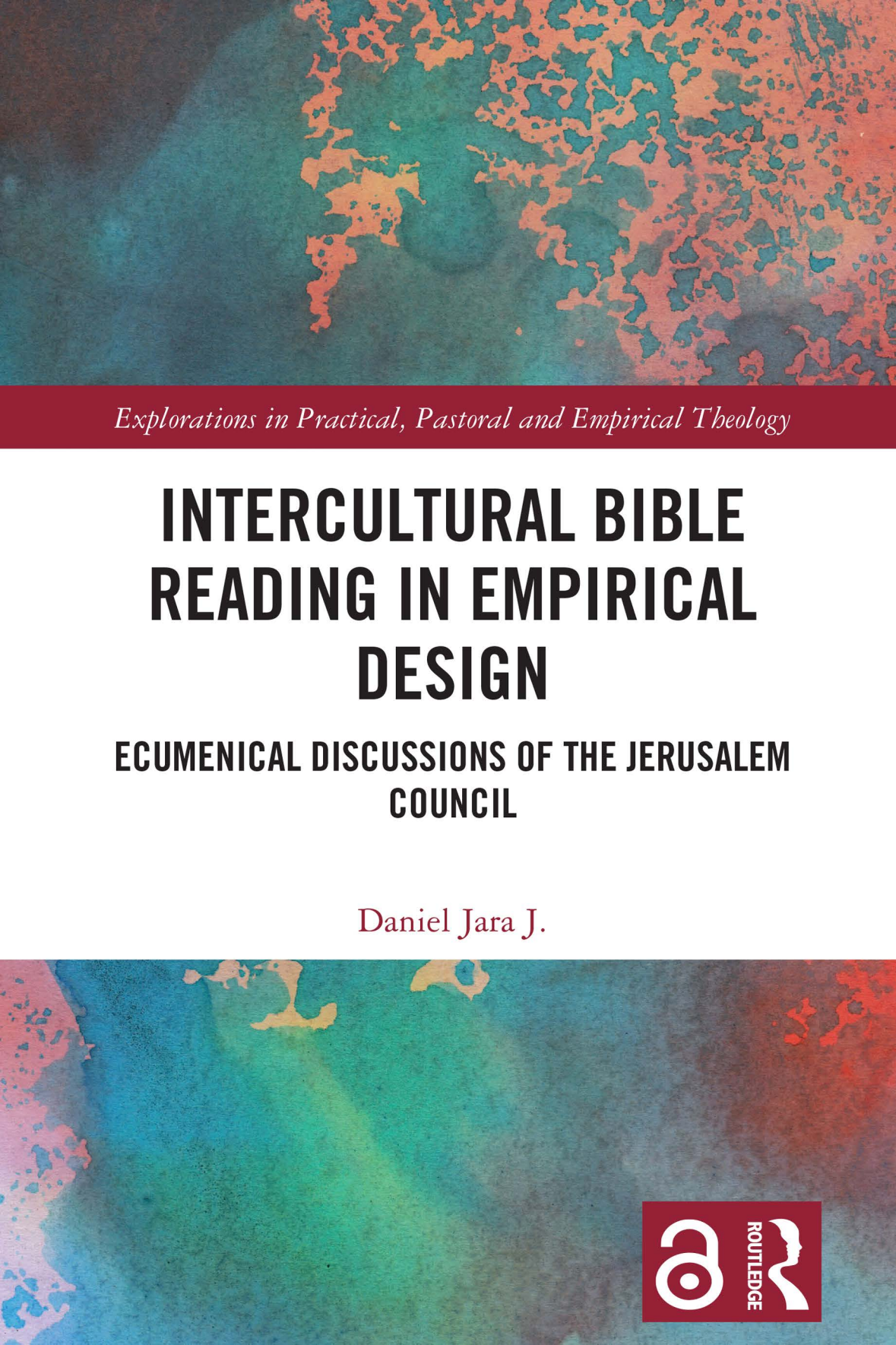




Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology

INTERCULTURAL BIBLE READING IN EMPIRICAL DESIGN

**ECUMENICAL DISCUSSIONS OF THE JERUSALEM
COUNCIL**

Daniel Jara J.



Intercultural Bible Reading in Empirical Design

Intercultural Bible Reading in Empirical Design offers an innovative exploration of how global Christian communities engage with Scripture together across cultural, theological, and denominational boundaries.

Focusing on the text of the Jerusalem Council (Acts of the Apostles 15), the book analyses digital ecumenical encounters among youth from Student Christian Movements (SCMs) affiliated with the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). Drawing on qualitative methods, grounded theory, and the use of MAXQDA software, the study identifies key factors that foster or hinder successful intercultural and ecumenical dialogue. The book builds on a transcultural framework that frames Christian faith as an open, networked system of multidirectional change. The author introduces a model of “receptive ecumenism” grounded in lived experience, affective trust, and ongoing interpretive negotiation among “grassroots” communities.

Situated at the intersection of empirical hermeneutics, intercultural communication, and ecumenical theology, this work offers both scholarly insight and a practical roadmap for churches, educators, and dialogue facilitators seeking renewed Christian unity amid the diversity of biblical interpretations.

Daniel Jara J. is a postdoctoral researcher in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Bern, Switzerland.

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Intercultural Bible Reading in Empirical Design

Ecumenical Discussions of the Jerusalem
Council

Daniel Jara J.



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Typeset in Sabon

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

To my parents, Barbora and Amelie



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Abbreviations

DGMW	Deutschen Gesellschaft für Missionswissenschaft
ESITIS	European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies
EXCO	Executive Committee
GT	Grounded Theory
IBG	Interkulturelles Bibelgespräch – Intercultural Bible Discussion
IBR	Intercultural Bible Reading
ICC	Intercultural Communication Competence
InTh	Intercultural Theology
LT	Liberation Theology
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
MWC	Mennonite World Conference
SCM	Students Christian Movements
WCC	World Council of Churches
WGTh	Fachgruppe Religionswissenschaft und Missionswissenschaft
WSCF	World Students Christian Federation

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This work is dedicated to the millions of Christian believers and communities around the world who approach the Bible each day with a simple and humble heart, seeking comfort, guidance, and inspiration in its ancient verses. It is also dedicated to all Christians who strive for unity and mutual understanding within the global *oikoumene* and who recognize the Scriptures as a gracious space of encounter. In the words of W.A. Visser't Hooft, former General Secretary of the WSCF (1932–1938) and first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (1948–1966):

The Bible once more becomes our meeting-place. As Christians, coming from different directions, we will meet here – or nowhere. The future of our unity depends on our willingness to make this pilgrimage together. It is not that we are on the verge of finding a universally acceptable formulation of the exact status of the Bible in our respective theologies, but simply that we come to the conclusion that this is the one place where we all must go to meet – no, not only each other but God.¹

Note

- 1 W.A. Visser't Hooft, "The Bible and the Federation" *The Student World* 27, no. 2 (1934).

Preface

The present work is a revised version of the doctoral dissertation “Intercultural Bible Reading in Empirical Design: Ecumenical Debates of the ‘Jerusalem Council’ Developed and Analyzed Through Digital and Qualitative Methods,” submitted by the author to the Faculty of Theology at Ruhr-University Bochum in March 2024 in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of *Doctor Theologiae* (Dr. theol.), and successfully defended in oral examination on 29 October 2024. The dissertation was supervised by Prof. Dr. Claudia Jahnelt, Chair of Intercultural Theology and the Body, who served as the first examiner, and Prof. Dr. Traugott Jähnichen, Chair of Christian Social Teaching, as the second examiner.

This book emerges from the conviction that Scripture continues to speak meaningfully across cultural, theological, and geographical boundaries if we, as readers, are willing to listen across difference. The study locates at the intersection of intercultural Bible reading (IBR), “grassroots” ecumenism, and empirical hermeneutics, employing virtual and qualitative methods drawn from the field of empirical social research. Its primary aim was to identify the key factors that facilitate or enhance successful intercultural biblical exchanges among groups of young “common Bible readers” from diverse global contexts. The analysis was conducted using discussion groups, Grounded Theory methodology, and the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 2022. Over the course of one year, participants from ten different Student Christian Movements (SCMs), affiliated with the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), engaged in virtual meetings to collectively read and discuss the passage known as the “Jerusalem Council” (Acts of the Apostles 15:1–21; 36–41). Transcriptions and video recordings of these sessions were analysed using the software, drawing on pre-existing hermeneutical code banks developed in earlier IBR projects, alongside new categories and codes created specifically for this project.

Centred on the “Jerusalem Council” narrative in Acts of the Apostles 15, the project brings to light the complexities, tensions, and transformative possibilities of IBR as both a method and a space for ecumenical engagement. It is grounded in the experiences of ten SCMs affiliated with the WSCF,

who participated in a year-long journey of collective interpretation, meaning negotiation, and mutual learning. The exchanges exposed deeply human dynamics, personal vulnerability, local struggles, colonial legacies, gender struggles, and differing theological assumptions. Some participants identified with the quest for unity in the Council or the story of rupture in Paul and Barnabas' conflict; others brought attention to the power dynamics in the text; still others viewed the council through the lens of contemporary ecclesial exclusions. In these readings, the Bible was seen not merely as an ancient text but as a dynamic field of negotiation, identification, and hope. This study seeks to take these voices seriously, not as anecdotal data but as theological contributions that challenge essentialist visions of Christian identity, tradition, and Scripture.

By adopting a transcultural framework, this work also proposes a reimagining of Christian unity, not as uniformity or doctrinal harmony, but as a complex and ongoing encounter of hybrid, evolving, and overlapping identities. Drawing on receptive ecumenism, cultural theory, and grounded empirical research, the book contends that the future of ecumenism lies not only in formal declarations but also in grassroots exchanges marked by mutual curiosity, gracious disagreement, and shared vulnerability. It is offered in gratitude to all those, past and present, who approach Scripture with open hearts and to all communities who dare to believe that unity can be woven across difference. As a participant compellingly articulated:

There is a biblical text in Isaiah 54:2 that for me is the essence of what ecumenism is and what it should be: "Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes." At the end, it is as the simile of your tent, and there is always the possibility to widen it, and while you widen it, you must lengthen your cords and keep your stakes strong, so it can always get bigger, and there is always a place for the person who comes.

Mayra – Second session, SCM I



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Introduction

This book focuses on the field of contextual biblical interpretations, their exchange via digital means among Christian groups, and the dialectic processes this encompasses. By analysing dialogues among the members of national Student Christian Movements (SCMs) affiliated to the World Students Federation (WSCF) when interpreting a biblical passage, it sought to expose and study the particular Bible “reading styles” of these students, and how communication developed (and the text’s meaning changed) when two SCMs from different cultural backgrounds discussed a biblical passage in the following sessions. The analysis of these exchanges considered aspects such as the groups’ dynamics during communitarian Bible reading, dissimilar hermeneutical approaches to the same biblical passage, different text’s explanation strategies, the multiple forms in which the groups actualize the text, possible negotiations, hybridizations, or “clashes” among different interpretative styles during the discussion among culturally different groups, and if and how intercultural Bible reading (IBR) inspires the participants to act in accordance with what was discussed, etc. The main question that led the study pointed to identifying the most relevant factors (cultural, ecclesial, motivational, etc.) that guide or facilitate a successful intercultural and ecumenical biblical exchange between the involved SCMs. This main research question referred directly to other secondary ones, such as the following: Which intercultural/ecumenical dialogues can be considered as successful? What are the prevalent factors related to these dialogues? What are the most important common features of speech semantic systems in these cases? Which previously non-considered factors are related to them? How do theological contents evolve in these cases? Which ecumenical or theological models and theories relate the best to those “successful” exchanges? The manner in which successful and non-successful, or erratic, intercultural exchanges were distinguished is explained in detail in the upcoming chapter.

Study’s ecumenical and transcultural dimensions

In modern times, the pilgrimage of Christian churches, movements, and their members towards unity is often an uncertain journey, vulnerable to

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misunderstandings and stereotypes. As Rev. Samuel Kobia, once General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), stated in his 2005 Keynote Address at the New York Interchurch Center:

Representatives of churches in the North must learn to listen more carefully to what theologians of the South are saying – just as southern Christians must reject the tendency to stereotype northern cultures, listening instead to the actual voices of people from churches in Europe and North America.¹

According to Kool, several factors contribute to this undesirable phenomenon, including a lack of intercultural competencies, limited knowledge of the ecumenical counterpart, its doctrinal tradition, or its specific contextual circumstances (e.g. historical, political, or ethnic background). Additional causes include misguided motivations for engaging in dialogue and “clashing” approaches to biblical interpretation and the Church’s tradition. Consequently, ecumenical exchanges have, on numerous occasions, been characterized by confusion, prejudice, and erratic mutual understanding.²

For instance, not few ecumenical dialogues during the last century experienced an apparent gap between the attitudes and agreements reached by religious leaders and expert theologians who took part in ecumenical initiatives and the concrete openness of common believers and communities to be challenged or even transformed as a result of local ecumenical exchange and encounter (situation which can be experienced in the opposite way depending on the specific region, i.e. Europe or Latin America). Due to various factors, including historic misunderstandings, different migratory backgrounds, divergent theological traditions, or distinct liturgical practices, many congregations around the world, despite sharing a common geographic space, have historically remained separate, if not in confrontation. They exist as “estranged siblings,” with minimal collaboration and little sense of mutual enrichment.³ In this regard, it is reasonable to argue that ecumenical efforts remain incomplete unless they effectively engage lay believers in these exchanges.

Furthermore, as van Zyl asserts, theological or hermeneutical approaches that emphasize the role of contextual factors, such as Contextual Theology, have historically focused primarily on the contributions and interpretations of biblical texts by a select academic elite, including professionally trained theologians, church leaders, exegetes, and hermeneutists.⁴ As a result, Western theological faculties have maintained a longstanding self-imposed bias that largely overlooks the richness and diversity of biblical interpretations offered by so-called “ordinary Bible readers.”⁵ This exclusion, as De Sousa Santos describes, constitutes a “waste of experience,”⁶ disregarding valuable reflections that emerge from lived faith and non-institutionalized theological engagement. As Kahl affirms: “Hermeneutics from an ecumenical perspective today can [bring] together the insight that scripture has multiple

meanings with a positive estimation of interpretations *from below*, i.e. non-academic, popular interpretations.”⁷ To address these challenges, this research sought to facilitate the exchange of biblical interpretations among groups of ordinary Bible readers worldwide and to analyse these exchanges through a perspective that does not emphasize post-colonial nor liberationist approaches to the biblical text (perspectives that are particularly prevalent among biblical scholars in the so-called “global South”⁸) to prioritize the cultural and ecumenical aspects of these exchanges, which tend to be more often mentioned by the participants.

This study also responds to the widely acknowledged shift in Christianity’s centre of gravity from the Global North to the Global South,⁹ specifically Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. This transformation represents one of the most significant challenges for contemporary theological studies and ecumenical dialogue. In this context, Hintersteiner emphasizes the need for a “new orientation and a new paradigm of ‘interculturality’ for missiology and the study of non-European theologies,”¹⁰ advocating for the centrality of intercultural issues in emerging hermeneutical frameworks. This intercultural paradigm has been profoundly influenced by theorists such as Homi Bhabha, who conceptualizes the existence of third spaces or interstitial zones between cultural boundaries. According to this author, these spaces “challenge our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force.”¹¹ They exist “in-between the designations of identity [as an] interstitial passage between fixed identifications [opening up] the possibility of a cultural hybridity.”¹²

Thus, in the latter half of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first, interculturality emerged as a widely accepted paradigm with significant influence in cultural, social, and theological studies. Rather than treating issues such as colonialism and epistemological imbalances as merely historical subjects, this theoretical framework emphasizes the ongoing forces that continue to shape contemporary cultural encounters and dynamics. However, it soon proved insufficient in addressing cultural realities that challenged the notion of historically independent entities or the idea that cultures emerge solely as a result of interactions between independent and self-restrained cultural units or systems. In recent decades, Christian theological studies have moved away from conceptualizing this faith as a cluster of locally independent entities with distinct beliefs, rituals, and structures that collectively form a singular universal meta-religion. Instead, scholars have increasingly emphasized the internal plurality and heterogeneity within each tradition, as well as the ongoing entanglements, exchanges, and hybridizations that occur among porous socio-religious systems of traditions from a *trans-cultural* approach. This theoretical shift aligns with contemporary cultural constructivist approaches, which offer more fitting interpretations of the dynamics and nature of culturally mediated encounters. These approaches reject earlier frameworks which “approach[ed] cultures and identities as self-contained entities and [did] not provide a framework that enlightens the

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far more complex dynamic of transcultural contact- and exchange processes taking place.”¹³ In this sense, “religious history came to be understood as a history of entanglement, exchange, and translation between different religious and cultural traditions, or as re-inventions across time and space.”¹⁴ This turn reframes syncretism and mutual transformation among religious groups not as anomalies to be resisted but as historical norms, challenging wrongly understood “orthodox” tendencies among certain Christian affiliations that have naively sought to prevent such exchanges.

In the theological field, this cumulus of turns – from mission to indigenization studies, then to inculturation, accommodation, contextualization, interculturalization, and more recently, transculturalization – reflects a broader transformation within social and cultural studies. This turn is marked by growing reflexivity, interdisciplinarity, and a deepening understanding of the complexity of the cultural phenomena. Rejecting essentialist assumptions that conceptualized cultures as static and self-contained “phenomen[a] in its own right,”¹⁵ transculturality instead seeks to “substantiate the container concept of culture with one that considers relational cultural processes of interaction, interstices and disjunction”¹⁶ in porous contact zones. In such zones, processes of accommodation, hybridization, negotiation, reconfiguration, multidirectionality, integration, differentiation, or seclusion intertwine simultaneously, constructing identities and othering notions, apart from creating cultural novelty (all these dynamics were evidenced in the dialogues hosted by the present study). Thus, the trans-model, in opposition to the previously mentioned ones, points to the transgressive and translational processes occurring, since “borders create border-crossing, in dividing they simultaneously connect.”¹⁷ In this sense, the transcultural model engenders a paradox at its very core:

In order to point to the transcultural, one must first assume separate cultures, while simultaneously negating its existence. Pointing to a “third” or a transitory and liminal space “in between,” whose constitution and location can only be defined in relation to the transcultural, one first has to assume separate cultures, while simultaneously negating their existence. Pointing to a “third” or a transitory or liminal space to the self-contained units it professes to replace, cannot resolve this dilemma.¹⁸

The growing recognition of the multiple potentialities offered by the transcultural model has opened new opportunities for a better understanding of the inherent features and tensions of a global faith such as Christianity, while enabling new formulations and possibilities, particularly in the realm of ecumenical and intercultural theology. Claudia Jähnel, for instance, has emphasized the significance of the cultural turn for a more productive theory of intercultural and ecumenical dialogues. In her words, “the Cultural Turn . . . goes right to the centre of ecumenical theology – its concept of universal unity!” and she adds: “the development and dialogue towards unity involved and involves transcultural processes. Ecumenical movement, dialogue and theology are contact zones.”¹⁹ Such an approach rejects both a simplistic and essentialist view

of ecumenical efforts – one that falsely assumes the dissolution of individual and ecclesial identities for the sake of unity – and the tendency to regard Christian traditions as stable, homogeneous, and unidimensional entities. Instead, it acknowledges the complex realities of centuries of mutual ecclesial interpenetration: namely, theological, ritual, and doctrinal (re)definitions in response to the challenges posed by encountering the Christian “other”; evolving logics and dynamics of communion, schisms, or reconciliation that have succeeded each other over centuries; the deep influences and reformulations of Christian theology and practice brought about through the coexistence of the churches with diverse local religious, ethnic, and national identities; etc. As the author concludes: “it is no accident that Christian identity is dynamic and inclusive; rather, the continuous reshaping and renewing of Christian identity follows from ‘hermeneutic imperative’ that is a specific Christian principle.”²⁰

The pertinence of the transcultural model in the present research becomes evident in at least three main aspects. First, the model acknowledges that inter-ecclesial interactions, like all cultural processes, are largely unregulated and emergent practices. These interactions predominantly occur through everyday communication, rather than as outcomes of strategic planning by ecclesial leadership or as exclusive domains of certain group members. Within these ordinary encounters, all participants engage in transcultural exchanges in a *rhizomatic* manner. Drawing from its botanical origin,²¹ the concept of the social rhizome describes cultural processes that are non-linear, spontaneous, and generative. Rhizomatic interactions thus allow for the continuous emergence of new faith expressions, meanings, and reformulations through the lived experiences of believers in diverse and shifting contexts. Understood as a social rhizome, the ecumenical table among common Bible readers functions as an “anti-hierarchical and a-centered [system]. No single organizing principle predetermines the consistencies and compatibilities between the network of its elements. The rhizome precisely fosters transversal, even alogical, connections between heterogeneous events.”²² Thus, the Christian faith itself functions as an open system with countless points of entrance and exchange, fostering continuous contact and communication among believers and faith communities, which operate as interconnected nodes within a self-sustained rhizomatic network.

Second, the way the Christian identity of the SCMs’ members is conceptualized undergoes a series of reconfigurations when examined through a transcultural framework. This model emphasizes that their identities and belongings are neither fixed nor singular, but rather dynamic, multifaceted, and continuously shaped by ongoing intercultural encounters. Participants in the study often embody multiple, overlapping identities as members of a particular Christian tradition or denomination, of their local SCM, and of the global WSCF federation, alongside their national, ethnic, or socio-economic belongings. This unstable situation creates tensions, negotiations, and accommodations among the participants. As one of them insightfully remarked:

We are [from this continent] in origin. We are known to have so many traditions. . . . Am I going to choose whatever my Bible and whatever

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God tells me to do, even though it goes against my culture? . . . We want to obey our ancestors, and the people put in place to show us the way, but at the same time, we want to obey God.

These imbricate identities manifest not only as expressions of multiple affiliation (i.e. Baptist at home and progressive ecumenical at the SCM) but also in the way the biblical text is interpreted, the situations it is expected to illuminate, or the resources at disposition. Thus, a transcultural approach was especially fruitful in this work because it aimed to explore the multiple transformations that participants and their biblical interpretations underwent as a result of encountering the Christian other, echoing Hall's consideration:

The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent "self." Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. . . . The fully unified, complete, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily.²³

The identity of a Christian tradition and its members is always in process, shaped by discursive practices and cultural negotiations. Within this transcultural framework, biblical interpretation becomes not only a theological exercise but a dynamic, identity-transforming act, reflecting and reshaping the readers' position across diverse communal and religious horizons.

And third, the transcultural framework of the research shaped not only the analysis of the participants and their ecclesial or cultural belongings but also the approach to the biblical text itself. As elaborated in the upcoming chapter, the practice of IBR rests on the foundational assumption that Christian Scripture is not a fixed or coherent entity with a singular, definitive meaning. Rather, Scripture is continually actualized, reshaped, and reinterpreted in light of time, culture, context, and the lived experiences and expectations of faith communities, while undergoing processes of interpretation, reformulation, and appropriation. Significantly, as Jahnel anticipates, one of the most contentious issues in the less successful exchanges was precisely the status of the Bible itself, whether it should be understood as the inerrant Word of God, as inspired human testimony, or otherwise. This aligns with her critique of the acritical absolutization of Scripture:

The problem this "absolutization" of the Bible creates is that its presumption of an extra-incarnate "Word of God" is blind to the fact that every reading and hermeneutical explanation of a biblical text, as well as the canon as a whole, is ideologically bound; and the presumed

equation of Bible = Word of God is, because of its innate pretension of an ideology-free Bible, even more an ideological construction.²⁴

Participant student group members of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF)

The organizational challenges associated with a study of this nature are substantial, encompassing a wide range of tasks, from identifying or forming groups of Bible readers across different regions to fostering participants' confidence in the initiative. Additionally, practical concerns arose, such as establishing a common language for communication and creating virtual meeting spaces. To effectively address these and related challenges, collaboration with a historically established ecumenical organization, such as the WSCF and its national affiliates, the SCMs, was essential. Through its extensive global and regional networks, WSCF provided a stable and structured framework, comprising hundreds of Christian student groups organized at national, local, institutional, or university levels, including theological seminaries. The global character of WSCF presented itself as a "super culturally-diverse"²⁵ network. Once activated, it functioned as a dynamic space for debate and exchange, offering invaluable theological and hermeneutical insights.

Founded in 1895, the WSCF is one of the oldest global ecumenical bodies with an active membership, originating during the so-called "modern" ecumenical phase. The Federation defines itself as:

A global federation of student Christian groups. WSCF is ecumenical – welcoming people from all Christian traditions and encouraging dialogue between students of different traditions. WSCF has members from Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, and Anglican traditions and other faiths. As a federation of student movements, the WSCF empowers and connects responsible young leaders around the world on their path to changing tomorrow. We encourage a culture of democracy to mobilize youth to become proactive in society, promoting positive change through dialogue and action between different traditions and cultures.²⁶

As an ecumenical organization, the WSCF is dedicated to embodying the diversity of Christianity as a truly global and multicultural faith. It actively promotes interdenominational dialogue, cooperation, and partnerships among various Christian traditions, including Protestant, Orthodox, Catholic, Pentecostal, and Anglican, among others. Due to its deep historical ties to the modern ecumenical movement, WSCF has, for decades, served as a gateway for emerging Christian leaders who later consolidated their vocations and ministries in ecumenical fellowships such as the WCC, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), or the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). Prominent

ecumenical figures, including W.A. Visser't Hooft, Samuel Kobia, Philip Potter, Mercy Oduyoye, Jürgen Moltmann, Steve Biko, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, have held leadership roles within WSCF, significantly shaping its missiological identity. In support of this research, the WSCF European regional office facilitated engagement by extending invitations to other regional offices and SCMs to participate in the initiative.

Today, the WSCF brings together more than two million students across approximately 90 countries, organized into six autonomous regions: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, and North America. The SCMs serve as the fundamental ecumenical units through which students gather to read the Bible, engage in collective reflection, pray, and worship. In many cases, multiple SCMs are organized into national bodies. However, in some countries, the global federation is represented by only a few SCMs or, in certain cases, a single movement. At the supranational level, WSCF provides coordination and representation for these diverse local groups, which “operate different models of leadership appropriate to their cultural context.”²⁷ The role that WSCF assumes in relation to the SCMs summarizes the missiological model upon which the federation was historically founded:

- 1 To call them to faith . . . , and to discipleship within the life and mission of the Church.
- 2 To help them grow in Christian life through prayer, study of the Bible, and participation in the worship and witness of the Church.
- 3 To help them witness Jesus Christ in the academic community.
- 4 To bring them into fellowship with one another in mutual service and to support efforts to serve all students in their needs.
- 5 To help them work for the manifestation of the unity of the Church.²⁸

Reading the Bible together, as a global fellowship, is a long-standing tradition of the WSCF. As its General Secretary from 1932 to 1938, W.A. Visser't Hooft affirmed nearly a century ago:

The Bible once more becomes our meeting-place. As Christians, coming from different directions, we will meet here – or nowhere. The future of our unity depends on our willingness to make this pilgrimage together. It is not that we are on the verge of finding a universally acceptable formulation of the exact status of the Bible in our respective theologies, but simply that we come to the conclusion that this is the one place where we all must go to meet – no, not only each other but God.²⁹

Nevertheless, as Delteit observed: “The relationship between the WSCF and the Bible, over the last hundred years, has had its ups and downs,” and just as it happened in the current project, “it had its moments of quiet, obedient

submission, its moments of conflict and misunderstanding, its moments of struggle and corps-à-corps resulting sometimes in temporary rejection, or in renewed blessings and passion.”³⁰

This study aims to analyse the different dynamics involved in transcultural dialogue within the global Church, using the WSCF fellowship as a case study. To ensure broad representation, all WSCF regional offices were invited to participate, with each region asked to designate at least one SCM as a representative. Invitations were extended to all regions, and all expressed their willingness to participate, except WSCF North America, which was unable to take part due to internal restructuring during the SCM exchange period (February 2021 to March 2022). To be eligible for participation, the SCMs were required to have between four and seven members who were proficient in English and had access to a stable internet connection. Beginning in February 2021, ten SCMs engaged in paired dialogues as follows: the SCM in Tübingen examined the Jerusalem Council’s text with the SCM Windhoek; the SCM Bangalore with its partner in Vienna; the SCM Sydney with a combined group from the SCMs in Habana and Mexico DF; the SCM Edinburgh with its partner in Nairobi; and finally, the SCM Chemnitz with the SCM in Beirut.³¹ Figure 0.1 illustrates the geographical locations of the SCMs and the exchanges among them.

To adequately represent the vast diversity of the global Church, previous projects of IBR have included groups characterized not only by their diverse cultural backgrounds but also by differences in formal educational levels, age, socioeconomic status, and other factors. However, some of these variables extend beyond purely cultural dimensions, potentially complicating the development of valid hypotheses and theories in the field of intercultural

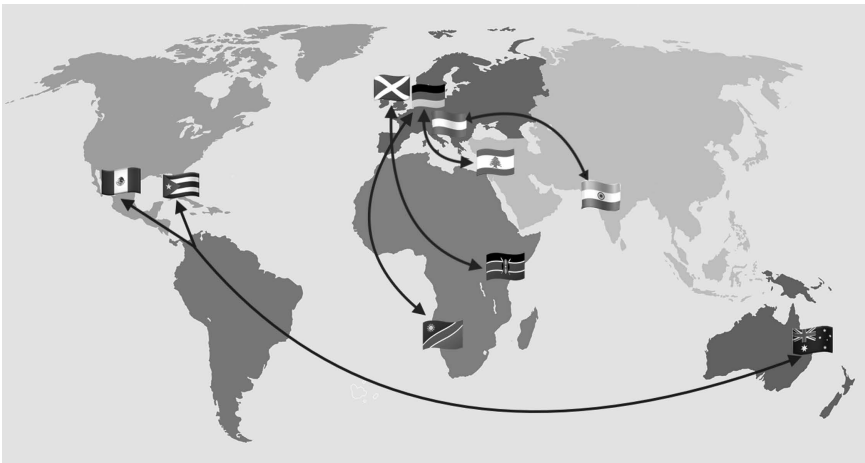


Figure 0.1 Location of the SCMs and their exchanges.

ecumenical dialogue. To address this challenge and minimize the influence of non-cultural factors, the current study adopted a different approach from previous similar initiatives, giving particular attention to ensuring educational and age equivalency among participating groups.

The WSCF brings together students from a vast array of Christian churches, traditions, and communions. While certain SCMs, such as the Evangelische Studierendengemeinde (ESG) in Germany, tend to be denominationally homogeneous, others, like SCM Sydney, are organized within university campuses, fostering internal diversity. Because this study prioritizes the ecumenical dimension of intercultural exchanges, no denominational requirements were imposed on participating SCMs. As a result, the students who took part in the exchanges represented a wide spectrum of Christian affiliations, including Nonconformists, members of the Uniting Church in Australia, Baptists, Congregationalists, liberal Christians, Lutherans, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Protestants, Eastern Lebanese Orthodox, Oriental Lebanese Orthodox, Catholics, Ecumenicals, Interdenominationalists, and those who identified as non-defined, among others.

For over a century, the WSCF has embodied the cross-border principle of a world Christendom that thrives through dialogues, exchanges, and interconnectedness. It has established itself as a border-crossing community that affirms the unity of the Church while embracing the vast diversity of its regions and SCMs. Consequently, this Christian fellowship moves beyond the traditional notion of a peripheral Christianity reliant on a radiating core, as was characteristic of the missionary era.³² Without romanticizing its evolution, it is important to acknowledge the growing agency of regions formerly considered “peripheral.” This shift challenged the Eurocentric narrative of WSCF’s “founding fathers” and has contributed to the creation of a polyvocal space, one that fosters more egalitarian relationships among members and encourages democratic participation, even if full equality, as in most of the Christian Church, has yet to be achieved. Since the early 1970s, this multi-centred reconfiguration of WSCF has facilitated new processes of translation, adaptation, and reconfiguration, serving as a model for other ecumenical organizations.³³

The chosen text: Acts of the Apostles 15:1–21, 36–41 “The Jerusalem Council”

Few religious resources possess the potency, polysemy, and openness to actualization as profoundly as narratives. The more closely stories resonate with the lived experiences of individuals, and the more openness they present in their outcomes, the more fruitful they become in stimulating the imagination of believers. Jesus exemplified mastery in the art of storytelling through his parables, which continue to inspire imagination, reflection, and transformation among Christians. As de Wit observes, “religious stories stimulate the imagination, cause people to decide the question of how they stand in life,

and may determine the behaviour of the reading community of faith.”³⁴ Stories are particularly fertile when addressing moral concerns because, first, they provide resources for moral development grounded in previously shared and transmitted values, and second, unlike laws or commandments, they present a creative range of moral possibilities. In doing so, they allow individuals to move beyond fixed parameters and binary conceptions of good and evil, while shaping their ethical choices. Few biblical narratives address as succinctly and comprehensively as Acts 15 such themes as ecclesial cultural diversity, power dynamics, openness to cultural difference, community conflict, deliberation and debate, dispute resolution, separation, reconciliation, traditionalism, theological imagination, and Christian unity. Following a comparative review of various Bible translations, the *Easy-to-Read Version* (2004) was selected for the discussions due to its accessible language and its suitability for readers who are not native speakers of English.

The authorship of the Acts of the Apostles remains partially unsettled. While a majority of biblical scholars associate the text with Luke, the author of the Gospel bearing his name (as affirmed by Keener³⁵ and Haaker³⁶), others such as Maloney and Reimer,³⁷ as well as Parsons and Pervo,³⁸ argue in favour of a figure referred to as Lukas – this is “a male believer of Jewish descent writing in the first quarter of the second century.”³⁹ The narrative situates this episode at both the thematic and structural centre of the book, during a period of existential crisis for the emerging Church. At this critical juncture, the nascent Christian community is faced with a pivotal decision: whether to persist as a messianic Jewish movement, to transform into a new religious identity devoid of ethnic and national affiliations, or to adopt an intermediate stance that partially accommodates the diverse allegiances involved while avoiding a definitive resolution of the underlying ethnic and theological tensions. From a contemporary standpoint, nearly 2,000 years later, the Church’s eventual embrace of full ethnic inclusivity and both cultural and liturgical diversity may appear inevitable. However, prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (when the author situates the events narrated in the text), the resultant Jewish diaspora, and the collapse of the Jerusalem-centred Jewish messianic movement, the very identity, tradition, and future of what was originally a distinctly Jewish sect, rooted in the testimony of a Jewish Messiah, remained highly contested. The writer succeeds in condensing a wide array of ethnic, religious, national, and missiological concerns into merely 41 verses giving account of a community shaped by traditional and hegemonic logics (vv. 1, 5), marked by intense conflict (v. 2), yet also characterized by ecumenical openness (vv. 2–6), evangelical witness (vv. 7–19), hesitance towards inclusivity (vv. 20–21), shared ecclesial testimony (vv. 22–33), and ongoing disagreement culminating in further division (vv. 35–41).

According to most biblical scholars, the background of the Acts 15 episode is found in Galatians 2. While a few proposed chronologies seem not to coincide, many argue that this reflects a characteristic Lucanian strategy of

prioritizing theological and literary concerns over strict historical sequencing.⁴⁰ Central to both texts is the controversy over the inclusion of male Gentile believers in the Church and whether circumcision was a necessary requirement. Although Acts was written at a time when the full inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles was widely accepted, the narrative appears to function as a definitive theological affirmation that all believers, regardless of circumcision (and therefore, ethnic origin), are integral members of the Christian community. Scriptural precedents (Genesis 17:12–13; Exodus 12:48) had clearly required that foreigners be circumcised if they were to become part of God’s people, and by the first century, circumcision had become a well-established marker of Jewish ethnic identity, even among surrounding pagan communities.⁴¹ Within the early Jerusalem Church, some members whom Paul sharply criticizes as “false believers [who] had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves” (Galatians 2:4) maintained that circumcision should remain a physical sign of covenantal belonging, even for Gentile converts, as a continuation of the old covenant now reframed through the novelty of Jesus Christ. By contrast, diaspora Jews often showed greater flexibility, seeking to avoid alienating Gentile proselytes.⁴² Paul represented one of the most radical voices against such impositions. For him, “those who had received the eschatological Spirit already belonged to God’s people, making them already part of the eschatological new creation.”⁴³

Three central figures emerge during the Jerusalem Council based on their individual speeches: James, Peter, and Paul. Notably, the rhetorical strategies they employ reflect a kind of cultural reversal. Thus, “while Peter, the representative of the evangelization of the Jews, voices a Pauline argument [v. 7–11], Barnabas and Paul present their position according to the Semitic tradition [v. 12], stating facts rather than following the conceptual logic,”⁴⁴ which underscores the fluidity of cultural and rhetorical identities within the narrative. James’ speech notably omits any reference to Jesus or to the messianic faith, grounding his argument instead in the Hebrew Scriptures and advocating for the retention of certain purity regulations. This rhetorical exercise seems to reflect the understanding of the Jerusalem community regarding Gentile conversion not as an expansion of the faith into new horizons, but rather as the fulfilment of God’s promises to Israel through the prophets. In this framework, Gentile inclusion is conceived as a continuation of the existing religious order, a broadening of Israel’s boundaries, and a complementary extension of the Synagogue since “what it raises is the possibility of having ‘Israelites’ excepted from certain ritual marks, but not of revising the centrality of Judaism.”⁴⁵

Interestingly, James’s final speech functions as both a compromise⁴⁶ and a formal final “decision,”⁴⁷ marked by the deliberative formula “therefore I judge . . .” (Acts 15:19 – *Διὸ ἐγὼ κρίνω*). James appears to represent the Jerusalem perspective, proposing that Gentile believers observe a set of minimal purity requirements, most probably intended to reduce the scandal their

inclusion might cause within Jewish communities, particularly regarding shared table fellowship. This sort of “minimal Torah” includes abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, hemophagia, the meat of strangled animals, and sexual immorality (πορνείας) in its broad sense (vv. 19, 29). Biblical scholars have noted that these stipulations are moral in character, implicitly related to pagan cultic practices (though not explicitly named), and echo the Levitical regulations applied to foreigners residing in the land of Israel (Lev 17–18), a striking reversal, as the Gentile believers now constituted a minority within predominantly pagan contexts. These instructions also recall the Noahide laws, traditionally understood as applying to righteous Gentiles.⁴⁸ While Paul likely would have preferred to dispense with these restrictions altogether, they may have represented a relatively minor concession considering the substantial endorsement the Council granted his missionary efforts. Notably, there is little evidence that Paul emphasized the Council’s decision in his preaching. On the contrary, he was keen to assert that his mission operated in parallel to, rather than under, the authority of the Jerusalem “pillars” (Peter, James, and John, according to Galatians 2:9). In his account of the meeting in Galatians 2, Paul does not mention the agreement reached in Acts 15 but instead recalls being asked only to “remember the poor,” a worry, he adds, “I had been eager to do all along” (Galatians 2:10). As Keener points out: “If a regular activity is in mind, Paul’s later collection for the needy in Jerusalem . . . is simply the supreme fulfilment of his commitment to this understanding.”⁴⁹ Moreover, the content of the Council’s decree largely aligns with Paul’s own teaching. He repeatedly denounced idolatry (1 Cor 8:1–13; 10:14–11:1) and sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:1–13; 1 Thess 4:3–8), and in practice, kosher butcheries were often the safest source for meat not sacrificed to idols anyway.⁵⁰ As Paul bluntly concludes, “those leaders contributed nothing to me” (Galatians 2:6).

In the final portion of the narrative, the scene returns to Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas had been “sent off in peace” (Acts 15:30). The author’s decision to include the conflict and subsequent separation between these two key figures (Acts 15:36–41), immediately following his predominantly positive portrayal of a council that almost certainly involved more complexities and disagreements than those explicitly recorded, stands, in my opinion, as a highlight of the author’s commitment to presenting a mostly accurate portrayal of the Church’s earliest definitions and internal dynamics. Despite having the option to omit this discordant episode, the author chooses to include it, providing the Church with valuable material for reflection. The conflict appears almost inevitable, as Paul and Barnabas find themselves at odds over two absolute values that distinctly characterize their respective personalities and ministerial approaches. On one hand, Paul advocates for steadfastness and reliability in the execution of the mission, embodying a theology of endurance and the costly demands of discipleship, as evidenced in Acts 9:15–16 and further elaborated in his own account in 2 Corinthians 11:23–28. On the other hand, Barnabas stands for grace, forgiveness,

and patience towards fellow collaborators in the faith, a posture he had previously demonstrated in his defence of Paul himself, as narrated in Acts 9:26–27. Located just after the conciliar episode, “while the two parties’ motives may be honorable, however, their schism contrasts starkly with the consensus painstakingly achieved in 15:22–29.”⁵¹ As a result, Paul and Barnabas part ways, each embarking on a separate path. Barnabas sets sail for Cyprus accompanied by Mark, an event that, together with Peter’s disappearance after Acts 15:7–11, marks the conclusion of the first half of Luke’s narrative. Neither Barnabas nor Peter reappears in the remainder of the book of Acts. From this point onwards, Luke shifts the narrative focus entirely to Paul, who “is now the head of all new missionary efforts, and it is Paul’s teaching that will be the Christian standard.”⁵²

The text of the Jerusalem Council was chosen for this study because its account is closely related to the intercultural and transcultural framework envisaged for the exchanges among the SCMs. According to Néstor Míguez, the ethos of Acts 15 reflects Christianity’s transcultural transformation from a faith rooted in the ethnic particularism of the Second Temple theology to a universal religious movement. Within this interpretative framework, the author identifies Paul as the central figure, referring to him as the “transculturality prophet.”⁵³ He underscores the significance of Paul’s missionary work and specifically highlights the episode in Lystra in which Paul and Barnabas were mistakenly identified as Zeus and Hermes (Acts 14:8–17) as a paradigmatic moment for understanding Paul’s transcultural stance. Despite the various religious perspectives represented at the council, the narrative presents the participants as reaching a consensus, an element Míguez considers the most fictional part of the story. By analysing other biblical sources, he concludes that instead of an agreement, it was a limited non-aggression pact that was poorly respected by the parties in the future. The author emphasizes that the consensus was achieved through narratives, experiences, testimonies, and most importantly, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is in this emphasis that the core of Míguez’s theological perspective resides. From his point of view:

It is the Spirit that promotes “transculturality,” from the moment of its irruption at Pentecost, when he allows each of the pilgrims of different nationalities to hear in their own language that first irruption of the message. The Spirit is the true character who pulled the strings, The result of the meeting in Jerusalem is one more milestone in this journey in which the Spirit moves the “followers of the way” from within Judaism to open up and become messianic (Christian) of this universal Messiah, a journey that begins in Jerusalem but that takes the Gospel to the heart of the Gentile world.⁵⁴

In his analysis of the letter recorded in Acts 15:23–29, Míguez highlights its reference to those who “went out from us without our authorization and

disturbed you” (v. 24). In his opinion, this framing serves to delegitimize the monocultural visions within the Church that these “unauthorized” believers maintained, supporting the agency of former cultural, ethnic, and religious belongings as affirmed by Paul and reflected in his own testimony (1 Corinthians 9:20–21). Such a vision is supported by authors such as Du Toit: “Paul was convinced of the universal scope of the Christian gospel. It must suffice here to call to mind the inclusive character of passages such as Rom 1.16; 3.22–24; 5.18; 11.32; 15.7–12; 1 Cor 1.18–25. And he saw his personal mission as embedded in [this] universal scope.”⁵⁵ From a sociological stance, Míguez argues that the Council narrative in Acts 15 is less a purely theological discourse and more an expression of open power struggles within the early Church, a contest for the appropriation of meaning and hermeneutical authority, with unmistakable cultural dimensions. He contends that the entire book of Acts serves as an early witness to the numerous cultural crossroads the Church had to navigate in order to establish itself as a trans- and supra-cultural project. At the same time, the text both reveals and conceals the “inevitable tensions that arise in situations of cultural dominance and resistance, in struggles for hegemony, in the hermeneutic crossings of opposing viewpoints.”⁵⁶ For the author, Acts of the Apostles testifies to an ongoing dialogue and conflict between a Judaism that had found its Messiah and an increasingly multicultural Christian movement. The book portrays incomplete agreements, mutual distrust among factions, the inherent power dynamics within such a diverse community, and, ultimately, the theological accommodations and appropriations made by each competing group.

Particularities, limitations, and innovations of the model

Despite its inclusive and democratic character, the study has certain particularities, limitations, and innovations that must be taken into consideration when evaluating the gathered data and its analysis. First and foremost, it remains an academic endeavour with clearly defined scholarly parameters and objectives. As such, it adheres to an academic agenda aimed at fulfilling the requirements of an educational degree. Consequently, its format, methodology, theoretical framework, and research scope align with a long, yet inherently limited, scholarly tradition rooted in German-speaking Europe. For instance, while the study employs a transcultural framework for analysis, the doctoral candidate’s exclusive role in interpreting the exchanges and drawing conclusions raises a potential paradox: the risk that transculturality merely becomes another “European conceptual category [for the analysis of the cultural other] in the name of transcultural dialogue,” which Daniel P.S. Goh qualifies as “thinly veiled eurocentrism.”⁵⁷

A key practical consideration of the work was the language used during the Bible reading sessions and subsequent exchanges. The majority of SCM members who participated were not native English speakers, nor did they all possess fluency in the language. This challenge was particularly pronounced

among the Latin American SCMs, necessitating the merger of two SCMs from the region to form a complete reading group. For this reason, the combined Cuba/Mexico group received support through simultaneous Spanish–English translation during their three sessions. Despite English-native-speaking and non-English-native-speaking SCMs being paired, the willingness of the former ones to foster communication, by allowing the latter sufficient time to organize their thoughts and express themselves, led to some of the most fruitful and satisfactory exchanges. Another particularity concerns the participants’ educational and technological resources. While internet access was generally not a major issue, since most participants were college students who connected via mobile devices or their campus networks, the quality of the connection was often poor, particularly among SCMs in Africa and the Middle East. Despite these challenges, communication remained fluid in most exchanges. Additionally, the fact that all participants were church-active college students was both an advantage and a limitation: on one hand, their engagement in ecclesial and ecumenical dialogues enriched the discussions; on the other, it excluded non-formally educated Christians, and those from different age groups, thereby increasing equivalency among participant groups but limiting broader representation.

Another limitation lies in the structured academic setting in which the exchanges took place. Although participants joined from their homes or campuses, the one-hour timeframe, along with the predefined agenda and discussion format, differed from a more spontaneous exchange among Christian students. Thus, the digital nature of the research could sometimes create a “virtual Gesell chamber,” where participants were aware of being observed by the moderator or turned discussions into a structured “question-and-answer session,” particularly among groups less inclined to speak freely. Additionally, the analytical model tended to prioritize cognitive and verbal content, leaving less space for emotional, gestural, or non-verbal communication. As de Wit aptly notes, “You can’t send a kiss by messenger,”⁵⁸ a sentiment that many would immediately extrapolate to virtual interactions through screens. Nevertheless, different mannerisms such as “flying kisses,” “hand hearts,” or “goodbye” signs (together with all types of facial gestures) found their way into the virtual exchanges and subsequently into the data analysis. Despite these limitations, the quality and diversity of the collected data allowed for valid, though necessarily partial, conclusions that can meaningfully contribute to theory generation in the field of IBR and further encourage ecumenical exchanges within WSCF and other Christian fellowships.

On the other hand, the developed model presents a range of innovations aligned with the latest trends in theological interdisciplinarity. As previously discussed, the empirical nature of the research situates it at the intersection of theological reflection and methodologies for empirical religious research, drawing from cultural and religious studies as well as empirical hermeneutics. This methodological approach integrates analytical concepts and techniques that, due to their relatively recent development in some German,

Dutch, and Scandinavian institutes for Contextual Theology, Hermeneutics, and Intercultural Theology, remain largely unfamiliar to scholars from other theological fields. By emphasizing an interdisciplinary framework, this research design fosters dialogue and collaboration between academic theology and other social and humanistic disciplines. In doing so, it broadens the study of biblical interpretations among non-theologically trained believers and applies empirical models to analyse their interpretative processes. This approach not only enriches theological inquiry but also enhances the understanding of how biblical texts are engaged in diverse cultural and religious contexts. Similarly, while unconventional within the theological tradition, the application of empirical analytical tools from the social sciences, such as coding systems, questionnaires, conceptual categorization, intensive coding, conversation analysis, grounded theory, and qualitative analysis software, has proven valuable in this research. These methodologies have facilitated the study of biblical oral traditions and interpretations, ecumenical conversations, transcultural interactions among Christian groups, and the production of new biblical knowledge. As Professor Peter Ward from Durham University affirms,

Theology exists in so many different forms. . . . In different places, what we call theology appears to function differently, or at least to connect with thought and action differently . . . qualitative research has become a go-to method for theologians partly because this realization has become more evident and interesting for those working in areas such as, ecclesiology, Christian ethics, mission studies and systematic theology.⁵⁹

In this spirit, the study seeks to explore new interdisciplinary intersections, fostering dialogue between theology and the social sciences. By embracing these methodological innovations, it aims to open fresh paths for theological inquiry, ultimately contributing to the Church and its mission.

Likewise, although *Through the Eyes of Another*⁶⁰ is the study with the most significant influence on the current work, the methodological and analytical innovations of this new research are vast, which guarantees that it is not “more of the same.” For example, even when the basic five categories considered for the analysis of the first exchange among communities (background information, group process, group dynamics, hermeneutical process, and actualization/re-reading) are the same as in de Witt’s model, more than 500 new categories and codes were developed to analyse in depth this specific generated data. Likewise, participants maintained a much more homogenous profile than in previous studies, which helped to increase the equivalency among groups and reduced external previously non-considered factors that can deeply influence the exchange results, such as, for example, a significant age gap among the participants or highly dissimilar academic profiles. In addition, it avoids those obvious imbalances between university students and

mostly manual worker migrants in the work of Kahn. In this study, there are no “welcoming” nor “new coming” communities, nor are there any theology experts or common believers. On the contrary, all participants share the same student status, and none of them is either host or guest. Nevertheless, the most significant advance of the study is its reading and exchange process.

Using digital platforms, such as Zoom and Skype, the exchange process that *in Through the Eyes of Another* took between nine and 14 months was reduced to only three weeks. This resulted in a substantial improvement in the fluidity of interactions, alongside increased participant familiarity and engagement, ultimately leading to a null attrition rate. This represents a significant advancement compared to previous works, where group attrition rates occasionally exceeded 50%. Moreover, this novel design allowed participants to interact directly and synchronously with their counterparts on a different continent, an advantage that favoured the sense of personal intimacy and represented the inner individual differences of each group, much better than the previous technique of long and translated group reading reports. In this sense, when observing the recorded exchanges of the partner group about the selected biblical text, participants were able to appreciate the counterpart’s inner discussion dynamics and listen to each opinion or argument directly from its author. Besides, the possibility of recording the entire dialogues, discussions, or inner misunderstandings of the groups during each session allowed the researcher to count with a much richer material, which was later transcribed, coded, and processed. Finally, the resulting videos constituted a new source of information, which reflected both verbal and gestural contents, and are available for any future researcher with a different analytical approach.

Because of its novel methodology, the current model represents one of the first academic or ecclesial attempts to formally relocate entire ecumenical initiatives and their analysis to the digital frame, reducing the financial costs of these meetings drastically and including, at the same time, a multitude of new voices in the discussions. Such a turn to digital formats echoes the radical liturgical changes that the COVID-19 pandemic impulsed in churches worldwide (during the exchange period, global sanitary lockdowns reached their peak). Due to the sanitary restrictions, the ecclesial use of technological means raised the novel awareness that “being church is no longer reduced to a building, but to people coming together in prayer and living their faith.”⁶¹ Thus, this research experience highlights the many advantages and potentialities of this innovative framework, which in the digital age could transform the nature and dynamics of future ecumenical and intercultural exchanges, as it has already done among congregational celebrations, liturgies, and certain ceremonies.

Notes

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 - 3 See: Werner Kahl, "Interkulturelle Bibelarbeiten: Ein qualifiziertes Begegnungsprojekt für evangelische Kirchengemeinden und afrikanische (und andere fremdsprachige) Migrationsgemeinden (2008)," in *Zusammen wachsen. Weltweite Ökumene in Deutschland gestalten*, ed. Werner Kahl, Weltmission heute 73 (Hamburg: EMW, 2011), 117–28.
 - 4 "Studies of biblical texts that are available in writing and are therefore open to study, evaluation, and reflection are in most cases produced by individuals. These writers are usually academically trained in issues of interpretation and approach the text consciously from an explicit point of departure" Daniel van Zyl, "The Eyes of the Other as Porthole and Mirror: The Communication between Sokhanya and Zaandam," in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, eds. Hans de Wit et al., Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics Series 1 (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 199.
 - 5 Hans de Wit, "Through the Eyes of Another: Objectives and Backgrounds," in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, eds. Hans de Wit et al., Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics Series 1 (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 5–25.
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 - 7 Werner Kahl, "Intercultural Hermeneutics – Contextual Exegesis: A Model for 21st Century Exegesis," *International Review of Mission* 89, no. 354 (2000): 425.
 - 8 "The South is used here as a metaphor for the human suffering which is systematically caused by colonialism and capitalism. It is a South that exists as well in the geographic global North, the so-called interior third world of the hegemonic countries. At the same time, the global south contains in itself . . . the local practices of complicity with them." Boaventura De Sousa Santos, *Una Epistemología del Sur* (México DF: 2009), 2.
 - 9 Allan Anderson, "Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity," in *Reforming Theology, Migrating Church, Transforming Society*, eds. Uta André, Benjamin Simon, and Lars Röser-Israel (Hamburg: Missionshilfe, 2017), 45–51.
 - 10 Norbert Hintersteiner, "Translating God(s): From World Mission to Interreligious Witness," in *Reforming Theology, Migrating Church, Transforming Society*, eds. Uta André, Benjamin Simon, and Lars Röser-Israel (Hamburg: Missionshilfe, 2017), 69.
 - 11 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 37.
 - 12 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 4.
 - 13 Claudia Jähnel, "Vernacular Ecumenism and Transcultural Unity: Rethinking Ecumenical Theology after the Cultural Turn," *The Ecumenical Review* 60, no. 4 (2008): 406.
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 - 17 Abu-Er-Rub et al., "Preface."

- 18 Abu-Er-Rub et al., "Preface."
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- 23 Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity and its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 277.
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- 25 See: Steven Vertovec, *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023).
- 26 The World Students Christian Federation, "About Us," <https://www.wscf.ch/who-we-are/the-federation/about-us> (accessed April 15, 2022).
- 27 The World Students Christian Federation, "Who We Are," <https://www.wscf.ch/who-we-are/the-federation/scms> (accessed June 11, 2023).
- 28 The World Students Christian Federation, "Who We Are."
- 29 W.A. Visser't Hooft, "The Bible and the Federation," *Student World* 27, no. 2 (1934): 5.
- 30 Jean Francois Delteil, "Preface," in *Bible and Theology in the Federation: A Report*, ed. Thomas Wieser (Geneva: WSCF, 1995), 1.
- 31 The chronological order of these exchanges has been modified to preserve the anonymity of the participants.
- 32 See: Michael Marten, "Re-Imagining 'Metropole' and 'Periphery' in Mission History," in *Protestant Missions and Local Encounters in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, eds. Hilde Nielssen, Inger Marie Okkenhaug, and Karina Hestad-Skeie (New York: Brill, 2001), 239–315.
- 33 The World Students Christian Federation, "WSCF Regions," <https://www.wscf.ch/who-we-are/the-federation/regions> (accessed September 14, 2023).
- 34 de Wit, "Through the Eyes of Another: Objectives and Backgrounds," 19.
- 35 Craig Keener, *Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.
- 36 Klaus Haaker, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 2019), 12.
- 37 Linda Maloney and Ivoni Richter, *Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2022), lv.
- 38 Mikeal Parsons and Richard Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 1.
- 39 Maloney and Richter, *Acts of the Apostles*, lv.
- 40 J.D. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 446–50.
- 41 M. Whittaker, *Jews and Christians: Graeco-Roman Views* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 80–85.
- 42 M. Hengel and A. Schwemer, *Paul between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years* (London: SCM, 1997), 71–73.
- 43 Keener, *Acts*, 363.
- 44 Néstor Míguez, "Diálogo Interreligioso, Hegemonías y Sincretismo: Hechos en la Encrucijada de las Culturas," *Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana RIBLA* 72 (2012): 67.
- 45 Míguez, "Diálogo Interreligioso, Hegemonías y Sincretismo: Hechos en la Encrucijada de las Culturas."
- 46 Keener, *Acts*, 368.

- 47 Maloney and Richter, *Acts of the Apostles*, 200.
- 48 Keener, *Acts*, 369.
- 49 Craig Keener, *Galatians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 78.
- 50 Keener, *Acts*, 369.
- 51 Keener, *Acts*, 375.
- 52 Maloney and Richter, *Acts of the Apostles*, 208.
- 53 Míguez, “Diálogo Interreligioso, Hegemonías y Sincretismo,” 59.
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1 Hermeneutical and empirical frameworks

Having outlined the fundamental aspects of this research, such as its primary research question and sub-questions, the problem it seeks to address, its aims and objectives, as well as its academic and ecumenical relevance, this chapter turns to the two main theoretical frameworks that shape its design. First, intercultural Bible reading as a hermeneutical frame that recognizes the value of biblical interpretations produced among non-theologically trained “ordinary Bible readers.” And second, Grounded Theory, a qualitative research method increasingly applied in theological studies. Particular attention is given to the coding process it entails and the theoretical generation it facilitates, emphasizing its role in uncovering patterns and insights within intercultural biblical dialogue.

Intercultural Bible Reading as hermeneutical model

The study seeks to contribute to the Intercultural Bible Reading (IBR) methodology, which has been developed through multiple stages and with considerable variations by different scholars and theologians, each emphasizing different aspects of the intercultural exchange. Two of these models were of especial relevance. First, the method of intercultural Bible discussion, *Interkulturelles Bibelgespräch* (IBG), developed by Prof. Werner Kahl since 2002 as part of the seminars he offered at the universities of Kassel and Hamburg, and as a Christian response to the increasing migration of Africans to Germany during the last 40 years.¹ In turn, this model is mainly inspired by the work of Gerald O. West in the context of apartheid in South Africa. The goal of West’s work was to create a space for theologically trained Christians together with common Bible readers to reflect on the multiple possible interpretations of the same biblical text, in a context marked by exclusion and systemic violence. For Kahl, the presence in Germany of these “strange” new neighbours posed a series of challenges to historically established local churches, especially considering, on the one hand, their different cultural and national backgrounds, and on the other, that most of them belonged to so-far alien Christian traditions such as Pentecostalism.

Kahl's IBG project aimed to create equalitarian encounters among different communities around the Bible, which, in his opinion, "reached outstanding results [by creating] a qualified meetings' forum from local and incoming Christians, because the Bible represents a common ground to which all Christians refer."² According to the author, IBG produced unexpected discoveries, such as the realization of German students about the depth and richness of African Christian spirituality, how God can make himself present in the current world, the vital role that the Bible occupies in the daily life of these migrant communities, and their wide knowledge of biblical stories. Likewise, African participants shared their discussion outcomes, among the most important ones, they mentioned a new understanding of the Bible's social relevance, and therefore a critical dimension, and new conflict-solving strategies in the community to avoid secessions and divisions. Furthermore, they realized that among Germans there were also pious Christians who lived their spirituality in a more personal and intimate form than the newcomers assumed.

IBG, as developed by Kahl, consists of meetings every two weeks between students and migrant communities, which could take part in the migrants' common worship place or a student's facility, such as a residency. The total length of the reading exchanges can vary from some weeks to half a year. A moderator is responsible to lead the exchange while keeping it fluid and paying special attention to those actors who tend to monopolize the conversation (in most of the cases, these are the pastors and "leaders" of the churches). Participants are asked to bring their own Bible versions (this is a common habit of most migrants, but it is not usual among theology students), and to sit in a circle around an optionally decorated table. Each exchange takes place in a liturgical framework that starts and finishes with music and prayers, and during the discussion, participants are encouraged to openly analyse their and their counterparts' "reading styles." Each session follows a relatively structured order as follows: 1) liturgical beginning (music or prayer), 2) the biblical passage is read by the participants aloud and in turns in a previously agreed language, 3) the text is fully read again and the participants are asked to reflect on what of its elements call their attention, what is especially interesting, or relates to their lives. A space for personal reflection is opened while music is played, 4) participants are invited to share a specific portion or word from the text with no extra reflections, 5) the moderator opens the discussion by inviting the participants to share their questions or commentaries to the text, 6) the moderator tries to keep the discussion flowing while encouraging also more introvert participants to share, 7) the moderator summarizes the discussion and highlights key points that appeared on it, and 8) there is a liturgical close with music or prayers.³

Kahl highlights how these exchanges contribute to a more profound and vital spirituality of those who participate, apart from strengthening a more holistic understanding of God's salvation, which considers its social,

economic, and political dimensions, and is framed in the communal character of God's Kingdom. Kahl offers a final evaluation of the IBG project:

In the intercultural encounter of Christians, the respective others function both as a mirror and as a window: I learn to understand myself best in my respective *so-sein*, and at the same time a new perspective may be opened to me from which change could become possible. There is great potential in concrete ecumenism on the ground. Local churches and migrant communities can walk together and grow together.⁴

A second especially relevant model was developed by Professor Emeritus Hans De Wit at the Theology Faculty of the Free University of Amsterdam VU, where he held the *Dom Helder Câmara* Chair in Contextual Biblical Interpretation for several years. From 2001 to 2004, the theologian led the international research project *Through the Eyes of Another*,⁵ which aimed to delve into the field of intercultural Bible reading and interpretation among groups of ordinary readers on the basis of two eminently exploring questions. The first of them referred to the focus and problem of this project: "What happens when Christians from radically different cultures and situations read the same Bible story and start talking about it with each other?"⁶ This focus points to the global character of Christianity in the twenty-first century and the emergence of Bible reading as a truly worldwide practice. The problematic of the project alludes to a new impulse of transcultural exchanges of Bible interpretations, triggered by globalization, migration, and the improvement of information technologies. Regarding the second question: "Can intercultural reading of Bible stories result in a new method of reading the Bible and communicating faith that is a catalyst for new, trans-border dialogue and identity formation?"⁷ Segovia identifies it as what he calls the "spirit and vision of the project." The Cuban American states:

The spirit has to do with undertaking such reading and sharing among Christians. The vision is to establish, through such reading and sharing of the Bible, dialogue and identity as Christians across the boundaries represented by the divergent cultures and situations of global Christianity.⁸

For this project, hundreds of ordinary Bible readers from more than 25 countries engaged in the analysis and interpretation exchange of the text of *The Samaritan Woman* (John 4:1–42). The reading and exchange process consisted of three main phases. In the first one, each group read, reflected, and discussed the mentioned biblical text. They were encouraged to deal with it with freedom and with a special emphasis on the actualization of the text. A series of guiding questions that aimed to direct but not to interfere in the discussion was provided to the participants. Each group prepared a reading report of various pages summarizing the most important aspects of their

interpretation, inviting other groups to engage in discussion. These reports were sent to the Free University in Amsterdam for their translation into a significant variety of languages. In the second stage, groups were paired and had the chance to read the biblical text “through the eyes of the another,” considering their living circumstances, challenges, and cultural background. Finally, each group prepared an answer to its counterpart. In the third and final stage of the project, these answers were gathered and translated into the language of the partner group to be subsequently sent to each addressee. Once each group read their partner’s answer, they reflected on the significance of the entire process and discussed if or how further exchanges would continue. As explained, the project aimed to create intercultural communicative networks among Christians around the world, considering on the one hand the enormous cultural, historical, or traditional diversity of current Christendom, and on the other, the points of contact that they already share. In this sense, De Wit envisions intercultural reading of the Bible as a “point of convergence for Christians.”⁹

Following the process above described and after hundreds of hours of material analysis by a team of experts and volunteers, the coordinator of the project, Prof. de Wit, answered the second research question (“Can intercultural reading of Bible stories result in a new method of reading the Bible and communicating faith that is a catalyst for new, trans-border dialogue and identity formation?”) unequivocally: “We can only answer this question with a heartfelt Yes”¹⁰ The study confirmed that IBR indeed constitutes a new trans-border method for engaging with the Bible. Regarding the first question, the conclusions were far more varied, as the exchanges yielded a wide range of outcomes. In some instances, “[IBR] appears to awaken a longing in Christians, an opportunity that faith itself creates. People want to share the story of the gospel with one another, to learn from one another.”¹¹ However, in many other cases:

The fact that interaction [was] established [did] not mean that the intercultural communication [was] successful. There were interactions in which insights were frozen in both directions. In these cases, participants were only critical toward the partner group, and they held to their own repertoire. Prejudices were not readjusted, and profound differences continued on next to each other. However, . . . always something happened between the groups. Interactions never ended in a complete split with the partner group; negative experiences in the initial phase were often readjusted later.¹²

In several other cases, the exchanges led to only a minimum or partially successful mutual understanding. In some instances, groups were unable to complete the process, with participants gradually disengaging.

This initial project inspired a series of other studies around the world. Among them, we could mention: *Intercultural Reading of John 10:1–2*¹³

(2016), in which the African researchers Eric Nii Bortey Anum and Ebenezer Quaye coordinated and analysed exchanges among Christian communities on the topics of leadership and followership by interpreting the gospel story of *The Good Shepard*. Likewise, Charlene van der Walt, in her *Toward a communal reading of 2 Samuel 13*¹⁴ (2014), uses de Wit's method with Bible readers from the entire world to recover the biblical tradition of Tamar, and to engage in the study of ideology, gender, and power dynamics concerning sexual and psychological violence. Finally, in *The Widow and the Judge: Memory, Resistance, and Hope*¹⁵ (2020), de Wit and E.A. López employ the gospel's parable of *The Persistent Widow* in Luke 18:1–8 to reflect with Latin American communities on the phenomena of violence, impunity, and injustice in the continent.

Intercultural Bible reading (IBR) refers both to a communal approach to reading and interpreting the Bible and to an academic project that explores the various dynamics and outcomes of such readings. At its core, IBR values and acknowledges the diverse cultural contexts, perspectives, and lived experiences that readers bring into conversation.¹⁶ It also broadens the spectrum of voices considered “legitimate” in biblical interpretation, fostering a more democratic and inclusive approach to engaging with Scripture. IBR also seeks to bring together believers from different cultural and denominational backgrounds, encouraging dialogue, mutual learning, and deeper understanding among their communities. As a biblical movement, it recognizes that the Bible was written in specific historical contexts¹⁷ and originally addressed to distinct communities with their own concerns, challenges, and hopes. At the same time, it affirms the ongoing relevance and significance of Scripture in the daily lives of Christians across diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds.¹⁸

In intercultural Bible reading, believers and communities from diverse cultural and interpretive backgrounds come together to study and reflect on biblical texts, emphasizing the ways in which they can appropriate its meaning and be inspired to act by its stories.¹⁹ IBR creates a space for intercultural and transcultural exchange, where differing interpretations and understandings of Scripture are shared within a framework of mutual respect and egalitarian dialogue. IBR takes place in various settings, academic, communal, or ecclesial, yet these formats share common concerns. One central concern is to increase cultural awareness and sensitivity towards different ways of reading and interpreting the Bible, experiencing God's revelation, and living the Christian faith.²⁰ It assumes that cultural and denominational backgrounds shape how communities understand Scripture and seeks to promote mutual learning and enrichment by exposing participants to unfamiliar interpretive approaches.²¹ It encourages dialogue and exchange of ideas, fostering a more meaningful understanding of the Scriptures and its role. Moreover, IBR actively challenges cultural preconceptions and biases, inviting participants to critically examine their own denominational or cultural assumptions and

how these shape their engagement with the text. In doing so, it resists imperialist perspectives and opens possibilities for new biblical insights and deeper understandings.²² Finally, IBR has a strong ecumenical dimension, fostering dialogue among different Christian traditions. Creating spaces for engagement and shared reflection, it helps build relationships of respect and mutual appreciation across denominational and cultural boundaries. Werner Kahl summarizes the aims that motivate IBR as follows:

- 1 To get to know, understand, and appreciate each other.
- 2 To learn to understand oneself with one's own hitherto unconscious cultural and denominational characteristics – the other person takes on the function of a *mirror*.
- 3 To get to know new, so far overlooked meanings of biblical statements or interpretations of the Gospel, which could become significant for one's own shaping of faith and the world: the counterpart takes on the function of a *window*.
- 4 To recognize and balance problematic interpretations: the *corrective* function.
- 5 To try to rewrite together what the Gospel actually is, recalling existing life experiences, perspectives, and insights.²³

IBR aligns itself with similar efforts to analyse biblical contextualization and appropriation at the level of reception,²⁴ that is, where the potential of the text becomes operative²⁵ for modern readers. According to Segovia, this study approach is driven by three movements or discourses: liberation theology, reader-response criticism, and cultural studies. First, Liberation Theology (LT), as one of the most influential peripheral theological discourses of the twentieth century, reshaped global Christian theological cartography by asserting both the right of the majority southern world to originally speak about God and the role of the reader's context as the "socio-political ground of collective action."²⁶ Its *orto-praxiological* epistemology resonated with the Marxist interest in cooperative transformation, political action, class struggle, and social organization, leading to the assertion that "what applied to theological discourse . . . applied to critical discourse as well."²⁷ The accentuation of LT on contextual analysis became a powerful tool to criticize extreme socio-economic disparities in Latin America and the Global South. Second, IBR draws inspiration from reader-response criticism in literary studies, particularly its focus on how readers actively construct meaning when engaging with a text. This perspective views the reader as "by no means a passive receptor but rather an active creator in the process of approaching and understanding the text, [this is] as proactively involved in the re-creation of meaning and the reconstruction of context."²⁸ In this framework, the text becomes inexhaustible, as each new reader, shaped by their unique historical and cultural context, brings fresh perspectives to its interpretation.

This emphasis on the reader's role in co-constructing meaning aligns with Ricoeur's hermeneutical principle, which underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of textual interpretation:

What I finally appropriate is a proposition of the world, this is not *behind* the text, as a hidden intention would be, but *in front* of it, like what the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Therefore, to understand [a text] is to understand ourselves *in front* of the text.²⁹

Third, IBR takes seriously the insights from cultural studies regarding the role of context in shaping individual and communal belongings and, by extension, their approaches to biblical texts and life in general. Cultural studies have exposed the limitations of earlier, naive, and essentialist understandings of culture, particularly within contextual theologies. These earlier perspectives often assumed monolithic and static cultural identities (e.g. Dalit, Black, and Indigenous) while overlooking the regional and supra-regional cultural trends that influence these groups. Moreover, cultural studies have highlighted the vast epistemological diversity of the world, the different logics that shape knowledge production, and the imbalances in the validity ascribed to different knowledge systems.³⁰ In this sense, "context had thus been blown wide open: horizontally it encompasses new contexts of interpretation, and vertically it took the networks of power across society and culture into account. Context had taken a popular as well as a political turn."³¹

From a historic-hermeneutic perspective, IBR sheds light on the often-overlooked transcultural and cross-border interactions in which the reader actively participates. As Kessler observes, traditional biblical hermeneutics has largely been structured around a bipolar model of analysis. On one side, scholars have focused on the text itself, its author(s), and the original intent behind its production. The second pole represents the reader, typically viewed as an individual interpreter engaging with the text. Over time, biblical and exegetical scholarship has emphasized different aspects of this binary relationship, depending on historical and academic contexts. However, Kessler ultimately concludes:

The traditional bipolar model of historical-critical exegesis has generated much reflection on the position of the author of the text, on the text itself, and on the rules of the functioning of texts. However, reflection on the *concrete* reader or readers of the text has been neglected.³²

In contrast to the classical bipolar model, the IBR hermeneutical approach acknowledges that contemporary Bible readers, whether individuals or communities, do not exist in a cultural vacuum or monocultural interpretative spaces. Rather, they actively engage in a range of trans-border exchanges (denominational, cultural, national, ethnic, and beyond) that shape both their understanding of the text and the actions it inspires. As a result, the

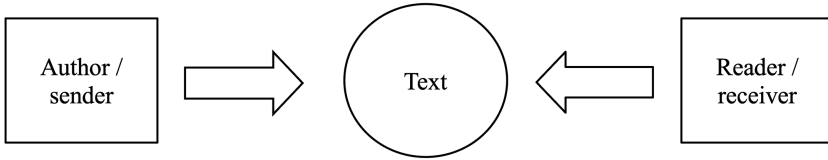


Figure 1.1 The bipolar hermeneutical model.

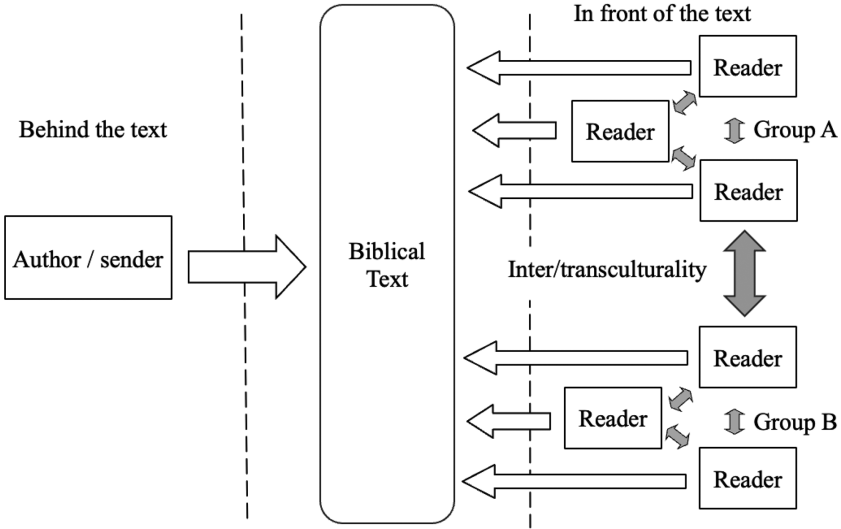


Figure 1.2 The IBR hermeneutical model

abstract, idealized reader of traditional models, often envisioned as a *bourgeois*, academically trained individual, is replaced by a plural, communal, and contextually situated one. Communication, therefore, extends beyond the traditional dialogue between the reader and the text (or its author); it also encompasses dialogue with other readers. In this process, interpretation is no longer confined to the reinforcement of one's preexisting views within a familiar group but is actively shaped by engagement with diverse perspectives, leading to moments of challenge, transformation, and deeper understanding. In the words of Kessler: "I am also challenged by readers who are, by definition, different."³³

Intercultural Bible also addresses a longstanding concern that has been a focal point for theologians from the "majority world" in the Global South. As early as 1976, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) issued its famous *Final Declaration*, which strongly criticized the persistent universalizing tendencies of Eurocentric hermeneutics.³⁴ The declaration denounced how these dominant interpretative frameworks

systematically overshadowed and marginalized theological discourses from the global periphery. It ultimately called for a radical reassessment of theological authority, affirming the necessity of contextual and locally rooted biblical interpretations. The declaration concluded:

The theologies from Europe and North America are dominant today in our churches and represent one form of cultural domination. They must be understood to have arisen out of situations related to those countries, and therefore must not be uncritically adopted without our raising the question of their relevance in the context of our countries. Indeed, we must, in order to be faithful to the gospel and to our peoples, reflect on the realities of our own situations and interpret the word of God in relation to these realities. . . . We are prepared for the radical break in epistemology, which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on praxis of the reality of the Third World.³⁵

Nevertheless, nearly five decades later, this emancipatory and postcolonial theological initiative remains unfinished, leading to a certain agreement with Sugirtharajah's assertion:

Biblical scholarship continues to be managed and controlled by the West. There has been no perceptible improvement since I raised this issue in the fifteenth-anniversary edition of *Voices*.³⁶ Of all the disciplines in the humanities, biblical studies was the creation of the West and remains unabashedly Eurocentric.³⁷

Today, scholars such as Eric Anum, Fernando Segovia, Daniel Schipani, Uka-chukwu Chris Manus, Ebenezer Quaye, and Edgar Antonio López continue to engage in what De Sousa Santos describes as transforming "impossible objects into possible objects, objects that are absent in present objects."³⁸ By amplifying the voices and exchanges emerging from Christian communities across the globe, they bring these perspectives to the forefront of theological discourse.

Thus, IBR provides both a theoretical and practical framework for developing a new inter/trans-cultural hermeneutic paradigm, one capable of navigating the tension between locally grounded religious reflections, which are "constituted around topics . . . adopted by concrete social groups with local living projects,"³⁹ and the broader landscape of global theological knowledge. In recent decades, globalization, advancements in communication technologies, and the increasing dynamism of contemporary migrations have expanded the arena in which diverse actors, representing previously marginalized regions and cultures, demand active participation in global theological discussions. Consequently, the tension between global and local perspectives in theological discourse has gained greater prominence, as illustrated by IBR. In this sense, the goal of IBR's emerging inter/trans-cultural

hermeneutical paradigm is to establish a critical and creative distance from the monopoly of (Western) academic theological tradition, its methodologies and postulates, so as to create analytic spaces for the emergence of absent or silenced theological discourses and spiritualities that are continually being developed across the world. At the same time, it must preserve an openness to novelty, allowing for the unexpected to challenge and expand interpretive frameworks, resisting the temptation to close the “hermeneutic canon.” As De Sousa Santos articulates in quasi-theological terms, “the bet on the new must be followed by the bet on the non-conclusion, on the *Not-Yet*.”⁴⁰ The author affirms:

The consciousness of our own blindness must occupy the center of our epistemological attitude . . . which invites to 1. a wise move as it cannot guarantee that all movements are in the intended direction . . . 2. a plurality of knowledges and practices [and] 3. an uplifting and socially responsible application of the [*hermeneutic*] science, rather than a *technical* one.⁴¹

Ordinary Bible readers as situated communitarian subjects

A central concept within the IBR project is the hermeneutical category of the “ordinary Bible reader.” Contrary to relativistic perspectives, this individual does not approach the biblical text with a *tabula rasa* mindset, naively attempting to preserve an unaltered original meaning. As Stanley Fish observed: “No one can achieve the distance from his own beliefs and assumptions which would result in their being no more authoritative for *him* than the beliefs and assumptions held by others.”⁴² Rather than striving for an unattainable neutrality, IBR acknowledges and affirms the active and creative role of the common reader as the “space in which the connection between culture, context, tradition and reading becomes visible.”⁴³ The most comprehensive analysis of the “ordinary Bible reader” within the framework of IBR has been developed by de Wit, who argues:

The common reader is more than a flesh-and-blood reader -it is an attitude toward the text, defined by Ricoeur as the existential attitude. It is the space in which the effect of Holy Scripture is manifest. It is a dynamic playing field in which Bible texts are not soiled but called into new life; it is a field where a gigantic reservoir of experiences and memories, of social memory, becomes manifest, a space that reflects the asymmetry and challenges us to give an ethical answer. Viewed from the often closed world of the exegesis, it has to do here, in fact, with an *elsewhere*, an *otherwise*, and the *other*.⁴⁴

The vast majority of the hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of believers who engage with the Christian Bible daily fall into this category. However, as de Wit notes, “we [actually] know very little”⁴⁵ about them, despite their

presence across diverse cultures and social strata. As West and Dube argue, the term “ordinary” carries both a general and a specific meaning. In a general sense, it refers to those who read the Bible “pre-critically” (here the authors define critical readings as those “interpretations, whether exegetical or hermeneutical . . . of readers who have been trained in the use of the tools and resources of biblical scholarship”).⁴⁶ More specifically, the term is usually associated with liberationist approaches that emphasize the perspectives of marginalized and impoverished Christian communities. In this study, the term “ordinary” will primarily be employed in the first sense, referring to Bible readers who engage with the text outside the framework of academic theological training.

Ordinary Bible readers represent a dynamic and complex category, characterized by an existential attitude and an approach to the text marked by “expectation and hope.”⁴⁷ Their readings should be understood as legitimate actualizations and appropriations of the text, rather than as impositions or distortions of the author’s original meaning. As Ricoeur asserted, “Tradition can only remain alive as long as it is subjected to a creative re-appropriation, an innovation of meaning concerning the different themes and theorizations it contains.”⁴⁸ In these actualizations, ordinary readers bring their personal experiences, backgrounds, and doubts to the text, seeking direction and inspiration for their lives, through a process in which “the historical reference of the text is replaced by a new one, the actual moment of the new reader.”⁴⁹ Ordinary readers are responsible for “revitalizing” the biblical text, partially detaching it from both its author and its original context, thus rendering it relevant once again. De Wit emphasizes this idea by invoking Gregory the Great’s principle: “Holy Scriptures are simultaneously developing with their readers.”⁵⁰

Nevertheless, the ordinary Bible reader engaged in IBR is not an isolated reader, but one who participates in a community, exchanging meanings, influencing and being influenced by other interpretations, and co-creating beliefs that “are not individual-specific or idiosyncratic but communal and conventional.”⁵¹ These beliefs represent both common and unfamiliar experiences in the reflection of the biblical text. To explore the relationship between the Bible and the communities that gather around it, co-constructing plural interpretations, Jonker proposes the application of an intertextual postmodern approach.⁵² The author examines various dimensions of textuality, emphasizing two primary ones for his analysis. First, textuality as a deconstructive reading posits the text as an intertextual event. Two main perspectives can be identified here: a narrower and a broader one. The narrower perspective focuses on the multiple interrelationships between texts and their mutual influence, understood as a weaving of symbols within a literary corpus. From the broader perspective, intertextuality pertains to the reciprocal relations between texts as objects of understanding, encompassing not only literary texts but also objects, ideas, or communities. The second perspective on

intertextuality that Jonker highlights is its political significance, which involves studying the text as a site of political struggle, as Degenaar explains:

By viewing society and history as texts one becomes conscious of the relationships of power between signs which reverberate through all texts, also literary texts. The understanding of meaning is not a neutral affair but an involvement in a struggle in which choices have been made and are to be made.⁵³

From this deconstructive and political framework, communities of readers are also regarded as texts within intertextual networks, in which both written texts and other interpretative communities participate. The exchanges within these networks are constant and reciprocal, as readers guide their actions by texts and “find their identity formulated”⁵⁴ by them, while simultaneously expanding their reservoir of meaning and shaping these texts “according to their image,”⁵⁵ informed by their previous experiences and denominational affiliations. Jonker delves further into this relationship, asserting: “The reciprocal processes of textual production and textual reception in ancient and contemporary contexts tend to obliterate the boundaries between these processes. Textual production becomes textual reception, and vice versa.”⁵⁶

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the category of ordinary Bible readers is implicitly defined in opposition to scholarly and professional biblical analysis. According to Kessler, the key distinction between these two “styles” lies in the “knowledge of the ancient languages”⁵⁷ that scholars cultivate. Eric Anum describes the difference as follows: “The ordinary reader is identified as the real subjective reader who reads the text directly from her/his social context or location while the scholarly reader is identified as the one who stands back and acts as an objective critic.”⁵⁸ However, de Wit reminds us of even more profound differences in their approaches to the Bible, as he argues:

Clearly the Bible is not primarily a gift to academics but to the people. . . . The instruments used to approach the text are so different [among these groups]: power and knowledge rather than expectation and hope. . . . The slow, careful approach of the scholar is often difficult to understand in places where the quest for life is urgent. . . . For the [common readers’] groups, reading is more than a cerebral process.⁵⁹

However, this does not imply that ordinary believers are theologically or biblically “untrained” or “uneducated.” In fact, they are part of much more complex educative networks, which include primary (e.g. family, friends), secondary⁶⁰ (e.g. church, school), and tertiary (e.g. international religious broadcasters) communities.

This marked preference for ordinary Bible interpreters brings us to the longstanding debate regarding the idealization of common Bible readers and

believers, particularly those from marginalized contexts. While this research is grounded in the premise that “the ordinary reader is a source of wisdom and knowledge,”⁶¹ it shares the concern of IBR pioneers to avoid creating a “cult . . . around the ordinary reader,”⁶² an essentialist pitfall that could undermine the entire IBR project. An internal debate on the most fundamental postulates of IBR is necessary. For instance, in response to de Wit’s emphasis on the fact that among ordinary Bible readers “the same single text can be read in many ways [and] this multicoloredness is hard data,”⁶³ Kessler argues for a similar capacity among scholar experts, and dedicates an entire chapter of the book *New Perspectives on Intercultural Reading of the Bible* to probe with examples that “there is not less multicoloredness in professional reading than in ordinary reading.”⁶⁴

Hermeneutics in empirical and inter/trans-cultural design

The academic concept of Empirical Hermeneutics refers to de Wit’s research model, which seeks to trace and explore how common, theologically non-trained readers around the world interpret the Bible and act accordingly. Its aim is to incorporate these “grassroots” interpretations into the historical repertoire of Christian hermeneutics. In recent decades, this approach has been primarily developed within the context of international and inter-regional dialogues, making it appropriate to refer to it as *intercultural empirical hermeneutics*. This hermeneutical model “seeks to enter into what must be considered a great void in hermeneutics and the biblical sciences, i.e. the space where the *effect* of the act of reading is made manifest.”⁶⁵ De Wit identifies two primary dimensions that overlap in the process of intercultural and empirical hermeneutics. First, an analytic-descriptive dimension examines “how the *hermeneusis* (reading practice) of ordinary readers of sacred texts develops, what factors are at work and how context and culture influence this process.”⁶⁶ This approach aligns with reception criticism, emphasizing how common readers engage with and appropriate the biblical text. In this sense, it “wishes to explore the area where the behaviour potential of the text becomes operational.”⁶⁷ Second, it encompasses a normative dimension related to the assumption that understanding the text is enriched through dialogue with other believers. The encounter with and negotiation of meaning alongside a cultural other thus transforms the reading experience into a hospitality hermeneutics.⁶⁸ As de Wit affirms:

If we attach the label intercultural to hermeneutics here, we are dealing with a normative dimension. Here intercultural is not only descriptive in the sense of a purely geographical way of reading the Bible that crosses boundaries but mainly an *ethically loaded* concept.

The designation *intercultural empirical hermeneutics*, which conceptually frames the current project, consists of three key elements. First, the

intercultural component highlights essential aspects of the employed research model: it considers Bible readers as culturally embedded actors, presupposes that this cultural background influences biblical interpretation, and explicitly aims to create spaces for discussion between readers from different geographical regions. Ideally, these dialogues occur across what De Sousa Santos describes as the *abyssal line* that separates the conceptual global North and South.⁶⁹ The term *intercultural* itself comprises two fundamental concepts. The “*inter-*” prefix signifies the deliberate exchange of biblical meanings and interpretations among individuals from diverse contexts. It implies that actively facilitated intercultural dialogues can foster a deeper appreciation of the thought-worlds and life-worlds both “in” and “in front of” the Scriptures, particularly when they are “led by a commitment to learn *about* in order to learn *from* other contexts.”⁷⁰ *Culture*, within the framework of IBR, is understood as a dynamic symbolic system in which multiple, ongoing meaning negotiations and reconfigurations take place. It pertains to the communal construction of social constructs and is continuously enriched and transformed by the interplay between new and pre-existing meanings.⁷¹ This approach to Bible reading has proven especially valuable for intercultural studies. One key reason is that the Christian Bible, as the most widely read text globally, and the Christian faith, as the tradition uniting the largest number of believers, have historically evolved as result of profound intercultural dynamics. As de Wit affirms: “the gospel itself is transcultural and trans-border. The scripture is a product of intercultural communication.”⁷² In this particular research, the use of the concept *intercultural* instead of *transcultural* (as theorized in the previous chapter) is used in alignment with the established traditions of intercultural hermeneutics and intercultural theology. However, in practice, the specific interactions within WSCF as a network, more closely correspond to the transcultural paradigm, rather than to Bhabha’s intercultural theory. Therefore, while the term *intercultural* is retained for consistency with existing academic discourse, the study employs a distinctly transcultural analytical approach, particularly in the examination of the generated data in the later chapters.

The academic category *empirical* signifies the commitment to systematically analyse the outcomes of Bible reading, particularly when it occurs in dialogue with readers from different contexts. It emerges as a response to the fact that “very little research [has been done] on exactly how readers travel the path from interpretation to praxis and back.”⁷³ This approach seeks to move beyond reductionist or romanticized assumptions about how marginalized or non-academically trained individuals engage with and respond to religious texts. As we just start to acknowledge, despite the vast body of work on popular Bible reading (*lectura popular de la Biblia*) and African grassroots Bible reading, “not even the beginning has been made of the systematic analysis of the empirical material that the people have so abundantly produced.”⁷⁴ In this research, the empirical dimension also pertains to the nature of the studied material, which consists of transcribed speeches, videos,

and audio recordings of discussions and exchanges. This implies a necessary departure from the traditional focus on written texts, which has historically dominated theological hermeneutics, and a recognition of the value of oral content in Christian intercultural dialogues. The empirical endeavour aligns with the hermeneutical shift towards real readers, emphasizing the active role of appropriation in biblical interpretation, which ensures both its relevance and historical continuity. Across religious traditions that regard sacred texts as normative, there exists a shared understanding that reading or listening to scripture brings about change, renewal, or transformation in believers and influences their actions. However, it is striking that theological research has rarely focused on tracing how this transformation actually occurs. As de Wit provocatively challenges: “If you claim that reading the Bible is good for people and contributes to liberation, then also analyze how it operates! See how it works.”⁷⁵ Thus, this research ultimately aims to contribute to local communities and intercultural/ecumenical initiatives by offering hermeneutical and ecumenical models that are not merely idealistic but empirically grounded and tested.

Finally, the *hermeneutical* component pertains to the theoretical discipline that examines the process of text interpretation rather than the interpretations themselves. It has been conceptualized as a *meta-discipline* or a *metareflexion*, focused on the structures and development of understanding and interpretation.⁷⁶ Now it is possible to demarcate the entire scope of intercultural empirical hermeneutics as follows:

Intercultural hermeneutics can then be defined as consisting of the following elements: (1) Intercultural hermeneutics concerns itself with the analysis of the interaction between culture and the process of interpreting biblical texts, within the setting of intercultural confrontation and dialogue. (2) Intercultural hermeneutics explores the conditions that make communication of the meaning of biblical texts possible across cultural boundaries. (3) Intercultural hermeneutics also presses questions of liberation and of truth across cultural boundaries.⁷⁷

The current research dedicates especially to the second of these focuses.

In summary, intercultural empirical hermeneutics is distinguished by its ability to integrate theoretical reflection with actual biblical interpretations. It represents an interdisciplinary effort informed by modern, postmodern, contextual, and post/decolonial biblical scholarship, as well as methods and techniques from empirical religious research, anthropology, literary studies, and cultural studies. It affirms the vast multiplicity of biblical interpretations as a source of richness and diversity in the Church, result of cultural, contextual, denominational, educative, and other dimensions that influence how readers engage with the text. Rather than viewing this diversity as a limitation, it is understood as a natural consequence of the “polysemic character of texts from an ethico-religious tradition, such as the Bible.”⁷⁸ This is an

interpretative work that values such heterogeneity among Bible readers and actively encourages dialogue and exchange among them, fostering a deeper understanding of both the Christian tradition and the Bible itself while promoting more equitable relationships among global communities. Its primary focus is on the appropriations and transformative effects that arise from these intercultural reading experiences, particularly in their performative, practical, and attitudinal dimensions. Finally, this approach is characterized by a qualitative, in-depth analysis of empirical materials, including transcribed discussions, written reports, personal questionnaires, video recordings, and audio materials, all of which document these interpretative encounters.

Distinction between successful and non-successful intercultural exchanges

At the core of the study lies the distinction between successful and more erratic intercultural exchanges. To differentiate between them is, by definition, a complex issue. To establish such a difference, a dual-pronged approach was adopted. First, existing literature on intercultural communication competence and intercultural/ecumenical dialogue was analysed. Second, participants were directly asked to evaluate the quality of their exchange upon its conclusion. In the first case, intercultural communication competence ICC is broadly defined as the ability of individuals to apply attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and skills in order to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds.⁷⁹ It enables constructive and pleasant interactions across cultural boundaries and is increasingly seen as a vital competence in an interconnected world. Scholars emphasize that the development of ICC is multidimensional, involving both cognitive and affective aspects. Key components commonly associated with ICC include language proficiency, empathy, adaptability, intercultural sensitivity, and mutual cultural awareness.⁸⁰ In contrast, several factors can hinder the development of ICC. These include a lack of cultural awareness, insufficient language skills, low intercultural sensitivity, and underdeveloped emotional or cognitive capabilities.⁸¹ Moreover, Holmes and O'Neill argue that the journey towards intercultural competence often involves acknowledging internal resistance, confronting stereotypes, embracing confusion, and navigating emotional complexity. This implies that ICC is not merely a set of skills but also a transformative process that includes self-reflection and a willingness to challenge one's assumptions.⁸² Additionally, researchers have linked ICC with traits such as intimacy-seeking, bilingualism, and prior intercultural experiences.⁸³ These findings reinforce the idea that ICC is not static but develops over time through both intentional learning and lived experiences.

Theologically, academic and ecclesial sources helped to define the main characteristics of successful ecumenical and intercultural encounters. In this sense, a bibliographical review revealed that the issue has been approached from a range of perspectives, each offering a distinctive vision of what constitutes success. For instance, from the most "classical" positions, David

Bosch suggests that genuine biblical dialogue promotes a shared witness to the Gospel and fosters unity in diversity as part of the broader participation of the believers in the *missio Dei*.⁸⁴ Similarly, Lesslie Newbigin warns against reducing dialogue to mere institutional compromise and instead insists: “that which makes the Church one is what makes it a mission to the world.”⁸⁵ For Newbigin, such dialogue seeks to affirm the integrity of each tradition while converging in the common task of Christian witness. Yves Congar, from within the Catholic tradition, emphasizes how these dialogues can foster identification with both the own Christian tradition and the universal *Ecumene*. He contends: “The ecumenical dialogue has . . . compelled me to become more Christian and more catholic.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, he characterizes it as a dialogue open to “countless discoveries and enrichments.”⁸⁷ Contemporary theologians such as Kathryn Tanner and Miroslav Volf focus more on the dynamics of identity building, listening, and reconciliation within interdenominational encounters. Tanner proposes a model of theological pluralism in which dialogical success does not necessarily entail doctrinal agreement, but rather the cultivation of spaces for deep, respectful conversation. For her, successful dialogue is marked by hospitality and a willingness to be transformed “by a community of argument.”⁸⁸ Volf complements this by emphasizing the role of reconciliation in ecumenical discourse. He argues that the “self is dialogically constructed”⁸⁹ and healing historical divisions and embracing the other without erasing difference are essential elements in any fruitful dialogical process. Dialogue, therefore, requires a catholic (universal) personality from the participant. Such person,

practices interpretive hospitality when interacting with others. She listens generously, working to understand and willing to be touched by the faith stories of others. At the same time, she does not shy away from telling her own story, recognizing that she is shaped by her faith just as others are shaped by theirs.⁹⁰

Institutionally, the practical dimension, or inspiration to act, of ecumenical/intercultural dialogue is foregrounded in the work of the World Council of Churches and in the teachings of Pope Francis. The World Council of Churches views dialogical success as being reflected not only in doctrinal convergence but also in the capacity of the dialogue to inspire participants to

moving to issues and places relevant for life and survival of people and the earth; deepening the fellowship of churches on the way with a strong spiritual dimension of common prayer and theological reflection; participating in a journey of hope; looking for and celebrating signs of God’s reign of justice and peace already here and now; and discovering opportunities for common witness and transformative action that make a difference in today’s world.⁹¹

Pope Francis echoes this emphasis, urging Christians to walk together in brotherhood, prayer, and service to the world. His ecumenical charisma is characterized by what he terms “spiritual ecumenism,” in which reading the Bible together and serving the world are intrinsically linked:

There is another strong sign of the Spirit in Charismatic Renewal: the search for unity of the Body of Christ. . . . Christian unity is the work of the Holy Spirit and we must pray together – spiritual ecumenism, the ecumenism of prayer. “But, Father, can I pray with an Evangelical, with an Orthodox, with a Lutheran?” – “You must, you must! You have received the same Baptism”. . . . We have all made these divisions in history, for so many reasons, but not good ones. But now, in fact, is the time in which the Spirit makes us think that these divisions are not good, that these divisions are a counter- testimony, and we must do everything in order to journey together: spiritual ecumenism, the ecumenism of prayer, the ecumenism of work, but of charity at the same time; the ecumenism of reading the Bible together. . . . To go together towards unity. “But Father, do we have to sign a document for this?” – “Let yourself be carried forward by the Holy Spirit: pray, work, love and then the Spirit will do the rest!”⁹²

The second means to differentiate among successful and erratic intercultural/ecumenical exchanges was the application of a structured questionnaire to the participant students. This instrument incorporated previously discussed indicators of successful intercultural communication, along with additional criteria developed considering the ecumenical orientation of the present study. Participants were invited to reflect on questions such as: Do you think this exchange was successful? How would you describe it? Secondary questions included: Did your understanding of the text change because of the exchange of ideas? If yes, what was influential for this change? Did it change your understanding of the unity and diversity of the Church? If yes, how would you describe this change? Do you think the way you read the Bible will change after this experience? In the affirmative case, how? Did this experience personally change you? If you think so, how would you describe this change? Did you learn something from this exchange? Did this experience make sense to you? Why? Was it worth the investment of time and energy?

Through this combined approach, the study concluded that, in general, an ecumenical dialogue can be considered successful if, after sharing and comparing two interpretations of the same biblical passage by SCMs from culturally diverse backgrounds and different WSCF regions, participants reported that their understanding of the text was enriched through the exchange of ideas. Additional indicators of success included participants’ openness to learning from “strange interpretations,”⁹³ improvements in their Bible “reading style” due to interaction with the partner SCM, an increased motivation

to act missionally as result of the dialogue, overall satisfaction with the experience of intercultural Bible reading, and a perception that the time and effort invested in the exchange were worthwhile.

Empirical research models and their irruption in the theological praxis

The growing awareness within academic theology of the contextual embeddedness of all theological and religious discourse, practice, or belief led, by the mid-twentieth century, to a profound reformulation of its research focus, the legitimacy of its central questions, and the methodological strategies used to study what were now understood as culturally conditioned discourses. Various emergent academic and socio-political movements, such as postcolonial, liberationist, and feminist theologies, converged amidst the broader crisis of modernity, effectively challenging and destabilizing long-established and normative disciplines such as European theology. This convergence resulted in the emergence of Contextual Theology as a distinct academic field within Western theological scholarship. As Gruber notes:

Contextual theologies no longer imagine the relation between Gospel and culture through the difference between the kernel of the Gospel and its accidental husks; instead, they frame this relation as text/context and emphasize that both are two equal foundations of theological reflection that interpret each other in a hermeneutic circle.⁹⁴

Due to their cultural embeddedness, contextual theologies turned to new “methodological conversation partners, [among them] cultural anthropology and sociology, rather than the Western philosophy,”⁹⁵ which had traditionally served as theology’s principal interlocutor.

The further analysis of these contextual theologies revealed that, despite their local cultural embeddedness, they were also shaped by a constellation of regional and global exchanges, encounters, trends, and flows that interacted dynamically with their contextual dimension. In response to this theoretical challenge, the German-speaking theological academy developed a new *intercultural* paradigm. As articulated by the Working Group on Religious Studies and Mission Studies (*Religionswissenschaft und Missionswissenschaft WGTh*) and the Governing Board of the German Society for Missiology (*Verwaltungsrat der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Missionswissenschaft DGMW*):

In the course of its history, missiology has given rise to a variety of tasks for the whole of theology, which gives it the character of an “intercultural theology.” [Methodologically], religious studies provides the subject with specific research . . . competencies which cannot only be conveyed through intercultural theology/missiology, but also through the cooperation between religious studies and other theological sub-disciplines.⁹⁶

Intercultural theology committed itself to the study of the multiple interactions and exchanges among Christian communities and their influence on religious practices and beliefs. However, it soon became clear that, in order to adequately reflect the complexity of these dynamics, the emerging field needed to engage not only with the voices of theologically trained authors, who represent a small minority, but it was essential to deal with the non-written and “popular” spiritualities, traditions, symbols, and reflections of ordinary believers. This approach aligns with the longstanding calls from various scholars for the inclusion of more diverse voices in the construction of Christianity’s multiple histories.⁹⁷ Given the nature of these “new studied materials,” researchers were required to adopt methodologies that, for instance, complemented “archival materials with oral history or other sources.”⁹⁸ The methodological implications of these shifts in the European academy were substantial, prompting various societies for intercultural theology and research collectives, such as the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies ESITIS, to lead “the quest for methods into the field of cultural studies.”⁹⁹

Several shared concerns highlight the appropriateness of cultural studies and empirical methodologies as research partners for intercultural theology. For instance, both fields are deeply committed to exposing and challenging colonial logics and practices that persist in contemporary centres of knowledge production across the global North and South. These logics sustain dynamics that invalidate “the existence of alternative ways of knowing which are not linked by a relation of dependence with the totality of the rational system.”¹⁰⁰ In response to this hegemonic epistemology, which positions Western scientific rationality as superior and normative, Boaventura de Sousa Santos advocates for a post-abyssal mode of thinking that:

confronts the monoculture of modern science with the ecology of knowledge. It is an ecology because it is based on the recognition of the plurality of heterogeneous knowledge (one of them is modern science) and on the continuous and dynamic interconnections between them. . . . The ecology of knowledge is based on the idea that knowledge is inter-knowledge.¹⁰¹

Supported by an approach that acknowledges knowledge as inter-knowledge, that is, as a dialogical process among heterogeneous, culturally embedded ways of knowing and experiencing the sacred, intercultural theology stands to gain significantly from the methodological tools of critical cultural studies. These methodologies prioritize theorizing from “popular” knowledges, focusing on how they interact, inform, and transform one another within shared interpretive and experiential spaces.

Moreover, the integration of empirical methods developed within cultural studies into theological and ecclesial research offers the potential for a more holistic and nuanced understanding of emerging discourses, rituals, practices, symbols, and beliefs of Christian communities. Such integration facilitates

the construction of a methodological framework capable of addressing both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of these phenomena. Thus, while cultural methods can offer us light on the synchronous dimension of the phenomenon, as Panotto affirms: "Theology will focus on the diachronic surface, but without separating from the synchronic surface, from which a particular moment is historicized."¹⁰² In this sense, methods such as participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and open-ended questionnaires have become increasingly valuable in theological research. Among the tools available for analysing the resulting data, Grounded Theory has garnered particular interest within theological scholarship for its inductive logic and its flexibility in generating theory from empirical data.

Grounded Theory (GT) as method for empirical analysis

Building upon previous IBR projects, the data generated in this research was analysed using the Grounded Theory (GT) method, specifically its constructivist approach. This method emphasizes the interpretation of commonalities, differences, and patterns within semantic systems across empirical material. Employing Grounded Theory as a framework for analysing empirical data entails an iterative process, characterized by continuous back-and-forth movement. This process involves a repetitive interplay between the collection and analysis of data. Through this approach, it is possible to analyse, code, and categorize semantic units with the goal of inferring relationships that may either challenge, test, or generate theories.

Originally developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, GT is a systematic methodology historically associated with qualitative analysis and social sciences, and nowadays, employed for empirical and practical theological purposes.¹⁰³ A central feature of this methodology is its capacity to generate theoretical insights that emerge from the systematic analysis and interpretation of data. GT was formulated in response to the perceived need for a third methodological path situated between two prevailing theoretical paradigms. The first of these is a naive objective-positivist approach, which emphasizes a supposed objectivity, prioritizes what is quantifiable and measurable, and upholds the dominance of facts over subjective interpretations or opinions. Within this framework, the role of the social researcher is likened to that of a laboratory scientist: maintaining detachment from the subject of study and adopting a neutral, ostensibly unbiased position. Knowledge of social phenomena, in this view, is expected to be "as an unmediated copy, and its . . . description of that world as it appears to the observer in experience."¹⁰⁴ In contrast, the social-structuralist orientation affirmed that "phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through their interrelations [which] constitute a structure, and behind local variations in the surface phenomena there are constant laws of abstract structure."¹⁰⁵

Positioned between these two paradigms, Grounded Theory seeks to integrate theory and empirical research as interdependent elements within a

unified analytical process.¹⁰⁶ However, emphasis placed on one or the other of these approaches has led to the development of two, and subsequently three, distinct strands within GT. The first of these is often associated with Barney Glaser and is referred to as the *traditional* stream. This approach emphasizes the generation of “conceptual theory that *accounts* for a pattern of behavior that is relevant and problematic for those involved.”¹⁰⁷ GT in this sense, is understood as “a set of integrated conceptual hypotheses systematically generated to produce an inductive theory about a substantive area.”¹⁰⁸ A second strand, commonly linked to the work of Anselm Strauss, Juliet Corbin, and Adele Clarke, is known as *evolved* GT. This approach is characterized by a semiotic and hermeneutic orientation within the broader framework of symbolic interactionism. It “relies on the symbolic meaning people ascribe to the processes of social interaction [and] addresses the subjective meaning people place on objects, behaviors or events based on what they believe is true.”¹⁰⁹ Within this framework, GT is understood as a “theory that was *derived* from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. [The researcher] begins with an area of study and allows the theory to *emerge* from the data”¹¹⁰ (my italics). A third alternative is represented by Kathy Charmaz’s *constructivist* approach to Grounded Theory. This model avoids both positivist and interpretivist extremes and centres on “how participants *construct meaning* in relation to the area of inquiry [at the time that] *co-constructs* experience and meanings with participants”¹¹¹ (my italics). It also recognizes the co-construction of experience and meaning between the researcher and participants, thus emphasizing the collaborative and situated nature of knowledge production.

Although the three aforementioned orientations share several foundational features, their distinct epistemological configurations inevitably lead to divergent methodological stances. These differences are reflected in the positioning of the researcher, the role attributed to pre-existing theories, the strategies employed in coding analysis, and the processes involved in theory development. A detailed examination of these distinctions lies beyond the scope of the present study. However, it is important to note that this research adopts a constructivist perspective, one that rejects essentialist conceptions of reality as something that “speaks directly” to the researcher or exists exclusively as a symbolic construct within the researcher’s mind. Rather, both data and theory are understood to be *constructed* or *generated* by researchers. They do not *speak*, nor they *emerge* as independent or metaphysical entities.

Grounded theology: grounded theory applied for theological purposes

The use of Grounded Theory in theological research is relatively recent and not without significant challenges. Most scholars engaging with the method are theologically trained students or academics with limited or no formal education in empirical research methodologies or field-based ethnographic work. This lack of methodological grounding has led to a number of studies

marked by basic errors, such as the inappropriate use of statistical analysis on non-random samples, misguided attempts to uncover the “*whys*” behind Christian behaviours, or reliance on unqualified interviewers in the field. Additional issues further compromise the quality of such research. Frequently there is little room for conceptual creativity, as the studies are often shaped by biased sampling and analysis, leading researchers to confirm pre-existing assumptions. Moreover, many of these studies fail to address the theological and methodological implications of incorporating everyday experiences of Christian communities into academic theological discourse, resulting in what may be termed “dull or even bad theology.”¹¹² As I have argued:

The conjunction of theological research and models from cultural studies transcends a purely pragmatic or utilitarian approach. Rather, it implies the epistemological and ontological postulates that sustain both disciplines. To continue further in this conjunction, we shall consider both disciplines as epistemological configurations and meaning frameworks for symbolic, discursive, and practical components of religious experience. Once in contact with the other, theological research and cultural studies interpenetrate the most central premises and dimensions of the counterpart. Further research in the field might explore the implications of this inter-penetration and the subsequent recalibration of our theoretical and methodological frames of reference.¹¹³

In my opinion, one of the most insightful applications of Grounded Theory in theology has been introduced by feminist theologian Jenny Barnsley in her work *Grounded Theology: Adopting and Adapting Qualitative Research Methods for Feminist Theological Enquiry*.¹¹⁴ Barnsley begins by affirming the theological legitimacy of human experience, asserting that: “In feminist theology the category of experience has paramount importance . . . , feminist theology [itself] emerged with the intention of claiming women’s experience ‘as authentic human experience.’”¹¹⁵ From this standpoint, Grounded Theology becomes a “transgressive approach,”¹¹⁶ which constitutes at the same time a research method and a “spiritual practice,” rooted in the belief that “accidental epiphanies and ‘aha’ moments come from the renunciation of control that attentive listening requires.”¹¹⁷ Barnsley centres her inquiry on the person, whom she considers “unknowable as GOD/DE.”¹¹⁸ This acknowledgement of radical alterity renders the other “ultimately unrepresentable,” which, in turn, prevents the instrumentalization of individuals or communities as mere objects of study. The use of human experiences and narratives as “raw material” for theological reflection is justified by Barnsley on both ethical and epistemological grounds, recognizing lived experience as a vital theological source, as follows:

In honoring narrators as words *from* GOD/DE and books *about* GOD/DE, I simultaneously assert that they are not reified or, in theological

terms, idolatrous models of GOD/DE, even though they are *imago Dei*. While grounded theory is focused on the things of the world, the end point of Grounded Theory is attention to GOD/DE; theologizing around human experiences is always a means to that end, the end of drawing down GOD/DE's good into the world.¹¹⁹

The present project draws inspiration from Barnsley's contemplative methodology, particularly her emphasis on "listening to the texts, in silent contemplation, in a way that takes them 'beyond' themselves, beyond what the narrators tell of their lives and into what their lives tell of GOD/DE, into 'aha' moments and accidental epiphanies."¹²⁰ However, this study diverges from her stance in one key aspect: while Barnsley resists the use of prior analytical codes and categories, viewing them as potentially "idolatrous [impositions] upon the data,"¹²¹ this research embraces the insights and structures developed by earlier IBR scholars. These prior contributions are not perceived as constraints but rather as a valuable foundation, enabling the project to build upon the legacy of experienced IBR pioneers. Undoubtedly, Barnsley's most significant contribution lies in the spiritual and ethical dimensions she brings to the use of Grounded Theory for theological purposes. Her approach reframes research as a sacred practice, guided by humility, attentiveness, and the profound recognition of the other as a bearer of divine revelation. In her words:

Grounded Theory, in approaching research prayerfully [and] waiting silently upon data for the Spirit to move through them, attempts to speak what comes inwardly from GOD/DE, and thus to be a theology in which GOD/DE speaks. . . . The heart of Grounded Theory is listening, or silently waiting for non-coherent data to make itself a little more coherent. . . . In listening, in being receptive rather than grasping or desiring, in giving absolute unmixed, prayerful attention, I assert that attention to GOD/DE and attention to narrators are made up of the same substance. . . . Attention in Grounded Theory is ethically directed to GOD/DE and for the world; attention to the One is attention to the others. . . . It contradicts the idols of methods by asserting that the rational and the a-rational coexist in research. . . . Grounded Theory is concerned not simply with intellectual pursuit, but with drawing down the good from GOD/DE into the world.¹²²

An adjusted version of Data Coding

Data coding constitutes the foundational step in material analysis within Grounded Theory. It requires the researcher to take an analytical distance from the data and interrogate it through a series of critical questions. As Charmaz explains, "Coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data.

[The] codes show how you select, separate, and sort data to begin an analytic accounting of them.”¹²³ This process entails a significant theoretical dimension, as it reflects the researcher’s interpretative choices in selecting, classifying, and organizing material, while also shaping the analytical framework for subsequent stages, aiming to interpret the role of specific semantic units in broad systems. In its early stages, coding typically adheres closely to the data, focusing on actions, events, viewpoints, and contextual information. As analysis progresses, the codes evolve into more abstract and theoretical concepts. From a constructivist perspective, coding is described as “the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data. Through coding [it is] define[d] what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means.”¹²⁴ The coding process generally unfolds in three main phases. The initial coding phase involves naming words, lines, or semantic units in a way that remains open to multiple theoretical directions. This is followed by focused (or selective) coding, in which the most frequent and significant initial codes are used to condense, organize, and conceptualize large volumes of data. Its primary objective is to “pinpoint and develop the most salient categories in large batches of data.”¹²⁵ Finally, axial coding connects categories with their subcategories, articulating their properties and dimensions and laying the groundwork for theory development.

Initial coding

The logic of the initial coding phase lies in maintaining codes that remain as close as possible to the descriptive dimension of the actions presented in the data. These codes “are provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data . . . because [they aim] to remain open to other analytic possibilities.”¹²⁶ At this early stage, the coding process benefits from qualities such as speed, receptiveness, and spontaneity, which enable fresh perspectives to emerge. Glaser suggests the use of gerunds during initial coding to emphasize processes and stick to the material.¹²⁷ The current project made use of four main types of initial coding. First, *word-by-word* coding, as proposed by Charmaz, was especially effective when analysing documents such as the pre- and post-exchange questionnaires used in this study. Charmaz argues that this technique “forces . . . to attend images and meanings.”¹²⁸ Second, *line-by-line* coding involves assigning a name to each line of transcribed data.¹²⁹ This technique is particularly valuable for uncovering both implicit concerns and explicit statements, while also fostering the emergence of fresh and original insights. It serves to maintain a critical stance, helping researchers avoid “becoming so immersed on the respondents’ worldviews that [they] accept them without question.”¹³⁰ In this study, line-by-line coding was especially useful in rendering the “familiar” elements of each conversation “strange” or newly visible. Third, *incident-to-incident* coding employs a comparative analysis of events and actions. This approach proved particularly effective when comparing parallel experiences among members of different SCMs.

Additionally, it facilitated the identification of patterns and divergences among them. And fourth, *in vivo* coding draws its codes directly from the language used by participants, capturing their exact words as analytic starting points. They were a useful analytic departure point, at the time that aided “to preserve participant’s meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself. [serving as] symbolic markers of participant’s speech and meaning.”¹³¹ This technique was helpful in identifying and analysing frequently used terms and concepts across SCMs, such as “patriarchalism,” “activism,” or “inter-generational conflicts.” Other *in vivo* codes, such as “SCM,” “GA” (General Assembly), or “EXCO members” (members of the Executive Committee), required a deeper familiarity with WSCF’s organizational culture and internal dynamics.

Focused coding

At this point, the flexibility of the Grounded Theory (GT) model becomes evident in the present research. In most GT projects, focused coding involves “using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. [It] requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize . . . data incisively and completely.”¹³² By design, focused codes are typically more directed, conceptual, and selective than initial codes. They are often “condensed,” relying on the most analytically productive and recurrent codes developed during the initial coding phase. A central question at this stage is: which initial codes provide the most analytical leverage for categorizing and holistically understanding the constructed data? However, due to the particular objectives of this research, a divergent methodological path was adopted. Each of the five Bible reading exchanges was analysed as an independent unit, deliberately avoiding the influence of previous exchanges on subsequent ones. In practice, this meant that focused coding was not implemented; instead, the initial coding method was preserved throughout the entirety of each of the five analyses. This decision, while requiring considerably more time and effort than typically expected in GT projects (one full year was devoted to coding), resulted in a significantly more nuanced and detailed depiction of each exchange. It also proved to be theoretically generative, allowing for a more precise exploration of semantic correlations, discursive patterns, and conceptual correspondences within each context.

A second major deviation from classical GT procedures was required by the absence of focused codes and the sheer volume of data. To systematize and organize the material, previously developed general categories from the field of intercultural Biblical reading (IBR) were employed. These included background information, group process, group dynamics, hermeneutical process, and actualization/re-reading. In particular, the basic hermeneutical categories established by Hans de Wit and his colleagues in *Through the Eyes of Another* were adapted and enriched with original categories specific to the present study. This approach allowed for a deeper engagement with the

research's core themes (intercultural communication, ecclesial diversity, and Christian unity) while simultaneously contributing to the broader aims of the global IBR initiative.

Axial coding

The final stage of the coding process involves establishing connections between categories and subcategories through what Strauss and Corbin define as axial coding. This phase requires “intense analysis done around one category at the time in terms of the paradigm items.”¹³³ The selected category will function as an “axis” around which further relationships among codes or categories will be analysed. The aim is to reassemble the previously fragmented material into a coherent analytical framework, allowing for a more integrated understanding of the phenomena under study. Through these connections, the properties and dimensions of the central category are clarified. Axial coding involves asking contextual and analytical questions such as “*when, where, who, how, and with what consequences.*”¹³⁴ This process functions as a reference frame for researchers, and as any other frame, it could widen or confine the interpretative vision determined by the “subject’s matter and [his/her] ability to tolerate ambiguity. [Researchers] who prefer to work with a preset structure will welcome having a frame. Those who prefer simple, flexible guidelines – and can tolerate ambiguity – do not need to do axial coding.”¹³⁵ In this study, axial coding was used primarily within hermeneutical categories to search for broader trends and relationships related to styles of reading and communication. The analysis was informed by the framework proposed by Strauss and Corbin,¹³⁶ which offers a group of key terms to bring forward relationships among categories. The most significant of these relations include conditions (the context or environment that configures the analysed phenomena – they answer the *why, where, how come, and when* questions), actions or interactions (participants’ responses to issues or dilemmas – they refer to *by whom* and *how* questions), and consequences (results of specific actions and interactions – they answer *to what happens as consequence* of these actions and interactions).

Theory generation

A core promise of Grounded Theory lies in its potential to support the development of theory grounded in empirical field data. However, despite the considerable focus within GT literature on techniques for processing and coding data, comparatively little attention has been given to clarifying what is meant by “theory” within this methodological framework, its character, purpose, and the processes through which it is actually constructed. In this context, Charmaz raises a critical question:

What stands as *theory* in Grounded Theory? How do researchers make their grounded theory analysis theoretical; that is how do they move

from the process of analysis to production of grounded theory? . . . What is theory? The term remains slippery in grounded theory discourse. Many grounded theorists talk about theory but few define it. A number of grounded theorists claim they construct theory, but do they?¹³⁷

Although it may initially appear methodologically redundant or self-evident, a careful consideration of what is meant by “theory” and how it emerges is a crucial concern that influences the entire Grounded Theory process, from the formulation of research questions to the development of conclusions.

In the social sciences, two predominant approaches to social theory have shaped much of the field’s research. One of these is the positivist perspective, exemplified by Émile Durkheim’s conception of sociology, and social knowledge more broadly, as the study of “social facts and social facts alone,” which should be considered as “things.”¹³⁸ Within this framework, theory is understood as a systematic account of the pre-existing relationships among abstract concepts that correspond to a wide array of unmediated field observations. This positivist approach to social theory “seeks causes, favours deterministic explanations, and emphasizes generality and universality.”¹³⁹ It operates under the assumption that social realities can be known “as unmediated copies, and its first step [is] the description of that world as it presents itself to the observer in experience.”¹⁴⁰ Consequently, this approach prioritizes precise and replicable field measurements, aiming for clarity and, ideally, predictive capacity regarding specific phenomena. Its core interests lie in the systematization and production of knowledge, as well as in the empirical testing of clearly defined hypotheses. While such theories are often praised as “elegant in form and direct in their statements; however, [they] can result in narrow, reductionist explanations with simplistic models of action.”¹⁴¹

Traditional Grounded Theory, as originally formulated by Barney Glaser, incorporates several characteristics aligned with positivist perspectives. For example, it emphasizes the importance of theoretical categories as central axes of theory construction, seeks to generate supra-contextual explanations, and aspires towards the “achievement of parsimony and scope in explanatory power.”¹⁴² Glaser particularly highlights the significance of the comparative method, defining Grounded Theory as the “*discovery* of theory from data systematically obtained from social research”¹⁴³ (my italics). In a similar form, Strauss and Corbin retain certain positivist assumptions in their work, conceptualizing theory as “a set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict phenomena.”¹⁴⁴ While Corbin does acknowledge the researcher’s active role in the theorizing process, she tends to view this influence as a methodological limitation. She thus raises a critical question:

How can one remove who and what one is from the comparative process? An analyst can only compare based on how s/he reads the data.

One would hope that by “sticking to the data” the analyst is left out of the interpretative process, but this is highly unlikely.¹⁴⁵

In contrast to objective-positive approaches, purely interpretative perspectives assert that “human events are not governed by mechanical movements or by an immanent order external to individuals, but by the meanings they assign to their actions.”¹⁴⁶ According to this view, the social world consists of unobservable meanings that must be interpreted within their specific context, using the system of meanings of the group that produces them. From this standpoint, “interpretative theory calls for the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon. [It assumes] emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual.”¹⁴⁷ From this approach, to comprehend social meanings, the researcher must engage with the group’s logic and, through empathy, experience the cultural phenomenon firsthand. In this sense, the researcher’s subjectivity becomes integral to understanding social reality, achieved through participation and subsequent theorization. Fieldwork and theoretical analysis, from this perspective, are conceived as a hermeneutic exercise that prioritizes understanding (interpretation) over explanation. The researcher interprets culture or cultural interactions as “texts” in an unfamiliar language, which must be “translated” into the researcher’s own system of meanings. Geertz even describes culture as “an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the [cultural scientist] strains to read.”¹⁴⁸ These theories embrace “indeterminacy rather than seek causality and give priority to showing patterns and connections rather than to linear reasoning,” offering an “imaginative interpretation.”¹⁴⁹ Critics of the interpretative paradigm quickly pointed out the impossibility of a researcher fully becoming a participant in the studied group or aligning their motivations with those of the group. Additionally, the emphasis on the “originality” of the phenomenon risks presenting an atomistic, homogenizing, and isolationist view of the cultural subjects, disregarding their interconnectedness with others and broader global cultural trends. Furthermore, like the objective-positive approach, it shares the passive assumption that the researcher functions merely as a replicator of pre-existing realities (ideas and social constructs in this case), which exist independently of his intervention.

In response to these and similar approaches, it became essential to reclaim the active role of the researcher and their theoretical preconceptions as integral components in the creation of social theory, asserting that “reality only speaks when it is questioned,”¹⁵⁰ and the manner in which we pose those questions will shape the kind of answers we receive. Consequently, theory construction, as an active and mediated endeavour by the researcher, challenges the naive view of theoretical emergence or discovery. As Bourdieu and others argue, “an object of research, . . . can only be defined and constructed [and theorized] on the basis of a theoretical problematic that makes possible

to systematically examine all aspects of reality in relation to the posed problems.”¹⁵¹ In a similar vein, Charmaz affirms:

Theorizing is a *practice*, it entails the practical activity of engaging the world and of *constructing* abstract understandings about and within it. [Thus] a constructivist approach places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants.¹⁵²

However, this is not a tacit endorsement of the researcher’s empirical subjectivity. On the contrary, theory construction, along with the scientific process it entails, must be subjected to the reflexive scrutiny of its epistemological and methodological assumptions in order to “discover in the scientific practice itself, endlessly threatened by error, the conditions in which the true can be discerned from the false.”¹⁵³ This does not imply that, in the attempt to reduce the methodological discretion inherent in the constructivist model, one should succumb to the technological rigorism of a pre-established methodological manual or model (such as de Wit’s), which would be the antithesis of epistemological reflexivity. For all these reasons, *what* we conceptualize as data and *how* we process it are inherent elements of the theories we develop.

From a constructivist approach, special attention will be given to *how* participants construct meanings, aiming to get as close as possible to real-life experiences, while acknowledging that their exact replication is not feasible. Moreover, within this framework, theory does not merely respond to the participants’ logics (as suggested by the interpretative paradigm); rather, it recognizes that theory development is a shared interpretation,¹⁵⁴ one that also “depends on the researcher’s view”¹⁵⁵ (and his interests). The logic underpinning a constructivist model of Grounded Theory involves examining how, when, and to what extent the phenomenon under study manifests in unexpected places, systems, entanglements, circumstances, or connections. Through such an analysis,

differences and distinctions between people become visible as well as the hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate such differences and distinctions. A constructivist approach means being alert to conditions under which such differences and distinctions arise and are maintained.¹⁵⁶

At this point, it becomes evident that the constructivist process for theory generation aligns closely with the epistemological framework of contemporary trans-cultural approaches to Intercultural theology. This approach resists the identification of simple processes or singular categories that aim to account for social-religious phenomena. Instead, it seeks to reflect the complexities of social interactions, participants’ perspectives, and their unique

worldviews, all while acknowledging “an obdurate, yet ever-changing world, [recognizing] diverse local worlds and multiple realities, [and addressing] how people’s actions affect their local and larger worlds.”¹⁵⁷ In this way, constructivist Grounded Theory and contemporary Intercultural Theology benefit from addressing reality through non-fixed theoretical lenses, engaging in constant comparison, pursuing multiple analytic leads (even when they appear paradoxical or contradictory), and constructing theories that are always provisional and limited. Charmaz’s description of constructivist GT resonates strongly with the ethos of modern Intercultural Theology (InTh): “Theoretical playfulness enters in. Whimsy and wonder can lead . . . to see the novel in the mundane. Openness to the unexpected expands [the] view of studied life and subsequently of theoretical possibilities.”¹⁵⁸

Notes

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2 Research methodology

This chapter illustrates the practical implementation of the methodological framework previously introduced. It does so by employing a range of techniques, strategies, and tools for data collection and analysis,¹ which are integratively interpreted through Grounded Theory. In addition, it addresses the ethical considerations that guided the research process, from the initial planning stages through to the presentation of results. The study's methodological approach draws upon the flexibility and creativity that characterize an empirical approach to biblical hermeneutics. Thus, while the design is inspired by previous projects within the field, it incorporates a number of improvements and adaptations that contribute to a fresh and innovative perspective.

Data collection

The data collected in this research are twofold. First, two distinct questionnaires were administered: one prior to the Bible reading exchange, aimed at exploring each participant's "interpretive style" or approach to the biblical text; and a second, post-exchange questionnaire, designed to evaluate participants' reflections on the process. Second, the primary body of data consists of detailed verbatim transcripts and visual materials derived from recorded group discussions, which captured the dynamic interactions and interpretive processes of the participants in real time.

Questionnaires

As previously mentioned, this research analysed data generated through various research techniques. While the core of the analysis centred on the verbatim transcripts of the group discussions, crucial insights, such as shifts in interpretive strategies or instances of cognitive dissonance (e.g. discrepancies between public statements in the group and private reflections), were accessible only through direct, individualized inquiry. As Winter and Woodhead observe:

In some cases, it may be useful to follow up the [discussion] group with individual interviews with participants. . . . We discovered a revealing

change of tone between the [discussion] groups and the subsequent individual or paired follow-up interviews.²

To access this layer of personal insight, individual questionnaires were administered to each participant following the group sessions. The use of questionnaires and similar empirical tools has a longstanding tradition in the study of religion, serving particularly to enable comparisons between different groups or different segments of the population.³

In previous IBR projects, there was a special interest for the groups to know each other and to transform the other's written reports into portraits of "flesh and bone" partners.⁴ This was achieved by encouraging each group to craft a collective introduction that presented their national context, personal backgrounds, church affiliation, religious tradition, key concerns and interests, hobbies, and the role their faith community played in their lives. In some cases, groups even conducted brief research into the cultural and historical background of their partner group's country or region. As de Wit notes: "The reports also contain information about the group: the context of participants, personal information, their church background. Sometimes the reports contain attachments: photos of the group [or] videos of the meetings."⁵ This strategy aimed to foster familiarity and empathy among groups. In the present study, the traditional group-based introductory reports used in earlier IBR projects were replaced with individual questionnaires focused on each participant's Bible "reading style." These were addressed exclusively to the researcher and not shared with exchange partners. This methodological shift was grounded in several considerations. First, unlike earlier projects where participants interacted asynchronously through written reports, the current design enabled real-time, synchronous exchanges. As a result, interactions were inherently more personal and engaging on an individual level. Second, it quickly became evident that participants often harboured persistent preconceptions about "Christian others" and their approaches to Scripture, preconceptions frequently framed through cultural stereotypes, such as "literalist Africans," "Spirit-less Europeans," or "revolutionary Latin Americans." While these biases were problematic, they were also understood to be a common component of real-life intercultural encounters. It was therefore considered both artificial and potentially intrusive to attempt to eliminate these assumptions pre-emptively. Instead of providing pre-exchange reports about the groups and their backgrounds, participants were encouraged to inquire directly about one another's context and practices, thus retaining agency over how much personal information they chose to disclose. This decision proved effective: by the end of the project, several participants (particularly those involved in the most dynamic and fruitful exchanges) expressed surprise at how different their partners' communal spirituality and interpretive styles were from what they had initially expected. Such moments of revelation were notably absent in less successful exchanges. To discourage easy generalizations about how

specific groups or regions “read” the Bible, participants were encouraged to attend to the diversity of perspectives within each group, including internal debates and disagreements. Third, it was essential for the research to avoid generalized views of the groups that overlook internal differences and the individual agency of participants. Therefore, collecting data on individual habits and experiences of Bible reading was of great interest. This included participants’ personal relationships with the biblical text, their prior familiarity with the selected passage, their motivations for participating, and any shifts in perspective that occurred during or after the exchange. To capture these dimensions, two separate questionnaires were developed.

Initial questionnaire for participants (Appendix A)

This initial questionnaire was designed to assess the participants’ “Bible reading style” prior to any engagement with the selected biblical text or intercultural exchange. Its primary focus was to explore each participant’s personal relationship with the Bible through questions such as “How often do you normally read your Bible?” and “Do you read it individually (alone) or communally (in a group)?” It also examined the participant’s interpretive approach by asking: “What do you consider important when you read the Bible?” and “Do you believe your religious background influences your interpretation of Scripture?” In addition, the questionnaire probed participants’ prior knowledge and assumptions about the specific biblical narrative under study, namely, the Council of Jerusalem and the conflict between Paul and Barnabas, by including the prompt: “Do you have any prior ideas or understandings of this text? If so, what are they?” Finally, it addressed the participant’s motivation for joining the project, asking: “What is your motivation to participate in this initiative?”

Evaluation questionnaire (Appendix E)

This second questionnaire was administered at the conclusion of the exchange process to each participant. Its primary aim was to enable participants to reflect on and evaluate any changes or new insights they had gained through the intercultural engagement. The questionnaire focused on several dimensions. First, it asked openly about the general evaluation of the exchange, asking: “Do you think this exchange was successful? How would you describe it?” It also explored whether participants experienced a shift in their personal understanding of the specific biblical text, through questions such as “Did your understanding of the text change as result of the exchange of ideas? If yes, what factors influenced this change?” It also investigated possible transformations in their perception of ecclesial unity and diversity: “Did your understanding of the unity and diversity of the Church change?

If yes, how would you describe this change?” In addition, the questionnaire assessed whether the participants anticipated a modification in their approach to reading Scripture: “Do you think your way of reading the Bible will change after this experience? If yes, how?” It further addressed potential personal impacts of the project, asking: “Did this experience personally change you? If so, how would you describe this change?” and “Did you learn anything from this exchange?” Finally, participants were invited to evaluate the overall significance and value of the process through questions like: “Did this experience make sense to you? Why?” and “Was it worth the investment of time and energy?”

Discussion groups

This research employs discussion groups as a primary method to facilitate dialogue among students and to analyse the dynamics and content generated through these exchanges. The method is closely aligned with focus groups, which “involve one or more researchers facilitating discussion among a group of people, who may or may not know each other and to whom researcher-determined semi- or completely open-ended questions are posed.”⁶ Although widely utilized in fields such as marketing and political research, it has “been little used in the study of religion, and there is potential for their greater use.”⁷ One of the core advantages of discussion groups lies in their ability to offer deep insights into “how particular topics are negotiated in a group setting and through social.”⁸ As such, they are particularly valuable for exploring interpretive and dialogical processes. For this research, discussion groups present several key benefits. They allow the inclusion of both newly formed and pre-existing groups, offering flexibility in group composition. Moreover, they serve as effective tools for bridging geographical, cultural, and theological distances, making them especially useful in intercultural theological research. As Winter and Woodhead affirm:

[It] offers an additional method to study such groups, allowing the researcher to direct specific questions not only to artificially gathered groups but also to already existing ones, or subsections of them. Alternatively, different groups that don't usually meet could be brought together to see what transpires in this context. Whilst the . . . group is a structured space for research and does not replicate the kind of social settings in which religion operates, it does nonetheless offer a way to consider how religion is reflected upon by people in dialogue with others.⁹

This methodology proved particularly suitable for the purposes of this research due to its efficiency in generating substantial amounts of data within

relatively short timeframes (none of the discussions exceeded one hour). Its flexibility also emerged as a notable strength: participants were able to shape the direction of the conversation to varying degrees, depending on their communicative abilities and levels of self-confidence. This, in turn, allowed for deeper observation of group dynamics and interpersonal exchanges. Moreover, as Guest et al. have demonstrated, data collected through discussion groups often includes a higher degree of personal and emotionally sensitive content than that obtained through individual interviews, even when the same exploratory questions are used.¹⁰ This tendency towards increased self-disclosure in a group setting was clearly observed in the present study and proved particularly beneficial in informing the formulation of conclusions.

A longstanding and significant debate regarding the composition of discussion groups substantially influenced the methodological decision to conduct this research within the World Student Christian Federation. Traditionally, discussion group methodology emphasized two main principles: maintaining random sampling and targeting specific audience segments. For instance, during the latter half of the twentieth century, it was common practice in North America to select participants at random from shopping mall attendees and solicit their evaluations of particular products. Within this framework, participant unfamiliarity was often considered a critical prerequisite for methodological rigour and objectivity. However, more recent scholars, such as Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, have challenged these conventional assumptions. They argue that “exploiting pre-existing social networks also contributes to the success of focus group work” by encouraging “collegiality and solidarity building.”¹¹ Similar authors, such as Emily Winter, observed that “the best method was to recruit amongst existing social networks that already knew and enjoyed one another’s company, such as members of student societies.”¹² According to this perspective, the inclusion of pre-existing and relatively homogeneous groups not only facilitates a more nuanced understanding of collective identity formation but also allows for the replication of social interactions in a manner that closely resembles real-life contexts. Winter and Woodhead affirm this position by stating: “In our research, we have found that using ‘ready-made’ groups provided considerable insight into how students construct belonging and meaning through their social interaction and relationships – and made it easier to recruit.”¹³

Nevertheless, the discussion group method also entails a series of inherent limitations and potential biases that must be critically acknowledged. Firstly, it tends to foster an environment that, while structured for observation, may appear artificial and contrived to participants, who remain constantly aware of being both observed and recorded. This awareness can contribute to predictable behavioural tendencies, such as expressing “certain types of socially acceptable opinions [or] for certain types of participant to dominate the research process.”¹⁴ Moreover, the method’s predominant focus on verbal exchanges restricts the researcher’s access to the behavioural and performative dimensions of biblical engagement, that is, the practical contexts in which

the transformative potential of the text is actualized.¹⁵ At times, the dialogical dynamics of discussion groups may become strained, leading to stagnation. From a logistical perspective, additional challenges arise when coordinating the simultaneous engagement of two or more discussion groups. Scheduling a shared meeting time that accommodates participants across different continents, each with distinct time zones, proved particularly demanding.

The reading process

The reading process was carried out over the course of approximately one year, beginning with the initial exchange session in February 2021 and concluding with the final session in March 2022. The ten participating Bible reading groups were formed based on the membership composition of the local Student Christian Movements (SCMs) and included between four and seven members each. Pairings of SCMs were determined according to their registration order, with the requirement that each pair belonged to different regions within the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). Each exchange followed a three-session format in two parts each, adhering to the design outlined below.

First reading session

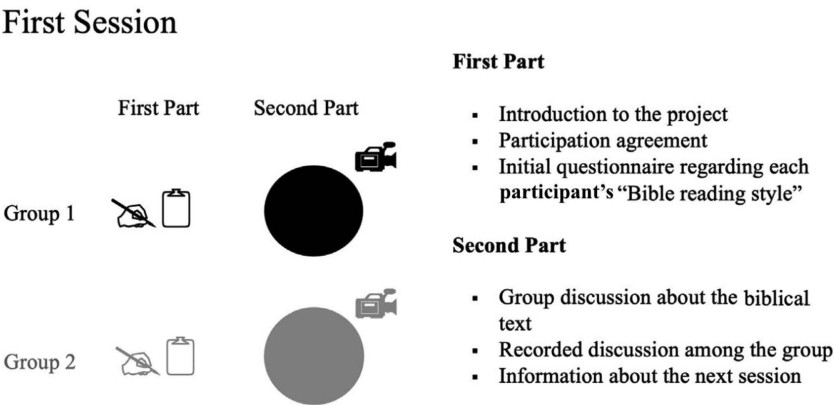
During the initial part of the first reading session, participants from each SCM engaged in an introductory virtual meeting with the project coordinator. This session served to provide comprehensive information about the project. The orientation included an overview of the theoretical and historical background of the initiative, a step-by-step explanation of the reading process, and a clarification regarding the intended analysis, publication, and use of the results. The confidential nature of the material generated throughout the process was also emphasized. Following the presentation, any questions or concerns raised by potential participants were addressed. Those who chose to participate were required to sign a participation agreement confirming their interest in partaking at the intercultural Bible reading (IBR) sessions and acknowledging their understanding of the project's objectives and the procedures for handling the generated data. Participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire designed to explore their Bible reading habits or interpretive "style" (attached Appendix A: Initial questionnaire for participants)

In the second part of the first session, each group engaged in discussion about the selected biblical text. The reading process unfolded as naturally as possible, reflecting the group's customary approach to Scripture, and was conducted via a virtual platform. Participants were informed in advance that the dialogue would be recorded and that the discussion was to be completed within a one-hour timeframe.¹⁶ To support the conversation, the readers were provided with a set of open-ended questions designed to facilitate a

semi-structured discussion. These questions aimed to prompt interpretative, contextual, and appropriative engagement with the text. Examples included: “What, in your opinion, is the central message of the text?”; “What dynamic do you recognize in the text?”; “Are there similarities or differences between the characters, and how are these addressed within the narrative?”; “Do the characters in the story engage with the topic of unity, and if so, in what way?”; “Does culture influence the conflicts described, and how?”; “Do you identify with any of the protagonists?”; or “Why do you think some theologians refer to this event as the ‘Ecumenical Council of Jerusalem?’” (annexed Appendix B: Informative document about the first meeting). At the conclusion of the discussion, the moderator inquired about any symbolic elements or environmental factors that may have influenced the exchange and their significance for the participants. Finally, the session ended with the distribution of information regarding the upcoming second meeting, as outlined in the annexed Appendix C: Informative document about the second meeting.

Second reading session

The second session was also structured in two parts. In the first part, each group viewed the recorded discussion of their partner group concerning the biblical text. While watching, participants were encouraged to take notes on the most striking elements and the aspects of the analysis that particularly impressed them. During the second part of the session, each group engaged in a recorded discussion focused on the partner group’s interpretation. This conversation was once facilitated by a moderator and supported by a set of open-ended questions intended to guide reflection and comparative analysis. Examples of these questions included: “What form of reading did the partner group employ?”; “What was the primary focus or orientation of their reading?”; “Were there elements of their religious tradition evident in their interpretation?”; “What do



they identify as the central message of the text?"; "Do you think any particular characteristics of the other group influenced their interpretative approach?"; "In what ways did their method of engagement with the text differ from or align with yours?"; "Is the biblical text rendered relevant or applicable to contemporary life?"; "Did their interpretation prompt any suggestions for practical application?"; or "Did this intercultural reading exercise have any personal impact on you, and if so, in what way?" (Appendix C: Informative document about the second meeting). At the conclusion of the session, participants were informed about the format and objectives of the third and final meeting (annexed Appendix D: Informative document about the third meeting).

Third reading session

The third session marked the final stage of the reading process and was similarly divided into two parts. In its first one, each group watched separately the video of the last partner's discussion (second part of the partner's second session) to listen to the opinion of the other group about "*our*" interpretation of the biblical text. This step allowed participants to consider how their own readings had been perceived and interpreted by others. In the second part of the session, both groups engaged in a synchronous virtual meeting, enabling direct intercultural dialogue. This final discussion was facilitated with the support of open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection on mutual understanding and the broader theological implications of the exchange. Questions included: "How did the other group understand our interpretation of the biblical text?"; "Did we feel that our reflection was accurately understood or misrepresented?"; "Did we gain any insights from their interpretation?"; "Do we believe they gained insights from ours?"; "What similarities and differences emerged in our respective interpretations?"; "Did this exchange modify our understanding of the biblical text?"; or "Has our

Second Session

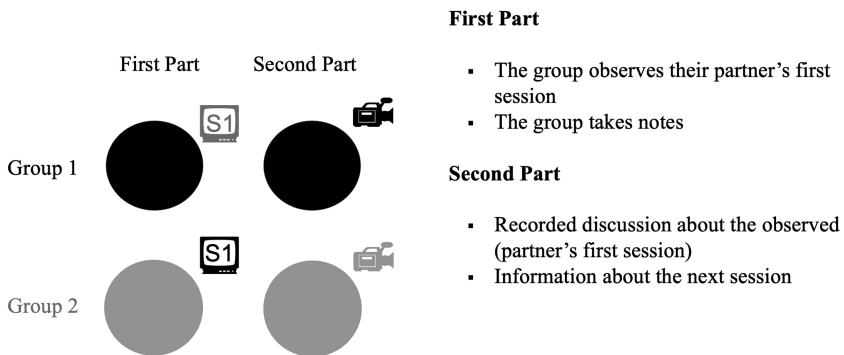


Figure 2.2 The second reading session.

perception of the unity and diversity within the Church evolved as a result of this dialogue?” (annexed Appendix D: Informative document about the third meeting). At the conclusion of the session, participants were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire. This final instrument focused on identifying any changes in their understanding of the biblical text, shifts in their Bible reading approach, and the overall personal and theological significance of the intercultural exchange experience (Appendix E: Evaluation questionnaire).

Data analysis

The analysis of the data generated throughout the project extended over the course of approximately one year. It primarily concentrated on the content of the recorded conversations, including both verbal and non-verbal elements, as well as on the responses collected through the various questionnaires. These two strands of analysis were carried out synchronically. For this purpose, the computational software MAXQDA 2022 was employed. The data analysis was based on code systems and categories that had been previously established by researchers engaged in IBR; others were developed by the author prior to the coding process, and many others were constructed inductively during the coding phase.

Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis is a methodological approach that originated in sociology during the 1960s, primarily developed by Harvey Sacks and heavily influenced by Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodological tradition.¹⁷ Today, this technique is widely adopted across various disciplines within the humanities and social sciences, particularly in research related to linguistics, communication, education, and psychology. As Lehtinen explains:

Conversation analysis . . . is primarily a method for the analysis of spoken interaction, but it can also be used to study mediated forms of

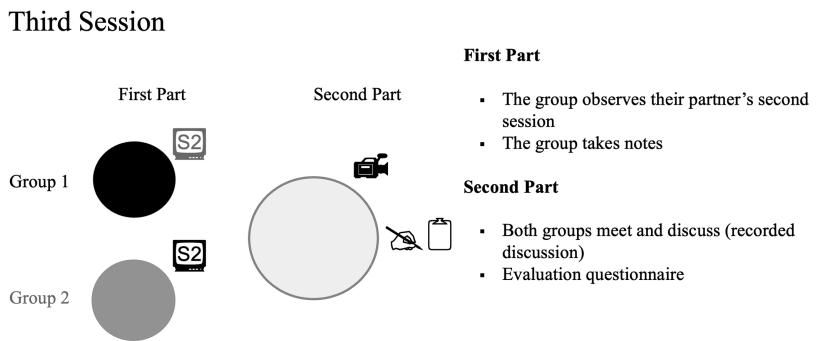


Figure 2.3 The third reading session.

interaction. . . . It is, most of all, concerned with the sequential organization of [social] interaction. . . . That is, it seeks to explore how actions and turns of talk follow each other in a systematic way.¹⁸

The primary application of this method in religious and theological studies lies in the microanalytic examination of exchanges of religious meanings in discussions.

In previous studies, conversation analysis has shed light on the content generated in biblical discussions among various groups, with particular significance in student contexts. For instance, in 2012, Nissi conducted an extensive, multidimensional study of Bible reading sessions organized by student missionary movements within the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church. Similar to the present study, these Bible reading groups convened weekly to collaboratively discuss and interpret specific texts under egalitarian conditions, with the researcher present. As Nissi notes, “the core institutional task of these encounters [was] to generate meanings for the text, to explore the text from different perspectives.”¹⁹ Her study, employing conversation analysis, concentrated on two equally important phenomena within these discussions: disagreement and contradictions. Nissi ultimately concluded:

In [these encounters] disagreement acts as a vehicle for participants’ exploration with the text: it is used to ensure that the interlocutors study the text from different perspectives and that none of them interprets the text alone, but the meaning-making process is a shared and joint activity of all the attendants. With the help of disagreement the participants can for example construct various inner states for the textual characters and thus produce a more multifaceted and potentially more profound understanding of the biblical text. . . . [Participants] assess, correct, and elaborate each other’s views in order to build a more intricate and complex picture of the matter under discussion. . . . In short, disagreement can be approached as interlocutors’ method of achieving the best possible comprehension and awareness of the text.²⁰

Conversation analysis primarily focuses on the sequentiality of meanings within exchanges, examining how arguments unfold. In other words, this method investigates how verbal expressions (such as agreement, disagreement, counterarguments, etc.) or performative cues (including facial gestures, intonations, or mannerisms) follow one another, representing a series of diverse choices that generate distinct dynamics and outcomes. Additionally, as Lehtinen asserts, it “uncovers the interactional methods that participants of religious groups use . . . , answering the question of how religious tasks are accomplished in practice.”²¹ This approach enables the identification of the inferential frameworks and logical structures employed by students during conversations on religious topics.

On a practical level, the data for conversation analysis primarily consist of audio or video recordings of naturally occurring interactions and exchanges.

However, in projects such as the current one, dialogues may also be structured by external coordinators. It is recommended that participants take conversation notes and provide written comments during the exchanges. Although modern qualitative analysis software allows for coding over video or audio segments, it is far more advisable to transcribe the exchange contents in a so-called verbatim format. A verbatim transcription is a highly detailed account of the conversations that, in addition to capturing verbal speech, also includes a faithful representation of various other conversational elements. These elements include silences, gestures, interruptions, repetitions, laughter, and others, which contribute to a deeper understanding of the conversation. The following text presents an illustrative extract from the verbatim of the first session of one of the participating SCMs:

Moderator: Does something come to your mind that could occupy this position? Nowadays?

Elias: Migration, for example, is a big problem nowadays in [our country] and there are two opinions. Some people said in the church . . . These guys want to work and find a job and need a career. And there is no specific way in [our country], because we have an economic crisis. And in the same hand we have social problems. So, let's migrate from [our country] to another country, especially to Europe or United States. And there is another way . . . that this is our nation and we should stay here to make our nation better. So, this, this is the topic that we have. And there is a debate around this topic

[Fatima smiles]

Moderator: Thank you so much. Someone else would like to add to this?

[Long pause]

Joseph: Well, what these verses [teach] nowadays, I think there is always a solution if we sit together, no matter what our problem is, no matter what our thoughts are, so we can always find the solution. And we must respect what is the end of every path, if you want. The path that everyone will take. Even in our church . . .

[Elias affirms with his head]

. . . everyone takes his own path and he is loved. He is he is accepted in his own path, and he would succeed in his own path . . .

[Elias affirms with his head]

. . . Thank you. Forgive our English.

[Laugh of Elias, Joseph and Laila]

[Long pause]

Moderator: I would like to make you a question, which, because you are saying, a lot that there is always a solution and it has been said liked by almost all of you. And my question is: Is it always a solution to our discrepancies? Actually . . . inside of the Christian church,

has been always a solution to what we think and what we . . . for example, if we disagree, there is always one solution in this aspect?

[Fatima, Laila and Joseph smile]

Joseph: If you want, if you want, we can . . . we could find a solution . . .

[Elias affirms with his head]

[Fatima laughs positively]

. . . and we will be convinced in this solution, no matter what is the solution.

Questionnaire analysis

The analysis of the questionnaires occurred synchronically with the conversation analysis. It primarily focused on the attached Appendix A: Initial questionnaire for participants, which was examined alongside the conversation materials from the first session and its corresponding coding system. Additionally, Appendix E: Evaluation questionnaire was analysed at the conclusion of the coding process, using an independent coding system.

Software-based conversation analysis

The volume of data generated was considerable, comprising personal questionnaires completed prior to the exchanges, transcripts of the group discussions, and individual post-exchange questionnaires evaluating the impact and overall process from each participant's perspective, amounting in total to more than 450 pages of material. The next step involved processing this information to identify and correlate categories and subcategories of factors (systems of meaning), which can then be compared with one another. To this end, the use of the MAXQDA 2022 software was essential. Although the use of such software in religious studies is relatively new and remains largely unexplored for theological purposes, these tools "are increasingly proving their worth within the academic study of religion/s."²² For centuries, Western theology has predominantly centred on the individual analysis of texts using various methods and approaches. However, material and empirical shifts²³ within theological and religious research in recent decades have opened the door for methods and techniques from empirical studies to support more interdisciplinary research projects. As Wesley et al. note, "Such methods can complement the interpretative dimensions of the study of religion/s and enhance [its] hermeneutical sophistication."²⁴

Diverse studies over the past decades have demonstrated the ability of computational software to support the study of biblical interpretations. These tools "function in a generative way, helping scholars discover and refine important hypotheses and promoting evaluation, correction, and improvement of theories of religion,"²⁵ through the comparison and processing of coded empirical materials. Computational software designed

for in-depth qualitative analysis, such as Atlasti and QualCoder, are among the preferred choices for empirical hermeneutists for analysing generated data. The MAXQDA2022 software facilitated the correlation of code banks with the verbatim transcripts and individual questionnaires of different groups. Content units were assigned to one or multiple codes, allowing the researcher to introduce new codes or categories to the bank as the content required. The software enabled relatively straightforward coding and efficiently condensed substantial amounts of data into a compact visual space.

Computational software facilitates the comparison of coded documents and the detailed analysis of specific codes or categories across different exchanges. For instance, in the third exchange, the category “Praxeology Effect” was associated with the highest possible outcome of an exchange in this project: the decision to act or perform differently, primarily through new initiatives, as a result of the interaction with the partner group. Each of the five exchanges produced varying degrees of practical effects, depending on a range of factors. The software enabled the visual representation of these differences and facilitated their correlation with surrounding categories and codes.

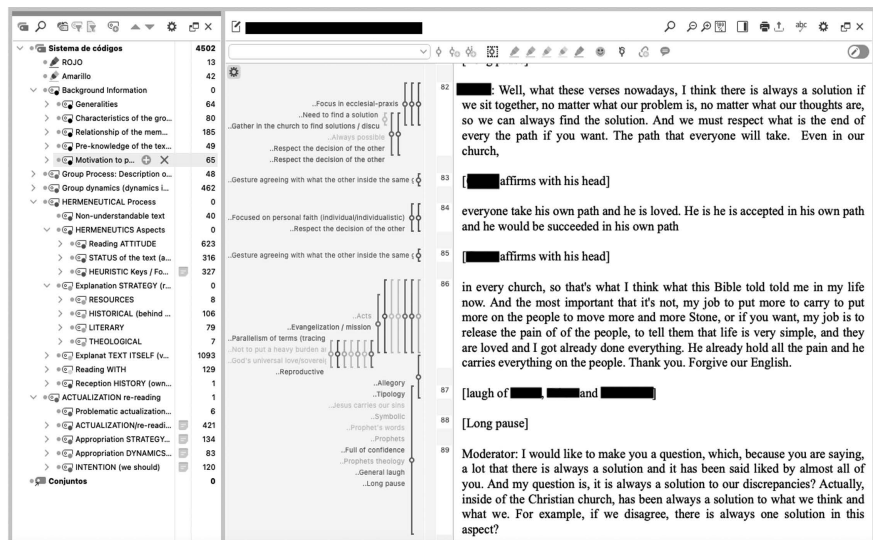


Figure 2.4 Image of software-based conversation analysis.

Código: Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior 2 (30) segmentos codificados (de 1 documentos, 0 grupos de documentos)

when it comes to the church globally, church at large, a **communication of this nature it's needed**, that's how we **share knowledge, that's how we share an understanding, and that's how we can now grow the church** regardless what denominations, what is needed is the number of patient to increase

Grupo de doc...	Nombre del documen...	Código
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Evangelization / preaching
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Further dialogue engagement / Ecumenism

Figure 2.5 Marginal presence of the semantic category “Praxeology Effect” across an exchange.

Código: Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior 12 (30) segmentos codificados (de 1 documentos, 0 grupos de documentos)

██████: yeah, but before I wanted to... maybe I have a few more minutes before an idea came to my mind because ██████ said she would like to extend this meeting for the whole night and maybe you feel you would be happy to maybe have one more meeting too, I mean this is the last this is the last meeting but it does not mean, I mean why not to meet one more time? for example, one more time because we as ██████ we have our own Zoom account so it would be no problem to for example send you the link to our account and then you can join and then we could just do a quick meeting, I don't want to kick out ██████ but I mean if their job was done, you could be participate moderator, but yeah so maybe one of you, I would give to one of you my email address or something like that and then we can text and maybe talk about another meeting and then I will send you our contact or Zoom contact and then maybe we could meet a third or fourth time or fifth time

Grupo de doc...	Nombre del documen...	Código
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > (Partial) Adoption of partner's method in future studies
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > (Partial) Adoption of partner's method in future studies
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Challenged to new study
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Challenged to new study
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Challenged to new study
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Future more reflection on the text
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Future more reflection on the text
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Future more reflection on the text
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Keep in contact, reading together
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Keep in contact, reading together
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Keep in contact, reading together
☐		Perceived effects > PRAXEOLOGICAL effect-behavior > Keep in contact, reading together

Figure 2.6 Robust presence of the semantic category “Praxeology Effect” across an exchange.

Ethical considerations

Exploring the ways in which individual believers or communities engage with and interpret biblical passages presents a considerably more nuanced and sensitive task than analysing divergent interpretative approaches to literary classics, motivational literature, or poetry. For many believers, participation in Bible reading sessions entails far more than intellectual engagement. What they bring into these encounters, and what they anticipate as outcomes, is fundamentally shaped by their understanding of the Bible as the sacred revelation of God. Consequently, such reading experiences often touch upon deeply personal convictions, existential questions, and spiritual aspirations. These sessions frequently engage core aspects of identity, expectation, and the desire for transformation. As expressed by a South African group participating in a similar initiative:

We come to the Bible study to gain more knowledge of the Bible and God's purpose for our lives, to share our ideas and to understand that people have different points of view, but most of all we share a lot of that what is good and honest within us. . . . This is not only a learning process, but also a healing process – spiritually and physically.²⁶

For this reason, in a study like the current one, basic ethical research principles such as “respecting the dignity and integrity of others, communicating honestly and objectively with research participants and audiences, and responsibly exercising judgment”²⁷ must be complemented by a deep sensitivity to the intimate and personal dimensions of the participants’ experiences. Throughout the dialogues, participant Student Christian Movements addressed complex and sensitive issues, including economic disparities in their respective countries; personal accounts of discrimination and marginalization within their churches due to sexual orientation; legacies of colonization, with some participants recounting ancestral experiences of subjugation at the hands of powers from which other participants originate; experiences of religious doubt, anger, and alienation within local faith communities; or broader socio-political challenges such as instability, forced migration, and asylum-seeking. The ethical complexity of this study was further heightened by the use of a virtual methodology, which introduced its own set of ethical considerations. As Guiliat-Ray et al. affirm: “research [hosted in virtual settings] has additional ethical complexities, including issues of privacy, consent, difficulties faced by users (and researchers) in understanding the relevant ethical issues and normative assumptions implicit in the technologies themselves.”²⁸

Academic institutions and faculties are increasingly attentive to the ethical complexities inherent in conducting research within social contexts. In alignment with this awareness, the present project implemented a series of precautionary measures to safeguard the dignity and data security of participants and uphold the highest academic standards throughout the research process. Thus, particular emphasis was placed on ensuring transparent and

honest communication regarding the objectives, procedures, and implications of the study. To this end, both the initial invitation to the WSCF Regional Offices and the invitation to the SCMs provided a detailed overview of the project. These documents outlined the academic nature of the research, the collaborating organizations, its core aims, and its contextual, cross-cultural, interactive, and communal character. They also introduced the foundational assumptions of the project and presented a summary of the proposed reading process. Subsequently, during the first half of the initial session, participants received both a verbal and written comprehensive introduction to the project. This included a concise historical background of the IBR methodology and a detailed step-by-step explanation of the reading process. All personal identifiers were replaced with pseudonyms, the identity of the participating groups during the exchanges was preserved using letters to identify them (i.e. SCM A), and any visual materials (such as photographs) were only included with the explicit consent of participants. Furthermore, participants were informed about the ways in which the data would be used, analysed, and disseminated. Only after all this information had been communicated and participants' questions addressed, each individual was invited to sign an informed consent form, referred to as the Participation Agreement, affirming their voluntary involvement in the project and their understanding of its ethical framework.

Additionally, ongoing and deliberate methodological reflexivity functioned as both a methodological and ethical safeguard. Among the measures adopted, continuous comparison with previous similar projects served to ensure analytical consistency, enhance the reliability of interpretations, and situate findings within the broader field of IBR. Furthermore, regularly seeking counsel and feedback from academic peers and subject matter experts was established as an essential criterion for ensuring both quality and ethical integrity prior to concluding each research stage and proceeding to the next. Finally, throughout the reporting of the project, particular emphasis was placed on articulating clear and well-founded justifications for methodological and analytical decisions, as well as on explicitly distinguishing between the interpretive frameworks of the participants and those of the researcher.

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- 4 Hans de Wit, "Through the Eyes of Another: Objectives and Backgrounds," in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, eds. Hans de Wit et al., Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics Series 1 (Elkhart: Institute of Menonite Studies, 2004), 5.

- 5 de Wit, "Through the Eyes of Another: Objectives and Backgrounds."
- 6 Winter and Woodhead, "Focus Groups," 543.
- 7 Winter and Woodhead, "Focus Groups," 542.
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- 26 Hans de Wit, "My God," *She Said, "Ships Make Me So Crazy": Reflections on Empirical Hermeneutics, Interculturality, and Holy Scripture* (Elkhart: Evangel Press, 2008), 27.
- 27 Sophie Gilliat-Ray et al., "Research Ethics," in *The Routledge Handbook of research methods in the study of religion*, eds. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg (London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 88.
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3 Systems of codes

This chapter provides an in-depth examination of the research methodology previously introduced, with particular emphasis on the employed coding systems. The coding phase constitutes the analytical core of the study, as it is at this stage that the theoretical foundations and methodological framework of intercultural Bible reading (IBR) are rendered operational and observable within the data. Three distinct coding systems were used throughout this phase. *The first coding system* was applied to the analysis of the initial ten reading sessions and approximately 42 individual initial questionnaires (see attached Appendix A: Initial questionnaire for participants). This system drew its five principal analytical categories from the first phase of the *Through the Eyes of Another*¹ project: background information, meeting dynamics, group dynamics, hermeneutical process, and actualization. Notably, the final two categories, hermeneutical process and actualization, accounted for more than 95 per cent of the codes employed. In addition to these foundational categories, dozens of secondary-level and hundreds of tertiary and more granular codes were developed specifically for the present study. The same occurs in the *second coding system*, which was used for analysing ten second sessions and five third sessions. The second coding system, modelled after de Wit's approach² in the second phase of the aforementioned project, was used for analysing ten second-session discussions and five third-session interactions. This system was organized around four main categories: background information, group dynamics, confrontation, and perceived effects. Finally, a *third coding system* was developed exclusively for the 28 individual evaluative questionnaires (see Appendix E: Evaluation questionnaire), consisting of ten principal analytical categories. Altogether, the study employed more than 1,500 distinct codes, both adapted and newly formulated, resulting in approximately 11,500 total codifications across the dataset.

The coding system developed for *Through the Eyes* was primarily shaped by a series of guiding questions proposed by the research initiative *Determining Relative Adequacy in Biblical Interpretation*,³ conducted by Louis Jonker from Stellenbosch University and Ernst Conradie from the University of the Western Cape. These questions function as foundational analytical categories, serving as the interpretive core of the hermeneutic framework employed

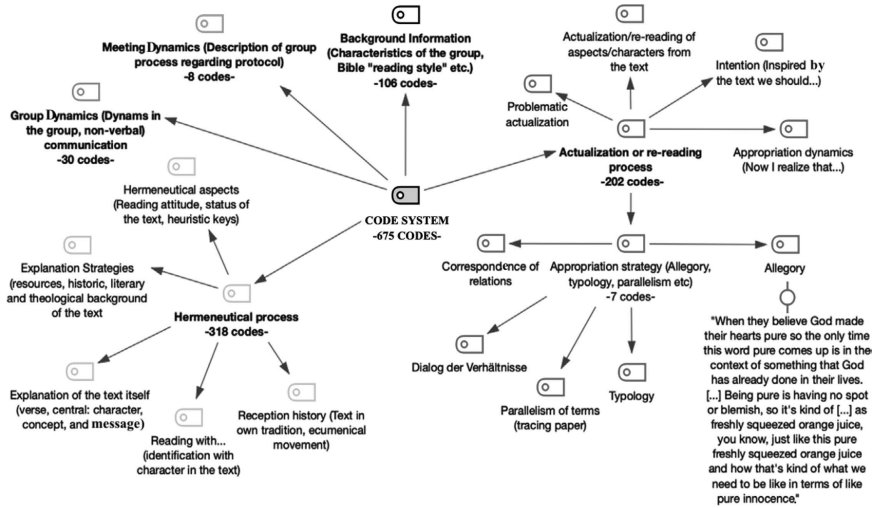


Figure 3.1 Illustrative map of the main categories and subcategories of the first system of codes.

in IBR. Each category is formulated either as a single inquiry or a cluster of related questions, and they provide a structured approach for evaluating the interpretive processes observed throughout the project. Here is a condensed overview of the Jonker–Conradie framework.

1. Did the group give any indication that they took notice of the textual features (e.g., genre, narrative or poetic structure, wider literary context, intratextual parallels or references, rhetorical structure, etc.)? [ATTENTION TO TEXT ITSELF].
2. Did the group give any indication that they took notice of the possible history of origin of the text, its possible compositeness, or the circumstances . . . ? [ATTENTION TO THE WORLD BEHIND THE TEXT].
3. Did the group pay attention to the different ways the text has already been interpreted by other individuals/traditions/theologies? [ATTENTION TO THE TRADITION OF INTERPRETATION].
4. How did the group link the text to contemporary life/experience/worldview? What status does the text have for them? Do they regard the text as having an influence on their lives, behavior, etc., or is the Bible an “object of study”? . . . [INTERPRETATIONAL STRATEGIES].
5. How did the group fill in the gaps of the narrative? [STRATEGIES OF IMAGINATION].
6. Which actor did the members of the group identify with? [“READING WITH”].
7. What model was used for the appropriation of the meaning of the text (e.g., allegory, typology, correspondence of terms, correspondence of relationships, Dialog der Verhältnisse)? [APPROPRIATION STRATEGIES].
8. Did the groups develop new praxes out of their understanding

of the text (e.g., new forms of social or political action, involvement in resistance movements, forms of diakonia, assistance)? [PRAXEOLOGICAL EFFECT]. 9. Which heuristic keys or codes did they use to unlock this meaning from the text? Are there specific themes/concepts, etc., which originated in their experiences of life that provided them with mechanisms to unlock meaning from the text . . . ? [CODES/HEURISTIC KEYS]. 10. Which reading attitude does the group have (e.g., literary, dogmatic, liberative, contemplative, psychologizing, pietistic, transformative, with suspicion, to retrieve something, as a means of survival, resistance, productive, reproductive, etc.)? [READING ATTITUDE]. 11. Did the group give any indication of a self-awareness, of an understanding of who they are, and what the contexts and cultural settings are in which they live? Did they give any indication that they are aware of how these contexts influence their reading? . . . [ATTENTION TO THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF INTERPRETATION]. 12. Did the group show any awareness of ideologies or power relations that may orient, influence, guide, distort their interpretation of the text? [ATTENTION TO THE WORLD BEHIND THE INTERPRETATION PROCESS]. 13. Describe the interaction in the group. Was there a strong leader, different factions, outsiders, insiders in the group? What rhetorical purpose does their interpretation serve in terms of the group's self-understanding, self-esteem, convictions, faith, values? . . . [ATTENTION TO GROUP DYNAMICS].⁴

First system of codes: individual initial questionnaire for participants and first session

The first system of codes is structured around five main categories. The first category, titled *Background information*, encompasses general details about the participants and their respective groups, including their identified "Bible reading styles" and their motivations for participating in the exchange sessions. This category was especially applied to the analysis of the attached Appendix A: Initial questionnaire for participants. The second main category, *Meeting dynamics*, explores three primary aspects of the reading sessions: the degree to which the reading was organized or spontaneous; the presence and nature of any liturgical elements framing the sessions; and the specific reading methodology employed, such as verse-by-verse engagement or structured periods for individual reflection preceding group discussion. The third category, *Group dynamics*, focused on intra-group interaction during the initial session. It includes considerations of whether any reference was made to the partner group, the character of the group's internal dialogue (including the presence of disagreement, requests for clarification, and other discursive patterns), instances of interruption or silence, and the occurrence and type of non-verbal communication. The fourth category, *Hermeneutical process*, sheds light on various dimensions of biblical interpretation. It considers the interpretative approach underlying each speech, whether analytical, critical,

contextual, trusting, or otherwise, and the status attributed to the biblical text, such as whether it is viewed as a source of hope and trust, an object of critique, or a foundation of authority. This category also identified the heuristic tools employed in the interpretive process, including personal or collective experiences such as racism, physical disability, political instability in the place of residence, and other socio-cultural realities that inform the reading. It further addresses the historical, literary, or theological presuppositions that participants perceive as operative “behind the text” (context of the original writer and audience) and which they deem essential to acknowledge when engaging with the passage. Additionally, the analysis includes how participants characterize the text, its central themes, key figures, and core messages, as well as the relational framework within which they situate their reading. Finally, it examines “with whom” participants read the biblical text, whether they read in dialogue with the biblical author, with the characters within the narrative, with contemporary society, or through the lens of their ecclesial traditions. The final category in this system, *Actualization*, addresses the extent to which, and the manner in which, participants actualize the biblical text during their discussions. This analytical category considers how participants engage in re-readings or reinterpretations of the text, particularly regarding elements or figures that resonate with their lived realities. Such re-readings may concern ecclesial issues; questions of national, ethnic, or religious identity; understandings of the character and actions of God; as well as themes of conflict, separation, and boundaries, etc. The category also examines various strategies of appropriation employed by participants. These include the use of illustrative examples, allegorical or typological readings, or the establishment of relational correspondences between the biblical narrative and contemporary experiences. In addition, the category analyses the so-called “appropriation dynamics,” which refer to

What happens to the perspective and self-image of the readers? The power of the story is measured here. Does the story have a critical function? . . . Have they become more sensitive to their own prejudices, cultural bias, . . . , their own failings?⁵

Finally, this category also explores the praxeological outcomes of the reading, namely, the participants expressed intentions to act in response to the message of the biblical passage. Such responses may include commitments to increased interreligious or ecumenical engagement, political or social activism, or personal expressions of altruism, compassion, and service to others.

The attached Appendix F consists of a summarized list of the most important first-, second-, and third-level categories and codes of this first system. A comprehensive code bank, comprising 675 distinct codes, was developed for this system, facilitating over 4,500 codifications across the initial ten sessions and the preliminary questionnaire (attached Appendix A: Initial questionnaire for participants).

Most important categories and codes of the first system

The current section presents a general conceptual overview of the most important codes and categories employed in the first system. As explained before, it allowed the analysis of the verbatim of the ten first sessions and 42 individual initial questionnaires. For explanatory and illustrative purposes, the definition of some of the most important codes of this system is accompanied by examples from the exchanges.

Background information

This category encompasses four primary dimensions related to the context and identity of the participating groups and individuals. The *first dimension* pertains to general information about the groups themselves. This includes the composition of the group (whether newly formed for the project, pre-existing, or constituted through the merging of members from different countries), its geographical location, the age range of its members, the number of participants, and their denominational affiliations. The *second dimension* addresses the participant's relationship with the Bible. This involves questions concerning the frequency with which they engage in biblical reading, whether such reading occurs individually or within communal settings, the elements they deem significant during the interpretive process, and a self-assessment of how their religious background influences their reading of the Scriptures. Notably, when reflecting on the influence of their religious background, nearly all participants affirmed its strong impact on their interpretation of the Bible. This influence was frequently characterized as "totally influential." The following excerpt from one of the exchanges exemplifies this widespread perception:

I think that my religious background does affect my interpretations as I read the Bible. . . . I have also been encouraged to think about how the Bible impacts us today . . . , so I think my interpretations often lean towards that focus rather than a more rigorous understanding of historical circumstances. . . . I also did not grow up going to church regularly, which I think has also impacted my interpretations . . . I often don't connect them to pre-held doctrines and ritual knowledge in the way I imagine might be done so more in a church context.

Nicole – Questionnaire for participants

The *third dimension* within this category concerns the participants' prior knowledge of the biblical text under discussion. A broad spectrum of familiarity was observed, ranging from students with formal theological training to those with non-theological ("secular") academic backgrounds but significant ecclesial exposure, such as regular church attendance during their upbringing. This diversity in biblical literacy shaped the nature and depth of the participants' contributions during the sessions. The *fourth dimension*, which proved especially significant in the interpretive outcomes of the exchanges, addresses the motivations that led participants to engage in the project. This

subcategory delves into the aspirations and goals that readers brought to the intercultural reading process. De Wit distinguishes two principal forms of motivation: those grounded in cognitive interest and those rooted in confessional or spiritual engagement. In the context of this study, participants with cognitively driven motivations primarily sought to encounter and understand alternative biblical interpretations. A smaller subset expressed the desire to share personal faith insights or to deepen and reaffirm their own interpretive convictions through dialogue with others.

I look forward to see how much I can learn.

Faith – First session

We are going to see how people get to interpret the Bible differently and from the end of this we are also going to understand how we ourselves, also how you read the Bible and how you are applying to sort of your situation. . . . Through this we will also let you understand how we . . . interpret, it is also nice to see our own missteps and also trying to correct them slowly.

Nadia – First session

A second category of motivation pertains to affective interests. Participants motivated by such interests were primarily driven by the desire to engage relationally with others. Their involvement was often animated by the intention to share life experiences, to foster empathetic and solidaristic connections, or, in some cases, by a simple sense of curiosity.

We can motivate each other, especially the torned ones to remain faithful.

Kidiz – First session

Curiosity about the beliefs and religious background of the [other] students

Ana – First session

When analysing the data, a correlation between the participants' motivations and the outcomes of the exchange was observed, consistent with De Wit's conclusions:

A certain type of motivation leads to freezing of belief based on knowledge, and a different type of motivation leads to unfreezing them. One can analyze the factors that lead to rigidity (freezing) or softening (unfreezing).⁶

Meeting dynamics

This is a relatively concise category. It examines whether the discussions followed a structured format (e.g. progressing question by question) or whether participants felt sufficiently confident to take ownership of the conversation by introducing their own topics or questions. In the latter cases,

the exchanges tended to be significantly more spontaneous and productive, with minimal intervention from the moderator. This category also considers the manner in which the biblical text was read within the group, whether silently, verse by verse, collectively, or individually, although this factor ultimately did not appear to influence the quality of the subsequent discussion. Additionally, it includes reference to any liturgical frameworks, practices, or elements employed during the session, such as prayers, hymns, crosses, candles, and other liturgical instruments.

Group dynamics

The analysis of group dynamics represents one of the most significant contributions of the present study. The use of video-recorded materials enabled an in-depth examination of the internal dynamics within the groups, as well as the explicit and non-verbal messages exchanged with their counterpart SCMs. Regarding the spoken interactions, participants were observed building upon each other's arguments, requesting clarification, mutually affirming ideas, experiencing both brief and extended contemplative silences, openly expressing disagreement, and occasionally interrupting one another. Particularly noteworthy was the presence or absence of spontaneous non-verbal expressions, which were often indicative of either fruitful or less satisfactory exchanges. These included joyful or uncomfortable laughter, affirming smiles, and gestures conveying happiness, agreement, camaraderie, uncertainty, doubt, or surprise. During the analysis, a marked correlation was found between both the quality and frequency of these non-verbal cues and the overall character of the exchange they fostered.



Figure 3.2 Gesture of camaraderie with the other group (hands heart shape).

Kathy – Third session

Hermeneutical process

The fourth category of this coding system pertains to a thorough analysis of the group's interpretative engagement with the biblical text. It encompasses five primary interpretative dimensions: *Hermeneutical aspects*, which concerns the attitudes adopted in reading the text, the status attributed to the text, and the heuristic keys employed in its interpretation; *Explanation strategies*, such as the use of external resources and references to the historical, literary, or theological background of the passage; *Explanation of the text itself*, referring to identification of central characters, concepts, and messages; *Reading with dynamics*, for example, taking a stance within the conflict presented in Acts 15; and consideration of *Reception history*.

Concerning the *Hermeneutical Aspects*, this subcategory focuses on three fundamental hermeneutical elements: the attitude with which the reader approaches the biblical text, the status or authority ascribed to the text, and the heuristic tools derived from the reader's personal context or experience that aid in "unlocking" the text's meaning. First, the *Reading Attitude* represents one of the most significant categories within this research. It is conceptually informed by:

Gadamer's notion that it is the [reader's] tradition . . . that shape [his] attitude towards texts and create the starting point that guides all reading, uncovering and interpretation. . . . It is the . . . attitude towards the text that allows the text to address, touch and arouse wonder.⁷

While this category contributed significantly to the subsequent data analysis, it is noteworthy that, during the second and third sessions, some participants spontaneously reflected on their counterparts' reading attitudes and even speculated on potential underlying causes. This category draws upon 33 attitudinal concepts or dispositions derived from theological, ecumenical, exegetical, social, and psychological studies. Among the most frequently observed attitudes were: *Analytic/academic*; *Inquisitive/questioning/problematising*; *Scientific/exegetical*; *Suspicious*; *Critical/deconstructive/reconstructive*; *Rationalistic*; *Identifying with the text*; *Focused on human transformation or conversion*; *Realistic/human-centred*; *Idealistic/naive*; *Hypothetical/speculative*; *Ecumenical/unifying/inclusive*; *Interreligious*; *Focused on God's love and acceptance*; *Oriented towards ecclesial praxis*; *Liberative*; *Contextual/historical*; *Reproductive/imitative*; *Confident*; and *Centred on personal faith*.

The more we were talking, the . . . angrier I got, because it seems to me that it has a lot to do with integration and the whole story happens in Jerusalem where the core Christians are sitting and deciding on how to proceed and even though the arguments are clear "That God gave his Holy Spirit and adding the non-Jews as they are is part of the prophecy," [there are] still those three "Don'ts" which become basics for the

whole Church. And it still bothers me [because] I assume there's a kind of. . . . It's a question of power.

Emotional | Sophie – First session

To be honest, when you read about Paul in Acts . . . , you just get the impression that he got his dream job, you know? stoning people!

Critical/Deconstructive | Mark – First session

Second, the *Status of the text* refers to the condition, dignity, or nature that a reader or community attributes to the Bible. Throughout the project, a variety of textual statuses were identified. These included, for example: the Bible as a source of personal or communal identification; as a source of present or future hope and trust; as an object for rational actualization or contextual application; as an object of critique; as a source of inspiration; as an object of scholarly analysis; and as a source of theological or moral authority, among others.

I'd like to add, that there is always a solution, but it may take . . . time. And there should be a . . . sacrifice . . . and minimum one, [by] each side. . . . So that [we] could unite and [find] a solution and talk. Taking as example [the] Christian Church: Orthodox, Protestant, Catholics and all churches, . . . there should be a sacrifice so that they unite.

Acts of the Apostles 15 as an inspiration
source | Laila – First session

The third *Hermeneutical Aspect* sub-category, *Heuristic Keys*, pertains to the various personal experiences or contextual factors that inform or are reflected in the reader's interpretation of the biblical text. This category "especially examine[s] the cultural components that help determine the interpretation as a selection process."⁸ The heuristic keys identified in this study were organized into several main groups, including the global pandemic, cultural background, educational background of the reader, and ethical or moral concerns, among others.

To be honest, I think it's actually quite actual this text because there are always conflicts in Church. . . . In [our country], like only a few years ago we had the discussion in our churches [about] what to do with people who love differently [or] who are homosexual. Do they get to marry in this Church? And we had [a] very big conflict in this country . . . we almost separated on this issue.

Gender/sexuality issues | Emma – First session

One of the units I'm taking this semester . . . is called Psychology and Law, and it's . . . about conflicts and how often in conflict people perceive the other party as being biased but their selves being rational. . . . What kind of seemed to resolve the dispute in this situation was James

getting up and being like: “Hey! Simon Peter has told us how God showed his love for the non-Jewish”

Formal educational background | Bill – First session

The second main category of the Hermeneutic Process is *Explanation Strategies*. This second-level category pertains to the potential resources that readers may utilize in their study of the text, including dictionaries, commentaries, and various Bible translations. It also encompasses references to the historical, literary, or theological context of the text, often referred to as its “behind” dimension. Here, three main subcategories are worthy of mention. First, *Historical Background* clarifies the circumstances surrounding the origin of the text, as well as the various issues that its contemporaries faced. It encompasses the cultural, ethnic, political, economic, geographical, cultic, and religious contexts that influenced the composition of the text.

Apostles are coming from different traditions [and] places. Everyone was born somewhere and studied its Jewishness in different ways. For example, Paul and Barnabas are from the diaspora. Even they are from . . . for example, Paul was routed from Benjamin’s tribe, but Barnabas was Greek. And other apostles are living in Jerusalem and are aware of the conflict between Antioch and Jerusalem, . . . So this raised a conflict. So, the background of each one appeared in the Council of Jerusalem . . . , their background and their culture affected a lot.

Geographical and ethnic background | Elias – First session

Second, *Literary Background* includes allusions made by the participants to the potential writing and editing process of Acts 15, its origins, authorship, textual parallels, or references to other texts or songs, and the genre to which it belongs.

I am trying to get a dynamic between the author and the reader. The author is Luke who also wrote the Gospel of Luke, and he is continuing to write this big another book which is the book of Acts, which is the history of the Church.

Milan – First session

I think this may be going off on a bit of a tangent but it’s interesting that in a [similar] passage in [the Gospel of] Mark, Mark says or rather . . . adds an editorial comment, and he said: “by doing this Jesus pronounced all foods clean.” . . . A lot of people think that’s not what Jesus was doing, that’s what Mark . . . adds to that interpretation because Mark is being written at the time when they have pronounced all food clean. Peter had that vision . . . where [a sheet with animals] comes down and God says: “Eat!” . . . On this level, . . . the Church is even going further arguably than . . . Jesus himself . . . ! They are responding to something the Spirit of God has done, . . . making these people believers. . . . The

Church is moving on to a point where . . . Mark can make that kind of editorial comment: “he pronounced all foods clean.” Is that what Jesus is actually doing? Sorry, a bit of a side-tangent, but I’m just trying to emphasize that this is what happened in the Church at this moment! It is something that may have not even occurred to Jesus himself. This is new! A new thing is happening in the Church!

Mark – First session

Third, the *Theological background* category pertains to the identifications or correlations that participants established with other theological materials, potentially within the Bible, to explore the religious meaning of the text. Throughout the analysis, frequent references were made to Pauline and Lucan theologies, in addition to insights drawn from Old Testament prophets.

I noticed that I did not expect Peter to give a speech in favour of non-Jewish Christians, . . . so I thought it must be a mistake in the text! but I was wrong, that’s what I noticed. I’ve been reading Galatians recently and I think I’ve got Paul’s notion about the early Church stuck in my head or so.

Paul’s theology | Michelle – First session

The third main sub-category of the Hermeneutic Process is *Explanation of the text itself*. This group of codes relates to the explanatory abilities of the readers and highlights the central characters, concepts, and messages that they identify within the biblical passage.

I believe that the text tells us about resolving conflicts, the text [explains that] there is not a single way to resolve a conflict. In addition, we must keep in mind that it is not a good example of mediation, this is a negative example! because it shows us how vulnerable we are when it comes to differences between us.

Central message > Conflict resolution | Fernanda – First session

The final main sub-category is *Reading with* . . . The act of reading among ordinary believers does not seek objectivity or neutrality. The Bible addresses deeply human and relatable experiences, making it common for participants to “choose sides” or approach the text from a perspective that, whether consciously or unconsciously, favours one or more of the characters involved. These preferences also reveal the readers’ “blind spots” when engaging with the text.

In the second part of the reading [Paul] is not willing to accept Mark on their trip because Mark didn’t willfully go with them the first time. . . . [John] Mark [despite] considering himself already part of the Christian

faith didn't follow the principles or didn't pursue the will of God, so that's why Paul on the other hand didn't want him to come along.

Reading with Paul | Andrés – First session

Actualization

Actualization represents the primary reason why most ordinary readers engage with the Bible. It addresses questions such as: What should I do? How should I behave? How does God want to guide me through the Bible? How does it make sense to me, *now*? Actualization has been a constant throughout the history of the Church. From its inception, “texts have been reread in the light of new circumstances and applied to the contemporary situation of the people of God. The same basic conviction necessarily stimulates believing communities of today to continue the process of actualization.”⁹ The actualization of the texts ensures their polysemy, making them relevant and a source of inspiration in diverse contexts and across different times. Four main subcategories informed the actualization process in the study. First, the *Actualization/re-reading of text aspects* category analyses the topics or aspects of the text to which participants relate with current individual or communal circumstances and experiences, and it also explores how this process unfolds. It focuses on the content of such actualizations and may describe themes such as hope and “new life,” interreligious or ecumenical initiatives, social, economic, or cultural realities, God's character or actions, and national, ethnic, or religious identities, among others.

I think I could give an example of a group of people which might not feel welcomed in the Church maybe. Because if you're not living in cities where open-minded and open [people live], it might be difficult for you to come to church if you're a non-binary person or if you live not in traditional marriage. . . . And then you might have the feeling that God also does not accept you because of the people there who don't like your lifestyle.

Morals/Ethics > Sexuality | Lena – First session

The second *Actualization* subcategory is *Appropriation strategy*. It refers to the way or *how* “the original reference of a text is replaced by a new one (Ricoeur), how does this process develop for the reading groups.”¹⁰ The project identifies five main strategies that are common to similar IBR initiatives, these are *Allegories*, *Typologies*, *Parallelism of terms (tracing paper)*, *Correspondence of relations*, and *the Dialog der Verhältnisse*. Here, two of those strategies will be presented. The type or *Typology* is a strategy that associates parts or characteristics of one text with others. In theological studies, Luis Rivas defines it as the “study of various themes, events, persons or objects of

the Old Testament, which are considered as a ‘shadow,’ image or prefiguration of another reality in the New Testament,”¹¹ its fulfilment is called anti-type.

There is a scripture . . . from verse 16 there, where it says that “it’s ruined, I will rebuild, and I will restore it.” I’ll just continue to verse 17: “The rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name says the Lord, who does these things.” So that scripture there from 16 to 17 is . . . confirming that this meeting took away that difference and basically fulfilled the word of God.

Francy – First session

Likewise, *Correspondence of relations* is a concept from Clodovis Boff’s theological hermeneutics. The author defines it as a relation in which “both the text and the situation to which they are to be ‘applied’ are taken in their respective autonomy. [It occurs] on the level of the relationship between context and message on each side respectively.”¹² Volker Küster stresses that in this case, the relation is established in the interconnection of both hermeneutic circles, instead of by direct identification¹³ (which is common in the *Parallelism of terms* strategy).

[Luke] is writing the text, and he has an identity, that identity has a connection with the text, so I connect myself with Luke because I am inside the Church now but I was once an outsider. Now I am inside, now I am concerned about the outsiders just like me. . . . I am a kind of Luke, like I feel I am still part of the Church, but I still see [that] my people are outside. It’s like finding a text which will actually allow my kind of people to come inside the Church.

Sanjay – First session

Another Actualization subcategory is *Appropriation dynamics (now I realize that . . .)*. The category encompasses new realizations made by the readers as a result of the exchange dynamics within the SCM. This includes potential transformations in their perspectives, self-perception, self-worth, or their cultural or denominational presuppositions. Furthermore, it assesses the critical and inspirational function of the text, concurrently generating heightened awareness regarding diverse topics.

The more I am thinking about it, meditating about it, it feels like [the text] is saying “The mission is more important than unity”. . . . The ecumenical movement is not doing anything! It’s not saying anything because it’s trying to keep so many different voices together that we can’t actually say anything together anymore, so we’re not just doing much. . . . [There are] a lot of things we should be talking about, we should be discussing, we should be thinking about, [that] we are kind

of avoiding, and I think it is telling us that conflict isn't always bad. It is necessary and it doesn't hurt to separate sometimes.

Conflict > Separation is a good option | Self-critical
(awareness of own. . .) > Church/SCM/ecumenical
movement | Claire – First session

Finally, *Intention to Act* refers to the praxeological effect or the concrete actions that the text inspires in the participants. It analyses if “there is any empowerment toward others . . . , or the self . . . , Can any significant correlations be pointed out between reading the Bible and social transformation?”¹⁴ It points especially to concrete actions or changes with visible consequences.

I realized at the beginning, that Paul and Barnabas . . . visited a lot of churches and also Jerusalem. . . . They taught what great things God did, and . . . if you look at Christianity in [our country], [it] is very dead, very silent. . . . And I guess deeply, that . . . Christians are still experiencing a lot, but they don't . . . don't tell about it. I think that . . . when I go to Church . . . I can go to the front and say: . . . “I had a great experience, this week God helped me in a wonderful way” . . . , it doesn't always have to be such big things. It's just sharing what God did and to strengthen one another.

Evangelization/Mission (Testify) | Marcus – First session

Second system of codes: second session and third session

The second system of codes is used to analyse the ten second sessions and the final five third sessions. This system is divided into four main categories. The first one is called *Background information*, and like the previous system, it refers to the SCMs' location, their number of participants, composition (same group as in the previous session, new participants, etc.), or their gender balance. The second principal category, *Group Dynamics*, investigates four aspects related to reading and exchanging: potential considerations of the other group (such as posing questions or fostering mutual acquaintance); the nature of existing dynamics within the group (including requests for clarification and instances of mutual verbal affirmation); interruptions; and the presence of nonverbal elements (such as gestures indicating agreement or doubt, expressions of emotion or happiness, laughter, yawns, etc.)

The third category of the second system is *Confrontation*, which encompasses all analytical aspects related to how participants engage with an unfamiliar or divergent biblical interpretation. This includes considerations such as whether attention is paid to the liturgical dimension of the partner group's reading, how the “interaction of interpretations” unfolds, and how participants evaluate the structure and internal dynamics of the partner group's session. Its first main sub-category is *Interaction with the partner group*, which

refers to the participants' engagement in the linking process, their attention to the partner group's profile, their attitudes towards the partner group, the nature of communication maintained with the other group, their expectations regarding the outcomes of the encounter, and their overall assessment of the partner's interpretation. Another key sub-category is *Partner's video analysis*, which examines the participants' interest in the partner group's methodological approach and the dynamics of their interpretive process. Finally, the largest subcategory is *Partner's interpretation process*, which analyses the interpretative resources employed by the partner group and explores how their methods, understanding of the text's status, reading attitudes, and interpretive outcomes compare or relate to those of the participants' own group and the partner group.

The fourth and final category of this system is termed *Perceived effects*. It seeks to assess the impact or consequences of the interaction. Among its most important sub-categories is the *Interpretation process of Acts 15*, which examines the effects on participants' understanding of the biblical text, their own interpretive approaches, and their hermeneutical methods. It also includes shifts in their understanding of broader themes such as theology, faith, the Church, and ecumenism. *Self-image of the group after (as effect of) process* refers to increased awareness of participants' own culture, biases, prejudices, or ideology, as well as any growth in intercultural competence. *Relation to the partner group* captures any increased awareness of the partner group's context, ideological background, the relationship between Church/religion and society in their region, their cultural biases, and their intercultural skills. It also explores whether the partner group's capacity for self-criticism contributed to participants' own self-reflection. *Final description of the completed process* focuses on both affective and cognitive developments, particularly in relation to overcoming cultural or religious tensions. *Final assessment of the entire process at the end* evaluates whether, by the conclusion of the exchange process (third session), participants exhibit hermeneutical growth or whether they revert to their original interpretive frameworks (stagnation). Finally, *Praxeological effect – behaviour* concerns any practical behavioural outcomes stemming from the exchange. These may include a renewed commitment to evangelism and preaching, a greater effort to treat others equally and avoid discrimination, or engagement in further intercultural or ecumenical initiatives.

Appendix G contains a summarized list of the most significant first-, second-, and third-level categories and codes used in the second coding system. A comprehensive second code bank, comprising 735 distinct codes, was developed. This system enabled approximately 4,000 codifications of the ten second-session transcripts, in which participants reflect on their partner group's interpretation of the biblical text, and more than 2,200 codifications of the five third-session transcripts, which correspond to the synchronous meetings between paired groups.

Most important categories and codes of the second system

As with the first coding system, this section provides a general conceptual overview of the most significant categories and codes used in the second system. As previously noted, the second system was applied to the verbatim transcripts of ten second sessions and five third sessions. The definitions of several key codes are accompanied by practical examples drawn from the recorded exchanges.

Confrontation

Confrontation between interpretations, or the act of evaluating and responding to the biblical interpretations of others, is a defining feature of IBR. By nature, IBR facilitates an encounter in which ordinary Bible readers engage with one another as individuals shaped by distinct cultural, ethnic, religious, denominational, or political contexts, all of which are understood to influence their approach to Scripture. The *Confrontation* category identifies the various factors that mediate this encounter by raising questions such as the following:

Does the group acquire knowledge from the context of the partner group? Does it address the partner group directly . . .? Are culture-co-culture (e.g., poor- rich; powerless-powerful) communication patterns involved . . .? . . . Do certain issues of the partner group stand out (vulnerability, experience of suffering, ethnic background, openness, etc.)? What attitude does the group assume: critical, mindful, nonjudgmental, open, vulnerable, tolerant of ambiguity? Or does the group wish to convert? Is there need for control? . . . What differences or similarities does the group itself (and subsequently, the researcher) discover in method, focalization, identification patterns, appropriation, and actualization of the partner group? How does the group deal with these similarities and differences? Do similarities lead to an ecumenical honeymoon? . . . Are differences damped . . . , or do they lead to breach and rejection?¹⁵

Four main sub-categories integrate the *Confrontation* section. First, *Liturgy* focuses on the ritual and spiritual frameworks surrounding the act of Bible reading. It examines whether the reading is embedded within a broader liturgical practice or accompanied by religious elements that confer particular meaning to this communal activity.

— Sophie: I have the impression [that] worshiping was a main issue to them. Praying with the Scripture, reading the Scripture unites them, so it seemed to me as if reading the Scripture is not something to reflect their belief but to nourish their belief. My impression.

— Andrea: Well, I think it always depends on basically how you're surrounded, and how you read the Bible. Yeah, I think as Sophie said, for us is always like "What do I take from the text?"

Prayer/Worship | Sophie and Andrea – Second session

Second, *Interaction with the partner group* examines how participants engage with their partner group. It considers their evaluation of the group pairing, the degree of interest shown in the partner group's profile, the attitudes expressed towards them, the nature of communication established, and the expectations participants hold regarding the forthcoming dialogue. It includes third-level categories such as *Linking process*, which investigates the participants' responses to the pairing of groups. It explores whether participants express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the assigned pairing, the language used in their evaluations, and whether they would have preferred to be paired with a different type of group. If so, the reasons and underlying motivations for such preferences are examined.

For me, this whole project is kind of an eye-opener because it made it possible to see the same text through somehow another eyes and another perspective, and I am really thankful . . . , and to meet you all, to share opinions. I am just really grateful that we could have these shared opinions and this talk [non-understandable] I think we have to re-think many of the points that were first mentioned in the meetings over the last [three] weeks, so thank you all.

Satisfied | Lena – Third session

Likewise, *Attitude towards the partner group* analysed how this critical factor influenced the quality of the exchanges. Helm and Guth define attitude in the context of intercultural virtual communication as "the willingness to explore, learn and participate in online networks, collaborate with others, share ideas, knowledge, media and contribute to the collective construction of knowledge."¹⁶ The most frequently observed attitudinal codes included: *Openness/vulnerability/sensitivity to the partner's disclosure, Admiration/gratitude, Mindfulness, and Questioning*. Less commonly used, yet equally significant codes were *Tolerance for ambiguity, Critical, Nonjudgmental, and Closed/hurt/not understood*.

I was . . . impressed by the fact that the opinions of both groups were influenced . . . not only [by their] previous Bible studies but also their culture, the way they think in general, not just [their] religion, let's say. So that's . . . really interesting and I took many notes about this particular point. . . . Kathy said that she found us "likeable," I just wanted to say: Thank you!

Admiration/Gratitude | Fatima – Third session

Another *Interaction* sub-category is *Expected results of the encounter*. Brinkerhoff et al. explain that “the first step in every encounter is to develop an answer to the question ‘what is going on here?’ The answer forms a frame [which is] a set of expectations about the nature of the interaction that is taking place.”¹⁷ A similar set of expectations takes place when readers with different ways of interpreting a religious text meet each other: What is hermeneutically going on and where does it lead us? A series of different answers to this question have been gathered around two main categories: *One expects and accepts (hermeneutical) diversity*, and *One seeks for a universal unambiguous (biblical) meaning*.

I think we all have similar questions but like on a different background, we all search for the answers . . . in Jesus Christ and the Bible. I think that’s what the word “Christian unity” is, that we all search for the answers to these questions in the Bible, . . . the answers may be different, but we all search at the same source

One expects and accepts diversity | Veronica – Third session

In the beginning it was . . . I think Joseph [who] said that it must not be the same rules for everyone, you know? . . . I would disagree with this point because to me . . . it’s clear that we have the universal truth of the Bible and that we have to live by these rules, so we can’t just pick the rules that are easier for us or what we are more drawn to . . . [ironical laugh]. They are universal rules, and we have to follow them, and we have to obey!

One seeks for a universal unambiguous meaning |
Kathy – Second session

Finally, the complexity of IBR’s confrontation becomes particularly evident in cases where, even before the conclusion of the exchanges, a hermeneutical rupture occurs among the participants, leading to an overall judgement or condemnation of the partner’s biblical interpretation. Such dynamics were coded under *Overall judgement of partner’s interpretation*. The final evaluation of these exchanges demonstrates that when such a rupture takes place, it is exceedingly difficult to reopen the possibility for further mutual enrichment or learning.

They . . . sometimes just overlook what the word of God is saying and . . . just [agree] with what [their] society is . . . doing, basically because they said: “In [our continent], it is difficult to obey the rules. . . .” So that means they have something they believe in, and they want to believe in that.

Eteferau – Second session

A third *Confrontation* subcategory is *Partner’s video analysis*. Ecumenical and intercultural dialogue, like communication in general, extends beyond the specific semantic content of verbal religious messages and non-verbal

elements. For this reason, the present category engages with the analysis of meta-communicative elements, such as the presence of unintelligible messages, the memories they recall concerning prior interpretations, or potential references to the internal communication dynamics of the other group. Within this category is located *Partner's analysis method*. This brief third-level category focuses on the analysis of specific meta-communicative elements, such as frequent references to the partner's unintelligible messages or instances where their interpretation evokes memories or serves as a reflection of one's own interpretations from previous sessions.

I agree with what Gezanhe and Francy have just narrated now, and just to add to that: What caught me is when they were looking at the interpretation, [but] how would they link the text to homosexuality? I think it also goes back to the question that I think it was Sophie who posted . . . of "why do we really have rules?" . . . I think these two visions of how they look at this text give much more details on how the Word looks to [them].

Absorbed by partner's non-understood interpretations | Awel – Second session

Another third-level subcategory of importance in this section is *Partner's interpretative dynamics*. The past decade has been particularly prolific in the study of virtual exchanges and the development of content within them, as affirmed by Kumar et al.:

Information networks such blogs, online forums, and other online content-generating communities are among the most important sources of knowledge. In such networks, information is provided and disseminated through social interaction among members of the community. Understanding the dynamics of such interactions is therefore essential in making sense of how this information is generated, . . . and how the content generation process can be influenced to achieve better results.¹⁸

Empirically, participants also identified various dynamics in the conversation of their counterparts (e.g. fluent, mechanical, unfamiliar, etc.) and assigned different appraisals to them, which in turn influenced the overall exchange.

From what I understood, the approach of the others was, that they stick very very hard to the questions that they were given, I think it's just a different focus of the discussions that we had. I think our discussion was more our own opinion and the opinion that all of us had, while they were kind of sticking to the script to find the points that were somehow prepared already. We also looked at some of the questions, but we said "Okay, they are just points to start," . . . and then just the discussion flows. They were somehow like in an exam or something. [Ours] was

more about finding your own opinion and adjusting [it] because you're open-minded. . . . I felt like [they] were not so much talking about their own opinions and thoughts but . . . were like "Okay, that's a general answer that my pastor would give after or in a sermon about that topic."

Mechanic: Questions and answers | Maria – Second session

The final and largest Confrontation sub-category is *Partner's interpretation process*, which examines interpretative aspects most closely related to traditional academic and theological hermeneutics. It is primarily concerned with evaluating how different approaches of the other group to the text (such as their reading method, the status they assign to the biblical text, their reading attitude, their intentions or expected effects of Bible reading, and their interpretative outcomes) compare to one's own. Additionally, it considers the use of exegetical resources, including various Bible versions and theological materials. The category consists of several third-level categories. For instance, *Partner's interpretation method in relation to ours* examines how the group classifies the reading method of their partners, identifies similarities and differences with their own way of interpreting the Bible, and assesses these elements. De Wit represents the multiple dimensions to which this category refers, as follows:

Is group A paying attention to the method used by partner group B in the explanation (exegesis) of the text? Are any differences in reading attitude discovered? Are any differences in focalization and concentration on text segments observed? Are the appropriation strategies of the partner group analyzed? Is the process of appropriation submitted to analysis? How are the differences and the similarities evaluated? If differences are found to be enriching and positive, can we use the term *ecumenical honeymoon*? Will the result be continuing contact?¹⁹

Moreover, the *Classification of partner's method* is studied, which refers to how each group classifies the overall Bible reading method of its counterpart and the implications of these classifications when they describe or analyse it. The most common classifications included: *Focused on appropriation, life, or actuality*; *Blind-sided or limited*; *Political, Theological, Historical-critical*; *Focused on cultural dimensions*; *Cerebrally, distant, or scientific*; and *Historical or historicized*.

They (the other group) are about, you know . . . "unity can be good!" I'm not against it. I think unity can be good, but sometimes . . . if we sort of [pursue] unity for unity's sake, then I always wonder about what we end up sort of sacrificing in that pursuit, when we try kind of hold people together. . . . Well, I'll be really doing the best for . . . marginalized people, but maybe [they] are being hurt.

Blind-sided/limited | Elizabeth – Second session

[Theirs] was a very interesting session, and it was quite different from what we did, definitely! [They] did a lot of critique to the Scripture . . . ,

which was quite exciting to listen to and even to experience. I think it was quite different from our point of view or rather our perspective, and that's interesting . . . because we . . . tried to relate it with the various things that we experience here, as young people in this country, and with them, it was all about how it looks from . . . you know, the Bible, from the New Testament.

Literary/Historical-critical | Faith – Second session

It also relates to possible *Assessments of similarities*. In the exchanges, the participants were able to identify various similarities in the way they interpreted the Bible. Some participants, for example, referred to considering the Bible as an authoritative reference, placing value on the socio-religious context of the biblical passage, affirming that both groups discussed the same topics but “with different words,” or simply stating that “they read just the way we do.” However, the fact that they were able to identify similarities in their reading methods does not indicate how they assessed them. While for some participants these similarities carried positive connotations, for others, they were more neutral or even considered “boring” to discover.

This process has been really moving and really encouraging for me in my faith. . . . I feel like we really came to very similar . . . we're talking about similar things and yeah, for me it was really encouraging hearing you talking about the differences in denominations in [your country] and hearing . . . that it is something . . . you have to navigate as well. It's really encouraging knowing that all over the world that's something that as young Christians . . . we have to learn how to [deal with]. It's a beautiful sense having that in common and doing that journey together. . . . Also, I felt the same way about . . . colonialism and the presence of God within indigenous peoples, it was really encouraging hearing how we both have seen and experienced that.

Positive/ecumenical honeymoon | Stuart – Third session

Similar to the previous category, differences were also identified regarding the “Bible reading method” of the other group or some of their participants. These were coded under *Assessment of differences*. Typically, these differences were ascribed to the logic “we/they were more focused on the text, maintaining a more technical, historical, or objective perspective, while we/they were more disconnected from the text or associative.” Participants assessed these differences in various ways. Some viewed them as sources for intellectual negotiation, aiming to articulate both opposing opinions, while others chose to ignore the differences and emphasize similarities, maintaining a neutral or descriptive attitude. Some considered the differences as pathways to common ground or as complementary and enriching. Others simply found

them irritating or as elements of disagreement that suggested the reading partners were wrong and offered nothing to learn from.

- Marcus: Paul in my view has this impulsive character, and don't know how far God was with him. So, if they separated in peace, I wish they would. And I think in a positive way, I think they separated in at least a middle way of peace . . . because they knew "every one of us is still on the faith, every one of us still wants to preach Jesus." And I hope . . . that they separated in peace, with that thought in the back of their minds.
- Moderator: I want to remind you that Elias even said: "We are educated, we are Christians, we must find a solution!"
- Marcus: Also, I was wondering if for Elias separation is a solution. That of course we can find a solution and the solution in this case is separating. Separation in peace could be, if that is a solution for him, then it's easy to agree. . . . But a solution is that . . . well . . . difficult.

Negotiation: articulation of both (opponent)
opinions | Marcus – Second session

The second *Partner interpretation process* subcategory was *Partner's text status in relation to ours*. It refers to the question: What status does the Bible retain among Christians? Millions of them would adhere to Farris' affirmation that its 66 books are "the sacred scriptures of the Christian church through which, the church believes, God speaks. As such, the primary function of these texts is to serve as a resource for teaching, the shaping of doctrine, and above all for preaching."²⁰ Nevertheless, this normative and traditional status has rapidly eroded in recent decades due to the emergence of critical and non-dogmatic approaches to Scripture. These approaches, such as historic-critical, feminist, post-colonial, and empire studies, have made the reader's consideration of the biblical text a much more heterogeneous issue. As Sugirtharajah identifies, one of the most important developments in both biblical scholarship and contextual reading of non-academics, since the first publication of his classic book *Voices from the Margin* in 1991, has been a quick change and diversification of the Bible's status.²¹ How do these changes reflect in Bible reading among common students in different regions of the world? Participants were able to identify and appraise different kinds of status considerations given to the Bible by participants in both their own and the other groups. They primarily referred to treating the Bible as an object of continuous actualization or inspiration, an object of criticism, an ecumenical meeting point, holy scripture, a historical text, or as an object of purely scientific analysis, which often led to no actualization.

- Eteferau: I think when they read the Bible is just like any other book. To them, . . . whatever it says in the Bible is not to teach and instruct,

because they feel like “we don’t need the rules, and we don’t need . . .” Why are they saying this? . . . There is no sense of learning, . . . I think the Bible is the full word of God . . . , inspired by the Holy Spirit. So, as I read or approach it, I think of what I can learn . . . , and for them is like “It is difficult to live like that in [our continent],” but that’s not how it was supposed to be! God is the same . . . and the Bible says you should be holy for God is holy. It is tough, yes!

- Francy: I would agree with what Eteferau said, I got the same feeling . . . It was more on the point of finding something that they disagree with, instead of trying to understand why it was so. [They think]: “Why the rules?” The rules [are] something that to them [do] not fit, [like] when you don’t want [them], they should be removed from the Bible. . . . I feel they were looking for something that would fit in with their culture that would fit in with their way of living that would fit in . . . the area where they come from, instead of trying . . . to live according to what the Scripture is saying. . . . Is more about saying: “How can we fit the grace of God into our living standards? or how can we fit the grace of God into our culture?”

They: Object of critique | Eteferau and Francy – Second session

Another relevant subcategory is *Partner’s reading attitude in relation to ours*, since references to the Bible reading attitude of the partners and how participants assess them proved to be one of the most interesting elements of the overall analysis. According to de Wit, the “reading attitude may mean the result of the combination of the status of the text for the readers, the result expected from the interpretation, and the methods to be used for it.”²² In this sense, some participants were able to correlate the Bible interpretation of their partners with the possible problems or situations they face on a daily basis and the potential relevance the text might hold for them.

It was quite present to me, or it appeared very often at the beginning that they said: . . . “God loves everyone and it’s important that God loves everyone, and that God forgives.” And also, Joseph jumped into that too, and I was thinking of that as a bit maybe motivated by [their] Islamic background. There are a lot of Muslims there and the Islamic religion is quite more present . . . , and maybe it’s a weakness of us, that for us is so clear, so obvious for us that God loves everyone. The gospel [affirms] this, but it’s a main important point, and I was thinking: Maybe because it’s so different in the Islamic religion, that God is a more harder God, and that God loves you is quite a revolutionary message for Muslims.

They: Contextually influenced/They:
Focused on God’s love, acceptance | Marcus – Second session

The final *Partner interpretation process* subcategory was *Partner’s interpretation results in relation to ours*. It relates to how the content of the partner’s

interpretation can be compared to one's own. It explores different dimensions of both interpretations, such as perceived similarities in the central messages presented, the centrality or roles of characters (such as Paul, Mark, Barnabas, etc.), broader literary intra- and inter-textual parallels (including word and thematic parallels), imagination strategies, and heuristic or focalization keys (such as the sanitary and pandemic situation during the reading phase, or the religious, social, ethnic, or economic contexts of the groups). Additionally, it examines references to specific theological or biblical topics and the use of diverse appropriation strategies. It also pays attention to those non-perceived similarities at the cultural, social status, knowledge, and hermeneutic levels, focusing on how they are assessed by participants (i.e. as factors promoting positive appraisals in a sort of ecumenical honeymoon, as negative or disappointing, or in some other way). A similar exercise of identification and evaluation occurs regarding dissimilar interpretation results among the groups, with particular attention to how these differences are assessed. For instance, differences may be understood as factors that call for inclusion, mutual coexistence through negotiation and learning, or the exploration of possible "middle grounds," as objects of interest, further questioning, or criticism; or as factors where diversity and difference lead to growth, new argumentation, or non-agreement. Finally, it examines how these differences are addressed in discussions. A subcategory of special relevance here was *Dealing with the differences*, referring to how participants deal with interpretative and practical differences in ecumenical and intercultural dialogues. Four main sub-categories describe this phenomenon. First, *Growth and learning* is a coping style that involves appreciating and even embracing the perspective of the other group. Second, *Graceful fighting* acknowledges that:

Anytime there are groups of people living together, sharing experiences, and space, conflict is sure to arise. Graceful fighting in communities seeks to acknowledge questions arising from differences and to put them to good use within the community.²³

When it takes place, the group "graciously" argues by using proofs from the text, their own interpretation can be supported by new arguments, or other imagination strategies can take place, but in all cases, there is "the conviction that if we can live together in community, then someday we will be able to resolve our conflicts. The outlook here is that conflict is associated with community."²⁴ Third, *Damping* refers to putting differences into perspective in order to prioritize a much more important goal. In this research, damping manifested in appeals to religious universals, such as recognizing Jesus as the superior meeting point for Christians, viewing the Bible as a commonality factor, or advocating for the Church's unity amid its diversity. Some groups appealed to cultural universals, such as respecting local law or promoting human rights, while others opted for negotiation or the articulation of both opposing viewpoints. Finally, a fourth way of dealing with differences is *Rupture or withdrawal*, which occurs when readers argue using new "proofs" from the text, support their

interpretation with new arguments, or employ other imagination strategies. All these cases were marked by complete disagreement and further breakdown.

- Milan: I think they were able to be very critical . . . they were sure who they wanted to be identified with. Many of them had a problem with Paul's choice to leave John Mark in that story.
- Rita: As I said before, they say what they think. . . . We also argued about Paul last time, we all think that it was not a good attitude. I realized that, as example, . . . I am a teacher, my sister is also a teacher. We have the same goal to teach children. . . . Now, it is not 100% sure that my idea or my way of teaching is the same as my sister's. Now, I think that some people might think that Paul was aggressive, but I think it's just like the way of teaching. . . . So maybe Paul just wanted to preach in a different way to different people. I do not think it was a sin. . . . I don't think there is anything wrong about it, it is just natural, like if I don't like somebody, I would rather take my best friend. . . . So, I don't think that Paul was wrong in that, it is just division.

Graceful fighting > Own interpretation is supported
by new arguments | Milan and Rita – Second session.

Perceived effects

The fourth main category of this system focuses on identifying or measuring possible effects or consequences of the exchange. It aims to respond to questions of the following type:

What happened to the group's own opinion of the text? Is there any growth? Why, and based on what factors? Is there any rejection of the reading of the partner group? Why, and based on what factors? Has the intercultural competence (insight into the cultural positiveness of the group's own values and those of the partner group) increased? Were the group's own insights put into perspective? Has a so-called Third Culture perspective developed, or is there instead culture shock and a return to the group's own repertoire?²⁵

This main category focuses on six dimensions or sub-categories on which such perceived effects were observed. These are the *Interpretation process of Acts 15*, the *Self-image of the group after (as effect of) the exchanges*, in *Relation to the partner group*, in the *Final description of the completed process*, in the *Final assessment of the completed process*, or in relation to possible *Praxeological effects (behaviours)*.

The first dimension in which the multiple effects of the exchange were observed was the *Interpretation Process of Acts 15*. For various readers, their *understanding of the text* evolved during the second session, as they acquired a new outlook on the story of the Jerusalem Council or its main characters.

Some participants reported developing a new reading focus or gaining new information about the text's background. Others, however, reported no change in their perspective or even rejected the partner's point of view, reinforcing their own interpretation. Nevertheless, during the third synchronous session, the number of participants adhering to this latter position declined significantly, prompting new perspectives on the specific text and on the Bible more broadly. On the other hand, the effect on their *reading methods* was similarly ambivalent during the second session. At this stage, nearly half of the participants expressed appreciation for and even attempted to imitate the method of their counterparts, while the others rejected it, arguing that new reading approaches were unnecessary. However, as in the previous case, after engaging in virtual interactions with their counterparts, nearly all participants reported adjustments and developments in their Bible reading methods. Finally, regarding specific religious topics such as *theology, faith, the Church, or ecumenism*, the patterns observed in the second and third sessions were repeated. At first, reinforcing their own interpretations and previous assumptions was more common than gaining new insights into faith and Church life. This dynamic, however, shifted significantly in the face-to-face exchanges, which greatly fostered the emergence of new perspectives.

- Sophie: [Their reading method] reminds me of my blind spots. I mean, getting closer to the Scripture always by your head and your brain, and your rationality, instead of, as Andrea put it in the very beginning, going by your emotions and by the belief, and by asking for what keeps us together. I think this was helpful.
- Andrea: As I said in the beginning, it kind of reminded me of experiences that certainly had quite a huge impact on me and on my faith and [they] faded away a little bit, I have to say. So, it's nice to be reminded of those things. . . . I'm usually one who looks quite on the rational side of things and it's nice to be pointed at things that you just don't see.

Method > New information/group values – imitates
partner's method | Sophie and Andrea – Second session

Considering the *Hermeneutics* involved, the comparison between the hermeneutical effects of the exchange during the second and third sessions, that is, measuring the interpretative development of participants after viewing a report (the video of the partner group's discussions) and after engaging in direct person-to-person exchange, although still at an exploratory stage, revealed the considerable potential of virtual intercultural Biblical reading. For instance, the hermeneutical impact of the second session reflected an almost equal prevalence of interpretative clashes or conflicts and episodes of horizon broadening. These latter instances occur:

At the junction of two intertwined interpretations: one from our socio-historical tradition and the other from our experience of novel

phenomena. A hermeneutic horizon involves both a reader's reflective and creative engagement with a text (in this case a biblical text and a different interpretation). . . . Ricoeur . . . sees a fusion of horizons that intersect through the world of the reader and the world of a text. . . . For horizons to fuse, the multiple meanings that rise up from reading a text must merge at some point in readers' minds. This fusion involves a creative process of questioning the text, exploring the underlying meaning, and going beyond it. A fusion of horizons leads to new self-realizations in relation to the world of the text and one's previous experiences and opens up the possibility of writing and expanding on ideas or information in novel ways.²⁶

IBR develops through the interplay of diverse horizons, which may fuse, expand, hybridize, or even come into conflict. These horizons include the social, ethnic, religious, or historical backgrounds of the individual reader, those of other members within the same group, the traditional interpretative frameworks of the partner group, and the horizon of the biblical text itself. In contrast to the second session, reports of horizon-broadening or fusion episodes increased significantly during the third synchronous session, rendering interpretative clashes or conflicts marginal occurrences.

I also think [the exchange] just added so much deep to the text and the interpretation that we had, because in the group it's always [like] you have a kind of interpretation, or you have some kind of conclusion by yourselves, but then you add another perspective, and . . . you open the entire text up again, and I really enjoyed having that! I mean, it would be great if you could do that again more often because I think we live of conversation and communication, and given all those different backgrounds or situations it would be so good to have all this more often.

Horizon Broadening | Emma – Third session

Another analytical dimension refers to the *Self-Image of the group after (as effect of) the exchange*. The category explores if there are any changes in the self-awareness of the reader or his/her group about their own culture, biases, prejudices, or ideologies. It also explores any developments on Gudykunst, Wiseman, and Hammer's "big three" factors for an effective "cross-cultural attitude." These are as follows: the cognitive (stereotypic), affective (evaluative), and conative (behavioural) components,²⁷ expressed on IBR through the triad of *Knowledge*, *Motivation*, and *Skills*.²⁸ In general, a significant growth of these factors was observed after the virtual synchronic discussions

[The exchange] made us learnt so much, . . . I think we saw each other through each other's eyes but we also reflected on our own position and learned something about ourselves through the eyes of the others. . . . For example, when you said in your observation that we are talking with like an individualized mindset. [It] was very interesting, because the point of individualization is what sociological researchers

are saying about [our continent] and we are always critical to it a little bit, you know: “[our continent] is not that individualized,” and by seeing ourselves through your eyes, we maybe regard to know how individualized we are, so it was really helpful I think.

More awareness of one's own culture | Leo – Third session

The *Relation to the partner group* category analyses if the participants can identify the same factors involved in the previous item (*Self-image of group after the process*) but now in the context and experience of their partners and their discussions. It also studies whether participants reached a higher awareness of their partner's relationship or problems with their society or Church, and their coping strategies

[Someone in the other group] was saying that . . . she gets to understand that conflict in the Christian community will always exist. . . . The Bible . . . made them able to investigate their standpoint when it comes to Christianity, especially when they encounter someone new. It [prompts] a reflection like: “Which perspective or what kind of behaviour are they going to put upfront when they encounter somebody from a different religion or a Christian which [has] a different perspective?” So, for me, that was interesting because it made me think that I also need to reflect on this because I don't also . . . have a clear picture of how I would react when I find someone with a different ideology. Will I be more accommodative and accepting? or very critical and very intransigent on my beliefs or my standpoint? [Which means] not being shaken by any other thought different from what I think.

Partner's self-criticism prompts self-one | Naomi – Second session

Final description of the completed process explores how participants experienced the exchange.

Was it perceived as linear, or rather as a more dialectical and dialogical process? Were the readers able to identify distinct stages within their exchanges? The most commonly reported descriptions included affective growth, moving from initial orientation to a more stable and sustained exchange; cognitive growth, evolving from cognitive discrepancy to a form of cognitive consensus; and one or more instances of cultural or religious shock, with exchange dynamics often following a “U” or “W” pattern, eventually leading to stabilization and progress.

For me, at first, I felt a bit awkward. It is the first experience listening to other people, like seeing other people . . . recorded [non-understandable] I was like “Ah okay let's do this.” Then I was listening also, I was touched by their different ideologies, it was really unique and the way [non-understandable] it has been interesting, a really good experience for me.

Affective growth: from orientation to stabilization | Nadia – Third session

The *Final assessment of the completed process* sub-category deals with the final evaluation of the process during the third synchronic reading session. Two main subcategories give an account of this assessment: *Growth* and *Return to own repertoire* (stagnation). Referring to *Growth*,

Gudykunst et al. understand growth to be the process in which a person becomes a new kind of person at a higher level of integration. Within the framework of the intercultural Bible reading project, we can define growth as the eventual result of a process of confrontation, relapse, and progress, leading to new insights (in faith), an increase in intercultural competence, being able to put differences in perspective, a reinforced engagement and effort for a better world, and willingness to continue participating.²⁹

In this study, *Growth* was characterized by an increased competence in intercultural communication, the attainment of a shared interpretative ground, and a more critical stance towards one's own interpretation. Among the main factors that facilitated growth were the attitude of the partner group, their interpretation of Acts 15, their reading method, their strategies of appropriation and actualization of the text, their expression of vulnerability, and gaining knowledge about the partner group's context. Conversely, *Return to own repertoire* or stagnation occurred when no shared perspective was achieved, or when interpretative closure on a particular belief resulted in rigidity or resistance to dialogue.

This meeting actually helped me to be patient with listening. You know, when we have two groups, one group has different questions and I . . . have different views, different ways of thinking. It's very difficult to listen there and [not] just say: "Stop, stop, this is what I think, stop, stop." So, you know? this actually helped me to listen [to] other views and to listen nicely and to . . . give the answer like . . . slowly, because, you know? We can hurry up with the people, like "I know this . . . but you have to be . . . you should also think like this way." We cannot do that! We cannot force our thinking onto other people. . . . This meeting actually helped us to learn to be more patient, . . . be loving, how to be more caring [with] them.

Growth > Acknowledged more competence in
intercultural communication | Penelope – Second session

The last *Perceived Effects* subcategory is *Praxeological effects (behaviours)*. As in the previous coding system, the final category is dedicated to analysing possible praxeological effects, that is, the concrete actions inspired by the dialogues on Acts 15. This category focuses particularly on observable changes or initiatives, such as reevaluating one's attitude towards others, maintaining contact with the partner group for continued Bible study, committing to further reflection on the biblical text, (partially) adopting the partner group's interpretative

method in future studies, or actively participating in subsequent ecumenical initiatives.

Something . . . I didn't fully expect but makes sense now, that is happening, is how we kind of have come together and found a kind of call to action in the text through the central messages of being inclusive, finding our kind of Christian identity and mission, those kinds of things. I feel like . . . when I read the Bible alone I get lost in all of the details and trying to figure out what's happening or the history or just relating to the people in these stories, but it was really amazing in these kind of discussions and hearing everyone's opinions, how I feel like I kind of have a strong sense of what I can do with this text, how it affects me in when I go out into the world and how it affects us having this conversation, yeah! that was really amazing and wouldn't have happened without this very collaborative interactive format

Call to action | Nicole – Third session

Third system of codes: evaluation questionnaire

The third coding system was employed to analyse the individual evaluation questionnaires (Appendix E: Evaluation questionnaire) completed at the conclusion of the exchange process. This system is organized into ten main categories: *Change in the meaning of the text*, *Change in the understanding of the Church's unity and diversity*, *Change in Bible reading method*, *Personal transformation or self-perception*, *Learning outcomes*, *Significance of the exchange*, *Evaluation of the exchange*, *Relationship with the partner group*, *Final assessment of the exchanges*, and *Anticipated future praxeological effects*. Appendix H provides a summarized list of these primary categories along with their most significant sub-categories and corresponding codes. A comprehensive third code bank comprising 133 codes was developed, enabling approximately 700 codifications across 28 individual Evaluation Questionnaires. In some cases, the questionnaires were completed several days after the final exchange session had taken place.

Most important categories and codes of the third system

As with the previous two coding systems, the following section offers a general conceptual overview of the most significant codes and categories utilized in the third system. For clarity and illustration, the definitions of selected key codes in this system are accompanied by examples drawn from the exchanges.

Changes in the understanding of the church's unity and diversity

The aim of this project, to address the themes of diversity, unity, and conflict within the Church, was clearly established from the moment Acts 15 was selected for study. However, as the text itself reveals, conflict and struggles for power have historically accompanied such diversity. Participants not only

engaged with these realities through reading and discussion but also experienced firsthand how misunderstandings and conflict can pose challenges to ecumenical dialogue. Changes in participants' understanding of the Church's unity and diversity emerged in three principal ways. First, the majority reported that IBR fostered in them a greater appreciation for diversity, a strengthened sense of global Christian community, and the insight that Student Christian Movements across different regions face similar challenges regardless of their geographic context. A second group described a newfound awareness of the Church's unity and internal conflicts as ongoing realities, along with the recognition that greater emphasis on common ground among Christians is essential. However, several participants indicated that the exchange merely deepened their pre-existing views or that it had no discernible impact on their understanding.

I often feel pretty hopeless about the state of the Church and embarrassed to be a part of it. Progressive Christianity often feels like an insignificant minority. . . . Hearing that young people in [their country] are also navigating faith in a context that is dominated by conservatives gave me a deep sense of solidarity and hope for the future. It made me feel a lot more compassion for people in the conservative Church and feel a lot less fear. . . . I feel like it gave me the energy to have grace with Christians who do and say really hurtful things, and to respond to that by presenting a different way of doing faith to the world.

Similar challenges or situations between SCMs |
More sense of (global) community/Toleration of other
Christian groups | Stuart – Evaluation Questionnaire

Changes in Bible reading method

Modifying, adapting, or enriching one's personal or communal approach to the Bible is regarded as a significant outcome of ecumenical exchanges within the framework of intercultural Biblical reading. In this context, some participants affirmed that, as a result of these exchanges, they would be more inclined in the future to consider how individuals from other cultural backgrounds interpret Scripture. Others expressed an intention to approach the Bible in a more critical, deconstructive, analytical, academic, or systematic manner, or to adopt a more inquisitive and questioning attitude. Other participants indicated a desire to shift the focus of their reading towards aspects such as the socio-historical context of the text, its emotional dimensions, the actions or practices it may inspire, its potential for contemporary relevance, its original meaning, or its communal and personal implications. A smaller number of respondents, however, stated that the exchange would have little or no impact on their method of reading the Bible.

Yes [my Bible reading method] will [change]. Rather than just relating texts to my current realities, I'll be looking more at the text and what the text meant at the time and in the context described in the Bible.

More focused on first meaning |
Adamu – Evaluation Questionnaire

Learning outcomes

Central to IBR is to foster exchanges and conversations among Christians from diverse continents, regions, and denominational backgrounds, which, despite their complexity, offer substantial learning potential. In this research project, participants reported a variety of learning outcomes resulting from these dialogues. The majority, for example, indicated that as a result of the discussions they now recognize the vast diversity of biblical interpretations and acknowledge that none of them can be regarded as “universally valid.” They also emphasized the significant influence of context on biblical interpretation. Others expressed that they had learned that Student Christian Movements worldwide face similar challenges and issues, that maintaining dialogue with other Christians is of paramount importance, that it is acceptable to hold differing views on unity and diversity within the Church, and that ecumenism should take into account the culture and context of its participants. However, a small number of participants stated that their learning was minimal or non-existent.

I learned that the social background of the individual impacts the way he/she analyses the text and that maybe there is no universal interpretation of the Bible. Nonetheless, the essence is preserved, and the differences are minor and even complementary.

Diversity of Bible interpretations/no “universally valid” one |
Fatima – Evaluation Questionnaire

Evaluation of the exchange

This category addresses the question: How do participants evaluate the exchange process when reflecting on it retrospectively? The responses were varied. The majority of participants provided a positive evaluation, describing the exchange as “interesting” or “valuable” while expressing feelings of happiness or gratitude. However, a few participants found the exchange challenging, marked by doubts, conflicts, or moments of frustration. For some, the experience was “eye-opening,” often leading to cognitive growth, characterized by a steady progression from cognitive discrepancy to cognitive consensus.

The partner group addressed us in a highly positive way, giving an ear to our perspectives, as well as being open and excited about this exchange. Our group is deeply grateful.

Positive: happiness/thankfulness | Milan –
Evaluation Questionnaire

Notes

- 1 Hans de Wit, “Codes and Coding,” in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, eds. Hans de Wit et al., Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics Series 1 (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004), 425–28.
- 2 de Wit, “Codes and Coding,” 428–33.
- 3 Louis Jonker and Ernst Conradie, “Determining Relative Adequacy in Biblical Interpretation: Biblical Interpretation in Established Bible Study Groups in the Western Cape, South Africa,” *Scriptura* 78 (2001): 448–55.

- 4 Jonker and Conradie, "Determining Relative Adequacy in Biblical Interpretation," 409–10.
- 5 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 417.
- 6 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 411–12.
- 7 Camilla A.-L. Koskinen, "Hermeneutic Reading of Classic Texts," *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 27, no. 3 (2013): 757.
- 8 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 415.
- 9 The Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," last modified April 23, 1993, https://catholic-resources.org/Church-Docs/PBC_Interp-FullText.htm#Sec4.
- 10 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 417.
- 11 Luis Rivas, "Tipo – Tipología," in *Diccionario para el estudio de la Biblia* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Amico, 2010), 185.
- 12 Cleodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 148–49.
- 13 Volker Küster, "Models of Contextual Hermeneutics: Liberation and Feminist Theological Approaches Compared," *Exchange* 23, no. 2 (1994): 154.
- 14 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 417.
- 15 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 418.
- 16 Sarah Guth and Francesca Helm, eds., *Telecollaboration 2.0: Language, Literacies and Intercultural Learning in the 21st Century* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 81.
- 17 David Brinkerhoff, Suzanne Ortega, and Rose Weitz, *Essentials of Sociology* (New York: Cengage Learning, 2013), 86.
- 18 Bharat Rao and Balaji Krishnapuram, *KDD'10: Proceedings of the 16th ACM SIGKDD International Conference on Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 2010), 553–62.
- 19 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 421.
- 20 S. Farris, "Limping Away with a Blessing: Biblical Studies and Preaching at the End of the Second Millennium," *Interpretation* 51, no. 4 (1997): 366.
- 21 See: Sarojini Nadar, "What about the Margins? Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years After Voices From the Margin . . ." *Scriptura* 95 (2007): 294–95.
- 22 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 414.
- 23 Cyndi L. Najar, "Quest to Belong," *Conversations* 1, no. 1 (2013): 10.
- 24 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 422.
- 25 de Wit, "Codes and Coding."
- 26 James L. Myers, "A Fusion of Horizons: Students' Encounters with Will and Wave," *Asia Pacific Education Review* 7, no. 2 (2006): 162–64.
- 27 Mitchell Hammer, "Dimensions of Intercultural Effectiveness: An Exploratory Study," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 2, no. 4 (1978): 384.
- 28 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 423.
- 29 de Wit, "Codes and Coding," 424.

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4 Dialogue cases

After outlining the three coding systems employed to analyse the collected data, this chapter will present each of the five dialogues in relation to the principal categories of these systems. As previously mentioned, in these dialogues, the participants read and discussed together the passage from Acts of the Apostles 15:1–21 and 36–41, commonly known as The Jerusalem Council. The inter-group reading phase of this project spanned approximately one year, beginning with the first session between SCMs A and B in February 2021 and concluding with the third session between SCMs I and J in March 2022.¹ The participating SCMs were composed according to their existing memberships, each consisting of four to seven readers. The groups were paired based on the order of their registration, with the condition that no two paired SCMs belonged to the same WSCF region. Each exchange comprised five sessions: two initial reading sessions (conducted separately by each SCM following identical formats), two second reading sessions (again conducted separately but identically), and a fifth and final session in which both SCMs participated in a synchronous, joint discussion. The following section provides an overview of these five exchanges, introducing the paired SCMs and summarizing the principal characteristics of their biblical engagement.

First exchange: SCMs A and B

The first exchange took place in February 2021 between SCMs A and B. Approximately five participants from SCM A, most of whom were female, took part in the sessions. SCM B was represented by six students from Baptist, Protestant, or Ecumenical backgrounds, the majority of whom were male.

Initial questionnaire for participants

Most participants from SCM A reported reading the Bible three to four times a week. As Claudia² explained: “Last year I tried to read the whole Bible from the beginning to the end . . . , now I am reading the Bible not so often than last year, but I try to do it some days a week.” They frequently read the

Bible both privately and in group settings. For them, the biblical text holds a significant place in their lives; it is present in their weekly religious gatherings, everyday conversations, and, in some cases, even their professional activities. As Emma noted: "I use it to plan and teach my students when we deal with biblical topics or every Sunday at Church. Sometimes, it comes up in discussions with my friends as well." Regarding their motivation to participate, nearly all participants referred to so-called "cognitive" interests, such as the desire to learn from or engage with other biblical interpretations and perspectives. Veronica, for instance, shared: "I am interested in how people interpret a text passage when they read it in a different cultural context." The members of SCM B reported an even closer relationship with the biblical text. Most of them read it almost daily at home. As Penelope expressed, "The Bible guides me every day. In time of sadness, it provides me peace and relief. I find joy in reading his words." In addition to personal reading, they also engage with the Bible through study groups and similar events. Their interpretative approach focuses primarily on the actualization of the text and its capacity to inspire contemporary readers. As Preety explained: "As a Christian who is now learning to read the bible psychologically . . . , the Bible . . . plays an important role in my journey towards expanding my consciousness and self-awareness." The group's motivations for participating were varied. While some expressed interest in sharing and engaging in dialogue, others emphasized a desire to learn or to be challenged by unfamiliar interpretations or spiritualities. As Milan stated: "This is a great opportunity to interact with somebody not my own. It lets me be challenged, widen my horizon and become a better person spiritually and physically."

First sessions

The first exchange of SCM A was marked by a flexible adherence to the reading protocol, which enabled participants to introduce new topics while maintaining the main focus of the discussion. The session was relaxed and rich in non-verbal communication, characterized by frequent affirming smiles, gestures of agreement, and spontaneous group laughter. This was accompanied by verbal affirmations such as "I agree" and "You are right," although occasional verbal disagreements also occurred. Despite this, the exchange was somewhat non-fluid, with both short and long reflective pauses often preceding semantically rich contributions.

From a hermeneutical perspective, the predominant reading attitudes were both inquisitive and critical, particularly in relation to Paul's "confrontational" stance towards Barnabas. This stance prompted questioning, such as Claudia's remark: "I don't like Paul's acting," while simultaneously affirming God's love and acceptance of all people (Lena: "God loves all the people"; Claudia: "We can't judge"; Emma: "my sentence is 'don't make it harder'"). From the outset, the text of Acts of the Apostles was viewed as a source of inspiration and immediate actualization (Veronica: "I think

[the text is] a bridge to today”), applied to critically addressing experiences of ecclesial exclusion (Claudia: “Maybe from the outside the Church looks very exclusive”; Emma: “there are many technicalities in Church”; Veronica: “Church nowadays should be more open”; Claudia: “Church is some kind of unattractive or uncool,” etc.) and the alleged logics which produce them (Emma: “Society and Church have always to deal about how they are going to deal with strangers”). These reflections primarily focused on the ecclesial and social marginalization of specific groups, such as sexual minorities, non-churchgoers, or migrants. However, these considerations were accompanied by more complex questions, for instance, Emma asked: “How far are we going to give up our mind and tradition for the new people, and how much they have to change?” References to the historical, literary, or theological background of the text were limited, while the primary hermeneutical key through which the conversations unfolded was the concept of inclusion within the Church.

The actualization of the text was a central focus of the conversation, encompassing secondary topics such as the need for rules in both life and the Church, with a near-universal agreement on their malleable nature (Claudia: “If people are living together, then rules are something necessary [and] there’s always the question how many rules do we need”; Veronica: “no rule lasts forever”), Christian identity (Lena: “Who isn’t loving its neighbours isn’t a real Christian”), or national identity (Leo: “We have in [our country] right-wing populism and a group that is called the *identitarians* . . .”). However, the primary emphasis of the actualization occurred on a societal level, with less attention given to more personal or individual perspectives (Leo: “We are always [discussing] at the point of . . . Church issues and society issues, maybe [we can] try to make it personal”). The communal reading inspired little in the way of direct action but fostered a critical awareness of the situation of the Church in their country, alongside a realistic understanding of the history of the global Church (Emma: “I take away that the history of Christianity has not always been ideal, . . . there have always been conflicts and it’s okay if we kind of discuss things”), and hopeful insights regarding Christian life (Leo: “Christianity is not about what you have been, is about the future”).

On the other hand, the reading style of SCM B during the first session followed a well-defined structure, which was established from the beginning: (Milan: “We will have a structure as we go through this study. First, we will read the text . . . , next we will go into locating the text, the author, and the reader, which is us. . . . We will interpret the text based on a few questions . . . , and then we will go to applying the text to our lives and our context.”) The discussion’s dynamics were very paused, and at certain moments, it resembled more of a question-and-answer session than a conversation. The group’s reading attitude was predominantly historical-contextual (Raj: “This clearly shows and portrays the societal ideology of the Jews and gentiles during that period”; Preety: “This particular text has its own situation and context where

rituals have turned into a demand”) with constant self-identifications with the text (Preety: “I can take this text and make it relevant for my country in terms of religious tolerance and beauty in diversity”). The reading contained abundant heuristic references, especially regarding collectivistic tendencies, logics of inclusion and exclusion, and experiences of national-ethnic and religious pluralism (Preety: “When I came to [the South of my country] for my further studies, the food habits, the culture, everything is totally different”).

These readers frequently referred to the literary background of the text, particularly emphasizing their identification with its author. Milan noted, “Luke is an outsider, who is writing this text, he is a gentile, he is not a Jew, so it is important for him to include this particular story,” while Sanjay added, “[Luke’s] identity has a connection with the text, so I connect myself with Luke because I am inside the Church now, but I was once outsider.” They also referenced the historical situation of the Church at the time of writing (Milan: “This is a very initial time of the Christian faith, and they are trying to formulate what later became [its] rules [and] theology”). In addition to the central focus on Luke, Paul was viewed from varying perspectives, ranging from critical (Preety: “I see Paul as a very egocentric person here”) to more balanced (Raj: “Paul is in a middle ground.”) Two principal hermeneutical keys shaped the discussion. First, similar to SCM A, the conversation centred on the theme of social inclusion, framed here in terms of “insiders” and “outsiders.” However, in the context of SCM B, this was interpreted through the lens of minority experience and marginalization (Milan: “Let’s try to put [the characters] on two sides, ok? . . . insiders and outsiders”; Sanjay: “In [my country], my religion is of outsiders, so I’ll be an insider in the Church, and I’ll be an outsider to my country”). The second major hermeneutical focus was culture as a socio-differentiating factor within the Church (Rita: “All this text is revolving around the [issue of] culture and religion”; Sanjay: “The conflict between the culture of the Church and the culture of the nation is the problem here”). The actualization of the text drew on these two motifs, affirming inclusive and intercultural understandings of the Gospel (Neeraj: “I understand this passage . . . in this year of 2021, . . . the claiming of the Good News of the Lord is not limited to one person or the other, it should not be blocked or stopped, due to our ego”; Preety: “Basically it’s all about God beyond culture”). However, despite the depth of reflection, the discussion barely called for new awareness, nor inspired significant practical actions (Rita: “we don’t need to accept the culture . . . , we only have to believe with our heart”).

Second sessions

For the participants of SCM A, observing the video of SCM B’s first session prompted a series of “surprises” and unexpected insights, as several noted (Lena: “I’m also very impressed about all the similarities which we have in both groups although we have very different cultures”). The participants paid

special attention to how the context of their partners shaped their counterparts' reflections, often drawing comparisons to their own situation (Veronica: "Here in [our country] the culture and the religion are quite the same, so we don't have to think about what is our religion and what is our . . . culture"; Lena: "For them, it's important to talk about this because there are so many different religions in [their country], so they have much more difficulties to have an identity as Christians"). These observations generally fostered mindful and open attitudes towards the other group's context and challenges (Veronica: "by my friends, they all [are] not part of the Church, . . . they're very against [it] and I don't always mention that I'm part of the Church because I don't want to start a fight every time again"). Communication remained largely indirect, consistently referring to the other group through pronouns such as "they" and "their." Some participants reflected on the contrast with their own interpretive approach (Veronica: "They take the Bible as a whole . . . , we only concentrated on a text and I don't know if we imagined the other stories around it"), while others expressed appreciation for their inner dynamics (Leo: "In the end, where they were talking about human relationships, there was also always a sense of humour").

SCM A was one of the few groups to comment on the exegetical resources employed by their counterparts (Leo: "I observe the people from the [other] group reading like they had books next to their computers"), identifying their method as appropriation-oriented and shaped by cultural context. They also recognized a diversity of reading attitudes within SCM B, including critical and deconstructive approaches (Emma: "I think [theirs] was a critical approach . . . that was relatively similar . . . to what we did"), as well as ecumenical perspectives (Lena: "I found it interesting that they also said that . . . it should be a way . . . for everybody to be part of the Church . . . I didn't expect that!"). Much of the discussion focused on two shared hermeneutical themes. The first was the ambivalence of feeling like outsiders or insiders within the Church or society (Leo: "We were talking about the same issues [but] with different words"; Emma: "I think [we are] a different kind of outsiders . . . , we still live . . . in a secularized country, or let's say city, . . . So you are kind of an outsider, [and] like Protestants . . . we always have a kind of fight against the mainstream Catholic identity"). The second was the theme of Christian unity (Emma: "So many Christians actually have the Bible as their basis. . . . I think you can still be one even if you're different, because you want to talk to each other, and because . . . you want this ecumenical consensus").

The perceived impact of the encounter remained modest, though clear progress was evident compared to the previous meeting. Participants reported developing a fresh perspective on the biblical text and expanding their hermeneutical horizons through the intercultural exchange. For instance, Veronica remarked, "I really found it interesting that they said that . . . Paul and Barnabas' . . . argument [was] only a problem of their ego. . . . It's like . . . here in [our country] with . . . Catholics and Protestants, it isn't about how

we interpret the Bible, it's more about ego, and I didn't see it last time." Additionally, the exchange prompted greater self-awareness regarding their own interpretive biases (Leo: "The most interesting thing . . . was [that] we knew that we are reading it as [locals], and as students . . . but there were also some points where we learned about us being part of this culture only by the eyes of the [other] group"). The most tangible outcome of the session was a heightened interest in future intercultural engagement, reflecting a growing appreciation for dialogical learning (Emma: "I would like to have this more often . . . , I think that was really great and I look forward to . . . talking to them").

On the other hand, SCM B adopted a markedly more personal and direct style of communication, which enabled them to engage openly with the partner group (Milan: "I would just like to ask a question to our friends from . . ."). This openness was accompanied by clear expressions of mutual appreciation (Penelope: "I really like that they express what they think"; Sanjay: "There are very good things that we have to learn from them, I think they also can surprise about our own way to read"), while portraying a mindful, non-judgemental, and open attitude to them (Milan: "[the reading] really shows the different kinds of issues that we face as countries"; Sanjay: "They were very courageous and . . . confident in the way they approach the Bible . . . , educated theologically [and] open-minded"; Neeraj: "When I read the Bible I always connect the Bible verses to my life, always! to the society around me"). The interpretative method of their counterparts was generally perceived as rationally oriented, with a focus on socio-religious context and textual appropriation (Milan: "It was interesting to see how our understanding of our situation impacts our . . . interpretation of the text"; Raj: "They had this rational thought of viewing the scriptures and they could really relate that to their personal life"). However, this approach was also occasionally viewed from a critical standpoint, particularly with regard to its perceived detachment or lack of spiritual engagement (Neeraj: "The Bible is the holy Scripture but . . . in the talk of our friends, . . . it is for them [a] totally technical thing").

The effects of the encounter were multifaceted, generating both interpretive tensions and new theological insights. Moments of interpretive conflict emerged, particularly around sensitive topics such as sexuality (Penelope: "They had a lot of question about homosexuality . . . , they actually think like 'we should be like this, we should be like that' but . . . there is the answer of this all in the Bible, [about] homosexuality, why is it a sin? why? It is in the Bible why we as Christians do not allow this thing"). At the same time, the exchange prompted significant reflections on the plurality of biblical interpretation and personal growth in faith (Sanjay: "For me, it helped me to understand me more, because I always think what I understand in that particular text is THE understanding, but it is not actually, it really meant something different to . . . the people from [the other country], to me and Milan, even when we come from the same group"). Participants

also reported a noticeable growth in intercultural competence and relational awareness (Penelope: “I think that for me this meeting actually helped me to be patient with listening . . . with the other people, be loving, how to be more caring about them”), along with renewed motivation to engage in intercultural Biblical reading practices (Milan: “I think it comforts me as well as it challenges me . . . to take up more opportunities to read the text along with people, to hear different perspectives . . . and go back to this wonderful tradition . . . of sitting and reading the Scripture . . . in communities”).

Third session

The third and final meeting between the SCMs A and B was regarded as one of the most successful encounters of the project. Participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with the exchange, with several noting that they felt genuinely heard and acknowledged by the other group (Emma: “I really liked the experience, and I really think that your group also listened to what we said”). There was significant attentiveness to the partners’ cultural and religious contexts, as reflected in comments highlighting mutual awareness and appreciation (Sanjay: “We spoke about . . . our social structure and . . . multi-religious context, they spoke about being Catholics and Protestants, and that’s not a problem here, we still find everyone as Christian”). Communication during the session was marked by directness and sincere expressions of gratitude and trust (Preety: “They have been so polite to us. . . . I . . . appreciate their good observation skills”), and participants frequently referenced insights and themes from previous meetings. Many participants began the session by acknowledging a kind of mirroring effect brought about by mutual observation and reflection, which led to further learning and self-awareness (Leo: “Observing made us learn so much . . . , I think we saw each other through each other’s eyes, but we also reflected on our own position and learned something about ourselves through the eyes of the others”). The overall attitude was characterized by openness, vulnerability, and a mindful approach to cultural and ecclesial identity (Milan: “I want to talk to someone who doesn’t belong to my context and . . . tell them that I have this kind of problems. Can you connect to me in some way, as we are the Church together?”; Penelope: “I also feel like I am from another place, like I don’t belong to [my country]”; Veronica: “In Easter holidays . . . a lot of my friends drive away and I want to go to Church . . . and you have to insist that it takes place for me, so I have to say ‘No, I can’t go with you because I want to go to Church’”).

Three principal hermeneutical keys emerged as central to the exchange. First, culture was identified as the primary differentiating factor shaping the life of the Church, theological perspectives, and expressions of belief. Participants emphasized the importance of mutual respect and coexistence across cultural contexts (Preety: “We talked about unity [and they] on ‘don’t make Christianity more harder,’ but . . . is all about peaceful coexistence and

understanding . . . , respecting one's culture"). Second, participants affirmed the person of Jesus Christ and the Bible as the two foundational unifying elements of the Christian faith. Despite interpretive differences, these common reference point grounded the dialogue (Leo: "[What] matters [is] that we are all dealing with this texts, and maybe we will not read the same things out of them, but we are referring to them because we accept those texts as challenges"; Veronica: "We all have similar questions, but . . . we all search the answers in Jesus Christ and the Bible"). Third, there was a shared appreciation for the richness and depth that arise from multiple interpretations of Scripture. Participants recognized the contextual nature of biblical meaning and the value of diverse readings (Sanjay: "I need to have a Christ who belongs to [my country, and] can liberate people from [local] struggles"; Leo: "We're learning that the meaning of the text is always different for people . . . , but even within my own group are different readings!").

Regarding the perceived effects of the exchange, participants reported a significant broadening of their hermeneutical horizons and the development of new interpretive insights. The interaction was described as enriching and transformative in terms of scriptural understanding (Emma: "It just added so much deep to the text and the interpretation that we had . . . , you add another perspective and then you open the entire text up again!"). In addition to interpretive growth, participants also noted an increased awareness of the others' cultural context and the development of intercultural competence (Claudia: "We all need to be aware that our context and our understanding of the Bible is not whole, . . . we all should learn from each other"). The exchange was evaluated positively overall, fostering a clear interest in continued intercultural engagement. However, most of its tangible impact remained within the realm of interpretive and reflective practice rather than immediate concrete action (Lena: "This whole project is kind of an eye-opener because it made it possible to see the same text through somehow another eyes and . . . perspectives. . . . I think we have to re-think many of the points that were mentioned in the [previous] meetings").

Evaluation questionnaire

For the participants of SCM A, the exchange resulted in an expanded understanding of the biblical text, a deepening of their prior theological conceptions, and a heightened appreciation for diversity. The process also enabled them to emphasize the commonalities that unite them across cultural and theological boundaries. When asked about potential changes in their future approach to Scripture, many expressed a growing interest in considering how individuals from other cultural contexts might interpret the same texts, often adopting a more critical or deconstructive lens (Leo: "Each person will read biblical texts at least twice: through the own eyes and through the eyes of our [partner] friends"). In terms of personal development, participants reported increased awareness of their own cultural situatedness and biases, as well as

notable growth in intercultural knowledge, motivation, and communicative skills. For instance, Veronica reflected on the emotional and linguistic challenges of discussing matters of faith in a foreign language: "What struck[ed] me was how difficult it was for me to talk about faith in English. The problem was not so much one of vocabulary, but rather not speaking about something very private in the mother tongue. I realized how personal [my language] is for me." Participants identified several specific learning outcomes: a new awareness of the contextual nature of biblical interpretation, the legitimacy of diverse theological readings, the critical role of dialogue in Christian practice, and a renewed sense of ecumenical belonging. The exchange was widely regarded as "eye-opening," meaningful, and worthwhile, inspiring expressions of gratitude and appreciation (Emma: "[It was] definitely [worthy]! Thank you for making this project possible!"). At the same time, participants demonstrated an improved understanding of their partners' social and religious contexts and acknowledged their own cultural biases. Overall, the dialogues were marked by "hermeneutical growth," the development of intercultural competence, the creation of so-called "common grounds," and a more critical assessment of one's own interpretation.

In the case of SCM B, three participants responded to the post-exchange questionnaire, revealing a consistent pattern of positive transformation in their approach to biblical interpretation and intercultural engagement. All participants reported that the meaning of the biblical text had expanded for them, largely due to their partners' interpretive methods and respectful, attentive posture during discussions. This exposure led to deeper insights and enriched understandings, both of the Scriptures and the broader Christian community. One of the most significant outcomes was a revised understanding of the Church's unity and diversity. Participants expressed a newfound appreciation for the complexity of Christian identity across contexts. While diversity in SCM A was often framed in terms of denominational distinctions (Catholics and Protestants), SCM B saw diversity primarily through the lens of multicultural plurality (Preety: "It somehow changed my understanding of the unity and diversity of the Church. . . . The diversity as understood by the other group was mostly centered on denomination as in the Catholics and the Protestants in their . . . society. . . . In our case, it was a religion issue. So, it was a thought provoking [and] eye-opening exchange"). Participants also affirmed the development of their intercultural competence, citing increased awareness of different theological worldviews, openness to diverse interpretations of Scripture, and a stronger commitment to ecumenical dialogue. They highlighted a range of learning outcomes, such as recognizing the plurality of valid biblical interpretations and confronting contrasting understandings of Church diversity and unity. Despite finding the dialogue occasionally challenging, particularly in navigating theological differences, the overall evaluation of the exchange was highly positive. It fostered a new sense of global Christian community, empowered their local SCM, and encouraged further reflection on identity and mission. Importantly, they felt that the SCM A had

not only gained insight into their local context but had done so with curiosity, empathy, and openness (Milan: “The[y] addressed us in a highly positive way giving ear to our perspectives [and] being open and excited about this exchange. Our group is deeply grateful”). Ultimately, all participants testified to a process of hermeneutical growth, characterized by expanded interpretive horizons and a commitment to ongoing engagement in ecumenical initiatives.

Second exchange: SCMs C and D

The second exchange of the project took place during June and July 2021, involving the SCMs C and D. SCM C is part of a well-established and nationally organized Protestant structure, whereas SCM D is one of the smallest SCMs on its continent. It consists of local university students, along with several others who have relocated to the city for academic purposes. SCM D is an ecumenical movement that brings together Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical students, fostering a diverse and inclusive environment for dialogue and collaboration.

Initial questionnaire for participants

Participants from SCM C described a variety of relationships with the biblical text, ranging from daily personal readings to engaging with it solely during religious liturgies. For some, reading the Bible was a private practice, while for others, it had a more communal dimension. Their priorities when approaching the text were equally diverse, with some emphasizing the importance of its contemporary relevance, context awareness, the discovery of new meanings, or even the environment in which the reading took place (Sophie: “A quiet surrounding – a thorough reading/being awake and aware – being mentally and emotionally connected to the world I live in”). This diversity of approaches was also evident when participants were asked about their motivations for participating in the project, as both affective and cognitive interests were expressed (Shen: “I am interested to learn more, as well as develop my understanding”). However, all participants agreed that their religious background played a significant role in shaping their interpretation of Scripture (Andrea: “I think the general background of a person – faith, personal circumstances – affects the Bible interpretation”).

The Bible reading style of SCM D exhibited a slightly more uniform stance. All participants mentioned reading the Bible three to four times a week, both at home and in church. When asked about the influence of their religious background on their Bible reading, half of the participants felt that it was completely influential, while the other half were unsure but acknowledged that it could play a role. A similar split appeared when participants were asked about the factors they considered important during Scripture reading. Half emphasized the importance of actualization, while the other half highlighted the value of considering the text’s historical background (Gezanhe:

"I always consider the Lord's prayer where it says: 'give us our daily bread.' Reading the Bible, I take it as a way of feeding, motivating, or strengthening our ability to understand the Holy Spirit's opportunities."). When it came to their motivation for participating in the project, cognitive interests were more prominent than affective ones, with many participants mentioning a desire to learn as their primary motivation (Francy: "Willingness to learn is what motivated me to be part of this project").

First sessions

For SCM C, reading the Acts of the Apostles 15 text proved to be a challenging and sometimes perplexing experience for the participants (Sophie: "I find [the text] difficult!"). They began the reading process in silence, and, during the subsequent discussion, they frequently paused for reflection. Their approach to the text was characterized by a critical and deconstructive attitude (Sophie: "Why do we have verse 20 at all? Why couldn't they just skip from verse 19 to 21 (three 'don'ts') or probably you have to skip 21 as well. I don't get the point why you need rules at all!"). This process involved continuous problematization, where participants raised questions about the text's meaning and implications (Andrea: "Why would you put this burden on the people?"). Regarding its status, the participants treated the biblical text primarily as an object for rational analysis (Anna: "Why they should not do this? Is it out of courtesy or is it because it's bad by itself?"), with critique playing a significant role (Sophie: "At the letter [the council sent, it was affirmed:] 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements.' All of a sudden, the Holy Spirit is also behind these rules! . . . The more we were talking the angrier I got, . . . It has a lot to do with integration, [there are] still those three 'don'ts' . . . for the whole Church, and it still bothers me!"). To a lesser extent, the text served as a source of identification for the participants (Andrea: "It's also something we see in the churches today. It's a core group that decides"). The most prominent heuristic keys used in interpreting the text were related to their lived experiences within diverse Christian traditions, as well as past experiences within their local church settings (Sophie: "About the Church in [our region and] their discussion about homosexuality, all of the sudden it was . . . a big, big, issue!"). This focus on lived experiences helped shape their critical reflections and interactions with the text.

The participants in SCM C analysed Acts of the Apostles 15 through multiple layers of interpretation, incorporating its historical, literary, and theological dimensions. They frequently referred to the historical background of the text, particularly the relationship between the Jerusalem Christians and the Gentiles, to better understand the context and the tensions addressed by the council. There was also a focus on the literary features of the text and its theological implications, especially the implications of the debates about godly laws and Moses' recommendations. For instance, Sophie reflected on the symbolism

of the characters and events, noting, “Isn’t it revealing that Barnabas and Mark are ending up in Cyprus? An island! And where [Paul and Silas] are the churches grow stronger . . .? Luke . . . is taking sides with Paul and Silas!” The interpretation of key characters such as Paul, Luke, and Moses played a significant role in their understanding of the Scripture. The participants explored how the text addressed the three prohibitions decreed by the council, with some questioning their significance (Shen: “These rules are [just] opinions”), and others reflecting on the leadership of Paul and Silas and its impact on the growth of the churches (Anna: “What gave me a little bit of hope . . . is that even though they separate . . . , still the last sentence is ‘helping the churches grow stronger’”). The actualization of the verses was mostly carried out on a discursive level, with the group connecting the themes of the passage to contemporary issues. These included the need for debate within the Church, conciliarity, conflicts in the current Church, discussions about gender identities, and the importance of finding ecumenical common grounds (Andrea: “What stood out [was that they] always [were] having long discussions about . . . disagreements . . . , That’s something that’s often missing today”). Anna also emphasized the importance of focusing on shared values to foster unity: “It’s hard to find rules that everybody can agree on . . . but . . . concentrating on things that we have in common . . . is more promising.” The general approach to appropriation was critically oriented, with most of the participants focusing on challenges within their own Church or SCM, indicating a reflection on the implications of the Scripture for contemporary Christian practices.

On the other hand, SCM D’s approach to reading the Acts of the Apostles 15 text was markedly different from SCM C’s. The reading was integrated into a broader liturgical context, beginning and ending with prayers. The group asked for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their interpretation, with a focus on making the text understandable and inspiring a lifestyle in accordance with its teachings. This spiritual framework helped set the tone for their communal reading, which was not only focused on the text itself but also on fostering a shared, unified experience within the group. The reading was highly structured, following a clear format aligned with Questionnaire 4, and it fostered a cohesive and communal dynamic. This was evident in the group’s verbal and gestural affirmations of one another’s contributions, such as “I agree with you” and extensions of each other’s thoughts (Eteferau: “Just the same with what Francy has said . . .”). This collaborative and supportive environment helped shape their collective interpretation, where the focus was not only on the intellectual understanding of the text but also on maintaining an inclusive and ecumenical attitude. From a hermeneutical perspective, SCM D’s reading was characterized by an ecumenical and inclusive attitude, emphasizing God’s love and mutual acceptance. Francy expressed this clearly, stating that the core of the text is “[to] accept everybody,” while Awel highlighted the importance of fostering “acceptance to each other.” The text was viewed as a source of inspiration, identification, and authority, reinforcing the group’s sense of connection to the Scriptures (Gezanhe: “it’s really

a good thing to have law!”). In terms of the heuristic keys they employed, the group’s multi-denominational composition played a significant role. As Gezanhe noted, “Regardless from which church [students] came from . . . you can do the Bible study with them, preach, share the word of God.” This reflects the group’s experience of diversity within unity, as they came together from different Christian traditions to study and interpret Scripture. Additionally, the impact of the global pandemic and their communal tendencies influenced their approach. Francy observed how long Church services, sometimes lasting for five hours, are a normal part of their religious life, emphasizing the social and interactive nature of their gatherings: “They’re singing, talking, communicating to the others because you need that for yourself.” This communal aspect of their faith practice added a dimension of shared life and fellowship to the biblical interpretation process.

In SCM D’s reading of Acts of the Apostles 15, the group’s approach diverged from a typical academic or historical focus, prioritizing theological interpretation and spiritual reflections. Unlike SCM C, which engaged deeply with the text’s historical and literary aspects, SCM D’s reading was predominantly theologically driven, with a strong emphasis on classical Pauline themes such as salvation by faith, justification by grace, and the expiatory sacrifice of Jesus. Francy highlighted this theological focus, stating, “This scripture [focuses on] the sacrifice [of] Jesus . . . on the cross. . . . There are no conditions for you to be saved, apart from his grace and your faith.” The text, therefore, served as a lens through which the group reflected on the core doctrines of Christianity, rather than an object of intellectual critique or historical exploration. The main characters in their discussion were God, Barnabas, and Paul, with Paul being portrayed positively, embodying values like unity and acceptance. The central theological concepts that emerged in their reading included inclusion and acceptance within the Church, the grace of God, and the role of Moses’ law in the Christian faith. These ideas framed their understanding of the text and shaped their collective reflections. As Gezanhe remarked, the Apostles’ actions in Acts 15 were viewed as attempts to “create unity . . . , they want to understand each other . . . , have a common goal . . . , a common vision.” Most of the text actualization followed similar interpretative keys, stressing the great diversity within the SCM, its ecumenical mission, and the need for tolerance and acceptance. Awel’s comment, “We [need] to work together and be able to bring . . . acceptance to each other,” captures the group’s sentiment about fostering unity amid diversity, which they saw as a practical outworking of the message in Acts of the Apostles 15. This sense of unity was reinforced by Francy’s interpretation of the text as a mirror of their own experiences in the SCM, where they felt a deep sense of community and inclusiveness, without being burdened by denominational or cultural differences. “This is practically what’s happening in the SCM, where we don’t have differences, . . . denominations, . . . cultures, . . . criticisms, is like one unity, one group way, . . . one big family,” Francy reflected, highlighting the romanticized and idealistic view of

Christian unity that the text inspired in the group. The group did not seem to critically interrogate the deeper tensions or conflicts present in Acts of the Apostles 15 (such as the disagreements between Paul and Barnabas), nor did they seem to question the practical and doctrinal challenges of achieving such unity within the Church. Instead, they saw the text as an affirmation of their own harmonious, ecumenical experience within the SCM. In terms of practical outcomes, the conversation did not lead to concrete actions. However, there was a suggestion to study the text with other students, reflecting the group's desire to share the insights gained from their reading with others. The session concluded with a prayer, which carried a tone of gratitude and a deep awareness of the fragility of life, especially given the ongoing global pandemic. The prayer included pleas for protection from the virus and for Christ's guidance, with Gezanhe's words representing a deep spiritual outlook: "If this is the last day for us to be on earth, we are hoping to meet you in heaven."

Second sessions

In the second session between SCMs C and D, the dialogue diverged significantly from the pattern observed in other project exchanges, both in structure and tone. Unlike other groups that engaged in conversations about diverse topics, this exchange was largely dominated by four participants (Sophie and Andrea from SCM C, and Francy and Eteferau from SCM D), resulting in a narrower range of perspectives and a more limited duration of the meetings. SCM C's participants noted and reacted to the liturgical and devotional structure framing SCM D's approach to Scripture. The group observed how their counterparts integrated prayer and worship into their Bible reading, treating it as a spiritually nourishing, unifying experience rather than a platform for analytical analysis. Sophie's comment captures this realization: "The issue of worshipping was a main issue to them. Praying with the Scripture, reading the Scripture unites them, so it seemed to me as if reading the Scripture is not something to reflect their belief but to nourish the belief." This insight highlighted a fundamental contrast between the two groups' hermeneutical styles: while SCM D emphasized Scripture as a devotional and formational practice, SCM C approached it through critical reflection and deconstructive questioning. This interpretative difference led to a range of emotional and intellectual reactions from the SCM C participants. Their attitude towards their counterparts vacillated between critique and self-reflective openness. At one end, there were strong critical responses, particularly from Sophie, who expressed scepticism about the coherence and consistency of SCM D's interpretative framework: "Their Bible reading habits has no way to [inform] their beliefs, or to ground their beliefs. It's not that the belief has to follow the Scripture, but the Scripture has to follow the belief." Such a view suggested a perception that the SCM D's approach was governed more by pre-existing theological commitments than

by engagement with the text itself. However, this critical posture was not uniform or static. There were also moments of openness and recognition of common spiritual ground. Andrea, for instance, recalled her own past experiences in similar worship environments, showing a willingness to connect empathetically across cultural lines: “I experienced a similar way of worship before, it was . . .”

A profound and decisive interpretative divergence determined the entire dialogue; this was the status that each group ascribed to the Biblical text. This fundamental difference shaped not only how each group engaged with Scripture, but also how they perceived each other’s interpretative integrity. For SCM D, the Bible functioned as a source of divine authority, a foundational and guiding force for both belief and behaviour. Their approach to the text was reverent, liturgical, and devotional. Scripture was not just read but inhabited through prayer, song, and communal affirmation. It provided a clear moral and theological compass. As Andrea from SCM C noted, expressions such as “the Bible is the word of God” or “the word of God was fulfilled” surfaced repeatedly in SCM D. In contrast, SCM C viewed the Bible more as a human document shaped by divine inspiration, which opened it up to historical-critical scrutiny and deconstruction. Andrea articulated this explicitly: “For me it’s not the word of God given to people, it is the words of people inspired by God. . . . That makes a bit of a difference, and . . . changes how you approach the meaning of the text or what you take from it.” Their orientation was academic, analytical, and often sceptical; posing questions, critiquing narrative structures, and problematizing theological assumptions embedded in the text. The most revealing dimension of this divergence, however, lay in the mutual accusations of text instrumentalization. Each group perceived the other as selectively using Scripture to support preexisting cultural or ecclesial practices and norms. Sophie from SCM C remarked: “Our approach was to say: ‘we look at the Scripture, what is it talking about? what is it telling?’ I had the impression their approach was rather: ‘We have our belief. What do we find within the Scripture to side our belief?’” Conversely, Francy from SCM D mirrored this critique by suggesting that the other group interpreted Scripture to suit their cultural lifestyle: “They were looking for something that would fit within their culture . . . instead of trying to live according to the Scripture.” She perceived their method as a domestication of God’s grace into culturally acceptable terms, rather than a surrender to the transformative demands of divine revelation: “Instead of trying to see [on which] way can we all . . . find the grace of God, it is more about: ‘How can we fit the grace of God into our living standard?’ or ‘. . . into our culture?’” Andrea’s further reflection, “[their practice] was about reading and singing and praying and it wasn’t so much about what do I take from the message,” again underscores SCM C’s preference for an interpretive approach centred on personal or ethical takeaways, in contrast to SCM D’s more communal, worship-infused orientation.

These final reflections underscore a notable limitation in the exchange's potential between SCMs: unlike other exchanges in the project that resulted in tangible shifts in perspective, interpretive approach, or future action, the perceived effects here were minimal and, when existing, confined to personal self-awareness, particularly regarding hermeneutical blind spots and cognitive biases. Sophie's comment encapsulates this outcome: "[reading together] reminds me of my blind spots. I mean, getting closer to the Scripture always by your head and your brain and your rationality, instead of . . . your emotions and beliefs, and by asking for what keeps us together." Similarly, Andrea reflected on how the exchange reconnected her with past impactful experiences of faith: "It reminded me of experiences that certainly had quite a huge impact on me and my faith and faded away a little bit. . . . I always enjoy discussing different texts with people because I'm usually one who looks quite on the rational side of things and it's nice to be pointed at things that you just don't see." However, this approach remained retrospective and introspective rather than generative. It recalled the previous change without prompting a new change. The dialogue did not inspire concrete actions, new theological insights, or behavioural commitments. There were no movements towards more ecumenical engagements, no changes in scriptural practices, and no clear deepening of intercultural sensitivity, at least not beyond a momentary or intellectual level.

The second session of the SCM D closely resembled their partners' previous one, though at times it became even more pointed in tone. When evaluating the other group's interpretive practices, the dynamic remained cohesive and communally reinforcing. The participants attributed significant influence to the liberal cultural context of their interlocutors. Eteferau remarked, "They [find what is] right and wrong in their society. So, they basically build on that and sometimes just overlook what the word of God is saying, and then just going with what the society [says]. They said . . . : 'In [our continent], it is tough to obey the rules, then take [them out]. . . .' something like that. So that means they have something they believe in and want to believe in that." The group maintained a critical stance, often with limited tolerance for ambiguity or interpretive flexibility. Francy commented: "[For them, reading the Bible is about] finding something that they disagree with, instead of trying to understand why it was so. [They ask:] 'Why the rules?' The rules [are] something that to them does not fit, [so] they felt they should not be there . . . , removed from the Bible." She continued: "I . . . disagree [with them] about the law of Moses [being] not the law of God. My question [would be]: 'Where does the law of Moses come from?' . . . because Moses wrote it based on what he got from God, that's how!" Nevertheless, the group's position was not entirely closed. On occasions, brief yet significant moments of critical openness and empathy emerged. Francy, reflecting on a partner's response, noted: "I understand [Sophie's] point, why it is making her angry. . . . I would also be angry if somebody is subjecting me to that in order for me to become a believer."

The interpretative method employed by their dialogue partners became a central point of criticism, frequently portrayed as textually superficial, limited in scope, or ideologically biased. Awel observed: "They picked what interests them . . . and not really to get a full interpretation of the whole context." Much of the discussion centred on divergent reading approaches and differing views on the status of Scripture, with the authoritative nature of the Bible repeatedly emphasized by the participants from SCM D. Gezanhe stated, "All whatever Moses said is from God [but] within a certain context." Eteferau added: "When they read the Bible is just like any other book to them, [it] is not to teach and instruct . . . , there is no sense of learning. . . . For us, for me, . . . the Bible is the . . . full word of God that is inspired by the Holy Spirit. So, as I read or approach it, I think 'What can I learn from this text?'" The exchange yielded minimal transformation in the participants' interpretive frameworks and offered little advancement in intercultural competence. Awel reflected, "I [evaluate] this type of exchanging . . . in a positive way because . . . for one person to grow [he/she] needs the other person criticism, [so he/she can be] able to strengthen [his/her] capacity of thinking." Nonetheless, no significant hermeneutical development was observed; rather, a tendency towards interpretive stagnation or a reaffirmation of previously held views prevailed. As in earlier cases, the dialogue did not stimulate any tangible behavioural change or practical ecclesial engagements.

Third session

The final session of the exchange maintained an erratic and often fragmented dynamic, marked by frequent misunderstandings, misinterpretations of one another's statements, and repeated retreats into defensive or apologetic positions. As Sophie candidly admitted, "We had a hard time [trying] to understand what we were talking about." A clear example of this occurred in discussions surrounding the liturgical framing of the SCM D's Bible reading. Gezanhe explained, "They [said:] 'these people end with the prayer,' . . . If we haven't done it, it's like you missed something. . . . Once you [pray], you let everything in God's hands." In contrast, Anna responded, "I didn't insist on a prayer because we did not know each other before and . . . it is in [my country], for a lot of young people, something very personal." Sophie further clarified, "We had a common Bible study, [not] a common worship . . . , That's still a difference!"

Participants attributed most interpretive discrepancies to cultural and contextual differences between the groups, navigating these contrasts with a mixture of openness, critical questioning, and at times, defensiveness. As Anna remarked, "Gezanhe . . . you said that we don't take the Bible seriously. I was even a little bit hurt, to be honest. For me applying the Bible from its context to today is very much taking the Bible seriously, and it's not a book like all the others." Judgements concerning the interpretative methods of the partner group often culminated in mutual accusations of instrumentalizing the biblical text. Francy stated, "We look at [the Bible asking]: 'How are we going to apply

the scriptures in our daily life?’ and for them is more like ‘how does this picture fit in [my life]?’,” to which Andrea responded, “We exactly discuss the same thing when we reacted to your video . . . feeling exactly the opposite.” The status of the biblical text emerged as a central and contested issue. There were repeated affirmations of its inspired nature, alongside rebuttals of the accusation that it was being treated as mere literature. Francy affirmed, “The Bible [is] the word of God. [For them] it is the word of God [written] through the interpretation of the people of God.” In contrast, Sophie responded, “I don’t agree . . . when you said that we take the Bible as a book, as any other. That’s not true! But we take it first for a book. . . . By studying [it] God talks to us in different ways.” Despite the often tense tone, moments of mutual appreciation emerged, where interpretative differences were acknowledged as potential learning opportunities. As Anna reflected, “I receive the strong reminder of grace . . . , and for that I’m extremely grateful.”

The perceived outcomes of the exchange remained limited, with minimal broadening of hermeneutical horizons. Nevertheless, a narrow window for increased awareness of personal biases, mutual learning, and self-critique appeared to open towards the end. Eteferau observed, “[They] do Bible studies more relating to their culture, and . . . for us is more into emotion into our beliefs.” Similarly, Andrea noted, “Sometimes we forget to look at . . . how does [the text] touch me emotionally, and I think that’s something that we can learn from others.” Anna added a critical self-reflection: “It’s an easy way out for both of us, [arguing that] the [other] group is coming to their conclusions due to cultural settings or just fitting something to a culture or a belief. . . . It’s not true!. . . . It’s easier . . . not to reflect more deeply about what they’re doing and maybe changing . . . your own beliefs or your own way of doing things.” Despite these insights, the exchange ultimately seemed not to inspire any further concrete action or behavioural transformation.

Evaluation questionnaire

The participants of SCM C reported that their understanding of the biblical text underwent minimal, if any, change as a result of the exchange. This was attributed primarily to a perceived lack of comprehension on the part of their interlocutors, as well as to the brevity of the encounters. As Sophie noted, “I felt there was a lack of understanding on their side concerning questions that bother us in [our country].” Despite this, all participants acknowledged that the shared biblical study contributed to a deeper appreciation of the diversity and unity within the global Church. Andrea reflected, “It showed to me that diversity in the Church has always been there, right from the beginning and that many decisions were made by humans in the end, even though they also pointed out that for God there is no difference between the people.” Correspondingly, there was almost no reported shift in their interpretive methods or hermeneutical approaches. Reflections on personal transformation were slightly more varied: only one participant acknowledged a meaningful

change at the individual level. Sophie commented, “No. There was no time to get to know each other thoroughly. It was a kind of confrontation with the position of the other group and not a way of convergence,” while Anna remarked, “I would describe this change as a greater tolerance for differences between different groups.” Additional insights were limited and primarily related to the recognition of interpretive diversity and the influence of contextual factors on biblical reading practices. When asked to evaluate the exchange, nearly all participants offered a positive assessment, stating that they had “enjoyed” the experience or found it “worthwhile.” Approximately half of them reported having gained a greater awareness or understanding of the ideological frameworks guiding their partners’ interpretations.

The evaluation of the exchange by members of SCM D highlighted one of the methodological limitations of the research design: a marked tendency among participants to disengage from the project following the final session. In this case, only two individuals responded to the concluding evaluation questionnaire. Both affirmed that the exchange led to a renewed understanding of the biblical text and enhanced their awareness of how unity and diversity are perceived within the global Church. However, neither reported any significant transformation in their approach to Scripture. One participant indicated that the experience prompted her to become more critically reflective of her cultural and ecclesial context, while the other stated that no personal change had occurred. Regarding specific learning outcomes, responses were similarly mixed. One participant denied experiencing any notable learning, whereas the other stated: “I learned . . . that you can always learn something new from the Bible and that we should not let our surroundings determine how we interpret” (Francy). Both participants nonetheless assessed the exchange positively. As Gezanhe noted, “I got more information from the overall understanding and performance of the other team, whereby I believe that should I meet a Christian from [their country], regardless of the denomination, I will be able to have a productive conversation.”

Third exchange: SCMs E and F

The third exchange of the project took place in August 2021 and involved SCMs E and F. SCM E comprises smaller member organizations structured along ethnic and regional lines, encompassing participants from Orthodox, Coptic, and Apostolic traditions. Approximately six members, both male and female, took part in the exchange. In contrast, SCM F represents the local chapter of a larger national Protestant body, with around five participants involved, the majority of whom were women.

Initial questionnaire for participants

Participants from SCM E reported varied Bible reading practices, ranging from daily engagement to reading once or twice per week. All participants

indicated that these readings occurred both privately and within communal liturgical contexts. When asked about what they considered important in engaging with the Bible, a broad spectrum of responses emerged. Some emphasized the significance of understanding the historical background of the text or its contemporary relevance, while others highlighted the role of ecclesial tradition or sought inspiration and motivation for their faith (Laila: “It motivates me and helps me strengthen my faith. Plus, every time I read the same verse, I discover new meanings”). Regarding the influence of one’s ecclesial tradition on biblical interpretation, most participants considered it highly significant (Fatima: “Of course [it influences]! I have done Bible readings with Christians from various sects and . . . the interpretations differed a little bit, not only due to their religious background but due to educational and social background as well”). Their stated motivations for participating in the exchange could be broadly categorized into two domains: cognitive (seeking knowledge or understanding) and affective (seeking spiritual encouragement or emotional connection).

The members of SCM F, on the other hand, reported a close and almost daily engagement with the biblical text, often describing their relationship to it in terms of deep reverence and affection (Kathy: “I read my Bible very often, one to four chapters every day . . . , I also combine it with praying, sometimes worship . . . , I really love it! . . . I also like to carry my Bible with me, so I can read while I’m waiting somewhere”). Owing to their regular involvement in structured Bible studies, nearly all participants read the Bible both communally and privately. As in other SCMs, participants highlighted the importance of both contextualizing the text historically and applying it to contemporary life. However, SCM F was distinctive in prioritizing the necessity of divine presence and guidance during the reading process (Marcus: “[It is important] to pray before starting, that the Holy Spirit will open the text for me”). There was a general consensus among members that the personal background of the reader significantly shapes the interpretative process. When asked about their motivations for participating in the exchange, most pointed to affective reasons, such as the desire to foster dialogue and cultivate new relationships across cultural and ecclesial boundaries (Maria: “I want to get in touch with Christians from all over the globe . . . , that’s why I find it a pity that we only meet the other group once”).

First sessions

The first reading session of SCM E was marked by a relaxed and collegial atmosphere. The discussion included moments of shared laughter, silent reflection, and frequent expressions of agreement, with almost no internal disagreement. Three primary interpretative approaches emerged during the session: a historical-contextual reading (Elias: “The apostles are coming from different traditions [and] places [and] studied its Jewishness in a different way. For example, Paul and Barnabas are from the diaspora . . . , Paul rooted

from Benjamin tribe, but Barnabas, he was Greek. And other apostles are living in Jerusalem”); an ecclesial-practical focus (Laila: “There should be a sacrifice [from] each side so that [we] could unite. . . . Orthodox, Protestant, Catholics and all churches”); and a reproductive or imitative perspective (Joseph: “What these verses tell nowadays [is that] there is always a solution if we sit together, no matter what our problem is, no matter what our thoughts are”). These approaches indicated a general understanding of the biblical text as a source of moral and spiritual inspiration. Two predominant interpretative keys were employed: a collectivist orientation towards societal challenges and a particular concern for contemporary youth issues (Elias: “Migration . . . is a big problem nowadays in [our country] and there are two opinions . . . in the Church, [some say]: ‘Let’s migrate . . . to another country. . . . And there is another [group] that [think]: ‘This is our nation, and we should stay here to make our nation better’”).

The readers made only limited reference to the historical, literary, or theological contexts of the text in their interpretative efforts. The figures most frequently mentioned were Paul and Barnabas, with whom the participants predominantly aligned. The central themes of their discussion centred on the cultural diversity within the early Church as depicted in the chapter of Acts of the Apostles and the processes of conflict resolution presented in the narrative. Two primary theological insights emerged: first, that disagreement can always be overcome through dialogue and mutual understanding (Joseph: “There’s always a solution when we sit together, and we discuss every argument. We will find a solution that will help all!”), and second, that God’s love is universal and inclusive (Fatima: “God’s love is not exclusive to a certain group of people. It is given to anyone who wishes out and . . . asks for his love”). The themes explored during the actualization of the text closely mirrored the hermeneutical keys established earlier: the Church’s imperative to resolve internal conflicts, the necessity of compromise and mutual concession, and the importance of respecting divergent decisions within the community. The most frequently employed appropriation strategy was the *correspondence of relations* (Elias: “We have these problems but in different topics”), through which participants drew analogies between the biblical narrative and contemporary ecclesial challenges. However, the first reading session led to only limited ecclesial, ideological, or cultural self-reflection and inspired minimal practical responses (Joseph: “It’s not my job to put more [weight] to carry to the people. . . . My job is to release the pain of the people, to tell them that life is very simple, and they are loved”).

In contrast, the Bible exchange session conducted by SCM F took place within a liturgical framework that included prayers, dialogical engagement, and moments of reflective silence. The setting remained informal throughout, marked by internal jokes, laughter, gentle interruptions, and frequent gestures or expressions of mutual affirmation. Participants often referred to their partner SCM, inviting deeper mutual acquaintance (Marcus: “You could also

ask . . . if you want to . . . know something about us”), and recognizing them as a source of learning (Maria at the final prayer: “I thank you [God] that we have the opportunity to learn from the other group from far away”). From a hermeneutical standpoint, certain textual elements were repeatedly identified as difficult to interpret (Nora: “I don’t understand why these [prohibitions] are so important for them”). A range of interpretative attitudes were employed, the most prevalent being a critical and deconstructive approach (Marcus: “Why they picked these laws [if] Jesus said: ‘It’s not what . . . you eat what makes you unclean, it’s what comes out of your mouth?’”), alongside an ecumenical way of reading (Maria: “The ecumenical councils usually have exactly that problem, that they come from different backgrounds and because of [that] they think the Bible has to be interpreted . . . this or that way”), a rationalistic tendency (Marcus: “The second law is logical to me, because it’s [about something] which . . . destroys relationships . . .”), and an inquisitive or questioning approach. In this exchange, the biblical text retained a dual role, primarily as an object of critical analysis and secondarily as a source of spiritual inspiration (Marcus: “‘What God should [inspire] in your life out of this text?’ . . . that’s always in my view the way how to deal with the [Bible]”). The group stood out for its engagement with multiple Bible translations and scholarly commentaries, and for its numerous references to the literary (both Old and New Testament), theological, and historical (religious and cultural) contexts of Acts of the Apostles 15 (Maria: “It’s basically fear that we [are] here speaking, of losing their tradition”). The discussion centred around four key figures: Paul, Barnabas, the Jewish community, and the Gentiles, with the Gentile perspective being the dominant interpretative lens (Marcus: “The Jewish believers . . . wanted to hold up the position of the chosen people”). Core themes of the conversation included ecclesial unity, the resolution achieved at the Jerusalem Council, and the complex role of Jewish tradition within the early Church. Frequently cited theological insights included the enduring presence of conflict within ecclesial life, and the notion that while unity is ideal, its absence is not inherently catastrophic for the Church (Nora: “[The] messages is [that] you should find unity in what we believe but is not the biggest problem if you don’t get unity”).

The group placed strong emphasis on the text’s actualization, particularly in relation to how unity is lived within the global Church and the present state of Christianity in their country (Marcus: “Christianity [here] is very dead, very silent”). The text was appropriated through various strategies, with the so-called *correspondence of relations* being the most frequently employed (Maria: “They all thought they were something better because they were the people of God, . . . like it’s for some [locals] with the migrants”). Although the reading did not result in significant new insights or theological breakthroughs, it nonetheless inspired a range of modest intentions towards action (Maria: “I ask God to be open-minded in discussions, [accepting] that people have different opinions”).

Second sessions

The second meeting of SCM E preserved the relaxed atmosphere of the previous session and was marked by numerous gestures and verbal expressions of mutual agreement, the development of each other's arguments, reflective pauses, good humour, and minimal internal disagreement. No liturgical elements were included, and no direct communication with the partner SCM occurred. The biblical interpretation offered by their counterpart was largely received positively, viewed as complementary or enriching (Joseph: "Our group only answered the question without taking our time to . . . think about the text more. They . . . not only answered the questions but tried to give us more maybe, something new"), while also acknowledging the presence of two distinct analytical approaches (Elias: "We don't go back to the history, [but] bring . . . the council event to our days, so if we have problems, how can we make a solution?. . . They had a long debate about circumcision [or were] interested in those biblical events or Jewish rules"). The biblical text was primarily understood as a source of ongoing actualization and as sacred Scripture (Fatima: "The Bible [affirms]: '*It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place you any burden beyond these necessities, namely to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols*' so I guess it's the Holy Spirit that's acting in what they're saying"). At times, the group discerned what they perceived as a rationalistic, critical, or deconstructive approach to the text on the part of SCM F, which they "gracefully" countered by adopting what they described as an "orthodox" or more text-trusting stance (Laila: "Someone [from them] talked about the verse [regarding] making God angry. [For them], it sounds like a human judging about God. . . . For me, Peter was a human being, but he's an Apostle, so he's . . . saying the same things Jesus wants [to] say"). Overall, their reading attitude remained primarily oriented towards ecclesial praxis, theological reflection, and ecumenical engagement (Fatima: "The concept of 'if there's not unity then it's fine' is kind of very generalized. It depends on the context of the situation. . . . It's different when there's no unity in opinions, we can maybe reach acceptance of opinions . . . , but if there is no unity in the purpose, . . . that's more complicated").

The perceived effects of the exchange were ambivalent. While at times it led to interpretive "conflicts" and a reinforcement of the participants' original positions, it also created space for drawing connections between the experiences of both groups (Elias: "Similar [to some attitudes towards migrants in their country] is this *Theology of Land*. That God has given this land to us, [and] we are living very close to the holy places. . . . This is still present and has an impact on a large scale on every human in [our] region. . . . But [also], the thinking about the inheritance of Orthodoxy, of the 'true way' is still present in the Coptic church. So, we have it, we have it, yes!"). In some cases, the exchange led to a broadening of the hermeneutical horizon and the emergence of new interpretive perspectives (Elias: "[Their reference to] Jesus' teaching surprised me. We didn't discuss . . . about what is the

relation [between] Jesus' teachings and the Council of Jerusalem. This is very very new. I didn't think about it! and why do the Apostles want to make a justification to be circumcised or not. Because Jesus didn't talk in any gospel about it"). However, the exchange had no significant impact on the group's self-image, their awareness of the partner group's context, or the development of new practical initiatives.

During its second session, the reading dynamics of SCM F were again marked by a relaxed and informal atmosphere, characterized by frequent laughter and mutual verbal and non-verbal affirmations. However, in contrast to SCM E, participants in this group were more inclined to ask for clarifications and to voice open disagreements among themselves. No liturgical elements were included in this session. Participants expressed appreciation for their partner group (Kathy: "They seem more like . . . friends and in general they seemed really just nice and '*likeable*.' . . . it was a nice experience!"). The discussion frequently referenced the socio-religious context of the partner group, with some participants attempting to link aspects of the latter's interpretation to their broader cultural and religious setting. As Marcus explained: "They said [repeatedly that] 'God loves everyone and . . . forgives. . . . [That is] maybe motivated by their Islamic background. . . . The Islamic religion is quite more present there, [and for them] God is a more harder God, and that God loves you is quite a revolutionary message.'" SCM F participants displayed a generally more normative and unambiguous interpretive stance than their counterparts in SCM E (Kathy: "Joseph said that it must not be the same rules for everyone. . . . I would disagree with this point because to me it's clear that we have the universal truth of the Bible"; Marcus: "There is one truth and, in my view, also the Spirit gives one truth clearly . . . for everyone!"). The group was openly critical of the partner group's interpretive methods and emphasized their own more individualistic and opinion-centred approach. For example, Maria added, "They were somehow like in an exam, working all the questions and I think our [discussion] was more about finding your own opinion. [They] were not so much talking about their own opinions and thoughts." From a semantic perspective, the exchange was not especially rich. The biblical text retained its role primarily as a source of authority and a medium for ongoing actualization. The group's reading attitude remained strongly focused on personal faith and God's action, often expressed with confidence (Maria: "Of course the fight and the disagreement is not the aim but I think it's also important to have it to grow in faith"), though at times it became more interrogative or critical. Nora noted: "One has to ask what's the purpose or aim of a rule [such as] circumcision." Participants more frequently highlighted interpretive differences with their partner group than similarities, which generally led to further argumentation or straightforward disagreement, for instance, when the moderator mentioned: "Elias even said 'we are educated, we are Christians, we must find a solution,'" Kathy replied: "This sounds like a duty like it is a failure . . . a catastrophe when you fail!"

The effects of the exchange were limited. The comparison of interpretations primarily resulted in disagreement or conflict, with participants largely reinforcing their initial perspectives rather than developing new hermeneutical insights. No significant new understandings of the biblical text emerged. As Kathy remarked in response to SCM E's repeated assertion that a solution to any conflict is always possible: "I disagree . . . because . . . it is very clear to me . . . in this text [that] the Holy Spirit can bring agreement and it can bring compromise, but it can also bring elegant solutions as separating and going different ways. For me, it is clear that it is the Holy Spirit working in both ways." The exchange did not lead to changes in the group's self-perception, nor did it inspire any notable practical responses.

Third session

The synchronous exchange between SCMs E and F was among the most fruitful in terms of emotional intimacy and semantic depth, despite at times revealing starkly divergent biblical interpretations, as Kathy mentioned, "I want to stretch [the conversation] out through the whole night because I think this is great and I have a little bit of a different opinion." Participants frequently expressed spontaneous satisfaction with the interaction (Joseph: "I didn't know we could have so much impact at the [other] group, so I was so happy that we could deliver some . . . new ideas"), and multiple references to one another's cultural contexts enriched the conversation (Fatima: "Now I'm going to take a look at your culture, your history, to see the basis of [how] you approach the Bible. . . . It was really 'eye-opening' on so many levels!"). The attitude towards the others was mainly open, mindful, questioning, characterized by admiration and gratitude speeches, and even vulnerable, sensitive to the partner's self-disclosure, and eager for feedback. Marcus pointed out, "We as a [local] group . . . guessed some points which could influence you. . . . What do you think? What influences us?" Communication was direct, marked by explicit expressions of trust and mutual appreciation (Fatima: "Kathy said that she found us '*likeable*,' I just wanted to say thank you! [general laugh and gesture of mutual intimacy by Fatima and Kathy]"). No overall judgements of the partner group's interpretations were made. Furthermore, extra exegetical resources aided the conversation, as Fatima mentioned: "This time I actually did research, I compared many versions of the Bible." The groups discussed their respective interpretative approaches in a descriptive rather than evaluative manner (Maria: "For us it was more 'How do we view the situation through [the characters'] eyes?' . . . while you were . . . directly straight saying 'okay how do I apply this?'"). While few references were made to the status of the biblical text itself, much attention was given to the interpretative attitudes shaped by cultural and theological backgrounds. Fatima remarked, "I was impressed . . . that the opinions of both groups were influenced by not only their previous Bible studies but also their culture." Though interpretative differences were more

frequently highlighted than similarities, these were viewed as opportunities for learning and dialogue (Kathy: “Joseph said that there are no rules . . . but that doesn’t really make sense . . . in some ways [Jesus] actually made the law even harder”).

The exchange yielded multiple outcomes, including a broadening of participants’ hermeneutical horizons (Laila: “My opinion has changed about Paul and Marcus. The separation [was] not the end. [You] said that the separation may be a solution, and this is a new idea I started thinking about”) and, in some cases, the adoption or imitation of the partner group’s interpretative methods. It also fostered greater awareness of personal biases and cultural conditioning, while enhancing participants’ intercultural competence. As Joseph mentioned, “I really got new ideas and added [them] to my life, to my Bible . . . to read it in other way, so thanks.” Process evaluations consistently pointed to some form of semantic, attitudinal, or interpretive growth, even in the absence of interpretative consensus (Fatima: “For me it was meaningful, but in a different way, in a way that now I have many other questions”). The most important practical outcome was the expressed desire to maintain contact after the conclusion of the project in order to continue reading and reflecting on the Bible together.

Evaluation questionnaire

All participants from SCM E reported a broadened understanding of both the biblical text and the themes of Church unity and diversity as a result of the exchange. They attributed this enrichment primarily to their partners’ interpretative approaches and the ways in which they engaged with the text. Participants indicated that their own reading methods would likely change, incorporating elements from the other group such as a more questioning and problematizing stance towards Scripture, a stronger focus on actualization, or a greater attention to historical context, as Laila affirmed: “It would change [after] seeing how the other group analysed the Bible, compared to how I’m used to (based on the moment). I liked their way and felt like it’s helpful . . . to go back in time and see the act [with] the [character’s] eyes.” Their learning outcomes included recognition of the contextual nature of biblical interpretation, renewed awareness of the diversity of interpretive approaches, or a newfound appreciation of technology as a valuable tool for intercultural and ecumenical exchange (Elias: “I learned that technology made spaces small not only in daily or management work, but also in the cosmic church to contemplate together in different region and share our thoughts”). The exchange was evaluated positively by all participants, for instance, Fatima concluded: “This was a unique experience. Each group enlightened the other group with their ideas, and I personally took home a fresh perspective and a renewed strategy in my reading.” Two members specifically noted an increased awareness of the context and challenges faced by the partner SCM. The most frequently cited anticipated practical outcomes were a deeper commitment to

ecumenical dialogue and the integration of selected elements from their partners' interpretative style into their future Bible reading practices. Unfortunately, only one member of SCM F completed the evaluation questionnaire, making it impossible to provide a comprehensive assessment of that group's overall experience.

Fourth exchange: SCMs G and H

The fourth exchange of the project took place in September 2021 and involved SCMs G and H. SCM G is part of the national Student Christian Movement, the oldest student Christian organization in its country. As observed during the exchanges, the group is characterized by progressive and inclusive positions on issues such as social injustice, racial discrimination, and gender diversity. Approximately six participants, primarily male, from Non-conformist, Congregationalist, Anglican, and "liberal" Christian backgrounds took part in the dialogue. On the other hand, SCM H is affiliated with its national Student Christian Movement and, over the past decade, has gradually integrated into the national, regional, and global structures of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF). Today, it stands out as one of the SCMs with the most developed expertise in intercultural Bible reading initiatives, largely due to similar projects conducted within its continent. Around five participants, most of them female, represented this SCM in the exchange.

Initial questionnaire for participants

All members of SCM G reported reading the Bible once or twice per week, either individually, communally, or exclusively in group settings. As Vincent noted, "Mainly on a Sunday after joining worship to follow up on some references mentioned in the sermon. I also attend a weekly Bible study surrounding Palestinian liberation theology organized in the wake of aggression in the region, so I read my Bible communally and as an individual." When asked what they consider important when engaging with Scripture, participants offered a variety of responses. The most commonly mentioned approach was analysing the historical background of the text. Other key concerns included finding inspiration for action, relating the text to their current context, interpreting it in the light of Jesus' teachings, considering translation differences, and practicing reflective reading. As Claire explained: "Understanding both the text contextually and how my own context illuminates the text. I also try and be very conscious not to center myself in my Bible reading." All participants agreed that their socio-cultural context significantly influences their biblical interpretation. When asked about their motivations for joining the exchange, nearly all participants cited cognitive interests, such as the desire to gain deeper knowledge and to learn from different perspectives and interpretations. As Harry expressed it: "To gain a deeper understanding of the Bible and gain a new perspective and understanding of Christianity elsewhere."

In contrast, members of SCM H reported a more frequent Bible reading habit than their counterparts, typically engaging with Scripture daily or three to four times per week. All participants described their reading as both a private and communal practice. As Faith noted: "I at times read as an individual and every Wednesday I join a group . . . with whom we share different perceptions and ideas." In terms of interpretative focus, members of SCM H tended to emphasize the present-day relevance of the text over its historical background. Naomi explained: "[it is important] how much I understand the chronological events in the Bible, how much I resonate with certain verses, [and] how I can apply the word of God in my life and those of others." All participants recognized the significant influence of their personal and socio-cultural context on how they interpret Scripture. Similarly, their motivations for participating in the exchange were primarily cognitive, centring on the desire to learn from and engage with alternative interpretations.

First sessions

The first session of SCM G began with individual introductions, during which participants shared details about their academic backgrounds, current occupations, religious and activist involvement, as well as personal interests. The reading dynamic was casual and informal, marked by frequent laughter, gestures of agreement and disagreement, internal debates, and counterpoints. At times, the text was perceived as theologically and practically challenging (Harry: "[Regarding] purity [in the text]: What do you mean by pure? Is anyone's heart pure?"). The group adopted a markedly academic, analytical, critical, and inquisitive approach to the Scripture (Mark: "A lot of people would say Simon Peter is not Peter the fisherman [who is] writing. This is a text in his name . . . , and an early Bishop [affirmed] that this John Mark contributed to Mark's Gospel"). Consequently, the biblical text was predominantly treated as an object of study and critique, while also serving as a source of inspiration. As Vincent mentioned: "Being a congregationalist [the text says that] every decision that has a bearing on the Church [has] to go through a collective meeting." The group's interpretative strategies were deeply shaped by their theological education, denominational traditions, and ecumenical experiences. Claire remarked: "It is saying that mission is more important than the unity. . . . The ecumenical movement is not doing anything . . . , because it's trying to keep so many different voices together that we can't actually say anything together anymore." Biblical commentaries were frequently referenced to deepen the conversation (Mark: "Mark adds an editorial comment: 'By doing this Jesus pronounced all foods clean'. . . . A lot of people think that's not what Jesus is doing, that's what Mark adds because they have [already] pronounced all food clean. . . . The Church is even going further than . . . Jesus, . . . responding to something the Spirit of God has done"), and the discussion was enriched with critical historical, literary, and theological insights. Claire stated, "[Where] it says, 'when they believed, God made their heart pure.' That opposes my radical inclusivity.

Why do we have to believe? Didn't God make everyone's heart pure? Isn't Jesus' incarnation changed the whole world anyway?"

The group engaged with a range of biblical characters, such as Jesus, Peter, John Mark, and Paul, among others, primarily through a deconstructive lens, as Mark commented, "When you read about Paul in Acts, you just get the impression that he's got his dream job, you know, stoning people!" Their analysis incorporated a wide array of theological and ecclesiological concepts, including the role of tradition, church unity, the authority of the council's commandments, and the question of inclusion within the Church. Rather than seeking to extract central teachings from the text, the group focused on critically problematizing its implications. The narrative was read predominantly from the perspective of the Gentile believers, with actualization occurring mainly at a conceptual level. Discussions often centred on ecumenical and inclusivist frameworks, and the group employed different *correspondence of relations* to bridge biblical contexts with contemporary ones. As Alex commented: "Even if we don't necessarily see the text as kind of one-to-one normative, because we recognize the difference in context . . ." The reading process primarily inspired attitudinal shifts, such as greater openness to dialogue and self-critique, rather than immediate practical actions (Alex: "There is always a possibility we aren't all right and you're never gonna find that out if you are not prepared to take the risk of [embracing] vulnerability and encounter").

Similarly, SCM H's first exchange unfolded in a relaxed and collegial environment, driven primarily by cognitive motivations and a desire for mutual learning, as Nadia noted: "We are going to see how people interpret the Bible differently and . . . understand how we ourselves [do it]. Also, . . . how you are applying it to . . . your situation. . . . It is nice to see our own missteps and also trying to correct them slowly." The reading dynamics were notably cohesive, with participants frequently building on each other's ideas and expressing agreement. Their interpretative posture emphasized divine grace (Naomi: "The aspect that came out . . . first of all, was the Lord's grace"), identification with the text (Faith: "[As in the text], [here] is all about ethnic groups"), and a realistic, human-centred approach to Christian experience (Faith: "As Christians we need to recognize that disputes will always exist . . . , I call this 'realistic Christian[ity]']"). These elements underscored the text's function as both a source of inspiration and a mirror for present-day realities. A diverse range of heuristic tools informed their interpretation, including the local political climate (Naomi: "I relate a lot to [this story] in terms of our [political] elections"), traditional customs and cultural norms (Adamu: "In our traditional way, . . . we've adopted [to] listening to our elders. In the text, we saw that when disagreement came out, they went to the elders for reference. . . . As Faith said, we have a very patriarchal system, so what happens when the elders tend to lean on to a certain idea and are not open for change?") and the power dynamics between younger SCM members and elders in their local church settings, as Alex questioned, "Do

you guys think [we could] discuss with the elders and . . . the leadership level and . . . debating on a fair table . . . , especially in our situation?”

The strong focus on actualization left little room for the use of historical, literary, or theological references as strategies for explaining the text, and only a few references were made to its main characters. The central concepts and messages discussed followed the logic of the heuristic keys employed, emphasizing God’s grace, conflict resolution, the primacy of mission (Naomi: “[Despite] they did not resolve their personal issues it did not stop them from their main goal and their main vision”), and equality within the Church, as Faith added: “We can usually disagree, but we can usually resolve all this . . . , grace is for everybody, not just one particular party or body.” The actualization of the text was extensive, addressing the aforementioned themes with a predominantly critical perspective on the national Church. As Nadia emphasized: “When I meet what I call ‘holly Christians’ they . . . make me feel like I’m not Christian enough, because maybe I don’t wear or dress ‘Christian-like’ or have the behaviors . . . associated [to it].” The text inspired minimal practical responses, with only limited references to evangelization and proclamation (Faith: “[the text is] for us to learn the truth and being in a position to now share it with the rest of the community [and] society”).

Second sessions

The second meeting of SCM G unfolded as a dynamic and engaging debate, marked by the emergence of new topics and an abundance of arguments and counterarguments. Participants expressed satisfaction with the exchange and showed a strong sense of identification with their partners’ discussion. As Mark reflected: “I really enjoyed listening to the other group and I just find it amazing how sort of the different issues resonates across our contexts but in different ways.” The group’s attitude towards their partners was predominantly characterized by openness, vulnerability, and sensitivity. This was evident in their attentive consideration of the partner group’s background and the frequent comparisons drawn between their respective political, ecclesiastical, cultural, or religious situations. Mark remarked: “It felt . . . like watching a parallel Bible study to our own, . . . very familiar. I thought there was gonna be a greater cultural shift or gap, but . . . many of the points that were raised . . . were just very relevant to our own context . . . talking about toxic masculinity or patriarchy.” Claire echoed this connection: “Someone said ‘often in Christian circles young people can feel like they’re not Christian enough,’ that’s a phrase we use a lot in SCM.” SCM H’s interpretation prompted SCM G to revisit and reevaluate the content of their own previous discussion, often engaging with their partner’s interpretative method in a mostly appreciative way. Harry observed: “I think it was Mark last week who talked about how this passage might be a model for how we look at conflict, but the other group kind of spent the whole time on that and went into detail about actual practical examples . . . , which was interesting.” This

comparative approach also drew attention to the differing statuses attributed to the biblical text in the prior session, whether regarded as a source of ongoing actualization and inspiration or approached as an object of scientific analysis. As Mark put it: “We kind of kept it on a very . . . abstract level, and didn’t sort of relate it so practically as they did.” The group’s reading attitude became more contextual in this session, focusing on contemporary challenges faced by youth within the Church. Claire noted: “I do think experience does come with wisdom, but it also comes with blindness, and like a loss of energy The energy that young people bring, I think, is really important to the Church.” Mark added: “It’s . . . something we can resonate with, [this] kind of intergenerational dissonance, you know, between our generation and our parents’ generation.” In addition to these parallels, the group identified various interpretative differences, which were generally assessed positively and seen as sources of mutual growth. Claire remarked: “[Someone] said that the [key] word was Grace, I was like ‘oh yeah! Why don’t we use that word?’ Obviously, this passage is about Grace!” At the same time, moments of *graceful fighting* also emerged. As Alex commented: “They [affirmed that] unity can be good. I’m not against it . . . , but sometimes . . . if we sort of pursue unity for unity’s sake, then I always wonder about what we end up sort of sacrificing.”

Among the effects of the exchange, a clear thematic broadening emerged compared to the first session. As Alex observed: “Often . . . , the older generations like don’t handle [disagreement], or . . . they kind of challenge your confrontation and react really poorly.” This expansion of themes was accompanied by new perspectives on the biblical text. Additionally, the exchange fostered greater awareness of the participants’ own ideological positions. Claire reflected: “[The exchange] made me question a little bit . . . of how I see my faithful latent at my politics . . . I see that my politics has been inspired by my faith. but like I don’t think about it explicitly.” However, despite these insights, until this stage, the exchange did not appear to lead to any visible or practical behavioural effects.

The second session of SCM H, on the other hand, unfolded in response to their partners’ arguments, with a markedly critical stance towards the practices of the local church and the broader national context. Like SCM G, their attitude towards their partners was predominantly characterized by openness, vulnerability, and sensitivity. Nadia reflected: “We are [from this continent] in origin. We are known to have so many traditions Am I going to choose whatever my Bible and whatever God tells me to do, even though it goes against my culture? . . . We want to obey our ancestors, and the people put in place to show us the way, but at the same time, we want to obey God. So, it’s kind of tricky.” Their reflections also included elements of admiration and thoughtful questioning, as seen in Negeri’s comment: “That was a very interesting session . . . , how they really developed into the history of that text.” As their partners did in their second session, the group compared both analysis methods and the status they grant to the text, often arriving at

similar conclusions. Faith observed: "They did a lot of critics to the Scripture analysis [while] we tried to relate it with the various things that we experience here, as young people in this country. With them it was all about How does it look from . . . you know, the Bible, from the New Testament?" While most similarities were positively acknowledged, the differences were often seen as complementary and enriching. As Negeri put it: "Their [discussion] about acceptance, [that] you have to accept that people's will [may] not be the same . . . , that really touched me, and I appreciate it very much." In evaluating their respective reading attitudes, the group characterized SCM G's approach as mainly analytic or academic, in contrast to their own, which was rooted primarily in actualization, communitarian ecclesial praxis, and a socially critical lens. Adamu explained: "When we [were] reading the text, the first thing that came to mind was related to my current situation or current realities." Nadia added: "We even see from our parents the way they treat white people. They receive whatever they say . . . , whatever they do is also in a high standard."

As in the case of SCM G, the exchange led to a broadening of thematic horizons, sparking several new discussions, particularly around issues such as racism and social marginalization. Adamu reflected: "Some of our members and sure enough even the clergy, you find that they also are very racist towards minority groups, so it's interesting the question that they raised about confronting our power and it may not be necessarily racism but inequalities in also other forms." At the same time, the exchange enhanced the group's intercultural competence. As Nadia noted: "It made me think that I also need to reflect this, because I don't also know. I don't have a clear picture of how I would react when I find someone with a different ideology." Overall, the participants evaluated the exchange positively. This was particularly evident in their openness to adopting new interpretive approaches. Naomi remarked: "I really like how they went deep into the historical background of the text . . . I think in future . . . I will also focus on the historical background of the Scripture as a text, as opposed to just relating it maybe to the current situation, . . . It's very important [and] helpful to understand where the scriptures are coming from."

Third session

The synchronous exchange between SCMs G and H was among the most thematically rich and attitudinally transformative in the entire project. As Claire observed at the very outset: "Both [groups] brought up different ideas, ways of reading the Bible, and contextual things . . . That made each group compare that to their own situation . . . , it made us come out of our comfort zones and explore that passage in a different way." Almost all participants expressed satisfaction with the dialogue and showed a strong interest in both presenting their own cultural, ethnic, historical, or religious contexts and inquiring about those of their partners. Mark, for instance, asked: "It might

have been you Adamu [who asked]: ‘to what extent should I compromise on my heritage?’ . . . I think in [our country] we don’t really tend to think about heritage as a thing [nor] see ourselves as sort of passing on a culture What were you specifically referring to?” The attitude towards the other was predominantly characterized by openness, sensitivity to the partner’s disclosure, mindfulness, gratitude, and curiosity. Faith acknowledged: “That’s amazing Claire, thank you! . . . I remember I talked to Adamu [previously] and [told him]: ‘Oh my God, I’m not sure if they’re going to relate with what we discussed!’ but it quite astonishes me that some of the issues . . . we discussed . . . you could actually relate with [them]. The issues [of] patriarchy or feminism. . . . But . . . you did and added quite a number of things on them.” Communication was open and direct, with participants reflecting on their prior expectations and how those evolved throughout the conversation. Claire noted: “Being a [local] historian . . . , we kind of just think that in [your continent] you always talk about . . . colonialism, . . . about how to indigenize your religion, and actually I’ve seen that that’s not necessarily the case.” Adamu echoed a similar realization: “I expected a lot of differences . . . , especially [because] one [group] is in the global West-North and we’re in South, . . . but eventually I found . . . that we have some similarities.” Throughout the session, both groups frequently referred to their differing interpretive methods and reading attitudes. Nadia pointed out: “Our [reading] was more cultural and based on experience, theirs is more . . . thinking about what the leaders were saying and also relating to the [historic] situation, like the time settings.” However, these differences were predominantly regarded as positively complementary. As Alex expressed: “I really appreciate . . . the way you contextualized [the text], your approach to the study, and found that really interesting. I’ve learned a lot!”

The discussion evolved around three shared thematic keys. First, participants explored intergenerational tensions within their churches and reflected on their varied strategies for coping with them. Naomi remarked: “I found really exciting how they . . . discussed about intergenerational gaps. That is something that I found very captivating, and the issue of the older generation presenting the younger one as aggressive.” Nadia added nuance by affirming: “The relation with the older generations . . . doesn’t have to be oppositional.” From SCM G, Claire offered a more critical view: “You were talking about how God places people in positions of leadership, and I think that we can be more skeptical about that . . . , we’ve got maybe a lot more tension [here].” Second, the groups engaged in dialogue about their experience of being Christian in their respective cultural contexts. In one exchange, the moderator asked: “Is also compromising your heritage a part of what you consider is being Christian?” to which Adamu responded: “Well, yes! There [are] some things that we definitely have to compromise on . . . that’s the conflict that we are typically caught in between.” Claire contrasted this with her own experience: “We don’t have so much tension between Christianity and our culture, and we don’t have to think about that, . . . and that’s

a place of privilege.” The third major theme was the legacy of colonialism in both nations, with particular emphasis on the historical role of the Church. This topic held significant weight for SCM G, located in a former colonial power, as Alex noted: “The legacy of that today, and the way that that still affects people’s mindsets [in] colonial nations . . . to sort of a certain sense of dominance or superiority.” However, members of SCM H largely regarded this topic as unimportant, irrelevant, or confined to academic history, despite being descendants of former oppressed groups in a colonized nation. Naomi stated: “On a personal level it might not affect me as much . . . because history is just history.” While Adamu expressed concern about how such narratives are used to undermine Christianity in his continent: “It is normally brought up by the traditionalists [who] say that Christianity paved [the way] for colonialism. . . . My history teacher used to say that Christians [came] to colonize and brought Christianity along.”

As illustrated, the hermeneutic horizons of both groups expanded significantly through the discussions, allowing for the adjustment of prior assumptions and fostering deeper awareness of each other’s contexts, faith perspectives, and lived experiences. Participants overwhelmingly described the process as one of affective growth, moving from initial orientation to a space of stable and meaningful exchange. Nadia explained this transformation: “At first, I felt a bit awkward. It is the first experience listening to other people, seeing other people [while] they are recorded Then I was listening, [and] I was touched by their different ideologies, it was really unique . . . it has been interesting, a really good experience!” Such reflections highlight the emotional and relational impact of the exchange, which was ultimately evaluated in highly positive terms. However, it is worth noting that no concrete practical actions or initiatives emerged from the final session.

Evaluation questionnaire

Only two members of SCM G completed the evaluation questionnaire. While one participant reported that the exchange did not provide any new insights into the text nor impact his understanding of the Church’s unity and diversity, the other noted a significant broadening of perspective. This was attributed to the partner group’s reading method, interpretive outcomes, and willingness to be vulnerable, particularly in relation to shared topics and challenges. Mark explained: “My understanding of the text was influenced I really found it fascinating how they related it to the negotiation of the previous generations’ faith/traditions I was influenced by their personal stories and their ability to relate this to the text.” Both participants affirmed that the exchange influenced their future approach to the Scripture, especially by focusing more on actualization and on how Christians from other cultures may read it, but just one of them informed about personal changes, such as increasing their motivation for further intercultural exchanges. According to the readers, the exchange boosted a deeper sense of global community by

bridging cultural gaps. They agreed to evaluate the exchange as positive. One of them mentioned the modification of his reading method as a main future practical effect (Mark: “I learned that I need my reading of the Bible to be less abstract and grounded in my other’s real-world challenges to real life problems”).

In contrast, all participants from SCM H reported that their understanding of the biblical text, and of the Church’s unity and diversity, had broadened, primarily due to SCM G’s approach to the text and the thematic overlaps between both groups’ interpretations. As Faith noted: “Through the exchange, my understanding of the context was definitely influenced and broadened. Apart from relating with the realities we face today, it is important to look at the historical background of the context which brings meaningful and deeper understanding. I took this with me.” Similarly, all members affirmed that the exchange would impact their future method of reading the Bible, particularly through an increased focus on the text’s historical background and its original contextual meaning (Adamu: “Yes it [changes], rather than just relating texts to my current realities I’ll be looking more on the text and what the text meant at the time and in the context described in the Bible”). Moreover, participants shared that the exchange empowered them to critically reflect on their own cultural and ecclesial contexts, while simultaneously enhancing their intercultural awareness and competencies. As Naomi emphasized: “The idea of intergenerational gaps came up as part of the discussion. Respect is key when it comes to the gap, and we should respect and understand the difference in ideologies as opposed to representing a certain age group as aggressive or traditional.” Most of the identified learning outcomes concerned the wide diversity of biblical interpretations and the shared challenges faced globally by youth within Christian communities. The overall assessment of the exchange was strongly positive. Anticipated future outcomes included a partial adoption of their partners’ interpretive strategies, increased respect and appreciation for theological diversity, and greater openness to future ecumenical and intercultural initiatives.

Fifth exchange: SCMs I and J

The fifth and final exchange of the project took place between February and March 2022, involving SCMs I and J. The idiomatic dynamics of the project required English to be used as the official language of exchange, which posed challenges for participants from regions where English proficiency is less common. To ensure their inclusion, six English-proficient participants from two different national SCMs within the same region were brought together under the collective designation of SCM I. On certain occasions, participants from this group required the assistance of a translator to fully engage in the discussions. On the other hand, SCM J, affiliated with its national Student Christian Movement, is known for its strong advocacy in favour of justice, peace, environmental sustainability, inclusivity, and critical thinking. Its

progressive values are particularly evident in its role as a counterbalance to the more traditional and fundamentalist Christian student fellowships found on university campuses. SCM J was represented in the project by four participants, all from the same city.

Initial questionnaire for participants

Most members of SCM J reported similar Bible reading habits, typically engaging with the text once or twice per week, either individually or within group settings. When asked about what they considered important for biblical interpretation, the most frequent response emphasized the need to understand the historical and literary background of the text. As Stuart noted, "It is important to understand the literary and historical context surrounding the passage . . . , I personally find it important to visualize the scene, if it's a story, and to honour the range of emotions that the text might bring up." All participants agreed that the reader's religious background significantly influences interpretation, with some explicitly acknowledging efforts to critically reflect on or even distance themselves from it. Michelle, for example, shared: "[It] definitely [influences]! I've spent a few years now reacting to my evangelical religious background, my instinct is always to interpret texts the opposite of the way I was taught to." While their primary motivation for participating in the project was cognitive, aiming to explore and learn from other Christian approaches to Scripture, affective motivations related to dialogue and sharing were also present. As Nicole explained: "I really enjoy discussing the Bible with others and allowing my perspective to be broadened through this. This is something I do often, as a literature student."

In contrast, participants from SCM I demonstrated slightly more heterogeneous Bible reading habits, with some reporting engagement once or twice per week, while others read the Scriptures three to four times weekly. Their approaches to Bible reading were also more diverse, occurring in individual, communal, or hybrid settings. When asked about what they considered important for biblical interpretation, their responses varied considerably. Among the key elements mentioned were the necessity of God's presence and guidance, maintaining an "open mind," focusing on the text's actualization and its capacity to inspire action, and deepening one's knowledge of Christ. Some participants also approached the text with critical preconceptions. As Fernanda explained: "Acts 15 tells us about ways of resolving conflicts, [it] gives clues about mediation. Several teachings must be recognized, the first: there is no single way to resolve a conflict. In addition, we must bear in mind that it is not a good example of peace as mediation. It's good that it's a negative example because it shows us how vulnerable we are when it comes to differences between us." All participants agreed that their personal and cultural backgrounds significantly influenced their interpretation of Scripture. Their motivations for participating in the project were shaped by both cognitive and affective interests. As Pedro summarized: "The most important is to

know new friends, brothers, and sisters from other cultures we can share our experiences of life and different points of view about the Bible. It's a good idea to teach and learn at the same time."

First sessions

SCM I encountered challenges with the English language, which led to a dialogue that was at times non-fluid and slightly uncomfortable. Despite these barriers, their first discussion centred primarily on the themes of God's love and acceptance, as well as the believer's responsibility to embrace others. As Andrés noted, "The central idea is that the message of Jesus is for everyone . . . Jew and Gentile." Participants engaged the text either through identification or with a critical and deconstructive lens. For instance, Luis remarked, "[Some] people were having this . . . mindset, like: 'they have to accept God and accept our way to follow him.'" The text was thus interpreted both as a source for actualization and personal inspiration, and as a subject for critical reflection. Valeria commented: "The text is like an alert, . . . a very diffuse line exists between the rules or traditions and fundamentalism." The interpretative keys applied were diverse, often rooted in the participants' lived experiences of social or ecclesial marginalization, particularly on ethnic or national level. As Corina emphasized, "We can see the situation of native people from [our country]. People don't accept [them] sometimes, and I think in the text this is very explicit."

Due to the group's strong emphasis on actualization, there were only minimal references to the historical, literary, or theological backgrounds of the text. As a result, discussions focused predominantly on God's figure and actions, with little attention paid to other characters in the narrative. The concepts most frequently mentioned related to Christian diversity, respect for others' identities, the acceptance of non-Jews within the Christian community, and the proclamation of the gospel. According to the participants, the two central messages of the text were God's universal love for all people and the possibility of unity within a diverse church. As Valeria observed, "One similarity between the people in this text is that everyone believes in the same God, they don't understand God the same way, but everybody feels the faith and everybody loved God." Reflecting this perspective, the group predominantly aligned itself with the position of the Gentile community in the council narrative. Luis shared, "I kind of identify with . . . the non-Jewish people, because I'm the son of a bishop but I have grown up with very mixed feelings about my own faith." Most of the group's reading centred on actualizing the text, employing the previously mentioned hermeneutic keys. The primary strategy for appropriation was the use of *correspondences of relations*, connecting the biblical narrative with their own social and ecclesial experiences. As Fernanda noted, "The text tells us about resolving conflicts . . . It is not a good example [but a] negative one, it shows how vulnerable we are . . . to difference." Above all, the text served as a source of attitudinal inspiration,

shaping the participants' approach to the dialogue with SCM J. This was evident in remarks such as Luis': "I hope that we all share the . . . willingness to listen and appreciate the differences that could rise up during this exchange . . . , yeah, just having that spirit that is present in the text."

The first reading session of SCM J was notably more semantically rich than that of SCM I. It unfolded in a dynamic and relaxed atmosphere, characterized by frequent gestural and verbal affirmations, interruptions, and shared laughter. The group demonstrated a range of reading attitudes, including contextual and historical, critical and deconstructive, inquisitive and questioning, imitative, suspicious, as well as ecumenical and inclusive. For example, Michelle remarked, "I did not expect Peter to give a speech in favour of non-Jewish Christians, so I thought it must be a mistake in the text!", while Stuart emphasized, "Your relationships and your experiences have to be the things that unify That allows you to do things that are productive and constructive." The text was simultaneously treated as a source of identification and an object of critique and analysis, with attention paid to power dynamics and structural tensions (Michelle: "What strikes me is that the power dynamics are incredibly complicated"). A broad set of heuristic keys shaped their interpretation, including the nation's multicultural landscape, the participants' political orientation, their religious and ecumenical commitments, and a critical awareness of the Church's role in colonial history. As Bill noted, "In [our country] we live on aboriginal land . . . , and the . . . Church has . . . just facilitated colonization even more, and has been . . . striving to undo some of that damage." The group employed a variety of interpretive strategies. Historically, they referenced the cultic, ethnic, cultural, economic, and geographic contexts of the narrative. Literarily, they discussed the text's potential compositeness, drew on parallels with the Old Testament, the prophets, the Gospels, and apostolic letters. Theologically, they leaned towards Pauline thought, particularly regarding justification by faith transcending cultural boundaries (Michelle: "This . . . reminded me . . . of Paul's letter to the Romans Justification of the non-Jewish believers is this sense that faith can transcend cultural particularities and traditions"). Throughout the discussion, they referenced various figures in the text, such as Paul, Barnabas, James, Peter, and both Jewish and Gentile communities.

Much of the discussion centred on themes such as ecclesial inclusion and acceptance, cultural diversity within the Church, the role of tradition and Mosaic law in the early Christian community, and the conflict between Paul and Barnabas. Stuart reflected on the relational dynamics in the text, noting, "It's comforting having that story, where they have a really dysfunctional relationship There were always people with big egos and messy relationships." The group generally aligned itself with those portrayed as "power-less" in the narrative, namely, the Gentiles or Barnabas, highlighting a preference for perspectives that challenge dominant interpretations. Nicole, for example, observed, "You could see things from Barnabas perspective, where maybe Paul seems unforgiving." The actualization of the text

was primarily shaped by the aforementioned discursive axes and expressed through a critical awareness of the contemporary Church's divisions and institutional shortcomings. Michelle remarked, "The Church today . . . seems sort of fragmented. When you disagree, you just split off and start your new *startup* and isolate yourself." Practical outcomes of the reading related largely to attitudinal changes, particularly around inclusivity and dialogue within ecclesial contexts. As Stuart concluded, "I really want to try to seek out people who are different to me, politically, because I don't usually do that . . . I think that's . . . important in this discussion."

Second sessions

The second session of SCM I proved to be semantically much richer than the previous one. Participants expressed a sense of satisfaction and personal connection with their SCM J counterparts. Luis, for instance, shared, "I was moved by [Stuart's] reaction, by how this text could reach him in such a personal level." The group frequently referred to the national, ethnic, and ecclesial backgrounds of their partners, actively seeking to draw both parallels and distinctions between their respective contexts. Their interpretative stance was marked by openness, vulnerability, and sensitivity to the personal disclosures of others. As Andrés noted, "Sharing experiences [and] points of view with another young people from another context, another reading of the Bible, I think that is ecumenism." Communication with SCM J participants was personal and direct, often framed in familial terms such as "brothers," "sisters," and "friends." SCM I participants recognized that their partners prioritized interpretative appropriation, and both groups affirmed that the sharing of lived experiences was more fruitful for ecumenical engagement than doctrinal debate. Fernanda remarked, "I think ecumenism is more than theories and doctrines, or even theologies, or ways of understanding God. It is built upon life experiences . . . , it presupposes to live together among our differences . . . on the unity of love." This shared hermeneutic orientation, which considered the Bible a source for continuous actualization, remained consistent throughout the exchange. Multiple reading attitudes emerged: communal, critical, deconstructive, praxis-oriented, theologically focused on divine love and acceptance, or ecumenical. Valeria articulated this spirit by referencing Isaiah 54:2: "[This verse] is for me the essence of what ecumenism is . . . : 'Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes' It is as the simile of your tent, there is always the possibility to wide it, and while you wide it, you must length your cords and keep your stakes strong, so it can always get bigger and there is always a place for the person who comes." Both groups demonstrated substantial interpretative convergence, especially regarding the text's central message, character roles, heuristic strategies, and thematic concerns such as intra-ecclesial tensions (Fernanda: "There are two personal differences that have a lot to do with power, . . . they did not end

up dividing because of doctrines but because of persons”) and conceptions of God’s presence (Luis: “What Christ and God represent is something universal . . . , I think God was present in this part of the world too, before Christians came”). While some differences in content and emphasis were noted, they were largely perceived as enriching rather than divisive. As Corina observed, “I thought in inclusion and exclusion [but unlike them] I didn’t think in compromise and identity. I think it’s very interesting to listen to these words.”

The exchange enabled SCM I participants to broaden their hermeneutic horizons by incorporating new interpretive perspectives into their reading of the text. Luis acknowledged this shift, stating, “In my personal reading . . . I didn’t quite emphasize the issue of identity, at least not as widely as their discussion, so that was interesting for me.” The exchange primarily prompted attitudinal transformations within the group, especially concerning an increased awareness of the inherent fragility of interpersonal relationships within the Church and a reinforced commitment to ecumenism. Valeria reflected on this by saying, “I think the text says: ‘Hello, the first followers of Jesus disagreed too and sometimes were not empathetic people and sometimes couldn’t resolve the situation with love, like us today, so please be better,’ but in this way, I think it’s human too. . . . This is not a kind of excuse to stop looking for agreements even in the middle of our differences.”

The second session of SCM J maintained its relaxed and cohesive character, with participants repeatedly expressing how moving and satisfying it had been to observe their partners’ first session. Nicole reflected, “[Their reading] was really kind of emotive and there were points where I felt quite emotional.” Throughout the discussion, the group frequently referenced their partners’ cultural, ecclesial, and religious contexts, drawing both parallels and distinctions with their own. This fostered attitudes marked by admiration, attentiveness, openness, and vulnerability. As Stuart noted, “It was really affirming hearing other people on the other side of the world also experiencing that It was really lovely hearing that and feeling . . . I guess the sense of solidarity with their experience.” Although communication with the partner group remained indirect, often framed in third-person references (“they” and “their”), the participants displayed notable interest and curiosity. Stuart expressed this sentiment, stating, “I would be interested in hearing the other group . . . , how they manage particular situations when it is really difficult I’m curious about what are for the other group the hot-button issues in their context right now that are particularly dividing the Church.” The group also reflected on the spiritual ethos conveyed by their counterparts, with Stuart observing, “They definitely radiated a spirit of . . . a desire for unity and love and humility and a strong desire to want to be unified.” SCM J perceived their partners’ interpretative approach as primarily centred on appropriation, recognizing the Bible as a source of ongoing actualization and inspiration. As Bill put it, “We seem to perhaps fall into a pattern of just being very focused on the text and I . . . think there’s value in that of

course, and learning about the history . . . but it's so nice to be reminded of the most central tenets of our faith, which is love for God and all of God's children." According to SCM J, their partners adopted an ecumenical and inclusive reading posture, emphasizing God's love and acceptance as well as ecclesial praxis. Nicole summarized this focus: "From the start [they focused on the question] 'why is this important to us today?' . . . We all really enjoyed hearing the kind of ideas of unity and community and overcoming our differences but also accepting and appreciating them." Multiple interpretative similarities were identified and positively assessed. Stuart remarked, "Maybe the most powerful part of listening to them [is that] I have also been part of fairly fundamentalist churches previously, and I really related to Luis and Corina experiences of needing to express your faith in a particular way." While interpretative differences were less frequent, they were generally regarded as enriching and thought-provoking, contributing to growth and mutual understanding. As Stuart concluded, "We got lost in the ways of the text, but I think they had a beautiful way of bringing it kind of back to what is really important."

The group's overall understanding of the biblical text was significantly shaped by the exchange, which provided a space for both reflection and active participation in an experience of ecumenical openness and mutual learning. As Nicole noted, "The other group made me think about how immediate these texts really are . . . I was learning as I was . . . listening, engaging, and appreciating differences, as in the spirit of the text. It is already applied to what we're doing and how we are interacting with others. . . . It was interesting how immediately we can be affected by the . . . Bible." The exchange also enhanced the participants' intercultural competence, particularly with regard to their motivation to engage with diverse perspectives and contexts. Stuart expressed this growing enthusiasm, stating, "I gained a lot from listening to the conversation of the other group and I'm really looking forward to being able to talk to you all and to meet you the next time." Additionally, the dialogue fostered greater awareness of their partners' social, cultural, and ecclesial situations, deepening their appreciation of the challenges and richness present in different Christian communities.

Third session

The third and final session of the exchange was especially successful, with participants' reflections strongly validating both the specific research design and the broader potential of intercultural Biblical reading. Nicole captured this impact aptly: "When I read the Bible alone I get lost in all of the details and trying to figure out what's happening, or the history, or just relating to the people in these stories, but it was really amazing in these kind of discussions and hearing everyone's opinions, how I feel like I kind of have a strong sense of what I can do with this text, how it affects me when I go out into

the world, and how it affects me us having this conversation. Yeah! That was really amazing and wouldn't have happened without this very collaborative interactive format." The dynamics of the session were marked by frequent shared laughter, nonverbal gestures of agreement, mutual verbal affirmations, thoughtful building upon each other's contributions, and direct, engaging questions. This atmosphere fostered genuine connection and learning, as evidenced by Stuart's curiosity: "I would be interested to hear what your experiences are like [when] talking to fundamentalists about your faith and how you navigate [that]." Participants consistently voiced their satisfaction with the exchange (Valeria: "At the end of this exchange I end up stronger, let's say, in my faith and my understanding of God") and expressed a deepened curiosity about the similarities and differences between their respective SCM contexts. Luis reflected: "It was really shocking for me to find out that [highly conservative positions] could happen in the 'first world,' usually I tend to think about it like 'third world' issues, but it's scary that something like that still happens in other countries apart from [our region]." The prevailing attitude towards the other group was one of mindfulness, openness, vulnerability, and sensitivity, often expressed through gratitude and admiration. Valeria noted: "In [my country] we have a strong battle . . . in social networks and one way for us to face this is to constantly transmit positive messages . . . , but from the other place they are constantly having aggressive and violent messages about topics as the LGBTI community, abortion, and those topics related to education and gender perspective in education." Communication was largely direct and transparent, with participants openly reflecting on whether the exchange had met their expectations. As Luis summed up: "Yeah, I definitely feel like I got everything I expected but at the same time not necessarily in the way that I expected It was much stronger and direct . . . , and I'm really glad about that, really!"

Both groups engaged in a reflective assessment of each other's interpretative methods, highlighting their sociological, socio-religious, and political dimensions alongside a shared emphasis on textual appropriation. Participants emphasized interpretative similarities as meaningful points of connection, while differences, though noted, were generally regarded as complementary and enriching. Stuart expressed this sentiment clearly: "It's really encouraging knowing that all over the world [fundamentalism] is something that as young Christians . . . we have to learn how to [deal with], and it's a beautiful sense having that in common and doing that journey together." Similarly, Corina observed, "I focus on what Nicole said . . . , that our lecture was about the present . . . and their lecture was about the future I think that both lectures are good because they give us more things about the text." In this final discussion, the biblical text emerged primarily as a source of inspiration. The participants adopted a range of interpretative attitudes: political (oriented towards social transformation), contextual (focused on ecclesial praxis), and ecumenical. Valeria articulated this intersection between local

and global concerns: “To see that on the other side of the world there are also these [very conservative] religious thoughts, it scares but also calls our attention to be more attentive so we can strengthen the ecumenical work.”

The exchange had a clearly broadening effect on the hermeneutical horizons of the participants (as evidenced by Nicole’s earlier reflection), while simultaneously fostering the development of intercultural competencies within both groups. This was particularly evident in their ability to listen to, respect, and value divergent perspectives without imposing their own (Luis: “We are being able . . . to understand each other’s thoughts or understandings, but before that, we were willing to respect . . . , to not trying to convince the others to see everything exactly like we already see it, and that’s something that I find invaluable in this exchange”). Expressions of enthusiasm and commitment to continuing the conversation were frequent and deeply felt (Bill: “I don’t want the conversation to end here, I think there was so much more, I really want to get to know the people from the other group”). The overall assessment of the dialogue was highly positive and emotionally resonant. For example, Stuart stated: “I also really want to keep in touch and . . . doing some sort of project together. . . . Progressive Christianity is quite small in [our country], I can feel really frustrated sometimes, but I’m going to take with me a sense that this is something that is a journey together with all around the world I’m hoping that I’ll be able to have a lot more patience . . . working with conservative groups who are really not open to change. But yeah! Knowing that there are people around the world doing this together, can help me to have more grace, and also to be aware of myself when . . . I don’t want them to find a common ground, I just want them to be the way that I am. I think that this process has really helped me to feel a sense of solidarity and part of something bigger and to have more grace.” Of all the exchanges, the one between SCM I and SCM J was likely the most successful in terms of inspiring concrete actions and forward-looking initiatives. This included aspirations to extend the ecumenical and interpretative collaboration into shared projects (Luis: “Make it practically, I was thinking about how we can bring all of what was discussed here to the realm of action. And I really would like to stay in contact with the [other] group to see if we could . . . plan some project that was a collaboration between the different groups that are present here I feel that such a collaboration would be really awesome to use as a motivator to start having some actual action here in this part of the world”).

Evaluation questionnaire

All participants from SCM J reported a significant transformation in their understanding of the biblical text as a result of the exchange. They noted acquiring fresh perspectives, attributing this to the thematic overlap between the two groups, their emotional engagement with the other group’s hermeneutical actualization, and the interpretive insights themselves. Concerning

their understanding of Church unity and diversity, the participants recognized that, despite differing cultural and ecclesial contexts, both groups shared similar challenges, such as navigating the dominance of fundamentalist Christian expressions, being a welcoming space for sexually diverse youth, and responding to the structural oppression of indigenous populations. The exchange prompted SCM J participants to adopt a more action-oriented and affective approach to Scripture, emphasizing practical application and personal resonance. On a personal level, the exchange was described as empowering, fostering greater awareness of their own cultural positioning, ideological frameworks, and potential biases. It also significantly enhanced their intercultural knowledge, skills, and motivation. Nicole, for instance, shared: "It . . . changed me by encouraging me to be more open and challenged by other perspectives. Holding progressive political ideas and values, I often find myself wanting to be dismissive of certain conservative ideas. However, after our discussions of unity and inclusivity, I feel as if I have gained a better sense of the value of engaging with perspectives that disagree with my own, both in growing my understanding of them and in allowing me to self-reflect and strengthen my own values." Participants also highlighted an increased sense of belonging to a global Christian community (Bill: "It reminded me of Jesus' wish that we make disciples of all nations and how an international exchange embodies that"). Overall, the exchange was evaluated very positively. It was described as an opportunity to develop intercultural communication competencies, appropriate new interpretative meanings, discover shared theological ground, and adopt a more critical stance towards one's own interpretive assumptions. Several participants noted experiencing cognitive growth throughout the process, often moving from initial disagreement to deeper consensus. Looking forward, participants expressed a renewed commitment to respecting and valuing theological and cultural differences, partially incorporating their partners' hermeneutical approach, and actively participating in future ecumenical exchanges, including with groups traditionally perceived as oppositional.

Mirroring the reflections of SCM J, all participants from SCM I affirmed that their understanding of the biblical text was significantly enriched through the exchange. They attributed this deepened comprehension primarily to the interpretative approach of their counterparts, as well as to the authenticity and vulnerability with which they shared their faith. The dialogue was seen as instrumental in cultivating a deeper awareness of the global Christian community and in uncovering shared challenges across diverse contexts. As Luis expressed: "This experience let me know that beyond the sense of community in the love of God, on a spiritual level, there's also a series of convictions and life experiences that we can look out for, share and work towards even with people that seem to be worlds apart." Participants also reported notable shifts in their approach to Scripture, particularly emphasizing the importance of textual actualization and the communal nature of biblical interpretation. The exchange was experienced as empowering, enhancing their intercultural

competence, including both skills and motivation. A variety of learning outcomes were identified, such as a heightened appreciation for the diversity of global biblical readings, especially those shaped by youth perspectives, and a deepened understanding of the role of contextual factors in shaping interpretation. As Andrés noted: “I met young people that have a new point of view about the Bible, the Church, Christianity, and its relationships with the world.” The exchange was evaluated overall as a deeply positive experience, albeit intellectually and emotionally challenging at times. Participants highlighted how the encounter enhanced their awareness of SCM J’s socio-religious context, as well as their cultural assumptions and the Church–society relationship within the partner group’s setting. In terms of future implications, readers expressed intentions to integrate elements of their partners’ interpretive methods into their own Bible study practices and committed to fostering a more dialogical and youth-inclusive environment within their local churches.

Notes

- 1 Alphabetical letters from A to J were assigned to the SCMs to ensure the anonymity of the participants.
- 2 All names of participants have been changed to pseudonyms.

5 Data analysis

After presenting the dynamics, trajectories, and outcomes of each of the five exchanges, this chapter aims to synthesize, categorize, systematize, and compare these results across three interconnected analytical stages. The *first stage* involved an in-depth examination of the generated data, which enabled the construction of a “profile” for each exchange and their subsequent classification according to the level of success achieved. As previously outlined, assessing the success of intercultural exchanges is inherently complex and multidimensional. Such encounters are characterized by fluctuating phases of openness, joint meaning-making, setbacks, and re-evaluations, which frequently interweave throughout the sessions. Nonetheless, one of the central aims of this project is precisely to identify those exchanges deemed successful, analyse their defining features, and propose elements or strategies that might foster similarly meaningful intercultural encounters among students, as well as among other Christian communities, regardless of their academic background. To identify successful cases, the study adopted a dual methodological approach. First, participants were explicitly asked to evaluate the quality of their exchange upon its conclusion (Appendix E – Evaluation Questionnaire). Second, the existing body of literature on intercultural Bible reading was consulted. Drawing on this combined approach, the study established a working definition of successful exchanges: an ecumenical exchange can be considered successful when, after sharing and comparing two interpretations of the same biblical passage by Student Christian Movements (SCMs) from culturally diverse backgrounds and distinct WSCF regions, participants report that their understanding of the text has been meaningfully modified or enriched through the dialogical process. Additional indicators of success included a demonstrated openness to learning from unfamiliar or unexpected interpretations, evidence of transformation in participants’ hermeneutical approaches due to interaction with their partner SCM, general satisfaction with the intercultural Bible reading experience, and the perception that the time and effort invested in the exchange were worthwhile. When these evaluative parameters were applied to the five exchanges included in this study, four were broadly regarded in positive terms and thus categorized as “satisfactory.” In contrast,

one exchange (between SCMs C and D) was primarily assessed in negative terms (as discussed in the previous chapter) and was consequently classified as “non-satisfactory.” Furthermore, two exchanges (between SCMs E and F, and SCMs I and J) were found to have exceeded the baseline success criteria, and were, therefore, categorized as “highly satisfactory,” to emphasize the particularly strong and impactful outcomes they achieved. Thus, the exchange between SCMs A and B was assessed as satisfactory, with its primary outcome centred on the acquisition of new knowledge and the appreciation of (Christian) multicultural diversity. In contrast, the dialogue between SCMs C and D was categorized as non-satisfactory, marked by mutual accusations of textual instrumentalization, limited dialogical engagement, a superficially positive final assessment, and minimal evidence of hermeneutical or interpersonal growth. The exchange between SCMs E and F was considered highly satisfactory; while participants remained critical of their partners’ interpretative frameworks and reading methods, this did not hinder the development of emotional closeness, mutual appreciation, interpretative enrichment, and a shared enthusiasm to continue reading the Bible collaboratively. The dialogue between SCMs G and H was also satisfactory, characterized by thematic richness in its final stages, a reconsideration of initial prejudices, and the development of intercultural competence. Lastly, the exchange between SCMs I and J emerged as highly satisfactory, distinguished by strong expressions of solidarity, emotional intimacy, mutual vulnerability, interpretative expansion, and a shared desire to pursue future collaborative initiatives. In addition, it fostered a greater appreciation for, and openness towards, engagement with more theologically conservative or “contending” Christian groups.

The *second stage* of the analysis entailed the construction of highly condensed summaries or “portraits” for each exchange, aimed at deepening the understanding of how particular outcomes correlate with specific dynamics of intercultural Bible discussions among the participating SCMs. These portraits were structured around three key moments within each exchange. The first moment focused on the beginning of the exchange, incorporating a per-group analysis of data derived from Appendix A: Initial questionnaire for participants, as well as observations from the initial two sessions. This stage aimed to establish a preliminary profile of each group’s relationship to the Bible (how its members read, interpret, and discuss Scripture) prior to any direct engagement with their partner SCM. The second moment addressed the development of the exchange, concentrating on the analysis of both groups’ second sessions. This phase marked the initial video-mediated encounter between the partner SCMs and was particularly concerned with how participants negotiated, challenged, or integrated unfamiliar interpretations of the biblical text. The third moment examined the completion of the exchange, including its concluding session and participants’ responses to Appendix E: Evaluation questionnaire. This final stage evaluated how the groups brought their exchange to a close and assessed its perceived effects, both immediate and prospective.

The *third and final stage* of the analysis consists of a comparative examination of the outcomes of the exchanges (represented through the previously constructed profiles) against a selected set of analytical categories. This stage aims to identify recurring patterns or meaningful correlations among the exchanges, with the ultimate goal of drawing broader insights about the dynamics and effects of intercultural Bible reading. The categories themselves were selected through an iterative, inductive process that involved moving back and forth between the raw data, the initial codes, and increasingly abstract analytical categories. This approach allowed for the identification of categories that yielded the most informative insights and aligned most coherently with the distinct features of each exchange profile. The categories selected for this comparative analysis are as follows:

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARTICIPANTS: Relationship with the Bible; reading approach; and motivation to participate.

FIRST SESSION: Hermeneutical Process. Reading attitudes; status of the text; heuristic keys; central concepts. *ACTUALIZATION:* Aspects from the text; Appropriation dynamics; intention to act.

SECOND SESSION: Confrontation: Linking process; attention to partner group's profile; attitude towards partner group; partner's reading attitude/interpretative method – own reading attitude/interpretative method; interpretative similarities; interpretative differences. *PERCEIVED EFFECTS:* Interpretation of the text; self-image of the group after (as effect) of the exchange; praxeological Effect.

THIRD SESSION: Confrontation: Linking process; attention to partner group's profile; attitude towards partner group/communication with partner group; partner's reading attitude/interpretative method – own reading attitude/interpretative method; interpretative similarities and differences. *PERCEIVED EFFECTS:* Interpretation of the text; self-image of the group after (as effect) of the exchange; praxeological Effect.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE: Changes in the meaning of the text/ understanding of Church's unity and diversity; changes in Bible reading method; personal changes/self-image; learning outcomes; exchanges evaluation/final assessment; relation with partner group; praxeological effect.

Exchanges' analytical summaries

As previously noted, the analytical summaries or "portraits" of the exchanges consist of highly condensed syntheses of each discussion. These portraits are structured around three key phases of the exchange process. First, the beginning of the exchange, which captures the initial context (including participants' backgrounds, biblical reading approaches, and interpretive frameworks), prior to any interaction with the partner SCM. Second, the development of the exchange focused on the dynamics of the first video-mediated encounter and how participants engaged with, negotiated,

contended, or accommodated unfamiliar interpretations. And third, the completion of the exchange, which encompasses participants' concluding reflections, evaluations, and perceived outcomes, as documented in the final session and in the evaluation questionnaires.

First analytical portrait: SCMs A and B

Stage 1: Beginning of the exchange (before encounter)

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE SCM A: Relationship with the Bible: Reading three to four times a week; In private or group; Bible plays an important role in their lives. *Motivation:* Mainly cognitive.

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE SCM B: Relationship with the Bible: Very closed; Almost every day reading at home and in Bible studies. *Reading approach:* Mainly focused on actualization; Text inspires the current reader. *Motivation:* Diverse: Affective and Cognitive.

FIRST SESSION SCM A: Exchange dynamics: Non-verbally rich and relaxed; Several mutual verbal reaffirmations; Few verbal counterarguments; Non-fluid conversation; Long reflection pauses. *HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS. Reading attitudes:* Inquisitive and critical; Focused on God's love and acceptance. *Status of the text:* Source of inspiration and immediate actualization for criticism of ecclesial exclusion and its alleged logics. *Heuristic keys:* Ecclesial and social segregation of specific communities. *Explanation Strategies:* Minimal references to the historical, literary, or theological background of the text; Constant references to inclusion in the Church. *ACTUALIZATION. Aspects/characters from the text:* Need for rules in life and Church; Almost general agreement on their malleable nature; Importance of Christian and national identity; Social implications of the text, Leaving behind more personal and individual approaches. *Appropriation dynamics:* Critical awareness regarding the situation of the local Church; Realistic awareness about the history of the world Church; Hopeful insights about Christian life. *Intention to act:* Minimal.

FIRST SESSION SCM B: Exchange dynamics: Very clear reading structure; Paused: questions and answers session. *HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS. Reading attitudes:* Mainly historical-contextual; *Status of the text:* Source of identification. *Heuristic keys:* Multiple: Collectivistic tendencies, Logics of inclusion and exclusion, Experiences of national-ethnic and religious pluralism. *Explanation Strategies: Literary background:* Identification with the author and the situation of the original recipients. *Main characters:* Luke and Paul; *Central concepts:* Social inclusion (themselves are a powerless minority); Culture as a socio-differentiator factor at the Church. *ACTUALIZATION. Aspects/characters from the text:* Social inclusion (they are a powerless minority); Culture as a socio-differentiator factor at the Church. *Appropriation dynamics:* Minimal. *Intention to act:* Minimal.

Stage 2: Development of the exchange

SECOND SESSION SCM A: CONFRONTATION. *Linking Process:* Satisfied; "Surprises" and unexpected realizations. *Attention to partner's group profile:* Attention to how their context informed their reflections and how it compared to their case. *Attitude towards partner group:* Mindful and open. *Communication with partner group:* Indirect. *Partner's interpretative dynamics:* Positive. *Partner's exegetical resources:* Books and literature. *Partner's reading attitude:* Critical; Ecumenical; Deconstructive. *Interpretative similarities: Specific themes: Shared hermeneutical keys:* Ambivalence of feeling like outsiders or insiders in the Church/society. **PERCEIVED EFFECTS.** *Interpretation of Acts 15:* New outlook on the text and hermeneutical horizon broadening. *Self-image:* Increasing their own bias self-awareness. *Praxeological effect:* Interest in future engagement.

SECOND SESSION SCM B: CONFRONTATION. *Communication with partner group:* Personal; Direct; Open expressions of mutual appreciation. *Attitude with partner group:* Mindful; Non-judgmental; Open attitude. *Partner's interpretative method:* Rational; Focused on socio-religious context and appropriation; Critically seeing. **PERCEIVED EFFECTS.** *Interpretation of Acts 15:* Conflict or clash of interpretations; New insights into faith. *Self-image:* More intercultural competence. *Praxeological effect:* Interest in future engagement.

Stage 3: Completion of the exchange, conclusions, and evaluations

THIRD SESSION SCMs A AND B: CONFRONTATION. *Linking Process:* Very satisfied; themselves feeling heard. *Attention to the partner's group profile:* Large attention to the partners' context and profile. *Attitude towards partner group:* Openness; Vulnerability; Mindfulness. *Communication with partner group:* Direct; Plenty of direct expressions of gratitude and trust; Mirroring effect through observation; Further learning processes. *Partner's analysis method:* Constant references to the content of previous sessions. *Interpretative similarities: Specific themes:* Culture as the main differentiating element among Churches, theologies, and beliefs; Jesus and the Bible as the two main Christian unifying factors; Richness that multiple biblical interpretations entail. **PERCEIVED EFFECTS.** *Interpretation of Acts 15:* Expansion of hermeneutical horizons; Consecution of fresh interpretative outlooks. *Self-image:* More cultural awareness; More intercultural competence. *Praxeological effect:* Mainly at an interpretative level.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE SCM A: *Changes in text meaning/ understanding Church's unity and diversity:* Extension of their text understanding; Deepening of their previous conceptions; Diversity appreciation; Emphasize what unites them. *Changes in Bible reading method:* Considering how other cultures may read; More critical or deconstructive. *Personal changes/Self-image:* Increase of cultural biases or prejudice awareness; *More intercultural knowledge:* Motivation and skills. *Learning outcomes:* New realizations of how the context influences reading; Multiplicity of

valid biblical interpretations; Importance of dialogue and discussion for the Church; New sense of global commonality. *Exchange's evaluation*: "Eye-opening"; Worthy; Interesting. *Relation with partner group*: Awareness of partner's context and cultural biases. *Exchange final assessment*: Hermeneutical "growth;" More intercultural competence; Consecution of "shared grounds"; More self-interpretation and critical assessment.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE SCM B: Changes in text meaning/ understanding Church's unity and diversity: Extension of their text understanding, More awareness of Church's complexity; Diversity appreciation; Strengthening ecumenical commitment; *Reason*: Partner's reading approach and their attitude. *Personal changes/Self-image*: More intercultural competence. *Learning outcomes*: Dissimilar conceptions on Church's diversity and unity; Plurality of legitimate Bible interpretations. *Exchange's evaluation*: Positive; Challenging. *Relation with partner group*: Partners gained new awareness about their context, their cultural biases, and their ideology; Able to assess their intercultural competence. *Exchange final assessment*: All: hermeneutical "growth." *Praxeological effect*: More ecumenical engagement.

Second analytical portrait: SCMs C and D.

Stage 1: Beginning of the exchange (before encounter)

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE SCM C: Relationship with the Bible: Diverse; Everyday reading to only in religious liturgy. *Reading approach*: Heterogeneous: Focused on actualization; Focused on current context; All participants: Religious background is of greatest influence; Discovering new meanings; Focus on the reading environment. *Motivation*: Cognitive.

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE SCM D: Relationship with the Bible: More homogeneous: Reading three or four times a week at home and church. Influence religious background: Half: completely influential; Half: possible. *Reading approach*: Half: Focused on actualization; Half: focused on historical background. *Motivation*: Mainly cognitive.

FIRST SESSION SCM C: Challenging; Sometimes confusing. HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS. *Reading attitudes*: Deeply critical; Deconstructive; Constantly problematizing and questioning the text. *Status of the text*: Object of rational analysis and critique; Lesser extent: source of identification. *Heuristic keys*: Living among different Christian traditions; Experiences in the local church. *Explanation Strategies*: Literary and theological analysis. ACTUALIZATION. *Aspects/characters from the text*: Paul; Luke; Moses; (Godly) laws and (Moses') recommendations; Three prohibitions; Growth under Paul's and Silas' leadership. *Appropriation dynamics*: Critical to Church or SCM. *Intention to act*: Minimal.

FIRST SESSION SCM D: Liturgy: Liturgical framework: prayers at the beginning and end. *Exchange dynamics*: Structured; Cohesive; Communal.

HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS. *Reading attitudes*: Ecumenical; Inclusive; Focused on God's love; Group's identification with the text. *Status of the text*: Source of inspiration, identification, and authority. *Heuristic keys*: Multi-denominational SCM; Global pandemics; Social or collectivistic tendencies. *Explanation Strategies*: No historical background; Pauline theological principles: Salvation by faith, justification by grace, and expiatory sacrifice of Jesus. *Central concepts*: Inclusion and acceptance in the Church; God's grace; Role of Moses' law; Aim for the Church's unity. ACTUALIZATION. *Aspects/characters from the text*: Diversity amid SCM; SCM's Ecumenical mission; Toleration and acceptance. *Appropriation dynamics*: Uncritical; Romantic. *Intention to act*: Minimal.

Stage 2: Development of the exchange

SECOND SESSION SCM C: CONFRONTATION. Two dominant voices; Shorter than other groups. *Liturgy*: Liturgical framework: For the other group, the Scripture is not to reflect their belief but to nourish it. *Attitude towards partner group*: Ambivalent: highly critical, open, and prone to self-disclosure. *Communication with partner group*: Others instrumentalized or manipulated the biblical text to fit their religious views. *Partner's reading attitude*: Source of authority. PERCEIVED EFFECTS. *Praxeological effect*: Minimal.

SECOND SESSION SCM D: CONFRONTATION. Two dominant voices; Shorter than other groups. *Attitude towards partner group*: Critical; Minimal tolerance for ambiguity; Highly questioning; Minimal openness. *Communication with partner group*: Others instrumentalized or manipulated the biblical text to fit in their liberal cultural setting. *Partner's text status*: Object of analysis and criticism. *Partner's reading attitude*: Less text focused; Limited; "Blind-sided." *Interpretative differences*: *Specific themes*: Different reading attitudes and the Bible's status; Reaffirmation of the Bible's authority. PERCEIVED EFFECTS. *Interpretation of Acts 15*: Minimal. *Self-image*: Minimal increase of intercultural competence; No growth; Stagnation; Return to one's own repertoire. *Praxeological effect*: Minimal.

Stage 3: Completion of the exchange, conclusions, and evaluations

THIRD SESSION SCMs C AND D: CONFRONTATION. *Linking Process*: Erratic, dynamic; Constant misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the partner's declarations; Constant apologetic positions. *Attention to partner's group profile*: Culture and context as the main sources of discrepancy. *Attitude towards partner group*: Mindfulness and openness; Critical and questioning; Defensive. *Communication with partner group*: Overall judgments of the partner's interpretative method; Mutual accusations of text instrumentalization. *Partner's reading attitude*: *Main topic*: Claims for its inspired status and rejection of degrading it to "mere literature." *Interpretative differences*: Some as learning opportunities. PERCEIVED EFFECTS. *Interpretation of Acts 15*: Stagnation. *Self-image*: Narrow awareness of self-biases; Narrow self-critique. *Praxeological effect*: Minimal.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE SCM C: Changes in text meaning/ understanding Church's unity and diversity: Minimal or no text changes. *Main reasons:* Alleged partner's lack of understanding; Need for more meetings. Deeper understanding Church's diversity and unity. *Changes in Bible reading method:* No change. *Personal changes/Self-image:* Minimal. *Learning outcomes:* Minimal ones on Bible interpretation diversity, and context's influence. *Exchange's evaluation:* Almost all: positive. *Relation with partner group:* Half: more awareness or understanding of partners' ideology.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE SCM D: Changes in text meaning/ understanding Church's unity and diversity: New text understanding about unity and diversity. *Changes in Bible reading method:* None. *Personal changes/Self-image:* One: more questioning of her culture and Church. *Exchange final assessment:* Positive. *Praxeological effect:* None.

Third analytical portrait: SCMs E and F.

Stage 1: Beginning of the exchange (before encounter)

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE SCM E: Relationship with the Bible: Diverse: From reading every day to once or twice per week; Communitarian and in private. *Reading approach:* Focus on historical background; Focus on actualization; Focus on the tradition of the Church; Most: Religious background possible influence in text interpretation. *Motivation:* Cognitive and Affective.

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE SCM F: Relationship with the Bible: Close; Almost daily; Communitarian and in private. *Reading approach:* Focus on actualization; Focus on historical background; Need for God's presence; All: Religious background is of great influence in text interpretation. *Motivation:* Affective: Engage in dialogue; New fraternal relations.

FIRST SESSION SCM E: Exchange dynamics: Relaxed environment; Laughs; Silent reflection; Various agreement gestures; Minimal inner dissent. *HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS. Reading attitudes:* Historic-contextual; Focused on ecclesial praxis; Reproductive; Imitative. *Status of the text:* Source of inspiration. *Heuristic keys:* Social challenges; Youth problems. *Explanation Strategies:* Minimal historical, literary, or theological text backgrounds. *Central aspects/characters from the text:* Paul; Barnabas; Cultural diversity of Acts' Church; Text's conflict resolution. *ACTUALIZATION. Aspects/characters from the text:* Solutions to any Church conflict; Compromises; Concessions; Respect for each other's decisions. *Appropriation dynamics:* Correspondence of relations. *Personal changes/Self-image:* Minimal new ecclesial, ideological, and cultural self-awareness; *Intention to act:* Minimal.

FIRST SESSION SCM F: Liturgical framework: Prayers; Dialogues; Reflective silence. *Exchange dynamics:* Informal; Inner jokes; Laughs; Gentle interruptions; Agreeing gestures; Expressions of mutual verbal reaffirmation. *HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS.* References to partner SCM; Invitations

to know each other; Partners as a source of knowledge; Text elements difficult to understand. *Reading attitudes*: Critical; Deconstructive; Ecumenical; Rationalistic; Inquisitive; Questioning. *Status of the text*: Object of critique and analysis; Source of inspiration. *Explanation Strategies*: Literary (New and Old Testament); Theological; Historical (religious and cultural) text backgrounds. *Central characters*: Paul; Barnabas; Jewish community; Gentiles (the group took their side). *Central concepts*: Church's unity; Council's solution; Role of the Jewish tradition. *Central messages*: Constant conflicts in ecclesial life; Division is neither ideal nor tragical. ACTUALIZATION. *Aspects/Characters from the text*: Unity in the global Church; Local Church criticism. *Intention to act*: Limited.

Stage 2: Development of the exchange

SECOND SESSION SCM E: *Group dynamics*: Relaxed; Gestural and verbal expressions of mutual agreement; Continuations of others' ideas; Reflective pauses; Good humour; Few inner verbal disagreements. CONFRONTATION. *Linking Process*: Partner's interpretation as positive, complementary, and enriching. *Partner's interpretative dynamics*: Different: We: Contextualization – They: Historical background. *Attitude towards partner group*: We: Open; Vulnerable; Sensible to partner's disclosure. *Partner's Status in relation to ours*: We: Source of continuous actualization; Holy Scripture. *Partner's reading attitude*: Rationalistic; Critical; Deconstructive. Interpretative differences: "Gracefully" refuted. *Own interpretative attitude*: Focused on ecclesial praxis; Theological; Ecumenical. PERCEIVED EFFECTS. *Interpretation of Acts 15*: Ambivalent: "Conflict" of interpretations; Broadening horizon; New outlooks. *Self-image*: No influence. Praxeological effect: No effect.

SECOND SESSION SCM F: *Group dynamics*: Relaxed; Laughs; Verbal and gestural inner agreement; Inner open disagreement. CONFRONTATION. *Linking Process*: Open satisfaction. *Attention to partner's group profile*: References to the partners' context. *Attitude towards partner group*: Critical; Questioning; Mindful, Openness; Vulnerability. *Partner's text status*: Our: source of authority; Object of continuous actualization. *Partner's reading attitude*: We: Highly critical regarding their analysis and interpretation methods; Focused on God's action; Full of confidence; Questioning; Problematizing. *Interpretative difference*: Much more attention to interpretative differences than similarities; New argumentations; Non-agreement. PERCEIVED EFFECTS. *Interpretation of Acts 15*: Clash or conflict; Reinforcement of interpretations; No new outlooks. *Self-image*: No influence. *Praxeological effect*: No effect.

Stage 3: Completion of the exchange, conclusions, and evaluations

THIRD SESSION SCME AND F: Fruitful in emotional intimacy and semantic richness. CONFRONTATION. *Linking Process*: Multiple satisfaction expressions. *Attention to partner's group profile*: Multiple references to each other's contexts. *Attitude towards partner group*: Open; Mindful; Questioning; Admiration and gratitude speeches; Vulnerable; Sensible

to partner's self-disclosure. *Communication with partner group*: Direct; Explicit expressions of gratitude and trust; No overall judgments of others' interpretations. *Partner's exegetical resources*: Extra exegetical resources. *Partner's interpretative method*: Each method was openly assessed descriptively and non-normatively; *Partner's reading attitude*: More focused on interpretative differences; *Interpretative differences*: Source of learning; Call for new argumentations. **PERCEIVED EFFECTS**. *Interpretation of Acts 15*: Broadening of horizons; Imitation of the partner's reading method. *Self-image*: More awareness of self-prejudices and cultural background; More general intercultural competence. *Final Assessment*: "Growth" (semantic, attitudinal, intercultural competences); No interpretative consensus. *Praxeological effect*: Further ecumenical and IBR involvement.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE SCM E: *Changes in text meaning/ understanding Church's unity and diversity*: All broadened their understanding of both; *Main factors*: Partners' interpretation; Their approach to the text. *Changes in Bible reading method*: Adopting elements of their partner's approach (attention to the context of the text, questioning and problematizing, focusing on actualization). *Learning outcomes*: Technology as a tool for intercultural and ecumenical exchange; Reader's context affects interpretation; Bible interpretations are diverse. *Exchange's evaluation*: All positively. *Relation with partner group*: More awareness of partners' context and challenges. *Praxeological effect*: Ecumenical commitment; Adopting some elements of their partners' interpretative styles.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE SCM F: Non-Significant.

Fourth analytical portrait: SCMs G and H.

Stage 1: Beginning of the exchange (before encounter)

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE SCM G: *Relationship with the Bible*: Once or twice per week; In private and communal settings. *Reading approach*: Most: Historical background. Also: Finding inspiration to act; Contextual actualization; Primacy of Jesus' teaching; Considering translation; Reflecting silently. All: Context is highly influential in interpretation. *Motivation*: All: Cognitive: Knowing more; Learning other interpretations.

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE SCM H: *Relationship with the Bible*: Regular: Every day or three to four times per week; In private and in community. *Reading approach*: Focus on actualization. All: Context is highly influential in interpretation. *Motivation*: All: Cognitive: Knowing more; Learning other interpretations.

FIRST SESSION SCM G: Started with individual introduction. *Exchange dynamics*: Casual and informal; Constant laughs; Agreeing and disagreeing opinions or gestures, Inner debates; Counterpoints. **HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS**. *Reading attitudes*: Academic; Analytical; Critical; Inquisitive. *Status of the text*: Object of analysis and critique; Source of inspiration.

Heuristic keys: Theological training; Religious tradition; Ecumenical involvement. *Explanation Strategies:* Use of biblical commentaries; Using critically multiple historical, literary, and theological references. *Central text characters and concepts:* Jesus; Peter; John Mark; Paul (mainly deconstructively); Role of tradition; Churches' unity; Council's commandments; Church inclusion. ACTUALIZATION. *Aspects/Characters from the text:* Mainly conceptual; Ecumenical and inclusivist approaches. *Intention to act:* Attitudinal.

FIRST SESSION SCM H: Exchange dynamics: Relaxed; Constant agreement; Development of each other's arguments; Mainly cognitive motivation. HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS. *Reading attitudes:* Focused on God's grace; Group's text identification; Realistic; Human. *Status of the text:* Source of identification; Source of inspiration. *Heuristic keys:* National political situation; Traditional practices and culture; Intergenerational power asymmetry. *Explanation Strategies:* Minimal. ACTUALIZATION. *Aspects/Characters from the text:* God's grace; Conflict solving; Mission's primacy; Equal relations in Church. *Appropriation dynamics:* Mainly a critical view of the national Church. *Intention to act:* Minimal.

Stage 2: Development of the exchange

SECOND SESSION SCM G: Very dynamic debate. *Exchange dynamics:* New topics; Abundant arguments and counterarguments. CONFRONTATION. *Linking Process:* Satisfaction; Identification with partners' discussion. *Attention to the partner's group profile:* Attention to the partner's background; Drawing comparisons among respective political, ecclesiastical, cultural, or religious situations. *Attitude towards partner group:* Openness; Vulnerability; Sensitivity. *Partner's reading attitude:* More contextual; Focused on youth issues at Church; Seeing other's method positively. *Partner's text status:* Object of continuous actualization and inspiration; Object of scientific analysis. *Interpretative differences:* Multiple; Positively assessed; Growth; Graceful fighting. PERCEIVED EFFECTS. *Interpretation of Acts 15:* Thematic broadening. *Self-image:* More awareness of the readers' ideologies. *Praxeological effect:* Minimal.

SECOND SESSION SCM H: CONFRONTATION. *Attitude towards partner group:* Openness; Vulnerability; Sensitivity; Highly critical towards local church and country. *Partner's reading attitude:* They: Analytic; Academic/We: Focused on contextual actualization; Focused on contextual ecclesial praxis; Socially critical; Deconstructive. *Interpretative differences:* Complementary; Enriching. PERCEIVED EFFECTS. *Interpretation of Acts 15:* Horizon broadenings; Inspiring new debates on racism, social marginalization. *Self-image:* More intercultural competence. *Exchange Assessment:* Positive; Partial adoption of others' reading approach.

Stage 3: Completion of the exchange, conclusions, and evaluations

THIRD SESSION SCMs G AND H: One of the most thematically rich and attitudinally transformative. CONFRONTATION. *Linking Process:* Satisfied. *Attention to partner's group profile:* Presenting and inquiring about

cultural, ethnic, historical, or religious context. *Attitude towards partner group*: Openness; Sensitivity to partner's disclosure; Mindfulness; Gratitude; Curiosity. *Communication with partner group*: Direct. *Specific themes*: Intergenerational tensions; Being Christian in their countries; Colonial past is irrelevant; Discussion affects them and gives arguments to Christianity's critics on their continent. **PERCEIVED EFFECTS**. *Interpretation of Acts 15*: Both hermeneutic horizons expanded vastly. *Exchange Assessment*: Very positive; Growth; From orientation to stable exchange.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE SCM G: *Changes in text meaning/ understanding Church's unity and diversity*: Moderate: the reason is partners' reading method and vulnerability. *Changes in Bible reading method*: Focusing more on actualization and how other cultures may read it. *Personal changes/Self-image*: More intercultural motivation; Deeper sense of global community; Bridging cultural gaps. *Exchange's evaluation*: Positive.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE SCM H: *Changes in text meaning/ understanding Church's unity and diversity*: All: understanding of the text and the Church's unity and diversity broadened. *Changes in Bible reading method*: Focusing more on the historical background and the first meaning of the text. *Personal changes/Self-image*: More critical of one's own culture and Church; More intercultural knowledge and skills. *Learning outcomes*: Diversity of Bible interpretations, Common youth challenges. *Exchange's evaluation*: Positive. *Praxeological effect*: (Partially) adopting their partner's approach to the Bible; Respecting and valuing differences; More ecumenical willingness.

Fifth analytical portrait: SCMs I and J.

Stage 1: Beginning of the exchange (before encounter)

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE SCM I: *Relationship with the Bible*: Once or twice per week. *Reading approach*: Focus on historical and literary background; Importance of readers' background. *Motivation*: Cognitive and affective

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE SCM J: *Relationship with the Bible*: Heterogeneous: Once or twice per week; Three or four times. *Reading approach*: Need for God's presence/guidance; Having an "open mind"; Focus on actualization/inspiration to act; Deepening in the knowledge of Christ; Importance of readers' background. *Motivation*: Cognitive and affective.

FIRST SESSION SCM I: *Exchange dynamics*: Non-fluid (language issues). **HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS**. *Reading attitudes*: Identification with text; Critical or deconstructive; Mainly focused on actualization. *Status of the text*: Object of analysis and actualization; Source of identification and inspiration. *Heuristic keys*: Social or ecclesial marginalization due to ethnic or national reasons. *Central text characters and concepts*: God's love and acceptance; Christian diversity; Respect for others' identities; Acceptance of non-Jews in the Christian community; Gospel's proclamation. *Explanation Strategies*: Minimal historical, literary, and theological

backgrounds. *Reading with:* Gentiles ACTUALIZATION. *Aspects/characters from the text:* God's universal love; Unity of the diverse church. *Intention to act:* Attitudinal.

FIRST SESSION SCM J: *Exchange dynamics:* Dynamic and relaxed; Repeated gestural and verbal mutual reaffirmations. **HERMENEUTICAL PROCESS.** *Reading attitudes:* Contextual; Historical, Critical; Deconstructive; Inquisitive; Questioning; Imitative; Suspicious. *Status of the text:* Source of identification; Object of critique and analysis. *Heuristic keys:* Multicultural nation; Readers' left-wing political affiliation; Ecumenical engagement; Church's role in colonial efforts. *Explanation Strategies:* Historical background of the text: Cultic, ethnic, cultural, economic, or geographical. *Literary:* Possible compositeness; Textual parallels in the Old Testament, prophets, gospels, apostolic letters. *Theologically:* Paul's theology. *Central text characters and concepts:* Paul; Barnabas; James; Peter; Jewish and Gentile communities; Ecclesial inclusion and acceptance; Church's cultural diversity; Role of tradition and Moses' law for the early Church; Paul and Barnabas' conflict. *Reading with:* "Power-less": Gentiles or Barnabas. ACTUALIZATION. *Aspects/characters from the text:* ecclesial inclusion and acceptance; the Church's cultural diversity. *Appropriation dynamics:* Critical of the local Church's history and action. *Intention to act:* Attitudinal.

Stage 2: Development of the exchange

SECOND SESSION SCMs I: CONFRONTATION. *Linking Process:* Satisfactory; Personal attachment. *Attention to partner's group profile:* Other's national, ethnic, or ecclesial background (establishing similarities or differentiations). *Attitude towards partner group:* Open; Vulnerable; Sensible to partner's disclosure. *Communication with partner group:* Personal and direct ("brothers," "sisters," and "friends"). *Partner's reading attitude:* Partners focused mainly on appropriation; Both groups: Sharing experiences more beneficial than doctrinal discussion; Both: Bible as a source of actualization. *Own reading attitude:* Communal; Critical; Deconstructive; Focused on ecclesial praxis; Focused on God's love and acceptance; *Ecumenical.* *Interpretative similarities:* Specific themes: Central message; Characters' roles; *Heuristic keys:* Inner tensions in the Church; God's person and presence. *Interpretative differences:* Specific themes: As a valuable contribution. **PERCEIVED EFFECTS.** *Interpretation of Acts 15:* Broaden their hermeneutic horizon. *Self-image:* More Awareness of how fragile personal relationships in the Church have always been. *Praxeological effect:* Maintaining ecumenical commitment.

SECOND SESSION SCM J: Relaxed and cohesive. **CONFRONTATION.** *Linking Process:* Moving; Satisfying. *Attention to partner's group profile:* Multiple references to the others' cultural, ecclesial, or religious context (finding similarities and differences); Their spirituality: desire for unity, love, humility. *Attitude towards partners:* Admiration; Mindfulness; Openness; Vulnerability. *Communication with partner group:* Indirect but interested

and curious. *Partner's interpretative dynamics*: Focused on appropriation. *Partner's text status*: Object of actualization, inspiration. *Partner's reading attitude*: They: Ecumenical; Inclusive; Focused on God's love and acceptance; Focused on ecclesial praxis; Interpretative similarities: Multiple; mainly positive. *Interpretative differences*: Less common: objects of interest; Led to growth, learning, and appreciation. **PERCEIVED EFFECTS**. *Interpretation of Acts 15*: Hermeneutical broadening (ecumenical reflecting and participating). *Self-image*: More intercultural competence (motivation). More awareness of partners' context.

Stage 3: Completion of the exchange, conclusions, and evaluations

THIRD SESSION SCMs I AND J: Especially successful; validates IBR research design. *Group dynamics*: Multiple relaxed laughs; Agreeing gestures and expressions; Direct questions. **CONFRONTATION**. *Linking Process*: Satisfaction. *Attention to partner's group profile*: Curiosity; Interest in contextual similarities. *Attitude towards partner group*: Mindful; Vulnerable; Sensitive; Open; Gratitude or admiration expressions. *Communication with partner group*: Direct; Open about expectations. *Partner's reading attitude*: Both: references to partner's method; Focus: Sociological, socio-religious, and political; Focus on appropriation; Focused on ecclesial praxis, Ecumenical. *Interpretative similarities*: Emphasize similarities; *Positive encounter points*. *Interpretative differences*: Complementary and enriching. *Text status*: Source of inspiration. **PERCEIVED EFFECTS**. *Interpretation of Acts 15*: Horizon broadening. *Final Assessment*: Deeply positive. *Praxeological effect*: Future projects together; Looking for difference and dialogue; Ecumenical engagement.

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE SCM I: *Changes in text meaning/understanding Church's unity and diversity*: New biblical perspectives. Reason: partner's biblical method; Partner's faith and vulnerability. *Changes in Bible reading method*: More focus on actualization; More communitarian dimension. *Personal changes/Self-image*: Empowering; Improvement of intercultural skills and motivations; Deeper sense of global community. *Learning outcomes*: Appreciation of Bible interpretative diversity (youth approaches); Influence of the reader's context. *Exchange's evaluation*: Positive experience; Challenging. *Relation with partner group*: More awareness of their context and shared challenges, their cultural biases, and their country's church–society relationship. *Praxeological effect*: (Partial) adoption of partner's reading method; Local Church into a much more dialogical place (opened to youth voices).

EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE SCM J: *Changes in text meaning/understanding Church's unity and diversity*: New biblical perspectives, Reason: Similar challenges (fundamentalist Christian groups, youth sexually diverse believers, indigenous oppression). *Changes in Bible reading method*: focus on action, practical aspects, personal, and emotional elements. *Personal changes/Self-image*: Empowering effects; More own cultural and ideological awareness; More awareness of prejudices or biases; Increased

intercultural knowledge, skills, and motivation; More critical of own interpretations. *Exchange's evaluation*: Positive: More competence in intercultural communication, Appropriation of the discussed meanings; "Shared grounds" development; Higher sense of global community. *Relation with partner group*: Growth: From discrepancy to consensus. *Praxeological effect*: Respecting and valuing differences; Partially adopting partner's reading approach; Engaging in future ecumenical exchanges.

Analytical comparison among exchanges based on selected categories

The *third and final stage* of the analysis involves a horizontal comparison of the exchange outcomes (as described in the aforementioned profiles), with particular attention given to a set of selected analytical categories. This comparative exercise enables the identification of patterns, correlations, or divergences between the results of each exchange and the various factors that prompted them. By doing so, the study seeks to illuminate which conditions, approaches, or dynamics contribute most significantly to the success or halt the development of intercultural Bible reading encounters.

Beginning of the exchanges

Questionnaire for participants

Regarding the participants' *relationship with the Bible*, no significant correlation was found between the frequency of individual Bible reading and the overall quality of the intercultural dialogues. However, a slightly stronger tendency towards successful exchanges was observed among those groups that reported a regular practice of communal Bible reading and discussion. In relation to their *reading approaches*, special attention to either the actualization or the historical background of the text appeared to have only a minimal influence on the success of the intercultural exchange. More revealing were the participants' *motivations to participate* in the project and their (non-)relation to the exchange's success. These were categorized into two overarching types: cognitive motivations, related to a desire to learn from or compare biblical interpretations, and affective motivations, associated with the intention to foster fraternal or solidarity-based relationships with members of another SCM. While all groups cited cognitive motivations, only participants in the most successful exchanges, namely, SCMs E and F, and SCMs I and J, expressed strong affective motivations as well. From this, it can be inferred that cognitive motivations alone are not sufficient indicators of success: they were present in both the most and least successful exchanges (e.g. SCMs G and H versus SCMs C and D). In contrast, the presence of affective motivations shows a clearer correlation with more meaningful and productive intercultural dialogue.

First session's hermeneutical process

Concerning the *reading attitudes* of the participants, the way in which each group approached the Scriptures did not appear to have a significant influence on the overall success of the exchange. For instance, the participants of SCMs I and J (a highly successful exchange) shared similar reading attitudes, while the other three successful exchanges, as well as the unsuccessful one, involved groups with markedly different interpretative approaches (as was particularly evident in the case of SCMs G and H). Similarly, no clear correlation was found between the *status* that each group grants to the text and the quality of the overall exchange. The *heuristic keys* employed across the exchanges also varied considerably, without revealing any discernible pattern linked to the success of the interaction. Finally, regarding the discussions' *central concepts*, it was noted that engaging with similar themes during the initial phase of the exchange (prior to any direct interaction) had only a limited positive effect on the depth or quality of the subsequent conversation. This positive effect was more evident when the initial discussions reflected an affirming stance towards the Church's multicultural diversity.

First session's actualization

A particularly compelling aspect regarding the *actualization* of the biblical text lies in how participants addressed cultural and doctrinal diversity within the Church. Both the most successful and the least successful exchanges referred to this diversity and to the need for tolerance. However, a notable distinction emerged in the degree of intercultural competence displayed. More interculturally competent groups (typically those in the most successful exchanges) tended to approach diversity in a nuanced and reflective manner. They emphasized the importance of compromise, mutual concession, and respect for others' decisions and theological positions. In contrast, less interculturally competent groups often either idealized and romanticized diversity or disregarded it altogether. For example, one participant from SCM D remarked: "This Scripture . . . is practically what's happening in the SCM, where we don't have differences, we don't have denominations, we don't have cultures, we don't have criticisms, is like a one unity, one group way," thus expressing an oversimplified and uncritical view of unity. Regarding the groups' *appropriation dynamics*, a similar pattern emerged. Groups involved in the most successful exchanges typically demonstrated a constructively critical attitude towards their local churches or SCMs. While acknowledging shortcomings, they also expressed a sense of responsibility and offered constructive alternatives. On the other hand, less successful exchanges were marked either by uncritical idealization of their ecclesial contexts or, conversely, by radical and uncompromising criticism, with limited engagement in proposing actionable solutions. Finally, in terms of the participants' *intention to act*, the transformative capacity of intercultural Bible reading (IBR)

became particularly evident when comparing responses from the first and third sessions. During the first session, most participants reported no or only minimal intentions to act upon the text. At best, actualization was limited to modest attitudinal reflections. This contrast highlights the developmental nature of the IBR process, whereby deeper engagement and intercultural dialogue tend to significantly broaden the perceived relevance of the text and motivate more concrete practical responses.

Development of the exchanges

Second session's confrontation

A key indicator of a successful intercultural Bible reading (IBR) exchange was the presence of a dynamic *linking process*. In all successful exchanges, the encounter with a culturally distinct SCM served as a catalyst for new discussions around previously unexplored aspects of the text, contextual circumstances, and interpretive strategies. Participants in these exchanges consistently expressed satisfaction with the pairing, characterizing their partners' interpretations in highly appreciative terms. For example, SCM A referred to the exchange as a source of "surprises" and unexpected realizations; SCM G noted a sense of mutual identification, while SCM E described the partners' readings as "complementary" and "enriching." These reactions suggest a cognitive expansion of biblical interpretation facilitated by exposure to unfamiliar perspectives. Beyond these cognitive gains, the most successful exchanges also reported important affective outcomes. Participants described forming personal attachments (SCM I), being emotionally moved by their partners' interpretations (SCM J), and perceiving them as warm and sympathetic interlocutors (SCM F). These emotional responses further reinforced the interpretive and relational depth of the exchanges, fostering both empathy and solidarity. In contrast, the least successful exchange (between SCMs C and D) exhibited clear limitations in this linking process. The dialogue failed to generate new interpretive discussions, and their second sessions, in which intercultural engagement was expected to unfold, were notably the shortest ones across all exchanges. Participation in these sessions was weak (with only three members from SCM C present), and the conversations were largely dominated by a few voices, leading to minimal dialogical interaction and limited interpretive growth.

A recurring feature across all successful exchanges was the deliberate and empathetic attention given by participants to the biographical and contextual background of their partner groups, that is, the *partner group's profile*. In these cases, participants not only acknowledged but also actively inquired into the national, ethnic, ecclesial, and cultural settings of their dialogue partners. Such interest frequently led to the establishment of meaningful comparisons, identifying both similarities and divergences with their own individual and communal experiences, and served to deepen the interpretive engagement

with the biblical text. Conversely, in the less successful exchange, there was a noticeable absence of such contextual engagement. References to the partner group's background were limited and, when present, often framed in a judgmental or dismissive manner. A salient example may be found in the remarks of Eteferau, who, rather than exploring the socio-cultural realities shaping the interpretive approach of the partner group, criticized their ethical stance and construed their context as morally deficient: "As I read or approach [the text] I think: 'what can I learn from [it]?' and for them is like: 'it is difficult to live like that in [their region],' but that's not how it is supposed to be! . . . They said: '[here] it is thug to obey the rules' . . . So that means they have something they believe in, and they want to believe in that, so it's like the ethics, and the morals, and the behavior surrounding one area."

In general terms, across nearly all successful exchange cases, participants' *attitude towards the partner group* was characterized by three principal dispositions: a willingness to disclose the group's living contexts, an empathetic attentiveness to the openness of their interlocutors, and a posture of self-vulnerability manifested in the sharing of personal feelings, experiences, and convictions. Among these, self-vulnerability emerged as particularly strong in the most successful engagements, most notably in the exchange between SCMs I and J. However, in the case of SCMs E and F, such relational openness and emotional transparency were further enriched by a spirit of critical inquiry directed towards the interpretive approaches of the partner group. By contrast, in less effective exchanges, even when limited openness was present, the dialogical process was significantly impeded by a predominant posture of critique and a marked intolerance for interpretive ambiguities and differences. These attitudes frequently obstructed deeper engagement and curtailed the potential of the exchange.

In this second stage, the category *Partner's reading attitude/interpretative method – Own reading attitude/interpretative method* proved to be of considerable significance for the final analysis. In the majority of cases, the interpretative methods employed by the paired SCMs differed either partially or entirely, yet such divergences did not preclude the occurrence of successful exchanges. The sole exception was the exchange between SCMs I and J, wherein a markedly similar hermeneutical posture contributed to a highly successful outcome. Nevertheless, such ideal conditions were seldom encountered in practice. Partially divergent interpretative approaches, as exemplified in the exchanges between SCMs A and B, and SCMs G and H, also yielded satisfactory results. More notably, the dialogue between SCMs E and F, despite involving profoundly contrasting interpretative frameworks, culminated in a highly successful exchange. Conversely, in the case of SCMs C and D, starkly differing interpretative orientations led to mutual allegations of textual instrumentalization and manipulation, thereby impeding the constructive development of the dialogue.

With regard to *interpretative similarities and differences*, the highly successful exchange between SCMs I and J was marked by numerous interpretative

convergences, which were predominantly evaluated in positive terms. Nonetheless, the emergence of a few interpretative divergences was likewise received constructively by both groups, being regarded as valuable contributions or points of particular interest that fostered mutual learning and appreciation. A comparable dynamic between similarity and difference was evident in other effective exchanges, such as those between SCMs A and B, and SCMs G and H. The highly satisfactory exchange between SCMs E and F, however, unfolded along a different trajectory. SCM F placed significantly greater emphasis on the interpretative disparities with its partner group than on the relatively few points of convergence. This emphasis prompted new lines of argumentation and ultimately led to sustained disagreement. SCM E likewise focused predominantly on the multiplicity of interpretative differences between the groups. In contrast, where intercultural competence appeared underdeveloped and the perceived authority or status of the biblical text diverged markedly between the groups, the result was primarily one of condemnation of the partner's interpretative approach and a concomitant reaffirmation of one's own position.

Second session's perceived effects

A clearer pattern among the exchanges began to emerge at this stage of the analysis. With regard to the *interpretation of the text*, as a result of engaging with and reflecting upon the interpretative approaches of their respective partners, the dialogues between SCMs A and B, SCMs G and H, and SCMs I and J evidenced a broadening of their hermeneutical horizons, incorporating new themes and methods of approaching the Scriptures. In the case of the highly successful exchange between SCMs E and F, SCM E combined interpretative expansion with the development of new arguments that primarily served to reinforce its prior hermeneutical stance. By contrast, SCM F demonstrated only marginal openness to alternative readings, largely consolidating its existing interpretative position. The exchange between SCMs C and D exhibited no such development, maintaining an apologetic posture and failing to generate novel interpretative insights. A similar pattern emerged in relation to the groups' *self-image of the group after (as effect of) the exchange*. In the dialogues involving SCMs A and B, SCMs G and H, and SCMs I and J, participants reported various forms of intercultural competence development. These included heightened awareness of the vulnerability inherent to fostering interpersonal relationships within the Church (SCMs I and J), increased motivation to engage in intercultural encounters (SCM J), and a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural and ideological contexts of their partners (SCM G). In contrast, the remaining four SCMs reported little to no advancement in intercultural awareness. This pattern was partially replicated with regard to the praxeological effect of the exchanges. Notable outcomes included a willingness to incorporate elements of the partner's interpretive method (SCM H) and an intention to explore new avenues for

ecumenical engagement (SCMs A, B, I, and J). The remaining SCMs reported no discernible practical outcomes resulting from the exchange.

Completion of the exchanges, conclusions, and evaluations

Third session's confrontation

Regarding the *linking process*, participants in the four successful exchanges reported a general sense of satisfaction with their respective dialogues during the final session. In the two most effective cases, these discussions were further marked by emotional intimacy and a notable depth of semantic engagement. In contrast, the exchange between SCMs C and D exhibited an erratic dynamic, characterized by recurring misunderstandings, misrepresentations of the partner group's viewpoints, and a predominance of defensive rhetoric. A shared feature among all successful exchanges was the sustained *attention to the partner group's profile* in relation to its socio-cultural and contextual realities. These participants actively presented and inquired into the multiple cultural, ethnic, historical, and religious backgrounds of their interlocutors. In the less effective exchange, however, the partner group's cultural context often became a source of tension and disagreement. Likewise, all successful dialogues demonstrated a consistent set of positive *attitudes towards the partner group*, including openness, responsiveness to the other's disclosures, attentiveness, and intellectual curiosity. In both of the most effective dialogues, such dispositions were deepened through the creation of spaces for intimate vulnerability, accompanied by several open expressions of mutual gratitude and esteem. By contrast, the interaction between SCMs C and D was marked by more ambivalent attitudes. While some participants maintained a thoughtful and receptive stance, others adopted a more critical or defensive posture. In this context, overarching judgments regarding the interpretative methods of the partner group and repeated accusations of textual manipulation were prominent features.

With respect to the category *partner's reading attitude/interpretative method – own reading attitude/interpretative method*, as observed during the second sessions, the interpretative methods remained diverse throughout the third synchronous meetings. Nevertheless, in the most successful exchanges, these differing approaches were predominantly addressed in a descriptive rather than normative manner. Moreover, in both of the highly effective exchanges, participants exhibited a marked preference for the text's actualization over its historical-critical analysis. Conversely, the dialogue between SCMs C and D was primarily characterized by a defensive posture, wherein each group concentrated on upholding its own hermeneutical approach while countering the partner's allegations of textual instrumentalization or accusations of reducing Scripture to "mere literature." Moreover, all exchanges exhibited a range of *interpretative similarities and differences*. A common characteristic among effective dialogues was the shared perception

of interpretative similarities as valuable points of connection, while differences were regarded as opportunities for learning, seen as complementary or enriching. In the case of the exchange between SCMs E and F, one of the two most successful, such differences prompted renewed argumentation and debate, for which the allocated time was considered insufficient. Conversely, in the dialogue between SCMs C and D, the majority of interpretative differences resulted in conflict, with only a minority being recognized as potential learning opportunities.

Third session's perceived effects

As a result of the exchange, the interpretation of the text in all four successful dialogues was marked by a broadening of the participants' interpretative horizons. By contrast, in the case of the SCMs C and D exchange, the confrontation led to a stagnation of meaning. With regard to the *self-image of the group after (as effect of) the exchange*, several participants from the successful dialogues reported an increase in intercultural competence (SCMs A and B), or a heightened awareness of their own prejudices and cultural situatedness (SCMs E and F). Particularly noteworthy is the SCMs E and F exchange, in which participants identified the development of intercultural competencies and deepened textual understanding, despite the absence of interpretative consensus. Conversely, the SCMs C and D dialogue yielded only limited growth in terms of self-awareness and critical reflection. Finally, in terms of the *praxeological effects* of these dialogues, participants in the two most successful exchanges (SCMs E and F; SCMs I and J) expressed a clear intention to engage more actively in future ecumenical IBR initiatives. In these instances, dialogue extended beyond the formal duration of the project. In the other successful exchanges, the effects were largely confined to the interpretative level, including the adoption of the partner group's hermeneutical approach or increased attention to previously overlooked interpretative dimensions. By contrast, the SCMs C and D exchange produced minimal practical impact.

Evaluation questionnaire

In all successful exchanges, participants reported *changes in the meaning of the text* or their *understanding of the Church's unity and its diversity*. Among the primary factors contributing to these changes (especially in the most successful dialogues), participants highlighted exposure to alternative hermeneutical approaches, the openness and self-disclosing attitude of their dialogue partners, and their own willingness to engage vulnerably. In the case of the SCMs C and D exchange, participant responses were divided: while some noted a deeper appreciation for ecclesial unity and diversity, others reported minimal or no change. Reasons cited for this included perceived misunderstandings on the part of their partners or the belief that additional meetings

were necessary. Likewise, participants in all successful exchanges indicated *changes in their Bible reading methods or personal changes (self-image)*. These included the adoption of elements from their partners' interpretative frameworks, such as increased attention to the socio-historical context of the text, a more critical and inquisitive stance, a stronger focus on actualization and communal engagement, an emphasis on practical application, and deeper connections to personal experiences and emotional resonance. Furthermore, participants described a general sense of empowerment, reflected in the development of intercultural competencies, enriched theological and cultural awareness, a renewed sense of the global Christian community, heightened sensitivity to personal biases and ideological presuppositions, and a more critical posture towards their own interpretative practices. In contrast, participants in the SCMs C and D exchange reported no significant evolution in their hermeneutical methods and only marginal changes in self-perception.

The *learning outcomes* reported in the successful exchanges were both abundant and diverse. Several participants identified hermeneutical insights, such as the recognition that the reader's context significantly shapes biblical interpretation, that a multiplicity of legitimate biblical interpretations co-exists in current global Christendom, and that such interpretative diversity should be acknowledged and valued. Ecclesiological insights included an increased awareness that various ecclesial traditions articulate different understandings of the Church's unity and diversity, as well as the realization that young Christians across the globe often confront similar challenges. Practical outcomes were also noted, particularly the perceived value of digital technologies as effective instruments for fostering intercultural and ecumenical dialogue. By contrast, the learning outcomes of the SCMs C and D exchange were limited, with references primarily focused on the existence of diverse interpretative approaches to Scripture. Concerning the *exchanges' evaluation/final assessment*, all ten participant groups assessed their experiences positively, regardless of the exchange's overall effectiveness. In the most successful dialogues, participants described the encounters as intellectually stimulating, personally challenging, "eye-opening," and conducive to the discovery of "shared grounds."

All successful exchanges reported notable changes in their *relationship with their partner group*, including an increased awareness of their partners' contextual realities and the challenges they face. Many participants highlighted the development of their intercultural competencies and, in certain cases, perceived similar developments in their counterparts. By contrast, the responses from participants in the SCMs C and D exchange were significantly more heterogeneous. While some participants indicated a heightened awareness of their partners' ideological positions, several others reported no perceptible change in this respect. Finally, the *praxeological effects* of participation in the project were particularly numerous and diverse among the two most successful exchanges. Participants in these cases expressed a collective decision to continue reading the Scripture together beyond the formal conclusion of

the project. Furthermore, they reported adopting certain elements from their partners' interpretative methods, expressing a renewed ecumenical commitment, and expressing a markedly less condemnatory stance towards biblical interpretations from traditional and conservative groups outside WSCF. These praxeological effects were also present, albeit to a lesser extent, in the other two effective intercultural exchanges. In contrast, the SCMs C and D exchange yielded no discernible praxeological outcomes for its participants.

6 Study conclusions and further discussions on intercultural Bible reading

Having presented the methodology and results of the data analysis, this final chapter seeks to address the principal research question and its sub-questions that led the study, in light of the findings. Moreover, it will present some further discussions on intercultural Bible reading. To recapitulate, the primary question guiding this research sought to identify the most significant factors (cultural, ecclesial, motivational, and others) that facilitated or enabled successful intercultural and ecumenical biblical dialogues among groups of “ordinary Bible readers”¹ from different regions of the world. To differentiate between successful and unsuccessful exchanges, the study adopted a dual methodological approach. First, participants were explicitly asked to assess the quality of their exchange upon its conclusion, using a standardized instrument (Appendix E: Evaluation questionnaire). Second, the existing body of scholarly literature on intercultural Bible reading was consulted to provide theoretical grounding and comparative insights. By integrating these two sources of data (empirical participant evaluations and established academic discourses), the study formulated a working definition of what constitutes a successful exchange. An “exchange” was deemed successful if, following the engagement with two distinct interpretations of the same biblical passage by SCMs from culturally different backgrounds, participants reported that their understanding of the text had been enriched or transformed through the dialogue; that they were open to learning from unfamiliar or “alien” interpretations; that their respective approaches to reading Scripture had benefited from the interaction with their partner SCM; that the experience of intercultural Bible reading was regarded as meaningful and fulfilling; and that the investment of time and energy in the process was considered worthwhile. This main research question generated a number of subsidiary inquiries, including: Which of the five intercultural and ecumenical dialogues among SCMs may be considered successful? What predominant factors are associated with these dialogues? What are the principal shared characteristics of these successful exchanges? Which previously unconsidered factors appear relevant? Which ecumenical or theological models and theories most effectively interpret or correspond to the nature of these successful dialogues?

And finally, how might the conclusions of this study inform or support future intercultural and ecumenical engagements within the WSCF and comparable ecumenical fellowships?

Profiles of different exchange “styles” by their results

Each of the five exchanges exhibited a distinct dynamic and set of results; however, discernible patterns emerged that allowed for their classification into three categories. First, two *highly successful exchanges*, which were marked by mutual interpretative influence, emotional intimacy, and a desire to continue the dialogue beyond the formal project. Second, two *successful exchanges*, which, although lacking the depth of mutual transformation and continuity of the former category, nonetheless fulfilled several ecumenical objectives, such as interpretative growth regarding the biblical text, a certain level of openness to the speeches of their counterparts, and some level of problematization of the former interpretation of the text. Third, a *non-successful exchange*, which failed to achieve any substantial ecumenical outcomes and was marked by interpretative “stagnation,” apologetic positions, and mutual accusations of text instrumentalization. The following section offers a concise summary of the principal findings, aiming to construct a profile for each of these exchange types.

Highly satisfactory (SCMs E and F; SCMs I and J) and satisfactory (SCMs A and B; SCMs G and H) intercultural exchanges

The main conclusion drawn from the comparison of these four exchanges is that, within the framework of intercultural Bible reading (IBR), both satisfactory and highly satisfactory encounters reveal significant diversity and do not follow a single, uniform pattern. This applies to communicative dynamics, the degree of reached consensus or disagreement, and the extent of interpretative transformation resulting from exposure to differing biblical readings. Similarly, in the preparatory phase of the exchange (prior to any intergroup engagement), the eight participating groups demonstrated notable differences in their frequency of Bible engagement, the contexts in which Scripture was read, and their interpretative approaches (e.g. emphasis on actualization versus historical analysis). However, certain common features among them were distinguishable. For instance, all these exchanges were characterized by their capacity to influence or alter the interpretative perspectives of the participants, with the highly satisfactory cases being defined by a pronounced level of emotional intimacy and an ecumenical “shared journey” that extended beyond the formal conclusion of the project. A common trait among all successful exchanges was that participants approached the dialogue with a desire to learn from, explore, and understand their partners’ methods of engaging with Scripture. However, both highly successful exchanges shared

a dual motivational structure, cognitive and affective, that was not observed in the other cases. Participants in these groups not only sought intellectual enrichment but also aimed to form new bonds of solidarity, cultivate personal friendships, and identify on a more intimate level with Christians from different traditions or geographical contexts. The presence of this affective and relational dimension appeared to significantly enhance the outcome of the exchange.

Conversely, specific patterns concerning more narrowly hermeneutical aspects were also analysed. These included the status ascribed to the Scriptures by the readers, the central theological concepts identified in the text under discussion, and the heuristic keys employed during interpretation. These factors, however, showed minimal correlation with the attainment of satisfactory or highly satisfactory exchanges. By contrast, the manner in which the groups actualized the biblical text during the initial phase of the dialogue appeared to bear a more direct relationship to the success of the exchange. While all groups acknowledged the inherent cultural and doctrinal diversity within the global Church, those demonstrating higher levels of intercultural competence commonly nuanced this recognition by addressing the necessity of compromise, mutual concession, and respect for ecclesial decisions within the Christian community. Furthermore, participants in these more successful exchanges frequently adopted a constructively critical stance towards their own churches or student Christian movements (SCMs), expressing a sense of responsibility and offering thoughtful alternatives for ecclesial improvement.

The attitudes adopted by the participants and their partners during the second phase of the exchange revealed a noteworthy development. Across all four successful cases, three principal attitudes were consistently observed, albeit to varying degrees: an openness to present the lived realities of one's group, a sensitivity to and interest in the partner group's disclosures, and a willingness to engage in self-vulnerability by sharing personal feelings, experiences, concerns, or doubts. Among these, the expressions of self-vulnerability emerged as particularly characteristic of the most successful exchanges. Notably, in the case of SCM F, these attitudes were further accompanied by a disposition towards critical engagement and questioning of the partner's interpretative approach. Given that the dialogue between SCMs E and F was classified as highly successful, it may be concluded that within the practice of intercultural Bible reading (IBR), the integration of a questioning and critical stance, when exercised with openness and sensitivity, can also contribute to highly constructive and transformative outcomes.

As outlined in the previous chapter, it was common for the paired SCMs to employ partially or entirely different interpretative methods; yet, this divergence did not hinder the occurrence of successful exchanges. An interesting exception to this trend was observed in the SCMs I and J exchange, where participants shared notably similar reading attitudes. Particularly noteworthy is the SCMs E and F dialogue, which, despite the presence of fundamentally dissimilar interpretative methods, resulted in a highly successful

exchange. A distinguishing factor in this case appears to be the participants' (especially those from SCM E) capacity to "gracefully"² deal and negotiate those differences with their counterparts. Likewise, across all four successful exchanges, participants identified numerous interpretative similarities, which were generally evaluated positively. At the same time, the few emerging differences were approached as valuable contributions or points of special interest, fostering mutual learning and appreciation. The highly satisfactory SCMs E and F exchange, however, followed a somewhat different trajectory. Its participants placed greater emphasis on the interpretative differences than on the similarities, which led to the generation of new arguments and, at times, to non-agreement. Nonetheless, their ability to "gracefully" engage with and critically respond to divergent interpretations appears to have been a key factor in the exchange's overall success.

Regarding the perceived effects of the second phase, a common pattern emerged across the four successful exchanges. In three of them, participants reported an expansion of their hermeneutical horizons, which included the emergence of new thematic concerns and interpretative approaches to Scripture, alongside varying degrees of growth in intercultural competence. The SCMs E and F exchange, however, presented a notable exception. While participants in this group experienced hermeneutical development, particularly through the formulation of new arguments and the articulation of alternative perspectives on the text, they reported limited or no enhancement of their intercultural competencies during this stage of the dialogue.

In the third phase of the exchange (i.e. the third sessions and evaluations), a common hermeneutical feature across the four successful dialogues was the considerable attention participants devoted to the contextual and lived realities of their partners. Likewise, while all groups reported overall satisfaction with their respective exchanges, the two most effective dialogues were further distinguished by a high degree of emotional intimacy and semantic depth. These four exchanges were marked by a range of constructive attitudes, including openness, attentiveness to partners' disclosures, mindfulness, and genuine curiosity. In the highly successful dialogues, these attitudes were further enriched by discussions of personal matters, the creation of spaces for intimate vulnerability, and the mutual articulation of gratitude and admiration. Throughout the third synchronous meetings, interpretative methods among the eight SCMs remained diverse. However, in the most effective exchanges, differing hermeneutical approaches were treated descriptively and without normative judgement. Consistent with the pattern observed in the second phase, these participants showed a greater interest in the actualization of the text than in its historical background. Lastly, across all effective exchanges, interpretative similarities were framed as valuable points of contact, while differences were embraced as opportunities for learning, complementarity, and enrichment. Notably, in the SCMs E and F exchange, such differences also prompted new argumentative engagements and interpretative discussions.

The perceived effects reported by the eight SCMs during the third phase mirrored those identified in the previous stage, though they appeared even more pronounced. These effects included the adoption of certain interpretative approaches from their partners, increased attention to previously neglected dimensions of the text, a strengthened sense of global Christian community, and an overall expansion of their interpretative horizons. Participants attributed these developments largely to their partners' openness, sensitivity to self-disclosure, and their own willingness to engage vulnerably in the exchange. Notably, during this phase, even participants from SCMs E and F reported significant improvements in their intercultural competencies despite the lack of interpretative consensus. These improvements were reflected in heightened awareness of their cultural and ideological biases, a deeper understanding of their partners' contexts and challenges, and a more critical and reflective approach to their biblical interpretations. These findings suggest that the inclusion of synchronous (even virtual) elements in intercultural Bible reading (IBR) dialogues may offer added value in fostering meaningful exchanges. Participants identified various hermeneutical outcomes, including the recognition that readers' contexts shape their scriptural interpretations, that multiple legitimate readings of the Bible coexist in a multicultural Christendom, and that such diversity should be appreciated rather than contested. Ecclesial insights included the realization that different Christian traditions offer varied yet valuable explanations of the Church's unity and diversity, and that young Christians across the globe often face comparable challenges. Practical outcomes were also noted, such as the positive role of digital technology in facilitating intercultural and ecumenical engagement. Finally, participants in the two most successful exchanges maintain an ongoing scriptural engagement with their partners. Moreover, they reported adopting less judgemental attitudes towards divergent Christian interpretations within their own national or ecclesial contexts, particularly in relation to conservative movements.

Non-successful intercultural exchange (SCMs C and D)

Among the five studied exchanges, only the interaction between SCMs C and D qualifies as non-successful. This categorization arises primarily from recurring accusations of textual instrumentalization among the participants, poor dialogical engagement, and minimal hermeneutical development. Despite these significant limitations, it is noteworthy that in the last session, some participants still considered the exchange positively. However, upon closer examination of the data, these ostensibly favourable assessments may be better understood through the lens of a social desirability bias,³ a phenomenon in which individuals provide responses they believe are socially acceptable or expected, rather than those that truly reflect their internal evaluations. As suggested by Winter and Woodhead, such biases are typically more pronounced in open conversation and may diminish somewhat

when respondents complete anonymous questionnaires⁴ (as occurred in most Appendix E: Evaluation questionnaire of both groups). Still, this remains a hypothesis that cannot be conclusively verified with the data available. Rather than dismissing this exchange entirely, it may be more productive to interpret it as a case study; this is a “multifaceted, in-depth investigation of a simple social phenomenon employing qualitative research methods.”⁵ The strength of such analysis lies “in its dense character and its capacity to untangle narratives of very diverse meanings,”⁶ providing “a detailed description about how variables interact in a specific manner,”⁷ rather than allowing to generalize conclusions to all deficient ecclesial intercultural exchanges.

The initial phase of the SCMs C and D exchange followed a pattern similar to the other four, revealing no significant correlation at this stage between the participants’ relationship with the Bible, their interpretative approaches, or their motivations for participating (most of which were primarily cognitive) and the eventual outcome of the exchange. As observed in all five exchanges, participants exhibited diverse reading attitudes; however, the SCMs C and D case offers a particularly illustrative example of how profound differences in interpretative posture can hinder dialogue. Specifically, a highly critical, deconstructive, and questioning stance towards Scripture (as adopted by SCM C) contrasted sharply with a more dogmatic, devotional approach focused on self-identification with the biblical text and God’s loving nature (as exemplified by SCM D). These opposing frameworks appeared to monopolize and polarize the content of the dialogue once interaction commenced, effectively blocking mutual engagement. As in the other exchanges, during the first session, several hermeneutic dimensions, such as participants’ reading attitudes, the authority they attributed to the text, their heuristic strategies, and the core theological concepts raised, did not appear to influence the final outcome directly. However, in this exchange, divergences began to surface more clearly in the process of textual actualization. For example, some participants tended to overlook or dismiss the cultural and doctrinal diversity of their ecumenical partners, while others expressed either an idealized and uncritical view of their own Church or SCM, or conversely, an overly radical and critical perspective.

In the second phase of the exchange, the differences between the SCMs C and D dialogue and those of the four successful exchanges became markedly pronounced. Unlike in the other cases, where engagement with the partner group’s reflections often sparked new interpretative insights or conversations, the discussions between SCMs C and D failed to generate any substantive new dialogue. Both groups’ second sessions were notably the shortest, marked by participants’ low levels of commitment and dominated by a few outspoken voices, which monopolized the conversation and further constrained participation. Crucially, references to the partners’ socio-cultural or ecclesial contexts were minimal. When such references were made, they were frequently expressed in critical or even condemnatory terms, reflecting a broader pattern of limited openness, heightened defensiveness, and low

tolerance for interpretative ambiguity, which seemed to negatively affect the rest of the exchange. Although SCMs C and D, like the other participating groups, employed significantly different interpretative methods, this difference did not lead to mutual enrichment or curiosity. Instead, it resulted in reciprocal accusations of textual instrumentalization and manipulation, categorical rejection of the partner's interpretative framework, and a rigid reaffirmation of one's own. Following these confrontational exchanges, the dialogue took on an increasingly apologetic tone, which further entrenched pre-existing positions and closed off possibilities for mutual learning or transformation. As a result, this phase of the exchange failed to produce any novel interpretative insights or stimulate hermeneutical growth. There was no observable enhancement of intercultural competencies, no deepened appreciation of theological diversity, and no indication that the exchange inspired participants to consider practical applications of the biblical text.

The third phase of the SCMs C and D exchange continued the same problematic trajectory observed in the previous session. The dialogue was characterized by an erratic dynamic, marked by frequent misunderstandings, misrepresentations of the partners' positions, and a predominance of defensive rhetoric. Although a few participants maintained a mindful and open attitude, many others adopted highly critical postures, which further contributed to the deteriorating quality of the interaction. Rather than serving as a bridge for mutual understanding, the cultural and ecclesial contexts of the participants continued to be a source of tension and generalized judgement. Condemnations of the other group's interpretative approach, coupled with persistent accusations of text instrumentalization, remained central features of the conversation. The dialogue largely revolved around reinforcing one's own interpretive stance while attempting to refute or discredit the counterpart's perspective, often blaming the other of reducing the biblical text to either a mere literary source or a dogmatic tool. Most interpretative divergences led to conflict rather than dialogue, with only a few instances being viewed as potential learning opportunities. This dynamic resulted in hermeneutical stagnation: no significant advancement in interpretive insight was noted, and the exchange yielded minimal practical or ecclesial implications. When the participants evaluated the overall experience, their responses were divided. Some claimed to have gained a deeper understanding of ecclesial unity and diversity, while others reported little to no impact. Reasons cited for the lack of perceived growth included the inability to understand or connect with the partner group and a perceived need for additional encounters to bridge these gaps. Moreover, there was no observable evolution in the participants' biblical reading methods, and any changes in self-perception or theological posture were marginal at best. In terms of learning outcomes, references were largely confined to an acknowledgement of interpretative diversity. A minority expressed greater awareness of their partner group's ideological framework, while others reported no change. The exchange inspired no discernible praxeological outcomes, new practices, nor ecumenical initiatives.

Research conclusions

The data analysis from the preceding section supports a broad and well-grounded, albeit still partial, set of conclusions. These findings are necessarily tentative due to the limited number of exchanges examined and the wide range of influencing factors involved. The conclusions are organized around several key dimensions of intercultural Bible reading (IBR). A primary conclusion is that satisfactory and highly satisfactory IBR exchanges follow diverse trajectories and cannot be reduced to a single model. Despite their variation, such exchanges consistently foster significant growth in multiple dimensions of participants' interpretative and relational capacities. Across different formats, IBR has been shown to markedly enrich participants' interpretative discussions. It facilitates the broadening of intercultural competencies, deepens awareness of personal cultural, ideological, and theological biases, and enhances the practical implications (praxeological dimension) of engaging with Scripture. Furthermore, participants gain deeper insights into alien socio-cultural and ecclesial contexts and the challenges that distant Christian communities face. In addition, the exchanges proved that IBR consistently promotes a heightened sense of global Christian community. It also encourages critical self-reflection on one's own reading practices and theological assumptions. Importantly, the experience significantly enhances participants' commitment to practical ecumenism, often inspiring further engagement in cross-cultural or interdenominational collaboration. From a methodological perspective, the inclusion of synchronous elements (even in virtual formats) proved particularly effective in amplifying the above-mentioned benefits. However, certain structural features can hinder exchange quality. These include excessively small participant groups (three or fewer members), as well as the dominance of certain individuals who monopolize the conversation, thereby stifling diverse contributions and limiting mutual learning.

Concerning the hermeneutical dimension of IBR, different main conclusions were reached. First, in IBR, the participants' habitual ways of engaging with the Bible and their initial reading approaches appeared to have minimal influence on the overall quality of the exchange. Second, the manner in which participants actualize the biblical text, relating it to their own contexts and lived experiences, proved to be significantly more consequential for the quality of the dialogue than their analysis of the text's historical background. Likewise, even when interpretative methods diverged substantially, highly successful exchanges were still possible. However, tensions emerged when a deeply critical, deconstructive stance towards Scripture confronted a more dogmatic or devotional reading, resulting in a monopolization of the conversation and the breakdown of constructive dialogue. Furthermore, in the most fruitful exchanges, differing interpretative approaches were generally assessed in descriptive and non-normative terms. This openness facilitated mutual understanding and minimized conflict. In addition, successful IBR

dialogues were often characterized by a greater number of interpretative similarities, which were positively acknowledged, while differences were typically approached as enriching contributions or opportunities for deeper reflection. Notably, even significant interpretative divergence could foster highly effective exchanges, provided they were undergirded by specific motivational factors, relational attitudes, and a degree of intercultural competence. Likewise, a hallmark of successful exchanges was their capacity to inspire the adoption of new interpretative approaches, to bring greater attention to previously overlooked dimensions of the text, to deepen participants' awareness of the global Christian community, and to broaden their overall interpretative horizon. Finally, participants who held realistic and nuanced understandings of the Church's cultural and doctrinal diversity, rather than romanticized or idealized visions, were more likely to engage constructively. When this realism was combined with a posture of critical yet constructive reflection on their own traditions, the exchange was significantly more likely to be successful.

The research methodology further enabled the identification of key patterns regarding the influence of participants' motivations and attitudes on the quality of IBR exchanges. The analysis revealed that the nature of participants' motivations significantly shapes the trajectory and outcome of the dialogue. While purely cognitive motivations, such as a desire to learn, explore alternative interpretations, or understand diverse biblical approaches, could result in either successful or unsuccessful exchanges, a combination of cognitive and affective motivations was strongly associated with highly successful dialogues. These affective motivations included the intention to form new bonds of solidarity, foster intercultural friendships, and personally engage with Christians from different cultural or ecclesial traditions. Moreover, the expression of honest and spontaneous appreciation for the partners and their interpretative insights emerged as a notable enhancer of dialogue quality. The detailed examination of the data indicated that three primary attitudinal factors were consistently present in successful exchanges: openness in presenting the group's own living context and experiences, sensitivity and interest towards the partner group's disclosures, and self-vulnerability, that is, the willingness to share personal emotions, experiences, and concerns. This latter factor was particularly prominent in the most successful exchanges. In addition, the findings suggest that successful IBR is not necessarily contingent on full agreement or harmony. Rather, critical and questioning attitudes, when expressed with openness, empathy, and sensitivity, can equally lead to highly positive outcomes. These attitudes are especially effective when paired with non-condemning perspectives on the partner group's profile and context, along with an active curiosity and genuine inquiry into their national, ethnic, ecclesial, or cultural backgrounds.

The findings of this research further underscore the pivotal role of intercultural competence in shaping the outcomes of intercultural Bible reading (IBR) dialogues. Successful exchanges were consistently associated with marked improvements in participants' intercultural abilities. These included

a heightened awareness of personal cultural and ideological biases, a deeper understanding of the partner group's context and challenges, and a more self-critical engagement with one's own biblical interpretations. However, the data also revealed that in exchanges marked by significant interpretative divergence and different conclusions, the success of IBR heavily relied on the interpersonal and intercultural capacity of participants to "gracefully" navigate and negotiate these differences. This suggests that intercultural competence in IBR extends beyond passive tolerance and requires relational dexterity, empathetic engagement, and a willingness to embrace interpretative plurality as an opportunity for mutual enrichment rather than division.

Further discussions on intercultural Bible reading

To conclude, four additional aspects of the current IBR project will be discussed. First, the influence of the virtual format on the IBR experience will be examined, particularly its role in shaping safe spaces, the opportunities it facilitates, and the inherent limitations it presents. Second, the narrative of the "Jerusalem Council" will be reinterpreted in light of the diverse meanings and insights generated by the groups during intercultural dialogues. This re-reading highlights the dynamics of power embedded in the narrative, the dependency-oriented mindset perceived by participants in certain characters, the ambivalence experienced by young Christians in various contexts in relation to the biblical text, Paul's complex stance regarding Christian unity and inclusion, and the conspicuous absence of women in Acts 15. Third, the discussion will address how the transcultural nature of IBR positions it as a practice aligned with biblically grounded receptive ecumenism. Fourth and finally, a brief reflection on biblical interpretative normativity will be offered, emphasizing the importance and potential of fostering engagement between academic biblical scholarship and the "popular" interpretations that emerge within IBR contexts.

Intercultural Bible reading (IBR) on virtual design

The present project was conducted during the peak years of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by widespread lockdowns and severe disruptions to social life. In response to public health restrictions, most forms of social engagement, including office work, university instruction, and religious observance, had to be fundamentally restructured. In the religious domain specifically, this restructuring often demanded not only logistical adaptation but also a "re-theologization" of spiritual practices and communal life to accommodate the absence of physical presence. Originally conceived as an intercultural Bible reading (IBR) initiative between historically established German churches and so-called "migrant" churches, this project was necessarily relocated to a fully virtual environment. This shift was not merely technical, but it introduced both new possibilities for global participation

and a range of practical and theoretical challenges. The project thus became an example of the broader “digital turn” in the humanities, which extends beyond the adoption of new tools to encompass a transformation in methodology, epistemology, and the materiality of research itself. Heyden and Schröder explain the complexities involved in such re-design:

Unlike other ‘turns’ in the sciences, the ‘digital turn’ is not just about establishing a new theoretical perspective or opening up a new subject area, but also about using a variety of new methodological settings and changing the materiality of what the humanities study and how they present their findings.⁸

As a general remark, it is fair to agree with these authors that theological research could hardly be considered a pioneer among other humanities in the study of the implications of digitalization in daily life.⁹ While fields such as Religious and Cultural Studies have increasingly emphasized the intersection between their disciplines and digitalization, particularly under the broad umbrella of “digital humanities,” academic theology, especially within the German-speaking context, often retains a more traditional self-conception as primarily exegetical or classical. Although this debate has been ongoing for at least a decade, the COVID-19 lockdowns brought it abruptly into the spotlight. Suddenly, a wide range of ecclesial activities, including liturgies, pastoral care, confirmation classes, Bible studies, and even choir rehearsals, were transferred to digital platforms. These changes revived theological questions such as: “Where and how should the church be present and for whom and by whom should it be represented?”¹⁰ Such inquiries gained particular relevance in relation to Christian ceremonies and rituals that inherently embody the communal and publicly professing nature of the faith community, such as Holy Communion or believers’ baptism. Could these rites also take place in virtual spaces? And if not, what theological rationale justifies the distinction? Different Christian traditions have offered varied responses to these questions, depending largely on their sacramental and liturgical theologies. For instance, the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and some more traditional Protestant churches have emphasized the necessity of physical presence for sacramental life. In contrast, more progressive or independent Christian traditions have adopted flexible approaches, with some “free churches” even conducting baptisms online.¹¹

The specific case of communal Bible reading or “Bible study groups” within the Church appears to be less controversial than the aforementioned examples; after all, as Karcher affirms, “liturgical practice [is not static, and] transforms itself with each generation.”¹² Heidi Campbell identifies Bible study groups as a classic example of what she terms “the Distanced Church.” In her words, this refers to “one where people are physically separated from one another but still *spiritually interconnected* and in need of some modified forms of technologically facilitated social interaction.”¹³ Von Oorschot

echoes this perspective, noting no inherent contradiction between the local or parochial congregation and a digital one. Instead, she observes that “the question of where and how the Church can and should be present reveals a unique combination of physical proximity and media-mediated presence,” asking: “Is media-mediated, virtual koinonia ecclesologically problematic – or is the sharpness of the debate perhaps only due to the (still) unfamiliar digital medium?”¹⁴ If this is the case, could virtual IBR be seen as a pioneering initiative towards fostering non-physical, yet spiritually connected, global fellowships? In my view, IBR cannot, and should not, seek to replace local communities and parishes as the foundation for a new model of virtual congregation. Any such attempt would ultimately undermine its core purpose: to bring together believers and their local communities, with their own historic religious traditions, to the ecumenical table. Nevertheless, all answers in this regard must remain provisional, as “Practical theology is particularly challenged here in terms of church theory in order to bring together institutional and organizational logic models with the logic of an agile or hybrid [global] church.”¹⁵

The two most common criticisms of virtuality in religious contexts can be meaningfully challenged by the findings of this research. The first concerns the supposed “unreality” of the interactions it enables, namely, the question of “to what extent such mediated [religious experiences are] ‘real’ for those who experience it via broadcast or livestream, especially Eucharistic and sacramental celebrations.”¹⁶ The second relates to the allegedly “flawed” nature of communication in virtual religious exchanges. German liturgist Teresa Berger addresses the first concern by emphasizing that the dichotomy between virtuality and reality is ultimately false, overlooking the fact that virtual spaces can also facilitate real scenarios in which participants engage in meaningful interactions.¹⁷ “Virtual” does not equate to “disembodied.” In these encounters, participants are physically and materially involved, actively engaging their senses and bodies (eyes, hands, and ears) in the full experience of a religious-centred conversation or ritual. Berger further contributes to the debate by distinguishing between “spatial co-presence” and “liturgical communion,” arguing that the former is neither a prerequisite for the latter nor for the experience of ecclesial koinonia.¹⁸ In her opinion, it is a “matter of connecting different types and levels of proximity with each other, describing fluid forms of proximity and presence, and enabling forms of visual witnessing.”¹⁹

Regarding the second critique, Livingstone notes that “even though . . . face-to-face communication can . . . be angry, negligent, resistant, deceitful and inflexible, somehow it remains the ideal against which mediated communication is judged as flawed.”²⁰ Similarly, Ilona Nord addresses this concern and argues that there is no reason within liturgical or theological studies to consider virtual spaces as inherently inferior or deficient compared to in-person communication.²¹ The specific findings of this IBR project appear to support both perspectives. In this research, the digital environment proved

effective in creating safe spaces where participants felt comfortable sharing intimate feelings, emotions, hopes, and concerns. They were able to empathize with their partners' experiences, reported being emotionally affected by them, and established strong bonds of solidarity. Although similar outcomes have been observed in previous IBR projects, the fact that nearly all groups in this study, regardless of their context, reported these effects further affirms the potential of virtual IBR to foster meaningful, creative, and interactive spaces among everyday Bible readers, all within a communicative framework that proved more than adequate.

In addition, this critique tends to overlook the fact that much of the Christian tradition has been mediated not only through face-to-face testimony but also through epistles, hymns, images, creeds, relics, oral narratives, and letters. In these forms, the absence of direct personal connection between sender and recipient is often bridged by a new relationship, one formed between the receiver, the faith object, and the Holy Spirit. This suggests that Christian communication is ultimately an encounter between human subjectivities, with the intent of inviting divine presence to reconcile differences and bridge distances, thus enabling individuals and communities to become one, "a body," in the Pauline tradition (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). Nonetheless, further research is needed on the relationship between medium and message in virtual IBR, since, as von Oorschot reminds us, "media are not only a means of communication, but also shape and form content."²²

In general terms, the evidence suggests that the opportunities virtuality offers to IBR, and by extension, to the global Church, outweigh its limitations and associated biases. Perhaps the most evident of these opportunities is its capacity to "stretch the presence of the Body of Christ, [rather than its] negation."²³ Through its virtual presence, the Church becomes more inclusive, reaching those who, due to physical, health-related, or other constraints, are unable to gather in person. In this light, "gathering online [becomes] unequivocally a blessing. . . . It is social communication that gives us a sense of connection and community, a sense of belonging, a sense of participation."²⁴ Moreover, virtual platforms enable the Church to offer a form of public witness that is accessible to anyone, at any time, and from any location. Still, there remains the risk that Church life and its communication may become diluted or abstracted, especially if virtuality is pursued primarily for the sake of "convenience and efficiency."²⁵ In such cases, it risks conforming to the logic of fluid consumerism and volatile membership, hallmarks of a competitive religious market, rather than expressing the authentic and tangible reality of the Body of Christ.

The Jerusalem Council: a "new" shared story

Prof. Hans de Wit opens the first chapter of his *Through the eyes of another*²⁶ with an unexpected statement for a biblical scholar: he quotes a Himalayan proverb that states, "You cannot send a kiss by messenger."²⁷ This simple, yet

evocative, phrase captures the essence of intercultural Bible reading (IBR). Beyond a mere encounter between two theologies or interpretative traditions, IBR is ultimately the meeting of two believing communities who share in the religious text an intimate and personal faith (like a kiss) that defies definition but is recognized and honoured in the other's belief and practice. It represents the encounter of two vulnerable groups of believers, whose hearts, intellects, and souls recognize each other through the shared Scripture, which, despite being interpreted differently, constitutes a reserve of meaning from which they all nourish and give sense to their lives. In this encounter, new dimensions of the text emerge, and previously overlooked aspects come to light. The meaning of the Scripture becomes enriched, generating new stories from "old" and familiar sacred narratives. As one participant from SCM G observed, "[IBR] made us come out of our comfort zones and explore that passage in a different way."

The biblical interpretations developed by the groups during the text discussions were highly diverse, reflecting a wide range of interests and prior experiences within their congregations and their respective societies. One of the most frequently mentioned themes centred on the ecumenical discussion of the "Jerusalem Council" in Acts 15, which was interpreted not primarily as a case of doctrinal disagreement, but rather as an episode marked by power struggles within the early Church. Many participants viewed the text more as a historical narrative that reveals the conflicts and rivalries of the nascent Christian community, rather than as a romanticized account of unity and dialogue. Some even described it as an "example of how conflicts should NOT be solved." A recurring interpretation saw the Council as a story of intergenerational conflict between those who had encountered Jesus personally before his ascension and those who came to faith through the testimony of early missionaries. This dynamic resonated deeply with several participants, particularly younger believers who often find themselves striving for voice and influence within Church communities dominated by older, more traditional leaders demanding conformity and obedience. Their sense of marginalization within their congregations sparked intense reflection and critical questioning throughout the IBR process.

- The text tells us about resolving conflicts, [it] is NOT a good example of peace mediation, this is a negative example because it shows us how vulnerable we are when it comes to differences between us. [It refers to] dynamics of power and if we just surrender ourselves to this power or not. So, the question is how much power do we actually have and how can we manage it inside of our churches (SCM I)
- The older generations don't handle, or not always . . . they kind of challenge your confrontation, and react really poorly (SCM G).
- About intergenerational gaps . . . and the issue of the older generation presenting the younger generation as aggressive . . . for sure! I do present to some of my younger friends or relatives as aggressive in a way, for me it's quite a lot of changes! (SCM H).

- Experience does come with wisdom but it also comes with blindness and a loss of energy (SCM G).

Almost all participants across the groups identified themselves with the Gentile believers portrayed in the text. Some explicitly denounced what they perceived as a “power-oriented” mindset among some participants in the Council and raised critical questions about the appropriate role of ancient traditions within their own churches. Throughout the dialogue, several participants noted that the dynamic described in Acts 15 continues in their present-day communities, particularly when Christian groups or denominations pressure them to abandon their traditional customs to appear more “Christian-like.” They recognized this expectation as a lingering legacy of the colonial histories their ethnic groups or nations endured, and many did not hesitate to condemn the historical role of the Church and its faith as instruments of cultural imperialism.

- [Some in the text] were having this kind of . . . mindset, like “they have to accept God and accept OUR way to follow him” (SCM I).
- You are to hold to our origin, yes! we want to obey our ancestors, and the people put in place to show us the way, but at the same time we want to obey God, so we don’t really know what is the right path to follow At what extension [should I] compromise on my heritage to fit the perfect image of a Christian? (SCM H).
- In [our country], obviously, we live on aboriginal land of different indigenous nations . . . and the relationship between the Church and colonization has been . . . they basically just facilitated colonization! (SCM J).

The story brought to light the ambivalent feelings and challenges associated with being a community of young Christians in different contexts, whether in Western secular societies or in countries where Christians are a minority. For nearly all readers, the narrative raised questions about the inclusive character that a truly welcoming Church should embody. Many described their own position as liminal, that is, a space of constant negotiation between cultural or ethnic identity and Christian belonging. This sparked rich discussions on what it means to be a Christian who remains faithful both to their traditional roots and to the gospel message. A recurring theme was the inner tension between being an insider or an outsider, which resonated with the various boundaries the Church establishes and how participants imagined those boundaries might be transgressed, dismantled, or reimaged to create a more open and inclusive institution. References to verse 19 of the chapter: “We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God,” repeated constantly, serving as a strong call for the Church to adopt a more open and pastoral posture. Finally, some participants identified parallels between the racial tensions in their own communities and those portrayed in

the text between Jewish and Gentile believers. They also criticized the ways in which local religious leaders at times perpetuate these divisions, to the detriment of both their religious and ethnic communities.

- The conflict between the culture of the Church and the culture of the nation is the problem here. . . . There are some traditional attitudes that [a national] follows and I cannot follow that, so I follow some Christian traditions [which] will not go hand in hand with the culture of my nation. So, we have two kinds of problems here: is that you choose to be the insider of the Church or the insider of the country, I have to lose either of these identities if I have to choose one (SCM B).
- I would take [with me] what I told at the beginning of this meeting “Don’t make things harder than they are,” so don’t build more borders (SCM A).
- What I’m seeing from this text is basically that with God there is no discrimination (SCM D).
- Society and the Church have always to deal with how they are going to deal with strangers who [do not have] the same background or same traditions, . . . and [decide] how far are we going to give up our mind and tradition for the new people, and how much they have to change that they are part of the Church or the society (SCM A).
- Especially in [our country] we do have racism Even at the Church I attend, I’ve seen [that] somebody who is in white complexion [is] welcomed and given the VIP seats near the pastors, while you as an ordinary Christian just find your seat. . . . We even see from our parents the way they treat white people, they receive whatever they say [or] do [as of] higher standard (SCM H).

The second part of the text (related to the conflict between Paul and Barnabas due to the insistence of the latter for including John Mark in their next missionary journey) was the object of less attention than the council’s narrative. Nonetheless, those who discussed it identified in Paul an ambivalent attitude towards Christian unity and inclusion. Such a disposition was commonly related to local experiences in which personal discrepancies among the different ecclesial actors and their personal egos threatened the unity of the Church, trying to present these differences as doctrinal when they are personal. In a few cases, the participants even identified themselves with the character of John Mark, that is, as provocative sources of unrest in their local congregations.

- Instead, rather than being a kind of difference in belief that drew them apart, it was an experience of one person trusting someone who the other thought they shouldn’t trust, [it] wasn’t difference in belief and what we should, and how we should include people in the

Church but . . . people! basically relationships and people. Those are very human experiences! (SCM J).

- I see Paul as a very egocentric person . . . he didn't want to include Mark just because of the reason mentioned previously. I find Paul very egoistic. While he was trying to stand for unity and trying to include Gentiles, he himself was the one who wanted to exclude Mark in his missionary journey, so that was the irony that I found. . . . I can relate this to . . . our Christian "supremacy syndrome" in the present context (SCM B).
- John Mark doesn't sound like a good egg! [but] perhaps I am like John Mark, perhaps we are the people that create the conflict as well (SCM J).

An unexpected but significant thematic axis that emerged during the dialogues concerned the "absent" place of women in the Acts 15 narrative. Several participants questioned the author's intention in portraying the first ecumenical council as an entirely male-centred event, with all key figures, Paul, Peter, James, Barnabas, John Mark, the Pharisees, the Gentiles, and the Church elders, being men. This observation sparked broader discussions on the representation of women in (inter)religious assemblies and the Church's stance on issues such as women's reproductive health. Participants also reflected on the extent to which the Church functions either as a guardian of or a challenge to patriarchal social structures. The gender discussion further expanded to include the role of sexually diverse identities in Christian congregations, and how the ecumenical movement should engage with these topics, especially considering the often-contradictory positions held by its member communities.

- I have understood that God does not discriminate between people. [He allows] women to be engaged in leadership in the Church (SCM H).
- [Regarding] things like abortion or women's rights, a lot of times religion can be seen as a threat. Like if women's body headed against religious views a lot of the times, it's difficult! And then the men in power will often use religion to assert that power (SCM G).
- Can I remind you something Adamu? Do you remember when we went to the meeting in 2019? That was a meeting that was composed of international leaders. They came to the table and discussed what the ICPD was trying to do [so] we don't have abortions [nor] contraceptives? There was this Muslim [.] Iman saying "We cannot all be discussing [about] women's bodies and we are all men! We need to include these women!" (SCM H).
- Many of the points [and] terms that were raised, were just very relevant to our own context: talking about toxic masculinity or the patriarchy (SCM G).

Intercultural Bible reading as a tool for transcultural ecumenism

Despite the practical challenges that global intercultural Bible reading (IBR) entails, its ability to gather individuals from different geographical regions, Christian traditions, and personal or communal backgrounds around a shared sacred text positions it as one of the most promising models for developing “base ecumenism.” This is defined as “initiatives that emerge from the people – from the bases – in conversation with interchurch ecumenical work.”²⁸ The present project has demonstrated that successful IBR arises from a combination of several factors: the “cognitive” intention to better understand the other and their faith; the “affective” motivation to foster personal intimacy and solidarity; attitudinal dispositions such as openness, empathy, and self-vulnerability; genuine curiosity about the other group’s context; the ability to navigate opposing views with grace and respect, among others. From an ecumenical perspective, these findings raise critical questions: How do such insights contribute to ongoing global ecumenical discourse, and in what ways do they intersect with or challenge current ecumenical models?

Various scholars have emphasized the need to move beyond a purely “doctrinal-centric” model of ecumenism towards an approach less concerned with “harmonization and reconciliation . . . and aimed more at . . . mutual challenge, development, and growth by bringing the traditions into encounter with each other precisely in their difference.”²⁹ This perspective aligns closely with the agenda of IBR. Professor Paul Murray of Durham University has advanced the concept of receptive ecumenism, based on the conviction that ecumenical progress is indeed possible, “but only if each of the traditions, both singly and jointly, makes a clear, programmatic shift from prioritizing the question ‘What do our various others first need to learn from us?’ to asking instead, ‘What is that we need to learn and can learn, or receive, with integrity from our others?’”³⁰ Such a model transitions the focus from abstract, “faceless” doctrines to lived personal and communal narratives, biographies, testimonies, and aspirations. This emphasis resonates with the attitudinal triad that characterized the most successful IBR exchanges in this project: openness in presenting one’s living circumstances; sensitivity and attentiveness to the openness of others; and the self-vulnerability required to share deeply personal feelings, experiences, and hopes. This receptive posture marks a distinct ecumenical style, which

starts with humble recognition of the wounds, tears, and difficulties in one’s own tradition and asks how the particular and different gifts, experiences, and ways of proceeding in the other traditions can speak to and help to heal these wounds that elude the capacity of one’s own tradition to heal itself.³¹

This represents a shift from an ecumenical strategy based on epistemological agreement to one rooted in a shared experience of pilgrimage, where ongoing

self-conversion becomes essential, and the vision of full communion remains a hopeful, though indistinct, horizon. In this context, personal commitment and mutual trust emerge as fundamental prerequisites for a genuinely receptive ecumenical encounter.

Intercultural Bible reading becomes a truly receptive encounter when, as Margaret O’Gara suggests, it is approached as an exchange of Christian gifts,³² that is, an experience of sacred hospitality in which every believer has something to contribute to the ecumenical table and something to take from it. Avery Dulles qualifies it as an “ecumenism of mutual enrichment by means of testimony”³³ grounded in a profound commitment to unity amid Christian diversity. As a receptive practice, IBR is enriched through the ongoing process of open listening, speaking, and mutual influence, all directed towards the shared goal of attaining “a deeper share in the truth of Christ.”³⁴ Such encounters demand a high degree of sensitivity, akin to the “necessary self-transcendence”³⁵ embedded in the receptive tradition. In both IBR and receptive ecumenism, meaningful communication can only flourish when individuals are willing to look beyond themselves, attending to the needs, rhythms, and perspectives of the other, and remaining open to the possibility of thinking or feeling in new ways in response.

Nevertheless, the previously described exchanges demonstrate that essentialist approaches to Scripture interpretation, such as exoticizing the other, must be avoided. As some readers candidly expressed, they were surprised by how different their partners’ interpretations were from what they had expected. In some cases, liturgical practices across the groups were strikingly similar despite their geographical distance. Likewise, there were notable overlaps in biblical interpretations and shared concerns, such as the lasting impact of colonization in their societies or the rise of far-right movements that seek to instrumentalize Christian sentiments and identities. As one member of SCM G noted:

A lot of [what they discussed in their continent] felt almost just like watching a parallel Bible study to our own, really! It felt very very familiar. I thought there was gonna be a greater cultural shift or a cultural gap, but it felt very familiar and many of the points and terms that were raised were just very relevant to our own context.

Static conceptions of ecumenism that treat each tradition as a fixed, independent cultural entity must be reconsidered in favour of approaches grounded in empirical data and cultural studies. These approaches account for ongoing globalization with its homogenizing effects, social particularization forces as a response to the previous phenomenon, and the acknowledgement of complex historical interactions and exchanges among the societies and traditions represented in these dialogues. Such dynamics arise from multiple processes of hybridization and the permeability of the religious and cultural identities involved. In this context, O’Gara’s “exchange of Christian gifts” must be

sensible to the diverse Christian traditions and the cultural contexts in which they have developed, considering that they

have never evolved as distinct entities or even primarily by the interaction of separate units. Rather, entanglement, exchange, porosity, and hybridization have always been an instrumental part of the[ir] ongoing definition[s] and development[s]. [Historically, they have followed] transgressive and translatory direction[s] [marked by] borders creat[ion] and border-crossing[s]. In dividing they simultaneously connect[ed].³⁶

This is a transcultural understanding of receptive ecumenism.

Intercultural Bible reading as a receptive practice regards the experiences, narratives, biographies, material artefacts, and spiritual dispositions of participants with equal seriousness as the doctrines and official theologies they represent. Through inter-group dialogue, these elements undergo processes of translation, adaptation, reconfiguration, or hybridization. However, such interactions can also result in hardened rhetoric or, in some instances, lead to demarcation and isolation. This phenomenon occurs because “cultural difference is not something ‘given.’ It is rather a discursive creation with a history that can be researched as it is created by processes of ‘othering.’”³⁷ The variety of outcomes observed in the current IBR project demonstrates that “encounter engenders change, though this change may bring about conflict as well as concurrence. This is due to the fact that transculturation is an open, multidirectional process.”³⁸

The receptive and transcultural movement towards an ecumenical communion, which is continually evolving and embodied in IBR, acknowledges that the hybridizations or demarcations arising from encounters among diverse biblical interpreters and their interpretive approaches constitute creative spaces for the emergence of new shared religious identities, narratives, and biographies. In this regard, the transcultural encounter extends beyond the mere hybridization of the traditions involved. It represents a generative process aimed at producing and embodying new knowledge, narratives, transcultural strategies, and competencies among participants. This process seeks to enrich participants and their religious communities with the novelty that emerges through collective reflection and construction, thereby opening the possibility of uncertainty and requiring mutual trust among all parties engaged.

Intercultural Bible reading in dialogue with biblical sciences: its normative dimension

Intercultural Bible reading, alongside Reception Studies of the Bible or the approach known as “Ordinary theology,”³⁹ affirms the legitimacy and agency of every believer to engage in theological reflection, interpret Scripture, and contribute new biblical insights in response to their particular context and the global situation of the Church. However, as several scholars have noted,

this affirmation does not entail “unlimited and indifferent liberalism regarding biblical hermeneutics; it does not induce an absolute relativism concerning the interpretation of the Bible,”⁴⁰ nor does it imply “lack of identity.”⁴¹ Rather, each Christian reader of the Bible interprets and interacts with the text through the lens of a particular Christian tradition, which itself carries a hermeneutical heritage. Moreover, the reader, whether consciously or not, participates in a universal faith tradition that encompasses over two millennia of biblical interpretation and scholarship. This raises a critical question: how to respond to the fact that certain “spontaneous” or lay interpretations diverge from, or even contradict, biblical academic scholarship? Several clarifications are necessary. First, as outlined previously, biblical scholarship itself is neither static nor uniform. It represents a dynamic field shaped by a plurality of voices, each employing distinct theoretical and methodological approaches⁴² (often driven by specific scholarly agendas and traditions). These differences can also lead to varying, even conflicting, conclusions. An illustrative example is found in *New Perspectives on Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, where Kessler compares the works of two eminent Old Testament scholars: Frank Crüsemann, in his *Habilitationsschrift*, and Richard Müller, in his doctoral dissertation. Both scholars analyse the so-called anti-monarchic texts of the Old Testament using comparable academic methodologies. Yet, after a detailed chapter-by-chapter comparison of their works, Kessler poses a critical question: “How is it possible that two scholars in two scholarly books, reading the same texts with nearly the same scholarly methods, come to conclusions that contrast sharply at nearly every point?”⁴³ Kessler concludes that one must acknowledge that “there is not less multicoloredness in professional reading than in ordinary reading.”⁴⁴ Thus, despite the sophisticated methodologies employed in biblical scholarship, it remains far from a purely objective or positive science, since, among other reasons, all “knowledge production is constituted by some epistemologically, ontologically, and methodologically normative choices and assumptions.”⁴⁵ Rather, even the most skilled and committed exegete must engage with a multiplicity of voices and approaches to the text in order to meet the necessary standards of critical interpretation. This principle becomes even more crucial within the field of intercultural Bible reading. To clarify, a posture of humble openness to divine guidance does not substitute for the exegetical expertise cultivated by biblical scholars over decades of rigorous study. Likewise, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is not more evident in one group of readers and diminished in another; rather, it is present and active across diverse interpretative communities, each one of them bearer of a specific charisma.

Within Protestantism, for instance, a defining emphasis has been the empowerment of individual believers to engage directly with the biblical text, free from the exclusive mediation of ecclesial authorities or academic experts tasked with determining the “true” meaning of Scripture beforehand. As such,

For whatever else the Reformation may have been: it experienced and understood, explained and staged itself as a biblical movement that

represented its biblical knowledge and convictions at the academic height of its time and at the same time resolutely popularized them.⁴⁶

Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church undertook significant reforms during the Second Vatican Council, which reaffirmed and expanded the role of both communal and personal engagement with Scripture. Two conciliar documents in particular underscore this shift. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* affirms the centrality of the biblical text in the Church's liturgical life, particularly in preaching and the public reading of Scripture. *Dei Verbum* goes further by declaring the Bible as the *suprema regula* (DV 21) of faith for the Church and the foundation of theological reflection (DV 24). It also calls for the regular study of Scripture by clergy and encourages the creation of commented biblical translations to enable lay people to engage with the sacred text in a manner that is both informed and independent (DV 25). Thus, in both traditions, Scripture is primarily regarded as a gift to the community of believers, who possess the capacity to interpret it freely, yet in continuous dialogue, not subjugation, with those who are experts in the sacred text.

Biblical scholarship differs from academic disciplines such as Philology, Literary Criticism, or Religious Textual Studies, in that, "as a duty of the Church," it is foremost theologically constructed, which means it develops as a systematic and academic endeavour informed and guided by the light and inspiration of faith. Any attempt to separate the faith of the Church from biblical scholarship must be regarded as a distorted effort to grasp the full truth of the Gospel, which is accessible only through the guidance of God's Spirit (John 14:26; John 16:13; Luke 24:45). If biblical scholarship (as a discipline within academic theology) is intended to guide and "serve the Church,"⁴⁷ as Barth proposes, how can the significant diversity of readings evident in both scholarly and "popular" interpretations be reconciled? I suggest that, precisely because biblical scholarship is fundamentally a vocation in service to the Church, it must not detach itself from the grassroots ways in which the Spirit inspires the community through the daily engagement with Scripture. Furthermore, it cannot claim any position of superiority, as both the exegete and the ordinary Bible reader are members of the same body, distinct, yet equally bearers of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, all members of the communion of saints are called to mutual listening, reciprocal learning, and shared discernment, in order to distinguish how the Spirit speaks to each for the edification of all (1 Corinthians 14:12).

In this sense, the last decades have witnessed a growing incorporation of empirical methods into academic theology, arising from two key insights. First, theologizing, that is, the "intelligence of faith [which] arises instantly and inescapably in the believer,"⁴⁸ is not solely an academic pursuit, but it "belongs to the life and mission of [all] the Church."⁴⁹ Second, theological reflections are not confined only to scholarly discourse; rather, they are also embodied in the beliefs, practices, liturgies, and conversations of the community of believers. As Reichel articulates, believers "are always already engaged in articulating these implicit theologies in words and deeds, in practices and

habits Implicitly or explicitly, they wrestle with assumptions and experiences, with conflicting interpretations and ambiguous implications.”⁵⁰ The meanings that emerge through their lived faith and communal interaction serve as “bearer[s]. . . of theological understanding.”⁵¹ These theologies, generated within what Reichel terms the “common theologianhood,”⁵² possess theological significance insofar as they meet the legitimacy criteria established by each Christian tradition. Such criteria may include internal and external coherence, fidelity to the biblical witness, or engagement in dialogue with the Church’s Magisterium. When these conditions are fulfilled, the theological insights of ordinary believers carry normative weight. Nevertheless, the degree and character of theological normativity vary vastly from tradition to tradition and from paradigm to paradigm. For instance, in the Protestant tradition, which strongly emphasizes the right and responsibility of each believer to read and interpret the Scripture, theological normativity assumes a collegial character. This implies that all members of the faith community are invited to engage in theological reflection and contribute to the interpretative process, each one with their respective gifts.

To this collegial character, which is shared across the “common theologianhood,” Geir Afdal assigns the term “distributed normativity.”⁵³ Historically, theological normativity has been more closely associated with the abstract and academic work of scholars. However, fields such as liturgical studies or homiletics reveal the normative dimensions embedded in Christian practices, speeches, and performances. As a result, normativity has also been “distributed” through a range of liturgical, academic, and diaconal practices and actors, which have, in turn, contributed dialectically to a deeper understanding and clarification of the Church’s nature and mission. Intercultural Bible reading and its empirical orientation represent a continuation of this tradition. Since, as Afdal affirms,

If normative theology is not empirical, not analysing the issues, differences, tensions, and solutions of everyday practices, it is not only left with guessing what are relevant issues to discuss, but is also devoid of the normative resources made in everyday practices.⁵⁴

Conceiving interpretative normativity as a “distributed” and plurally constructed quality entails a series of restatements. On the one hand, it implies broadening the range of voices, practices, beliefs, and dispositions considered theologically legitimate, as each represents an authentic manifestation of the Church. It also presupposes levelling the theological table, so all participants (whether academics or non-academics) are able to contribute meaningfully to the pursuit and practice of Gospel truth. Academicians and lay believers, exegetes and ordinary Bible readers alike, each possess something valuable to offer to the understanding of Scripture, which is fundamentally given for the faith and life of the Church, each one contributing “whatever received gift to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (1

Peter 4:10). Furthermore, it entails that the riches offered to the Church from the ministry of biblical scholarship are intended to inform, to contextualize, and to illuminate the readings of common believers, insofar as they allow themselves to be inspired, challenged, and destabilized by “popular” interpretations. Finally, it is an invitation to recognize that interpretative tensions and disturbances between these two communities represent valuable creative spaces, since “constructive theological reflection happens precisely where the tensions between interpretations . . . are made explicit and brought into a critical and constructive discussion.”⁵⁵ This, ultimately, is the invitation that intercultural Bible reading extends to biblical scholarship.

Notes

- 1 Hans de Wit, “My God,” *She Said, “Ships Make Me So Crazy”: Reflections on Empirical Hermeneutics, Interculturality, and Holy Scripture* (Elkhart: Evangel Press, 2008), 37.
- 2 In his theory about “true communities,” M. Scott Peck identifies eight characteristics of these groups, one of them being their capacity to “gracefully fight.” The author explains the concept as follows:

In genuine community [its members] have learned how to listen to each other and how not to reject each other. Sometimes consensus in community is reached with miraculous rapidity. But at other times it is arrived at only after lengthy struggle. Just because it is a safe place does not mean community is a place without conflict. It is, however, a place where conflict can be resolved without physical or emotional bloodshed and with wisdom as well as grace. A community is a group that can fight gracefully.

M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1987), 71.

- 3 Social Desirability Response Bias (SDRB) is understood as “a participant’s tendency to over (under) report activities [or results] that are socially desirable (undesirable). SDRB is a pervasive issue with self-reported data that can lead to spurious or misleading results” (Richard A. Bernardia and Jonathan Nash, “The Importance and Efficacy of Controlling for Social Desirability Response Bias,” *Ethics and Behavior* 33, no. 5 (2023): 413).
- 4 “In some cases, it may be useful to follow up the focus group with individual interviews with participants . . . We discovered a revealing change of tone between the focus groups and the subsequent individual or paired follow-up interviews”. Emily Winter and Linda Woodhead, “Focus Groups,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, eds. Steven Engler and Michael Stausberg (London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 549.
- 5 Joe Feagin, Anthony Orum, and G. Sjoberg. *A Case for Case Studies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 2.
- 6 Daniel Jara J., “Anthropological Case Studies as Research Design for Intercultural Theology,” *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 6, no. 2 (2022): 119.
- 7 Imanos Ortega, “La naturaleza comparativa de los estudios de caso,” *Encrucijadas* 4 (2012): 90.
- 8 Katharina Heyden and Bernd Schröder, “Zu diesem Heft,” *Verkündigung und Forschung* 65, no. 2 (2020): 83.
- 9 Heyden and Schröder, “Zu diesem Heft.”

- 10 Frederike von Oorschot, "Präsent sein. Ekklesiologische Perspektiven auf das kirchliche Leben unter den Bedingungen des Infektionsschutzes und seiner Folgen," *Dokumentation* 27 (2020): 11.
- 11 See: Free Chapel, "Baptism," <https://www.freechapel.org/online/baptism> (accessed January 18, 2024).
- 12 Stefan Karcher, "Praktische Theologie und Digital Humanities," *Verkündigung und Forschung* 65, no. 2 (2020): 135.
- 13 Heidi A. Campbell, "A Distanced Church in a Time of Pandemic . . . An Introduction," in *The Distanced Church*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (Chicago: Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 4.
- 14 von Oorschot, "Präsent sein," 14.
- 15 Karcher, "Praktische Theologie und Digital Humanities," 137.
- 16 Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, "Is it Real? Mystagogizing the Livestreamed Service," in *The Distanced Church*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (Chicago: Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 91.
- 17 Teresa Berger, *@Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (Milton: Taylor and Francis, Liturgy, Worship and Society Series, 2017), 16.
- 18 von Oorschot, "Präsent sein," 14.
- 19 von Oorschot, "Präsent sein."
- 20 S. Livingstone, *Children and the Internet: Great Expectations, Challenging Realities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 40.
- 21 Heidi Campbell, "What Religious Groups Need to Consider When Trying to Do Church Online," in *The Distanced Church Reflections on Doing Church Online*, ed. Heidi Campbell (San Antonio: Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 49–52.
- 22 von Oorschot, "Präsent sein," 13.
- 23 Matthew John Paul Tan, "Communion in the Digital Body of Christ," in *The Distanced Church Reflections on Doing Church Online*, ed. Heidi Campbell (San Antonio: Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2020), 82.
- 24 Zsupan-Jerome, "Is it Real?," 91.
- 25 Zsupan-Jerome, "Is it Real?," 92.
- 26 Hans de Wit et al., eds., *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics Series 1 (Elkhart: Institute of Menonite Studies, 2004).
- 27 Hans de Wit, "Through the Eyes of Another: Objectives and Backgrounds," in *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, eds. Hans de Wit et al., Intercultural Biblical Hermeneutics Series 1 (Elkhart: Institute of Menonite Studies, 2004), 3.
- 28 Raimundo C. Barreto, *Base Ecumenism: A Latin-American Contribution to Ecumenical Praxis and Theology* (New York: Fortress Press, 2025), 1.
- 29 Paul Murray, "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism," in *Reforming Theology, Migrating Church, Transforming Society*, eds. Uta André, Benjamin Simon, and Lars Röser-Israel (Hamburg: Missionshilfe Verlag, 2017), 52.
- 30 Murray, "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism," 53.
- 31 Murray, "Introducing Receptive Ecumenism," 60.
- 32 Margaret O'Gara, "Receiving Gifts in Ecumenical Dialogue," in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, ed. Paul Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.
- 33 Avery Dulles, "Saving Ecumenism from Itself," *First Things* 178 (2007): 26.
- 34 Dulles, "Saving Ecumenism from Itself," 27.
- 35 James Sweeney, "Receptive Ecumenism, Ecclesial Learning, and the 'Tribe'," in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*, ed. Paul Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 334.

- 36 Laila Abu-Er-Rub et al., "Introduction: Engaging Transculturality," in *Engaging Transculturality: Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies*, eds. Laila Abu-Er-Rub et al. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 26.
- 37 Klaus Hock, "Beyond the Multireligious – Trasculturation and Religious Differentiation: In Search of a New Paradigm in the Academic Study of Religious Change and Interreligious Encounter," in *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue*, ed. Viggo Mortensen (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003), 58.
- 38 Hock, "Beyond the Multireligious – Trasculturation and Religious Differentiation."
- 39 See: Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007).
- 40 Claudia Jahnel, "Vernacular Ecumenism and Transcultural Unity: Rethinking Ecumenical Theology after the Cultural Turn," *The Ecumenical Review* 60, no. 4 (2008): 416.
- 41 Jaco Dreyer, "Theological Normativity: Ideology or Utopia?," in *Normativity and Empirical Research in Theology*, eds. Johannes A. van der Ven and Michael Scherer-Rath (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 5.
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- 50 Hanna Reichel, *After Method: Queer Grace, Conceptual Design, and the Possibility of Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 3.
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- 52 Reichel, *After Method*, 4.
- 53 Afdal, "Two Concepts of Practice and Theology," 25.
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Appendices

Appendix A

Initial questionnaire for participants

This questionnaire has been prepared so we can know more about your “Bible reading style” as the role the Bible fulfils in your life and how you usually approach it. Please be generous and honest in your answers, we want to hear your voice!

- How often do you normally read your Bible?
- Do you read it in an individual (alone) or communitarian (in-group) way?
- What do you consider important when you read the Bible?
- Do you have some previous ideas about the text of Acts 15:1–20, 36–41 (The Council of Jerusalem and the conflict between Paul and Barnabas)? If yes, what are they?
- Do you think your religious background affects your Bible interpretation?
- What is your motivation to participate in the project?
- Please add your name and age to the document.

Appendix B

Informative document about the first meeting

In the meeting, the group will conduct a Bible study as regularly in the SCM. To help the reading of Acts 15: 1–20, 36–41, some questions have been prepared that can guide you through the process.

- What, in your opinion, is the central message of the text?
- What dynamic do you recognize in the text? Are there similarities between the characters? Differences? And if so, how would you describe these differences?
- How are these differences or similarities addressed in the text?
- Do the characters in the story address the topic of unity? And if so, how?
- Does culture play a role in these conflicts? And if so, in which way?
- Do you recognize yourself with a protagonist of the story?
- How do you interpret Paul's attitude towards Mark? How do you interpret Paul's attitude towards Barnabas?
- What aspects of the story touch you in particular? Does the text evoke your thoughts, memories, or experiences of your own life? Why?
- How might the text play a role in your life?
- Why do you think some theologians refer to this event as the "Ecumenical Council of Jerusalem"?

Appendix C

Informative document about the second meeting

In this second meeting, your group will listen carefully to how the other group reacted to the text of Acts 15: 1–20, 36–41. After observing the meeting and taking notes of what you find interesting or confusing, your group will reflect on their meeting. The following question format is intended to provide an analysis guide. Please do not try to answer each of the following questions; just use them as a discussion guide. If there are other points that you want to highlight, it is better to start with them.

On handling the text

- What form of reading did the partner group use? What is their reading oriented towards?
- Did you recognize on their discussion certain elements of their religious tradition?
- What is the central message of the text according to them?
- Do you think that one or more of the characteristics of the other group influence their way of reading the text?
- How does the other group approach the biblical text?
- What are the differences and similarities between both groups' interpretations?
- Why do you think the other group interprets the text the way they do?
- Does their context influence their reading?
- How does the group deal with the important characters in the story?
- Is the whole text discussed or did they concentrate just on one part? Which part?
- How do they relate to important characters in the story?
- With whom do you identify in the story and why?
- How do they understand the unity of the Church?
- How do they understand conflict or division in the Church? Is it similar to your understanding?

About updating the text

- Is the text updated? Does the text apply to one's life? Does reading lead to a new practice?
- What does the text mean for the concrete life of the other group?
- Are they guided towards different acting?
- Is the text transformed into a window through which they look at reality or the world differently?
- Does the text change the thoughts, feelings, or actions of those who have read?

On what we have observed about the group

- Were there any liturgical expressions?
- What is the content of the prayers or songs?
- What spirituality does the group radiate?
- How did members of the group get along with each other? How were the dynamics in the group?
 - Was there any intimacy, did they feel comfortable in the group?
 - Did they talk about their own (sometimes intimate) experiences?
 - Were there any conflicts in the group, were there any disagreements?
 - Was there a consensus about the meaning of the biblical text?

About the effect of this exercise on your life

- Does this intercultural reading exercise affect you in any way? How?
 - Can you learn something from the interpretation of the other group? If so, what did you learn?
 - Does this intercultural exercise affect your understanding of the text

Appendix D

Informative document about the third meeting

The third and last session consists of two main parts: first, watching the video of how the partner group dealt with you and your interpretation of the Bible story, and second, meeting the other group via Zoom. During the first part, it is important to hear and observe their reaction to your Bible interpretation. To do so, it is suggested to have a pen and paper ready to write down everything we consider interesting, or we would like to comment on in the future.

The second part of this meeting consists of meeting the participants of the other group and discussing this exchange of perspectives and interpretations. Now that both groups will finally meet via Zoom, you will be asked to focus on two main aspects: (1) How did the partner group deal with your interpretation of the Bible story? (2) How did they deal with the similarities and differences in your biblical interpretations? Please do not hesitate to comment on what you actually think! As long as you do it with respect and in an orderly way, there is nothing bad about expressing positive or negative feelings like joy, confusion, disappointment, anger, hope, doubtfulness, etc.

Analysis of the response of the partner group to our Bible interpretation

- How did the partner group deal with your Bible interpretation?
- Did the partner group deepen their understanding of your context and culture?
- What did the partner group notice in particular about your interpretation?
- Did the partner group reflect on who you are, on your previous experiences?
- Were they able to identify with you?
- Did the group look carefully at your interpretation of the Bible story?
- Did they discuss differences or things they share with you?
- Did you feel that they understood or distorted your interpretation?

Similarities and differences in Bible interpretation

- What possible similarities did the two interpretations produced in them?
- What was the result of discovering what you share?
- How did the partner group deal with the different interpretations between both groups?
- What was the result of discovering your discrepancies? How did it influence further communication?

Appendix E

Evaluation questionnaire

At the last meeting of the intercultural Bible process, the group looks back over the entire reading. Please use as many sheets of paper as you consider necessary. Be generous and honest in your answers. We want to hear your voice!

- Do you think this exchange was successful? How would you describe it?
- Did your understanding of the text change because of the exchange of ideas? If yes, what was influential for this change?
- Did it change your understanding of the unity and diversity of the Church? If yes, how would you describe this change?
- Do you think the way you read the Bible will change after this experience? In the affirmative case, how?
- Did this experience personally change you? If you think so, how would you describe this change?
- Did you learn something from this exchange?
- Did this experience make sense to you? Why?
- Was it worth the investment of time and energy?

Appendix F

Summarized version of the first system of codes

(1.1) Background Information

(1.1.1) Generalities; (1.1.2) Relationship of the members with the Bible – Document 3; (1.1.3) Pre-knowledge of the text itself – Document 3; (1.1.4) Motivation to participate in the project.

(1.2) Meeting dynamics

(1.2.1) Structured Bible study; (1.2.2) Liturgical Framework; (1.2.3) Reading dynamics.

(1.3) Group dynamics

(1.3.1) Consideration of the other group; (1.3.2) Dynamics inside the group; (1.3.3) Interruption; (1.3.4) Non-verbal communication

(1.4) Hermeneutical process

(1.4.1) *Non-understandable text*

(1.4.2) *Hermeneutical aspects*

(1.4.2.1) Reading attitude; (1.4.2.2) Status of the text; (1.4.2.3) Heuristic keys

(1.4.2.3.1) Global pandemic; (1.4.2.3.2) Environmental/animals' rights/vegetarianism – veganism; (1.4.2.3.3) Politics; (1.4.2.3.4) Culture; (1.4.2.3.5) Gender issues; (1.4.2.3.6) Social; (1.4.2.3.7) Reader's educational background; (1.4.2.3.8) Economic; (1.4.2.3.9) Ethics/moral; (1.4.2.3.10) Sexual/reproductive; (1.4.2.3.11) Religious; (1.4.2.3.12) Physical.

(1.4.3) *Explanation strategies*

(1.4.3.1) Resources; (1.4.3.2) Historical background

(1.4.3.2.1) Lack of context; (1.4.3.2.2) Cultural; (1.4.3.2.3) Health/sanitary; (1.4.3.2.4) Ethnic; (1.4.3.2.5) Educational; (1.4.3.2.6)

Political; (1.4.3.2.7) Historical; (1.4.3.2.8) Religious; (1.4.3.2.9) Cultic; (1.4.3.2.10) Gender issues; (1.4.3.2.11) Economic; (1.4.3.2.12) Geography; (1.4.3.2.13) Greek/source language.

(1.4.3.3) Literary background

(1.4.3.3.1) (Possible) compositeness of text; (1.4.3.3.2) (Possible) history of origin of the text; (1.4.3.3.3) Author of the text; (1.4.3.3.4) Genre; (1.4.3.3.5) Textual; parallels or references; (1.4.3.3.6) Songs.

(1.4.3.4) Theological background

(1.4.3.4.1) Theology of Paul; (1.4.3.4.2) Prophets' theology; (1.4.3.4.3) Theology of Luke.

(1.4.4) *Explanation of the text itself*

(1.4.4.1) Central characters of the text; (1.4.4.2) Central concepts of the text

(1.4.4.2.1) God; (1.4.4.2.2) Law of Moses/beliefs/tradition; (1.4.4.2.3) Conversion; (1.4.4.2.4) Mission; (1.4.4.2.5) Christian beliefs; (1.4.4.2.6) Morality/ethics/commandments; (1.4.4.2.7) Diversity and inclusion; (1.4.4.2.8) Conflict; (1.4.4.2.9) Solution to the conflict; (1.4.4.2.10) Unity; (1.4.4.2.11) Separation; (1.4.4.2.12) Ecumenical council.

(1.4.4.3) Central message of the text

(1.4.4.3.1) Importance relationships; (1.4.4.3.2) God's personal experience; (1.4.4.3.3) Many ways to solve conflict; (1.4.4.3.4) God's universal love/sovereignty; (1.4.4.3.5) Mission over unity; (1.4.4.3.6) Openness to dialogue/vulnerability; (1.4.4.3.7) Christian diversity; (1.4.4.3.8) Faith in Jesus sufficiency; (1.4.4.3.9) Nobody is perfect; (1.4.4.3.10) Unity/oneness of the church; (1.4.4.3.11) Acceptance/inclusion non-Jewish or strangers; (1.4.4.3.12) Not judging others; (1.4.4.3.13) Look for unity but not having it is also okay; (1.4.4.3.14) Not to put a heavy burden around the necks of the non-Jewish; (1.4.4.3.15) There is (always) a solution to disagreement.

(1.4.5) *Reading with . . .*

(1.4.5.1) With today's society; (1.4.5.2) With today's Church; (1.4.5.3) With Paul and Barnabas; (1.4.5.4) With Paul; (1.4.5.5) With Barnabas; (1.4.5.6) With John Mark; (1.4.5.7) With the non-Jewish community; (1.4.5.8) With the Apostles; (1.4.5.9) With the Jewish Church; (1.4.5.10) With the author.

(1.4.6) *Reception history*

(1.4.6.1) By one specific tradition; (1.4.6.2) Ecumenical Movement.

(1.5) Actualization

(1.5.1) Problematic actualization (difficult/dangerous/problematic), (1.5.2) Actualization/re-reading of text aspects

(1.5.2.1) Health issues; New life/hope; (1.5.2.2) *Sola fidei*; (1.5.2.3) Acceptance/inclusiveness/not make harder; (1.5.2.4) Interreligious/ecumenical; (1.5.2.5) Bible interpretation/commandments; (1.5.2.6) Social/economic/cultural reality; (1.5.2.7) God's character/actions; (1.5.2.8) Morals/ethics/sin; (1.5.2.9) Conflict/separation/borders; (1.5.2.10) Solutions finding for problem solving; (1.5.2.11) Church issues; (1.5.2.12) National/ethnic/religious identity.

(1.5.3) Appropriation Strategy

(1.5.3.1) Example; (1.5.3.2) Allegory; (1.5.3.3) Typology; (1.5.3.4) Parallelism of Terms (tracing paper); (1.5.3.5) Correspondence of relations; (1.5.3.6) *Dialog der Verhältnisse*.

(1.5.4) Appropriation Dynamics (now I realize that . . .)

(1.5.4.1) God is personal/personal experience; (1.5.4.2) Conflict

(1.5.4.2.1) Relationships rather than doctrines; (1.5.4.2.2) Separation is a good option; (1.5.4.2.3) Same conflicts nowadays; (1.5.4.2.4) Dialogue opportunity; (1.5.4.2.5) Normal/permanent; (1.5.4.2.6) Regarding values.

(1.5.4.3) Self-critical (awareness of own. . .)

(1.5.4.3.1) Church/SCM/ecumenical movement; (1.5.4.3.2) Context; (1.5.4.3.3) Ideology; (1.5.4.3.4) Cultural bias; (1.5.4.3.5) Failure/sin; (1.5.4.3.6) Prejudices.

(1.5.5) Intention to Act

(1.5.5.1) Denounce injustice; (1.5.5.2) Interpersonal relations; (1.5.5.3) Cultural/multicultural; (1.5.5.4) Interreligious/ecumenical dialogue; (1.5.5.5) New lifestyle; (1.5.5.6) Scripture/law; (1.5.5.7) Pray/faith; (1.5.5.8) Evangelization/mission; (1.5.5.9) Separate in peace; (1.5.5.10) Political/social action; (1.5.5.11) Altruism/love for others/service.

Appendix G

Summarized version of the second system of codes

(2.1) Background Information

(2.1.1) Location; (2.1.2) Type of document; (2.1.3) Number of participants per group; (2.1.4) Composition; (2.1.5) Gender participation.

(2.2) Group dynamics

(2.2.1) Consideration of the other group; (2.2.2) Dynamics inside the group; (2.2.3) Non-verbal communication.

(2.3) Confrontation

(2.3.1) *Liturgy*

(2.3.2) *Interaction with the partner group*

(2.3.2.1) Linking process; (2.3.2.2) Attention to partner group's profile

(2.3.2.2.1) Partner group issues that stand out; (2.3.2.2.2) Perceived similarities; (2.3.2.2.3) Perceived differences.

(2.3.2.3) Attitude towards the partner group

(2.3.2.3.1) Admiration/gratitude; (2.3.2.3.2) Openness/vulnerability/sensitivity to partner's disclosure; (2.3.2.3.3) Questioning; (2.3.2.3.4) Mindful; (2.3.2.3.5) Nonjudgmental; (2.3.2.3.6) Tolerance for ambiguity; (2.3.2.3.7) No tolerance for ambiguity; (2.3.2.3.8) Critical; (2.3.2.3.9) Closed/hurt/non-understood.

(2.3.2.4) Communication with partner group

(2.3.2.4.1) Direct; (2.3.2.4.2) Direct expressions of admiration/gratitude/trust; (2.3.2.4.3) Indirect: "they," "their"; (2.3.2.4.4) Power/asymmetry – Development–underdevelopment patterns.

(2.3.2.5) Expected results of the encounter

(2.3.2.5.1) A universal unambiguous meaning; (2.3.2.5.2) One expects/accepts diversity.

(2.3.2.6) Overall judgment of partner's interpretation

(2.3.3) *Partner's video analysis*

(2.3.3.1) Partner's analysis method

(2.3.3.1.1) One is absorbed by partner's non-understood interpretations; (2.3.3.1.2) The group remembers its own reading.

(2.3.3.2) Partner's interpretative dynamics

(2.3.3.2.1) Fluent discussion; (2.3.3.2.2) Unfamiliarity among members – New group; (2.3.3.2.3) Mechanic: Questions and Answers.

(2.3.4) *Partner's interpretation process*

(2.3.4.1) Partner's exegetic resources

(2.3.4.1.1) Theological training; (2.3.4.1.2) Other Bible versions.

(2.3.4.2) Partner's interpretation method in relation to ours

(2.3.4.2.1) Classification of partner's method

(2.3.4.2.1.1) To fit/justify current beliefs (instrumental); (2.3.4.2.1.2) Focused on appropriation/life/actuality; (2.3.4.2.1.3) Political; (2.3.4.2.1.4) Theological; (2.3.4.2.1.5) Historical-critical; (2.3.4.2.1.6) Sociological; (2.3.4.2.1.7) Literary; (2.3.4.2.1.8) Cultural dimensions; (2.3.4.2.1.9) Historical.

(2.3.4.2.2) Perceived similarities; (2.3.4.2.3) Assessment of similarities; (2.3.4.2.4) Perceived differences; (2.3.4.2.5) Assessment of differences.

(2.3.4.2.5.1) Negotiation: articulation of both (opponent) opinions; (2.3.4.2.5.2) Paths to common points; (2.3.4.2.5.3) Complementary/enriching; (2.3.4.2.5.4) Neutral/descriptive; (2.3.4.2.5.5) Intriguing/needs more thought; (2.3.4.2.5.6) Disagreement (incorrect, nothing to learn); (2.3.4.2.5.7) Irritation; (2.3.4.2.5.8) Don't understand what they are talking about.

(2.3.4.3) Partner's text status in relation to ours

(2.3.4.3.1) They/their

(2.3.4.3.1.1) They: Object of continuous actualization/inspiration; (2.3.4.3.1.2) They: Object of critic; (2.3.4.3.1.3) They: Holy inspired Scripture.

(2.3.4.3.2) We/Our

(2.3.4.3.2.1) We: Object of continuous actualization/inspiration; (2.3.4.3.2.2) We: Object of critic; (2.3.4.3.2.3) We: Ecumenical meeting point; (2.3.4.3.2.4) We: Holy Scripture; (2.3.4.3.2.5) We:

Historical text; (2.3.4.3.2.6); We: Object of scientific analysis/no actualization.

(2.3.4.4) Partner's reading attitude in relation to ours

(2.3.4.4.1) They/their

(2.3.4.4.1.1) They: Political; (2.3.4.4.1.2) They: Instrumental; (Own belief over text); (2.3.4.4.1.3) They: Theological; (2.3.4.4.1.4) They: Communal; (2.3.4.4.1.5) They: Focused on personal faith; (2.3.4.4.1.6) They: Analytic/academic/systematic; (2.3.4.4.1.7) They: Inquisitive/questioning/problematicizing; (2.3.4.4.1.8) They: Scientific/exegetic; (2.3.4.4.1.9) They: Suspicious; (2.3.4.4.1.10) They: Critical/deconstructive/reconstructive; (2.3.4.4.1.11) They: Rationalistic; (2.3.4.4.1.12) They: Identification with text; (2.3.4.4.1.13) They: Focused on human transformation/conversion; (2.3.4.4.1.14) They: Focused in social transformation; (2.3.4.4.1.15) They: Realistic/human; (2.3.4.4.1.16) They: Idealistic/naïve; (2.3.4.4.1.17) They: Hypothetical/speculative; (2.3.4.4.1.18) They: Ecumenical/united/inclusive; (2.3.4.4.1.19) They: Interreligious; (2.3.4.4.1.20) They: Focus on God's love/acceptance; (2.3.4.4.1.21) They: Focused on God's punishment; (2.3.4.4.1.22) They: Moralistic; (2.3.4.4.1.23) They: Focused on God's action; (2.3.4.4.1.24) They: Focused in ecclesio-praxis; (2.3.4.4.1.25) They: Literal/implicit "good" and "bad" ones; (2.3.4.4.1.26) They: Dogmatic; (2.3.4.4.1.27) They: Liberating; (2.3.4.4.1.28) They: Contemplative; (2.3.4.4.1.29) They: Psychologizing; (2.3.4.4.1.30) They: Pietistic/spiritual; (2.3.4.4.1.31) They: Focused on survival; (2.3.4.4.1.32) They: Reproductive; (2.3.4.4.1.33) They: Contextual/historic; (2.3.4.4.1.34) They: Full of confidence; (2.3.4.4.1.35) They: Pentecostal; (2.3.4.4.1.36) They: Emotional.

(2.3.4.4.2) We/our

(2.3.4.4.2.1) We: Political; (2.3.4.4.2.2) We: Instrumental; (Own belief over text); (2.3.4.4.2.3) We: Theological; (2.3.4.4.2.4) We: Communal; (2.3.4.4.2.5) We: Focused on personal faith; (2.3.4.4.2.6) We: Analytic/academic/systematic; (2.3.4.4.2.7) We: Inquisitive/questioning/problematicizing; (2.3.4.4.2.8) We: Scientific/exegetic; (2.3.4.4.2.9) We: Suspicious; (2.3.4.4.2.10) We: Critical/deconstructive/reconstructive; (2.3.4.4.2.11) We: Rationalistic; (2.3.4.4.2.12) We: Identification with text; (2.3.4.4.2.13) We: Focused on human transformation/conversion; (2.3.4.4.2.14) We: Focused in social transformation; (2.3.4.4.2.15) We: Realistic/human; (2.3.4.4.2.16) We: Idealistic/naïve; (2.3.4.4.2.17) We: Hypothetical/speculative; (2.3.4.4.2.18) We: Ecumenical/united/

inclusive; (2.3.4.4.2.19) We: Interreligious; (2.3.4.4.2.20) We: Focus on God's love/acceptance; (2.3.4.4.2.21) We: Focused on God's punishment; (2.3.4.4.2.22) We: Moralistic; (2.3.4.4.2.23) We: Focused on God's action; (2.3.4.4.2.24) We: Focused in ecclesio-praxis; (2.3.4.4.2.25) We: Literal/implicit "good" and "bad" ones; (2.3.4.4.2.26) We: Dogmatic; (2.3.4.4.2.27) We: Liberating; (2.3.4.4.2.28) We: Contemplative; (2.3.4.4.2.29) We: Psychologizing; (2.3.4.4.2.30) We: Pietistic/spiritual; (2.3.4.4.2.31) We: Focused on survival; (2.3.4.4.2.32) We: Reproductive; (2.3.4.4.2.33) We: Contextual/historic; (2.3.4.4.2.34) We: Full of confidence; (2.3.4.4.2.35) We: Pentecostal; (2.3.4.4.2.36) We: Emotional.

(2.3.4.5) Partner's expected intention/effect in relation to ours

(2.3.4.5.1) They: Effect for today (relevant)

(2.3.4.5.1.1) They: Justification for current living situation; (2.3.4.5.1.2) They: inspiration for daily life; (2.3.4.5.1.3) They: Comfort/hope; (2.3.4.5.1.4) They: Social transformation; (2.3.4.5.1.5) They: To retrieve something; (2.3.4.5.1.6) They: Focused on survival.

(2.3.4.5.2) We: Effect for today (relevant)

(2.3.4.5.2.1) We: Justification for current living situation; (2.3.4.5.2.2) We: inspiration for daily life; (2.3.4.5.2.3) We: Comfort/hope; (2.3.4.5.2.4) We: Social transformation; (2.3.4.5.2.5) We: To retrieve something; (2.3.4.5.2.6) We: Focused on survival.

(2.3.4.6) Partner's interpretation results in relation to ours.

(2.3.4.6.1) Perceived similarities

(2.3.4.6.1.1) Central message; (2.3.4.6.1.2) Centrality/role of characters; (2.3.4.6.1.3) Broader literary context intra/inter-textual parallels.

(2.3.4.6.1.3.1) Word parallels; (2.3.4.6.1.3.2) Thematic parallels

(2.3.4.6.1.4) Imagination strategies; (2.3.4.6.1.5) Heuristic keys/focalization; (2.3.4.6.1.6) Specific themes

(2.3.4.6.1.6.1) Human intrinsic value/dignity; (2.3.4.6.1.6.2) Social networks; (2.3.4.6.1.6.3) Faith/"Sola fidei"; (2.3.4.6.1.6.4) Feminism/women rights; (2.3.4.6.1.6.5) Sin; (2.3.4.6.1.6.6) Tension insiders and outsiders; (2.3.4.6.1.6.7) Identity; (2.3.4.6.1.6.8) Purity; (2.3.4.6.1.6.9) Power dynamics; (2.3.4.6.1.6.10) Free will; (2.3.4.6.1.6.11) Social realities; (2.3.4.6.1.6.12) Conflict; (2.3.4.6.1.6.13) God; (2.3.4.6.1.6.14) Church; (2.3.4.6.1.6.15) Bible/text.

(2.3.4.6.1.7) Appropriation strategies

(2.3.4.6.1.7.1) Example; (2.3.4.6.1.7.2) Allegory; (2.3.4.6.1.7.3) Typology; (2.3.4.6.1.7.4) Parallelism of terms (tracing paper); (2.3.4.6.1.7.5) Correspondence of relations; (2.3.4.6.1.7.6) Dialog der *Verhältnisse*.

(2.3.4.6.2) Non-perceived similarities

(2.3.4.6.2.1) Culture; (2.3.4.6.2.2) Social status; (2.3.4.6.2.3) Knowledge; (2.3.4.6.2.4) Hermeneutic.

(2.3.4.6.3) Assessment similarities

(2.3.4.6.3.1) Positive/ecumenical honeymoon; (2.3.4.6.3.2) Negative/it's a pity, disappointed/not exciting; (2.3.4.6.3.3) Other.

(2.3.4.6.4) Perceived differences

(2.3.4.6.4.1) Imagination strategies; (2.3.4.6.4.2) Information on/perception of the world behind the text; (2.3.4.6.4.3) Central message; (2.3.4.6.4.4) Centrality/role of characters; (2.3.4.6.4.5) Reading with; (2.3.4.6.4.6) Broader literary context (intra/intertextual parallels); (2.3.4.6.4.7) Heuristic keys/focalization; (2.3.4.6.4.8) Specific themes; (2.3.4.6.4.9) We/They Actualization.

(2.3.4.6.4.9.1) They/their Appropriation strategies

(2.3.4.6.4.9.1.1) They: Analogy; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.2) They: Touched by partner's actualization; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.3) They: Example; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.4) They: Allegory; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.5) They: Typology; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.6) They: Parallelism of terms (tracing paper); (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.7) They: Correspondence of relations; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.8) They: Dialog der *Verhältnisse*.

(2.3.4.6.4.9.2) We/our Appropriation strategies

(2.3.4.6.4.9.1.1) We: Analogy; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.2) We: Touched by partner's actualization; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.3) We: Example; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.4) We: Allegory; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.5) We: Typology; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.6) We: Parallelism of terms (tracing paper); (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.7) We: Correspondence of relations; (2.3.4.6.4.9.1.8) We: Dialog der *Verhältnisse*.

(2.3.4.6.4.9.3) We/They Appropriation content/praxeological

(2.3.4.6.4.9.3.1) They/their; (2.3.4.6.4.9.3.2) We/our.

(2.3.4.6.5) Non-perceived differences

(2.3.4.6.5.1) Culture; (2.3.4.6.5.2) Social status; (2.3.4.6.5.3) Knowledge; (2.3.4.6.5.4) Hermeneutics.

(2.3.4.6.6) Assessment differences

(2.3.4.6.6.1) Further questioning the other; (2.3.4.6.6.2) Positive: ecumenical honeymoon/diversity leads to growth; (2.3.4.6.6.3) Inclusion; (2.3.4.6.6.4) Object of interest/interesting; (2.3.4.6.6.5) Mutual co-existence/negotiation/learning; (2.3.4.6.6.6) Middle ground; (2.3.4.6.6.7) Object of critic; (2.3.4.6.6.8) Looking correlations differences and backgrounds; (2.3.4.6.6.9) Active: differences call for new argumentation; (2.3.4.6.6.10) Negative: differences call for non-agreement.

(2.3.4.6.7) Dealing with the differences

(2.3.4.6.7.1) Growth/learn (2.3.4.6.7.2) Graceful fighting (2.3.4.6.7.3) Damping (2.3.4.6.7.4) Rupture/withdrawal.

(2.4) Perceived effects

(2.4.1) *Non-perceived effect*

(2.4.2) *Interpretation process of Acts 15*

(2.4.2.1) Understanding the text

(2.4.2.1.1) New outlook about the entire; (2.4.2.1.2) Bible New outlook on the text; (2.4.2.1.3) No new outlook on the text; (2.4.2.1.4) New focalization; (2.4.2.1.5) New information on (historical background) of the text; (2.4.2.1.6) Rejection partner's point of view/ reinforcing own; (2.4.2.1.7) New outlook on central characters.

(2.4.2.2) Method

(2.4.2.2.1) New information/group imitates partner's method; (2.4.2.2.2) Rejection of partner's method/new ways not necessary.

(2.4.2.3) Hermeneutics

(2.4.2.3.1) Horizon broadening; (2.4.2.3.2) Clash/conflict of interpretations

(2.4.2.4) Theology/faith/Church ecumenism.

(2.4.2.4.1) New insights into faith; (2.4.2.4.2) Reinforce own interpretation/nothing learned.

(2.4.3) *Self-image of the group after (as effect of) the exchange*

(2.4.3.1) Own culture; (2.4.3.2) Own bias/prejudices; (2.4.3.3) Own Ideology; (2.4.3.4) More intercultural competence.

(2.4.3.4.1) Knowledge; (2.4.3.4.2) Motivation; (2.4.3.4.3) Skills.

(2.4.4) *Relation to the partner group*

(2.4.4.1) Partner's context; (2.4.4.2) Partner's ideology; (2.4.4.3) Partner's relationship/problems with society/church; (2.4.4.4) Partner's cultural bias; (2.4.4.5) Partner's self-criticism serves for self-criticism;

(2.4.4.6) Partner's criticism serves for self-criticism; (2.4.4.7) Perceived intercultural competence in the other.

(2.4.4.7.1) Knowledge; (2.4.4.7.2) Motivation; (2.4.4.7.3) Skills.

(2.4.5) Final description of the completed process

(2.4.5.1) Affective growth: faith orientation to stable exchange; (2.4.5.1) Cognitive growth: From cognitive discrepancy to cognitive consensus; (2.4.5.1) U or W figure cultural/self/religious shock.

(2.4.6) Final assessment of the completed process

(2.4.6.1) Growth

(2.4.6.1.1) Acknowledge more competence in intercultural communication; (2.4.6.1.2) Consecution of a "shared ground"; (2.4.6.1.3) More critical towards own interpretation; (2.4.6.1.4) Main factors responsible for growth/change.

(2.4.6.1.4.1) Partner's attitude; (2.4.6.1.4.2) Partner's interpretation of Acts 15; (2.4.6.1.4.3) Partner's reading method; (2.4.6.1.4.4) Partner's faith; (2.4.6.1.4.5) Partner's appropriation and actualization of the text; (2.4.6.1.4.6) Partner's vulnerability; (2.4.6.1.4.7) Knowledge of partner's context; (2.4.6.1.4.8) Partner's motivation.

(2.4.6.2) Return to own repertoire (stagnation)

(2.4.6.2.1) Freezing; closure on a given belief; (2.4.6.2.2) No cultural shared perspective; (2.4.6.2.3) Factor responsible to return to own repertoire

(2.4.6.2.3.1) Culture; (2.4.6.2.3.2) Secularization of partner contexts; (2.4.6.2.3.3) Appropriation (*applicatio*).

(2.4.7) Praxeological effects (behaviours)

(2.4.7.1) Future more reflection on the text; (2.4.7.2) Keep in contact, reading together; (2.4.7.3) Respect to difference; (2.4.7.4) Social activism; (2.4.7.5) Call to action; (2.4.7.6) Embody God's love/grace; (2.4.7.7) Analyse self-power; (2.4.7.8) Evaluation of self-attitude towards others; (2.4.7.9) Treat others equally/no discrimination; (2.4.7.10) More inclusive/accepting; (2.4.7.11) (Partial) adoption of partner's method in future studies; (2.4.7.12) Evangelization/preaching; (2.4.7.13) Challenge to new study; (2.4.7.14) Further dialogue engagement/ecumenism.

Appendix H

Summarized version of the third system of codes

(3.1) Changes of text meaning

- (3.1.1) No new outlook on the text (Clash/conflict of interpretations)
 - (3.1.1.1) Factors responsible for return to one's own repertoire
- (3.1.2) Minimal change; (3.1.3) New/extension understanding of the text
 - (3.1.3.1) Main factors responsible for growth/change
 - (3.1.3.1.1) Common topics among groups; (3.1.3.1.2) Partner's attitude; (3.1.3.1.3) Partner's interpretation of Acts 15; (3.1.3.1.4) Partner's reading method/approach to text; (3.1.3.1.5) Partner's faith/religiosity; (3.1.3.1.6) Partner's appropriation and actualization of the text; (3.1.3.1.7) Partner's vulnerability; (3.1.3.1.8) Knowledge of partner's context.
- (3.1.4) New focalization of the text; (3.1.5) New info on (historical background of) the text; (3.1.6) New focalization of characters.

(3.2) Changes in the understanding of the Church's unity and diversity

- (3.2.1) No change; (3.2.2) Complex to fulfil; (3.2.3) Ecumenical commitment; (3.2.4) Equality of people for God; (3.2.5) Different positions in church always there; (3.2.6) Emphasis on what unites; (3.2.7) Unity and division/conflict reality; (3.2.8) Unity is possible/necessary; (3.2.9) Diversity appreciation; (3.2.10) Deep on previous conceptions; (3.2.11) Toleration of other Christian groups; (3.2.12) More sense of (global) community; (3.2.13) Similar challenges/situations between groups.

(3.3) Changes in Bible reading method

- (3.3.1) No change; (3.3.2) Minimal; (3.3.3) Considering how other cultures may read; (3.3.4) More focused on text context; (3.3.5) More focused on

emotional aspects; (3.3.6) More focused on action/praxis; (3.3.7) More focused on actualization; (3.3.8) More focused on first meaning; (3.3.9) More focused on human dignity; (3.3.10) More focused on personal/individual effect; (3.3.11) More critical/deconstructive/reconstructive; (3.3.12) More analytic/academic/systematic; (3.3.13) More communitarian; (3.3.14) More inquisitive/questioning/problematising.

(3.4) Personal change/self-image

(3.4.1) No personal change; (3.4.2) Minimal change; (3.4.3) More questioning with culture/Church; (3.4.4) Identification of self-value/empowerment; (3.4.5) More awareness of one's own culture; (3.4.6) More awareness of one's own ideology; (3.4.7) More awareness of one's own bias/prejudices; (3.4.8) More intercultural competence.

(3.4.8.1) Knowledge; (3.4.8.2) Motivation; (3.4.8.3) Skills.

(3.5) Learning outcomes

(3.5.1) No learning; (3.5.2) Minimal; (3.5.3) Similar situations/problems of SCMs; (3.5.4) Importance discussion; (3.5.5) Benefits of technology use; (3.5.6) Different ideas about diversity and unity; (3.5.7) Need for concreteness on Bible reading; (3.5.8) Ecumenism also a matter of culture and context; (3.5.9) Context influences reading; (3.5.10) Diversity of Bible interpretations/no "universally valid" one; (3.5.11) Always something new to learn; (3.5.12) Difference of youth approach.

(3.6) Meaning of the exchange

(3.6.1) Ecumenical perspective/more inclusive; (3.6.2) Personal differences bigger than cultural; (3.6.3) New understanding of the Bible/text; (3.6.4) Meeting people/bridges; (3.6.5) Understand people better; (3.6.6) (Global) community sense; (3.6.7) SCM/communal empowerment

(3.7) Evaluation of the exchange

(3.7.1) Difficult/full of doubts; (3.7.2) Conflicting/blocking; (3.7.3) Eye-opening; (3.7.4) Positive: interesting/worth/happiness/thankfulness; (3.7.5) Challenging; (3.7.6) Cognitive growth: from cognitive discrepancy to cognitive consensus.

(3.8) Relation to partner group

(3.8.1) More awareness of partner's context/challenges; (3.8.2) More awareness/comprehension of partner's ideology; (3.8.3) More awareness of

partner's relationship society and Church; (3.8.4) More awareness of partner's cultural bias; (3.8.5) Perceived intercultural competence on the other.

(3.8.5.1) Knowledge; (3.8.5.2) Motivation; (3.8.5.3) Skills.

(3.9) Final assessment of the exchanges

(3.9.1) Growth

(3.9.1.1) Appropriation (growing) of discussed meanings (in personal life); (3.9.1.2) Acknowledged more competence in intercultural communication; (3.9.1.3) Consecution of a "shared ground"; (3.9.1.4) More critical towards own interpretation.

(3.9.2) Return to own repertoire (stagnation)

(3.9.2.1) Freezing: closure on a given belief; (3.9.2.2) No shared perspective.

(3.10) Future praxeological effect

(3.10.1) Church should . . .

(3.10.1.1) Open to young voices; (3.10.1.2) More dialogical.

(3.10.2) Keep in contact, reading together; (3.10.3) Respect/value to difference; (3.10.4) Social activism/engagement; (3.10.5) Call to action; (3.10.6) Embody God's love/grace; (3.10.7) Evaluation of self-attitude towards the other; (3.10.8) More inclusive/accepting; (3.10.9) (Partial) Adoption of partner's method in future studies; (3.10.10) Evangelization/preaching/reaching people; (3.10.11) More intercultural exchange; (3.10.12) Challenged to new study/learn more; (3.10.13) Further ecumenical involvement.

(3.10.13.1) With "opponent" Christian groups.

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