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AWM
eröffnet Welten

AWM gGmbH
Hindenburgstraße 36
70825 Korntal-Münchingen

www.awm-korntal.eu
info@awm-korntal.eu
+49 (0) 711 83965-0

Leading in a Changing Church: Intercultural Christian Leadership in an Increasingly Diverse German-Speaking Europe

Team project paper

Research paper for the course

ICL 6440

Leading Multicultural Teams

Lecturer:

Tobias Menges, Ph.D.

Submitted by

Jeffrey Allers

Noah Sebastian Imhof

Campbell Lockley

Robert-Florin Rohozneanu

MA–students, (ICL/CTH)

2026

Columbia International University

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1 Introduction

With an unprecedented rise in both internal and external migration since the 1990s,[1] Europe is undergoing demographic transformation as increasingly more people with different languages, cultural backgrounds, and countries of origin work side by side in societies that are rapidly becoming multicultural. This has implications for those in leadership: leaders need not only classical leadership skills such as good communication, people management, and vision casting, they also require cultural awareness and intercultural skills to lead people from diverse cultural backgrounds. While the world of globalized business is already aware of the challenges of multicultural leadership (Northouse 2016:427), the increase in both migrant and multicultural churches in Europe has now unavoidably brought intercultural issues to the fore for leaders of Christian ministries and churches. Indeed, if existing churches are to flourish in the new pluralistic and multicultural reality of Europe then Christian leaders must be able to effectively engage across cultural boundaries. This will prevent the body of Christ from being divided along cultural lines and enable it to effectively reach those of other cultural backgrounds who are yet to respond the gospel.

This paper is an investigation of how current Christian leaders in German-speaking Europe understand and are adapting their leadership to the challenges surrounding multiculturalism. The restriction of this investigation's scope to German speaking countries—to Germany, Austria and Switzerland—reflects the personal investment of this papers' authors in this region as serving pastors and missionaries.[2] The investigation was conducted by interviewing four Church and ministry leaders from German-speaking Europe. The interviews comprised of twelve questions that examined the leaders' views on intercultural Christian leadership in multicultural Europe (see Appendix for the interview questions used). The four interviews were conducted online over a 1-month period from late November to early December of 2025. In line with research ethics, verbal assent to collect and process interview data was collected from interviewees

[1] See, for example, the European Union's population statistics from 1990 to 2024 (Eurostat 2025). Since 2012, Europe's population increase is solely due to net positive immigration from outside of the European Union.

[2] Although a diversity of perspectives was deliberately sought, due to organizational and time constraints an Austrian perspective could unfortunately not be included at the interview stage.

as part of the interview process. Following the interview stage, the gathered interview data was grouped and analyzed under four major themes.

The first theme, 'Understanding the New Cultural Landscape', investigated how the interviewed leaders perceived demographic and cultural shifts in their ministry environments. The second theme, 'Leadership Identity and Intercultural Adaptation', examined how the leaders' own cultural identities and leadership styles are being reshaped by intercultural contexts. The third theme, 'Theological and Spiritual Foundations for Intercultural Ministry', sought to answer how biblical and theological convictions inform leadership across cultural boundaries. The fourth and final theme, 'Building Bridges and Fostering Mutual Transformation', investigated the potentials of intercultural conflict for reconciliation, learning, and mutual transformation. Identified insights arising from the data were then discussed in light of current Christian and secular intercultural leadership literature. The four interview partners will now be briefly introduced:

Oleg Dik (PhD) is Professor of Urban Theology and Sociology at the *Evangelische Hochschule Tabor* and an occasional lecturer at Humboldt University in Berlin. He was raised in Russia and came to Germany with his family at the age of ten as an asylum seeker. Together with his American wife they lived in Beirut, Lebanon, where they were involved in cross-cultural Christian ministry among Arab communities. In 2011 they relocated to Berlin, where they founded *Batik*, a cross-cultural street church in a district of Berlin with very high cultural and religious diversity. Dik is also actively involved in discipling and supporting African church leaders in Germany. His academic research explores the complex relationships between religion and society in contexts of migration, pluralism, and post-Christendom in Europe. He is the author of *Church, Immigration & Pluralism: Paradoxical Reformation after German Christendom* (2022) and *Worship or Suicide: On the Paradox between Religion and Society* (2025).

Johannes Müller is originally from Germany but has lived in Switzerland since his early youth. Following his theological studies he served, together with his wife, for 14 years in Guinea, West Africa, in a multicultural setting as part of a Swiss mission. Together they are the parents of five children. After returning to Switzerland, they founded *African Link,* an intercultural ministry with the vision to establish connections with African-led churches in Switzerland, to build bridges through dialogue both among migrant churches and with local Swiss congregations, and to serve as contact people for intercultural issues in church life. Until his recent retirement, he was part of the

leadership team of *MEOS Interkulturelle Dienste* and the core team of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Interkulturell* of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance.

H F[3] (MTh) is a German pastor who has served for decades in intercultural Christian ministry and church planting. Following his studies in Switzerland, H F served among drug addicts and in prison ministry, alongside broader community and evangelistic work, including being closely involved with Sri Lankan refugees in Switzerland—an experience that further shaped his intercultural sensitivity and prepared him for his later ministry. After marrying and starting a family, H F and his wife sensed God's call to become missionaries, and they moved to a country in the Middle East with their three young children where they spent 26 years engaged in church planting ministry. During this time, he gained extensive experience working with international and multicultural teams, including in the areas of intercultural leadership, discipleship, and evangelism. In 2019 H F's ministry was interrupted, requiring him to return to Germany, where, upon arriving, he helped start an intercultural church.

Stephan Sigg (DMin) is a Swiss pastor and current president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in German-speaking Switzerland. He is married and the father of two adult children. In his younger years he was passionate about Christian youth work, holding various leadership positions, including European level leadership of the Adventist Church organization. He gained a wealth of experience in multicultural teams through project and event management, and the organization of training courses in the field of Christian scouting and youth work. Originally trained as a carpenter, he is now engaged with the question of how the church should organize itself in an increasingly multicultural society in order to bring together all the ethnic backgrounds and influences within the local community in a meaningful and beneficial way.

What follows is a discussion of the insights gained through interviewing the above four leaders, alongside an accompanying examination of intercultural leadership literature. The structure of the paper follows the four themes outlined above, with each of the four parts dedicated to treating one theme. At the end of this paper, a concluding summary briefly draws several motifs together that arose from the discussions.

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[3] Due to security concerns, this interviewee has asked to remain anonymous.

2 Part One: Understanding the New Cultural Landscape

2.1 Summary of insights from interviews

Insight 1: Challenges for Church leaders in the new cultural landscape

The rapidly changing cultural landscape in German-speaking Europe presents many challenges for church leaders, as all four interviewees noted. The first of these are long-held cultural assumptions, which are now exposed. “We do not encounter Christ in a vacuum, but always in the context of our own culture and our own world” (Sigg 2025). The German church has largely avoided examining its own cultural assumptions, having been largely homogenous historically (Dik 2025). “Leaders often assume that the cultural rules they grew up with still apply, but the context has changed fundamentally” (Dik 2025). Furthermore, even though their context has become more multicultural, these churches lean on their traditions and are resistant to change (H F 2025). “There is little vision for reaching people with a migrant background” (H F 2025). It is therefore important to recognize that this cultural shift presents church leaders with the challenge of recognizing and adjusting the German church’s cultural assumptions and creating a vision that removes these barriers and can successfully reach their changing, multicultural contexts.

Another challenge is the need to recognize that cultures are fluid, and that the cultural identities of second-generation immigrants do not often fit with their immigrant parents or their host country. Instead, they become a type of hybrid. “The second generation goes to school here and often assimilates more quickly” (Sigg 2025). Even so, the next generation is often stereotyped because of their parents’ ethnicity. “Second-generation migrants are often interpreted using first-generation categories, and that simply doesn’t work anymore” (Dik 2025). Church leaders can therefore not rely on the old cultural categories to inform their vision or ministry practice in reaching this new cultural landscape but instead must engage second-generation immigrants with openness and curiosity.

Communication is probably the biggest challenge in multicultural contexts. Not only is there a language barrier—especially with first-generation immigrants—but there are also different cultural frameworks of understanding (H F 2025). “Misunderstandings often arise not because people disagree, but because they attach different meanings to the same words” (Dik 2025). Cultural differences such as hierarchical vs. democratic or

how direct one communicates are factors that can lead to these misunderstandings. Conflict in multicultural settings, then, arises more from cultural misunderstandings than from actual opposition, and it is imperative that leaders are aware of these differences and have the patience to work through these barriers to promote clear communication.

Finally, there also exists a gap between German-speaking Christians and immigrant populations. In one district, for example, "over 80% of the students have a migrant background. There are no German children in the first and second grades at school" (H F 2025). In church leadership structures—especially in the German state church—"there is often a distance between those who make decisions and those who actually live in intercultural tension every day" (Dik 2025). The problem of distance is related to the historically homogenous German Christian church, and leaders must therefore overcome this gap to learn about and engage their changing multicultural contexts.

Insight 2: The potential for the Church in the new multiculturalism

Although cultural barriers must be overcome, there is also great potential for this new multiculturalism to transform the churches in German-speaking Europe into more vibrant and evangelistic faith communities. First, there is the potential to experience the fullness of the Gospel, meant for all nations. "As soon as more than one culture comes together, I experience God more powerfully" (Müller 2025). There is also the potential to prevent the complacency often present in a comfortable, homogenous church since believers "cannot ride on culture very far" and must rely more on Christ (Dik 2025). A multicultural church is also more welcoming to people of different ethnicities, even those who are not yet represented in a specific church. "Having different cultures in the leadership team opened up opportunities to reach different people with the gospel" (H F 2025). When multiple cultures within the church are equally valued, there is more opportunity to challenge each of our cultural assumptions and become more aware of the nuances in Scripture. "It is always the same God, the same Jesus, but you come from a different angle" (Müller 2025). Church leaders must remind their congregations that "Jesus is not bound to one culture or ethnicity" (Sigg 2025) and foster an open dialog so that the unity in Christ can be experienced in the church's diversity, and each culture is both challenged and encouraged.

Another opportunity is that the church can be a visible sign of reconciliation between cultures: "A multicultural team or community can radiate reconciliation between people from very different backgrounds. Ultimately, this points to Jesus" (Müller 2025).

In a world that is increasingly culturally fractured and tribal, the church's role of unifying diverse cultures—especially those who are hostile to each other—brings attention to Christ and his finished work of reconciling humanity with God through the cross. "Facilitating reconciliation brings real honor. This mediating role reflects Christ himself" (H F 2025). This is why it is also important for church leaders to overcome the numerous barriers in multicultural contexts. "We should not encounter each other in combat mode, but as peacemakers and ambassadors of reconciliation" (Sigg 2025). The church has the potential to lead the way in peace-making within the new multicultural landscape.

Finally, the greatest opportunity for the church today is that cross-cultural missions is within reach of every Christian. "Mission today is often not about going somewhere else, but about learning to see who is already here" (Dik 2025). The nations have been welcomed into German-speaking Europe, many of whom were from predominantly Muslim countries that are more closed to a Gospel witness. "People who would otherwise be very difficult to reach are now here" (H F 2025). This can feel overwhelming to the church—one third of people in Germany now have a migrant background (H F 2025)—but the opportunity to fulfil the Great Commission "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) has never been more accessible to the local church in German-speaking Europe.

Insight 3: The preparedness of the Church for the new cultural reality

Unfortunately, the church has been largely unprepared for this paradigm shift, which challenges cultural assumptions, leadership models, and its homogenous church unity. Church leaders are "poorly equipped and still in a learning process" (Sigg 2025). It is not only because of resistance to change, however; it is also because of their limited capacity to learn and adapt. "Many pastors simply don't have the time. They are already overwhelmed with their normal program" (Müller 2025). Leaders are often overburdened by caring for their own congregations and working through problems that arise, which they see as their priorities. Furthermore, they prefer to lean on their strengths. "Often pastors are very strong pastorally but not apostolically" (H F 2025).

Training is valuable, but it can also hinder ministry in multicultural contexts. "You pump up yourself with books, and you develop categories and filters of how to engage the world, but in a truly diverse setting, these categories are not helpful" (Dik 2025). Even serving in a foreign country cannot prepare one completely in reaching

immigrants from that country in another land (Dik 2025). Instead, all previous learning must then be embedded in relational and experiential learning in the new context. “Intercultural understanding develops through long-term exposure, not quick fixes” (Dik 2025). Leaders should then train others in a way that encourages the immediate interaction of both theory and practice in intercultural contexts, as well as an openness to be surprised that all previous learning, whether through books or other experiences, may not apply in their new context.

Despite this unpreparedness, there are signs of hope. As with the cultural adaptation exhibited by second-generation immigrants, the same can happen with Christian leaders. “Second-generation leaders who grew up multicultural are extremely helpful” (Müller 2025). Other leaders are experimenting with the structures of their churches in order to encourage a multicultural mindset. “We place a German Swiss pastor in an Angolan community—and we also do the reverse” (Sigg 2025). A street church in Berlin also serves its multicultural community through presence and hospitality, while the leadership learns through immersion and experience (Dik 2025). Another multicultural church plant in Weil am Rhein values community involvement and extended fellowship times on Sundays (H F 2025). These examples suggest that even though churches in German-speaking Europe were largely unprepared for the new multiculturalism, there are leaders who have a vision and are addressing the need creatively.

2.2 Discussion of insights with the literature

Most people are unaware of their own cultural values and worldview assumptions (Hibbert & Hibbert 2014:20). With its historically homogenous churches, then, it has not been necessary for German leaders to examine their assumptions until now. Hibbert and Hibbert agree with the interviewees that a major barrier to multiculturalism is ethnocentrism or “the belief that my culture is right” (2014:49) in the German-speaking churches. Elmer adds to this the warning that cultural superiority “appears in disguises that pretend to be virtues” such as wanting to correct, mentor or equip, which can actually mean “I have superior knowledge…I am your role model…let me make you into a clone of myself” (2006:17).

Hibbert and Hibbert also support the interviewees’ contention that culture is fluid and changing rather than static (2014:20), especially among second-generation immigrants, which is why leadership models based on first-generation migrants are no longer adequate. Furthermore, Coscia et al. mention that these complex and changing

environments place an added emotional demand on leaders, particularly those who have trouble adapting (2023:124).

Hibbert and Hibbert cite another barrier as “cultural dissonance”, which they define as a “massive mismatch between the meaning frameworks of different cultures” (2014:26-28). This tracks with the interviewee’s emphasis on overcoming communication barriers in multicultural settings. Additionally, there is agreement that conflict often arises not from disagreement but from differing interpretations in communication. Hibbert and Hibbert add that values are “associated with strong emotions” which can easily result in escalation (2014:12).

There is consensus on the great potential of the multicultural church in German-speaking Europe. Elmer affirms the global and intercultural nature of all believers as the “holy priesthood” with each culture contributing unique insights into Scripture and God’s character (2006:117). Hibbert and Hibbert add that “Christianity has been a faith that, as it is taken into each new context, becomes expressed in new ways” (2014:55) and they explicitly deny the existence of a single Christian culture (2014:58). This supports the interviewees’ contention that the multicultural church deepens believers’ experience of God and their dependence on Him.

Hibbert and Hibbert’s metaphor of a choir singing in harmony rather than unison parallels the interviewees’ vision of a church that is a visible witness of reconciliation between cultures (2014:59). They add that unity in Christ must be expressed through “mutual love and respect and not the destruction of cultural identity” (2014:58). Diversity in the church is itself a witness. However, the interviewees stressed that this must be intentionally cultivated. Coscia et al. agree that to model cooperation and trust in multicultural settings, leaders must “develop the relationships, build a consensus and engage with all the persons” (2023:124).

The interviewees saw migration as an opportunity to bring fulfilment of the Great Commission to the doorstep of the local church, rather than keeping cross-cultural missions geographically distant. Hibbert and Hibbert’s rejection of assimilation and cultural pluralism (2014:60-63) warns leaders not to continue in the ways of the traditional homogenous church. Instead, they should follow Hibbert and Hibbert’s vision of multiculturalism as a mosaic. Elmer also stresses the church’s call to bless the nations which reveals the glory of God through the acceptance of other cultures (2006:61).

The interviewees agreed that church leaders have been largely unprepared for the new multiculturalism in Europe, and that much of that is due to both a lack of time and energy. Hibbert and Hibbert note that multicultural teams require extended "storming" phases characterized by patience, communication, and grace (2014:11). It is imperative, then, that church leaders have time and capacity to navigate intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts. Elmer insists that leaders must prioritize understanding over efficiency (2006:127-129). Leaders must also give themselves opportunities to learn and grow in their cultural and emotional intelligence. Both servanthood and listening must be intentionally formed (Elmer 2006:19-20).

The interviewees agreed that training can be both a help and a hindrance. Preparedness must be tempered with an openness to learn through experience. Hibbert and Hibbert agree that intercultural competence is not gained only through knowledge but comes through interacting with other cultures and having our own values and worldview challenged (2014:20). Coscia et al. confirm that training focusing on cognitive skills is less important than increasing the competences of emotional intelligence for leaders navigating the complexities of intercultural groups (2023:131).

Coscia et al. also claim that leaders of multicultural teams tend to develop higher emotional intelligence over time (2023:131-134), which agrees with the interviewees' experience that training comes primarily through engagement in a multicultural environment rather than preceding it. Likewise, Hibbert and Hibbert write that a leader must be a "lifelong learner who takes time to reflect on practice, and then changes and adapts in the light of that reflection" (2014:85). Elmer adds that leaders need to learn from and with other people from other cultures, not just learn about them (2006:93-104). The interviewees confirmed through their experiences that successful intercultural engagement comes through leaders who are humble, adaptive, innovative and high in emotional and cultural intelligence.

3 Part Two: Leadership Identity and Intercultural Adaptation

3.1 Summary of insights from interviews

Insight 1: Leaders bridge across cultural difference starting from their own culture

When discussing changing cultural identities, the leaders interviewed identified several positive factors for engaging with cultural differences, including tolerance (H F 2025) analytical thinking (Müller 2025), resilience (Dik 2025), and vulnerability (Sigg 2025). With the exception of vulnerability, it is notable that these factors are also understood as virtues in the interviewees' respective cultures. By way of example, Dik explained how the resilience that was distilled in him through his Russian upbringing is helpful for his ministry among street people (2025). He contrasts the Russian virtue of resilience with what he describes as German "softness"—an excessive sensitivity arising from affluence—and interprets the former as being more beneficial for working with African migrants who likewise experience tough situations living in Germany (2025). Following this example, ministry leaders from other cultural backgrounds working in German speaking Europe can be at an advantage, as they bring a different set of cultural values with them. A greater diversity of cultural perspectives in ministry teams can potentially result in greater overlap with the cultural values of migrants, many of whom come from countries with very different value sets from those of Germanic countries.

Several interviewees highlighted the reciprocal nature of the cultural exchange. Sigg emphasized how culture learning is a two-way street: leaders should expect to share aspects of their own culture as well as learn from other cultures (2025). For Müller this means maintaining a fine balance between seeing the benefits of the traditional virtues of his own culture but not treating these virtues as absolutes (2025). This reciprocal cultural exchange requires openness, flexibility and vulnerability (Sigg 2025), and can even lead to a deeper understanding of one's own culture—an experience to which Sigg can personally attest (2025). An interesting suggestion raised by Müller was that cultural sensitivity starts with having a personal experience of being a cultural outsider (2025). Having personally lived in a cross-cultural situation enables the Christian leader to engage with cultural difference from a position of sympathetic openness. More than being just a question of technical skills, leaders in multicultural ministry settings require the character traits identified above to help navigate the cultural gap.

Pulling the preceding together, namely that interviewees drew on their own cultural values and that cross-cultural learning involves a two-way interchange from a position of sympathy and openness, it follows from our interviews that leaders start from their existing cultural identities when bridging cultural gaps. The values in a leader's own culture deliver them with valuable tools for adapting to people from other cultures. Starting from these values, leaders can build bridges of understanding—if they avoid absolutizing the standards of their own culture. H F gave an example of this from his time serving in the Middle East. As a German, he brought his strong monochronic time orientation to a context where, by his own admission, schedules never go to plan. Starting from his cultural value of strong time orientation and planning, he overcame this culture difference by planning for the unforeseen (2025). This bridge to the realities of planning and time management in Middle Eastern culture started from within the values of his own culture, but he avoided absolutizing his German conceptions of time management, leading to him being able to adapt to the other culture.

Insight 2: The biggest challenge for communication in multicultural contexts is culture

Across all interviewees, the most frequently mentioned issue was communication. That language and communication is fundamental to intercultural exchange is nothing new. For example, Sigg highlighted the necessity of having competency in a shared language as the precondition for intercultural dialog (2025). What the interviews made clear, however, is that the central issue for communication in multicultural teams is not the lack of language skills per se, but rather it is the cultural differences related to communication that impede clear and efficient communication. For example, Sigg described communication difficulties with a South American and an Angolan colleague who read too much into his intended message (2025). Similarly, Dik described issues when communicating with a Korean team member:

> I sometimes couldn't even understand what he's talking about. I had to work with him, and we would sit in a team meeting, and he would say something and I just had a blank look (Dik 2025).

The above two examples point in particular to issues regarding the different cultural expectations of direct and indirect communication styles. The language of communication was not the issue, rather shared understanding was missed as the Swiss and Russian

directness and the Korean, South American and Angolese indirectness resulted in differing interpretations of the same message.

Having a shared language is, then, no guarantee for effective communication in a multicultural team, and specific strategies are needed for overcoming these culture differences in communication. Alongside differences in direct vs. indirect communication, further dimensions of culture affecting communication mentioned in the interviews include power distance (Müller 2025), direct vs. indirect negative feedback (Sigg 2025), and task vs. relationship orientation (Sigg 2025). Despite the importance of managing these cultural differences in communication, exact strategies for overcoming communication barriers were only lightly touched on by the interviewees. Several principles were identified, however. Sigg identified cultural sensibility and the willingness to put in extra effort to enable real understanding as being important for good intercultural communication (2025). Dik and H F both highlighted the importance of adapting one's communication style to the particular cultures present in the team (Dik 2025; H F 2025). Müller described the cost to the leader of adapting communication style when it goes against one's natural tendencies (2025). Taken together, the interviews highlight the active role that leaders need to take in improving intercultural communication (c.f. Hibbert & Hibbert 2014:77). Although there may not be any universal solutions, as strategies for improving communication depend on the exact cultural makeup of any one multicultural setting, leaders have a key role in developing and implementing strategies to improve communication processes and to remove communication barriers in intercultural contexts.

Insight 3: Counter-cultural servant leadership is required

When talking about leadership styles, several interviewees contrasted the differing expectations that cultures have for either democratic leadership or authoritarian leadership. Müller emphasized the practical benefits of both: multicultural teams bring a diversity of perceptions, sensibilities and creative ideas (implying a democratic process) which can be helpful in complex situations, but a hierarchy works better in a crisis (2025). H F argued that we shouldn't be assuming the leadership style of any one culture, but rather we should be striving for a Kingdom of God leadership style. For him, Kingdom of God leadership is neither democratic nor authoritarian, but is rather characterized by servant leadership (H F 2025). Dik contrasted the German democratic style of leadership with the African authoritarian leadership and ultimately rejected both (2025). From his

experience of planting a multicultural church he saw how democratic leadership following culturally German leadership assumptions simply didn't work in a multicultural setting. Likewise, he critiqued the extremely authoritarian leadership styles that some Arab and African migrants bring with them to Germany as lacking accountability, which ultimately leads to power abuses. He sees the Bible as teaching a middle way where God-ordained leaders inhabit a clear hierarchy based on calling but where the power implications of this hierarchy are balanced out by modelling servant leadership (2025). This, then, forms a middle path between democratic and authoritarian leadership that corrects the weaknesses of both:

> I would say that this is very effective because it transforms the German fear of hierarchies, and the democratic thing doesn't work. Someone must lead and make decisions. But it also subverts the kind of authoritarian cultures from Africa or the Middle East ... they don't expect that we as leaders will serve them (Dik 2025).

Following this model, no one culture is taken as being normative for leadership, but every culture is challenged by the counter-cultural nature of servant leadership. Leadership is based on God's calling and anointing (Dik 2025), which implies a clear hierarchy, but the nature of the hierarchy is turned on its head as leaders model being servants.

3.2 Discussion of insights with the literature

Our interviews demonstrated that cultural issues are prevalent in multicultural leadership. Multicultural leadership theory is therefore needed to help navigate these issues. Hibbert and Hibbert reject the notion of a normative Christian culture and instead see a cultural plurality in Christian expression (2014:58). Similarly, Plueddemann sees every culture both as being affected by fallen human nature and having the innate capacity to reflect the image of God (2009:65-66). He advocates for a model of multicultural leadership based on Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership model but extends it to account for team members' different cultural expectations of leadership (:153). For Plueddemann, the skilled intercultural leader knows how to adapt his or her leadership style to match the cultural expectations of their followers, analogous to how a leader matches their leadership behavior to the situation of the follower in the situational leadership model (Northouse 2016:93-94). Hibbert and Hibbert advocate for a similar approach where multicultural leaders prioritize supportive leadership intervention—i.e. enhancing team connections and communication—rather than directive leadership intervention (2014:15-17; c.f. Northouse 2016:94-95). This multicultural situational

leadership model proposed by Plueddemann can help leaders to navigate cultural differences when leading multicultural teams.

The interview data revealed some of the tensions that exist in multicultural leadership with regards to hierarchical vs. democratic leadership styles. One interviewee suggested that democratic Germans needed to adapt more to hierarchical leadership in multicultural situations. It should be noted, however, that even across German speaking Europe there are notable differences in orientation. In the business world, traditional German multinational companies tend to have rigid hierarchies, whereas smaller German family-owned companies value more participative leadership structures (Nagel 2018:92). This German ambivalence for strong hierarchy conflicts with the notion that German leadership is democratic and not hierarchical, and points to situational factors being at play.[4] By contrast, Swiss leadership demonstrates a greater commitment to democratic institutions, despite Switzerland exhibiting more multiculturalism (Lewis 2006:238). Austria, on the other hand, tolerates a more autocratic and authoritarian leadership style, despite (or perhaps because of) being a country with a history of leading a multicultural empire (:233-234). It is clear, then, that there is no universal preference for democratic leadership structures over and against hierarchical leadership structures in German speaking Europe. What appeared promising in connection to this dynamic, however, was the discussion in the data of servant leadership.

The counter-cultural nature of servant leadership emerged strongly from the interview data as being counter-cultural both to democratic and to hierarchical cultures. Lidstone argues that hierarchical cultures shouldn't adopt a Western democratic model of leadership (2019:77). For him, servant leadership in hierarchical cultures means that the leader understands his or her authority as coming from God but that leaders must lay no personal claim to their authority as leaders nor draw personal benefit from it (:78-79). Lidstone also criticizes Western corporate leadership styles that emphasize the goal of leadership as achieving the personal vision of the leader (:83). In a Western context, servant leadership therefore rejects the command-and-control rhetoric of earlier "Controller" leadership styles that see people as just another resource at the leader's disposal (Western & Garcia 2018:193). Plueddemann sees the central role of the servant leader

[4] For example, are flatter organizational structures expected in the context of small Christian ministries and organizations in Germany, but stronger hierarchies tolerated in large businesses and institutions?

as developing others (2009:164). He considers developing the leadership potential of others, which he calls the gift of leadership (:173), as being a fundamental part of fulfilling the Great Commission (:55). Similarly, Hibbert and Hibbert see the role of the team leader as "to empower the group to decide and act rather than to direct and decide for it" (2014:90). Hence, servant leadership transforms the leader-follower dynamic—both in Western democratic and in hierarchical cultures—by defining leadership as being focused on others and on the common calling of the group.

4 Part Three: Theological and Spiritual Foundations for Intercultural Ministry

4.1 Summary of insights from interviews

Insight 1: The primacy of Christ and dependence on the Holy Spirit

A central theological conviction that emerged across all four interviews was the priority of Christ as the head of the church and the necessity of dependence on the Holy Spirit, especially in working with multicultural teams. Müller, who has extensive experience both in Switzerland and in Guinea, articulated this most explicitly: "Clearly, Jesus is the head of the church. What that means is that no person should stand in the way—no procedures or structures, no principles, but Jesus himself" (2025). Müller also explained how intercultural contexts intensify this dependence. He repeatedly experienced that people relied on shared cultural mechanisms, but in an intercultural team, those are no longer there. Therefore, in a multicultural setting one is more dependent on the Holy Spirit (2025). He saw this demonstrated, for example, in how six people from different nations planning an event together prayed for 45 minutes, after which they achieved clarity on the event's main theme within minutes (2025).

Dik emphasized a similar trajectory. When he started ministry 14 years ago, he focused on what he did and said. Now, however, his focus is on who he is—his identity in Christ (2025). He concludes, "The most important thing to do is to allow to fill [*sic*] myself with the Holy Spirit. The complexity of the intercultural church made me think this way" (2025). This challenges the Western tendency toward programmatic approaches to ministry. Dik critiqued this tendency, because—at least in his context—he says: "You cannot only learn from the books; the street is something else... The biggest preparation is humility. You have to start from zero" (2025). He recommends the following

approach: "It's very simple: you have to love the person in front of you, as Bonhoeffer said, to see them with the eyes of Christ" (2025).

Insight 2: Christ's example of servant leadership

All four interviewees converged on servant leadership as the biblical model that both critiques and goes beyond cultural norms. For the Christian leader, servant leadership is far more than simply just one approach to leadership among many. Jesus modeled servant leadership in his earthly ministry, thereby setting the standard of what Christian leadership is to be. Dik drew attention to how the gospels portrayal of Jesus's servant leadership often cuts across our culturally conditioned interpretation of servant leadership:

> Jesus accepted to be worshiped and also washed the feet of the apostles. If we follow his example, we will not be fitted in a culture [*sic*] but will be prepared to be home in more cultures (Dik 2025).

Dik demonstrated how Jesus carefully nuanced his leadership so that it neither capitulated to cultural norms nor simply merged different approaches—rather it was truly transformational and challenged his disciples to think about leadership differently. Thus, for the Christian leader, leadership is not solely a question of methods, but it intersects with their spiritual identity as a follower of Jesus.

This faith dimension of Christian leadership practice eclipses that of the leader's own cultural identity. H F recounted his desire to lead out of identification with the Kingdom of God:

> We don't want to adopt the leadership style of any particular culture, but rather we want a Kingdom of God leadership style, which is servant leadership. We want to promote the culture of the Kingdom of God and not just any culture (H F 2025).

Accordingly, the follower of Jesus leads from a position of cultural humility that refuses to idolize their own culture. All cultures are welcome in the Kingdom of God, but all cultures are equally transformed through discipleship to Jesus. For the Christian leader, true leadership starts and ends with emulating the example of Christ.

Insight 3: The gospel for all people and reconciliation

Sigg grounded multicultural ministry in the universal scope of the gospel: "The gospel is for all people. Jesus is not a special possession of only one culture or ethnicity, but for all people and languages. This is an enriching experience" (2025). Sigg described himself as a "translator" or "bridge-builder"—not translating language but translating between cultures or building bridges between cultures. He emphasized that bridge-

building must be bilateral: “This should come from both sides, not just from one” (2025). Sigg also emphasized the central role of reconciliation:

> Fundamentally, we encounter each other in the context of reconciliation. God has reconciled us with himself; reconciliation is also a central aspect of intercultural encounter … We should not encounter each other in combat mode, but as peacemakers and ambassadors of reconciliation (Sigg 2025).

It is very important to him that people meet one another within the context of reconciliation. The Lord has reconciled us to himself, and that is what we want—to meet one another as peacemakers and reconcilers, not as combatants (Sigg 2025). H F emphasized a practical side of reconciliation: “The church must be characterized by God's grace: receiving grace and passing grace on to others” (2025). This means being ready to be hurt by others and yet being willing to forgive them—a practical means of passing on grace.

Insight 4: Worship and the nature of diverse churches

Dik provided theological reflection on intercultural worship. When asked about creating safe spaces for intercultural dialog, he rejected the terminology:

> I don’t like this term [safe spaces] … I believe the only truly safe space will be in the presence of God in heaven. Until then, nothing is safe. Everything is dangerous. It's gonna kill us. And only Jesus saves us. He is the safe place" (Dik 2025).

Instead, Dik sees a focus on Jesus and on worship as being the space for open and vulnerable intercultural dialog (2025). Worship, which is the “total self abandonment in response to God's grace” (Dik 2025), becomes the central point where the culturally diverse church meets together. Indeed, the diverse church has the potential to model biblical worship in a unique way:

> Being a diverse church is a picture of what we see in God's Kingdom. Diverse church reflects our sinfulness much more. You cannot ride on your own culture very far. You need Jesus in diversity (Dik 2025).

Hence diversity exposes our limitations and our sin in ways that monocultural contexts can hide. In multicultural churches, the shared lordship of Jesus comes clearly into the foreground because, without having a shared culture “there is not much that binds you together” apart from Jesus (Dik 2025).

4.2 Discussion of insights with the literature

The interview data reveals that, when considering how the Bible informs Christian leadership, biblical principles function not merely as abstract ideals but as practical tools for navigating cultural differences in leadership. This aligns with Lingenfelter's

incarnational model (2003:11-12), which emphasizes that effective cross-cultural leadership requires leaders to examine their own cultural values in light of Scripture and to distinguish between biblical non-negotiables and cultural preferences. A key biblical leadership principle that the interviewees touched on is "cross-cultural servanthood", which Elmer defines as a posture of humility that places Christ's example at the center (2006:21-22). Dik's emphasis on humility and "total self abandonment in response to God's grace" (2025) embodies this servant leadership attitude. Where the interviews go beyond Elmer's framework, however, is by showing how servant leadership critiques multiple cultural approaches simultaneously—it transforms both German individualism and African hierarchy.

Hibbert and Hibbert emphasize shared spiritual values as the foundation for team unity (2014:67-68). The interview data confirms this, particularly in Müller's observation that, when cultural mechanisms are removed, "you are more dependent on the Holy Spirit" (2025). Dik asserts that "there is not much that holds people from different cultures together apart from Jesus" (2025). Hence, Christ himself must be the unifying center when cultural common ground is limited.

With reference to the theological significance of diversity, the interviews reveal that intercultural churches are not merely pragmatic responses to demographic changes but rather they carry inherent theological value. Dik's insight that "diverse church reflects our sinfulness much more" (2025) carries the implication that monocultural churches can mask dependence on shared cultural mechanisms rather than on Christ. Hiebert's concept of critical contextualization is relevant here (2009:21-23). Leaders in multicultural churches are engaged in what Hiebert calls a process of "hermeneutical community"—bringing multiple cultural perspectives into dialogue under Scripture's authority to discern which practices are biblically faithful and contextually appropriate (2009:21-23). Sigg uses the language of "translator" or "bridge-builder" to describe this mediating role (2025). The theological principle that the gospel is for all people has profound implications: if Christ is not the possession of any single culture, then no cultural model of leadership can claim exclusive biblical authority. This supports Plueddemann's argument (2009:129-130, 152-153) that effective cross-cultural leadership requires a both/and approach that honors diverse cultural expressions while maintaining biblical non-negotiables.

The interviewees' emphasis on spiritual authority challenges both Western egalitarian assumptions and non-Western hierarchical traditions. Dik's approach to leadership reflects the New Testament pattern where authority is granted based on spiritual maturity and not based on cultural status. His practice of accountability—e.g. by encouraging people to go over his head—creates a structure that honors both authority and mutuality, consistent with Laniak's exploration of pastoral leadership (2006:21-23,284). H F's vision of "Kingdom of God culture" rather than prioritizing any particular human culture represents sophisticated theological thinking. This moves beyond contextualization and extraction to transformation—bringing all cultures under Christ's lordship. This allows leaders to honor cultural diversity while maintaining theological conviction.

The interviewees' emphasis on grace and reconciliation reflects deep conviction about the gospel's nature. H F's insistence that "the church must be marked by grace" (2025) recognizes that intercultural contexts will inevitably produce misunderstandings requiring gospel resources to navigate. This aligns with the New Testament vision of the church as a reconciled and reconciling community. Sigg's point that bridge-building "should come from both sides" (2025) reflects Paul's vision in Ephesians 2-3 of Jews and Gentiles reconciled into one new humanity in Christ. Paul's treatment of the Jew-Gentile conflict provides a biblical paradigm for contemporary intercultural ministry. Sigg noted that "the Lord has reconciled us with him" (2025). Vertical reconciliation with God therefore becomes the foundation for horizontal reconciliation across cultural boundaries.

5 Part Four: Building Bridges and Fostering Mutual Transformation

5.1 Summary of insights from interviews

Insight 1: Intercultural settings have great potential for conflict but leaders have many options

The interviewees agreed that the root of conflicts in intercultural ministries or church teams tends to be related to communication. Whether it is different communication styles (Müller 2025), linguistic challenges (especially cultural aspects), poor communication (H F 2025), or no communication at all (Dik 2025), what all these aspects have in common is that they occur very frequently and regularly. In effective teams, it is essential to be able to communicate with each other well, even across significant personality

differences, which can be a hurdle in themselves. Diverse cultural backgrounds add another complicating factor to this equation.

Dik identified a fundamental challenge in connection with communication, namely whether one can identify the conflict at all. What is the conflict? What is the real core issue? He often found that most people were aware of a certain tension in the air but the exact problem proved opaque, especially for the leader (2025). Müller recognized the cause of this to be the cultural tension between direct and indirect communication, which in turn is closely linked to a person's background, whether they come from a high-context or a low-context culture (2025).

Another element was found to be ethnocentrism, or the “assumption that one's own way is better or more normal” than all others (Müller 2025). Ethnocentrism is also expressed, among other things, in the way faith is lived, e.g. in different cultures’ styles of piety or worship. Problems arise when different approaches to faith are judged disparagingly, leading to tension, distance, or mistrust (Sigg 2025). Dik gave the example of a former Muslim of African origin who became angry every time someone stood up during the service, made a cup of tea in the tea corner, and sat down again. In conversation with him it became clear that the African believer associated this behaviour with a lack of respect for the authority of God. He had the impression that Christians in Germany did not understand who God really was that they were worshipping. Thus, his former religious background is mixed with his image of God, and cultural aspects were clashing with an unsuspecting German street church culture. Finding a compromise to these issues is not so easy. Dik says: “Don't try to make everybody happy. It never works” (2025).

Sigg saw different attitudes among people with a migration background in Europe. While some are willing to “assimilate and embrace change, others want to preserve their own culture” (2025). Sigg observes that this also leads to “tensions between progressive and conservative forces” within the ethnic communities that exhibit these diverging attitudes (2025). Müller identified a type of conflict that arises when both sides of a cultural divide wait for the other to take the initiative. Who will make the first move? It is this expectation that the other group will take the initiative which leads to frustration and isolation in the long term (2025).

There was unanimous agreement among all interviewees as to what the role of the leader consists of. He must be a gifted communicator in the truest sense of the word,

filled with the wisdom of God (Dik 2025). Sigg described him as a “translator”, not only idiomatically, but also culturally, and in terms of content and not just of words (2025). The leader's role is to understand and address conflict (Dik 2025), always talk to both sides (H F 2025), to point out the different cultural influences (Sigg 2025), and, if necessary, to explain the other side's perspective (Müller 2025).

The leader must also ask themselves in what context they should act: in individual conversations or in group sessions (Dik 2025). In a group setting, Müller saw it as the leader's responsibility to “motivate particularly reserved individuals to express themselves” (2025). H F wanted conflicts to be resolved as quickly as possible—but without appearing too “German” in his approach (2025). Likewise, Dik cited time as a decisive factor (2025). In his opinion, the leader should take on the role of “space creator” to meet at regular intervals and spend time together. From an intercultural perspective, much more can be achieved in such “free” moments than when everything is planned and efficiently timed (Dik 2025).

Insight 2: Close to Jesus' heart is the safest space to talk about cultural misunderstandings.

When talking about safe spaces where cultural misunderstandings can be discussed, the interviewees explained various approaches, both in terms of content or basic philosophy and in terms of formal aspects. Regarding the former, H F saw grace as the most important factor: “The church must be characterized by God's grace: receiving grace and passing grace on to others” (2025). To this Dik added the presence of Jesus. Focusing on Jesus and worshipping him is the only “safe space” for talking about differences, because only there are we loved, forgiven, and restored (2025). Sigg and Müller spoke about the formal aspects such as showing genuine interest, being willing to learn, and the relaxing effect of humour (Müller 2025). Shared meals in a warm table fellowship and shared communion celebrations could act as catalysts for safely and respectfully resolving cultural differences of opinion (Sigg 2025). In certain constellations, it may be useful to engage a mediator to create such safe spaces (Müller 2025).

Insight 3: Intercultural ministry can be part of transformation into the image of Christ

Dik explained how he sees the impact of intercultural ministry on both leaders and followers:

> I think any church where different people come together—where real encounters between sinful people happen—either destroys you, drives you into cynicism, or pushes you into a more intimate relationship with Jesus and moves you toward worship...so it's either you walk away disillusioned—and I've seen people who reacted in this way—or you will be transformed (Dik 2025).

It was moving to hear the testimonies that the interviewees shared with us. They included intensely felt dependence on the Holy Spirit (Müller 2025; Dik 2025) or deepening understanding of oneself in one's own cultural context and the associated reflection on what this means for working with others (Sigg 2025; H F 2025). They demonstrated that intercultural ministry can be an integral part of the spiritual maturation of a leader. Other values that were illuminated included consensus orientation (Müller, 2025), serenity in dealing with differences (Sigg 2025), broadening horizons, tolerance, and openness to new things (H F 2025).

Dik reported on the transformative effect of his culturally and ethnically heterogeneous street church. In so many facets there lies the opportunity to reflect God's kingdom in a very raw and authentic way: “The diverse church also reflects our sinfulness much more immediately than a homogeneous church because if people are like you, you can hide things more easily” (2025). When everyone is very similar theologically and culturally, it acts like social glue that holds everything together. In contrast, these mechanisms cannot be relied upon in a more diverse context. Jesus must be the one who brings different people together; He is the only reason they meet (Dik 2025). Sigg also sees reconciliation as an inherent aspect of intercultural ministry. For him, reconciliation with God and reconciliation with one another is a central component of intercultural encounter (2025).

5.2 Discussion of insights with the literature

Dik points out that conflict often goes unaddressed in multicultural settings and that it is important for leaders to recognize it immediately and guide the resolution process (2025). This is one of the five core competencies of a leader of a multicultural team (Hibbert & Hibbert 2014:139). “Confronting people is difficult, but the leader needs to do it or else the team and its work suffer” (Hibbert & Hibbert 2014:188). If conflict is not addressed quickly, the anxiety of a few can spread through the group or “system” through reactivity (Cuss 2019:101). Hübner says leaders should display an attitude of “I want to talk and I want to understand” to signal that they recognize the tension and are ready to act (2001:157-158). To combat future conflict avoidance, leaders can also

reframe conflict in their church as “an opportunity for growth and development” (Hibbert & Hibbert 2014:88).

The leader must learn to act as a cultural “translator” (Sigg 2025), which is especially important in multicultural settings because of the “massive mismatches between the meaning frameworks of different cultures” (Hibbert & Hibbert 2014:26). Translating begins with understanding—not only the conflict itself—but mainly the other people involved, their culture, and even their generation (Elmer 2006:129).

Understanding is a challenge when intercultural communication is difficult (Müller 2025). In the case of conflicts between high-context and low-context cultures, for example, where communication is fundamentally different, one solution is to help both sides learn what those differences are and to agree on a process that is as context-free as possible (Meyer 2014:50, 66).

Listening is one of the most important skills of a leader when working through conflict, as “it honors the person speaking” and it signals that one is “willing to be taught” (Elmer 2006:122). Müller emphasized the importance of participation from each person (2025), and Hibbert and Hibbert agree that a leader should help every team member fully participate in conflict resolution (2014:140).

When creating a safe space for communication, listening, and understanding, Dik emphasized that being in the presence of Jesus was the only truly safe space. Platenga agrees that prayer and worship have the greatest unifying effect on the multicultural team (2014:87-88). Furthermore, Elmer states that it is also possible for a leader to create a safe space around him or her by practicing openness, “the ability to welcome people into your presence and make them feel safe” (2006:39). When a leader practices incarnational ministry, there is a safe space around him because Jesus is present.

H F saw grace as a central aspect to conflict transformation, both “receiving grace and giving grace to others” (2025). This is the best way to combat ethnocentrism in the multicultural church. Leaders must promote “thinking well of others and giving them the benefit of the doubt” and learning through communication rather than making assumptions (Hibbert & Hibbert 2014:84). Cuss also agrees with the need for the leader to receive grace, which gives him the freedom to admit his own mistakes openly. This is important—not only as an example to others—but also to “repair the damage, rather than avoid or minimize it” (2019:135).

Dik expressed how people in multicultural churches have more difficulty hiding their sins. Cuss writes that conflicts expose self-reliance (2019:18), and since multicultural churches tend to have more conflicts due to cultural misunderstandings, it supports the idea that multicultural churches must become more fully reliant on Christ if they are to survive. In a world in which cultures are often at war, a maturing multicultural church can be a glimpse into God's Kingdom where the "unity of Christ is…expressed in mutual love and respect" (Hibbert & Hibbert 2014:58) and servanthood is not forced but instead a lifestyle—a natural outflowing of the centrality of Christ (Elmer 2006:22).

6 Concluding Summary

In the preceding four sections we have examined four key themes around leadership in multicultural contexts by interviewing four Church and ministry leaders in German-speaking Europe. Insights derived from the interview data were discussed together with intercultural leadership literature. Several cogent motifs crystalized throughout the investigation, with some motifs recurring across multiple thematic areas. These guiding motifs will now be briefly summarized.

Firstly, our investigation highlights how there are real needs in German-speaking Europe for churches and ministries to engage positively with the new multicultural reality. As the interview data has made apparent, contexts of multiculturalism prove to be minefields of reciprocal misunderstandings and relational breakdown, but the deciding factor is a willingness to engage across cultural divides based on a theological conviction that all cultures are joined at the lordship of Christ. The many anecdotes of real struggles and genuine fellowship in multicultural Christian contexts shared by our interview partners demonstrate that it is more important to *be* multicultural church than it is to first carefully strategize the *how* of multicultural church. More than ever, holding up a multicultural vision for the Church is a key task for current Christian leaders who wish to take the message of both vertical and horizontal reconciliation in Christ seriously.

Related to this is the practice of intercultural leadership, which is decisive for healthy multicultural communities. Our investigation revealed that, due to the sheer diversity of cultures, conventional training in skills for intercultural ministry is of surprisingly little value and is no substitute for learning by doing. Cross-cultural knowledge and skills are certainly important, but solid biblical values and principles for leadership drawn from scripture are more useful in helping to navigate the unexplored terrain of

multicultural church and ministry. A model of multicultural leadership such as that proposed by Plueddemann (2009:154) may also help the intercultural leader as an orientation guide. Ultimately, what is needed is an ongoing process of intercultural learning that is sustained by the New Testament vision of communities of reconciliation.

Finally, the importance of servant leadership emerged several times throughout our investigation. More than a passing leadership fad (c.f. Northouse 2016:225), servant leadership is a culturally transcendent model of biblical leadership because it is universally counter-cultural: both democratic-consensus style leaders and authoritarian-hierarchic leaders are challenged to bear their authority by serving. Although this investigation focused on servant leadership primarily with regards to power-distance and hierarchies, one wonders how servant leadership universally transforms other dimensions of cultural practice. For example, how does the servant leader overcome the dichotomies of direct vs. indirect and high-context vs. low-context communication that makes intercultural communication so difficult? Should the servant leader prioritize the task or the relationship? The topic of intercultural servant leadership shows great potential for further research.

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8 Appendix

8.1 Interview questions

Theme 1: Understanding the New Cultural Landscape

1. What potentials and / or challenges do you see multiculturalism bringing to the Church in German speaking countries?
2. In your view, how well prepared is Church leadership in German speaking countries for adjusting to the new multi-cultural paradigm of Europe, and what input or equipping do pastors and leadership teams need to embrace the new reality?
3. How do you (or would you) go about understanding the changing cultural makeup of your ministry context? How do you study it or find information about it?

Theme 2: Leadership Identity and Intercultural Adaptation

4. What aspects of your own cultural background have you found most helpful—or most challenging—in intercultural leadership?
5. What kind of leadership structures and dynamics are required for effective leading of multicultural churches?
6. Have you ever had a time when you realized your 'normal' way of leading was actually not good for someone from another culture?

Theme 3: Theological and Spiritual Foundations for Intercultural Ministry

7. How have you seen God's faithfulness as your ministry has become more intercultural? What new opportunities does it present for the Gospel?
8. How do you see God shaping or transforming your understanding of leadership through intercultural ministry experiences?
9. What biblical principles do you consider as normative over and against cultural norms of leadership?

Theme 4: Building Bridges and Fostering Mutual Transformation

10. How do you create safe spaces for open dialogue when cultural misunderstandings arise?
11. In what ways have you seen both yourself and others transformed by working in multicultural teams? In what ways has this happened through conflict?
12. What kind of conflicts does multiculturalism bring to the churches, and what do you see as being the leader's role in relation to it?

8.2 Indication of AI tools as sources/aids

AI-based tool	Use	Reason	Parts concerned
Microsoft CoPilot	Transcribe interviews	Sped up interview transcription process	Direct quotations from interviews (Part One to Four)
ChatGPT	Correct interview transcripts	Removed fill words and corrected grammar	Direct quotations from interviews (Part One to Four)
ChatGPT	Search interview transcripts and written notes	Used to locate specific quotes from interviews and written notes	No direct impact on paper
DeepL	Translate German interview transcripts into English	Made interview transcriptions accessible in English	Direct quotations from interviews (Part One to Four)
DeepL	Grammar checking	Assisted with checking correct English grammar construction	Part Three