-program. Therefore, the variety of the programs is great. A majority of the participants have not used official course material at all. This makes a comparison in the chosen educational method almost impossible. Therefore, to increase the reliability of the survey, we have chosen for objective criteria such as the length of the program, the use (or not) of official course material and the presence or absence of an official welcoming in the church community. The study design has been approved by the Ethics Review Board of Tilburg School of Catholic Theology.

Further in this research, correlations between various religious and spiritual activities on the one hand and relationship quality on the other hand have been calculated through linear regression analysis, using SPSS software. Data have been controlled for education level and age of the participants. Although in previous research low income has proven to be associated with marital distress and dissolution, we have chosen in this survey not to ask couples specifically about their income level, for privacy reasons. Other risk factors have been indicated as well in earlier research, such as parental divorce or previous divorce of self or spouse. If these risk factors play a role within the relationship, they could be dealt with for instance by means of individual or couple therapy or mediation. However, since this research focuses on how MRE and pastoral accompaniment could enhance future relationship quality and not on individual or couple therapy or mediation, these risk factors have not been taken into consideration in this survey.

To measure the extent of cultural transition (CT) or cultural defence (CD), we made a distinction between participants with a Western cultural background and participants with a non-Western cultural background. We asked them five specific questions: (1) if their participation in the local church community makes them feel more at home in the Netherlands (CT+1), or rather helps them to sustain their own cultural background (CD+1); (2) if because of their intended marriage, they feel more connected to Dutch society (Yes = CT+1; No = CD+1) or (3) rather to their own culture (Yes = CD+1; No = CT+1); (4) if they would like to have more contacts with other Christian, young Dutch couples (CT+1), or (5) rather with other Christian, young couples with a migration background (CD+1). CT- and CD-scores are supposed to be opposite to one another, so that the range of the total score varies from -4 to 4. Thus, we were able to measure the mean degree of CD or CT among both migrant and Dutch participants.

2.4 Descriptive analysis of participants

Table 1 gives a descriptive analysis of the participants.¹²¹ From the sample, it seems that among those couples who have chosen to marry in the church, a relatively high percentage is highly educated. Recent qualitative research in the United Kingdom shows a similar picture of a minority of highly educated, young ‘active affirmers’ of their faith and love life.¹²² 88% of participants has been baptized in the Catholic Church, with small regional differences. The other 12% of participants either have not been baptized, or baptized in a Protestant, Orthodox, or Anglican church community.

121. Underlying, pseudonymized dataset is available on request at: <https://doi.org/10.34894/VLLBCE>.

122. Ruth H. Perrin, *Changing shape: The faith lives of millennials*. London: SCM Press, 2020, XV.

Regarding the intercultural couples, it is remarkable that the numbers of Dutch men and Central / Eastern European and South American women are relatively high. It is further notable that they indicate their self-perceived relationship quality as high, with an 8.4 on a scale from 1 (not good) to 10 (excellent).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of participants (n = 223)

Origin	n =	Male	Female	Mean age	Mean education level (1 = primary education; 6 = university)	Mean number of years married	Mean number of children	Mean relationship quality (1 = not good; 10 = excellent)
Dutch	56	41	15	41.7	5.1	8.9	1.18	8.5
Other Western European	36	19	17	38.9	5.5	7.8	1.03	8.08
Central/ Eastern European	56	14	42	37.8	5.4	9.8	1.45	8.78
North American	2		2	37	6	5.5	2	9.5
South American	20	4	16	37.2	5.5	5.7	1.35	8.1
African	7	5	2	39.8	5.1	5.3	2	8
Asian	45	21	24	38.5	5.7	10.1	0.98	8.2
Australian	1		1	36	6	2	0	10
Total	223	104	119	39.1	5.4	8.7	1.2	8.4

Table 2. Religious and spiritual activities and ethnicity (n = 223)

Ethnicity	Mean church visit (0 = never; 4 = more than weekly)	Personal prayer (0 = never; 3 = often)	Prayer as a couple or as a family (0 = never; 3 = often)	Speaking together about prayer life (0 = never; 3 = often)	Average number of religious and spiritual activities	Frequency of voluntary work within parish community (0 = never; 3 = often)	Importance of Sunday rest (0 = not important; 3 = very important)	Role of forgiveness within relationship (0 = never; 3 = often)
Dutch (ref.)	2.35	1.93	1.22	1.17	2.95	1.0	2.07	2.30
Western European, North American, Australian	2.0*	1.72	1.05	1.33	3.61	0.74	2.13	2.56**
Central / Eastern European	2.68 **	1.93	1.25	1.36	5.61***	0.62**	2.62***	2.30
South American / African	2.26	2.37**	1.44	1.63**	4.41**	0.55**	2.0	2.59**
Asian	2.4	2.11	1.89***	1.71***	4.78***	0.87	2.16	2.25

* = Significant at 0.1 level; ** = Significant at 0.05 level; *** = Significant at 0.01 level

Table 2 gives the data for various religious and spiritual activities which are undertaken by participants. Means of various ethnic minorities are compared, using F-tests and T-tests. Results show that migrants from South America or Africa spend more time in personal prayer than Dutch people, whereas Asian migrants pray more often as a couple than Dutch couples do. South American, African, and Asian migrants speak more often together about their prayer life and take part more often in religious and spiritual activities than Dutch people.

Dutch people more often visit a church community than migrants from other Western European countries. Central / Eastern European migrants, many of whom are coming from Poland, visit their church community more often than Dutch people, attach more importance to Sunday rest and participate more often in other religious and spiritual activities, such as a short retreat, a pilgrimage, for instance to a Marian shrine, a family celebration in the church and praying with their children at home. Polish migrants more often go to church within a migrant community, where celebrations take place in Polish. Asian, American, and African migrants more often integrate within the Dutch parish structure, where they find a mass celebrated in English, or they go to a specific English-speaking migrant community.

Participants were asked about the role of forgiveness within their relationship. Results show that for participants from other Western European countries, Africa, the Americas and Australia, forgiveness plays a significantly bigger role within their relationship than for Dutch people. As we will see, this has implications for their relationship quality.

2.5 Main results of quantitative survey

In Table 3, the focus is on the characteristics and evaluation of the marriage preparation programs in which couples participated. Overall, marriage preparation as provided by parishes is evaluated as rather helpful by most of the couples ($\mu = 2.13$ on a scale from 0 to 3). Results show that marriage preparation with a length of more than 10 hours has a more positive evaluation ($\mu = 2.49$) than marriage preparation with a length of less than 10 hours. Hypothesis 1 can thus be confirmed. In courses with a length of more than 10 hours, marriage preparation is usually not limited to the preparation of the liturgy at the wedding day, but more attention is paid to communication skills, to various ways of developing one's spiritual life, to the value of forgiveness within the relationship, to the establishing of a bond with other members of the church community, etc.

Table 3. Characteristics and evaluation of the marriage preparation

Characteristic of the marriage preparation	Evaluation μ (0 = not helpful; 3 = very helpful)	F- and T-values
Marriage preparation with a length of 0-5 hours (n = 39)	2.0	F = 0.77; T = 0.15
Marriage preparation with a length of 5-10 hours (n = 89) (= ref.)	2.16	
Marriage preparation with a length of more than 10 hours (n = 71)	2.49***	F = 0.73; T = 0.0036
Marriage preparation with course material (n = 85)	2.51***	F = 0.066; T = 1.4E-05
Marriage preparation without course material (n = 113)	2.04	
Marriage accompaniment without a welcoming in the church community (n = 136)	2.04	
Marriage accompaniment with a welcoming in the church community (n = 87)	2.28**	F = 0.48; T = 0.026
Cooperation not good or mediocre (n = 23)	0.78***	F = 0.81; T = 4.5E-10
Cooperation fairly well (n = 65) (= ref.)	1.88	
Cooperation very good (n = 132)	2.51***	F = 0.57; T = 1.65E-09
Total	2.13	

** = Significant at 0.05 level; *** = Significant at 0.01 level

As hypothesis 2 presupposed, marriage preparation which made use of course material has a significantly more positive evaluation than marriage preparation without course material. Many participants appreciate it when during the course they can reflect on their mutual expectations, their ways of communication, their dealing with conflicts, etc., as is done for instance in the marriage course *Before "I do"*. This is in line with research by Thomas Spielhofer and colleagues, who found that an emphasis on communication skills training during marriage preparation produces more positive effects on mental well-being.¹²³ It is also appreciated when connections are made

123. Thomas Spielhofer et al., *op cit.*, 2014, 45.

with Holy Scripture and with Church teaching (for instance by using the *Youcat*, papal documents such as *Amoris Laetitia*, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, etc.).

From these data we can conclude, confirming hypothesis 3, that a good cooperation between the person responsible for the marriage preparation and the couple is a significant predictor for a more positive evaluation of the marriage preparation. It is therefore worthwhile to invest in a more personal, professional, and culturally sensitive relationship between the responsible(s) of the marriage preparation and the couples who want to marry.

Marriage accompaniment with a welcoming in the church community has a more positive evaluation ($\mu = 2.28$) than marriage preparation without such a welcoming. Thus, hypothesis 4 can also be confirmed. When a social network is established with members of the church community, this could be helpful for sharing experiences of married life and family life, organizing activities together, mutual support, etc. For migrants in particular, a social network of the church community could help the integration process in the neighbourhood or region where the church is located.

Table 4 shows the correlations between various religious and spiritual activities and perceived relationship quality.

Table 4. Correlation of various activities and relationship quality (n = 223)

Activity	Correlation with relationship quality (r)
Seeking reconciliation after a conflict	0.361***
Granting and receiving forgiveness	0.188***
Church attendance	0.033
Personal prayer	- 0.22
Praying together	0.043
Speaking about prayer life	0.036
Maintaining Sunday rest	0.104

*** = Significant at 0.01 level

These correlations have been analysed through linear regression, which models the relationship between activities (independent variables) and relationship quality (dependent variable).

The way of dealing with conflicts within the relationship has been measured in two ways: 1) by asking participants about their opinion on the importance of actively

seeking reconciliation after a conflict and 2) by asking them about the frequency by which forgiveness plays a role within their relationship. From the data we can conclude that seeking reconciliation after a conflict is significantly associated ($r = 0.361$) with a higher perceived relationship quality. The frequency by which forgiveness plays a role within the relationship is also associated ($r = 0.188$) with a higher perceived relationship quality.

Thus, hypothesis 5 about correlations with a higher relationship quality, can be confirmed regarding seeking reconciliation and granting and receiving forgiveness, but not regarding church attendance, personal prayer, praying together, speaking about prayer life and appreciation of Sunday rest. When asked about possibilities of improving the relationship quality, migrants mention matters of recreation much more often than Dutch people. This is understandable, since matters of recreation are most likely not among the first thing migrants are looking for after their arrival in the host country. Migrants also mention religious matters more often than Dutch people do. This corresponds with the findings of Table 2, that on average, migrants attach more value to religious and spiritual activities than Dutch people.

Table 5 shows that migrants with a non-Western cultural background score significantly higher in their pattern of CD in comparison to Dutch people or Western migrants, thus confirming hypothesis 6.

Table 5. Difference in cultural transition (CT) or cultural defence (CD) and relationship quality between migrants and Dutch participants (n = 223)

Ethnicity	Average (μ) of CT minus CD	Difference in relationship quality among various ethnicities
Dutch (n = 56) (ref.)	-0.0893	8.49
Western (Western Europe, North American, Australian) (n = 39)	-0.0769 (F = 0.52; T = 0.47)	8.21 (F = 0.011; T = 0.18 (ns.))
Non-Western (African, Asian, Central/Eastern European, South American) (n = 128)	-0.375** (F = 0.021; T = 0.041)	8.44 (F = 0.017; T = 0.40 (ns.))

(ns.) = not significant; ** = Significant at 0.05 level

Non-Western migrants have indicated more often than Dutch people or Western migrants that participating in the local church community helps them to sustain their own cultural background. Their marriage helps them to feel more connected to their own culture. They would also rather have more contacts with other Christian, young couples with a migration background than with other Christian, young Dutch couples. The average relationship quality does not differ between various ethnicities.

2.6 Conclusion

Marriage preparation and pastoral accompaniment after marriage in the Netherlands is increasingly international. The sample of this study has been limited to couples who are married within the Catholic Church. Therefore, results cannot be generalized to groups of migrants from other Christian denominations or groups with other or no religious affiliations. The method of data collection implies that participants have relatively close ties to the local parish priest. Further, participants' education level and perceived relationship quality are relatively high.

We can conclude from this survey that on average, an intensification of marriage preparation, with more contact hours (up to 20 hours, before the wedding), leads to a more positive evaluation by participating migrant and intercultural couples. Secondly, using course material made by experts in the field leads to a significantly more helpful marriage preparation than a preparation without course material. Thirdly, an official welcoming within the parish community also contributes to a higher evaluation score. Fourthly, investing in a good cooperation between the course leader and the couple has a beneficial effect on the couples' evaluation of the marriage preparation, whereas a poor or mediocre cooperation has a negative effect on the couples' evaluation. Fifthly, it is worthwhile to pay attention in marriage preparation courses and in pastoral accompaniment after marriage to the values of forgiveness and reconciliation after a conflict. This could lead to a higher relationship quality and may thus strengthen the marriage bond. It needs to be said that the empirical findings regarding hypothesis 5 are correlations, no causality can be supposed. For instance, forgiveness could contribute to a good relationship quality, but also a good relationship quality could contribute to the inclination to forgive.

Earlier research has indicated that often, migrants are 'more religiously observant than they were in the old country, especially once they marry and have children and passing on their culture (with its religious component) becomes an issue'.¹²⁴ However, recent research indicates that average church attendance increases during the first years after migration into the Netherlands, but without reaching pre-migration levels.¹²⁵ Our findings indicate that MRE and other religious and spiritual activities could often be a support in the social and cultural transition from the migrant's own country to the host country; it could help migrant and intercultural couples to have a

124. Steve Bruce, *op. cit.*, 2011, 49.

125. Yassine Khoudja, *op. cit.*, 2022.

good start of their marriage and family life in the Dutch society, while being appreciative of their cultural roots.

In this survey, we did not investigate indicators for a successful integration in the host society. Individual cultural differences could be traced through qualitative research rather than by means of a quantitative survey. In-depth interviews could probably give further insights in the connection between MRE, religious practices and integration processes. It is recommendable that in interviews with migrant and intercultural couples, special attention is given to the motives which gave rise to their migration to Western Europe and to the role MRE and other religious and spiritual activities have played in their integration process.

Patterns of CD do not necessarily imply an unsuccessful integration. On the contrary, migrants who are firmly rooted in their home culture could probably deal more successfully with difficulties in the integration process in the host society. This study has shown that the role church communities play in this process could be reinforced when their offer of MRE aimed at migrant and intercultural couples is further professionalised and when pastoral accompaniment before and after marriage is intensified.

Chapter 3

Dynamics of integration processes into the Netherlands of migrant and intercultural couples who have been married in the Catholic Church¹²⁶

126. Published by Ward Biemans under the same title in: *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 34(2), 2024, 100-114. doi:10.1080/10649867.2024.2380160.

Abstract

Migration is often a far-reaching event in the personal lives of migrants to Western Europe, especially when there is a background of war or persecution. This article aims at investigating patterns of cultural transition (CT), intercultural transition (IT) and cultural defence (CD), and values distilled from 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews with migrant and intercultural couples who have been married in the Catholic Church between 1995 and 2022. All couples live in the Netherlands. Results show that patterns of CT (n = 86) are more common than patterns of CD (n = 51) or IT (n = 22). From the three categories of values, faith values have been mentioned most often (n = 242), followed by family values (n = 132) and societal values (n = 87). Implications for intercultural pastoral care, faith education and community building are mentioned. Welcoming and listening to migrants fits in the recent worldwide synodal process of the Catholic Church.

Keywords: migration, cultural transition, cultural defence, values, intercultural pastoral care.

3.1 Introduction

In the last two decades, migration to Europe has almost doubled, from 20 to 39 million people.¹²⁷ Sometimes, stories from migrants are success-stories, but unfortunately this is not always the case. People from non-Western origin who have migrated to Western Europe report high percentages of traumatic experiences before emigration and post-traumatic stress disorder or symptoms of depression after migration.¹²⁸ Above that, within Europe young people with migrant parents in the Netherlands (15-34 years) score the highest percentage (37%) of self-reported discrimination.¹²⁹ Being a young adult or a child with a migration background can thus be a stress factor for a successful integration process.

With migrants are meant ‘a wide range of different groups of people with different reasons for leaving their countries of origin: humanitarian, economic, family or study, among others’.¹³⁰ Integration is not always a linear process. Sometimes, migrants intend to stay in the host country, but in other cases they might turn back after several years or move on to a third country. With the focus of attention of political leaders on the many emergency situations in welcoming or refusing migrants and refugees, their full integration process into European societies is often under pressure. From a pastoral theological point of view, church communities and their leaders need to ask themselves how they welcome migrants in their midst and how they foster their further integration into the community.

This study focuses on migrant couples and intercultural couples who have been married in the Catholic Church. For migrants in particular, religion can provide a sense of belonging because the identity religions confer is not based on a certain place. Often, as migrants they find themselves less connected to a place, but they find their identity confirmed in their religion.¹³¹ For instance, practical theological research by Jan Eijken in the Netherlands has shown that Catholic migrants from

127. International Organization for Migration (IOM), *World migration report 2020*. Geneva: IOM, 2019, 86.

128. Jennifer L. Steel, Andrea C. Dunlavy, Collette E. Harding and Töres Theorell, ‘The psychological consequences of pre-emigration trauma and post-migration stress in refugees and immigrants from Africa’, *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 19, 2017, 523–532.

129. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Young people with migrant parents, making integration work*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021, 61.

130. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) *Working together for local integration of migrants and refugees in Amsterdam*, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018, 3.

131. James V. Spickard, and Afe Adogame, ‘Introduction: Africa, the new African diaspora, and religious transnationalism in a global world,’ in Afe Adogame and James V. Spickard, *Religion Crossing Boundaries. Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*. Leiden: Brill, 2010, 1-28, at 18-19.

Africa are strongly attached to their African identity, but at the same time they consider their African church community in the Netherlands a part of the universal Church.¹³² Another study on African migrants in the Netherlands by Naomi van der Meer showed that during interviews, possible cultural differences between Africans and Dutch Catholics were downplayed by an emphasis on the shared Catholic – or Christian – identity.¹³³

After migration one can often see patterns of secularization, when migrants give up elements of their own culture of origin, including their religion and spirituality and integrate in the dominant culture of the host society and church community. Yassine Khoudja shows that after an initial decline in service attendance and prayer by migrants who have arrived in the Netherlands from Poland, Bulgaria, Turkey and Spain, average attendance recovers in all four groups, but without reaching pre-migration levels.¹³⁴ This raises the question if the pastoral accompaniment migrants receive in the hosting church communities could be improved.

From 2021 until 2024, the Catholic Church has been involved in a worldwide process of synodality, which has been described as ‘Christians walking in communion with Christ toward the Kingdom along with the whole of humanity’, by ‘being silent, praying, listening, and speaking, rooted in the Word of God and in joyful, if also sometimes painful encounters’.¹³⁵ For local church communities who take part in this process, engaging with people from other cultures is supposed to be one of the core elements, as part of being a welcoming church. In the face of increasingly hostile attitudes toward migrants, especially in Europe, church communities are ‘called to practice an open welcome, to accompany them in the construction of a new life and to build a true intercultural communion among peoples’.¹³⁶ This being said, the Dutch organizing committee on synodality admits that migrants are one of the groups that are often not being heard.¹³⁷ From a pastoral theological point of view, it is therefore interesting to see what challenges and fruits of integration processes are mentioned by migrants themselves. After clarifying the theoretical framework and method of this survey, we will focus on the experiences of migrant and intercultural couples with

132. Jan Eijken, *Strijd om betekenis: Discoursanalyse van een beleidsmatig experiment interculturele kerkopbouw in de Schilderswijk, Den Haag 2000 – 2010*. Nijmegen: Radboud University, 2018, 272.

133. Naomi van der Meer, *Believers in the universal Church: Processes of self-identification among Catholic immigrants of African descent in the Dutch religious landscape*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010, 64-66.

134. Yassine Khoudja, ‘Religious trajectories of immigrants in the first years after migration’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 61(2), 2022, 507-529, at 517.

135. XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *First session: A synodal Church in mission. Synthesis report*. Vatican: Secretaria Generalis Synodi, 2023, 5-6.

136. *Ibid.*, 13.

137. Landelijke Werkgroep Synodaliteit, *Hoe kunnen we een meer synodale en missionaire kerk zijn? Landelijke handreiking voor de gesprekken tijdens de 2e fase*. Baarn: Secretariaat Rooms-Katholiek Kerkgenootschap, 2024, 4. Other groups that are mentioned are young people and the poor.

pastoral accompaniment and integration and on the implications these experiences could have for a more effective, intercultural pastoral care.

3.2 Theoretical framework

The process of cultural transition (CT) can be described as providing a form of integration for migrants.¹³⁸ Like other organisations or associations, a hosting church community could facilitate a process of CT by helping migrants to integrate into the host society without losing entirely their own culture of origin. In a process of CT, migrants would often give up their mother tongue when they come together to celebrate their religion and also educate their children in the language of the country to which they migrated, or in a third language, mostly in English.

On the other hand, religion could also provide resources for the defence of a certain migrant culture, when migrants resist influences of the host society that are perceived as a possible threat for their culture of origin, including their religion or spirituality. In those cases, they often choose to celebrate their religion in their own language and want to educate their children in their mother tongue as well. This is an example of cultural defence (CD), which can be described as protection against external influences on culture and identity.

The overarching question of this mixed method research is the following: *to what extent do the experiences of migrant and intercultural couples who have been married between 1995 and 2022 in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands, show patterns of cultural or intercultural transition or cultural defence regarding their integration into the church community and the society at large?*

According to Steve Bruce, CT and CD could be described as ‘retardant tendencies’ of secularization.¹³⁹ Although Charles Taylor largely agrees with Bruce, he questions the outcome predicted by Bruce of a widespread indifference, at least in the Western society. Taylor argues that religion in general and Christianity in particular cannot be restricted to beliefs and actions but bears a perspective of transformation of human beings, based on the participation in God’s love, which may result in a radical self-giving. This could then lead to new or adapted forms of religion, rather than resulting in a homogeneous secularisation.¹⁴⁰ It needs to be explored to what extent CT also

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

139. Ibid.

140. Charles Taylor, *A secular age*. Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2007, 430-435.

involves an intercultural transition (IT) on the part of the hosting community. According to Glenda Ballentyne and others, interculturalism is based on the principle of societal desegregation and greater understanding.¹⁴¹ Experiences of Dutch partners in an intercultural relationship and of their children could express this dynamic on a micro-level.

With the increasing globalization, more and more a plurality of cultures exists. The Ghanaese Methodist theologian Emmanuel Lartey has pleaded for an approach of intercultural pastoral care, which acts on three levels: first, to affirm the full humanity of the persons involved, created in the image of God. Caregivers need to recognize the others as equals in their otherness. Second, there needs to be an affirmative, self-critical, and open exploration of cultural views and practices. By doing so, the influence of other cultures than one's own can be investigated. And third, intercultural pastoral care presumes that relevant experiences which are unique to each person involved are recognized as far as possible.¹⁴²

This description of intercultural pastoral care and counselling builds on the classical distinction of four functions of pastoral care, namely healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling, as has been elaborated by William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle.¹⁴³ Later, Howard Clinebell broadened this vision by pointing at the importance of empowerment and growth and the communal aspect of the congregation.¹⁴⁴ In the case of migrants, pastoral care could be aimed at relief from what could sometimes be a traumatic experience of leaving behind one's home, family, language, culture, work, etc. However, intercultural pastoral care is not merely a response to crisis. According to Lartey, it includes promotion of well-being through education, creative anticipation, and community action.¹⁴⁵ Intercultural pastoral care before and after marriage could foster or enable human growth in three ways: individually, within the relationship and within the community.¹⁴⁶

141. Glenda Ballentyne, 'From multicultural nation to intercultural city: the case of Melton,' in Iris Levin, Christian A. Nygaard, Peter W. Newton, Sandra M. Gifford (Ed.), *Migration and Urban Transitions in Australia*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022, 265-282, at 271.

142. Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *In living color: An intercultural approach to pastoral care and counseling*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003, 171.

143. William A. Clebsch, and Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral care in historical perspective*. Lanham: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1994, 8-9.

144. Howard Clinebell, *Basic types of pastoral counseling: Resources for the ministry of healing and growth*. Updated and revised by Bridget Clare McKeever. Third edition. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, 16.

145. Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *op. cit.*, 2003, 172.

146. *Ibid.*, 30.

3.3 Method of qualitative research among couples

In this study, migrant couples consist of two persons who have both migrated to the Netherlands. Intercultural couples consist of a migrant who has married a Dutch man or woman. Patterns of CT or CD serve as indicators for integration into the host society and the local church community. We speak of CT when migrants adapt to the new cultural environment in the host country and when they take initiatives to introduce cultural elements from their own background into their new environment. This could then lead to IT on the part of intercultural partners and their children or of the hosting church community.

On the other hand, a pattern of CD indicates that migrants are preserving their religious, spiritual, familial, social, or cultural customs after arrival in the host country. The distinction between CT, IT and CD serves to clarify the different dynamics of integration, including the development of an intercultural lifestyle. Our data indicate that these dynamics do not have a significant positive or a negative influence on couples' relationship quality ($r = 0.04$).

For our quantitative survey in 2021, 198 parish priests, student chaplains and contact persons of religious communities in the Netherlands have been contacted. They have been asked to forward the invitation to migrant or intercultural couples who were preparing for marriage or have been married in the Catholic Church after 1995, to participate in our online questionnaire. Participants ($n = 223$) have been asked questions about the pastoral care they have received from church leaders before and after their marriage. Further, these couples have been asked to report about their experiences of the integration process in their local church community and in the society at large.¹⁴⁷ Recent sociological research on the relationship between religion and migration uses only quantitative methods.¹⁴⁸ With these methods, it is very difficult to come to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of integration when migrants want to be part of a religious community in the host country and to grasp underlying values they adhere to when they seek to maintain their shared religiosity or personal spirituality. Therefore, we have chosen for a mixed method which uses

147. Cf. chapter 2.

148. For instance, Yassine Khoudja, *op. cit.*, 2022; Francesco Molteni and Frank van Tubergen, 'Immigrant generation and religiosity: a study of Christian immigrant groups in 33 European countries', in *European Societies* 24(5), 2022, 605–627. doi:10.1080/14616696.2022.2044067.

both quantitative and qualitative research methods. For the current qualitative study, 12 married migrant and intercultural couples ($n = 24$) have been selected from the large group of participants for semi-structured in-depth interviews in 2021 and 2022. This selection method probably guarantees more objectivity than for example using a snowball method.¹⁴⁹ It is presumed that by listening to their life-stories, further insights can be developed into what migration means for young couples who want to settle in a secularized and multi-ethnic Western European society and which dynamics of CD, CT and IT play a role in this integration process. Questions were asked to gain insight into their migration history, their integration process in the Dutch society and in the local church community, their experiences with pastoral care, their religiosity and spirituality, and their future perspectives. By coding the interviews, we have investigated which underlying values interviewees express when they describe their personal integration process into the local church community and the Dutch society.

It is expected that couples who have chosen to get married in the Catholic Church, being a small religious minority in their new environment, have a relatively strong sense of their identity as Christians. Further, it is expected that (migrant) church communities can offer support in reinforcing the sense of belonging of migrants, albeit limited within the complexity of integration into the hosting Dutch society. Earlier research has shown that migrant church communities help migrants develop their social networks and contribute to their well-being.¹⁵⁰ As a priest and as a theologian, I have witnessed the vibrant atmosphere during English, French, Italian, Polish, Ukrainian, and other services in various migrant and multi-ethnic church communities in the Netherlands.¹⁵¹ Still, as Khoudja has shown, after migration to Western Europe, many non-Western migrants choose to attend church services less often and they gradually adopt a more secularized lifestyle.¹⁵²

For the selection of the 24 interviewees, the strategy has been to strive for a variety of countries of origin and for a mixture of couples from the same ethnic background and intercultural couples. Participants have given their informed consent to participate in this research. The study design has been approved by the Ethics Review Board of Tilburg School of Catholic Theology.

149. For instance, Ergün Özgür (2022) has used a snowball method in his research on Assyrian migrants in Germany, Belgium, and The Netherlands. He acknowledges that one of the limitations of his study is 'activist bias'. Cf. Ergün Özgür, 'Challenges of participation in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands: Christian – Assyrian and Muslim – Turk immigrants', *Revista Internacional de Estudios Migratorios*, 12(1), 2022, 28–54, at 47. <https://doi.org/10.25115/riem.v12i1.5320>.

150. Sanne Siete Visser, Ajay Bailey and Louise Meijering, 'Food, faith and community: social well-being of Ghanaian migrants in the Netherlands', *Gender, Place & Culture* 22(5), 2015, 608–625. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2014.885891; Maurizio Ambrosini, Paola Bonizzoni and Samuele Davide Molli, 'How religion shapes immigrants' integration: The case of Christian migrant churches in Italy', *Current Sociology* 69(6), 2021, 823–842. doi:10.1177/0011392120979018.

151. The Ukrainian eucharistic celebration was all in Ukrainian, but a Ukrainian-Dutch liturgy booklet was available. At the Polish eucharistic celebration many young families were present, whose children all learn Dutch at school, but the celebration was entirely in Polish.

152. Yassine Khoudja, *op. cit.*, 2022, 517.

3.3.1 Data-analysis

All interviewees now live in the Netherlands. They have been married as a migrant couple or as an intercultural couple in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands or in their homeland. In Table 6, descriptive data of the interviewees are presented.¹⁵³

Table 6. Descriptive data of interviewees (n = 24)

Pseudonyms	Nationality	Educational level*	Age	Married (years)	Number of children	Denomination and rite (R.C. = Roman Catholic)
Amber and Taiwo	Dutch and Nigerian	5 and 3	45 and 44	1	3	Both R.C.
Gerson and Onella	Both Hungarian	6 and 6	30 and 31	3	1	Both R.C.
David and Patricija	Bosnian Dutch and Dutch Croatian	5 and 4	38 and 37	2	0	Both R.C.
Charbel and Julia	Lebanese and Dutch	6 and 4	32 and 31	2	1	R.C. Maronite rite and R.C.
Mikayl and Sara	Both Indian	5 and 6	38 and 31	4	1	Both R.C.
Widi and Rina	Both Indonesian	6 and 6	36 and 36	6	0	Both R.C.
Emmanuel and Sophie	Tanzanian and Dutch	6 and 6	40 and 40	4	2	Evangelical and R.C.
Asmara and Johan	Indonesian and Dutch	6 and 6	30 and 32	4	0	Both R.C.
Fatimah and Yonas	Both Eritrean	6 and 6	33 and 37	5	2	Both R.C., Coptic rite
Ivanna and Kostyantyn	Both Ukrainian	6 and 6	36 and 43	16	2	Both R.C., Greek-Catholic rite
Hanna and Jeroen	Polish and Dutch	6 and 6	43 and 44	17	2	R.C. and Reformed
Dennis and Maryska	Dutch and Ukrainian	3 and 6	45 and 31	1	0	Both R.C., Greek-Catholic rite

*Educational level (Primary ed. = 1; Lower secondary ed. = 2; Lower professional ed. = 3; Higher secondary ed. = 4; Higher professional ed. = 5; University = 6)

153. Pseudonymized interviews and metadata are available at: <https://doi.org/10.34894/KGQRTE>.

Five couples share the same nationality; seven couples have a mixed ethnicity. The average educational level is 5.5, which is between higher professional education and university level (in comparison: the whole sample of 223 individuals has an average level of 5.4). The average age is 36.8 years (of the whole sample: 39.1 years). On average, couples have been married for 5.4 years (of the whole sample: 8.7 years). The average number of children is 1.2 (of the whole sample also 1.2).

All interviews have been coded to discover patterns of CT, IT and CD and to distinguish values which are important for interviewees. To increase the interobserver reliability, 4 out of 12 interviews have been coded by a second and a third coder as well. Of the 94 codes labelled in these 4 interviews, 74 times the same code has been attached (78.7%) by the principal researcher and the second or third coder; 9 times, the principal researcher has after consultation decided to attach a different code as initially attached by the second or third coder (9.6%); 11 times, an attached code by the second or third coder (11.7%) has not been included by the principal researcher, mainly because of a repetition in codes attached by the second or third coder.

3.4 Results of qualitative research among couples

The first research question which has been formulated is: *How do patterns of CD, IT and CT evolve among the interviewed couples?*

In 12 interviews, 86 times quotes have been coded as characteristic for CT, 51 times for CD and 22 times for IT. The prevalence of CD, CT and IT does not differ significantly between migrant couples and intercultural couples (For CD: $F = 0.66$; $T = 0.94$; For CT and IT: $F = 0.30$; $T = 0.47$). Patterns of CT, IT and CD can take very different shapes, as is shown in Table 7.

Table 7. 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)	
Dutch 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
Dutch 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

3.4.1 Cultural Transition (CT)

The most common form of CT implies that migrants discover a new religious or spiritual experience in the host country, often within their Christian faith, for instance when they visit a migrant community or when they are introduced in a predominantly Dutch speaking community. Several couples expressed that in the Netherlands, they felt less constrained by cultural obligations and ecclesial customs. For instance, one couple appreciated the fact that during their marriage preparation, the priest encouraged them to choose a Scripture passage they found fitting for their marriage liturgy. This individual approach has been an enriching spiritual experience for them.

Mikayl¹⁵⁴ and Sara from India have discovered the universality of the Catholic Church in their local English-speaking community, where people gather from Poland, South-Korea, Japan, and African countries. They and other couples indicated that they have grown in their faith, precisely because they came as migrants in a foreign country and they sometimes felt lonely, away from their families.

Secondly, CT implies that migrants give up certain elements of their culture of origin, for instance their native language or societal customs (related to work, study, friends, etc.) and adapt to the new situation in the host country. Sometimes, couples gradually feel more at home in a local, Dutch parish, because migrant communities do not always gather on a weekly basis and their churches are often further away. Interviewees indicated that giving up cultural habits can sometimes be an opportunity for personal, psychological growth. On the other hand, the process of CT could also be accompanied by stress because of the high socio-economic demands in the host country.

3.4.2 Intercultural Transition (IT)

When Dutch spouses in an intercultural relationship take over certain cultural elements from their migrant partner, we speak of IT. Some decide to join their migrant partner in attending a migrant church community. In some cases, these celebrations are already multi-cultural, as is the case with African migrant churches. Not rarely, a younger average age makes these communities attractive for young families, especially when catechesis for children is offered. Some couples mention that the hosting church community is developing intercultural pastoral care.

3.4.3 Cultural Defence (CD)

When interviewees mention patterns of CD, religion is by far the most mentioned cultural element. This indicates that, when other cultural elements like language, familial and societal customs tend to change after migration, religious customs often remain. Maryska from Ukraine explains what her Greek-Catholic faith means to her, when she is speculating about raising children in the Netherlands: ‘I want that they will understand that half of them belongs to Ukraine and it's not only a word: belongs to Ukraine. That they will exactly belong to Ukraine. So, tradition, culture, and everything. I want to show the Church, I want them to study with me, talk with me, I also want that they will know about that, so what is good, what is not good...’¹⁵⁵

154. All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

155. Interview 12, 2022, 203.

Maryska regularly goes to a Greek-Catholic Ukrainian church community, a quickly growing migrant community in the Netherlands. It is important for her that values which are being transferred, both in the liturgy and in personal conversation with the Ukrainian parish priest, would become familiar to her children. After the Second World War, in Central and Eastern European countries the Catholic Church has been oppressed under the influence of communism. Some Central-European interviewees indicate that the long oppression has had a negative side-effect of a rather rigid, defensive religious practice. Other interviewees, also from other continents, rather point out they want to maintain their positive religious experiences from their home countries. For instance, for Taiwo from Nigeria, who arrived in the Netherlands in 1991, going to church gives a feeling of belonging. Whether this is in Africa or Europe, seems less important, even when his mother tongue, Igbo, is not used: 'Well, when I'm in church, basically, I just feel at home. To me, it's just unthinkable if you didn't go to church. In my family, almost everyone just goes to church.'¹⁵⁶ Other interviewees appreciate the opportunity to visit a migrant church community in the Netherlands, with a Mass or other devotional practices in their own language (for instance Polish or Indonesian). For them, using their mother tongue could bring a deeper spiritual experience than when they need to use a second or third language.

3.4.4 Values

The second research question is: *What values do couples express regarding their married and family life, their faith life, and their integration into the Dutch society?*

156. Interview 1, 2021, 86.

Table 8 subdivides into three categories the values expressed by the 12 couples mentioned above.

Table 8. 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

3.4.4.1 Faith values

The value category mentioned most often, is that of faith values. Several interviewees mention that the experience of migration has increased their faith. Widi from Indonesia says it like this: ‘When I came to the Netherlands, it was like building a stronger foundation for what was already built during the earliest years.’¹⁵⁷ This experience can also influence a Dutch partner in an intercultural relationship. They face different facets of inculturation of their migrant partner, which at times can be stressful. Often, intercultural partners feel supported by their faith and by one another. In situations, where one has deserted a home country, family members, cultural customs, faith can be something which is shared together, despite cultural differences. According to Johan, who has married Rina from Indonesia, ‘it really helped when you are in a difficult situation. Because you face together quite a lot, especially in difficult situations, you are not only getting close to each other but also close to God’.¹⁵⁸ Faith and its expression within the church community is thus experienced as common ground, which could help to bridge other cultural differences such as language and family background. Voluntary work in the local community is a way of supporting one another and it may help to maintain the native language and cultural traditions, or to increase the knowledge of host country’s language and traditions.

Migrants of the same ethnic background often support each other emotionally and practically. In other cases, migrants choose to attend multi-ethnic religious gatherings. Especially English-speaking church communities in the bigger cities attract people from many nations. Sometimes, intercultural differences arise. Some African migrants

¹⁵⁷. Interview 6, 2022, 145.

¹⁵⁸. Interview 8, 2022, 64.

express that the formal style of the Latin rite feels somewhat distant to them. They like spontaneity, singing, dancing and informal meetings after the celebration. Some migrants from Central and Eastern Europe indicate that they appreciate a house visit by a priest on important moments, such as after a relocation. Pilgrimages to a shrine or short retreats can contribute to local community building.¹⁵⁹ In some other cases, migrants see it as their task to contribute to the process of evangelization in the host country. In a way they aim at IT of people in the host country.

Several interviewees bring forward the value of ecumenism. Being used to adapt and to bridge cultural differences, some articulate the desirability of a common future path for the various Christian denominations, and they bring ecumenism into practice within their families. They make use of the strong points of the different communities regarding liturgy, catechesis, and charity. For instance, some appreciate the Catholic liturgy, but they might go to an Evangelical service as well, because the children's catechesis is more intensive. Other couples may meet each other in charity activities or Christian feast days across denominations.

3.4.4.2 Family values

Almost all migrants mention the importance of contacts with family members who stay in the country of origin. Migrant partners often mention differences with the hosting Dutch society regarding family matters. One striking difference is that among Asian or African migrants and among Ukrainians, it is common that before a wedding takes place, the parents of couples need to give their consent with the coming marriage. Previous research among Christian, Indian migrants in Canada reveals that the practice of arranged marriages is not so strict as it used to be one or two generations ago.¹⁶⁰ This tendency was confirmed by interviewee Mikayl from Kerala, South India: 'That is usually the case, that the parents will meet each other, and they will talk, and they will see if it is a good match for us. So, the parents and we also liked it, of course it is our decision, finally, but they also want to be part of our community, right, even when we marry, we say it is not two people, but two families living together. So, in the end we make the decision, but our parents will also say, okay, it is okay to have it, or not. And we all processed that and finally, we married.'¹⁶¹

159. Interview 3, 2021, 100.

160. Lina Samuel, 'South Asian women in the diaspora: reflections on arranged marriage and dowry among the Syrian Orthodox community in Canada', *South Asian Diaspora* 5(1), 2013, 91-105. doi:10.1080/19438192.2013.722384.

161. Interview 5, 2021, 32.

Among refugees, the desire to maintain strong ties with the family back home can sometimes be stronger than for expats who freely choose to leave their country of origin. Yonas from Eritrea expressed a desire that his children would spend some time with his family back home: 'I really want my children to spend some time, I would like, in Eritrea, my country. And then, they get the language, the people, the faith, so they have the basic thing when they are children. Then they will never forget it.'¹⁶²

A problem is that migrants who want to return to Eritrea, even for a family visit, could face imprisonment and/or a fine when they have fled the country, for instance to evade military or civil service or without an exit visa.¹⁶³ The idea that you cannot go back to your home country without being sanctioned, can give rise to tensions because of a feeling of being uprooted, deprived from one's family and home culture and performance pressure in the host country.

It is quite common that when migrants marry and have children, they become more religiously observant, because they want to pass on their culture with its religious component.¹⁶⁴ In many of the countries of origin, faith education has a more important place in society than in the Dutch educational system. Some parents express concern regarding the (lack of) faith education provided in Dutch schools. Above that, migrants indicate that they cannot profit from the role grandparents normally play regarding faith education in their home countries, because of their physical distance. Instead, migrant church communities meet a parental need for faith education. Most communities attended by interviewees have facilities for children's catechesis in the language shared by the community, given by volunteers in a way which parents appreciate.

Speaking about emancipation, all interviewees say they appreciate this and put it into practice. Some couples indicate that within their relationship, there has been a development towards practicing more equality, under the influence of Western European culture. One intergenerational conflict in a migrant church community was mentioned, of a young woman who felt looked at and decided not to go to this community anymore.

162. Interview 9, 2022, 132.

163. European Asylum Support Office, *Country of origin information report: Eritrea. National service and illegal exit*, Valletta: European Union Agency for Asylum, 2016, 29.

164. Steve Bruce, *op. cit.*, 2011, 49.

3.4.4.3 Societal values

A third category represents societal values as expressed by the interviewees. In several interviews, the issue of personal responsibility versus social control has been raised. Migrants value the freedom combined with personal responsibility, which is given to people in situations of work, family, and the religious community in the Netherlands. For Gerson from Hungary, this phenomenon is rooted in Christianity: 'I really feel here that there's a real freedom because they think that people are adult. That's when I said to myself that in that sense the Netherlands applied a lot of Christian based rules, at least in terms of freedom, that was my experience.'¹⁶⁵

For some migrants, social control in families back home is experienced in a rather negative way. For instance, Rina from Indonesia sensed a lack of personal freedom in her family: 'So, my family taught me how to listen to the people's opinion, like what I am expected to do and to behave. So that's why I cannot be myself because the community, the culture has already set the standard how to behave.'¹⁶⁶ She feels that as a woman in Western Europe, she has more opportunities to develop her intellectual capacities. Regarding religion and familial customs, social control is felt less strongly than in her home country.

Some of the interviewees come from home situations of war or persecution. Some couples stress the importance of knowing each other's background, of not feeling the need to explain one's values and norms. In several interviews, a link between reconciliation, religion and inclusivity has become explicit.

For Dutch interviewees, being part of an intercultural relationship can be a learning experience to show more hospitality towards other people, not only migrants. In some cases, migrants and their Dutch partners support a charity project in the country of origin, or they assist newcomers. Knowing the experience of having arrived in a foreign land, this can be an obvious thing for them to do.

In all the interviews, we did not encounter intolerance towards people with other religious ideas. On the contrary, several interviewees expressed resistance towards imposing one's religious convictions on others. Interviewees did not mention incidents or existing patterns of discrimination within church communities.

165. Interview 2, 2021, 76.

166. Interview 6, 2022, 141.

3.5 Discussion and conclusion

This survey shows that dynamics of CT, IT and CD are present in the lives of migrant and intercultural couples, often in a flexible manner. In general, patterns of CT are more common than patterns of CD among migrant and intercultural couples, which indicates an openness to the new cultural environment in the host country. Most interviewees have adapted well to the Dutch society or have found a balance in their intercultural relationship. Quite frequently, migrants discover new ways of spirituality or religious experiences in the host country. As a third dynamic of integration, IT presupposes a willingness to change on the part of the hosting community, to account for the presence of migrants and to try to let them flourish. In this regard, Lartey speaks of *kenosis*, referring to the life of God who is constantly engaging in acts of self-giving.¹⁶⁷

Mutual care within the family and faith education of the children have an important place in the lives of migrant and intercultural couples. The Christian identity of interviewees often transcends cultural differences which they experience in the Dutch society. Thus, religion can counterbalance a loss of identity which migrants may experience in the host country, since they have left their familiar surroundings. Through pastoral care, services and other encounters, migrant and multi-ethnic church communities play a sustaining and pedagogical role in preserving this identity. Above that, several interviewees express that being part of a church community in the Netherlands is more a conscious choice than it was back home. We have no indications that their experience of Christianity is associated with intolerance towards secularised society or towards other religious minorities. Although the pattern of values distilled from the interviews shows a tendency towards cultural conservatism, interviewees appreciate the sense of personal responsibility and tolerance they experience in the Netherlands. If hosting, pluralistic societies want to preserve mutual tolerance, however, it is essential that they continue to ensure good living conditions and freedom of fundamental rights from the first moment of reception.

Given the small number of interviewees, no causal inferences can be drawn from our analysis. Another limitation of this study is that interviewees were relatively highly educated; this could have caused selection bias. In further research it is recommended to include interviewees with lower educational levels. Future research on IT should include the role of the clergy in the integration process of migrants.

167. Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *op. cit.*, 2003, 176; cf. Phil. 2, 5-9.

3.5.1 Implications for pastoral care

It is key that an effective pastoral care provided to migrant and intercultural couples represents the values indicated by the couples. Intercultural pastoral care takes cultural sensitivities into account, without absolutizing them. For instance, many migrants value a certain liturgical style during religious celebrations, with elements they know from their country of origin. Similarly, awareness of cultural differences can enrich multi-ethnic catechesis, pilgrimages, retreats, etc. Family values also differ across ethnicities. It could help when local clergy or lay leaders pay attention to this in their communication with multi-ethnic communities. It needs to be said that with the integration of migrant priests and the increase in numbers of migrants, the pastoral and liturgical style of clergy and communities is already changing in many places, with more multi-cultural elements and a recognition of cultural differences.

Given the widespread contemporary movement of migrants worldwide, Pope Francis has repeatedly appealed for a change of attitude in the larger society towards migrants and refugees, moving away from an attitude of indifference and marginalization towards an attitude based on a culture of encounter.¹⁶⁸ Reflecting on what a culture of encounter could entail, I agree with Ryan LaMothe, who argues that ‘if we are to care for refugees, immigrants, and others, it is necessary to retain the dialectical tension between identification and disidentification.’¹⁶⁹ By this he means that we need to recognize migrants in their uniqueness, although we may also identify with them as civilians, or as believers. This study adds the insight that when migrants’ CT is stimulated, they can themselves work towards a fuller integration into the local church community and the host society. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that elements of CD are sometimes experienced as equally worthwhile, for instance regarding their children’s religious upbringing. Eijken has already shown that migrant church communities appreciate the preservation of their cultural identity as a base for dialogue and cooperation.¹⁷⁰

Our study indicates that there are chances for migrant and local multi-ethnic church communities to strengthen the organization of liturgical gatherings with specific ethnic or multi-cultural elements, to develop intercultural catechetical programs for children and young people, and to develop projects aimed at community building across ethnicities. It is important here to note that local church communities can learn from migrants’ experiences and vice versa, thus stimulating IT. For migrants,

168. Francis, *Message for 2014 World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2013.

169. Ryan LaMothe, ‘A radical pastoral theology for the Anthropocene era: Thinking and being otherwise’, *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 31(1), 2021, 54–74, at. 59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2021.1887993>.

170. Jan Eijken, *op. cit.*, 2018, 199–201.

voluntary activities in their community often function as a double-edged sword, because it helps them to make new contacts and to develop their personal skills in the new surroundings. In this regard, bishops and experts gathered at the worldwide Synodal Assembly in Rome in October 2023 recommended that local church communities and dioceses equip themselves with suitable people trained to facilitate and accompany intercultural processes of decision-making.¹⁷¹ Through the process of synodality, co-responsibility and cooperation between clergy and lay faithful – including migrants – can grow regarding the mission of evangelisation.¹⁷² As migrant and intercultural couples have learned to deal with differences in their own cultural, religious, and spiritual backgrounds, they can often bring their valuable insights on hospitality and racial inclusiveness to benefit local church communities and the host society.

171. XVI Ordinary General Assembly, *op. cit.*, 2023, 8.

172. Andrzej Pastwa, 'Accompanying migrants as a touchstone of the realisation of the synodal Church idea. A canonist's remarks', *Ecumeny and Law* 9(2), 2021, 7-40, at 18. <https://doi.org/10.31261/EaL.2021.09.2.01>.

Chapter 4

**Married couples' need to be reconciled
with one another, with society and with
God¹⁷³**

173. Published by Ward Biemans under the same title in *Gregorianum*, 105(4), 2024, 851-873. This chapter has some small adaptations and additional references.

Abstract

The few available empirical studies show a purifying and relieving effect of the sacrament of Reconciliation and the possibility of reconnecting with others. A change towards a humbler attitude among the clergy, a language adapted to a postmodern mindset and more attention for the social dimension of sin could reawaken the declined interest in the sacrament. Reflecting on data obtained from interviews ($n = 24$) with migrant and intercultural couples living in the Netherlands, it is made clear that positive effects of the sacrament were confirmed by some, whereas other interviewees use other means to seek reconciliation with God or prefer to resolve conflicts within their relationship directly with their partner. Finally, several ways are indicated to increase the attractiveness of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Keywords: sacrament of Reconciliation, migrant and intercultural couples, social teaching, communicative skills

4.1 Introduction

When couples want to marry in the Catholic Church, they would normally be asked to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation (also called confession) before the church wedding takes place.¹⁷⁴ It also happens that married (or divorced) persons ask for this sacrament after the wedding. Reconciliation with one another and with God can be important to keep a marriage sustainable, healthy, and happy. In a recent document, the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life argues that: ‘Experience shows that receiving God’s forgiveness – perhaps even making a more involved confession covering previously-confessed sins, if appropriate – prepares spouses better than anything else to welcome the grace which God offers them in the Sacrament of Marriage, since it removes feelings of profound guilt resulting from past “baggage”, grants inner peace, and directs the spirit toward God’s grace and mercy and toward that which really matters. It also diverts attention away from the merely material aspects of the wedding.’¹⁷⁵

The reality is that for many Catholics participation in the sacrament of Reconciliation is rather unknown. Mark Gray and Paul Perl show that in the United States, three-quarters of Catholics never participate in the sacrament of Reconciliation or that they do so less than once a year.¹⁷⁶ After the Second Vatican Council, the European continent has also seen a steady decline in the number of Catholics going to confession regularly, if at all.¹⁷⁷ Still, among the 1,007 participants in the mentioned American survey, Millennials (born in 1982 or later, 15% of participants) participated less often in the sacrament of Reconciliation than the pre-Vatican II-generation (born in 1942 or earlier, 17% of participants), equally often than the Vatican II-generation (born between 1943 and 1960, 33% of participants), but more often than the post-Vatican II-generation (born between 1961 and 1981, 36% of participants).¹⁷⁸ So the interest in this sacrament has not been lost. Focus of this article are the experiences of migrant and intercultural couples with the sacrament of Reconciliation. The central question is how the attractiveness of the sacrament of Reconciliation could be increased,

174. *Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC), *Wetboek van Canoniek Recht*, Brussel: Licap c.v., 1983, n. 1065, par. 2.

175. Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life, *Catechumenal pathways for married life: Pastoral guidelines for local Churches*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022, n. 71.

176. Mark M. Gray and Paul M. Perl, *Sacraments today: Belief and practice among U.S. Catholics*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Georgetown University, 2008.

177. Aidan Ryan, ‘Going to Confession’, *The Furrow* 68(1), 2017, 14-19. See also: Sławomir Zalewski, ‘The sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as an encounter with God and experience of his mercy’, *Roczniki Teologiczne. Annals of Theology* 05, 2016, 71-89.

178. Mark M. Gray and Paul M. Perl, *op. cit.*, 2008, 59.

for couples in general and in particular for migrant and intercultural couples. To answer this question, we first need to give a brief overview of the anthropological foundations of the sacrament of Reconciliation. (4.2) This is followed by an overview of recent empirical studies and reflections on the participation in the sacrament of Reconciliation (4.3) In part 4.4, we delve into the question of what, in the view of participants, the sacrament of Reconciliation adds to the mutual reconciliation partners express to one another. A sample of migrant and intercultural couples ($n = 24$) in the Netherlands have been interviewed about their experiences with the sacrament of Reconciliation. We discuss some methodological aspects (4.5) and results (4.6) Finally, in part 4.7 we investigate how the attractiveness of participating in the sacrament of Reconciliation could be increased.

4.2 Anthropological foundations of the sacrament of Reconciliation

Robert Fastiggi has pointed out the anthropological foundations of the sacrament of Reconciliation.¹⁷⁹ He reminds us of the teachings of the First Vatican Council that God can be known by human beings by means of created things, with the help of natural reason and even apart from divine revelation.¹⁸⁰ This teaching on natural reason is relevant for a proper understanding of the sacrament of Reconciliation, because, for centuries the Church has taught that God is a personal being to whom we have a responsibility, in a moral sense with regard to our actions and in a spiritual sense, with regard to our attitude, our ways of expressing our belief and sharing this with others. The Second Vatican Council has reiterated the importance of each human being's conscience, based on a natural law which they do not impose on themselves, but which is summoning them to love good and avoid evil. In freedom, human beings can direct themselves toward goodness.¹⁸¹

The Catholic faith shares with many ancient religions the idea that by bringing spiritual, corporal, or material sacrifices, the harmony which is disturbed by sin could be restored. The religions of India recognize the need of purification after bad actions, often through ascetical means. Within Islam, there is no sacramental offering of sins to Allah, but Muslims believe that prayer, almsgiving and fasting have a purifying

179. Robert L. Fastiggi, *The sacrament of Reconciliation: An anthropological and Scriptural understanding*. Chicago (Ill.): Hillenbrand Books, 2017.

180. Ibid., 11; First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 1870, chapter. 2, c. 1.

181. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 1965, n. 16-17. Pope John Paul II has provided a clarification on the relationship between the Biblical understanding of conscience and natural law, cf. John Paul II, *Encyclical letter Veritatis Splendor*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, n. 57-58.

effect. It is taught that Allah is the almighty creator, lawgiver, and judge.¹⁸² Further, Judeo-Christian revelation makes it clear that as imperfect and finite creatures, human beings are dependent on God. The story of Adam and Eve, among other stories in the book of Genesis, points out that sin leads to alienation from God. The teaching of the Ten Commandments, including Jesus' interpretation at the Sermon on the Mount and his farewell speech at the Last Supper, express the fundamental duties of human beings toward God and their neighbours.¹⁸³

In the early Western Church tradition, an essential characteristic of penal discipline was that normally, this could be applied only once. From the 6th century AD, under the influence of the Irish and Anglo-Saxon churches, the practice of repeated confession spread across the European continent. Because of this development, not only big sins, but also smaller sins could be brought under the ecclesial penal practice. Thus, it became possible to receive Holy Communion more frequently.¹⁸⁴

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, thinkers like Luther and Calvin criticized fundamental elements of the teaching on the sacrament of Reconciliation, such as the obligation to confess mortal sins and the requirement to mention relevant circumstances while confessing one's sins.¹⁸⁵ However, the Council of Trent maintained that confession before a priest is part of divine law – not of natural law – and with certain exceptions, necessary for salvation.¹⁸⁶ Nowadays, although Protestant communities have abolished the celebration of reconciliation with God as a sacrament, some Anglican and Lutheran church communities have preserved some form of private confession, whereas other communities have encouraged a sharing of sins among members of the laity.¹⁸⁷

During the 18th century, an anthropocentric shift has taken place in Western thinking, influenced by philosophers as Rousseau and Kant. Rousseau used self-exploration as a means of self-affirmation, because he presupposed a natural goodness in men. His rejection of the doctrine of original sin brought him into conflict with the Church

182. Robert L. Fastiggi, *op. cit.*, 2017, 18.

183. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 1993, n. 2072-2074.

184. D. Sattler, 'Bußsakrament', *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Volume 2, Freiburg: Herder, 1994, 845-853, at 847-848.

185. Martin Luther, 'Ein Sermon von dem Sakrament der Busse', in Clemen Otto (Ed.), *Luthers Werke in Auswahl: Band 1. Schriften von 1517-1520*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016, 183; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by John Allen, Vol. II. Eugene (OR.): Wipf and Stock, 2010, 465; Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012, n. 899-900.

186. *Ibid.*, n. 916, which stresses that the sacrament of Reconciliation has its origins in Christ. Regarding earthly sanctions, canon law makes exceptions for those who are considered incapable of committing an offence, for instance those under the age of sixteen, those who acted out of ignorance, compulsion or fear, cf. CIC, 1323.

187. Aaron B. Murray-Swank, Kelly M. McConnell and Kenneth I. Pargament, 'Understanding spiritual confession: A review and theoretical synthesis', *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 10(3), 2007, 275-291.

teaching.¹⁸⁸ Kant is well-known for his criticism of philosophical presuppositions about the possibility for human beings to prove the existence of God. According to Kant, the idea of the existence of God is given to us by means of practical reason, which teaches us how to act morally. Still, despite Kant's focus on human autonomy and personal responsibility, a human orientation to a God who is both transcendent and immanent remains fundamental to his theological horizon.¹⁸⁹ The Enlightenment's anthropological shift, preceded by the Reformation, has certainly brought an enormous increase in scientific productivity. Within the scope of this article, it is interesting to look at some of the existing empirical research within the social sciences, to see what the significance of the sacrament of Reconciliation could be for twenty-first century Catholics.

4.3 Empirical studies on the sacrament of Reconciliation

Aaron Murray-Swank and colleagues have conducted a review of empirical studies which had religious or spiritual confession as their focus.¹⁹⁰ It must be said that they have only found four published studies and two unpublished dissertations on this subject. Their findings indicate the purifying and relieving effect of the sacrament, especially when confessants have an internalized commitment to their belief in a loving, forgiving God. Besides that, confession could also bring a beginning of a reconnection with others. They also report results of related psychological studies in which a beneficial effect of disclosure has been found; this is when participants talk (or write) about traumatic or personal events in their lives. However, they did not find studies on the disclosure of transgressions and more specifically disclosure within a religious or spiritual context.

Since the publication of their review in 2007, two other empirical studies on the sacrament of Reconciliation have appeared. Máté Joób and Paavo Kettunen investigated the confessional practices in Finland and Hungary. In Finland the group

188. Elwin Hofman, 'A wholesome cure for the wounded soul: Confession, emotions, and self in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Catholicism,' *Journal of Religious History* 42(2), 2018, 222-241; Wing Kwan Anselm Lam, 'The source of evil in Rousseau's Confessions: A reply to Augustine's Confessions', *Theology and philosophy* 19, 2011, 79-121; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to Beaumont, Letters Written From the Mountain, and Related Writings*. Edited by Christopher Kelly and Eve Grace. Hanover (NH): University Press of New England, 2001, 28.

189. Philip J. Rossi, Reading Kant from a Catholic horizon: Ethics and the anthropology of grace, *Theological Studies* 71(1), 2010, 79-100; Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, translated and edited by J. Michael Young. New York: Cambridge University, 1992, 538; Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn. Raleigh (NC): Alex Catalogue, 1998, 399.

190. Aaron B. Murray-Swank, Kelly M. McConnell and Kenneth I. Pargament, *op. cit.*, 2007.

of participants consisted largely of Lutherans (79%, n=201), in Hungary the majority was Catholic (73%, n=117). They wrote letters about their experiences to the researchers. With regard to the latter group, the Hungarian Catholics, their letters indicate that for them, the primary goal of receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation seems to be twofold: 'to be relieved from the burden of sins' and to 'return to a harmonic relationship with their Creator, the liberating God'.¹⁹¹ Since for them a confessional relationship also means the opportunity to receive spiritual direction or pastoral care, personal characteristics of the confessor play an important role. They have high expectations about the personal belief of the priest and his attitude of being a so-called middleman between God and the confessant.

Another empirical study took place in Milwaukee, U.S.A. among 302 participants who had experience with the sacrament of Reconciliation.¹⁹² Researcher Kathleen Drysdale Beuscher admits that her sample did not achieve racial diversity, with a sample population of 96,6% Caucasian. One of the main objectives of this research was to get an understanding of the reasons for the decline in participation in the sacrament. As main reasons for this decline, lay participants indicated: 'Confess privately to God' (62.2%), 'Feel reconciled through the Eucharist' (40.0%) and 'Feel uncomfortable with face-to-face confession' (35.6%).¹⁹³ To me, it seems that the first answer indicates that individualism has influenced Catholics in their religious practice. At the same time, liturgical changes that were introduced after the Second Vatican Council, such as the celebration of the Eucharist in the vernacular and with the priest facing the people, seem to have had a side-effect on the participation in the sacrament of Reconciliation. A positive interpretation might be that people experience God's reconciliation stronger in the celebration of the Eucharist than before the Council, when Mass was celebrated in Latin and with the priest facing the high altar. On the other hand, American church leaders indicate a 'general confusion over what is right or wrong' as an important factor leading to the decline in participation in the sacrament.¹⁹⁴ Lay persons mention a lack of education about reconciliation and a lack of availability among the clergy.¹⁹⁵

191. Máté Joób and Paavo Kettunen, 'Confession from the point of view of the experience of the people seeking help: An empirical study about Confessional practices in Finland and Hungary', *European Journal of Mental Health* 8, 2013, 163–186, at 179.

192. Kathleen Drysdale Beuscher, *A mixed methods inquiry into the role of cognitive dissonance in the decline of participation in the sacrament of Reconciliation*. Ann Arbor (MI): ProQuest LLC, 2012.

193. *Ibid.*, 84.

194. National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Research and Practices Committee, *Reflections on the sacrament of penance in catholic life today: A study document*. Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1990, 11.

195. Kathleen Drysdale Beuscher, *op. cit.*, 2012, 111.

4.3.1 Reflections on the current state of the sacrament of Reconciliation

Analysing the decline in receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation, Thomas Brogl, a German Dominican priest acknowledges that on the one hand, this decline has to do with a tendency in our society to repress the reality of culpability and of personal failure.¹⁹⁶ Many people feel a constant pressure to have success in life and this causes a tension with admitting one's faults. In confession, however, one can presuppose that human beings fail every now and then and thus have a certain culpability. According to Brogl, failing does not necessarily mean that something is destroyed, but that one needs to rise again and that one can grow in this respect. When this awareness is lacking, one can easily fall into fatalism, with the idea that nothing lasts forever and that big ideals of love and a life-long marriage are impossible.

Another factor is that the Catholic Church has suffered an authority loss, particularly in the Western world. Somewhere until the Sixties of the previous century, receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation was considered compulsory for many Catholic school children.¹⁹⁷ Above that, many priests would consider it their task, sometimes out of scruples, to ask intimate questions, with the intention that no grave sin would be kept hidden. Sometimes they would even ask this kind of questions out of disordered interest. In this way, going to confession was seen by many as threatening or as an inappropriate use of power. The scandal of sexual abuse has made things even worse. Restoring credibility and confidentiality takes a lot of time and for some people, reconciliation with the Church may be far away.

On the other hand, many people never had this kind of negative experiences. If faithful and clergy manage to explain with humility the value of the sacrament of Reconciliation, this might lead to a renewed interest to receive it. Thomas Halík and others have pleaded for a humbler attitude among Christians today.¹⁹⁸ Halík refers to emperor Constantine (fourth century A.D.), who in a dream saw a cross and at the same time heard the words: 'In this sign you will conquer'. He then adorned the standards of his army with crosses and won the battle. However, in today's postmodern society it would rather be necessary to grasp the kenotic meaning of the symbol of the cross, as in Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians: 'Christ Jesus, who,

196. Sabine Demel and Michael Pflieger (Eds.), *Sakrament der Barmherzigkeit. Welche Chance hat die Beichte?* Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2017, 113-115.

197. See also René Bastiaanse, *Onkuisheid. De Nederlandse biechtpraktijk 1900-1965*. Zwolle: W Books, 2013.

198. Thomas Halík, 'Wege einer neuen Evangelisierung', in Karlheinz Ruhstorfer (Ed.), *Das Ewige im Fluss der Zeit: der Gott, den wir brauchen*. Freiburg: Herder, 2016, 217-223; Jan Löffeld, *Getting to know God after God*. Tilburg: Tilburg University, 2021, 25.

though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...' (Phil. 2, 6-7a) It is my conviction that if Catholic priests would apply this dimension of the Gospel in their explanation of the sacrament of Reconciliation to people who are not familiar with it, they would gain more credibility. After all, it is God's mercy and not the mercy from another human being which could be experienced and celebrated in this sacrament. One can grow in the awareness of his mercy.

Partly, a better explanation of the meaning of the sacrament has to do with language. In classical terms, the focus in this sacrament is on repentance of one's sins. But among young persons, often this kind of language is not very actively present in their vocabulary. Even if one admits having made mistakes in life, words like 'sin', 'repentance' and 'penance' are not very frequently used. However, this does not mean that these young persons are not willing to take their responsibility and to acknowledge their role in for example a relationship crisis. To connect better with today's language, New Testament scholar Tobias Nicklas pleads to reconsider the Biblical translation for words like the Greek '*metanoia*'.¹⁹⁹ Rather than 'repentance', '*metanoia*' could also be translated with 'change of attitude', or 'change of mindset'. So, for instance Saint John the Baptist's words from Mk 1:15, traditionally translated as: 'Repent and believe in the Gospel' could also be translated as 'Change your attitude and trust in the Gospel'. Jesus' words in Lk 5:32: 'I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners', could be translated as: 'I have not come to call the righteous to a change of mindset, but sinners.' When Saint Peter addresses the crowd in Acts 2:38, his appeal 'Repent (*metanoiein*) and be baptized', could be translated as: 'Rethink and be baptized'.²⁰⁰ And when Saint Paul summarizes his preaching in front of King Agrippa, he stresses that both the Jews and the heathens should rethink and turn to God (Acts 26:20). Elsewhere, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul explains that this new way of thinking implies to have the same attitude which characterized Christ Jesus, an attitude of humility. (Phil. 2:3-11)

199. Tobias Nicklas, 'Buße tun heißt "Um-Denken"! Neutestamentliche Perspektiven', in: Sabine Demel and Michael Pfleger (Eds.), *op. cit.*, 2017, 383-400.

200. *Ibid.*, translations are mine.

4.4 Sin and reconciliation within marriage

In part 4.2, we have seen the First Vatican Council teaching that the knowledge of God begins with natural reason. This also pertains to marriage. Marriage is in the first place a natural commitment which then could be sacramentally confirmed and sanctified.²⁰¹ When we speak about reconciliation within the context of married couples, very often this reconciliation is first sought and found within the couple themselves. Irmgard Pees, counsellor of married couples and families, has observed that at the start of a counselling process in cases of relational conflicts, often reproaches and references to the other person's guilt are made.²⁰² When people manage to discover, to accept and to stand in for their (mostly unfulfilled) needs behind these reproaches, this opens the way to their own share in the negative development in their relationship. This change of perspective from a negative view on the other towards one's own behaviour is often difficult, but worthwhile at the same time.

When a married person seeks the help of a counsellor for certain issues within his or her marriage, it could happen that the person's partner is not ready to have a dialogue, either unwillingly or willingly. In such a case a counsellor could together with the client analyse the client's own behaviour, find his or her motivations, and try to reach a common understanding of all this. However, sometimes the client maintains to experience guilt feelings, which do not disappear by understanding oneself or one's motives. In such cases, the sacrament of Reconciliation could bring relief and even redemption, because it brings with it the experience of being accepted by God, despite and with one's feelings of guilt. Being freed of a burden which one could experience in one's relationship with God, one could then start to work on one's relationship with renewed energy or move on in life if human reconciliation is really impossible. The Church acknowledges that in certain exceptional situations, a marriage can be dissolved or a separation from bed and board could take place.²⁰³

201. CIC, can. 1055.

202. Irmgard Pees, "Ehe-, Familien- und Lebensberatung. "Sag ja zu mir, wenn alles nein sagt ...", in: Sabine Demel and Michael Pfleger (Eds.), *op. cit.*, 2017, 248-250.

203. CIC, can. 1141-1155.

4.4.1 The social dimension of sin

The introduction to the Rite of Penance clearly mentions the social dimension of sin, by stating that the sin of one person harms the others, just as the holiness of one person benefits the others.²⁰⁴ Within a couple, there could be behaviour of one which causes harm to the other, for instance because of alcohol or drugs abuse, verbal aggression, compulsive sexual behaviour, or physical violence. Conflicts could arise because of lying towards one's partner, a lack of openness towards one another regarding spending money, acting out of jealousy, etc. Or, to give another example of the social aspect of sin: when, because of their busy timetables, couples are not able to visit their parents or grandparents, the latter may suffer loneliness or sadness as a result.

When couples do not follow the precepts of the Church, this could also do harm to the community, which is true of course for most sins in general.²⁰⁵ For instance, for couples who want to marry or who are married, a regular negligence in attending Sunday's Eucharist could mean that they are missed by others in the church community, despite good reasons couples may have not to attend Sunday Mass. Also, when they choose not to go to church, it may become more difficult for the parish community to organize children's catechesis during or after Mass, due to a lack of volunteers or participants. Of course, it would be helpful for couples when the local community on their part could facilitate childcare during or after Mass and that young families really feel welcomed by the church community.

Reflecting on his experiences with the sacrament of Reconciliation, systematic theologian James Donohue stresses the social dimension of sin. As a priest, he sometimes invites penitents to do some material form of penance, such as some act of charity or kindness towards the person who has been hurt, rather than responding only spiritually, by prayer for him or her. This advice is often appreciated by penitents, especially when the sin has been committed within the context of their marriage or family.²⁰⁶ Appendix III of the Rite of Penance gives an overview of questions for an examination of conscience, many of which have a social character, for instance: 'Is

204. Nationale Raad voor Liturgie, *Orde van dienst voor boete en verzoening*, Hilversum: Gooi en Sticht, 1976, 14.

205. The five precepts of the Church are: '1) to attend Mass on Sundays and other holy days of obligation and to refrain from work and activities which could impede the sanctification of those days; 2) to confess one's sins, receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation at least once each year; 3) to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least during the Easter season; 4) to abstain from eating meat and to observe the days of fasting established by the Church; and 5) to help to provide for the material needs of the Church, each according to his own ability.' Cf. *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, n. 432.

206. James Donohue, CR, 'Confessions of a priest: The unused potential of the rite of Penance', in Jana Marguerite Bennett and David Cloutier (Eds.), *Naming our sins: How recognizing the seven deadly vices can renew the sacrament of reconciliation*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2019, 168-180.

my love for neighbours genuine, or do I use my fellow human beings for my own purpose?'; 'Do I share my possessions with those who are less well off?' or 'Have parents taken care for a Christian education of their children?'²⁰⁷ In this regard, Kathleen Drysdale Beuscher mentions that becoming a parent has led for some participants in her research to an increase in participation in the sacrament of Reconciliation, because they witness their children's catechesis or they want to be a good role model for their children.²⁰⁸

The Indian theologian Alex Kalathikattil also focuses on the social element of sin, in the context of a globalized society. For example, many people have become part of a culture in which cheap labour has become normal, with the downside of underpaid workers and child labourers who make products which are then sold all over the world. Negative effects of our private actions on nature, our environment or our climate are further examples through which we could become accountable for our behaviour. We could also mention our lack of acknowledging the intrinsic value of every human being from the moment of conception to natural death. In his discussion on the current crisis of the sacrament of Reconciliation, Kalathikattil argues that in our days there is a loss of the sense of sin and moral guilt. He states that as a consequence, reconciliation becomes superfluous, because reconciliation is considered as a means to remove moral guilt.²⁰⁹ According to John Paul II, the loss of a sense of sin has to do with the loss of faith in God as our Creator, Lord and Father.²¹⁰ It is a fact that for instance in a country like the Netherlands, the percentage of people who say they believe in a personal God or in a transcendental power has decreased from 78% in 1966 to 42% in 2015.²¹¹ When the influence of secularist ideas increases, it can easily happen that personal failings are blamed on society or on psychological conditioning rather than that people accept their personal responsibility towards God and towards others.

4.5 Methodological aspects

In 2021 and 2022, I undertook a mixed method research project among 223 participants, mostly migrants who live in the Netherlands and who have been married in the Catholic Church after 1995. The method of data-collection for this quantitative

207. *Rite of Penance*, New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Corp, 2009, Appendix III.

208. Kathleen Drysdale Beuscher, *op. cit.*, 2012, 103.

209. Alex Kalathikattil, *Postmodernity, globalization and the sacrament of Reconciliation. Social reconciliation and the recontextualization of the sacrament of Reconciliation*. Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2010, 355.

210. John Paul II, *Post-synodal Apostolic exhortation Reconciliation and Penance*. Vatican, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984, n. 18.

211. Ton Bernts, Joantine Berghuijs and Joep de Hart, *God in Nederland 1966-2015*. Utrecht: Ten Have, 2016, 65.

research has been described in detail elsewhere.²¹² Participants have been asked to fill in a survey, for which they could choose between eleven languages. 167 participants were migrants from all continents. 56 Dutch people who participated were preparing for marriage or have been married within an intercultural relationship with a migrant spouse. The response rate was 30%. This sample is not representative for the migrant population in the Netherlands, let alone for Dutch society. Yet, the survey shows an interesting result, which is relevant in the context of this article. Participants indicate that after a conflict, seeking mutual reconciliation and granting and receiving forgiveness from one another are important factors which positively influence their relationship quality. In other words: mutual reconciliation ($r = 0.361$) and mutual forgiveness ($r = 0.188$) are both significantly correlated with relationship quality. Recent empirical research goes in the same direction. Ho, Liang and Van Tongeren found that the inclination to forgive one's partner is positively associated ($r = 0.44$) with the self-assessed relationship satisfaction. Further, they measured that the positive effect of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction lasts for at least four weeks. These results are in line with earlier research on the association between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction.²¹³

Further in 2021 and 2022, I had 12 in-depth interviews with migrant and intercultural couples, most of whom had taken part in the survey. During the interview, questions were asked about their migration history, their integration process in the Netherlands and in the local church community, their experiences with Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) and pastoral care, their spirituality and religiosity, their values, their dealing with conflicts and their future perspectives. In selecting the 24 interviewees, the strategy has been to strive for a mixture of couples from the same ethnic background and intercultural couples and for a variety of countries of origin. All couples have been married in the Catholic Church, in the Netherlands or in their homeland. Their homelands are: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Eritrea, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Poland, Tanzania and Ukraine. All interviewees lived in the Netherlands when the interview took place. The Ethics Review Board of the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology has approved the study design. Data have been coded with Atlas ti software. A detailed method description and data-analysis for this qualitative research have been provided elsewhere.²¹⁴

212. Ward Biemans, *op. cit.* 2023, 153–172, cf. chapter 2 of this thesis.

213. Man Yee Ho, Siya Liang and Daryl R. Van Tongeren, 'Self-regulation facilitates forgiveness in close relationships', *Current Psychology* 43, 2024, 2679–2689. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04504-5>

214. Ward Biemans, *op. cit.*, 2024, 100–114, cf. chapter 3 of this thesis.

4.6 Results from interviews with couples

During the interviews, 29 times people spoke about reconciliation, most often with God (n = 14), then with one another (n = 9) and finally with society (n = 6). In this part, we will discuss the main results and compare them with other findings of research on reconciliation of migrants in globalized hosting societies.

4.6.1 Reconciliation with God

Reconciliation with God can take many different shapes. The familiarity with the sacrament of Reconciliation varies considerably. For interviewees from Ukraine and Poland, a regular confession is quite normal. They often consider it a condition for receiving Communion. Some expressed their surprise when they saw that during the celebration of the Eucharist, almost all Dutch Catholics come forward to receive Communion. One of the interviewees, Hanna²¹⁵ from Poland, explained that going to confession forces her to reflect on her behaviour, in dialogue with the priest: ‘Very often it is indeed about those emotions between us. Confession does not help me change my character, but a few times during confession I have heard something from a priest that confronted me with my behaviour. Like one time the priest asked me: “But do you love your husband?” And I said: “Yes, very much”. And then I thought: gosh, that's crazy, because on the one hand I love him very much and then I say things I don't really mean. So, confession definitely brings something into my life.’²¹⁶

Julia from the Netherlands also confirms that the sacrament of Reconciliation is important for her: ‘It sets me free; I no longer have to remember my mistakes. It renews my bond with Jesus.’²¹⁷

For other interviewees, reconciliation with God can be reached in a non-sacramental way, by personal prayer or by silent listening inside a church. It is remarkable that especially within intercultural couples, there can be great differences in finding ways of reconciliation with God. For instance, Julia's husband Charbel from Lebanon indicates that for him, reconciliation with his Dutch wife is more important than going to confession, although he regrets that he is not going to confession more

215. All names are pseudonyms.

216. Interview 11, 2022, 151.

217. Interview 4, 2021, 215.

often.²¹⁸ Hanna's Dutch husband Jeroen, who is Protestant, says he speaks to God in personal prayer. He admits that in this way, he does not receive some form of feedback, but still, he does not miss the possibility of going to confession.²¹⁹

Spiritual direction (or spiritual accompaniment) is another form through which reconciliation with God can be reached.²²⁰ Gerson from Hungary was having a relationship crisis with his fiancée, who was in a crisis of faith. This brought him to a crossroads in his relationship with his fiancée and with God. Or, in his words: 'I had to understand over the time, which actually also caused a breakup in our relationship in 2016, what I wanted from a relationship, what I wanted from the love and what I wanted from God, who is the love in this business.'²²¹ He asked a Dutch priest for spiritual direction, first alone and later with his fiancée. They were able to overcome their relationship crisis and eventually decided to get married.

Within a couple, different ways to be reconciled with God may exist. The interaction within a couple when there are differences in the way or the intensity of believing has already been treated by Saint Paul in rather strong words in his letter to the Corinthians, when he says: 'the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband.' (1 Cor. 7, 14) It must be added that these dynamics are above all based on grace through which persons can grow in virtues like faith, hope, and love. Grace can be received either in a sacramental way or in the form of a special charism.²²² When it comes to relational dynamics, grace may be more important than personal merit. Still, the interviews make clear that migrants often make considerable material and spiritual sacrifices, leaving their country of origin and their cultural background. Within intercultural relationships, giving up one's language, close family bonds and cultural habits is quite common. Often, these couples need to work hard together to find a new balance in their relationship and in their private lives, including their faith life.

4.6.2 Reconciliation with one another

Reconciliation with one another is a second way to deal with relational conflicts. Several couples indicate the importance of mutual communication of emotions and

218. Interview 4, 2022, p. 13

219. Interview 11, 2022, 153.

220. Spiritual direction has been defined by William Barry as: 'help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.' Cf. William Barry, *Spiritual direction and the encounter with God*, Mahwah (NJ): Paulist Press, 1992, 8.

221. Interview 2, 2021, 28.

222. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2003.

thoughts in this process. Particularly, intercultural couples are used to coping with cultural and character differences. It is important for them to communicate about these differences. Jeroen from the Netherlands stresses that if they would not do that, they would grow apart as a couple.²²³ After a conflict, also Asmara from Indonesia and her Dutch husband Johan try to forgive one another before going to bed and express their mutual love, even though they may find it very hard to say it. They both agree that they should not end the day being in pain and being mad at each other. They mention one aspect which could complicate matters for them: a more extravert, direct way of resolving conflicts, more common to Dutch people and a more introvert, humble way of expressing, more common among Indonesians. They have learned through the years to listen in a more effective way to one another, both by praying – or in Johan’s words: ‘being close to God’ - and by reflecting on themselves, being conscious of their cultural differences.²²⁴

Sometimes, a certain cultural environment complicates the deepening of a relationship. Emmanuel, who is from Tanzania and his Dutch wife Sophie met one another in South Africa. While being there, they experienced tensions which originated in the racialised history. They managed not to let it affect their relationship when they settled in the Netherlands, although at first, they received some negative comments.²²⁵ Another couple, the husband David born in Bosnia and his wife Patricija with a Serbian father and a Croatian mother, share painful memories of their youth when there was a war in former Yugoslavia. They have experienced that for their parents during the war, their ethnicity suddenly played a major role in contacts between neighbours in the same town or village, unlike the situation before the war. It has helped David and Patricija that they don’t have to explain their feelings to each other, because they understand each other’s history.²²⁶ Still, it is a reality that societal conflicts from abroad which are brought into the family, could cause post-traumatic stress and a need to be reconciled with the hosting society.

4.6.3 Reconciliation with society

Thirdly, we have seen that some interviewees mentioned a need to reconcile with certain historical or cultural aspects which they have come across in their homeland or in the hosting society. It could be an alienating experience if people in the hosting society are not aware of this history, which could still play a role years after the migration. Such experiences of alienation could emerge for instance when migrants

223. Interview 11, 2022, 138.

224. Interview 7, 2022, 158.

225. Interview 8, 2022, 24.

226. Interview 3, 2021, 77-78.

are faced with new situations of discrimination in the hosting society. The scientific literature confirms that there is still a long way to go to fight discrimination and racism in globalizing societies.²²⁷ Regarding experiences of discrimination in the workplace, research shows that there is a need for reconciliation among young people (15 to 34 years old) born to immigrants in the European Union, with their native-born neighbours. Almost one in five of these young people feels part of a group that is discriminated against on the grounds of ethnicity, nationality, or race. In the Netherlands, this percentage is even higher, around 37%. These figures are much lower in Canada (one in seven) and the United States (one in ten).²²⁸

Church communities have a role to play in the process of preventing discrimination and in establishing a process of reconciliation between migrants and the hosting society. One possible solution against discrimination in church communities could be a racial diversification of clergy and lay leaders. Wessel Bentley describes how between 2000 and 2011 at a Methodist congregation in South Africa, the racial diversification of ministers and lay leaders led to the diversification of the congregation itself.²²⁹ It must be said that South Africa has a particular history of racial segregation, so that one needs to be very cautious with a generalisation of this type of development. On the other hand, it is not implausible that also in other countries and church communities, a cross-national diversification of clergy and lay leaders leads to a more mixed composition of the community. In the Catholic church in the Netherlands, a process of diversification of clergy is taking place, especially in dioceses which have made this an explicit part of their human resources policy, for instance by hosting a seminary from the Neocatechumenal Way. A survey among 894 'active Catholics' living in the Netherlands has shown that a majority (53%) of them is (very) positive about the commitment of foreign priests.²³⁰ In our research, some of the interviewees expressed a real delight because in the Netherlands they were able to confess to a priest of the same ethnicity as they have. A confession in one's mother tongue could make it much easier to speak in a nuanced way about one's sins, emotions, conflicts, and the like.

227. For instance: Alex Strecker and Marilyn Naidoo, 'The dynamics of multicultural youth ministry in a changing South Africa', *Missionalia* 46(1), 2018, 163-182. Pål Ketil Botvar and Anders Sjöborg show that Muslim pupils living in Norway and Sweden report significantly more discrimination related to ideology and ethnicity than Christian and non-religious pupils. However, their results do not differentiate between Christian native pupils and Christian pupils with a migrant background. Cf. Ibid., 'Social conflicts, religion and human rights support: A study of young Christians and Muslims in Scandinavia', in C. Sterkens and H.-G. Ziebertz (Eds.), *Political and judicial rights through the prism of religious belief: Religion and human rights* 3. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018, 255-274.

228. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Young people with migrant parents, making integration work*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021, 60-61.

229. Wessel Bentley, 'Ministry as bridge building: Facilitating culturally diverse faith communities in South Africa', in R. Drew Smith, William Ackah, Anthony G. Reddie (eds), *Churches, blackness, and contested multiculturalism: Europe, Africa and North America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 145-156.

230. Charlotte van Miltenburg and Peter Kanne, *Katholicisme in Nederland: Opmvattingen en ervaringen van katholieken en voormalig katholieken*. Amsterdam: I&O Research, 2022, 21.

4.7 Conclusion: increasing the attractiveness of the sacrament of Reconciliation

In part 4.3, we have seen that the few available empirical studies on the participation in the sacrament of Reconciliation indicate positive effects of this participation, in the sense of experiencing a purified conscience, feelings of relief, a possibility to reconnect with God and with others. In part 4.4, we have explored the added value of the sacrament of Reconciliation for individuals, couples, and communities, with a particular focus on the social dimension of sin. In part 4.5, methodological aspects of our survey among migrant and intercultural couples have been discussed. In part 4.6, the main findings of our in-depth interviews regarding the sacrament of Reconciliation have been presented and interpreted. The positive effects of the sacrament were confirmed by some, whereas other interviewees use other means to seek reconciliation with God or prefer to resolve conflicts within their relationship directly with their partner. For migrants, reconciliation with one another and with society could be more complicated because of intercultural differences, misunderstandings and patterns of discrimination.

We will conclude by indicating ways to increase the attractiveness of the sacrament of Reconciliation, in particular for married migrant and intercultural couples. We have already seen in part 4.3.1 that, firstly, a humbler explanation of the value of the sacrament of Reconciliation could be helpful for a better understanding among people who are not familiar with it. Secondly, we have mentioned in the same part the use of a language which connects better with the vocabulary of today's generations.

A third way to make the celebration of the sacrament more relevant to the faithful is to integrate insights from the social sciences, in particular psychology. Regarding the confession of sins, Kalathikattil points at a mistake with historical roots to reduce the understanding of sin as an action and to forget the underlying attitudes that have led a person to sin. As a result, attitudes like racism, elitism, indifferentism or sexism never figured in lists of sins to be confessed.²³¹ In the latest manual for the Dutch Church province, the examination of conscience does mention one's commitment to unity in

231. Alex Kalathikattil, *op. cit.*, 2010, 369; Richard M. Gula, *To Walk Together Again: The Sacrament of Reconciliation*, New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984, 90.

society, justice in the world, hostility towards others and unworthy words and thoughts regarding chastity. This indicates a shift towards stimulating an increased awareness of underlying attitudes leading people to sin.²³²

A fourth way of increasing the relevance of the sacrament of Reconciliation, related to the previous point, is to increase the awareness of the social teaching of the Church among the clergy and the faithful. In times of globalisation, many of our actions have far-reaching implications, be it socially, economically or ecologically. One can think for instance of a culture of cheap labour, maintained by a free market economy. Pope John Paul II reminded the faithful in this regard that: 'It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied, and not to allow those burdened by such needs to perish. It is also necessary to help these needy people to acquire expertise, to enter the circle of exchange, and to develop their skills in order to make the best use of their capacities and resources.'²³³

If by our consumerist behaviour the socio-economic development of labourers and their families is made impossible, this kind of behaviour can certainly be called 'sinful'. Another example of the integration of social teaching into the formation of consciences has to do with the exploitation of natural resources. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that: 'Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment.'²³⁴ By persisting in a consumerist attitude which would not take into account the damage done to creation, man makes himself guilty of an 'ecological sin'. In our globalized society, these socio-economic and ecological developments require a recontextualization of the sacrament of Reconciliation.

Fifthly, besides the content also the form in which the sacrament is celebrated, could be further developed. Kalathikattil pleads for a partly communal celebration of the sacrament, so that the ecclesial dimension of the sacrament and our solidarity in sin and reconciliation could receive the attention they need. This would be in accordance with early Church practices.²³⁵ Similarly, James Donohue states that if the liturgical and communal dimension of sin and reconciliation is reinforced, penitents could 'make a clearer connection between this sacrament and life'.²³⁶ For example, during a short retreat the sacrament of Reconciliation could be explained and offered. In our

232. Nationale Raad voor Liturgie, *Klein rituale voor de Nederlandse Kerkprovincie*. Den Bosch: Nationale Raad voor Liturgie, 2009, 46-51.

233. John Paul II, *Encyclical letter Centesimus Annus*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991, n. 34.

234. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 339.

235. Alex Kalathikattil, *op. cit.*, 2010, 377-385.

236. James Donohue, *op. cit.*, 2019, 178.

survey, migrant and intercultural couples have indicated that they would value this. Another possibility are evenings – or afternoons - of mercy, which can be organized in a parish. Such an event can be a mixture of a eucharistic celebration, followed by adoration, worship and the possibility for confession or common prayer.²³⁷ If a retreat or one day activity are organized for couples and young families in particular, facilities like childcare are important. A complicating factor for a regular receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation is that because of merging parishes, priests are regularly transferred to another parish, churches close, time schedules change, etc. These circumstances could make it more difficult to establish a bond of trust between the priest and the confessant. Offering a retreat or pilgrimage could be a good alternative through which this bond of trust could grow. A clear communication on when and how to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation is important, on these occasions but also in general, both for ordinary parishioners and for migrants.

Finally, a renewed attention for catechesis on the sacrament of Reconciliation in relation to the other sacraments is needed. In this article, we have focused on the experiences of married couples. An improvement of the praxis of marriage preparation could include the development of communicative skills among couples who want to marry. With this, an increased awareness of the value of the sacrament of Reconciliation could be fostered. In recent decades, in many Western countries the Catholic education in the sacramental life has diminished substantially. This includes the usage of going to confession before receiving (first) Holy Communion, Confirmation and Marriage. From the interviews with migrant and intercultural couples, we can conclude that reconciliation with God can be experienced in different ways, the sacrament of Reconciliation being an important way for some of them. Within their relationship, an open and effective communication is considered as a crucial factor for mutual reconciliation. Thus, couples can experience a connection between a regular receiving of the sacrament of Reconciliation and a willingness to forgive one another, as has been pointed out by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life: ‘The Sacrament of Reconciliation offers spouses the infinite richness of God’s mercy, who in His Son always forgives us. In this way, they learn to be patient and merciful with each other, because forgiveness received becomes forgiveness given, according to Jesus’ teaching: “Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you”? (Mt 18:33).’²³⁸

237. In the Netherlands, evenings of mercy are for instance organized in parishes in Bergen op Zoom and Eindhoven. Cf. <https://www.lievevrouweparochie.nl/nieuws/avond-van-barmhartigheid/> and <https://www.petrus-ehv.nl/avond-van-barmhartigheid-aanbidding/>, both accessed 5-7-25.

238. Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life, *op. cit.*, 2022, n. 82.

The final report by the Synod on the Family rightly remarked that reconciliation during personal crises could be an arduous task for couples. This 'requires the support of grace, needs the generous cooperation of relatives and friends, and sometimes even outside help and professional assistance'.²³⁹ With these different forms of support, sacramental and otherwise, marriages could indeed be strengthened and further suffering within families could be prevented.

239. Synod of Bishops, *Relatio finalis for the fourteenth ordinary general assembly on the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2015, n. 81.

Chapter 5

Chances for intercultural pastoral care - A SWOT-analysis of interviews with pastoral caregivers in Catholic migrant and multi-ethnic church communities in the Netherlands²⁴⁰

240. Accepted for publication under the same title in *ET-Studies, Journal of the European Society for Catholic Theology*. This chapter has been extended with some examples, because of the journal's limitation in number of words.

Abstract

Research has shown that migrant and multi-ethnic church communities positively contribute to the well-being of migrants. The current study focuses on ways to improve the pastoral accompaniment of Catholic migrant and intercultural couples and families offered by pastoral caregivers in the Netherlands. By means of a SWOT-analysis, ten interviews with pastoral caregivers, one interview and three written responses from diocesan staff members and one annual report have been analysed. Migrant and multi-ethnic church communities have a large offering in formation, catechesis and marriage preparation, besides liturgical activities and activities aimed at community building. Many Dutch-speaking church communities are involved in reorganisations due to a declining number of participants, which can be burdensome for pastoral caregivers and volunteers. Four opportunities for further development of pastoral practices are discussed: intercultural pastoral care; intercultural communication; promoting well-being and community building. Both migrant and native communities could profit when these pastoral practices are implemented.

Keywords: migrant and multi-ethnic church communities, pastoral accompaniment, integration

5.1 Introduction

According to recent estimates, there are about one million Christian migrants in the Netherlands. They come together in more than 1,000 church communities, exact figures are not available.²⁴¹ These Church communities can be divided into migrant church communities and multi-ethnic communities. Migrant church communities mainly consist of members of one ethnicity or language group and intercultural couples. Multi-ethnic communities are mostly English-, French- or Spanish-speaking communities where people from several ethnicities come together. As far as the Catholic communities are concerned, these communities have either a parish or quasi-parishes structure with its own clergy, or they make part of a larger parish with a Dutch-speaking parish board.²⁴² Multi-ethnic communities are often located in the bigger cities. In rural areas, the percentage of migrants in parishes is usually much lower. Besides spiritual activities, many migrant and multi-ethnic communities offer social support to their members, which contributes to the integration into the host society.²⁴³

This article focuses on policy and practice aimed at couples and families within Catholic migrant and multi-ethnic church communities. Despite a strong decline, the Catholic Church is still the biggest church community in the Netherlands, with 3.5 million members, some 20% of the population.²⁴⁴ After two synods on family matters in 2014 and 2015 in which, among other things, the widespread phenomenon of separation and divorce has been amply discussed, Pope Francis has pointed out that it is desirable that marriage preparation, pastoral accompaniment after marriage, counselling and mediation in crisis situations would be intensified.²⁴⁵ Seven years later, a worldwide synodal process has started in the Catholic Church, in which the openness and commitment towards migrants are among the key elements. Pope Francis has stressed that in encountering the diversity of foreigners, migrants and refugees, and in the intercultural dialogue that can emerge from this encounter, the Church can grow in catholicity - universality - and thus be mutually enriched.²⁴⁶

241. Joep de Hart and Pepijn van Houwelingen, *Christenen in Nederland: Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid*. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2018, 103-104.

242. A quasi-parish is a definite community of the Christian faithful in a particular church, entrusted to a priest as its proper pastor but not yet erected as a parish because of particular circumstances. Cf. CIC, can. 516, par. 1.

243. Radboud Engbersen and Tineke Lupi, *Het belang van slow social work. Op zoek naar nieuwe welzijnsfuncties in Rotterdam*. Den Haag: Platform31, 2015, 63.

244. Joris Kregting, *Kerncijfers Rooms-katholieke Kerk 2023*. Nijmegen: Kaski, 2024, 9.

245. Francis, Post-synodal Apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2016, no. 206, 217 and 244.

246. Francis, *Message for the 107th world day of migrants and refugees*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2021.

At the moment of writing this dissertation, the pastoral accompaniment of migrants in the Netherlands functions in a political context with a (caretaker) government who has made as one of its goals to establish ‘the toughest asylum admission regime and the most comprehensive migration control package ever.’²⁴⁷

5.2 Theoretical framework

According to Holly Straut Eppsteiner and Jacqueline Hagan, a strength of migrant and multi-ethnic church communities is that they have a holistic approach in providing support to migrants. Support can be spiritual, social, emotional, and material.²⁴⁸ By doing so, they distinguish themselves from other professional organisations, who often have projects for only one aspect. Phillip Connor has found that in Western Europe, the United States, and Australia, religious participation is positively associated with migrants’ emotional well-being, more so than participation in non-religious groups, although the effect is slight.²⁴⁹ He has not looked specifically at differences in the way pastoral accompaniment has been offered to migrants. Adeinev Reyes-Espiritu reflects on how migrant churches could even more become communities of care that provide ‘guidance and support, without impeding the capacity of members to make their own informed choices’.²⁵⁰ However, also in her analysis there is not much attention for the concrete means that could contribute to an improvement of the pastoral care of migrant churches.

The effect of religious participation on mental, spiritual, social, and material well-being of migrants is dependent of the financial and organisational situation of migrant and multi-ethnic church communities. In bigger cities in the Netherlands, there is a growing number of people who seek emergency assistance, for whom the government does not provide additional support and whose social network is small.²⁵¹ Still, across the different Christian denominations, there is a shared opinion that although the government is promoting self-reliance and a participatory society, migrant and multi-ethnic church communities and other volunteer organisations cannot substitute the

247. PVV, VVD, NSC and BBB, *Hoop, lef en trots - Hoofdlijnenakkoord 2024 – 2028*. The Hague: Bureau woordvoering kabinetformatie, 2024. The status of caretaker government is temporary until the elections of 29 October 2025 and the formation of a new government.

248. Holly Straut Eppsteiner and Jacqueline Hagan, ‘Religion as psychological, spiritual, and social support in the migration undertaking’, in: Jennifer B. Saunders, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Susanna Snyder (Eds.), *Intersections of religion and migration: Issues at the global crossroads*. New York: Springer Nature, 2016, 49-70, at 59.

249. Phillip Connor, ‘Balm for the soul: immigrant religion and emotional well-being’, *International Migration* 50(2), 2012, 130-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2010.00623.x>

250. Adeinev M. Reyes-Espiritu, ‘Homemaking in and with migrant churches as communities of care’, *Religions* 14(2), 2023, 257 (1-17), at 2. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020257>.

251. Radboud Engbersen and Tineke Lupi, *op. cit.*, 2015, 60-61.

state in providing all the support that is needed. Support from churches in a basic social infrastructure is not always available or sufficient.²⁵² Especially in recent years, Catholic church communities are heavily involved in reorganisations and merging of parishes, which implies that their focus is more internally than externally oriented. Churches do not always make use of the available means from the local government, because they value their autonomy.²⁵³ On the other hand, from all churchgoers in the Netherlands, the percentage of volunteers is higher than 50%, which is the highest percentage in Europe.²⁵⁴ From a perspective of stimulating integration, it would be interesting to see to what extent international, interreligious, interdenominational and intergenerational cooperation takes place in migrant and multi-ethnic church communities. Research in the U.S. by Straut Eppsteiner and Hagan shows that the provision of social services by migrant church communities cuts across lines of ethnicity and religiosity.²⁵⁵ Further, Derek Wu and Erin Raffety describe intergenerational tensions which could arise in 'closed' first generation ethnic churches, when the second generation wishes to belong to a more 'open' multi-ethnic church community.²⁵⁶ Meeting the needs of first and second generation migrant families requires an intercultural attitude from pastoral caregivers, as Emmanuel Lartey has rightly pointed out already twenty years ago.²⁵⁷ Through a process of listening and dialogue, pastoral caregivers need to learn about the context in which migrants find themselves and to adapt their pastoral strategy accordingly.²⁵⁸

Despite financial difficulties, cultural and intergenerational tensions, the literature shows that, overall, the influence of religious participation on mental well-being of migrants remains positive. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate to what extent church communities could further develop this positive influence on migrants' religious experience. For instance, in her article on transnational – Philippine -

-
252. Lia van der Ham, Maaike den Draak, Wouter Mensink, Peggy Schyns and Esther van den Berg, *De Wmo 2015 in praktijk. De lokale uitvoering van de Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning*. Den Haag: Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau, 2018, 197.
253. Radboud Engbersen and Tineke Lupi, *op. cit.*, 2015, 66.
254. Paul Dekker, 'Religion and civic engagement: European patterns and digging deeper in the Netherlands.' In: Rupert Graf Strachwitz (Ed.) *Religious Communities and Civil Society in Europe*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2019, 137-159, at 138-140.
255. Holly Straut Eppsteiner and Jacqueline Hagan, *op. cit.*, 2016, 61.
256. Derek Wu and Erin Raffety, 'Give the grant money to the youth': From youth departure to belonging in the ethnic church, *Ecclesial Practices* 10, 2023, 182–201.
257. Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *In living color: An intercultural approach to pastoral care and counseling*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003, 33-34.
258. Elaborating Lartey's approach in an Evangelical context, Sue Holdsworth uses the concept of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) as a model of intercultural competence. She and other authors distinguish four domains of CQ: 'cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral. Cognitive CQ concerns a person's cross-cultural knowledge, while metacognitive CQ describes a person's ability to think and apply this knowledge during a cross-cultural interaction. Motivational CQ refers to an individual's emotional capacity and energy to learn about how to conduct themselves in cross-cultural settings, and behavioral CQ is about the ability to adapt speech and nonverbal behaviors in cross-cultural settings.' Cf. Sue M. Holdsworth, *Learning to love: utilizing the principles and practices of pastoral care for mission*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024, 45. See also: Soon Ang and Linn Van Dyne, *Handbook of cultural intelligence: Theory, measurement, and applications*. London, New York: Routledge, 2015, 3-16.

mothers and their families, Reyes-Espiritu suggests that a next step for a future study would be to explore Christian sources to evaluate which beliefs and practices in the tradition are burdensome to transnational mothers and their families and which can better promote their flourishing.²⁵⁹ The current study aims to add insights into the practices of pastoral accompaniment of migrant couples and intercultural couples within their church communities. The intention is to contribute to the improvement of these religious and pastoral practices. The research described below is part of a bigger research project on pastoral accompaniment of Catholic migrant and intercultural couples before and after marriage in the Netherlands.²⁶⁰ In a survey among 223 participants which has taken place in 2021, it has become clear that migrant couples and intercultural couples appreciate a more intensive, professional, and welcoming Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) and pastoral accompaniment after marriage. It has also been concluded that when participants are used to seeking reconciliation after a conflict in their relationship and when they experience forgiveness from their spouse, they indicate a significantly higher relationship quality. Therefore, it has been recommended that during MRE, more attention is given to communicative skills aimed at reconciliation and forgiveness. However, in many cases MRE and pastoral accompaniment after marriage are rather limited in terms of contact hours and introduction into the church community.

The central question of this article is: *How could the pastoral accompaniment of Catholic migrant couples and intercultural couples and their families offered by pastoral caregivers in the Netherlands be improved?*

5.3 Method of qualitative research among pastoral caregivers

Qualitative research has been undertaken among migrant and Dutch Catholic clergy and diocesan staff members in the Netherlands, questioning them on how pastoral strategies regarding migrant and intercultural couples and their families could be improved. In 2023, ten semi-structured in-depth interviews have been held: with seven pastors, from the Chaldean and Syro-Antiochean rites, from English-, Polish-, Spanish- and Ukrainian-speaking migrant communities; with two parish priests and

259. Adeinev M. Reyes-Espiritu, 'A hopeful gamble: Living the faith as migrant workers and transnational mothers', *Studies in World Christianity* 29(1), 2023, 10–36. <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/10.3366/swc.2023.0416>.

260. For a more detailed description of the project, see the Introduction and chapter 2 of this thesis.

one rector of three multi-ethnic, Dutch- and English-speaking communities.²⁶¹ One other interview has been held with a young couple working for a Dutch diocese, facilitating family meetings in parishes. Three written answers to a short questionnaire have been collected from diocesan staff workers. During the interviews, experiences and expectations of migrant and intercultural couples, which have been gathered in an earlier sub-study have been taken into consideration.²⁶² In addition to an interview with a Spanish-speaking pastor, an annual report from a charity foundation for Spanish-speaking migrants in Amsterdam has been analysed.²⁶³ Participants have given their informed consent to participate in this research; their names have been pseudonymized.²⁶⁴ The study design has been approved by the Ethics Review Board of the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology.

All interviews and written sources have been investigated with a SWOT-analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). A SWOT analysis intends to distinguish between internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats.²⁶⁵ In this case, internal factors regard the organisation of marriage preparation and pastoral accompaniment of couples in migrant and multi-ethnic church communities; external factors regard the integration of couples and their families into these communities and into Dutch society.

One critique of SWOT analyses is that they are based on subjective views of managers or planner judgements.²⁶⁶ Parish priests or migrant pastors could be compared to managers in the sense that they are responsible for the organisation of their church communities. Phadermrod Boonyarat and colleagues argue that a SWOT analysis should be evaluated by considering a customer's perspective. Although we have not undertaken such an evaluation of our SWOT analysis in the strict sense, in our survey among migrant and intercultural couples (n = 223), we have measured the appraisal of the pastoral accompaniment these couples received before and after their wedding.²⁶⁷ These results, together with an analysis of 12 in-depth interviews with

261. The communities of the Chaldean Catholic and the Syriac Catholic migrants are so-called quasi parishes, which means that they gather in various churches in several dioceses throughout the country for liturgical celebrations and other activities, without a fixed territory. Cf. CIC, can. 516, 1. The patriarchate of the Chaldean Catholic Church is in Bagdad, Iraq. The patriarch of the Syriac Catholic Church resides in Beirut, Lebanon. The Ukrainian Catholic community in the Netherlands makes part of an eparchy for France, Benelux, and Switzerland. The Polish parishes in the Netherlands are run by priests from the Society of Christ for Polonia Abroad. The English- and Spanish-speaking communities are parishes with a parish priest.

262. Cf. chapter 3.

263. Stichting Casa Migrante. *Jaarverslag 2022*. Amsterdam, Stichting Casa Migrante, 2023.

264. Verbatim, pseudonymized interviews are available on request at: <https://doi.org/10.34894/VABHJX>.

265. Birla Institute of Technology and Science, 2022. SWOT analysis, <https://universe.bits-pilani.ac.in/uploads/SWOT%20Analysis.pdf>, accessed 5-7-2025.

266. Phadermrod Boonyarat, Richard M. Crowdera and Gary B. Wills, 'Importance-performance analysis based SWOT analysis', *International Journal of Information Management* 44, 2019, 194–203, at 194. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2016.03.009>.

267. Cf. chapter 2.

migrant and intercultural couples, provide additional insights into the values couples adhere to and into the role migrant and multi-ethnic church communities play in the couples’ integration into Dutch society.²⁶⁸

To increase the interobserver reliability, for 4 out of 11 interviews a SWOT-analysis has also been undertaken by a second and a third researcher. Of all codes indicated in these 4 interviews, in 79% of all cases the principal researcher has attached the same code as the second or third coder; in 11% of all cases the principal researcher has indicated a different code; and in 10% of all cases, the principal researcher has indicated a code attached by the second or third coder as repetitious.

5.4 Results of the SWOT-analysis

In Table 9 the results of the SWOT analysis are subdivided into categories of pastoral activities, mainly aimed at migrant and intercultural couples and their families, and necessary preconditions for these activities.

Table 9. 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

268. Cf. chapter 3.

5.4.1 Strengths

Most Catholic migrant and multi-ethnic communities in the Netherlands are relatively young and have quickly grown in the last few decades, although it is estimated that between 2019 and 2024, the number of Catholic churchgoers in migrant communities has diminished, similarly to the total number of Catholic churchgoers in the Netherlands.²⁶⁹ Still, many Catholic migrant and multi-ethnic communities are vibrant places of ecclesial life, mostly with a large catechetical offering and formation activities. Before a church wedding takes place, especially in the bigger cities, couples often take part in a common MRE course and receive individual pastoral accompaniment. Most MRE programs are provided by teams consisting of a member of the clergy in cooperation with other professionals or volunteers. When there is no official course, couples are usually prepared individually. Couples who want to marry in a mixed Dutch and English-speaking parish often have a migrant background and are committed Christians who regularly go to church.²⁷⁰ New ecclesial movements like the Neocatechumenal Way or Opus Dei play a substantial role in local formation programs. For instance, in 23 years, the intercultural pastoral team of the multi-ethnic community of the church of Our Lady in Amsterdam, entrusted to Opus Dei has prepared more than 1,500 couples for their marriage.²⁷¹ In these and other courses that are offered throughout the country, topics that are dealt with are: the add value of an ecclesial marriage in comparison to a civic marriage, Biblical and faith aspects of marriage, the bond with the church community, communication skills, intercultural sensitivities, responsible parenthood, faith education of children, etc. Among intercultural couples, it is often the case that a migrant partner encourages a Dutch partner to take part in a marriage course or in ecclesial life, though sometimes they may participate alone. Regarding the language used for formation, there are big differences between the various migrant and multi-ethnic communities. Some communities use Dutch, whereas others use a native language or English. Also, in Dutch-speaking parishes, migrants are more and more involved in formation activities aimed at families. In some dioceses, a successful formula in this regard is the so-called 'Family Sunday', a combination of a family friendly celebration of the Eucharist, catechesis for various age groups of children and parents and a common, informal lunch afterwards.²⁷²

269. Joep de Hart and Pepijn van Houwelingen, *op. cit.*, 2018, 103-104. Joris Kregting estimates that the number of churchgoers in Catholic migrant communities in the Netherlands was around 9,100 persons in 2023, compared to 14,800 in 2019, cf. *op. cit.*, 2024, 17. Probably, this has to do with the Covid pandemic, due to which a) church visits were restricted; b) migrants returned to their native countries and c) live streaming of celebrations taking place in their native countries became available.

270. Interview 2, 2023, 24; cf. Joris Kregting and Jorien Copier, *Het gebruik van gebedshuizen door migrantenkerken*. Nijmegen: Kaski, 2021, 22-23.

271. Interview 9, 2023, 18.

272. Interview 3, 2023, 25.

The increasing number of migrants that is participating in liturgical celebrations causes a change in the shape of the liturgy. Especially in the bigger cities, more and more parishes are offering celebrations in English or in other languages. This brings along a gradual change in the choices of hymns, the celebration of local saints, a more frequent use of the sacrament of Reconciliation and sometimes more personal prayers of the faithful or personal blessings. Some clergy in migrant or multi-ethnic communities offer the sacrament of Reconciliation during or after Mass. Most first-generation Polish-, Ukrainian- and Spanish-speaking migrants prefer to celebrate in their own language. Several other migrant communities, like the Syrian and Iraqi communities use simultaneous translations projected on screens. In some migrant parishes, such as in Polish and Ukrainian communities, much time is spent on house visits by the parish priests, especially around Christmas and New Year, and to families whose children are preparing for their first Holy Communion.²⁷³

Catechetical programs for First Holy Communion and Confirmation in many Dutch-speaking parishes are in transition, from isolated preparational courses towards a continuing program for various age groups. In the Catholic migrant communities we have analysed, these continuing programs are already offered to groups varying from 10 to 300 children by capable, unpaid catechists.²⁷⁴

Interviewees indicate that most migrants they know, are successfully integrated into the Dutch society. Most African, Latin-American and Asian migrants intend to stay in the Netherlands. Interviewees report almost no cases of discrimination among their community members. Equality among men and women regarding work and household tasks is common among all ethnic communities.

For adults coming from Africa or Asia, English is often the language that connects them with each other. Still, some maintain ties with their compatriots, also for liturgical celebrations, such as the Indian and Indonesian communities. Celebrations in the native language are for instance offered once a month. Among migrant and multi-ethnic communities, members often use modern means of communication such as chat groups to stay in touch and to organize events. During and after the Covid-crisis, some parishes have developed new means of communication, for formation purposes or live streaming. In big migrant or multi-ethnic parishes, it has proved useful to employ a parish assistant or a sacristan for logistical and communication matters.

273. Interview 4, 2023, 97; interview 7, 2023, 102.

274. Interview 4, 2023, 61; interview 5, 2023, 180; interview 8, 2023, 278.

Most migrant communities have made arrangements with local dioceses and parishes about buying or renting church buildings for worship. When they can buy a church, this gives them the freedom to adapt the interior of the church to their own wishes and to use their own time schedule. On a deeper level, the ownership of a church building gives a sense of responsibility and strength.²⁷⁵

Migrant and multi-ethnic churches are to various extents engaged in formation and charity. For instance, in the English-speaking parish in The Hague, language courses and meals are offered to refugees; a buddy project has been set up, this is a one to one coupling with volunteers and documented refugees; and charity is a fixed part of the catechesis program for children.²⁷⁶ In a Spanish-speaking parish in Amsterdam, charity tasks have been placed in a separate organization, although there is some cooperation with the local church community. This construction makes it possible that private funds invest in charity projects.²⁷⁷ In some other cases, permanent deacons fulfil or have fulfilled tasks in boards of local charities.²⁷⁸

5.4.2 Weaknesses

In many Dutch parishes, church buildings are being closed and no longer used for worship practices because of budget deficits, poor church attendance, a lack of volunteers and of young people. For the migrant and multi-ethnic communities we have analysed this is not the case, although some have financial problems.²⁷⁹ Causes of deficits are often the expensive maintenance of old church buildings, combined with an aging and declining Dutch-speaking community. Merging of parishes and closing, or in some cases restauration or renovation of church buildings take a lot of time and energy from parish boards, pastoral caregivers, diocesan staff members and volunteers. Between 2000 and 2023 in Catholic parishes in the Netherlands, the number of weddings and initiation sacraments (Baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation) have decreased significantly. Only recently, the number of adult admissions seems to increase.²⁸⁰ Given the current situation of large parishes and small pastoral teams, several priests from the sample indicate they do not have sufficient time for pastoral accompaniment of couples after their wedding. One difficulty with community building is that migrant and multi-ethnic communities are more prone to change, people come and go. Volunteers need to have substitutes and

275. Interview 8, 2023, 314.

276. Cf. <https://parish.nl/our-outreach/hand-in-hand/>, accessed 5-7-2025.

277. Stichting Casa Migrante, *op. cit.*, 2022, p. 3 and 5. They organize language courses for immigrants, visit elderly, lonely people, prisoners, asylum seekers, prostitutes, they provide support to people with HIV, etc.

278. Interview 2, 2023, 350; interview 11, 2023, 238.

279. For instance, interview 1, 2023, 251.

280. Joep de Hart and Pepijn van Houwelingen, *op. cit.*, 2018, 38; Joris Kregting, *op. cit.*, 2024, 15.

on average, commitments are more short-term compared to volunteers in local Dutch parishes. In particular, many Polish migrants, some 80%, indicate they want to return to Poland, except for most intercultural couples.²⁸¹ Many Polish migrants, including several Polish priests, work and live in a mainly Polish-speaking environment in the Netherlands, which makes integration more difficult.²⁸²

Normally, church communities in the Netherlands do not receive financial support from the government. Only for maintenance of a monumental building or for some charity projects, local, regional, or national governmental support may be available. When a church is being rented by a migrant community, this often means that migrant communities come together after the Dutch communities, later during the day. Sometimes this causes frictions with time schedules, use of meeting rooms, etc. When a migrant community is renting a church building from a Dutch parish, celebrating together with the Dutch community is rare and only takes place on special occasions.

5.4.3 Opportunities

The restructuring of parishes generates chances for churches which remain open for a growth of the local community. Catechetical cooperation between migrant communities, multi-ethnic and Dutch-speaking communities is rare, although several interviewees mention that in the future, this would be a possibility.²⁸³ In bigger cities, some parishes offer a bilingual catechetical program for children, for instance Dutch-English or Dutch-Spanish, which can be helpful to involve the parents. Often, children of migrant parents are more familiar with Dutch than with the language spoken in the church community, because they learn Dutch at school. In these communities, there is often a willingness to get to know each other and support each other, also across ethnicities. Several migrant priests point out that during the time children have lessons in catechesis, they can spend valuable time with pastoral accompaniment of the parents. Short retreats are an opportunity for formation, for example before Christmas or Easter. A pilgrimage to a monastery or a shrine is another way to foster community bonds. Migrants are often more flexible and willing to invest time in building up community bonds, for instance by organizing a potluck dinner before a marriage course. House visits are also suitable means for community building. On average, migrant clergy do this more frequently than Dutch clergy, for instance after a wedding has been celebrated abroad; for a house blessing, or by visiting families whose children prepare for the initiation sacraments. Celebration of

281. Interview 5, 2023, 308; interview 4, 2023, 161-162. As members of the European Union, Polish migrants do not have to take a civic integration exam. Often, only one of the partners come to the Netherlands for work, the other stays in Poland.

282. Interview 4, 2023, 162.

283. Interview 6, 2023, 168, interview 10, 2023, 205, interview 2, 2023, 178.

marriage jubilees, renewal of marriage vows and welcoming newlyweds is appreciated by the faithful and could be a source of inspiration for other church participants. Occasionally, cooperation between migrant church communities and local parishes take place, for instance in processions or other events. Orthodox Christians of the Syro-Antiochian, Chaldean and Byzantine rites participate in Catholic celebrations, but for baptisms and marriages, it is common that people return to their own Orthodox church community.²⁸⁴

The experience of some pastoral caregivers is that it can be effective when they take initiatives to reach out to people using social media, for instance sometime after the celebration of a wedding or an initiation sacrament. It is appreciated when Dutch multi-ethnic parishes do some of their communication also in English or other languages. For instance, a pilgrimage could be offered bilingual. It can be inspiring for multi-ethnic communities when a synodal or other setting is created in which it is possible to listen to migrants' stories. Hospitality towards newcomers can be improved by the opening of churches at certain hours and by equipping volunteers to welcome these newcomers. Being more hospitable fits within the vision of a missionary parish, as has been laid out by James Mallon and which is further developed by Dutch dioceses and lay organisations.²⁸⁵

If pastoral accompaniment is offered to couples in crisis, the presence of a community which can provide support is an added value, compared to secular counselling. In some cases, priests offer mediation or counselling after separation. It would be interesting to explore other ways of accompaniment of newlyweds or couples in crisis, for instance by experienced married couples.²⁸⁶ In some cases, psychological, juridical, and pastoral counselling is offered by a subsidized foundation for a specific migrant community, such as the Spanish-speaking community in Amsterdam.²⁸⁷

Diocesan ecclesiastical courts receive more requests for mixed marriages and for marriage annulments, especially from migrant and intercultural couples, probably because of the globalization and because procedures have been made more accessible.²⁸⁸ For migrant or multi-ethnic communities, it could be worthwhile to participate in the yearly national, interdenominational fundraising project 'Actie

284. Interview 6, 2023, 216 and interview 7, 2023, 147.

285. James Mallon, *Divine renovation. Guidebook: a step-by-step manual for transforming your parish*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Novalis, 2016; cf. <https://missionaireparochie.nl/waarom-een-missionaire-parochie>, accessed 5-7-2025.

286. For instance, Retrouvaille.org.uk and Retrouvaille.nl offer accompaniment to couples experiencing marital problems. Both accessed 5-7-2025.

287. Stichting Casa Migrante, *op. cit.*, 2022, 5-6.

288. Interview 9, 2023, 135-137; Francis, *op. cit.*, 2016, 244.

Kerkebalans'.²⁸⁹ In that case, the community could profit from a common marketing strategy.

5.4.4 Threats

Migrant communities are often dispersed over large areas, so that people need to travel long distances to come to church. This makes it more difficult for instance to organize a choir, with rehearsals etc. In one multi-ethnic community, some Dutch people showed resistance when foreign influences in the organisation of the liturgy became strong.²⁹⁰ Interviewees give examples of migrants who had great difficulties to come to the Netherlands, or to deal with the different cultural situation, for whom their faith clearly has been a support during their trials. One interviewee speaks of cultural tensions and concerns regarding children's education, with the example of the exposure of pupils to drugs sales at Dutch secondary schools.²⁹¹ In some other situations, intercultural couples have the experience that initially, tensions arose when a migrant partner was introduced in the larger Dutch family, but these tensions were later resolved.²⁹² Other interviewees have had experiences with undocumented migrants who are vulnerable for abuse of their working conditions, or who may be involved in the black or grey economy.²⁹³ One interviewee mentions that the new Dutch government will probably be more severe towards migrants and refugees.²⁹⁴

Besides many new possibilities, the introduction of new means of communication within communities could also bring along new threats to some. One important aspect regarding the use of social media is to protect users' privacy. Of course this can be managed, but it requires particular attention for people who for privacy reasons chose not to make use of certain social media.

Dioceses in the Netherlands have dealt with reorganisations and redundancies, which could make it more difficult to take new initiatives.²⁹⁵ Several diocesan staff workers indicate that because of budget cuts or other priorities, communication towards migrant communities is underdeveloped.²⁹⁶ One interviewee mentions that despite the simplification of the diocesan procedures for the annulment of a church marriage,

289. This yearly campaign is organized by the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), the Old Catholic Church and the Moravian Church (Evangelische Broedergemeente). Cf. <https://www.kerkebalans.nl/over-ons/>, accessed 5-7-2025.

290. Interview 3, 2023, 126.

291. Interview 6, 2023, 128.

292. Interview 5, 2023, 86 and 336.

293. Interview 9, 2023, 151; interview 4, 2023, 194; interview 8, 2023, 356.

294. Interview 1, 2023, 295; most interviews were held before the national elections of 22 November 2023.

295. Response 2, 2023, 8 and 16.

296. Response 2, 2023, 12; Response 1, 2023, 13.

participation in these procedures can still be a psychological burden to some migrants and to Dutch people.²⁹⁷

Some parish priests who work in large parishes, indicate they have a heavy workload and that the distance between them and the parishioners has increased, both physically and spiritually.²⁹⁸ On the other hand, the number of church funerals has been reduced significantly, due to the increased number of memorial services in crematoria. In communities with many temporal labourers, such as the Polish parishes, a reality is that many people rather financially support their home parish than their host parish.²⁹⁹ Some multi-ethnic communities have decided not to invest time and energy in local charity projects, because other organizations in the same city are already doing this. However, as one parish priest indicates, if you don't practice what you preach, this could be a threat to the authenticity in spreading the Gospel message.³⁰⁰ For this reason, other communities contribute to charities abroad. Finally, the importance of friendship and relaxation for clergy is mentioned, to combat loneliness.

5.5 Conclusion and discussion

The current Dutch caretaker government wants to restrict asylum, labour, knowledge and study, and family migration. The proposed asylum policy focuses on the completion of the asylum procedure and relatively little attention is paid to promoting participation of asylum seekers or creating job opportunities.³⁰¹ This brings along a bigger responsibility for societal organisations and church communities to care for migrants who are visiting them and to pay attention to others in need of support.

When we bring together the results of the SWOT analysis with the insights of our earlier survey and the interviews with migrant and intercultural couples, it becomes clear that there are several possibilities for improvement of pastoral practices in migrant and multi-ethnic communities. We mention four opportunities for development: Intercultural pastoral care (5.5.1); Intercultural communication (5.5.2); Promoting well-being (5.5.3) and Community building (5.5.4). We are aware that, given the methodological design of our research, no causal inferences can be drawn from our analysis.

297. Interview 11, 2023, 140 and 160.

298. Interview 2, 2023, 263. The interviewee mentions the sexual abuse crisis as one of the reasons for the increased spiritual distance.

299. Interview 4, 2023, 161.

300. Interview 11, 2023, 266.

301. Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, *Reflectie op het hoofdlijnenakkoord Hoop, lef en trots*. The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2024, 4.

5.5.1 Intercultural pastoral care

The desirability of intercultural pastoral care, as for instance elaborated by Lartey, is confirmed in our study in a threefold manner: 1) by a willingness to look at relevant issues from various cultural perspectives; 2) by an ability to marvel and to be able to recognize God's presence in the diversity of cultures and 3) to develop an understanding of where people are really 'coming from', or in other words, a praxis of contextual analysis.³⁰² In the current situation, it is still often the case that both Dutch and migrant communities are acting in a rather self-enclosed manner. For Dutch-speaking communities, this is frequently due to the many internal reorganisations. For migrant communities it is rather the preservation of the native language and habits, or the growth of the own community which keep the gaze inwardly. It could help both migrant and Dutch-speaking communities to look more outward, to build bridges to other communities and to intensify cooperation. If we look for example to evangelical church-planting movements in cities in the U.K., Neil Powell and John James describe how by seeing beyond the own church community, by collaborating on a city level, Christians can more effectively spread the Gospel message in a multi-ethnic and secular environment.³⁰³ In several multi-ethnic communities in the Netherlands, this is already happening in charity and formation activities. Dioceses could support such a development by investing in intercultural skills of their staff members and pastoral caregivers, insofar as they have the means to do so.

5.5.2 Intercultural communication

The SWOT analysis shows that Dutch church communities on the one hand and migrant and multi-ethnic church communities on the other hand often have little knowledge of each other's strengths, let alone the opportunities for synergy. In the long term, through creative, bilingual cooperation, migrant and multi-ethnic communities could support Dutch-speaking church communities, for instance in the domains of formation, catechesis, charity, pilgrimages, and retreats. For many children and youngsters, receiving bilingual catechesis or other activities could be a logical thing to do, since most of them already speak more than one language. It certainly helps when migrant clergy has a fluency in the Dutch language and a knowledge of the local culture, and when simultaneous translations are available during liturgical services, formation and catechesis, which is not always the case. On

302. Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *op. cit.*, 2003, 175-177.

303. Neil Powell and John James, *Together for the city: How collaborative church planting leads to citywide movements*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2019.

the other hand, migrant clergy are often pro-active in seeking contacts with their compatriots, using both traditional rituals such as house blessings and modern means of communication. In some cases, their Dutch colleagues could learn from them to communicate more effectively, especially in their contacts with newcomers.

5.5.3 Promoting well-being

Migration can be a stressful or even a traumatic experience. From the analysis of practical theological research by Straut Eppsteiner and Hagan, Connor and Reyes-Espiritu, as described above and interviews with migrant and intercultural couples, it has become clear that migrant and multi-ethnic church communities often play a sustaining role in the integration process of these couples into the host society.³⁰⁴ Examples from interviews with pastoral caregivers have shown that formation, liturgical activities and charity can directly or indirectly contribute to the mental, spiritual, social and material well-being of migrants and of intercultural couples. For instance, an observation by a medical practitioner that some people visiting his practice would benefit more if they would talk to a priest is supported by scientific literature.³⁰⁵ Glòria Durà-Vilà has described how symptoms of sadness with a recognized cause or loneliness could be diagnosed as depression, whereas religious persons would sometimes see these symptoms as normal and valued experiences, especially when they themselves have reached spiritual maturity and found ways to combat loneliness. In those cases, pastoral accompaniment could positively contribute to the mental health of persons suffering from loneliness or depression, for instance in times of bereavement or marital problems.³⁰⁶

5.5.4 Community building

A characteristic of the current approach of pastoral care of migrants within the Catholic Church is that it should be inserted into the general pastoral ministry of the Church.³⁰⁷ The Vatican instruction *Erga migrantes* foresees various pastoral structures

304. Cf. chapter 3 of this thesis.

305. Interview 2, 2023, 263.

306. Glòria Durà-Vilà, *Sadness, depression, and the dark night of the soul: transcending the medicalisation of sadness*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017, 57-62 and 226.

307. Peter C. Phan, Embracing, protecting, and loving the stranger: A Roman Catholic theology of migration. In: Padilla, E., and Phan, P. (Eds.), *Theology of migration in the Abrahamic religions*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, 77-110, at 92.

for new and settled migrant and multi-ethnic communities from different rites.³⁰⁸ In the present situation in the Netherlands, migrant, multi-ethnic and Dutch-speaking church communities could see how internally they can build bridges between these different church communities, as mentioned under 5.5.2, and how they can externally cooperate with other local organisations and governments in the city or region where they convene. Especially in a political climate of resistance against large-scale migration, communities could stimulate further integration of their members in the host country. Charity and formation projects have a potential for intergenerational, interdenominational and interreligious cooperation.³⁰⁹ Thus, a network with communities from other Christian denominations and with other citizens could be reinforced. At the same time, within communities, spiritual formation through home groups, prayer meetings, etc. could both stimulate personal spiritual growth and strengthen community bonds.³¹⁰

When these four opportunities for development are implemented in migrant, multi-ethnic and Dutch parishes, the pastoral accompaniment of Catholic migrant and intercultural couples and families offered by pastoral caregivers in the Netherlands can be improved. In this way, more justice can be done to our globalizing society. Church communities could open themselves more for newcomers. Thus, they can be more credible witnesses of the Gospel, both for people within the community, and for those who are seeking to become a part of it.

308. Pontifical Council for the pastoral care for migrants and itinerant people, *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* (The love of Christ towards migrants), Vatican, Holy See Press Office, 2004, nr. 91. The instruction distinguishes four different pastoral structures: 1) *Missio cum cura animarum* (mission with pastoral care), for communities still being built up. An example is the Chinese Catholic community in The Hague, cf. <https://hub-den Haag.nl/kerk/chinese-katholieke-associatie-in-nederland/>, accessed 5-7-2025. 2) A personal ethnic-linguistic parish or one based on a particular rite. This structure is foreseen for places where there is an migrant community that will continually have newcomers even in the future, and where that community is numerically strong. Examples are the Polish parishes, cf. <https://parafia.nl/?q=pl/node/222>, accessed 5-7-2025, or the Chaldean-Catholic quasi parish, cf. <https://ichk.nl/test/>, accessed 5-7-2025. 3) A local parish with an ethnic-linguistic mission or with one based on a particular rite. Examples are multi-ethnic parishes in bigger cities where pastoral services in English are offered, cf. <https://gerardusmajella.nl/>, accessed 5-7-2025. 4) An ethnic-linguistic pastoral service on a zonal level, understood as pastoral care for migrants who are relatively well integrated in the local society. An example is the Italian speaking Catholic community, cf. <https://www.missionecattolicaolanda.org/>, accessed 5-7-2025.

309. Interview 11, 278-290.

310. Sue M. Holdsworth, *op. cit.*, 2024, 154.

Chapter 6

General discussion and conclusion

6.1 Synthesis

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

From this central research question, five research parts have emerged: a literature review on pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after marriage (chapter 1); a survey among migrant and intercultural couples and an analysis of their experiences with Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE), pastoral accompaniment and integration processes (chapter 2); in-depth interviews with migrant and intercultural couples on their integration process into the church community and the broader society and an analysis of the values they adhere to (chapter 3); a reflection on aspects of reconciliation and forgiveness among interviewees, in relation to the sacrament of Reconciliation (chapter 4); in-depth interviews with migrant and Dutch clergy and diocesan staff members on pastoral care to migrant and multi-ethnic church communities, followed by a SWOT-analysis (chapter 5).

In most cases, couples who want to get married in the Catholic Church need to do some form of Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE). In chapter 1, we have seen that MRE-programs can be beneficial for couples' communication skills and relationship quality or satisfaction, particularly when these programs have between 9 and 20 contact hours. Local church communities can provide support to couples, both in their process of creating a loving and stable relationship and in their process of integration into the church community.

For migrant couples and intercultural couples who want to have a church marriage or who have been married recently, integration into the local church community and the society at large can be even more important when they intend to stay in the host country. To see more clearly the different forms of integration processes, we have used Steve Bruce's sociological terminology of cultural transition (CT) and cultural defence (CD).³¹¹ As has been explained in the Introduction, we speak of CT when migrants give up elements of their own culture of origin and integrate into the host

311. Ward Biemans, *op. cit.*, 2023, 153-172, cf. chapter 2 of this thesis; Steve Bruce, *Secularization: in defence of an unfashionable theory*. Oxford: University Press, 2011, 49-52.

society and the church community. With CD are meant those dynamics that develop when migrants connect with people from their own ethnicity in the new, host society or church community, rather than with native people and when services are offered in the migrant's own language, according to their cultural customs and answering to their social needs. In addition to Steve Bruce's binary of CT and CD, I have distinguished a third dynamic of intercultural transition (IT), which entails the adoption of certain foreign cultural elements by individuals in an intercultural relationship or by communities who welcome migrants in their midst.³¹²

After the literature review, our data collection and interpretation has taken place in four phases. (chapters 2 to 5) First, a quantitative survey has been held among 223 participants, either migrants or Dutch persons in an intercultural relationship. The main question for this 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?*

Several outcomes have been found by analysing the survey's results, which are more extensively presented in chapter 2:

1) It has been shown that marriage preparation with a length of more than 10 hours has a more positive evaluation ($\mu = 2.49$ on a scale from 0 to 3) than marriage preparation with a length between 5 and 10 hours ($\mu = 2.16$; $p < 0.01$), as assessed by the couples themselves.

2) Marriage preparation which made use of official course material has a significantly more positive couples' evaluation ($\mu = 2.51$), than marriage preparation without course material ($\mu = 2.04$; $p < 0.01$).

3) A good cooperation between the person responsible for the marriage preparation and the couple is a significant predictor for a more positive couples' evaluation of the marriage preparation ($\mu = 2.51$) than when the cooperation is fairly well ($\mu = 1.88$; $p < 0.01$).

4) Marriage accompaniment with a welcoming in the church community has a more positive couples' evaluation ($\mu = 2.28$) than marriage preparation without such a welcoming ($\mu = 2.04$; $p < 0.05$).

312. Ward Biemans, *op. cit.*, 2024, 100-114, cf. chapter 3 of this thesis.

5) Seeking reconciliation after a conflict ($r = 0.361$) and the frequency by which forgiveness plays a role within the relationship ($r = 0.188$) are both significantly associated with a higher perceived relationship quality ($p < 0.01$), whereas church attendance, personal prayer, praying together, speaking 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 for these correlations can be presupposed.

Overall, our findings indicate that MRE and other religious and spiritual activities could often be a support in the social and cultural transition from the migrant's own country to the host country; it could help migrant and intercultural couples to have a good start of their marriage and family life in the Dutch society, while being appreciative of their cultural roots.

During the second phase of our data collection, 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews have been held among married migrant and intercultural couples ($n = 24$). The interviewees' homelands are: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Eritrea, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Poland, Tanzania and Ukraine. Questions have been asked about their migration history, their integration process into Dutch society and into the local church community, their experiences with pastoral care, their religiosity and spirituality, and their future perspectives. The first research question for this phase was: *How do patterns of CD, IT and CT evolve among the interviewed couples?* Results, more amply described in chapter 3, show that patterns of CT ($n = 86$) are more common than patterns of CD ($n = 51$) or IT ($n = 22$). The most common form of CT implies that migrants discover a new religious or spiritual experience in the host country, often within their Christian faith, for instance when they visit a multi-ethnic church community or when they are introduced in a predominantly Dutch speaking church community. Further, quite often they give up certain societal customs (related to work, study, friends, etc.) and their native language. When interviewees mention patterns of CD, religion is by far the most mentioned cultural element. This indicates that, when other cultural elements like language, familial and societal customs tend to change after migration, religious or spiritual customs tend to remain. This is understandable, since principally, religion and spirituality are not bound to geographical, linguistic or social limitations. Thirdly, patterns of IT are mentioned, for example when Dutch spouses decide to join their migrant partner in attending a migrant or multi-ethnic church community, or when cooperation takes place between a migrant church community and a Dutch speaking community.

The second research question for this second phase has been: *What values do couples express regarding their married and family life, their faith life, and their integration into the Dutch society?* The value category mentioned most often, is that of faith values (n = 242), followed by family values (n = 132) and societal values (n = 87). Five interviewees mention that the experience of migration has increased their faith. In intercultural relationships, faith can be something which is shared together, particularly in situations, where the migrant partner has deserted a home country, family members and cultural customs. Twelve interviewees mentioned the value of ecumenism. These interviewees participate in different Christian communities and make use of their strong points regarding liturgy, catechesis, and works of charity.

An unexpected outcome of our quantitative research has been that participants indicated that after a conflict, seeking mutual reconciliation and granting and receiving forgiveness from one's spouse are important factors which positively influence their relationship quality (conclusion 5 mentioned above). Other factors like church attendance, prayer or Sunday rest did not show this association with relationship quality. This outcome made us delve deeper into the issue of reconciliation. In chapter 4, various aspects of reconciliation have been treated: reconciliation with God, with one another and with (the host) society. Central question of this chapter is *how the attractiveness of the sacrament of Reconciliation could be increased, for couples in general and in particular for migrant and intercultural couples*. We have analysed the same sample of interviewees (n = 24) as has been selected for the second phase of our data collection. During the interviews, 29 times people spoke about reconciliation, most often with God (n = 14), then with one another (n = 9) and finally with society (n = 6). Reconciliation with God can take shape in many ways, either sacramentally or non-sacramentally. The importance of mutual communication to reconcile with one another after a conflict has been mentioned by several couples. It could be helpful to pay extra attention to values of reconciliation and forgiveness during MRE or in spiritual direction. This could lead to a higher relationship quality and may thus strengthen the marriage bond. Churches can also play a role in the process of reconciliation of migrants with the host society, for example through the ethnic diversification of pastoral caregivers.

The previous chapters have shown that migrant and intercultural couples value a more intensive, professional and welcoming form of MRE. Therefore, in chapter 5 we have focused on ways to improve the pastoral accompaniment of migrant and intercultural couples and families offered by pastoral caregivers in the Netherlands. This may include new forms of cooperation between migrant church communities and Dutch-speaking church communities. Earlier research has shown that migrant and multi-ethnic church communities positively contribute to the well-being of migrants. By

means of a SWOT-analysis, 11 interviews with Catholic migrant and Dutch clergy and with diocesan staff members, as well as 4 written sources have been analysed. Migrant and multi-ethnic church communities have a large offering in marriage preparation, (adult) formation and (children's) catechesis. These activities and also liturgy are often mentioned as a strength. Many Dutch-speaking church communities are involved in reorganisations, which can be burdensome for pastoral caregivers and volunteers and may take place at the cost of formation or community building. There are chances for catechetical and formational cooperation and for community building between migrant communities, multi-ethnic and Dutch-speaking communities. Several diocesan staff workers mention as a threat that because of budget cuts or other priorities, communication towards migrant communities is underdeveloped. Some parish priests who work in large parishes, have pointed at a heavy workload and an increased distance between them and parishioners, both physically and spiritually.

Four opportunities for further development of pastoral practices have been discussed in the fifth chapter, by bringing together the results of the SWOT-analysis with the insights of previous chapters: 1) Intercultural pastoral care, or how to grow in intercultural sensitivity. On a community level, intercultural pastoral care could be achieved by building bridges between migrant and multi-ethnic communities, for instance in the fields of formation and works of charity. 2) Intercultural communication. We have mentioned opportunities for bilingual catechesis, simultaneous translation during liturgical celebrations and formational activities and a more effective use of modern communication means in contacts with newcomers. 3) Promoting well-being. Migrant and multi-ethnic church communities often play a sustaining role in the integration process of migrants into the host society. Pastoral accompaniment could positively contribute to the mental health of persons suffering from loneliness or depression. 4) Community building. Mutual knowledge of people, activities and cultural values and norms between migrant, multi-ethnic and Dutch church communities is often lacking. Charity and formation projects have a potential for intergenerational, interdenominational and interreligious cooperation.

6.2 Theoretical implications

Following the results of our sub-studies, three theoretical implications can be distinguished. First, in our research we have used the distinction between CT and CD as developed by Steve Bruce.³¹³ During our analysis, we have introduced a third dynamic of intercultural transition (IT), because we concluded that a binary model of

313. Steve Bruce, *op. cit.*, 2011, 49-52.

CD and CT was too narrow to capture the diversity of dynamics which existed within couples and within church communities who welcome migrants in their midst. In our view, this addition does more justice to the real situation in globalising societies, where there are more and more ethnicities living together, which brings a mixing of cultures. Existing theories on IT have a tendency to focus on the efforts of migrants to adapt to the new surroundings, rather than to look critically at the receptivity of the host culture.³¹⁴ Still, this receptivity is a crucial factor when it comes to successful integration. Now ideally, for intercultural couples this process of cross-cultural transition works both ways. Migrants gradually adapt to the host culture, but the hosting partner will also take over some cultural elements from the migrant partner, for instance regarding food, holidays in the migrant's land of origin, visiting a migrant church community, learning some of the language, etc. Thus, both partners could grow in a simultaneous process of individualisation and universalisation of identity, which could 'endow them with a special kind of freedom and creativity.'³¹⁵

Secondly, related to the dynamic of IT, there is a need to acknowledge that increasingly pastoral care has an intercultural character. In chapter 5, we have argued that in an ever more globalising society, it could help both migrant, multi-ethnic and host church communities to look more outward, to build bridges to other communities and to intensify cooperation. This conclusion, based on the SWOT-analysis and the interviews with migrant and intercultural couples, corresponds with Emmanuel Lartey's analysis of today's currents in pastoral theology, in which he sees a gradual shift from a classical-clerical paradigm, via the growing importance of a clinical-pastoral paradigm and the recognition of a communal-contextual paradigm, towards an intercultural paradigm.³¹⁶

Thirdly, according to Peter Phan Catholic migration theology should have implications for various theological disciplines, including pastoral or practical theology.³¹⁷ A central question in pastoral theology is how ministry to others takes place, in and outside the Church. Phan uses an analogy of migrants with Jesus who is tempted by the Devil in the desert (Mat. 4, 1-11). In the desert, Jesus denounces wealth, power and influence. Phan states that precisely because Jesus 'was at the margins, in his teaching and miracle-working, Jesus creates a new and different

314. Joshua F. Hoops, 'Examining intercultural transition and history through service learning', *Communication Teacher* 36(1), 2022, 47-53. doi:10.1080/17404622.2021.1903522. See also the work of John Berry, who focuses on acculturation strategies: John Berry, 'Contexts of Acculturation', in David L. Sam and John W. Berry (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 27-42.

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

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

317. Peter C. Phan, Embracing, protecting, and loving the stranger: A Roman Catholic theology of migration. In: Padilla, E., and Phan, P. (Eds.), *Theology of migration in the Abrahamic religions*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, 77-110.

center, one constituted by the meeting of the borders of the many and diverse worlds, often in conflict with one another, each with its own center which relegates the “other” to the margins. It is at this margin-center that marginal people meet one another. In Jesus, the margin where he lived became the center of a new society without borders and barriers, reconciling all peoples, “Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female” (Gal. 3: 28).³¹⁸ It needs to be said that Phan’s migration theology is of a fundamental nature and therefore it lacks the inclusion of empirical research. This research tries to partly fill in that gap. It has been shown by the experiences of migrants, having gone through a process of integration and personal transformation, that often they become hosts themselves to other newcomers in the host country. This process takes place within intercultural families and intercultural church communities. Practical theology should take this empirical, intercultural dimension into account.

6.3 Ecclesial and societal implications

Our research results raise a couple of questions regarding ecclesial and societal implications. A first question is of an ecclesial nature: Reflecting on these findings, could it be expected that in the future, migrants will contribute more strongly to activities in multi-ethnic or Dutch speaking religious communities? Earlier research by Frank van Tubergen and Jórunn Sindradóttir has found out that religiosity among migrants who arrive in Europe, measured by religious attendance, daily prayer and self-perceived religiosity, is higher than among natives.³¹⁹ In the Netherlands, migrants from outside Europe also characterize themselves more often as religious (63.7%) than Europeans (47.2) or Dutch people (37.5%).³²⁰ Above that, among Christian migrants who arrive in a country where they are a religious minority, religiosity remains higher, also for the second generation.³²¹ On the other hand, Van Tubergen and Sindradóttir find that in countries where religiosity is relatively low, migrant religiosity decreases. Further, we have found that among non-Western migrants, the level of CD is higher than among migrants with a Western background or Dutch people in an intercultural relationship. This means for instance that many non-Western migrants prefer to attend religious services in a language other than

318. Ibid., 101-102.

319. Frank van Tubergen and Jórunn Sindradóttir, ‘The Religiosity of Immigrants in Europe: A Cross-National Study’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50(2), 2011, 272–288.

320. Hans Schmeets and Marieke Houben, *Religieuze betrokkenheid in Nederland*, Den Haag: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2023. Cf. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2023/religieuze-betrokkenheid-in-nederland/4-religieuze-betrokkenheid-naar-achtergrondkenmerken>, accessed 5-7-2025. These percentages include people who have indicated they belong to another religion or philosophy of life than Christianity or Islam.

321. Francesco Molteni and Frank van Tubergen, ‘Immigrant generation and religiosity: a study of Christian immigrant groups in 33 European countries’, *European Societies* 24(5), 2022, 605-627, doi:10.1080/14616696.2022.2044067.

Dutch. So, the answer to the question raised above is somewhat ambiguous and will largely depend on the future policy of migrant, multi-ethnic and Dutch speaking communities and their capacity to build intercultural bridges in their religious services. It could help if parishes and dioceses are willing to invest in intercultural skills of their staff members and pastoral caregivers, insofar as they have the means to do so. In this regard, Pope Francis and the Synod on synodality recommend that catechesis contributes to a reciprocal knowledge between Churches in the country of origin and in the host country.³²²

A second question has to do with the societal context of our findings. In a political climate of resistance against large-scale migration, could it be expected that church communities stimulate further integration of their members into the host society? Based on the outcomes of recent Dutch and European research and our own findings, we tend to give an affirmative answer. A recent study by Jessica van den Toorn and colleagues has shown that religious organisations including migrant churches in the city of Rotterdam in the Netherlands contribute to creating a social network, they offer much voluntary support, and they are places of encounter. The researchers also found that more than half of the religious organisations who participated in their survey pay attention to both bonding (connections within the own community) as well as bridging (connections between different communities).³²³

A first European wide study by Andrea Bohman and Mikael Hjerm showed that strongly religious people emerge as being less negative towards immigration than non-religious people.³²⁴ Similarly, Riccardo Ladini and colleagues found that on average, Italian Catholics with a high religious commitment have a more positive attitude towards immigrants than non-practicing or irregularly practicing Catholics.³²⁵ It must be said that in their study, non-religious people showed the most positive attitude towards immigration. However, when they controlled their outcomes for political ideology, the difference between practicing Catholics and non-religious people lost its statistical significance. Therefore, Ladini and colleagues explain the difference between immigration attitudes of practicing Catholics versus ‘cultural’ Catholics (non-practicing or irregularly practicing) by pointing at preexisting differences in terms of political convictions. Or, in other words: they say that political

322. Francis and XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a synodal Church: communion, participation, mission. Final document*. Vatican: Secretaria Generalis Synodi, 2024, no. 145.

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

324. Andrea Bohman and Mikael Hjerm, ‘How the religious context affects the relationship between religiosity and attitudes towards immigration’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37(6), 2014, 937-957, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2012.748210>.

325. Riccardo Ladini, Ferruccio Biolcati, Francesco Molteni, Andrea Pedrazzani and Cristiano Vezzoni, ‘The multifaceted relationship between individual religiosity and attitudes toward immigration in contemporary Italy’, *International Journal of Sociology* 51(5), 2021, 390-411, doi:10.1080/00207659.2021.1937778.

convictions are a more important factor for immigration attitudes than practicing the Catholic faith. A similar outcome has been found for the Netherlands by Ingrid Storm, who after controlling for political attitudes, no longer finds an association between being Catholic and seeing immigration as a threat for national identity.³²⁶

Within the Catholic Church, the Synod on synodality has recently admitted that its governance has not always taken place in a spirit of listening to others, in particular to migrants and to women, among others. Pope Francis and the Synod have recommended that all local church communities continue their daily journey with a synodal methodology of consultation and discernment.³²⁷ Having gone through an experience of being received in a host church community themselves, migrants can often play a valuable role in welcoming other newcomers.³²⁸ Pope Francis and the Synod call on both host communities and migrants to build intercultural communities.³²⁹ At the same time, the synodal method can also be effectively applied by couples and within families, through a sincere listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit, in a prayerful setting.³³⁰

6.4 Methodological considerations

The use of a mixed method with both quantitative and qualitative research has as an advantage that on the one hand, personal experiences with migration and pastoral accompaniment can be investigated in a systematic manner, generating statistically significant conclusions about the effectiveness of intercultural pastoral care. On the other hand, through semi-structured in-depth interviews, we have gained insight into the dynamics of integration of migrant and intercultural couples and the values they cherish. We also have been able to distinguish fields in which the pastoral care in migrant, multi-ethnic and host communities can be further improved.

As limitations of the chosen research method, it has been mentioned that participants in our survey have been married within the Catholic Church. Results cannot be generalized to groups of migrants from other Christian or non-Christian

326. Ingrid Storm, 'Christian Nations? Ethnic Christianity and anti-Immigration Attitudes in Four Western European Countries', *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 24(1), 2011, 75–96. doi:10.18261/ISSN1890-7008-2011-01-05.

327. Francis and XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *op. cit.*, 2024, no. 6 and 9.

328. The same can be true for interchurch couples in relation to the ecumenical dialogue, cf. Diane Ryan and Gregory A. Ryan, 'From Experiment to Encounter: Receiving Interchurch Families in a Synodal Church, *Marriage, Families & Spirituality (INTAMS Review)* 30, 2024, 6-20. doi:10.2143/INT.30.1.3293276.

329. Francis and XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *op. cit.*, 2024, no. 112.

330. Łukasz Borowski and Dariusz Lipiec, 'The synodal method in building marital and family community', *Verbum Vitae* 42(4), 2024, 843-855.

denominations or groups with no religious affiliations. Therefore, our first recommendation states that:

A) Comparable research will be undertaken for groups of migrants from other Christian or non-Christian denominations, groups with no religious affiliations or mixed groups.

Secondly, the average education level of our participants was relatively high (5.4 on a scale from 1 to 6 levels). We recommend that:

B) Further research on the effectiveness of intercultural pastoral accompaniment will be done among participants with a lower average education level.

6.5 Conclusion

Coming back to our central research question, we can conclude that experiences from migrant and intercultural couples indicate a tendency towards cultural and intercultural transition, more so than towards cultural defence. This shows migrants' willingness to adapt to the cultural circumstances in the host country, as well as flexibility from their Dutch partners, by taking over cultural elements from their migrant partner. At the same time, couples have experiences that their faith has played a supportive role during the integration process into the host country. Faith is a value which can bridge cultural differences between the host society and the homeland.

In our study, it has become clear that church communities in which Christian migrant and intercultural couples participate, play a sustaining and pedagogical role in preserving and transmitting a Christian identity within the family, through pastoral care, liturgical services, catechesis and other encounters. However, we have distinguished several opportunities for further development of pastoral practices. Our third recommendation states that:

C) Both migrant and Dutch-speaking church communities reflect on how they could implement pastoral practices in the domains of intercultural pastoral care, intercultural communication, promoting well-being and community building.

Our quantitative research has shown that MRE can be a stimulus for the couples' own relationship quality. These are important reasons why couples appreciate a more

intense, professional and welcoming MRE, as has been pointed out above. Our fourth recommendation states that:

D) Local church communities and dioceses consider the implementation of a more intense, professional and welcoming MRE.

It needs to be said that some dioceses already offer a marriage course for couples who are preparing for their wedding.³³¹ These courses are mostly offered in Dutch, which is not always feasible for migrant couples. In places like Amsterdam and The Hague, MRE is offered in English.³³² These latter courses are concrete examples of IT in multi-ethnic church communities. This model could be rolled out to other regions. When couples are invited to take part in such a MRE trajectory, it is important that the pastoral approach is gradual, welcoming and supportive.³³³

Finally, our research has shown that when couples apply the values of reconciliation and forgiveness in their relationship, this has a positive effect on couples' self-perceived relationship quality. Therefore, it could be helpful when MRE programs pay attention to communicative skills aimed at reconciliation and forgiveness. Our fifth recommendation states that:

E) In MRE trajectories, more attention could be paid to communicative skills aimed at reconciliation and forgiveness.

331. For instance, the Diocese of Rotterdam is offering both an online course and a course on location of ca. 16 hours. Cf. <https://www.bisdomrotterdam.nl/roeping/huwelijk-en-gezin-roeping/marriage-course>, accessed 5-7-2025.

332. For instance, in the church of Our Lady in Amsterdam and the church of Our Saviour in The Hague, cf. <https://www.olvkerk.nl/en/liturgy/marriage> and <https://parish.nl/sacraments-2/>, accessed 5-7-2025.

333. Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life, *Catechumenal pathways for married life: Pastoral guidelines for local Churches*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022, no. 20; Ward Biemans, 'An ambitious and challenging new document: Catechumenal itineraries for married life: Pastoral guidelines for particular Churches', *Marriage, Families & Spirituality (INTAMS Review)* 28(2), 2022, 285-290. doi:10.2143/INT.28.2.0000000.

Summary

In this mixed-method research, our aim has been to answer the following central question: *to what extent do the experiences of migrant and intercultural couples married in the Roman 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 the society at large?*

The first chapter presents the findings of a literature study on pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after their church wedding, using an empirical-critical theological method. This practical theological method integrates empirical data from the humanities into a pastoral-theological vision and aims to renew pastoral practice. The first step of this method focuses on the practical experience of couples in the Western world. Marriage and relationship education (MRE) is shown to have a long-term beneficial effect on couples' relationship quality and significantly reduces the likelihood of divorce. MRE is often delivered in a religious setting. Married couples who have attended a form of MRE score significantly higher on relationship quality and mutual commitment, as rated by the couples themselves, and lower on relationship conflict. Other research shows that the risk of divorce for cohabiting couples is about twice as high as for married couples. The literature review also found that in general, post-divorce adults and children with divorced parents have lower mental well-being than adults and children in intact families.

The second part of the literature review aims to set out a vision of how pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after the church wedding could be further improved. Pope Francis, in the post-synodal exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, invites the ecclesial community to broaden its pastoral vision on accompanying couples and families. This accompaniment should take into account a diversity of family life. It should assume a supportive and welcoming attitude towards young couples from different cultural backgrounds, towards single parents and towards families that do not (yet) conform to the ideal image of married life. Regarding the latter group of families, a pastoral application of the principle of graduality is needed.

A third step critically reflects on empirical research that could support a pastoral strategy for accompanying couples. Most of the research has taken place in the United States; European studies in this area are scarce. This American research measures various effects related to religiosity, spirituality and relationship quality. According to these research results, church attendance, praying together as a couple, praying for the partner, investing time in MRE and willingness to forgive the partner all contribute to

higher perceived marital quality. Lasting effects of MRE are more likely if a pastoral caregiver has a strong relationship with a couple and shows sensitivity to intercultural church community building.

For migrant and intercultural couples who are planning a church wedding or who have recently been married, integration into the local church community and into society in general may be even more important if they intend to stay in the host country. To see more clearly the different forms of integration processes, we have distinguished between three different dynamics: cultural transition (CT), intercultural transition (IT) and cultural defence (CD). As explained in Chapters 2 and 3, we speak of CT when migrants abandon elements of their own culture of origin and integrate into the host society and the local church community. IT involves the adoption of certain new ethnic cultural elements by individuals in intercultural relationships or by communities that welcome migrants into their midst. Finally, CD refers to the dynamics that develop when migrants of common ethnicity establish ties in the new host society or church community and when celebrations and other pastoral services are offered in the migrant's own language, according to his or her cultural practices and responding to his or her own social needs.

Our data collection took place in three phases. First, quantitative research was conducted through a survey of 223 participants, both migrants and Dutch people in an intercultural relationship. The main question for this research section was: *to what extent can MRE and pastoral accompaniment before and after a wedding within the Catholic Church contribute to higher relationship quality among migrant and intercultural couples in the Netherlands?*

After analysing the survey results, several outcomes were found, which are presented in chapter 2:

- 1) It is shown that marriage preparation with a duration of more than 10 hours is rated more positively ($\mu = 2.49$ on a scale of 0 to 3) than marriage preparation with a duration between 5 and 10 hours ($\mu = 2.16$; $p < 0.01$), as rated by the couples themselves.
- 2) Marriage preparation using official course materials is rated significantly more positively by participating couples ($\mu = 2.51$), than marriage preparation without course materials ($\mu = 2.04$; $p < 0.01$).
- 3) Good cooperation between the person responsible for marriage preparation and the couple wanting to get married was a significant factor for a more positive evaluation of marriage preparation by the couple ($\mu = 2.51$) than when cooperation was rated as fairly well ($\mu = 1.88$; $p < 0.01$).

4) Marriage accompaniment with a welcome in the church community has a more positive evaluation by the couples themselves ($\mu = 2.28$) than marriage accompaniment without such a welcome ($\mu = 2.04$; $p < 0.05$).

5) Seeking reconciliation after conflict ($r = 0.361$) and the frequency with which forgiveness plays a role within the relationship ($r = 0.188$) are both significantly associated with 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 higher perceived relationship quality. Given the research method chosen, no causality for these correlations can be assumed. Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile to pay attention to the values of forgiveness and reconciliation after conflict in MRE and in pastoral counselling after the wedding. This may lead to higher relationship quality and may strengthen the marital bond.

6) Migrants with a non-Western cultural background score significantly higher in their pattern of CD ($\mu_{CT} - CD = -0.375$; $p < 0.05$) compared to Dutch people who are in an intercultural relationship ($\mu_{CT} - CD = -0.0893$). This is not so for migrants from Western backgrounds. Specifically, non-Western migrants are more likely than Western migrants or Dutch people to indicate that participation in the local church community helps them maintain their own cultural background (language, religion, family values, etc.), and/or that they prefer to have more contacts with other young couples with a migration background than with Dutch couples.

Overall, our findings indicate that MRE and other religious and spiritual activities can often be supportive in the social and cultural transition from the migrant's home country to the host country; this could help migrant and intercultural couples get a good start to their marriage and family life in Dutch society while continuing to value their cultural roots. The participants in this survey married within the Catholic Church; therefore, the results cannot be generalised to groups of migrants from other Christian denominations, groups of migrants with different or no religious background, or mixed groups. Recommendation A states that similar research is conducted for these groups. The average education level of our participants was relatively high (5.4 on a scale of 1 to 6). Therefore, recommendation B states that further research will be conducted among participants with a lower average education level.

During the second phase of our data collection, 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted among married migrant and intercultural couples ($n = 24$). Questions were asked about their migration history, their integration process in Dutch society and in the local church community, their experiences with pastoral care, their religiosity and spirituality, and their future perspectives. The first research question

for this phase was: *How do patterns of CD, IT and CT evolve among the interviewed couples?* The results, described in more detail in Chapter 3, show that patterns of CT (n = 86) are more common than patterns of CD (n = 51) or IT (n = 22). 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 instance when they visit a migrant church community or when they are introduced to a predominantly Dutch-speaking church community. Furthermore, they often give up certain social customs (related to work, studies, friends, etc.) and their mother tongue. When interviewees mention patterns of CD, religion is by far the most frequently mentioned cultural element. This indicates that religious habits often persist, while other cultural elements such as language, family contacts and social habits tend to change after migration. Third, patterns of IT are mentioned, for example when Dutch spouses decide to attend a migrant or multi-ethnic church community together with their migrant partner.

The second research question for this second phase was: *What values do couples express regarding their married and family life, their religious life and their integration into Dutch society?* The most frequently mentioned value category is that of faith values (n = 242), followed by family values (n = 132) and societal values (n = 87). Several interviewees indicate that the experience of migration has strengthened their faith. In intercultural relationships, faith can be something shared together, especially in situations where the migrant partner has left the home country, family members and cultural customs. Some interviewees mentioned the value of ecumenism. These interviewees participate in various Christian communities and draw on their strengths in liturgy, catechesis and works of charity.

An unexpected outcome of our quantitative study was that participants indicated that seeking mutual reconciliation after conflict and granting and receiving forgiveness from one's spouse are important factors that have a positive impact on the quality of their relationship. This outcome made us look deeper into the issue of reconciliation. In Chapter 4, we focus on different aspects of reconciliation: with God, with each other and with the (host) society. Reconciliation with God can take shape in many ways, sacramental or non-sacramental. The importance of mutual communication to reconcile with each other after a conflict was mentioned by several couples. It might be useful to pay extra attention to these and other communication skills during MRE. Reconciliation of migrants with the host society may come into play, for example, in certain forms of alienation with their own culture or in cases of discrimination. Churches can play a role in a process of reconciliation, for example through the ethnic diversification of pastoral care givers.

In Chapter 5, our central question is: *How could the pastoral accompaniment of Catholic migrant and intercultural couples and families offered by pastoral caregivers in the Netherlands be improved?* Earlier research has shown that migrant and multi-ethnic church communities contribute positively to migrants' well-being. In the third phase of our data-analysis, 11 interviews with Catholic migrant and Dutch pastors and with diocesan staff, as well as 4 written sources, were analysed through a SWOT analysis (SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats). Migrant and multi-ethnic church communities have a wide range of offerings in marriage preparation, (adult) formation and (children's) catechesis. These activities and also liturgy are often mentioned as a strength. Many Dutch-speaking church communities are undergoing reorganisations, which can be stressful for pastoral caregivers and volunteers and may be at the expense of formation or community building. There are opportunities for catechetical and formative cooperation and community building between migrant, multi-ethnic and Dutch-speaking communities. Several diocesan staff mention as a threat that communication with migrant communities is not highly developed due to budget cuts or other priorities. Some pastors working in large parishes pointed to the heavy workload and increased distance between them and parishioners, both physically and spiritually.

Four possibilities for further development of pastoral practices are discussed: 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, multi-ethnic and Dutch-speaking communities, for example in formation and works of charity. 2) Intercultural communication. Opportunities exist for bilingual catechesis, simultaneous translation during liturgical celebrations and formation activities and more effective use of modern communication tools in contacts with newcomers. 3) Promoting well-being. Migrant and multi-ethnic church communities often play a supportive role in the integration process of migrants in the host society. Pastoral accompaniment can make a positive contribution to the mental health of persons suffering from loneliness or depression. 4) Community building. Mutual knowledge of people, activities and cultural values and norms between migrant, multi-ethnic and Dutch-speaking church communities is often lacking. Charity and formation projects have a potential for intergenerational, interdenominational and interreligious cooperation. Recommendation C states that both migrant and Dutch-speaking church communities reflect on how pastoral practices in these four domains could be implemented.

Returning to our central research question, we conclude that the experiences of migrant and intercultural couples show a stronger tendency towards cultural and intercultural transition than towards cultural defence. This shows migrants' willingness to adapt to cultural conditions in the host country, as well as their Dutch

partners' flexibility in adopting cultural elements of their migrant partner. At the same time, couples experienced that their faith played a supportive role during the integration process in the host country. Faith is a value that can bridge cultural differences between the host society and the homeland.

In our research, it has become clear that church communities in which Christian migrant and intercultural couples participate, play a supportive and formative role in maintaining and passing on a Christian identity within the family, through pastoral care, liturgical services, catechesis and other encounters. Besides that, MRE can provide a boost to the couples' own relationship quality. These are important reasons why couples value a more intense, professional and welcoming MRE, as has been pointed out above. Recommendation D states that these findings be implemented in MRE programmes in local church communities. Furthermore, our research has shown that when couples apply the values of reconciliation and forgiveness in their relationship, it has a positive effect on their self-perceived relationship quality. Therefore, recommendation E states that MRE trajectories focus on communication skills regarding reconciliation and forgiveness, which could help couples when conflicts arise.

Samenvatting

In dit *mixed method*-onderzoek is ons doel geweest om de volgende centrale vraag te beantwoorden: *in hoeverre laten de ervaringen van migranten stellen en interculturele stellen die tussen 1995 en 2022 in de Rooms-katholieke Kerk in Nederland getrouwd zijn, patronen zien van culturele of interculturele transitie of culturele behoudszin met betrekking tot hun integratie in de kerkgemeenschap en de samenleving in het algemeen?*

In het eerste hoofdstuk zijn de bevindingen weergegeven van een evaluatie van onderzoek naar de pastorale begeleiding van stellen voor en na hun kerkelijke bruiloft, met behulp van een empirisch-kritische theologische methode. Deze methode uit de praktische theologie integreert empirische gegevens uit de menswetenschappen in een pastoraal-theologische visie en is gericht op een vernieuwing van de pastorale praktijk. De eerste stap van deze methode is gericht op de praktische ervaring van stellen in de Westerse wereld. Er wordt aangetoond dat huwelijks- en relatie-educatie (MRE) een duurzaam gunstig effect heeft op de relatiekwaliteit van stellen en de kans op echtscheiding significant vermindert. Gehuwde stellen die een vorm van MRE hebben gevolgd, scoren significant hoger op relatiekwaliteit en wederzijdse betrokkenheid, zoals beoordeeld door de stellen zelf, en lager op relatieconflicten. Deze MRE wordt vaak in een religieuze setting gegeven. Ander onderzoek wijst uit dat het risico op scheiding voor samenwonende stellen ongeveer twee keer zo groot is als voor getrouwde stellen. Het literatuuronderzoek wees ook uit dat volwassenen na een scheiding en kinderen met gescheiden ouders in het algemeen een lager mentaal welbevinden hebben dan volwassenen en kinderen in intacte gezinnen.

Het tweede deel van het literatuuronderzoek is erop gericht een visie uiteen te zetten over hoe pastorale begeleiding van stellen voor en na de kerkelijke bruiloft verder verbeterd zou kunnen worden. Paus Franciscus nodigt in de post-synodale exhortatie *Amoris Laetitia* de kerkgemeenschap uit om haar pastorale visie op de begeleiding van stellen en gezinnen te verbreden. Deze begeleiding dient rekening te houden met een verscheidenheid aan gezinsleven. Ze zou uit moeten gaan van een ondersteunende en gastvrije houding ten opzichte van jonge stellen met verschillende culturele achtergronden, ten opzichte van alleenstaande ouders en ten opzichte van gezinnen die (nog) niet voldoen aan het ideaalbeeld van het huwelijksleven. Met betrekking tot deze laatste groep gezinnen is een pastorale toepassing van het principe van geleidelijkheid nodig.

In een derde stap wordt kritisch gereflecteerd op empirisch onderzoek dat een pastorale strategie voor de begeleiding van stellen zou kunnen ondersteunen. Het meeste onderzoek heeft plaatsgevonden in de Verenigde Staten; Europese studies op dit gebied zijn schaars. In dit Amerikaanse onderzoek worden verschillende effecten gemeten met betrekking tot religiositeit, spiritualiteit en relatiekwaliteit. Volgens deze onderzoeksresultaten dragen kerkbezoek, samen bidden als stel, bidden voor de partner, tijd investeren in MRE en de bereidheid om de partner te vergeven allemaal bij aan een hogere ervaren huwelijkskwaliteit. Duurzame effecten van MRE zijn waarschijnlijker als een pastorale zorgverlener een sterke band heeft met een stel en gevoeligheid toont voor een interculturele opbouw van de kerkgemeenschap.

Voor migrantenstellen en interculturele stellen die een kerkelijk huwelijk willen sluiten of die onlangs getrouwd zijn geweest, kan integratie in de lokale kerkgemeenschap en de samenleving in het algemeen nog belangrijker zijn als ze van plan zijn in het gastland te blijven. Om de verschillende vormen van integratieprocessen duidelijker te kunnen zien, hebben we een onderscheid gemaakt in drie verschillende dynamieken: culturele transitie (CT), interculturele transitie (IT) en culturele behoudszin (CD). Zoals in de hoofdstukken 2 en 3 wordt toegelicht, spreken we van CT wanneer migranten elementen van hun eigen cultuur van herkomst opgeven en integreren in de gastsamenleving en in de lokale kerkgemeenschap. De dynamiek van IT houdt in dat bepaalde nieuwe, etnische culturele elementen worden overgenomen door personen in een interculturele relatie of door gemeenschappen die migranten in hun midden verwelkomen. Tot slot wordt met CD de dynamiek bedoeld die zich ontwikkelt wanneer migranten met een gemeenschappelijke etniciteit banden aanknopen in de nieuwe gastsamenleving of -gemeenschap en wanneer vieringen en andere pastorale diensten worden aangeboden in de eigen taal van de migrant, volgens zijn of haar culturele gebruiken en beantwoordend aan de eigen sociale behoeften.

Onze dataverzameling heeft in drie fasen plaatsgevonden. Ten eerste is er een kwantitatief onderzoek gehouden door middel van een enquête onder 223 deelnemers, zowel migranten als Nederlanders in een interculturele relatie. De hoofdvraag voor dit onderzoeksgedeelte was: *In hoeverre kunnen MRE en pastorale begeleiding voor en na een bruiloft binnen de katholieke Kerk bijdragen aan een hogere relatiekwaliteit onder migranten- en interculturele stellen in Nederland?*

Na analyse van de resultaten van de enquête zijn verschillende uitkomsten gevonden, die worden gepresenteerd in hoofdstuk 2:

1) Huwelijksvoorbereiding met een duur van meer dan 10 uur wordt positiever beoordeeld ($\mu = 2,49$ op een schaal van 0 tot 3) dan huwelijksvoorbereiding met een duur tussen 5 en 10 uur ($\mu = 2,16$; $p < 0,01$), zoals beoordeeld door de stellen zelf.

2) Huwelijksvoorbereiding waarbij gebruik gemaakt is van officieel cursusmateriaal wordt significant positiever beoordeeld door de deelnemende stellen ($\mu = 2,51$), dan huwelijksvoorbereiding zonder cursusmateriaal ($\mu = 2,04$; $p < 0,01$).

3) Een goede samenwerking tussen de verantwoordelijke voor de huwelijksvoorbereiding en het stel dat wil trouwen is een significante factor voor een positievere evaluatie van de huwelijksvoorbereiding door het stel ($\mu = 2,51$) dan wanneer de samenwerking wordt beoordeeld als redelijk ($\mu = 1,88$; $p < 0,01$).

4) Huwelijksbegeleiding met een verwelkoming in de kerkgemeenschap heeft een positievere evaluatie door de stellen zelf ($\mu = 2,28$) dan huwelijksbegeleiding zonder een dergelijke verwelkoming ($\mu = 2,04$; $p < 0,05$).

5) Het streven naar verzoening na een conflict ($r = 0,361$) en de frequentie waarmee vergeving een rol speelt binnen de relatie ($r = 0,188$) zijn beide significant geassocieerd met een hogere ervaren relatiekwaliteit ($p < 0,01$). Kerkbezoek, persoonlijk gebed, samen bidden, spreken over het gebedsleven en waardering van de zondagsrust hangen niet significant samen met een hogere ervaren relatiekwaliteit. Gezien de gekozen onderzoeksmethode kan geen causaliteit voor deze correlaties worden verondersteld. Toch kan het de moeite waard zijn om in MRE en in pastorale begeleiding na de huwelijksluiting aandacht te besteden aan de waarden van vergeving en verzoening na een conflict. Dit kan leiden tot een hogere relatiekwaliteit en kan de huwelijksband versterken.

6) Migranten met een niet-westerse culturele achtergrond scoren significant hoger in hun patroon van CD ($\mu_{CT} - CD = -0,375$; $p < 0,05$) in vergelijking met Nederlanders die een interculturele relatie hebben ($\mu_{CT} - CD = -0,0893$). Dit geldt niet voor migranten met een westerse achtergrond. Concreet betekent dit dat niet-westerse migranten vaker dan Nederlanders of westerse migranten aangeven dat deelname aan de lokale kerkgemeenschap hen helpt om hun eigen culturele achtergrond (taal, religie, familiewaarden, etc.) te behouden, en/of dat ze liever meer contacten hebben met andere jonge stellen met een migratieachtergrond dan met Nederlandse stellen.

In het algemeen geven onze bevindingen aan dat MRE en andere religieuze en spirituele activiteiten vaak een steun kunnen zijn bij de sociale en culturele overgang van het eigen land van de migrant naar het gastland; dit kan migranten en interculturele stellen helpen om een goede start te maken met hun huwelijk en gezinsleven in de Nederlandse samenleving, terwijl ze hun culturele wortels blijven waarderen. De deelnemers aan deze enquête zijn getrouwd binnen de katholieke Kerk; daarom kunnen de resultaten niet gegeneraliseerd worden naar groepen migranten van

andere christelijke denominaties of groepen met een andere of geen religieuze achtergrond. Het wordt aanbevolen (A) om voor deze groepen vergelijkbaar onderzoek uit te voeren. Aangezien het gemiddelde opleidingsniveau van onze deelnemers relatief hoog was (5,4 op een schaal van 1 tot 6), wordt ook aanbevolen (B) om verder onderzoek te doen onder deelnemers met een lager gemiddeld opleidingsniveau.

Tijdens de tweede fase van onze dataverzameling zijn 12 semigestructureerde diepte-interviews gehouden onder getrouwde migranten- en interculturele stellen (n = 24). Er zijn vragen gesteld over hun migratiegeschiedenis, hun integratieproces in de Nederlandse samenleving en in de lokale kerkgemeenschap, hun ervaringen met pastorale zorg, hun religiositeit en spiritualiteit, en hun toekomstperspectieven. De eerste onderzoeksvraag voor deze fase was: *Hoe ontwikkelen patronen van CD, IT en CT zich onder de geïnterviewde echtparen?* De resultaten, die uitgebreider beschreven worden in hoofdstuk 3, laten zien dat patronen van CT (n = 86) vaker voorkomen dan patronen van CD (n = 51) of IT (n = 22). De meest voorkomende vorm van CT houdt in dat migranten een nieuwe religieuze of spirituele ervaring ontdekken in het gastland, vaak binnen hun christelijk geloof, bijvoorbeeld wanneer ze een migrantenkerkgemeenschap bezoeken of wanneer ze worden geïntroduceerd in een overwegend Nederlandstalige kerkgemeenschap. Verder geven ze vaak bepaalde maatschappelijke gewoonten (met betrekking tot werk, studie, vrienden, enz.) en hun moedertaal op. Wanneer geïnterviewden patronen van CD noemen, is religie veruit het meest genoemde culturele element. Dit geeft aan dat religieuze gewoonten vaak blijven bestaan, terwijl andere culturele elementen zoals taal, familiale en maatschappelijke gewoonten na migratie veranderen. Ten derde worden patronen van IT genoemd, bijvoorbeeld wanneer Nederlandse echtgenoten besluiten om samen met hun migrantenpartner een migranten- of multi-etnische kerkgemeenschap te bezoeken.

De tweede onderzoeksvraag voor deze tweede fase was: *Welke waarden geven stellen aan met betrekking tot hun huwelijks- en gezinsleven, hun geloofsleven en hun integratie in de Nederlandse samenleving?* De meest genoemde waardencategorie is die van geloofswaarden (n = 242), gevolgd door gezinswaarden (n = 132) en maatschappelijke waarden (n = 87). Verschillende geïnterviewden geven aan dat de ervaring van migratie hun geloof heeft versterkt. In interculturele relaties kan geloof iets zijn dat samen wordt gedeeld, juist in situaties waarin de migrantenpartner het thuisland, familieleden en culturele gewoonten heeft verlaten. Sommige geïnterviewden noemden de waarde van oecumene. Deze geïnterviewden nemen deel aan verschillende Christelijke gemeenschappen en maken gebruik van hun sterke punten op het gebied van liturgie, catechese en werken van naastenliefde.

Een onverwachte uitkomst van ons kwantitatieve onderzoek was dat deelnemers aangaven dat het zoeken naar wederzijdse verzoening na een conflict en het schenken en ontvangen van vergeving van de echtgenoot belangrijke factoren zijn die een positieve invloed hebben op de kwaliteit van hun relatie. Deze uitkomst deed ons dieper ingaan op het fenomeen verzoening. Hoofdstuk 4 richt zich op verschillende aspecten van verzoening: met God, met elkaar en met de (gast)samenleving. Verzoening met God kan op vele manieren vorm kan krijgen, sacramenteel of niet-sacramenteel. Het belang van onderlinge communicatie om je met elkaar te verzoenen na een conflict werd door verschillende stellen genoemd. Het zou nuttig kunnen zijn om tijdens MRE extra aandacht te besteden aan deze en andere communicatieve vaardigheden. Verzoening van migranten met de gastsamenleving kan bijvoorbeeld spelen bij bepaalde vormen van vervreemding met de eigen cultuur of bij discriminatie. Kerken kunnen een rol spelen in dit proces van verzoening, bijvoorbeeld door de etnische diversificatie van pastorale zorgverleners.

In hoofdstuk 5 is de centrale vraag: *Hoe kan de pastorale begeleiding van migranten- en interculturele stellen en gezinnen door pastorale zorgverleners in Nederland worden verbeterd?* Eerder onderzoek heeft aangetoond dat migrantengemeenschappen en multi-etnische kerkgemeenschappen positief bijdragen aan het welzijn van migranten. In de derde fase van de dataverzameling zijn 11 interviews met katholieke migrantenpastores en Nederlandse pastores en met diocesane stafmedewerkers en 4 schriftelijke bronnen geanalyseerd door middel van een SWOT-analyse (SWOT staat voor sterktes, zwaktes, mogelijkheden en bedreigingen). Migrantengerkemeenschappen en multi-etnische kerkgemeenschappen hebben een groot aanbod op het gebied van huwelijksvoorbereiding, (volwassenen)vorming en (kinder)catechese. Deze activiteiten en ook de liturgie worden vaak genoemd als een sterk punt. Veel Nederlandstalige kerkgemeenschappen zijn bezig met reorganisaties, die belastend kunnen zijn voor pastorale zorgverleners en vrijwilligers en die ten koste kunnen gaan van vorming of gemeenschapsvorming. Er liggen kansen voor samenwerking in catechese, vorming en gemeenschapsopbouw tussen migrantengemeenschappen, multi-etnische en Nederlandstalige gemeenschappen. Verschillende diocesane medewerkers noemen als bedreiging dat de communicatie met migrantengemeenschappen niet sterk ontwikkeld is vanwege bezuinigingen of andere prioriteiten. Sommige pastoors die in grote parochies werken, hebben gewezen op de grote werkdruk en de toegenomen afstand tussen hen en de parochianen, zowel fysiek als spiritueel.

Vier mogelijkheden voor verdere ontwikkeling van pastorale praktijken worden besproken: 1) Intercultureel pastoraat, of hoe men kan groeien in interculturele gevoeligheid. Op gemeenschapsniveau kan intercultureel pastoraat worden bereikt door bruggen te slaan tussen migrantengemeenschappen en multi-etnische

gemeenschappen, bijvoorbeeld op het gebied van vorming en diaconie. 2) Interculturele communicatie. Er liggen mogelijkheden voor tweetalige catechese, simultaanvertaling tijdens liturgische vieringen, vormingsactiviteiten en een effectiever gebruik van moderne communicatiemiddelen in contacten met nieuwkomers. 3) Bevorderen van welzijn. Migrantenkerkgemeenschappen en multi-etnische kerkgemeenschappen spelen vaak een ondersteunende rol in het integratieproces van migranten in de gast samenleving. Pastorale begeleiding kan een positieve bijdrage leveren aan de geestelijke gezondheid van personen die lijden aan eenzaamheid of depressie. 4) Gemeenschapsvorming. Wederzijdse kennis van mensen, activiteiten en culturele waarden en normen tussen migrantenkerkgemeenschappen, multi-etnische en Nederlandse kerkgemeenschappen ontbreekt vaak. Diaconale projecten en vormingsprojecten hebben een potentieel voor intergenerationele, interkerkelijke en interreligieuze samenwerking. Aanbeveling C luidt dat zowel migrantenkerkgemeenschappen als Nederlandstalige kerkgemeenschappen reflecteren over hoe pastorale praktijken in deze vier domeinen kunnen worden geïmplementeerd.

Terugkomend op onze centrale onderzoeksvraag kunnen we concluderen dat de ervaringen van migrantenstellen en interculturele stellen een sterkere tendens vertonen tot culturele en interculturele transitie dan tot culturele behoudszin. Hieruit blijkt de bereidheid van migranten om zich aan te passen aan de culturele omstandigheden in het gastland, evenals de flexibiliteit van hun Nederlandse partners, door culturele elementen van hun migrantenpartner over te nemen. Tegelijkertijd hebben stellen ervaren dat hun geloof een ondersteunende rol heeft gespeeld tijdens het integratieproces in het gastland. Geloof is een waarde die culturele verschillen tussen het gastland en het thuisland kan overbruggen.

In ons onderzoek is het duidelijk geworden dat de kerkgemeenschappen waarin christelijke migrantenstellen en interculturele stellen participeren een ondersteunende en vormende rol spelen in het behouden en doorgeven van een christelijke identiteit binnen het gezin, door pastorale zorg, vieringen, catechese en andere ontmoetingen. Daarnaast kan MRE een stimulans betekenen voor de kwaliteit van hun eigen relatie. Dit zijn belangrijke redenen waarom stellen een meer intense, professionele en gastvrije MRE waarderen, zoals hierboven is vermeld. Aanbeveling D stelt dat deze bevindingen worden geïmplementeerd in MRE-trajecten in lokale kerkgemeenschappen. Verder heeft ons onderzoek aangetoond dat wanneer stellen de waarden van verzoening en vergeving toepassen in hun relatie, dit een positief effect heeft op hun zelf waargenomen relatiekwaliteit. Daarom luidt aanbeveling E dat in MRE-trajecten aandacht wordt besteed aan communicatieve vaardigheden gericht op verzoening en vergeving, die stellen kunnen helpen wanneer er conflicten ontstaan.

List of abbreviations

AL:	Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)
ANOVA:	analysis of variance
CBCEW:	Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales
CBS:	Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (Statistics Netherlands)
CD:	Cultural Defence
CIC:	Codex Iuris Canonici (Code of Canon Law)
CPREP:	Christian Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program
CQ:	Cultural intelligence
CS-PREP:	Culturally Sensitive Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program
CT:	Cultural Transition
E (in small numbers):	times ten to the power of...
FOCCUS:	Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding, and Study
F-test:	Statistical test that compares variances
Ibid.:	Ibidem (in the same place)
IT:	Intercultural Transition
MRE:	Marriage and Relationship Education
μ :	population mean
n.:	number
ns.:	not significant
op. cit.:	opus citatum (the work cited)
p.:	probability
PFPP:	Prayer-Focused Program
r.:	correlation coefficient
ref.:	reference category
SPSS:	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SWOT:	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
T-test:	Statistical test that is used to compare the means of two groups

Bibliography

- XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *First session: A synodal Church in mission. Synthesis report*. Vatican: Secretaria Generalis Synodi, 2023.
- Agius, E., 'Clear as a teacher and tender as a mother: The interface between doctrine and pastoral care', in Knieps-Port le Roi, T. and Brenninkmeijer-Wehrhahn, A. (Eds.), *Authentic voices, discerning hearts: New resources for the Church on marriage and family*. Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2016, 30-58.
- Aleksynska, M. and Chiswick, B.R., *Religiosity and migration: Travel into one's self versus travel across cultures*. Bonn: IZA, 2011.
- Amato, P.R., 'Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72(3), 2010, 650-666. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00723.x.
- Ambrosini, M., Bonizzoni P. and Molli, S.D., 'How religion shapes immigrants' integration: The case of Christian migrant churches in Italy', *Current Sociology* 69(6), 2021, 823-842. doi:10.1177/0011392120979018.
- Ang, S. and Van Dyne, L., *Handbook of cultural intelligence: Theory, measurement, and applications*. London, New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Ballentyne, G., 'From multicultural nation to intercultural city: The case of Melton', in Levin, I., Nygaard, C.A., Newton, P.W. and Gifford, S.M. (Eds.), *Migration and Urban Transitions in Australia*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022, 265-282.
- Barry, W., *Spiritual direction and the encounter with God*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992.
- Barth, S., 'The path of elective love: towards a Christian spirituality of the contemporary couple', *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* 23, 2017, 215-235.
- Bastiaanse, R., *Onkuisheid. De Nederlandse biechtpraktijk 1900-1965*. Zwolle: W Books, 2013.
- Beach, S.R.H., Hurt, T.R., Fincham, F.D., Franklin, K.J. and McNair, L.M., 'Enhancing marital enrichment through spirituality: Efficacy data for prayer focused relationship enhancement', *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 3(3), 2011, 201-216. doi:10.1037/a0022207.
- Bentley, W., 'Ministry as bridge building: facilitating culturally diverse faith communities In South Africa', in Smith, R.D., Ackah, W. and Reddie, A.G. (eds). *Churches, blackness, and contested multiculturalism: Europe, Africa and North America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 145-156.
- Berg, L. van den and Verbakel, E., 'Trends in singlehood in young adulthood in Europe', *Advances in Life Course Research* 51, 2022, 100449. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2021.100449>
- Bernts, T., Berghuijs, J. and Hart, J. de, *God in Nederland 1966-2015*. Utrecht: Ten Have, 2016.
- Berry, J., 'Contexts of Acculturation', in David L. Sam and John W. Berry (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 27-42.
- Bhugun, D., *Intercultural parenting and relationships: Challenges and rewards*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2019.

- Biemans, W., 'An ambitious and challenging new document: Catechumenal itineraries for married life: Pastoral guidelines for particular Churches', *Marriage, Families & Spirituality (INTAMS Review)* 28(2), 2022, 285-290. doi:10.2143/INT.28.2.3291377.
- Biemans, W., 'Dynamics of integration processes into the Netherlands of migrant and intercultural couples who have been married in the Catholic Church', *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 34(2), 2024, 100-114. doi:10.1080/10649867.2024.2380160.
- Biemans, W., 'Marriage preparation, pastoral accompaniment, and relationship quality among migrant and intercultural couples in the Netherlands', *Family Forum* 13, 2023, 153-172. <https://doi.org/10.25167/FF/5085>.
- Biemans, W., 'Married couples' need to be reconciled with one another, with society and with God', *Gregorianum* 105(4), 2024, 851-873.
- Biemans, W., 'Pastoral accompaniment of couples before and after marriage', *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* 27(2), 2021, 196-212. doi:10.2143/INT.27.2.3289974.
- Birla Institute of Technology and Science, 2022, *SWOT analysis*, <https://universe.bits-pilani.ac.in/uploads/SWOT%20Analysis.pdf>, accessed 5-7-2025.
- Bohman, A. and Hjerm, M., 'How the religious context affects the relationship between religiosity and attitudes towards immigration', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37(6), 2014, 937-957, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2012.748210>.
- Boonyarat, P., Crowdera, R.M. and Wills, G.B., 'Importance-performance analysis based SWOT analysis', *International Journal of Information Management* 44, 2019, 194-203. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2016.03.009>.
- Borowski, Ł. and Lipiec, D., 'The synodal method in building marital and family community', *Verbum Vitae* 42(4), 2024, 843-855. <https://doi.org/10.31743/vv.17490>.
- Botvar, P.K. and Sjöborg, A., 'Social conflicts, religion and human rights support: A study of young Christians and Muslims in Scandinavia', in Sterkens, C. and Ziebertz, H.-G. (Eds.), *Political and judicial rights through the prism of religious belief: Religion and human rights 3*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018, 255-274.
- Bruce, S., *Secularization: in defence of an unfashionable theory*. Oxford: University Press, 2011.
- Brügmann, D. 'Work disability and divorce', in Kreyenfeld M. and Trappe H. (Eds.), *Parental life courses after separation and divorce in Europe*. Cham: Springer, 2020, 289-308.
- Calvin, J., *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by J. Allen, Vol. II. Eugene (OR.): Wipf and Stock, 2010.
- Carroll, J.S. and Doherty, W.J., 'Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research', *Family Relations* 52(2), 2003, 105-118.
- Carlson, R.G., Daire, A.P., Munyon, M.D. and Young, M.E., '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), 2012, 123-130. doi:10.1177/1066480712441588.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993.

- Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales (CBCEW), *Guidelines for the preparation of couples for marriage*. London: Catholic Trust for England & Wales, 2016.
- Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS), *Immigration to the Netherlands*, 2023, <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/dossier/migration-and-integration/how-many-people-immigrate-to-the-netherlands->, accessed 1-7-2025.
- Chapman, G., *Things I wish I'd known before we got married*. Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2010.
- Clebsch, W.A. and Jaekle, C.R., *Pastoral care in historical perspective*. Lanham: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1994.
- Clinebell, H., *Basic types of pastoral counseling: Resources for the ministry of healing and growth*. Updated and revised by McKeever, B.C. Third edition. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011.
- Codex Iuris Canonici(CIC)*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983.
- Compendium of the catechism of the Catholic Church*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005.
- Connor, P., 'Balm for the soul: immigrant religion and emotional well-being', *International Migration* 50(2), 2012, 130-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2010.00623.x>
- Conradi, H.J., Dingemanse, P., Noordhof, A., Finkenauer C. and Kamphuis, J.H., 'Effectiveness of the "Hold me tight" relationship enhancement program in a self-referred and a clinician-referred sample: An emotionally focused couples therapy-based approach', *Family Process* 57(3), 2018, 613-628. doi:10.1111/famp.12305.
- Dekker, P., 'Religion and civic engagement: European patterns and digging deeper in the Netherlands', in Strachwitz, R. G. (Ed.) *Religious Communities and Civil Society in Europe*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2019, 137-159.
- Demel S. and Pfleger, M. (Eds.), *Sakrament der Barmherzigkeit. Welche Chance hat die Beichte?* Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2017.
- Denzinger, H. *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012.
- Derks, F. and Sremac, S., 'Negotiating the sacred: the lived religion of Eritrean newcomers and their process of integration in the Netherlands', *Practical Theology* 13(6), 2020, 594-608. doi:10.1080/1756073X.2020.1792638.
- Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Catechumenal pathways for married life: Pastoral guidelines for local churches*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022.
- Dillen, A. 'What is practical theology?', in Dillen, A. and Gärtner, S. (Eds.), *Discovering practical theology : Exploring boundaries*. Louvain: Peeters Publishers & Booksellers, 2020, 63-92.
- Donohue, J., CR, 'Confessions of a priest: The unused potential of the rite of Penance', in Bennett, M.J. and Cloutier, D. (Eds.). *Naming our sins: How recognizing the seven deadly vices can renew the sacrament of reconciliation*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2019.
- Drysdale Beuscher, K., *A mixed methods inquiry into the role of cognitive dissonance in the decline of participation in the sacrament of Reconciliation*. Ann Arbor (MI): ProQuest LLC, 2012.
- Dundes Renteln, A., *The cultural defense*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004.

- Durà-Vilà, G., *Sadness, depression, and the dark night of the soul: transcending the medicalisation of sadness*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017.
- Eijken, J. *Strijd om betekenis: Discoursanalyse van een beleidsmatig experiment interculturele kerkopbouw in de Schilderswijk, Den Haag 2000 – 2010*. Nijmegen: Radboud University, 2018.
- Engbersen, R. and Lupi, T., *Het belang van slow social work: Op zoek naar nieuwe welzijnsfuncties in Rotterdam*. Den Haag: Platform31, 2015.
- Escher, D., 'How does religion promote forgiveness? Linking beliefs, orientations, and practices', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52(1), 2013, 100–119.
- European Asylum Support Office, *Country of origin information report: Eritrea. National service and illegal exit*. Valletta: European Union Agency for Asylum, 2016.
- Eurostat, *Divorce indicators*, Luxembourg, 2024,
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_ndivind__custom_13605890/default/table?lang=en, accessed 5-7-2025.
- Eurostat, *Marriage indicators*, Luxembourg, 2024,
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_nind__custom_13606689/default/table?lang=en, accessed 5-7-2025.
- Fastiggi, R.L., *The sacrament of Reconciliation: An anthropological and Scriptural understanding*. Chicago (Ill.): Hillenbrand Books, 2017.
- First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 1870.
- Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelium Gaudium*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2013.
- Francis, 'Epistula Apostolica to Mgr. Sergio Alfredo Fenoy, delegate of the Buenos Aires pastoral region', *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 108(10), 2016, 1071-1074.
- Francis, *Message for 2018 world day of migrants and refugees*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2018.
- Francis, *Message for the 107th world day of migrants and refugees*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2021.
- Francis, Post-synodal Apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2016.
- Francis and XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a synodal Church: communion, participation, mission. Final document*. Vatican: Secretaria Generalis Synodi, 2024.
- Gähler, M. and Palmtag, E. 'Parental divorce, psychological well-being and educational attainment: Changed experience, unchanged effect among Swedes born 1892–1991', *Social Indicators Research* 123, 2015, 601–623. doi:10.1007/s11205-014-0768-6.
- Gray, M.M. and Perl, P.M., *Sacraments today: Belief and practice among U.S. Catholics*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Georgetown University, 2008.
- Halík, T., 'Wege einer neuen Evangelisierung', in Ruhstorfer, K. (Ed.), *Das Ewige im Fluss der Zeit: der Gott, den wir brauchen*. Freiburg: Herder, 2016, 217-223.

- Ham, L. van der, Draak, M. den, Mensink, W., Schyns, P. and Berg, E. van den, *De Wmo 2015 in praktijk. De lokale uitvoering van de Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning*. Den Haag: Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau, 2018.
- Härkönen, J., Bernardi, F. and Boertien, D., 'Family dynamics and child outcomes: An overview of research and open questions', *European Journal of Population* 33, 2017, 163–184. doi:10.1007/s10680-017-9424-6.
- Hart, J. de, and Houwelingen, P. van, *Christenen in Nederland: Kerkelijke deelname en christelijke gelovigheid*. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2018.
- Hawkins, A.J., Stanley, S.M., Blanchard, V.L. and Albright, M., 'Exploring programmatic moderators of the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education programs: A meta-analytic study', *Behavior Therapy* 43(1), 2012, 77–87. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2010.12.006>.
- Ho, M.Y., Liang, S. and Van Tongeren, D.R., 'Self-regulation facilitates forgiveness in close relationships', *Current Psychology* 43, 2024, 2679–2689. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04504-5>.
- Hofman, E., 'A wholesome cure for the wounded soul: Confession, emotions, and self in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Catholicism,' *Journal of Religious History* 42(2), 2018, 222-241. doi:10.1111/1467-9809.12455.
- Holdsworth, S.M., *Learning to love: utilizing the principles and practices of pastoral care for mission*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024.
- Hoops, J.F. 'Examining intercultural transition and history through service learning', *Communication Teacher* 36(1), 2022, 47-53. doi:10.1080/17404622.2021.1903522.
- Houdt, K. van and Poortman, A. 'Joint lifestyles and the risk of union dissolution: Differences between marriage and cohabitation', *Demographic Research* 39(15), 2018, 431-458. doi:10.4054/DemRes.2018.39.15.
- International Organization for Migration (IOM), *World migration report 2020*. Geneva: IOM, 2019.
- John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991.
- John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*. Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993.
- John Paul II, *Post-synodal Apostolic exhortation Reconciliation and Penance*. Vatican, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984.
- Joób, M. and Kettunen, P., 'Confession from the point of view of the experience of the people seeking help: An empirical study about Confessional practices in Finland and Hungary', *European Journal of Mental Health* 8, 2013, 163–186. doi: 10.5708/EJMH.8.2013.2.1.
- Kalathikattil, A., *Postmodernity, globalization and the sacrament of Reconciliation: Social reconciliation and the recontextualization of the sacrament of Reconciliation*. Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2010.
- Kamiński, J., 'Przygotowanie do małżeństwa i życia w rodzinie na przykładzie diecezji Płockiej', *Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny* 19(2), 2011, 119-136. doi:10.34839/wpt.2011.19.2.119-136.
- Kant, I., *The Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn. Raleigh (NC): Alex Catalogue, 1998.

- Kant, I., *Lectures on Logic*, translated and edited by J. M. Young. New York: Cambridge University, 1992.
- Katholiek Documentatiecentrum (KDC), *Database Catholic migrants* [Online], 2021. Available at: <https://www.ru.nl/kdc/database-katholieke-migranten/>, accessed 5-7-2025. To this date, the database is only accessible on request.
- Khoudja, Y., 'Religious trajectories of immigrants in the first years after migration', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 61(2), 2022, 507–529.
- Kim, Y.Y., *Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation*, Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE Publications Incorporated, 2000.
- Knieps-Port le Roi, Th. (Ed.), *A point of no return? Amoris Laetitia on marriage, divorce and remarriage*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2017.
- Konferencja Episkopatu Polski (KEP, Conference of Polish Bishops). *Dyrektorium Duszpasterstwa Rodzin (Directory of Family Pastoral Care)*. Warsaw: KEP, 2003.
- Kregting, J., *Kerncijfers Rooms-katholieke Kerk 2021*. Nijmegen: Kaski, 2022.
- Kregting, J., *Kerncijfers Rooms-katholieke Kerk 2023*. Nijmegen: Kaski, 2024.
- Kregting, J. and Copier, J., *Het gebruik van gebedshuizen door migrantenkerken*. Nijmegen: Kaski, 2021.
- Kreidl, M., Štípková, M. and Hubatková, B., 'Parental separation and children's education in a comparative perspective: Does the burden disappear when separation is more common?', *Demographic Research* 36(3), 2017, 73–110. doi:10.4054/DemRes.2017.36.3.
- Ladini, R., Biolcati, F., Molteni, F., Pedrazzani A. and Vezzoni, C. 'The multifaceted relationship between individual religiosity and attitudes toward immigration in contemporary Italy', *International Journal of Sociology* 51(5), 2021, 390–411, doi:10.1080/00207659.2021.1937778.
- Lam, W.K.A., 'The source of evil in Rousseau's Confessions: A reply to Augustine's Confessions', *Theology and philosophy* 19, 2011, 79 - 121.
- LaMothe, R., 'A radical pastoral theology for the Anthropocene era: Thinking and being otherwise', *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 31(1), 2021, 54–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2021.1887993>.
- Landelijke Werkgroep Synodaliteit, *Hoe kunnen we een meer synodale en missionaire kerk zijn? Landelijke handreiking voor de gesprekken tijdens de 2^e fase*. Baarn: Secretariaat Rooms-Katholiek Kerkgenootschap, 2024.
- Lartey, E.Y., *In living color: An intercultural approach to pastoral care and counseling*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003.
- Lartey, E.Y., *Pastoral theology in an intercultural world*, Eugene (OR.): Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013.
- Lee, G.R. and Payne, K.K., 'Changing marriage patterns since 1970: What's going on, and why?', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 41 (2010), 537–555.

- Leopold, T. and Kalmijn, M., 'Is divorce more painful when couples have children? Evidence from long-term panel data on multiple domains of well-being', *Demography* 53(6), 2016, 1717-1742. doi:10.1007/s13524-016-0518-2.
- Lichter, D.T. and Carmalt, J.H., 'Religion and marital quality among low-income couples', *Social Science Research* 38(1), 2009, 168-187. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2008.07.003.
- Loffeld, J., *Getting to know God after God*. Tilburg: Tilburg University, 2021.
- Luijckx, R., Halman, L., Sieben, I., Brislinger E. and Quandt, M., *European values in numbers. Trends and traditions at the turn of the century*. Leiden: Brill, 2017.
- Luther, M., 'Ein Sermon von dem Sakrament der Busse', in Otto, C. (Ed.), *Luthers Werke in Auswahl: Band 1. Schriften von 1517-1520*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016.
- Maier, K., Konaszewski, K., Skalski, S.B., Büssing, A. and Surzykiewicz, J., 'Spiritual needs, religious coping and mental wellbeing: A cross-sectional study among migrants and refugees in Germany', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19(6), 2022, 3415. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063415>.
- Mallon, J., *Divine renovation: Bringing your parish from maintenance to mission*. New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2014.
- Mallon, J., *Divine renovation. Guidebook: a step-by-step manual for transforming your parish*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Novalis, 2016.
- Mandemakers, J.J. and Kalmijn, M. 'Do mother's and father's education condition the impact of parental divorce on child well-being?', *Social Science Research* 44, 2014, 187-199. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2013.12.003>.
- Markman, H.J. and Rhoades, G.K., 'Relationship education research: Current status and future directions', *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 38(1), 2012, 169-200. doi:10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00247.x
- McNulty, J.K. and Fincham, F.D., 'Beyond positive psychology? Toward a contextual view of psychological processes and well-being', *American Psychologist* 67(2), 2012, 101-110. doi:10.1037/a0024572.
- Meer, N. van der, *Believers in the universal Church: Processes of self-identification among Catholic immigrants of African descent in the Dutch religious landscape*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010.
- Miltenburg, C van and Kanne, P., *Katholicisme in Nederland: Opvattingen en ervaringen van katholieken en voormalig katholieken*, Amsterdam: I&O Research, 2022.
- Molteni, F. and Tubergen, F. van, 'Immigrant generation and religiosity: a study of Christian immigrant groups in 33 European countries', in *European Societies* 24(5), 2022, 605-627. doi:10.1080/14616696.2022.2044067.
- Murray-Swank, A.B., McConnell K.M. and Pargament, K.I., 'Understanding spiritual confession: A review and theoretical synthesis,' *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 10(3), 2007, 275-291. doi:10.1080/13694670600665628.

- National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Research and Practices Committee, *Reflections on the sacrament of penance in catholic life today: A study document*. Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1990.
- Nationale Raad voor Liturgie, *Klein rituale voor de Nederlandse Kerkprovincie*, Den Bosch: Nationale Raad voor Liturgie, 2009.
- Nationale Raad voor Liturgie, *Orde van dienst voor boete en verzoening*, Hilversum: Gooi en Sticht, 1976.
- Nicklas, T., 'Buße tun heißt "Um-Denken"! Neutestamentliche Perspektiven', in: Demel, S. and Pfleger, M., *Sakrament der Barmherzigkeit. Welche Chance hat die Beichte?* Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2017, 383-400.
- Olson, J.R., Marshall, J.P., Wallace Goddard, H. and Schramm, D.G., 'Shared religious beliefs, prayer, and forgiveness as predictors of marital satisfaction', *Family relations* 64(October), 2015, 519-533. doi:10.1111/fare.12129.
- Orgad, L., *The cultural defense of nations: A liberal theory of majority rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) *Working together for local integration of migrants and refugees in Amsterdam*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Young people with migrant parents, making integration work*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021.
- Owen, J.J., Rhoades, G.K., Stanley, S.M. and Markman, H.J., 'The role of leaders' working alliance in premarital education', *Journal of Family Psychology* 25(1), 2011, 49–57. doi:10.1037/a0022084.
- Özgür, E., 'Challenges of participation in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands: Christian – Assyrian and Muslim – Turk immigrants', *Revista Internacional de Estudios Migratorios* 12(1), 2022, 28-54. <https://doi.org/10.25115/riem.v12i1.5320>.
- Pastwa, A., "Accompanying migrants' as a touchstone of the realisation of the synodal Church idea. A canonist's remarks', *Ecumeny and Law* 9(2), 2021, 7-40. <https://doi.org/10.31261/EaL.2021.09.2.01>.
- Pees, I., 'Ehe-, Familien- und Lebensberatung. "Sag ja zu mir, wenn alles nein sagt ..."', in Demel, S. and Pfleger, M., *Sakrament der Barmherzigkeit. Welche Chance hat die Beichte?* Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2017, 248-250.
- Perrin, R.H., *Changing shape: The faith lives of millennials*. London: SCM Press, 2020.
- Pew Research Center, *U.S. Catholics open to non-traditional families: 45% of Americans are Catholic or connected to Catholicism*. Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2015.
- Pew Research Center, 'Modern parenthood: Roles of moms and dads converge as they balance work and family', Washington D.C., 2013. Cf. www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/03/14/modern-parenthood-roles-of-moms-and-dads-converge-as-they-balance-work-and-family/, accessed 5-7-2025.
- Phan, P. C., 'Embracing, protecting, and loving the stranger: A Roman Catholic theology of migration', in Padilla, E., and Phan, P. (Eds.), *Theology of migration in the Abrahamic religions*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

- Pius Almanak: Jaarboek katholiek Nederland 2021*. Baarn: Adveniat Geloofseducatie B.V., 2021.
- Ponthieux, S., 'Intra-household pooling and sharing of resources: a tentative "modified" equivalised income', in Atkinson, A.B., Guio, A. and Marlier, E. (Eds.), *Monitoring social inclusion in Europe*. Luxembourg: Eurostat, 2017, 175-190.
- Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *Erga migrantes caritas Christi* (The love of Christ towards migrants). Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2004.
- Powell, N. and James, J., *Together for the city: How collaborative church planting leads to citywide movements*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2019.
- Proulx, C. M., H. M. Helms and Ch. Buehler, 'Marital quality and personal well-being: A meta-analysis', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69(August), 2007, 576–593. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2007.00393.x.
- Pufal-Struzik, I., Sordyl-Lipnicka, B. and Duda, M., 'Parents' economic migration and the psychological well-being of their Polish children', *Family Forum* 11, 2021, 115-128. doi:10.25167/FF/3507.
- PVV, VVD, NSC and BBB, *Hoop, lef en trots - Hoofdlijnenakkoord 2024 – 2028*. The Hague: Bureau woordvoering kabinetformatie, 2024.
- Reuver, R. de and Nagy, D. et al., *Van migrant tot naaste. Plaatsmaken voor jezelf*. Utrecht: Kok Boekencentrum, 2018.
- Reyes-Espiritu, A.M., 'A hopeful gamble: Living the faith as migrant workers and transnational mothers', *Studies in World Christianity* 29(1), 2023, 10–36. <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/10.3366/swc.2023.0416>.
- Reyes-Espiritu, A.M., 'Homemaking in and with migrant churches as communities of care', *Religions* 14(2), 2023, 257. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020257>.
- Rite of Penance*, New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Corp, 2009.
- Robles, T. F., R. B. Slatcher, J. M. Trombello and M. M. McGinn, 'Marital quality and health: A meta-analytic review', *Psychological Bulletin* 140(1), 2014, 140–187. doi:10.1037/a0031859.
- Rossi, P.J., 'Reading Kant from a Catholic horizon: Ethics and the anthropology of grace', *Theological Studies* 71(1), 2010, 79-100.
- Rousseau, J., *Letter to Beaumont, Letters Written From the Mountain, and Related Writings*. Edited by C. Kelly and E. Grace. Hanover (NH): University Press of New England, 2001.
- Ruspini, E., 'Families in uncertain times: Sociological perspectives on family formation', *Marriage, Families and Spirituality* 24(2), 2018, 164-178. doi:10.2143/INT.24.2.3285669.
- Ryan, A., 'Going to Confession', *The Furrow* 68(1), 2017, 14-19.
- Sánchez Gassen, N. and B. Perelli-Harris, 'The increase in cohabitation and the role of union status in family policies: A comparison of 12 European countries', *Journal of European Social Policy* 25(4), 2015, 431–449. doi:10.1177/0958928715594561.

- Samuel, L., 'South Asian women in the diaspora: reflections on arranged marriage and dowry among the Syrian Orthodox community in Canada', *South Asian Diaspora* 5(1), 2013, 91-105. doi:10.1080/19438192.2013.722384.
- Sattler, D., 'Bußsakrament', *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Volume 2. Freiburg: Herder, 1994, 845-853.
- Scheule, R., 'Schönster Tag, undeutliches Sakrament. Was Brautleute denken', *Stimmen der Zeit* 2, 2023, 119-130.
- Schmeets H. and Houben, M. *Religieuze betrokkenheid in Nederland*, Den Haag: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2023. Cf. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2023/religieuze-betrokkenheid-in-nederland/4-religieuze-betrokkenheid-naar-achtergrondkenmerken>, accessed 5-7-2025.
- Schreiter, R. *The new Catholicity: Theology between the global and the local (faith and cultures)*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997.
- Second Vatican Council, Decree on ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 1964.
- Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 1965.
- Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, *Reflectie op het hoofdlijnenakkoord Hoop, lef en trots*. The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2024.
- Spadaro, A., S.J., 'A big heart open to God: The exclusive interview with Pope Francis', *America*, 30.09.2013, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis, accessed 5-7-2025.
- Spickard, J.V. and Adogame, A., 'Introduction: Africa, the new African diaspora, and religious transnationalism in a global world,' in Adogame A. and Spickard, J.V., *Religion Crossing Boundaries. Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*. Leiden: Brill, 2010, 1-28.
- Spielhofer, T., Corlyon, J., Stock, L., Gieve, M., Durbin, B. and Smith, M., *Relationship support interventions evaluation*. London: Department for Education, 2014.
- Stanley, S.M., Amato, P.R., Johnson, C.A. and Markman, H.J., 'Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey', *Journal of Family Psychology* 20, 2006, 117-126. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.20.1.117.
- Stanley, S.M., Trathen, D., McCain, S., and Bryan, M., *A lasting promise: A Christian guide to fighting for your marriage*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- Steel, J.L., Dunlavy, A.C., Harding, C.E. and Theorell, T., 'The psychological consequences of pre-emigration trauma and post-migration stress in refugees and immigrants from Africa', *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 19, 2017, 523-532. doi:10.1007/s10903-016-0478-z.
- Stichting Casa Migrante. *Jaarverslag 2022*. Amsterdam: Stichting Casa Migrante, 2023.
- Storm, I. 'Christian Nations? Ethnic Christianity and anti-Immigration Attitudes in Four Western European Countries', *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 24(1), 2011, 75-96. doi:10.18261/ISSN1890-7008-2011-01-05.

- Strecker, A. and Naidoo, M., 'The dynamics of multicultural youth ministry in a changing South Africa', *Missionalia* 46(1), 2018, 163–182. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7832/46-1-292>.
- Straut Eppsteiner, H. and Hagan, J. 'Religion as psychological, spiritual, and social support in the migration undertaking', in Saunders, J.B., Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Snyder, S., (Eds.), *Intersections of religion and migration: Issues at the global crossroads*. New York: Springer Nature, 2016, 49-70.
- Synod of Bishops, *Relatio finalis for the fourteenth ordinary general assembly on the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in the contemporary world*. Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2015.
- Taylor, C., *A secular age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Relatio synodi*, Vatican: Holy See Press Office, 2014.
- Toorn, J. van den, Davelaar, M., Hamdi, A., Reches L. and Keulen, M. van, *Omvang en karakter van de maatschappelijke activiteiten van levensbeschouwelijke organisaties in Rotterdam*. Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut, 2020.
- Tubergen, F. van and Sindradóttir, J., 'The Religiosity of Immigrants in Europe: A Cross-National Study', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50(2), 2011, 272–288.
- Tulud Cruz, G., *An intercultural theology of migration: Pilgrims in the wilderness*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Visser, S.S., Bailey, A. and Meijering, L., 'Food, faith and community: social well-being of Ghanaian migrants in the Netherlands', *Gender, Place & Culture* 22(5), 2015, 608-625. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2014.885891.
- Waijman, K., 'What is spirituality?', *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 8, 2006, 1-18.
- Wiik, K.A., Keizer R., and Lappegård, T., 'Relationship quality in marital and cohabiting unions across Europe', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 74(3), 2012, 389-398. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00967.x.
- Wijzen, F., 'Global Christianity: A European perspective', *Exchange* 38, 2009, 147-160.
- Wilcox, W.B. and Wolfinger, N.H., 'Living and loving "decent": Religion and relationship quality among urban parents', *Social Science Research* 37, 2008, 828–843. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2007.11.001.
- Wu, D. and Raffety, E., 'Give the grant money to the youth': From youth departure to belonging in the ethnic church, *Ecclesial Practices* 10, 2023, 182–201. doi:10.1163/22144471-bja10052.
- Zalewski, S., 'The sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as an encounter with God and experience of his mercy,' *Roczniki Teologiczne. Annals of Theology* 05, 2016, 71-89. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18290/rt.2016.63.5-4>.
- Zhai, J.E., Ellison, C.G., Stokes, C.E. and Glenn, N.D., '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), 2008, 379–394.

Biography

Ward Biemans (* 1971) is a Dutch priest from the Society of Jesus. He has studied environmental science at Utrecht University (MSc), theology at the Radboud University in Nijmegen (Ba) and moral theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome (STL). He is a student chaplain at Tilburg University and a spiritual director at the Ariens institute of the Archdiocese of Utrecht and at the St. Willibrord seminary of the Diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam. He teaches moral theology at the St. Boniface institute of the Diocese of Haarlem-Amsterdam. From 2020 to 2025 he has conducted practical theological research at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology as an external PhD-student on pastoral accompaniment of migrant and intercultural couples before and after marriage in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands.

Dankwoord

Mijn dank gaat allereerst uit naar alle deelnemers aan de online enquête over pastorale begeleiding voor en na hun kerkelijk huwelijk. Ik bedank in het bijzonder de twaalf stellen die ik heb mogen interviewen over hun ervaringen met deze pastorale begeleiding, over hun migratieverleden, hun integratie in Nederland, hun religiositeit, spiritualiteit en toekomstperspectieven. Ik dank de pastoors, kapelaans, rectoren, studentenpastors en religieuzen die mij in contact hebben gebracht met migrantenstellen en interculturele stellen. In het bijzonder dank ik de priesters die pastorale zorg verlenen aan migrantengemeenschappen en multi-etnische gemeenschappen in Nederland en die bereid waren tot een interview over hun pastorale ervaringen. Dank ook aan de diocesane stafmedewerkers die hun medewerking aan dit onderzoek hebben verleend.

Ik bedank mijn promotoren Jan Loffeld en Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer voor hun enthousiaste ondersteuning en hun constructieve kritiek tijdens mijn onderzoek. Dank aan de leden van de promotiecommissie voor hun commentaar en suggesties voor verbetering. Eveneens veel dank aan Harm Goris die een aantal onderdelen van dit onderzoek van gedetailleerd commentaar heeft voorzien. Dank aan de collega's en studenten van de Tilburg School of Catholic Theology voor het meedenken en delen van hun ervaringen.

Speciale dank gaat uit naar mijn ouders, broer en zus. Afkomstig uit een familie met een geadopteerde zus uit Zuid-Korea, ben ik van jongs af aan gewend aan het gezelschap van een gezinslid dat er zelf niet voor gekozen heeft om te migreren. Zij heeft alle moeilijkheden om zich aan te passen aan een compleet nieuwe en vreemde omgeving onder ogen gezien. Deze achtergrond heeft veel voor mij betekend, ook bij de totstandkoming van dit proefschrift. Dank ook aan vriendinnen en vrienden die hebben geluisterd naar en meegedacht met mijn plannen, vorderingen en strubbelingen.

Tenslotte bedank ik mijn huisgenoten en de regionale overste van de jezuïeten in Nederland en Vlaanderen, pater Marc Desmet, voor het mede mogelijk maken van dit onderzoek.

Ad majorem Dei gloriam.

This dissertation by Ward Biemans SJ (* 1971) reports on five sub-studies on pastoral accompaniment and integration processes of Catholic migrant couples and intercultural couples, living in the Netherlands, before and after their wedding. The first is a literature study, which shows a sustainable beneficial effect of Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) on relationship quality. A second, quantitative survey investigates the relationships between marriage preparation, pastoral accompaniment and relationship quality. Results show that overall, migrant couples and intercultural couples (n=223) appreciate a more intensive, professional, and welcoming MRE and pastoral accompaniment after marriage. It is also concluded that seeking reconciliation after a conflict ($r=0.361$) and experiencing forgiveness from one's spouse ($r=0.188$) are significantly associated with a higher perceived relationship quality. Thirdly, twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews with migrant and intercultural couples have been held. Results show that patterns of cultural transition (CT) are more common than patterns of cultural defence (CD) or intercultural transition (IT). From three categories of values, faith values have been mentioned most often (n=242), followed by family values (n=132) and societal values (n=87). Faith is a value that can bridge cultural differences between the host and home country. Fourthly, interviewees have been asked to reflect on experiences with the sacrament of Reconciliation. Finally, by means of a SWOT-analysis, eleven interviews with pastoral caregivers and diocesan staff members, as well as four written responses have been analysed. Four opportunities for further development of pastoral practices are discussed: intercultural pastoral care; intercultural communication; promoting well-being and community building. Both migrant and native church communities could profit when these pastoral practices are implemented.