



CONVERSION IN GERMANY

An Analysis of Patterns of Diffusion
in Evangelical Church Planting (2010-2020)

Frank R. Liesen



PETER LANG

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Evangelical mission work in Germany has made little inroads to reach secular people with the Good News of Jesus Christ. This book investigates diffusional patterns that enabled three evangelical church plants to guide converts through processes of transformational conversion. Each church plant in this multi-case study represents a salient expression of their correlating missional movement pointing to contemporary trends in German evangelicalism: migrant missions, new Pentecostal churches, and American mission efforts in conjunction with globally active church planting organizations.

Frank R. Liesen is the director of the church planting organization Antiochia Teams in Germany. He holds a PhD in World Christian Studies from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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*To my wonderful wife Terrae and our three children
Luke, Colby, and Emmie.*

Abstract

This dissertation argues that common and unique patterns of diffusion are the causes for the process of transformational conversion across three church plants in Germany. The research findings of this qualitative multi-case study disclose five common diffusional patterns: multi-faceted transmission, caring translation, clear turnaround, deep transformation, and continual retransmission. A total of nineteen common and divergent sub-themes in gospel diffusion add to a rich description of the phenomenon of conversion in relation to each church's ministry.

Chapter 1 introduces the thesis, the pertinent academic literature, and the research approach to identify patterns of diffusion in German church plants. A theological assessment of conversion and diffusion in the New Testament supplements the Diffusional Matrix of Conversion in preparation for the research analysis.

Chapter 2 portrays the historical context of each case study church. This historical perspective enriches the understanding of the local phenomenon of conversion and diffusion by disclosing the missionary activities of each church plant as a salient expression of their correlating evangelical movements: Migrant mission endeavors, new Pentecostal churches, and American mission efforts along with globally active church planting organizations in Germany.

Chapters 3 to 5 delve into a thick description of research findings in each case according to the sequence of the actual field research: Hope Center in Berlin, Gospel Church Munich, and ConnectKirche Erfurt. The analysis of research findings across cases culminates in the cross-case analysis in Chapter 6, which renders an explanation for the primary research question and reveals common and divergent patterns of gospel diffusion. Finally, Chapter 7 comprises the conclusion with relevant implications, potential applications, suggestions for further research, and a final outlook.

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The proper human response to the divine act of translation is conversion: the opening up of the functioning system of personality, intellect, emotions, relationship to the new meaning, to the expression of Christ.

—Andrew F. Walls

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Tables | 19 |
| Figures | 21 |
| Preface | 23 |
| Abbreviations | 25 |
| Chapter 1 Introduction | 27 |
| Literature Review | 28 |
| Thesis Statement | 41 |
| The Distinctiveness of the Study | 41 |
| Research Questions | 42 |
| Primary Research Question | 42 |
| Research Sub-Questions | 42 |
| Diffusional Matrix of Conversion | 43 |
| Methodology and Delimitation | 45 |
| Definition of Terms | 47 |
| Conversion and Diffusion in the New Testament | 49 |
| Conversion within the Doctrine of Salvation | 49 |
| The Two Basic Components of Conversion | 50 |
| Conversion and the Order of Salvation | 52 |
| Conversion as Process or Point | 53 |
| Conversion and Transmission | 54 |
| Conversion and Transformation | 55 |
| Conclusion | 56 |

- Chapter 2 The Historical Context of Case Study Churches 59**
 - Evangelical Free Churches in Germany 59
 - Impulses and Challenges of Pentecostalism in Germany 62
 - Historical Impulses of Pentecostalism from North America ... 63
 - Historical Highlights of Pentecostalism in Germany 64
 - Pentecostal Church Planting since World War II 68
 - New Pentecostal Church Planting 69
 - Conclusion 71
 - African Migrant Churches and Reverse Mission in Germany ... 71
 - Development of Global Christianity and Reverse Mission 72
 - African Migrants in Germany 74
 - African Migrant Churches in Germany 75
 - Failure of Reverse Mission in Germany 77
 - Potential of Reverse Mission in Germany 78
 - Conclusion 80
 - The History of Redeemer City to City in Germany 80
 - American Mission Efforts in post-World War II Germany 81
 - The Origins of Redeemer City to City 83
 - The Development of Redeemer City to City in Germany 85
 - Conclusion 87
 - Conclusion 88

- Chapter 3 Case Study 1: Hope Center in Berlin 89**
 - Overview of Research at Hope Center 89
 - Local Context of Hope Center 91
 - History of Hope Center 91
 - Observation of a Worship Service 92
 - Transmission 94
 - Encouraged Individual Transmission 95
 - Committed to Corporate Transmission 96

| | |
|--|-----|
| Engaged with Biblical Message | 97 |
| Moved by Spiritual Experiences | 98 |
| Translation | 99 |
| Attracted by Translated Programs | 99 |
| Related through Translated Communication | 100 |
| Drawn by Community Dynamics | 102 |
| (Not) Affected by Pentecostal Translation | 103 |
| Turnaround | 104 |
| Presented Conversion Intelligibly | 104 |
| Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making | 106 |
| Affirmed Point and Process | 107 |
| Connected Conversion and Discipleship | 108 |
| Transformation | 109 |
| Implemented Deep Discipleship | 110 |
| Pursued Scripture Formation | 112 |
| Embraced Social Action | 113 |
| Changed by Pentecostal Application | 114 |
| Retransmission | 116 |
| Communicating the Value of Retransmission | 116 |
| Training in Retransmission | 117 |
| Provided Opportunities for Retransmission | 118 |
| Summary of Diffusional Themes | 120 |
| Transmission | 120 |
| Translation | 120 |
| Turnaround | 120 |
| Transformation | 120 |
| Retransmission | 121 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Chapter 4 Case Study 2: Gospel Church Munich | 123 |
| Overview of Research at Gospel Church Munich | 123 |
| Local Context of Gospel Church Munich | 124 |
| History of Gospel Church Munich | 125 |
| Observation of a Worship Service | 126 |
| Transmission | 126 |
| Encouraged Individual Transmission | 127 |
| Committed to Corporate Transmission | 128 |
| Engaged with Biblical Message | 129 |
| Moved by Spiritual Experiences | 130 |
| Translation | 131 |
| Attracted by Translated Programs | 131 |
| Related through Translated Communication | 133 |
| Drawn by Community Dynamics | 135 |
| Turnaround | 136 |
| Presented Conversion Intelligibly | 137 |
| Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making | 138 |
| Affirmed Point and Process | 140 |
| Connected Conversion and Discipleship | 142 |
| Transformation | 143 |
| Implemented Deep Discipleship | 144 |
| Pursued Scripture Formation | 146 |
| Embraced Social Action | 148 |
| Changed by Spiritual Application | 150 |
| Retransmission | 151 |
| Communicating the Value of Retransmission | 151 |
| Training in Retransmission | 152 |
| Provided Opportunities for Retransmission | 154 |
| Summary of Diffusional Themes | 155 |
| Transmission | 155 |
| Translation | 155 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Turnaround | 155 |
| Transformation | 156 |
| Retransmission | 156 |
| Chapter 5 Case Study 3: ConnectKirche Erfurt | 157 |
| Overview of Research at ConnectKirche Erfurt | 157 |
| Local Context of ConnectKirche Erfurt | 158 |
| History of ConnectKirche Erfurt | 158 |
| Observation of a Worship Service | 160 |
| Transmission | 160 |
| Encouraged Individual Transmission | 161 |
| Committed to Corporate Transmission | 162 |
| Engaged with Biblical Message | 163 |
| Moved by Spiritual Experiences | 164 |
| Translation | 165 |
| Attracted by Translated Programs | 165 |
| Related through Translated Communication | 167 |
| Drawn by Community Dynamics | 169 |
| (Not) Affected by Pentecostal Translation | 170 |
| Turnaround | 171 |
| Presented Conversion Intelligibly | 172 |
| Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making | 173 |
| Affirmed Point and Process | 175 |
| Connected Conversion and Discipleship | 176 |
| Transformation | 178 |
| Implemented Deep Discipleship | 179 |
| Pursued Scripture Formation | 181 |
| Embraced Social Action | 183 |
| Changed by Spiritual or Pentecostal Application | 185 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Retransmission | 186 |
| Communicating the Value of Retransmission | 186 |
| Training in Retransmission | 187 |
| Provided Opportunities for Retransmission | 188 |
| Summary of Diffusional Themes | 190 |
| Transmission | 190 |
| Translation | 190 |
| Turnaround | 191 |
| Transformation | 191 |
| Retransmission | 191 |
| Chapter 6 Cross-case Analysis | 193 |
| Multi-Faceted Transmission: Engaged with the Multi- Faceted Transmission of the Christian Message | 194 |
| Versatile Propagation | 194 |
| Encouraged Individual Transmission | 195 |
| Committed to Corporate Transmission | 196 |
| Biblical Dissemination | 197 |
| Moved by Spiritual Experiences* | 199 |
| Caring Translation: Related through Careful Translation in a Loving Community | 201 |
| Careful Translation | 201 |
| Attracted by Translated Programs | 202 |
| Related through Translated Communication | 204 |
| Loving Community | 207 |
| (Not) Affected by Pentecostal Translation* | 209 |
| Clear Turnaround: Enabled Conversion through Clear Invitations into Discipleship | 210 |
| Clear Invitations | 210 |
| Presented Conversion Intelligibly | 210 |
| Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making | 212 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Explicit Discipleship | 214 |
| Affirmed Point and Process | 214 |
| Connected Conversion and Discipleship | 216 |
| Deep Transformation: Pursued Deep Discipleship with | |
| Biblical Standards and Social Engagement | 218 |
| Deep Discipleship | 218 |
| Implemented Deep Discipleship | 218 |
| Pursued Scripture Formation | 221 |
| Social Engagement | 224 |
| Changed by Spiritual and Pentecostal Application* | 227 |
| Continual Retransmission: Propagated Retransmission | |
| with a Continual Facilitation of Outreach | 229 |
| Continual Propagation | 229 |
| Communicated the Value of Retransmission | 229 |
| Training in Retransmission | 231 |
| Continual Facilitation | 233 |
| Summary | 235 |
| | |
| Chapter 7 Conclusion | 237 |
| Review of Thesis and Research Methodology | 237 |
| Flow of Dissertation | 238 |
| Summary and Implications | 238 |
| Multi-Faceted Transmission | 238 |
| Caring Translation | 239 |
| Clear Turnaround | 240 |
| Deep Transformation | 241 |
| Continual Retransmission | 242 |
| Historical Research and Theological Assessment | 243 |
| Potential Applications | 243 |
| Prospective Research Topics | 245 |
| Outlook | 247 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Appendix 1 Examples of Analytical Schemes | 249 |
| Appendix 2 Diffusional Matrix of Conversion | 251 |
| Appendix 3 Extended Methodology | 253 |
| Appendix 4 Codebook | 273 |
| Appendix 5 Coding Procedure and Overview of Diffusional Patterns | 281 |
| Appendix 6 Letter of Introduction and Church Consent Form | 283 |
| Appendix 7 Consent Forms for All Interviewees | 285 |
| Appendix 8 Interview Questions | 287 |
| Appendix 9.1 Oral History Interview 1 | 289 |
| Appendix 9.2 Oral History Interview 2 | 315 |
| Appendix 9.3 Oral History Interview 3 | 337 |
| Bibliography | 353 |

Tables

| | | |
|---------|--|-----|
| Table 1 | List of converts who participated in interviews at HCB | 90 |
| Table 2 | List of converts who participated in interviews at GCM | 123 |
| Table 3 | List of converts who participated in interviews at CKE | 157 |

Figures

| | | |
|--------|--|-----|
| Fig. 1 | The Diffusional Matrix of Conversion | 44 |
| Fig. 2 | Our Heart Strategic Discipleship Plan at CKE | 179 |
| Fig. 3 | The Matrix for Conversion Processes | 249 |
| Fig. 4 | The Gray Matrix | 250 |

Preface

The motivation to engage in this research project came from my own conversion experience as a teenager. Born and raised in Germany, I had little interest in spiritual matters and believed the EKD, the church I was born into, was the last place to look for God. My radical conversion from no faith to trusting Jesus for my salvation occurred as an exchange student in the United States. Since then, the following question intrigued me: “How can secular Germans find faith even though most have closed the chapter of Christianity and do not consider the Christian faith a viable alternative to finding meaning in life?” Hence, the research question for this dissertation evolved to discover how people in secular Germany can experience transformational conversion. A qualitative study of three evangelical church plants and a limited selection of converts allowed me to trace the stories of conversion and better understand how evangelical churches can “make disciples” despite their adverse context.

The journey of drafting this dissertation after a long break from academia was truly enriching and challenging. Special thanks belong to several people who played a crucial role in helping me succeed in this process. Dr. Paige Patterson made it possible for me to enter the World Christian Studies program through scholarship opportunities. Dr. Keith Eitel inspired me with his deep commitment to academic excellence and the inerrant Scriptures as the ultimate authority in contextualization. My mentor Dr. Schulze spent many hours encouraging me, discussing every step of my research, and intriguing me with new or alternative perspectives. Finally, my wife Terrae, and our good friend Jane DeVries, spent long hours proofreading my dissertation. Thank you to all for their willingness and sacrifice to walk alongside me. *Gott allein sei die Ehre.*

Abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| BEFG | Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden (Federation of Evangelical-Free Churches; German Baptist denomination) |
| BFeG | Bund Freier evangelischer Gemeinden in Deutschland (Federation of Free Evangelical Churches in Germany; German Evangelical-Free Church denomination) |
| BFP | Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden (Federation of Free Pentecostal Churches; German Pentecostal denomination) |
| CKE | ConnectKirche Erfurt (ConnectChurch Erfurt) |
| CtC | Redeemer City to City network |
| CtCE | Redeemer City to City network in Europe |
| DMC | Diffusional Matrix of Conversion |
| EKD | Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (Evangelical Church in Germany; mainline Protestant denomination) |
| GCM | Gospel Church Munich |
| GST | Giessen School of Theology |
| HCB | Hope Center in Berlin |

Chapter 1 Introduction

Present-day Germany is a post-Christian nation. Religious pluralism, a decrease of ethical and religious convictions originating in Christianity, individualism, and secularization describe the cultural influences in Germany.¹ Mainline churches have suffered from a drastic decline in membership for several decades and expect to lose half of their members by 2060.² The average growth of membership in conservative, evangelical denominations has been minimal. The four major evangelical denominations only grew by about 20,000 members from 2002 to 2012. Philipp Bartholomä speaks of a crisis of mission in Germany.³

Evangelical leaders of German denominations yearn to counter this negative missional trend by initiating a church planting movement since the methodology of church planting promises an increase in conversion growth.⁴ This qualitative multi-case study focuses on three evangelical church plants that exhibited an unusually high number of conversions among secular Germans and traces the factors that contributed to the diffusion of the gospel. The study reveals how

-
- 1 Stefan Paas, "Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences," *Mission Studies* 28, no. 1 (2011), 11, <https://doi.org/10.1163/016897811X572168>. The loss of Christian values as a motivational basis and the relegation of Christians to a minority status defines the term post-Christian according to Paas.
 - 2 Elke Schäfer, "Kirchenausritte evangelische und katholische Kirche [Membership loss in the EKD and Catholic Church]," Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland, September 1, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2EzHxF>; Reinhard Bingener, "Studie sieht dramatischen Mitgliederverlust in beiden Kirchen [Study reveals drastic membership loss in both churches]," Frankfurter Allgemeine Inland, last modified May 2, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2VnpyrA>.
 - 3 Philipp F. Bartholomä, "Gibt es eine freikirchliche 'Krise der Mission?' Eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme [Is there an evangelical crisis in mission? A critical assessment]," *Freikirchenforschung* 26 (2017): 218–36.
 - 4 "2018 NC2P-Berlin Gathering Highlights," 2018, video, 7:13, <http://www.nc2p.org/national-stories>. Leaders across denominations met during the National Church Planting Process (NC2P) conference to discuss a church planting movement in Germany from February 5–7, 2018. Paas concludes church planting does aid conversion growth despite his skepticism of the related empirical data in the church growth movement. Stefan Paas, "A Case Study of Church Growth by Church Planting in Germany: Are They Connected?," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 42, no. 1 (November 6, 2017): 40–42, 50–53.

church plants transmitted the Christian faith, translated their ministry to attract secular Germans, facilitated conversion, and moved converts to transformational changes and missional involvement. The diffusional patterns that emerged during the research disclose how and why Germans experienced transformational conversion. Each church represents one of three evangelical movements that bear hope for re-evangelizing secular Europe: migrant mission efforts, globally active church planting organizations, and new Pentecostal churches. Thus, the findings provide critical insights into the present-day phenomenon of gospel diffusion through evangelical church plants in secular Germany and add to the historical account of missions in world Christianity.

Literature Review

This literature review introduces the topic of the diffusion of the gospel and its corresponding themes of transmission, translation, transformation, and retransmission that shape the phenomenon of conversion. The various theological and sociological perspectives from authors in the academic disciplines of World Christian Studies, Missiology, and Theology precede a reflection of literature that bears on these topics in a European, and more specifically, a German context of mission and church planting. The current literature reveals the sparse research on evangelical conversions through church planting efforts in Germany.

Andrew Walls, the Scottish historian who shaped the academic discipline of World Christian Studies, believes that conversion, with its affirmation and reorientation of indigenous cultures, has been vital to the cross-cultural diffusion of Christianity throughout history.⁵ The diffusion of the Christian message across cultures is possible because of the linguistic and conceptual translatability of the gospel, grounded in the original act of translation in the Incarnation of Christ.⁶ Walls describes two principles that are active in this translation process and shape the forming of Christian communities in the indigenizing principle and the pilgrim principle. God accepts converts with their cultural predispositions through the indigenizing principle, causing local expressions to embody faith,

5 Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 66–68, Kindle.

6 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 26–29, 44, 47; Andrew F. Walls, “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1 (January 2004): 4.

while the pilgrim principle challenges a culture with the binding truths of the gospel. Either principle is prone to abuse when Christian communities prevent the canonical Scriptures from challenging culture or impose culturally foreign requirements.⁷

Walls describes conversion as “the opening up of the functioning system of personality, intellect, emotions, relationships to the new meaning, to the expressions of Christ.”⁸ Conversion implies a transformation that utilizes, rather than replaces, pre-existing structures of thought and behavior in a continual turning process. Correspondingly, Christian teachings alter, rather than completely substitute, pre-existing worldviews.⁹ Ideally, converts retain and creatively reapply God’s Word within their cultural context in Christian discipleship. The discipleship of nations in their fundamental structures of cultural identity follows personal conversion in a generational process.¹⁰ Walls concludes that it is too late for revival in his native, post-Christian Scotland but places his hope in basic evangelism through migrant missionaries from the Global South who will provide a critical voice for Western churches in their struggle with syncretism.¹¹ Walls’s perspective raises the question of how, and to what effect, the translation of the gospel positions culture and Scripture in the transformational process of conversion.

Lamin Sanneh, a former professor at Yale Divinity School, together with Andrew Walls, founded the Yale-Edinburgh Group of World Christian Studies. Although both passed away recently, their voices will remain highly influential among scholars of world Christianity. Sanneh notes that translating the Bible in the vernacular languages helped to preserve indigenous cultures and situated Christianity as a culturally pluralistic religion. He promotes a shift in perspective for the spread of Christianity from the missionary entity to the recipients of the Christian message, who continued to spread the gospel and plant indigenous churches.¹²

7 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 7–12, 53–54.

8 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 28.

9 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 28–29; Andrew F. Walls, *Crossing Cultural Frontiers: Studies in the History of World Christianity*, ed. Mark R. Gornik (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 38–42, Google Books.

10 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 35–36, 49–51; Walls, “Converts or Proselytes,” 6.

11 Andrew F. Walls and Cathy Ross, eds., *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 198–99, 203–04; Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 68; Walls, *Crossing Cultural Frontiers*, 63–64.

12 Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed., rev. and expanded, American Society of Missiology Series no. 42 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis

Sanneh welcomes indigenous cultural beliefs to blend with historic Christianity in the translation process by setting the indigenous culture in dialectic tension with Scripture.¹³ His view of conversion illustrates this tension between the formative influences of the Bible and culture. Conversion, according to Sanneh, is the turning of all of humanity “without leaving anything behind” or “replacing what is there with something else.”¹⁴ Sanneh postulates that conversion does not lead to syncretism as long as the Christian message preserves its Christian character in the indigenous context. The tension remains unresolved since genuine Christianity finds its only boundary in the faith community that converts join, continually creating new faith traditions with the potential of “fresh materials being introduced into Scripture.”¹⁵ Further empirical research is necessary to determine whether Walls’s and Sanneh’s view of translation enriches the understanding of Christianity or distorts the gospel. Also, a shift in perspective to the indigenous recipient of the gospel prompts the question of the missionary contribution in the translation process.¹⁶

Philip Jenkins, who popularized the idea of world Christianity with his book *The Next Christendom*, points to the south- and eastward shift in the explosive, demographic growth of Christianity, moving from Europe to Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Jenkins surmises that the typical faith of a Global South Christian affirms a conservative view of biblical convictions and moral

Books, 2009), 16, 51–59, 79–84, 119–22, Google Books; Lamin O. Sanneh, “World Christianity and The New Historiography: History and Global Interconnections,” in *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 94; Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 10–11, 18.

- 13 Lamin O. Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*, Oxford Studies in World Christianity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67–69, Google Books; Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 14; Keith E. Eitel, “World Christianity,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John M. Terry (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), “Critiquing Forward: Time for Western Introspection,” LifeWay.
- 14 Sanneh, *Whose Religion*, 43.
- 15 Sanneh, *Whose Religion*, 59, 43–47. Sanneh also differentiates between conversion as translation, focusing on “indigenous theological inquiry,” or conversion as diffusion, which implies foreign “cultural adaptation,” Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 51–52.
- 16 Jin Hyung Park, “Journey of the Gospel: A Study in the Emergence of World Christianity and the Shift of Christian Historiography in the Last Half of the Twentieth Century” (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2009), 131.

teachings, stresses personal salvation and the supernatural, and maintains a literal approach to Bible interpretation.¹⁷

Jenkins believes the reverse migration of southern Christians consequently bears the potential for a revived, distinctly charismatic type of Christianity in Europe. Signs of indigenous spiritual renewal also oppose the perception that secularism effaced vital forms of Christianity.¹⁸ Even though movements of spiritual vitality remain local occurrences, they provide insights for regions with similar cultural dynamics.¹⁹ The case study about a second-generation African migrant church offers an example of the missionary activity of Christians from the Global South in secular Germany.

Leslie Newbigin, former missionary to India and founder of The Gospel and Our Culture movement in Britain, sought to inspire “a genuinely missionary encounter” with secular Europe and North America.²⁰ He describes Europe as a pagan society born out of the rejection of Christianity, and therefore more resistant to the gospel than pre-Christian societies. Newbigin states that effective mission work in the West is only possible when it challenges a secular worldview that relegates Christianity with its exclusive truth claim into the private sphere of subjective opinions.²¹ Nonetheless, the appeal to an ultimate source of authority cannot challenge culture. Newbigin rejects an inerrant approach to the Bible and believes Christian traditions have continually reshaped its content.²² Instead, the calling of the church in the secular West is to testify to the gospel as universal

17 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1–10, 101–19, Kindle; Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–17.

18 Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 99, 119–25. Jenkins points to the presence of African churches in Germany, the German, evangelistic ProChrist events inspired by the Billy Graham’s crusades, or the cross-denominational charismatic movement, in Philip Jenkins, *Gottes Kontinent? Über die religiöse Krise und die Zukunft von Islam und Christentum* [God’s continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s religious crisis], (Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 72–76, 93–100, 108–21.

19 Jenkins, *Gottes Kontinent*, 362–64.

20 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 1.

21 Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 10–20. On page 19, Newbigin criticizes Protestant churches that withdrew into the private sector willingly and refrain from challenging culture with Christ’s universal claim of truth and authority.

22 Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 45–46, 55–56.

truth publicly and provide credibility to its message by living out the gospel as a community of faith, thus becoming a “hermeneutic of the gospel.”²³

According to Newbigin, the conversion of the whole person must include the conversion of culture. Christian faith that does not affect structures of social life remains superficial.²⁴ Whether Newbigin’s claim that evangelical Christians have erroneously separated these aspects of a private and public call to discipleship remains true in contemporary efforts of church planting calls for empirical exploration.²⁵

David Hesselgrave, “the driving force behind the evangelical study of missions in the 20th century,” proposes an approach to contextualization that faithfully communicates God’s will based on the inerrant Scriptures and translates it effectively into particular cultures.²⁶ Bi-cultural or indigenous believers are most apt for the task of contextualization, allowing for a *cross-fertilization* of contextualization between the communicator and recipient of the gospel.²⁷ Facing a post-modernist spirituality in the West, “true evangelical Christian contextualizers” encourage spiritual formation by a concerted effort of teaching biblical doctrines as propositional truth.²⁸ In contrast to Newbigin, Hesselgrave advocates a view of Christian mission that prioritizes the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of the lost without disregarding the need for social action.²⁹

Hesselgrave points out that the Christian call to conversion with its exclusive truth claim and demand for ethical change was as uncommon during the time of the New Testament as it is in the twenty-first century and hence has not lost

23 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (New York: SPCK Classics, 2014), 227, 126, 191–93, 227–33, Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 56–58.

24 Newbigin, *Pluralistic Society*, 188–89. Newbigin states that a medieval Christendom form of Christianity, controlling all aspects of society, is no longer viable. True discipleship, though, includes both personal faith and a vision for a society shaped by Christian values. Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 124–41.

25 Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 132–33.

26 Kate Shellnutt, “Died: David Hesselgrave, Scholar Who Made Missions Cross-Cultural,” *Christianity Today*, May 22, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2I1kzey>; David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 172–74, 195–96, 199–211.

27 Hesselgrave, *Contextualization*, 174–75, 198, 211.

28 David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 15 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*, ed. Keith E. Eitel, 2nd exp. and upd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018), 240, 239–40.

29 Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 120.

its relevance.³⁰ Conversion calls for an urgent and radical decision of repentance and faith but also requires a process-sensitive approach that acknowledges conversion as a point and process of decision-making. Thus, church leaders need to allow for a time of deliberation by the convert while providing culturally sensitive opportunities for decisions of repentance and belief. Hesselgrave warns against the pressure to produce quick decisions without adequate explanations of faith in a quest for numerical success, resulting in superficial, non-transformational conversions.³¹ Furthermore, new believers face challenges during a period of *dissonance* after conversion when they require diligent follow-up by missionaries.³² Converts affirm their faith through verbal confession, public baptism, and changed behavior.³³ The inclusion in the church and the submission to church authority are vital to the continued growth process of converts.³⁴ The qualitative case studies that track the experience of converts offer probing questions of biblical authority in the translation of the gospel and developmental aspects of conversion.

Paul G. Hiebert, well-known for bringing anthropological insights into the study of missions, affirms Walls's position that the gospel has always existed in a culturally conditioned form yet does not equate with a single cultural expression. All cultures are both good and evil, and Hiebert's proposed model of critical contextualization allows the gospel to relativize all cultures. Critical contextualization starts with the exegesis of humans in their culture and moves to exegete Scripture for specific local issues. A *meta-theology* prevents syncretism by relying on the inspired Bible, the interpretive work of the Holy Spirit, and mutual correction from other churches.³⁵

30 David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 170.

31 Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches*, 167–82; David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 617–30.

32 Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 621.

33 Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches*, 182–87.

34 Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches*, 192–253; Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 622–23.

35 Paul G. Hiebert, "The Gospel in Human Contexts: Changing Perceptions of Contextualization," in *Missionshift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave, Ed Stetzer, and John Mark Terry (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 91–97, Kindle; Paul G Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (July 1987): 109–11.

Unlike Hesselgrave's warning about quick decisions of conversion, Hiebert encourages leaders to refrain from setting high boundaries for conversions and presumes that conversions can begin with little theological understanding. Hiebert perceives justification from sin as the center of a biblical view of salvation but does not clearly define a minimal knowledge for saving faith. Christian leaders avoid preaching a gospel of "cheap grace" by presenting conversion as a directional shift of continual transformation and respectively emphasize the discipleship of believers.³⁶

In his cumulative work *Transforming Worldviews*, a posthumous publication, Hiebert emphatically states that conversion must move beyond a change of behavior and belief to a transformation of worldview.³⁷ *Deep discipling* takes place as a life-long process of cognitive, affective, and evaluative transformation toward a biblical worldview.³⁸ Transformation will only replace old behavior patterns if indigenous Christians share in applying God's Word to their contexts.³⁹ Interviews with converts provide further insights into the respective dynamics of transformation in Germany.

Keith Eitel served as the dean of the Roy Fish School of Evangelism and Mission at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He believes that in the pilgrim and indigenous principles of the cross-cultural transmission of the gospel explicated by Andrew Walls, the authority of Scripture as God's inerrant Word needs to retain its prophetic voice in critiquing culture. Eitel sides with Hesselgrave's evangelical approach to contextualization, stating that "Scripture critiques culture rather than the reverse."⁴⁰ Thus, Eitel represents a conservative, evangelical voice similar to those of Global South Christians and challenges ecumenically oriented scholars like Lamin Sanneh, who give precedence to indigenous sources in the continuous tension between prior religious beliefs and biblical Christianity. Eitel conveys that a dialectic approach between the voices

36 Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 10, 299, 311–12. Hiebert views conversion as a directional process because of the inability to determine genuine conversion based on belief and behavior. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 31–36, 308–10.

37 Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 11–12, 308–16. Hiebert defines worldview as "the cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives." Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 25–26.

38 Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 319, 265–305.

39 Hiebert, "Changing Perceptions," 99; Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," 110.

40 Eitel, "World Christianity," "The Bible. Always a Prophetic Voice."

of Scripture and culture inevitably leads to syncretism.⁴¹ He questions missional or emergent approaches to mission work that bypass biblical authority for the sake of misguided creativity.⁴²

Correspondingly, Eitel reflects on Andrew Walls's description of Christian conversion as "turning what is already there" and surmises that the Bible as the source of authority for the supra-cultural gospel needs to determine the cultural translation process.⁴³ Deep transformation occurs when believers individually and corporately engage in self-theologizing and allow the Bible to control "the dance between text and context."⁴⁴ The same principle applies to ethical lifestyle choices, as believers are free to pursue culturally appropriate solutions yet welcome the voices of missionaries.⁴⁵ Eventually, evangelicals hope that Holy Spirit-inspired transformation will lead to a cross-cultural retransmission of the Christian faith across the globe.⁴⁶ This research study inquires about the extent of self-theologizing by converts and their involvement in local and cross-cultural missions work.

Craig Ott's literature reflects profound insight into the German culture due to his experience as a church planter and church planting consultant in Germany for more than twenty years. Ott broadly summarizes the church's responsibility in the world in the creation mandate, which addresses the care for all of humanity and creation, and the gospel mandate, encapsulated in the Great Commission.⁴⁷

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- 41 Keith E. Eitel, "Updated Reflection on Restrictivism and Inclusivism: Is This Mission Trip Really Necessary," in *Paradigms in Conflict: 15 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*, ed. Keith E. Eitel, 2nd exp. and upd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018), 71–72; Keith E. Eitel, "Challenges of World Christianities: What Is God Doing in Our World?," in *Paradigms in Conflict: 15 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*, ed. Keith E. Eitel, 2nd exp. and upd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018), 332; Keith E. Eitel, "World Christianity," "Critiquing Forward: Time for Western Introspect."
- 42 Keith E. Eitel, "On Becoming Missional: Interacting with Charles Van Engen," in *Missionshift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave, Ed Stetzer, and John Mark Terry (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 34–38, Kindle.
- 43 Eitel, "Challenges," 334, 334–35.
- 44 Eitel, "Challenges," 337, 336–37.
- 45 Keith E. Eitel, "Transcultural Gospel: Crossing Cultural Barriers," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (April 1, 1987): 132–37.
- 46 Eitel, "World Christianity," "History Lives Again: A Fresh Look."
- 47 Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), ch. 6, "The Two Mandates and the Task of Mission," Kindle.

In church planting, Ott encourages leaders to use multiple methods of transmitting the gospel with a well-researched understanding of the target culture but without neglecting prayer, Scripture, and a “clear gospel presentation.”⁴⁸ He sides with Hiebert and Hesselgrave that unless a biblical worldview of creation, sin, and judgment replaces worldviews such as the Western, post-modern worldview, superficial conversions and syncretism will follow.⁴⁹ A progressive path of discipleship will lead to life transformation and participation in the local church.⁵⁰

Ott supposes that most church planters work in their own cultures. The query occurs whether German church planters sufficiently reflect on their Christian sub-culture and the need for translating the gospel into the local culture of their target group.⁵¹ Ott’s view of understanding the context comprehensively moves beyond Hiebert’s focus on culture to include such aspects as religious heritage, historical and current events, or personal circumstances.⁵²

In *Transforming Conversion*, Gordon T. Smith combines Pentecostal, sacramental, and evangelical views of conversion and seeks to generate a theological framework for conversion that is both evangelical and ecumenical. Smith points out a paradigm shift among evangelicals to correct a *revivalist* understanding of conversion that is overly individualistic, offers a cheap version of salvation, and expects people to convert through evangelism instantly. In agreement with authors like Walls and Hiebert, Smith perceives conversion in most people’s lives as a process and “complex development over time.”⁵³ He defines conversion as a “deep turning that in turn establishes a person for growth toward transformation of the whole person.”⁵⁴ An inner component of repentance and an outward component of baptism form the core elements of Christian conversion.⁵⁵

48 Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 223, 185–228, Kindle.

49 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 218–19; Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology*, ch. 11, “Contextualization and Syncretism.”

50 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 228–66.

51 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 186.

52 Ott, *Encountering Theology*, ch. 11, “Culture and Context.”

53 Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 6, 1–16, “Introduction,” Kindle.

54 Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 120.

55 Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 121–25. Smith describes seven aspects of a genuinely Christian conversion on pages 118–19 and in more detail in Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion & Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 157–206.

Therefore, evangelism should always portray a theological vision for the ultimate goal of conversion, namely Christian maturity. Smith delineates that a life in union with Christ advances through transformation to sapiential, vocational, social, and emotional holiness.⁵⁶ Smith's depiction of revivalist conversion practices prompts the question of how German church plants across heterogeneous congregational traditions facilitate conversions and integrate a path toward transformation.

Tim Keller's book *Center Church Deutsch* has gained widespread acceptance across denominational lines in Germany.⁵⁷ Keller promotes an evangelical, gospel-centered approach to church planting in metropolitan centers around the world, harmonizing a conservative, evangelical body of beliefs with a commitment to gospel translation. He proposes relational, churchwide evangelism presuming that conversions in a post-modern context require a process of several smaller steps. Growing faith and understanding of the gospel throughout the believer's life primarily foster spiritual transformation in all areas of life.⁵⁸ Keller also believes that a profound influence on culture is possible through an ecumenical movement of gospel-minded churches.⁵⁹

Although Keller's church planting manual describes a discipleship strategy to facilitate transformation, the ministry of teaching a gospel of grace and forgiveness is central in Keller's theological vision of a balanced church.⁶⁰ The query occurs how the diffusion of the gospel takes place through church plants in Germany that follow Keller's evangelical ministry model.

Stefan Paas, a self-described skeptical proponent of church planting, views two motives for church planting in Europe, the quest for confessional commitments

56 Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 87–110. On page 97, Smith explains that sapiential holiness refers to the wisdom of knowing and obeying God's truth.

57 Philipp Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission: Perspektiven für den freikirchlichen Gemeindebau im nachchristlichen Kontext* [Free church with a mission: Perspectives of church planting for free churches in a post-Christian context], (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019), 235.

58 Timothy Keller, *Center Church Deutsch: Kirche in der Stadt* [Center church Germany: Church in the city], trans. Jutta Schierholz (Gießen: Brunnen, 2017), 40–64, 78–79, 254–65.

59 Keller, *Center Church Deutsch*, 340–49; Timothy Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Handbuch zur urbanen Gemeindegründung* [Handbook for urban church planting], trans. Linda and Matthias Voigt et al., 2nd ed. (Worms: Pulsmedien, 2012), 236–54, 274–86.

60 Keller and Thompson, *Handbuch*, 161–67; Keller, *Center Church Deutsch*, 24–36, 83–88, 274–85.

or the limited focus on conversion growth, as unhelpful in reaching a highly secularized culture. Instead, church plants should become places of innovation to discover new paths of gospel translation.⁶¹ Paas perceives a disconnect between the call of Christian conversion and a secular European culture that lacks the ideological framework to accept the basic truths of the gospel.⁶² Therefore, a revivalist approach to evangelism that presumes too much Christian knowledge and aims at quick conversions hinders a genuine missionary encounter.⁶³

Additionally, Paas deduces from several case studies that foreign missions efforts in Europe, such as charismatic or migrant church plants, have globalizing tendencies that threaten local expressions of Christianity. In contrast to Hesselgrave, Paas believes that mission movements are out of step with the ethical convictions of secular Europeans and need to re-evaluate their emphasis on biblical standards of morality, notably regarding sexuality. Including ecological concerns and social justice in missions would provide greater credibility and more balance in presenting the Christian message.⁶⁴

Furthermore, Paas believes Newbigin's vision of cultural transformation that influenced Tim Keller's church planting initiative bears little potential in post-Christendom Europe. Church planting in a highly secularized environment will more likely produce small churches without significant transformations of culture.⁶⁵ Plausible factors contributing to conversions in church planting are the location of the church plant, hopeful leaders with missionary zeal, and increased evangelism efforts. Paas raises conspicuous questions about the transmission of the gospel through church planting and its anticipated ethical and cultural

61 Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 1–3, 50–53, 179–80, 224–39, Kindle.

62 Stefan Paas, “The Crisis of Mission in Europe: Is There a Way Out?” *Scandinavian Evangelical E-Journal* 3 (2012): 19–22, 30.

63 Stefan Paas, “Mission from Anywhere to Europe: Americans, Africans, and Australians Coming to Amsterdam,” *Mission Studies* 32, no. 1 (2015): 23; Paas, *Church Planting*, 101–05.

64 Paas, “Mission from Anywhere,” 21–26.

65 Paas, *Church Planting*, 96–100, 144; Stefan Paas, “Einführung zur europäischen Ausgabe [Introduction to the European edition],” in *Center Church Deutsch* (Gießen: Brunnen, 2017), 20. Paas' narrow demarcation of Christendom characterized by close “church-state relationships and the use of legal force in religious matters” ended in the eighteenth century. A wider definition entails “massive participation in Christian rites, the propagation of Christian politics, or a Christian culture,” which is still descriptive of some parts of present-day Europe. Paas, “Post-Christian,” 12.

transformation. He laments the lack of data concerning converts with a secular background in European church planting.⁶⁶

Philipp Bartholomä, professor for Practical Theology at the evangelical Giessen School of Theology, received his doctoral degree under Stefan Paas in 2018. Bartholomä's research points to a new, missional ecclesiology for evangelical churches and contains a qualitative case study of two evangelical churches in Germany that exhibited notable conversion growth and contextualization efforts. The evangelization of Germans with a secular background remained a problematic endeavor in both churches.⁶⁷ Bartholomä's study concludes, in harmony with Paas's understanding, that the primary need for evangelical churches in Germany is to couple their missionary zeal with a more diligent and self-reflective pursuit of contextualization. The challenge for evangelical churches needs to shift from reviving nominal Christians to finding a voice among seculars with minimal knowledge and interest in Christianity.⁶⁸ This research study moves beyond the question of how evangelical churches initiate conversions among secular Germans to incorporate inquiries about the causes for a turnaround experience, transformational changes, and retransmission subsequent to conversion.

Bartholomä and Paas critique Keller's perspective of evangelism that starts with a rational change of worldview. They believe a more holistic and process-oriented approach to evangelism is necessary since conversions are primarily emotional, non-rational decisions. Experiential aspects such as the music style in worship services carry significant weight in a conversion process that may take several years of active participation in a church community.⁶⁹

Johannes Zimmermann, together with Anna-Konstanze Schröder, published a research study that addresses the question of how adults experienced conversion in the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), the mainline Protestant church of Germany. More than 450 converts within the EKD received questionnaires to study the conversion process and its relationship to the church based on Lewis Rambo's seven-stage conversion model. Three distinct types of conversion, classified as turn-of-life, discovery, and assurance, reveal that individuals experience

66 Paas, *Church Planting*, 159, 174–78.

67 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 375–542, 456–57, 524.

68 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 149–50, 230–32, 585–86.

69 Stefan Paas and Philipp Bartholomä, "Die Zeitenhabensich geändert: Rahmenbedingungen für freikirchlichen Gemeindeaufbau im nachchristlichen Kontext [Times have changed: Framework for church planting of free churches in the post-Christian context]," in *Center Church Deutsch*, by Timothy Keller (Giessen: Brunnen, 2017), 359–60.

conversion very differently.⁷⁰ Lengthy conversion processes require “missionary patience” by witnessing Christians. Conversions typically lead to more intense prayer habits, stronger convictions of faith, a sense of joy, and a greater commitment to the local church.⁷¹ The study offers a theological description of conversion without making a judgment about the participants’ faith. Sanneh portrays a similar reluctance to question conversion beyond a person’s self-testimony.⁷² Questions arise about the definition of conversion by church planters in this study and the corresponding effect on converts in their transformational process.

Steve Dye conducted a qualitative multi-case study of three migrant churches in Germany that received an unusually high number of native Germans into their congregations. Dye attributes four main factors to the success of church plants in bridging the cultural gap to native Germans: a commitment to cultural adjustment by church planting leaders, the contextualization of ministry, the presence of cultural negotiators, and a *Christ culture* that manifests itself in

70 Anne-Konstanze Schröder, “Die Befragung: Einführung in die Methodik der Studie ‘Wie finden Erwachsene zum Glauben?’ [Introduction to the methodology of the study ‘How do adults find faith?’],” in *Wie finden Erwachsene zum Glauben? Einführung und Ergebnisse der Greifswalder Studie*, ed. Johannes Zimmermann and Anne-Konstanze Schröder, 2nd, rev.exp. ed., Beiträge zu Evangelisation und Gemeindeentwicklung Praxis (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2011), 49–57. Rambo’s seven stages are context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 16–17.

71 Johannes Zimmermann et al., “Zehn Thesen zur Konversion [Ten theses about conversion],” in *Wie finden Erwachsene zum Glauben? Einführung und Ergebnisse der Greifswalder Studie*, ed. Johannes Zimmermann and Anne-Konstanze Schröder, 2nd, rev.exp. ed., Beiträge zu Evangelisation und Gemeindeentwicklung Praxis (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2011), 82, 149–56, 170–76.

72 Johannes Zimmermann, “Theologische Einführung [Theological introduction],” in *Wie finden Erwachsene zum Glauben? Einführung und Ergebnisse der Greifswalder Studie*, ed. Johannes Zimmermann and Anne-Konstanze Schröder, 2nd, rev.exp. ed., Beiträge zu Evangelisation und Gemeindeentwicklung Praxis (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2011), 24; Johannes Zimmermann, “Sind Glaubensveränderungen schon Konversion? Eine kritische Reflexion zum Konversionsbegriff [Are changes of faith already conversion? A critical reflection on the term conversion],” in *Konversion zwischen empirischer Forschung und theologischer Reflexion*, ed. Martin Reppenhagen, Beiträge zu Evangelisation und Gemeindeentwicklung 18 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2012), 105–06; Sanneh, *Whose Religion*, 45–47.

a multi-cultural, spiritual unity.⁷³ The comparison between migrant and native church planters in their efforts of crossing cultural boundaries will shed further light on the dynamics of gospel translation and the conversion of secular Germans. In conclusion, this literature review concerning gospel diffusion in relation to conversion reveals the need for further empirical research about the phenomenon of transformational conversions in German evangelical church plants.

Thesis Statement

This dissertation identifies and analyzes patterns of diffusion resulting in conversions in Germany by comparing and contrasting selected case studies of evangelical church plants that illustrate such patterns (2010–20). The thesis argument is that both common and unique patterns of diffusion are the causes for the process of transformational conversion across case study churches. The general diffusional patterns underlying this qualitative research study consist of transmission, translation, turnaround, designating the point of conversion, transformation, and retransmission.

The Distinctiveness of the Study

The academic disciplines of World Christian Studies, Missiology, Theology, and Sociology provide the foundation for this research study. The perspective of World Christian Studies emphasizes the viewpoint and critical role of indigenous believers and the dynamics of translation in the diffusion of the Christian message. Correspondingly, this research study relies heavily on the testimony of native German converts or those who grew up in secular Germany. The study also integrates translation in the analysis of diffusional patterns in church plants. In comparison to sociological studies of conversion that focus on the process of change in the individual, this study applies the primary strands of World Christian Studies to analyze the conversion process directly related to the missionary entities that advocate the Christian message.⁷⁴ Out of this study

73 Stephen D. Dye, “Mission in the Diaspora: Multicultural Churches in Urban Germany Initiated by Church Planters from the Global South” (PhD diss., Biola University, 2017), 209–33.

74 Lewis Rambo and Steven Bauman, “Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation,” *Pastoral Psychology* 61, no. 5/6 (December 2012): 885–86. Rambo indicates a lack of conversion studies that address the dynamic relationship between advocates, their missionary strategies, and converts.

a proposed Diffusional Matrix of Conversion (DMC) emerges that enables a holistic viewpoint and serves as an analytical map to assess diffusion in relation to the entire conversion process. The DMC discloses the point of conversion or turnaround as the crucial “hinge” for the progression of the Christian faith.⁷⁵ Finally, this study augments the sparse literature of qualitative research concerning the phenomenon of conversion in the context of evangelical church planting in Germany and offers an evangelical, theological perspective.⁷⁶

Research Questions

The research questions guide the process of gathering data during the fieldwork of the case studies. They do not correspond to the interview questions for church leaders and converts but determine the data selection from multiple data sources.⁷⁷

Primary Research Question

What are the contributing factors to conversion in the diffusion of the Christian message through evangelical church plants in Germany?

Research Sub-Questions

How and why did the transmission of the Christian message influence the conversion process?

How and why did the translation of the Christian faith influence the conversion process?

How was conversion defined, facilitated, and experienced, and why did this support the conversion process?

75 Andrew Walls’s literature points to conversion, besides translation, as a “basic hermeneutic key” to understand the historical progression of the Christian movement. William R. Burrows, “Conversion: Individual and Cultural,” in *Understanding World Christianity: The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls*, ed. William R. Burrows, Mark R. Gornik, and Janice A. McLean (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 109, 114.

76 Henri Gooren, “Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 3 (September 2007): 348. Gooren argues for the benefit of theological and missional insights in the study of conversion in the social sciences.

77 Appendix 8 lists the actual interview questions for church leaders and converts.

How and why did conversion lead to the transformation of converts in their cultural context?

How and why did converts continue to propagate their faith, possibly leading to cross-cultural retransmission?

Diffusional Matrix of Conversion

The Diffusional Matrix of Conversion serves as an analytical framework for this multi-case study (see Fig. 1 and a large-scale version in Appendix 2). The matrix presumes conversion as both point and process and relates the diffusional process of the missionary entity to conversion. The sequential ordering and understanding of transmission, translation, transformation, and retransmission as primary aspects of diffusion from a World Christian Studies perspective originate from lectures in the doctoral program by Keith Eitel and Matt Queen at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The author added conversion or turnaround to the diffusional process. The pertinent academic literature provides the research topics, while the fieldwork during case studies has the potential to reveal unexpected caveats of interest in the diffusional process. The matrix follows a logical sequence but does not presume a fixed chronological progression of either the process of diffusion or conversion. For example, translation affects all diffusional areas, and retransmission may occur at an early stage of the conversion process. The DMC highlights the influence of translation on conversion, transformation as part of conversion, and retransmission as an essential element of diffusion. The matrix also designates turnaround or conversion as the pivotal point in the diffusion of the Christian message.

| DIFFUSIONAL PROCESS | TRANSMISSION | TRANSLATION | TURNAROUND | TRANSFORMATION | RETRANSMISSION |
|---|--|--|---|---|---|
| ANALYZING DIFFUSION: RESEARCH TOPICS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local and historical context Individuals Church programs Use of media Biblical content Christian message Leadership motivation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual and cultural context Leadership background Programs and communication Characteristics of community Participation of local converts Biblical authority and cultural influences Global networks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theological understanding of conversion Facilitation of conversion Decision-making Understanding of point and process of conversion Connection between conversion and discipleship Rituals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Church programs Behavior, belief, and worldview changes Relational and cultural changes Religious practices Political views Social action Ecological concerns Dissonance Biblical authority | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivation for retransmission Facilitation and training Local evangelism Cross-cultural missions Social versus gospel focus Verbal and other forms of communication Use of media Challenges to retransmission Global networks |
| INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CONVERTS | How did you hear? | How did you relate and understand? | How did you turn around? | How did you change? | How did you retell and change? |
| INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS | How did you tell? | How did you relate and explain? | How did you facilitate turnaround? | How did you facilitate change? | How did you facilitate retransmission? |
| | | | | | |

Fig. 1. The Diffusional Matrix of Conversion

The Diffusional Matrix differentiates from analytical frameworks created by other scholars who portray the conversion process without relating it necessarily to the missionary entity that advocates conversion.⁷⁸ The Gray Matrix does offer a conversion scheme to diagnose Christian ministries that seek to foster progressive conversion and discipleship.⁷⁹ In contrast to the Gray Matrix, the DMC

78 Reinhold Strähler, for example, created the insightful Matrix for Conversion Processes to describe chronological conversion processes with a view to the affective and cognitive dimensions among Muslims in Kenya (see Appendix 1). Strähler provides an extended discussion of various models that depict conversion as a process. Reinhold Immanuel Strähler, “Coming to Faith in Christ: Case Studies of Muslims in Kenya” (DMiss diss., University of South Africa, 2009), 54–58, 194–201.

79 Frank Gray, “Uses,” The Gray Matrix, accessed January 1, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2Mm8ovz>. Appendix 1 shows the Gray Matrix and its application to people and program processes.

traces the diffusional process and visualizes conversion from the viewpoint of the missionary entity. This approach allows for a natural integration of translation and retransmission in the analytical scheme. The DMC also incorporates an initial list of research topics to help guide the inquiry process. Basic interview questions ensure hearing the voices of both church leaders and converts, thereby strengthening the validity of research findings.⁸⁰

Gospel diffusion and transformational conversion weave together in a dynamic interaction between advocates who spread the gospel and converts who apply the Christian message within their cultural framework. The intertwining arrows at the bottom of the matrix display this interactive process in the experience of Christian mission work.

Methodology and Delimitation

The methodological approach to study patterns of diffusion in three German church plants was a qualitative multi-case study. Case studies help answer the questions of how and why a “real-world phenomenon that has some concrete manifestation” occurs.⁸¹ The selected church plants with substantial contextualization efforts, high conversion growth, and transformative conversions depicted unusual cases in light of the general crisis of contemporary mission work in Germany and supplied the rationale for a case study design.⁸²

Each church plant displayed both similar and divergent characteristics, which ensured the ability to make comparisons between the church plants, draw generalized conclusions based on similarities, and produce substantial results because of their variation. Churches were similar since they reported a considerable

80 Everett Rogers presents a similar five-step model that traces the innovation-decision process: the Knowledge Stage, Persuasion Stage, Decision Stage, Implementation Stage, and Confirmation Stage. On the one hand, the DMC also places the point of decision in the middle of the diffusional process. On the other hand, the DMC differentiates from Rogers’s model in that it integrates the confirmation of conversion in the turnaround and transformation stage, and places retransmission as the final phase of diffusion. Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 5th ed. (New York: Free Press, 2003), 169–94.

81 Robert K. Yin and Donald T. Campbell, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018), 31.

82 Yin and Campbell, *Case Study Research*, 49–62. Appendix 3 supplies an extended description of the methodology that elaborates on the design of the study, sample selection, data analysis, questions of validity and reliability, and the authenticity of conversion narratives.

number of conversions among secular Germans and shared an evangelical theological orientation. The cases exhibited variation because of their theological differences and cultural backgrounds as a migrant church, a German Pentecostal church, and a German non-charismatic church. Each case presents a salient example of missional engagement and offers potential insights into future expressions of the evangelical diffusion of the gospel in Germany. A two-tier sampling strategy within each case included church leaders who were influential in facilitating conversions and converts who reported a transformational conversion. The converts grew up with or without a religious heritage in the secular context of Germany. Several of them were atheists or had a secular predisposition before experiencing a Christian conversion with profound, personal changes. The minimum sample size in each church plant was one church leader and three converts.⁸³ Oral history interviews captured the conversion experience of one individual in each church plant who most exemplified transformational conversion within the specific case.⁸⁴

The binding of the cases, or setting limits for the cases, prevented the research findings from becoming too broad and enabled an in-depth study of each case. The number of three church plants set the limit of research cases. The selection of church plants that started not earlier than the year 2010 posed a time limit and ensured that church plants conducted their ministries in comparable cultural settings.⁸⁵ This qualitative study also limited the research to converts who, in fact, did experience transformational conversion. Research about converts who discontinued discipleship processes or deconverted despite exposure to the same diffusional patterns goes beyond the scope of this study.⁸⁶ Also, this study does

83 Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 95–102. Yin, and Campbell, *Case Study Research*, 55–61; Paas, *Church Planting*, 264–65. In consultation with the supervising professor, the number of interviews in conjunction with several other data sources was sufficient for producing salient conclusions in this qualitative research project. The hesitation to share personal information and the geographical mobility of converts limited the number of additional interviewees during the research phase.

84 Appendices 9.1 to 9.3 contain the translated transcripts for each oral history interview.

85 Pamela Baxter and Susan Jack, “Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers,” *The Qualitative Report* 13, no. 4 (2008): 546–47; Yin and Campbell, *Case Study Research*, 31–32.

86 Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (New York: Oxford

not comprise quantitative research to prove or disprove the effectiveness of specific methodologies to favor numerical conversion growth.

The analysis and management of data took place through a coding procedure. The author adopted Creswell and Poth's model of lean coding and applied it to the data analysis of this multi-case study.⁸⁷ Appendix 4 provides a codebook with the definitions and descriptions of codes that emerged during the research phase. Each code represents a diffusional sub-theme or pattern. Appendix 5 contains an overview of all codes, the coding procedure, and the final five diffusional patterns.

Definition of Terms

Authors across academic disciplines use certain terms with different meanings. The following definitions clarify the meaning and use of critical terms in this research study.

Diffusion refers to the entire process of transmitting and translating the Christian message, resulting in the turnaround and transformation of various peoples and cultures as well as the retransmission of the gospel. Walls applies the term diffusion to the cross-cultural transmission and appropriation of the Christian message.⁸⁸ In the case study analysis, the term pertains to the dynamics of gospel diffusion from Christian sub-cultures into their local, secular contexts and subsequent retransmission.⁸⁹

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a *matrix* as “something within or from which something else originates, develops, or takes form.”⁹⁰ Thus, the DMC

University Press, 2014), 8. Rambo and Farhadian point out new trends in the contemporary study of conversion concerning deconversion or disaffiliation.

87 John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2018), 190–95. The extended methodology in Appendix 3 includes the definition and use of lean coding.

88 Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 2, 10, 30, 34. In comparison, Sanneh signifies a cultural transplantation when he points to mission as diffusion rather than mission as translation. Sanneh, *Translating*, 51–52.

89 Everett Rogers defines diffusion as “the process in which innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system.” Rogers, *Diffusion*, 5. Lewis Rambo discusses the application of Rogers's innovation theory to conversion studies in the chronological adoption process of conversion. Rambo, *Religious Conversion*, 95–97.

90 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “Matrix,” accessed January 2, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3rLNiQI>.

traces the process of Christian conversion that develops within the patterns of gospel diffusion.

Secularism presumes the ability to separate the religious from the public life and entails a non-religious worldview that is “opposed to religious commitments . . . maintaining that this world is all there is; there is no transcendent reality.”⁹¹

Transformation signifies the change of individuals and cultures through conversion and applying the Christian faith to all aspects of the human experience. The term comprises the change of the individual, often referred to as discipleship, but moves beyond personal transformation to its effects on the socio-economic and political context.⁹²

Translation defines the linguistic and conceptual transferal of the Christian faith into a culture.⁹³ In the study of World Christianity, the term highlights the importance of Bible translation and the recipient culture in the translation process. This author uses the terms translation and contextualization interchangeably.

Transmission includes all aspects of communicating the Christian message by missionary entities to the recipient culture. *Retransmission* occurs when local converts begin to share their new faith within their social context and cross-culturally.⁹⁴

The term *turnaround* serves as a synonym for conversion. Christian conversion occurs when a person turns around from sin through repentance to place their faith in Christ for salvation. Conversion may entail a point or a process of decisions and coincides with the spiritual regeneration by God.⁹⁵ The section Conversion and Diffusion in the New Testament offers a detailed, theological description of conversion.

91 Netland, Harold A., “Secularization, Multiple Modernities, and Religion,” in *Against the Tide: Mission Amidst the Global Currents of Secularization*, ed. W. Jay Moon and Craig Ott, Evangelical Missiological Society series no. 27 (Littleton, CO: William Carey Library, 2019), 41.

92 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 8. Walls also speaks about the transformation of Christianity itself through its serial progression across cultures. Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 34.

93 Walls, “Converts or Proselytes?” 4.

94 Eitel, “World Christianity,” “History Lives Again: A Fresh Look.” Eitel uses the term retransmission to imply cross-cultural transmission.

95 Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 310–11; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1989), 904–05, 933–46.

Conversion and Diffusion in the New Testament

The following section offers a biblical understanding of conversion and diffusional themes from an evangelical perspective, which complements the diffusional matrix to guide the analytical process in this research project. An explanation of how conversion fits within the topic of Soteriology in Systematic Theology proceeds a summary of the basic elements of conversion in the New Testament. The order of salvation, conversion as point or process, and conversion in relation to transmission and transformation continue this review of NT teachings on themes relating to conversion and diffusion. Various biblical findings and theological considerations reveal salient points of interest that bear on the praxis of conversion and diffusion in the case study churches.⁹⁶

Conversion within the Doctrine of Salvation

Conversion belongs to the subject of *Soteriology* in Systematic Theology, which addresses the Christian doctrines of the work of salvation as it applies to sinful humankind. Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof summarizes Soteriology as dealing “with the communication of the blessings of salvation to the sinner and his restoration to divine favor and to a life in intimate communion with God.”⁹⁷ The evangelical understanding of conversion rests on the orthodox, Protestant view of salvation, which identifies the fundamental problem of man in a severed relationship with God through sin (Rom 3:23 [HCSB]). Sin also spoiled the human nature, resulting in spiritual death and a constant inclination toward sin, affecting all aspects of life (Rom 3:9-20, Eph 2:1, 5).⁹⁸ Salvation occurs when a person converts, repenting from their sin and placing their faith in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to take away the sin of the world (Rom 3:21-25).

As a result, a Christian believer’s relationship with God changes. *Regeneration*, also called the new birth, coincides with conversion and initiates an essential change in the inclination away from sin toward God’s will (Eph 2:10, 4:23-24). Regeneration represents the subconscious beginning of the Christian life. The

96 Reinhold Strähler supplies a helpful review of theological literature on the nature of conversion comprising conversion in biblical theology, church history, systematic theology, and the order of salvation. Strähler, “Coming to Faith,” 42–51.

97 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 415.

98 Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well*, 20–21. Gordon Smith summarizes the effects of sin as rebellion, bondage, and alienation.

believer receives a judicially righteous standing before God through *justification*. Simultaneously, *adoption* establishes a spiritual and intimate father-child relationship with the convert (Jn 1:12-13, Rom 5:1, 8:15-17). The reception of the Holy Spirit at conversion mediates the so-called *mystical union* between Christ and believers (Eph 1:13, 1. Cor 6:17). *Sanctification*, a life-long change in conformity with God's will, designates the transformational change after conversion (Rom 12:1-2). The Holy Spirit ensures the *perseverance of the saints* throughout their lives until the spiritual nature of the believer is perfected at the point of physical death in *glorification* (Phlm 1:6, Rom 8:29-30).⁹⁹

The Two Basic Components of Conversion

The biblical terms for conversion reveal that conversion consists of the two basic movements of turning away from sin through repentance and turning to God by faith. In the Old Testament, the two Hebrew terms *nacham* and *shuv* denote repentance. *Nacham* can mean to "lament" as an emotion of compassion for others. When *nacham* refers to repentance, it is an emotional response to one's personal character or conduct and more frequently applies to God than to man. In Genesis 6:6-7, "the LORD *regretted* that He had made man on earth." *Shuv* is the most common term for human repentance. The prophets often applied this term to urge Israel to return to God. The term emphasizes a moral separation from sin and entry into fellowship with God. God promises in 2 Chronicles 7:14 that when "My people . . . pray and seek My face, and *turn from* their evil ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land."¹⁰⁰

In the New Testament, three main Greek words denote repentance. The most common term is *metanoeo*. Jesus began his ministry with a call to repentance and ended his ministry by commissioning his disciples to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations (Mt 4:17, Lk 24:46-47). The apostle Paul affirmed the universal need for repentance when he told his Gentile audience in view of God's judgment that "God now commands all people everywhere to *repent*" (Acts 17:30). *Metanoeo* describes a change of mind, which comprises a genuine regret for past sins and a commitment to a changed life. Berkhof points out that *metanoeo* entailed an intellectual component of accepting God's truth in salvation (2 Tm 2:25), a volitional component to turn from self to God consciously (Acts 8:22), and an emotional component of godly sorrow over personal sin (2 Cor 7:10).¹⁰¹

99 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 904–05.

100 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 933, 935–36.

101 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 480–81.

Second in importance to *metanoeo* is the term *epistrepho*, which describes a *turning again* or *turning back*, putting greater emphasis on returning into a relationship with God. Thus, the apostle Peter urges his listeners in Acts 3:19 to “repent and *turn back*, so that your sins may be wiped out.” The final term in the NT is *metameleia*, which may or may not indicate true repentance and translates to *change your mind* or *regret*. *Metameleia* highlights the emotional more than the volitional component of repentance (Mt 21:29, 32, 2 Cor 7:10).¹⁰² Prolific, evangelical author and theologian Millard Erickson points out that the frequent use of the concept of repentance in various cultural settings in the New Testament testifies to the universal importance of repentance as a critical aspect of conversion, thereby counteracting a cheap grace approach of making disciples.¹⁰³ Congruently, John Stott laments that despite the frequent call to repentance by Jesus and the apostles, the concept of turning away from sin is often absent in evangelism for the sake of decisionism. Instead, evangelism needs to “spell out in realistic and concrete terms” the consequences of repentance.¹⁰⁴

Whereas repentance is the negative side of conversion by turning away from sin, placing one’s faith in Christ for salvation is the positive side. Faith plays a critical role in the concept of Christian salvation since by faith, the believer receives justification from sin, which establishes a righteous standing before God.

In the NT, the Greek verb *pisteo* contains two essential aspects of genuine faith. In one sense, faith simply affirms truth. Heb 11:6 sets the baseline of faith by stating that “the one who draws near to Him must *believe* that He exists.” In another sense, *pisteo* moves beyond an affirmation of truth to denote a personal trust in Christ for salvation. Jn 3:16 states that “everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life” (also Jn 1:12, 3:18). Faith that leads to salvation both affirms Christian teachings as truth and relies on the saving work of Christ. Similar to the concept of repentance, Berkhof explains that faith has an intellectual element of positively recognizing the truth of God’s Word, an emotional element of deeply sensing the need for Christ, and a volitional

102 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 482. Eckhard Schnabel explains that in the NT, the imminence of God’s judgment and the coming of God’s kingdom induce repentance. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 227.

103 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 937–38.

104 John R. W. Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, upd. and exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 92.

element of personal trust in Christ as Savior and Lord.¹⁰⁵ New Testament scholar Leon Morris depicts faith in Paul's writings as a "warm personal trust in a living Saviour" and a "transforming attitude," encapsulating the entire Christian life as a life of faith.¹⁰⁶ Thus, individuals receive salvation by placing their faith in Christ and continue in a life-long, transformational process of personal faith called sanctification (Eph 2:8-10, Ro 5:1-2).

Conversion and the Order of Salvation

Since the Reformation, theologians have set the various aspects of soteriology more deliberately in a logical and interrelated order, commonly called *order salutis*. Since the Bible does not provide a specific order of salvation, a considerable variety of viewpoints exists among theological traditions and across various denominations. The contrasting views are most explicit when comparing the Reformed and Arminian approaches to the order of salvation, the former influential in Tim Keller's church planting network City to City, the latter within the Methodist tradition as well as the Pentecostal and charismatic movements.

The Reformed view begins with regeneration, making God the sole and decisive author of genuine conversion. Conversion follows as the human response to God's saving act, only possible through God's prior, effectual calling of the sinner. Conversion, which consists of repentance and faith, naturally leads to the explanation of justification by faith, the adoption of the believer as God's child, and the reception of the Holy Spirit. As the believer enjoys a new relationship with God through adoption, sanctification continues the process of continual change into Christlikeness after conversion. Finally, the Holy Spirit ensures the perseverance and glorification of the believer.

In contrast, the Arminian view emphasizes the ability of man to make a free choice in conversion. God graciously enables man to respond to the call of conversion, but man has the ability to choose or deny that offer. Regeneration follows the human decision in conversion. Respectively, man's responsibility rather than God's sovereign work is the critical factor in the processes of sanctification and the perseverance of the saints.¹⁰⁷ Independent of this controversy, the apostle

105 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 503–06. Similarly, Erickson argues that *pisteo* must entail the affirmation of truth and personal trust. He adds that faith does not contradict but harmonizes with reason and knowledge. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 939–41.

106 Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 263.

107 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 491; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 932–33. Berkhof represents the Reformed view and begins with effectual calling that results in

Paul considered conversion a supernatural work of God, revealing it as a “demonstration of the Spirit and power” (1 Cor 2:4-5, 1 Thes 1:5).¹⁰⁸

Although the doctrinal differences between denominations are less accentuated in present-day evangelicalism, the query occurs whether the divergent emphases of God’s sovereignty and human will in the order of salvation result in differing missional practices.¹⁰⁹ Do churches within the Arminian tradition seek to influence the human will in conversion and sanctification more urgently? Do they use emotional appeals more readily with the potential of human manipulation? In contrast, do Reformed leaders remain too passive in appeals to conversion by only trusting in God’s sovereignty? Do they repress human emotion and rely exclusively on cognitive persuasion?

Conversion as Process or Point

Richard Peace argues that the slow conversion process of Jesus’ apostles in the gospel of Mark and the crisis experience of Paul’s conversion are similar in that they begin with an insight into Christ and self, a turning from sin to Jesus, and a transformation through forgiveness and discipleship (Acts 9:1-19). Peace concludes that they supply two basic, biblical models of instantaneous and gradual Christian conversion. Although theologians debate whether the use of Paul’s conversion as a model is tenable, Peace demonstrates that the biblical testimony affirms gradual processes of conversion.¹¹⁰ John Stott reasons convincingly that conversion may be instantaneous, yet “the Holy Spirit is a

regeneration, followed by conversion. Erickson takes the position that the effectual call leads to conversion, thus producing regeneration. Both authors clarify that this is not a temporal but rather logical sequence. Erickson offers an insightful discussion of predestination and its relation to regeneration and conversion on pages 908–28.

108 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 227, 227–28.

109 “An Assemblies of God Response to Reformed Theology [Position Paper],” Assemblies of God, accessed October 14, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2B8UYKq>.

110 Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 279–81. Smith criticizes Peace for using Paul as model for conversion since Paul’s conversion might also have been more gradual. Typically, conversions are protracted experiences. Smith, *Beginning Well*, 31, 126–29. Similarly, Scot McKnight opposes the use of Paul’s conversion as a model to make way for accepting conversion approaches across ecclesial traditions. Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 23, 1–25.

gentle Spirit; he often takes time to turn people around from self-absorption to Christ.”¹¹¹

Berkhof and Erickson agree that conversion may be gradual in the experience of the convert. However, regeneration, the supernatural work of God in conversion that takes place subconsciously, has a finite beginning and marks a definite starting point of the Christian life. Conversion is “rooted in the work of regeneration.”¹¹² Eckhard Schnabel confirms this understanding of a finite beginning of the Christian life in Paul’s missionary preaching, who presumed that believers had gone through a profound transition as a consequence of conversion.¹¹³ Thus, evangelism requires sensitivity to conversion as a process while maintaining the relevance of a conversion commitment.¹¹⁴

Conversion and Transmission

In Reformed theology, the *external calling* through the preaching of God’s Word precedes the *internal calling* of the convert, effectually leading to regeneration and the human response of conversion. A prominent example of this account is Lydia’s conversion in Acts 16:14, when “the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was spoken by Paul.” Paul preached the gospel to several women. God opened Lydia’s heart to the external call, and the effectual, internal call led to Lydia’s genuine conversion.¹¹⁵ In the early church, the preaching of the gospel, which centered on the redemptive and sacrificial death of Christ on the cross, was the primary method of seeking new converts. Rather than fulfilling the demands of supernatural signs or culturally relevant wisdom, Paul and his co-workers determined to focus only on the task of preaching “Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23, also 1:18, 2:2).¹¹⁶ Based on his extensive research on the mission of

111 Stott and Wright, *Christian Mission*, 92.

112 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 483, 483–85; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 933–35.

113 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 226.

114 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 934–35. Derek Tidball critiques the historical shift in evangelical evangelism to seek instant conversions but supports the expectation of evangelicals to consider conversion as a personal experience rather than a mere process of religious socialization. Peace puts forth various suggestions for process-oriented evangelism. Derek J. Tidball, *Reizwort evangelikal: Entwicklung einer Frömmigkeitsbewegung* [Emotive word evangelical: Development of a movement of piety], ed. Dieter Sackmann, Edition Anker (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1999), 188–91; Peace, *Conversion*, 330–45.

115 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 454.

116 Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1355–59. On page 1356, Schnabel summarizes the content of gospel

the early church, Schnabel deduces that “the oral proclamation of the gospel was a fundamental element of the missionary work of the early church.”¹¹⁷ Paul, as a prolific leader in early Christian mission, also revealed a sincere commitment to the recipient of the message by his willingness to accommodate people from various cultural backgrounds, stating that he was ready to “become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). However, Paul always maintained the integrity of the gospel in missionary proclamation and credited the effectiveness of the Christian message to the work of the Holy Spirit rather than oratory methodology.¹¹⁸

Derek Tidball raises two critical questions in the practice of evangelical preaching. First, he deliberates if the charismatic and Pentecostal movements replaced the centrality of the cross in Christian proclamation with the need for Spirit baptism and with portraying Jesus as conqueror over evil powers rather than Savior from sin. Secondly, Tidball wonders if evangelicals still believe in a call to conversion and the possibility of radical life change or whether the expectation of a slow process of religious, social change has replaced this core component of evangelicalism.¹¹⁹

Conversion and Transformation

After the Reformation, Protestant theologians made a clear distinction between justification and sanctification. Justification referred to the legal, righteous standing before God as a result of regeneration and conversion at the beginning of the Christian life. Sanctification encompassed the lengthy process of continual transformation into conformity with God’s holy character after conversion. At the same time, Protestants affirmed that justification and sanctification were

proclamation in the early church with three main points: “the death and resurrection of Jesus, the identity of Jesus as Messiah and Kyrios and Savior, the expected return of Jesus.” This summary stands in contrast to some contemporary scholars, such as Scot McKnight, who create a meta-narrative of the gospel, thereby sidelining the central gospel content with a message of holistic transformation. Carl Joseph Bradford, “‘Schooling’ the Gospel: An Investigation of British and German Schools of Kerygmatic Interpretation in the Twentieth and Twenty First Centuries” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 116–19, 121–25, 148–51, 157–59.

117 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 34. Leon Morris delineates the NT meaning of the cross as atonement, the substitutionary death of Christ for sinners. Morris, *The Cross*, 364–419.

118 Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1356–62, 1479–81.

119 Tidball, *Reizwort evangelikal*, 179–83, 208–09.

inseparable and that sanctification immediately followed conversion and the reception of the Holy Spirit.¹²⁰

Berkhof elucidates that sanctification challenges believers to two basic actions, which affect the whole person: the abandonment or “putting to death” of the old, sinful life, and the embracing of the new, holy identity in Christ (Col 3:5-11, Gal 2:19-20, 5:16-26). Simultaneously, Scripture portrays sanctification as a supernatural work of God in which the believer co-operates: “For it is God who is working in you, enabling you both to desire and to work out His good purpose” (Phil 2:13, in conjunction with verse 12).¹²¹

The inclusion of converts into Christian fellowships, theological, ethical, and ecclesiological instruction, as well as the encouragement for evangelistic outreach, naturally followed conversion in the early church (Eph 1:1-14, 4:1-16, 4:17-32, 6:15).¹²² Hans Kasdorf explains that a restoration of the vertical relationship with God through reconciliation resulted in the restoration of the horizontal relationships within the new community of the church (2 Cor 5:20, Eph 2:13-16). The communal ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as well as church discipline, bound together the fellowship of believers (Acts 2:38-42).¹²³ Thus, a biblical understanding of conversion always entailed a view toward the total transformation of the individual within a community. In conclusion, conversion “is not an end but a beginning” of a continual transformation into greater Christlikeness (Rom 8:28-29).¹²⁴

Conclusion

The New Testament portrays conversion as a two-fold movement of repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. An evangelical perspective affirms conversion as a supernatural act of God that guides people to a point of personal decision in response to the verbal transmission of the gospel. Conversion often requires

120 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 530.

121 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 532–34.

122 Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1370–79; Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 236–48.

123 Hans Kasdorf, *Christian Conversion in Context* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980), 85–98, 183–91. Evangelical churches, such as Baptist churches, generally perceive baptism and the Lord’s Supper as *ordinances*, in which believers commemorate the blessing of the union with Christ and his sacrificial death. The Catholic church and traditional Protestant churches hold a *sacramental* view, in which the physical acts of baptism and the Lord’s Supper bestow spiritual blessings. Erickson provides a discussion of various views. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1089–105, 1108–23.

124 Smith, *Beginning Well*, 20, 19–23; Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 120.

a preceding process of inquiry and cannot be separated from a life-long commitment to personal transformation within a community. Case study findings disclose whether church plants communicated a biblical understanding of conversion, how they facilitated the point and process of conversion, and why gospel diffusion in these cases generated transformational changes among converts.

Chapter 2 The Historical Context of Case Study Churches

This chapter describes the historical context of the three church plants in this multi-case study by outlining the development of German Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement, the historical background of African migrant churches and their beginnings in Germany, as well as American mission efforts in Germany that have continued with the spread of church planting networks like Redeemer City to City. A brief overview of the history of free churches and evangelicalism in Germany precedes this historical study and supplies the necessary framework to identify all three church plants as evangelical-free churches. Each of the three church plants exemplifies a movement that provides new impetus for evangelical church planting within and beyond their denominational and confessional allegiances.

Evangelical Free Churches in Germany

In Germany, the so-called *Freikirchen* (free churches) developed as an alternative to the mainline Catholic and Protestant churches, predominantly since the mid-nineteenth century. In contrast to the mainline churches, free churches insist on the voluntary principle of personal conversion as the basis for church membership, the separation of church and state and freedom from state control, the priesthood of all believers, and the emphasis on conversion through evangelism and mission.¹²⁵

German free churches fit into three separate categories. *Confessional free churches* developed in the nineteenth century to retain the confessional stands of the mainline Protestant church while seeking freedom from the state. Also, faith as a personal choice aligns denominations such as the Selbstständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche (SELK, Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church) with

125 Philipp Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission: Perspektiven für den freikirchlichen Gemeindebau im nachchristlichen Kontext* [Free church with a mission: Perspectives of church planting for free churches in a post-Christian context] (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019), 19. Erich Geldbach offers an extended description of free church characteristics. Erich Geldbach, *Freikirchen: Erbe, Gestalt und Wirkung* [Free churches: Heritage, form, and impact], 2nd rev. ed., Bensheimer Hefte Heft 70 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 32–107.

all other free churches. Most of the *classical free churches* were planted in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century, though the Mennonites and the Moravian church in this category of free churches trace their origins as far back as the Reformation and the eighteenth century. The majority of free churches in Germany are classical free churches, such as the Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden (BEFG, Federation of Evangelical-Free Churches, the largest German Baptist denomination that includes Brethren churches), the Bund Freier evangelischer Gemeinden (BFEG, Evangelical-Free Churches), and the Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden (BFP, Federation of Free Pentecostal Churches). *New free churches* appeared since the Second World War and in higher numbers since the 1980s, often choosing to either remain independent churches or form separate denominations or networks. Russian-German churches started by German Christian emigrants, who returned from the former Soviet Union after the Cold War, represent the largest group of new free churches with about 100,000 church members. Charismatic and Pentecostal networks such as the Vineyard churches, Calvary Chapels, or Foursquare churches started in the 1980s and give testimony to the continued Anglo-Saxon influence in the development of German free churches. Finally, migrant churches from the Global South add to the present-day variety of new free churches.¹²⁶

Evangelicalism in Germany does not appear until the 1960s as a counter-movement to the rising effects of liberal theology and biblical criticism in the mainline churches. Friedhelm Jung states that the mainline Protestant church EKD rejected the Bible as God's Word, Christ as the Son of God who is worthy of worship, and Christianity as the only path to salvation. Conversely, evangelicals adhered to these orthodox Christian doctrines that mainline Protestant churches discarded as binding teachings. Thus, evangelicalism would not exist without the rise of biblical criticism. Jung points out that evangelicalism in Germany has adherents across denominations in the EKD, the free churches, and even the Catholic church, representing a "trans-denominational renewal movement" that contributes to a "recollection of the biblical heritage and spiritual renewal" in their denominations.¹²⁷ David Bebbington's quadrilateral definition describes

126 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 26–30, 58–61. Bartholomä points to the direct Anglo-Saxon influence on the development of continental, European free churches, as exemplified in the Methodist churches. The indigenizing forces of Anabaptism and Pietism, according to Bartholomä, counterweighed the Anglo-Saxon influence to prevent German free churches from becoming an "imported product."

127 Friedhelm Jung, "Was ist evangelikal? [What is evangelical?]," *Biblisches Glauben. Denken. Leben.*, no. 75 (May 2007): 2. Although Jung's statement may apply to

the four common qualities of evangelicalism in its historical development as an emphasis of the need for personal conversion (*conversionism*), the expression of the gospel through effort (*activism*), the Bible as the ultimate authority (*biblicism*), and the importance of the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross (*crucicentrism*).¹²⁸

Most of the German free churches consider themselves evangelical, although liberal theological tendencies, for example, within the Baptist denomination (BEFG) and the Methodist church, make the term evangelical and its associations unacceptable to parts of those denominations.¹²⁹ Charismatic and Pentecostal churches like ConnectKirche Erfurt also fit the description as evangelical churches due to their agreement with theological statements by such entities as the German Evangelical Alliance, which represents a majority of free church denominations in Germany.¹³⁰ Migrant churches from the Global South find their heritage in the modern missionary movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as in the Pentecostal and charismatic renewals in the home countries of migrant Christians. Hence, migrant churches, such as Hope Center in Berlin, tend to hold theologically conservative positions that also harmonize with evangelicalism.¹³¹ All churches within the Redeemer City to City

large parts of the denomination, the EKD officially still adheres to central ecclesial confessions such as the Augsburg confession of faith. Philip Melancthon, “The Confession of Faith,” EKD, accessed October 29, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3CsUop9>.

- 128 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. (London: Routledge, 1988), 13–45. Jung’s definition of evangelicalism includes the eschatological expectation of Christ’s return in contrast to a this-worldly perspective in nominal Christianity. Friedhelm Jung, *Die deutsche evangelikale Bewegung: Grundlinien ihrer Geschichte und Theologie* [The German evangelical movement: Baselines of its history and theology], 4th ed., Biblia et symbiotica 8 (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2011), 26.
- 129 Jung, *evangelikale Bewegung*, 208–10, footnote 15. Jung points to the liberal position of the Methodist church concerning their view of Scripture as early as the 1970s. Erich Geldbach detects a mainline-ecumenical stream within the German Baptists (BEFG). “Was manche Baptisten von Evangelikalen unterscheidet [How some Baptists differentiate from evangelicals],” Idea, Idea e.V., March 15, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2kD5N35>.
- 130 Jung, “Was ist evangelikal?,” 5. Jung divides the German evangelical movement into four categories: Alliance-Evangelicals represented by the Evangelical Alliance, Confessional Evangelicals within the EKD, Pentecostal and Charismatic Evangelicals, and Independent Evangelicals such as Russian-German migrant churches. Jung, *evangelikale Bewegung*, 50–173.
- 131 Amos Yong, “Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Charismatics: A Difficult Relationship or Promising Convergence?,” Fuller Studio, Fuller Theological Seminary, accessed

movement (CtC) are evangelically oriented but choose their denominational allegiance freely. The first CtC church plant in Berlin, for example, became a member of the BFeG denomination. Gospel Church Munich remained an independent congregation.¹³² In conclusion, all three case study churches share in common their evangelical commitments and their status as free churches in Germany.

Impulses and Challenges of Pentecostalism in Germany

Pentecostalism has grown to become one of the major influences in evangelical Christianity in Germany. The Federation of Free Pentecostal Churches (BFP) is the second-largest evangelical denomination in Germany, following the membership numbers of the stagnating Baptist denomination.¹³³ Nevertheless, the planting of German-speaking, Pentecostal churches had limited success in the years following World War II. The most substantial statistical increase of BFP church plants originated from sub-Saharan migrant churches. Aside from the upsurge of migrant churches, new Pentecostal churches, adapted to popular culture and linked to international networks, provide renewed momentum for German Pentecostalism in the twenty-first century.

A description of various impulses of North American Pentecostalism and the charismatic renewal movement precedes the history of Pentecostal faith in Germany. Subsequently, research data of church planting since the Second World War reveal the limited progress of starting new churches compared to the worldwide expansion of Pentecostalism. Thus, new Pentecostal churches emerge as substantial hope bearers for German Pentecostal expansion.¹³⁴

September 12, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2mdAOLj>. Amos Yong identifies some of the controversies in categorizing Pentecostals as evangelicals in their global expressions: the cornerstone teaching of tongue speaking as evidence of Spirit baptism, the rejection of trinitarian theology within the Pentecostal Oneness tradition, pneumatic spirituality in the Global South that alters traditional biblicism, or the significance of “new revelations” in tension with biblical revelation.

132 “Berlinprojekt: Wer wir sind [Berlin project: Who we are],” Berlin Projekt: Kirche für die Stadt, accessed September 18, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2moAgm1>.

133 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 28; “Größte Freikirche: Weniger Gottesdienstbesucher und Mitglieder [Largest free church: Less worship attendees and members],” Idea, Idea e.V., May 13, 2019, <https://bit.ly/31zeriW>.

134 A narrow, theological definition of Pentecostalism refers to churches that require a second Spirit baptism with the confirming sign of speaking in tongues after conversion. The subsequent, charismatic movement shares the prominence of

Historical Impulses of Pentecostalism from North America

The beginning of Pentecostalism in the twentieth century is usually associated with the Azusa Street Revival under the leadership of William Seymour in Los Angeles from 1906 to 1909, although precursors of charismatic phenomena occurred in places like London, Wales, and South India. In Los Angeles, enthusiastic worship, speaking in tongues, healings, and “slayings of the Spirit” accompanied the revival among the predominantly African American community, who privileged enthusiastic and charismatic forms of worship. Before the revival, Seymour was a student of Charles Parham at a small Bible College in Topeka, Kansas. Parham taught that speaking in tongues was the exclusive sign of Spirit baptism, which would become a cornerstone doctrine for Pentecostalism. Soon, the revival attracted participants whom Brian Stanley calls predominantly white “evangelical tourists,” who quickly spread the Pentecostal experience throughout the United States. Mostly white missionaries aided in the rapid dissemination of Pentecostalism across Africa, India, China, and Europe. Nevertheless, Stanley argues that there were diverse origins and worldwide manifestations of Pentecostalism. Pentecostal faith is neither a white man’s religion nor finds its source in a single denominational tradition but is “a way or style of being Christian that has plural origins and multiple institutional expressions.”¹³⁵

In the 1960s and 1970s, the charismatic renewal movement brought the teaching of charismatic gifts and divine healing into mainline churches such as Episcopalian, Lutheran, and Catholic churches. A revived interest in divine

charismatic gifts with Pentecostalism, yet without the necessity of a second Spirit baptism or tongue speaking. In view of multiple, historical sources and variants of Pentecostal-charismatic faith, this author agrees with Brian Stanley who conveys that both movements emphasize “the availability of the power of the Holy Spirit to all Christians,” but “no absolute differentiation between the two movements is sustainable.” Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 289–90. Jung perceives a clear demarcation between Pentecostals and other evangelicals in Germany based on the teaching about Spirit baptism and tongue speaking. Ehmann offers a helpful discussion of varying definitions. Jung, *evangelikale Bewegung*, 166; Matthias Ehmann, “Pentecostal Mission: A German Free Church Perspective,” *International Review of Mission* 107, no. 1 (2018): 65–69.

135 Stanley, *Christianity*, 294, 289–96. A standard work on Pentecostal history and Pentecostalism in Germany remains Walter J. Hollenweger, *Enthusiastisches Christentum: die Pfingstbewegung in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1969). Translated by R.W. Wilson as *The Pentecostals* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1972).

healing and a desire by Pentecostals to move beyond a sectarian status were two salient forces for the charismatic movement. Denominational boundaries to mainline Protestant and Catholic churches diminished since soteriological differences were set aside. Charismatics held the view that a subsequent baptism of the Spirit after conversion was not necessary but only a “release” of the Spirit. In the 1990s, missiologist C. Peter Wagner coined the terms Third Wave and New Apostolic Reformation for the global, charismatic expansion with expectations of healings, signs, wonders, and Spirit baptism simultaneous with conversion. Strands of Pentecostal faith further diversified across denominational boundaries.¹³⁶ John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard churches, became the prominent spokesperson for the Third Wave and propagated the necessity of *power evangelism* that seeks the display of signs and wonders to make evangelism effective. The New Apostolic Reformation advocates the reinstatement of the apostolic office as part of the five-fold ministry (Eph.4:11) in church governance. Common among all the various Pentecostal/charismatic renewal movements of the twentieth century is an Arminian theology that emphasizes the human will to access God’s blessings.¹³⁷

Historical Highlights of Pentecostalism in Germany

At the beginning of the twentieth century, believers within the Pietistic Gemeinschaftsbewegung (Fellowship Movement) eagerly anticipated a revival as they heard about the Welsh revival in 1904 and 1905.¹³⁸ Already in 1905, large numbers of conversions, even among people without a previous connection to the church, occurred during meetings held in Mülheim an der Ruhr but without

136 Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 180–210, Google Books. Key practitioners of divine healing were the Canadians Benny Hinn and John Arnott, pastor of the Toronto Airport Vineyard church, where the Toronto Blessing took place with practices such as uncontrollable laughter and bodily convulsions, drawing thousands of evangelical “tourists” from across the world.

137 Michael McClymond, “Christian Revival and Renewal Movements,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Christianity*, ed. Lamin Sanneh and Michael McClymond (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 293–96, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)

138 Jung, *evangelikale Bewegung*, 40–45. The Gemeinschaftsbewegung in Germany was the result of a revival within the mainline Protestant church in the nineteenth century. The revival spread primarily in areas where Pietism was already present and incorporated influences from the Methodist and Holiness movements.

accompanying signs or speaking in tongues. The beginning of Pentecostalism in Germany traces back to meetings with the evangelist Heinrich Dallmeyer and two young Norwegian women in Kassel in 1907.¹³⁹ Participants started to speak in tongues, uttered prophecies, experienced healings, and encountered other extraordinary manifestations such as making animal sounds and falling backward. Reports of ecstatic excesses ended the revival meetings abruptly. The police shut down the meetings and arrested several individuals. Leaders of the Fellowship Movement and other evangelical churches began to question the genuineness of the revival and joined together to condemn Pentecostalism as demonic by signing the Berliner Erklärung (Berlin Declaration) in 1909. This declaration created a determinative rift between Pentecostal and non-charismatic evangelical churches in Germany throughout the twentieth century.¹⁴⁰ Pentecostal believers, who were no longer welcome in the Fellowship Movement, quickly planted independent churches. The first Pentecostal conference took place in Mülheim in 1909, leading to the foundation of the Mülheimer Verband (Mülheim Association) in 1913, an umbrella organization for Pentecostal churches that later became an independent denomination.

Pentecostal churches and mission organizations such as the Velbert Mission Society or the Elim Movement continued to form and operate during the interwar period despite the rising pressure of the Nazi regime. After the Second World War, the BFP outgrew the Mülheim Association and evolved into a “typical, moderate Pentecostal Church,” mainly due to its close ties with the Assemblies of God denomination in the United States.¹⁴¹

139 Carl Simpson, “The Development of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements in the Germanic Countries,” in *European Pentecostalism*, ed. William K. Kay and Anne Dyer, vol. 7, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 62–63. In June 1907, Dallmeyer received a Spirit baptism and apparent physical healing of a heart ailment during an evangelistic campaign in Hamburg. Emil Meyer, who later became a key leader in German Pentecostalism, and two young women from Norway with a specific call to spread the Pentecostal experience in Germany, were present in Hamburg. The latter three had met Thomas B. Barratt in Norway, the central figure to bring Pentecostalism from the US to Europe. Dallmeyer urged the two young women to join him in the meetings in Kassel.

140 Jung, *evangelikale Bewegung*, 154–56; Simpson, “Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements,” 59, footnote 33. There is some debate whether a conference in Hamburg in 1908, where international leaders affirmed the Pentecostal revival in Germany, marks the actual starting point of German Pentecostalism.

141 Ehmann, “Pentecostal Mission,” 72; Simpson, “Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements,” 70–73.

The charismatic renewal movement found its way into Germany through the Lutheran pastor Arnold Bittlinger in 1962. Bittlinger was impressed by the non-ecstatic character of the charismatic movement during his visit to the United States. Charismatics challenged traditional Pentecostal churches in the area of holiness, their understanding of the baptism by the Spirit without speaking in tongues, and more enthusiastic, contemporary forms of worship. Ecumenical conferences opened the door for charismatic teaching in German mainline churches in the 1960s. The *Gemeindeerneuerungsbewegung* (Church Renewal Movement) under the leadership of Wolfram Kopfermann provided a platform to disseminate charismatic theology and praxis since the mid-1970s. In 1987, the Church Renewal Movement invited John Wimber as a guest speaker to their leadership conferences, thus introducing the Third Wave teachings of spiritual warfare and power evangelism. In Germany, Wimber's Vineyard churches sprang up in the early 1990s and grew to about ninety churches in German-speaking Europe in 2016.¹⁴²

Alongside the trans-denominational growth of charismatic faith in Germany, the BFP incorporated many smaller denominations and independent churches and grew to become the largest Pentecostal denomination with 836 churches and over 62,000 members in 2019.¹⁴³ The Mülheim Association, which settled on a moderate charismatic position, consisted of forty-four churches and about 4,600 members in 2018.¹⁴⁴ Various smaller denominations such as the *Gemeinde Gottes* (Church of God), independent Pentecostal churches, and charismatic churches and organizations add to the present-day variety of Pentecostal faith in Germany.¹⁴⁵

The EKD, non-charismatic evangelical churches, the BFP, and the Mülheim Association took various measures to mend the fissure of the Berlin Declaration

142 Jung, *evangelikale Bewegung*, 156–59; Simpson, “Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements,” 77–78; Maren Freudenberg, “Kurzinformation Religion: Vineyard [Quick information: Vineyard],” REMID - Religionswissenschaftlicher Medien- und Informationsdienst e.V., accessed August 7, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2ZFIAMT>. Watling traces the history of Vineyard churches in Germany. Marlin Watling, *Natürlich übernatürlich: die Geschichte der Vineyard-Bewegung* [Naturally supernatural: The history of the Vineyard movement], Vineyard-Edition (Witten: Brockhaus, 2008).

143 “Statistiken und Zahlen [Statistics and numbers],” Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden, accessed August 7, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Kvyd7Y>.

144 “Statistik [Statistic],” Mülheimer Verband FEG e.V., last modified December 31, 2018, <https://muelheimer-verband.de/statistik/>.

145 Simpson, “Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements,” 75–78.

as early as 1958.¹⁴⁶ It was not until 2009 that the Fellowship Movement, represented by the Gnadauer Verband (Gnadau Federation), and the Mülheim Association signed an official statement that nullified the implications of the Berlin Declaration. Evangelicals took a conspicuous step of reconciliation when in 2017, Ekkehart Vetter, head of the Mülheim Association, became chairman of the board for the German Evangelical Alliance, the primary representative body for evangelical denominations in Germany.¹⁴⁷

Alongside denominational reconciliation, divergent Pentecostal theologies dissipate into German evangelicalism. Pentecostal ministries such as Bethel Church in Redding, CA, led by pastor Bill Johnson, exert a growing influence across denominations despite controversial beliefs and practices.¹⁴⁸ Trans-denominationalism reached a new level of cooperation when leaders across non-charismatic, charismatic, and Pentecostal evangelical denominations united during the National Church Planting Process conference (NC2P) in Berlin from February 5–7, 2018. Participants aspired to initiate a Germany-wide church planting movement. According to the event organizers, a significant increase of church plants was feasible if denominational leaders joined forces strategically.¹⁴⁹ New Pentecostal churches offer insights into contextualized approaches

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- 146 Jung, *evangelikale Bewegung*, 159–66. Jung identifies the doctrine of a necessary, secondary baptism of the Spirit, authenticated by speaking in tongues, as main reason for the historical rift between Pentecostals and non-charismatic evangelicals in Germany.
- 147 “Deutsche Evangelische Allianz: Ekkehart Vetter Neuer Vorsitzender [German Evangelical Alliance: Ekkehart Vetter new chairman],” Vereinigung Evangelischer Freikirchen, December 12, 2016, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2MLzQ4f>. Ehmann discusses steps of reconciliation between Pentecostal churches, the EKD, and evangelical churches. Ehmann, “Pentecostal Mission,” 72–77.
- 148 Ehmann, “Pentecostal Mission,” 76. Richard Moore points out the widespread influence of Bethel church and the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) in Germany, Europe, and the United States. Their teachings include extra-biblical revelations and dominionism, the mandate to re-establish God’s kingdom on earth. Richard P. Moore, *Divergent Theology: An Inquiry into the Theological Characteristics of the Word of Faith, Third Wave Movement and The New Apostolic Reformation* (Self-Published, CreateSpace, 2017), 31–33, 93–110.
- 149 “2018 NC2P-Berlin Gathering Highlights,” 2018, video, 7:13, <http://www.nc2p.org/national-stories>. Leaders from the BFP, Vineyard, the Fellowship Movement, the Evangelical-Free Church, and other denominations engaged in developing a common strategy. Key-note speakers included Dave Furgeson, co-founder of the US-based church planting network Exponential, and Leo Bigger, pastor of ICF Zurich and initiator of the charismatic ICF network. The author attended the conference as observer.

to church planting and may fuel the growth of German-speaking, Pentecostal churches.

Pentecostal Church Planting since World War II

Paul Clark, an American missionary with the Assemblies of God in Germany, surveyed and analyzed the methodologies of German Pentecostal church planting between 1945 and 2005. The case study included almost five hundred churches and focused on the five largest German-speaking, Pentecostal denominations that started before and shortly after World War II: BFP, Mülheimer Verband, Volksmission (People Mission), Gemeinde Gottes (Church of God with headquarters in Cleveland, TN), and Gemeinde der Christen Ecclesia (Ecclesia Fellowship of Churches).¹⁵⁰ Clark's study discloses the inhibited overall growth of German Pentecostalism compared to the worldwide spread of Pentecostal faith. The BFP denomination, for example, outpaced all other evangelical denominations in planting German-speaking churches between 1970 and 2005. Typically, though, German BFP congregations grew slowly and remained small, with an average of 47.7 church members in 2009.¹⁵¹

Clark's study also reveals that more than one-third of all BFP churches were international churches in 2010 (233 out of a total of 623 churches). BFP statistics trace the planting of numerous migrant churches during the last twenty years. Eighty percent of those churches originating from sub-Saharan Africa. Most migrant churches, though, remain ineffective in reaching native Germans.¹⁵² Fresh stimuli for planting German-led congregations stem from new Pentecostal and charismatic initiatives that operate within transnational networks or profit from global partnerships. Examples include Hillsong churches, ICF churches (International Christian Fellowship), Kirche im Pott (Church in the Pott), and ConnectKirche Erfurt.

150 Paul Clark, "German Pentecostal Church Planting, 1945–2005: Implications for Intentional Mission in the Twenty-First Century" (Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2011), 74–77. Ecclesia joined the BFP denomination in the year 2000.

151 Clark, "Pentecostal Church Planting," 128, 151–52, 177. Bartholomä calculates a 1.2 percent growth rate of German BFP churches with only 97 new converts spread between 475 churches in 2006 and shows that the BFP suffers from minimal conversion growth among Germans similar to all other evangelical denominations. Philipp F. Bartholomä, "Gibt es eine freikirchliche 'Krise der Mission'? Eine kritische Bestandsaufnahme [Is there an evangelical crisis in mission? A critical assessment]," *Freikirchenforschung* 26 (2017): 229.

152 Clark, "Pentecostal Church Planting," 11, 173–74.

New Pentecostal Church Planting

New Pentecostal churches and charismatic initiatives are quickly growing in urban areas throughout Germany. Their networks exert an increasing influence across evangelical and Pentecostal churches and are beginning to diversify the *kirchliche Landschaft* (ecclesial landscape) of Germany.¹⁵³ One example is the Hillsong Church in Sidney, Australia, which has established a church network across the world with forty-eight churches in Europe and four major cities in Germany.¹⁵⁴ Hillsong is a typical neo-Pentecostal church that engages its audience in late-modern forms of worship and the use of charismatic gifts such as prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues. Hillsong ministries gained fame in the evangelical world through their worship music, conferences, and highly engaging worship events. Evangelical churches across denominations use the popular Hillsong worship music.¹⁵⁵

ICF (International Christian Fellowship) represents a charismatic, transnational church planting network. In 1990, the first ICF church began with a non-denominational worship service through the initiative of Heinz Strupler in Zurich, Switzerland. Leo Bigger took over the leadership of ICF in 1994, and the network swiftly expanded to sixty-four locations in German-speaking Europe in 2019. ICF draws young people, leans on popular culture, and anchors its ministry around event-style, charismatic worship services.¹⁵⁶

153 Peter Zimmerling, “Die Theologie pfingstlich-charismatischer Bewegungen: Annäherungen [Theology of Pentecostal-charismatic movements: approximations],” *ThLZ*, no. 11 (2015): sec. I, <https://bit.ly/34QF7Qk>. Zimmerling identifies these churches as the fourth stream of Pentecostal-charismatic faith after the Azusa Street revival, the Charismatic Renewal, and the Third Wave. Yong speaks of an “emerging post-denominational landscape” in a global context due to the growing influence of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement through megachurches and individual congregations, unifying churches across denominations in forms of spirituality and diminishing doctrinal boundaries. Yong, “Evangelicals, Pentecostals.”

154 “Hillsong Church: Welcome Home,” Hillsong Church, accessed August 9, 2019, <https://hillsong.com/#locations>.

155 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 28–30, 247–49; Reinhard Hempelmann, “Beten in alten Fabrikhallen - Neue Vielfalt des Protestantismus [Praying in old industrial buildings: New diversity of Protestantism],” in *Jahrbuch für Mission* (Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2017), 94–96.

156 Hempelmann, “Beten in alten Fabrikhallen,” 96–97; “Locations: The ICF Movement,” ICF, accessed August 9, 2019, <https://www.icf.church/en/locations/>; “International Christian Fellowship,” Wikimedia Foundation, last modified August 12, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2NdUEkR>.

An example of creating global partnerships that assist German church plants is the moderately Pentecostal Church of the Highlands, the second-largest megachurch with 48,000 members in the United States.¹⁵⁷ In 2010, Church of the Highlands launched Grow conferences in cooperation with the Ecclesia church in Nürnberg to promote their seeker-oriented style of worship services and enable leaders to grow their churches by making use of “systems and structures that work for Highlands.”¹⁵⁸ Leaders of Church of the Highlands support new Pentecostal churches, such as the congregation Kirche im Pott (Church in the Pot) in Bochum, through personal visits, strategic counsel, and church growth materials. Kirche im Pott grew to 550–600 worship attendees within five years since its inception in 2013.¹⁵⁹

Finally, ConnectKirche Erfurt exemplifies new Pentecostal churches that start within the BFP denomination. Close ties between pastor Herla and Mountainview Community Church in Fresno, CA, aided Herla in developing practical ministry concepts and shaped his theology before planting their church. Their contemporary worship services and practical sermons quickly attracted a young audience in secular Erfurt.

Reinhard Hempelmann, former director of the Central Office for Worldview Questions in the EKD, names the search for a new type of spirituality and devotion as the primary reason young people flock to new Pentecostal churches. He describes this phenomenon as a “yearning for intensively experienced fellowship in accessible groups, where the Christian faith is shared personally and applied to everyday life.”¹⁶⁰ Hempelmann writes from the perspective of a leader within the mainline Protestant church in Germany, where few church members attend Sunday services, and the experience of a personal, spiritual community remains an exception for the average worship attendee.¹⁶¹ Brian Stanley perceives the

157 “List of Megachurches in the United States,” Wikimedia Foundation, last modified August 7, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2YDcHrT>.

158 “Grow Germany: About Grow,” Grow, Ecclesia Church e.V., accessed August 9, 2019, <https://www.growleader.eu/about-grow/>;

159 Sarah Bolenz, pastor of Kirche im Pott, in discussion with the author, January 2018; “Kirche im Pott [Church in the Pot],” Kirche im Pott e.V., accessed August 9, 2019, <https://www.kircheimpott.de/>; Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 248.

160 Hempelmann, “Betten in alten Fabrikhallen,” 98.

161 *Gezählt 2019: Zahlen und Fakten zum kirchlichen Leben* [Counted 2019: Numbers and facts about church life] (Hannover: EKD, 2019), <https://bit.ly/2KFFvaw>. Church attendance in the EKD hovers at 3.5 percent. Members who do attend church generally experience a liturgical rather than informal and contemporary worship service.

defensive overreaction against liberal Protestantism as the reason that traditional evangelicalism “left too little room for the freedom and enjoyment of the Spirit,” thus providing fertile ground for the open reception of Pentecostal expressions of faith in the younger generation of evangelicals.¹⁶²

Fears exist among evangelical churches that new Pentecostal churches, well-adjusted to popular culture, not only have the potential of reaching secular Germans with the gospel but will also cause an exodus of young people from evangelical congregations with more traditional services. The focus on creating a highly engaging worship experience rather than on careful contextualization raises the question of whether the numerical success of new Pentecostal churches stems primarily from attracting a young, Christian audience rather than from the diffusion of the gospel to a secular audience.¹⁶³

Conclusion

Traditional paths of church planting within German Pentecostal denominations resulted in limited numerical success in the twentieth century. Migrant churches account for the most robust growth in the BFP yet face difficulties in reaching a native German audience. In the twenty-first century, new Pentecostal and charismatic churches within transnational networks or global partnerships have quickly expanded their church planting efforts throughout Germany and offer new momentum for starting Pentecostal churches. Conversion narratives in the case study about ConnectKirche Erfurt provide further insights into how a new Pentecostal church moved beyond attracting Christians to initiate transformational conversions in a secular context.

African Migrant Churches and Reverse Mission in Germany

A wave of migration from West Africa to Germany led to the planting of numerous neo-Pentecostal African churches in the late twentieth century. Scholars in World Christian Studies, like Andrew Walls and Philip Jenkins, share the expectation of significant Christian influence by immigrant churches in post-Christendom Europe.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, most migrants who engage in

162 Stanley, *Global Diffusion*, 209.

163 Ehmann, “Pentecostal Mission,” 78; Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 24, 247–49.

164 Andrew F. Walls, *Crossing Cultural Frontiers: Studies in the History of World Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 57–58, Google Books; Philip Jenkins, *Gottes Kontinent? Über die religiöse Krise Europas und die Zukunft von Islam und Christentum*

reverse mission efforts have failed to contextualize their vibrant faith into the world of secular Germany. The hope rests on second-generation Africans who have grown up in Germany and can translate their neo-Pentecostal faith into a secular culture, potentially resulting in the conversion of native Germans. This section begins with a description of the currents of world Christianity that position the phenomenon of reverse mission by Africans in Germany in a global context. The section continues with a historical overview of West African migration to Germany. A description of the church planting efforts by Ghanaian migrants illustrates the current state of African migrant churches in Germany. The section ends by pointing out both failures and potentials of reverse mission, disclosing second-generation Africans as hope bearers for bringing back the gospel to Germany.

Development of Global Christianity and Reverse Mission

The growth of African migrant churches in Germany connects intricately to the global development of Christianity. Worldwide Christianity has experienced explosive growth during the last two centuries. Also, a dramatic geographical shift has taken Christianity from post-Christendom Europe, where “Western multitudes [are] now immunized against the gospel,” and from North America to a place of exponential growth in the Global South.¹⁶⁵ Christianity has grown in total numbers. In 1800, 208 million Christians made up 23 percent of the world population (903 million). In 1900, this number had more than doubled to 558 million and 34 percent of the world population. By 2015, continuing with steady growth and trailing the explosion of the worldwide population, 2.3 billion Christians comprised 31.2 percent of the global population and made it the largest religious group in the world.¹⁶⁶

Moreover, Christianity has changed its center of gravity from its decline in the West to unprecedented growth in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania. What was once the center of Christianity has become the new margin and vice

[God’s continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s religious crisis], trans. Ulrich Ruh (Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 108.

165 Wilbert R. Shenk, “Introduction,” in *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), xvii.

166 Shenk, “Introduction,” xi-xiii; “Christians Are the Largest Religious Group in 2015,” Pew Research Center, April 4, 2017, <https://pewrsr.ch/2UvWbD4>. Usually, statistics on Christianity do not apply evangelical standards to determine Christian adherence but include all variations of Christian affiliation.

versa. William Shenk points to the effects of the modern missionary movement, the role of indigenous missionaries, and high birth rates as causes for the phenomenal growth of Christianity in the Global South. The geographical shift of Christianity continues, reinforced by the dynamics of geopolitical changes.¹⁶⁷ In the year 2019, 513 million people in Europe still had a Christian affiliation. Africa surpassed Europe with 651 million and Latin America with 551 million believers, while Asia had 364 million and North America had 315 million Christians. At a 2.5 percent growth rate, Africa could double its Christian population in less than thirty years and become the predominant center of Christianity.¹⁶⁸

Consequently, the profile of a typical Christian today is much different from one hundred years ago. A “transformation of Christianity in worship, theology, denominations, and practices” has occurred.¹⁶⁹ Charismatic forms of Christianity have become a highly influential, worldwide phenomenon, crossing denominational boundaries. Africa, for example, witnessed the most impressive spread of Christianity through African Independent Churches, marked by an emphasis on prophecies, healings, and visions. A more literal interpretation of the Bible causes these conservative churches to “be more open to the supernatural universe that the West has discarded.”¹⁷⁰

The explosive growth of world Christianity has created unprecedented opportunities for a multi-directional spread of the Christian faith. The phenomenon of reverse migration from the Global South to the Global North ushered in a new phase of Christian mission work through migrants who engage in reverse mission, bringing back the gospel to the “dark continent” of Europe. African churches, for example, have established international headquarters to send missionaries entrusted with the task to re-evangelize post-Christendom Europe.¹⁷¹ Nonetheless, most migrant churches in Germany, including

167 Shenk, “Introduction,” xi–xv.

168 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1–3, Kindle; “All Regions,” Joshua Project, Frontier Ventures, accessed February 26, 2020, <https://bit.ly/30TvGx2>.

169 Jin Hyung Park, “Journey of the Gospel: A Study in the Emergence of World Christianity and the Shift of Christian Historiography in the Last Half of the Twentieth Century” (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2009), 19.

170 Park, “Journey of the Gospel,” 24, 20–24.

171 Paul Freston, “Globalization, Religion, and Evangelical Christianity: A Sociological Meditation from the Third World,” in *Interpreting Contemporary Christianity: Global Processes and Local Identities*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu and Alaine M. Low (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), sec. 2, Kindle.

African-led churches, have not been able to integrate native Germans into their congregations.¹⁷²

African Migrants in Germany

The earliest records of Africans who had come to Germany as slaves stem from the twelfth century, although little is known about their living conditions. Slave trade increased in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and at the end of the nineteenth century, Germany formed colonial societies to further colonial and economic interests. Africans were brought from the colonies to Germany so they could receive training and return to Africa as cheap yet more qualified laborers on plantations. Some Africans remained in Germany and in other European countries. The rise of the Nazi regime led to horrific persecutions of Africans who lived in Germany after the Second World War, resulting in such atrocities as forced sterilizations and ultimately leading to imprisonment and death in concentration camps. A new African population arose from some 94,000 children of American soldiers and German women who were born in post-World War II Germany. Out of those children, 3,093 had Afro-American fathers who faced prejudices and resentment as “Afro-Germans” despite a newly developing, democratic society.¹⁷³

African migration to the Global North was relatively small compared to other global migration flows for most of the twentieth century.¹⁷⁴ Beginning in the 1970s, West Africans, primarily from Ghana and Nigeria, immigrated to Germany to pursue educational and professional goals. In the 1980s and 1990s, West African immigration increased because of political and economic pressures.¹⁷⁵ The total African population in Germany grew steadily from 22,603

172 Claudia Währisch-Oblau, *The Missionary Self-Perception of Pentecostal/Charismatic Church Leaders from the Global South in Europe: Bringing Back the Gospel*, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies* 2 (Boston, MA: Brill, 2009), 330.

173 Benjamin Simon, *From Migrants to Missionaries: Christians of African Origins in Germany*, *Studien zur interkulturellen Geschichte des Christentums* 151 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 7–15. The German colonies were Cameroon, Togo, German East Africa, and German South-West Africa. All colonies were lost after the First World War. Consequently, fewer African migrants from former colonies lived in Germany in comparison to France or Britain.

174 Stanley, *Christianity*, 338.

175 Afe Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 37–49; Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2008), 226–27.

in 1967 to 300,611 in 1999. In 2017, a total of 856,000 Africans with a *migration background* lived in Germany.¹⁷⁶ In Berlin, the number of registered migrants from Africa grew from 3,999 in 1973 and 13,252 in 1996 to 33,362 in 2018, not counting the numerous Africans who had acquired German citizenship or lived in the surrounding suburbs of Germany's capital.¹⁷⁷

African Migrant Churches in Germany

The planting of African migrant churches coincided with the immigration of Africans to Germany beginning in the 1970s. Werner Kahl's study of Ghanaian migrant churches, their history, and efforts of reverse mission in Germany illustrates the difficulties of African migrants who seek to evangelize secular Europeans.¹⁷⁸

In the early 1970s, a charismatic movement spread from the European mission churches to all other types of churches in Ghana and became the primary force to shape the faith of present-day Ghanaians. This movement of renewal led to the planting of numerous, smaller charismatic/neo-Pentecostal churches and megachurches. Megachurches expanded by planting daughter churches in nearby African countries, the United States, and Europe. Kahl concludes that the young generation of Ghanaians embraces neo-Pentecostalism because it appears more suitable in a globalized world as they engage in modern forms of worship. Ghanaian Christian faith depicts Jesus primarily as the one who brings victory

176 "Bevölkerung in Privathaushalten nach Migrationshintergrund im engeren Sinne nach Herkunftsland in Staatengruppen [Population in private households with a migration background in the narrow sense according to home country in state categories]," Destatis: Statistisches Bundesamt, accessed July 12, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2LRFYY6>. People with a migration background designate migrants and children with at least one migrant parent.

177 Simon, *Migrants to Missionaries*, 16–17; Werner Kahl, "Migrants as Instruments of Evangelization: In Early Christianity and in Contemporary Christianity," in *Global Diasporas and Mission*, ed. Chandler H. Im and Amos Yong, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series vol. 23 (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 82–83; *Statistischer Bericht: Einwohnerinnen und Einwohner im Land Berlin am 31. Dezember 2018* [Statistical report: Residents in the state of Berlin on December 31, 2018], vol. 2/18, 5 (Berlin: Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, 2019), 20, <https://bit.ly/2KTXRWy>.

178 Werner Kahl, "Migrationsgemeinden aus Afrika in Deutschland [Migrant churches from Africa in Germany]," in *Zusammen Wachsen: Weltweite Ökumene in Deutschland gestalten - Weltmission Heute*, ed. Werner Kahl and Martin Keiper, vol. 73 (Hamburg: EMW, 2011), 68–85.

over demonic forces and empowers the believer to experience a better life in the present world rather than portraying Jesus as the one who saves from sin. Kahl suggests that this soteriological emphasis fosters cultural appropriation as it harmonizes with African traditional religions, which often deal with the oppressive powers of the supernatural. He criticizes a narrow and individualistic understanding of salvation by new Ghanaian churches with “a call to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and *personal* savior.”¹⁷⁹ Additionally, Pentecostal teachings of the prosperity gospel and deliverance ministries, originating from the United States, contributed to shaping the Ghanaian faith since the 1980s.¹⁸⁰

Mark Shaw takes a more favorable position toward individual, evangelical conversion when he identifies it as a core component of revivals that shape Christianity in the Global South. The experience of personal conversion within revival became the very fuel of Ghanaian migrants to engage in reverse mission efforts.¹⁸¹ Furthermore, Harvey Kwiyani notes that Pentecostal conversion in Ghana and across sub-Saharan Africa did not remain a secluded, individualistic experience but resulted in profound economic, political, and cultural transformations.¹⁸² On a global scale, Pentecostalism is “increasingly engaged in community-based social ministries.”¹⁸³

When African Christians arrived in Germany, they faced difficulties relating to both mainline and evangelical churches because of the language barrier as well as differences in worship traditions and theology. Similar to the Ghanaian practice, they began to plant neo-Pentecostal, independent churches. Typically, a prayer group that met in a private home grew large enough to begin public worship services in rented spaces such as storefronts. Most of these fellowships started in large cities like Hamburg or Berlin, the primary destinations for migrants from Africa. Churches tend to remain small, and those with several hundred in attendance, such as the Christian Church Outreach Mission in Hamburg, remain an

179 Kahl, “Migrationsgemeinden aus Afrika,” 72, 69–72. Kahl identifies four types of churches in Ghana: traditional European Mission Churches, African Independent Churches, Pentecostal Mega Churches, and charismatic, neo-Pentecostal Churches.

180 Stanley, *Christianity*, 300–04.

181 Mark Shaw, *Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 86–87, 173–74, 198.

182 Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Sent Forth: African Missionary Work in the West*, American Society of Missiology Series No. 51 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 20, 20–24.

183 Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 211, 1–5, 211–24.

exception. Pentecostal migrant churches often join local and regional networks for mutual support, public representation, and spiritual objectives.¹⁸⁴

In present-day Germany, most church members are still first-generation African migrants. However, the second generation of African children has grown up in Germany. They have adjusted to the German culture, speak German fluently, and offer hope to bridge the cultural gap to native Germans. In 2011, Kahl estimates that about one thousand African migrant churches met for worship in Germany.¹⁸⁵ The evangelical association *Gemeinsam für Berlin* (Together for Berlin) states that approximately 250 migrant congregations exist in Germany's capital, the largest group consisting of 80–100 Pentecostal African churches.¹⁸⁶

Failure of Reverse Mission in Germany

West Africans planted churches to minister to their ethnic groups, but their revival experience also generated a missional passion for evangelizing native Germans.¹⁸⁷ Nonetheless, even missionaries commissioned by African churches for the express purpose of spreading the gospel to Germans remained mostly ineffective. Few Germans attend African migrant churches. Währisch-Oblau estimates that only five percent of the membership in immigrant churches are native Germans, many of whom leave those congregations eventually because they cannot adjust to the cultural differences. Additionally, evangelistic efforts rarely motivate Germans to join migrant churches.¹⁸⁸ Kahl believes that “the vast majority of the migrant evangelists had no skills in cross-cultural communication.”¹⁸⁹ He blames a semantic breakdown between the sender and receiver of the Christian message as the primary cause for the inability of African evangelists to communicate the Christian message to secular Germans. A spiritualistic perception of the world with a belief in demons and the need for spiritual warfare collides with a secular worldview.¹⁹⁰

184 Kahl, “Migrationsgemeinden aus Afrika,” 74, 77–78; Bianca Dümling, *Migrationskirchen in Deutschland: Orte Der Integration [Migrant Church in Germany: Places of Integration]* (Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck, 2011), 187–96.

185 Kahl, “Migrationsgemeinden aus Afrika,” 77–78.

186 “Migrationskirchen in Berlin: Migrant Churches in Berlin,” *Gemeinsam für Berlin e.V.*, accessed June 15, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2WF6V36>.

187 Shaw, *Global Awakening*, 86–87.

188 Währisch-Oblau, *Missionary Self-Perception*, 330.

189 Kahl, “Migrants as Instruments,” 84.

190 Kahl, “Migrants as Instruments,” 82–85.

Afe Adogame's research points to additional factors that contribute to a cultural disconnect between migrant churches that fail at contextualization and reaching native Germans: (1) Germans find it challenging to attend worship services that may last several hours in contrast to shorter worship times in German churches; (2) Germans struggle with language barriers in churches that do not switch to German-speaking services; (3) Migrants do not succeed in evangelizing Germans through "personal modes" of communication" such as street evangelism.¹⁹¹ Although African churches increasingly replace traditional approaches to evangelism with new media technologies such as websites, Facebook, and home videos, numerical growth using these new communication methods has not occurred.¹⁹² Kahl deduces that "the attempt to evangelize among indigenous Germans by migrant preachers from West Africa of the first generation has turned out to be a 'mission impossible,' as African pastors in Germany have begun to realize."¹⁹³ The question remains how missionaries from the Global South can translate their evangelical, neo-Pentecostal faith into a secular context.

Potential of Reverse Mission in Germany

Reverse mission intricately connects to the ability of migrant congregations to relate to their secular host countries. Benjamin Simon delineates three phases of identity and integration for African migrant churches in Germany that potentially advance to cultural integration. Churches in the *Phase of Seclusion* perform worship services in an African language, remain mono-ethnic, and do not attempt to evangelize native Germans since they are still preoccupied with internal organization. Ecumenical relationships rarely exist, and extreme theological teachings contribute to their isolation. Migrant churches can move on to a *Phase of Opening-Up* when using a European language as the primary language in the community. They are open to including people from different ethnic backgrounds, actively engage in evangelism, and welcome a multi-cultural membership. Nonetheless, there remains little success in reaching German speakers,

191 Afe U. Adogame, "Globalization and African New Religious Movements in Europe," in *Interpreting Contemporary Christianity: Global Processes and Local Identities*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu and Elaine M. Low (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), sec. 2 and 3, Kindle. Adogame states that many African churches adjusted their worship services for a German audience without leading to church growth.

192 Adogame, *The African Christian Diaspora*, 154.

193 Kahl, "Migrants as Instruments," 84–85.

and ecumenical relationships are atypical. Simon identifies the Church of the Lord (Aladura-Worldwide), which quickly adds congregations throughout Europe, to be in this phase of integration. The third *Phase of Interculturation* describes a church with second-generation, German-speaking Africans, the integration of the German language and culture in ministry, and active mission efforts to reach Germans. Interculturation, an exchange between multiple cultures, gives testimony to neo-Pentecostalism's cross-cultural boundary crossing. Simon identifies migrant churches in the Phase of Interculturation as most effective in contextualizing their faith and ministry in the German culture. Second-generation migrant children rise up as crucial players in the translation of the gospel.¹⁹⁴

Furthermore, the literature review in this study addresses Steve Dye's analysis of the causes of cultural integration in three migrant churches with an unusually high number of German church members. Dye identifies several common patterns among migrant leaders and their churches that foster contextualization efforts. First, migrant pastors coupled their missionary zeal with cultural adaptability, manifesting itself as a willingness to integrate into the German culture. Second, leaders contextualized their ministries, for example, by conducting German language services. Third, so-called *connectors* helped to bridge the gap to the German host culture. Connectors were native Germans who felt comfortable in a multi-cultural setting and migrants who were born or grew up in Germany. Especially migrant children were able to identify with both their culture of origin and the host culture. They functioned as cultural negotiators and bridge-builders between migrants and native Germans. Finally, a commitment to unity attracted Germans to the multi-cultural congregations. This unity rested on biblical faithfulness and "an undiluted adherence" to the gospel message.¹⁹⁵ In summary, reverse mission efforts are contingent on the ability of migrant churches to relate to their host culture.

194 Simon, *Migrants to Missionaries*, 190–95. Simon emphasizes that churches do not necessarily move through each phase progressively. For example, bilingual children of migrants might relocate for educational or professional reasons and leave an African migrant church more isolated than before.

195 Stephen D. Dye, "Mission in the Diaspora: Multicultural Churches in Urban Germany Initiated by Church Planters from the Global South" (PhD diss., Biola University, 2017), 230, 209–33. Kahl agrees that second-generation Africans whose primary language is German and share the basic value system of native Germans will more likely succeed in their missionary endeavor. Kahl, "Migrants as Instruments," 86.

Hope Center in Berlin serves as an example of a migrant church that pursued contextualization diligently to reach their audience of young, underprivileged Germans in Berlin, many of whom came from international backgrounds. Pastor Lupemba, a second-generation, German-speaking Ghanian who grew up in Berlin, exhibited a sincere personal motivation to evangelism and gospel translation. Their unity as a multi-cultural congregation had a similar, integrative effect to Dye's case study churches.

Conclusion

The currents of world Christianity have ushered in a new period of mission efforts in the Global North. West African migrants have planted numerous neo-Pentecostal churches in Germany that move along various stages of integration into the host culture. The hope of African Christians to bring back the gospel to Europe remains unfulfilled, and the effect of reverse mission through the conversion of native Germans has been slower than anticipated. Second-generation Africans who have grown up in Germany play a significant role as cultural negotiators to contextualize their neo-Pentecostal faith. The case study of Hope Center reveals how a second-generation, African migrant church translated the gospel for a German-speaking audience in secular Berlin, combining a commitment to transformational conversion and social action.¹⁹⁶

The History of Redeemer City to City in Germany

The conviction that church planting is the best method of evangelism popularized starting new churches as a missionary strategy among evangelical mission agencies and denominations through the church growth movement. This strategy has led to various efforts of church planting in post-Christian Germany.¹⁹⁷ The church planting network Redeemer City to City (CtC) represents one of these approaches that has shown substantial contextualization efforts and has quickly expanded in Germany and across Europe. In this section, a description of American mission activities in post-World War II Germany sets the stage for the inception of CtC in Europe. The history of CtC in North America and

196 Kahl, "Migrationsgemeinden aus Afrika," 84. Kahl expresses the hope for African migrant churches to engage in this type of holistic mission approach.

197 Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 31–42; Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 233–35.

Europe reveals that theological convictions and strategic decisions were critical for the network's global development. The historical account of CtC in Germany tells the story of empowered native German leaders who benefited from a supportive leadership network to assist in the quick progression of CtC during the last ten years.

American Mission Efforts in post-World War II Germany

American mission efforts have adapted to the cultural changes in Germany throughout the twenty-first century. John Boy traces back American missions to the interwar period when Germany was first perceived as a mission field rather than an already Christianized nation without the need for evangelism.¹⁹⁸ In the era after the Second World War, US mission agencies and denominations focused their activities on social relief and evangelism. Billy Graham drew thousands during his first crusade in Berlin in 1954 and established a ministry network that helped solidify conservative evangelicalism among the evangelical churches in Germany. By 1954, about seventy US denominations, mission agencies, and organizations pursued missionary work in Germany.¹⁹⁹ When it became apparent that mass evangelism was no longer effective at the end of the 1950s, North American missionaries followed a “two-fold strategy of church planting and theological education.”²⁰⁰ This new mission emphasis benefitted evangelical churches predominantly, although the total growth of evangelical membership in Germany remained minimal. The International Congress of World Evangelization in Lausanne in 1974 marked a climactic event for North American mission in Europe and prioritized evangelism rather than social

198 John D. Boy, “Blessed Disruption: Culture and Urban Space in a European Church Planting Network” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2015), 49–55; Jung states that the Southern Baptists viewed Europe as a destination for mission work as early as 1869. Friedhelm Jung, “American Evangelicals in Germany: Their Contribution to Church Planting and Theological Education,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 47, no. 1 (2004): 13–14.

199 Jared Bok, “Diversity within Protestant Transnationalism: Differences in the Scope and Reach of Pentecostal/Charismatic and Evangelical Missions,” *Review of Religious Research* 62, no. 4 (July 2020): 610–11. Bok’s research reveals that most American evangelical mission agencies active in overseas missions during the last forty years were Protestant evangelical rather than Pentecostal or charismatic. Bok evaluates this finding as unsurprising given the prominence of evangelicals in the United States.

200 Paas, *Church Planting*, 43; Stanley, *Global Diffusion*, 65–71; Jung, “American Evangelicals,” 13–24.

action for worldwide evangelical mission endeavors.²⁰¹ Billy Graham initiated the conference with 2,300 representatives of churches and mission agencies from 150 countries in attendance.²⁰² In the 1990s, the DAWN organization (Discipling a Whole Nation), led by the American James Montgomery, proposed a church planting method heavily influenced by a church growth mentality with little effect in Germany.²⁰³

The growing awareness of needing to adjust mission approaches to a post-Christian context popularized new church planting strategies in the late twentieth century.²⁰⁴ The megachurch Willowcreek Community Church began to propagate its “seeker-friendly” approach to ministry with leadership conferences starting in 1993. Although the Willowcreek model did not induce significant conversion growth among *Kirchenferne* (people distant from the church), conferences remain popular, and a record number of over twelve thousand participants attended the Willowcreek conference in 2018.²⁰⁵ In present-day Germany,

201 Paas, *Church Planting*, 44, Shaw, *Global Awakening*, 124–28; Frederik Elwert and Martin Radermacher, “Evangelikalismus in Europa [Evangelicalism in Europe],” in *Handbuch Evangelikalismus*, ed. Frederik Elwert, Martin Radermacher, and Jens Schlamelcher, Schriftenreihe Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, Band 10174 (Bonn: transcript, 2018), 178.

202 “Lausanne I: The International Congress on World Evangelization,” Lausanne Movement, accessed August 14, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Z5BU9x>.

203 Paas, *Church Planting*, 44, footnote 88. The goal of DAWN was to plant one church for every one thousand inhabitants. Fred McRae critically analyses DAWN’s reception in Germany. Fred W. McRae, *A Case Study in Contextualization: The History of the German Church Growth Association 1985–2003* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 149–51.

204 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 233–35. James Enns points out that American evangelical missionaries began to adjust their ministries to Germany’s post-Christian conditions as early as the 1970s and 1980s. He identifies two main responses: “An increased emphasis on cultural contextualization of the Christian message, and greater indigenization of missionary personnel.” James Enns, *Saving Germany: North American Protestants and Christian Mission to West Germany, 1945 -1974*, McGill-Queen’s Studies in the History of Religion, Series 2 (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), Introduction, A Word About Methodology and Structure, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

205 “Willow-Creek-Bewegung: Kein Durchbruch in Deutschland [Willow-Creek movement: No breakthrough in Germany],” Idea, Idea e.V., February 13, 2016, <https://bit.ly/30PKXNm>; “Kongress-Historie [History of conferences],” Willow Creek Deutschland e.V., accessed July 22, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2OcJQFT>. Walldorf describes Willowcreek’s ministry in Germany and the strong American influence on German evangelical mission work since 1945. Friedemann Walldorf, “Missionarische Bemühungen im

American mission agencies, megachurches, and church planting networks continue to be active in planting churches, often in close partnership with German evangelical denominations.²⁰⁶ The global network CtC, which originated from the well-known evangelical pastor Tim Keller and his ministry at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, was able to recruit native leaders and quickly expand its network across Germany during the last twenty years.

The Origins of Redeemer City to City

Redeemer City to City has developed into a genuinely global, transnational network since its genesis in the year 2000. In 2018, CtC boasted 632 planted churches, 24,681 trained leaders, and an additional 605 churches connected to the network. Operations span across North America, Europe, the Asian Pacific, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East. CtC's vision is to plant churches in urban centers and "to see the gospel of Jesus Christ transform lives and impact cities."²⁰⁷ Al Barth, a co-founder of CtC and current vice president, recounted the beginning of the church planting training program at Redeemer in New York City and its development in Europe and Germany during an interview with the author.²⁰⁸

Tim and Kathy Keller began to plant Redeemer Presbyterian Church at the request of their denomination, the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), in 1989. In the next five years, Keller and a group of church planters within the PCA who started new churches in New York City realized that it was impossible to reach the city's diverse population unless they expanded their network and trained leaders cross-denominationally.²⁰⁹ The training of church planters from New York City and other North American cities began in 1994.

Kontext gesellschaftlicher Veränderungen in Deutschland von 1945 bis 2000: Teil 2 Von der 68er Revolution bis zum vereinten Deutschland," *Evangelikale Missiologie* 2 (2007): 47–48, 52.

206 Examples include the mission agencies IMB or Greater Europe Mission, megachurches such as John McArthur's Grace Community Church or Church of the Highlands, and church planting networks like Exponential and Acts29.

207 "Redeemer City to City: 2018 Annual Report," CtC Annual Report, Redeemer City to City, accessed July 15, 2019, <http://ctcannualreport.com/p4953023/>.

208 Al Barth, interview by author, Dallas, June 29, 2019.

209 Daniel Yang, "The Need for Multi-Denominational Church Planting Networks in Our Cities," *The Exchange: A Blog by Ed Stetzer*, Christianity Today, September 5, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2OCgqkS>. Yang points to the trend of forming multi-denominational, regionally located networks to support church planting within the United States.

The Redeemer Church Planting Center, established in the year 2000 and later renamed Redeemer City to City, facilitated the training of leaders for church planting across the globe during the following years.

Barth played a crucial role in fostering the growth of the church planting initiative in Europe as the first director of CtC and its European branch (CtCE). Already in 1998, Redeemer Presbyterian Church started ministering in Budapest, Hungary and helped to replant churches in the urban area of Budapest by the year 2000. In 2002, Martin de Young asked CtC for assistance in church planting efforts in Amsterdam. Church plants quickly developed in Amsterdam, London, Moscow, Ghent, Paris, and Berlin. Barth perceived a meeting with fourteen church planters in London in 2005 as the genesis of CtCE. The following year, about thirty-five leaders gathered for the CtCE conference in Berlin, and by 2018, 650 people attended the conference in Krakow, Poland.²¹⁰ Barth coached the first twenty-five European church planters personally and mentored leaders by visiting them in their local cities every six weeks. As CtCE continued to grow, Barth switched his mentoring role by coaching network leaders, who, in turn, remained in personal contact with local church planters. Simultaneous with the network's growth, Barth encouraged leaders to form regional networks so that a cross-fertilization of ideas between church planters could occur according to shared languages and cultural affinities. In this context, the idea of City to City DACH for German-speaking Europe evolved, which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2019 (DACH refers to Germany, Austria, and Switzerland).

In the interview, Barth highlighted the crucial decision to recruit native leaders rather than relying on cross-cultural missionaries for developing their network during the early stages of CtCE. Cross-cultural missionaries had the financial means to attend all of their conferences and were “the loudest voice in the room,” while European leaders remained silent.²¹¹ Thus, CtCE decided that cross-cultural missionaries could not attend network leader meetings. When the interviewer asked about CtC's influence on European leaders, Barth singled out the theological centrality of the gospel and its message of grace, uniquely applied in each cultural context. The influence that grabbed hold of leaders was “the theological understanding of the gospel and its application, and that actually,

210 “2018 Report.” The 650 leaders represented 32 countries. The annual report lists several training events and the recruiting goal of 500 church planters in the next five years.

211 Barth, interview.

all change is really driven by the gospel.”²¹² Subsequently, leaders communicate and apply the gospel carefully to each cultural narrative. A critical aspect of transmitting this value and Redeemer’s ministry philosophy was a close tie between European leaders and the ministry of Redeemer Presbyterian Church. All European leaders, for example, were encouraged to participate in a six-week intensive training program in New York City. Concurrently, Barth stressed the decentralized and independent nature of the leadership networks CtC seeks to create globally.²¹³

Finally, Barth elucidated that a common feature of conversion across CtCE’s church plants in Europe is a prolonged conversion process. Conversions typically resemble an arch, a process of sixty to eighty decisions a secular person needs to make before a conversion is possible.²¹⁴ Thus, CtC sought to empower native leaders to contextualize and apply a gospel of grace to a gradual conversion process among secular Europeans.

The Development of Redeemer City to City in Germany

In 2003, Christian Nowatzky, a recent graduate from the Giessen School of Theology (GST), became the first international trainee at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City and entered an eighteen-month internship program with four other interns. Participants met with Tim Keller over a meal in his home for bi-weekly “Socratic sessions” to process and internalize the theology and values of Redeemer’s ministry approach. Nowatzky and another student from the GST, Konstantin von Abendroth, had been discussing the idea of planting a church in Berlin. Simultaneously with Nowatzky, von Abendroth interned in a church in Toronto led by Stephen Beck. Beck was part of the CtC network and had grown up as a missionary kid in Germany and Austria. He began to teach courses on Urban Ministry at the GST seminary, then joined the mission agency Greater Europe Mission, moved to Germany, and became a full-time professor

212 Barth, interview. Barth summarizes the ministry approach of Redeemer with two core values, contextualization and the centrality of the gospel. Al Barth, “Vorwort zur deutschen Ausgabe [Preface to the German edition],” in *Handbuch zur urbanen Gemeindegründung*, by Timothy Keller and J. Allen Thompson, trans. Linda and Matthias Voigt et al., 2nd ed. (Worms: Pulsmedien, 2012), 8.

213 Al Barth, email message to the author, April 28, 2020.

214 Barth, interview.

at the GST in 2005. Subsequently, Beck inspired numerous students to become church planters in the initial development of the CtC network.²¹⁵

In January 2005, Nowatzky and Abendroth arrived in Berlin to plant the first German CtC church in the city district of Prenzlauer Berg. An initial core group of eleven team members formed to start the church. In the beginning, Nowatzky and Abendroth focused on building relationships informally within their target area by attending parties and concerts or by meeting in private homes. Ten months later, the Berlin Projekt (Berlin Project) celebrated its first public worship service with about sixty-five people in attendance. A female friend of Nowatzky became the first convert after two months of meeting for worship. The worship service grew quickly to about one hundred people by the summer of 2006. More conversions followed. In a video, Nowatzky shares how proclaiming the basic gospel message of grace, a core component of Keller's ministry approach, had far-reaching effects on secular people during the initial church planting stage: "There was a hunger for the gospel. People were reacting very strongly to the presentation of the cross, of forgiveness, every Sunday, so that was a very intense time spiritually."²¹⁶ Nowatzky credits the encouragement and ministry support of CtC for the survival of their ministry as he faced the daunting challenges of church planting.²¹⁷

The second CtC church plant in Germany, Frankfurt City Church, started shortly after the Berlin Projekt in late 2005. Beck began to mentor the GST student Bodo Park in the fall of 2005. Four other students joined the initiative in the following year. The core group continued to grow, and about fifty people took

215 "RPC: Missionary Spotlight," Reformed Presbyterian Church RPC, accessed July 22, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2XT0lcW>; Stephen Beck, "Die Geschichte des City Mentoring Programms [The history of the City Mentoring Program]," in *Handbuch zur urbanen Gemeindegründung*, by Timothy Keller and J. Allen Thompson, trans. Linda and Matthias Voigt et al., 2nd ed. (Worms: Pulsmedien, 2012), 299–306. Beck encouraged and trained students to become church planters within and outside of the CtC network. He created a training program for church planters called City Mentoring Programm, heavily relying on materials from CtC. Currently, Beck is no longer part of CtC network and promotes a *mono-multi cultural* model of church planting that integrates a German and migrant audience.

216 "Christian Nowatzky," April 2019, produced by Redeemer City to City, video, 5:00, <https://vimeo.com/329822843>.

217 "Christian Nowatzky," video; Christian Nowatzky, "Kirche in der Stadt: Das Berlinprojekt [Church in the City: The Berlin Project]," in *Center Church Deutsch: Kirche in der Stadt*, by Timothy Keller, trans. Jutta Schierholz (Giessen: Brunnen, 2017), 388–92.

part in the launch of their first public service in 2007. Hamburg became the third location for a CtC church plant. Daniel Bartz, yet another student from the seminary in Giessen, moved to Berlin to join the Berlin Projekt for a hands-on internship in 2006. Bartz initiated the Hamburg Projekt with a core group of twelve people in 2008. The church plant grew consistently and expanded its ministry by planting five more churches during the subsequent ten years.²¹⁸ Pastor Müller and his family started the CtC church plant in Grünwald outside of Munich in 2012 after serving as the pastor of a Reformed church in the United States for several years. Müller and his wife also attended a church planter's training seminar at Redeemer Presbyterian Church and sensed a call into church planting after being inspired by such stories as Nowatzky's and Abendroth's Berlin Projekt.

In 2019, City to City DACH had grown to twenty-five churches and church plants in German-speaking Europe. Stephen Pues, who started the CtC church Nordstern Kirche (NorthStar Church) in Frankfurt in 2012, followed Al Barth as director of City to City Europe in 2018, effectively placing the future of the CtCE network in European hands.²¹⁹

Conclusion

A crucial factor in the development of CtC in Europe, specifically Germany, was the commitment to train, support, and empower native leaders, eventually relying on them for regional leadership roles. Close ties through intensive training with Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, regular network conferences in Europe, and personal, on-location support by Barth ensured the transfer of Redeemer ministry values to native leaders. The personal assistance of leaders through the CtCE network provided critical support for church planters in difficult places. Furthermore, the willingness to work cross-denominationally made it possible for CtC to expand its work across ecclesial boundaries and reach a diverse audience. Finally, a commitment to translation facilitated the prolonged conversion process typical for European converts in CtCE churches. The case study of Gospel Church Munich offers insights into a City to City church plant

218 "Daniel Bartz," April 2019, produced by Redeemer City to City, video, 5:33, <https://vimeo.com/329824211>; Boy, "Blessed Disruption," 30–33; Beck, "City Mentoring," 299–301; Barth, interview.

219 "New Director for CTCE," City to City Europe, Redeemer City to City, accessed July 17, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2Y5JC7f>; unpublished PowerPoint slide about the CtC DACH region, attained by the author through Stephen Pues on July 8, 2019.

that adopted CtC's theology and ministry approach to present the gospel in the highly secular context of Grünwald, a town of the rich and famous.

Conclusion

New evangelical movements have changed the ecclesial landscape in Germany, offering fresh impetus for church planting and altering pathways for evangelical conversion. New Pentecostal churches that benefit from transnational networks connect with popular culture and may invigorate the limited growth of German Pentecostalism. The rising number of African migrant churches pursue the call of bringing back the gospel to a post-Christendom Europe. Second-generation migrant leaders carry the hope of translating the gospel into the context of secular Germany. Global church planting networks such as Redeemer City to City have empowered native German leaders to contextualize the Christian message and are expanding their influence across denominations. Each of the case study churches in this research project represents one of the new evangelical movements spreading the Christian message through conversion in Germany and across the globe.

Chapter 3 Case Study 1: Hope Center in Berlin

The following three chapters present the findings of the case studies according to the sequence of the actual field research at Hope Center, Gospel Church Munich, and ConnectKirche Erfurt. The chapters disclose how and why transformational conversions occurred in the diffusion of the Christian message through evangelical church plants in Germany. Each chapter summarizes the data according to the five primary diffusional patterns: transmission, translation, turnaround, transformation, and retransmission. The coding procedure generated a total of nineteen expanded codes or diffusional sub-themes that ensure a rich description of the within-case presentations. Each report introduces the individual case with an overview of the research, a description of the local context and history of the church plant, and the observation of a worship service. As is customary with multi-case studies, a cross-case analysis follows the individual case studies to present and analyze common and divergent diffusional patterns across cases.²²⁰

Overview of Research at Hope Center

The research at Hope Center in Berlin (HCB) included interviews, observations, online sources, and printed materials. The interviews and observations took place during the field visits on October 25–28, 2019, November 16–21, 2019, and January 24–26, 2020. The researcher attended three worship services, the fundraising event Gala on October 25, 2019, and a community group meeting on November 20, 2019. Four individuals who experienced conversion and pastor Joshua Lupemba participated in the interviews, which provided the primary sources of information for studying the diffusional processes at Hope Center.²²¹ The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant individually and followed up with clarifying questions. The interview with Anna Cruz, a typical convert at HCB, serves as a document for oral history

220 John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2018), 190–92; Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 194–99.

221 All quotes from the interviews are English translations created by this author. The author also added words in square brackets [...] where necessary to clarify the content. Unique German words or sayings appear in italics, followed by the English translation in parentheses (...).

(see Appendix 9.1). Table 1 offers biographical details about the converts in this study. Each participant received a pseudonym except for the pastor and Anna Cruz as an oral history interviewee.

Table 1. List of converts who participated in interviews at HCB

| Name Interview Date | Background | Age | Gender | Conversion | Baptism |
|-------------------------------|---|-----|--------|------------|--|
| Anna Cruz (November 16, 2019) | Mother: German Father: Cuban Raised in Berlin, German citizen Childhood and adolescence: no church affiliation, secular upbringing Pre-conversion: atheist | 21 | F | 2015 | At HCB in 2016 |
| Andrea (November 20, 2019) | Both parents: Russian Parents divorced Raised in Berlin, German citizen Childhood and adolescence: spiritual interests and contact with Jehovah’s witnesses Pre-conversion: no spiritual interests from age 18–25 | 27 | F | 2017 | At HCB in 2017 |
| Joel (November 20, 2019) | Mother: German with migrant background Father: African American Parents divorced Raised in Berlin, German citizen Childhood and adolescence: nominal, non-practicing Catholic; no influence on life Pre-conversion: basic faith in Christian God | 22 | M | 2012 | Catholic, infant baptism; adult baptism at HCB in 2013 |
| Nadja (January 24, 2020) | Both parents: German Parents divorced Raised mostly in Berlin Childhood and adolescence: no church affiliation, secular upbringing Pre-conversion: atheist | 34 | F | 2008 | At Christ Community Church in 2008 |

Also, the researcher collected data from the church’s website, their Facebook page, and their YouTube channel. Finally, printed materials such as brochures and flyers gave further insights into the beliefs and practices of HCB.

Local Context of Hope Center

Berlin is the capital of Germany and its largest city with 3.7 million inhabitants. A popular tourist destination and home to several universities, Berlin can be described as “a world city of culture, politics, media, and science.”²²² Prenzlauer Berg, where Hope Center held its services in a Christian school from 2017 to 2019, is a popular city district with pubs and restaurants, attracting many young people for its nightlife.²²³ In 2018, Prenzlauer Berg’s 164,000 inhabitants included 25 percent of people with a migration background. The same percentage of people was age twenty-seven years or younger. The statistics substantially change when looking at the district of Neukölln, which became the new target area for Hope Center’s ministry in 2020. People with a migrant background made up 55 percent of its 167,000 inhabitants and up to 80 percent for children under fifteen.²²⁴ In 2018, one-third of the multi-cultural population of Neukölln lived on social welfare, making this city district known as a *sozialer Brennpunkt* (social focal point) for political issues relating to integration.²²⁵ Consequently, Neukölln became an attractive target area for Hope Center with its aspiration to reach socially disadvantaged youth with a multi-cultural background in Berlin.

History of Hope Center

Two church brochures, the church’s website, and personal communication with pastor Lupemba served as sources for the history of Hope Center. The origins of the church go back to the missionary work of Lupemba’s mother, Essuah Djonfiah, a first-generation migrant from Ghana. Djonfiah began an evangelistic ministry to refugees in 1979. Eventually, she started the Pentecostal migrant church called Christ Community Church in 1996.²²⁶ Lupemba took over the

222 “Berlin,” Wikimedia Foundation, last modified February 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/37CF7BR>.

223 “Prenzlauer Berg,” Wikimedia Foundation, last modified December 19, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3bNeAVS>.

224 *Statistischer Bericht: Einwohnerinnen und Einwohner im Land Berlin am 31. Dezember 2018* [Statistical Report: Inhabitants of the State of Berlin on 12.31.2018] (Potsdam: Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, 02.19), <https://bit.ly/37EeW6>.

225 Thomas Lindemann, “Der Berliner Bezirk Neukölln: Als Deutscher bin ich Minderheit [Berlin’s city district Neukölln: As a German, I am the minority],” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 4, 2016, <https://www.faz.net/1.4146481>.

226 “Unsere Geschichte [Our history],” Hope Center e.V., accessed June 21, 2019, <https://www.hopecenter.de/unseregeschichte>.

church's leadership for three years after his mother suffered from a stroke in 2006. Young people began to attend the worship services, and a vision developed to reach out to socially disadvantaged young people in Berlin. Lupemba, who had grown up in social hardship as a second-generation Ghanaian in Berlin, sensed a particular affinity to young people with the same social background. He reported "outbreaks of glory" as significant, spiritual events in 2005 and 2008, which Lupemba described as occurrences of gold dust, fog, glitter, and oil on the hands of people during the services. In 2010, Lupemba received his pastoral ordination at his father's Pentecostal church in Belgium and became the leading pastor in Berlin officially two years later.²²⁷ Axel Nehlsen, a German Lutheran pastor and prominent Christian leader in Berlin, began to mentor Lupemba and helped him to consider issues of contextualization in reaching the German youth culture. The networking with German leaders led to the participation in *Gemeinsam für Berlin* (Together for Berlin), an umbrella organization to foster unity among Protestant ministries in Germany's capital. In 2013, Lupemba married Shilan, a Kurdish refugee who also took on pastoral responsibilities. Lupemba and his leadership team formulated a new ministry approach with the assistance of the European director of the American Free Church of America, who served in Germany at the time. On November 1, 2014, Christ Community Church restarted as a non-denominational church plant for young people with its new name, Hope Center. The assembly hall of the Christian school Corrieten-Boom in the city district of Prenzlauer Berg served as the worship facility for Hope Center from 2017 to 2019. The church organized multiple meetings throughout the month, such as worship and prayer nights, Bible studies, training events, and homegroup meetings. On October 25, 2019, a fundraising event called Gala introduced the plan of a large-scale social outreach program with a new multi-purpose facility in the district of Neukölln to Christian leaders, city officials, and potential donors. HCB moved out of the Christian school in Prenzlauer Berg at the beginning of 2020, seeking to concentrate its mission efforts to reach young people in their new target area.

Observation of a Worship Service

On this particular occasion on January 26, 2020, the worship service took place in the building of a Nazarene church on the outskirts of Berlin-Neukölln. Hope

227 Centre Chrétien Lumière des Nations: Christian Center Light for the Nations, Facebook, August 6, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/cclnbe/>.

Center had not found a permanent facility in their new target area yet. The service promptly began with worship music led by a young German lady and the band at 2:00 p.m. Helpers had covered all the windows with black foil to create a dark worship room, only lit with spotlights on the stage. The congregation expressed their thankfulness and praise by singing five contemporary worship songs, highlighting God's faithful love as well as the believer's healing and security in Christ.

At 2:30 p.m., about fifty-five people had joined the worship service. Most of the congregation consisted of women with an African migrant background, many of whom had brought their children. Only six male adults were present. Anna, the participant for the oral history interview, gave the announcements at 2:38 p.m. She shared how, as a Christian, she sometimes felt strange about having to give up all the parties in her old life. Now, that old life seems like a B-movie, whereas the Christian life is like an Action Thriller, a life of true adventure. "No day with Jesus is like the other," Anna exclaimed. The announcements, which lasted eighteen minutes, encouraged the audience to participate in various prayer events, Bible studies, community groups during the week, and other service opportunities.

Pastor Lupemba then took thirty minutes to address the topic of finances and giving before taking the financial offering, a standard procedure in every service. Lupemba referred to such Old Testament passages as Dt 21:17 to argue that God will give double the blessings of favorable circumstances or finances for any sacrifice the congregants experienced. "Double for your trouble" was one of Lupemba's favorite sayings. He opposed the idea that God wants to teach believers through hardships emphatically. God can use those circumstances but rather teaches through the Holy Spirit. Then, Lupemba encouraged the audience to give extraordinarily during the first month of the year, a type of first fruit in giving. The offering ended with the usual recital of a financial confession of faith, expressing confidence in the promise of financial well-being:

As we receive the thank-offering today, we expect from the heavenly Father: Jobs and better jobs, raises and bonuses, subsidies and stipends, revenues and commissions, advantageous agreements, properties and inheritances, returns and interest earnings, discounts and refunds, donations, gifts and surprises, monetary discoveries, debt redemption, lowered expenses, blessing, and multiplication. Thank you, Lord, that you meet my financial needs, that I have more than enough to give toward the kingdom of God and promote the gospel of Jesus Christ. Hallelujah!

At 3:28 p.m., Shilan, the pastor's wife, took over leading the service. Worship in singing resumed with the continual repetition of single sentences, such as "open

the scroll, break the seal, worthy one,” while Shilan interspersed thoughts about Christ’s sacrifice and our ability to enter God’s presence fully. The constant repetition of individual sentences and the dimly lit worship room created a highly emotional worship experience. People in the congregation started to jump up and down, clap, raise their hands, or pray while kneeling in the walkways. At 3:48 p.m., Lupemba continued with the singing of individual sentences and invited the congregation to worship “in their own language.” Many people began to sing by repeating non-comprehensible sentences. Others started to fall on the ground, laugh uncontrollably, or shake vehemently, similar to an epileptic seizure. Lupemba thanked God for filling this room with the glory of God.

At 4:17 p.m., Lupemba started to preach the sermon, at which point everyone in the congregation promptly sat back down in an orderly fashion. Lupemba pointed out that the believer’s purification through God’s Word in Jn 15:3 rests on the righteousness of the believer in Rom 1:16-17, thus presenting a traditional, evangelical view of salvation through justification by faith. He explained that an awareness of the believer’s new identity as sons and daughters of God should replace an inferiority complex with a sense of self-worth in Christ. “No one without Christ is doing better than you,” even if it appears to be to the contrary, Lupemba proclaimed. He finished the sermon by encouraging church members to bring their non-Christian friends to the worship service so they can hear the gospel as well.

Finally, Lupemba led the congregation in a prayer of conversion and commitment, which a technical team streamed live on YouTube and Soundcloud along with the entire service. He finished with a prayer of blessing at 5:22 p.m., at which point the pastor invited people who desired special prayer for themselves to come forward. Helpers stood behind the five individuals who asked for prayer, ready to catch them as some of them fell backward onto the floor. At 5:37 p.m., the prayer time ended, and enthusiastic volunteers commenced with the cleanup of the makeshift facility.

Transmission

The following section describes how Hope Center transmitted the Christian faith and why converts engaged with the Christian message at the beginning of their conversion process. HCB encouraged individual transmission, committed to corporate transmission, and communicated the biblical message. Converts also reported how spiritual experiences moved them to start attending Hope Center.

Encouraged Individual Transmission

The pastor continuously encouraged members at HCB to pursue the individual transmission of the gospel. Converts reported that congregants from Hope Center invited them to church functions but did not necessarily share the gospel with them individually.

Lupemba viewed the call to make disciples as a mandate for every Christian. The emphasis rested on sharing the Christian faith in the immediate social context, but this practice did not exclude street evangelism:

Each of us has a clear mandate to share the faith and make disciples. This means that by repeating again and again, in all facets, in every get-together, in every meeting, in everything we do, to repeatedly verbalize through simple short sentences, that people are always reminded of it: "Live your faith in your everyday life!" That is the most important [approach]. Going on the streets one-on-one is one thing, but to be a testimony in everyday life, this mandate: "You are the testimony of God!"

Lupemba inspired the congregation to engage in individual transmission when he shared a personal experience during the worship service on October 27, 2019. He told the story of how he gave a gospel tract, a Bible, and food to a homeless person who had spent several nights in his apartment building. Genuine faith practices, Lupemba showed, must include meeting real needs and also sharing the gospel.

The interviews of all four converts revealed how specific individuals were always crucial on the path to first engaging with the Christian message, yet these individuals did not necessarily witness personally by sharing the gospel message themselves. Instead, they invited converts to hear the gospel at HCB. Joel, for example, took lessons from a dance teacher who was part of Lupemba's church. The instructor impressed Joel with his testimony of interpreting dance practices through biblical principles. Thus, Joel was ready to accept the teacher's invitation to a dance competition where Lupemba preached:

I took dance lessons, and the coach invited me to a dance in a church, [and asked] if I would like to dance with him there. I said, "yes, okay, why not," because I knew he was a Christian, and because I was also very impressed that we danced once, and he explained to me what he imagined when he was dancing. . . . He was talking about dance battles, and he made a movement and said, "Hey, I am David, and I am fighting Goliath."

Nadja shared how she lived a life of attending parties and dance clubs. One day, a friend of hers, who also attended Lupemba's church, invited her to the worship service. Her friend motivated Nadja to join him for the service by stating that "I think you would really like it, and maybe you want to come along." Anna's former boyfriend also attended Hope Center but was more direct in gospel

transmission. He and another friend engaged Anna in regular Bible discussions to convince her of the Bible's validity. They began meeting with Lupemba for Bible discussions as well, and eventually, Anna attended her first worship service.

Hope Center's commitment to encouraging individual transmission affected converts, especially in the retransmission of their faith. The section on retransmission describes this topic in more detail.

Committed to Corporate Transmission

Hope Center unceasingly pursued the corporate transmission of the Christian faith through worship services, evangelistic events, and street evangelism. Converts in this study attended evangelistic events, while the worship service was the main venue for them to engage with Christianity.

The pastor anticipated that non-Christians would come to church every week and always preached with non-Christians in mind: "The sermon needs to have depth, but at the same time, people who come for the first time should still be able to take something with them." Lupemba shared the gospel with a prayer of conversion at the end of every sermon. In addition, HCB streamed its services on media platforms such as YouTube and SoundCloud, expanding the number of potentially non-Christian viewers.²²⁸

A concerted effort to organize evangelistic events and practice street evangelism took on various forms throughout the year. The Revival Week was an annual campaign in street evangelism that varied from three to seven days. Church members participated in street evangelism, speaking with strangers about the gospel and praying for them. In the interview, Lupemba called this campaign an "intense form of proclamation." The Revival Week, though, was not the only occasion to engage in street evangelism at HCB. Throughout the year, church members went on the streets to share the gospel in regular intervals. Starting in January 2020, the leadership expected members to take part in street evangelism in their new target area of Neukölln every Saturday. The highlight of Hope Center's evangelistic programs was a dance competition called The Battle. Lupemba estimated that 90 percent of their competitors came from a non-Christian background: "This is an event that is fully advertised in a non-Christian milieu and always reaches, I would claim, 90 percent of non-churched youth. The 10 percent who have a connection to the church predominantly are people who do not live it."

228 "Hope Center Livestream Gottesdienst, 24.11.2019," video, 2:46, <https://bit.ly/2OnMBC7>. The video of the service had 186 clicks on January 29, 2020.

Joel and Andrea, who were both passionate dancers, reported that their attendance at the dance competition was a critical step toward pursuing the Christian faith. Street evangelism was not a decisive factor for conversion among the participants of this study. However, all converts began to attend the worship services after their initial contact with people from HCB or after coming to an evangelistic event. The emotional response to worship services was crucial for several converts in their experience of corporate transmission, which is addressed in the section Moved by Spiritual Experiences.

Engaged with Biblical Message

Hope Center engaged converts consistently with the content of the Bible through corporate programs. Personal Bible reading became an additional source of moving participants in this study toward conversion.

Observations of worship services disclosed the frequent use of Scripture and lengthy sermons as distinctive characteristics of HCB. Lupemba used multiple Scripture references in each sermon and challenged worship attendees to interact with the Bible. On January 26, 2020, the two-part sermon lasted a total of ninety minutes. A welcome table outside the worship room offered printed materials, gospel tracts, and Bibles free of charge to visitors. Every new attendee received an information package that included a gospel tract. Anna shared how HCB's worship service was her first exposure to a sermon with biblical content: "This is the first time I came into contact with the Word, the spoken Word, and the first time I heard a sermon." The annual dance competition The Battle also offered Bibles and Christian materials to the predominantly non-Christian audience. Andrea remembered how she casually picked up a Bible during the event: "Then I walked past a particular table, where there was this Street Bible [A New Testament in the German New Living Translation with testimonies of converts], and I thought: 'Hmm, Street Bible, okay,' and took it with me." The reading of this particular copy of the Bible became a crucial component in her conversion process.

Andrea, Anna, and Joel also reported how self-initiated personal Bible study helped generate their initial interest in Christianity, either before or after their first contact with Hope Center. For example, Anna first discussed the validity of the Bible with her boyfriend and Lupemba. Anna's self-motivated Bible reading, though, helped her in opening up to the Christian message:

From the point where I started reading the Bible myself, my life actually changed because then I did not have the feeling someone else is trying to tell me something, but I looked

at it myself, and then I started simply with the Gospels. And then it was kind of a whole new world for me because I had really never read the Bible before.

Joel began to read a children's Bible after initially attending several other evangelical churches with his former girlfriend. He wanted to find out more about the Christian faith: "I started reading the children's Bible myself because I was somehow interested. I read the story of Noah, Abraham, and I just read it at home. My mother asked: 'What is going on with you? Why do you read the Children's Bible?' But I continued reading it."

Moved by Spiritual Experiences

Hope Center sought to prepare city districts spiritually in preparation for transmission and generate supernatural experiences in worship services. Converts talked about mystical experiences that resulted in greater spiritual receptivity.

HCB practiced prayer walks, open-air worship, and continual prayer campaigns for "opening up" certain geographical areas spiritually. Lupemba stated that "prayer is crucial for us. We notice that prayer walks plus day and night prayer, which means prayer chains, are crucial for us to open up the spiritual space for us; worship evenings and also worship in general in the district; also open-air worship." A direct relationship between the strategy of spiritual preparation and the receptivity of converts was not identifiable. The observations of worship services, though, revealed an interest in inducing spiritual phenomena.

Converts talked about spiritual experiences or unusual circumstances that resulted in becoming more receptive to the Christian message. Regardless of the interpretation of these occurrences, the converts' conviction about those experiences fostered their determination to pursue the Christian faith. Andrea clearly remembered a chance encounter with a former boyfriend on the street right next to Hope Center in a city district she rarely visited. He invited her to the church, and it was as if God communicated with her in a time of need: "I smoked one, and I thought: 'Never in my life I would go up there!' Then it felt like God had answered my conversation [with him]." When she entered the facility, she became very emotional, and it was as if God spoke to her directly: "When I came in, it felt like this sermon . . . I cannot remember anything, but it was just for me. I cried and cried like never before in my life, and I stood there, and I cried, and I cried, and it felt as if God stood before me and said, 'I love you!'" Joel mentioned a non-rational experience during the first time of attending HCB. He started crying and felt like there was gold in the atmosphere of the worship area: "They began with praise, and I could not process anything. I remember how I started crying, how I was so moved inwardly. The picture I remember

was that there was so much gold in the atmosphere as if gold was everywhere in this room, and I was just sitting in there.” Nadja reported that she could not remember the sermon but also cried throughout her first experience of the worship service: “I absolutely do not remember what was preached. All I know is that I started crying from the first minute and could not stop and could not classify it.”

Translation

Hope Center translated Christianity to its young audience that often shared a history of social hardship. The church attracted converts through translated programs, related to converts by translated communication, drew converts into the church by their community dynamics, and affected converts by Pentecostal translation.

Attracted by Translated Programs

The two main programs that attracted converts in this study before their decision of conversion were the dance competition and the worship services. Converts confirmed their ability to relate to the church through these translated programs.

Lupemba noted in the interview that he wants to create an attractive worship service with appealing music, primarily emphasizing its high quality to relate to young people. Observations disclosed that worship services were highly choreographed. Volunteers darkened the room by covering up the windows, making the lengthy worship times conducive to spiritual or emotional responses. A band with keyboard, drums, guitar, and singers led the contemporary worship segments with exceedingly repetitive lyrics, singing some English songs and interspersing them with prayers and proclamations. Worshipers raised their hands, kneeled, or danced in the isles. Lupemba also mentioned that HCB would offer shorter services to reach people in their new target area after relocating to Neukölln.

The Battle targeted a specific sub-culture of young people who took part in dance competitions. The event reflected the multi-cultural context of youth in Berlin since participants had German, African, Asian, or Mid-Eastern backgrounds. Critical for the translation into that sub-culture was to create a high-quality event that could compete with their secular counterparts. “And this is important to us,” the pastor explained, “that the events are highly professional. Our incentive is always to be one of the three best events in the city in terms of the battles.” HCB sought to preserve a uniquely Christian character for their dance

competition as a testimony to its non-Christian audience. Participants knew that the organizers of The Battle prohibit content of violence and sexuality, which are common in secular dance competitions. The pastor explained: “Our event is . . . a value-oriented event. Everyone in the city knows that this event is totally free of violence and free of sexual content. This means that, from the beginning, people who come are prepared to ensure that those themes must not take place on-site.” The pastor explained that converts took part in contextualizing HCB’s programs. Feedback sessions with the church leadership allowed volunteers to give input on how to adjust the translation of church programs for a non-Christian audience. As soon as new believers volunteered at HCB, the leaders included them in this process of contextualization.

Joel and Andrea reported that the dance competition was a crucial stepping-stone for them to start attending Hope Center. The Battle related the Christian message to them in a unique way since both shared a multi-cultural background and an interest in dancing. Nadja, who was born in socialist East Germany and grew up in a completely secular family context, could not imagine attending one of the mainline church services. She mentioned how her negative impression of the traditional churches overpowered her initial desire to seek God: “I only knew the mainline churches, the Protestant church, the Catholic church, and thought to myself: ‘I cannot sit down and come back every Sunday. That will not keep me there.’ I did not know how to find access [to pursue my spiritual interest].” Nadja recalled how a friend invited her to Hope Center by picturing a young and alive church service. The simple fact of people in her age group attending HCB added to the attractiveness of the worship service:

I was invited by a good friend at the time, and he told me: “Nadja, I attend a church that is totally alive. The people are very young; the pastor is totally young.” . . . There I was [and thought] immediately: “Okay, yes!” Suddenly there was the door that I had been looking for for years when I did not know how to find God, and actually, I wanted to know God.

Notably, converts in this study described their spiritual or emotional response to the worship service as memorable rather than the particular style of worship music.

Related through Translated Communication

Hope Center contextualized its communication carefully by translating the Christian faith for socially disadvantaged young people in Berlin. Converts, in turn, reiterated HCB’s ability to relate Christianity to their social context.

Lupemba preached every sermon with non-believers in mind, although his sermons always addressed both Christians and non-Christians. The sermon had to have depth, yet he always remembered his audience has little prior knowledge of the Bible: “I am always aware that I am trying to speak a language where I do not expect people to read the Bible. It is always in the back of my mind that I am talking to a no-Bible generation.” Therefore, the pastor picked illustrations straight out of the daily experiences of the audience, most of whom were young people who grew up in social hardship. Lupemba was able to relate to the audience as a communicator since he was raised under similar circumstances in Berlin. At the core of contextualization was a message of hope. The pastor explained that “we want to be a church that reaches young people on the social fringes and to help them with this message of hope . . . to find their way with God, and to live a real, dedicated life for Jesus.” Hope, according to Lupemba, “has to do with a mindset. The mindset needs to be determined by the Bible and not what other people say.” According to a church brochure, every church member can become a *Hope Botschafter* (hope ambassador) ready to bring hope to people in despair.²²⁹

Additionally, the pastor affirmed that he “unashamedly professed a gospel of wealth,” even if preachers often misrepresented the biblical concept. In the interview, Lupemba explained that people who grow up in poverty adopt a mindset of poverty, making them believe that change is not possible: “Poverty is simply said: ‘I do not deserve it. That is why I live in a limited way.’” He believed the congregation needed to replace their sense of deprivation with a sense of inner wealth. Lupemba wanted to “help these people first of all to generate wealth in their hearts, that is, to know that God wants me to be well and that I am loved by God. I am worth it.” This inner wealth would naturally result in physical well-being since God does not destine believers to poverty and suffering. In a Sunday message on November 17, 2019, the pastor interpreted Abraham’s blessing in Gal 3:13-14 and Gn 13:2 as a physical blessing readily available for believers today. Lupemba also rejected the idea that God’s will is to teach spiritual truth through suffering in the sermon on January 26, 2020. He explained that God gives instructions through the Holy Spirit and not through misfortunes. God intends prosperity for believers and to give “double for our trouble.” Congruently, the pastor shared on Facebook that faith in Christ’s blood protects believers during

229 *Wir bilden Leiter, die Liebe zeigen und Hoffnung geben* [We educate leaders who show love and give hope] (Hope Center e.V., n.d.).

the COVID-19 pandemic: “No virus or disease will come near your home. Trust in the Lord for protection.”²³⁰

Interviews and observations revealed that the admonishment to abstain from unhealthy habits, manage finances well, and pursue professional goals was integral to achieving physical well-being at Hope Center. Aside from Lupemba’s contextualized messages, his outer appearance presented interviewees in this study with a new perception of Christianity.

Converts talked about how HCB succeeded in communicating the Christian message to them. Anna recalled Lupemba’s unconventional sermons and dress style: “Pastor Joshua’s sermons were just super unconventional. . . . I saw pastor Joshua, such a young guy who always wore a *basecap* [baseball cap] and then preached in a fun and relaxed way. That also gave me a whole new picture of the Christian faith.” Nadja explained that she was able to relate to the practical sermons at Hope Center. Messages were “simply spoken out of everyday life. They were not just read or recited, where you think: ‘When is the story finally finished?’ It was applicable to normal life. You could put yourself in it precisely because he was at eye level in terms of age and background.” Joel shared how the pastor always conveyed hope and confidence in Joel’s abilities, inspiring him to continue in Christian discipleship and ministry. Andrea, who grew up in social hardship, applied the message of wealth during a one-year discipleship program at HCB. She stated that for the first time in her life, she built healthy financial habits: “Then I was able to learn financial management, to manage my finances, to manage my time, and that . . . made me realize why I had not accomplished certain things in my life because I never knew how it works. No one ever taught it.” Andrea also internalized a message of health and anticipated receiving permanent physical health by faith. After reading a book by Kenneth Hagin, she explained that “the healing in the Bible that God gives us is for us. So we have the right to be healthy. . . . I received the revelation about healing. I cannot see it fully yet . . . but I have received the revelation about it, and I know it is mine.”

Drawn by Community Dynamics

The community dynamics were a primary force that drew converts into the church plant. People displayed an attitude of love and stood out to converts by exhibiting a life with purpose. The congregation was also similar in age and social background.

230 Pst Joshua Lupemba, “No virus or disease will come near your home,” Facebook, March 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2UaA3Rq>. In a subsequent comment, Lupemba clarifies that he does not oppose wearing facemasks.

On October 27, 2019, observations of the worship service displayed the loving interaction between worship attendees before and after the service. A friendly greeter welcomed the researcher before entering the worship facility. One of the church members gave a testimony during the service and shared her excitement about how Hope Center had become like a family. After the service, church members gathered for a meal and fellowship, a weekly tradition at HCB.

Anna remembered that the decisive factor for her spiritual openness at HCB were not the sermons but the love and unity of the community:

Actually, the decisive thing at that time was for me, emotionally speaking, not necessarily that I was exposed to the Word, but above all the people that I got to know, because I simply saw something in the community of the people in the church that I had never seen before. There was such a unity, such an appreciation and love for each other, which I did not know at all from somewhere else, . . . I was valued, although the people did not know me. . . . That was the first thing that just opened my heart to listen more.

Unity among people with a multi-cultural background was all the more impressive for Anna since “the people had nothing in common except Jesus.” Furthermore, a sense of purpose among people of her age drew Anna’s interest: “One thing that really thrilled me [was] that they were young people who were visibly passionate about Jesus. . . . All the people I knew who were my age were just completely different, had no vision, no perspective, they did not care about anything.” Similar to Anna, Joel reported how the loving welcome at Hope Center moved him emotionally: “I came in there, and they did worship. Then they greeted me and told me: ‘Hey, I love you, and Jesus loves you.’ When I heard that, I was almost moved to tears.” Notably, pastor Lupemba did not mention the dynamics of a loving community as a strategic measure to draw converts into the church during the interview. Instead, he stated that HCB concentrated on community dynamics as a foundational approach to discipleship, which the section *Committed to Rigorous Discipleship* addresses in more detail.

(Not) Affected by Pentecostal Translation

The Pentecostalism of Hope Center did not deter converts from pursuing the Christian faith. HCB’s statement of faith distinguishes glossolalia, the speaking in tongues, as a proof of the Spirit baptism, clearly identifying it as a Pentecostal church.²³¹ The observation of worship services also confirmed HCB’s Pentecostal heritage by disclosing various traditional and unusual teachings and practices.

231 “Glaubensgrundsätze [Statement of faith],” Hope Center e.V., accessed July 29, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2wINtvc>.

The lively worship with its singing, dancing, and raising of hands always incorporated a section for speaking in tongues. Each service ended with special prayers for individuals when the “slaying of the Spirit” occurred, and people fell backward onto the floor. Lupemba openly taught a gospel of wealth and physical well-being. Besides, he propagated unique teachings. In the service on November 17, 2019, Lupemba declared that well-trained prophets could meet with Jesus personally to receive secret revelations in a fourth, spiritual dimension.²³² Believers could enter this fourth dimension at any time by learning how to bend time. In fact, the pastor stated, God expects every believer to live in this dimension.

Nonetheless, converts did not mention that Pentecostal forms of worship and doctrines were an incentive to learn more about Christianity. Converts also did not point to Pentecostal practices or teachings as a disturbing element in their initial interest in the Christian faith. Andrea, for example, asked for prayer unassumingly at one of the healing and prophecy booths during a dance competition: “I went to one of those prayer stations—I just happened to walk by—and had them pray for me. I do not really know why.” Nevertheless, Pentecostal teachings shaped the personal changes of participants after their conversion. The section *Changed by Pentecostal Application* addresses this topic of transformation.

Turnaround

Hope Center facilitated conversion by presenting conversion clearly, providing opportunities for decision-making, affirming the point and process of conversion, and connecting conversion and discipleship. Converts affirmed that in their experience, conversion resembled a process and that a close connection between conversion and discipleship aided in their personal transformation.

Presented Conversion Intelligibly

The pastor emphasized the need to present conversion clearly. All converts reiterated a comprehension of basic Christian doctrines and the meaning of conversion, but their theological understanding varied during their process of turnaround.

In the interview, Lupemba explained that the decision of conversion is a turning from the world to Christ, which must include the components of sincere repentance from sin and faith in Christ. A decision of faith without turning away

232 David Yonggi Cho, *The Fourth Dimension*, Combined ed. (Newberry, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1983).

from the world would only be a partial conversion. The pastor elucidated that it is essential to

create clarity that this is a [change] from a self-determined life to a God determined life, a life that was without repentance, so to speak, when I sinned and I did not know better, to a life of repentance. . . . This understanding to say: “Forgive my sins, I am a sinner,” to then say: “Now, I follow you. I turn away from the world, and I turn to you.” . . . It is not a full conversion, according to my definition, if it is not also a turning away from the world.

The recital of a confession of faith in each sermon contained the key components of repentance and faith required for conversion, the affirmation of forgiveness of sins through Christ’s death, and an understanding of Jesus as Redeemer and King. Lupemba summarized that “the important points are Jesus as Redeemer, as Lord and God, we often say the King, the renunciation of self-redemption and the self-determined life, the devotion, the turning to Jesus as God and then the prayer of repentance. Also, the forgiveness of my sins and the cleansing through the blood of Jesus.” HCB’s website confirms a standard, evangelical set of doctrines, which lists the Trinity, Jesus as the Son of God, and Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross.²³³ On Sundays, gospel tracts of the evangelical mission agency Heukelbach, available on a book table and inside a welcome package, offered a written, clear invitation of conversion to every new visitor.

Anna, Joel, and Andrea affirmed their comprehension of Christ’s death for their sins at the time of their initial commitment of conversion. However, converts differed in other aspects of their theological understanding of conversion. Anna explained that she understood the love of Jesus for her but not the full submission in obedience:

I realized that all the things that made me sad, all the things in my heart where I was hurting, that Jesus was the answer to that. . . . I did not have the understanding yet of Jesus now being the king of my life, [that] he is now the one who makes the decisions, but it was more like this: “He is the answer to my questions. He is the one who gives me joy, who gives me love that I do not get from anyone else.”

Andrea had difficulties accepting the doctrine of the Trinity because of her exposure to the contradictory teaching of the Jehovah’s witnesses during her childhood. Andrea made the initial decision of faith during her first visit to HCB, but she explained that “for me, God was simply the Creator and Father and I just understood that at that moment, so to speak, I gave him my life in the first

233 “Glaubensgrundsätze,” Hope Center.

moment. . . . I was offended a bit, because they talked about the Trinity, and there is no Trinity among Jehovah's witnesses."

Finally, Lupemba stated that in present-day Germany, the mainline Protestant church still sets the standard for what Germans consider normal and acceptable Christian practices, including the meaning of mission work and conversion: "The evangelical church [mainline Protestant church] definitely sets the standard for conversion, . . . whether it is still socially accepted, in the sense of mission work and conversion." Consequently, the pastor explained, the mainline church "bears a great responsibility" to guide Germans toward a proper understanding of conversion.

Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making

Hope Center provided regular opportunities to make decisions of conversion. Converts in this study, though, did not necessarily make their decision in response to an invitation but described their conversion as a process.

In the interview, Lupemba stated that he gives an invitation of conversion at the end of almost every worship service. Sometimes, opportunities arise during communion or by the prompting of the Holy Spirit to give an invitation earlier in the service: "So I try to do it [the invitation] in every sermon. Very rarely does it not happen. . . . Then it usually takes place after the sermon. Sometimes, for example, when we have communion or even when one feels that there is a special moment when God touches human hearts, then it happens earlier." The observation of worship services showed how Lupemba led the congregation in a prayer of commitment at the end of each service. The prayer was both a prayer of conversion and Christian re-commitment. This invitation of turnaround, along with the entire service, was broadcasted to a larger audience through the streaming services of YouTube and Soundcloud. Lupemba reported that five to ten conversions occurred every month.

Additionally, the annual dance competition *The Battle* always included a short, five-minute message with an invitation of conversion. Participants who responded were asked to come to a designated area after the invitation. In this particular setting, Lupemba believed that the testimonies of Christians who portray positive values and share their life stories are more significant than verbal invitations:

I believe that the gospel is most effectively taught by the very fact that we live these values, that we are witnesses ourselves, which is much more important than what is preached. . . . In between, there are always testimonies of individuals telling their life

story, . . . and then there is a very short call of a maximum of five minutes, where the gospel is told very quickly with pictures, and then people are invited out of the tent.

Invitations to make decisions of conversion also occurred multiple times throughout the year during personal street evangelism and church-sponsored outreaches such as the Revival Week.

Nonetheless, the interviews revealed that converts in this study did not necessarily make their decisions in direct response to an invitation. Anna did not remember the exact time of her decision and described her conversion as a process:

I really cannot say the day I made my decision for Jesus. For me, it was not this one encounter with Jesus when I changed forever, but it was really a process. I think the conversion itself took place because I simply read the Bible and God himself revealed things to me. . . . It was rather something that happened in me personally than in a church service, traditionally, that I raised my hand.

Joel's first visit to HCB was a highly emotional or spiritual experience. Although he committed to following Christ fully at that point, he did not recall the exact moment he trusted Christ for his salvation: "I do not know when I first said, 'Lord Jesus, I give you my life,' or 'Jesus, I believe that you died for me, that you resurrected.' I do not know."

Affirmed Point and Process

The pastor affirmed both a point of decision and a process of a growing understanding and commitment in conversion. Converts reported that their comprehension of conversion increased after their initial commitment, but they could not necessarily recollect a specific point of decision.

Genuine salvation happens at the point of decision, Lupemba explained, even though a new convert does not have a full understanding of conversion or the ability to live out the Christian life. Conversion comes with a sense of remorse over sin, which is the conclusive proof of a genuine conversion:

I believe that if someone has sincerely made this decision from the heart on a certain day, that he is saved and it is fully adequate before God, even if he has not grasped the significance in his soul . . . and cannot live it yet, the Spirit works in you. . . . If it is a real confession, you will have a clear awareness of sin. . . . You cannot continue to sin without remorse. Otherwise, in my understanding, you are not converted.

The pastor believed that converts enter a process of fully committing their life to Christ after their conversion:

The decision is the conversion. . . . I would argue that it is not completed yet, but that discipleship actually defines this process of full renunciation, that is, this full devotion to Christ. This dying, the taking upon oneself of the cross, this fully dying in Christ, because I can say for myself that I still discover so many areas in me that have not died yet, and there is still a process.

The testimonies of converts confirmed that more sincere commitments and a growing understanding of conversion followed their initial commitments. Anna shared that she was in a pre-marital relationship with her boyfriend, and she came to identify this as a sin through the teaching at HCB. The church leadership did not pressure her to make moral changes. Nevertheless, her full devotion to Christ only began after she separated from her boyfriend: “About one week afterward [my baptism] we separated, and that is just so interesting because based on my feelings, my real, living relationship with Jesus only started after that. . . . Then I really gave my life to Jesus.” In comparison, Andrea explained that an extraordinary experience several months after her first decision at HCB was the reason for her final commitment to Christianity. She was lying on her bed when

suddenly, the devil screams through my ear, through my brain. I cannot describe it. It was the worst thing I have ever heard in my life. . . . It felt as if the heavens had opened and then such a double voice, such a powerful double voice said [a sentence] in a language that I did not know. It was one sentence, but this sentence was like this: “Do not be afraid, I am here. You are my child. I love you. I am God.” So in this one sentence, everything was included, and then everything was gone, and I was awake. . . . Then I had no doubt that God exists. It was the moment when I had no doubts.

At the time of his baptism, Joel knew his conversion implied a turning away from the old life and turning to Jesus, but only on an emotional level: “Baptism is this public confession: ‘Hey, Jesus is now my Lord and my old life is gone,’ and that was clear to me. It was clear in my heart but with the mind, not yet.”

Connected Conversion and Discipleship

Hope Center connected conversion and discipleship by integrating their practice of baptism, membership, and mentoring. Consequently, converts in this study entered a rigorous path of discipleship after their conversion.

Lupemba viewed the ritual of baptism as the simultaneous step of church membership. Membership, the pastor elucidated, also involves the assignment of a mentor to each new convert, which forces the beginning of a diligent application of biblical principles in discipleship. The mentor’s role is to guide the new member in lifestyle changes and Christian practices closely:

Membership and baptism go together. . . . It runs in parallel, . . . that you now say, “I am part of the spiritual family:” . . . There is a membership sheet. The person signs this and gives a clear mandate to the church leadership and the mentor whom you are assigned, whom you do not choose. Then the process begins that we look together: “What is next for you?”

All converts talked about the importance of HCB’s mentor in their discipleship process. One week after her baptism, Anna fully committed her life to Christ. She knew she could not continue living in a pre-marital relationship with her boyfriend and be a church member at the same time. Her mentor also addressed the issue: “From the moment I was baptized, I also had a mentor, and I think she also tackled this subject a little bit. . . . It just would not have worked if I had not given up my whole life and, despite of it, be a member of Hope Center.” Anna was amazed at the sacrificial devotion of HCB’s leadership to the needs of the congregation. They inspired her “in the way that they gave themselves to us, as young people who all come from such broken backgrounds.” Andrea’s baptism solidified her commitment to Hope Center after her extraordinary supernatural or emotional experience: “Of course,” she remembered, “I am going to be baptized because I had no doubt. I have experienced God. . . . Since then, I have gone to church every Sunday.” Andrea ascribed her mentor, Joshua Lupemba, a critical role in her spiritual growth. Contrastingly, Nadja did not continue in her spiritual growth until several months after her baptism. She explained that her limited understanding of conversion and lack of personal friendships in the church caused this disruption in personal discipleship: “After my baptism, there was actually a bit of a falling away, maybe because I was not willing to involve myself very much, so I fell away a lot easier. . . . From the present point of view, I really did not understand what it meant.” Later, Lupemba and his wife assisted Nadja in her continuing transformation.

Transformation

Fördern und fordern (support and demand) was the challenge pastor Lupemba posed to all converts who entered their discipleship programs as church members. Hope Center not only supported converts in their transformational processes but also demanded commitment and submission to church programs from their proteges. The church guided the transformational changes in converts by implementing deep discipleship, pursuing Scripture formation, challenging converts through Pentecostal applications, and embracing social transformation. Converts testified that they dealt with emotional pains from their past, adopted

biblical values, and found a new purpose in life. Pentecostal practices personalized and intensified transformational processes.

Implemented Deep Discipleship

Hope Center implemented a rigorous discipleship strategy, which Lupemba called the Five Pillars of Discipleship. Converts confirmed that their involvement in church programs, especially mentoring relationships, led to transformational changes.

The pastor explained that each pillar in their discipleship structure symbolizes a distinct commitment that church members make for becoming more Christlike. The first pillar, the attendance of weekly worship services and Bible studies, ensures an exposition to biblical teaching. The commitment to join a community group is the second pillar and facilitates Christian fellowship. Serving in the church represents the third pillar. The assignment of a mentor, who takes on the role of a personal counselor and closely follows converts in the implementation of personal lifestyle changes, is the fourth pillar. Finally, Lupemba offered the fifth pillar of personal coaching to determine personal gifting and calling on a voluntary basis. HCB also organized a one-year, full-time discipleship program that encompassed living in a host family and weekly assignments in addition to the regular activities of discipleship. Lupemba's understanding that personal change often happens slowly balanced the rigorous demands of church involvement. He explained that it is not appropriate to expect mature behavior patterns of new believers.

The attendance of worship services and other events at HCB, as well as volunteerism throughout the week, kept converts busy. Anna reported how her peer group changed due to her commitments at HCB, which left less time for family members and former friends: "My whole life made a complete turn of 360 degrees. . . . My entire peer group changed. I related to completely new people in my life. . . . Over time, I have taken on more and more responsibility at Hope Center, which means that, in purely practical terms, I gave up a lot of what I did before." On a positive note, Anna did not continue with activities she no longer deemed helpful in the Christian life. She believed the intense involvement in the discipleship process quickens personal transformation: "I believe that in Hope Center life can change much faster because it is an intense process that also costs a price, and God can also work much faster when it feels like you are there three or four days a week." The observation of an all-male community group, which met in Joel's apartment bi-weekly, disclosed how church members met for dinner, worshipped together, prayed for each other, and shared

their desire to live out Christian values in everyday life. The meeting fostered the growth of relationships and encouraged members to adopt Christian values. Joel volunteered by hosting the small group.

Membership at HCB not only asked converts to participate and volunteer in church programs throughout the week but also led to the assignment of a personal mentor. The church designed the mentoring program in view of its target audience. Personal mentors provided additional assistance in transformation for socially disadvantaged young people who often grew up without learning basic life skills. A brochure about HCB explains: “The vision of Hope Center is to be a church that reaches young people from socially marginalized groups and supports them through mentoring programs (discipleship) to become responsible leaders in our society who resemble Jesus.”²³⁴ Lupemba stated that members need to give their voluntary mandate for mentoring. This mandate permits mentors to address personal changes in their mentees. A set of written guidelines, the pastor added, is to prevent abuse of power within the mentor-mentee relationship. Lupemba and his wife Shilan had been the sole mentors for converts at Hope Center at the time of this study, although Lupemba trained other mentors in anticipation of future church growth.

Each of the converts testified to the critical role of their mentor in accomplishing transformational changes. Andrea felt that the close personal contact with her mentor helps her during times of temptation: “You meet every three or four weeks, but you are actually always in touch, and you can say: ‘Hey, I need your prayer, I am tempted or whatever.’ This person knows everything about you, and that is super helpful.” Nadja welcomed the encouragement of Lupemba and his wife during a period of personal hardship: “I just clung to Jesus and had many conversations with pastor Joshua and Shilan, who always encouraged me and who accompanied me through this whole tragedy. This was another real turning point, which made me much stronger and also more consistent with my decision.” Andrea affirmed the loving and patient support of her leaders during her one-year discipleship program: “In the entire process, I have my leaders who are spiritual parents for me, who love me in my weaknesses. This also brought transformation because, in the past, I did not feel valued or loved or understood. Here, all these weaknesses are okay. No one condemns me.”

234 *Hope Base: Creative Lab, Respect* (Hope Center e.V., n.d.).

Pursued Scripture Formation

Hope Center pursued the spiritual formation of converts by emphasizing biblical instruction in their worship services, in personal Bible reading, and in Bible studies. This emphasis on Scripture formation led converts to adopt new daily routines, new convictions, and a new understanding of the Bible's validity.

Worship services always included sermons with extended Bible expositions that addressed non-Christians evangelistically and Christians for the purpose of spiritual formation. In the interview, Lupemba asserted that he often preaches the same message three weeks in a row for the didactical purpose of retention: "Sometimes I preach a message for three Sundays, the same message in a row, and on the third time I notice *der Groschen ist gefallen* [they finally understood it]." Lupemba also encouraged members to read the Bible personally. For example, in the worship service on October 27, 2019, the pastor urged the congregation to take part in a period of fasting and Bible study for three months. He exclaimed that "a Christian, who is not in the Word, is dead" and encouraged members to read three to four chapters each day to finish the New Testament by the end of the year.

After her conversion, Anna explained that feelings of genuine love replaced a judgmental attitude toward other people. At the same time, she realized that many of her previous, positive values resemble biblical values. She came to believe that God created the world and that the Bible is entirely trustworthy despite her university education and seeming contradictions with science: "I know that even if I do not understand things, or even if they do not match up with science, the Word of God remains and is truer than science." Anna was also active in the socialist party Die Linke (The Left) and said that her "whole political worldview" changed to a more differentiated and biblical evaluation of politics: "For me, the world was clearly black and white before. Yes, I would just recognize that there are good things and bad things in most parties and that there are parties that are definitely a little bit closer to what Jesus might have said about our political situation than others. I got away from this blaming thing."

Joel ended what he described as self-centered, physically and emotionally abusive relationships with women. Instead, he adopted the traditional, biblical mandate of marriage. At the time of this study, Joel had married a church member at HCB. Both served actively in the church. Andrea's year-long discipleship course at HCB instructed her in routines of personal devotions and systematic Bible study: "We have something like a Bible reading plan, where we are constantly in the Word. We should meditate on Bible verses. We must always have a quiet time, which means that this discipleship program serves to set aside time for God."

Also, personal Bible reading became a habit for converts before conversion and intensified in their progression of discipleship.

Nonetheless, the adoption of biblical values did not ensure protection from hardship or quick and all-encompassing changes. Nadja confessed that she married a church member hastily without giving proper thought to her future spouse's compatibility and spiritual commitment. The marriage quickly ended in divorce. Nadja also had a passion for ecological activism but lacked personal resources to pursue this cause. Anna reported that "my whole family is bombarding me all day, to this day, about the things that are going on in the world from their worldview." Hence, her own political worldview only changed slowly since her parents propagated a different political orientation.

Embraced Social Action

Hope Center embraced social action intending to achieve a profound transformation of Neukölln as a crucial component of its overall ministry. However, the pursuit of making disciples remained the primary definition of mission. Converts, in turn, started to share a burden for social change while upholding a focus on evangelism.

Pastor Lupemba pursued a vision for HCB to become a significant agent of social transformation in the city district of Neukölln. Their brochure *Wir bilden Leiter* (We Train Leaders) states that the church seeks to "bring forth heavenly trendsetters who spread the message of God's kingdom in all areas of society in an experiential way and start a movement of hope." Lupemba engaged in social action himself and believed that the church should move beyond a Christian sub-culture to influence society: "I am involved politically, in terms of social policy rather than within a political party. We as leaders also want to live as examples and not focus on church growth, retreat into a subculture, and then rejoice that we are such a big church, but be salt in society."

On October 25, 2019, a fundraising event drew city representatives, politicians, and Christian leaders to support establishing an elaborate program for social action in Neukölln named Hope Project. The goal was to raise over 700,000 euros to finance salaries and a new ministry center that would offer various social aid programs for children and teenagers. HCB envisioned achieving measurable goals of social transformation, such as a decrease in the number of teenagers who drop out of school. Another concern for church leaders was to lower crime levels in Neukölln. Lupemba planned to recruit leaders from outside the church to put this social agenda into action. However, church members needed to limit their pursuit of social change to their social context due to the time constraints

of everyday life. The task of making disciples persisted as the primary objective for Hope Center. Each church member, Lupemba argued, should define their idea of mission in view of their context and personal gifting. They should “find a formulation for their mission, whether it is in the professional world, whether it is in art, whether it is in the classical priestly ministry, the fivefold ministry. No matter how they live, they do it in a conscious understanding of mission . . . to share my faith with the people in my context.”

Converts confirmed that sharing their faith evangelistically within their social context prevailed as their primary mission. Simultaneously, Nadja and Joel began to pursue passions and careers that allowed for a more substantial contribution to social transformation. Nadja struggled with debt and finances before her conversion. She shared a story of having to leave her mother’s home shortly after finishing school and living with friends from one week to the next, not knowing how to meet her financial needs. She developed a calling to help others with financial issues after Lupemba asked her to manage the finances of HCB: “My heart desires to see how people become free from this burden, become free from the mammon, and understand that money is a tool to bring blessings.” Nadja’s newfound passion for finances and administration caused her to study Public and Non-Profit Management with the goal of overseeing the administration of HCB. Joel, who had struggled with violent behavior and criminal activities before his conversion, decided to become a Sozialassistent (social worker). Hope Base’s latest church brochure features Joel as a proponent of the social project Respect, teaching young people how to build respectful and meaningful relationships. The mentoring role of Lupemba was critical in preparing him for this task:

I experienced in my own life that my mentor Pastor Joshua Lupemba taught me the value and consequences of treating other people with respect. In retrospect, I can say that this mentoring program positively influenced my decisions and made things easier for me. I look forward to the many children and young people who will have the same experience through the project Respect.

Changed by Pentecostal Application

Hope Center challenged converts to transformational changes through Pentecostal teachings and experiences. Converts testified that they started to speak in tongues, experience physical healing, or receive special revelations, which personalized and intensified their transformation.

The observation of three worship services revealed that the church engaged the audience in a highly emotional worship experience. Leaders anticipated the immediate presence of God and Pentecostal occurrences. When the worship service led

to Pentecostal phenomena, such as uncontrollable laughter, the pastor identified this as the experience of God's presence. Each service included time segments for glossolalia or receiving prayer resulting in the "slaying in the Spirit" and falling over backward. Also, the pastor and his wife repeatedly asserted that they receive prophetic insights to pray for special needs in the congregation. Lupemba, for example, sensed someone with a desperate financial need during the service on November 17, 2019. God's intervention was the only solution for that person. Shilan received a prophetic insight for mothers with children during the same service. She asked mothers not to let traumatic experiences diminish the love for their children. It is noteworthy that single mothers, their children, and socially disadvantaged people with financial needs regularly attended the services.

Pentecostal practices personalized and intensified transformational processes in converts independent of their validity as genuine spiritual experiences. Anna shared how the baptism of the Spirit and glossolalia helped her to overcome the limitations of her mind to engage in other Pentecostal experiences:

The experience that I myself received the praying in the Spirit [speaking in tongues] was a very interesting and great experience, which simply exceeded my understanding. . . . God knew, okay, this is maybe one thing that I need [if I am] to open my heart at all. I may first have to understand the Bible to some extent, but these supernatural experiences have helped me not to stop there. At some point, my mind also limits me because things that you do not understand are guaranteed to happen with God.

Anna described how she fell over in prayer, witnessed demon exorcism and the screaming of people during services. These phenomena would have been incomprehensible to her if she only relied on her mind. Andrea and her mentor engaged in what was called Sozo prayer.²³⁵ The mentor and mentee expect God to give special revelations during a time of prayer to receive personalized applications for the mentee:

Sozo is really nothing else than that you sit down, and you tackle the issues, and you ask God directly: "God, what is this or what is happening in my life?" Then you hear what God says. . . . So God actually does the work. The only thing my mentor does at that moment is that she asks the questions, but the answers are given by God. Then, so to speak, you write along and then have a summary of what was in the room at that moment. Then you ask: "Was there a reason?" or "Can you imagine that something happened?"

Andrea declared that she received special prophecies from God, which encouraged her to pursue her life-long dream of acting. Consequently, she enrolled

235 "What is SOZO?," SOZO: Saved, Healed, Delivered, Bethel Transformation Center, accessed February 17, 2020, <http://bethelsozo.com/>.

in an acting school. Nadja reported that she had suffered from a disease of her ovaries. Her medical exams every three months gave no sign of improvement, and doctors had no plan for treatment. Nadja received prayer for healing during one of the services at Hope Center, and Lupemba asked sick people to receive a medical checkup the following week. The results confirmed that Nadja's disease had disappeared. This experience solidified Nadja's resolve to devote her life to Christ: "I was healthy, and that was a sign for me when I thought I could not go back now. God gave me my life as a gift. He healed me, and *jetzt erst recht* [more resolved than ever]."

Retransmission

Converts in this study were not only recipients of the Christian faith, but Hope Center enlisted them in the retransmission of their faith to non-Christians. HCB mobilized new believers by communicating the value of retransmission, offering evangelism training, and providing opportunities for outreach and missions.

Communicating the Value of Retransmission

Hope Center communicated the value of retransmission to converts continually along with its general emphasis on mission for all members. Converts confirmed in the interviews that they adopted the value of sharing their faith verbally.

The mission of making disciples for all members was a foundational value at HCB, as stated in the sections Encouraged Individual Transmission and Embraced Social Transformation. The Great Commission served as the biblical rationale for all believers to accept this value of Christian activism. Lupemba felt it was important that "one really understands that the command of missions is to make disciples wherever you are, based on Matthew 28, that we really tell people: 'You, wherever God has put you, [make disciples].'"

Anna spoke about the priority of mission at HCB and testified to the pervasive encouragement for personal evangelism by sharing her faith verbally with non-believers:

We at Hope Center are specifically called to bring people to us who were not Christians before. . . . That means we must evangelize, and that is something being preached to us every day, that this is the simple reason why we are saved and we are still on earth, and why we still have access to other people . . . and we are not spiritual beings.

Anna internalized this passion for evangelism to view her sole purpose on earth as a disciple-maker: "I wake up every day with the prayer that I want to tell someone about Jesus. And it looks quite different. . . . I do not get to share

the gospel every day. But then I can, for example, love a person practically or somehow share the gospel. . . . I believe that my only calling is for people to come to the Lord.” Andrea’s enthusiasm for evangelism stemmed from the excitement about her own conversion and required little verbal incentive from HCB: “I think in the first year after my conversion I could not talk about anything else, which often became a stumbling stone for me when I was somewhere because all I talked about was: ‘God loves you, God is really true!’” Similarly, Nadja’s and Joel’s reports about sharing their faith revealed that they heard about and enthusiastically accepted the value of personal evangelism and disciple-making at HCB.

Training in Retransmission

The training of converts in retransmission took place through theoretical and practical training. As a result, converts became active in various evangelistic efforts.

In the interview, Lupemba stated that he instructs members “how to reach outsiders evangelistically” in their leadership training and through personal coaching. He elucidated further that street evangelism on weekends and the dance competition *The Battle* are regular occasions for practical training. The annual street evangelism event *Revival Week* supplies an additional opportunity for intense training. According to the pastor, church members learn how to overcome their fear of speaking about Christ and how to pray for supernatural manifestations during this week of evangelism:

We train people specifically in how to share their own faith for a week. . . . During this week, everyone should consciously overcome this inner limitation and have a positive experience with this normal [way of] sharing, talking to people about the faith . . . but also to get them in touch with the supernatural by praying for them.

Hope Center’s brochure *Wir bilden Leiter* expresses the conviction that people will become more open to evangelism if they experience the supernatural by “bringing heaven to earth: We believe, that when people get in touch with heaven through the supernatural work of God (healing, prophecy, miracles, signs, etc.), their perception will change fundamentally, and they will become more open to the gospel.” Consequently, Lupemba taught converts how to seek supernatural phenomena alongside their evangelistic efforts. Despite regular occasions of street evangelism, becoming a Christian witness within one’s relational network persisted as the priority for HCB’s evangelistic instructions. Mission, according to Lupemba, consists of sharing the Christian faith with the people in your social

context: “For us, mission means sharing the faith, that I live with an awareness that I share my faith with the people around me.”

Anna committed to Christian witnessing on the university campus. She lived out HCB’s emphasis on mission within one’s context primarily through her behavior:

In the university, for example, I try to be a testimony, mainly through my life, because it is a long-term relationship where I do not just see a person once, but I can invest in the relationship. I try to love people so that they can see that there is something different about me. Also, I try to be excellent at what I do. . . . I testify emphatically to the fact that it is by God’s grace and not by myself.

Nadja began sharing her faith with people in her apartment complex: “We are a very close neighborhood community. . . . I share my faith and speak about Jesus openly. . . . God simply gives opportunities to talk about him.” Joel explained how he received personal coaching by Lupemba in a healing ministry soon after his conversion: “He [Lupemba] said, ‘Put your hand on the foot and pray.’ Then, for the first time in my life, I prayed for a sick person, and it really activated a passion in me to see all the sick people healed.” Joel went on to regularly pray for people with ailments on the streets of Berlin. In high school, he prayed for God to heal sick students, but never without personal evangelism, sharing the gospel verbally: “I started practicing this at school, praying for people who had problems with their eyes . . . and that was always connected for me, telling them about Jesus.” Finally, Andrea, who sensed special gifting for street evangelism, received additional training by attending a conference led by the Pentecostal evangelist Reinhard Bonke.

Provided Opportunities for Retransmission

Hope Center provided opportunities for converts to retransmit their faith locally, while involvement in foreign missions was in its beginning stages. Converts participated in local evangelism regularly and developed aspirations for mission work. However, not each convert felt comfortable about participating in street evangelism.

Regular street evangelism campaigns on the weekend, the yearly evangelism event Revival Week, the dance competition, and evangelistic events in cooperation with other churches were continual opportunities for converts to retransmit their faith. At the same time, weekly worship services served as a primary platform for converts to invite non-Christians to hear the gospel. Lupemba explained that Hope Mission, a new branch of ministry at HCB, fosters evangelism and foreign missions. God had revealed to the church that mission work

should take place in East Germany and Eastern Europe. The partnership with a mission agency and a trip to Ukraine were in the planning stages:

Hope Mission is about evangelism. It is about equipping other churches. Specifically, God has shown us that we should direct our efforts to the East, the new federal states [of East Germany], and Eastern Europe. We are now in conversation with the missionary agency Josua, . . . how we can serve them. Beyond that, we are also planning a mission trip to Ukraine.

The pastor also said that a number of their converts received divine revelations about becoming missionaries in foreign countries. Hope Mission would prepare them for these mission efforts, beginning with short-term trips: “These are people who converted here and came through our discipleship, to whom God clearly gives nations. We start with short-term trips where they can just come along. . . . In the next three to five years, we will probably release up to ten missionaries into the world.”

Converts in this study invited friends to worship services, participated in street evangelism, and anticipated a future involvement in foreign missions. Anna shared how HCB’s evangelism programs left little choice not to evangelize: “We have a structure at Hope Center where you cannot get around it. We have many evangelistic events, practice it [evangelism] as groups, or do it with other congregations.” Nevertheless, Anna did not feel comfortable with street evangelism and rather shared her faith in everyday situations: “I am not the evangelistic type who approaches everyone every two seconds. After all, it is on most days that God puts it on my heart to approach a stranger and at least say: ‘God loves you!’” Nadja explained that weekly, mandatory street evangelism is difficult for her as well, although she practices it regularly: “I practice this in the activities we do as a church. We are very focused on evangelism . . . although I am very challenged to stand on the street and talk to people. . . . Now, we practice this every Saturday . . . in Neukölln, two hours of evangelism, and everyone is assigned.” Nadja anticipated pursuing her childhood dream to engage in foreign missions in Africa at some point. Finally, Joel wanted to organize large evangelistic campaigns, possibly in foreign countries, similarly to campaigns by Reinhard Bonke: “I can imagine putting on large evangelistic campaigns. He [Lupemba] showed me videos of Reinhard Bonke . . . how he does this in Africa, and I was thrilled. A vision of the future was created in me.”

Summary of Diffusional Themes

The research data revealed distinct patterns in the diffusion of the gospel through Hope Center. The interviews of converts confirmed but also contradicted or supplemented the findings of other data sources.

Transmission

HCB continually encouraged individual transmission, and individuals became crucial for converts to begin attending the church. Corporate transmission through various venues led converts to hear the Christian message frequently, especially during worship services. The church engaged converts with the biblical message, while personal Bible reading also became meaningful in the process of conversion. Spiritual or emotional experiences solidified the spiritual receptivity of converts.

Translation

The church attracted converts by carefully translating its programs to reach socially disadvantaged young people in Berlin. Translated communication enabled converts to relate Christianity to their social context. All converts reiterated that the community dynamics of mutual love and respect drew them into the congregation. Pentecostal translation did not affect converts negatively before their conversion.

Turnaround

Pastor Lupemba presented conversion intelligibly as repentance and faith in Christ, while converts confirmed a basic understanding of faith when they converted. HCB provided weekly opportunities for decisions of conversion, although converts in this study did not make their decisions in response to an invitation. Participants described their conversion as a process, which Lupemba affirmed in his understanding of conversion as a point and process. Baptism, membership, and the assignment of a mentor solidified the connection between conversion and discipleship.

Transformation

The implementation of a rigorous discipleship strategy led to the converts' participation in various church programs. Mentors aided in transformational changes. Bible teaching permeated all church activities and caused converts to adopt new

spiritual routines, biblical convictions, and an understanding of the Bible as literal truth. HCB challenged converts to transformational changes by applying Pentecostal teachings and experiences. Converts, in turn, adopted Pentecostal practices, which personalized and intensified their transformation. The church also embraced a comprehensive vision of social transformation in Neukölln, while making disciples remained the primary mission.

Retransmission

Hope Center communicated the value of retransmission continually. Converts confirmed a passion for sharing their Christian faith with others. The training of retransmission took place through verbal instruction and practical training while HCB and converts expected supernatural occurrences to cause spiritual receptivity. The church plant also provided opportunities for converts to retransmit their faith both locally and cross-culturally. Converts participated in local evangelism opportunities regularly but were only beginning to consider foreign missions work. Each convert developed preferences in their practice of evangelism and aspiration for foreign missions.

Chapter 4 Case Study 2: Gospel Church Munich

Overview of Research at Gospel Church Munich

The research for the second case study included two field visits to Munich on February 1–2 and 20–23, 2020. Online participation in a worship service on March 22 and a Bible study on March 24 was necessary due to travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research comprised observations, printed materials such as the worship bulletin, information on websites, and interviews. Semi-structured, individual interviews with three converts and pastor Steffen Müller were the primary sources of information to discover the diffusional themes of conversion at Gospel Church Munich (GCM). Table 2 offers biographical information about the converts in this study.

Table 2. List of converts who participated in interviews at GCM

| Name Interview Date | Background | Age | Gender | Conversion | Baptism |
|---|---|-----|--------|------------|--|
| Andreas Küffner (March 11, 2020) | German parents; separated Raised in Munich Childhood and adolescence: nominal, non- practicing Catholic; no influence on life Pre-conversion: no interest in God | 33 | M | 2015–16 | Catholic, infant baptism; adult baptism at GCM in 2016 |
| Helena (February 23, 2020) | German parents; separated Raised in Bavarian village Childhood and adolescence: nominal Lutheran, irregular church attendance Pre-conversion: interest in God | 22 | F | 2019 | Infant baptism in EKD |
| Silke (March 6, 2020) | German parents Raised in Hannover Childhood and adolescence: nominal, non- practicing Lutheran, secular upbringing Pre-conversion: secular, no interest in God | 56 | F | 2013–15 | Infant baptism in EKD |

The interviewees received a pseudonym except for the pastor and Andreas Küffner, who took part in the oral history interview. Appendix 9.2 contains Küffner's translated transcript, a typical convert with a transformational conversion at GCM.

Local Context of Gospel Church Munich

Grünwald, with its eleven thousand residents, is located just outside of Bavaria's capital Munich in Southern Germany and counts as "one of the most exclusive places to live in Germany."²³⁶ Europe's largest film production facility, Bavaria Film, began with its productions in Grünwald in 1910.²³⁷ Actors, professional soccer players, and wealthy business owners have their residence in this suburb of Munich, which statistically makes it the town with the most millionaires in Germany.²³⁸ The median income in 2010 was 118,000 euros, three times the amount of the average income in Bavaria. "In Grünwald, people often show off with material things," is the conclusion of one of its long-time residents.²³⁹ Pastor Steffen Müller described Grünwald as a very secular, hard-to-reach place where people have high walls around their homes and stay isolated. Politically, most people in Grünwald voted for the conservative party CSU with 53 percent during the parliamentary election in 2017.²⁴⁰ Historians consider the Grünwalder Konferenz (Grünwald Conference), which took place in the castle of Grünwald in 1522, as the beginning of the Counter-Reformation in Europe.²⁴¹ The Grünwalder Freizeitpark (Grünwald Recreational Park), where GCM met for worship on Sundays, is located in the center of Grünwald with easy access for local residents.²⁴²

236 "Grünwald," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified January 19, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2PQHQSa>.

237 "Grünwald."

238 Kathrin Braun, "Nach Merz-Debatte: Wer ist in München reich? Und wie viele? [After the Merz debate: Who and how many are rich in Munich?]," *tz Merkur*, October 14, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2v0wyUe>.

239 Ruth Eisenreich and Lenka Jaloviecova, "Grünwald: Normalverdiener unter Superreichen [Grünwald: Normal earners among the super rich]," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 7, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2PQq3dG>.

240 "Wahlergebnisse [Voting results]," Gemeinde Grünwald, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2uVP2VM>.

241 "Burg Grünwald [Castle Grünwald]," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified January 2, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Ttxidg>.

242 "Tagungsraum 'Forum' [Meeting room 'Forum']," Grünwalder Freizeitpark, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2LMTm2h>.

History of Gospel Church Munich

The story of Gospel Church Munich begins with pastor Müller's journey into vocational ministry in the United States. Müller, who grew up in a Christian home and studied economics in Stuttgart, sensed a call by God into the pastorate and decided to study theology at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC, in 1999. Subsequently, he pastored Christ Community Church, a member of the conservative Presbyterian Church of America, for six years. The church began to financially support the German church planting initiatives of the City to City network, Berlin Projekt and Hamburg Projekt. Müller's visits to the church plants inspired him and his American wife to plant a church in Germany as well, and they decided to attend the six-week training seminar on church planting at Tim Keller's church in New York City in 2008.

In the fall of 2011, Müller and his family relocated to southern Munich with a vision to reach young families with the gospel. They began with bi-weekly Sofagottesdienste (Sofa Worship Services) in their living room by inviting neighbors and people they met randomly in December 2011. When the attendance of these informal services grew to about fifty people by the summer of 2012, Müller concluded that the time had come to move the worship events to a public facility. In October 2012, the opening service of GCM took place in the meeting hall of the recreational facility Grünwalder Freizeitpark. The church plant quickly grew to about 150 people who considered GCM to be their church home during the next five years. Non-Christians regularly attended the church and converted to Christianity. This honeymoon phase, according to Müller, came to an end when three families in the church went through a divorce. Müller explained that other church attendees became disillusioned by saying, "if we have Jesus and the Bible and the gospel, then something like this should not happen," and stopped attending GCM. At the time of the interview, Müller believed the church was in a stable phase and "has arrived in reality" with a set of encouraging as well as challenging aspects of church ministry. In August 2019, Müller described GCM as a place where "by God's grace, we have a significant number of people who have come to faith in Christ and who are young believers."²⁴³

243 "Steffen & Elizabeth Mueller - Munich," Catalina Foothills Church, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3awQwF3>.

Observation of a Worship Service

Gospel Church Munich met for worship in a modern, multi-purpose room of the Grünwald Recreational Facility on February 3, 2020. The brightly lit room had many non-covered windows and a staging area for the speaker and the worship team. Every visitor received a bulletin that included a sequence of the service and the printed text of this Sunday's Bible passages. The worship service started promptly at 10.30 am with a welcome by pastor Müller who invited the audience to spend one minute in silent contemplation. Three contemporary worship songs followed, highlighting the church as the hope of the world, Christ's victory over death, and God's comfort in times of need. After the worship segment at 10:45 a.m., Müller read Psalm 84 and offered a pastoral prayer. Mueller thanked Jesus for dying for sins on the cross and petitioned God to enable congregational members to live worthy Christian lifestyles. The pastor also prayed that people in Gruenewald would experience spiritual hunger and asked God to bestow God-honoring wisdom on the German government. The performance of one more worship song, the children's exit for their age-specific program, and a quick collection preceded the sermon at 11:01 a.m.

By this time, about fifty adults, including children, had joined the service. Aside from a few internationals who spoke English or had an African background, most of the attendees were native Germans and ranged in age from young adults to senior citizens. On this particular Sunday, Heiko Barthelmeß, a pastor in Austria and a frequent guest speaker, preached on Jn 11:1-44. Barthelmeß reflected that Jesus purposefully waited for three days before raising Lazarus to teach his disciples about his power over death. In the same way, God uses suffering in the believers' lives to teach them lessons they could never learn otherwise. Lazarus died again, which shows that Jesus will fulfill the final promise of a life without hardships when believers resurrect physically. At 11:39 a.m., the sermon ended with another minute of contemplative silence. Subsequently, pastor Mueller led the congregation in a time of communion and in praying the Lord's prayer. A final worship song that petitioned Christ for social justice preceded an appeal to bring non-Christian friends to the service on the following Sunday. The service ended at 11:58 a.m. Afterward, worshippers gathered for coffee and personal interaction in the foyer.

Transmission

The following section explains the commitment to transmit the Christian message by Gospel Church Munich and how converts responded to the church's

ministry of transmission. GCM encouraged individual transmission, committed to corporate transmission, and engaged converts with the biblical message. Spiritual or emotional experiences by converts solidified their receptivity to the Christian message, although the church did not seek to generate these types of experiences in converts.

Encouraged Individual Transmission

GCM perpetually encouraged members to share the Christian faith with a focus on inviting non-Christian friends to church activities. Converts reported how individuals influenced them in their initial steps toward conversion.

The observations of events at GCM revealed that pastor Müller conveyed his passion for evangelizing non-Christians in every Bible study and worship service. On March 22, 2020, Müller reminded his congregation that God provides the power of the Holy Spirit so they can be witnesses according to Acts 1:8. Members should pray that people repent and convert to Jesus during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pastor finished the sermon with the following words: “We know Jesus allowed this to happen. If you and I accept this, God can use it as something good in my life and other people’s lives. The question is: ‘Jesus, how do you want me to change?’ Maybe to pray more, maybe in other areas in my life, but one thing is for sure, that we are witnesses of his resurrection.” The observations also disclosed that in the current praxis of the church, Müller anticipated that members bring their friends to church functions rather than necessarily engage in personal evangelism. In the worship service on February 23, 2020, the pastor urged the congregation to invite families to the evangelistic outreach event for children called Lego-Tage (Lego-Days) and pray for their conversion.

Congruently, the experience of Andreas demonstrated the significant role that individuals played in transmitting the Christian message. For example, a member of GCM engaged Andreas in a biblical discussion for several hours during his birthday party. This encounter led Andreas to take an interest in Christianity, start reading the Bible personally, and seek further consultations:

This person was extremely important in my process of finding faith. He was practically the wingman who brought me to this, also my link to the congregation. . . . This birthday [party] became four to five hours of discussion with [the result] that a small seed was planted in me. Then, I asked the golden question a few weeks later: “Dear God, if you really exist up there, then show yourself to me!” That was the *Initialzündung* [initial spark].

Committed to Corporate Transmission

The corporate transmission of the Christian message at GCM occurred through a variety of programs and advertisement campaigns. Converts became regular attendees of these activities even before their conversion.

The Sunday services and weekly Bible studies were most significant in the converts' initial exposure to the gospel. Steffen Müller elucidated that "the big pillars" of their evangelistic efforts as a church are "the worship services and Bible studies." Personal contacts of church members were crucial in bringing non-Christians to these gatherings. Müller perceived regular worship services as a primary venue for evangelism since most individuals convert through sermons statistically. In the Sunday message on February 23, 2020, he stated that "most people come to know Christ through sermons in churches." Müller confirmed the attraction of their worship services to many unbelievers in an update to a supporting church in August 2019: "There is a good number of non-Christians that come to our services and who are hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ."²⁴⁴

In addition, GCM organized outreach-oriented activities that propagated the Christian faith. Müller stated that a *Gottesdienst im Biergarten* (Worship Service in a Beer Garden) is one of GCM's annual events when they organized a worship service with open-air preaching as an official part of a summer festival in a nearby park. Another evangelistic opportunity is a musical performance by members of Redeemer Presbyterian Church. The musicians from New York come to Grünwald to support the church plant once a year. The pastor explained that "these are professional musicians and singers who perform on Broadway or in the opera. And then we put on a concert in Grünwald with different songs from some musicals from New York." Müller always shared a short, five-minute message during the performances. Finally, Müller used mass mailings to attract visitors to GCM worship services and events. The pastor explained that about twenty thousand postcards reach one-fourth of the population in Grünwald and the surrounding area, and many people respond positively to these advertisement campaigns: "We had the experience that actually, people are willing to be invited through such a flyer or postcard. . . . I guess, during the first three years, somewhere between two-hundred and five-hundred people came and had a look."

Congruently, converts mentioned the worship services and Bible studies as primary venues for their initial exposure to the Christian message. Andreas

244 Catalina Foothills Church, "Müller."

made his first contact with GCM at a men's Bible study on Friday mornings. His friend from GCM invited him to the study rather than the worship service as the first step in corporate involvement. Andreas recounted that the Bible study "was not the church yet. Basically, he put something ahead of it [service attendance]." He decided to attend the worship service with his family a few weeks later. After receiving one of the advertisement flyers in the mail, Silke came to the first worship service at GCM and never failed coming to church on Sundays since her initial visit. She recalled her first experience of a worship service: "I enjoyed it so much, and it was wholesome for me, and then I thought: 'This could just be a coincidence! I will come next Sunday again.' That was six years ago, and since then, I have come every Sunday, and I have stayed ever since."

Engaged with Biblical Message

The emphasis on Bible teaching was an essential characteristic of Gospel Church Munich to reach the secular audience in Grünwald. Biblical instruction occurred during worship services and Bible studies. Converts reported how the exposure to Scripture at GCM was a vital step toward accepting the Christian faith.

The causes for empty churches in Europe, Müller suggests in an online article, are the effects of liberal theology and the neglect of preaching a clear gospel message:

When it comes to the weaknesses of the church in Europe, the first thought that comes to mind is that liberal theology has tremendously hurt the church. If you have pastors who are not preaching Christ crucified and risen and who do not talk about sin, then it is no wonder that people are not converted and that those churches die.²⁴⁵

Therefore, the remedies are to teach biblical content, a gospel of grace, and the exclusiveness of salvation in Christ. Müller declares in the same article that

people in Europe desperately need the Bible. They desperately need truth so that they can personally meet the King of kings and be changed by Him and His Word. They also need to be freed from the burden of works-righteousness by knowing and understanding that their justification is by faith alone. In the midst of the widespread spiritual illiteracy in Europe, it is of utmost importance that people are taught clearly that Jesus Christ is the only mediator through whose work we are redeemed.

In worship services, the pastor chose an expository preaching method to speak about entire books of the Bible progressively. Sermons could take longer than

245 Steffen Müller, "The Church in Europe," Ligonier Ministries, July 1, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3b8Xrob>.

forty minutes. In the interview, Müller explained that they usually “deal with certain biblical books, so not just thematically, but we deliberately take a book. For example, we recently addressed the third part of Acts. . . . A sermon usually lasts thirty-five to forty minutes, and sometimes it can even be a little longer.” In addition to the verbal proclamation, each service attendee received a bulletin that listed the sermon’s entire Bible text. Also, the audience was able to follow the text and sermon notes on a screen projection. A book table offered free Bibles in the German, contemporary translation NeÜ with apologetic commentaries on science and faith to visitors.

In the interview, Andreas reflected on his growing interaction with the Bible at GCM. Andreas read the entire gospel of John after his first discussion about the Scriptures with a friend from GCM. His friend also introduced him to the phone app Olive Tree, which became the primary medium for Andreas to start reading the Bible by himself. The next step of Bible interaction for Andreas was attending a weekly men’s Bible study. Insights from the gospel of Mark impressed Andreas deeply: “It was again a passage that somehow gave me a very, very good impulse, especially in this situation. *Es hat mir so aus der Seele gesprochen* [It really spoke to my soul]. It touched me.” His engagement with the Bible during worship services continued the process of accepting the biblical message: “You need to imagine that it was like an escalation that occurred within a few days or a few weeks. Suddenly, I went from, ‘Hey, the Bible is a book that I will never understand,’ to, ‘Wow, it touches me, and it even makes sense.’”

Müller’s sermons were also the primary reason for Helena and Silke to return to GCM. The gospel message astounded Silke when she first started to attend the services:

I remember that in the first sermons, this point kept coming up again and again that we are all sinners and that none of us can achieve, that is, by good behavior, by decent praying, by regular worship, whatever, to be good enough before God’s eyes. . . . I never heard it like that before. It was a bit frightening and, at the same time, a relief.

Moved by Spiritual Experiences

Observations during the field research disclosed that worship services focused on a rational rather than emotional response from worship attendees. Pastor Müller did not seek to generate supernatural experiences among converts. Nevertheless, converts reported spiritual or emotional experiences that contributed to their resolve in pursuing the Christian faith.

In the interview, Andreas reported that he could not go back to work because of his emotional reaction after attending his first Bible study: “We only read in

the book. Yes, that was the case, but I was so moved. . . . I did not go to the office anymore. I could not work normally.” He also pointed out a significant event that solidified his conversion commitment at the beginning of his faith journey. On his wedding day on August 8, 2015, pastor Müller, Andreas, and his wife Maria prayed for relief from the extreme heat during their outdoor ceremony in Italy. By the end of the service, the weather had changed from blue skies to rain. Andreas described this phenomenon as a confirmation of God’s existence:

It was really like that. It was bright, it was warm, but it rained. Maria and I looked at each other and told Steffen: “What a wonderful moment!” That was a real Jesus moment. . . . Then it was clear to me: “Crazy, unbelievable! He really exists!” This sign happened almost one year after I had asked the question: “God, if you really exist, show yourself to me!”

Silke explained that an intuitive sense of being connected to the power of the Creator motivated her to remain a participant at GCM. When she did not attend church on Sundays, there was a sense of loss: “And then I discovered that when I do not go to church on Sunday, I really miss something, but not the people, well, those as well, but mainly, what was missing was *das Andocken an die Schöpferkraft* [the connection to the power of the creator].”

Translation

Gospel Church Munich translated the gospel message into the context of the affluent population of Grünwald. GCM attracted converts through its translated programs, related to converts by translating their communication, and drew converts into the church due to community dynamics.

Attracted by Translated Programs

GCM chose an intellectual and structured format of their worship services and Bible studies in order to reach the wealthy population in Grünwald. Outreach events tailored to the local audience also offered opportunities for non-members to become acquainted with the church. The interviews confirmed that translated programs attracted converts to the church and offered new venues to interact with Christianity.

Müller explained that he conducted demographic research before starting the church plant. The pastor concluded that people in Grünwald resemble the affluent and well-educated constituency of his former denomination, the PCA, and Tim Keller’s church in New York City. Consequently, Müller chose a similar, more intellectual and structured format for their worship services. A successful

business executive, for example, “does not necessarily want a worship service that is just very loud and youthful . . . for such a person it is important [to have a service] with certain sobriety, also with reason, so that it simply makes sense. Of course, the emotional is present also, but it must not be overemphasized.” A loud and party-like worship style, Müller said, would present a non-credible version of Christianity: “I do not think they would take it seriously, or it would repel them. At the end of the day, it would be a bit like Christians do not have much to offer anyway because they have nothing substantial [to show forth].” The observation during field visits confirmed this well-structured and intellectual approach to worship services. Each worship attendee received a bulletin with a written outline of the entire service to follow the order of worship. GCM used a variety of German worship songs, some produced by Hillsong and some in the English language. A band led the worship time with a lively but not overly emotional music style. Services lasted only one hour because Müller surmised that affluent people in Grünwald have time constraints due to their busy professional lives and recreational activities.

Furthermore, GCM organized outreach events throughout the year to relate the Christian message to people outside of the church. On July 28, 2019, a family party in the park offered special activities for children and an attractive, informal setting for families with young children.²⁴⁶ The event gave church members an opportunity to bring families from their social context and then invite them to church on the following Sunday. Another example was the open-air worship service on July 15, 2018, which non-Christians could attend without the stigma of meeting in a traditional church building.²⁴⁷

Converts confirmed their attraction to the translated programs at GCM. Andreas preferred services at GCM when comparing them to the worship experience at Hillsong or ICF churches. He looked for intellectual depth in biblical teaching rather than a modern form of entertainment with many worship songs. Worship in churches like Hillsong are “*kurzweiliger und schnellebiger* [more entertaining and fast-paced],” but “what was interesting to me was to have a sermon where the content went deep. . . . My hunger and thirst to be in the Bible were greater than to sing five extra songs.” The sermons, as well as the music during worship services, were Silke’s primary attraction to GCM. Müller’s

246 Gospel Church München, “Familien-Sommerfest [Family summer party],” Facebook, July 4, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2U9NwZU>.

247 Gospel Church München, “Open-Air Gottesdienst am 15. Juli 2018 [Open-air service on June 15, 2018],” Facebook, June 28, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2U9NwZU>.

practical messages impressed her on a rational level, while the music helped her to process the messages emotionally: “I need something that reaches me on a rational level, that is, information and examples, and I also need something on an emotional level. On the emotional level, it was always the music that truly benefited me.” The music at Gospel Church, Silke explained, is both modern in style and meaningful in content. The hymns she knew from attending the Lutheran church during her childhood did not communicate to her everyday life in the same way: “There were always very biblical texts, expressed in a modern way, but reflecting the biblical content, and I really liked that. I did not know songs like that before. The old chorales also have biblical content, but in a language that does not necessarily reach into my everyday life.”

Related through Translated Communication

GCM conveyed the Christian message to their affluent community by translating the communication of the Christian message, in particular the content and presentation style of sermons. Converts confirmed their ability to relate to GCM’s contextualized communication.

Müller adopted Tim Keller’s approach to prioritizing worship services as the primary venue for evangelism. The preacher should presume that the audience is both Christian and non-Christian: “For us, the worship service plays a central role, and that is something Tim Keller repeatedly conveyed, that in a worship service, in a sermon, we must consciously have the goal of both relating to non-Christians . . . as well as addressing people who have been in the faith for a long time.” Consequently, the pastor contextualized the content of his messages carefully for his wealthy audience and the secular visitors to GCM.

For example, Müller shared that he had many conversations with men who found their sense of value in professional accomplishments: “One of the biggest idols here in southern Munich and Grünwald is this strong identification with professional success. Of course, money also plays a role here, their personal status, but that is something that people define themselves by very strongly.” Therefore, such a self-reliant audience needs to understand that people are utterly dependent on God in salvation and all matters of life, even if secular visitors react adversely: “Then to tell someone like that: ‘The most decisive matter in your life you cannot do, God in his grace has to give it to you as a gift. You are completely, 100 percent, dependent.’ That is certainly not something that creates *Begeisterungstürme* [storms of excitement] at first.” Müller did not shy away from presenting other difficult subjects. The pastor spoke freely about the biblical view of sexuality in a community that exhibits relational dysfunctionality

within and outside traditional marriages. He welcomed critical questions in response to controversial topics due to his confidence in Scriptural truth. Müller stated that “it is very good to have questions, even to see everything critically at first. We encourage that very much because we are convinced that the Bible has very good answers.”

Congruent with the rejection of misguided self-reliance, the pastor sharply opposed prosperity teaching as a false gospel since it teaches people to believe they are still in control and “selfish desires stay in the foreground, where Jesus must be a *Wunscherfüller* [fulfiller of wishes], like pressing a button on a machine.” Müller believed God might heal supernaturally, but the apostle Paul’s hardships and Jesus’ suffering and death prove that a claim to health contradicts Scripture. Authentic faith entails learning to live with sickness: “I know that many churches teach that Jesus heals you from all diseases. Yet, in the end, that is not biblical, even though God often heals. There are also situations where Christians have to live with suffering and sickness, and that is an authentic faith: ‘What does it mean to follow Christ faithfully if I do not get healed?’” On March 22, 2020, Müller reflected on the protection promised in Psalm 91 and stated that he “often experienced that God protects Christians in special ways.” This expectation does not mean, though, that God shields every Christian from sickness and death. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, Müller taught his congregation that Jesus might intervene to stop the pandemic suddenly. This knowledge should cause Christians to trust in God’s power but focus their prayers on the most urgent cause of conversions.

Moreover, Müller explained that he frequently deals with the historical context of a Bible passage or comments on the original Greek or Hebrew language since the well-educated people in his congregation prefer messages with academic rigor. The pastor stated that “then they know that Christians have something substantial to offer.” Simultaneously, sermons need to apply to everyday life and answer the “so-what question” about the biblical text. The presentation style of Müller’s sermons added to the aspiration of engaging with the audience both intellectually and relationally. The pastor described his presentation style as humble, friendly, yet clear and straightforward to address both popular and unpopular themes in the Bible. The observation of worship services and Bible studies corroborated how Müller conveyed his topics in a professional yet friendly teaching style.

Converts reiterated GCM’s ability to communicate the Christian message and relate the biblical content to their everyday experience. Silke described how the practical and informative sermons impressed her when she started attending the church since she was able to apply the Bible to her daily life:

What first impressed me was the sermon. I was not used to sermons like that from the Lutheran church, and I was very impressed with how tangible and pragmatic they were; that I was able to hear something in the sermon and immediately apply it on Monday, very much relating to my everyday life. I liked that he gave many examples of applications, and I enjoyed this knowledge about the historical background.

Silke, a well-situated optometrist, also stated that she gave up all reliance on material wealth and found true meaning in her spiritual life: “Anything that has to do with outward appearances, by which one recognizes that someone is a good person, has been thrown overboard. . . . I have no more respect for money or big cars or anything like that because I see the things that really mean something, and those are located somewhere else, on the inside.” Helena declared that Müller’s non-pretentious and lucid sermons were a critical component of understanding Christianity:

Yes, definitely the sermon. When Steffen preaches, it moves the heart. He stands there, and when he speaks, he does not speak alone—it is so real, there is nothing pretentious, nothing that is somehow embellished or dramatized, which happens in some congregations—but he speaks impartially and yet with love, and that is how the church captivated me.

Drawn by Community Dynamics

Gospel Church Munich presented itself as a loving church with in-depth relationships that welcomes newcomers into their fellowship. Converts confirmed that the community dynamics at GCM drew them into the church and closer to a commitment of conversion.

The GCM website shows a video that invites visitors to a church of genuine love and community with the words: “I know a place where I can live in peace, where I feel loved, where I am at home.”²⁴⁸ In the interview, pastor Müller explained that he seeks to foster loving relationships within their community in all of their congregational activities:

On Sundays and during the week, in Bible studies and personal meetings, we try to deal with people affectionately, with much love, and that is something we hear from non-Christians all the time. They come and tell us how moved they are and that they never experienced a group of people who are so affectionate and who show them so much love.

Consistently, the observation of worship services revealed how congregants greeted each other warmly before the services and spent time in friendly

248 “Gospel Church München,” accessed March 18, 2020, <https://gospelchurchmuenc hen.de/>.

conversations over coffee and tea after the worship time. During the men's Bible study on February 21, 2020, the participants engaged in intense Bible study yet respectfully interacted despite differing opinions. The men supported each other in sharing personal hardships.

Converts reflected in detail on the loving environment at GCM. In the interview, Andreas explained that when he and his family began to attend the church services, the community welcomed them kindly: "We were thrilled about the people. Not just about the service. . . . We came in and were greeted affectionately." Eventually, they started sharing meals with other families. Andreas described the relational growth as "a web of relationships" that integrated them into the community and helped them to develop spiritually. However, the profundity in conversations with church members remained Andreas's most critical benefit of the community:

You suddenly leave out this superficiality, which was a very important factor in my life before, in my professional life, in my private life, everything was so superficial. All of a sudden, I noticed that the conversations go deeper and more elementary and existential, beyond the edge of my own nose. . . . I always had the feeling that it was all dry and not exciting, and suddenly, I was shown the exact opposite.

The heartfelt kindness and joyfulness among church members also struck Silke when she started attending GCM: "At the first time [of attending the church], I noticed right away how affectionate this congregation is. How the people greet each other and are friendly and not just say 'hello' with a little grin, but a real, warmhearted cheerfulness and friendliness. That was something incredibly special. It was strikingly beautiful." Helena, who had moved from rural Bavaria to Munich shortly before attending the church, concluded that GCM's loving community inspired her to stay in the church. It gave her "*eine Stück Heimat* [a sense of homeland] to show that I am at home here."

Turnaround

GCM facilitated the process of turnaround by presenting conversion clearly, providing opportunities for decision-making, affirming the point and process of conversion, and connecting conversion and discipleship. The testimonies of converts revealed an evangelical understanding of conversion, the conversion experience as a process, and a continuation from conversion to discipleship.

Presented Conversion Intelligibly

GCM presented conversion intelligibly as personal faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. Converts in this study reiterated a basic theological understanding of their conversion.

In the article posted on the website of Ligonier Ministries, Müller argues that the lack of conversions in mainline churches stems from pastors who no longer preach the basic doctrines of salvation: “If you have pastors who are not preaching Christ crucified and risen and who do not talk about sin, then it is no wonder that people are not converted.”²⁴⁹ In contrast, Müller’s goal was to present evangelical conversion clearly. The pastor explained that conversion requires an understanding of God’s perfect holiness and man’s complete sinfulness. At that point of understanding, conversion takes place. Full assurance of salvation is possible if a person comes to Christ, confesses personal sins, and asks for forgiveness. Conversion is a

very honest realization that as a human being, I am truly a sinner, and that God is genuinely holy through and through, no matter how great and intelligent I am. That I urgently need this, that Jesus Christ really takes the burden of my sins and that with sincerity and honesty, and to confess this very thing to God, . . . to ask for forgiveness, but then also to know that if one has done so, then one is fully forgiven.

The decision of conversion, according to Müller, consists of asking Christ for the forgiveness of sins primarily. Repentance begins as a spiritual practice of believers after conversion. The pastor commented that repentance needs to be understood in the sense of Martin Luther: “A Christian is someone who brings his sins to Jesus every day, but not to convert for the tenth time.”

The observation of the worship service on February 23, 2020, demonstrated a clear, evangelical presentation of the gospel at GCM. Each visitor received a church bulletin with a gospel explanation. On the first page, a definition of the word gospel as the message of salvation in Christ stated “that we humans are lost and cannot find our way back to God on our own. Therefore, God himself, in the person of Jesus, came into the world to save us.” A subsequent quote by Tim Keller clarified that only the death and resurrection of Christ provide forgiveness. God establishes a personal relationship with believers “on the foundation of what Christ did for you on his death on the cross and in his resurrection.” In the sermon on that Sunday, Müller explained the meaning of the Christian

249 Steffen Müller, “The Church in Europe,” Ligonier Ministries, July 1, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3b8Xrob>.

rebirth in John 3. People need to bring their sins to Christ and ask for forgiveness, which requires genuine faith rather than a superficial acknowledgment of the truth. Müller accentuated real faith as “not simply believing in general truth, but a deep conviction that Jesus is the living God who truly came to be the Savior for you and me.”

All converts remembered they understood the meaning of conversion clearly yet at various times in their turnaround process. Andreas reported that he was fully aware of the significance of his conversion at his baptism on April 1, 2016: “I had this clear understanding that Jesus died for my sins, that he conquered death. That was clear for me at that moment, and I wanted to testify to this. . . . It was this rebirth, this redirection, to go under and rise again as a Christian.” In the interview, Silke shared that she began to comprehend the meaning of personal sin and salvation through sermons at GCM. Silke accepted the truth of Christ’s death and resurrection eventually, although this process took about two years: “Of course, for someone who grew up with the natural sciences, the fact that someone dies on the cross and then does not die, that was *eine harte Nummer* [difficult]. So, to allow this understanding was the most difficult challenge for me.”

Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making

GCM continually provided opportunities for decisions of conversion, although the pastor refrained from formulated prayers of decision due to his theological convictions. The converts’ stories disclosed that their conversion decisions did not occur in direct response to an invitation but with progressive levels of understanding and commitment.

Müller’s Reformed theology became evident when he stated that the spiritual rebirth by God precedes faith, and God’s will rather than human decision causes regeneration. Thus, there is no need to coerce non-Christians to make decisions of conversion, but their decision would occur in God’s timing:

Of course, this has something to do with theology and the understanding of the Bible. I am convinced that, in the end, it is Jesus Christ who will bring people to faith whenever he desires to extend His grace to them as a gift. In other words, at the right time, he will grant the elect that their eyes will be opened and that they will respond in faith and answer. That is when they genuinely confess their sins to Jesus Christ.

Correspondingly, Müller opposed repetitive, formulated prayers of conversion, especially looking at the praxis of decision-making in the United States:

We always decided not to offer a formulated prayer in every service, in the sense that we speak a prayer at the end of the sermon, and everyone can repeat it. The reason for that is the time [I spent] in the USA, where it is very common, for example among the

Southern Baptist, . . . that people do this sixteen times in their lives, and it is still not clear if they really believe.

However, Müller often urged unbelieving worship attendees to contemplate a decision of conversion and to discuss this with a church leader: “Again and again, I say in the sermons that there is nothing more important than to bring our sins to Jesus, confess them, and ask for forgiveness. Then I say: ‘Did you do this already? What is holding you back? Take time this afternoon or now during the service. Come to me or someone on the leadership team.’” The pastor explained further that liturgical elements in worship services add occasions of decision-making for conversion. Silent prayers encourage believers and non-believers to confess their sins and affirm Christ’s offer of forgiveness. The Lord’s Supper is another chance to ask non-Christians about their obstacles to becoming Christians. For example, Müller challenged people by stating: “If you do not have faith yet, then think about what hinders you and use this time to bring the things that hold you back to Jesus.” In an email, the pastor commented that about fifty people had converted since the inception of GCM. Conversions occurred despite not offering pre-formulated prayers of decision-making.

Observations during worship services demonstrated Müller’s approach to providing opportunities for conversion. In the sermon on February 23, 2020, the pastor proclaimed that God uses the Bible to cause conversions, which means that the simple preaching of sermons would induce decisions of conversion. Nonetheless, the pastor emphatically appealed to worship attendees to contemplate the meaning and implications of a decision of conversion: “Maybe you know God loves you, but you do not remember when you were born again. Then fully commit your life and follow Christ!” Müller elucidated in the interview that he favors personal conversations to pose direct questions of decision-making. Once people had attended the service several times, he met with them and asked if they already prayed a prayer of conversion. The pastor often used a question from the training program Evangelism Explosion to ascertain their spiritual state: “If you stood before God and he would ask you: ‘Why should I let you into heaven?’ What would you say?”

Converts in this study told stories of conversion without a direct link to a personal invitation. Andreas described his conversion as a growth toward the decision of conversion: “In a sense, the decision was taken over for me. That is the beauty. I did somehow mature into it.” Silke reported that a decision of conversion never happened: “I did not sit down and say: ‘Starting tomorrow, I will do this now!’ Like you stop smoking or [stop eating] candy. No, I cannot say that. I did not actively decide that. It decided me.” Helena explained that

her conversion entailed a non-rational experience overnight after a worship service and reading the Bible. She had gone through a period of severe physical illness, and her resolution to recover on that Sunday blended with her conversion. When she woke up the next day, she simply sensed God's presence:

Then we had a Sunday [service], and it snowed on that Sunday. I went home and just read some more about what was in the sermon, and when I woke up the next morning—I did not sleep that much, I am sure I only slept four or five hours—I woke up, I went outside, and the snow was whiter. . . . It was the first time that I really felt this tremor from God. . . . That is so real. I would not have thought it is possible that he can come so close to you.

Affirmed Point and Process

Pastor Müller affirmed the point of conversion as the moment of salvation, while his belief in God's sovereign control over spiritual rebirth allowed him to acknowledge processes of conversion. Converts told the story of conversion as a process with a growing commitment and understanding of the Christian faith.

As stated previously, Müller believed that God is the author of spiritual rebirth. In his sermon on February 23, 2020, the pastor proclaimed that “rebirth precedes faith” as the human decision of conversion, thereby affirming a Reformed doctrine of regeneration. Consequently, the pastor did not see the need to press for decisions of conversions but allowed for processes of deliberation concerning spiritual truths. In the same sermon, Müller encouraged pre-converts in their spiritual interests rather than forcing an immediate decision: “If you do not know that you are born again, but you have the desire to do so—I want the Holy Spirit in my life—then that is a positive sign!”

Müller also believed that the point of conversion, which coincides with spiritual rebirth, is a one-time event, yet may entail a process of varying degrees of understanding and commitment subsequent to conversion. Conversion is the point when a person trusts Christ for his forgiveness: “Conversion is where I bring [my] sins to Jesus Christ, ask for forgiveness, and then also happily accept his righteousness given to me. Then I am converted, and I am in Christ.” Subsequent to the point of conversion, Müller clarified, a fluctuation in Christian commitments may follow: “I do not think to convert again and again is biblical. What is true, of course, is that there are times when we come back to God more strongly again and again, or perhaps go deeper in different areas of life. However, I think conversion actually only happens once, and then it is a conversion.”

Interview participants reported that their conversion involved a process of growing in Christian commitments and theological understanding. Andreas

recounted his conversion as a one-year process between his wedding and the birth of his daughter. The decision did not occur at one point due to an invitation at church but as a process amid personal changes and hardships. The section Presented Conversion Intelligibly cites Andreas's comment about his theological conception of salvation at the time of his baptism. His wedding in 2015 and the difficult birth of his daughter in 2016 bracketed the one-year process of his turnaround:

It was these two experiences in the summer of 2015 and the summer of 2016, in the phase in which I really noticed, "okay, right there!" In that year, a lot changed with me in all areas, and there was an insane amount of things. Many things collapsed; a lot of stuff broke down. I was also attacked from all sides. Now that I think about this, I would say that was the time of conversion, but it was not that one moment, I would say, it was this being touched, but then also when you study more and more in the Scriptures. . . . It was in the course of one year.

Silke identified her conversion as development over two years of attending GCM. Her conversion was not a specific decision as well but a transformational process of understanding and applying Christian truths in everyday life. In the interview, she recounted that for her, it

was not this one event. I always think it is nice when people say, "That is the moment, and I suddenly knew it!" However, I am just not like that. For me, it grew, I would say, from Sunday to Sunday and in the testing of what I heard in the sermon on Sunday. I saw in everyday life during the week that this opens doors and what I found questionable before, suddenly, it all made sense.

Silke disclosed that she engaged in this gradual process of conversion emotionally before she acknowledged it rationally:

Bit by bit, I realized that I am actually becoming someone else, and I cannot really say when the point was where I said, "Now, I follow him!" I almost have the feeling that long before my rational side understood this, the other side of me already walked with him. And then, when the rational side noticed it, it was not so clear. Okay, since when? It was a gradual process.

In Silke's recollection, the doctrines of Christian salvation began to make sense simultaneously to her conversion process. The realization that she finally committed her life to Christ occurred when she participated in leading worship and felt a supernatural peace: "Then I noticed: 'Yes, this is a power, that is not mine. That is the connection all the way above.' That was a sign for me that as rational as I am, I am being guided. At that point, I would say, that was my realization that I had finally bound myself to him."

Connected Conversion and Discipleship

At GCM, biblical instruction within regular church programs was the primary tool to connect conversion and discipleship for converts rather than baptism or membership commitments. Müller shared in the interview that a genuine conversion always leads to progressive and profound lifestyle changes:

If, for example, someone repeated a prayer in the worship service, but you do not see any changes in life for years, than it was not a conversion, even if he uttered the words. . . . If it was done with honesty, than it will also be a proper conversion, and then this person will not want to continue living as before. He will not live perfectly, but a definite life change will take place. This person will be lying less and less, will be cheating less, will be less self-centered, and so on. A deep change of character [occurs].

The pastor elaborated that a gospel-centered ministry approach supports this transition from conversion to discipleship. All elements of their gospel-centered worship services communicate God's holiness, love, and forgiveness. The sermon, the worship music, and silent prayers motivate converts not only to accept Christ's forgiveness but also to move toward discipleship. In a worship service, Müller clarified this discipleship progression:

we can confess our sins and receive the affirmation that Christ loves and forgives us in [our] sins, that he is for us. Then it is clarified that we should not simply stay at the point where we are. Also, when someone came to faith, that they should always live like that more and more in the power of God so that God rejoices, that he is honored because we grow in sanctification.

Baptism and membership were secondary tools to connect converts to discipleship at GCM. Müller opposed the doctrine of regeneration by infant baptism in the mainline churches. GCM's statement of baptism declares that "the Bible says clearly that no one is saved by baptism itself since the Bible states several times that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone (and by nothing else!). We consider the understanding of baptism by the Catholic Church and the EKD in Bavaria, a rebirth by baptism, as unbiblical." However, GCM's statement affirms infant baptism as a valid practice alongside adult baptism. Thus, converts did not undergo the ritual of baptism after their conversion necessarily, and the church did not attach strict obligations to baptism.

Membership also did not imply formal requirements of discipleship. Instead, the short, one-page membership covenant reiterates general affirmations of Christian life and discipleship. A new member, for example, should commit to sanctification: "I give my best to God out of thankfulness and glorify him in my whole life." Although Müller promoted church membership, he could not

confirm from his experience that formal membership created more robust ties between members and the local congregation.

Correspondingly, converts shared how biblical instruction moved them toward transformational changes, while baptism and membership had a limited effect on connecting conversion and discipleship. Silke remembered that several sermons addressed the sinfulness of all people and that no one can save themselves through good deeds. This new concept liberated her to accept the reality of her own sinfulness and learn how to show compassion toward others: “When I viewed others critically, I thought immediately: ‘Well, you are no better!’ Of course, that leads to a much more relaxed and more gentle treatment of yourself and others.” Converts varied in their experience of baptism. On the one hand, Silke and Helena were baptized as infants in the EKD and did not ask for baptism as adults after converting at GCM. Their infant baptism was of no consequence to their discipleship after conversion based on the interviews. On the other hand, Andreas interpreted his baptism as a new birth or new orientation when he asserted his belief in the gospel through the act of adult baptism: “I had this clear understanding that Jesus died for my sins, that he conquered death. That was clear for me at that moment, and I wanted to testify to this.”

Finally, formal membership had a limited effect on converts in moving them toward discipleship as well. Silke and Andreas became members of GCM, while Helena was not a member at the time of the interview. In an email to the author on March 8, 2020, Silke explained that she became a member two years after joining the church, but this decision did not change her belief. Instead, “it was an expression of my [sense of] belonging, but it did not have an influence on my life of faith.” Andreas elucidated that membership did not change his general Christian commitment but did strengthen his resolve to volunteer at GCM. He remembered that it “did not affect faith in itself but only the responsibility within the community. Of course, I take on leading through the service now. My wife organizes events and is responsible for childcare now. By being members, we have a mandate within the community and beyond.”

Transformation

“A born-again Christian experiences life change as a step-by-step process, and that person does not remain the same,” the pastor declared in the sermon on February 23, 2020. Müller stated unambiguously that genuine conversion must lead to transformation. GCM fostered transformational changes by implementing informal discipleship, pursuing Scripture formation, and embracing social

action with a focus on relational transformation. Additionally, converts reported changes through spiritual or emotional experiences.

The mobility of an affluent constituency posed a unique challenge to foster transformational changes at GCM. In conversation with the author on February 2, 2020, the pastor explained that members in the church regularly left Munich on trips for professional or recreational purposes. This obstacle made consistency in worship service attendance and member involvement more challenging. In a newsletter to a supporting church, Müller asked for prayer concerning the busy travel schedule of Andreas, who volunteered as the youth group leader: “Please pray for Andreas Küffner, who is leading this new ministry. He is very busy at work and travels a lot, but God has given him a heart for the teenagers.”²⁵⁰

Implemented Deep Discipleship

The teaching of Scripture rather than a systematic program structure was the core component for implementing GCM’s approach to discipleship. Converts also reported that mentoring relationships and the formation of a relational community along with volunteerism were integral aspects of their transformational changes.

In the interview, pastor Müller identified the teaching and application of biblical truth to everyday life throughout all church programs as pivotal to the spiritual development of new believers. Biblical instruction took place primarily during worship services and weekly Bible studies. Müller mentioned the annual church retreat as another highlight for Bible teaching. On February 20, the church advertised the next church retreat at lake Garda, Italy, in the following summer. Finally, personal meetings of the pastor or other mature Christians with young believers fostered discipleship processes. Müller stated that this approach of informal mentorship helps secular converts to apply biblical truth to their everyday lives:

I have lots of meetings with people during the week, many of them in the city because many of them [the people in church] work there. That is when I realized that it is incredibly important to make yourself available because many questions come up because, for many people, this is entirely new. In other words, many things are clear to you if you grew up in the church. Someone who is secular has no comprehension at all concerning many areas, for example, “What does this mean for a marriage relationship or for raising children or for conflicts at work?”

250 Catalina Foothills Church, “Mueller.”

Additionally, the pastor contemplated using a formal discipleship program, a three-year course published by Randy Pope from Perimeter Church in Atlanta, Georgia. This particular course, according to Müller, is an ideal tool to “systematically work through various topics biblically dealing with money, what it means to be a spiritual leader and guide as a husband for the family.” Again, discipleship, in the pastor’s understanding, should accentuate biblical instruction with life application.

In response to the question of what caused transformation after his conversion, Andreas quickly referred to the informal mentorship with the pastor along with worship attendance and programs such as the men’s Bible study: “On the one hand, of course, the work with Steffen, whether it was the marriage preparation with Steffen when we met every week for more than half a year, the worship service itself, as well as the other programs. They helped us to remain steady and to develop and to mature.” Andreas’s and his wife’s growth in the Christian faith led to their volunteerism in various capacities at GCM. Andreas took on the youth ministry leadership, and his wife started to participate in the children’s ministry and event management. Nonetheless, Andreas wished for additional programs to foster spiritual growth and believed the small size of GCM limited those opportunities: “This is missing in a very, very small church like ours.”

Silke reported that, aside from the primary impact of sermons during worship services, the biblical advice of an informal mentor helped her with applying biblical truth to solve personal issues. The section Pursued Scripture Formation describes this encounter. Silke also recalled the friendly and accessible church community as a supportive component in her personal discipleship: “This warm-heartedness in the congregation led to the fact that I found many friends there, who are available for the small Christian worries in everyday life. I feel very supported by the church.” Silke started to serve in the children’s ministry. When she joined the worship team, she welcomed Müller’s steady assistance in her new role as a volunteer musician.

Like Andreas and Silke, Helena identified the sermons during worship services as a crucial component of her discipleship process. The relationships in the church also had a profound impact on the transformational processes in her life. She stated that spiritual changes happened “first and foremost through the sermons of Steffen. . . . Also, the people who are in the congregation, the people I got to know there. They also played a huge part.” Thus, she summarized her spiritual growth as a process that coincides with her integration into the church community: “It is the little things that make the big difference. That binds you even more than if there is a big, decisive point than just this coming [to church] more often and [developing] this sense of belonging more bit by bit.”

None of the converts reported that church leaders pressured them to move quickly toward transformational changes, which harmonizes with Müller's concept of discipleship as a process. In the sermon on February 23, 2020, the pastor shared the example of a convert whose transition from a self-centered to a selfless attitude took many years. Müller elaborated that, despite the call to leave a life of habitual sin in 1 Jn 3:9, moral changes can be slow processes.

Pursued Scripture Formation

GCM pursued Scripture formation with a gospel-centered focus through sermons, Bible studies, and informal mentoring. Converts reported that Bible instruction caused a transformation of their spiritual practices, personal values, and biblical convictions.

Müller emulated Tim Keller's gospel-centered teaching approach to convey that the Bible and a gospel of grace and forgiveness can transform all areas of life through practical application. The pastor explained that in all forms of teaching and preaching, GCM seeks to

transfer what is in the Bible and show in concrete terms how it applies to everyday life. That is extremely important and something very central for us, that we seek to be gospel-centered . . . not only in the sense that we come to faith, our sins are forgiven, we will then go to heaven, but if we have communication problems, problems in the relationship with the teenage daughter or whoever, [to ask the question:] "What does it mean to work on this in a gospel-centered way, and also to let oneself be changed?"

According to Müller, a deep transformation of converts is possible by not avoiding biblical topics that demand drastic life changes. He affirmed that the application of biblical guidelines concerning heterosexual marriages or a biblical view of finances steers converts to wholesome lifestyle changes. As a result, converts "not only somehow believe in Jesus and basically live godlessly, but experience more and more liberation in the grace of God from things that trap them, that are not wholesome for them, that are destructive." Müller was confident that the truth of Scripture provides the resources to transform lives positively: "We have resources in the Bible that are consistent, that are convincing, that are ultimately—because it is the truth—liberating, where human lives are truly changed."

On March 24, 2020, the Bible study via Zoom exemplified this in-depth approach to biblical teaching. As Müller explained each verse of Exodus chapter two, participants discussed various aspects of the Bible passage and potential applications. The pastor pointed out that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, participants should understand God's plan for their life-long transformation: "God has a covenant faithfulness toward his people. . . . God has a plan. He

is with us and will bring us to the goal where he wants us to be. Sometimes this takes one day, and sometimes it takes forty years.”

Like Andreas and Silke, Helena reported that Müller’s sermons impacted her spiritual life deeply as a new believer. In response to the researcher’s question about the cause of her transformation, Helena said it was “first and foremost through the sermons of Steffen. They contributed a lot because when he preached, it was very understandable, and you could just take it into your heart so that you really thought about it afterward or that you read it yourself.” After her conversion, Helena prayed and read the Bible more often. She also listened to sermons online more frequently. Silke received practical, biblical advice from a GCM counselor when she struggled with raising her teenage children:

We met maybe three or four times, and she very quickly understood what was going on and gave me very particular Bible passages, which I read and discussed with her again, and which were very helpful. . . . It showed me how well-rounded this world that I entered was and also how helpful Jesus is in this difficult situation, where you cannot make progress with your common sense.

Moreover, biblical teaching and the awareness of God’s assistance helped Silke to become less anxious about conflicts within the family: “Well, I am not alone anymore. I have someone who fights the battles with me. I do not have to get so upset about other things. Actually, I can deal with everything more calmly.” Silke also taught herself the ancient Greek language so that she could study the New Testament in depth. She came to understand the Bible as the literal Word of God despite her scientific upbringing and education as an optometrist:

I believe that the Bible is much smarter than we think, and the access to the Greek language helped me [to understand this]. . . . I believe that these are the words that God wanted one-to-one, . . . and apart from the reliable historical evidence, that these are the words that were made for us. . . . I believe that what is contained in the Bible is our salvation if we are willing to receive it.

The men’s Bible study on Fridays, sermons on Sundays, and the regular interaction with an informal mentor were the primary stimuli for Andreas’s growing interaction with the Scriptures. Andreas began to pray and read the Bible personally by using online applications such as the app Olive Tree or the website Auftanken.de. He started to lead his children in daily family devotions and care for his family spiritually by what he described as “living in a triangle” between himself, his wife, and God. Feelings of “jealousy and such things do not play a role in our relationship, in our love” anymore, according to Andreas, as they adopted biblical standards to their marriage. The counseling sessions with the

pastor motivated Andreas and his wife to affirm their permanent commitment to each other as husband and wife:

We read the book about marriage by Timothy Keller together, which deals with marriage, the covenant, about what matters in marriage. That is when for me and Maria *alle Schallklappen runterflogen* [all the sound valves flew off]. We understood who the bride is, we understood the big picture, this covenant, and suddenly it made sense again.

Embraced Social Action

GCM prioritized relational change in their contextualization of social action due to the affluent population of Grünwald that was in little need of welfare programs. The testimony of converts confirmed various aspects of relational transformation, while professional obligations either enabled or limited personal engagement in social action.

Pastor Müller characterized the most severe hardship for affluent people in Grünwald as an inner rather than outward poverty. People in their community struggle with the consequences of broken relationships in marriages and families rather than with basic financial needs. The pastor believed that GCM offers the most vital aid to people in their context by assisting them in relational struggles:

The great need is not that we have people who live on social welfare or similar challenges. Relational distress is a severe [problem] here, I would say much more pronounced than in any middle-class areas. We noticed that if we want to be a blessing for neighbors, for people who live here, that is a big deal, [to help] where relationships have broken down, where there is loneliness, that we do a lot in this area, and not sell cheap, second-hand clothes.

During the observation of a Bible study on February 21, 2020, this author witnessed how a group of men from GCM cared and prayed for a participant who was on the brink of divorce. Müller explained that caring for such individuals relationally is critical for the social well-being of GCM's constituency:

To be there for such people, to take the time to meet with them again and again, to accompany them in the hope that a partnership will not break up, or that God will do a miracle and give healing, or if it leads to a divorce or separation, after all, to simply be there for them, to accompany them, so they do not end up in a depression or even in suicide.

Nonetheless, Müller expressed in the interview that he seeks to instill a desire for social action in his congregation: "But, of course, we try to sensitize people for it [social action], and not just [to] look at ourselves." Worshipers at GCM contributed large monetary donations to such social causes as relief efforts for children in war-torn Syria. Also, a couple in the church had established the foundation

Münchner Herz (Heart of Munich) to provide aid in a socially disadvantaged area of Munich by running a second-hand clothes store or assisting students with homework. Some church members regularly volunteered in these activities.

Converts talked about their relational transformation as well as their involvement in social action. On the one hand, Silke explained that the time constraint of her demanding job as a physician is the primary reason for not engaging in social action. On the other hand, she reported significant relational transformation within her family. The previous section discloses how the relationships with her teenage children improved as a result of biblical counseling. A new reliance on God's sovereignty eased the relational friction within her family: "In my private life, I notice this as a whole, especially the family life and my concern about raising teenagers—how they are they doing, what will become of them?—that it is much easier because I know that I do not have to do it all myself so that children turn out okay, but they also are in God's hands."

The relational transformation between Andreas and his wife coincided with the application of biblical teaching to their marriage. The husband, according to Andreas, should have the final authority in a marriage relationship. Once Andreas and his wife followed this guideline, it generated greater peace and harmony in their relationship. Andreas elaborated that "we both have the Christian faith for us that I am responsible and make the decisions. I include her, but I have the 51 percent. . . . If we have this *Bibel-Leben* [a life based on the Bible] and live out this Scripture and take it into the present day, then it simply works, and that is the key." Unlike Silke, Andreas intended his business to become a platform for social action. At the time of the interview, he had started a new business successfully that enables people to generate income through sales in social networks.²⁵¹ Andreas hoped his business venture would provide aid for social causes around the world. The profits from starting a new clothing line, for example, could help to fund organizations that assist persecuted Christians:

This idea with [the clothing line] Plan of God is actually about releasing funds and making them available to help organizations that, in the name of the Lord, deal with the persecution of Christians around the world so that Christians in every country today have the opportunity to live out their faith and not have to hide . . . This is an especially important factor for me.

251 "Andreas Küffner," Andreas Küffner, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://andreas-kueffner.com/>.

Changed by Spiritual Application

GCM did not challenge converts to transformational changes by seeking to induce spiritual experiences but converts reported changes due to emotional or spiritual phenomena. The observation of three worship services at GCM showed that Müller's non-charismatic, theological convictions as a former pastor in the PCA formed his perspective on the Pentecostal teachings. However, Müller asserted it is always possible that God intervenes supernaturally in world affairs and believers' lives. On March 22, 2020, he proclaimed in light of Mk 4:35-41, the history of deadly pandemics, and COVID-19 that "Jesus never lost control. As Creator, he has power over natural powers." Jesus allowed the virus but also has the ability to stop the virus. The primary lesson from Jesus' story of calming the storm, though, is to understand our complete dependence on God during the pandemic and the need to accept salvation in Christ: "If people die without accepting the forgiveness, then we know with 100 percent certainty that they will spend eternity separated from God. In comparison, only 1 percent died of the coronavirus."

Nonetheless, converts talked about spiritual or emotional experiences during their conversion process. Andreas reported supernatural occurrences that not only affirmed his willingness to convert but solidified simultaneous personal changes. The section *Moved by Spiritual Experiences* retells the story of how the extraordinary answer to a prayer request moved Andreas toward conversion. The second event that confirmed his convictions about Christianity happened on his daughter's birthday in June 2016. His daughter was born without a heart-beat after twenty-one hours of labor. Doctors rushed her off for emergency care, and Andreas went down on his knees to pray in despair. Jesus spoke to him, Andreas stated, and assured him that God does not make mistakes and is entirely trustworthy. This emotional or supernatural encounter solidified his personal trust in God: "I knew, no matter if my daughter is not alive or if she is alive, [that] God makes no mistakes, and I was at peace with that. . . . This situation in the summer of 2016 was like a rocket that shot us closer to him. They were two actual experiences [his wedding and his daughter's birth] where God revealed himself to us in a real-life scenario." A practical consequence amid these two occasions was that Andreas built up the courage to end a lucrative business partnership. His Christian convictions no longer harmonized with the value system of his business partner:

At that time, I had to break up with my fellow business partner, with whom I had built a highly successful business. I just was not able to build a business anymore with someone who does not have the Christian faith. Well, there were certain drawbacks that came

with it, but you just could no longer live a normal life with the previous principles or values.

Silke shared that she feels continual joy without having a rational explanation and rarely becomes tired in her work as an optometrist. Even more astounding to Silke is a sense of God's supernatural power intuitively guiding and improving her patients' treatments:

I clearly feel that this power does not come from me. It is actually often the case—I would not have thought it was possible, and I would like to know how my father, who is a physicist, would explain this—that often, I have the feeling that I am being guided during a treatment. I do not have a special revelation or a supernatural appearance. . . . You could call it revelation or intuition; I do not know what to call it. So, I just explain it this way: “I give myself into *fremde Hände* [the hands of another one] and let myself be guided;” and that is, of course, a blessing for me and my patients.

Thus, the converts' spiritual applications of presumably supernatural phenomena contributed to their transformational changes.

Retransmission

GCM mobilized converts as a primary asset for evangelism by continually communicating the value of retransmission and providing opportunities to invite non-Christian friends to church events. Pastor Müller believed that the enthusiasm of converts outweighed the need for formal evangelism training. GCM did not pursue active involvement in foreign missions at the time of this study.

Communicating the Value of Retransmission

GCM always promoted the value of reaching out to non-Christians evangelistically. Converts responded by developing a desire for retransmission.

Müller encouraged converts and the entire congregation to engage in personal outreach during sermons and Bible studies. In the study via Zoom on March 24, the pastor led Silke and the other participants in a prayer that instilled a passion for making disciples: “We would like to ask you to open the eyes of many people in Germany, that they recognize you and follow you gladly.” In addition, Müller continually motivated converts to invite non-Christian friends to outreach events, such as the annual Broadway musical. The membership covenant of GCM reiterates the expectation that new church members should internalize the value of sharing their Christian faith. Converts who become members need to agree that “as a follower of Jesus, I desire to share the Good News in a relevant and contemporary fashion.” Müller was confident that the inherent enthusiasm

of new believers and their relational network in the secular world makes them the ideal Christian witnesses: “A lot of things happen simply through personal contacts, and we have experienced that those who were very secular and who came to believe are by far the best evangelists.”

The pastor pointed out a recent convert with a secular background as an example of a passionate, missionary vigor in retransmission: “I mean, she has brought so many people with her, it is amazing, and that is not complicated somehow, but she simply says: ‘Church as you know it is something completely different. Come to the Gospel Church! It is not a sect, but it is the way we need it for our life.’” After her conversion, Silke also began to speak about her faith with colleagues and patients at work. The many positive responses encouraged her to address spiritual subjects and pray for people passionately: “I do not hold back now that I am a believer and I tell this also at pretty much every opportunity, and I like to pray for other people, and I also tell them that I pray for them.” Similarly, both Helena and Andreas internalized the value of retransmission, evident in their frequent invitations of friends and colleagues to church activities.

Training in Retransmission

GCM did not offer formal but informal training in personal evangelism as part of its regular teaching ministry. Converts began to speak about their faith freely while receiving mixed responses in their social context.

The pastor held the conviction that the enthusiasm of new converts to reach out to their friends outweighs their need for formal training. In Müller’s experience, evangelism courses were not necessarily helpful since even seasoned Christians who did receive training continued to struggle with evangelism. Contrastingly, the pastor explained, new converts “do not need much teaching or training or anything else, but they just need enthusiasm for Christ and the courage to confess it. . . . Actually, those who have been in the faith for a long time and would like to have all kinds of courses and go through them find it rather difficult to implement them.” Müller conceded that a course in evangelism like *Evangelism Explosion* might help train church members in the future. He added that the testimonies of new converts about their transformation reinforce the credibility of their witness, particularly if they embraced a secular worldview previously: “When I see who really invites people who then actually come, whether to the worship service or the Bible studies, above all, they are those [converts] who had a secular background, but their lives were changed very clearly by the love of Jesus Christ and by the gospel.” Hence, the pastor concluded that the inability of recent converts to explain the gospel correctly in personal evangelism is not

a severe obstacle to outreach. Proper teaching about conversion during church functions makes up for any partial doctrinal knowledge:

In principle, it is not very complicated, but they simply say: “Jesus loves me, he forgives me, he has forgiven me, come, you also need Jesus, you simply need God in your life.” . . . It may well be that they leave out some important things, but that is not dramatic, because when they come to church services or good Bible studies, they hear about it bit by bit.

Observations revealed that the pastor did provide theological training about gospel transmission as part of his regular teaching in sermons and Bible studies. For example, in the Bible study on February 21, 2020, a discussion arose about the conflict between God’s sovereign election and the need for sharing the gospel. One participant voiced the opinion that sharing the gospel with his grandchildren is irrelevant if God elected all believers already. The pastor explained that God’s sovereignty assures the worthiness of believers independent of their evangelistic work. At the same time, it is God’s will for believers to share their faith and pray for salvations: “His love is not deeper for you if through your evangelistic efforts two thousand people come to know Christ instead of five,” but “it is right that we should struggle in prayer for your grandchildren and expect God to work.”

The converts in this study reported that they talked about their faith within their social networks but did not tell stories of personal evangelism, the verbal sharing of the gospel message. Silke focused on giving verbal hints about her Christian convictions to patients in her doctoral office. She said that “often and very carefully, I talk to patients when something went well, using little thoughts like this: ‘You can thank your creator that it has gone so well!’” Helena made her faith known to non-Christian friends by simply praying at the beginning of a meal. She also talked about attending church on Instagram. As a result, Helena’s friends became inquisitive and started interacting with her: “I have told so many friends where I go [on Sundays] because most of them are already wondering on Instagram in my story and ask: ‘Hey, what are you up to?’ Something like that, and then we write about it, or if you meet up, I tell them about it.” Andreas and his wife succeeded in inviting families to their home and church events with the hope of creating spiritual interests. Andreas mentioned, though, that he would like more assistance in outreach through GCM. He also explained that his parents came along to church occasionally but remained suspicious of his new faith: “There is always a bit of a bad vibe.” Similarly, Silke and Helena reported difficulties in convincing non-Christian friends to attend GCM. Helena assumed that prejudices against evangelical churches dissuade people in her

social network from accepting her invitations: “Well, most of them are curious, and I feel most of them are interested, but then they are somehow deterred because they may have many prejudices.”

Provided Opportunities for Retransmission

GCM provided opportunities for retransmission locally, while the church engaged in foreign missions work only through financial contributions. Converts reported that they made use of church activities as a means of retransmission. Involvement in foreign missions occurred only on an individual basis.

The observation of church events and the testimony of converts disclosed that GCM emphasized retransmission by asking converts to invite non-Christians to worship services. For that reason, Müller’s sermons were applicable to everyday life and always addressed a non-Christian audience. Besides, various evangelistic events and Bible study meetings served as corporate opportunities for retransmission. Special worship services in the park, family activities, or musical events created bridges for converts to introduce friends to their church community and the gospel message. The pastor explained that the annual Broadway musical is an example of “a classic evangelistic event, and of course, we invite them to come to the church service.” Participation in foreign missions, according to Müller, only happens by sponsoring Christian missionaries in countries like France and Austria. GCM did not plan to recruit church members for foreign missions trips at the time of this study.

As illustrated in the previous two sections, Andreas, Silke, and Helena took advantage of GCM’s opportunities for retransmission. They talked about their habit of inviting friends and colleagues to church events so they can hear the Christian message. Silke, for example, passed out flyers to encourage her co-workers to join her at GCM. Andreas and his wife regularly invited non-believing friends to outreach events and the worship service. Andreas shared that “we keep inviting people on certain occasions. For example, when we have an Easter egg hunt or the Lego-Days for children and families. We always invite a lot of people. Of course, a few families with children who are friends of ours have come to the church service off and on.” Whereas Silke and Helena had no foreign missions experience, Andreas pursued foreign missions during his business travels. He had a passion for spreading the Christian faith and assisting the Christian church around the world by utilizing his business venture. He desired to “work in places where it is needed, yes, always in the context of spreading the faith and building houses of God.” Andreas did not hesitate to profess his faith even in Muslim contexts. He wore his necklace with a cross and openly talked about his faith

while giving public presentations in Turkey. Andreas professed proudly: “I also use these stages to talk about it [my faith] at opportune times. So, I am in Turkey, and I run around with my chain and my cross, and I will never hide it!”

Summary of Diffusional Themes

The analysis of the data collected during the case study revealed distinct patterns in the diffusion of the gospel at GCM. The interviews of converts served as primary sources of data to corroborate the findings.

Transmission

GCM continually encouraged the transmission of the gospel through individuals, especially by asking them to invite their non-Christian friends to church events. Worship services and Bible studies were the primary venues to transmit the gospel corporately, while evangelistic events and mass mailings supported the outreach efforts. The church always engaged converts with biblical content during worship services and Bible studies. Additionally, converts reported spiritual or emotional experiences that encouraged them to pursue the Christian faith without the church seeking supernatural interventions in their evangelistic efforts.

Translation

GCM translated their programs to connect with their affluent population in Grünwald. The intellectual, gospel-centered communication style of pastor Müller related the Christian faith to a wealthy and well-educated audience. Converts shared how the community dynamics of love and friendliness drew them into the congregation.

Turnaround

GCM presented conversion intelligibly as faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Converts confirmed an understanding of evangelical conversion. The pastor refrained from pre-formulated conversion prayers but continually encouraged individuals to consider a decision of conversion. Müller believed God determined the point of salvation sovereignly, allowing for processes of conversion. Converts also told a story of conversion as a process. Biblical teaching rather than baptism and membership commitments connected conversion and discipleship at GCM.

Transformation

Weekly worship services and Bible studies facilitated the implementation of rigorous discipleship. Converts reported that community involvement also helped in their personal transformation. Müller's emphasis on Bible teaching caused the formation of biblical values and deep changes in converts' lives. Spiritual experiences affirmed and aided the discipleship process of converts. GCM emphasized relational restoration rather than welfare programs in their contextualized approach to social action.

Retransmission

GCM communicated the value of retransmission during all church events. Converts reported their willingness to talk about their faith without hesitation. Retransmission focused on inviting non-Christians to worship services and outreach events. The pastor believed that converts' enthusiasm outweighed the need for evangelism training, although instruction took place informally during church gatherings. GCM provided regular opportunities for retransmission locally but did not pursue active involvement in foreign missions at the time of this study.

Chapter 5 Case Study 3: ConnectKirche Erfurt

Overview of Research at ConnectKirche Erfurt

The research study of ConnectKirche Erfurt (CKE) took place from March 29 through May 19, 2020. The observations of worship services and a prayer meeting occurred online due to restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic on March 29, April 19, and April 25. The researcher conducted interviews with pastor Kevin Herla, the pastoral staff, and converts with the video application Zoom and over the phone. Table 3 provides biographical information about the converts in Erfurt.

Table 3. List of converts who participated in interviews at CKE

| Name Interview Date | Background | Age | Gender | Conversion | Baptism |
|---|---|-----|--------|--|--|
| Vanessa Krackler (April 4, 2020) | German parents, divorced Born and raised in Erfurt Childhood and adolescence: no church affiliation, secular upbringing Pre-conversion: atheist, no interest in God | 22 | F | 2018 | Planned at CKE in 2020 |
| Maurice (April 24, 2020) | German parents Raised in Erfurt Childhood and adolescence: no church affiliation, secular upbringing Pre-conversion: atheist, no interest in God | 20 | M | 2017 shortly before the first contact with CKE | EKD adult baptism in 2018 |
| Lara (April 25, 2020) | German parents Raised in Erfurt Childhood and adolescence: nominal Lutheran Pre-conversion: temporarily Muslim, general faith in God | 35 | F | 2018 | Infant baptism in EKD; adult baptism at CKE in 2018 |
| Peter (May 19, 2020) | German parents Raised in Thuringia Childhood and adolescence: nominal Lutheran Pre-conversion: faith in basic Christian doctrines | 51 | M | 2019 | Infant baptism in EKD; planned adult baptism at CKE |

The interview with Vanessa Krackler, who represents a typical convert with a secular background at CKE, serves as an oral history testimony (see Appendix 9.3). The participants received a pseudonym except for the pastoral staff and Krackler as an oral history interviewee. CKE granted access to all church documents on their corporate workspace online. Transcriptions of interviews and all other data sources were stored, analyzed, and coded in the MAXQDA software program.

Local Context of ConnectKirche Erfurt

Erfurt, located in former Communist East Germany, is the capital of the federal state of Thuringia and its largest city with 214,000 residents.²⁵² Bonifatius first documented Erfurt in 742. In 1392, the city established the third university in Germany, where Martin Luther would become its most famous student. The central location of Erfurt and low employment costs caused the city to become a logistical center and transit hub in present-day Germany.²⁵³ Politically, people in Erfurt gave most votes to the socialist party Die Linke (The Left) during the last election in 2019, followed by the ultra-conservative party AfD, putting Angela Merkel's party CDU in third place.²⁵⁴ ConnectKirche decided to locate in southern Erfurt with 52,000 inhabitants, socially disadvantaged city districts, and a sharp disparity between the rich and poor. The Michaelis church is the only traditional church building in southern Erfurt and was home to CKE worship services during this study.²⁵⁵

History of ConnectKirche Erfurt

CKE's website, the interview with Kevin Herla, and online sources provided the information for the church plant's history. Kevin Herla converted during a time of sickness only eight years before starting the ConnectKirche in Erfurt. Since he grew up as an atheistic unbeliever, Herla developed a passion for starting a church where people with similar backgrounds and without prior Christian

252 "Erfurt in Zahlen [Erfurt in numbers]," Erfurt.de, Stadtverwaltung, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ebdS4S>.

253 *Praktikanten-Handbuch* [Intern-Handbook] (ConnectKirche Erfurt, 2019), 10.

254 "Thüringen-Wahl 2019: Wahlergebnisse und Grafiken im Überblick [Elections in Thuringia 2019: Results and Graphics in Overview]," Die Welt, Axel Springer SE, October 29, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3ebiBn7>.

255 *Praktikanten-Handbuch*, 11.

knowledge could ask any questions about matters of faith.²⁵⁶ Herla decided to study theology at the seminary of the Pentecostal denomination BFP. In 2017 and before moving to Erfurt, Kevin and his wife Katharina spent five months as interns at Mountainview Community Church in Fresno, California. Herla reported that this charismatic Mennonite church assisted them in developing a strategy for church planting and shaped their theological outlook.²⁵⁷ Upon their arrival in Thuringia, he joined the German church planting initiative KirchenThür (Church Door), led by James Ross, who also oversaw the church planting efforts of the BFP in Eastern Germany.²⁵⁸ They conducted a demographic study and determined to locate in southern Erfurt since no other evangelical church existed in that part of the city.

In September 2017, Herla and his wife began to gather a core group for the church plant in Erfurt and trained them in personal evangelism. One month later, the pastoral couple opened up their living room for a monthly, informal worship service that grew to about sixty people within one year. The emerging church planting team started to organize evangelistic events for relationship building with non-Christians, such as concerts in an Irish pub called Dubliner. Simultaneously, theology students from the BFP seminary and local volunteers distributed fifty thousand flyers and collected the contact information of eleven thousand people in Erfurt. Pastor Herla explained that they trained a total of thirty-four people, both believers and unbelievers, for various volunteer teams ahead of the first public service. In September 2018, the opening worship service took place in a hotel and drew 311 visitors. Herla reported that forty-five people had converted at CKE in the following year. Eventually, the church moved its location to the Michaelis church in southern Erfurt. About 120 people attended weekly worship services by the time of this study.

256 “Über uns [About us],” ConnectKirche Erfurt, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://bit.ly/34CYqgl>.

257 “Mountain View Church,” Mountain View Church, accessed May 23, 2020, <https://www.mountainview.org/>. Mountainview Church considers ConnectKirche as one of their church planting extensions. Herla reported that the church planting organization Exponential (exponential.org) categorizes Mountainview as a level five or multiplying church due to their multiplication of church plants.

258 “Über uns [About us],” KirchenThür, accessed May 23, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3cec0dD>.

Observation of a Worship Service

CKE did not have an on-site audience but transmitted their services on their YouTube channel due to the COVID-19 pandemic during this research project. On April 25, 2020, the service promptly began with a recorded welcome by Kevin Herla at 10:45 a.m. He introduced worship songs as *gesungene Gebete* (sung prayers) and assured viewers that they could experience God while worshipping at home: “God is present, even in our living room!” A band and two dancing singers performed two modern worship songs, proclaiming in one of the songs that “He is our destiny.” Vicar Elisa Treblin gave the announcements after the short worship segment. Treblin encouraged viewers to participate in social gatherings online. They could meet in small groups during the week or join Hangouts directly after the service. “Generosity is a biblical principle,” Treblin conveyed to the audience afterward and encouraged giving online to become a finanzieller Möglichmacher (Financial Enabler). At 11:12 a.m., Katharina Herla started with a twenty-five-minute sermon on 1 Cor 3:1-9. Eighty-nine viewers had joined the live broadcast by the time of the sermon. Herla read the entire Bible passage and petitioned believers to match their behavior with their Christian beliefs. She proclaimed that devotional times with Jesus and personal evangelism are essential aspects of the Christian life, and only God’s power can bring about spiritual changes: “The only way to mature is by having the changing power of Jesus in us.” At 11:35 a.m., Katharina Herla entered into the *Entscheidungszeit* (time of decision) when she explained that Christ died for our guilt and invited viewers to follow along in a prayer of conversion. She encouraged new converts to contact the church in order to receive further information and a Bible. At 11:37 a.m., Herla finished with the challenge to invite non-Christians to CKE: “Whom can I invite to take part in the service next week, so they can get to know Jesus as well?” At 11:44 a.m. and after a final worship song, a short panel discussion with Treblin, Katharina Herla, and the worship leader preceded a prayer for Kevin Herla, who had been suffering from a prolonged eye disease. Katharina prayed that doctors would receive wisdom to discover the right diagnosis, and consequently, that “we can experience how you can heal!” A final blessing by Treblin ended the worship service at 11:50 a.m.

Transmission

In the church document *Culture of the Church*, CKE describes itself as “a church that is hungry for revival,” a church that wants people to come to faith and follow Jesus. This section addresses the transmission of the Christian message through

CKE. The church plant in Erfurt engaged in a wide range of continual transmission of the gospel by encouraging individual transmission, committing to corporate transmission, and engaging pre-converts with the biblical message. Converts also reported spiritual or emotional experiences as a cause of greater receptivity to the call of conversion.

Encouraged Individual Transmission

CKE always encouraged each individual in the church to share their faith with non-Christians and bring friends and neighbors to church events. Individual invitations were also the main reason converts in this study started to attend ConnectKirche.

The pastor's couple ceaselessly encouraged believers to transmit the gospel personally. Herla explained that they have been training people to evangelize since forming the initial core group:

We started a small group in our house where we trained people. How do I tell my story with God? How do I start a conversation about faith with an atheist or a-religious [person]? How do I pray a prayer of decision? So how do I lead someone to Jesus? . . . Each meeting began with everyone telling their story with God in two minutes.

The value of personal interaction with non-Christians for personal transmission is also evident in the document titled *A Church We Dream About and Live For*. The text introduces CKE as a church that seeks to be inclusive by providing three entryways into the community, illustrated by three different tables: the worship service as a *Tisch des Herrn* (the Lord's Table), Connect groups or home groups as a *Familientisch* (Family Table), and neighborhood parties as a *Tisch der Welt* (Table of the World) to form friendships with non-Christian friends. Each table, the document states, serves as an opportunity for individuals to invite their non-Christian friends. The executive pastor Alex Blum confirmed the effectiveness of this approach. He estimated that 80 to 90 percent of first-time worship attendees came because of a personal invitation.

The testimonies of converts attested to the crucial role of individuals bringing them into contact with CKE. A friend of Vanessa's ceaselessly invited her to come to the worship service until Vanessa finally gave in: "A buddy of mine, who is still at the ConnectKirche, invited me to the ConnectKirche so many times, and I always refused. I always had some excuse. . . . On December 16, 2018, I said, 'Okay, I will just try this out now. What can go wrong?'" One of Lara's friends sent out a general invitation to the opening service of CKE in a WhatsApp group. Lara was the only one who accepted the invitation after two other friends also encouraged her to go to church: "And then, by chance, in another WhatsApp

group, a friend of mine posted the invitation for the opening service of the ConnectKirche. . . . I said, ‘Oh yeah, cool, that sounds interesting! I would like to come along.’” Nevertheless, Herla explained that personal evangelism, the verbal sharing of the gospel message, rarely occurred through worshippers at CKE.

Committed to Corporate Transmission

CKE transmitted the Christian message corporately through worship services, home groups, outreach events, and versatile advertisement campaigns. Converts reported that the worship service was their main entry point into the church.

Pastor Herla pointed out that he considers worship services and Connect groups as the primary corporate events to reach non-Christians. His goal is to limit the number of regular, weekly programs to help church members focus on those two activities:

The worship service is one of our evangelical highlights. It is also deliberately designed for this. . . . We want as few appointments as possible, but as many as necessary. That is pretty much our goal. We say we have a mission: “Show people who Jesus is and walk with them in discipleship.” By and large, that is [accomplished through] the worship service and small groups.

Connect groups also had to organize regular outreach events to invite non-Christian friends. The small group for worship team members, for example, performed a concert in the Irish pub Dubliner several times a year. Hundreds of people attended this event over time and received invitations to the worship service. Elisa Treblin, who became a vicar at CKE in 2018, elaborated that the church organizes a variety of additional outreach events each year. Blockparties, for example, provide an opportunity for volunteers to give away popcorn and drinks in a specific neighborhood of Erfurt. Elisa explained that these events help to lower the threshold of eventual church attendance: “That, I think, makes it even easier for people to actually come [to church] and take this step, even if they had nothing to do with faith before.” CKE’s annual report of 2018 states that a total of 1,400 people attended one of the eighteen evangelistically oriented events during that year. Extensive use of social media and flyer distribution reinforced corporate transmission. Pastor Blum often received feedback about the positive effect of Instagram and YouTube. People first watch a sermon online before they attend the actual service: “We often get the feedback that people become aware of us mostly through social media, so we use Instagram a lot. . . . People watch our services first and then decide whether to come or not, which means that YouTube is a big thing.” Flyer distribution was a frequent method of corporate transmission at CKE. The church distributed five thousand invitations

for a Christmas service, and fifteen thousand flyers informed people in Erfurt about their first-anniversary celebration in 2019. The church quickly abandoned door-to-door evangelism due to the negative feedback from residents about this practice by sectarian groups.

All converts in this study explained that the attendance of the worship service was their first experience of CKE. Vanessa, mirroring the testimonies of the other converts in this study, summarized the reasons why the service made such an impression on her: “It really was this sermon of Kevin and the overall feeling, this entry, to be at home, the friendly reception, really the sermon and this worship time. I thought this interplay was awesome.” Promptly after attending the first service, converts joined home groups and started to volunteer on Sundays and during evangelistic events.

Engaged with Biblical Message

ConnectKirche Erfurt engaged converts by presenting the biblical message in worship services and small group meetings. Some of the converts interacted with the Bible at CKE for the first time in their life.

Worship services, Kevin Herla explained, focus on making the service attractive to visitors without neglecting to communicate biblical content. The initial instruction in fundamental aspects of faith takes place during sermons. A regular meeting after the worship service called Entdeckerkurs (Discovery course), and the Connect group Experiment Glauben (Experiment of Faith) for new visitors, provides further instruction for newcomers. In an email to the author on April 29, 2020, Kevin noted that an attractive service format does not diminish the importance of teaching a biblically faithful message:

We try to make the worship service as visitor-friendly as possible without deviating from our biblical beliefs or whitewashing them. Truth and love always belong together. We always preach for rather than against something, for example, for marriage and not against sex before marriage. It is important to us that people in the church get to know the foundations of faith. That is why we have the Connect group Experiment Glauben and the Entdeckerkurs after the worship service, where we briefly explain what we believe.

The observation of worship services confirmed that each sermon addressed a Scripture passage directly. The text appeared on a screen for worship attendees to see, and the preacher read the Bible verses aloud. Furthermore, vicar Treblin stated that visitors receive a welcome package that includes a Bible, instructions on how to read the Bible, and an explanation of the gospel. Additionally, CKE applied creative methods to share the gospel during outreach events. Treblin

explained that in the summer of 2019, church attendees distributed water bottles to random people in Erfurt as an activity of social welfare. A QR code on the bottles supplied a link to a gospel presentation.

In the interview, Vanessa expressed that pastor Herla's sermon captivated her during her first visit to CKE: "Honestly, Kevin's sermon knocked me over a bit. At the time, he talked about the Christmas story and told it from a completely different angle. . . . *Da hat es mich voll gecatched* [that really hooked me]!" Maurice purchased a Revised Elberfelder Bible after his conversion but had difficulties understanding this literal translation. At CKE, he received a Bible in the German New Living Translation. This contemporary translation, and the advice to start reading the New Testament, helped him to engage with the biblical message:

I did not understand anything at all. I had no desire to read the Bible because I was sure I was not going to understand what it said On the third visit [at CKE], I received a free Bible in the New Living Translation, and that is pretty easy to read. I understood what I read after all, and I was told to start with the New Testament because it is easier to understand than the Old, and probably more exciting because it deals with Jesus right away.

Moved by Spiritual Experiences

CKE did not pursue a specific strategy of inducing spiritual or emotional experiences to guide people toward conversion. Nevertheless, interviewees talked about unusual circumstances and emotional experiences that affirmed their desire to convert.

Herla preferred a rational approach to gospel communication despite his Pentecostal convictions. He elucidated that instructions on how to read the Bible, for instance, encourages a focus on engaging the text intellectually: "In this way, they learn to hear God's voice from the Bible, and not just because we come from a Pentecostal background, not just from a feeling or some image or worship song, but straight from the Scriptures." The observation of church services verified that worship leaders did not seek to generate an overly emotional response to the short music segments. Outreach events were another example of a more rational approach to gospel transmission. The pastoral staff described these events as opportunities to build friendships in the community rather than to generate supernatural phenomena such as healings or miracles.

Nonetheless, the interviews of converts disclosed that unusual circumstances or emotional experiences solidified their resolve of conversion. On a Sunday about three weeks after her first visit to CKE, Lara's company canceled a business trip, and she was able to attend the church unexpectedly. Lara did not raise her

hand to convert in the worship service but during the Discovery course afterward. Typically, leaders did not ask for conversions during the course meetings. Thus, Lara believed God had ordained all these events to facilitate her conversion: “It just could not be a coincidence. I should not have been there on that day. . . . So, I think it was predestined for me.” Vanessa shared that Herla’s sermon triggered a strong emotional response during her first visit to CKE. This reaction puzzled Vanessa since she had no intention of returning to the church. She identified her emotional reaction as God’s direct intervention so she would make a decision of conversion:

During that reflection, I became very emotional at times. I tried to suppress it constantly because I could not explain it to myself. “Okay, what is going on right now? Actually, I only went to church to check it out, and that was it.” . . . Yes, I was extremely emotional. I remember that very clearly. Then, I raised my hand, trembling. I do not think that really came from me. I truly believe that God was already with me entirely and encouraged me to do so.

Translation

CKE translated the Christian message with careful diligence into the secular context of Erfurt. The church plant attracted people by contextualizing their programs, relating the Christian message through translated communication, and drawing newcomers with loving community dynamics. Pentecostal practices, which CKE de-emphasized for the sake of gospel translation, did not affect new believers adversely before their conversion.

Attracted by Translated Programs

CKE contextualized its programs so that non-believers related well to the style of worship services and other outreach activities. In the interview, Kevin Herla talked about their commitment to translating the Christian message for a predominantly secular audience in Erfurt. Churches should welcome the inquiries of skeptical non-believers and respond to them adequately. Therefore, Herla explained, CKE’s worship services anticipate visitors who question the claims of Christianity and capture their attention with sermons that relate to their daily experiences and a modern worship experience:

The church is a place where strangers become friends, where one can say consciously, “God is foreign to me. Christians are strangers to me, but I will go, and I can open up to it.” I established a thesis that plays a major role here, which states that questions in the church and with God are not only allowed but desired because real, sincere questions honor God. . . . In that way, the worship experience should be very close to where people

are, like a conversation over a cup of coffee. I would say very modern, very young, suitable for everyday applications.

Online worship services during the COVID-19 crisis lasted only about one hour and remained short for the sake of contextualization. A band led the congregation in modern-style songs, sometimes in English, while the worship leader explained each aspect of their spiritual activities. In the interview, Herla clarified that the current format during the pandemic is not dissimilar to previous worship services with in-person attendance. The church limits the length of the worship time so that visitors without musical inclinations endure the worship segment easily until they could hear the sermon: “We sing three songs, so that if someone who totally does not like the music and wonders when a sermon or a good input will finally start, can endure this.”

Furthermore, the church plant translated the design and purpose of outreach events. Kevin Herla recalled how door-to-door evangelism had been ineffective in Erfurt due to the negative connotations with the practice of Jehovah’s witnesses. Instead, CKE had organized Parkfeste (Park Festivals) at the beginning of their church planting efforts, which later evolved into so-called Blockparties. The purpose of these events was to help overcome prejudices against Christianity through relational interaction rather than to facilitate a verbal proclamation of the gospel. Herla explained that during the Parkfeste, volunteers were to present an attractive form of Christianity by building friendships:

[The Parkfeste] served to overcome the fear of the church and of faith in general, which is quite significant here, and which mainly exist due to false prejudices. We did not preach at all, but the party was the sermon, and the thirteen people, who were trained to talk about the faith, were thirteen sermons, and we invited [people] for the opening service.

Moreover, the pastor pointed out that non-believers always take part in the process of translating programs at CKE. The church motivates every attendee to join a volunteer team and offer suggestions for adjusting the service program even before their conversion. Thus, new converts integrate into the church easily without apprehensions about the worship style. Herla elucidated that

we have consciously decided to take in people who have nothing to do with faith because we said that the worship service should be for people who are *kirchenfern* (distant from the church). That is why we take in *Kirchenferne* into teams right away. . . . When people first come to faith—one example is Vanessa—they stay in that style because that is the only way they know.

Converts confirmed their attraction to translated programs at ConnectKirche. Vanessa declared that worship songs are more appealing at CKE than in worship

services of the EKD, which she only attended a few times. She recalled that in the EKD service, “we sang a song every once in a while, which was according to that time, very old.” At ConnectKirche, “these modern songs . . . are super appealing. You understand them, and that is not in high German, I would say. Young people like me, we like it when it is easy [to understand], when it is really clear, when it is modern.” Lara also enjoyed the modern worship music and was thankful that services did not take place in a traditional church building at the time she joined CKE: “It was in a hotel, and that meant that I did not feel as distressed as in a traditional, old church. I thought it was so contemporary, so casual, so modern. I could really identify with it.” Maurice did not appreciate the enthusiastic worship when he first attended the Sunday service. The modern style of the songs and the applicable sermons made up for the disappointment: “I found it a bit strange to sit there, and everyone is totally on fire for God, and I thought to myself: ‘It is kind of weird here!’ It felt like an intro from a TV series that I cannot skip and that I always have to endure. Yes, but modern music, just like the sermon, was appealing to me.”

Related through Translated Communication

ConnectKirche translated its communication to relate to an audience without prior knowledge of Christianity. Converts responded to the Christian message because sermons were comprehensible, and the presentation style was appealing.

Herla adjusted his choice of language and sermon topics carefully to communicate with people in Erfurt unfamiliar with Christian doctrines. The pastor stated that learning to speak to a secular audience is similar to learning a foreign language: “We need to learn anew to find a fluent language for people who have nothing to do with it [Christian faith].” Since its inception, CKE conducted extensive, informal surveys to question the population in Erfurt about confusing Christian terminology and relevant sermon topics. CKE adjusted its communication accordingly. The church, Herla explained, needs to discover “which words are incomprehensible here in Thuringia or Erfurt, but which are indispensable to explain the gospel. . . . So, for example, gospel changed to the good news, the good news of friendship with God. Grace changed to the gift of friendship. *Buße* [repentance] became *Reue* [regret], *Sünde* [sin] became *Schuld* [guilt].” For the opening service, CKE picked the question of why God allows suffering as the sermon topic. Previous surveys uncovered that this was the predominant question about faith for people in Erfurt. Additionally, ConnectKirche trained church leaders to contextualize their communication carefully. The pastor explained that the Masterclass of Communication occurs “once a month, where

we train lay people—not only our pastors and theology students—to preach for the unchurched, where people preach in class, receive feedback, and where we as pastors also receive feedback continually.”

Herla did not preach a gospel of prosperity to his economically diverse audience but believed that conversion has a positive, social effect on individuals. In the interview, he elucidated that believers cannot claim a promise of supernatural healing, and the lack of healing does not relate directly to the measure of faith by believers. God may intervene supernaturally at any time, but He also heals through medical treatments. The greatest treasure, according to the pastor, is not material wealth but individuals whom Christians help to convert: “I always say the greatest treasure I have in heaven are people whom I will see there again, who have met Jesus. That is worth more than all the money in the world.” At the same time, it is reasonable to presume that a positive social change occurs when individuals convert and acquire new self-confidence. Herla recalled the example of a young man who had failed many job interviews. Soon after his conversion, he secured new employment due to the positive effects of an inward transformation. A new sense of identity and self-worth as God’s child provided confidence during the job interview: “He believes in himself again and trusts that God holds his whole life in his hand. He went into the interview with that attitude. . . . He probably went in with a wholly different demeanor because he understood more about who he is as God’s son.”

Consistently, Herla’s wife communicated to the congregation that God’s healing might manifest itself through medical professionals rather than miracles. She prayed for God to heal the sick during the COVID-19 pandemic but also thanked God for all medical staff and prayed for conversions. In the service on March 29, 2020, she petitioned God to “heal all sickness that people experience, all pains. . . . especially that they come to know you. . . . Thank you for medicine and doctors and nursing staff. It is so important to see what an important service [they provide].”

Vanessa recollected the effect of translated communication before and after joining CKE. The few sermons she heard in an EKD church were difficult to understand and apply for a novice in Christianity: “The sermons were composed in such a way that as a young person, if you never had anything to do with it, you did not understand anything. . . . It was more like *ein Absitzen* [having to sit down] and not listening, understanding, and applying.” In contrast, Herla’s sermons succeeded in applying biblical knowledge to the everyday experience of a secular audience:

Kevin really tries to integrate these biblical passages into the sermons. He does this in an impressive way, but then, he seeks to translate it fully into something practical. I think, for people like me who had nothing to do with faith before, that is precisely what it takes to take this step and this decision with God. Otherwise, you just do not understand anything about it.

Maurice not only related well to the content of pastor Herla's sermons but also to his communication style. The pastor's enthusiastic manner of preaching captured Maurice's attention and defied his prejudices against boring sermons:

The sermons were something I could apply to my life, and I often saw myself in them. Also, how he preached was with quite a lot of emotion, with quite a lot of passion above all else. That thrilled me, and he took me along with what he said. I think it was just the opposite of what I imagined church to be like, really boring. . . . That was also the moment when I said to myself: "I will check it out more often, it is worth it."

Drawn by Community Dynamics

ConnectKirche Erfurt created a detailed strategy to welcome and integrate newcomers, while converts reported how a loving community attracted them to the church. The headline of the CKE's website welcomes visitors with the words "*Reinkommen. Zu Hause sein* [Come in. Be at home]."²⁵⁹ Pastor Herla perceived a powerful connection between being a welcoming church and creating openness to the gospel. In the interview, he stated that "church is a place where strangers become friends, where consciously, I can say that God is a stranger, Christians are strangers, but I can attend and can open up." Herla supposed that by enabling non-believers to experience a Christian community, the joyful confidence of believers would overcome people's prejudices against Christianity. Quick integration into small groups boosts this process:

I think we are always so afraid that the Christian life is so unattractive, but what is actually very attractive is how Christians radiate such joy and confidence. There are just silly prejudices against us, which we must overcome. When we know how to proclaim the gospel and help people become friends with Jesus, you can experience it almost everywhere. That is what we are trying to do with the groups.

Vicar Treblin, responsible for assimilating newcomers, shared how a team of Gastgeber (Hosts) ensures that visitors receive a warm welcome every Sunday. Elisa expounded that "we call it the Gastgeberteam [Host Team], and we deliberately call it that because we want to treat everyone who attends [the church] like a

259 "Reinkommen. Zuhause sein. [Come in. Be at home]," ConnectKirche Erfurt, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://erfurt.connectkirche.de/>.

guest who is pretty much at home with us. We help them to arrive; we offer them coffee; we connect them with people who—that might sound strange—but who might be interesting for them.” The church document *Guidelines for Follow-Up* describes a detailed plan to reach out and track visitors within twenty-four hours of their first attendance. The assimilation strategy moves beyond interacting with visitors before and after the service to inviting them to Hang-Outs, a lunch invitation in someone’s homes right after church. The document states that attending a Discovery course after the service, visiting a Connect group, or participating in a volunteer team are the next possible steps of integration.

Converts in this study joined the community quickly and commended the loving welcome they received at ConnectKirche. Maurice recalled his initial resistance to attending CKE and the pleasant surprise of strangers who reached out to him in a loving way: “It was pretty tough for me. I did not know anyone, and secondly, I was a stranger. I must admit that I was pleasantly surprised when I got there. . . . Random people came up to me, welcomed me warmly, and had a conversation with me.” Church leaders asked him to join the setup team on Sunday mornings, which Maurice portrayed as a place of forming deeper relationships: “It was cool to hang out with people. Of course, I got to know them all better. I saw how loving these people were and that they all had such a *guten Draht* [good connection] to each other. It almost felt like family, and that pretty quickly.” Likewise, the personal acceptance Peter sensed during his first visit motivated him to return to CKE. Peter said that “you are accepted, so that you say to yourself, ‘Man, I will go back again next week!’” Finally, Lara, who hosted a small group soon after her conversion, singled out the genuine love within the community as the essential characteristic of the church: “The ConnectKirche is more like a family than a church. People help each other; they are there with an honest interest for each other; they really like each other and are concerned for each other.”

(Not) Affected by Pentecostal Translation

CKE subdued Pentecostal practices for the sake of translating the gospel to a non-Christian audience. New believers accepted the validity of Pentecostal practices quickly and were not affected negatively in their process of conversion.

At the time of this study, CKE was a member of the Pentecostal denomination BFP, but their website did not publicize specific charismatic gifts in the statement of faith.²⁶⁰ Co-pastor Blum elucidated that Pentecostal practices do not occur

260 “Über uns,” ConnectKirche Erfurt.

on stage for the sake of relating faith to non-Christians. Glossolalia, prayers for healing, and prophetic utterances find their proper place in a controlled setting or private conversations: “We practice it in such a way that a non-Christian can understand it. So, we would not speak in tongues from the stage. If we do it, then in a personal prayer, and maybe we ask beforehand, ‘Hey, are you already a Christian, and are you familiar with it all? Would it be okay if I prayed for you in tongues?’” Blum elaborated that prayers of deliverance might take place when someone prays to become a Christian after the service, aiding the contextualization of this Pentecostal practice: “In this prayer, we certainly ask the Holy Spirit to speak to him, to reveal something to him, to deliver him. So, we do transport it [into our context], but we try not to make it weird.”

Speaking in tongues struck Maurice as awkward when he first witnessed this phenomenon, but he soon came to believe in its validity:

At the very beginning, it was negative when I first came into contact with it. However, at some point, I accepted that it was like a gift from God, or I started to realize that it is something a person cannot do by himself because as fluent as that sounds, it sounds like it is really a different language and not as if you just make it up.

Lara learned about glossolalia during the Discovery course, which caused her not to devalue this practice as *Spinnerei* (crazy practice). Hence, she never took offense when people spoke in tongues in her Connect group. Her co-leader’s ability to translate tongue-speaking confirmed Lara’s belief in its validity: “I never took offense at it. . . . Once, I had a very intense experience in my Connect group. Two young people from Iran came along, who were also converts, so Christians who were Muslims previously. The man prayed in tongues, and my co-leader was able to translate that prayer language.”

Turnaround

CKE stirred individuals toward Christian conversion by presenting conversion clearly, providing opportunities for decision-making, affirming the point and process of conversion, and connecting conversion and discipleship. Converts reported that they grasped foundational Christian doctrines of conversion, experienced conversion as a point and process, and proceeded from the point of decision to transformational changes.

Presented Conversion Intelligibly

Connect Kirche Erfurt presented conversion intelligibly while maintaining a low threshold of decision-making. Converts confirmed a basic understanding of conversion at the time of their decision.

Herla stated that a gospel explanation and clarifying questions precede any prayers of conversion that happen after a worship service. The leaders who conduct these personal interactions with converts receive training to ensure clarity at the point of decision. The pastor pointed out that

we ask people specifically why they raised their hands. . . . Then we pose the question: “Can I explain to you again what your decision is about?” Then, in two or three minutes, they give a summary of the good news of the gospel and ask people again very clearly, “Is this what you want to choose?” If the person says yes, he or she is led in a prayer of decision.

At the same time, co-pastor Alex Blum elucidated that by adhering to biblical standards of conversion, CKE keeps a low barrier for professions of faith: “We keep the hurdle biblical so that people can say: ‘I messed up. Jesus, I ask you for forgiveness.’ That summarizes almost everything that the Bible demands, which is to confess your sins, name them, and to accept Jesus.”

Herla added in his interview that repentance is an essential, biblical aspect of conversion. He wants individuals to learn how to repent starting with their decision of conversion. Therefore, aside from the unusual circumstances of online services during the COVID-19 pandemic, CKE does not offer generalized prayers of conversion during worship services. The pastor warranted their practice by pointing out that

in the Acts of the Apostles, it [repentance] has a great centrality since the first sermon of Peter: “Repent and be baptized.” This is the experience of real remorse. That is why we do not take that out. That is why we do not pray from the stage because we have all seen that [otherwise] the experience of remorse, joined with the reception of forgiveness, is not experienced as drastically.

Moreover, Herla expounded that the first act of repentance begins with the decision of conversion and leads to a habitual practice in the Christian life: “We talk about a *Bußbeginn* [start of repentance] theologically, beginning with the first decision [of conversion]. . . . Wherever I leave God’s will, I can return to God’s will through remorse again and again.” The pastor also explained that he replaced the term *Buße* (repentance) with *Reue* (remorse) in communicating the gospel. *Buße* had been trivialized with such terms as *Bußgelder* (fines) in the contemporary German language. Hence, Herla believed that the term *Reue*

expresses genuine repentance more profoundly as a “reuevolles Umkehren zu Gott [a return to God with remorse].”

A review of church documents and the website and confirmed a clear gospel presentation at CKE. The Discovery course curriculum for newcomers begins with the layout of the four pillars or four basics of the gospel: the love of God, the problem of sin, the solution in Christ, and the decision of conversion. CKE’s statement of faith on their website also affirms a biblical explanation of the gospel and saving faith: “We believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. We believe that he died in our place to reconcile us with God, and that he rose again from the dead. He is the only one who can free us from guilt. We believe that through our faith in Jesus, we receive eternal life.”²⁶¹

Respectively, converts told stories of comprehending the theological aspects of their conversion at ConnectKirche. Vanessa’s decision to become a Christian was an extremely emotional experience, but she clearly understood the forgiveness of her sins through faith at that point: “Definitely, I was aware that there is a God who loves me infinitely with all my mistakes and with my sins which I committed, and I can let go of that with him, I can become free of that, and I can really accept that for myself.” Traditionally a member of the EKD, Peter grew up acknowledging the truth of Christ’s death and resurrection but did not consider himself to have genuine faith: “I must say quite honestly, this belief was actually not there. You just went to church because it was the tradition.” He came to accept the forgiveness of his sins personally when he made the decision of conversion at CKE. Peter’s comprehension of the gospel continued to grow through biblical education in the Connect groups: “I knew it and tolerated it, but only became fully aware [of its meaning] in the ConnectKirche. More deeply later on, when I kept going to the group meetings.” Congruently, Herla thought that EKD members who converted at CKE did not receive a completely new understanding of Christianity but instead learned how to put their faith into practice: “I would not talk about a first conversion, but I would rather say that what you heard about before, you start living it. What you grew up with becomes your own.”

Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making

CKE invited non-Christians to make decisions of conversion during every worship service and through online media. Three out of the four converts in this study made their decisions in direct response to invitations on Sunday mornings.

261 “Über uns,” ConnectKirche Erfurt.

“A *Zeit der Entscheidung* [time of decision] is the focal point of every worship service,” Herla emphasized in the interview. Non-believers receive a call to conversion at the end of every sermon, but a prayer of decision does not occur until after the worship service to ensure a proper understanding of conversion. Then, Herla explained, Christian leaders lead converts in a pre-formulated prayer of decision. Treblin remarked that this practice assists people who are unfamiliar with prayer: “We pray ahead of them. It is a hurdle just to start praying freely, especially for people who never prayed before.”

The formulated prayer also guided converts to reflect and confess a personal sin. Herla shared enthusiastically that converts never fail to determine personal sins and enter into a personal interaction with God at the point of conversion: “They close their eyes and then the person who prays says: ‘Jesus, show my personal guilt to me!’ Crazy enough, none of the fifty people whom we prayed with ever said: ‘I did not hear anything.’ We genuinely believe in a God who speaks.” Herla added that this mode of decision-making helps converts to accept forgiveness and understand the security of their salvation. Finally, each new visitor at CKE received a welcome package that included a bookmark with a gospel presentation and a conversion prayer to inspire decision-making.

The observation of online worship services revealed that CKE had adjusted its practice of decision times at the time of the COVID-19 crisis. Preachers spoke a formulated prayer of conversion during the worship service instead of inviting responsive visitors to a personal meeting after the service. On April 19, 2020, Katharina Herla exclaimed in the service that “this is the best decision you can ever make!” She asked viewers to click on a link in the chat function if they had converted. At the time of this study, CKE’s website also featured an online video with a seven-minute gospel presentation and an invitation of conversion by vicar Treblin. Viewers who converted filled out a form online to indicate their decision and provide their contact information for follow-up.²⁶² In summary, worship services were the foremost opportunity to make commitments of salvation at CKE, especially since the church did not practice street evangelism or press for spiritual interactions with non-believers during outreach events.

Peter and Vanessa raised their hands to make a decision of conversion during their first attendance of a worship service at CKE. Katharina Herla led Vanessa in a prayer of conversion and personal reflection of repentance after the service:

262 “Entscheidung [Decision],” ConnectKirche Erfurt, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2xGCX8t>.

Kata asked me two or three questions, I think. That was also [the question]: “Hey, do you have any sins? Did you make any mistakes that we can give to God now?” It was like that. . . . I really thought critically about myself at that time. I struggled with my burdens. . . . It was so emotional at that moment when those questions came, and during the prayer, that I really started crying.

Lara was not ready to commit her life to Christ in the worship service but raised her hand during an invitation in the Discovery course directly after the service. Two leaders joined her in a separate room to pray with her. Lara remembered that “the three of us sat down together in a room and prayed this prayer of decision.” Maurice followed a prayer of conversion with a Christian friend shortly before joining ConnectKirche. Although he barely knew anything about the Christian faith at that point, he identified the prayer with his friend as a genuine conversion. He understood that there was no need for another decision despite CKE’s continual invitations: “In fact, I have often considered making a decision again, but I never did. I often feel like I have to do it. However, I knew that I had made my decision long ago, and consequently, I do not have to raise my hand again.”

Affirmed Point and Process

The leadership of CKE acknowledged a process before and after the point of conversion. Congruently, converts reported progressive developments in their commitment and understanding of the Christian faith.

Vicar Treblin shared a story about a young lady who had many questions about Christianity. A prolonged process of interaction was necessary before her conversion during a New Year’s party: “What is important in this moving toward the decision is to stay close to people, to answer their questions, because often it is simply a process that does not happen overnight.” The inclusion of pre-converts in the community and voluntary service at CKE facilitated the processes toward decision-making. Co-pastor Blum explained that “we have few hurdles to tell someone, ‘Oh, you can only participate if you are a Christian or baptized.’ That is truer for things that take place on stage . . . or to lead a group or a team.” Herla believed that once a decision of conversion occurs, a process of continual transformation begins by interacting with God and the Bible. In an email on April 29, 2020, he wrote that “the prayer of decision is a first step, almost like the first kiss when you meet a lady. After that, the relationship grows, and the process of life change begins. God often reveals things he wants to change gradually, like bad habits, as we get to know him better, spend time with him, and discover his will in the Bible.” Herla did not support the Pentecostal understanding of salvation in several distinct steps (rebirth, sanctification, and Spirit baptism) or a recurring

need for conversion to ensure forgiveness. Instead, he affirmed the theological position of complete salvation at the time of conversion:

It is a gift of grace, and Jesus died for all the guilt. We come out of the Pentecostal movement, and in the past, there was the three-step teaching, sometimes almost with four steps. You have to receive forgiveness over and over again. Otherwise, you lose your salvation. We would consider ourselves more Lutheran in this respect.

In the interview, Maurice explained that his understanding of Christ's substitutionary death continued to deepen even after he made his profession of faith: "Even now it is still a process, something I sometimes dwell on, that I understand that Jesus is the reason that I can belong to God, not because I believe in him, but only because Jesus took my guilt on himself." Similarly, Lara, who described herself as an independently minded personality, continued to struggle with God's control over her life. She confessed that "in every worship service, it is difficult for me to admit that I am not my own boss, that I cannot simply rely on myself. It is incredibly difficult for me." Vanessa fully committed to following Christ only after she was willing to leave her boyfriend, who was still an atheist. She was able to embrace God's forgiveness after the point of separation: "So, that [full commitment] only came with time. Especially after the separation from my ex-boyfriend, I was able to experience it completely differently. I said, 'Here you have my whole package with all my sins.'" During this transition, Herla and his wife extended practical support by letting Vanessa stay in their apartment.

Connected Conversion and Discipleship

CKE implemented a detailed follow-up strategy to guide converts from their point of conversion to continue in Christian discipleship. Converts affirmed their progression from conversion into various stages of transformation.

In the interview, pastor Herla elucidated that church leaders motivate new converts to submit their entire lives in obedience to Christ immediately after their conversion. Leaders encourage people to say,

"Jesus, I give you control over all areas of my life!" Then, we briefly explain what we mean by areas so that discipleship really happens. Family, finances, marriage, and so on. Then we also say: "Ask again concretely: 'Jesus, where is there perhaps a place where you want to be God, where you want to set the tone, and where God might make it rather difficult [for you] to trust Him?'"

Every convert received a welcome package with additional materials to assist them in their first steps of Christian discipleship. The church leaders who led converts in their prayer of conversion scheduled a follow-up meeting to

encourage them to read the Bible personally and join a Connect group. Kevin Herla explained that

they fill out a card and then have contact with those who prayed with them. They arrange to meet for coffee the next week and SHAPE [method of Bible reading] together. So, they read the Bible together, pray with each other, and they ask: “Hey, we have small groups, a church in a small format: Would you be interested in going there with me?”

Herla emphasized that converts should first attend the Connect group Experiment of Faith. This small group, he stated, addresses worldview issues before moving to fundamental beliefs: “The first small group they attend, if at all possible, is called Experiment of Faith, where we start with worldviews. We do not start with the four pillars to explain the gospel, but with worldviews: ‘Why do we believe what we believe?’” The pastor also believed that the value of belonging to a group is more important than formal membership to bind believers to a discipleship process. His wife’s research on the topic of Millennials yielded the same conclusion. Herla explained that “for Millennials, this membership is not important at all, and that is our major target group. Belonging is important to them.” Hence, Christian formation did not occur if converts failed to integrate into a small group. Herla recollected the example of a recent convert who did not join a Connect group and left the church. He surmised that “no experience of discipleship will take place if people do not join a group.”

The ritual of baptism was the final step from the initial point of conversion toward discipleship. CKE’s document on baptism and the church’s website depict this ritual as a personal profession of commitment to Christian discipleship and the local church. The website states: “If you became a Christian, baptism is the next step on your journey with Jesus. It is a public sign that you belong to him, that you are part of the church, and that you want to live a life that honors God.”²⁶³ Herla elaborated that baptism has a solidifying effect on converts in their commitment to discipleship and the church community. The same person who leads someone to Christ also performs their baptism, thereby strengthening the bond between convert and church. In the past, if new believers did not join a small group between their conversion and baptism, the transition toward discipleship failed:

The one who prayed the prayer of decision with a person also baptizes that person because then a baptismal godparenthood arises with that person automatically. We experienced that all those who were baptized in the church remain with us because

263 “Deine Kirche [Your church],” ConnectKirche Erfurt, accessed April 23, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3avMY5F>.

they were genuinely integrated into the whole process. We sometimes have a problem between this period from the first point [of decision] to the baptism. We notice that if it does not work with the group, people usually break away in the process.

The pastor summarized conversion as a dynamic process that begins with a decision and enters into discipleship through personal Bible reading, small group participation, and baptism:

Many things are dynamic and changing, but if you still try to draw the attempt of a model, as ConnectKirche, we would say that the prayer of decision is the starting signal of conversion. For us, this is not the conversion par excellence. If you set a final point, it would be baptism, and in between, there is the small group. So, the prayer of decision, Bible reading, small group, then, at some point, baptism.

All converts in this study gave an account of moving from their initial decision of conversion to Christian discipleship. Vanessa recalled how she received a welcome package on the day of her conversion. People from CKE followed up with her to talk about possible questions and invite her to a small group. At the time of the interview, she looked forward to her baptism as a public assertion of her Christian faith: “I publicly profess it on an even newer level. That means I am entering into this infinite covenant with God, and I am truly connected to Him forever.” Lara explained that her baptism as a four-year-old child in the EKD was insufficient since it was not her own decision. She chose baptism as an adult to affirm her commitment of conversion publicly: “I probably would not have needed it for my faith, but I wanted to send this signal to the outside world, that this is really my decision and *das bleibt auch so* [that remains the case]. I let go of the old and decided on something new for me.” Peter still hesitated to commit to an adult baptism but remembered how small group participation moved him to face personal limitations. He did not always “behave like a Christian” in the past. Finally, Maurice confirmed that a sense of belonging was more vital to him than formal membership: “I never had the feeling of being a member. It was more like being part of a family.”

Transformation

Kevin Herla perceived evangelism that leads to discipleship as the sole purpose of ConnectKirche: “We have one mission, which is to show people who Jesus is and to accompany them in discipleship!” Thus, the church developed a detailed plan to foster deep discipling of converts. The transformation of converts also took place as the church plant pursued Scripture formation, encouraged converts to take part in social action, and challenged converts by spiritual or Pentecostal applications.

Implemented Deep Discipleship

CKE implemented deep discipleship by inviting converts into a progressive program of spiritual growth. Converts pursued their spiritual development quickly and received substantial support through informal mentors and small groups.

The illustration Unser Herz (Our Heart) depicts a detailed, strategic plan to foster progressive transformation at ConnectKirche. The Discovery course curriculum displays the heart-shaped design with a process of spiritual development in four successive steps: salvation, integration, discipleship, and leadership (see Fig. 2). Herla elucidated that they applied the discipleship model of Four Cups by Chris Hodges, pastor of Church of the Highlands, and adapted it theologically for CKE.²⁶⁴

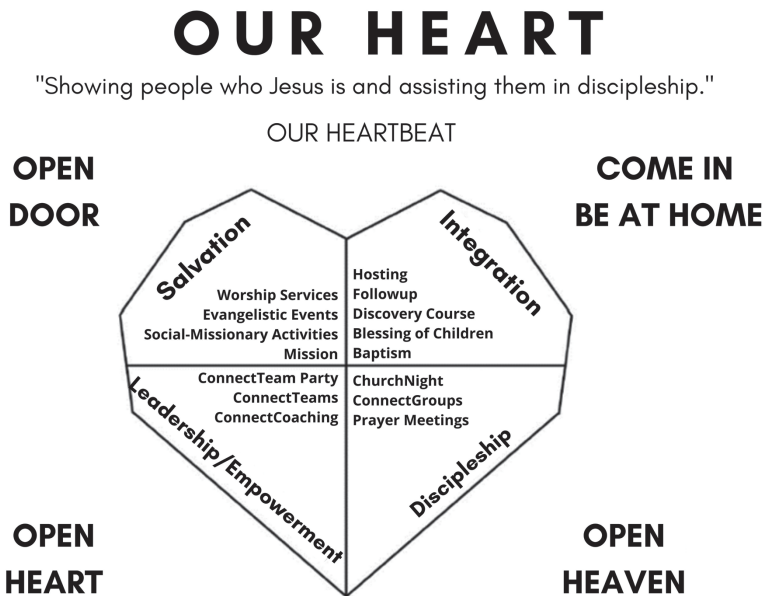


Fig. 2. Our Heart Strategic Discipleship Plan at CKE

²⁶⁴ Chris Hodges and Larry Stockstill, *Four Cups: God's Timeless Promises for a Life of Fulfillment* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2014).

The illustration shows that various programs facilitate each step of the discipleship path. Most importantly, according to Herla, genuine discipleship occurs only once converts join a Connect group. In the interview, he compared this progression to an indispensable, spiritual roadmap into a fellowship of believers similar to the Old Testament:

The next step after the decision [of conversion] and Bible reading is the small group. We notice that when people do not take this step, the support becomes very difficult. I think, compared to the Old Testament image, that a people group is saved; even in Christianity, one is saved into a people group. It starts with an individual decision, but it always still ends in a collective.

Correspondingly, small groups rather than worship services address topics of discipleship since worship services focus on attracting non-believers:

People can take very good steps of faith because small groups are thematically oriented and team-oriented, not only directed toward special interests [for non-believers]. The Sunday service does not offer that. . . . We say that if you only come to church on Sundays, it is the absolute worst church you can go to because you are going to starve spiritually.

Herla concluded that small group participation can personalize spiritual growth due to the interactive, relational bond between leaders and converts. A popular saying at CKE reiterates this value of small groups: “The small group is the better pastor than the preacher on Sunday.”

Volunteerism led converts from passive participation to active involvement in either evangelism or discipleship. Herla stated that volunteers “use their talent for everyday life with *Kirchenferne* [people distant to the church], or during the Sunday worship service so that *Kirchenferne* come to faith there, or as small group leaders to accompany Christians to take the next steps.” Participants of the Discovery course determined their area of involvement by filling out a personality and spiritual gifts test. The next step was to join a volunteer team called ConnectTeams, such as the KreativTeam (Creative Team) that served during worship services. Co-pastor Blum shared that volunteerism also solidifies the bond between converts and the local church: “At the moment that they are needed, not only being loved but being used, people often find a quicker connection and stay with it.” Converts took on leadership responsibilities promptly as another developmental step. Monthly leadership sessions offered ministry training and additional instructions in discipleship.

Simultaneously, Herla elucidated that ConnectKirche simplifies church programs to facilitate the discipleship progression:

The training of the small group leaders takes place during coaching. We have Connect Coaching once a month, where we train the leaders of groups to take steps of discipleship. The advantage for us is that there are very few appointments. Sometimes, I felt that church was so complicated and packed, so we wanted to keep it as simple as possible.

CKE also presented discipleship as a process in which individuals rather than church leaders have the final say in determining their spiritual development. The website declares that after conversion, each person “can decide on their own what this decision means for their life.”²⁶⁵ The Discovery course, for example, directs participants to find their value as individuals. Session three begins with the words that “this course exists so that you can discover your uniqueness and that which makes you special!”

In the interview, Vanessa recalled that her participation in the all-girls Connect group *Herzensfreundinnen* (Girlfriends of the Heart) taught her how to pray: “I had to pray in front of everyone for the first time, which was already a small obstacle to overcome. . . . If you never had anything to do with it, you do not know at all at the beginning: ‘How does prayer even work?’” Vanessa volunteered in the Creative Team on Sunday mornings and surmised that both small groups and volunteerism were crucial factors in her personal, spiritual development. The informal mentorship by Kevin and Katharina Herla and vicar Treblin assisted her during a time of personal hardship. Herla and his wife offered Vanessa room and board after she left her non-Christian boyfriend. She interpreted this as God’s provision to make a challenging decision: “[I] know that I am not alone. I have someone who loves me, I am cared for, and I can take every step with God. That is *mega gut* [awesome]. Kevin and Kata helped me enormously. Elisa also helped me a lot in many situations.” Lara reported how she started volunteering in various capacities shortly after taking the spiritual gifts test in the Discovery course: “I did almost everything. I had my own team, I led a group, and I was in a lot of different teams.” She also commented on the loving support of Katharina Herla as her informal mentor in discipleship: “I just have much trust in her. I know I can tell her everything. I can entrust everything to her. She prays for me. She does not condemn me, which is very important for me. She is also a great spiritual example for me.”

Pursued Scripture Formation

CKE pursued Scripture formation through personal Bible reading and biblical instruction in group settings. Sermons in worship services always addressed

265 “Über uns,” ConnectKirche Erfurt.

biblical topics but focused on reaching non-believers primarily. Converts shared how they learned to hear God's voice and apply the Bible to personal living.

In the sermon on April 25, 2020, Katharina Herla encouraged listeners to foster a personal relationship with Jesus: "What makes us more spiritual is not about how many preachers we watch but how much time I spend with Jesus personally." Correspondingly, Scripture formation at CKE focused on the personal application of biblical insights. CKE's website presents an annual Bible reading plan, daily Scripture passages, and a video by Kevin Herla promoting the Bible reading method called SHAPE.²⁶⁶ The webpage "About Us" clarifies that the Bible is God's authoritative Word for every aspect of life.²⁶⁷ Each visitor of a worship service also received a welcome package with an explanation of the SHAPE method. Instructions during personal follow-up, the Discovery course, and Connect groups reiterated the appeal to use SHAPE for personal Bible interaction. Kevin explained the acronym during the interview:

S stands for Scripture. They write out a verse that they read, which speaks to them in a special way. H stands for hearing. They listen. What does God want to tell me? . . . A stands for application. How do I apply this in my life? P stands for personal prayer requests, which they write down, and E stands for exalting, where they can thank God again for the new discovery in the text.

SHAPE benefitted new believers by preventing them from seeking insights through feelings and encouraging them to hear God's voice in the Bible. Herla conveyed that "in this way, they learn to hear God's voice from the Bible. And not just because we come from a Pentecostal background, not just from a feeling or some image or worship song, but really straight from the Scriptures."

Additionally, vicar Treblin pointed out that the Connect group Experiment of Faith offers initial instructions in fundamental Christian doctrines by addressing questions such as, "How does the Bible describe God? Who is Jesus? Who is God the Father? Who is the Holy Spirit? What are spiritual gifts?" Furthermore, converts who took on leadership responsibilities engaged in biblical formation during monthly coaching sessions. CKE used the leadership curriculum GrowthTrack for challenging leaders to implement transformational changes in all areas of life. The manual states that it "is intended to help leaders in the ConnectKirche to grow holistically in crucial areas of life so they can bear as much fruit as possible to the glory of God." Inspirational Bible verses in the

266 "Deine Kirche," ConnectKirche Erfurt.

267 "Über uns," ConnectKirche Erfurt.

curriculum guide leaders to set spiritual goals in such areas as generosity, relationships, and physical health.

Vanessa described how the small group Experiment of Faith assisted her in understanding basic Christian doctrines and practices. She learned to pray to each person of the Trinity: "I was told and learned from the ground up that the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and God is one and that I can talk to each one of them." The habit of reading the Bible was still challenging for Vanessa, but a Bible app helped her to interact with Scripture daily. She concluded that the Bible is God's Word, although she admitted she had never thought about this subject before the interview: "I would definitely say [the] Bible is God's Word. That is how it is always preached in the ConnectKirche. Of course, what is written in the Bible comes from God." As a result of biblical formation, Vanessa shared that her basic value system changed and her decision-making process became less impulsive: "I think, my values, my priorities in general or this way of looking at love. . . . God has changed me very positively. . . . He has changed me so that I pray about my decisions and do not decide on my own, which also means deciding more slowly." Maurice started to attend the Connect group called Burger-Book-Bar, which introduced participants to biblical topics in a casual restaurant setting. Prayer and Bible reading within a relational community helped Maurice to become acquainted with Christian practices: "It was quite a lot of fun to read the Bible with people and pray in a community there as well, rather than doing this by myself, which was challenging for me." The affirmation of the Bible's historical validity motivated Maurice to keep on reading the Bible: "What triggered me the most was to learn or to realize that it all really happened and that it was not just stories but that it was based on true events." Nevertheless, Maurice struggled to believe some Scriptural reports, such as the story of Noah and the arc. Finally, Peter came to understand the meaning of prayer at CKE and learned how to trust God for the worries of his life: "I am putting this into your hand, I am okay with it, whatever you decide is fine with me." Peter's character transformed, and he became more amiable in his interactions with other people: "I deal with people very differently. They also said: Hey, you have become much more approachable than in the past."

Embraced Social Action

CKE offered activities of practical aid in Erfurt yet without a detailed plan for a profound social transformation. All converts in this study participated in these activities of social action through ConnectKirche.

CKE's webpage "About Us" publicizes the church plant's values, including their support of the city's general welfare. The statement reveals the church's perception of transmission as an integral consequence of social action: "We make a cultural and social contribution in our environment and increase *das Gute* [the general good]. That is a lived mission. We create access to God and the Bible." In the interview, Herla described their corporate practice of social action through small groups and churchwide events, such as picking up trash in public areas:

We call it Stadtlicht-Aktion [Citylight-Campaign], where we do something good for the city, and now, every small group puts on their own Stadtlicht-Aktion once every six months. We do this as a whole church together only once every six months. For that purpose, we cancel the regular worship service and, for example, clean up the Nordstrand [Northbeach, a lake in Erfurt] as a whole church body.

Vicar Treblin clarified that although direct evangelism does not occur, social action events communicate the importance of practical, Christian love: "These actions are incredibly important because they convey and exemplify this value of Christian love for your neighbor . . . where we do not talk about the faith directly, but where we live faith practically." Co-pastor Blum hoped that the Citylight-Campaigns would remind people of where to find spiritual help in times of personal hardship: "The more people see our logo or see what we do, the more they will remember us when they go through a crisis."

Maurice, Lara, and Vanessa talked about their regular participation in social action once they started to attend CKE. They enjoyed taking part in activities for the general welfare of other people. Maurice distributed free cookies in a socially disadvantaged neighborhood and interpreted this as a means to connect people with God. He explained that they brought cookies to "a poor part of Erfurt, where people are not doing so well, and there are many old people. They just started to make people happy, rang every doorbell, and handed them to people. . . . Once again, it showed me that they want to bring God closer to people." Lara participated in two activities of social engagement through CKE, cleaning up a train areal and the lakeshore called Northbeach. She felt rewarded by a sense of altruistic benevolence toward the community: "You just have a good feeling afterward. You did something for the city, you did something for the community, and you showed this genuine love for your neighbor. We, as a church, love the city and also want to do something for the city." Finally, Vanessa explained that picking up trash during the Citylight-Campaign opened up opportunities to initiate spiritual conversations with her friends: "We picked up trash. Those activities are so cool, I would say. You post them, for example, and people ask: 'Hey, what are you doing here anyway?' Then you can always talk more about it."

Changed by Spiritual or Pentecostal Application

CKE encouraged personal changes in converts by applying spiritual practices while limiting Pentecostal experiences to controlled settings. Connect Kirche Erfurt belonged to the BFP denomination and adhered to a Pentecostal statement of faith. Kevin Herla elucidated that the church addresses doctrines such as the Spirit baptism and the subsequent practice of glossolalia at various stages in the convert's path of discipleship. In an email to the author on April 29, 2020, he wrote that "we teach about the baptism of the Spirit, and we pray for the filling of the Holy Spirit during the prayer of decision. The reception of speaking in tongues often becomes a topic in the process of a relationship or, at the latest, during the baptismal instruction." The spiritual gifts test in the Discovery course for newcomers lists healings, miracles, prophecies, and speaking in tongues as contemporary gifts for the church. According to CKE's annual report, five physical healings and one Spirit baptism occurred in 2018.

However, Pentecostal practices remained subdued at CKE for the sake of translating the gospel to a non-Christian audience. Co-pastor Blum explained that people with prophetic insights are not allowed to speak publicly during the worship service. The church, according to Blum, also does not permit glossolalia during regular services but usually retains this practice for small group settings. Moreover, Herla stressed in the interview that he opposes the health and wealth gospel and its effect on the transformation of new believers.

Nonetheless, converts reported personal changes by applying spiritual or Pentecostal practices that solidified and personalized their faith. Vanessa explained that she learned how to hear God's voice through signs, although CKE prioritized hearing God through biblical instruction. She not only became less impulsive and slowed down her decision-making process but also asked God to give her signs for personal direction: "I start praying to God and ask him: 'Hey, please just send me some kind of sign! How am I supposed to do it?' In fact, I was allowed to experience that he did it, and this has been such an absolute highlight for my faith because I always had problems, I would say, to hear God's voice." At first, the phenomenon of glossolalia at CKE bewildered Maurice and reminded him of demon possessions. Once he started to pray in a non-comprehensible language himself, he believed that speaking in tongues helps him mature spiritually. In the interview, he mentioned that "in fact, I received it [speaking in tongues] myself, which has strengthened my faith quite a bit. I have to say, it is cool, and if you can do it, it might not be as strange as you think initially." Lara did not speak in tongues at the time of this study and felt no pressure to speed up the process to receive this spiritual gift. Instead, a conspicuous answer

to prayer affirmed her faith. Lara sensed an ongoing tension in her relationship with her partner that had lasted for several years and started asking for God's intervention: "I prayed for three nights in a row . . . and said, 'Jesus, I need your help now! You have to help me somehow! I have to get clarity now!'" After three days and unaware of the prayer, her partner called her at work to resolve the longstanding issue. Lara's faith solidified because she believed God answered her prayer supernaturally.

Retransmission

ConnectKirche Erfurt mobilized converts vigorously in the retransmission of their faith by communicating the value of evangelism, training in retransmission, and providing opportunities for sharing the Christian faith. Converts responded to the church's emphasis on retransmission by habitually speaking about their Christian beliefs and practices within their social network. Involvement in foreign missions was in its infancy at the time of this study.

Communicating the Value of Retransmission

CKE communicated the value of retransmission to converts unceasingly. New believers responded by quickly developing a desire to talk about their new faith.

On the day of conversion, church leaders encouraged converts to call their friends and family members immediately and tell them about their decision. Leaders asked converts: "[Do you] know anyone in your circle of friends or your family who would be happy about this decision?" Reflecting on this practice, Herla commented that "it is so funny, even here in Thuringia, there is always someone, maybe a grandmother somewhere, who went to church at one point in time." Appeals for retransmission also took place during prayer meetings, small group sessions, and training sessions. On April 19, co-pastor Blum instilled the value of retransmission in a prayer meeting by asking participants to pray for evangelism "so that we can give away Bibles and pray prayers of decision." Herla surmised that evangelism must occur seven days a week. He motivated converts for daily outreach by impressing on them the idea that "you can count on Sundays, and that your friends will get a chance to become Christians. But on the other six days of the week, if you will learn it [evangelism], then it happens through you."

All converts in this study adopted the value and took part in retransmission. Vanessa became convinced that people in secular Erfurt would benefit from subtle reminders about the Christian faith. She declared that Christianity

needs to be brought “back into the memory of people subconsciously.” Maurice received motivation for outreach by seeing himself as a participant in spreading the gospel with Christians from all other denominations: “I also work so that people come to know God, to build God’s kingdom. In this respect, I am not much different from the others.” Nevertheless, street evangelism and forcing personal conversations about Christianity with strangers seemed offensive to Maurice: “I would view it as quite creepy if someone suddenly came up and wanted to talk to me about Jesus. So, I have not participated in things like this, and I could hardly be motivated to take part in it.” Like the other converts, Peter internalized the value of personal outreach and started to share his new convictions with co-workers. Conversations about Christian, traditional values ensued: “‘Did you know that, or did you get that out of this big book again?’ I tell them, ‘Yes, out of the big book! That is just the way it is, and that has become my point of view.’ [They respond:] ‘Ah yes, that is what my grandma used to say. Probably, there is some truth to that!’”

Training in Retransmission

CKE trained converts in retransmission by instructing them to share the gospel and invite friends to church. Converts learned how to retransmit their faith despite difficulties in personal evangelism.

Instructions in evangelism for new believers started at the point of conversion. After the worship services, leaders challenged new converts to speak about their decision right after praying their prayer of conversion. This practice prepared them to continue sharing their faith in everyday life. Herla thought that “it is so fun to see how courageous they [the converts] become. Usually, they tell the third person: ‘I just became a Christian! It is the best thing that could happen in my life,’ or something similar. This prepares them a bit for the day-to-day life in the upcoming week.” CKE also invited any church attendee to watch prayers of conversion for training purposes. Treblin stated that “this is how we train people, by simply letting them be there, by watching this [prayer of conversion] and maybe take over a part themselves next time.” Besides, small group leaders received theoretical training on how to share the gospel message and their own story of conversion. Herla elaborated that the same leaders proceed to instruct all members of their small groups in personal evangelism: “‘How do I tell my story with God? How do I lead someone to Jesus?’ They lead people to Jesus on Sundays or watch. The next step is that they train people in the small groups to do the same, so a lot [of evangelism] happens in day-to-day life.”

New believers had a formal opportunity to practice professing their faith publicly at their baptism. The baptismal training course outlines the format of a personal testimony, entailing an explanation of their conversion and subsequent transformation. Vicar Treblin emphasized the benefit of this training in retransmission since “this is another first step for people to realize they can tell their story with God to other people.” Nevertheless, Herla surmised that personal evangelism, the verbal sharing of the gospel, did not frequently occur yet: “It [personal evangelism] has not happened that often in everyday life, but there are beginnings of it.”

All converts learned how to take part in retransmission without mentioning specific instances of personal evangelism. Lara’s extroverted personality helped her to profess her Christian activities freely through social media and at work: “I told everyone, my colleagues, and my friends. I also post this regularly on Facebook or WhatsApp because I believe it simply belongs to me, it is a part of me, and I will not *hinter dem Berg stehen* [hide behind a mountain].” At the same time, she believed that positive changes in her personal life might provide a better witness than her verbal testimony. Lara elaborated that “it has a strong, symbolic effect and force of attraction for people when they see that my life is only developing for the better. I think, sometimes, it is wrong to talk too much but to speak more through action.” Vanessa began to study the Bible with one of her colleagues, who had many questions about Christianity. Maurice enjoyed witnessing through CKE’s outreach campaigns. At one of the social action events during the summer, he distributed free water bottles with a web link to a gospel explanation. Maurice commented, though, that his attempts in personal evangelism had little success. Few non-Christian friends remained in his social network. Moreover, his family was not receptive to the gospel: “The other friends I have met are mostly from the church. That is why there were not so many opportunities to talk about my faith, except with my family. I was able to talk about it a few times, but I do not get the impression it gets through to them.”

Provided Opportunities for Retransmission

CKE worked diligently to provide opportunities for retransmission through church events. The church also started to offer participation in mission trips. Converts confirmed they utilized church activities to retransmit their faith.

CKE established two primary approaches to outreach. According to Herla, the church designs worship services to be visitor-friendly, thus ensuring that converts can invite non-Christians without hesitation. He explained that a “*Komm-und-Seh Charakter* [come-and-see feature] happens through the worship service. It

is a set law, and every volunteer knows this: ‘If there is anything you are embarrassed about on that Sunday that would cause you not to invite your friends on the next Sunday, let me know! I am going to change it.’” The pastor declared that, on average, thirteen non-believers attend the worship service each week. Most visitors come to CKE because of a personal invitation rather than online advertisement. The observation of a prayer meeting on April 19, 2020, disclosed how co-pastor Blum urged participants to invite non-Christians even shortly before the start of the online worship service. Blum exclaimed: “We still have half an hour! Everyone has time. Everyone is at home.”

The second approach to retransmission through small group events and personal evangelism featured a *Geht-Hin Charakter* (go-to characteristic). Herla elucidated that this “second aspect is to go, which happens through events organized by small groups, but also through your personal life.” He inferred that personal evangelism rarely had occurred at the time of this study. Additionally, the church scheduled mission trips within and outside of Germany. The pastor believed that each believer should go on at least one mission trip, just like Muslims who go on a pilgrimage. The foremost benefit is to stir an evangelistic passion in participants: “Just as every good Muslim should go to Mecca, we recommend . . . to everyone that they should take part in a missionary trip at least once because it benefits missions. Above all, it creates a missionary heart in you. People come back very differently.” In 2020, several converts planned to join an American-led mission trip to assist a church plant in Dortmund, Germany. A foreign missions trip to Ethiopia was most likely not going to take place because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Converts utilized church events freely for outreach while participating in mission trips was not possible yet at the time of this study. Vanessa posted her church activities on social media and regularly invited friends to join her for the worship service: “If someone asks me, ‘Hey, what are you doing on the weekend?’ I talk about the church. I say, ‘I attend a worship service [on] Sunday. If you feel like it, you can also come along or [watch it] on a live stream right now.’” Maurice took part in CKE outreach events for sharing his faith. For example, he distributed free popcorn and drinks during a Stadtfest (City Festival). He commented on how quickly people entered into conversations as they came to appreciate the Christian volunteers:

Many people asked: “What is the ConnectKirche, and what do they do?” Some of them responded to the invitations and made a decision. . . . This shows that such activities for non-Christian can make a big difference if you meet people and show them that you are just a human being and are not weird just because you are a Christian.

Maurice had not gone on a mission trip at the time of this study but thought he would benefit from participating in missions: “I could imagine doing that [a mission trip] at some point. I think it is an experience that would be rewarding for me.” Lara hosted a Connect group and organized events so group members could form friendships with non-Christians. She refrained from putting pressure on her friends to attend CKE but confidently invited them to church services on social media. The contemporary worship style was appealing to her contacts: “I post the invitation on my WhatsApp and think when the time is right, and they make the decision to come and see it, then it is going to work. So, I am not so active in approaching people. However, quite often, people come to me and tell me: ‘Hey, incredible, that is a totally modern church! It is so young and cool!’” Pursuing foreign missions as a white person in Africa only seemed acceptable if missionary endeavors coincided with social aid. At some point, Lara could see herself taking part in a relief project: “If you evangelize with the idea of helping to improve people’s lives sustainably, then I see absolutely nothing wrong with it. I can also imagine in the future, . . . that I might go to Africa with my partner and support aid projects.”

Summary of Diffusional Themes

The within-case study of CKE disclosed distinct patterns in gospel diffusion. Converts’ testimonies confirmed or expanded insights from other data sources.

Transmission

CKE continually encouraged individual transmission while utilizing worship services, home groups, and outreach events as platforms for corporate transmission. Sizeable advertisement campaigns attracted people to the worship services. Church leaders engaged pre-converts with the biblical message consistently on Sunday mornings and in small group settings. Furthermore, converts reported spiritual experiences or unusual circumstances that moved them toward Christian conversion.

Translation

CKE translated the Christian faith carefully to a predominantly secular audience in Erfurt. The church contextualized its programs to create a low threshold of interaction with the Christian message. Congruently, the pastoral staff translated their communication to ensure that secular non-believers comprehended Christian terminology. Besides, converts reported how the community dynamics

of love and acceptance drew them into the congregation. Apprehensions against Pentecostal applications quickly faded once converts attended the church.

Turnaround

CKE presented conversion intelligibly with the need for remorse and faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Church leaders provided opportunities for decision-making continually, while pre-formulated prayers of conversion occurred in personal interactions after the service. Converts confirmed a basic understanding of conversion at their point of decision. Herla perceived conversion as a point and process, which converts confirmed in their experience. A detailed strategy connected conversion and discipleship.

Transformation

The church implemented deep discipleship by inviting converts into a progressive program of spiritual development, primarily through small group participation. Informal mentors supported the discipleship process. Scripture formation occurred through personal Bible reading, teaching in small groups, and leadership training. Converts adopted new spiritual practices, values, and behaviors while Pentecostal spirituality stayed within a controlled setting. CKE embraced the value of social action and engaged church attendees in regular activities to seek the social welfare of Erfurt.

Retransmission

CKE mobilized converts vigorously for retransmission by communicating the value of retransmission starting at the point of conversion. Evangelism training occurred at various stages of church involvement. The church also provided opportunities for retransmission through worship services, small groups, and outreach events. Converts talked about their faith within their social context but were not involved in mission activities at the time of this study. Personal evangelism was not common yet as well.

Chapter 6 Cross-case Analysis

The multi-case study revealed distinct patterns in the diffusion of the gospel that led to transformational conversions. The cross-case analysis compares and contrasts the data across individual cases to discover common and divergent patterns while offering an explanation for the primary research question of this study: What are the contributing factors to conversion in the diffusion of the Christian message through evangelical church plants in Germany?²⁶⁸ The coding process resulted in the description of nineteen expanded codes or diffusional sub-themes. Continual data analysis and constant comparison of evolving patterns helped categorize ten final codes and identify five distinct diffusional patterns: multi-faceted transmission, caring translation, clear turnaround, deep transformation, and continual retransmission.²⁶⁹ The following chapter summarizes the research findings by delineating the diffusional patterns and interacting with pertinent academic literature to generate the most fitting explanations for the phenomenon of conversion across church plants.²⁷⁰ Several expanded codes were not homogenous patterns or did not portray a clear cause-and-effect relationship. Nevertheless, they represent unique diffusional sub-themes that influenced the transformation of converts.²⁷¹

268 Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 194–99.

269 John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2018), 189–91. Appendix 5 provides an overview of the initial, expanded, and final codes and how the coding procedure led to identifying five diffusional patterns.

270 Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 282. This chapter interacts with relevant literature to interpret the research findings, whereas the case study reports in Chapters 3–5 focus on providing rich descriptions of each case.

271 An asterisk (*) signifies each of the three non-congruent, expanded codes, which are Moved by Spiritual Experiences, (Not) Affected by Pentecostal Translation, and Changed by Spiritual/Pentecostal Application.

Multi-Faceted Transmission: Engaged with the Multi-Faceted Transmission of the Christian Message

All three church plants engaged in multi-faceted transmission to disseminate the Christian message widely within their social context. Church leaders inspired individuals to transmit their faith and committed to versatile, corporate programs of transmission. The spreading of the message of salvation was a priority for each church plant. Converts in this study heard and responded to the Christian message due to these efforts of transmission. Moreover, new believers reported spiritual experiences or unusual circumstances that contributed to their initial receptivity to transmission without necessarily a direct link to church activities. This section addresses the diffusional pattern of transmission from the perspective of converts as recipients of the gospel, whereas the section Continual Retransmission delineates how converts became active as new agents of transmission.

Versatile Propagation

Each church encouraged its audiences unceasingly in the individual transmission of their faith. Individual and corporate transmission complemented each other for a versatile propagation of the Christian message. Observations and interviews across church plants revealed that the missionary passion of church leaders was an underlying factor for initiating the concerted transmission efforts. Pastor Lupemba stands representative for the other pastors when he shared that “in every get-together, in every meeting, in everything we do,” their church urges believers to take part in missions. Leaders, according to Paas, can create their own reality against the pessimistic outlook of social theory and expect high conversion growth.²⁷² Congruently, pastors in the case studies voiced remarkable enthusiasm in their prospect of initiating conversions. Müller, for example, solicited prayer support so that a revival would occur and “thousands come to faith” in Grünwald.²⁷³ Although this multi-case study does not attempt to prove the causes of quantitative conversion growth, it was evident that an extraordinary

272 Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 144–45, 174–78.

273 “Steffen & Elizabeth Mueller - Munich,” Catalina Foothills Church, accessed March 6, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3awQwF3>.

zeal for evangelism motivated church planters to promote individual and corporate transmission.

Encouraged Individual Transmission

A common pattern across case study churches was the continual and passionate encouragement by church leaders for individuals to transmit the Christian faith. Correspondingly, personal friendships with church members played a significant role in introducing converts to the church and the Christian faith. Lupemba at Hope Center in Berlin (HCB) emphasized that “each of us has a clear mandate to share the faith and make disciples.” Pastor Müller at Gospel Church Munich (GCM) cast a vision for church members to reach out to their friends evangelistically at every possible opportunity. For example, in the service on March 22, 2000, he stirred up worship attendees to view themselves as “witnesses of his resurrection.” At ConnectKirche Erfurt (CKE), Kevin Herla explained that he trained core group members how to share their faith from the outset of their church planting ministry: “Each meeting began with everyone telling their story with God in two minutes.”

Several converts in this study confirmed that church members either involved them in spiritual conversations or asked them to attend church functions. Vanessa explained how a friend invited her to Sunday services ceaselessly before her first visit to ConnectKirche. According to co-pastor Blum, personal invitations to worship services accounted for 80 to 90 percent of visitors to CKE. Andreas reported that his interaction with a member of GCM “was extremely important in my process of finding faith.” However, church members rarely practiced personal evangelism, the verbal sharing of the gospel message, with the converts in this study. The section *Trained in Retransmission* depicts how converts had similar difficulties in their own practice of personal evangelism. One of the exceptions was Anna’s boyfriend at HCB, who studied the Bible with her apologetically before she agreed to attend church.

The Greifswald study of converts in the EKD highlights the significance of individuals initiating matters of faith with people from a secular background. A personal relationship was the only way for these converts to begin their interaction with matters of faith since they had no previous contact with Christians.²⁷⁴

274 Johannes Zimmermann et al., “Zehn Thesen zur Konversion [Ten theses about conversion],” in *Wie finden Erwachsene zum Glauben? Einführung und Ergebnisse der Greifswalder Studie*, ed. Johannes Zimmermann and Anne-Konstanze Schröder, 2nd rev.exp. ed., *Beiträge zu Evangelisation und Gemeindeentwicklung Praxis* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2011), 118–21.

The recent study of two German churches by Bartholomä confirms that mobilizing individuals for outreach is crucial for conversion growth. Bartholomä surmises that non-believers are only willing to engage with the Christian faith if “they had a natural and authentic relationship with Christians from the particular church” previously.²⁷⁵ Thus, the church plants succeeded in encouraging individuals to connect with converts relationally or invite them to church activities, while gospel proclamation primarily occurred through corporate transmission.

Committed to Corporate Transmission

All three church plants employed a variety of corporate programs for the sake of transmission, while worship services were the main entry point for converts to hear the gospel message. Interviews and observations disclosed the high value churches placed on worship services as the primary venue for corporate transmission. Müller at GCM believed that Sunday services play the most crucial role in facilitating conversions. He stated that “most people come to know Christ through sermons in churches.” CKE organized its services with the primary goal of transmitting the gospel to non-Christians, and HCB streamed its services online for an even larger audience. The reports of converts confirmed that worship services were the primary venue for them to hear the gospel.

Furthermore, each church organized a variety of corporate events as opportunities for transmitting the Christian message to non-believers, ranging from musical performances with Broadway musicians (GCM), a street evangelism campaign called Revival Week (HCB), or Connect groups that organized unique gatherings to interact with non-Christians (CKE). Gospel Church Munich and ConnectKirche Erfurt promoted their events through large-scale advertisement campaigns, leading converts like Silke at GCM and Maurice at CKE to attend church services initially. In agreement with Ott’s assessment of effective church planting, church planters used a broad range of corporate programs to “cast the net widely” for transmitting the gospel but did not make the mistake to pursue outreach without individual transmission.²⁷⁶ Personal invitations were the

275 Philipp Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission: Perspektiven für den freikirchlichen Gemeindebau im nachchristlichen Kontext* [Free Church with a mission: Perspectives of church planting for Free Churches in a post-Christian context] (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019), 527.

276 Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 215, 212–17, 223, Kindle.

critical component to attract non-believers to church functions. Thus, corporate transmission relied on and supplemented individual transmission.

Hope Center was the only church plant that pursued frequent street evangelism campaigns to communicate the gospel corporately, although none of the participants in this study converted due to this outreach method. Währisch-Oblau states that most migrant churches retain street evangelism as a primary form of outreach despite its questionable effectiveness.²⁷⁷ In comparison to HCB, CKE quickly abandoned door-to-door evangelism due to its negative reception by local residence, and GCM never practiced it. Nonetheless, each church planter embraced Walls's assumption that basic evangelism, the sharing of the gospel with the expectation of conversions, is needful to spread the Christian faith in a secular culture.²⁷⁸

Biblical Dissemination

Each church plant disseminated biblical content consistently in order to motivate non-believers to contemplate Christian salvation. Churches utilized corporate programs, especially worship services, to transmit the Christian message verbally as their "central process of missionary work" in fulfilling the New Testament mandate of making disciples.²⁷⁹ Pastor Lupemba preached the longest sermons

277 Claudia Währisch-Oblau, *The Missionary Self-Perception of Pentecostal/Charismatic Church Leaders from the Global South in Europe: Bringing Back the Gospel*, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies* 2 (Boston, MA: Brill, 2009), 229–31.

278 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 198–99.

279 Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1480, 1548–49. Schnabel elucidates that the main missionary tactic of the early church was the verbal proclamation of the gospel. The apostles were convinced that "faith comes from preaching, from the message about Jesus Christ proclaimed to audiences." This transmission strategy entailed preaching the "word of God," more broadly speaking, with a clear goal of conversion, transformation, and church planting. The written Scriptures were the "eminent authority" along with the apostles' preaching. Similarly, transmitting the Christian message by church plants focused on the gospel message and comprised the preaching of wider biblical content to engender transformative conversion. Even so, church plants did not sideline the central gospel message of salvation, based on the cross and resurrection of Christ, with a broader definition of the gospel as a meta-narrative of the entire Bible. Carl Joseph Bradford, "'Schooling' the Gospel: An Investigation of British and German Schools of Kerygmatic Interpretation in the Twentieth and Twenty First Centuries" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 157–59.

lasting up to ninety minutes in total, while Steffen Müller at GCM offered the most careful interpretations of biblical texts in his expository preaching style. In contrast, pastors at CKE held the shortest sermons but were most diligent in providing specific steps of personal Bible interaction in their introductory Bible courses. Intensive Bible studies at GCM, instructional meetings for visitors at CKE, and outreach events, such as the dance competition at HCB, served as supplemental communication platforms for the gospel. Also, each church plant stimulated personal interaction with the written Word of God. All churches, for example, offered free Bibles in contemporary translations to church visitors. Walls propounds that historically, personal Bible reading was a key component to the “Christian penetration of Western culture” with its increasingly individualistic orientation.²⁸⁰

In contrast to emergent church models that seek innovative approaches to engage the secular European culture, biblical dissemination prevailed as a core component for transmitting the Christian message in all church plants.²⁸¹ Converts reported how the hearing and reading of God’s Word moved them toward conversion. Anna Cruz remembered that sermons at Hope Center were “the first time I came into contact with the Word, the spoken Word.” Several converts spoke about the impact of individual Bible reading before their conversion. Andreas at GCM shared how his comprehension of the biblical message increased, starting with personal conversations and reading the Bible before attending a men’s Bible study and hearing sermons in the worship services. He realized that the Scriptures are meaningful and intelligible, concluding that the Bible “touches me, and it even makes sense!” Evidently, the theological conservatism of each evangelical church plant, expressed by an emphasis on biblical

280 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 40–41.

281 Blayne Cameron Waltrip, “Being Church in Contemporary Western Europe: Eight Cases of French-Speaking and German-Speaking Fresh Expression of Christian Communities” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Intercultural Studies, 2011), 7–8, 257–59. Waltrip studied eight emerging, missional churches, which he defines as contemporary churches, in contrast to traditional churches influenced by modernity and Christendom. Waltrip concludes that the churches in his study were deficient in biblical proclamation and evangelistic zeal. Michael Herbst points out that sermons become optional in emerging churches for the sake of relational processes and spontaneity. Michael Herbst, *Wachsende Kirche: Wie Gemeinde den Weg zu Postmodernen Menschen finden kann* [Growing church: How churches find their way to postmodern people], 2nd ed., Kirche Lebt - Glaube Wächst (Giessen: Brunnen, 2010), 76.

dissemination, did not hinder the evangelization of converts with a secular background in this study.²⁸²

Moved by Spiritual Experiences*

Converts across all three church plants reported spiritual or psychological experiences and unusual circumstances that contributed to their resolve in pursuing the Christian faith. HCB implemented a prayer strategy with the hope to induce spiritual openness in specific geographic areas.²⁸³ The church also sought to produce supernatural or emotional occurrences during worship services. Worship segments were lengthy, repetitive, and designed with the expectation of spiritual manifestations. Andrea interpreted a chance encounter with a former boyfriend as an intervention by God to attend church. She cried continuously during her visit to HCB and thought God spoke to her directly: “It felt as if God stood before me and said, ‘I love you!’” The sociologist Henry Gooren identifies a close connection between the specific religious organization and the type of spiritual experiences of converts. Pentecostal conversions, for example, often entail hearing God’s voice or experiences of intense joy and crying.²⁸⁴

In contrast to HCB, GCM and CKE did not pursue a particular strategy to prompt spiritual or supernatural experiences. Müller at the non-charismatic church GCM affirmed the possibility of supernatural intervention but did not

282 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 526–27. Bartholomä describes similar findings. The Swiss study *Phänomen Freikirchen* argues that evangelical churches in Switzerland compete in a secular culture successfully by preserving conservative boundaries, such as a traditional view of family, and by opening up to a self-centered culture through such competitive products as friendships and a social network. Consequently, biblical conservatism helped rather than hindered the diffusion of the Christian message through evangelical churches. Jörg Stolz et al., “Das Phänomen Freikirchen in der ‘Ich-Gesellschaft’” [The phenomenon of free churches in the “Me-Society”]. in *Phänomen Freikirchen: Analysen eines wettbewerbsstarken Milieus*, ed. Philippe Bornet et al., vol. 5, Culturel (Zürich: Pano, 2014), 352–54.

283 Währisch-Oblau, *Missionary Self-Perception*, 271–92. Währisch-Oblau discusses geographic prayer strategies of West African migrant churches in Germany and indicates the interrelatedness with African cosmology and Pentecostal theology. Hesselgrave warns of instrumentalizing prayer as a tool in strategic prayer encounters rather than perceiving it as relational link to God. David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 15 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*, ed. Keith E. Eitel, 2nd exp. and upd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018), 174–75.

284 Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 139–40.

seek to generate such phenomena. Pastor Herla at CKE preferred a rational approach to communicate with God despite his Pentecostal convictions. For instance, a welcome package for visitors contained instructions on reading the Bible and applying it personally. Herla explained that “in this way, they learn to hear God’s voice from the Bible, and not just because we come from a Pentecostal background, not just from a feeling or some image or worship song, but straight from the Scripture.”

Nevertheless, spiritual or supernatural experiences moved converts closer toward conversion at GCM and CKE, similar to converts at HCB. Silke, an optometrist with a secular background, shared that attending worship services at GCM gave her the impression of a spiritual connection with God. She described this as *das Andocken an die Schöpferkraft* (the connection to the power of the creator). Lara at CKE believed that God predestined a canceled business trip so she could convert after a worship service: “I should not have been there on that day. . . . So, I think it was predestined for me.” Gooren expresses his surprise about the high frequency of unforeseen circumstances or spiritual experiences in the conversion process and categorizes them as Contingency Factors.²⁸⁵ Evangelical scholar Scott Moreau points out that a sizable percentage of evangelical Christians in the United States report personal encounters with God. He argues for the authenticity of spiritual experiences in Christianity, comparing them to biblical data such as Jesus’ miracles. According to Moreau, western Christians with a secular worldview “have often lost the intellectual and spiritual resources to grasp what it means to encounter things beyond the natural world personally.”²⁸⁶ Berkhof already drew attention to the fact that psychological studies fall short in explaining the mystical aspect of conversion.²⁸⁷ Hence, the testimonies of converts in this study affirm the belief in God’s activity to guide individuals to salvation in Christ and display the spiritual or mysterious component of planting churches.²⁸⁸ Notwithstanding the challenge of verifying subjective phenomena as genuine acts of God or dismissing them as mere psychological experiences, converts indicated that spiritual experiences moved them toward conversion.

285 Gooren, *Religious Conversion*, 139–41.

286 A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith: A Holistic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 182, 182–85, 189–92.

287 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 489.

288 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 8–10; Paas, *Church Planting*, 204.

Caring Translation: Related through Careful Translation in a Loving Community

Church plants in this multi-case study contextualized their programs and communication within the setting of a loving church community. Interviews and observations revealed that churches succeeded in relating the Christian message to the everyday experience of converts. The dynamics of loving relationships drew them into the community and closer toward conversion. Pentecostal translation at ConnectKirche Erfurt and Hope Center in Berlin did not deter converts from moving toward conversion.

Careful Translation

All church plants exhibited diligence in translating both their programs and communication for their specific cultural contexts. Churches attracted converts by contextualizing the format of worship services, evangelistic events, and other church programs. The translation of communication, especially regarding sermons during worship services, enabled secular audiences to relate to the content of the Christian message. Careful translation only became possible because of a fundamental commitment to contextualization by church planting leaders. Müller and Herla, both native Germans, overcame their potential limitations in contextualizing the Christian message to a secular audience as conservative evangelical Christians. Lupemba, a second-generation Ghanaian migrant, displayed rigorous translation efforts similar to migrant pastors who successfully incorporated native Germans into their churches. His personal dedication to translation and the mentoring relationship with a German pastor aided contextualization at HCB.²⁸⁹ The church planters' familiarity with the social background of their audiences was also conducive to careful translation. Kevin Herla grew up in an atheistic family, pastor Lupemba spent his childhood in social hardship in Berlin, and Müller served as a pastor in the affluent PCA denomination before moving to the wealthy Grünwald community. Church planters at GCM and CKE augmented their prior knowledge of the social context by analyzing the demographic data of their target area.²⁹⁰

289 Stephen D. Dye, "Mission in the Diaspora: Multicultural Churches in Urban Germany Initiated by Church Planters from the Global South" (PhD diss., Biola University, 2017), 210–20.

290 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 191–95. CKE conducted extensive, informal surveys. On page 195, Ott and Wilson explain that "the data from such informal surveys cannot be broadly generalized to statistically describe a population, but it

Furthermore, careful translation took place because pastors at CKE and HCB purposefully included new converts in contextualization. From the outset of planting CKE, Herla even asked non-believers to provide insights for translation. Once converts or non-believers volunteered in church programs, leaders received feedback on adjusting their programs and communication for a non-Christian audience. Cross-fertilization between the sender and receiver of the Christian message enhanced translation efforts across the cultural divide between evangelical churches and secular culture.²⁹¹

Attracted by Translated Programs

Each church plant translated its programs carefully and attracted people from their specific target audience to hear the Christian message. Worship services were the primary entry point for converts to join the Christian community. HCB choreographed their emotionally charged services for a young, multi-cultural constituency. Observations attested to the appeal of late-modern forms of worship as emotional and subjective experiences for a young generation.²⁹² Aspiring to a high level of quality for Sunday services was also important to Lupemba and the other church planters, matching “the expectation of high quality and professionalism” of their urban audiences.²⁹³ GCM chose a structured, rational approach to Sunday services that was more appealing than an overly emotional worship format to the affluent and well-educated community of Grünwald. Andreas reported that his “hunger and thirst to be in the Bible were greater than

can reveal insights into people’s thinking and perceptions that are very useful for ministry strategy.” Demographic research discloses data about population growth, family structures, economy, education, and social/political/religious affiliations.

- 291 David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 174–75.
- 292 Tobias Faix and Tobias Künkler, *Generation Lobpreis und die Zukunft der Kirche: Das Buch zur empirica Jugendstudie 2018* [Generation worship and the future of the church: The book about the empirica youth study 2018] (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2018), 22. *Generation Lobpreis* presents and interprets the results of the large-scale, quantitative and qualitative empirica youth study of 2018 about the religious practices of highly religious, Protestant young people in Germany. Tobias Künkler et al., *Empirica Jugendstudie 2018: Forschungsbericht* [Empirica youth study 2018: Research report] (Kassel: CVJM-Hochschule, January 1, 2018), <https://bit.ly/3s5QXzE>.
- 293 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 253. Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 528–31.

to sing five extra songs.” CKE designed short worship segments with a few worship songs that were modern to attract secular, young people with little prior knowledge of Christianity. Pastor Herla explained that “the worship experience should be very close to where people are, like a conversation over a cup of coffee.” Lara at CKE remembered: “I thought it was so contemporary, so casual, so modern. I could really identify with it.”

Apparently, Walls’s indigenizing principle did not make converts “feel at home” by limiting the focus of contextualization within a local framework.²⁹⁴ Instead, case study churches connected with converts in urban settings by drawing on global sources. Worship segments included songs published by international producers such as Hillsong in Australia. Churches also attracted converts by performing some songs in the English language, allowing congregants to “loosen their German identity, praise God in an uninhibited way, and connect with a global, cosmopolitan Christianity.”²⁹⁵ In contrast, converts of various ages across church plants reported that they could not relate to the traditional worship practices in mainline churches. Nadja at HCB knew she would not return to the boring worship services in the EKD: “I cannot sit down [in church] and come back every Sunday.” Scott Moreau concludes that local and global forces must inevitably intertwine to determine current-day worship practices. He suggests that urban churches will benefit from worship arts leaders to guide this negotiation process so that local expressions of worship will not be “subsumed by the global.”²⁹⁶

Additionally, each church exhibited creativity in designing outreach events that focused on attracting non-Christians and establishing relational bridges into the community. Events ranged from concerts in an Irish pub (CKE) to the artistic dance competition *The Battle* (HCB). Participation in *The Battle*, for example, was a critical step toward conversion for Joel and Andrea, both of whom were part of a social group fascinated with dance competitions. Walls’s stipulation that “the Word has to be translated in terms of specific segments of social reality” became real for these two converts as they turned toward Christ within their particular sub-culture.²⁹⁷ GCM and CKE followed Keller’s model of creating *safe spaces* for informal interaction between the Christian community

294 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 7–8.

295 Ken Chitwood, “Why German Evangelicals Are Praising God in English,” *ChristianityToday.com*, February 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/35KwDLo>.

296 Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith*, 157.

297 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 47, xvii.

and non-believers by organizing family-oriented events or community parties.²⁹⁸ Each occasion varied in its balance between gospel proclamation and relationship building.

The case studies disclosed that church plants did not seek to become places of “radical renewal,” which Paas suggests as a critical aspect to reach a secular culture.²⁹⁹ Churches remained within the basic structures and theological commitments of conservative, evangelical churches. Nonetheless, organizational creativity led to new paths of connecting with secular audiences. The interviews also revealed that pastors did not settle for merely offering a more substantial version of Christianity than mainline Protestant churches. Bartholomä views this motivation to contextualization as insufficient in relating the Christian faith to a secular audience with little prior exposure to traditional Christianity.³⁰⁰ Congruently, church leaders never mentioned the negative critique of traditional churches as a stimulus for contextualization. The missionary passion for evangelizing people within a secular culture was the driving force behind the careful and creative translation of church programs.

Related through Translated Communication

Church plants related to their audiences by translating the content and delivery style of the Christian message. The pastors, as foremost communicators, did not expect church attendees to have prior knowledge of the Christian faith. Lupemba shared that “it is always in the back of my mind that I am talking to a no-Bible generation.” First, the demographic knowledge of church leaders helped to adjust sermon topics and make them applicable to the social context of their congregations, whether it was the message of hope and prosperity at HCB, the problem of suffering at CKE, or the idol of wealth and self-reliance at GCM. Thus, pastors practiced Hiebert’s contextualization approach that begins with exegeting the cultural framework of the audience before translating and applying biblical truth in context.³⁰¹

298 Timothy Keller, *Center Church Deutsch: Kirche in der Stadt [Center church Germany: Church in the city]*, trans. Jutta Schierholz (Giessen: Brunnen, 2017), 257–66. Keller proposes that a combination of Christians with relational connections, supportive pastors, and safe spaces fuel a spiritual dynamic conducive to gradual conversions.

299 Paas, *Church Planting*, 224, 212–41.

300 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 540–41.

301 Paul G. Hiebert, “The Gospel in Human Contexts: Changing Perceptions of Contextualization,” in *Missionshift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, ed.

Secondly, pastors adjusted their delivery style and preached practical sermons. Steffen Müller delivered his messages in professional attire to fit the preferences of his affluent constituency. Lupemba impressed Anna because he “wore a *basecap* [baseball cap] and then preached in a fun and relaxed way. That also gave me a whole new picture of the Christian faith.” Converts across church plants applauded their leaders for preaching messages that were easy to understand and applicable to everyday life. Silke from GCM shared how she “was able to hear something in the sermon and immediately apply it on Monday, very much relating to my everyday life.” Hempelmann concludes that particularly German young people in urban settings migrate to churches that offer not only modern-style worship but also Christian instruction that occurs *biographienah und alltagsbezogen* (personal and applicable to everyday life).³⁰² Consequently, biblical truth disclosed itself to be highly relevant to the converts’ experience. HCB’s pastor exemplifies preachers from the Global South whose literal application of the Bible to everyday issues carries “a freshness and authenticity that adds vastly to its credibility as an authoritative source and a guide for daily living.”³⁰³

Thirdly, church leaders employed easy-to-understand terminology in communication. CKE, for example, conducted extensive surveys to determine how to rephrase Christian terminology for communicating to secular people in Erfurt. Herla chose to utilize the word *Reue* (regret) instead of the biblical term *Buße* (repentance) since the latter term adopted a trivial connotation in the German language and lost its meaning. Likewise, Hesselgrave recommends the search for “new supplemental terminology” to ensure a comprehensible gospel presentation.³⁰⁴ Christian leaders, such as Herla, face the challenge of interpreting new terminology carefully to convey the full meaning of biblical terms for their

David J. Hesselgrave, Ed Stetzer, and John Mark Terry (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 95–96.

302 Reinhard Hempelmann, “Beten in alten Fabrikhallen: Neue Vielfalt des Protestantismus [Praying in old industrial buildings: New diversity of Protestantism],” in *Jahrbuch Für Mission* (Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2017), 98.

303 Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

304 Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 179, 178–79. The authors also comment on the loss of meaning for the word repentance in the German language. They state that using new terminology is “fraught with danger” but necessary to convey the gospel. Faithfulness to Scripture is the critical standard for evaluating contextualization that adjusts vocabulary for communicating the gospel clearly.

audiences.³⁰⁵ None of the church plants, though, saw the need to abandon biblical concepts of sin and forgiveness in their presentation of conversion and replace them with ambiguous concepts such as social exclusion.³⁰⁶ Evidently, the gospel with its core theological components of sin and forgiveness remained translatable as people from secular backgrounds responded to the communication of the gospel with a transformational conversion.³⁰⁷

Finally, HCB's, GCM's, and CKE's diverse interpretation and application of prosperity teaching for their respective audiences call for theological discernment. Lupemba affirmed the interpretation of Gal 3:14 as Abraham's physical blessing for believers today, similar to many Ghanaian churches and Kenneth Hagin, a prominent proponent of the prosperity gospel.³⁰⁸ In agreement with Hagin's theology, the pastor also propagated that believers may claim continual

305 Similar to the word *Reue*, the Greek term for regret, *metameleia*, may or may not infer true repentance as expressed through the Greek word *metanoeo*. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 480–82. A discussion of the biblical terms for repentance is found in Chapter 1 of this research study.

306 Tobias Faix, "Vortrag von Prof. Tobias Faix [Lecture of Prof. Tobias Faix]," Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden in Deutschland K.d.ö.R., <https://bit.ly/2Ti7yAa>; Ron Kubsch, "Spiritualität in und Kirche out [Spirituality is in and church is out]," TheoBlog.de, May 15, 2018, <https://bit.ly/32VkmCa>. Faix argues for communicating the gospel to reach secular Germans with the concepts of social exclusion and acceptance instead of the outdated ideas of sin and forgiveness. Kubsch opposes Faix and states in the comment section that the apostle Paul never changed the message of sin and forgiveness on the cross despite the pluralistic spirituality of his time.

307 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 27–28; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 400. Walls contends that biblical, linguistic translation needs to be as culture-specific as Christ's Incarnation: "No one speaks generalized 'language.'" A transformational conversion "into the fullest reaches of personality" becomes possible since proper translation works with the pre-existing materials of the receptor culture. Schnabel stresses for contemporary praxis that "the cross has been and always will be regarded as a religious scandal and as intellectual nonsense. The search for a message that is more easily comprehensible must never attempt to eliminate the provocative nature of the news of Jesus the messianic Son of God who came to die so that sinners can be forgiven by God who hates sin and judges sinners on the Day of Judgment."

308 Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 300–04; Kenneth E. Hagin, "Redeemed from the Curse of Poverty," Kenneth Hagin Ministries, accessed July 28, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2X3zKcr>; Peter Zimmerling, *Charismatische Bewegungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 174–75.

health. He denied that God has a spiritual purpose for suffering.³⁰⁹ In contrast, Müller at GCM believed that the Christian life entails learning to live with suffering and sickness as part of authentic faith.³¹⁰ Indian scholar Ken Gnanakan argues convincingly that human suffering is inevitable in a fallen world and requires a theology that addresses “human suffering here and now.”³¹¹ Therefore, the problem of evil in the world necessitates the training of church leaders in how to counsel Christian communities when facing hardships.³¹²

Loving Community

On their journey of finding personal faith in Christ, the dynamics of loving relationships drew converts into the community of church plants. At HCB, a caring community rather than the sermon caused Anna’s spiritual openness initially, as it was “the first thing that just opened my heart to listen more.” The impression of young people living purposeful lives in multi-cultural unity astounded her. Dye’s research study discloses that unity across cultures in migrant churches rests on a common commitment to Christ, the authority of the Bible, and the gospel message.³¹³ The same foundational values marked Hope

309 Kenneth E. Hagin, “Possessing the Promise of Healing,” Kenneth Hagin Ministries, accessed July 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3fBzjNG>; Kenneth E. Hagin, “Must Christians Suffer?,” Kenneth Hagin Ministries, accessed August 26, 2020, <https://bit.ly/31sd9ce>; Konrad Otto, “Kenneth E. Hagins Heilungsverständnis im Rahmen der Word-of-Faith-Lehre: Darstellung und Kritik [Kenneth E. Hagins understanding of healing in the Word-of-Faith-teaching: Explanation and critique],” *Interkulturelle Theologie* 43, no. 4 (2017): 371–72, 375.

310 David W Jones and Russell S Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth, and Happiness: How the Prosperity Gospel Overshadows the Gospel of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2017), 54–55, 71–74, 85–87. The authors also expound that the inference of material blessings in Gal 3:14 confuses the obligations of covenantal agreements. Otto concludes that Hagin’s main error is the claim to prosperity simultaneous with salvation by faith at the point of conversion. Otto, “Heilungsverständnis,” 398.

311 Ken Gnanakan, “Some Insights into Indian Christian Theology,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), Some Theological Themes, Kindle.

312 Rodney James Nidever, “Evangelical Pastors and the Problem of Evil: Theodicy, Practical Theology and an Independent Study” (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Foundation, 2008), 270–71. Nidever’s study reveals that evangelical pastors were ill-prepared by seminaries to address the problem of suffering in counseling their churches.

313 Dye, “Mission in the Diaspora,” 227–31.

Center as a migrant church with a passion for welcoming young people from all ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, GCM's website promoted the church as a loving community where people can be "at home." Müller reported that affectionate relationships deeply impressed many worship attendees. Silke described the community dynamics at GCM as "strikingly beautiful."

CKE followed the most detailed strategy for including newcomers in their community compared to the other two church plants. A greeter team, various programs after the church, and a twenty-four-hour personal follow-up plan guaranteed that converts could form friendships quickly. Each convert also talked about the non-judgmental, loving attitude within the congregation. Lara's description of CKE summarizes the reports of converts: "The ConnectKirche is more like a family than a church." Corresponding to the findings of the study *Generation Lobpreis*, interviews of converts indicated that a loving community outweighed modern styles of worship in attracting them to their respective churches and making them "feel at home."³¹⁴

All church plants became what Newbigin calls hermeneutics of the gospel through a caring interrelatedness in each community, preparing unbelievers to become attentive to the gospel's proclamation. Hence, the dynamics of loving relationships were a crucial component in addition to Newbigin's description of churches seeking to testify the gospel in a skeptical, pluralistic society.³¹⁵ Karl Inge Tangen's multi-case study of two neo-Pentecostal churches in the Netherlands ventures to identify the "community and friendships with family qualities" as the most salient feature for individuals to move toward transformation.³¹⁶ Hence, research findings confirm Bartholomä's and Paas's argument that emotional factors, such as the experience of friendliness in a loving community, need to complement rational appeals in the process toward conversion.³¹⁷

314 Faix and Künkler, *Generation Lobpreis*, 182–84.

315 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (New York: SPCK Classics, 2014), 227–33. Newbigin lists six features of a congregation as hermeneutic of the gospel: praise, truth, concern for the neighborhood, a priesthood for the world, hope, and mutual responsibility. The latter addresses responsible inter-church relationships to illustrate a new social order but does not reflect on loving relationships.

316 Karl Inge Tangen, *Ecclesial Identification Beyond Late Modern Individualism? A Case Study of Life Strategies in Growing Late Modern Churches*, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies* 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 193, 193–96, 310–13.

317 Stefan Paas and Philipp Bartholomä, "Die Zeiten haben sich geändert: Rahmenbedingungen für freikirchlichen Gemeindeaufbau im nachchristlichen Kontext [Times have changed: Framework for church planting of Free Churches in the post-Christian context]," in *Center Church Deutsch*, by Timothy Keller (Giessen: Brunnen, 2017), 359–60.

(Not) Affected by Pentecostal Translation*

The Pentecostal teachings or practices of HCB and CKE did not hinder converts in this study from pursuing the Christian faith, independent of their secular backgrounds or previous exposure to mainline churches. Hope Center in Berlin practiced healings, speaking in tongues, prophetic utterances, and the “slaying in the Spirit” during or after worship services. Pastor Lupemba also taught unusual doctrines such as David Yonggi Cho’s exhortation to enter into a fourth dimension to receive secret revelations.³¹⁸ Nevertheless, Nadja, who grew up as an atheist, did not take offense at these practices when she started to attend HCB. Physical healing after her initial decision of conversion confirmed and solidified her faith. Intriguingly, Hope Center’s faith practices mirror those of African migrant churches that combine a belief in supernatural manifestations without abandoning a this-worldly orientation toward a secular world, such as HCB’s initiative for social change in Neukölln.³¹⁹

In comparison, CKE subdued or limited Pentecostal practices during church activities for the sake of not offending a secular audience. Healings or prophecies never occurred during regular worship services. Co-pastor Blum explained that speaking in tongues or prayers for healing found their proper place in controlled settings and private meetings: “We practice it in such a way that a non-Christian can understand it.” Prayers of deliverance, for example, might take place at the time of someone’s conversion decision after the service. Maurice, who grew up in a secular environment, accepted glossolalia quickly as a genuine expression of Christianity. He thought that “it sounds like it is really a different language and not as if you just make it up.” The interviews with converts revealed that the Pentecostal translation of Christian practices by HCB and CKE did not distract converts from their decision of conversion. The converts’ secular upbringing or disconnection from mainline churches possibly shielded them from preconceived notions about orthodox Christianity that could have preconditioned them toward a negative view of Pentecostalism. Lupemba noted the enduring influence of the EKD on portraying Christian norms to Germans. On the contrary, converts developed a Pentecostal “hunger for experiential transcendence.”³²⁰

318 David Yonggi Cho, *The Fourth Dimension*, comb. ed. (Newberry, FL: Bridge-Logos, 1983), 38–41, 65–66.

319 Jenkins, *The New Faces*, 4–5, 127.

320 Hempelmann, “Beten in alten Fabrikhallen,” 95.

Clear Turnaround: Enabled Conversion through Clear Invitations into Discipleship

The church plants in this multi-case study enabled Christian conversions through intelligible invitations and frequent opportunities for decision-making. Church leaders guided converts toward discipleship explicitly while affirming a point and process of conversion. Thus, conversion and spiritual growth remained an integral development. Converts, in turn, reported that they grasped foundational Christian doctrines when they converted, which often occurred as a process. Most of the converts proceeded steadily from conversion toward transformation.

Clear Invitations

Each church plant portrayed a biblical, evangelical understanding of conversion. Worship services and various church programs provided continual opportunities for decision-making. In response, participants in the interviews confirmed a grasp of basic Christian doctrines at the time of their conversion. However, their decision to convert was not necessarily as a response to a direct, verbal invitation.

Presented Conversion Intelligibly

The churches in this study presented Christian conversion intelligibly as repentance and faith in Christ. Converts across church plants confirmed a basic understanding of the Christian faith but at varying degrees when they converted. Each church plant adhered to a conservative, evangelical view of salvation and communicated the essential elements of conversion through verbal proclamation, printed materials, and online media. Pastor Lubemba from Berlin articulated the meaning of conversion most distinctly with the two necessary components of turning away from sin through repentance and turning to God by faith.³²¹ Lupemba explained that conversion is the change “from a self-determined life to a God-determined life, a life that was without repentance, . . . to a life of repentance.” Pastor Müller in Munich believed that a genuine sense of man’s sinfulness and deep, personal faith in Christ, rather than what Berkhof describes as a superficial faith in historical facts, are indispensable aspects of conversion.³²² In Erfurt, co-pastor Blum shared that they keep a low conversion threshold by focusing on

321 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1989), 933–42.

322 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 504–05.

personal faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. However, church leaders steer converts to repent from specific sins in their lives as soon as they decide to convert. Thus, CKE taught converts the meaning of repentance in “realistic and concrete terms” by addressing personal sin from the outset of their Christian faith.³²³ Notably, none of the churches in this case study jeopardized genuine spiritual renewal by omitting a message of “true repentance and conversion” despite their eagerness to see numerical growth.³²⁴

Hope Center also stands exemplary for the anticipation that migrant churches can counterbalance syncretistic forces in Western churches.³²⁵ HCB, for example, expected converts to have a sound understanding of conversion in contrast to the Greifswald research study. The study about conversions in the EKD refrained from questioning individuals about the integrity of their conversion accounts. Similar to the Greifswald study, Sanneh argues that a convert’s free choice of faith and a commitment to the church suffices to acknowledge genuine conversion. Syncretism becomes possible by reducing the test of genuine faith to the subjective understanding of the individual and putting into question the analysis of conversion based on propositional, biblical truth.³²⁶

In harmony with HCB’s practice, GCM and CKE explained the theological meaning of conversion to their audiences and expected converts to respond with the biblical components of repentance and faith. At the same time, as Hiebert suggests, each church kept a low threshold of conversion by not demanding a rigid list of doctrinal knowledge from converts and continually encouraging

323 John R. W. Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, upd. and exp. ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2015), 92.

324 Paas, *Church Planting*, 205.

325 Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 68, Kindle.

326 Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 43–47; Zimmermann, “Theologische Einführung,” 24. Zimmermann stresses that “the subjective self-testimony” and not the evaluation of others is the basis of their study while Hempelmann contends that biblical truth is not necessarily normative and “faith cannot be equated with content-based, propositional determination.” Heinzpeter Hempelmann, “Glaube als Beziehungswirklichkeit [Faith as relationship reality],” in *Wie finden Erwachsene zum Glauben? Einführung und Ergebnisse der Greifswalder Studie*, ed. Johannes Zimmermann and Anne-Konstanze Schröder, 2nd, rev.exp. ed., Beiträge zu Evangelisation und Gemeindeentwicklung Praxis (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2011), 37, 45.

individual decisions.³²⁷ Consequently, participants disclosed a clear understanding of their conversion while exhibiting varying degrees of theological understanding during their conversion process. Anna from HCB knew that Christ forgave her sins at the time of her conversion but did not submit to biblical moral standards right away since she “did not have the understanding yet of Jesus now being the king of my life.” In each church, a firm connection between conversion and discipleship safeguarded converts to advance toward theological clarity.

Finally, pastors varied in their interpretation of how mainline churches in Germany influence conversion. Lupemba stated that the EKD bears great responsibility to guide Christians toward a proper understanding of conversion. Herla welcomed the preparatory role of the Protestant church toward genuine conversions. The pastor viewed the conversion of prior EKD members as a deepening of faith rather than a first conversion: “What you grew up with becomes your own.” Müller took a counter-cultural approach and criticized the EKD for a false understanding of salvation through infant baptism. He opposed what Timothy Tennent describes as a Christendom conversion model, where “Christian adherence comes through territory and birth rather than through repentance and personal conversion.”³²⁸ In conclusion, all three church plants followed Newbigin’s presupposition that a genuine encounter of the gospel with Western culture cannot omit a personal decision of faith but “will involve contradiction, and call of conversion, for a radical metanoia, a U-turn of the mind.”³²⁹

Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making

The churches in this study provided opportunities for decision-making continuously, always pointing converts to the need for a personal experience of conversion. The two Pentecostal church plants gave invitations of conversion and offered pre-formulated prayers of conversion every Sunday, disclosing their Arminian, theological leaning and an emphasis on the human will in

327 Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 311–12.

328 Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2007), 180; Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. exp. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), ch. 9, *The Countercultural Model*, Kindle.

329 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 6.

conversion.³³⁰ However, observations of worship services showed that neither of the church plants sought to manipulate people to make conversion decisions by exerting overly emotional or mental pressures.³³¹ HCB invited non-believers to repeat a prayer of commitment during the worship service. Invitations also occurred at evangelistic events and street evangelism campaigns throughout the year. Typically, CKE gave only general invitations to conversion during services. Leaders guided each person who responded positively through a prayer of conversion afterward. This practice ensured that converts understood the meaning of their decision clearly. According to vicar Treblin, pre-formulated prayers assist secular people with no experience of prayer to make decisions of turnaround. Both church plants also publicized invitations of conversion through online media.

In comparison, Müller opposed pre-formulated prayers but trusted in preaching the Bible and God's sovereignty to cause conversions, reflecting his Reformed theology.³³² Nonetheless, he encouraged non-believers in the audience persistently to contemplate a decision of conversion. Liturgical elements in worship services and especially personal conversations provided further opportunities to motivate decision-making. The frequent appeals to receive Christian salvation across church plants revealed that leaders understood conversion as a personal experience rather than merely a process of religious socialization. They remained true to what Tidball calls the heart of evangelicalism by seeking conversions unceasingly through offering opportunities for decision-making.³³³ Intriguingly, their revivalist approach to conversion, which presumes the possibility of immediate decisions, did not hinder a "genuine missionary encounter" with secular converts in this study but led to deep, transformational changes.³³⁴ Each church planter, independent of their Arminian or Reformed convictions,

330 Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 932.

331 Eddie Gibbs, "Conversion in Evangelistic Practice," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1992), 285. Eddie Gibbs warns that "any attempts at persuasion must be characterized by integrity and sensitivity."

332 Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 471, 491.

333 Derek J. Tidball, *Reizwort evangelikal: Entwicklung einer Frömmigkeitsbewegung [Emotive word evangelical: Development of a piety movement]*, Edition Anker (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1999), 190, 208–09.

334 Stefan Paas, "Mission from Anywhere to Europe: Americans, Africans, and Australians Coming to Amsterdam," *Mission Studies* 32, no. 1 (2015): 23.

knew that “the task of the preacher is not simply to inform their hearers but to invite them to respond.”³³⁵

Despite ample opportunities for decision-making, individuals did not convert necessarily as an immediate response to a public invitation. Lara accepted the call to conversion on her first visit to CKE, but other converts described their decisions as a process or as a non-rational, spiritual experience. Anna at HCB, for example, recalled that “it was rather something that happened in me personally than in a church service, traditionally, that I raised my hand [to make a decision].” Their reports reflect Al Barth’s insight that conversion processes, and not one-time decisions, were typical for secular converts across Europe.³³⁶ Nonetheless, frequent opportunities for decision-making served as constant reminders about the need for a personal conversion experience.

Explicit Discipleship

Church leaders not only invited non-believers to convert but also integrated an explicit call to spiritual growth and discipleship. The understanding of conversion as a point and process allowed for transitional changes in new believers. Various measures, such as the ritual of baptism, assisted converts in progressing toward transformation.

Affirmed Point and Process

The leadership across all church plants affirmed the biblical data that genuine conversion has a finite beginning and allows the possibility of instantaneous change.³³⁷ At the same time, leaders acknowledged processes of deepening understanding and commitments of converts in their Christian faith before and after a point of turnaround.³³⁸ Correspondingly, most converts in this study

335 Gibbs, “Conversion,” 278, 277–78. Gibbs reflects on the Arminian belief that Christians can lose their salvation, potentially requiring multiple recommitments of conversion and thereby justifying the practice of continuous invitations. However, neither HCB nor CKE leaders proposed that the potential loss of salvation necessitates continuous decision-making opportunities.

336 Barth, interview. Gibbs points out that a lack of prior Bible knowledge and exposure to congregational life makes quick decisions difficult in secular societies. Gibbs, “Conversion,” 279–80.

337 Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 617; Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 226.

338 Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 279–81.

experienced their conversion as a process over time, while some made instant decisions of conversion. At CKE, Treblin shared that a prolonged interaction before a conversion was sometimes necessary for someone to make a decision of faith. Quick integration of non-believers into the church community aided this developmental process before conversion. Pastor Herla viewed conversion as a one-time event of complete salvation rather than adhering to a traditional Pentecostal view of conversion in several steps.³³⁹ A step-by-step process of discipleship followed conversion since “God often reveals things he wants to change gradually.” Similarly, pastor Lupemba at HCB stated that true converts enter a discipleship process toward a “full devotion to Christ,” in which believers discover new areas of life that require transformation. The Reformed perspective that regeneration occurs before conversion caused Müller at GCM to view conversion as a sovereign act of God. Trust in God’s control allowed individuals to go through times of deliberation without the need to force a point of decision.³⁴⁰ Even so, Müller affirmed that the spiritual rebirth happens only at one point and ushers in the process of going “deeper in different areas of life.”

As mentioned previously, churches kept low boundaries for decisions of conversion and gave frequent invitations of decision-making. Pastors tolerated varying degrees of Christian knowledge at the point of conversion since they believed in the urgency of salvation. The leaders acknowledged the biblical data portraying “conversion and salvation in radical terms that imply urgency and instantaneous change.”³⁴¹ Simultaneously, they recognized conversion as a directional, gradual shift toward transformation and “a complex development over time.”³⁴²

The interviews revealed how converts had to “think Christ into the patterns of thought they had inherited, into their networks of relationship and into their processes of decision-making.”³⁴³ Each participant told a story of turning pre-existing

339 Steven M. Studebaker, “Pfingstliche Soteriologie und Pneumatologie [Pentecostal Soteriology and Pneumatology],” in *Handbuch pfingstliche und charismatische Theologie*, ed. Jörg Hausteiner and Giovanni Maltese (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 222–27.

340 Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 618–20.

341 Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 617.

342 Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 5; Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 311–12.

343 Andrew F. Walls, “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 1 (January 2004): 6.

cultural ways of thinking and acting toward Christian values with progressive levels of commitment and theological understanding.³⁴⁴ At HCB, Anna spoke of complete devotion to Christ only after ending a pre-marital relationship with her boyfriend. Maurice at CKE admitted that grasping the reality of forgiveness in Christ continued to be a learning process even after he decided to convert. Silke at GCM explained that her conversion occurred as a process simultaneous to adopting Christian values in everyday life, “in the testing of what I heard in the sermon on Sunday.” Silke’s report also resembles the testimony of other participants when she recalled that engaging in worship emotionally occurred before embracing Christianity rationally. Her story confirms Rambo’s observation that a process of active participation in religious acts, such as singing, may precede a rational acknowledgment of conversion. People may “first perform religiously, and then rationalize by way of theology.”³⁴⁵ In conclusion, church leaders did not see a contradiction between a passion for numerical growth, frequent calls for decision-making, and a process-oriented understanding of conversion.³⁴⁶ The affirmation of both point and process supplemented each other to move individuals toward conversion and enter into a process of progressive transformation.

Connected Conversion and Discipleship

Each church plant connected conversion and discipleship to help converts transition into a process of transformation. Hope Center in Berlin implemented the simultaneous steps of baptism, formal membership, and mentoring to ensure the spiritual growth of converts. Once converts committed to membership, the church assigned a personal mentor who guided new believers closely toward transformative lifestyle changes and spiritual practices. At the time of her baptism, Anna Cruz at HCB knew that her membership required total devotion to Christ: “It just would not have worked if I had not given up my whole life.”

At ConnectKirche Erfurt, a detailed, personal follow-up strategy after a decision of conversion transitioned individuals toward discipleship. Leaders met with converts quickly after their conversion to encourage reading the Bible

344 Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 67.

345 Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 114, 113–16.

346 Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 14–15. Contrastingly, Smith argues against a pre-occupation with numerical conversions and calls of instant conversion since conversion is a process rather than a point of decision.

personally and joining a small group. Hesselgrave agrees that immediate follow-up of new converts is essential since they often face doubts during a phase of dissonance after their conversion commitment.³⁴⁷ Besides, pastor Herla explained that a sense of belonging through small groups is indispensable for progressive discipleship since millennials, the church's primary target group, valued community over formal membership. Similar to Tangen's research findings, a caring community not only attracted converts initially but moved them into a process of transformation.³⁴⁸ At CKE, the ritual of adult baptism functioned as the final step toward discipleship and integration into the church body. Lara declared that her adult baptism affirmed her Christian commitment and resolution for transformational changes: "I let go of the old and decided on something new for me." Miranda Klaver concludes in her study of conversion in two Dutch evangelical churches that the physical act of baptism helps converts to authenticate their mental ascent to conversion: "The evangelical ritual of baptism has the power to make the 'abstract' real to the believer."³⁴⁹

In comparison, Gospel Church Munich transitioned converts toward discipleship by focusing on a gospel-centered approach to biblical instruction without a formalized follow-up program. Müller believed that the gospel message itself and the experience of grace causes people to "grow in sanctification," leaning on Keller's view that revival and transformation occur through the communication of the gospel.³⁵⁰ Baptism and formal membership played a secondary role as steps toward spiritual growth, particularly since GCM accepted infant baptism as a valid form of baptism before conversion. Nonetheless, the adult baptism and membership commitment of Andreas at GCM strengthened his resolve of faith and service in the church.

In summary, church plants followed Smith's appeal to integrate conversion with a commitment to discipleship embedded within the church community, thereby preventing "cheap grace" and superficial decisions of faith.³⁵¹ However,

347 Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ*, 620–22. Hesselgrave urges missionaries for diligent, immediate follow-up within forty-eight hours after conversion. On page 621, he warns that if "follow-up is haphazard or (as is often the case) too little and too late, the new convert may yield to the temptation to return to the old way rather than take up his cross and follow Christ."

348 Tangen, *Ecclesial Identification*, 311–12.

349 Miranda Klaver, "This Is My Desire: A Semiotic Perspective on Conversion in an Evangelical Seeker Church and a Pentecostal Church in the Netherlands" (Dr. diss., Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 387, 383–90.

350 Keller, *Center Church Deutsch*, 83–85.

351 Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, 11–12, 14–15, 87–90.

churches also retained the urgency of conversion through frequent appeals for decision-making. All church leaders steered converts toward Christian discipleship to ensure transformational changes but varied in their degree of organizational planning and implementation of membership and baptism. The benefit of membership varied among converts, while all converts who pursued baptism described this as solidifying component in their discipleship process. The ritual of baptism marked “the transition from one stage to the next” in their self-perception as newly converted Christians.³⁵²

Deep Transformation: Pursued Deep Discipleship with Biblical Standards and Social Engagement

A deep transformation of converts occurred as church plants in this case study pursued a process of progressive discipleship to help converts grow toward spiritual maturity. Churches emphasized biblical formation and encouraged social action in various forms. Non-congruent patterns of spiritual or Pentecostal applications complemented the transformation of converts.

Deep Discipleship

Converts experienced deep discipleship, a profound transformation fostered by the churches’ ministries and biblical formation. Each church plant implemented a discipleship process supported by mentors, the church community, and volunteerism. Scripture formation was foundational for new believers to adopt spiritual practices and move toward a worldview transformation.

Implemented Deep Discipleship

Each church plant guided converts in transformational processes toward deep discipleship yet did so at various levels of organizational structure. Church members at HCB entered the most rigorous discipleship program, which asked converts to commit to Bible instruction, small group participation, mentoring, and volunteerism. Anna reported that extensive involvement in church programs throughout the week quickened her spiritual growth: “Life can change much faster because it is an intense process.” CKE implemented the most detailed effort in creating a progressive plan of discipleship, reflecting the advice of church

352 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 229, 228–30; David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 182–84.

planting experts such as Craig Ott or Aubrey Malphurs to establish deliberate church structures for disciple-making.³⁵³ A strategic path with various programs aided individuals to move from the point of conversion to integrating into the community, receiving support in personal discipleship, and progressing toward leadership and mission.

In comparison, GCM did not carry out a formalized strategy to foster deep discipleship but emphasized extensive Bible teaching in worship services, Bible studies, and small group meetings. Müller adhered to Keller's focus on biblical instruction to induce spiritual renewal but did not offer a programmatic path for spiritual development, as recommended in Keller's church planting manual.³⁵⁴ Andreas Küffner commented on wishing for additional discipleship programs. The pastor explained, though, that the time constraints of their affluent community are counter-productive to implementing extensive discipleship courses. The question arises whether GCM will be able to facilitate discipleship processes without additional structures if the church grows numerically. Nonetheless, the interviews revealed that a lack of organizational structure did not inhibit progressive transformation in GCM converts. All churches succeeded in offering "resources for personal growth" to support transformational changes.³⁵⁵

Although church plants varied in how they structured deep discipleship, several elements to support transformational changes were present across all cases. First, converts in each church reiterated the critical role of personal mentors to support transformation. CKE and GCM practiced informal mentorship. Converts talked about the personal care and exemplary life of their mentors. Lara at CKE stated emphatically that her mentor is "a great spiritual example for me." Hope Center assigned formal mentors to converts as a mandatory commitment at the time of membership.³⁵⁶ New believers at HCB required the additional assistance

353 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 260–63. Aubrey Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 87–104. Malphurs differentiates between church programs of primary and secondary importance in fostering spiritual maturity. He points out that factors such as age groups, ethnicity, location, and church size affect what type of primary programs churches can offer to their constituency.

354 Timothy Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Handbuch zur urbanen Gemeindegründung* [Handbook for urban church planting], trans. Linda and Matthias Voigt et al., 2nd ed. (Worms: Pulsmedien, 2012), 161–69; Keller, *Center Church Deutsch*, 83–92.

355 Tangen, *Ecclesial Identification*, 312.

356 HCB's discipleship structure shows characteristics of what Hiebert designates a bounded-set structure with clearly defined commitments at the time of membership. CKE and GCM represent a centered-set model where the process toward

of assigned mentors in their discipleship process since many grew up in social instability and hardship. The interviews disclosed that converts welcomed the voice of church leaders in their transformational process.³⁵⁷ Simultaneously, an attitude of grace in all three churches provided freedom for converts to determine changes at their own pace. Andrea, for example, knew she is always accepted at HCB: “Here, all these weaknesses are okay. No one condemns me.”

Second, the integration into the church community was another crucial aspect of deep discipleship. Helena at GCM reflected on her spiritual transformation and explained: “The people who are in the congregation, the people I got to know there, they also played a huge part.” Smith considers inclusion in the church, where believers unite in love and learn “to mature in mutual interdependence,” as an indispensable aspect of authentic conversion.³⁵⁸ Small group involvement played a crucial role in building community for all three church plants, especially at CKE, where worship services prioritized attracting non-Christians rather than instructing believers. The church openly declared that “the small group is the better pastor than the preacher on Sunday” since that was the setting where leaders helped converts to apply biblical truth personally.³⁵⁹

Third, volunteering strengthened the integration of converts in each local congregation and subsequently fostered participation in activities of spiritual formation.³⁶⁰ Lara at CKE reported how quickly she began to volunteer in

transformational commitments is more fluid. In that respect, CKE and GCM are similar to the two neo-Pentecostal churches in Tangen’s case study. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 34–36; Tangen, *Ecclesial Identification*, 275–76.

357 Keith E. Eitel, “Transcultural Gospel: Crossing Cultural Barriers,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (April 1, 1987): 134–35. Eitel refers to the important voice of missionaries in contextualizing discipleship issues with indigenous people rather than relying solely on self-theologizing. The same principle applies to evangelical leaders who guide converts from secular backgrounds in adopting new, biblical values. Tangen identifies a similar influence of caring role models in his cases studies. Tangen, *Ecclesial Identification*, 196–200.

358 Smith, *Beginning Well*, 204, 203–06.

359 Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the Twenty-First Century: A Comprehensive Guide for New Churches and Those Desiring Renewal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 213–15. Malphurs underscores the interaction within small group settings as a benefit to spiritual growth.

360 Faix and Künkler, *Generation Lobpreis*, 52–54, 192. The research study confirms that the commitment to the local congregation rises with the level of volunteerism. Converts in this study fit the category of *Höchstleister* (high achievers) of highly religious young Protestants. *Höchstleister* typically belong to a free church, have strong beliefs, and are active in the faith, for example, through volunteerism.

various capacities: “I did almost everything . . . I was in a lot of different teams.” The biblical data confirms that applying spiritual gifts or personal abilities in the church, which occurs through volunteerism, constitutes an essential element of Christian discipleship (1 Pt 4:10-11, Eph 4:12-13).³⁶¹

Intriguingly, the experience of converts in this study differed from highly religious, Protestant youth in the empirica study, in that converts did not mention worship participation as a means for spiritual growth. Faix and Künkler’s quantitative analysis lists worship music as the most crucial factor.³⁶² A possible explanation is that converts with a secular or non-evangelical background benefited more from biblical instruction and mentoring relationships in their discipleship than from the worship experience. They had little exposure to an intensely lived, evangelical faith before their conversion and were eager to receive biblical teaching and personal assistance in discipleship. Contrastingly, many of the young Protestants who took part in the empirica study most likely were not new believers. They were accustomed to evangelical spirituality and sought new, experiential expressions of faith in modern worship.³⁶³

Pursued Scripture Formation

Walls argues that deep discipleship requires Scripture to invade “the disciple’s whole personality . . . , passing through the disciple’s memory and into all the mental and moral processes; the ways of thinking, choosing, deciding.”³⁶⁴ Correspondingly, a passion for teaching the Bible as God’s authoritative Word to engender deep transformation characterized each church plant in this research study. Converts responded by accepting the Bible’s validity, pursuing spiritual practices, and adopting a biblical worldview, thereby stimulating the personal application of biblical values in lifestyle issues.

Bible instruction took place differently in each church. Teaching biblical content permeated all programs at HCB throughout the week, such as worship services, small group meetings, and Bible studies. The pastor always addressed

361 Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making*, 80.

362 Faix und Künkler, *Generation Lobpreis*, 87–89. Klaver elucidates that the bodily performance in evangelical, modern forms of worship strengthens commitments of conversion and belonging. Although neither church leaders nor converts mentioned this dynamic, observations confirmed at least a sense of community building through the shared experience of worship. Klaver, “This Is My Desire,” 228–31.

363 Hempelmann, “Beten in alten Fabrikhallen,” 93–97.

364 Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 50.

multiple Scripture passages during his sermons and encouraged diligent, personal Bible reading. At GCM, a gospel-centered approach of teaching in worship services, Bible studies, and small groups took center stage in the discipleship process of converts. Müller, in agreement with Keller's concept of a gospel-centered church, believed that teaching the gospel of grace must be the core component of church ministry and provides the resource for transformational changes.³⁶⁵ Biblical instruction geared converts to make lifestyle changes even concerning challenging topics such as sexuality or finances. When believers apply biblical guidelines, the pastor asserted, they "experience more and more liberation in the grace of God from things that trap them." CKE engaged converts with biblical teaching in successive church programs. A systematic approach to personal Bible reading led converts to apply Scripture in everyday life. Sermons in worship services focused on reaching non-believers evangelistically rather than on instructing believers.

Observations, interviews, and websites disclosed that church plants adhered to a conservative, evangelical belief in the inspiration of Scripture and taught biblical content as literal truth. They embraced Hesselgrave's appeal that "true *evangelical Christian* contextualizers" respond to aberrant forms of spirituality in the West by "ferently teaching Bible doctrine in propositional form."³⁶⁶ Both church leaders and converts also practiced Eitel's contextualization approach to always use the authoritative Scriptures as the filter for culture rather than the reverse. Churches did not allow cultural preferences to reinterpret biblical mandates and concede to syncretistic versions of Christian living.³⁶⁷ Consequently, a profound transition from a secular worldview, indifferent to religion in general, to a biblical worldview became evident among converts. A process of what Hiebert describes as "deep discipling" toward a cognitive, affective, and evaluative transformation became possible.³⁶⁸ New spiritual habits, such as regular Bible reading with the

365 Keller, *Center Church Deutsch*, 47–48, 65–92.

366 Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 240.

367 Eitel explicates that "for Scripture's prophetic voice to be heard, the directional priority should flow from God's Word to humanity with an increasingly closer approximation to God's truth. Its signature effect is an increasingly apparent life-evident walk by the believer in a manner worthy of his calling. Transformation into the likeness of Christ should be the gradual outcome." Keith E. Eitel, "Scriptura or Cultura: Is There a Sola in There?," *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, no. Fall 2012 (October 1, 2012): 66, 72–75.

368 Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 319, 312–16; Jay Moon defines people with a secular worldview as indifferent to sin and primarily in need for meaningful community. W. Jay Moon, "Evangelism in a Secular Age: Complexities and Opportunities," in *Against the Tide: Mission Amidst the Global Currents of Secularization*, ed. W. Jay Moon

use of technology like Bible apps, undergirded transformational changes among converts. Cognitively, new believers began to accept the Bible as literal truth and absolute authority for moral choices. Anna, a university student in Berlin, determined that the Bible is entirely dependable since “the Word of God remains and is truer than science.” Silke at GCM, an optometrist, came to understand the Bible as God’s literal Word and concluded that “the Bible is much smarter than we think.” In the sphere of affective transformation, converts developed more loving attitudes toward other people. Friends of Peter at CKE confirmed that he had “become much more approachable than in the past.”

Biblical formation also led converts toward an evaluative transformation, for example, in the area of sexuality and politics. At HCB, Joel realized that his previous pre-marital relationships with women were physically and emotionally abusive. Instead of continuing in that lifestyle, he adopted a biblical view of marriage and married a church member at HCB.³⁶⁹ Contrary to Paas, the promotion of biblical, ethical standards of sexuality by global missionary movements, exemplified by all three church plants, did not distract converts from a genuine missionary encounter. Instead, a biblical view of sexuality and marriage represented a core component of deep discipleship for several converts in this study.³⁷⁰ Furthermore, conversion and biblical formation did not necessarily imply, as German professor for Sociology David Pollack suggests, a “reduction of complexity,” a denial of other worldviews and of reality itself.³⁷¹ Anna, who had been active in the socialist party Die Linke (The Left), talked about her evaluative transformation and changing views of politics: “For me, the world was clearly black and white before. Yes, [now] I would just recognize that there are good things and bad things in most parties and that there are parties that are definitely

and Craig Ott, *Evangelical Missiological Society* series no. 27 (Littleton, CO: William Carey Library, 2019), 119–21, Kindle.

- 369 Faix and Künkler, *Generation Lobpreis*, 136–44. The literal interpretation of the Bible and the adoption of biblical standards of sexuality by converts in this study contrasts significantly with the uncertainty about these subjects even among highly committed young Protestants in Germany.
- 370 Paas, “Mission from Anywhere,” 24–26. Paas’s critique that Christians do not address ecological concerns to match the interest of secular Europeans in contextualizing their faith remains valid in this study. No church planter and only one convert mentioned a desire for ecological activism.
- 371 Detlef Pollack, *Rückkehr des Religiösen?* [Return of the religious?], *Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland und Europa 2* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 323, 322–23.

a little bit closer to what Jesus might have said about our political situation than others. I got away from this blaming thing.” Anna’s adoption of a biblical worldview enabled her to abandon simplistic evaluations of the world and cultivate a more differentiated, balanced view of politics.

Nevertheless, the pursuit of biblical formation did not guarantee protection from hardship or a long-term transformation of each convert. Nadja’s decision for marriage at HCB ended in divorce despite following biblical guidelines. In retrospect, she interpreted her decision-making process as lacking discernment. Vanessa at CKE shared the belief in the Bible as God’s Word but, as a young believer, never considered this subject prior to the interview. Diligence in biblical instruction does not ensure that recent converts like Vanessa remain on a path of progressive transformation. Rambo and Farhadian point out that individuals may deconvert and that “human beings are always on the move.”³⁷² Nonetheless, Vanessa’s admission or Nadja’s report of hardship do not invalidate the truthfulness of their transformational changes and the corresponding effect of Scripture formation at the time of this study. The triangulation with data from other sources, such as observations and interviews with other converts, confirmed this conclusion.³⁷³

Social Engagement

Each church plant embraced the value of social action by seeking to improve people’s lives in their community with varying degrees of intensity and practical implementation.³⁷⁴ Converts responded by integrating the value of social action

372 Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16. Rambo and Farhadian speak of the possibility of deconversion across religions. This author affirms the evangelical view of the believer’s eternal security after regeneration so that genuine Christian converts may temporarily abandon transformational processes but do not lose their salvation. Deconversion implies that a prior decision to convert was superficial (Jn 10:27-29, Mt 13:1-9, 18-23). Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 545–48.

373 Whether diffusional themes have similar, long-term effects in conversion processes needs to be the subject of another research study. Chapter 7 addresses deconversion as a salient research topic.

374 Social action is “about people coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important in their communities.” *Enabling Social Action: A Description of Social Action* (London: Department for Culture, Media & Sport, n.d.), 5, <https://bit.ly/35Yhh4O>.

into their newfound faith. Hope Center in Berlin pursued a formidable plan to inaugurate social transformation, a profound and measurable improvement of people, in the city district of Neukölln.³⁷⁵ Parallel to this effort, Lupemba called each believer to serve in their social context by defining their mission based on personal and spiritual gifting. Joel, for example, had a history of violence and criminal activity. After his conversion, he trained to become a social worker and looked forward to instilling positive values in young people. The pastor also stated that the goal of making disciples remains the primary mission emphasis at HCB: “No matter how they live, they do it in a conscious understanding of mission . . . to share my faith with the people in my context.” Hope Center exemplified Newbigin’s dictum that discipleship must include a vision for radical change in a secular society, calling believers to “be agents of God’s justice in all human affairs.”³⁷⁶ Thus, HCB fits the description of new, progressive Pentecostal churches that display a deep passion for addressing social causes in contrast to the other-worldly orientation of many traditional Pentecostal churches.³⁷⁷

In comparison, CKE engaged in regular activities of practical aid in the community but did not pursue a plan for a profound social transformation. The church’s burden was to seek the general welfare of the city. The Stadtlicht-Aktion (Citylight-Activity), for example, mobilized the whole congregation to collect trash and clean up certain areas of Erfurt. Vicar Treblin explained that such social action activities embody “this value of Christian love for your neighbor,” even if gospel proclamation does not take place. Lara genuinely enjoyed becoming active on behalf of the community: “We, as a church, love the city and also want to do something for the city.” CKE’s social action resembled what such authors as Steve Sjogren labeled as *servant evangelism* in the 1990s, “demonstrating the kindness of God by offering to do some humble act of service with no strings

375 Habibul Khondker and Ulrike Schuerkens, “Social Transformation, Development and Globalization,” *Sociopedia* (2014): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1177/205684601423>. The authors define social transformation as a profound change in society in contrast to social change, which signifies a partial or gradual change over time.

376 Newbigin, *Foolishness*, 133, 132–34.

377 Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1–5, 68–98. Miller and Tetsunao studied the global appearance of new Pentecostal churches that engage in social action. HCB’s focus on social transformation resembles these so-called progressive Pentecostal churches, especially the type of churches that focus on improving the social status of young people by affirming a loving church, education, and exposure to the arts.

attached.”³⁷⁸ Akin to HCB, CKE always portrayed social action within the framework of the primary mission of evangelism.

GCM translated the social dimension of discipleship by assisting believers in establishing healthy, interpersonal relationships. The greatest need for social action in their affluent community, according to the pastor, is not social injustice but the breakdown of marriage and family relationships. Consequently, the church did not pursue a social transformation of the city, which Keller suggests, due to the actual needs of their local context.³⁷⁹ Nevertheless, GCM committed to addressing social needs through generous financial giving toward global causes and by supporting a welfare program in an underprivileged city district of Munich. Andreas developed a personal burden for social action and used his profession to support Christian ministries in foreign countries.

In summary, all three church plants mobilized converts to address social needs within their community, ranging from improving family relationships to attempting a city-wide transformation.³⁸⁰ Newbigin’s assumption that evangelical churches separate evangelism and social causes artificially does not match the findings of this case study, especially given HCB’s comprehensive approach to social transformation. However, church leaders did not perceive social engagement in the world as a pre-condition for verbal proclamation, which missional church models postulate.³⁸¹ All three church plants prioritized the cause of evangelism over pursuing social causes since “only Christians know the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Only they will bring this message to the world.”³⁸²

378 Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1993), 17–18.

379 Keller, *Center Church Deutsch*, 340–49.

380 Tangen, *Ecclesial Identification*, 254–74, 313–14. Tangen refers to these causes of social action as self-transcendent commitment to others and commitments to the social welfare of the context. In his case study findings, social action interlaced with transformational commitments toward God, the church, and self.

381 Johannes Reimer, “Der missionale Aufbruch: Paradigmenwechsel im Gemeindedenken [Missional departure: Paradigm change in thinking about church],” in *Die verändernde Kraft des Evangeliums: Beiträge zu den Marburger Transformationsstudien*, ed. Tobias Faix and Tobias Künkler, Transformationsstudien Bd. 4 (Marburg an der Lahn: Francke, 2012), 320. The German Baptist theologian Johannes Reimer, for example, promotes this missional church model, which closely aligns itself with emergent churches as a supposedly innovative response to mission in a post-modern context.

382 Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), ch. 6, “The Gospel Mandate;” Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 120–22.

Changed by Spiritual and Pentecostal Application*

Each church plant fostered transformational changes by applying spiritual or Pentecostal practices differently, while converts across churches shared how these experiences solidified their discipleship processes. Hope Center encouraged Pentecostal manifestations openly during their church services, such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, prayers for healing, or the “slaying in the Spirit.” Highly emotional worship segments with repetitive singing created a platform for the occurrence of these phenomena. In comparison, CKE accepted Pentecostal doctrines, such as glossolalia and prophecy, but subdued their practice for the sake of translating the gospel to a non-Christian audience. The church leadership did not allow tongue speaking or “slaying in the Spirit” during worship services. Instead, small groups offered a controlled environment for Pentecostal practices. Contrastingly, pastor Müller at GCM held to non-charismatic convictions. He also opposed the idea that healings or miracles are readily available to believers. Müller presumed, though, that God may intervene supernaturally in the affairs of the world at any time.

Even though churches took divergent approaches of encouraging supernatural manifestations, converts across church plants testified to the influence of spiritual or emotional phenomena in their discipleship process. At HCB, Andrea participated in the revelatory prayer method Sozo to receive personal, prophetic insights.³⁸³ As a result, she enrolled in acting school to follow her life-long dream of becoming an actress. Nadja attested to a miraculous healing, which intensified her Christian commitment. She decided to follow Christ *jetzt erst recht* (more resolved than ever). Maurice at CKE reported that tongue-speaking helped him to grow in Christian maturity: “I received it [speaking in tongues] myself, which has strengthened my faith quite a bit.” Andreas from Gospel Church Munich explained that an extraordinary answer to prayer and hearing God’s voice during a personal crisis bracketed his conversion process. These occurrences solidified his faith, which, in turn, motivated him to end a disharmonious business venture. In summary, spiritual or Pentecostal applications personalized and intensified the transformation of converts, independent of their interpretation as authentic spiritual manifestations or mere psychological phenomena.

Peter Zimmerling explains that the popularity of Pentecostal practices corresponds to the “yearning for the extraordinary” and an emphasis on experience

383 “SOZO: Gerettet, Geheilt, Freigesetzt [SOZO: Saved, Healed, Freed],” Bethel Sozo Deutschland e.V., accessed December 1, 2020, <https://bethelsozo.de/>. Sozo is a prayer ministry from Bethel Church in Redding, CA.

in a late-modern, secular context.³⁸⁴ Highly emotional worship services create spaces for ecstatic manifestations. He raises the issue that an over-emphasis of subjective experiences like prophecies and glossolalia hinders the ability of critical self-reflection and correction.³⁸⁵ Alternate explanations for such phenomena as hearing God's voice as psychological conditions rather than genuine, spiritual encounters are possible.³⁸⁶ Neuroscientific research reveals that personal motivations rather than physical reality often influence sensory perception: "What people see depends fundamentally on what their minds are interested in seeing."³⁸⁷ Tania Harris's article on revelatory experiences highlights the concern of evangelicals toward the potentially subversive practice of seeking extra-biblical revelations from God. Harris argues that individual revelations intensify personal transformation and are "at the center of spiritual growth and faith" in Pentecostalism.³⁸⁸ Therefore, revelatory knowledge, supposedly communicated through God's Spirit directly toward life application, should have a higher priority in discipleship than the Bible as a written text.³⁸⁹ Harris's interpretation lends itself to abuse and error by positioning subjective experiences above the authoritative text of the Bible. Nonetheless, the evangelical faith in the authority of Scripture and the emphasis on Bible knowledge counterbalanced the subjective experiences of converts in all case study churches.

384 Peter Zimmerling, "Die Theologie pfingstlich-charismatischer Bewegungen: Annäherungen [Theology of Pentecostal-charismatic movements: Approximations]," *ThLZ*, no. 11 (2015): sec. III, <https://bit.ly/34QF7Qk>.

385 Zimmerling, "Annäherungen," sec. III, IV-V.

386 William Lee Adams, "In Your Head: Hearing Voices," *Psychology Today*, last modified June 9, 2016, <https://bit.ly/35XNh9a>. Adams states that hearing voices may be auditory hallucinations which often occur after traumatic experiences.

387 Kelly Bulkeley, "Religious Conversion and Cognitive Neuroscience," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 248. In Col. 2:18-19, the apostle Paul addresses the danger of visual illusions through human desires, actually distracting from devotion to Christ and preventing genuine spiritual growth.

388 Tania Harris, "Where Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism Part Ways: Towards a Theology of Pentecostal Revelatory Experience, Part 2," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 23, no. 1 (February 2020): 48.

389 Harris, "Pentecostalism, Part 2," 45-51. Harris concludes accurately that her view about the authority of personal revelations equal or superior to biblical revelation aligns Pentecostalism more closely with mystic Catholicism than Evangelicalism.

Continual Retransmission: Propagated Retransmission with a Continual Facilitation of Outreach

Each church plant in this multi-case study mobilized converts for the retransmission of their Christian faith. The propagation of evangelism took place as church leaders communicated the value of retransmission ceaselessly and trained converts in sharing their new beliefs. Church plants assisted converts by providing opportunities for retransmission and relationship building within their communities. Consequently, new believers spoke about their faith and spiritual practices freely within their social context. Foreign missions involvement did not occur yet at the time of this study. The diffusional patterns in this section, such as training in (re-)transmission, affected both new converts and seasoned church members across church plants. These patterns, though, did not play a significant role for converts until after their conversion. Hence, the following themes are listed in this section, describing the converts' retransmission of their faith, rather than in the section on transmission.

Continual Propagation

Church plants communicated the value of retransmission and offered formal and informal training, which empowered new believers to become vocal about their new convictions, lifestyle changes, and spiritual practices. Converts invited people within their social context to worship services and church activities, while personal evangelism, the verbal sharing of the gospel message, remained challenging.

Communicated the Value of Retransmission

The pastors in this case study perceived the mission of making disciples as the primary goal for their church plants. Consequently, each church plant communicated the value of retransmission continually. Converts internalized the need for evangelism as an inherent aspect of Christian living from the outset of their conversion.

Similar to the other pastors, Lupemba explained that the Great Commission in Mt 28 establishes the priority for the church's mission: "The command of missions is to make disciples wherever you are." Thus, all church plants asked converts persistently to retransmit their faith during worship services, small group meetings, and other church functions. Church leaders also helped new believers adopt a desire for participating in outreach by praying with them and their congregations for spiritual openness and evangelistic opportunities. Recent

converts were not exempt from their evangelistic tasks. Müller, for example, believed that new converts with their inherent enthusiasm and pre-existing, relational network in the secular world makes them “by far the best evangelists.”³⁹⁰ CKE sought to ignite a passion for evangelism in converts right after their decision by asking them to call friends and family members and tell them about their new faith. Thus, Herla explained, converts learn how to become Christian witnesses throughout the week. CKE joined the worldwide Pentecostal movement in its ability to mobilize their congregations for evangelism, “including the very newest Christians.”³⁹¹ Ott elucidates that converts are effective witnesses because of their contextual sensitivity: “They still speak the language and think in terms of the contemporary culture.”³⁹²

Correspondingly, new believers across church plants quickly adopted the value of retransmission. They developed a passion for evangelism, prayed for evangelistic opportunities, and started to speak about their Christian faith within their social context. Anna at HCB declared that evangelism is “something being preached to us every day” and “the simple reason why we are saved, and we are still on earth.” Silke at GCM grew in boldness to testify about her new faith: “I do not hold back now that I am a believer, and I say this also at pretty much every opportunity.” At CKE, Vanessa formed the conviction that people in secular Erfurt require reminders of Christianity by bringing it “back into their memory.” In conclusion, all church plants impressed on converts the value of retransmission as an immediate and essential consequence of conversion rather than a final step in Christian discipleship.³⁹³

390 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 367. Bartholomä's quantitative analysis shows that a lack of personal relationships with non-Christians was a significant factor for limiting evangelistic effectiveness.

391 Tennent, *Theology in the Context*, 182, 182–83. Tennent elaborates that in Pentecostalism, a shift from the clergy to the laity for fulfilling the task of evangelism stems from the conviction about God's miraculous intervention through signs and wonders and that new converts are capable to evangelize: “In Pentecostalism, anyone who knows enough to receive Christ knows enough to lead someone else to Christ.”

392 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 293, 223.

393 Kumar Abraham, “Evangelism and Discipleship,” Lausanne World Pulse Archives, May 2007, <https://bit.ly/38rqOEi>. Kumar Abraham cites biblical examples, such as the Samaritan woman in John 5, for evangelism by new converts. He argues for placing retransmission at the beginning rather than at the end of the discipleship process since “by compartmentalizing and programming spiritual growth to seasons and periods, we have limited the work of the Holy Spirit in people's lives.” Abraham also comments on a challenge converts faced in this research study: New believers lose

Training in Retransmission

All church planters trained converts in the retransmission of their faith through verbal instruction, practical training, or informal teaching. Converts learned how to testify their faith with enthusiasm, while personal evangelism remained challenging in two church plants. HCB offered theoretical instruction in evangelism during leadership meetings or personal coaching sessions. Practical training occurred during street evangelism campaigns, the most rigorous effort of training in personal evangelism among the three church plants. Lupemba explained that the practice of street evangelism helps believers to gain courage and “consciously overcome this inner limitation” of sharing the gospel verbally. Hope Center also directed its members to pray for supernatural manifestations to strengthen their evangelistic testimony, harmonizing with Wimber’s argument for power evangelism that “transcends the rational” and convicts through signs and wonders.³⁹⁴ Hesselgrave cautions that despite the reality of spiritual power encounters, proclaiming the truth of the gospel takes precedence in evangelism due to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit toward sin and salvation in Christ.³⁹⁵ At HCB, gospel proclamation balanced the desire for supernatural occurrences.

non-Christian relationships because they integrate into a Christian community. He states that churches should prepare recent converts to retain their previous social network and learn to “live in tension with both worlds.” The same motivation caused CKE leaders to keep program commitments to a minimal level for their constituency.

394 John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992), 78, 78–82. On page 79, Wimber stresses that “*the heart and soul of evangelism is proclamation of the gospel.*” Nonetheless, he presumes Western Christians are ineffective in evangelism because they do not seek supernatural manifestations. He references the global expansion of Pentecostalism, the missionary experience of C. Peter Wagner and Charles Kraft from Fuller Theological Seminary, and the size of David Yonggi Cho’s church in Korea as proof that power evangelism will generate conversion growth.

395 Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 159–70. Hesselgrave highlights the priority of truth encounters over power encounters by reflecting on Jesus’ message to his disciples in John 13–17. On that last evening before his crucifixion, Jesus does not mention the word *dynamis* (power) but focuses on the sending of the Holy Spirit, who will remind the apostles of Jesus’ teaching, enable them to witness, convict the world, and unify the believers. Hesselgrave surmises on page 168 that “in sending the Holy Spirit into the world, the Lord Jesus was preparing the way and equipping the apostles for truth encounter.”

Consistently with the other two church plants, Lupemba also taught converts that evangelism within the personal social network is the church's primary mission. The church leaders' mission approaches harmonized with Keller's plea for building long-term relationships with non-believers since they have little prior knowledge of Christianity.³⁹⁶

CKE was the most strategic church in personal evangelism training, beginning with instruction on the day of conversion that continued in small group meetings, leadership sessions, and preparatory lessons for baptism. All converts at CKE learned how to share the gospel message verbally and give a personal testimony of life transformation. In contrast, Müller at GCM instructed new believers in basic retransmission principles as part of his regular teaching ministry rather than through formal training in evangelism. The pastor believed the enthusiasm of new believers and proper gospel proclamation during worship services secures a sound process of retransmission. Nonetheless, the course *Evangelism Explosion*, which trains individuals in sharing the gospel message through personal conversations, might supplement informal training at GCM in the future.³⁹⁷ In summary, all churches employed methods of training laity in retransmission that were easily transferable and did not relinquish evangelism to paid staff members.³⁹⁸

Converts across all church plants learned how to retransmit their faith at the workplace, the university, among neighbors, friends, or family members. Silke at GCM intrigued her patients to consider spiritual topics by telling them after a successful treatment: "You can thank your creator that it has gone so well!" Personal testimonies of life transformations became powerful tools to convey the positive effect of Christian living.³⁹⁹ Lara at CKE concluded that her testimony "has a strong, symbolic effect and force of attraction for people when they see that my life is only developing for the better." However, converts at CKE and GCM reported that sharing the gospel message personally remains difficult, partially due to the negative response of non-Christian friends or family members.⁴⁰⁰ At HCB,

396 Keller, *Center Church Deutsch*, 232–67. Keller's adaption of the term missional prioritizes evangelism over social action while seeking meaningful ways to contextualize Christianity for secular people.

397 D. James Kennedy and Tom Stebbins, *Evangelism Explosion*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996).

398 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 221–22.

399 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 222.

400 Jörg Stolz, "Hoffnung weitergeben: Evangelisieren im evangelisch-freikirchlichen Milieu [Communicate hope: Evangelism in the evangelical-Free Church milieu]," in *Phänomen Freikirchen: Analysen eines wettbewerbsstarken Milieus*, ed. Philippe

the participation in street evangelism seemed to have its anticipated effect of overcoming limitations of fear so that new believers were more confident in personal evangelism. Converts from each church plant, though, talked freely about their Christian faith and invited friends within their social network to church.

Several new believers also reported the use of social media as a primary tool for retransmission. Moreau comments about the drastic change of communication in the present times, comparing the significance of cell phones in transmission to the invention of the printing press.⁴⁰¹ David Dunaetz points out that cyberbullying on social media and the *Mum effect*, the avoidance of sharing potentially bad news, amplify the fear of rejection and hinder personal evangelism, especially for the younger generation. Inadvertently, converts in this study followed Dunaetz's advice to focus on relationship building, testify to personal faith practices or experiences, and give invitations to public church services. Thereby, new believers prevented ridicule in case friends in their social network rejected the gospel as bad news but offered opportunities to hear clear gospel presentations in a less-threatening church setting.⁴⁰²

Continual Facilitation

Church plants continually facilitated retransmission for converts and their entire congregations, although ventures in foreign missions were only at the beginning stages of church programming. Worship services served as the primary venue for new believers to participate in retransmission. Each church designed visitor-friendly services. Herla explained that CKE creates a *Komm-und-Seh Charakter* (come-and-see character) so that believers can invite their non-believing friends without hesitation. All converts at CKE sought to persuade acquaintances in their social context to join them for worship. Vanessa, for example, posted her church activities on social media and told her friends: "If you feel like it, you can also come along or [watch the service] on a live stream."

Besides, each church organized a variety of creative church events throughout the year to help young believers welcome their non-Christian friends to their

Bornet et al., vol. 5, *Culturel* (Zürich: Pano, 2014), 220–33. The study discloses similar difficulties in sharing the gospel by evangelical Christians in Switzerland and analogous strategies for Christian witnessing: Creating curiosity, establishing long-term friendships, offering prayers, or witnessing to family members.

401 Moreau, *Contextualizing the Faith*, 148.

402 David R. Dunaetz, "Evangelism, Social Media, and the Mum Effect," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 43, no. 2 (April 2019): 138–51.

church community and hear the Christian message. HCB planned annual dance competitions for a young, multi-cultural audience. GCM scheduled family-friendly events such as Lego play days. Andreas reported that he and his wife “keep inviting people on certain occasions.” Silke passed out invitations for church activities to her colleagues. At CKE, small groups facilitated outward-focused activities to enable friendship building between converts and non-believers. Thus, all three church plants established “safe spaces” that overcame cultural barriers and connected with the surrounding community in non-offensive ways.⁴⁰³ Each church translated its programs to be attractive for their specific social context and mobilized converts with pre-existing relationships in the community to achieve missionary effectiveness.⁴⁰⁴ HCB was the only church that enlisted new believers for street evangelism, a mandatory, weekly activity during this study. However, converts at HCB like Anna and Nadja preferred speaking about their faith within their social network despite their willing participation in street evangelism.

At the time of this study, church plants were just at the beginning stages of foreign missions involvement, partially because of the recent start of their churches. Lupemba expected several new believers to go into full-time mission work due to prophetic revelations. HCB scheduled the first short-term mission trip for the summer of 2020. GCM supported foreign missions only through financial giving, while Andreas developed a personal passion for spreading Christianity worldwide in conjunction with his business venture. Craig speaks of a “business as mission” model that integrates “economic development and missional engagement.”⁴⁰⁵ Herla at CKE thought the greatest benefit for mission trips was that believers develop a passion for evangelism: “Above all, it creates a missionary heart in you. People come back very differently.” The churches plant also started to organize mission trips, but both CKE and HCB canceled their plans due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, it was not evident at the time of this study whether the church plants would help usher in Eitel’s hope of the retransmission of a biblically faithful, evangelical Christianity across the globe.⁴⁰⁶ However, interviews revealed that converts were more active in partnering with their churches in

403 Keller, *Center Church Deutsch*, 264.

404 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 570–76. Bartholomä concludes that conversion growth in evangelical churches is possible by adopting five values: purposeful relationships with non-Christians, high-quality church programs, a strong missionary passion, a change of mindset through a contextual awareness of secularism, and a visitor-friendly atmosphere.

405 Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 298.

406 Eitel, “World Christianity,” “History Lives Again: A Fresh Look.”

evangelism and more enthusiastic about foreign missions than most highly religious Protestant youth in Germany.⁴⁰⁷

Summary

Five common diffusional patterns contributed to conversion in each church plant of this multi-case study: multi-faceted transmission, caring translation, clear turnaround, deep transformation, and continual retransmission. Churches engaged converts with a multi-faceted transmission of the Christian message. Individual in combination with corporate transmission intrigued converts to interact with the biblical message personally, while spiritual or psychological experiences supported their desire to pursue Christianity further. Church leaders related the Christian message to their audiences through a careful translation of their church programs and communication within the appealing dynamics of a loving community. Pentecostal practices did not deter individuals from steps toward conversion. A clear turnaround became possible as churches enabled conversion through unambiguous invitations into discipleship. Participants in this study repented from sin and placed their faith in Christ for salvation due to theologically sound conversion presentations combined with frequent decision-making opportunities. The converts' theological understanding of faith varied at the time of their conversion. Church leaders made discipleship an explicit component of conversion by affirming the point and process of conversion and connecting conversion and discipleship through such measures as mentoring relationships. A deep transformation of converts occurred since church plants implemented discipleship processes and stressed biblical formation. Social action became an integral aspect of personal discipleship at various levels of intensity and practical implementation. Spiritual and Pentecostal applications personalized and intensified transformational processes. Finally, each church plant continually propagated retransmission by communicating the value of evangelism and training converts to retransmit their faith. Various church programs provided opportunities for outreach to both new believers and the larger church body, while foreign missions involvement remained in its infancy at the time of this study.

407 Faix and Künkler, *Generation Lobpreis*, 125–26, 193–94, 202–03. Although 85 percent of young people in free churches affirm the exclusiveness of their faith as the only way of salvation, many have apprehensions against foreign missions. Only 15 percent volunteered in evangelism and missions at the time of the empirica study, while 36 percent could foresee doing so in the future.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This closing chapter moves from reviewing the thesis, the research methodology, and the structure of this study to present a summary with conspicuous implications of the final diffusional patterns. Next, a reflection of potential applications includes a discussion of using the Diffusional Matrix of Conversion (DMC) for assessing diffusional patterns in other ministry contexts. A presentation of prospective research topics and a final outlook conclude this research study.

Review of Thesis and Research Methodology

The initial thesis argument of this research study was that common and unique patterns of diffusion are the causes for the process of transformational conversions across three evangelical church plants in Germany. The author chose the research approach of a qualitative multi-case study to identify diffusional patterns by comparing and contrasting selected case study churches. The research design of a multi-case study is a variation of a single case study and bears the potential of providing more robust analytical results. Case studies help to answer the questions of how or why a real-world, contemporary phenomenon occurs. Correspondingly, the research questions focused on how and why diffusional patterns affected converts. Typical for multi-case studies, the in-depth description of each separate case preceded a cross-case analysis that compared and contrasted the findings of each case.⁴⁰⁸

The process of lean coding was an essential component in analyzing data and identifying common and unique patterns during the research phase. Interviews with five church leaders and eleven converts across church plants were the most critical data sources aside from observations, online media, and written materials. Nineteen codes or diffusional sub-themes emerged in each case and across cases that shaped the description of five final diffusional patterns: multi-faceted transmission, caring translation, clear turnaround, deep transformation, and continual retransmission. Each diffusional pattern influenced the conversion process and guided individuals from their initial contact with the church to transformational conversion. Several converts came from an atheistic background or testified to their disinterest in religion. Their conversion stories reflect

408 Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 9–15, 54–62.

a missionary praxis of church plants that helped steer individuals toward conversion and transformational changes despite their adverse, secular context. Thus, the diffusional patterns reveal intriguing insights about evangelical practitioners who aspired to fulfill the Great Commission by planting churches in Germany's post-Christian environment.

Flow of Dissertation

Chapter 1 discloses the lack of qualitative research concerning the phenomenon of conversion in evangelical church planting in Germany. The introductory chapter also presents the Diffusional Matrix and a theological discussion about conversion and diffusion in the New Testament as an analytical basis for the research study. Chapter 2 places each church plant in the historical context of globally active evangelical movements: migrant missions, evangelical church planting networks, and new Pentecostal churches. Each of these movements bears the potential of imparting missionary impetus for evangelical denominations in secular Europe that have shown minimal church growth for decades. The three church plants offer examples of how missionary activism of global evangelical movements may continue to unfold in the twenty-first century.

Chapters 3 to 5 present the within-case analyses of each case study church: Hope Center in Berlin, Gospel Church Munich, and ConnectKirche Erfurt. Each chapter provides a thick description of a total of nineteen sub-themes within the five initial, diffusional patterns that emerged during the data collection and analysis. Chapter 6 describes the final diffusional patterns and their corresponding sub-themes as a result of comparing and contrasting the data across cases. This cross-case analysis interacts with the pertinent academic literature and draws salient conclusions concerning the contributing factors to transformational conversion. Lastly, Chapter 7 contributes to this research project by summarizing the research findings, highlighting pertinent implications, and proposing the Diffusional Matrix as a tool for assessing diffusional patterns in other contexts.

Summary and Implications

Multi-Faceted Transmission

The church plants engaged pre-converts with the multi-faceted transmission of the Christian message. Corporate programs of communicating the gospel relied heavily on individuals who invited non-believers from within their social

networks. Engaging potential converts with the biblical message was a core component of transmission, driven by the missionary zeal of pastoral leaders.

The research findings disclose that individuals retained a critical role in gospel transmission despite multiple church programs that communicated the Christian message to non-believers. Thus, mobilizing the church constituency for transmission seems essential for convincing secular people to participate in Christian activities and facilitate exposure to the gospel.⁴⁰⁹ A surprising discovery was that converts across church plants reported unusual or spiritual experiences contributing to their resolve in pursuing the Christian faith. In the end, the question of why some people respond positively to gospel dissemination and others negatively lies outside the control of church leaders and adds to the mystery of planting churches.⁴¹⁰ In the case study churches, a prayerful attitude and reliance on God's mysterious intervention in the lives of individuals counterbalanced the enthusiastic labor of Christian leaders at proclaiming the Christian message. This research result implies that church planting is not reducible to a business-like leadership approach in establishing new organizations. Traction with new "clients" is not solely determined by missionary zeal but also by God's supernatural work of creating spiritual receptivity and an internal call of salvation.⁴¹¹

Caring Translation

Church leaders took great diligence in relating the Christian message to converts through a careful translation of their church programs and communication. Pentecostal practices did not thwart the participants of this study from moving closer toward conversion. All converts reported that translation had its intended effect of attracting them to the respective churches and making the Christian message understandable in their language and life experience. However, the dynamics of a loving community also drew them into the church and made them "feel at home." The validity of Bartholomä's plea for evangelical churches to engage in self-reflective contextualization in their quest to evangelize secular

409 Philipp Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission: Perspektiven für den freikirchlichen Gemeindebau im nachchristlichen Kontext* [Free church with a mission: Perspectives of church planting for Free Churches in a post-Christian context] (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019), 527.

410 Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 204.

411 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 454.

people is undeniable.⁴¹² At the same time, the appeal of loving relationships and unity even within diverse communities, such as Hope Center, cannot be underestimated.⁴¹³ In harmony with Christ's prayer for the witness of a united church (Jn 17:21), case study churches placed a high value on establishing loving communities alongside careful contextualization.

Furthermore, the research about translation highlights that contextualizing both language and delivery style in communication was equally crucial to gospel translation as adjusting church programs for each local context. Church leaders found a voice among secular people because they used contemporary terminology and related the Christian message to the everyday experience of their audiences.⁴¹⁴ This research finding indicates the challenge for preachers not only to translate their messages diligently but also to explain the meaning of biblical truth fully when introducing new terminology.

Clear Turnaround

Church plants in this case study enabled conversions through clear invitations into discipleship. Although church leaders affirmed that conversions could take place as a process rather than a singular decision, they always communicated the need to make a clear turnaround from the old life of sin to the new life of following Christ. The practice of frequent calls of decision-making, which each church handled differently, reminded non-believers to make conversion a personal experience rather than merely a slow process of social integration.⁴¹⁵ Apparently, urgent and punctiliar calls for decision-making retain their significance in motivating individuals to have a personal turnaround experience even in post-Christian Europe, where individuals often go through slow conversion processes.⁴¹⁶

Additionally, each church plant presented the meaning of Christian conversion intelligibly. Even though converts reported varying degrees of doctrinal

412 Bartholomä, *Freikirche mit Mission*, 129, 149–50, 230–32.

413 Stephen D. Dye, "Mission in the Diaspora: Multicultural Churches in Urban Germany Initiated by Church Planters from the Global South" (PhD diss., Biola University, 2017), 227–32.

414 David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 179.

415 Derek J. Tidball, *Reizwort evangelikal: Entwicklung einer Frömmigkeitsbewegung* [Emotive word evangelical: Development of a piety movement], ed. Dieter Sackmann, Edition Anker (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1999), 190, 208–09.

416 Al Barth, interview by author, Dallas, June 29, 2019.

knowledge at the time of their conversion, all participants continued their spiritual progression toward discipleship. Clarity about the meaning of repentance from sin and turning toward Christ in faith for salvation laid the groundwork for transformation.⁴¹⁷ Thus, theological clarity on conversion emerged as one crucial aspect for enabling progressive transformation.

Deep Transformation

Each church guided converts to pursue deep discipleship. The discipling process occurred at various levels of organizational structure and engagement in social action, while all church plants stressed the importance of biblical teaching in fostering transformation. Spiritual or Pentecostal experiences personalized and intensified transformation even within the non-charismatic Gospel Church Munich.

The data analysis reveals that biblical formation that presumes the propositional truth of the Bible was a critical element in transformational changes and aided new believers to adopt a biblical worldview.⁴¹⁸ In the context of liberal tendencies within German evangelicalism that question the hallmarks of evangelicalism, such as an affirmation of biblical authority, research findings serve as a reminder that biblical formation stands at the heart of deep discipleship.⁴¹⁹ Moreover, the hope of lowering standards of faith so that Christians can cross the cultural divide to a secular audience does not harmonize with sociological insights into the competitiveness of evangelical churches and the experience of converts in this study.⁴²⁰ Instead, the centrality of biblical doctrines and values in discipleship across case study churches indicates that abandoning biblical conservatism will thwart the transformational changes of converts toward greater

417 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1989), 933–42.

418 David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 15 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*, ed. Keith E. Eitel, 2nd exp. and upd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018), 240; Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 312–16.

419 Friedhelm Jung, *Die deutsche evangelikale Bewegung: Grundlinien ihrer Geschichte und Theologie* [The German evangelical movement: Baselines of its history and theology], 4th ed., *Biblia et symbiotica* 8 (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2011), 208–10.

420 Jörg Stolz et al., “Das Phänomen Freikirchen in der ‘Ich-Gesellschaft’ [The phenomenon of free churches in the “Me-Society”],” in *Phänomen Freikirchen: Analysen eines wettbewerbsstarken Milieus*, vol. 5, *Culturel* (Zürich: Pano, 2014), 352–54.

Christlikeness. The authoritative, inerrant Scriptures must remain the filter for culture and prevent cultural values to supersede biblical mandates, thereby preventing syncretistic versions of transformation.⁴²¹

Furthermore, the integration into the church community, volunteerism that exposed converts to spiritual growth opportunities, and personal mentoring contributed to a progression of transformational changes. Converts across all three churches stressed the critical role of formal or informal mentors in their discipleship process.⁴²² The caring attention of mature believers who walk alongside converts in applying biblical values to their specific life circumstances, rather than organizational structures, disclosed itself as an indispensable component of deep discipleship.

Continual Retransmission

All of the church plants in this study propagated retransmission to new converts by communicating the value of evangelistic endeavors and training individuals in retransmission. Churches offered various church activities to support and engage converts in retransmission, while involvement in foreign missions remained minimal.

Notably, church leaders motivated converts to share their new faith immediately after their conversion and viewed their enthusiasm and pre-existing friendships with non-believers as an invaluable asset in propagating the Christian faith. Personal invitations to worship services and other church functions accounted for many new visitors to the respective church plants. The implication for discipleship processes is that guiding new believers in evangelism at the beginning rather than the end of progressive transformation is advantageous for evangelistically oriented churches.⁴²³ Nonetheless, sharing the gospel message personally posed a challenging task for several converts in this study, while those believers who took part in street evangelism showed less inhibition to verbal proclamation.⁴²⁴ Converts confirmed that baptism had a similar effect of

421 Keith E. Eitel, "Scriptura or Cultura: Is There a Sola in There?," *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, no. Fall 2012 (October 1, 2012): 66, 72–75

422 Karl Inge Tangen, *Ecclesial Identification Beyond Late Modern Individualism? A Case Study of Life Strategies in Growing Late Modern Churches*, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies* 10 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 196–200.

423 Kumar Abraham, "Evangelism and Discipleship," *Lausanne World Pulse Archives*, May 2007, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://bit.ly/38rqOEi>.

424 Jörg Stolz, "Hoffnung Weitergeben: Evangelisieren im Evangelisch-Freikirchlichen Milieu [Communicate hope: Evangelism in the evangelical-Free Church milieu]," in

solidifying their Christian profession. This research finding discloses that public confessions of faith invigorate young believers to share their faith more freely.

Historical Research and Theological Assessment

Each church represents a significant, global movement that influences German evangelicalism across denominational lines: migrant mission efforts, internationally operating church planting organizations such as Tim Keller's City to City network, and new Pentecostal churches. Their evangelistic zeal and commitment to contextualization offer fresh impetus for church planting among German evangelical denominations that yearn for conversion growth. Aside from their inspirational missional praxis, distinct doctrinal positions also characterized the church plants in this case study. The theological conservatism and Pentecostal orientation of many African migrant churches, for example, bear on missional trends in Western Europe and reflect global themes in the study of world Christianity.⁴²⁵ Another source for shaping the theologies of case study churches were globally operating networks, such as Bill Johnson's Bethel Church. Evangelical denominations face the challenge of discerning the validity of various theological trends, such as the prosperity gospel, that exert a growing influence in Germany.⁴²⁶ Is it possible to retain unity around foundational convictions, such as Bebbington's quadrilateral definition of evangelicalism, while tolerating divergent approaches to a gospel of health and wealth?⁴²⁷ Scripture points to an unrelenting commitment of theological discernment and mutual correction toward unified, Christian maturity under the headship of Christ and His authoritative Word (Eph 4:14-16, 2 Tm 3:14-17).

Potential Applications

The section Methodology and Delimitation in Chapter 1 clarifies that this multi-case study did not seek to prove or disprove causes for conversion growth. Instead, the qualitative research allowed for a rich description of each unique

Phänomen Freikirchen: Analysen eines wettbewerbsstarken Milieus, ed. Philippe Borner et al., vol. 5, Culturel (Zürich: Pano, 2014), 220–33.

425 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8–10, Kindle.

426 Matthias Ehmann, "Pentecostal Mission: A German Free Church Perspective," *International Review of Mission* 107, no. 1 (2018): 76.

427 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1988), 13–45.

case and the corresponding diffusional patterns across all three church plants. External validity, the generalization of research findings, is problematic since the strength of qualitative case studies is to provide in-depth descriptions rather than generalizations based on substantial amounts of quantitative data. The author agrees with Lincoln and Guba's caution to place the responsibility of discerning how emerging patterns are transferable in particular settings on the readers of the study.⁴²⁸ Paas also warns Christian leaders of copying church models with the hope to produce similar results in other contexts while not taking into consideration case-specific factors that are not replicable.⁴²⁹ Thus, each church leader needs to determine how far principles and practices are transferable to their settings and might have a similar impact as in the case study churches. Retranslation will be inevitable but may create new and fertile pathways to evangelical gospel diffusion in Germany. However, while the diffusional patterns that emerged from this study may not be prescriptive, they may be instructive to church leaders for fostering transformational conversions in their ministries, particularly in church planting settings.

In this respect, the Diffusional Matrix of Conversion (DMC) can serve as a heuristic tool for retranslation. The DMC provides a grid for church leaders to become aware of and analyze ministry patterns that encompass the entire process of gospel diffusion and transformational conversion. One advantage of the Diffusional Matrix, compared with other models such as The Gray Matrix, is that it integrates translation in the analysis of diffusion.⁴³⁰ This addition helps leaders become aware of the critical influence of contextualization on shaping the conversion and transformation of converts. Another advantage is that the Diffusional Matrix highlights conversion as the pivotal point to translate the gospel message into local contexts. An analysis of how churches present the gospel, provide opportunities for decision-making, and affirm conversion as a process will shed light on whether current practices might help or hinder evangelical conversion. Leadership teams may also discuss, for example, their current practice of connecting conversion with discipleship and ponder the role of rituals in this transitional phase. A third benefit of using the DMC as an analytical tool is that church leaders can pre-determine paths toward discipleship and

428 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 45; Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985), 298.

429 Paas, *Church Planting*, 203–04.

430 Frank Gray, "The Matrix," *The Gray Matrix*, accessed January 7, 2021, <https://bit.ly/397RqZC>.

the organizational level suitable for their contexts. A fourth advantage of the Diffusional Matrix is that it integrates retransmission as a natural component of analyzing the conversion process, reminding church leaders of the critical role of converts in recruiting new potential believers. Retransmission also conveys that churches need to incorporate cross-cultural missions as a vital component of discipleship. Finally, the DMC invites non-believers and converts to participate in the translation process, stimulating cross-fertilization in the formidable task of contextualization. The basic questionnaire of the DMC, along with its non-exhaustive list of research topics, can serve as a springboard toward a rich interaction between converts and church leaders about shaping transformational conversion in each local context. As evangelical leaders apply the Diffusional Matrix of Conversion to their contexts through cross-fertilization, Andrew Walls's pilgrim and indigenous principle, of which one cannot have "too much of one or the other," can diffuse the blessings of orthodox biblical teachings in culture-specific manifestations.⁴³¹

Prospective Research Topics

The study of three evangelical church plants offered significant insights into the diffusion of the gospel and transformational conversion in post-Christian Germany. Several potential research topics surfaced due to the limitations of this qualitative multi-case study. First, diffusional patterns in the transmission of the gospel unveiled mystical elements that contributed to the converts' resolve in pursuing the Christian faith. Conversion research investigating variations in the influence of spiritual or emotional experiences on new believers would shed further light on common and divergent patterns in these so-called contingency factors, especially by comparing Pentecostal and non-charismatic evangelical churches in Germany.⁴³²

Second, the case studies highlighted the positive effect of loving communities on individuals to move toward conversion. Future research could address how German evangelical churches foster loving relationships and how this affects evangelism. What are the conducive patterns to guide churches toward loving unity?⁴³³

431 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 54.

432 Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 138–42.

433 Tangen, *Ecclesial Identification*, 310–13, 193–96.

Third, a difference between church plants with an Arminian and Reformed heritage became evident in their practice of providing decision-making opportunities for conversion.⁴³⁴ Although participants in this study responded positively to the call of conversion, it is unclear how far direct calls for conversion also led to more superficial conversions that did not transition toward transformation. A comparative, quantitative, or mixed-method study between German churches of both theological tendencies would reveal pertinent implications for missionary praxis.

Fourth, this multi-case study focused on converts who did, in fact, move from conversion to transformational changes. The research did not entail questioning participants who left their congregations after their conversion or renounced their faith, possibly giving an overly positive impression of case study churches that share the struggles and imperfections of all disciple-making churches. A study of individuals exposed to the same diffusional patterns but who discontinued their discipleship process or deconverted could enrich the insights into ecclesial practices of discipleship.⁴³⁵ In addition, a follow-up study with interviewees in this research project in five to ten years could shed further light on the longevity of transformational changes among converts.

Fifth, converts had not participated in foreign missions work at the time of this research project, partially due to the relatively young age of the church plants and the COVID-19 pandemic. Evangelical scholars, such as Keith Eitel, hope for the cross-cultural retransmission of the gospel through biblically faithful churches.⁴³⁶ Research in German evangelical churches that successfully enlist their constituency in cross-cultural missions would offer valuable insights for church planters planning for retransmission at the outset of their ministries.

Finally, the historical research disclosed how each church plant represents a new movement of German evangelicalism that provides fresh impetus for conversions and church planting: second-generation migrant churches, transnational church planting networks such as City to City, and new Pentecostal churches. A comparative study of church plants within each of these movements

434 Eddie Gibbs, "Conversion in Evangelistic Practice," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1992), 277–78.

435 Gooren, *Religious Conversion*, 142.

436 Keith E. Eitel, "World Christianity," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John M. Terry (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), "History Lives Again: A Fresh Look."

would shed light on diffusional patterns that exert a growing influence across German evangelical denominations.

Outlook

Jürgen Moltmann made the provocative statement that “the future of the church is the free church,” marked by a new missionary passion in sharing the gospel.⁴³⁷ If current trends of membership loss among mainline churches of Germany continue, Moltmann’s prediction may come true. The evangelical churches in this multi-case study reveal a missionary vigor and ability to capture the attention of secular Germans. Their adherents represent part of the new mosaic of lived Christianity in post-Christian Europe. How the deep transformation of converts in their social context takes place depends on the perception and facilitation of conversion by Christian leaders. Each church plant shapes conversion in its translation of gospel diffusion. The growing influence of migrant missionaries, new Pentecostal churches, and global church planting networks take part in this diffusional process. Evangelicals hope that God’s will, as revealed in the Scriptures, determines and continually reshapes the transformation of converts and churches toward an ever-growing Christlikeness, flowing into the retransmission of the gospel locally and across the globe.⁴³⁸

437 “Theologe Moltmann: Die Zukunft der Kirche ist Freikirchlich [Theologian Moltmann: The future of the church is the free church],” *evangelisch.de*, Gemeinschaftswerk der Evangelischen Publizistik (GEP) gGmbH, November 29, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2HO9Svd>.

438 Eitel, “World Christianity,” “History Lives Again: A Fresh Look.”

Appendix 1 Examples of Analytical Schemes

The Matrix for Conversion Processes

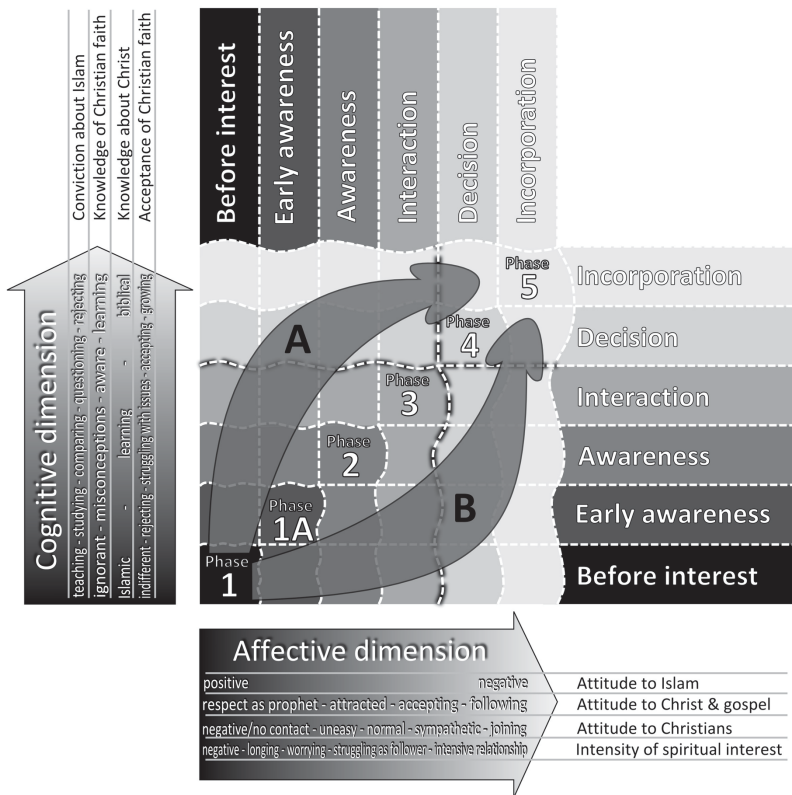


Fig. 3. The Matrix for Conversion Processes. Reinhold Strähler. “Coming to Faith in Christ: Case Studies of Muslims in Kenya” (DMiss diss., University of South Africa, 2009), 198.

The Gray Matrix

Laying a Pathway (for Person X)

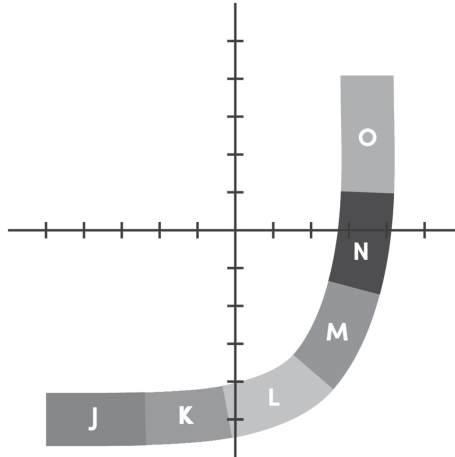



Fig. 4. Frank Gray, “The Gray Matrix: Getting the Message Across” (PowerPoint presentation, 2021), <https://thegraymatrix.org/index.php/downloads/>. Each alphabetical letter represents a program tailored to pre-converts or new believers, depending on their responsiveness to the gospel. The vertical axis displays a change from less to more knowledge (moving from bottom to top). The horizontal axis represents the attitude of a convert progressing from closed (left) to open (right).

Appendix 2 Diffusional Matrix of Conversion

| DIFFUSIONAL PROCESS | TRANSMISSION | TRANSLATION | TURNAROUND | TRANSFORMATION | RETRANSMISSION |
|---|--|--|---|---|---|
| ANALYZING DIFFUSION: RESEARCH TOPICS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local and historical context • Individuals • Church programs • Use of media • Biblical content • Christian message • Leadership motivation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual and cultural context • Leadership background • Programs and communication • Characteristics of community • Participation of local converts • Biblical authority and cultural influences • Global networks | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theological understanding of conversion • Facilitation of conversion • Decision-making • Understanding of point and process of conversion • Connection between conversion and discipleship • Rituals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church programs • Behavior, belief, and worldview changes • Relational and cultural changes • Religious practices • Political views • Social action • Ecological concerns • Dissonance • Biblical authority | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation for retransmission • Facilitation and training • Local evangelism • Cross-cultural missions • Social versus gospel focus • Verbal and other forms of communication • Use of media • Challenges to retransmission • Global networks |
| INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CONVERTS | How did you hear? | How did you relate and understand? | How did you turn around? | How did you change? | How did you retell and change? |
| INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS | How did you tell? | How did you relate and explain? | How did you facilitate turnaround? | How did you facilitate change? | How did you facilitate retransmission? |
| PROCESS OF GOSPEL DIFFUSION PROCESS OF CONVERSION  | | | | | |

Appendix 3 Extended Methodology

The methodological approach to study patterns of diffusion in German church plants was a multi-case study. This section provides an overview of this qualitative research method and addresses the design of the study, the selection of samples, the collection and analysis of data, and concerns of validity and reliability.⁴³⁹ The final section focuses on the academic study of conversion, the mis-siological and theological approach in studying conversion, and the authenticity of conversion narratives.

Design of the Study

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research allows the researcher to “get at the inner experience of participants, to determine how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables.”⁴⁴⁰ Congruently, understanding the phenomenon from the participant’s rather than the researcher’s view is a critical component of a qualitative study. Since the primary interest of this research study was to discover what factors contributed to the conversion of Germans, especially from the convert’s perspective, a qualitative research design was most fitting as a research method and corresponded to the overall emphasis on the recipients of the gospel in the academic field of World Christian Studies.

A further characteristic of qualitative research is to gather data and build concepts or theories inductively. This inductive approach to research does not exclude the use of theoretical frameworks, informed through academic literature, that provides a focus for analysis. Additionally, the Diffusional Matrix of Conversion (DMC) served as a theoretical framework to gather and process data in each case study inductively according to themes and sub-themes. A flexible

439 This methodological section follows the basic outline suggested by Sharan Merriam. Sharan B. Merriam, “Appendix: The Methodology Section of a Qualitative Research Study,” in *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, by Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, 4th ed., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 293–99.

440 Juliet M. Corbin and Anselm L. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2008), 12.

approach during the research process of the case studies allowed for unexpected findings to alter or add to anticipated themes.⁴⁴¹

Multi-Case Study as a Qualitative Research Method

Case studies help to answer the questions of “how” or “why” a real-world, contemporary phenomenon occurs. Yin defines a case study according to its scope when he states that a case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.”⁴⁴² On the other hand, Merriam defines case studies as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system,” making the case as a unit with specific boundaries the most defining aspect.⁴⁴³ Bounding the case serves the need to show how an abstract concept reveals itself in a real-world setting. Various boundaries of the case, such as spatial and temporal boundaries, also help tie the case to the research questions and set parameters for the data collection. A study of several cases is called a multi-case study and is simply the variation of a single case study. A cross-case analysis between cases follows an in-depth description of each separate case. Yin recommends at least two cases in a research design to counter the criticism of non-conclusive conditions of a single case and provide greater analytical strength.⁴⁴⁴

A multi-case study design was the best choice for this research project for several reasons. First, the primary research question fits well with the descriptive and explanatory nature of questions in case studies, seeking an explanation of how different aspects of the diffusion of the gospel contributed to conversion. Second, the study aimed at offering an in-depth description of the experience

441 Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 18–19, 85–95; Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2018), 34–36. Maxwell speaks of *concept maps* that can display existing theory and develop theory further. Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, 3rd ed., Applied Social Research Methods v. 41 (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013), 54.

442 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 15, 9–15.

443 Sharan B. Merriam, “Qualitative Case Studies,” in *International Encyclopedia of Education*, ed. Penelope Peterson, Eva Baker, and Barry McGaw (Amsterdam: Elsevier Academic, 2010), 456.

444 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 17, 31–32, 54–62.

of conversion. In this multi-case study, this was possible by drawing on multiple sources of data such as observations and interviews in evangelical church plants to provide information from various perspectives. Third, each case represented a bounded system where the abstract phenomenon of conversion manifested itself in the “real-world” context of an evangelical church plant, and the individual experience of conversion interlinked with the context of church planting.

The following boundaries of case study churches ensured their comparability and the ability to conduct in-depth research. Each church plant shared evangelical theological convictions to make a comparison possible and shed further light on their missional engagement in Germany. The selection of church plants that started no later than the year 2010 posed a time limit and guaranteed that church plants conducted their ministries in a comparative, cultural context. The limitation of three church plants allowed for in-depth research and producing significant findings by drawing on data from multiple cases. The case study research itself took place from October 25, 2019, to May 19, 2020.

Philosophical and Theological Assumptions

Merriam and Tisdell state that most qualitative research is interpretive in nature and assumes that “reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality.”⁴⁴⁵ Consequently, qualitative research aims to describe and understand rather than to predict or control, which is the goal of research based on a positivist epistemology.⁴⁴⁶

Since the primary goal of this research study is to describe and understand patterns of diffusion in unique church planting settings rather than to predict or control, this qualitative study harmonizes with a constructivist approach to qualitative research. Simultaneously, the author’s worldview presumes a single, observable reality, resting on a hermeneutical perspective that affirms the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the supra-cultural validity of the gospel, and the inerrancy of Scripture as inspired writings.⁴⁴⁷ Hiebert’s critical realist epistemology builds a bridge between a constructivist and positivist view by affirming

445 Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 9.

446 Merricam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 12.

447 The view of a single and observable reality correlates with Yin’s realist orientation of “a single reality that is independent of any observer.” Yin, *Case Study Research*, 16; David J Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 15 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*, ed. Keith E. Eitel, 2nd exp. and upd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018), 222–25.

the existence of “true truth” but acknowledging that all truth is conditioned by human perception.⁴⁴⁸ Consequently, the author of this study agrees with the limitations of human subjectivity but also believes an understanding of “true truth” is possible and that patterns of gospel diffusion in unique settings bear the potential of application in other settings.

Sample Selection

The choice of which church plant to study and which participants to interview is called *purposeful sampling*.⁴⁴⁹ In purposeful sampling, the researcher picks cases precisely because they promise to offer rich information and new insights into a particular phenomenon.⁴⁵⁰ The researcher of this study employed the sampling strategies of extreme cases, maximum variation, and two-tier sampling to choose specific cases and the participants within each case.

First, all three church plants represented unusual or extreme cases.⁴⁵¹ Church plants with high conversion growth of Germans and significant efforts in gospel translation were unusual cases in light of the crisis of contemporary mission work in Germany. Thus, they indicated the potential of providing new insights and reveal common patterns of gospel diffusion in the secular context of Germany.

Second, the author of this study applied maximum variation sampling to choose church plants strikingly different from each other. On the one hand, Creswell states that maximum variation “increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives—an ideal in qualitative research.”⁴⁵² On the other hand, common patterns among very different cases “take on added

448 Paul G. Hiebert, “The Gospel in Human Contexts: Changing Perceptions of Contextualization,” in *Missionshift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave, Ed Stetzer, and John Mark Terry (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 279–85; Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 9; David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 141–43.

449 John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2018), 157–60.

450 Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 45–46.

451 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 50, 54–62. Yin explains the need for *literal replication* in choosing cases in a multi-case study. Literal replication, predicting comparable, exemplary outcomes under similar conditions, guided the selection of church plants in this study.

452 Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 158.

importance precisely because they emerge out of great variation.”⁴⁵³ The cases in this study exhibited variation because of their theological orientation and cultural background as a migrant church plant, a non-charismatic church plant, and a Pentecostal church plant. At the same time, they shared features such as their report of high conversion growth, evangelical convictions, and influences from globally active, evangelical networks.

Third, a two-tier sampling strategy at two levels was necessary since the multi-case study required a selection of church plants and the second choice of participants within each church plant.⁴⁵⁴ The most important criteria for choosing interview partners was that they were Germans who experienced a radical conversion through the ministry of the church plant. Some of the participants had a migrant background but were German citizens who grew up in secular Germany. This selection promised the most significant insights for the entire process of diffusion and conversion as laid out in the Diffusional Matrix. Senior pastors served as “gatekeepers” to help identify converts with a transformational conversion experience.⁴⁵⁵

Data Collection

Yin states that “a major strength of case study data collection is the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence.”⁴⁵⁶ Multiple data sources are necessary to study a phenomenon in-depth and in its real-life context adequately. Furthermore, the convergent data provide the basis for data triangulation, a comparison between data sources, thereby adding to the construct validity of the case study.⁴⁵⁷ This multi-case study used interviews, direct observation, documents, and audiovisual material as data sources.⁴⁵⁸ The translation of German sources into English preceded the data analysis.

453 Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 235.

454 Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 99–101. Yin speaks about *embedded units* within each case. Yin, *Case Study Research*, 60.

455 Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 156, 159. Creswell and Poth call the process of receiving references for other individuals *snow-ball sampling*.

456 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 126.

457 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 127–29.

458 John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2014), 190–93.

Interviews

Interviews are an indispensable data source in case study research. Interviews enable the researcher to understand the perspective of the participant. Yin points out that “interviews can especially help by suggesting explanations (i.e., the “how’s” and “why’s”) of key events, as well as the insights reflecting participants’ relativist perspectives.”⁴⁵⁹ Since this study concerned the transformational experience of conversion, interviews of individual converts presented a crucial information source.

All converts participated in a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews are useful to capture “the emerging worldview of the respondent” and work with a list of questions without a pre-determined order or fixed wording, enabling a flexible approach to adjust the interview questions according to the flow of the interview. Appendix 8 contains the list of interview questions for converts and church leaders.⁴⁶⁰ One convert in each church plant took part in an oral history interview to capture a historical record of their conversion experience. Oral history interviews preserve “memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews” and work with open-ended questions so participants can share their personal stories.⁴⁶¹

Two pre-selected church leaders at ConnectKirche Erfurt (CKE) participated in a focus group interview. Focus group interviews collect data from people who are knowledgeable concerning the topic of interest. In a group setting, the unfolding conversation helps participants to refine and verbalize their understanding. Furthermore, focus groups can help to surface topics that are not usually part of everyday conversations. Thus, the focus group setting assisted church leaders to verbalize their understanding of such concepts as contextualization, which are foundational for their church praxis, but possibly remained silent assumptions within the leadership team. The author of this study created audio recordings and transcriptions of all interviews and used the voice recognition software f4x to shorten the transcription process. This method ensured the preservation of information for data analysis and helped the researcher stay close to the data.⁴⁶²

459 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 118, 118–21.

460 Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 110–11.

461 Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1, 80–81.

462 Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 114–15, 131–36; “F4x Automatische Spracherkennung [F4x automatic speech recognition],” Audiotranskription, dr.

Observation

Direct observation was another critical data source during the fieldwork. Observations differ from interviews in that they represent a first-hand encounter of the phenomenon in its real-world setting. The author of this study joined worship services and Bible studies as a participant-observer, which meant that the researcher took part in activities, other participants knew about the purpose of attendance, while the primary focus remained on collecting the data. Observations were recorded with unstructured or semi-structured field notes during the visits to capture the diffusional aspects of the church plants' ministry as they occurred. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, observations of a Bible study at Gospel Church Munich (GCM) and all worship services at ConnectKirche Erfurt took place online. At CKE, this researcher remained an anonymous observer.⁴⁶³

Documents and Audiovisual Material

Documents and audiovisual materials represent an excellent data source since an observer's presence does not alter the information, and participants often produce the documents with careful attention to their content. Nevertheless, the documents may contain only partially helpful information since they were not created for the specific purpose of this study.⁴⁶⁴ This researcher collected bulletins, church training documents, reports, and articles from all three church plants. Websites and social media platforms supplied additional written and audiovisual material.

Translation Issues

The primary language for all documents and participant interviews was German. Church leaders and converts in the migrant church spoke German fluently, even if their mother tongue was different. Naturally, all interviews took place in the German language. The researcher of this study, bilingual in English and German, first created German transcripts of the interviews and then translated the interviews into English. The coding of all interviews, documents, and

dressing & pehl GmbH, accessed January 7, 2021, <https://www.audiotranskription.de/f4x>.

463 Creswell, *Research Design*, 190–91; Yin, *Case Study Research*, 121–25; Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 137, 144–45, 158–60.

464 Creswell, *Research Design*, 190–93; Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 180–83.

audiovisual materials took place in English. Since the translation from one language to another can create difficulties in preserving the original meaning of words and concepts, this author quoted noteworthy German words or sayings in the case study reports, followed by the English translation.⁴⁶⁵

Data Analysis

The data analysis of this multi-case study was inductive since the goal was to compare and contrast cases and identify emerging, common patterns among the church plants. The following section lays out the understanding of simultaneous data analysis, the overall research strategy, and the coding of data to analyze the research findings.

Simultaneous Data Analysis and Saturation

In qualitative research, data analysis occurs simultaneously with data collection. Higher levels of abstraction and overall themes emerge as new data become apparent. The writing of memos is part of this research approach of continuously processing and analyzing the data. Creswell and Poth emphasize that writing memos should be a priority and occur at every level of analysis “as a way of tracking the evolution of codes and theme development.”⁴⁶⁶ The author of this study continuously wrote memos to capture new insights and begin the analysis during and shortly after interviews and observations. Although the author set an initial limit to the number of field visits and interviews, ending the data collection remained open. This procedure allowed research to continue up to the point of saturation when no further information surfaced during field research.⁴⁶⁷

Step-by-Step Analysis

Yin points out that the analysis of qualitative research offers no preset models and requires researchers to determine analytical strategies proactively. This research study applied the following steps in an overall strategy for analysis.

The first step in the research process began with the collection and simultaneous, initial analysis of data. The data consisted of interview recordings,

465 Cigdem Esin, Mastoureh Fathi, and Corinne Squire, “Narrative Analysis: The Constructionist Approach,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, ed. Uwe Flick (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2014), 208.

466 Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 188.

467 Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 195–99.

documents, website information, audiovisual material, and notes from field visits. All data were entered into a case study database that made all information accessible for analysis after initially editing redundant information. The software program MAXQDA served as a research database to assist in the coding process. After data entry, the researcher assigned codes to each data unit according to common themes that evolved from the data. This process proceeded for each church plant separately and consecutively in a within-case analysis to enable an in-depth description and analysis of each case.

As a second step, a cross-case analysis compared and contrasted the data to discover common or divergent patterns across cases. The goal was to find explanations for the conversion of Germans guided by the research question and sub-questions of this study. The analysis in two stages helped to preserve the holistic nature of a case study approach and the integrity of presenting within-case patterns in their context.⁴⁶⁸

Coding

The process of coding the data is central to managing and analyzing data in qualitative research. A code attributes meaning to data units to build interpretive patterns. Saldaña explains that a code “is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data.”⁴⁶⁹ This research project adopted Creswell and Poth’s model of *lean coding* and applied it to the data analysis in this multi-case study. Lean coding begins with collecting data into a limited number of five to six initial codes, which prevents difficulties in describing the emerging themes because of an overabundance of codes at the beginning stage of research. Each initial code in this study corresponded to one of the five patterns of the Diffusional Matrix. The continual comparison of data within and across cases led to clustering recurring patterns into a final list of nineteen expanded codes or diffusional sub-themes.⁴⁷⁰ Code names emerged from both expected information through the literature review and unexpected findings. The frequent

468 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 130–34, 194–99; Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 204–26.

469 Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2016), 4.

470 Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 190–92. Appendix 4 contains the codebook that defines each expanded code. This study uses the terms pattern and theme interchangeably.

pattern and expanded code Moved by Spiritual Experiences, for example, surprised the author of this study during the data collection. The reduction into eight final codes laid the foundation to describe the emerging diffusional themes generated from the data analysis: multi-faceted transmission, caring translation, clear turnaround, deep transformation, and continual retransmission.⁴⁷¹

Validity and Reliability

Merriam and Tisdell note that “all research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner.”⁴⁷² They differentiate the trustworthiness of qualitative research between internal validity, reliability, and external validity. This research project applied the proceeding strategies to ensure its validity and reliability. An explanation of ethical standards adds to establishing the integrity of this research project.⁴⁷³

Internal Validity

Internal validity answers the question of whether the research findings describe the reality of the case accurately. In other words, does the researcher accurately describe people’s understanding of their world?⁴⁷⁴ Strategies to ensure internal validity include data triangulation, a prolonged engagement in field studies, engaging rival explanations, and a discussion of the author’s potential biases.

First, data triangulation consists of drawing on multiple data sources to confirm the same findings and “develop converging lines of inquiry.”⁴⁷⁵ In this study, data triangulation compared findings across observations, interviews, written materials, and audiovisual sources.

Second, extensive fieldwork allows researchers to “build rapport with participants and gatekeepers,” discern recurring themes, and check for divergent information.⁴⁷⁶ Thus, the researcher can collect an adequate amount of data. Although the research took place in three different cities across Germany, this researcher was able to visit Hope Center in Berlin (HCB) three times, Gospel

471 Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 190–95. Appendix 5 offers an overview of the coding procedure.

472 Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 237.

473 Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 237–66; Yin, *Case Study Research*, 42–47, 86–87; Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 254–64.

474 Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 242.

475 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 127, 126–29.

476 Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 262.

Church in Munich two times, attend various church activities during the visits, and conduct interviews on location. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, one visit at GCM, all three visits of worship services at ConnectKirche Erfurt, and most interviews in both churches had to take place online.

Third, the comparison with the initial interpretation and rival explanations of the data is critical to reveal if the researcher's interpretation offers the best explanation. Consequently, the author of this study interacted with divergent views of the pertinent academic literature in the cross-case analysis to generate the most fitting explanations for the phenomenon of conversion as they occurred across the case study churches.⁴⁷⁷

A fourth strategy for ensuring internal validity is to discuss the researcher's perspectives and assumptions openly. The researcher is the primary instrument to collect and analyze the data in qualitative research and has shortcomings that influence the research process. Therefore, it is crucial to clarify the researcher's viewpoints.⁴⁷⁸

Researchers "declare their bias so readers can judge how successfully they bracketed it," contributing to the research study's robustness.⁴⁷⁹ The author of this study views Christian conversion and evangelical church planting in Germany positively. He experienced a radical conversion that led to a profound change of beliefs, behavior, and worldview, active participation in a German evangelical church, and foreign missions work. Thus, the author has a profound, personal interest in learning about the transformation of converts. Also, he adheres to a non-charismatic evangelical theology. An adequate self-awareness of the author's predispositions helped him be aware of potentially neglecting negative aspects of evangelical conversion, critiquing partial transformation too harshly, or holding an overly critical attitude toward Pentecostal expressions of faith.

Reliability

The reliability of a research study traditionally rests on whether repeating the same study would generate the same results. Since human behavior continually changes and exact replication of people and circumstances is problematic, Meriam and Tisdell prefer to base the reliability of qualitative research on the

477 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 172–74. Yin offers a detailed description of addressing rival explanations.

478 Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 261.

479 Richard L. Starcher, Leanne M. Dzubinski, and Jamie N. Sanchez, "Rigorous Missiological Research Using Qualitative Inquiry," *Missiology* 46, no. 1 (2018): 53.

consistency between the results and the research data. In addition to the triangulation of data and an awareness of the researcher's position as strategies to ensure reliability, the researcher created an *audit trail* that documents the process of collecting and analyzing data. An account of the audit trail was stored in the software program MAXQDA.⁴⁸⁰

External Validity

External validity deals with the question of whether the findings of a study are applicable in other situations; in other words, if the findings are “generalizable beyond the immediate study.”⁴⁸¹ Since the strength of qualitative case studies is to provide an in-depth description of unique cases rather than generalizations from large amounts of quantitative data, generating proof for generalizations is problematic. Lincoln and Guba prefer the term *transferability* to place the responsibility of making applications in other settings on the reader of the study, who is more knowledgeable to discern how the emerging patterns are transferable in their setting.⁴⁸² This study employed two strategies, thick description and maximum variation, to increase the ability to make well-informed choices concerning transferability.

A thick description consists of a detailed description of the setting, participants, and the study's findings. Each within-case study addresses and reports these topics in rich detail. Additionally, Robert Stake explains that “with its own unique history, the case is a complex entity operating within a number of contexts,” such as the historical or cultural context.⁴⁸³ This research study includes a description of each location, a history of each church plant, and a chapter on their historical context to offer broader viewpoints on the local phenomenon of gospel diffusion.

The validation strategy of maximum variation between cases and interview partners increases the study's broadness and the possibility of applying findings in varying settings.⁴⁸⁴ Variation in this multi-case study existed because of the theological and cultural differences of a migrant church plant, a non-charismatic

480 Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 250–53.

481 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 45.

482 Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 296–98, 316.

483 R. E. Stake, “Case Studies,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 439–40.

484 Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 256–58.

church plant, and a German Pentecostal church plant. Interview partners showed variation to a limited extent based on gender and age.

Ethical Standards

Qualitative research that engages closely with participants and studies human behavior requires strict ethical standards to ensure the researcher's integrity and to protect the rights of the participants. Yin states that "the need for protecting human subjects comes from the fact that nearly all case studies are about human affairs."⁴⁸⁵ Creswell urges researchers to anticipate ethical issues and suggests several strategies to safeguard ethical conduct during each phase of the research process.⁴⁸⁶ This research study employed the following ethical safeguards before the beginning of the study, at the time of the data collection, and the study's conclusion.

Before the beginning of the study, the leading pastor of each church plant received a written explanation about the purpose and process of the case study. Each church leader also gave written approval for the conduct of the study by signing a consent form (see Appendix 6). Also, leaders had the freedom to change the name of their church in the study, thereby protecting the church's identity and avoiding unwanted publicity.

At the beginning of the study and data collection, each interview participant received a written explanation of the research purpose and gave written consent for the participation and publication of their interviews. Appendix 7 contains the consent forms for interview participants. The researcher of this study replaced the names of all converts who took part in interviews with a pseudonym. This procedure warranted protecting the participant's privacy and created a safe environment for converts to share sensitive information about their personal conversion experience. Oral history participants and church leaders were quoted with their real names after prior approval. Each interviewee was allowed to withdraw their permission at any time during the active research phase. This research complies with the European General Data Protection Regulation.⁴⁸⁷ According to EUREC, the European Network of Research Ethics Committees, the legislation of the European Union in research ethics includes none of the

485 Yin, *Case Study Research*, 88, 86–89.

486 Creswell, *Research Design*, 92–101.

487 "Legislation," European Data Protection Supervisor, accessed March 2, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3bRWQt1>.

research conducted in this dissertation. The legislation is about clinical trials.⁴⁸⁸ All research data were stored in the password-protected personal computer of the researcher during and at the conclusion of the study. The software program MAXQDA contains all raw data and coding information.

The Study of Conversion

A short overview of the academic study of conversion offers the context for choosing a theological and missiological approach in this research project about conversion. Since interviews with converts constitute a primary data source, a discussion about the validity of conversion narratives concludes the methodological section.

Academic Perspective on the Study of Conversion

Rambo and Farhadian elucidate in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* that scholars from various academic disciplines began to study the phenomenon of conversion by the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸⁹ In the field of psychology, Harvard professor William James portrayed conversion as a subjective, inner experience and a radical reorientation. James offers his famous definition of conversion in his seminal book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: Conversion is “the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.”⁴⁹⁰

The current research trend about conversion favors an interdisciplinary approach that includes perspectives from academic fields such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and theology. In 1993, Lewis Rambo presented a heuristic seven-stage conversion model in his book *Understanding Religious Conversion* that integrates the aforementioned academic perspectives. His seven stages of conversion consist of context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment,

488 “Legislation: European Union,” Eurec: European Network of Research Ethics Committees, accessed March 2, 2021, <https://bit.ly/303JLYf>.

489 Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

490 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. (The Floating Press, 1902), 271.

and consequences.⁴⁹¹ Today, the focus has shifted to study conversions in as many religions as possible, capturing the plethora of religious expressions while not disregarding the importance of researching local phenomena of conversion in their unique cultural contexts.⁴⁹²

Rambo and Farhadian point to future caveats of research that will shape conversion studies. For example, globalization not only moves research interests from conversion to include all religions but also highlights globalizing forces that influence local religious expressions. The historical chapter in this research project traces the impact of global networks on shaping conversion in each of the three case study churches. Another new field of interest is the phenomenology of conversion, highlighting the unique, individual experience of converts versus the conversion standards set by religious groups. This study discloses how spiritual and Pentecostal applications of faith, such as healings and God encounters, shaped the conversion experience of individuals across varying faith traditions. Moreover, Rambo and Farhadian interpose that cognitive and neuropsychological perspectives may question the authenticity of spiritual occurrences or add to a scientific, biological description of conversion without denying transcendent realities. They also suggest that psychological studies should address cultural factors to supply a rich explanation of conversion within particular cultural communities.⁴⁹³

The author of this research project focused on a missiological and theological approach to study conversion in German evangelical church plants. Herny Gooren underlines the benefit of theological insights in the sociological study of conversion.⁴⁹⁴ Religious and theological perspectives help to understand the meaning both converts and religious groups place on authentic conversion and transformation.⁴⁹⁵ Since this research study traced diffusional patterns in churches that affected conversion processes, it was crucial to understand how each Christian community perceived genuine conversion and transformation. Furthermore, Rambo and Baumann indicate the need for research that addresses the relationship between the advocates for conversion and the converts.⁴⁹⁶

491 Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 16–17.

492 Rambo and Farhadian, “Introduction,” 10.

493 Rambo and Farhadian, “Introduction,” 11–16.

494 Henri Gooren, “Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 3 (September 2007): 348.

495 Rambo and Farhadian, “Introduction,” 13.

496 Lewis Rambo and Steven Bauman, “Psychology of Conversion and Spiritual Transformation,” *Pastoral Psychology* 61, no. 5/6 (December 2012): 885–86.

A missiological perspective aided in interpreting diffusional patterns that interrelate the missionary activities of churches with the experiences of converts.

The Authenticity of Conversion Narratives

Reinhold Strähler raises the principal issue of whether the reports or narratives of converts about their conversion experience are valid data sources. He addresses three specific concerns of credibility: 1. Are conversion stories factually true or invented by converts? 2. Is the biographical reconstruction of conversion as an event of the past reliable? 3. Is the inner, subjective experience of conversion verifiable?⁴⁹⁷

First, the author of this research study took several steps to ensure that the converts' stories were authentic and credible reports about actual events and personal changes in their conversion process. Each of the participants was picked by pastors as trustworthy cases of transformational conversion in their churches. Pastors knew converts personally over an extended period, and each convert was an active church member at the time of the interview. Thus, the endorsement of converts by pastors and their relational integration in the church community made converts' reports credible and verifiable.

During the interview, clarifying questions helped converts to reiterate specific incidents and describe circumstances more accurately. For example, the researcher asked Andreas at GCM a follow-up question to provide more details about the utilization of his business in social action and retransmission. Also, the author interacted with participants after the interviews through email or WhatsApp messages to clarify such matters as the time of key events. The author asked Andrea at HCB in a follow-up email, for example, about the exact dates of her first church attendance, her participation in a dance competition, and her baptism.

Some of the participants converted to Christianity recently and were only at the beginning stages of transformational changes. Vanessa at CKE, a new convert, stated that she affirmed the Bible as God's Word but admitted that she had never thought about this question before the interview. It is always possible that converts like Vanessa deconvert again despite their present convictions and allegiance to the church. Rambo and Farhadian highlight that "few conversions . . . are total, complete, irreversible. Human beings are always on the move."⁴⁹⁸

497 Reinhold Immanuel Strähler, "Coming to Faith in Christ: Case Studies of Muslims in Kenya" (DMiss diss., University of South Africa, 2009), 99–103.

498 Rambo and Farhadian, "Introduction," 16.

Nonetheless, Vanessa's admission does not invalidate the truthfulness of her transformational change as a result of conversion at CKE. Her report remains a salient data source to discover diffusional patterns and their effects on converts, especially in triangulating the data with other sources such as observations, documents, and interviews with church leaders. The question of whether the same diffusional patterns engender a long-term transformation of converts would need to be part of a different research study.

Second, converts tend to reinterpret their past conversion experience in light of new religious convictions, putting the reliability of their reports in question. The language itself contributes to how converts reinterpret their world. Rambo explains that a "language transformation and biographical reconstruction" occurs as converts describe their past conversion.⁴⁹⁹ David Snow and Richard Machalek coined the term *biographical reconstruction* as the convert's reframing of the past where "dis-jointed pieces are reassembled in accordance with the new universe of discourse and its grammar."⁵⁰⁰ Several converts reported, for example, how they now believed that God sovereignly arranged chance encounters or unplanned events so that they had an opportunity to convert. The religious interpretation of the past solidified their transformational commitments as new believers. Disregarding the biographical reinterpretation of previous events, Rambo views conversion narratives as a rich source for understanding conversion. The converts' reports disclose information about such intriguing aspects as the expectation of religious communities on converts.⁵⁰¹ Strähler concludes that since biographical reconstruction occurs in all human beings, though at less intense levels, an overly critical attitude toward conversion testimonies is unwarranted.⁵⁰²

Furthermore, Rambo and Farhadian point out that overly critical scholars falsely reject the religious language of converts "as merely a form of self-deception."⁵⁰³ Instead, researchers should study the theology and spiritual practices of religious groups to understand conversion more fully from the convert's perspective. New believers, disregarding the apprehension of non-religious scientists, believe in the truth of their religion, constituting the very foundation of their decision of conversion.⁵⁰⁴ Therefore, the author of this study

499 Rambo, *Religious Conversion*, 137.

500 David A. Snow and Richard Machazek, "The Convert as Social Type," *Sociological Theory* (January 1983): 266.

501 Rambo, *Religious Conversion*, 137–39.

502 Strähler, "Coming to Faith," 101.

503 Rambo and Farhadian, "Introduction," 13.

504 Rambo and Farhadian, "Introduction," 13.

analyzed converts' testimonies as descriptions of authentic conversions, at least in view of the individual and their respective church communities, while not discarding the possibility of self-deception in religious conversion. Whether scholars interpret the conversion narratives in this research study as authentic, Christian conversions or mere sociological or psychological phenomena depends in part on their philosophical and theological assumptions.

Third, the question arises whether the inner, subjective experience of conversion is verifiable. Strähler argues that, on the one hand, converts struggle to verbalize the mystical or emotional point of conversion. On the other hand, the events leading up to conversion and the subsequent changes can easily be confirmed since they relate to the everyday experience of converts. Hence, the internal aspect of conversion does not nullify the validity of the entire testimony of converts.⁵⁰⁵ In this study, the primary research questions encompassed the entire process of diffusion. Thus, most of the research interest focused on verifiable aspects of conversion before and after a point of decision. The section turnaround addresses the more vague and mystical conversion experience itself. Some converts reported spiritual or emotional manifestations. In this research project, the ambiguous character of conversion also surfaced as converts testified to a conversion process without an exact, cognitive point of decision. Rather than negating the validity of these reports, though, the subjective experience of converts confirmed diffusional patterns in case study churches. For example, church leaders affirmed a point and process of conversion, thereby validating a non-definable period of decision-making, which, in turn, shaped their ministry practice.

Furthermore, Christian Smith states that social scientists tend to explain the progression of Christianity based on structural factors. Smith takes a phenomenological approach and argues that the subjective, emotional aspect of Christianity is a crucial component for explaining the transformational commitments of Christian believers across centuries. Rather than viewing the reports about the inner experience of converts as a weakness in scientific research, they provide salient insights into key components of Christian transformation. For example, converts mentioned the experience of worship or the warmth of relational love as profound components of their ongoing transformation.⁵⁰⁶ Emotional aspects

505 Strähler, "Coming to Faith," 102–03.

506 Christian Smith, "Why Christianity Works: An Emotions-Focused Phenomenological Account," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2007): 165–78.

of the Christian faith testified to the way diffusional patterns, such as translated worship and a loving community, affected converts.

Finally, the author of this study acknowledges that Pentecostal and spiritual faith expressions, such as speaking in tongues, healings, or the report of supernatural interventions, may or may not be genuine spiritual aspects of conversion. Independent of their authenticity regarding Christian conversion, case study findings disclosed that these Pentecostal and spiritual applications solidified and intensified transformational changes in converts. Thus, they represented valid data sources and also mirrored diffusional patterns in case study churches.

In conclusion, this research project focused on a missiological and theological approach to study diffusional patterns in German evangelical church plants that portrayed conversion in relation to the missionary strategies of church plants and converts. The testimonies of converts proved valuable, trustworthy data sources despite biographical reconstruction by converts and the subjectivity of the conversion experience.

Appendix 4 Codebook

The following codebook defines each expanded code in this study, provides guiding criteria for each code, and furnishes examples for the analytical coding process.⁵⁰⁷

Transmission

Code **Encouraged Individual Transmission**

| | |
|-------------|--|
| Description | Describes how churches encouraged individual believers in their congregations to transmit the Christian faith to non-Christians. |
| Focus | Focuses on activities to reach converts at the outset of their involvement with the respective church before their conversion. |
| Examples | Personal evangelism, personal invitations to the church or church programs. |

Code **Committed to Corporate Transmission**

| | |
|-------------|--|
| Description | Describes the churches' programs and activities that facilitated the transmission of the Christian faith and how converts engaged in these programs when they first attended the church. |
| Focus | Does not refer to programs that fostered transformation but focuses on events to communicate the gospel message. |
| Examples | Outreach events, worship services, social media, advertisement. |

507 John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2018), 191–92.

Code Engaged with Biblical Message

Description Describes how churches disseminated biblical content in order to motivate non-believers to contemplate Christian salvation.

Focus Does not refer to biblical instruction to foster transformation after conversion but goes beyond gospel presentations to include all efforts to encourage non-believers to engage with biblical content.

Examples Biblical preaching in worship services, free Bibles.

Code Moved by Spiritual Experiences

Description Describes spiritual or emotional experiences and unusual circumstances that contributed to the converts' resolve in pursuing the Christian faith, whether instigated by the churches or independent of church activities.

Focus Includes churches' efforts to produce spiritual responses and stories of converts about spiritual experiences leading up to their conversion.
Does not refer to spiritual or Pentecostal manifestations that contributed to transformational changes after conversion, while overlap is possible.

Examples Stories of predestined events, emotional experiences, visions.

Translation

Code Attracted by Translated Programs

Description Describes how churches contextualized their programs to attract people from their specific target audience to hear the Christian message and how converts responded to these efforts of contextualization.

Focus Includes influences from local culture, global networks, and preferences of leaders.

Examples Style of worship services, special events, reports of converts about how they related to the church.

Code Related through Translated Communication

Description Describes how churches related to their audiences by translating the content and delivery style of the Christian message.

Focus Includes the evaluation of sermons and other speaking engagements by church leaders.

Examples Terminology, sermon topics, delivery style of speakers.

Code Drawn by Community Dynamics

Description Describes how churches drew converts into their community through positive, relational dynamics and the converts' impressions of relationships within the church.

Focus Includes relational aspects of the community, strategic measures to welcome and integrate church visitors, and church unity. Does not refer to relational dynamics that fostered transformational changes after conversion.

Examples Welcome team, loving relationships in the church, unity in a multi-cultural church.

Code (Not) Affected by Pentecostal Translation

Description Describes whether Pentecostal teachings or practices hindered converts from pursuing the Christian faith and how churches facilitated these practices in the congregational life.

Focus Includes a description of Pentecostal practices and the participants' response, especially at the beginning of their exposure to these practices. Does not refer to the influence of spiritual or Pentecostal practices on transformation.

Examples Prophetic and healing practices, speaking in tongues, initial responses by converts, church regulations concerning the use of Pentecostal practices.

Turnaround

Code **Presented Conversion Intelligibly**

| | |
|-------------|--|
| Description | Describes how churches presented the doctrine of conversion and what level of understanding converts had about conversion and the Christian faith when they converted. |
| Focus | Includes concepts of conversion, decision-making, and the need for personal faith. |
| Examples | Repentance and faith, reports of converts about their understanding at the time of conversion. |

Code **Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making**

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Description | Describes how churches provided opportunities for decision-making and pointed converts to the need for a personal experience of conversion. Discloses if and how participants made a one-time decision of faith. |
| Focus | Includes church programs for decision-making, questions of manipulation. |
| Examples | Pre-formulated prayers of conversion, weekly calls of conversion, conversion as a process rather than a point of decision. |

Code **Affirmed Point and Process**

| | |
|-------------|--|
| Description | Describes if and how churches affirmed the possibility that conversion can occur at one point or as a process over time. Depicts the levels of understanding and commitment of converts before and after a point of decision. |
| Focus | Includes theological convictions of church leaders and questions of urgency. Overlap of converts' reports about conversion as a process is possible with the code Provided Opportunities for Decision-Making and Presented Conversion Intelligibly. |
| Examples | Affirming the possibility of instantaneous change, reports of converts about conversion as a one-time decision or process. |
| Code | Connected Conversion and Discipleship |

Code Affirmed Point and Process

Description Describes how churches connected conversion and discipleship to help converts transition into a process of transformation with a focus on organizational structures.

Focus Includes rituals such as baptism, church membership, church programs of assimilation, questions of dissonance after conversion.

Examples Role of mentors, infant or adult baptism, formal membership.

Transformation

Code Implemented Deep Discipleship

Description Describes how churches led converts through a process of spiritual growth or discipleship. Anything that refers to the organizational structure or critical elements of the churches' ministry that contributed to the transformation of converts.

Focus Includes control factors and convert participation in determining transformational changes.

Examples Strategy of discipleship, mentors, small groups, volunteerism, biblical teaching.

Code Pursued Scripture Formation

Description Describes how churches used the Bible to foster transformational changes in converts and how converts depicted their transformational changes and evaluated biblical content.

Focus Does not refer to interaction with the Bible before conversion, which is included in the code Engaged with the Biblical Message.

Examples Biblical instruction through discipleship courses or sermons, worldview changes in converts.

Code Embraced Social Action

Description Describes how churches motivated converts to embrace any form of social action or transformation and the converts' activities in social action.

Focus Addresses the value each church gave to social action as a component of discipleship.

Examples Church programs for social action, aid in relational development, plans for social transformation.

Code Changed by Spiritual/Pentecostal Application

Description Describes if and how churches placed a value on spiritual or Pentecostal manifestations to support transformational changes in converts.

Focus Includes the reports of converts about spiritual or Pentecostal manifestations and their influence on transformation. Does not refer to spiritual experiences before conversion, which is included in the code Moved by Spiritual Experiences.

Examples Speaking in tongues, healings, miracles.

Retransmission

Code Communicated the Value of Retransmission

Description Describes how churches communicated the value of retransmission and how converts adopted the value of sharing their faith.

Focus Focuses on how converts were affected in their motivation for retransmission through the churches' efforts of mobilizing believers for outreach.

Examples Church leaders' motivation for retransmission immediately after conversion, stories of adopting personal value for evangelism, enthusiasm for retransmission by converts.

Code Trained in Retransmission

Description Describes how churches trained converts in retransmission and how converts learned how to speak about their faith or engage in personal evangelism, sharing the gospel message verbally.

Focus Includes stories about the practice of retransmission within the social network of converts, challenges in personal evangelism, the use of social media, and adverse reactions to evangelism that hindered retransmission.

Examples Training curriculum, training through street evangelism, the actual practice of retransmission by converts, stories of difficulties, use of social media.

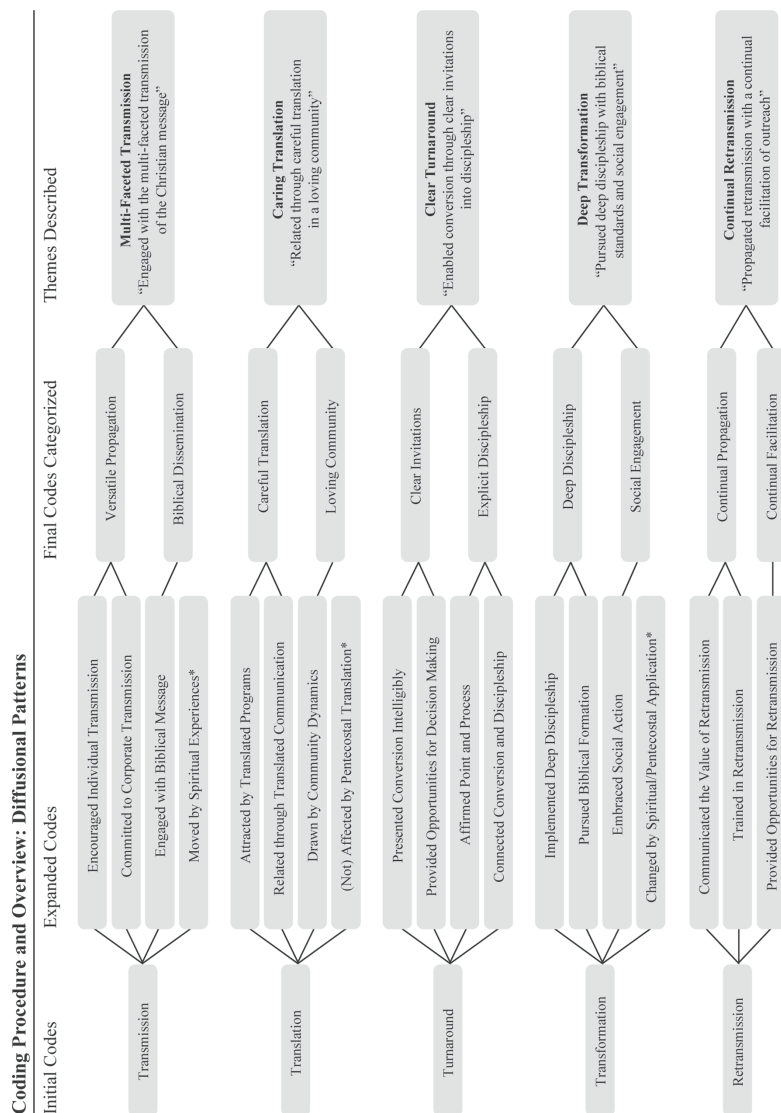
Code Provided Opportunities for Retransmission

Description Describes how churches provided opportunities for retransmission both locally and globally and how converts utilized those events.

Focus Includes church strategy for outreach events, how converts invited people to these events, and foreign missions involvement.

Example Evangelistic campaigns, worship services, foreign missions trips.

Appendix 5 Coding Procedure and Overview of Diffusional Patterns



Patterns with asterisk () are either not a homogeneous pattern among all three churches or not a pattern of clear cause and effect.

Appendix 6 Letter of Introduction and Church Consent Form

Dear pastor,

My name is Frank Liesen, and I am currently working on a dissertation in the department of World Christian Studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, TX. The dissertation's main part consists of conducting three case studies in differently shaped evangelical church plants in Germany, where a considerable number of people with a German background have experienced a transformative conversion. The goal is to learn what factors contributed to conversion and transformation, starting from first hearing the gospel, to the conversion experience, to the personal transformation, and faith transmission. I would welcome the opportunity to conduct one of these case studies at _____

The case study includes at least three visits to the church and church events where I will participate as an (active or passive) observer. Furthermore, individual interviews are planned with at least three people who have experienced conversion. Also, the research entails a focused interview with the leading pastors or the leadership team that is involved in the conversion process. Each interview will last approximately 60 minutes. One interview will be recorded as an "oral history" interview and will serve as a historical record for future generations. The interviews can be anonymized and may be reviewed by the participants for the correct data recorded.

A case study such as this requires a certain amount of work by the church leadership to find the appropriate interview partners and make scheduling arrangements. However, I hope that through the results of these case studies, other church planters will be encouraged and better equipped in their gospel ministry to bring the Good News of Jesus to people.

The case study at _____ is scheduled for _____.

Sincerely,

Frank Liesen

(Translation of the original, German document)

Informed Consent Form for Lead Pastors

- I hereby give permission for the case study to be conducted in our church,
_____.
- My name and the name of the church can be used in this study, as these names are already available to the public on the church's website and/or other promotional materials.

Place, Date, Signature

You will receive two copies of this consent form. Please sign the statements and return one copy to the researcher. The other copy is for your records. Please contact Frank Liesen if you have any further questions.

(Translation of the original, German document)

Appendix 7 Consent Forms for All Interviewees

SWBTS Interview Release Form

[Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Fort Worth, TX]

I, _____, do hereby grant permission to Southwestern Theological Seminary or the interviewer all right, title, or interest in the recorded interview (in any format) conducted by Frank Liesen on _____.

I understand that these interviews will be protected by copyright and deposited in Southwestern Theological Seminary Library and Archives for the use of future scholars.

I also understand that the recording/s and transcript/s may be used in public presentations including but not limited to audio and visual documentaries, digital presentations, exhibits, or articles. This gift does not preclude any use that I myself want to make of the information in these recordings.

Check One:

Recording/s and Transcript/s may be used without restriction.

Recording/s and Transcription/s are subject to the attached restriction.

Signature of Interviewee

Date

Address

Telephone number

This form is adapted from: Donald A. Ritchie: Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide. 3rd Edition (Oxford: University Press, [2002] 2015); 277.

German Interview Release Form for All Interviewees

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Name of Participant: _____

I authorize Frank Liesen, under the supervision of Dr. Dietmar Schulze at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, TX, to gather information concerning my conversion and spiritual transformation as part of Hope Center in Berlin.

I understand that the general purpose of the research is to discover and describe factors that contributed to my conversion and spiritual transformation, especially as part of the church. For this purpose, I am available to participate in an interview with Frank Liesen that will last approximately 60 minutes. I allow the audio-recording and transcription of the interview and am available for clarifying questions after the meeting.

This study's potential benefit is for other churches to understand how the processes of conversion and spiritual transformation can be encouraged and facilitated.

It is possible not to answer specific questions. Also, I may withdraw my consent to participate in the study at any time during the active case study in the church. The case study at _____ will take place from _____ until _____.

It is possible to replace my name with a pseudonym and refer to my answers in this study with a pseudonym. Hereby, I give permission for the publication of my interview results as part of the overall study. I am aware that Frank Liesen is available in case I experience undue anxiety or stress as a consequence of the interview. I may contact Frank Liesen concerning any questions about the study or my rights as a participant. The researcher will handle the results of the study confidentially.

Place, Date

Signature

You are receiving two copies of this consent form. Please sign one and return it to the researcher with your signature. You may keep the other copy for your records. Please contact Frank Liesen concerning any questions or comments:

- Frank Liesen
- Address
- E-mail
- Phone

(Translation of the original, German document)

Appendix 8 Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Church Leaders

Important: There are no right or wrong answers, but the focus is on the actual processes and realities in the church. The questions concern especially the processes that have led to conversions and life changes of people in your church.

1. Tell me about the history of the founding of your church.
2. How would you describe your church to outsiders?
3. Tell me about how you have communicated the content of the Christian faith.
4. What have you done to give people a new access to the Christian faith and to understand the faith in your culture?
5. Tell me about how you have facilitated the decision to convert.
6. How and by what means is life change facilitated or brought about in converts?
7. Tell me about whether and how converts in your church are empowered or involved in sharing the faith.

(Translation of the original, German document)

Interview Questions for Converts

Important: There are no right or wrong answers, but it is all about your actual, personal experience. The questions concern your conversion, especially in relation to the church. Regardless of that, you should simply talk about your very own personal experience.

1. Tell me about your personal and spiritual background before your conversion.
2. Tell me about how you first heard about the contents of the Christian faith.
3. What helped you to gain new access to the Christian faith (through the church) and to understand the faith?
4. Tell me about how your decision to become a Christian happened.
5. How and what has changed your life since your conversion?
6. Tell me about whether and how you have passed on the faith to others since then.

(Translation of the original, German document)

Appendix 9.1 Oral History Interview 1

This is a complete and accurate transcript of the interview with Anna Cruz, a convert at Hope Church in Berlin, Germany. Frank Liesen conducted this first oral history interview face-to-face in Berlin on November 16, 2019. The transcript is an English translation of the German transcript. Frequently used reflective words (well, so) and pause fillers (really, exactly, yes) were often omitted in the transcript to allow for a fluid translation unless words added meaning or emphasis to the content of the participant's comments. Both interviewee and interviewer also interjected utterances such as "hmm" at times, which were also not transcribed. In few cases, words were unclear in the recording, in which case the author inserted [unclear] in the text.⁵⁰⁸

(. . .) indicates a break in the interview with a clarifying explanation.

[. . .] designate the insertion of words for a grammatical correction or an explanation for an unclear statement. It also may provide the English translation of a poignant German saying.

. . . Three dots point out an interruption or break in the train of thought within the sentence of the speaker.

. . . . Four dots indicate what the transcriber believes to be the end of an incomplete sentence.

Frank Liesen created the original transcript in German and this English translation. The transcription software f4x helped in the transcription of the interview in German, while the translation program DeepL aided in the translation process.

[0:00:00] Frank Liesen: Okay, so today is the sixteenth of November. We are in Berlin at Homepage, and I am Frank Liesen. I am doing an interview with Anna. The last name is Cruz, right? We will ask some questions regarding your conversion and how you changed in that conversion, especially how the church Hope Center was involved in that. The first question I'd like to ask you is: "Tell me more about your personal and spiritual background first. What kind of family you came from, spiritually, culturally, worldview, before you even found the Christian faith?"

508 Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 55–59; Liz H. Strong, *Oral History Transcription Style Guide* (New York: Columbia University Center for Oral History Research, 2018), 17, <https://bit.ly/2ZLP6Dk>.

- [0:00:46]
Anna Cruz: I did not grow up Christian. I come from a family that is atheist. Respectively my father comes from Cuba. In Cuba, it is very typical to practice an Afro-Cuban religion, which everybody actually practices in Cuba, white or black. Do not necessarily have to be people who are of African descent. That would probably be called something like voodoo. That is white magic for them, and that is what I grew up with. I also went through a time where I was dealing a lot with my Cuban identity, where I just talked about it a lot, and I was researching it a lot.
- [0:01:39]
Anna Cruz: At any rate, I come from, as I said, a non-believing family, in any case, not a Christian [family]. My family is basically . . . so both my parents, they live together. But both my parents and both my families, both the German and the Cuban, are very politically and, above all, politically left-oriented. They are very committed to the whole thing and, yes, very passionate about the entire issue. I have a grandmother who grew up Catholic and left the church because she was super, well, very communist. She said: "Yes, I definitely have to leave the church!" That means I also grew up with the whole thing, had a rather bad image of the Christian faith, and was also very politically motivated myself. [I] was part of various left-wing youth organizations and simply found myself there.
- [0:02:42]
Frank Liesen: Were you all religiously active in this voodoo religion or rather not, but instead left [politically] and rather discarded that?
[0:02:56]
Anna Cruz: My father used to practice it. He mostly did it away from home. But he also had his altar at home, and sometimes they would do certain rituals at home, but I was never allowed to be there because they killed animals there, and he usually took my brother with him. He did not take me with him. There is a bit of syncretism between Christianity and this religion. They believe they are Catholic and at the same time that . . . that means for himself, per se, he does not say that Jesus does not exist or something, but he just believes in this religion.
- [0:03:28]
Anna Cruz: Exactly, I was very influenced by that, but I never practiced it myself. I got books from him about it, read through it, but he never brought me into it himself. Yes, so I did not grow up Christian, also in terms of values. My parents were always very laissez-faire. They wanted me to have my own experiences. They just let me do a lot of things. I have three big brothers who were the ones who tried to stop me. I went out partying a lot and also did things like smoking a lot of pot. So for a while, I did it every day. I was just pretty young at things that are actually not so healthy at that age.

[0:04:15]

At what age was that?

Frank Liesen:

[0:04:17]

Anna Cruz:

That was between thirteen and until I converted at seventeen. I was from my environment . . . I did not know any Christians at all. So I did not know any Christians at all, especially at my age. I never came into contact with the Christian faith in any way, especially not in a positive way. When I heard something, it was always in the course of colonization and, "They took everything away from us, the Christians!" Things like that. I never really got in touch with the Bible and never read the Bible before. I did not know what the gospel was, and I did not know who Jesus was. Colonization in what sense?

[0:04:54]

Frank Liesen:

[0:04:58]

Anna Cruz:

So by being Cuban in a country that was colonized by Spain. I was always told that we were colonized by the Spanish, who then brought us Catholicism and forced us to be Christians and things like that. That was more my image of the whole thing, and I was very anti [in my attitude]. That is very interesting because I know now that that was totally stupid because I did not deal with it myself. But I was just very anti [in my attitude] about it. I looked at different world religions over and over again. I studied Buddhism. I have read a lot about Islam, and my family has given me books on all the topics. Still, it has really never been related to Christianity. Do you have any other questions on the subject?

[0:05:49]

Frank Liesen:

[0:05:55]

Anna Cruz:

Your worldview was that God does not exist or I know it? What were you interested in? I was interested because I think I am a person who likes to think about things like that. I was always thinking about something like that at the time, but I never thought that it was a God as a person, so that it is a personal God. It was for me some energy or what my father does. It was never for me in the sense of [that] there is a God who wants a relationship with me, who has specific values. Not that at all. I already had a worldview that maybe there is more than I know. But I never kind of thought that there was a God as there actually is.

- [0:06:33]
Anna Cruz: My worldview was also very politically oriented. I thought very much of this “them versus us.” I have a very strong sense of justice. That is why I always had such strange phases where I almost had a depression, where I felt like it did not make sense anymore. And I ever only saw all this injustice and thought, “Okay, somehow you cannot do anything about it!” That was also my worldview. I had, I think, rather a negative, perhaps in my opinion, quite realistic worldview and found everything rather bad, what is happening in the world. That was my perception of the world.
- [0:07:16]
Frank Liesen: Then we’ll move on to the second question: “Tell me more about how you first heard about the content of the Christian faith. What people were involved maybe or programs from the community, perhaps the content [or] materials that you read?”
- [0:07:35]
Anna Cruz: The first time I got in touch with the Christian faith was when I got a boyfriend. That was my first relationship where I introduced the person to my parents. This was someone who was very different for me than men or people I knew before. He was someone who said about himself that he was a Christian. For me, at the time, he was a super-religious, practicing Christian because I did not know any other Christians, and he already lived certain values that I did not know. In retrospect, I do not know how deep his relationship with Jesus really was because he had a relationship with me just like that. But that was the first point of contact with the Christian faith. He did not really tell me that much about it, just that he is a Christian and that there is a Jesus and so on. But he always took me to meetings where other people told me about it because he did not really have much Bible knowledge himself because he wanted to convince me.
- [0:08:51]
Anna Cruz: Then, we always met in threes with a buddy of his, who actually, I learned, has more of a Jehovah’s witness background. Still, he had a lot of Bible knowledge, who always wanted to explain a lot to me. And then, I just had my political mindset and thought, I know everything. I totally questioned everything and discussed a lot and also discussed it with my friend a lot, because I could not understand it at all and found everything not so pleasant. That was a point where we discussed a lot. But I did see something with him that was different.

[0:09:26]
Anna Cruz:

Exactly, those were the first times I came into contact with the Bible. So even back then, nobody really explained the gospel to me. Nobody explained to me that Jesus died for me or anything like that. But they just tried to explain the Bible to me and wanted to make it make sense because I could not believe in the Bible. And then my boyfriend at the time used to take me to meetings with pastor Joshua, the one who now leads the church I am in. He then met with us alone a couple of times because he just wanted to support my friend at that time, and, of course, he wanted to win my soul. He was very patient and met with us again and again, although I really had no understanding at all, and discussed a lot. Exactly, those were the first times that I came into contact with it. The meetings you went to, those were not the church services?

[0:10:22]
Frank Liesen:
[0:10:25]
Anna Cruz:

Exactly, those were not the service in the beginning. At some point, he got me to the place where I went to Hope Center services with him. I remember, before I went to the services, I had a little booklet from Jehovah's witnesses, which I read, which I also found interesting, which simply explained more about the Bible. I found that interesting at the time. In any case, at some point, I went along to the church services and also found that totally horrible. For me, that was simply something that I could not understand at all in terms of the content at the beginning. I think I had such an anti-attitude in general because I knew that someone was trying to convince me of something, which was then just my boyfriend. I did not really think that was that great. This is the first time I came into contact with the Word, the spoken Word, and the first time I heard a sermon. Actually, a lot of things were appealing to me, but I know that at the time, I just did not want to admit it and just argued more. And I also know that it was definitely hard for me to believe.

- [0:11:35]
Anna Cruz: Then I always went along to things they did, where my friend dragged me along. That always had an effect on me. Things that the Bible says, things that people told me about Jesus. Then I started to read the Bible myself. I think it was more out of principle because I simply wanted to convince myself of what people told me. I did not really believe then either, but I just wanted to read it. Therefore, from the point where I started reading the Bible myself, my life actually changed because then I did not have the feeling someone else is trying to tell me something, but I looked at it myself, and then I started simply with the Gospels. And then it was kind of a whole new world for me because I had really never read the Bible before.
- [0:12:22]
Frank Liesen: Did someone assist you when you were reading, or did you read all by yourself?
- [0:12:26]
Anna Cruz: No, I just started reading on my own. I bought a Bible at that time, and then I just started reading. Yeah, exactly. So that was kind of the process towards my conversion. I do not know if I should continue with that yet.
- [0:12:39]
Frank Liesen: When you started listening, was it primarily, do you think, the sermons that were the deciding factor or the conversation with Joshua or your personal Bible reading or a combination?
- [0:12:51]
Anna Cruz: Actually, the decisive thing at that time was for me, emotionally speaking, not necessarily that I was exposed to the Word, but above all the people that I got to know, because I simply saw something in the community of the people in the church that I had never seen before. There was such a unity, such an appreciation, and love for each other, which I did not know at all from somewhere else because I always came from such a super-critical background, where everyone questioned everyone else, and no one really appreciated each other. I was valued, although the people did not know me, but also the people among themselves just had a blatant love for each other, and that was such a unity. That was the first thing that just opened my heart to listen more because I realized that there was something completely different.

- [0:13:41]
Anna Cruz: I would say the community of Christians at the Hope Center that I saw was the first thing that opened my heart. And the Bible was something that simply interested me at the time and where I simply read the Word as a letter. It sometimes made sense to me, and I understood that with the head then [intellectually], but it was not so blatant so. . . . I simply did not let the whole thing affect me spiritually, but it was such a head thing that I wanted to understand.
- [0:14:20]
Frank Liesen: That is actually already the second question, or it is the third question: "What helped you to get a new access to the Christian faith, especially through the church, and to understand the faith?" But it could also have been entirely different things, this access to the community. You talked about this community, about love. Can you perhaps talk about what helped you find access, especially there, which was maybe not the case before?
- [0:14:55]
Anna Cruz: One thing that also totally amazed and astonished and excited me at the Hope Center was this multiculturalism. I had a lot of friends from different backgrounds before, but then it was always single groups. I was with the Latinos a lot, because I am half Cuban myself, and then for a while with people who were together for political reasons. It was always these groups that were together because they had something in common. In Hope Center, the people had nothing in common except Jesus. That was one thing that really thrilled me [was] that they were young people who were visibly passionate about Jesus, and there was just something different about them.
- [0:15:40]
Anna Cruz: All the people I knew who were my age were just completely different, had no vision, no perspective, they did not care about anything. They were in the same situation as I was. Here were people who had a vision, who could appreciate other people without feeling bad about themselves. I think one thing that I experienced a lot at my age and also saw for myself was that you could not love or appreciate other people so readily because you were not yet so secure with yourself somehow, with your own identity. I simply saw that here. That gave me a whole new approach and a whole new picture of the Christian faith.

- [0:16:23]
Anna Cruz: I had no access, no experience of what Christians or what Christians believe. Then I saw many young people who looked cool, who actually looked just like me, but completely different. Their being was utterly contrary to what is in the world, and that gave me a whole new picture of the Christian faith. Also, because pastor Joshua's sermons were just super unconventional. Maybe when I was in a church at some point, I was somewhere in a country in Latin America or somewhere, perhaps in a Catholic church. The whole topic of church was something completely different for me. Then I saw pastor Joshua, such a young guy who always wore a *basecap* [baseball cap] and then preached in a fun and relaxed way. That also gave me a whole new picture of the Christian faith.
- [0:17:21]
Frank Liesen: Those were not the services, but. . .?
- [0:17:25]
Anna Cruz: Yes, it was in the worship services over time. At some point, I started going to the worship services sort of voluntarily, but at the time, I know it was not really because of Jesus. It was because I appreciated the people so much, and I just felt super comfortable with the people. The good thing was, I think that it is totally supernatural. I believe that is when God spoke to the leadership at Hope Center, because actually, at Hope Center we are very clear about certain things. Still, my friend and I were in this relationship at the time that actually was not somehow in the image of God. We were both still living entirely in the world. I knew it was not right from a doctrinal standpoint. I was taught, "Okay, this is the difference between the world and the Kingdom of God." But no one came to me and said, "So, you have to change now. Otherwise, you have to leave." I know that we are actually very clear with something like that, but I know that at that time I must have come for three or four months, but I was not really converted with all my heart but came because of the people. God just knew I needed that time. I can imagine that the leaders simply heard from God that I should not be approached yet necessarily because I still needed my time. It is totally interesting now in retrospect.
- [0:18:06]
Anna Cruz: Yes, that transitions to the next point already, and that is: "Tell me more about how your one decision to become a Christian happened. What was that actually like, that moment? Was that a long process or one thing? Where was that, with whom, and what were there influences in that decision?"
- Frank Liesen:
[0:18:59]

[0:19:16]
Anna Cruz:

Yes, so that was a prolonged process. I really cannot say the day I made my decision for Jesus. For me, it was not this one encounter with Jesus when I changed forever, but it was really a process. I think the conversion itself took place because I simply read the Bible and God himself revealed things to me. It was no longer just a letter, but the Spirit of God simply showed me what was written there. I think it was rather something that happened in me personally than in a church service, traditionally, that I raised my hand. But I know—that is interesting—I was baptized while I was still with my ex-boyfriend. The interesting thing is that he had been a Christian much, much longer than me, but he never wanted to get baptized because he felt like he was not ready yet. He is not yet living the way Jesus would want him to. He also did not have an understanding of grace.

[0:20:29]
Anna Cruz:

That was also one thing that changed me completely, this understanding of grace, which I then received through the teaching at Hope Center, that it is not about first having to live perfectly, but that I can invite Jesus into my life and that He changes my life from the inside out. That just His grace is enough. I also kind of thought, “Okay, now I have to get my whole life together before I can really say I am a Christian.” But over time, God has totally softened my heart, as I said, through the teaching, I have come to understand that it is not about that the gospel is not about being perfect.

[0:21:11]
Anna Cruz:

It was such an interplay between that: I read the Word. . . . I had a big hunger for the Word back then that I wish I had again. I really had an extraordinary hunger at that time. But it was also the case that at the time after I was baptized, [that] the Holy Spirit totally convicted me and I could not be together with my ex-boyfriend. At the point when we broke up, I felt so bad and so sad. I was doing super bad at the time, and that was when I knew, “Okay, God, I need you now. If you really exist, then I have to have such an encounter with you. I really have to get to know you now.” You know how it is. My world collapsed. That was the moment when I really gave up for Jesus when I really laid down everything else because I had the feeling that I had nothing else either. That was also, as I said, a process. I cannot remember the exact day, but that was the moment when I really started to open my heart, not only for people but for Jesus.

[0:22:11]
Anna Cruz: I think a big factor was also my family. It was very tough for my family that I was suddenly in church all the time. They just could not comprehend it because they did not go through the same process. I think that was also a factor that held me back a bit for a while. This knowledge that I now have to lay down my old life, what I had built my identity on back then. That is why I think it was such a process. I cannot say what precisely the encounter was that I had, that moment, but it was that process.

[0:22:52]
Frank Liesen: You were still together with your boyfriend when you were baptized?

[0:22:55]
Anna Cruz: Right, about one week afterward, we separated, and that is just so interesting because based on my feelings, my real, living relationship with Jesus only started after that. It is quite interesting. I was excited about people before that. I was excited about the things we were doing as a church. I was also excited intellectually about the teaching that I saw from Jesus in the Bible, from what Jesus had preached. I saw that many of my personal values were simply biblical values. That is what Jesus actually wants to teach us. That made sense to me intellectually at some point. I knew, okay, I want to do it now, and it was out of my own strength, and I just want to do it now, and it makes sense to me. Then I really gave my life to Jesus.

[0:23:54]
Frank Liesen: Joshua or other people did not ask you about it? They exerted no pressure, but it was your very own decisions to say, “I separate now.”

[0:24:01]
Anna Cruz: Exactly, that was my very own decision. They did not exert any pressure at all. From the moment I was baptized, I also had a mentor, and I think she also tackled this subject a little bit, but it was really clear to me right away. There was no extra work needed in that sense. At Hope Center, you also become . . . , from the moment you make the decision, “Okay, I want to be baptized,” then also the process of membership starts. At that moment, I know they would have told me. It just would not have worked if I had not given up my whole life and, despite of it, be a member of Hope Center. I know it would have come eventually, but they gave me a long time so that the Holy Spirit works on me. I also know that the leaders at Hope Center inspired me generally in the way that they gave themselves to us, as young people who all come from such broken backgrounds. They invested so much time in us. They also invested so much time in me. I can remember that this shocked me at that time because I did not know that.

- [0:25:15] Was that specifically Joshua or others as well?
 Frank Liesen:
- [0:25:18] Especially Shilan and the pastor, right. I did not have a female mentor yet because pastor Joshua was still the mentor for everyone at Hope Center because we did not have anyone that was spiritually mature enough at that time. He mentored all of us, and I think that was just crazy for him. That is why he was just there for me, and [he was] an important reference person.
 Anna Cruz:
- [0:25:42] In which year were you baptized?
 Frank Liesen:
- [0:25:45] I was baptized at eighteen, the year I turned eighteen. Now I am twenty-one. So that was 2016.
 Anna Cruz:
- [0:25:57] If you were to describe, “What did it mean for you to believe in Jesus and convert?” What did it mean in terms of content at that time? You mentioned “to let Jesus into my heart,” but now theologically: “What did you understand at that time, and how would you explain that today? What does that mean to you?”
 Frank Liesen:
- [0:26:22] That is quite interesting. I never thought about that before.
 Anna Cruz: I believe that at that time, I just realized that all the desires that I had in my heart, all the things that I just asked for. It is clear, it can only be [fulfilled] by God, but then I fully realized that. I realized that all the things that made me sad, all the things in my heart where I was hurting, that Jesus was the answer to that. At that moment, Jesus was for me . . . I think I did not have that understanding yet of Jesus now being the king of my life, [that] he is now the one who makes the decisions, but it was more like this: “He is the answer to my questions. He is the one who gives me joy, who gives me love that I do not get from anyone else.”
 I just knew my whole life was changing.
- [0:27:16] My whole social environment has also changed. All of a sudden,
 Anna Cruz: I no longer went out partying. I suddenly did not take part in all the things anymore. Suddenly, I no longer had the friends in the world—many of the ones I had before—simply because it naturally separated for me because we had completely different interests suddenly.
- [0:27:32] After your baptism?
 Frank Liesen:
- [0:27:33] Exactly after, after my real conversion, So, where in retrospect,
 Anna Cruz: I now realize that was the moment or that was the time where I really gave my life to Jesus.
- [0:27:44] Right after the baptism?
 Frank Liesen:

- [0:27:50]
Anna Cruz: So, that is what it meant to me at that time, to give my life to Jesus. It was also super time-intensive at the time because I was so hungry for the Word of God. I listened to the Bible a whole lot. I was in church all the time back then. My whole life totally changed structurally and practically. But spiritually, above all, Jesus was for me the one who can fill my heart's desire, with whom I really find peace for my soul. At some point, with time came the understanding that Jesus is also the king of my life; that he may do in my life what he wants; that his plans are always good.
- [0:28:34]
Frank Liesen: You say now that Jesus died for my sins on the cross. He rose from the dead, and faith means that he died for my sins and forgave my sins, and now I am a child of God, so to speak. Was that an understanding you had then, or did that come later, or do you see it differently?
- [0:28:52]
Anna Cruz: I do not see it differently. No, that was already the understanding that I had. I think it can also be something that comes through a process, but I realize I got a deeper understanding of grace and the sacrifice of Jesus over time. I understood even at that moment that I know now that I am going to spend eternity in heaven simply because of what Jesus did for me. I just felt a massive love above all. I understood above all how much God must love me, that he died for me, that he gave himself for me. I understood that. I understood that through the sacrifice that Jesus made, I will go to heaven and that there is someone who gave himself up for me, who gave up his life for me.
- [0:29:46]
Frank Liesen: You understood that at the time?
- [0:29:49]
Anna Cruz: I believe that I really understood that at the time. I just know that I felt an unbelievable appreciation and love from God towards me at that time because, all of a sudden, I understood that God died for me, that Jesus died for me. I can remember that this was simply a massive matter for me at that time, which I then only understood more deeply because I then saw in the Bible itself that it is written in the Bible.
- [0:30:25]
Frank Liesen: How and by what has your life changed since your conversion? This question: What has changed with you concretely, your character or how you make decisions, your own worldview, spiritual practices, but also in what way the church has accompanied you or has caused that? Maybe first tell the one and then the other. What changed after your conversion first?

- [0:31:07]
Anna Cruz: Yes, my whole life made a complete turn of 360 degrees, exactly. I just, like I said, . . . so my entire peer group changed. I related to completely new people in my life. Of course, also the way I know, for example, that I had, I think, quite some bitterness before and was not as appreciative of people, which I am sure also had quite a lot to do with the fact that I was totally insecure in my identity. That was one thing that I experienced so radically, what kind of love I got towards people. That was one thing that changed a lot. I got an incredible love towards people, an incredible need to tell other people about Jesus, but I think because I experienced this love from God. Practically, my whole life changed.
- [0:31:59]
Anna Cruz: In general, I am simply a person who did a lot with friends, who also did a lot with the family. Over time, I have taken on more and more responsibility at Hope Center, which means that, in purely practical terms, I gave up a lot of what I did before. It did not change my character. Many things that I did before, simply out of moral conviction, above all, because God revealed them to me, that these are things that are not in my heart. Naturally, I quite many things that I did before. One thing, for example, [was that] the relationship with men changed utterly. What else changed? It really changed everything. It is quite difficult. I questioned all the political things suddenly, my whole political worldview. It was also a process. I had a lot of [unclear] with pastor Joshua. It was a process because it was really tough for me. Yes, it was a process for me, just this worldview thing, politically speaking, because also my whole family—because I grew up that way—my whole family is bombarding me all day, to this day, about the things that are going on in the world from their worldview. Exactly, that was a process, but it changed then.
- [0:33:24]
Frank Liesen: That means, politically speaking, you would vote for a different party now than you did when you were fifteen or sixteen?

- [0:33:28]
Anna Cruz: I just have a different image. . . . For me, the world was clearly black and white before. Yes, I would just recognize that there are good things and bad things in most parties and that there are parties that are definitely a little bit closer to what Jesus might have said about our political situation than others. I got away from this blaming thing. Coming from Cuba, I had a very strong aversion to the United States, for example. I had to forgive a nation over and over again. That is gross. That is one thing, how a lot has changed this year, things like that. So I was shaped great in terms of that, and that was really a process. But I would say that I would make many political decisions now, even if I had the choice, very different than I would have made them then.
- [0:34:34]
Frank Liesen: Your values or your character traits? Looking back, can you say what might have changed there?
- [0:34:46]
Anna Cruz: My relationship with my parents, for example, has also changed a lot. We have always had a bit of a co-dependent relationship. I have always had a good relationship with my parents, but it has been a little bit too . . . my parents also changed a lot, because I could forgive a lot because I could die to myself a lot, where I could not before.
- [0:35:20]
Frank Liesen: This dying yourself?
- [0:35:22]
Anna Cruz: In the sense of when we were fighting, that then I could just be okay with that, if I then just say, "Okay, then, have your way, I love you and bless you." (Anna and Frank are laughing). I just could not do that before.
- [0:35:36]
Frank Liesen: So that has improved, the relationship with your parents?
- [0:35:40]
Anna Cruz: The relationship with my parents has improved a lot. And I think that is also a big testament to them because I actually went in a direction that they did not necessarily support initially. But they support me now. But that was a great testimony for them because I changed for the better, so to speak. My values have changed a lot; as I said, my self-worth has changed a lot, which has then also been reflected, for example, in my relationship with men, but also in how I deal with other people in general.
- [0:36:09]
Frank Liesen: What does self-worth mean? You had a greater appreciation for yourself?

- [0:36:15]
Anna Cruz: Exactly, getting for myself. I realized, okay, my identity is not in whether men or other people consider me significant, but just in God and in being a child of God. That is where a lot has changed. It is still changing a lot. It is a process, but that has changed a lot. My whole value system basically, because before I did not have the understanding of, "There is a truth, and there are things that are not the truth, and they are just not good." I did not have the understanding of, "There is good and bad," but that was, in the sense of my values, always so vague: "Yes, everyone can actually do what he wants, how he feels and so." That changed completely because then I suddenly saw: "There is a truth after all. There are things that are simply good, and there are things that are bad." And then God supports me in rejecting things that are bad. I do not have to do that by my own strength.
- [0:37:12]
Frank Liesen: The information about it was the Bible telling you what is good or bad?
- [0:37:15]
Anna Cruz: Exactly, but of course also at the Hope Center, by the fact that most of us grew up away from the church and came from backgrounds where we did not know all that, where we just did not know quite a few. I was so shocked when I first heard things that I had not heard that way, that things were not good that I had always thought were good.
- [0:37:35]
Frank Liesen: For example?
- [0:37:37]
Anna Cruz: For example, premarital relationships. I did not have any understanding of that at all, that it was somehow bad to live that out in a certain way. I had no understanding of that at all. Nobody ever told me that before. Something like that, for example. Or even how to deal with other people. I always had this understanding of, "You like me, I like you. If you're nice, I'm nice. If you're not, I'm not nice!" That has also changed completely. That is just addressed a lot at Hope Center, by the fact that our leaders know that we all come from these kinds of backgrounds. That changed pretty quickly. A lot of things became clear very quickly, and it was also a process. It was just an inward process where God had to heal my heart, but it was relatively quick to then not act it out because it was clear. It was clearly communicated to me.

- [0:38:31]
Anna Cruz: What has changed? Everything has really changed. It is quite hard to say. Oh, exactly, what has changed a lot is that I got vision and perspective. That is also one thing that is preached at Hope Center, a lot, that each of us, no matter where we come from and what we may have experienced before, can be a world changer, that God has a plan for each of us. . . . So we always had prayer nights where we could receive visions personally. I received such blatant things or words from God that I experienced a sense of vision and perspective for the first time, which was interesting because I used to have these phases of, "This all makes no sense! Why am I still doing all this?" Now I just know that everything I am doing is working towards a goal and that I am not doing it for nothing, but God has a vision for my life, and I am allowed to go towards it. There is a purpose to it all. That is one thing that has radically changed and given me such motivation because it was one thing that was not in the room for me at all, that somehow I have a special calling that someone else cannot fulfill. That was completely foreign to me. I never thought about that. That has been a big change for me.
- [0:39:52]
Frank Liesen: Worldviews; before you probably thought of evolution and then there is [unclear], and now you might think, "Jesus, somehow God made the world." Probably that Jesus [or] God made the world, and he is coming back, or how would you describe the whole worldview that has changed?
- [0:40:13]
Anna Cruz: I have always been a very analytical person who always wanted to understand things and, I do not know, I thought science was cool, and I just wanted to understand things. That is why I always found it completely ridiculous when people told me they kind of believed in a book or something that said things that actually completely contradicted the theory of evolution. That was utterly ridiculous to me. That is what I think my conversion took away from me more than anything else, that arrogance.
- [0:40:37]
Anna Cruz: There are still things, of course, where I just ask God too, "How can this be? Explain this to me!" But I no longer have the approach of, "I know how it is because science says so or this theory says so, and that cannot be right, what is there in the Bible. It does not make sense!" God has taken that pride away from me. And I know that even if I do not understand things, or even if they do not match up with science, the Word of God remains and is truer than science even if it does not match up. That has changed completely. But it was also in the process. That, I would say, has come with time. Exactly. I had so many questions in the beginning.

- [0:41:15] You would now say, "God created the world in seven days or
Frank Liesen: through evolution?"
- [0:41:19] No, I would say (Anna and Frank are laughing). God created the
Anna Cruz: world in seven days. How long those seven days are with God, I do
not know. There are quite interesting theories.
And Jesus is coming again?
- [0:41:28] Frank Liesen:
- [0:41:31] Jesus is really coming back [unclear] (Anna and Frank are
Anna Cruz: laughing).
- [0:41:32] You would say the Bible is God's Word, Word for Word?
Frank Liesen:
- [0:41:37] Yes, totally, word for word. I think you can get a more complete
Anna Cruz: picture by looking at different translations and also languages.
But I believe 100 percent that the Bible is the truth and that every
human being is an image of God. He is the one who speaks the
truth.
- [0:41:57] Now, if you were to say Hope, to what extent was this content
Frank Liesen: taught to you or helped you through Hope? Through mentors,
through services, through a combination of everything? Was it a
particular person who helped you along this path of development?
How would you see it?
- [0:42:12] We have a very intensive discipleship program at Hope Center.
Anna Cruz: With us, when you become a member, you automatically get
discipled.
- [0:42:25] So you automatically become a member after baptism?
Frank Liesen:
- [0:42:27] Well, if you want to. You can fill out a membership application,
Anna Cruz: and then that will be evaluated by both sides. Then you can
become a member.
- [0:42:36] You make an application, and then you become a member of the
Frank Liesen: association, or you are just a member of the community?

- [0:42:39]
Anna Cruz: No, not a member of the non-profit organization, but a spiritual member in the community, not kind of on paper. Then you are automatically in the discipleship process, which for us means that you get a mentor, that you participate in our Hope Communities, so that we have fellowship, that you come under the teaching, so in some way, just through the sermons—we also used to have a Bible course like that—that you do certain things like that. That is also time-consuming. Through this discipleship process, it changed very quickly. I believe that in Hope Center life can change much faster because it is an intense process that also costs a price, and God can also work much faster when it feels like you are in Hope Center three or four days a week if you want. You can also be there only two, three days, or two days. But really, it is three, four days that you are there. You have a mentor or mentors that you meet with all the time that you are accountable to. That is totally helpful. You always meet in pairs, once a week?
- [0:43:45]
Frank Liesen:
[0:43:47]
Anna Cruz: You meet in pairs. You actually meet every three, four weeks, really meet sort of, but you are always in contact, and you can say, “Hey, I need your prayer, I am tempted or whatever.” The person actually knows everything about you, and that is super helpful. It is assigned to you, or do you pick it?
- [0:44:04]
Frank Liesen:
[0:44:05]
Anna Cruz: No, it is assigned. That is new. We hadSo what do I mean with new? We all had Pastor Joshua as a mentor (Anna and Frank are laughing) because there was no capacity otherwise. But now you are assigned a person. Actually, Hope Center has been the driving force in all of this becauseI read the Word myself, but I think God works a lot through leaders and people because God is a God of community. I learned quite a lot through my brothers and sisters, but primarily through my leaders through, as I said, this discipleship process, which was very intense. My mentor played a big part in my process.
- [0:44:51]
Frank Liesen: Through your changes, you have already mentioned, there were specific conflicts perhaps with people, with your parents at first, where there is skepticism. Did you experience other tensions after you came to faith and changed in other relationships or situations where it became difficult?
- [0:45:09]
Anna Cruz: Yeah, so I think. . . .the positive. I have had a lot of reservations thrown at me by people. But I believe that when a person really converts, that cannot last long because they see face to face that this person changes so incredibly into the positive.

- [0:45:30] That was the case with you?
- Frank Liesen:
- [0:45:31] It was definitely like that for me. It sometimes meant, for example, that I got to spend less time with certain friends, less time with my family, which at first glance, like I said, created reservations where my family thought I was in a cult or something. I believe that is what every non-Christian family goes through when their child converts. But people saw the effects directly that I invested my time in God and in the church. Then, the reservations could not stay for long. Indeed, it was the case that I encountered certain prejudices from people.
- [0:46:04] From your friends at school?
- Frank Liesen:
- [0:46:06] Exactly, old friends, or especially the people I knew with whom I shared the political opinion. It was totally incomprehensible to many people.
- [0:46:16] You got engaged in discussion groups, or was that your [political] party where you got involved?
- Frank Liesen:
- [0:46:19] That was the youth [chapter] of The Left at that time, so the *Linksjugend* [youth of The Left].
- Anna Cruz:
- [0:46:21] You continued to attend the youth chapter of The Left after your conversion?
- Frank Liesen:
- [0:46:24] Yes, so they noticed that I converted and, generally, other people as well. I do not even remember if I continued to meet with them much. I can imagine that I did not. But they definitely noticed that I had converted. Most of them saw me again at some point and saw that I love them with all my heart, even if I am no longer with them every day. I love them much more than I loved them before. Consequently, they could no longer have a lot of reservations. It all dissolved at some point. There is still some resistance in my family—not with my close family anymore, but the extended [family], like a certain lack of understanding when I cannot come to all the events that my family does together because of the church. But actually, it has proceeded really well.
- [0:47:21] Maybe one more thing, which is quite interesting. Hope Center is more involved with the spiritual gifts and prophecies and prayer in the Spirit [praying with speaking in tongues] or speaking in tongues, falling over maybe, which other churches do not practice. What does that mean for you in your transformation, with changes in your life? What significance does that have?
- Frank Liesen:

- [0:47:49]
Anna Cruz: I have to say that it did not alienate me at all. It is quite intriguing. At Hope Center, we have seen this often, that when Christians come who have a different tradition, it is much harder for them to accept it than it is for people who are not Christian at all. For me, now that I think about it, praying in tongues should also have been so stupid [for me] at that time, but it was not weird for me at all, somehow, that people did that.
- [0:48:15]
Anna Cruz: How did this affect me personally . . . ? The experience that I myself received the praying in the Spirit [speaking in tongues] was a very interesting and great experience, which simply exceeded my understanding. These were, I think, all very good aspects, where God knew that I needed them, that I needed a church like that, to no longer rely only on my intellect because I am a person who by nature depends very much on her mind. I then simply had supernatural experiences like falling over. In the beginning, I saw it mostly in other people because I really struggled for a long time with letting go of my mind. It is even harder to receive what God is doing if you want to understand and things like that. In the very beginning, during the early stages, I did not personally come into contact with it so much. Still, I saw it a lot and knew that it was authentic because I just knew the people.
- [0:49:18]
Frank Liesen: You mean falling over?
- [0:49:18]
Anna Cruz: Exactly, falling over, speaking in tongues, that people were kind of screaming, I do not know, demons were leaving or things like that. I definitely saw that. It already was a big part of me. Clearly, people were praying for me, and obviously, I felt that things were getting better supernaturally. Things were maybe leaving. But personally, I am not a person who falls over easily. Personally, I am not a person who has a whole lot of experiences like that. That is why, I think, God worked in me the most through the Word and so on. Nevertheless, it definitely had a part in my process.
- [0:50:03]
Frank Liesen: If I understand it correctly. It helped you, not. . . . On the one hand, you were able to use your mind in coming to faith. On the other hand, you also let go, and it was something positive for you by experiencing these supernatural things?

- [0:50:20]
Anna Cruz: Exactly, that is what the mind . . . because God knows what we are like and God knew, okay, this is maybe one thing that I need [if I am] to open my heart at all. I may first have to understand the Bible to some extent, but these supernatural experiences have helped me not to stop there. At some point, my mind also limits me because things that you do not understand are guaranteed to happen with God. And if you stop there and say, “Yes, then I am out now because I do not understand it,” that it is stupid. That helped me not to stop there and to know that God is very much beyond my understanding and that I will not understand some things and that it is okay.
- [0:51:00]
Frank Liesen: Then [let me ask] the question: “Tell me more about whether and how you perhaps pass on the faith to others, evangelize or talk to others about the faith. Are there certain programs from the congregation in which you participate or actions? Do you do this personally, or do you no longer have time for it? How does it take shape?”
- [0:51:25]
Anna Cruz: I do not believe that you can have too little time for it. I think. . . . That is one matter I am very thankful for. At Hope Center, we learn that is the only reason I live. I think everybody lives it out differently because not all of us are the evangelistic type that preaches on the train. Still, if God put it on my heart very much (Anna is laughing) and made me bold, I would do that too. I wake up every day with the prayer that I want to tell someone about Jesus. And it looks quite different. I am not always. . . . I do not get to share the gospel every day. But then I can, for example, love a person practically or somehow share the gospel.
- [0:52:18]
Anna Cruz: I really try to do it every day. It is a very big part of my life. I think my calling is just to have people come to the Lord. I try to do it every day, as I said. We have a structure at Hope Center where you cannot get around it. We have many evangelistic events, practice it as groups, or do it with other congregations, but personally, I feel moved by God to do it as well
- [0:52:42]
Frank Liesen: So that you like to do it every day, that is a value instilled in you by Hope, or is it something that is on your heart so that you have that vision every day? You said that it is our sole purpose, that we live for it. Is it something that matters to you or something that is imparted by Hope Center?

- [0:52:57]
Anna Cruz: I find it quite fascinating. I think the Bible does not actually, [it] does not even allow for this question. I believe the Bible is clear that this is what we live for. Otherwise, I would be in heaven right now (Anna and Frank are laughing). I am just thankful because it became very clear to me at Hope Center because I know it is not clarified in all the churches, which is okay. I think every church has a different calling. But we at Hope Center are specifically called to bring people to us who were not Christians before. And we live for people coming to us who were not Christians.
- [0:53:34]
Anna Cruz: That means we must evangelize, and that is something being preached to us every day, that this is the simple reason why we are saved and we are still on earth, and why we still have access to other people, contact with other people, and we are not spiritual beings or something. That is where the Hope Center already has a big part in it. But I think [that is true] even if it was not Hope Center and I was not part of another church that would talk me out of it, but I would just read the Bible. I think that as a person if you are so gripped by the gospel, you cannot really help it. That is why, I believe, the Word could do it by itself. But it is a big topic at the Hope Center.
- [0:54:18]
Frank Liesen: You say you try to pass it on every day. Does it mean you are giving out Bible verses or trying to talk out to people, specific people on the street or neighbors, or what does that look like?
- [0:54:30]
Anna Cruz: It really depends. I try to, especially what I notice at the university. . . . I believe it is vital to hear from God, that you are not trying to just be someone that you are not. As I said, I am not the evangelistic type who approaches everyone every two seconds. After all, it is on most days that God puts it on my heart to approach a stranger and at least say, "God loves you!" I do not always do it, but it has been on my heart almost every day, even though I am not the evangelistic type. In the university, for example, I try to be a testimony mainly through my life, because it is a long-term relationship where I do not just see a person once, but I can invest in the relationship. I try to love people so that they can see that there is something different about me. Also, I try to be excellent at what I do and then give testimony.

- [0:55:25]
Anna Cruz: I testify emphatically to the fact that it is by God's grace and not by myself. People usually get curious then and ask, for example, why I go to church every Sunday and things like that. Right, stuff like that, actually. It is pretty spontaneous. I do not have a plan for how I am going to do it or anything. It is just something where I want God to make it clear to me every day that this is the reason for going to university and [the reason] I do everything else. It just depends, as I said. It can be in evangelistic outreaches where we go out on the streets just for that reason and approach random people constantly. But I believe that long-term relationships also bear a lot of fruit if you do not come with the Jesus hammer all the time but invest in the relationship. People realize on their own that you are different somehow.
- [0:56:23]
Frank Liesen: Have you been on a mission trip to other countries?
- (Anna Cruz signals no)
- [0:56:27]
Frank Liesen: If you were to say, "One thing that, you—now to finish, to wrap this up—one thing that changed as a result of your conversion that was the most important aspect or the most significant aspect? What would you say?"
- [0:56:46]
Anna Cruz: I think, the fact that I know that I am loved and that no one can take that away from me. Also, that I am chosen and that there is a plan for me. Those are the things that just make my life worth living and that have changed my whole life forever because I never get up again and ask myself, "What am I going to do? What am I going to do that day?" It has changed my whole life forever that I know that I am loved.
- [0:57:21]
Frank Liesen: If you were to say, "This is the one thing that Hope Center has done for you to accompany you on this journey of faith!" What would you say?

- [0:57:35]
Anna Cruz: I think the radicalism in the sense that they never told me what I wanted to hear, but they always told the truth even if it hurt, both from the leaders and from the brothers and sisters. That hurt maybe sometimes in the first moment, and that was also perhaps a deprivation because then I learned, “Okay, there is this one thing, it is good if you put it down, maybe slowly.” It was just always. . . . In the end, I am so grateful because I always saw what the purpose behind it was, what the heart of God was behind it. I am super thankful for that because I sometimes think in order not to hurt people, you do not always tell the truth radically. After all, it does not bear fruit, and it is not right for the person. I am grateful for that because I think it could be different. That is what I am most thankful for, that we are allowed to live radically for Jesus and that we are also taught to do so.
- [0:58:34]
Frank Liesen: This speaking into your life, that was mostly through a mentor or through a sermon?
- [0:58:39]
Anna Cruz: Through the mentor, precisely. Those are mostly things that maybe God already told you a little bit through a sermon or in a different way. But that decision, that accountability, “Okay, how is it going with this now that you wanted to discard of?” That is so incredibly helpful and so important because you could not overcome a lot of things like that if you did not have brothers and sisters to support you in this by telling you the truth and admonishing you [unclear].
- [0:59:13]
Frank Liesen: Thank you very much!
- [0:59:16]
Anna Cruz: It is really cool. I am really excited to see what the final outcome will be.

INTERVIEW RELEASE FORM

[Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Fort Worth, TX]

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This form is adapted from: Donald A. Ritchie: Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide. 3rd Edition, (Oxford: University Press, [2002] 2015): 277.

Appendix 9.2 Oral History Interview 2

This is a complete and accurate transcript of the interview with Andreas Küffner, a convert at Gospel Church Munich in Munich, Germany. Frank Liesen conducted the second oral history interview via a Zoom conference call on March 11, 2020. This transcript is an English translation of the German transcript. Frequently used reflective words such as so, really, exactly, or yes, were omitted in the transcript to allow for a fluid translation unless words added meaning or emphasis to the content of the participant's comments. Both interviewee and interviewer would interject "hmm" at times. These utterances were not transcribed. In few cases, words were unclear in the recording, in which case the author inserted [unclear] in the text.

(. . .) indicates a break in the interview with a clarifying explanation.

[. . .] designate the insertion of words for a grammatical correction or an explanation for an unclear statement. It also may provide the English translation of a poignant German saying.

. . . Three dots point out an interruption or break in the train of thought within the sentence of the speaker.

. . . . Four dots indicate what the transcriber believes to be the end of an incomplete sentence.

Frank Liesen created the original transcript in German and this English translation. The transcription software f4x helped in the transcription of the interview in German, while the translation program DeepL aided in the translation process.

[0:00:00] I will start the recording now. Hello, my name is Frank Liesen.
Frank Liesen: I am conducting the call today with Andreas Küffner and today is March 11. We are connected via Zoom. Andreas is based in Munich, and I am in Kändern. Andreas, we start with the first question: "Tell me about your personal and spiritual background before your conversion."

- [0:00:09]
Andreas
Küffner: I did not have anyone in my family where church and mainly God played a central role. I do not want to say that it was secular, but apart from religious education and reading the Bible a few times, it was nothing. I had communion but no confirmation. Communion, that was the only thing, and I went to church at Christmas sometimes. But it was not particularly God-centered, my life. And that was never lived out for me as something important. That is why I never really pursued it. But I always knew that there was something. So for me, it was always—especially in the difficult phase of my life, when, of course, my mother moved out of the home at some point, and I grew up with my dad, had no contact with my mother for over ten years—so, it was precisely in this phase that I noticed that I was being carried through. Today, I know how I was carried through, but at that time, I could not really grasp it. I just knew that there must be something that holds me and gives me strength, without knowing exactly how to describe it.
- [0:02:03]
Andreas
Küffner: Maria, my wife, and I got married in 2015, and before that, we also decided to leave the church [as members in the EKD] because the church is not a special place for us in that sense. We actually decided for ourselves that leaving the church was the right way to go. Now, in retrospect, we know to some extent why, but at that time, of course, it was not so visible to us. So, you could say that I did not have a God-centered life in that sense.
- [0:02:07]
Andreas
Küffner: Then, in 2014, precisely five, six years ago, yes, more or less through a discussion at a birthday [party], the initial spark came to read the Bible, at least individual passages. In that case, my first book was John, and actually, various passages made me think and, at that time, turned my logic upside down a bit. It was more like a discussion during a birthday party with the person that I will tell you a lot about in this interview because this person was extremely important in my process of finding faith. He was practically the wingman who brought me to this, also my link to the congregation, to the Gospel Church. Michael S. Actually, Michael had started this discussion at that time. This birthday [party] became a discussion of four to five hours with [the result] that a small seed was planted in me. Then, I asked the golden question a few weeks later: “Dear God, if you really exist up there, then show yourself to me!” That was the *Initialzündung* [initial spark].

- [0:02:11] That was still that initial spark before you left the church [EKD] in
Frank Liesen: 2015?
(short break for Andreas to get situated in his
office)
- [0:04:02] That was shortly before, I would say, a few months before the
Andreas: initial spark.
- [0:04:11] Again, very briefly for clarification. You grew up as Catholic?
Frank Liesen: Where, and how old are you, or when were you born?
- [0:04:20] I was born in Munich on 01.04.1986, and I grew up Roman
Andreas: Catholic, in that sense, concerning the denomination.
- [0:04:28] You grew up in Munich?
Frank Liesen:
- [0:04:37] Right, I grew up in Munich.
Andreas:
- [0:04:47] And concerning the worldview, how would you describe that there
Frank Liesen: might be some God? What was your worldview like at that time,
or was it not defined?
- [0:04:58] That was not defined. I knew there was something. Yes, that
Andreas: was the image, but I did not know precisely what. I actually did
Küffner: not have a real interest, in quotation marks [German idiom
for particular emphasis], to pursue it at that point. So, at that
time, I was in my mid to late twenties. That is when I started my
company. At that time, there was no real interest.
- [0:05:50] Then the second question already, which you already started
Frank Liesen: [to answer]: “Tell me more about how you first heard about the
content of the Christian faith. What were the key people or the
media and programs?”

[0:06:02]
 Andreas
 Küffner:

All right, so in the end, the medium, at that time, was the Olive Tree Bible, this app, maybe you know it. Michael had it on his cell phone at the time. In the final analysis, it is a Bible where you can look at it in different languages, in all the various versions, whether it is the Elberfelder, whatever, you can get all the translations. Then you can jump back and forth between the Bibles, which is super exciting. Michael showed it to me on his cell phone at this birthday party, and we talked about it. I do not remember which passage it was precisely, but it was about this aspect of logic. It was about having to explain everything to ourselves. And it was about where this demarcation is, the subject of philosophy, and all these things. It was a real regulars' table discussion at a birthday party. Michael just had selective passages ready, and that forced me, in quotation marks, to read the Bible for a change. The Bible was for me until then; it was hieroglyphics. I could not read those, but that I actually understood. There were three, four, five sentences. It was a [Bible] passage, and I understood it. It was somehow that moment that opened up for me, without really realizing it, you know?

[0:07:49]
 Andreas
 Küffner:

And then I started pursuing it. And then I started looking at the Bible, and then I read it before and after [the passages]. And all of a sudden, I kind of understood it. And that got me interested. And then I called Michael again weeks later and told him, "Michael, thank you very much for the impulses. I would like to talk to you again." Then, Michael said, "I knew that this would come at some point." Then, he invited me to his home and said, "Hey, we have a Bible study on Friday mornings, a men's group in Grünwald." That was not the church yet. Basically, he put something ahead of it [service attendance]. These are super-interesting personalities from business, sports, and everything else, who study in the Bible, on this day, share with each other, a men's breakfast. That is when I said, "Yeah, I will come by one day."

- [0:08:48]
Andreas
Küffner: The exciting thing was that only two, three, or four weeks later, I could bring myself to do it because I thought to myself, “For God’s sake, what kind of self-support group is going to be waiting for me there?” But then I was able to convince myself to do it, went to it, and I opened the Bible at that time. I do not remember exactly. I think we went through Mark or Matthew, I think Mark, and again, it was then that I realized what it was all about. It was again a passage that somehow gave me a very, very good impulse, especially in that situation. *Es hat mir so aus der Seele gesprochen* [It really spoke to my soul]. It touched me. The people around me were all people where I thought to myself, “So, if you meet them at the bus stop or when you meet them somewhere in the city, you would say those are super credible people. None of them are crazy. They can count to three.” I just liked everything already, and I thought to myself, “Why? I need to be part of it!” I went home, and I told my wife, and I said, “I am so touched. I cannot even describe to you what just happened because we were just reading in the book.” It was like that. But I was so touched that whole day, I could no longer—I had my company at that time—I did not go to the office anymore. I could not work in a usual way.
- [0:10:14]
Andreas
Küffner: It was so much on my mind that I said to Michael, “Hey, Michael, you told me you are in a church, and that is that Gospel Church. I would love to go there with Maria.” And then we went there, I think, on the following Sunday right away.
- [0:10:17]
Frank Liesen: When was that approximately?
- [0:10:22]
Andreas
Küffner: In November 2014. That is how it was, yes, and I then said, “Okay!” Then, we were also excited by the people. That is, we were not just there for the service by itself, and there again, it was like that: We came in. We were greeted very warmly, and the exciting thing was again that the sermon that Steffen preached at that time gave me another impulse. You need to imagine that it was like an escalation that occurred within a few days or a few weeks. Suddenly, I went from “Hey, the Bible is a book that I will never understand” to, “Wow, it touches me, and it even makes sense.”

[0:11:16]
 Andreas
 Küffner: Yes, that happened in a few weeks, and I did not think about whether I was converted yet. I did not think about what is really behind it, but I was really still a baby Christian [who] just hatched. But I noticed that there was something there, and it touched me. So it came about that Maria and I were there more and more, yes, every week, practically every Sunday, and slowly absorbed it, from left to right. Sometimes, we were also at dinner with all the families on Sundays and were really accepted into this community. The medium itself, if you put it that way, was actually always the service itself, the sermon. So, in the beginning, from Sunday to Sunday, I was always into the sermon, always [thinking], “Hey, insane, the Bible makes sense!” And that reinforcement of “Hey, it all makes sense!” That carried me. It became a fixed habit to go to church on Sundays.

[0:12:16] This started in late 2014?

Frank Liesen:

[0:12:19]
 Andreas
 Küffner: At the end of 2014, yes. And then it was the case that Maria and I got married in the middle of 2015 at Lake Garda, in Italy, in the summer, in August 2015. Then, Maria and I decided relatively quickly that it would be a free Christian ceremony and not a ceremony in the church or something like that [an evangelical, not a mainline church ceremony]. Then, we invited Steffen and Sam—the second pastor at that time, an American—we invited them both after the conversation and asked if they would do it for us. And they both said, “Great, we are very happy, we will do it.” They were also there. And it was really like that. We read the book about marriage by Timothy Keller together, which deals with marriage, the covenant, about what matters in marriage. That is when, for me and Maria, *alle Schallklappen runterflogen* [all the sound valves flew off]. We understood who the bride is, we understood the big picture, this covenant, and it suddenly made sense again.

[0:12:31]
Andreas
Küffner: Now, you will undoubtedly think, “Okay, then he became firmer and firmer, kept reading the Bible.” And the extremely emotional factor, where it really showed up for me, knowingly, what I can tell you now, was the first time in the summer of 2015. You have to imagine, it was August 8, 2015. It was 45 degrees in the sun. We had an open-air ceremony. Steffen, the pastor, comes to me, and we pray. He just said, “It is going to be difficult now because if we now do half an hour here, they will all tip over [faint].” The sun was beaming down. It was complete madness, blue sky, not a white cloud in the sky. Steffen and I are praying and saying, “Hey, just give a good time now, be in our midst. It is a wedding in your name. Do not let anybody get a sunstroke now,” and so on and so forth. You can imagine what happened. It actually happened that the ceremony went longer than half an hour, but it really rained at the end. It was really like that. It was bright, it was warm, but it rained. Maria and I looked at each other and told Steffen, “What a wonderful moment!” That was a real Jesus moment.

[0:12:42]
Frank Liesen: It was like God answered your prayer?

[0:12:48]
Andreas
Küffner: Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely. Then it was clear to me: “Crazy, unbelievable! He really exists!” This sign happened almost one year after I had asked the question: “God, if you really exist, show yourself to me!” And he did show himself always at specific points. Hey, he was always chasing me at that moment, and he said, “Stay on it, stay on it!” Like when you feed someone a little bit like that, and then he really showed himself though and raised his hand and said, “Here, I am here!” So obvious to see, and it was extreme.

[0:15:40]
Frank Liesen: Great! To briefly go back to the question: “What helped you to find access to the Christian faith, especially in the church?” You said the sermon was the deciding factor. Were there other things like the worship style or aspects of the church that helped you to attend there?

- [0:16:03]
Andreas
Küffner: Absolutely, of course. For one thing, the community in the church was extremely important. That is very clear, the people all around. Also, of course, to grow in the Christian faith. Naturally, individual members of the congregation supported me as they did Bible studies with me and so forth. So that was part of it, and that was all offline. Then, we had these Friday meetings with the men who helped me. I was not only in church on Sundays but also during the week when I wanted to mature in the Scriptures. And there were individual anchors, not necessarily the pastor, but rather the congregational members, who then practically caught you like a spider's web and developed you further. Mainly, this person, Michael S.; he then invited me or us as a family to the congregation at that time. Of course, that was an essential anchor at that time. There was someone who really went through a book with me for two or three hours on Thursday afternoons over several weeks. Yes, we really went through a whole book, Mark, Matthew, all the books, and David, and looked at everything.
- [0:17:24]
Frank Liesen: When you say community, what about the community appealed to you particularly?
- [0:17:30]
Andreas
Küffner: Actually, I believe the meaningfulness of conversations. You suddenly leave out this superficiality, which was a very important factor in my life before, in my professional life, in my private life, everything was so superficial. Suddenly, I noticed that the conversations go deeper and more elementary and existential, beyond the edge of my own nose. And I think that these conversations were not so dry. I always had the feeling that it was all dry and not exciting, and suddenly, I was shown the exact opposite. That it is alive, that there is a living faith, that there is actually community, that praying is fun. All these things and this learning by doing; this experience, this world of experience that was created there, contributed significantly to stay on this path and to develop the desire and the fun to keep on going.
- [0:18:33]
Frank Liesen: The experiential world, by that, you mean the Bible study experience and the worship experience, so to speak?
- [0:18:40]
Andreas
Küffner: Exactly, right.
- [0:18:43]
Frank Liesen: To what extent did the worship style have an impact?

- [0:18:51]
Andreas
Küffner: I found it appealing. That was also important, of course. If you do not see it appealing, then it is difficult because, after that, I also got involved with Hillsong, with ICF, also with other churches. I was also enthusiastic about them. That, of course, was a bit of a different style—the music [was] a bit louder. Perhaps, at times, not only half an hour on a specific Bible text, but there were several verses, several books in a worship service. That was a little more entertaining and fast-paced.
- [0:19:28]
Andreas
Küffner: But what really appealed to me about Gospel Church was that they are more exact in terms of content. What was interesting to me was to have a sermon where the content went deep, where you have to deal with topics, where you have to consider different views, and above all, freedom of interpretation. Well, there was no left and no right. There was just this one way, and I liked that very much, whereas with ICF or even with Hillsong, everything was geared more toward entertainment, where it was more lively. There, it was a bit more oriented towards entertainment. And I thought, what was interesting and important about Gospel Church was to be very close to the Word and to create this foundation. My hunger and thirst to be in the Bible were greater than to sing five extra songs.
- [0:20:23]
Frank Liesen: Fourth question! You had already partially answered that one too. The question [is]: “Tell me more about how your decision to become a Christian happened?”
- [0:20:35]
Andreas
Küffner: In a sense, the decision was taken over for me. That is the beauty. I did somehow mature into it, I would say, with that experience back then, and there was another experience that occurred in 2016. Because you are probably going to ask later, “How did life change after that as a Christian?” Yes, it was not that it was very positive at the beginning. It was more like many things in my life got shaken entirely through, [looking at it] in a review. At that time, I had to break up with my fellow business partner, with whom I had built a highly successful business. I just could not build a business anymore with someone who does not have the Christian faith. Well, certain drawbacks came with it, I would say. You just could no longer live a normal life with the previous principles or values.

- [0:21:35]
Andreas
Küffner: Yes, you also changed your social network a bit, which, of course, also led to tensions. There are occasional ones in my family even today. I invite my parents again and again, and they also come every once in a while. But there is always a bit of a bad vibe. They cannot really understand it, but I do not stop telling them about it again and again. And on Christmas, at times when they are all with me, I take the liberty of reading from the Bible. Well, I do not stop there either, but it is not tangible for them yet.
- [0:22:08]
Andreas
Küffner: On the other hand, it was the case that in June 2016, my first daughter, my E., came into the world, and that was a drastic situation, that E. was not alive at the beginning. She was blue [in her face]. It was a really difficult situation after 21 hours of birth, and E. was taken away immediately because there was no possibility. . . . It all happened so fast for me. I was so overloaded emotionally that I remember that situation exactly. It was a hallway; no one was there. There were these bright spotlights, and I saw a little door, and I had to—because I am so charged emotionally—I just went through that door, and it was a small bathroom. I locked the bathroom, and I dropped down on my knees. I probably never cried as I did at that moment in my [entire] life. I knew it was a determining moment because I did not know if my daughter was alive or not. She was taken away. It looked like it was all very, very unusual because, all of a sudden, there were nine doctors around me.
- [0:23:14]
Andreas
Küffner: And at that moment, you realized that “Okay, it is very tense.” I got down on my knees, and I just prayed, and I was utterly distraught, and it was probably only two minutes, but it felt like two hours. And the exciting thing was that God spoke to me at that moment, holding his hand over me, and I felt warmth. It was really evident. It was not kind of left or right, it was not black or white, but it was really an appearance of Jesus telling me, “God does not make mistakes. That means trust in me. I am the one who turns light switches on and off.” I still know the words today: “I am the one who decides about life and death. But I also do not make any mistakes. That means, my son, you can trust me!” In those days, I took my scepter in my own hand again and again and said again and again, “I decide everything!” On that very day, he simply showed me to really trust him.

- [0:24:26]
Andreas
Küffner: I came out of that toilet, and I knew, no matter if my daughter is not alive now or if she is alive, God makes no mistakes, and I was at peace with that. And it was such a calming atmosphere, not knowing what exactly was happening to my daughter at that moment. It was fascinating because I was so calm, and the doctors told me afterward, “It was extraordinary how calm you, and it was so apparent!” Long story short. Ella was alive. Ella was breathing, and I told that to Maria and later to Steffen, our pastor, you know him. And this situation was extraordinary. What happened there—also in the aftermath with us as a family, because for Maria—it was extremely difficult to deal with at the time. She also found a completely different approach to God. This situation in the summer of 2016 was like a rocket that shot us closer to him. They were two actual experiences where God revealed himself to us in a real-life scenario.
- [0:25:41]
Frank Liesen: If you had to pin down your conversion, this point in time? Is there a point in time where you would say, “That was my conversion!?” Before that, I was not a Christian, and after that, I was. Or was it this process? How would you describe that?
- [0:25:56]
Andreas
Küffner: It was this process, but, for sure, it was these two experiences in the summer of 2015 and in the summer of 2016, in the phase in which I really noticed, “Okay, right there!” In that year, of course, a lot changed with me in all areas, and there was an insane amount of things. Many things collapsed; a lot of stuff broke down. I was also attacked from all sides. Now that I think about it, I would say that was the time of conversion. Still, it was not that one moment, I would say, it was this being touched, as I told you before, in the first moments, in the first opportunities to talk to Christians. It was this being touched, but then also when you study more and more in the Scriptures, which becomes more and more relevant, pray more and more, get more and more access to it and then have such experiences. Of course, it has extreme effects. So, that is why for me, it was not this one moment, but it was over the time of one year, I would say.
- [0:26:54]
Frank Liesen: And this understanding, if you now summarize the gospel, the Good News: Jesus is the Son of God. He died for sins, rose again on the third day. I believe that now and accept that for me personally. That step, so to speak. That happened gradually over that period, or how would you describe it?

- [0:27:14]
Andreas
Küffner: Well, I was baptized on my thirtieth birthday. That was on April 1, 2016. On my thirtieth birthday, we were baptized in the pool of church members. That was clear to me at that moment that I had this clear understanding that Jesus died for my sins, that he conquered death. That was clear for me at that moment, and I wanted to testify to this. M. and I were baptized there. And it was on that day, on April 1, 2016, this rebirth, this new orientation, that I went under and then practically resurfaced as a Christian. And that was, practically speaking, the initial spark.
- [0:28:17]
Frank Liesen: Did you take a baptism class beforehand to understand that, or was that a conversation with both of you?
- [0:28:26]
Andreas
Küffner: No, we had another friend, the pastor, who was in Las Vegas. That was someone with whom I talked very, very intensively about everything at that time. Then [I asked him], "Should we have Ella baptized, or should we just have her blessed when she is born?" These were all elementary questions that I did not really understand at the time. Of course, I wanted to have the Scriptures as an interpretation and not somehow a denominational slant or some kind of interpretation. These were extraordinary conversations that I had at that time. In this context, I became aware of the topic of baptism, what it actually means, in combination with everything, whether that was [the gospel of] John, with that orientation, [to understand] what actually happens there. Based on that, we decided to have our children blessed. They blessed both in the church, both my son, afterward, and our daughter because we have the opinion, my wife and I, that they should have this experience [the decision of baptism] themselves. We always go to church with our children every Sunday.
- [0:29:36]
Andreas
Küffner: We live this Christian ideal. Still, they [our children] are supposed to have that moment themselves when they really believe on their own, when they convert on their own and confess they believe that Jesus died for their sins and they are loved by Him. Yes, and that is the extraordinary thing. And if they have that [faith] at eight, it is fine. If they have that at sixteen, it is fine, and if they have that at thirty-six, it is fine.
- [0:30:09]
Frank Liesen: Membership: Did you become members, and did that help in any way to make your faith firm, or did that not matter too much?

- [0:30:18]
Andreas
Küffner: We became members of the Gospel Church in 2018, as far as I know, at the end of 2018, so a little later. But that was just because I actually did not know exactly [the answer about] some of the questions, such as baptism. Yes, whether this is the right way. There were discussions about that from time to time. But that was never was the [crucial] role and did not affect faith in itself but only the responsibility within the community. Of course, I take on leading through the service now. My wife organizes events and is responsible for childcare now. By being members, we have a mandate within the community and beyond. That effect was there.
- [0:31:15]
Frank Liesen: That transitions into the next question: “How and through what has your life changed since your conversion?”
- [0:31:25]
Andreas
Küffner: I would say, in retrospect, it was radical, even then not overnight. But it was radical when you look at 2020. I am traveling all over the world today. I get to speak on stages in front of 10,000 people today. I never used to have the confidence in my personality to do something like that. Lots of incredible things have arisen in me, in my personality, even though I never attended a personality seminar or anything like that. It is extraordinary what has happened in me, through the love of God, with my personality. That is why I am incredibly excited about what he still has in store for me because he has called forth particular talents in me that I had never seen myself and that no other person had ever shown me or told me that I had them. Still, he practically threw me into it somehow. Today I also use these stages to talk about it [my faith] at opportune times. So, I am in Turkey, and I run around with my chain and my cross, and I will never hide it! And that is also nice, to be recognized everywhere as a personality. Everybody knows that you are a Christian, also in Egypt, and wherever I am allowed to build my business and wherever I can create income relevance. Of course, it is exciting to work in all those places and not hide the fact that I am a Christian, and today, I am allowed to build my business with Christians, with people who pray with me. Of course, that is another matter, because I have already changed that. Today, I could not work with anyone else. Today, I could not work with non-Christians in essential matters anymore. That is really important for me.

[0:33:12]
Andreas
Küffner:

Apart from that, it is also important what it has done to our family, Maria, and me. Of course, a lot in an extreme way, because we both live the faith, because we pray with our children every evening. We have a completely different community, and something like jealousy and such things do not play a role in our relationship, in our love. And we notice that in many situations, we are now 34, we have two small children . . . It is not always easy, but we see around us that many marriages are already failing, that many relationships are coming to an end, whether there are children or not. It is a very interesting time. We are very, very constant in our love and in the fact that we live in this triangle, that we are not only alone. We both have to work everything out, but we also have the Lord in this marriage, and thus, we can also give away very, very much. And that is very, very important. You can see that in our relationship. Otherwise, it would be difficult, because I am on the road a lot and she is here with the children. One fulfills his dreams, the other does not. So, our tasks are clearly distributed. Of course, with our belief that I also have the responsibility for the family.

[0:34:40]
Andreas
Küffner:

We live in a very emancipated time, when women, although women's rights are becoming more interesting, where women are also gaining more and more power, which is basically all super exciting. Yes, but we both have the Christian faith that I am responsible and make the decisions. I include her, but I have the 51 percent. Of course, that is also important. If we simply look at the families around us, wherever the woman has this 51 percent, it does not work. Wherever the man does not live up to his responsibility or does not know it, at that moment, it does not work. And that is quite clear for us. If we have this *Bibel-Leben* [a life based on the Bible] and live out this Scripture and take it into the present day, then it simply works, and that is the key. We already recognize that, and apart from that, of course, we have many friends today. Everybody knows this. It is just that people come to us like a magnet. That is also exciting. Many come to our home with us and appreciate being with us. We talk about it at every opportunity, whenever we can.

[0:35:50]
Frank Liesen:

Briefly, for clarification. Your gifting that you discovered professionally. What is that, for example, and very briefly, what is this profession that you have gotten into now? You said, "The Christian faith has helped you to find the gifting for it, to develop yourself." What is it that you do?

[0:36:11]
Andreas
Küffner: Well, basically I always work in sales, always in marketing. And today I get to work in an area where I just help people generate income worldwide through communities and through networkers. The biggest companies in the world today are networks. Data networks are today's gold. And today, we work with a community mindset; that is, we market health care products that are approved all over the world, that are Nobel Prize nominated. We market those through this community approach through online communities. Today, that also helps me to be active in very different countries, in Africa, in America, and to get to know very many different kinds of people. And the exciting thing is to keep meeting Christians in Africa or America and to keep working with them on this business, also to produce income.

[0:37:17]
Andreas
Küffner: In Italy, for example, we have enrolled entire churches, entire church congregations, that now work with our products and thus generate income, financing their expenses to some extent. It is unbelievable what is developing over time. We support, for example, in Dubai, in an Arab country, where there are no churches, where the Christian faith is forbidden on the surface, and fellowship is prohibited in the name of God. Two thousand people come to the service on a Saturday from very different countries, from African countries, from India, from Asia, it does not matter. Dubai is a melting pot. That is super exciting to see that the worship service is possible. And that is super exciting. You are hosting the worship services?

[0:38:10]
Frank Liesen:

[0:38:12]
Andreas
Küffner: No, I do not organize the worship service, but we support it financially, and I know many people. So, when I am in Dubai, I also go to the church, and I also know the pastor quite well, and I know many people in the church because we work with them in marketing and sales. I know that lots of incredible things are happening there. That is why it is super exciting to be able to experience this to such an extent today. If I were to just sit in my office all day, I would not have the opportunity to see and participate in all of this and come up with all of these points. That means that what I have today, this opportunity that is given to me is no longer to exchange money for time in a traditional sense, to be in a hamster wheel thinking, but to have the opportunity to support financially on the one hand and to do that much more because you can generate income on a completely different level and use that super well in a profitable way to invest in opportunities, to build the houses of worship. That is an incredible privilege. That is also the great goal that I have. It is precisely that, to simply support this everywhere.

[0:39:29]
Andreas
Küffner:

For example, I also have projects where we are building up our own brand, our own clothing brand, which we are marketing worldwide with Plan of God. And Plan of God will be nothing other than that we write Bible verses somewhere on sweaters, on caps, so that people know at specific points: “Hey, there is a Christian!” That one also shows this publicly, not only always with the cross, but classically with the Bible verse, with the Bible verse that one embraces, where some people even say, “Hey, Psalm 94, fascinating, I will take a look, I will Google it.” That is also super exciting. I was at the airport in Philadelphia, and I was about to miss my flight. And I remember very clearly; I had my sweater on with just this exact Bible verse. I do not know which one it was, but it was exciting, and someone recognized me at the airport and said, “Hey, brother,” and asked if I was a Christian. And I was like, “Yes!” and he said, “Listen, you are going to go this way, you are going to go through that airlock, and you are going to come right through to the flight.” I would never have made it without that, without that opportunity, to get that flight. You can already see the impact of that. Unbelievable. I did not realize until I was on the plane, reviewing what was going on, that I was actually wearing this sweater because I was wondering how he could tell that I was one of him? It is really, really exciting.

[0:41:01]
Frank Liesen:

Maybe I will ask something about that again before I go back to the changes through faith. It already relates to the last question: “Tell me more about it and how you yourself have communicated the faith to others since then, so locally, but also globally, to promote the faith?” You already talked about how you are involved, if I understand it correctly, through your business, to promote churches and the Christian faith worldwide, to get involved there, financially, and then your personal involvement. Maybe you can briefly say something about how you personally implement it locally or worldwide.

- [0:41:42]
Andreas
Küffner: Yes. On the one hand, the goal is clearly to generate income, to work in places and in organizations, to work in places where it is needed. Yes, always in the context of spreading the faith and building houses of God. That is the most important thing. We just had the topic of persecution of Christians all over the world. This idea with [the clothing line] Plan of God is actually about releasing funds and making them available to help organizations that, in the name of the Lord, deal with the persecution of Christians around the world so that Christians in every country today have the opportunity to live out their faith and not have to hide for it and to confess and name it in these situations. Yes, that is a crucial factor for me because it touches me that there are still countries worldwide where people are murdered because they are Christians. That is one of the topics that has been on my mind in recent weeks and months. And I definitely want to have an impact there.
- [0:43:11]
Andreas
Küffner: And because of the fact that I get around a lot in the world, that I am on the plane a lot, I see a lot, I can gather a lot of impressions. Of course, I would like to continue to expand that. And in every place where there are opportunities to talk about it on the stages, many people ask me why I am such an incredibly successful person today. I say, "Yes, I could say now I am a great person, and Andreas Küffner is the navel of the world and Rome or whatever." Or I can simply say that I let Jesus into my life at the right time. And in fact, I trust him today, that he gives me precisely the path that does not please me, but that pleases him. I am just curious to see how he still lets me have influence and what else he has prepared for me or what he is yet planned with me. Some people can process that. Also, on Instagram, in these social media channels, where I am very active. It happens very often that I post Bible verses. Yes, I am very transparent there, I would say. Well, everyone should know that I am a Christian and that my origin and everything that we are building here is happening in his name.
- [0:44:19]
Frank Liesen: Locally, giving away your faith personally. . .? Is that happening, and to what extent is Gospel Church helping you to maybe implement that through their programs or through instruction or encouragement?

- [0:44:33]
Andreas
Küffner: Yes, unfortunately, the infrastructure is not yet so good that I would say, “Wow, there is extreme support somehow!” The church is a bit too small for that, and perhaps the infrastructure is not yet far enough along to support me. So, that is rather my topic, that I am very open with the subject [of faith]. Unfortunately, the Gospel Church is still a bit behind. But that is a topic that should come in the next few years, when Gospel Church will grow larger, also in quantity, to manage something like that, and in quality, to spread that even further. That is certainly our task. That is where I see myself. But the current situation is that there is not so much coming from the church yet that helps me personally pass on [my faith].
- [0:45:26]
Frank Liesen: Do you sometimes take people along with you to church or events that they put on, involve them, so to speak?
- [0:45:36]
Andreas
Küffner: Well, that is the case after all, that we keep inviting people on certain occasions. For example, when we have an Easter egg hunt or the Lego Days for children and families. We always invite a lot of people. Of course, a few families with children who are friends of ours have come to church service off and on. We do that, after all.
- [0:45:54]
Frank Liesen: Okay, so in a way, these activities are helpful to you?
- [0:45:58]
Andreas
Küffner: Absolutely, absolutely! These activities also help, let us say, in a fascinating context, to get to know our community, to get to know the people. That is something completely different than, very blatantly, inviting people to the church service. These are two different opportunities.
- [0:46:17]
Frank Liesen: Then I would go back to the question: “How has your life changed since your conversion?” Describe that, and to what extent Gospel Church has helped you along the way regarding life change, spiritual practices. Describe what has changed and, for example, about new habits or spiritual practices, how Gospel Church influenced that process.
- [0:46:48]
Andreas
Küffner: On the one hand, of course, the work with Steffen, whether it was the marriage preparation with Steffen when we met every week for more than half a year, the worship service itself, as well as the other programs. They helped us to remain steady and to develop and to mature. Even though I would like to see more courses, more studies, opportunities for beginners and advanced students to simply study, to read the Bible in the community. That is what you see in ICF and in larger congregations. That the education, the development, this leadership is simply there. This is missing in a very, very small church like ours. I see it that way. It would be ingenious if we had that because that is the decisive factor, whether the spiritual stimuli come in multiple ways.

- [0:48:04]
Andreas
Küffner: Yes, and then I also see how new leadership is developing. And if the church grows as a consequence in quality and quantity. So that is certainly progress that one has to make, together with Steffen, to rebuild the Gospel Church. Because it is precisely the question that you have. Yes, that is just a pity that someone like me, for example, finds much more [support] on the outside than in the church itself. Nevertheless, the church has a vital role, and for me, currently, there is no other alternative. So, for our family, there is no alternative to go to the ICF or something like that. However, the worship service itself is so valuable that it is still important, even though we do not have other offers beyond that.
- [0:48:50]
Frank Liesen: So, what helped you at Gospel Church go through changes personally? What would you say?
- [0:49:05]
Andreas
Küffner: It was, above all, the worship service and the fellowship on Sundays. That was the decisive point, and the selective work with Steffen, directly with the pastor in individual sessions. For example, this marriage preparation [course] or then in so-called leadership training, which they offered at times, and so on.
- [0:49:32]
Frank Liesen: Spiritual practices like praying, reading the Bible, or other things. Did anything change there, before and after faith, or how did that change?
- [0:49:43]
Andreas
Küffner: You mean before faith? Alright, before that, I did not pray; before that, I did not read the Bible; before that, I did not go to church services. After that, it changed to the extent that today, I read the Bible. I know that when I go into my app here today, I have my Bible here on my cell phone. Yes, I also get Auftanken [Refuel, a web service] every day, a Bible verse combined with the opportunity to read something about current topics. Auftanken.de is a very, very important daily process for me, to get up every day with the Bible, with a verse, with a particular background, to get up and study it. In that way, I interact with the Bible every day. We also pray with the children every day, and my prayers with Jesus are spread out over every day. So, in that sense, [I am] very, very grateful for sure. Less when I need something [from him] but, of course, also when I need him. That has changed, I would say yes.
- [0:50:59]
Frank Liesen: If you would point out one thing that changed with you if you were to put it in a nutshell. Before faith and after faith, what was that?
- [0:51:11]
Andreas
Küffner: Can you ask the question more concretely?

- [0:51:18] The one thing that changed you in your faith and life?
Frank Liesen:
- [0:51:24] Yes, okay, I know what you mean. Definitely, the different
Andreas approach to love. Love for me today is a very essential factor in
Küffner: everything that I do. Whether professionally or whether with
my children, it does not matter at all. Of course, I notice myself
sometimes when I talk about specific individuals and then realize,
“Yes, am I badmouthing somehow.” Today, I have a completely
different understanding of the situation. Today, I notice when
I make a mistake immediately. And then, I immediately go into
prayer, or I immediately become aware. This consciousness that
it is not the right way. I approach that topic with a completely
different calmness. That helps me a lot, to always have love in my
heart like this: “What would Jesus do at that moment?” That is
always this question that I have. If someone is there with a really
stupid question and I would like to become very irritated, then
just close my eyes for a moment and to say, “What would Jesus
do?” He would hug him. No problem, I will repeat it again! Left
cheek, right cheek. And these are the situations that I become
aware of at that moment. I would say before I did not love. I did
not know what love was before. And today I know it.
- [0:52:38] And the one thing where you would say that it was the deciding
Frank Liesen: factor that helped you along the way at Gospel Church?
- [0:52:50] The deciding factor? Can I refer to my wedding? Exactly, the
Andreas wedding at Gospel Church because many were there and the two
Küffner: pastors. The wedding was not only a very emotional moment for
me but a wedding in the name of Jesus. Well, Jesus was with us. It
was a God-centered act, a confession, and making a covenant like
you are supposed to at a wedding. That was a very, very central
incident for me.
- [0:53:28] Great, then we are at the end of [the interview] now. Thank you
Frank Liesen: very, very much for your time.


INTERVIEW RELEASE FORM

[Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Fort Worth, TX]

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This form is adapted from: Donald A. Ritchie: *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 3rd Edition, (Oxford: University Press, [2002] 2015): 277.

Appendix 9.3 Oral History Interview 3

This is a complete and accurate transcript of the interview with Vanessa Krackler, a convert at ConnectKirche in Erfurt, Germany. Frank Liesen conducted the third oral history interview via a Zoom conference call on April 4, 2020. The transcript is an English translation of the German transcript. Frequently used reflective words (well, so) and pause fillers (really, exactly, yes) were often omitted in the transcript to allow for a fluid translation unless words added meaning or emphasis to the content of the participant's comments. Both interviewee and interviewer also interjected utterances such as "hmm" at times, which were also not transcribed. In few cases, words were unclear in the recording, in which case the author inserted [unclear] in the text.

(. . .) indicates a break in the interview with a clarifying explanation.

[. . .] designates the insertion of words for a grammatical correction or an explanation for an unclear statement. It also may provide the English translation of a poignant German saying.

. . . Three dots point out an interruption or break in the train of thought within the sentence of the speaker.

. . . . Four dots indicate what the transcriber believes to be the end of an incomplete sentence.

Frank Liesen created the original transcript in German and this English translation. The transcription software f4x helped in the transcription of the interview in German, while the translation program DeepL aided in the translation process.

[0:00:00] Hello, this is Frank Liesen, and I am doing the interview today
Frank Liesen: with Vanessa Krackler, and I am going to record that as well.
Vanessa, is that okay with you?

[0:00:09] Yes.

Vanessa
Krackler:

[0:00:11] Great. Today is the, let us see, April 4. It is 3:13 p.m., and we will
Frank Liesen: start right off with the first question. Vanessa, tell me about your
personal and spiritual background before your conversion!

[0:00:29] I was born in Erfurt in 1997 and grew up an atheist. I have been
Vanessa going to church once a year since 2014, always on Christmas Eve,
Krackler: but never had a connection to God and the church and therefore
did not pursue it further.

- [0:00:55]
Frank Liesen: Can you tell me a little bit more about how you grew up and maybe what your interests were, and if you had any spiritual interests at all?
- [0:01:05]
Vanessa
Krackler: Yes, my parents separated when I was seven. In fact, because of that, I grew up with just my mom. She raised me. I was with my dad a lot too. But my mom was always my caregiver. I used to dance all the time. I actually had these creative and athletic interests rather than spiritual ones. I danced in a dance club for over ten years. Apart from that, I was busy on vacation, traveling, and always got around a lot with my parents and grandparents. I have been able to experience a lot, and I even went to America. Yes, do you need more? (Vanessa and Frank are laughing)
- [0:02:08]
Frank Liesen: Did you have any interest in God or spiritual things or rather not?
- [0:02:12]
Vanessa
Krackler: Not at all, so really not at all. Like I said, I grew up completely atheist. I never had anything to do with faith. It was not in my family at all, or instead, it started out differently. My mom was baptized. She also had confirmation at that time, but then she decided against faith in God. That is how it was passed on to me, of course. I had no contact with it at all in my childhood and also not in my youth. As I said, in 2014, my grandfather died from my mother's side. We went to church every year after that on Christmas Eve. Yes, that became a tradition for us, which we have really held on to. However, these church visits were rather an obligation for me than this "I would like this, and also, I understand what is said there!" That is why it was always very difficult for me to get involved in this faith, so to speak, and to allow that to a certain extent. Exactly, I had no points of contact there at all.
- [0:03:38]
Frank Liesen: You were not baptized?
- [0:03:42]
Vanessa
Krackler: No, never. I am neither baptized nor . . . I also had a youth consecration [East German Communist tradition that replaced Christian confirmation] at that time. I was kept entirely from it.
- [0:03:54]
Frank: Your mother was in the Protestant church, so to speak, but then left or was still . . .?

[0:04:01]
Vanessa
Krackler: No, at a certain age, you can decide whether you want to go to church because of your faith or whether you don't want to do that. That is when my mom, I think it was at sixteen or eighteen, my mom decided against it and, since then, did not pursue it at all. My grandparents, my mother's parents, were also churched, but I think it was also rather something passed on by the parents, but there was no real faith. So, when we go to church today, it is more like: "Well, we show up." But it was never really like in the ConnectKirche, that you live by it. That is why it was not passed on [to me].

[0:04:52]
Frank: Well, then we can talk about the second question. Tell me about how you first heard about the content of the Christian faith and then specifically concerning the ConnectKirche.

[0:05:06]
Vanessa
Krackler: Of course, I had ethics classes at school. You always got to know a little bit about it. Naturally, I also knew a bit about the nativity play. But to be honest, I was never interested in asking further questions or having anything explained to me. Personally, I had no inclination for it. As I said, we started going to church in 2014. That is when I had my first contact, so to speak, with Christians in general, or with the church and also all the sermons. However, it was more of a traditional church.

[0:05:57]
Frank Liesen: That was Protestant or Catholic?

[0:05:58]
Vanessa
Krackler: Protestant, but yes, the sermons were composed in such a way that as a young person, if you had never had anything to do with it, you did not understand anything. We children, we sat—or I was already over 18—we always sat somewhere and listened to the whole thing. That was quite nice. We sang a song every once in a while, which was, according to that time, very old. But we never understood anything. For us, it was more like *ein Absitzen* [having to sit down] and not listening, understanding, and applying. Otherwise, I never had much contact with Christians. So, it was only always this Christmas Eve, we go to church, and we listen to the whole thing, but that was actually it. That is all I was ever interested in.

[0:07:03]
Frank Liesen: What was it like at ConnectKirche when you first heard about it?

- [0:07:09]
Vanessa
Krackler: A buddy of mine, who is still at ConnectKirche, invited me to ConnectKirche so many times, and I always refused. I always had some excuse. Either I had something to do or was on the road, and then on December 16, 2018, I said, “Okay, I will just try this out now. What can go wrong?” [I] then went to ConnectChurch, and this direct, friendly open reception that I got there was just really, really terrific. It was really great to talk to all the new people there and to make new contacts. We always say in the ConnectKirche, “Come in, be at home.” That is our motto, and that was so totally the case. It was really warm. . . I went in upstairs—we were still in a hotel at the time—I went in upstairs, was greeted directly by [Milan at the time, and was then directed downstairs to the [service] location. There was already coffee and tea and water waiting for me and lots of nice people who greet you really well and take care of you. They ask, “Hey, how are you? What are you doing here? How did you get here in the first place?” They took time for me there, and I thought that was something really, really great.
- [0:09:02]
Vanessa
Krackler: Those modern German songs we hear in the church—by now also in English—but these modern songs which we play in the church, they are super appealing. You understand them, and that is not in high German, I would say. Young people like me like it when it is easy [to understand] when it is really clear when it is modern, and that was totally the case there. The music was really great. Actually, Chris sang on that day. That was another bonus point. Honestly, Kevin’s sermon knocked me over a bit. At the time, he talked about the Christmas story and told it from a completely different angle. I think it was the third part of the sermon series. So, I had already missed two of them. Still, nevertheless, I was really gripped by them because he also asked, for example, “Hey, everything is so stressful during the Christmas season. And often we ask ourselves, ‘Hey, is this maybe more, like love, hope, peace?’” Peace, *da hat es mich voll gecatched* [that really hooked me]. That was mega cool. Yes, during the sermon, I made a decision for Jesus.
- [0:10:28]
Frank Liesen: Was there certain biblical content that particularly appealed to you?

- [0:10:33]
Vanessa
Krackler: I do not think I really understood that at the time. That is why I would answer no to that right now. But, I think it was just this moment in the church, how I was received there and above all, . . . I think it is really important for people who have never had anything to do with the faith that they first get such illustrative stories. That means Kevin really tries to integrate these biblical passages into the sermons. He does this in an impressive way, but then, he seeks to translate it fully into something practical. I think, for people like me who had nothing to do with faith before, that is precisely what it takes to take this step and this decision with God. Otherwise, you just do not understand anything about it. If Kevin had just slapped a Bible verse on me, I would not have been able to do anything with it. But this practical application is what really makes the difference.
- [0:11:47]
Frank Liesen: Cool. You have talked a lot about the next question already. Maybe you can think of something else concerning that. What helped you to get new access to the Christian faith through the church and to understand the faith? You have already talked about it, but maybe you can think again about what especially happened there at ConnectKirche . . . how did faith become accessible to you.
- [0:12:12]
Vanessa
Krackler: I think, as I said, that was this overall mood. Wait, now we have to pause for a second.
- (a break for Vanessa to take care of her dog)
- [0:12:43]
Frank Liesen: Okay, great, it is working out. What helped you receive new access to the Christian faith through the church and understanding the faith there, especially at ConnectKiche?
- [0:12:53]
Vanessa
Krackler: Yes, as I said, it really was this sermon of Kevin and the overall feeling, this entry, to be at home, the friendly reception, really the sermon and this worship time. I thought this interplay was fantastic. Kevin's words, or rather the illustrative explanations, made it very easy for me. He asked several questions during the sermon, I think, where you really thought about it. During this reflection, I became very emotional at times. I tried to suppress it constantly because I could not explain it to myself: "Okay, what is going on right now?" Actually, I only went to church to check it out, and that was it. But that got me moving more and more, I would say. I was able to fully engage with Kevin's sermon, which made it very easy for me to make a decision of faith in God.

- [0:14:06]
Vanessa
Krackler: Yes, every sermon, we ask people if they want to decide on a path with Jesus. When that question came, yes, I was extremely emotional. I remember that very clearly. Then, I raised my hand, trembling. I do not think that really came from me. I truly believe that God was already with me entirely and encouraged me to do so. Yes, that he helped me to really take this step.
- [0:14:51]
Vanessa
Krackler: That was one thing, and after that, we always have the prayer of decision. I did that with Kata at the time, with Kevin's wife. And that was also quite an emotional thing for me. Kata asked me two or three questions, I think. That was also [the question]: "Hey, do you have any sins? Did you make any mistakes that we can give to God now?" It was like that. . . . I really thought critically about myself at that time. I struggled with my burdens, and it was like this, I cannot really describe. It was so emotional at that moment when those questions came, and during the prayer, that I really started crying. Then, when I was done with Kata—I got my Bible, this starter packet from ConnectKirche—then, I went out and said to my buddy Chris, I really said, "Hey, I have nailed down the decision for God."
- [0:16:19]
Vanessa
Krackler: Somehow, I do not know; when I think about how it all happened back then, you cannot really realize that yet as a newly decided Christian. I think it only comes with time, and at that moment, I do not know why, when I said I had decided for Jesus, we were already in tears again. It was this super emotional [experience] and, exactly, in this way, I experienced my decision.
- [0:16:52]
Frank Liesen: That is the next question already. Tell me more about how your decision to become a Christian happened. Maybe [the question]: "What did you understand at that time about the faith, what conversion means at that moment?" Can you still remember that?
- [0:17:08]
Vanessa
Krackler: I also had to go . . . , well, it was different. Definitely, I was aware that there is a God who loves me infinitely with all my mistakes and with my sins which I committed, and I can let go of that with him, I can become free of that, and I can really accept that for myself. Those were the first impressions. The other things actually developed relatively late for me. So, I had a bit of a standstill in my faith. Last year after my exam time, towards late summer until about November last year. At first, it came in small stages for me, and then since mid-December, in big steps.
- [0:18:19]
Frank Liesen: The change in [your] faith, so to speak. At that time, you gave up your guilt, so to speak, your sin. You knew that God loves you. That Jesus is the Son of God and that he is equal to God. Was that clear to you or only later on?

- [0:18:36]
Vanessa
Krackler: Actually, that became clear to me relatively late, or rather not relatively late, no, the wrong way around. The [worship services with] sermons that I attended every time, I then became aware of this. Rather, these are also matters that are passed on in Connect groups. We also have this follow-up in the ConnectKirche, which means that people contact you and want to stay in conversation with you if you have any questions or something. I think I was told at some point that these three, the Holy Spirit, Jesus, God, that it is all one.
- [0:19:23]
Vanessa
Krackler: Last year, in the second half of the year, the new Connect groups started again. That is just something really, really fabulous. In the first half of last year, I was with the Herzensfreundinnen [Friends of the Heart]. Those are girls. It is a girls-only group that receives input from the Bible and from God, but who can also pray together, laugh together, have fun together, but who can even cry together. That was the first time, I would say, where I really took steps with God that I noticed myself. I had to pray in front of everyone for the first time, which was already a small obstacle to overcome. I would call it that now. If you never had anything to do with it, you do not know at all at the beginning: "How does prayer even work? What is that anyway? What am I supposed to do now?" That is what I learned a little bit during that time. . . .
- [0:20:32]
Frank Liesen: That was the first group you joined after that decision?
- [0:20:38]
Vanessa
Krackler: Exactly right, the first group and I also joined a team relatively quickly. I think starting about February or maybe already in January. I am not really sure anymore. In any case, I am on the Creative Team. I was in the Logistics Team until recently. That helped me a lot because you get a certain input there. We were . . . I had already been interested in photography in the past, but I never really had the chance to live it out because I did not have a camera, I did not have the equipment. I was able to expand my skills significantly through ConnectKirche. I was shown how to take pictures, how light changes, and so on. We received real advanced training, I would say, and how everything, how things work, was explained to us comprehensively. We were also sent out into the worship service and were told, "Hey, it is your turn to take pictures." That was really cool because you can live out your abilities fully, which is a lot of fun for me.

- [0:21:51]
Vanessa
Krackler: The second Connect group, that was then in the second half of last year, as I said. That was the Experiment of Faith group, which is still around now. It was infinitely good. All those who are still new to the faith or want to refresh their faith in some way. . . . There are also people who have been through it all before but never really decided for Jesus, and then the decision came. We want to refresh that in general, and for that, the group is really mega perfect. There, I was told and learned from the ground up that the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and God is one and that I can talk to each one of them and how I pray. So, all this background knowledge again. That is what I learned there.
- [0:23:05]
Frank Liesen: Tell me . . . or how and by what has your life changed since your conversion? Again, you have already just shared about that. What has changed in your life, and how has ConnectKirche influenced that?
- [0:23:23]
Vanessa
Krackler: ConnectKirche has been extremely helpful with the Connect groups and the Connect Team. I was able to really expand my skills there, was able to get a taste of it, was able to find out what I like and what I do not like. Since this year, about three or four weeks ago, I accepted the Assistant position with Kevin, where I can fully experience self-fulfillment, which came together just by chance.
- [0:24:07]
Vanessa
Krackler: I already mentioned that there was a relatively long standstill in my faith last year. This came with the separation from my ex-boyfriend, who was or is also atheist, it happened. . . . I then began to make really big steps in the faith. I experienced total provision—especially since I give my tithe to the ConnectKirche—I fully experience the supply regarding financial means, also material means, but also simply this aspect of friendship. I separated from him at that time, and I needed. . . .
- [0:24:49]
Frank Liesen: When was that exactly?
- [0:24:51]
Vanessa
Krackler: Mid-December, exactly. I broke up with him in the middle of December.
- [0:24:58]
Frank Liesen: 2019?

[0:25:01] Right, right, mid-December 2019. [I] then needed a place to sleep
 Vanessa with my dog. Kevin and Kata took me in because That was
 Krackler: actually the best thing that could have happened to me. That was
 a full provision from God. He kind of nudged me there to really
 do that. I am sometimes . . . I am a little shy about some things.

[0:25:45] I just do not want to force myself on people. So, he said, “Hey,
 come on, a nudge from me, and let us go to Erfurt!” Then I . . .
 Who gave the nudge?

Frank Liesen: God.
 [0:25:48]

Vanessa
 Krackler: Okay, and to Erfurt. . . . Did you live on the outskirts?
 [0:25:49]
 Frank Liesen:

[0:25:54] Exactly, right. I was living in Gera with my ex-boyfriend. God
 Vanessa gave me this nudge right to go to Kevin and Kata in Erfurt with
 Krackler: my dog. We stayed there for one or two nights. It was super
 good. It really calmed me down. It was, yes, just liberating, and
 it really touched my heart positively. In general, it has freed me
 up a lot in the last three months from. . . . I gave up those sins to
 God in the first prayer of decision, but I did not really give that
 up in my head. So, that only came with time. Especially after
 the separation from my ex-boyfriend, I was able to experience it
 completely differently. I said, “Here you have my whole package
 with all my sins. Take it!” I am really free now. I am experiencing
 real freedom. I am experiencing that these sins are no longer my
 burden but that God has taken it all away completely. After many
 years, I can now finally come to terms with my whole past, with all
 my sins. I believe that is the greatest gift from him.

[0:27:22] [I] am allowed, as I said, to fully live out my abilities with them
 Vanessa and was allowed to make true friends. That was always a little bit
 Krackler: more difficult for me as well. I was often disappointed in the past,
 friendship-wise, and in ConnectKirche I was allowed to find true
 friends. For example, Kevin and Kata or Elisa Treblin, whom you
 are still getting to know or have already gotten to know, I do not
 know (Vanessa and Frank are laughing). I have really been able to
 learn what it means to share, to care, to live friendship above all
 else, and to let go of the past. I was able to learn all of that in the
 last three and a half months.

- [0:28:22]
Vanessa
Krackler: Now, [I] was also allowed to accept this divine order. I grew up atheistic. For me, there were several relationships with men, and I was now allowed to really accept that it also works differently, that there are specific divine steps that you should adhere to in order to live healthy love and to receive a healthy marriage someday. My way of thinking has changed immensely in the last three months, by 180 degrees. I am really living this out fully now. Partly, I behave totally differently towards men because I always have in the back of my mind: “How do they think about me right now? Am I sending out some kind of stimuli or something?” I was able to learn that fully from God.
- [0:29:27]
Vanessa
Krackler: I was allowed to make all my necessary decisions to walk on new paths [unclear]; I was allowed to give it all up to God. [I] know that I am not alone. I have someone who loves me, I am cared for, and I can take every step with God. That is *mega gut* [awesome]. Kevin and Kata helped me enormously. Elisa also helped me a lot in many situations, so at the end of the day, about three months ago, I decided that I wanted to be baptized this year.
- [0:30:17]
Frank Liesen: This decision to be baptized—what does it mean to you in your faith?
- [0:30:25]
Vanessa
Krackler: I want to openly. . . . I am already living that. I show that publicly. That was the next question. I really show that faith publicly, on social media, at work. I talk about it if someone asks me, “Hey, what are you doing on the weekend?” I talk about the church. I say, ‘I attend a worship service [on] Sunday. If you feel like it, you can also come along or [watch it] on a live stream right now.’ For me, it is just again. . . . I publicly profess it on an even newer level. That means I am entering into this infinite covenant with God, and I am truly connected to Him forever. Something like that.
- [0:31:16]
Frank Liesen: Passing on your faith; are there specific programs that you take part in with ConnectKirche? How do you practice that, sharing your faith with other people?

- [0:31:31]
Vanessa
Krackler: Personally, I just share certain things through social media, that means through Instagram; through Facebook, I have done it before, but less [often] there. A whole lot via Instagram and sometimes also via WhatsApp on my status. Then, my family also sees it, that is, my grandmas, my grandpa, something like that. As I said, at work, I also tell people when someone asks me, “Hey, what are you doing this weekend?” I tell them about the church. That is for sure. I have done that a lot in the past. I changed teams again this year at work. [I] went to a different team now, but on the team before that, they heard about it more and more.
- [0:32:26]
Vanessa
Krackler: My one colleague has been questioning more and more: “Hey, what exactly are you doing? What kind of church is that actually? And how does that actually play out in faith? What do you believe in? What are your motives?” That is what I would say. He always questioned more and more, my colleague. I often invite him to the sermons. So far, unfortunately, he has not come to church with me. I am not sure if he watched the Livestream either. But he got a Bible from me a few weeks ago because I wanted him to always have the opportunity to look in there and see: “What does it say in there anyway?” He does not have to ask me anymore . . . He can still ask me, of course. But that he does not have to overcome the difficulty of asking me, “Hey, what is this and that actually?” He can decide himself now: “I would like to know what is in the Bible.” We have already read parts of the Bible together. It was so interesting for him. He asked a lot of questions.
- [0:33:40]
Vanessa
Krackler: I think it is just really important to keep bringing this “church” back into the memory of people subconsciously. I actually do that with my parents sometimes. My mom already received a Bible from me. My stepfather will still get one today (Vanessa is laughing). Yes, just living out my faith. I think if you do that, then people also see how your faith affects you positively or has an effect on you. I think, when questions arise, it is the best thing that can happen to you at that moment.
- [0:34:32]
Frank Liesen: Are there certain activities that take part in with ConnectKirche in order to speak with people about faith, or does that happen instead through your private contacts?

- [0:34:44]
Vanessa
Krackler: There are events; that is definitely the case. We have . . .
I personally have not been a part of that. We had park festivals
sometime in 2018. Last year, unfortunately, we could not put
those on. But we did other things; for example, we went to the
Christmas market and questioned people about faith, for example,
what they thought about Jesus.
- [0:35:07]
Frank Liesen: You participated in that?
- [0:35:09]
Vanessa
Krackler: No, I personally did not participate in that. There are different
things. But, for example, I participated in the activity—oh, gosh.
What is the word for that? I cannot think of the word right now—
there are always campaigns where we do something for Erfurt, for
our city. I already participated twice. We picked up trash once. .
. . (Vanessa is trying to remember) In any case, I took part once.
Definitely, we picked up trash. Those are really cool activities,
I would say. You post them, for example, and then people ask,
“Hey, what are you doing here anyway?” Then you can always talk
more about it.
- [0:36:00]
Vanessa
Krackler: Otherwise, a lot happens on the private level in my case, that
I apply it in life, that I show it, and that I deal with it openly, also
deal with it publicly. Otherwise, I cannot think of anything right
now. In the Creative Team with social media as well.
- [0:36:25]
Frank Liesen: In your changes as a result of faith? What has changed there in
terms of spiritual practices in your relationship with God?
- [0:36:40]
Vanessa
Krackler: How do you mean that exactly?
- [0:36:42]
Frank Liesen: For example, praying or reading the Bible or things like that. But
maybe you also had—so that for one—but perhaps somehow
spiritual experiences that you had, which changed you or had an
influence on you?

- [0:36:57]
Vanessa
Krackler: Sure, I pray very often now, especially also . . . well, as I said I had this low. I was not praying a lot. I did not really like it either, but for the last three months, I have been trying to do that every day. I notice that I am getting better and better at it, that the Holy Spirit is actually speaking out of me in the meantime. I have already been able to experience that now, where someone else said to me, "Wow, cool, I just had goosebumps when you prayed. It was as if this Holy Spirit was really speaking out of you." I can experience that more and more now. Otherwise, reading the Bible is sometimes else. I will be honest with you. It is not really established in me at the moment. But I am practicing it. I have a Bible app on my phone. I get a verse sent to me every day. What kind of Bible app is that? What is it called?
- [0:38:06]
Frank:
[0:38:14]
Vanessa
Krackler: That is a good question. Holy Bible, right. Then I am sent like I said, this daily input, which I always read. Sometimes I read a little bit more. There are different Bible reading plans. I already started a few. [I] identify myself with that a bit more because Bible reading in everyday life is sometimes a challenging matter for me. My day-to-day life is rather packed with things. Somehow, I have not yet managed to set priorities in such a way that Bible reading, for example, is also included. I vow improvement (Vanessa and Frank are laughing).
- [0:39:03]
Frank Liesen:
[0:39:22]
Vanessa
Krackler:
[0:39:30]
Frank Liesen: This pause of change, this interruption. You think that was from when to when? I understood until December!?
- [0:39:40]
Vanessa
Krackler:
[0:39:58]
Frank Liesen: I would say approximately July 2019 to the end of December 2019.
- [0:39:30]
Frank Liesen: Before that, you really experienced your faith, but then there was kind of a break? Now you are sort of really into it since you broke up with your boyfriend?
- [0:39:40]
Vanessa
Krackler:
[0:39:58]
Frank Liesen: Right. In the beginning, it was really this exploring, and now I would [describe] it as living it out. This living it out has happened for me now.
- [0:40:11]
Vanessa
Krackler: Cool. Tell me again what you do, I mean professionally or in your studies, before you came to faith, before you came to ConnectKirche. What are you doing since that time?
- [0:40:11]
Vanessa
Krackler: I did an apprenticeship as an event manager, which means everything in the area of event management. [I] completed it last year in June, at the end of June.

- [0:40:23] 2019?
Frank Liesen:
- [0:40:24] That is right, in June 2019. Afterward, [I] continued to be
Vanessa employed in my department and in my company. In October last
Krackler: year, [I] changed jobs, though, but I am still in the same company, although I am in a different department now and actually, in another career direction. Now [I] deal with real estate, which means everything that entails being a real estate agent—property management and so on and so forth. [I] am now working as a property manager. We mainly deal with commercial companies, commercial properties such as any kind of specialty stores, shopping centers or Netto stores or something like that. That is what I manage.
- [0:41:21] If you were to say one thing that changed for you, in your life,
Frank Liesen: from before to afterward. What would you say is the one thing that has totally changed?
- [0:41:34] I think my values, my priorities in general, or this way of looking
Vanessa at love. That is really twisted in my head big time. I think the rest
Krackler: of my characteristics, of my character traits, were already there. I have always been very helpful, but I really live it differently now. God has changed me very positively in that regard. He has changed me so that I pray about my decisions and do not decide on my own, which also means deciding more slowly. I have always been a very impulsive person when it comes to decisions.
- [0:42:24] I always made up my mind relatively quickly, and then that was
Vanessa it. Now I really think about things. I start praying to God and
Krackler: ask him, “Hey, please just send me some kind of sign! How am I supposed to do it?” In fact, I was allowed to experience that he did it, and this was such an absolute highlight of my faith because I always had problems, I would say, to hear God’s voice. Slowly it is really developing for me that I understand: “How do I personally hear the voice of God?!”
- [0:43:09] How do you hear the voice of God? (Vanessa and Frank are
Frank Liesen: laughing)

- [0:43:13]
Vanessa
Krackler: I do not hear the voice fully like that in my head. Sure, when I pray or go into conversation with God, there is indeed a voice speaking to me. But I experience him really blatantly with goosebumps, or I am overcome by such a comforting warm feeling like when you sit in the sun for the first time or just this . . . when I listen to worship, for example, and sing along sometimes, then it is such a, such a total grin, such a total feeling of happiness that spreads through me, such a warm feeling that somehow you're not alone. Exactly, that is how it tends to spread in me. I think these physical sensitivities are characteristics for me.
- [0:44:19]
Frank Liesen: Today, you would say the Bible, the Bible is God's Word, one to one, I believe everything? Or are you not sure, have not thought about it that way? What is your opinion on that?
- [0:44:30]
Vanessa
Krackler: That is a good question. In fact, I have not thought about that yet. But I would definitely say [the] Bible is God's Word. That is how it is always preached at ConnectKirche. Of course, what is written in the Bible comes from God. That is why I would say that it is God's Word.
- [0:44:55]
Frank Liesen: If you were to say, "ConnectKirche, [there] is one thing that makes ConnectKirche something totally positive for me." What would you say about that?
- [0:45:17]
Vanessa
Krackler: One thing? (Vanessa and Frank are laughing) For me, that would definitely be this coming in and being at home. Really, that sense of having arrived, not just concerning faith, but also in a family, in a faith community. Really, those sermons from Kevin and, to some extent [from] Alex. We have several preachers. Those sermons 'are' an essential part of it as well. I think it is an overall harmony of everything that makes it so infinitely good for many, many other people as well. Yes, that coming in and being at home. That is, I think, that icing on the cake.
- [0:46:01]
Frank Liesen: Cool! Thank you very much, Vanessa.
- [0:46:06]
Vanessa
Krackler: You are welcome!

INTERVIEW RELEASE FORM

[Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Fort Worth, TX]

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This form is adapted from: Donald A. Ritchie: Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide, 3rd Edition, (Oxford: University Press, [2002] 2015): 277.

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