Session 07.02 - The emerging future: what is being born

Lab: Mission Paradigms
Date: 07/10/2026
Room: Apolonia
Facilitator: Jan Wessels
Approximate number of participants: 27
Session theme: "Emergent Theologies"
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1. Purpose of today's session

What should today's session achieve?

- Turn from what is passing (HopeLab 1) to what is being born — to discern the theology and the forms of church already emerging in Europe.
- Move the group beyond representation toward a genuinely polyphonic theology, in which migrants, minority-background believers and long-established European Christians are all recognised as theological contributors.
- Test that hopeful vision against its hardest case: faithful witness in a Europe that is genuinely multi-religious.

2. Starting point

What question, input or previous result did the group begin with?

- Hope Lab 1's honest naming of what is fading in European mission, and the grief that is real but unevenly timed.
- The overarching question of the series: what is faithful, hopeful evangelical witness in a Europe where Christianity is losing its cultural default and evangelicals are a minority within that minority — without becoming either a chaplaincy for cultural fear or a denial of real loss?
- Inputs: the book of Ruth as a framework for crisis-shaped theology, and the polyphonic-God ecclesiology presented by Israel Olofinjana and Usha Reifsnider.

3. Key insights

- Ruth reframes migration theology: migration, shared vulnerability and trauma can generate new theological insight, not only signal loss or crisis — Ruth and Naomi as the model.

- Europe holds “two wounded strangers”: long-established Europeans and newcomers alike, shaped by fear, displacement and contested belonging — a shared but uneven field of trauma.
- Polyphonic theology means shared authority: every language and culture can contribute to Christian understanding; minority voices are not confined to speaking only about migration or diversity.
- Language carries culture and theology: churches cannot claim the gospel is for all peoples while failing to make faith intelligible in people's own linguistic and cultural worlds.
- Converts need voice, not narration: believers from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds should be heard as interpreters of faith in their own right, not have their stories told for them.
- Decolonising theology is shared work: a European and diasporic task to be shaped together across cultures, not only a Global South concern.

4. Challenges identified

- Representation without trust — visible diversity on platforms and websites, while budgets, gatekeeping and decision-making stay unchanged.
- Belonging that stops at service — churches serve migrants practically but stop short of shared family and ecclesial belonging.
- Christian nationalism and post-Christendom anxiety pulling toward a triumphalist model of nationhood.
- A relational-theology gap — over-reliance on abstract doctrine rather than embodied community and the body of Christ.
- Language and cultural barriers that keep the gospel from being understood in people's own worlds.
- AI raising an unresolved question about what it means to be human.

5. Ideas and possible solutions

- Develop a genuinely polyphonic theology — shared theological authority across cultures and languages.
- Approach nationhood in a Christ-centred, self-giving way that resists triumphalism, rather than reviving a Christendom model.
- Recover relational, embodied theology that takes the body of Christ seriously.
- Learn from the early church as a model for multi-ethnic, multi-class community that holds difference within one body.

- Practise faithful witness in multi-religious neighbourhoods marked by confidence, honesty, listening and responsive service rather than anxious activism or competitive posturing.
- Move from narrating minority-background believers to platforming them as theological contributors.

6. Examples, projects and useful resources

- Organisation / project: Polyphonic God (Olofinjana, Wise & Reifsnider, eds.)
  - What can be learned: Intercultural theology, church and justice held together; the Triune God as one in essence yet many-voiced, making interculturality an ecclesiological imperative.
  - Contact or link: SCM Press, 2025 (ISBN 978-0-334-06658-3)
- Organisation / project: Unmuted: Speaking to be Heard (Usha Reifsnider)
  - What can be learned: Muted-group theory applied to the church — how to hear the voices that go unheard, and why language and culture carry theology.
  - Contact or link: Apollos, 2024
- Organisation / project: The Havenkerk, Schilderswijk (The Hague)
  - What can be learned: A congregation living faithful, confident witness among Muslim and Hindu neighbours — presence and service rather than anxious activism.
  - Contact or link: Via MissieNederland / EEA
- Organisation / project: The early church (Acts and the first centuries)
  - What can be learned: A working model of multi-ethnic, multi-class belonging that held deep difference within one body.
  - Contact or link: Scriptural / historical reference

7. Opportunities for European collaboration

- Shape decolonising theology together across European and diaspora cultures, rather than treating it as a Global South topic.
- Create shared platforms where minority-background believers contribute as theologians — through the EEA One People Network and Lausanne Europe.
- Connect the intercultural-church, mission and racial-justice movements that usually work separately.
- Peer learning across contexts (Western and Eastern Europe) on moving belonging beyond service.

8. Decisions and points of agreement

These are the shared convictions that emerged.

- This moment calls for fresh theological work, not a return to inherited Christendom assumptions.
- Interculturality is an ecclesiological imperative, not merely a pragmatic response to demographic change.
- Representation alone does not shift power; trust and shared authority do.
- Belonging must go beyond practical service to shared family in the body of Christ.

9. Open questions or different perspectives

- What does faithful witness look like where churches live alongside mosques and mandirs — without fortress-retreat, and without losing anything to confess?
- How far does "polyphony" scale from the local congregation to pan-European networks and alliances?
- How do we hold the uneven, unevenly-timed field of trauma between long-established Europeans and newcomers?
- What theological response does AI require as it reshapes what it means to be human?

11. Three key takeaways

- The future is polyphonic — a church of many voices and shared theological authority, one in Christ.
- Europe is a land of two wounded strangers — mission begins with shared vulnerability, not strength.
- Representation is not enough — real change means trust, belonging and power shared.

12. Message to the wider HOPE community

As a HOPE Lab, we believe that *the renewal of mission in Europe will be polyphonic: that the voices of migrants and minority-background believers are not a diversity problem to manage but theological gifts to receive, and that a church which learns to listen across cultures, languages and faiths will find hope being born in the very place it feared only loss.*

13. Handover to the next session

What should the next session build on?

- Hope Lab 3 (the crossing) builds on this emerging vision by testing which initiatives genuinely carry it forward and which merely re-dress the old system — using the four tests (power, utility, liminality, allegiance).
- It should move the group from shared conviction to concrete personal commitments — the first steps each participant can take within their own reach.