



**A STRATEGY FOR  
INTEGRATION OF  
FARSI SPEAKING  
NEWCOMERS INTO  
THE DANISH CHURCH**

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LUTHERAN CHURCH IN DENMARK  
AUGUST 2018**

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## Executive Summary and Introduction

The recent waves of refugees and migrants from Muslim background into Europe have challenged the European societies as well as the Church. One challenging area is the increased conversion rate to the Christian faith among refugees and migrants with a Muslim background, especially among Iranians and Afghans. This phenomenon has caught the Danish Lutheran Church by surprise. How should the Church respond to this issue?

There are currently no statistics available on the number of converts in Denmark during recent years. The numbers vary depending on the churches' experiences and whether to include the number of converts in free churches. Some people estimate, although not verified, that around 3000 people with a Muslim background have converted to Christian faith during the past twenty years in Denmark.<sup>1</sup> Although the Church sees this as an opportunity, the Church has faced difficulties in dealing with the situation, the main reasons being the churches' lack of experience on this matter and untrained pastors, limited knowledge and insights about the newcomers, language barriers, lack of resources to teach and train converts, unenthusiastic and concerned Danish congregations, and a significant number of converts who have lost regular contact with the church after their baptism.<sup>2</sup>

There is a time-limited opportunity for the Church. If the Church fails to create room for newcomers to be fully included, converts may move on and either abandon their new faith or establish their own churches. The Interchurch Council, recognizing the problem as well as the opportunity, decided to study the situation, and find possible ways to sustain, equip and support churches and the newcomers.

To do this, it is necessary to take three steps. Firstly, the Interchurch Council needs to understand how the Danish Lutheran Church can better support the converts and refugees/migrants. Secondly, the Interchurch Council needs to ensure that individual churches who are welcoming and discipling newcomers are appropriately equipped, trained and resourced. Thirdly, on a national level, the Church needs to enlarge its presence, engagement and witness among minority and marginalised religious groups. This bigger vision should also contain the work among refugees and migrants.

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<sup>1</sup> The Interchurch Council does not support the given estimate of 3000 converts. Their views, however, support the suggestion that at least 2000 Muslim background people have converted to Christianity in Denmark since year 2000. Adding to this, Mogens Mogensen in his 2005 book, *Dab og religionsskifte*, (13-22) based on his research, gives an actual number of 735 converts in Denmark between 2000 – 2004. The largest number, 304, were from Muslim background. The Interchurch Council also did a short survey in 2016, calling 15 pastors to ask the number of adult baptisms from Muslim background that they had performed during the first nine months of 2016. The number estimated was around 500, which also was reported in a newspaper.

<https://www.b.dk/nationalt/muslimske-asyllansoegere-bliver-kristne-i-hidtil-uset-omfang>. In addition, the January 1, 2017, government statistics on the population of foreigners in Denmark and church membership shows 844 church members among Iranians and 68 among Afghans.

<sup>2</sup> Several reasons can be identified for this. a) Many asylum camps were closed, and asylum seekers were moved to different places. b) the relocation of accepted refugees by the Government. c) the lack of or limited Farsi language teaching and worship. d) uncommitted refugees, many of whom had not yet gained enough understanding of their new faith to make it part of their daily lives.

The aim of this project is to develop a strategy to integrate Farsi speaking converts into both the Christian faith (faith integration) and the Danish Lutheran churches and communities (cultural integration) and, since integration is a two-way process, the project considered the integration task of the Church to be more inclusive: how to be a Church also for migrants/refugees from different cultural and religious backgrounds?

Therefore, throughout the project the concepts of conversion and integration have been the two driving forces.

## **Conversion and integration**

Both conversion and integration are processes, and they have many factors in common, one related to faith and the other related to culture (though cultural integration is also imbedded in the concept of conversion). Both concepts include deliberate decisions to learn how to adjust to a new environment emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. It is a process of adaptation and reorganisation of (new) identity and lifestyle. There is no agreed definition for ‘integration’ or ‘conversion’ as such. The International Migration Law Glossary define integration this way:

“integration” can be defined as the process by which migrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as groups. It generally refers to a two-way process of adaptation by migrants and host societies, .... Integration does not necessarily imply permanent settlement. It does, however, imply consideration of the rights and obligations of migrants and host societies, of access to different kinds of services and the labor market, and of identification and respect for a core set of values that bind migrants and host communities in a common purpose.

For this project we define conversion and integration as a two-way process by which new converts to Christianity (mainly Muslim background migrant/refugee converts) establish their roots in Christian faith (faith integration), become accepted and integrated into their local churches (church integration), and through the church into the wider host society and communities (cultural and social integration).

## **The outline of the project**

The first chapter deals with the concept of conversion from Muslim background: what it means for a Muslim to convert to Christianity, and how it has been dealt with by the Danish Lutheran church. The second chapter looks at the practice of The Church of England, to see whether there are any areas that Interchurch/ the Lutheran Church of Denmark and the Church of England can work together as well as any lessons that the Lutheran church can learn from the CoE experiences. The third chapter presents

the findings in two sections. A) refugee converts - who they are, and what conversion means to them. Some of their views and comments on integration and church have also been presented. B) findings from the church leaders' interviews are discussed. Their understanding, or lack of it, of refugees' cultural and religious backgrounds, their definitions and practice of church, conversion, and baptism in relation to their work among refugees and migrants are described. Some of the challenges and tensions are also highlighted.

## Methodology

This research is based on data that has been collected through multiple methods:

- A questionnaire was distributed to 108 refugees/migrants (converts and those seeking baptism) in Aalborg Diocese, Haderslev Diocese, Odense and Copenhagen.
- Five group discussions and two workshops with refugees and migrants were formed (most of them were baptised, though a few were still waiting for their baptism). The workshops also included a few individuals from Danish congregations.
- Interviewing and listening to accepted refugees and asylum seekers (rejected and waiting) all of whom had been baptised.
- Interviewing four translators.
- Interviewing seventeen Lutheran church pastors, four free Church pastors, five lay church leaders.
- Observation: attending Bible (baptism) teaching classes and fellowship groups, including listening to translation from English to Farsi or Danish to Farsi. As well as many conversations with some Danes who are part of the Danish congregations.

## Chapter one: Conversion of Farsi speaking people into Christianity

### Introduction

In 1960 William Miller wrote a book "Ten Muslims Meet Christ". In his book, he asked why it was difficult for Muslims to convert to Christianity. Nearly 60 years later, many speak of several hundreds of thousands of Iranians and Farsi speaking people inside and outside of the country, mainly in Europe and North America, who have become Christian during the past three decades. In addition, some Christian organizations as Open Doors, and secular mainstream media such as The Telegraph<sup>3</sup> and New York Times,<sup>4</sup> have reported on the conversion of Muslims from the Middle East to Christianity. If it is true, then the valid

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/30/muslim-refugees-converting-christianity-find-safety/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/24/world/middleeast/the-jihadi-who-turned-to-jesus.html>  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/22/world/asia/afghanistan-a-christian-convert-on-the-run.html>

question is: why do more and more Muslims become Christian? This chapter aims to shed light on this phenomenon, focusing on Farsi speaking people, having also in mind the experience of the Lutheran church of Denmark. What is conversion? And why has it been exercised among Farsi speaking people, converting to Christianity?

Since, I am writing for the Lutheran Church in Denmark, and since many of their converts are Iranians, Afghans and Kurds, I use the term 'Farsi speaking people', because, the term covers Afghanistan, Iran and Kurdish groups – but it can also be extended to Azari speaking people as well. Secondly, I use 'People' instead of 'Muslims', because although a significant majority of converts are from Muslim background, the terms 'Muslim' and 'Islam' are ambiguous terms, and have much wider and general meaning, including very different understandings of their meaning and practice. Therefore, when it is used for 'conversion to', it becomes a very problematic term. For example, for most Iranians coming from a Muslim (Shia) background, their understanding of Islam is very limited, almost non-existent, and most of the time, it is linked to the politics of the Iranian regime, and therefore heavily politicized. Kurds on the other hand, come from different Islamic traditions such as Sunni and/or different Sufi religious traditions such as Yarsan (or Ahel-e Hagh, People of truth/God). Moreover, although the majority of Afghan converts come from Hazara (Shia) background, it seems their understanding and practice of Islam has been very different from that of Iranian Shia. Moreover, I use the term 'Farsi speaking peoples' (although Kurdish is a separate language, culturally and linguistically there is a closer relationship between Kurdish and Farsi than between Kurdish and Arabic).

In this chapter I will first give an overview of Iranians' encounters with Christianity in Iran and abroad. Next, I will give a brief overview of the Afghanistan situation. Then I will explain different understandings of conversion to Christianity among Muslims. Finally, I will discuss the motivations of Farsi speaking refugees in Europe seeking conversion.

## Iran

To fully understand the question of conversion of Farsi speaking people to Christianity, you need to begin with Iran. The two main issues that have enhanced the idea of "change of religion" among Iranians are the socio-religious and political situation of the country, and globalization/modernity. The combination of these two factors has resulted in relations between religion, society and politics in contemporary Iran becoming complex, with various tensions, controversies and conflicts. All these have led to a new understanding of the concept of religiosity with individualism (*fardgarai*) and inclusivism at the heart of the issue. For that reason, it has challenged the Iranian mindset to be more receptive not only towards Christianity but also to

other faiths such as Bahaism and Zoroastrianism (Afshari 2017).<sup>5</sup>

The inspiration to redefine their understanding of religiosity first came from their disappointment and disillusionment with the Iranian regime, who claimed and aimed to establish the Islamic Utopia (*madieneh fazeleh* – Islamic State), based on *Vilayat-e Fagih* (the Guardianship: “The rule of divine law over the people.”) Before 1979 Iran was a secular society and religion was of a little significance. After the revolution, Khomeini established the Islamic Republic as a theocratic form of government ruled by a Supreme Leader with divine authority (Khomeini, 1980)<sup>6</sup> and with very limited participation of the people in decision making, including private matters such as what to wear and what to eat, how to get married etc. all being decided for them. Therefore, religion became politics; and everything else became politicized under the name of religion. Yet not only were many of the revolution promises not fulfilled, but also the freedom of people, especially women, was greatly limited. So, people became disappointed and frustrated, not only towards the government but equally towards Islam. Consequently, significant numbers of people have moved away from Islam and many have become secularized, while some have chosen different religions such as Christianity and Bahaism.

Globalization and global media have also provided them with new options and opportunities to transform not only their lifestyle but also the meaning of religion from what is assumed to be communal and inheritable to a private issue and an achievable one. Therefore, changing religion can also be and should be an act of exercising their freedom of choice. Since Christianity, especially the version that has been promoted through media, its concept of religion being more around a set of beliefs rather than rites, and with its ideology of being a personal faith, has become an attractive choice among some people. Its link to Western culture gives them a chance to disaffiliate from Arabs and affiliate to the West. In this process, the presence of Christ in Persian poetry and Sufism has also made it easier to switch.

However, there are no reliable figures available on the number of converts. Figures presented by various groups cannot be verified and their methodology is unclear. Nor is it possible to establish accurately that the number of Christians is on the rise. Nevertheless, individual and anecdotal sources and reports all indicate that Christianity in Iran and among Iranians in Europe and North America is indeed growing. Since the increase of refugees into Europe, many churches in Europe, especially in the UK, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and Finland have witnessed and participated in the baptism of significant numbers of Farsi speaking people, mainly Iranians. Although, there are no accurate statistics on how many Muslim background people have become Christian during the past decade in Europe, the increase in requests for

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<sup>5</sup> Afshari, S. (2017), *The reception of Christian Television in Contemporary Iran: an analysis of audience interactions and negotiations*. PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh.

<sup>6</sup> Khomeini, R. (1981) *Islam and Revolution: writings and declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Hamid Algar. Berkeley: Mizan Press.

baptism has even taken the attention of mainstream media such as New York Times, the Telegraph and so on.

Looking at the rest of Middle Eastern countries, with the rise of Islamic extremism, religiously motivated violence, war and destruction, one can predict a similar pattern – disillusionment with religion, and search for new alternatives – among Arabs and other Muslim groups as well. For example, conversion to Christianity among Afghans was almost unheard of, but now we, even in Denmark and Finland, are witnessing Afghans seeking to change their religious views and belief systems.<sup>7</sup>

Conversion to Christianity and movement between religions are much higher among Iranians than those from other Islamic countries. It might be because Iran has a different cultural background and different understanding of Islam, even of Shia Islam. For example, regarding their theological practices, Iranian Shia are different from Afghan Shia or Iraqi Shia, although most Afghans and Iraqis who have been converted to Christianity are also from Shia backgrounds. This issue should be taken into consideration while teaching and discipling converts from Muslim background. For example, what might be effective with Iranians may not produce the same result with Afghans and Kurds.

Likewise, it is important to note that conversion motives and the conversion process among Iranians outside Iran and inside are very different as well, especially with the new wave of conversion among Iranians in Europe. That means Christian teachings that might work for new converts in Iran may not be suitable for Iranian converts in Europe. It is mainly to do with how conversion has been used as a tool of transformation. I will explain this in the section, titled “Conversion”.

## Afghanistan

Afghanistan looks very different throughout its history. During the Persian empires, it was home to an array of religious groups including Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Buddhism. The co-existence between different religious groups continued until the invasion of the Mongol in the thirteenth century, when persecution intensified, many churches were destroyed, and many Christians were killed or fled. It is claimed that the Apostle Thomas and Bartholomew, on their way to India, passed through Northern Afghanistan. It is also worth noting that under the leadership of Bishop Timothy in 780 A.D. the Church of the East in this area grew significantly in such a way that the Church’s liturgy and some parts of the Bible

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<sup>7</sup> Atheism is also on the rise among people of the Middle East. If one searches on social media and the Internet one can notice a significant rise of atheist websites, blogs, YouTube channels, social media platforms in Farsi and Arabic such as the Egyptian Atheist Society, Iraqi Atheist Facebook. The Iranian Atheist Facebook page has over 200.000 members, even though the discussions are not very inspiring. However, conversion to Christianity among Iranians is still much higher than among those from other Muslim countries around the world.

were translated into local languages such as the Sogdiana language.<sup>8</sup> Today everything in Afghanistan is tied to Islam from politics, to social customs and the identity of individuals.

Moving away from history to contemporary Afghanistan, one can say that its history has been a depressing one. However, while Islamic extremism is still on the rise, the civil society of Afghanistan is moving forward in sports, arts, music and so on. The increased tension among the National Unity Government (NUG), mainly the president, Ashraf Ghani and his Chief Executive Officer, Abdullah Abdullah, has contributed to regional division. As the result, more and more places are falling back into the hands of Taliban.<sup>9</sup> Some areas such as Helmand are still run by the Taliban instead of the National Unity Government.

The Salafi movement (another extreme Islamic group) and influence are also on the rise, especially in school curriculums. Terms such as martyrdom, jihad, violence, subordination of women and slaying of infidels are at the heart of Salafi teachings. Even at the university level, students need to take a course called *Soghafat* (Islamic culture) for which much of the materials are produced by Salafists. For that reason, some people, even among Afghans, are concerned that Afghanistan is returning to religious extremism again. As the result, many Afghans are leaving the country, and seeking refugee status somewhere else, especially in Europe.

The increase of violence, killings and bombings in the name of religion, have caused more and more people to become disillusioned with Islam. Some are turning to atheism and agnosticism, and a few have turned to Christian faith as in Iran but more subdued. Speaking to Arley Lowen, the founder of Pamir Ministries, he explained: “No-one knows how many Christian converts are living in Afghanistan, but we hear of groups in the North Afghanistan, Mazareh Sharif, Kabul, and of individuals who are connected with these groups around the country.” Although the Afghan constitution protects religious freedom, the persecution of Christians in Afghanistan is very high. The 2017 World Watch report from Open Doors has placed Afghanistan number two on their list – only surpassed by North Korea. For example, in November 2014, a house church was raided and many of its members were killed. A high proportion of acts of persecution against Christians in Afghanistan has been done by family, relatives and others Islamic groups rather than the government. For that reason, Afghanistan is not a safe country to deport an Afghan Christian convert. The church in Denmark should take this into consideration.

As Arley Lowen explained, there are very limited, almost no, Christian activities in Afghanistan today. From 2003 – 2010, many faith-based NGOs, mainly Christians, managed to work in Afghanistan. However, now, with the reduced security system in the country, many have left.

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<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, no one speaks the language any more.

<sup>9</sup> There are two types of Taliban operating in Afghanistan: one pro ISIS and the other anti-ISIS. They run schools and health clinics, some even get funding from the government for their work.

Why do more and more Afghans become Christian outside Afghanistan? Arley Lowen responded to this question by saying: “Of course they are free from social pressures and fear of government and oppression. Many of those Afghans are Iranianised Afghans, or Hazaras who have already experienced not only the pressure of their own religious people but also the pressure and discrimination of the Iranian people and government. That all adds to their disillusionment with Iranian Shia Islam: doubled pressure and disillusionment.”

Conversion of Afghans to Christianity have been slow in comparison to conversion of Iranians to Christianity. Nevertheless, since 2015, one can see a relatively growing number of Afghan seekers and converts to Christian faith mainly in countries such as Germany, Finland, Netherlands and Denmark. For example, 200 Afghan converts attended the 2017 Afghan conference in Finland. The Afghan church in India is also growing. Ministries such as Pamir Ministries<sup>10</sup> aim to produce culturally relevant materials for Afghan converts around the world and offer them teaching and training in discipleship and church leadership. Pamir has been involved in the producing of “Come and Follow Me” materials aimed for Afghans and Pakistani rural people. One of the challenges of ministries to Afghans is the low literacy level among them which has made it challenging to provide the right materials for them that are simple and less text oriented. Therefore, with this low literacy, it is difficult to know how much they understand at the baptism classes. What are they converting to?

The issue of literacy has also created a sense of inferiority among some Afghans. Teaching and discipling them together with Iranians, requires more attention to them. Moreover, their past religion (Islam) and worldview, normally, creates more difficulties for an Afghan convert than for Iranians to accept some Christian doctrine such as the concept of the Son of God and the Trinity. Many Afghan converts still struggle with the Books (the Quran and the Bible) and the place of the prophet Mohammad. That means for a while both religions might exist in a convert’s life, (a convert might practice both religions at the same time) and a real change might take place later and in different stages.

Iranians, instead, have been more secularized with less religious teaching. Accepting Christian doctrine might therefore be easier for them, and conversion/transformation might take place faster. Talking to a few Afghan converts in churches in Denmark, I noticed their understanding of the Christian faith is very limited, almost nothing, yet their love for God and Christ is deep.

## **Conversion**

One of the questions that I asked pastors in my interviews was related to the concept of conversion. What

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<sup>10</sup> <https://pamirmedia.org>

does conversion mean to both converts and those who baptized them? Do they share similar understanding, or is the concept and the practice of conversion personally and culturally based? In simpler terms, what does it mean for a Muslim to convert to Christianity? What does the conversion of Muslims to Christianity mean for Danish Lutheran churches?

The above questions are very wide and need much more time to investigate and research. However, in this section I mainly look at the meaning of conversion and its practice among Christian converts from Muslim background.

L.R. Rambo argue that the word “conversion” is a “universe of possible meaning, it can mean whatever one chooses it to mean.”<sup>11</sup> However, listening to and studying many conversion stories of Muslim background people in the Middle East and Europe, the ambiguity of the meaning of the concept; the historical and Biblical background to the issue; the Islamic cultures that converts have been brought up in and the social and political situation of refugees and converts, as well as the converts’ agendas and motives have made it very challenging to use the term, ‘conversion’.

That means conversion is a controversial concept especially when it enters languages such as Farsi and Arabic, or Islamic cultures where change of religion is prohibited, and religion is seen as ascribed, communal and hereditary. For example, there is no equivalent translation for the word ‘conversion’ in Farsi or Arabic that can convey the same understanding as ‘conversion’ in Christianity. It might be due to conversion from Islam has been prohibited and religion has been communal, therefore vocabulary for religious conversion of individuals has not been developed. Looking at the stories of conversion in an Islamic context, most of the times conversion or reconversion has been presented as mass conversion. For example, reconversion of Iranians to Islam in 1979 by the leadership of Khomeini. Speaking about personal encounters of change and religious transformation (religious experience) normally has been seen as part of the influence of Christianity on Islamic cultures.

As a result, whatever translation of the term ‘conversion’ might be used by converts, it has its own shades of meaning and implications. For instance, phrases such as “I have become Christian”, “I have accepted Jesus Christ in my life”, “I have given my heart to Christ”, all have different meanings and implications, and can lead to different types of religious change, depending on the convert’s agenda, the purpose of their search and the scope of their exercise of freedom and knowledge. It might be cultural Christianity, a Sufi form of Christianity or adding to the persons existing religious belief system.

We must differentiate and distinguish conversion from Muslim background to Christianity from the early

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<sup>11</sup> Rambo, L. R. (1993) *Understanding religious conversion*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Christian idea of a unique once in a lifetime experience such as the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19). For example, experience of divine encounters (especially with saints) through dreams and visions are common among Muslims, especially, among Shia Muslims. Iranian culture, through poetry and literature, encourages such spiritual experiences. Jesus is one of the five greatest prophets of Islam, with a high reverence among all Muslims especially Shia and Sufis, and so such dreams and visions are not unusual. So those dreams and visions may not be conversion experiences but Sufi exhilaration. However, in many circumstances dreams and visions have helped converts to make their final decisions. Therefore, they have been useful in the process of decision making to become Christian (or to disaffiliate from Christianity) and helped them in their process of conversion - shifting their thinking from the old to the new.

Moreover, conversion among Muslims, is not much about 'salvation in the name of Jesus Christ' or 'gaining eternal life with Christ'. It is more about this world, here and now. Most conversion stories among Muslims indicate their conversion mainly as the result of finding solutions to life issues, another spiritual source in times of need, in times of loneliness, especially in a foreign land, a place to belong and to be cared for, or an opportunity for a better future.

In this respect, conversion is a decision and a process: a decision about whether, when and how to switch. It is a choice based on cost and benefit calculations. 'What do I lose?', 'What do I gain?', 'What should I keep?' and 'What should I let go?' Therefore, responding to the question on to what extent people change their religious belief system might be difficult if not impossible. Nevertheless, the important question for us should be what new possibilities for developing themselves these converts have now encountered in the Lutheran churches in Denmark? The self-conscious selection of new elements into their lives is central in both possibilities of faith and social and cultural integration. How can the church help the converts in both directions?

I have noticed that there have been some differences concerning the understanding and practice of conversion. Free church groups have been influenced more by Calvinist theology of conversion while the Danish Lutheran church have been influenced by Luther's conversion experience. For example, for Luther conversion was more about daily striving to fulfill the promises of one's baptism, and to live under the grace of God – a whole life process. For Calvin, on the contrary, conversion was a sudden experience of grace and salvation from sin by God, in the name of Jesus Christ. Studying many refugees' testimonies, one can notice that for many, conversion is not about 'salvation from sin' but salvation from their pain in this world. Therefore, 'guilt and sin' has been replaced with 'being a victim' that needs to be rescued.

Speaking to several pastors in the Danish Lutheran church, the main emphasis has been on the baptism rather than the concept of conversion. Interestingly, listening to converts, one could see a mixed

understanding of both theologies: those who have been exposed to other Farsi Christian materials online have a similar understanding to the majority Farsi converts outside Denmark. Those with less access to Farsi Christian materials and Farsi churches normally see their baptism as mainly a gate into God's presence to which they can bring their problems and receive God's grace and healing. It looks to me as if baptism is very much like the Passover blood of the lamb that was a sign of protection and redemption (Exodus 12 7-22). However, do converts see this sign of protection and redemption as a conversion to Christianity, as a new religion? The findings in chapter three, section one might give us a better picture.

## Religious conversion and Migration

Many people in Europe and North America, especially within media and government groups, see conversion of migrants/refugees into Christianity, particularly among Iranians, as a calculated method and motivation to help their asylum cases. Indeed, this might be true for a small number of converts. However, to see it as the only reason seems a naive and simplistic assumption, playing down the socio-political situation of the Middle East, as well as individuals search for truth and meaning in such situations. In the same way, seeing conversion of Muslims to Christianity as a search for eternal salvation in the name of Jesus Christ – sin and guilt – is also a simplistic approach.

## Why are some Muslims becoming Christians in Europe?

As mentioned above, change of religion is a choice based on cost and benefit calculation. It is important to know that for many Muslims, conversion to Christianity is not a sign of liberation but exercise of freedom of choice and freedom of religion. Based on the converts' testimonies, their deconversion (moving away) from Islam has been a sign of liberation from and opposition to their past religion. Therefore, moving away from Islam should be seen as having symbolic meaning and a gesture. Becoming Christian, especially in a land with more freedom, should be seen as a replacement for what has been lost, an alteration and reconstruction of religious identity, a radical personal change in one's life, including a new system of meaning making, their exercise of freedom of religion as well as a tool for integration and negotiation into their new society.

Therefore, behind the conversion decision of individuals lies multiple motivations, agendas and purposes, especially looking at conversion among Muslim refugees in Europe. Below I will explain conversion as a migration strategy, as an integration strategy and the formation of a new identity.

## Conversion as migration strategy

During the recent waves of refugees coming into Europe, the role of refugees' religions (mainly Islam) and conversion to Christianity has been portrayed negatively. Islam has been painted 'dangerous' to Europe's security and culture, while conversion to Christianity has been viewed as a tool to support their asylum cases

– misusing the system. For example, many mainstream media such as BBC or The Daily Mail (12 Jan 2016) suggested that the conversion of Iranians to Christianity is “to exploit a loophole in the immigration system”.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, many asylum cases based on conversion to Christianity have been rejected for the same reason.

Significant numbers, especially among Iranians with an agenda to migrate, use religious conversion as a migration tool even before leaving their country of birth, motivated by their asylum cases, as well as starting a process of disaffiliation from their past belonging, and developing a negotiating claim for their space and belonging into European or North American societies and communities. For example, I interviewed a mother of two that told that while she was in Iran, she expressed her conversion motivation linked to their plan to migrate to Europe. According to her, her conversion to Christianity would help her children and herself to find friends and integrate into the European societies and schools easier. As well as protecting her children from Islamophobic groups.

In addition, migration strategy is not limited to social and legal issues, but it also covers spiritual issues and identity formation. That means as migrants move and change locations, their perception, representation and definition of who they are (identity) changes. To go through, or direct these changes make it easier for migrants, especially those who have disassociated themselves from their previous religious worldview, to adapt a new religious worldview. It is also important to note that for a migrant/refugee who is a stranger in a strange land, identity is less about what they “have” and more about what they “do”. They might even despise what they have from national and cultural points of view.

Moreover, from a spiritual point of view, migrants/refugees from religious background, need a sacred space in which they can find clarification regarding the meaning of life, as well as connection to the divine in times of difficulty. For example, in my workshops with refugee converts in Denmark, speaking and listening to their stories, I noticed that almost all refugees see the church as a sacred place where they find peace, to some degree, acceptance as well as help and support. One person said: “If I didn’t have the church, I don’t know whether I would still have been alive now”. Another said: “When I come to the church all my pain vanishes”, and another: “Christ gave me hope, but I wish I could go back and mend my past’. Therefore, many of them turn to God and rely on the church in times of need and pain, more than to use it for their asylum cases.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/30/muslim-refugees-converting-christianity-find-safety/> (accessed 15 June 2018).

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/24/world/middleeast/the-jihadi-who-turned-to-jesus.html> (accessed 15 June 2018)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/22/world/asia/afghanistan-a-christian-convert-on-the-run.html>. (accessed 15 June 2018).

## Conversion as integration strategy

Integration is the key. It has become a favorite word for many who work among refugees and migrants. As mentioned in the introduction, integration like conversion, is a process, though it might relate more to culture than religion. The integration policy normally relates integration to language (culture), citizenship and the labor market, excluding religion. The recent religiously motivated movements have brought back religion once again into public debate and to some extent into integration policy. It might be because many of the world conflicts in recent times are related to religious cultural issues rather than nation states. Even the rise of racism in Europe is linked to religion and use religion(s) as part of their argument.

However, religion that has been used in relation to integration is mainly religion that migrants/refugees are born into. There has not been much research into how religious conversion has been used by refugees/migrants as a tool for integrating into their new society. My work among refugees and migrants converts demonstrated a richness in this issue that would make a worthwhile in-depth research project.

Nevertheless, using conversion as a cultural integration strategy is only one of the aspects of integration. Another aspect of conversion as integration strategy is linked to construction of one's religious identity, that is using the available and existing tools within their new society to reconstruct their religious identity.

Religious conversion has also been used for negotiating space and belonging within the host society. For example, I noticed in several cases, mainly among men, that they wear visible crosses. While inside, they tucked their crosses into their shirts, but display them while outside in the public. Their action could be interpreted as this: "hey, I am not one of 'them', I am one of 'you'." Chapter three of this report highlights the use of conversion as integration strategy and for negotiation for space and belonging by both the church and converts.

In conclusion, religious conversion today is much more complex than before. It is an achieved moment. It covers a range of motivations, activities, and processes. It is very much a personal decision, an outcome of a multitude of fears and desires (hopes). Therefore, it links to a better life in this world here and now.

## Chapter Two: Church of England and Persian speaking converts

In this section I will, first, very briefly, introduce Presence and Engagement, a national programme of the Church of England, and after that I will give a brief account on how the Church of England has responded to the conversion of Farsi speaking people, mainly Iranians, to Christianity.

The reasons for writing this section are:

- To find areas for working together with Church of England in this area
- To see whether they are areas of learning from the experience of the Church of England

- To see whether the Lutheran church of Denmark needs to develop a project like Presence and Engagement.

## Presence and Engagement<sup>13</sup>

Presence and Engagement is a national programme of the Church of England aiming to equip churches and Christians “for mission and ministry in the wonderful diversity of our multi faith society.” Focusing on the importance of the church remaining present in multi religious areas and engaging positively with communities of other faith. P&E supports and resources churches in areas where more than 10% of the population are of other faith communities. The programme emphasizes “the theological, missiological, pastoral and practical implications of the country’s increased religious diversity.”

P&E was established in 2005 by the General Synod of the Church of England. Based on their 2017 report to the General Synod, the two main tasks of P&E in its new phase are: renewing “discipleship and ministry, evangelism and witness”; the other is the geo-political context (connecting global to local), including “religion and integration” and the place of different communities with a concern about “international religious freedom as well as religiously motivated violence.” (for more information please read Appendix A: *The Church of England’s Mission and Ministry in a Multi-Religious Society*.)

P&E has established a network of lay and ordained Diocesan Interfaith Advisors (DIFAs), to monitor and track trends and developments as well as areas of concern at local level. Their knowledge, resources and stories are normally shared through regular conferences and other communication tools.

At the moment P&E has four centres in Leicester, Birmingham, West Yorkshire and London. Their goals for the next five years are:

- A Christian presence in every community
- Building bridges through Near Neighbours (Near Neighbours is one of the P&E projects aiming to encourage interfaith social action and interaction between different faith groups.)
- Sharing Christian faith
- Equipping people for ministry

One of the areas that P&E has been monitoring is conversion among Farsi speaking people within the Church of England. Although the Persian Ministry among Iranians was established before the formation of P&E, the work falls under the supervision of the Presence and Engagement National programme coordinator, Kat Brealey. (For more information, please see, Appendix B, their 2017 report).

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.presenceandengagement.org.uk>

Reading through their 2017 reports (Appendix B) one can see very many similarities to the work of the Lutheran Church among Farsi speaking groups

## Conclusion

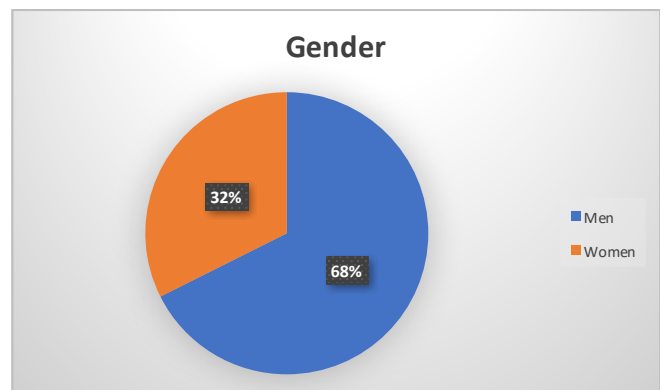
The concept of the Presence and Engagement programme is a very interesting and much needed concept for the complex societies of today Europe. However, it is difficult to know its impact within the grass-root communities since so far, its focus has been on pastors and leaders. Saying that it would be worthwhile for the Interchurch Council to make a trip to some of the P&E centres and to listen to pastors and congregations who have been part of the project, including meeting the ‘Near Neighbours’ group. The situation of Church of England among Iranian converts is like that of the Danish Lutheran Church. Therefore, it might be interesting for both Churches to work together to improve and develop potential, not only among converts, but also in how this new phenomenon can help both Churches integrate and become the inclusive body of Christ.

## Chapter three: Findings

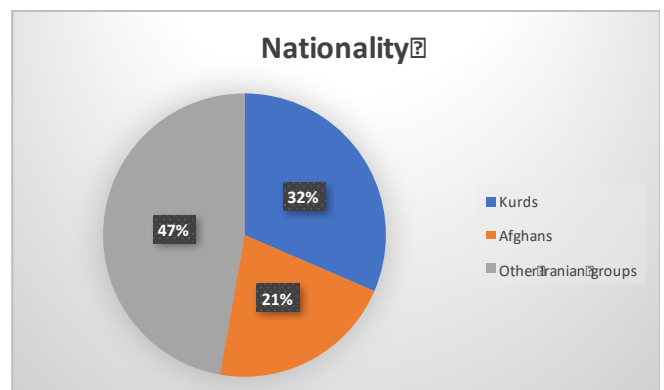
### Section one: Refugee converts

#### Who are they?

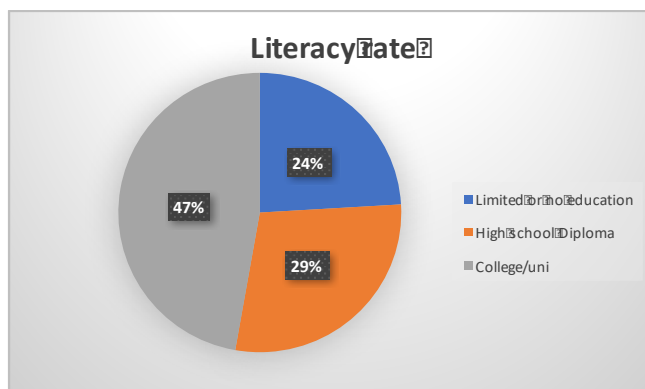
I distributed a questionnaire to 108 refugees: 73 men (33 Iranians, 16 Afghans, 24 Kurds), and 35 women (18 Iranians, 7 Afghans, 10 Kurds).



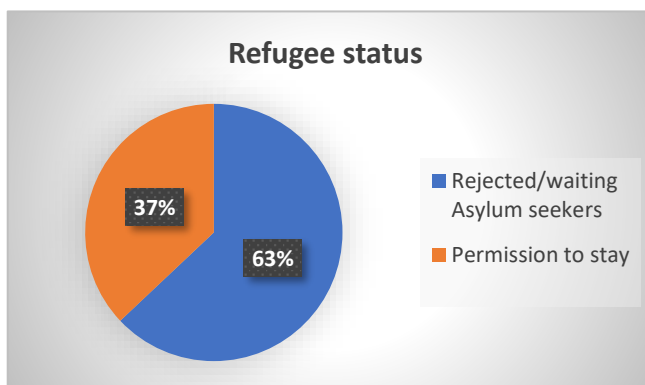
Most Kurds are from Iranian Kurdistan, however significant numbers were also from Iraqi Kurdistan. 47% of Iranians were from different ethnic groups, including Arabic speaking people. Of the Afghans, 21%, were Hazara and some Tajiks. There were only two Pashtun speaking people who did not want to fill in the questionnaire.



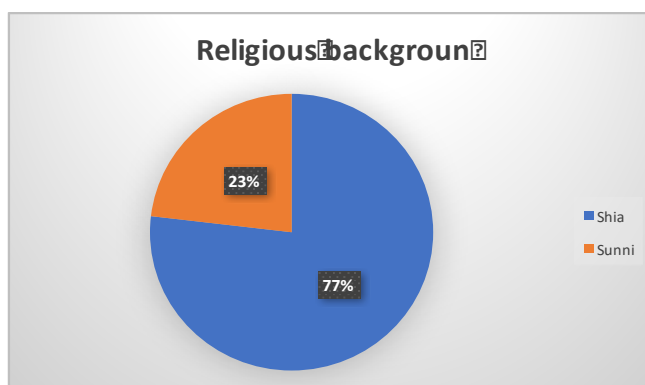
The literacy rate among Iranians was higher than the other two groups. Kurds, however, had a lower literacy background. Most illiterate people were among Afghans. Lower educated Afghans had ‘maktab’ education (religious schooling). Among Kurdish group, women had much lower literacy than men.



Most refugees were asylum seekers. Many of them have received rejection letters more than once. However, 37% had been given permission to stay. Most of those people were members of the Church of Love.

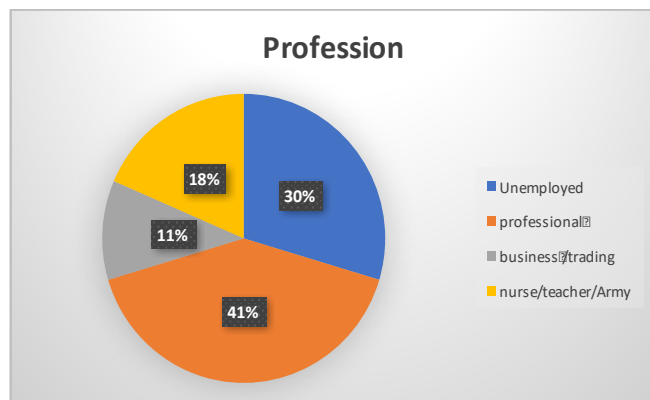


Less than one fourth of converts come from Sunni background, most of them being Kurds. Although the majority of Iranian and Afghan converts come from a Shia background, their religious upbringing and understanding of Shia Islam, and of religion in general is very different. For example, many Iranians speak of their faith in an emotional way, but Afghans on the other hand try to rationalise their new religion.

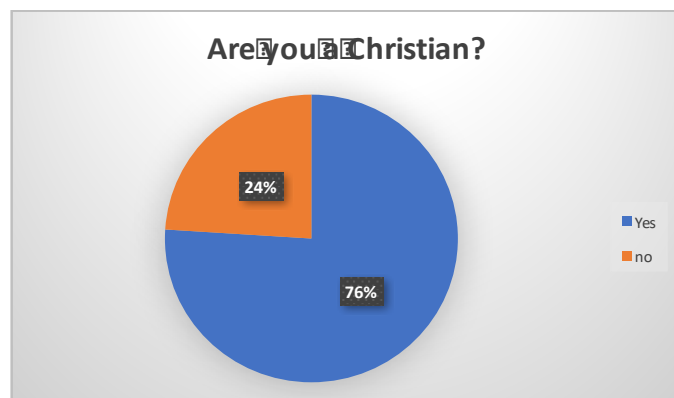
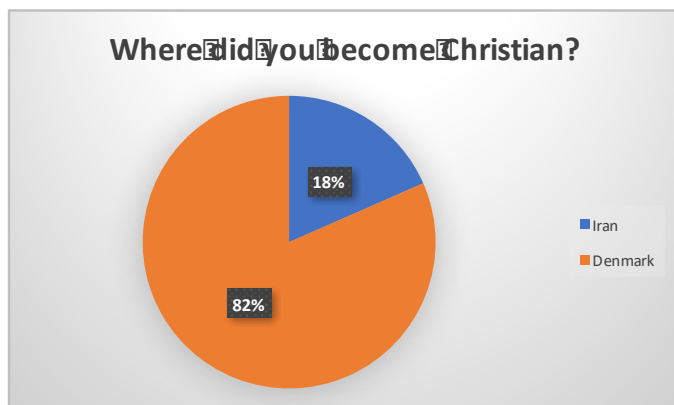
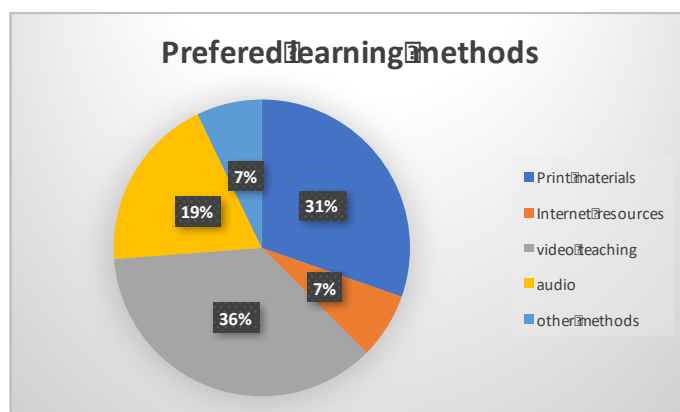


There were a few (4 in total) Kurds from Yarasan, a Sufi sect (two did not fill in the questionnaire). A significant number of Iranians indicated that they left Islam before leaving Iran. Therefore, they described themselves as non-religious or atheists before becoming Christian.

Answering the questions relating to their profession, many were hesitant to talk about it. Based on my observation, the main reason might be the fact that they had never had a permanent job. However, 30% said that they were unemployed in their country of origin.



In relation to their learning methods, most participants preferred print materials and video teachings while 7% indicated that group discussion and participation helped them to learn faster and better.



### What does Christian faith mean to them?

Interestingly, the Afghans never used phrases such as “change of religion” or “becoming Christian”, instead they used “being baptised”. However, the majority were not able to give much explanation on what it meant for them to be baptised into the Christian faith. Iranians on the other hand were more expressive and emotional in telling their testimonies on how Jesus met them, or they met Jesus. Kurds instead expressed their desire for seeing God. For example, one Kurd asked: “how can I increase my thirst for God?”

In all stories the concept of God as peace giver and problem solver was the dominating one. The places of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit were not too clear. Since they were still struggling with accepting the concept of original sin, the idea of eternal salvation was not much reflected upon in their stories. Many talked about God's saving grace mainly from their misery in this world. Some asked about the salvation of their loved ones who died before knowing Jesus Christ, mainly in relation to the Day of Judgement (hell and heaven).

After the concept of God, the place of the church and the work of church leaders, mainly pastors, were at the centre of discussions.

## The concept of God

The concept of God was at the heart of every story. It was like an umbrella of hope that protected them from the showers of pain, struggles and uncertainty. The main attraction to the church has been God and the sacred space. The church provided them with space to be with God and talk or pray to God.

In our discussions about God, most of answers and questions were a kind of meditative requests;

- From a spiritual point of view such as “open the eyes of my heart”, “help me to know you”, “I want to see you”.
- To their inner struggles such as: “Save me”, “redeem my past”, “give me strength to correct my past mistakes”.
- To their anger: “why are you asleep?”, “Why don't you speak?”, “Where is your justice?”, “God, there is too much suffering and injustice in this world, please come.”, “Why people are not equal in this world?”
- To questions of life purpose: “Why was I born in Afghanistan?”, “With all misery in my life, what is your message for me?”, “Why am I here?”
- To their desires in loving Him: “I wish one day my problems would be solved so that I could love God for himself.”, “God, are you planning to make me your child?”, “God, will you make me worthy of your service?”, “Why didn't you show yourself to me earlier?”, “I desire to grow in my faith so I can see God.”
- And many needed Him to protect and save their families and counties.

## The concept of Faith

Asking them about Christian faith, many spoke of forgiveness, peace, hope and love. Their understanding of faith was very much around Jesus Christ. For example, a young man said: “Christ forgave me, but I wish I could go back and mend my past. I have done lots of bad things.” Another person said: “At least he (Christ) doesn't judge me. He accepts me for who I am.” And another: “Christ

gave me hope to stay alive.” Other theological and moral questions were raised in relation to their faith, such as: “How can I love more, judge less and have more patience?”, “How can those who didn’t believe and died be judged?”, “Why do we still need to wait for the Son of God when he has already come?”

Some, though they have been baptized, are still puzzled with Christianity being ‘The Truth’, and some (mainly among Afghans) are still in search of a convincing argument on why they should become Christians. For example, one person said: “if I see and experience miracles in other religions should I change my religion again?”

Almost all requested more teaching in Farsi or Kurdish, so they can learn about their faith better.

There were also frequent comparisons between Islam and Christianity.

## Proclamation

- Many desired to spread the Good News among their family members and others. Therefore, some said that they plan to attend a Bible school for that purpose.
- A few desired their future job be in a full-time ministry.
- Many talked about their dreams that their church would become ‘a global mission minded church’ that can reach out not only to international groups in Denmark but also around the world, for example in Iran.
- Some asked for help in how to proclaim the good news?
- There were questions of why only a few Danes attend the church. One person asked: “What is the churches’ plan in encouraging Danes to come back to the church?”
- Some felt their talents have not been used in the church: “I asked so many times to serve in the church, but no one took it seriously.”
- “How can I help another believe in order to find peace?”

## The church

The main definition of the church was: “a sacred place of refuge and peace” not only within the world they live in, but also through their inner and spiritual struggles. For example, one person said: “Whenever I come to the church all my pain vanishes.” Another person said: “I don’t know what would had happened to me if I didn’t have this church.” And the other: “I come to find peace and hope.”

Other definitions and expressions of the church were:

- A helping hand in times of needs,
- A community of fellowship,
- “Outside I am an unwanted refugee, here I feel equal.”
- “Every space in my life and my world is dark, the only light I can see is the church.”

## Church leaders / Pastors

There was a huge admiration and respect for their pastors and church leaders, for their loving kindness and generous hearts. Many would like to ask their pastors questions such as:

- “Where do they get the energy and encouragement to keep serving?”
- “They know some of us are lying to them; yet they don’t judge us and keep serving us.”
- “How did they, spiritually, come to this point where they are now?”
- One person wrote: “I admire what my pastor is doing for us. But I would like to ask him this: “If you were born in a non-Christian country, would you still be a Christian and a priest?”
- “When you preach, how do you feel?”
- “What are your struggles? How did you overcome them?”
- “If I see miracles in other religions should I change my religion again?”
- “I wish the church could train more Farsi speaking priests.”
- “What kind of programmes do you have to encourage Danish people to come back to church?”
- “What is your purpose in serving people?”
- I wish my pastor would help us to be able to love one another, help others become spiritually and physically better.
- “I would like to ask my pastor: how can you accept even those who misuse your trust?”
- “How can you have such peace?”

## Changes converts would like to see in the church

Beside God, the three main reasons for attending a church were: to have fellowship and communication with Danes, to learn about Christian faith, and to pray. Therefore, many of their requests for change were related to these three motivations.

- Many did not like to be kept separately from the rest of church congregation. So, there was a significant emphasis on the church becoming more inclusive and a welcoming place where “No-one feels lonely”.
- The other issue was related to ‘ideological discrimination’ that should be reduced in the church. That means, they felt they have been seen as second-class Christians, and felt, there are many, even in the church, who don’t believe they are Christian.
- Many desired the church to also have Farsi services, “Even if it is only once a month”.
- Some dreamt of having Farsi churches, and asked to bring or train Farsi speaking pastors and church leaders.

- They requested more Farsi prayers, songs and Bible readings to be included. Including a separate time for Farsi speaking people to worship together.
- They feel invisible, they would like to be introduced better.

## Converts' views on church congregation

- Many spoke of Danish congregation being generous “Even more than us {culturally}”, but they struggle with the Danish concept of hospitality. For example, one said: “We don’t need things, we need friends.”
- Many refugees felt included, and that Danes in the church treated them equally although ‘they (Danes) don’t’ speak much to them.’ For instance, one said: “their smile tells me I am welcome, and I like it.”, “When they respond to my greetings, I feel respected.”

Their general criticisms were mainly on the issue of collective judgement. For example, one person said:

- “If one refugee does bad things, they generalise it. If one refugee does a good deed, they only talk about that individual. Why?”
- “Why do they rush to conclusions? For example, our baptism, they think we are not Christian, but we just do it for our asylum case.”
- “Why don’t they sit with us?”

## How can the church help?

Many of them wanted the church to advocate for them in society and the government:

- They asked whether the church can discuss with the government to find translators that at least would know Christianity so answers to their Christian faith can be translated accurately.
- Whether the church can put pressure on the government to improve the life conditions in the camps such as paying more attention to their health and to their children’s education.
- There was continuous request for more Christian teaching and resources in Farsi, as well as Danish language classes.

There were also other questions such as:

- What is the difference between the free churches and the state church?
- Why does the Church marry homosexuals when they know it is against God’s will?
- Why do they put statues in the church? Is it not idolatry?

## Integration

The issue of integration into Danish communities and society was one of the main concerns of recognized refugees. One person explained it in this way:

“Let me tell you this, with many [asylum cases] being rejected, you normally plan your next stage of being rejected. When I was given permission to stay, it was overwhelming news. You are released from tensions and the stress of uncertainty and possibility of being rejected, to tensions and stress of integration into Danish society. From not having much to do to not knowing how I am going to plan my life now.”

It seems that many refugees, when they get their permission to stay, suddenly enter a different disorientating phase that is more confusing than being an asylum seeker, perhaps because they have not been contemplating this beforehand. Observing asylum seekers, I noticed most of them have a passive and negative/despairing waiting attitude. Therefore, very little attention is given to their cultural and language integration. That goes also for the issue of settling into their new faith – conversion. Those with a motivation to stay in Denmark may not even try to go through the process of conversion, though they see it as a useful tool in their journey of seeking asylum.

There are asylum seekers who have been around for a long period, some even for 13 or 15 years. Many of them have developed severe depression, mental and physical health issues. Many of them talked about moments of contemplating suicide. It seems they are mentally and emotionally trapped, unable to find a way out. They desperately need help.

In addition to the despair and uncertainty of life in camps, and facing rejection by the authorities and society, Afghans, especially those converted to Christianity, go through extra pressures and hardship. On the one hand they must deal with worrying about the safety of their lives and their families back home, and on the other hand, with facing discrimination, threat and bullying by other Muslims, including Arab Muslims, while living in camps. Adding to that is the fact that they have been marginalised and overlooked by Iranian groups.

Here are a few questions and suggestions that were given by the refugees in relation to their integration into Danish society and church communities.

- “How can they better communicate with Danish communities and Christians in Denmark?”
- “One thing to change in the church is to change the views of the church on new believers.”

- “The church should use its power to influence the government to better support refugees, not only while they live in camps, but for their integration process.”
- “I don’t like to be kept away and separated from the rest of the church.”
- “Churches that have Farsi speaking people should include praying and read the Bible in Farsi.”
- “I love Holy Communion. It gives me an amazing feeling of being included. I also love the coffee breaks after the church: it helps me to fellowship with others.”
- “I don’t like the way some people look at us, refugees. Perhaps the church can introduce us better to their Danish congregation.”
- “I dream of having Farsi services in the church, at least once a month.”
- “Why cannot church have a better integration program?”

## Section Two: Findings from the interviews with church leaders and pastors

### Who are they?

Below is a summary of what was said by pastors and church leaders about refugees.

- “We don’t know much about them. The problem became clear to us when we saw them walking on our highways. In this moment, we felt we need to do something. But we were not clear on what and how.”
- “They came to our churches, asked for baptism, asking about Christian faith. We didn’t know how to approach the situation. We didn’t have resources to teach them, and we couldn’t speak their language. So, we sent them to other churches, but they kept coming back.”
- “Some pastors refused to teach them, simply because they didn’t know how. Some pastors were against baptizing Muslims. I remember one of them said: “we should encourage them to become good Muslims, not terrorists.”
- “They don’t speak our language. It has been difficult to communicate with them. We always rely on translation. The translators’ language ability is also limited, and they are not available all the time. So, it has been difficult to get to know them.”
- “We don’t understand the framework of Persian cultures. I did ask our Bishop to provide us with some cultural training.”
- “When they came and knocked at our churches’ doors we knew we should do something about it. Some pastors from different churches including Free churches came together to discuss the issue. We knew a woman priest should not teach them since most of them were men.”

The interviews revealed that lack of knowledge of refugees' cultural and religious background was not only a concern in relating to them, but also in some places created some kind of fear and carefulness such as "a women priest should not teach them." Many pastors also talked about their congregations' anxiety in having refugees at the church.

The hesitation and concerns over the issue of baptizing Muslims were mainly related to three issues;

1. Many pastors didn't want to be seen as 'evangelizing Muslims'.
2. The second reason was the fact that the church is national church with almost 80% of the population being members. Therefore, some pastors felt they should also take the views of the non-church goers into consideration, that is: not to be an evangelizing church baptizing and proselytizing Muslims or anyone.
3. Adding to the second reason, some pastors also mentioned another existing view, that is: many Danes see Christianity as part of their Danish national identity and since refugees are not Danish so 'they should stay Muslim'.

In brief, all pastors, who worked among refugees, felt privileged and humbled in teaching and baptizing refugees. Though they still struggle in getting to know them and keeping and including them in their churches.

## **The Church**

What has been the role of the church in this process?

The common definition of the church in such situation was "as a resource place." Other definitions include phrases such as "a place of refuge", "a place where everyone is included and accepted", "a place for wounded ones", "a spiritual resting place", "a place to find help and fellowship".

Overall, it seems the church has been seen as an institution that provides relief work. A place that refugees could come to find help spiritually, physically and mentally - "a good meal, being cared for and to find fellowship in a place where the name of God was also glorified". A few pastors also talked about the church as a place of teaching the sacraments and preaching the gospel.

In their definition of the church their focus was mainly on the practical ecclesiology although very few spoke of the mission of the church (making disciples of all nations). There was much mention about the cultural understanding of faith being a private and personal matter in Danish society and culture.

A few saw this as a concern and challenge, as one person said that 'since within the reformed tradition there is no private Christianity but only a communal one.' The ideology of private belief may not help converts to growth into their faith.

A good number of pastors saw the church as a cultural institution focusing on cultural integration of refugees into Danish society as well as a fellowship of believers in which strangers are welcomed, included and accepted.

However, the majority agreed that the church has not yet focused on making disciples of Jesus Christ in relation to the new converts. “Baptism is not conversion and we are not making disciples.”

## **Resources (this section should be considered as recommendation as well)**

The issue of resources or lack of them was one of the dominated one. Three types of resources were mentioned:

### **Materials for teaching**

The range of materials that was used to teach refugees is limited. Most pastors prepared their own materials. A few of them used the existing ones such as Miller’s book, Encounter With Christ (translated from Danish to Farsi), Red Thread in Danish, Alpha materials, and Masoud’s baptism classes (10 videos).

Those who did not use the existing Farsi materials explained that this was mainly due to their content. For example, many mentioned that the existing materials do not teach sacraments.

Answering questions regarding additional materials in Farsi, many requested the translation of liturgy into Farsi, and books that do not support “extremism” views and are theologically close to Lutheranism. Since they did not have plans for the future they were not very clear on what they really need in relation to teaching resources.

### **Resources for pastors and church leaders to understand refugees’ cultures and worldviews**

A significant majority requested resources for pastors and church leaders that can help and equip them to work better among refugees. Ideas such as cultural workshops for pastors and volunteers and reading materials were suggested.

One pastor said: ‘in order to contextualize Christianity we need constant dialogue between two cultures (Persian and Danish cultures). And another pastor said: ‘when there is education there is contextualization of theology for both sides.’

And another: “To help refugees grow in their faith we need to know who they are: their cultural background, their worldviews, their context. We don’t know anything about them.”

### **Human resources**

- *Translators:* translation was the big issue. Most of the translators were not trained as translators and were themselves new to Danish/English language as well as Christianity. It was a challenge for pastors to know how much and what kind of understanding was happening during their teaching sessions. Since most refugees did not speak English or

Danish, getting to know them was also a challenge since it required the presence of a translator.

- *Farsi speaking leadership:* although in most of the churches and house groups, refugees helped with domestic work, there was much need for participation in lower leadership of the Farsi groups both in churches as well as in their weekly groups. There was also an urgent request to have a coordinator who can speak Farsi to coordinate the work, and help with finding and distributing resources, as well as helping with teaching and training.
- *Volunteer work:* Some pastors felt alone and overwhelmed in their work. Most Danish congregations appreciated what their pastors were doing for the refugees, so they provided them with funds, however their involvement in the actual work was minimum.

Some pastors also spoke of issues with volunteers, especially with women volunteers. It is because most refugees are men, therefore it is important for volunteers to be trained culturally to protect both (volunteers and refugees) from harm and misunderstandings.

## Conversion and baptism

Question to the pastors: What is conversion? And why do you baptize refugees from Muslim background?

Three views were noticeable in all interviews: baptism as “a new birth”, as cultural and social integration, as relief work. Teaching materials and methods that were used also reflect on their approach to baptism. However, it seems there was not much theological reflection on baptizing an adult Muslim background person into Danish Lutheran Christianity. For example, there was not much concern over contextualization of materials and teaching into refugees’ cultures and contexts.

- *Baptism as a sign of “new birth”* was explained as a door to God’s family (fellowship), to receive God’s forgiveness and saving grace, a turning point from Islam to Christianity, “God is calling”. However, not many pastors talked about salvific views of conversion/baptism in the name of Jesus Christ except some of the free church pastors and some lay leaders with Indre Mission background.
- *Cultural and social integration:* Some pastors preferred to place more focus on the cultural integration of refugees through the church. It is because for them the Lutheran church as a national church is very much rooted in Danish culture and identity. Therefore, some pastors have adapted teaching methods such as including teaching traditional Danish hymns and other traditional practices into their baptism classes. For example, one pastor developed a method of teaching in this way: after a half an hour fellowship, she would take her group to a piano room where she would teach them a church hymn: how to read it in Danish, what it means, what it means to sing it at the church, and how to sing it.

- Many pastors have encouraged occasional eating together where both Danish and refugee congregations participate in preparing food and eating together.
- *Baptism as another kind of relief work:* Almost all pastors and church leaders said that the request for baptism came from refugees: “they requested, we responded”.

Baptism was also seen as an exercise of and search for freedom. At least two pastors mentioned that since their request for baptism is with multiple motivations, they do not see it as conversion.

It seems it was the norm for pastors to interview candidates before baptism classes and before actual baptism. All pastors mentioned that before baptism, they explain to every individual that their baptism will not support their asylum case.

Many pastors avoid using terms such as ‘mission’, ‘evangelism’, ‘salvation’, ‘preaching’ and ‘conversion’. They felt those words have a negative connotation in Danish society and culture. At least two pastors mentioned that since the church is a national church, they should consider the non-church goers’ views as well, so they didn’t like to be seen as evangelizing and baptizing Muslims.

## After baptism

There was a sense of loss among most of pastors. I heard repeatedly phrases such as “we lost them,” “they constantly move”, “it is difficult to plan anything” and “we have no plan”. Therefore, there was not much plan for after baptism. The request for continuing the teaching classes after baptism again came from converts themselves, mainly from asylum seekers. Many of the converts, those who have been given permission to stay, have left the church. That is why for many pastors it has been difficult to plan discipleship programs.

## Integration

For a Muslim background refugee convert two integrations are happening side by side: *faith integration* and *cultural integration*. It seems the church didn’t reflect much on the faith integration of refugee converts beyond their baptism classes. Despite cultural integration being everyone’s favorite topic, the church did not take much action, although the Free churches have been doing more in this area. The third part of integration related to *the integration of the church*, i.e. whether, how and in which area the church needs to change to accommodate and include these newcomers, was also another difficult topic to discuss. Yet all felt a need for it.

## Faith integration

One of the best quotes that shows the importance of faith integration is from the interview with one of the Lutheran pastors who said: “one of the converts to Christianity once said; ‘when you go from Islam

to Christianity, it seems your heart and lungs have been taken out, and you need a new heart and lungs.’ But she felt that the church was not able to provide her with new lungs and heart.”

Although there is a link between faith integration and cultural integration, it should be considered as a separate section for two reasons. Firstly, as refugee converts come from a religious background, to allow their new faith to become a new meaning making system for their daily lives needs a deliberate procedure guided by the church. Secondly, Danish “modern culture” does not represent Christian faith though it has roots in Christianity.

Beside baptism classes, little has been done in the area of faith integration, many churches included orientation to the liturgy and the Sunday services as well as teaching Luther’s Catechism.

Nevertheless, many pastors agreed that faith integration is an important area. For example, a Lutheran pastor said: “You are going from being a Muslim to be a Christian. You decided to receive the whole Biblical package.” What the Biblical package is and how a convert can unwrap and use the contents of the package to reshape her life and identity was unclear. Moreover, can the church deliver that package in just 10 or 12 baptism classes, especially knowing the overwhelming majority do not speak the language, some of them are illiterate or have minimum literacy education, and with the translators being amateur and untrained?

## Cultural and social integration

Churches with better intercultural or international programs and more volunteers managed the situation better. In such churches, pastors focus on teaching and intercultural workers and volunteers have been taking care of cultural integration and international events.

Most of the baptism classes did not include much instruction on Christian living. Free churches, however, have adopted a more holistic approach in their teaching to include Christian life, work and even how to be Christian, live and work in Denmark. For example, one Free church pastor said: “We don’t only teach Bible. We also talk about how to be Christian in Denmark, how to work and live in this country. To make it this practical we pair them with local families.”

Some churches kept the refugees in separate groups, away from the church with their programs being on weekdays. In these churches, although refugees can attend the Sunday services, it has not been encouraged, mainly because those churches do not have translation into Farsi, and some pastors were concerned about their Danish/local congregations. It seems some Danish individuals, depending on church congregations, did not wish to have refugees as part of their normal congregation.

Some churches, mainly those who have Farsi translation, have included converts to help during Sunday services such as distributing the bread and wine during Holy Communion, and including Bible readings and/or prayers in Farsi. Doing that they aim not only to include converts but also to help their local congregation to see and accept more diversity in their churches.

In general, most of the state churches were not doing much around integration for two reasons: the government has a comprehensive integration program for refugees, and the fact that most of the refugees are still in asylum seeker status. Very few churches offered Danish language classes.

## The integration of the church

Many thought, that it is the refugees that needed to be integrated into Danish society and churches. There wasn't much discussion on the changes that the churches need to make to accommodate the newcomers. However, one pastor talked about the need to also focus on the integration of churches, especially helping and encouraging the Danish congregation to be more open and participative towards other cultures and language diversity in the church.

Still, it seems, the question as to whether the church needs to change and if so, in what areas and how, has not been discussed and reflected upon by many clergy.

## Local congregations

The acceptance of refugees including offering them hospitality varies from church to church. Each church spoke about their strengths and challenges. For example, some churches were not willing to welcome the refugees or to fund the work. Most churches were happy to have them, yet the congregation did not get much involved in the work and left most of the work to their pastors. A few churches were very enthusiastic in welcoming the newcomers, including them in their services, inviting them to their homes and attending to their needs. For example, one church expressed their congregation's enthusiasm in this way that their church congregation were very excited to see refugees coming to the church. They were eager to get to know them, so they suggested having a fellowship event, so they can get to know them. The congregation provided and prepared all the food and services that were needed. 150 members of the congregation attended the event.

Asking why some churches were not very welcoming and others did a better job, the answers that were given mainly were related to the faith of the congregations (whether the congregations saw their faith as cultural or Biblical) and the mission of the church.

Other issues and practices highlighted are:

- Pastors used their congregation as witnesses at their baptism and to take some responsibility for the new converts to make sure they are ok and to help them to integrate into their faith and church.
- Some pastors talked about pairing refugees with locals.
- One person said: "Half a year ago we could not attract any Danes to our group but now we have more Danes than Farsi speaking people."

- A few mentioned that much focus has been on differences, little on communalities between refugees and local people. We should change our way and focus on communalities.
- Another expressed a desire to change ‘fear of strangers’ to ‘welcoming the strangers’.

## Challenges

Challenges were many. They have been categorized into cultural issues, resources, the church and institutions.

### Cultural issues

*Cultural differences:* The cultural issues were highlighted more as being the congregational concerns, because as one person said: “The main focus has been on differences rather than on communality”. In many of the interviews and based on my observations, the refugees were mainly perceived as a homogenous collection of individuals, less as individual human beings.

Though many admitted that they don’t know them, little effort was made in training and helping the church workers and pastors to increase their knowledge of refugees’ cultural and historical background. All (Afghans, Iranians and Kurds (including Iraqi Kurds) have been taught in the same teaching classes with Farsi being the main communication link through translation. That means the focus has been given to the Farsi speaking Iranians, while assuming that the Kurds and Afghans would have the same ability to follow the lessons. This approach has resulted in many Afghans and Kurds lagging behind, this being more noticeable especially among illiterate Afghans and Kurds. However, at the end of their teaching sessions some pastors noticed the cultural, linguistic and educational differences among refugees, yet lack of resources did not allow them to do things differently.

*Language barriers:* since many refugees don’t speak Danish or English, it has been very difficult for some Danes including their pastors to get to know them.

*Cultural paradoxes* were another challenge that some pastors talked about. For example, one said: “It took me while to understand that their ‘yes’ doesn’t mean ‘yes.’” At least two pastors spoke of the fact that some of the refugee converts tend to live two lives and have a dualistic way of thinking, which has made it difficult to know their intentions and to get to know who they are. It was also mentioned that some refugees might still live as Muslims at home and Christians in the church.

### Discrimination, persecution and racism

- Based on my observation especially while attending intercultural events, I noticed that refugees were third class citizens after Danish and other international/migrant groups. They themselves also felt and acted the same, except for a few confident Iranians.
- Many pastors mentioned that some among their congregations did not want refugees in the church. There were some stories of racism not only from Danish congregations but also

among refugees and migrant themselves. For example, one pastor said in their intercultural evening the African group was pushed out by Iranians.

- Persecution and discrimination of converts by other Muslim groups was also mentioned. The persecution and bullying of Afghan converts by other Muslim groups is more spoken of. Two pastors also talked about Kurds being afraid of other Kurds.
- Different levels of education and understanding are big issue and were mentioned by some teachers and pastors, but nothing has been done about it just because of lack of resources.

## Resources

- Teaching resources was one of the challenges mentioned by almost all pastors.
- Next to resources was the issue of translation and translators. Finding the right translators who could translate Christian teaching into Farsi had been a difficult task. Many of the translators did not have the right education or themselves, were new in their faith or didn't believe in Christianity. This issue made it difficult for pastors to know what was happening, how much learning was taken place during their teachings? And how much of their teaching was understood by the group?
- The issue of funding was not everyone's concern. Only very few mentioned they face financial problem to find funds for their work among refugees. However, future funding was a concern.
- Lack of coordinators and volunteers was another challenge. There has been a good coordination system among the Resource Pastors, however many expressed their wish to have a coordinator in and more volunteers who could also speak Farsi to help in the area of resources, teaching, conferences and so on.

## The Church

- Challenges that could be categorized under the church section are:
- Some pastors felt lonely in their work among refugees and were struggling to create more energy among their Danish congregations.
- Churches with elderly congregations found it challenging to encourage the young refugees remaining in the church.
- With many asylum camps being closed, and many of those who have been granted residency and have been moved by the government to different locations, pastors found it difficult to plan for the future.
- Converts' commitment, or lack of it, to the church has also been another challenge.
- "Everyone has gone." In some churches all refugees have disappeared.

- Two pastors spoke of challenges that they faced from some Free churches for example one said a Free church rebaptized a person that he had already baptized. And the other was worried about the teachings of some Pentecostal free churches that her Farsi groups sometime attend.

### **Institutions (government and media)**

- Beside the above-mentioned issues related to the government, there were also complaints that some asylum camps don't allow asylum seekers to attend church conferences. The accepted refugees, those who are going through integration programs, had also not been given permission to miss their language classes to attend the church conferences.
- Two pastors spoke of media being unkind to the refugees and the churches by portraying a wrong image of refugees and their conversion to Christianity. "Everyone thinks that refugees are taking advantage of the Church in order to strengthen their asylum cases."

### **Future**

- There is no plan: Many didn't even think about a future with converts because, as said, "we don't have them anymore".
- Promoting a culture of hospitality: Some churches talked about increasing the culture of hospitality in their churches by starting international evenings or intercultural events.
- A few pastors talked about visiting converts in their houses and inviting them back to the church.

### **Free churches vs Lutheran churches**

It was interesting to see more similarity between the Free churches and the State churches' practices.

A few differences were:

- Free churches felt not having state funds had been a great advantage for them to have more volunteers to work among refugees.
- Free church congregations have been more involved in the work than the State church congregations.
- There has been more holistic teaching to include Christian life and work within some Free churches' teaching than in the state churches. Although there have been some exceptions.
- Refugees have been given better pastoral care and hospitality within Free churches.
- However, both Free church pastors and some Lutheran pastors mentioned that some of refugees who had become Christians in Free churches had moved to the State churches. This cannot be taken too much into consideration since church shopping and movement is common among refugees especially asylum seekers.

## Conclusion

All pastors working with refugees said that refugees simply turn up at their churches. They were not prepared for it. They had very little knowledge about them. The coming of the refugees into the church put practical and theological challenges on the church and its definition in society as resource institution and proclamation body. Many pastors choose to focus on the church being a resource place responding to refugees needs and requests including baptism. Responding to refugees' needs and requests required resources. The biggest challenges for pastors were around teaching resources, translation, communication with refugees and insecure and unenthusiastic congregations.

Although the concept of 'integration' was very much present in everything related to refugees and migrants, it seemed that the church did not have deliberate plans. There was not much planning after baptism. For some churches the work has finished. Many pastors agreed that there is a need for the Church to change its way of being church in this multi-cultural society. Yet they did not know how.

## Chapter Four: Recommendations

### Recommendation #1: Making the church inclusive<sup>14</sup>

The Church needs to rearrange its furniture to make room for newcomers.

- *Belonging together:* The church should not keep refugee converts separate from their main congregations. Doing that will not help converts to belong nor the local congregation to go through a process of knowing them and accepting them as individuals. Many church congregations have accepted the work as a project, but not yet the individuals as living being and equal members of their congregations.
- *Celebrating diversity:* The church should celebrate diversity by, for example, catering towards the needs of migrants and refugees such as providing space for creation of different cultural and linguistic fellowships within the church (see also recommendation #3).
- *Make them known (refugees/migrants):* The congregation should be trained and provided with some courses on refugees' background, history and culture, focusing on communality. In telling refugees' stories, the church should avoid presenting refugees as victims who need sympathy, but as survivors with rich experience, who are also in search of a new life.
- *Make them known (local congregation):* In return, refugees and migrants also need to know the local congregation. Perhaps churches can pair them with locals, so they can get to know each

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<sup>14</sup> This section needs further research mainly into Danish congregations focusing on questions such as what are their experiences of refugees and migrants in the church? What challenges did they face, and what richness did they experience?

other. Practising hospitality in different ways such as cooking and eating together has been popular among some churches.

- *Encourage the culture of volunteering:* Free churches are a good example of this. Many Lutheran church congregations expect their pastors to do everything. To suggest any activity the first issue they think of is the finance, because not many people are willing to do things voluntarily. Voluntary work in the church helps new converts (especially if paired with locals) to feel ownership and belonging. In this way pastors will have more time to do their jobs as a pastor.
- *Training pastors:* The Church needs to train pastors at seminary level for the work and provide Pacific training to pastors those undertake pacific tasks such as resolving conflicts among migrants. To make the work among migrants and refugees integrated into the church rather than side-lined, it is essential to involve bishops and other influential people in the church. One suggestion could be to designate a bishop to oversee the work of the church among marginalized and minority communities of migrants and refugees.

## **Recommendation # 2: Setting up a steering committee and appointing a coordinator**

*At a national level*

There are two urgent tasks: The first one is to set up a steering committee that together with Interchurch Council, take an active and participative role to lead and sustain the project. The members of the committee could be from ex-missionaries into the refugees and migrants' parts of the world. The committee, together with Interchurch, appoint a coordinator for the work. The committee may also need to establish their own networks of people to strengthen the growth of the ministry.

The second urgent task is to appoint a coordinator for the work among Muslim background converts who can speak Farsi. The pressing tasks are:

1. To create or use the existing website in both languages Danish and Farsi, to centralize and gather resources for both the converts (aiming for their faith growth) and for the church leaders, to give basic introductions to other faiths and cultures, as well as cultural training courses that can be used with congregations.
2. Making sure the liturgy and other important Church resources have been translated and published bilingually and distributed among migrant churches.
3. To develop a member care programme: focusing on the needs of women, men, children/family and youth, encouraging local churches to create their own member care groups.

### Recommendation # 3: Education and Formation

- *The church needs to establish a faith integration program.* The faith integration programme can use Colossians 2:6 & 7 as a faith integration model for converts from Muslim background. It speaks of three levels: rooted in Him; built up in Him, established in the faith. The faith integration programme includes, but is not limited to, the recommendations below:
- *A Member Care Programme:* developing a Member Care programme to help integrate new members into the life of local church as well as to nurture them into spiritual maturity. Member care programmes should be locally owned to allow churches to create their own ways of taking care of one another, such as pairing converts with members from the Danish congregation within the Member Care programme, the church needs to:
  - Create women's, men's, children/family and youth programmes, which can oversee, provide resources, conferences workshops for each group. There should be an Afghan focus group.
  - Develop teaching resources on Christian marriage, how to find your partner, and how to sustain your marriage. The first teaching should be from a Christian point of view of the converts' cultures and the second can include Danish marriage courses.
  - Encourage converts and local church congregations to participate in church activities and take responsibilities for new members.
- *Faith School:* to establish a basic Christian teaching school in Farsi, in all areas of Christian faith. Students don't need to be present at school all the time. They can gather, on Sundays, in their local churches and study. Every three months they can meet for a longer weekend to share their experience. It should be optional and formal with registration and commitment from participants. At the end a certificate should be given to those who successfully finished the courses. This can identify potential leaders and pastors for future migrant churches.
- The school can develop a mentorship programme that can be distributed to different churches and pastors to mentor potential converts for leadership.
- Day seminars: beside churches' weekly teaching and worship services, the church can run 4 to 6 day seminars a year, perhaps on Saturdays, focusing on both faith integration and cultural/social integration. This can encourage converts who have left the church to come back. The programmes can include, fellowship, worship, Bible teaching and teaching on social and life issues such as gender or family issues, church life and culture, or even topics such as how to open a small business in Denmark. The seminars can be included and run by the Faith School.

#### *Establishing Farsi Fellowship within churches*

- Establishing Farsi fellowships within local migrant churches in order that Farsi speaking group can worship together, pray together and listen to Farsi teaching and preaching.

- For churches with good numbers of Afghans should also form their own Afghan fellowship.
- Develop small groups in Farsi, such as prayer and Bible study groups and encourage converts to join them.
- Annual fellowship conferences for all Farsi speaking converts in the country:

## **Recommendation #4: Cultural and social integration**

The church should contribute into the education and formation of refugee and migrant converts: how to live as a Christian in Danish society and communities?

- *Danish language classes:* starting by using Christian and Biblical terms and teachings such as the Lord's prayer, the Apostles' Creed, traditional hymns and basic sermon discussions in Danish. This would help converts to be included during the service and minimize the need for translation.
- *Advocacy for migrants and refugees:*

*At a societal level:*

- *Making them known:* Refugees and migrants are amongst the poorest in the society. They are easy and quick for right wing media and political groups to exploit. It is important for them to be known in the societies and communities where they live. This can be done by making their stories, abilities and contributions known.
- *Life in Denmark as Christian:* Include teachings on Christian life: how to live and work as a Christian in Denmark; for example, teaching the importance of gender equality and what it means from a Christian point of view.
- *Labour market:* Some refugees asked how to start their own small business in Denmark. Perhaps the church can also provide some help in this area.

*At the Government level,*

- To make sure they get fair housing, and good health care (many refugees and asylum seekers complained about the "unfair" health service they received.)
- To protect them from racist attacks and harassment: many refugees have faced racism and insults. It is important to help them to know their rights and how to report and deal with those incidents.
- During the time of relocation for integration programmes, to work with the government and request that converts' church affiliations be considered. And to provide the government with a list of churches that Farsi speaking migrants can attend.

- In case of any human rights issues related to individuals or groups, the church should stand behind refugees/migrants and be active in advocacy.<sup>15</sup> That could also be linked to media advocacy.
- *Christian counselling and psychological treatment:* many refugees have been deeply traumatized. They have painful memories, such as rape, torture, bullying and so on. Those memories, if not healed, make integration and settling down in their new community difficult. The church should run small counselling and healing seminars and workshops, as well as provide them with some counselling services. This can be done through partnership with other organisations.

## **Recommendation #5: At a national level**

*Lessons should be learnt from the P&E of Church of England<sup>16</sup>*

As we noticed from clergy interviews, the church has failed to engage their wider congregations, and most converts, among both asylum seekers and accepted refugees, have left the church after baptism.<sup>17</sup> Many active churches now have almost none. Three factors might cause the project to disappear are:

1. Government migration policy and programme
2. Unenthusiastic congregations
3. Inactive and uncommitted (casual) converts

To maximize the impact of the work among converts and church congregations, the church should strategically plan and expand its engagement, presence and witness among minority and marginalized groups (Christian and non-Christian alike) and allow this project to grow under a bigger vision of the Church. For example, the conversion of Farsi speaking people in the Church of England is part of the Evangelism and Witness which is only one dimension of the Church of England's national programme "Presence and Engagement" that aims to support and equip churches and Christians in their work "remaining present in multi religious areas and engaging positively with communities of other faiths."<sup>18</sup>

However, before that the Interchurch Council can do three things:

1. Plan an integration model for the Church, refugees and migrants

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<sup>15</sup> Legal advocacy does not mean that pastors need to give legal advice to migrants and refugees. However, the church should through legal aid groups provide help in case if any migrants or refugees face any human rights violations such as racist attacks.

<sup>16</sup> This recommendation needs separate research, as well as visits to some of the Presence and Engagement centres and churches of the Church of England.

<sup>17</sup> See the footnotes on page 1. This is also based on the interviews from church leaders and pastors and my observations.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.presenceandengagement.org.uk/content/about-presence-and-engagement>

2. Encourage government integration policy makers to include the Church's integration programmes when considering integration of refugee converts. This could be achieved, for example, by providing the government with a list of churches that have been equipped for refugee converts.
3. Reach out and witness to migrant and marginalized communities, especially to those communities that converts are coming from, such as Iranians, Afghans and Kurds. Get to know migrant communities and engage with them in a social, spiritual and cultural level.

### **Recommendation #6: The church should support asylum seekers**

- Providing asylum seekers with basic human support. (It would be more practical to find more advice from pastors and those who have been working in asylum camps or have a close relationship with them.)
- Teaching and training them: Asylum seekers spend too much time doing nothing. This waiting around sometimes takes years. There are asylum seekers that have been around for even 13 or more years. Many of them have developed mental and physical health problems. The church can help them by providing some language and skills courses, orientation to Danish system and culture (even if they may not be given permission to stay). Doing that not only keep their morals and mental health in a better condition, but also add more values and experience in their lives.
- *Advocacy aid:*
  - The church should offer advice and educational training courses for the decision makers to better understand asylum seekers' cultural, religious and political contexts and situations, to make a just decision.
  - Helping asylum seekers to truthfully present their case. Sometimes it seems those who deserve an asylum, their case has been reject and those with lese life threatening situations in their home country have been granted asylum. It might be because some of the rejected asylum seekers (those with a real and true story) may have been rejected because they were not able, from an education or honour and shame (in relation to cases such as rape) point of views, explain or defend their cases. They may need extra help to truthfully present their case, in a clear way that they would not hide important element of their story.
  - many rejected asylum seekers, especially those who have been around for a very long time seems to have become stuck and are unable to make any decisions for their life, except to wait (in camps, in prison or in hiding). These people need help to make sense of their lives and choices once again. It is sad to see them being wasted.

