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Strengthening Religious Ties: The Neo-Protestant Church and the Integration of Romanian Migrants in the United States

Ionut-Daniel Moldovan¹  and Sergiu Gherghina² 

¹Babes Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania and ²University of Glasgow, Scotland

Corresponding author: Ionut-Daniel Moldovan; Email: ionut.moldovan@ubbcluj.ro

Abstract

Previous studies show how religious affiliation and activity often facilitate the integration of migrants and their descendants, strengthens their sense of belonging, and increases their acceptance in the host society. However, the characteristics of immigrants who benefit from the church's help in the integration process remain largely unknown. This article addresses this gap in the literature and analyzes the ways in which the Neo-Protestant Church supports Romanian migrants in their integration in the US. We use primary data from an online survey conducted in September–November 2021 and semi-structured interviews conducted in 2022 with Romanian immigrants in the US. The results indicate that the church provides extensive help to people who are involved in religious organizations or associations, and to those who frequently attend religious services.

Keywords: church; religion; integration; social networks; family

Introduction

Religion is a key element of migrants' personal identity because it ensures continuity in beliefs and maintains a connection with traditions and practices that were established prior to migration (A. K. M. A. Ullah and Ahmad Kumpoh 2019; A. A. Ullah and Haque 2020). Existing research reports the importance of the church, faith, and religious communities for immigrants who face stress, insecurities, and challenges due to the integration process (Adogame 2010; Frederiks and Nagy 2016). The church can be a source of comfort and protection for migrants, especially during the initial, often traumatic, phase of arrival and resettlement within the host society (Portes and Rumbaut 2006, 301). Religious beliefs and experiences can enhance personal strength and thus promote psycho-social well-being, mental and physical health, and contribute to psychological well-being by generating positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, forgiveness, hope, and optimism (van der Merwe, van Eeden, and van Deventer 2010, 8). One study observed that the “loss of support from fellow church members can deprive a person of potentially important resources for improving health” (Krause 2004, 289–90).

The church provides people with a sense of dignity, and a place in a community of friends that often works as a surrogate for an extended family fractured by mobility and change (Sommers 2001, 362). In particular, the Pentecostals in urban communities help people to build a network for survival (Sommers 2001, 363); indeed, Portes and Rumbaut (2006, 300) explain that “religion has

never ceased to be a crucial presence in the process of emigration and especially incorporation, with many migrant churches being actively involved in establishing and/or promoting social networks among migrant groups". These networks are organizational arrangements based on social ties that allow marginalized individuals or groups to circumvent institutional constraints and exclusionary structures in society (Noyoo 2007, 9). Networks are often used to mobilize a range of specific economic resources, including credit, cheap labor, training, business contacts, and information, further enhancing the competitiveness of the local networks created (Noyoo 2007, 9). The church can thereby act as a supportive community providing financial assistance, knowledge, and encouragement to overcome difficulties (Amisi 2005, 11).

While these studies analyze the importance of the church in the integration of immigrants in the host countries, we know little about which migrants receive its help in integration. This is important because it can provide a concrete understanding of the church's involvement in people's lives after their relocation to another country, and can inform us about how religious networks complement the family or social networks in meeting migrants' needs. We also seek a clearer picture regarding the boundaries of the church's roles, i.e., whether it is conveyed to the home country's territory, or is transnational in accompanying migrants in their venture abroad.

This article aims to address these gaps in the literature and analyzes the characteristics of the Romanian migrants who receive help from the Neo-Protestant Church in their integration process in the United States. We selected Romanian migrants in the US due to the long-term relations between the two countries, which date back more than a century, the high religiosity of the Romanians, and the religious identity that characterizes segments of US society, which sometimes play important roles in the integration process (Alba and Foner 2015; Sarli and Mezzetti 2020). Among the first waves of migrants, at the beginning of the 1900s, the flows of Romanians chose distant destinations, emigrating predominantly to the United States and Canada, mainly for economic reasons (Tompea and Năstută 2011).

We use primary data from an online survey conducted in September–November 2021 with 280 Romanian migrants in the US and from 18 semi-structured interviews conducted in March–May 2022 with another group of Romanian migrants in the US. Our mixed-method approach combines statistical analysis (ordinal logistic regression) of the survey data with thematic analysis of the interview responses. The study contributes to the literature in three ways: it maps the avenues of support offered by the Neo-Protestant Church and the religious community in the migrants' integration process; it provides a perspective on the functioning and organization of transnational religious networks; and it identifies the individual-level characteristics that can explain the support offered by the church in the integration process.

The next section reviews the literature about religion and the church in the migrants' integration process and identifies several potential characteristics that can influence the support provided by the church in integration. The third section provides details about the present study's case selection, data collection, and methods of data analysis. Next, we present and interpret the results from both the survey and interviews. The conclusions summarize the key findings and discuss their implications for the study of the relationship between the church and migration.

The Church and the Integration of Migrants

The church has a direct presence in the lives of migrants and helps them to integrate in host societies in three ways: firstly, it provides a cultural identity that is consonant with the new national identity; secondly, it encourages socio-economic participation; and thirdly, it reinforces "values that promote social order" (McAndrew and Voas 2014, 100). If migrants define themselves in religious terms, then their ethnic, national, and racial differences become less obvious, and diverse communities are united with the native community through common worship (Peek 2005; Garcia-Muñoz and Neuman 2012). Religious ties can lead to integration in the host society by creating a ripple effect that allows people to discover community resources and share associated opportunities,

sometimes directly helping other members to connect to those resources too (Son 2018). The activities available within the church motivate individuals to expand their interpersonal networks, expose them to a wider range of information sources, and help them work together with organizational staff and professionals (Son, 2018). One of the functions of the church may be to facilitate access to the local information network for members; examples include the legal or health related workshops run by community organizations. Another function of the church's activities is to direct people to local resources by developing organizational and communication skills that members can apply in the community in contexts outside the church (Son 2018).

Religion, religious participation, and religious organizations can also be a buffer for immigrants, helping them to absorb the shocks that occur in their daily lives through the help provided within the community, supplying psychological comfort and alleviating loneliness (Connor 2010; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2002). The opportunities offered by the church, prayers, and religious rituals provide believers with a familiar cyclical rhythm and represent continuity between life in the country of origin and life in the host country (Tiilikainen 2003), while also helping them to establish ties with the native population and to adapt to the host country (Garcia-Muñoz and Neuman 2012). Church networks provide opportunities for migrants to develop social ties with other migrants from their own ethnic background. Migrants might develop ties by interacting with outward-oriented church-based groups, and/or by being introduced to external networks through the friends they make at church (Village, Powell, and Pepper 2017). The number of friends at church is a positive predictor of the social integration of migrants in their residential area (Son 2018). This happens through the gradual expansion of individuals into a network rooted in the local host community, with the church serving as the center of this network expansion. The identification of inclusive communities is a challenge for recent migrants, and the church helps them to take their first steps in understanding the social structures, communication resources, and institutions in the host society (Son 2018).

Faith-based organizational life contributes to boosting the commitment of members of communities. Members take on key roles, work together to address problems, invest resources in improving the church community, and develop their communication and organizational skills (Son 2018, 4774). Religion provides many migrants with "one of their first training grounds in participatory democracy" (Eck 2001, 336), through involvement in the governing structures of churches or religious organizations such as the boards of directors, elections, lists of members, and assuming various responsibilities in church associations (Foner and Alba 2008). Religious organizations provide psychological support against discrimination by serving as a refuge and by facilitating access to opportunities for economic mobility and social recognition (Hirschman 2004). Through its associations and affiliated experts, the church can also facilitate access to judicial protection and counselling in those market sectors where exploitation is (Davis, Greenstein, and Marks 2007; Wills et al. 2009). Moreover, within religious communities, migrants may be able to find homes to rent, or solidarity in securing temporary accommodation. Churches can thus serve as centers of an informal real estate market (Guest 2003; Mooney 2009; Molli 2020). Religious communities become hubs for the exchange of functional information on how to use local bureaucracies (Ley 2008), as well as information to improve legal status.

Who Receives Help from the Church

We identify five characteristics of migrants in the literature which make them more likely to receive help from the church in the integration process: arrival in the host country, involvement in religious organizations, financial situation, degree of religiosity, and church attendance. These characteristics can be clustered into three main categories: the arrival in the host country and involvement in organizations are related to integration experiences, the financial situation refers to economic hardships prior to emigration, while the degree of religiosity and church attendance are about religious behavior.

First, those migrants who have only recently arrived in the host society may need help from the church or religious organizations because of the stress associated with migration, a lack of familiarity with the culture of the host country, limited language skills, and the importance of quickly understanding how local communities function (Ley 2008). Longer stays increase the likelihood of migrants using networks other than those provided by the church to integrate in the host society (Bauer 1995; Espinosa and Massey 1997).

The second characteristic is involvement in religious organizations, which are independent from the Church. These can provide moral, psychological, and financial support required by migrants in the integration process (Hirschman 2004). This is secured either by the members of these organizations themselves, or by the specialists / experts hired by the organizations to help migrants (Son 2018). For example, a religious organization aware of migrants' problems with access to the job market can hire specialists to assist migrants with job applications, contract negotiations, how to deal with discrimination, etc. Migrants' direct involvement in the activities of religious organizations makes their problems known to the organizations, meaning they can receive help from the latter. At the same time, involvement in religious organizations has a strong socialization role by exposing migrants to the values of the host society. The religious organizations include locals and/or migrants with longer periods of stay in the host society, allowing new migrants to overcome cultural barriers. For example, religious involvement in American community life is important in several instances, and religious organizations provide support and social services to their members, while cultivating organizational skills, moral values, and altruism (Norris and Inglehart 2004a).

Third, migrants' financial situations are often a concrete barrier in the integration process because limited financial resources can lead to other socio-economic barriers (Parra-Cardona et al. 2021). Migrants with financial burdens are more oriented towards survival and short-term considerations rather than general integration and long-term activities (Anderson, Poeschel, and Ruhs 2021). The church has often helped those from deprived communities through missionary activities, social activities, and via different foundations and religious organizations (Norris and Inglehart 2004b).

The next characteristic refers to migrants' degree of religiosity. The experience of migration has an impact on faith, which leads to different types of participation models (Molli 2020). Those who actively experience religious participation tend to promote activities outside the church, involving other actors and sharing needs, problems, and solutions (Foley and Hoge 2007). For example, church-led civic participation, which is different from the engagement in independent religious associations that was discussed above, can lead to integration into wider society when the church-related activities motivate individuals to expand their interpersonal networks, expose them to a wider range of information sources, and help them work together with organizational staff and professionals (Son 2018, 4766). Religiosity can be important for integration because religious values are often essential in business development. Gbadamosi (2015) shows that some Pentecostal churches in the UK have a business directorate designed to encourage members to make choices when making purchasing decisions, and offer various business training programs such as sales services for entrepreneurial members. Christian values and a Christian lifestyle can help people to build trusting relationships with their customers and other stakeholders relevant to their businesses (Villares-Varela and Sheringham 2019, 11).

The church offers a supportive community that provides financial assistance and knowledge as well as encouragement in overcoming local difficulties (Amisi 2005). A religious person is closer to the church and to its activities, and invariably the church is closer to the religious person, thus with the help of the relationships created through the church, generating integration in wider social networks that extend beyond specific congregations (Ellison and George 1994). The church becomes a place of socialization through coexistence under the same roof and parish protection (Molli 2020).

Finally, we argue that migrants' regular church attendance will increase the help they receive from the church. This argument develops around the idea of group solidarity, especially for

individuals who are part of the church. The church, the religious groups formed around it, and religious organizations all stimulate their members to support each other both through help related to basic needs (food, financial aid) and emotional support in times of difficulty (Hook et al. 2014; Zhang et al. 2018). Individuals who regularly attend religious services are supported by the church more than the others. The help provided by the church to people who participate in religious activities can contribute to their integration in community (Son 2018). This support is influenced to some extent by several socio-economic characteristics such as gender, income, or family problems (Bradley et al. 2020).

Following these arguments, we expect that the church offers support for integration in the host society to those migrants who have arrived recently in the host country (H1), are involved in religious organizations (H2), have financial problems (H3), consider the church to be an important institution (H4), and frequently attend church services (H5). In addition to these potential explanations, we control for three socio-demographic characteristics that could influence the help offered by the church in the integration process: education, age, and gender. Education can influence the help offered by the church in two ways: highly educated migrants may be more aware of the opportunities offered by the church and use them more, but on the other hand, those without education may be helped more by the church to compensate for their low education or limited skills and abilities (Han 2009). Previous research indicates that age may make a difference regarding the help offered by the church, with older people receiving more support (Krause 2002). Women are sometimes helped more by the church in the process of migration and integration into the host society (Mutambara, Crankshaw, and Freedman 2022).

Research design

This analysis focuses on the case of Romanian migrants in the US to test these theoretical expectations. Case studies can be used either to build or to test theory (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). In our study, we use the Romanian case to test the theoretical expectations outlined earlier in this article. Among the several types of case selection outlined in the literature (Seawright and Gerring 2008), we argue that the Romanian case is typical for the migration between two countries with historical ties in which the church has played a role. This case selection was informed by several considerations. Many of the first documented migrants from Romania reached the US more than a century ago, and emigrated mainly for economic reasons (Tompea and Năstută 2011). In general, Romanian emigrants have high degrees of religiosity that are reflected in the desire to attend church services abroad (Gherghina and Plopeanu 2021). The absence of Romanian Orthodox priests in moments of sadness (e.g., funerals) or joy (e.g., christenings or weddings) was strongly felt by the early migrants to the US (G.-V. Gârdan and Eppel 2012). They therefore began building parishes and asked the church authorities in Romania to send priests for these parishes (G. V. Gârdan 2007; G.-V. Gârdan and Eppel 2012). Thanks to the religious ties created since the beginning of the waves of migration, Pentecostalism was brought to Romania with the help of a Romanian magazine established in the US (Popescu 1996, 231). The Southern Baptist Convention of the US was given the responsibility to deal with Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, and some areas in Russia (Payne 1954; Lord 1955, 39).

We use individual-level data from a survey and semi-structured interviews conducted with Romanian migrants to the US. The survey was conducted online with 280 Romanian immigrants in the US in September–November 2021 and aimed to identify statistical relationships between the independent, control and dependent variables. The respondents came from most US states, and some were irregular migrants. We used maximum variation sampling to increase variation among the respondents in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, profession, and area of residence in the US. The absence of official statistics regarding the profile of Romanian emigrants from the US made it impossible to build a representative sample. However, the sample characteristics represent a good estimation of the information we have about Romanian migrants in general. For example, the

average age of respondents in our survey is 36-45 years old, which matches the average age of Romanians abroad who secure residence, which is 38 years old (G4Media.ro 2021).

As such, we rely on a sample of convenience that, although not generalizable to the broad population of Romanian migrants in the US, provides informative results that can help in understanding the relationship between the church and migrants' integration. We distributed the survey to respondents with the help of the authors' own social and academic networks and via discussion forums for Romanians in the US. In the data collection process, we considered ethical issues, informing the participants about the objectives of the study. We set the minimum age of participation at 18 years and recorded all participants' consent. We did not preselect the respondents. Our analysis included only direct migrants, thus excluding the children of Romanian emigrants born in the US.

The 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted in March-May 2022 and aimed to provide in-depth explanations for the statistical relationships identified with the help of the survey. These were meant to complement the survey analysis and allowed the interviewees to elaborate on their behavior, provide contextual information, clarify their views and explain their attitudes and behaviors in their own words (Harris and Brown 2019). All the respondents come from mixed religious communities that include immigrants with various ethnic backgrounds and US citizens without a migration background. To recruit respondents for the interviews, we used a snowball sampling method with the help of some of the survey respondents who answered the questionnaire, asking them to provide the contacts of Romanian emigrants who would be willing to participate in an in-depth discussion. These respondents varied in terms of several socio-demographic characteristics as illustrated in [Appendix 1](#). Although we initially had a longer list of approximately 30 respondents, we stopped when we reached saturation point (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2020). With the help of the interviews, which we conducted in Romanian, we tried to identify the relationship between the church and the integration of individuals in US society (see the interview guide in [Appendix 3](#)).

We used two data analysis methods. For survey data, we used bivariate statistical analysis in the form of non-parametric correlations and ordinal logistic regression with two models: one with controls and one without controls. Before conducting the regression analysis, we ran correlations between the independent variables, because in theory some of them could have been related. For example, we expected a positive relationship between the importance of the church and frequent church attendance. The highest correlation between two independent variables was 0.51, statistically significant at the 0.01 level, which could be observed between these two variables. This value does not raise concerns of multicollinearity. We used deductive thematic analysis to analyze the answers to the interviews. The themes for the interview answers corresponded with the variables used in the survey.

Variable Measurement (Survey)

The dependent variable in this study was the help received from the church in the integration process, measured by the question "To what extent were you helped in the integration process in the US by the church?". Possible responses for the dependent variable were recorded on a six-point ordinal scale ranging from "not at all" (coded 1) to "very much" (coded 6). The length of stay in the US (H1) was measured with the help of the following question: "For how long have you lived in the US". This was coded on an ordinal scale with the following values: "less than 2 years" (coded 1), "between 2 and 5 years" (coded 2), "between 5 and 8 years" (coded 3), "Between 8 and 10 years" (coded 4), and "over 10 years" (coded 5). The degree of involvement in religious organizations (H2) was measured using the following question: "Are you involved in an organization or association of Romanians in the United States?" and the possible answers were dichotomous: "no" (0) or "yes" (1). The question regarding the migrant's financial situation (H3) before

emigration was as follows: “How would you evaluate your financial situation before leaving Romania?”. The available responses range from “poor” (coded 1) to “very good” (coded 4).

The importance of church (H4) for migrants was measured with the following question: “How important is the church to you at the moment?”. Possible responses were measured on a six-point ordinal scale, with responses ranging from “not at all” (coded 1) to “very much” (coded 6). Frequent participation in religious services (H5) was measured with the following question: “How often do you go to church / house of prayer?”. Possible responses ranged from “never” (1) to “daily” (8). The control variables were operationalized in a similar way to many international surveys: age is treated as an ordinal variable that clusters respondents in six age categories with extreme values of 18–25 years and over 65 years old, and gender is measured dichotomously as “female” (1) and “male” (2), while education is measured on an ordinal seven-point scale that ranges between primary school and postgraduate studies.

The Church and the Integration of Romanians in the US

Religious affiliation facilitates the Americanization of migrants, strengthens their sense of belonging to the host country, and increases the level of acceptance of minorities by the dominant group (Foner and Alba 2008). In the US, religion is a major facilitator of integration and a path to overcoming social exclusion (Foner and Alba 2008). Church civic participation can lead to integration into the host society when the types of activities available at the church motivate individuals to expand their interpersonal networks, expose them to a wider range of news sources, and help them to feel comfortable working with organizational staff and professionals in different fields of interest (Son 2018).

In addition to the construction of a nation of which religious pluralism is a characteristic, the US has labeled itself as a country of immigration, based on a founding myth that supports its national identity (Sarli and Mezzetti 2020). This promotes the integration of migrants by strengthening ties, including emotional ones, with the host society (Sarli and Mezzetti 2020). Religious identity is often perceived as an indicator of belonging to the American nation, and thus plays a key role in the integration of many migrants into American society (Alba and Foner 2015; Sarli and Mezzetti 2020).

Christianity as the dominant religion, and the fact that most migrants identify as Christians, favors integration through perceived religious similarities between natives and migrants (Sarli and Mezzetti 2020). Faith-based organizations occupy, in some contexts at least, the front line in the processes of settlement and integration of new immigrants (Ebaugh and Chafetz 1999, 587). Churches facilitate contacts with other groups, encouraging individuals to engage in volunteer activities in the community, and/or increasing their political activism (Smidt 2003). For immigrants, engagement with religious institutions can be a way to connect to new cultures and traditions, a source of direct resources and guidance, and a facilitator of access to other resources by diversifying and strengthening external social networks (Ley 2008; Village, Powell, and Pepper 2017). The role of religious organizations, especially Protestant churches, is important to American civil society: “Communities of faith where people worship together are arguably America’s most important repository of social capital” (Putnam 2000, 66). In some American communities, religious involvement is seen as essential, and religious organizations directly involved in civic life provide support and social services to their members, cultivating organizational skills, moral values, and altruism (Norris and Inglehart 2004a; 2004b).

Membership and frequent participation in church activities

This subsection presents an integrated discussion of the survey results and interviews. The latter are used to nuance and complement the results identified in the statistical analysis. According to our survey data, one out of four respondents declared that they had received help from the Pentecostal

Church regarding their integration in the US. The degree of help varies between a little and a lot. The interviews substantiated this observation, and several respondents explicitly indicated the involvement of the Pentecostal Church in the integration process. For example, one interviewee explained that “The Romanian Pentecostal community is very involved in the integration of newcomers. They are assisted, advised and financially assisted by other Pentecostals within the church or by the community leaders” (Respondent 7). Another provided additional details about the moment of the help and what it consisted of: “The church, in the sense of a community of believers, played an essential role in assisting the new migrants especially upon arrival. All this made us understand the local community. The church helped with advice, encouragement and finances” (Respondent 3).

The correlations between the support offered by the Pentecostal Church in the integration process and each of the independent variables and controls are presented in Table 1. The coefficient values indicate empirical support for some of the five hypothesized relationships. The results show that membership in a religious association (H2), the importance of the church for migrants (H4), and church attendance (H5) are all highly correlated with the help received from the church in the process of integration. All three coefficients are statistically significant. These relations go in the hypothesized direction. There is very weak empirical support for the expectation that migrants who were in a poor financial situation prior to their migration to the US (H3) received more help from the church. In addition to the low value of the coefficient (-0.10), this is not statistically significant. As such, it appears that the help provided by the church for migrants’ integration does not vary according to the financial status of the individuals.

The evidence for the length of stay (H1) goes against our expectations and indicates that migrants who had lived longer in the US received slightly more help in the integration process than those who had arrived recently. One possible explanation for this is that migrants with a longer period of stay had been exposed to more situations in which the church could have helped. Also, their interactions with the church were more numerous compared to recently arrived migrants. Among the control variables, people with lower levels of education had been helped on average more than highly educated migrants, and male respondents had been helped somewhat more than female respondents. Both coefficients are statistically significant. There is a weak positive correlation between age and help, but without statistical significance.

The observations from the bivariate correlations are confirmed by the regression analysis (Figure 1). The effects in the two models – main effects (model 1) and with controls (model 2) – are very similar and we interpret only those for model 2. The odds-ratios indicate empirical support for the same three of the five hypotheses: member of a religious association (H2), the importance of

Table 1. Correlations with the help provided by the church in the integration process

	Correlation coefficient
Length of stay in the US	0.15*
Member of a religious association	0.35**
Financial status	-0.10
The importance of the church	0.47**
Church attendance	0.53**
Education	-0.18**
Age	0.09
Gender	0.11*
N	280

Notes: Coefficients presented are non-parametric (Spearman). **p<0.01; *p<0.05.

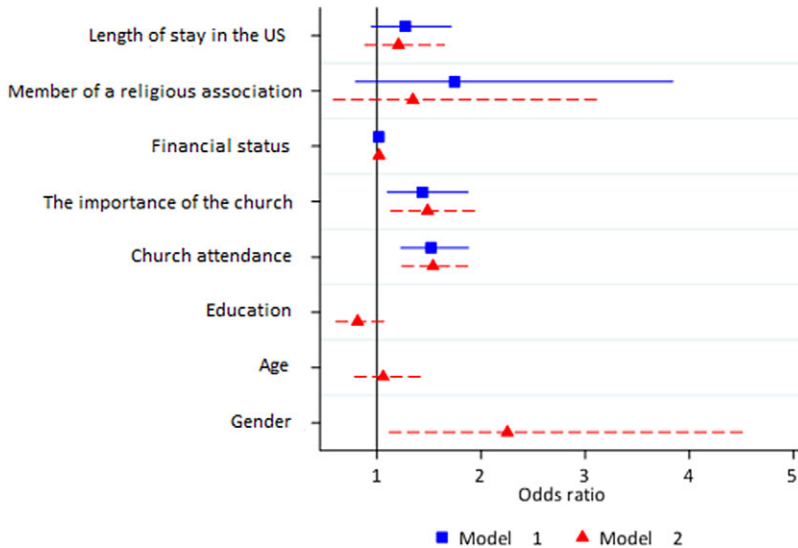


Figure 1. Effects of Church Help on Integration

the church (H4) and church attendance (H5). The effect size is large for all three variables, but it is statistically significant only for the latter two. The length of stay (H1) has a positive effect on the help provided by the church, similar to what was indicated by the correlations. The effect of the migrants' financial status (H3) is very weak, but statistically significant. It goes against the hypothesized relationship, as those who were better off seem to have been helped slightly more than the poor. However, the effect size is too small to allow for a meaningful discussion.

The answers to the interview questions confirm the effects for H2, H4 and H5. Starting with those who are involved in religious associations or organizations, many of the interviewees explained that they had benefited from the moral, psychological and financial support provided by the church. Their involvement in church organizations helped them in getting acquainted with new values and meeting more people from the host society, thus speeding up their integration. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that a longer period of stay in the host country (H1) is positively related to help provided for integration. The respondents' answers confirm what previous research has reported: that the church and faith-based organizations generate opportunities for engagement, thus providing avenues for the development of social networks. Involvement in organizations, and implicitly in networks, are the main social means through which referrals, jobs, loans, and business opportunities are exchanged (Esses et al. 2010).

For example, one interviewee explicitly argued that the church contributed to their integration through the activities and meetings it organized (Respondent 9). Another respondent explained that the church provided help in the form of finding a job and grasping the basic elements in the host society:

I was helped to find a job at the very beginning. In order to integrate, one must be part of the American community more than the Romanian one. The church played an important role because if it wasn't for the help of the church when I faced problems immediately after arrival, I probably wouldn't be where I am now. My cousin helped me find a job through someone in the church. The help was through the members, the religious community, not through the institution of the church (Respondent 1).

Another respondent clarified that the help consisted of moral support and encouragement, which had been possible because they were members of the congregation and engaged in the activities of

an association. The interviewee explicitly argued that “The church insisted on staying and integrating because they usually look for Romanians who settle in the US, they like the Romanian communities and encourage their development” (Respondent 3). In another case, involvement in religious organizations was the initial phase of integration:

A few months after my arrival in the US, since I did not have many Romanian friends, I started going to church where I met other people and learned about the church’s social projects. The neo-Protestants have many projects that follow family life, support women and children. I volunteered for social projects and this involvement connected and entwined me with extraordinary people from all backgrounds (Respondent 4).

The importance of the church (H4) has been highlighted by several respondents as crucial to their integration. One illustrative answer, which exemplifies several others, indicates that socialization and networking were the main mechanisms through which the church provided help: “The church had a very important role during my integration in the US. I am a faithful person and affiliated with a church, I like and want the relationship with other believers. I think that matters a lot, especially at times when you change the country, the city” (Respondent 5). In some instances, the religious community provided the migrants with new opportunities, which contributed to their faster integration:

The church is an integral part of my life. It was the first thing I did after my arrival: I looked for a religious community to which I could belong. At the church, I started participating in youth groups, where I had theological discussions, but with the same group of young people we also organized various outings, trips. I also met my husband there (Respondent 14).

Frequent church attendance (H5) helped to facilitate the integration process through the relationships it fostered between the Romanian migrants and the locals they met at religious services (Respondent 4, Respondent 10). Active participation and church attendance play an important role in the settlement of migrants in the destination country, more so than the community of Romanians, by building the community around the church. For example, Respondent 15 explained that frequent attendance at religious services fostered connections and friendships with locals, which she wanted to build after leaving her long-term friends behind in Romania. In other instances, the connections created through religious service brought tangible advantages in the integration process:

I knew many Romanians outside the church, and we met with them too, even if they did not come to church, but those who were at church had a much closer connection there. All those who go there go without families, few are with families, and then their whole life is around the church, that’s where you socialize, that’s where you relate, you do not go only for church programs. It matters a lot, plus you find people there who help you... with somewhere to rent, an apartment, moral support, all kinds of things (Respondent 3).

One nuance that the interviews brought to the statistical analysis was the explicit reference to education. The effects in Figure 2 are small and lack statistical significance for this variable, but the experiences of the interviewees did seem to confirm that in some instances, people with lower levels of education benefited from the help provided by the church. Several respondents indicated that the church had provided them or the members of their family with educational opportunities. For example, an illustrative answer about the link between the church, education and integration was as follows: “The church took care of the integration of my parents, they arrived there without knowing the language, they needed a job, so they were offered a course to learn English and two stable jobs near their home” (Respondent 14).

Conclusions

This article has aimed to identify the individual-level variables that increase the likelihood that migrants receive support from the church in their integration in a host society. The previous section presented the empirical results from an online survey and interviews with Romanian migrants to the US who engaged with the Neo-Protestant (Pentecostal) Church. These allow the formulation of several conclusions regarding the help offered by the church in the integration process. First, this help was more visible among migrants with positive attitudes and behaviors towards the church. More specifically, migrants who are involved in religious organizations upon their arrival to the host society, who see the church as important in their life, and who attend religious services frequently are more likely to receive assistance. The church takes care of those closest to it, while also strengthening the idea of community, taking care of parishioners who are active and involved in the organizations established within or around the church. The support provided by the church to migrants who actively participate in its activities expands their social networks, introduces them to a potentially new system of values, and can even lower the barriers that separate migrants from the host society. The more active migrants tend to be more informed about support opportunities and about the events organized by the church and its related organizations, making it easier for them to develop relationships with the wider community. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that migrants with a longer stay in the host country declared that they were helped more by the church in the integration process than those who had only had a short stay. Those migrants who had arrived in the US a long time ago could identify several ways in which the church has helped them and have already developed connections that have been useful for integration through the religious community. The results show us that the male respondents are on average more helped by the Church in the integration process than the female respondents. This result may be influenced by gender roles that are very closely related to religiosity, men are assumed to be more involved than women in the church and implicitly in religious organizations or associations, highlighting the direct relationship between religious values and gender roles – for example, patriarchal attitudes are strongly associated with the Christian tradition (Urbańska 2018). Another possible explanation can be related to the changes generated by gender attitudes in the labor market where men find it more difficult to find a job in contrast to women who do better and have a better chance of finding a job in various fields (Urbańska 2018). Women are more socially active, being more likely than men to get involved in the activities of religious organizations to solve local problems (Hardy-Fanta 1993), which helps them obtain US citizenship much more often than men (Jones-Correa 1998; Urbańska 2018).

Second, the church offers help in the integration process regardless of the individual migrant's financial situation or age. Migrants have different purposes when reaching the host society. One is the search for a better-paid job and income that can help the family left behind in the home country. The church does not favor this type of migrants over others that were better-off when migrating. Our interviews revealed that the help varies, and is tailored according to need: the church helps migrants in poor financial situations to identify suitable jobs, provides guidance for the recognition of studies, or helps migrants to achieve higher levels of professional qualifications. Meanwhile, for migrants with good financial status, the church can facilitate introductions to entrepreneurs, or offer help in the development of certain businesses within the communities.

The implications of these results reach beyond the single-case study covered in this article. We contribute to the study of migrant integration by identifying the circumstances under which the church can play a relevant role. The results indicate that the church can play an active role in the integration of migrants in the host society, and that the church often helps migrants with which it has frequent contact. The help offered by the church focuses on supporting and meeting migrants' concrete needs. The active involvement of the church, religious organizations, and the religious community in the integration process demonstrates that they can represent important structures with a role in managing migrant flows, complementing the role of the authorities and reducing

pressure both on emigrants and on the authorities of the country of destination. Such findings could also be useful to local or national decision-makers by helping them to understand the importance of church and religious communities, and identify potential avenues for cooperation and the complementarity of migrant integration efforts.

Further research can build on these results and expand the scope of analysis. For example, one possibility would be to look more closely at the links between religious affiliation, civic engagement, and political participation. Previous research suggests that membership of organizations may extend to other forms of activism over time (Levitt 2009; 2010), which may result in further integration for migrants. Another possibility would be to explore the contextual explanations that could shed light on the relationship between the church and migrant integration. Researchers could, for example, study the importance of leaders – both community and religious – in the entire process. Another direction could be a comparative study between two or more religious denominations and migrant communities to understand whether the conclusions reached in this article relating to the Neo-Protestant Church also apply across different political and social contexts.

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