

Migrant Churches as Integration Vectors in Danish Society

JULIE K. ALLEN

ABSTRACT: In highly secular, largely ethnically homogeneous modern Denmark, migrant churches—defined as independent Christian religious congregations with services conducted in a language other than Danish—facilitate social engagement, networking, and cultural fusion for newcomers to Denmark through the affirmation of multiculturalism and religious diversity, thereby challenging the equation of integration with sameness that is common in Scandinavia. Based on oral histories collected between 2015 and 2017 from a dozen African Christian women in Copenhagen and Aarhus who are active members of three different migrant churches, this article analyzes first-hand immigrant experiences with migrant churches as vectors of integration and identity formation for newcomers to Denmark.

RÉSUMÉ : Dans un Danemark moderne, fortement laïque et largement homogène ethniquement parlant, les Églises migrantes – définies comme des congrégations religieuses chrétiennes indépendantes avec des offices conduits dans une langue autre que le danois – facilitent l’engagement social, le réseautage et la fusion culturelle pour les nouveaux arrivants au Danemark par l’affirmation du multiculturalisme et de la diversité religieuse, remettant ainsi en question l’équation de l’intégration avec la similitude qui est commune en Scandinavie. Basé sur des histoires orales recueillies entre 2015 et 2017 auprès d’une douzaine d’africaines chrétiennes à Copenhague et Aarhus, qui sont des membres actives de trois églises migrantes différentes, cet article analyse les expériences de première main d’immigrées avec les Églises migrantes comme vecteurs d’intégration et de formation identitaire des nouveaux arrivants au Danemark.

Brigham Young University

When I first came to Denmark, the weather was hard. It was cold. I didn't like the food because it felt like it didn't have taste. I missed my family, and I felt alone. I was alone here, and I was pregnant. It was tough, but my faith has helped me through. I didn't know anybody, but I met someone who showed me there is a church I could go to, and since then I have been attending that church. It has been my family, not just my spiritual, but also my physical family. Especially since I don't have any family here, it's very important to make your own.
(Oni from Rwanda, interviewed in Copenhagen, December 2015)

Introduction

Despite popular perceptions that Denmark has traditionally been ethnically and culturally homogeneous, Danish society has in fact been multicultural for centuries, with German speakers, Jews, French Huguenots, Greenlanders, and the mixed-race children of Danish officials and Ghanaian women, to name just a few groups, leavening the Danish Lutheran mainstream. Today, the multicultural elements of the Danish population, bolstered by immigrants and refugees from dozens of countries, are more numerous and visible than in previous eras, which has posed integration challenges for a society that valorizes homogeneity. As Marianne Gullestad has shown, equality is often regarded as synonymous with sameness in Scandinavia (68), with the result that official integration efforts often serve, according to Karen Fog Olwig, to designate “who belongs—and by implication who does not belong” (2).

While integration policy initiatives generally focus on providing public services designed to prepare new residents to attain such pre-defined practical achievement parameters as education, housing, and employment, integration has also, as Olwig notes, “become an emic term denoting the ability to conform to social norms and cultured values defined in dominant discourse as basic to proper citizenship” (2). Such subjective, often unspoken achievement parameters can not only be difficult for immigrants to navigate but may also undervalue their own cultural heritage and norms, from foodways to faith.

Given the highly secular character of Danish society, immigrant religiosity is sometimes perceived as inhibiting conformity to Danish cultural norms, particularly since religious practice is often far more central to immigrants' lives than it is to native Danes'. As Pew Research Center associate Phillip Connor asserts, “religion is not merely one aspect among immigrant lives: it can encompass everything. Immigrant faith affects daily interaction with nonimmigrants, shapes the future of immigrants in their destination society, and influences society beyond the immigrants themselves” (4). Rather than setting newcomers apart from Danish society, however, active religious practice can facilitate integration

by helping new arrivals find a community and sense of belonging in Denmark. Denmark has a state-funded Lutheran church, known as *den danske Folkekirke* [the Danish People's Church], but few foreigners in Denmark become involved with it, due at least initially to the language barrier.

Instead, many newcomers to Denmark in search of a religious community are drawn to multiethnic independent churches referred to as *migrantmenigheder* [migrant churches]. Migrant churches function as “‘outward-looking’ inter-group networks” that can “transcend inter-group cleavages by linking individuals and groups within a broader social structure based on general trust in others, including strangers” (Larsen 154), thereby providing what Robert Putnam has described as “bridging” or inclusive social capital (22). This article provides a brief treatment of migrant churches in Denmark before analyzing the oral histories of a dozen African Christian women in Copenhagen and Aarhus, collected between 2015 and 2017, in order to illustrate how migrant churches have functioned in recent decades as important private vectors of integration during the interviewees’ transition to life in Denmark.

Migrant Churches as an Integration Vector in Danish Society

The term “migrant church” is commonly used in Danish scholarship to refer to Christian-oriented religious congregations whose services are conducted primarily in a language other than Danish, often led by an immigrant pastor. That language is often English, but can also be any number of national languages or regional dialects. The term encompasses congregations from all manner of Christian religious traditions and ethnicities, from Greek Orthodox to French Reformed to Korean Presbyterian, but excludes non-Christian traditions, notably Jewish and Muslim groups. Migrant churches do not receive state support and are self-funded. There is no official organization of migrant churches in Denmark, but some of them have ties to international organs of their faith community, while others collaborate informally with individual churches in Denmark. As of 2009, there were approximately 200 registered migrant churches in Denmark, representing a wide range of theological views and styles of worship (Sørensen 4). They are often categorized as either historical, international, or ethnic. Many of the latter are very young, small, and informal, meeting in private homes or rented rooms, while the former are often hundreds of years old and well-established, such as the *Brødre menighed* [Brethren's Congregation] of German Herrnhuters in Christiansfeld in southern Jutland, which dates to 1773. International migrant churches, which often serve expatriates, tend to fall somewhere between both extremes. Regardless of their date of founding, migrant churches have always served as a place for non-Danish speakers to find a network of support to ease their transition into Danish society. The existence of migrant churches is quite fluid and often fleeting, but the general trend in Denmark in

recent years is upward, in terms of numbers of both churches and attendees, in inverse relation to declining attendance and membership in *Folkekirken*. Danmarks Statistik estimated that in 2016, approximately 76% of Danes were nominally members of *Folkekirken* (Danmarks Statistik), yet less than ten percent of them attended worship services regularly (Jenkins 236).

Migrant churches tend to be flexible in terms of both doctrine and practice. Many are interdenominational and focus more on Christian life than theology. Rune Thomassen, Arne Kappelgaard, Hans Henrik Lund, and Birthe Munck-Fairwood, the editors of *Andre Stemmer. Migrantkirker i Danmark—set indefra* (2004), describe Denmark's migrant churches as "levende og pulserende fællesskaber, der ikke lader sig sætte i danske kirkebåse eller tæmme af traditioner, dogmatic og kirkehistorie" (9) [living, pulsing communities that neither conform to Danish church norms nor can be tamed by tradition, dogma, or church history],¹ while one of the interviewees in that volume, Jonas Kouassi-Zessia from Ivory Coast, defines a migrant church simply as "et levende netværk af mennesker, der har omsorg for hinanden" (10) [a living network of people who take care of each other]. With congregations made up of people of many different nationalities, such migrant church networks are far more exemplary of Putnam's concept of bridging social capital than of its counterpart, bonding social capital, which tends to build "inward-oriented intra-group networks that are exclusive and homogenous in nature and based on trust in known people-friends and kin-thereby binding individuals to their own narrow social group" (Larsen 154). By facilitating the development of social networks across ethnic, linguistics, and racial lines, migrant churches address the social and emotional needs of newcomers to Denmark that more pragmatic public policy initiatives often do not.

In addition to their theological autonomy and emotional appeal, migrant churches are also emblematic of the shifting political dynamics of Europe in the post-colonial era. The tendency for independent church congregations to emerge among migrants from former colonies has been less pronounced in Denmark than in, for example, the Netherlands (ter Haar 39), in part because Denmark's colonial presence was much smaller and of shorter duration. Yet the phenomenon of migrant churches led by immigrants from former European colonies, who are reinvigorating Christian belief in the homelands of the same missionaries who once converted their ancestors, contributes, on a small scale, to the reversal of colonial patterns of cultural transmission. As Thomassen et al. note, the concentration of Christians in the world has shifted over the past hundred years from approximately 80% residing in Europe and North America to two-thirds in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (9). They counter the concerns of those readers who may worry about the decline of Christian belief in Denmark with the assertion, "Der er masser af kristendom i Danmark. Men ofte findes den uden for de etablerede kirker (10) [There is lots of Christianity in Denmark. But it is often found outside the established churches]. Although immigrants make up less than

10% of the Danish population, migrant churches account for approximately a third of all church attendance in Copenhagen in any given week.

The rapid growth and proliferation of migrant churches in Denmark has caused *Folkekirken* to take notice, both by pursuing possible avenues of cooperation with these churches and making efforts to alert Danish Lutherans to the significant role in Danish religious life played by migrant churches in Danish religious life today, particularly with regard to integration but also in terms of revitalizing Danish Christianity. While *Folkekirken* has a highly developed physical infrastructure and substantial revenues from the church tax, its congregations suffer from extremely low levels of attendance and parishioner activity. Many rural churches have closed or been decommissioned as a result; *The Wall Street Journal* reported in January 2015 that more than 200 Danish churches had been pronounced “nonviable or underused” (Bendavid 2). By contrast, migrant churches are often, though not necessarily, poor in physical resources but rich in members and enthusiasm, attracting upwards of two hundred attendees to weekly worship services (Lund 6).

Cooperation between *Folkekirken* and migrant church congregations offers benefits to both parties. Several migrant churches in Copenhagen rent space in buildings owned by *Folkekirken*. For example, the International Church of Copenhagen, an ecumenical ministry founded in 1962 under the auspices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), meets in St. Andreas Church on Gothersgade near Nørreport Station under the direction of American pastor Tim Stewart, while the International Christian Community, founded in 2002 by Indian pastor Ravi Chandran, which meets in Fredenskirke on Ryesgade, attracts attendees of more than thirty nationalities. Twice a year, the International Christian Community holds a joint service with the *Folkekirke* congregation that formerly met in Fredenskirke and now meets in another church building on the same street. Other migrant churches, such as the New Covenant Church of Jesus Christ in Aarhus led by Congolese pastor Daniel Mbala, rent commercial space for their worship services, Bible study, and other activities. *Folkekirken*’s Interchurch Council has even begun exploring the possibility of a sort of dual citizenship in both *Folkekirken* and a migrant church. Other council initiatives bring together the pastors of Danish Lutheran and migrant churches, with an eye to promoting networking and collaborative efforts.

Such attempts at collaboration offer an encouraging counterpoint to the anti-immigrant fearmongering that characterizes the rhetoric of far-right parties on the Danish political spectrum. One rhetorical device used to familiarize the Danish mainstream with the concept and importance of migrant churches is to evoke the parallels between the modern-day influx of migrants to Denmark and previous centuries’ outflow of migrants from Denmark. In his introduction to a 2009 government publication titled *Migrantmenigheder.dk*, Paul Verner Skærved, chairman of the Interchurch Council, links the establishment of migrant churches

in Denmark with the nineteenth-century emigration of thousands of Danes, who “tog deres lutherske tro med sig og etablerede i deres nye hjemland kirker baseret på den folkekirke, de forlod” (3) [took their Lutheran faith with them and established in their new homeland churches based on the people’s church they left behind]. He explains,

Mange af disse migranter er kristne og tager ligesom danskerne i forrige århundrede deres kirke og tro med sig. Tro, kultur og tradition er ikke noget man bare sådan lige kaster fra sig. Troen giver identitet og ro—og kræfter til at være til stede i alt det, der er nyt omkring én. Kirken bliver det faste holdepunkt i en ofte usikker tilværelse. Den bliver også et instrument til integration.
(3)

[Many of these migrants are Christian and bring with them, like the Danes in the last century, their churches and faith. Faith, culture, and tradition are not something one can just cast off. Faith provides identity and peace—and the strength to be present in all of the newness that surrounds one. The church becomes the fixed point of reference in an often-uncertain existence. It also becomes an instrument of integration.]

Skærved emphasizes the existential and spiritual needs of immigrants in order to situate migrant churches as a psychologically significant tool for immigrant adaptation to a new homeland. Connor agrees, noting that “as people move, so do their gods. People take their religion with them, changing both the religion they left behind in their home country and profoundly changing the religious landscape of the new country they enter” (8), as was the case with nineteenth-century Danish immigrants to the United States, some of whom established still-extant Lutheran congregations and Grundtvigian folk high schools while others joined non-Lutheran communities ranging from Methodism to Mormonism (cf. Jeppesen; Olsen; and Allen). Twentieth- and twenty-first century immigrants are having a decisive influence on not only the changing ethnic and linguistic landscape of Denmark but also the character and function of religious practice in Denmark.

While Skærved’s comments make the phenomenon of cultural preservation after migration relatable to Danes, nearly all of whom have relatives who emigrated in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, Thomassen et al. elaborate on Skærved’s point, arguing that participation in a migrant church can be a useful but often ignored path to integration into Danish society for so-called *nydanskere* [New Danes]. They explain,

I Danmark er der ikke tradition for, at religiøs identitet og trosbaserede fællesskaber tillægges væsentlig betydning for integration. Men når man lytter til nydanskernes egne beretninger, opdager man, at for dem handler integration og livskvalitet om

meget andet end danskundskaber og tilknytning til arbejdsmarkedet. Set med deres øjne kan tro og integration ikke adskilles.

(9)

[There is no tradition in Denmark of paying particular attention to the significance of religious identity and faith-based organizations for integration, but when one listens to New Danes' own accounts, one discovers that integration and quality of life for them is about much more than mastery of the Danish language and joining the labour market. Seen with their eyes, faith and integration cannot be separated.]

Thomassen et al. acknowledge the ideological bias implicit in the Danish government's refusal to track religious affiliation. If the government discounts immigrants' religious identity, it becomes officially invisible, however important it may be in reality. Migrant churches demonstrate the utility of faith-based organizations for promoting cultural and social integration.

Migrant churches provide a space for immigrants from many nations to come together and find common ground, creating a third space within Danish society where they can make connections and contributions. For both Skærved and Thomassen et al., the fact that so many migrant churches in Denmark have emerged within the past ten to twenty years testifies to immigrants' active approach to the question of integration: "I al ubemærkedhed er de i fuld gang med at udvikle egne netværk, præmisser og strategier for integration. For migrantmenigheder er sjældent udtryk for et ønske om at isolere sig fra det omgivende samfund. Tværtimod fungerer mange som en platform for bedre kontakt med danskere og det danske samfund" (9) [Without attracting any attention, they are in full swing of developing their own networks, principles, and strategies for integration. Migrant churches are rarely the expression of a desire to isolate oneself from the surrounding society. On the contrary, many of them function as a platform for better contact with Danes and Danish society]. The congregations of migrant churches attract not only immigrants but also native Danes, some of whom are married to non-Danes, while others have found a new interest in religion through migrant churches' innovative and vibrant style of worship. The interracial, interethnic interaction made possible through migrant churches produces bridging social capital for both parties.

Migrant Churches and African Christian Women in Denmark

In the ongoing public discussion of who belongs in Danish society and who does not (yet), religion has played a prominent role, making the role of migrant churches highly relevant to questions of integration and assimilation. As mentioned above, the secular nature of Danish society, both in terms of participation in religious services and respect for religious belief, can pose an

integration challenge for immigrants to Denmark, many of whom come from societies where religion plays a more prominent role. However, while perceived incompatibilities between Islamic belief and Denmark's Christian heritage have received considerable attention in recent years, particularly from nationalist politicians and the media (cf. Pedersen), the relationship between Danish secularism and immigrant religiosity among Christian immigrants has gone largely unremarked. Although Danish law does not allow collection of demographic data on Danish citizens' religious affiliation, religious affiliation can be inferred to a certain extent from national origin and from unofficial surveys. In 2009, for example, approximately 40% of all first- and second-generation immigrants in Denmark self-identified as Christian (Sørensen 4). Aside from immigrants from within the European Union and other Nordic countries, many of these Christian immigrants come from sub-Saharan Africa, where the missionary efforts of European and American Christians from the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries have born prolific fruit, but where economic hardship and post-colonial conflict have driven millions of people from their homes, often into European diaspora. This article attempts to address the gap in scholarship about African Christians in Denmark, particularly women, who make up a significant percentage of this population group.

Like all immigrants, African Christians in Denmark experience a period of adjustment to their new country. This is due in large part to the altered balance between the constitutive factors of their personal identities in a new cultural context: native languages are replaced by foreign ones (whether English or Danish), habits of traditional dress and food are constrained by climate and availability, and social norms governing gender roles, interpersonal relationships, and behaviour can be radically different between countries. Marked as non-Danish by their skin and speech, their visible difference can trigger what R. D. Grillo describes as "cultural anxiety" (157) for some of their Danish neighbours, thereby creating additional barriers to social acceptance. Being Christian should theoretically grant many African Christians easier access to Danish society than Muslims, Buddhists, or members of non-Christian religious traditions, but Denmark's prevalent secularism means that some immigrants' religiosity, particularly when their faith involves abstaining from alcohol, makes them stand out even more.

In the remainder of this article, I draw on the personal narratives of African Christian immigrant women in Copenhagen and Aarhus, the two largest cities in Denmark, to illuminate the role of migrant churches in African Christian women's ongoing processes of identity negotiation and integration into Danish society. These conclusions are derived from oral histories of twelve African women, collected between December 2015 and June 2017, who have immigrated to Denmark within the past three decades and who attend Christian church services regularly at a migrant church. These women, whose names have been changed in this article

to protect their privacy, come from many different countries in Africa and arrived in Denmark in different eras. Most of them were in their teens or early twenties when they came to Denmark. They came to Denmark for a wide variety of reasons that place them into three general categories: political refugees, economic migrants, and beneficiaries of family reunification policies (including marriage to a Danish partner). The churches they attend are, for the most part, non-denominational Christian churches, with a general tendency toward the charismatic movement. I will focus on three churches in particular: the International Christian Community (ICC) in Copenhagen, the Copenhagen Community Church (CCC) in Valby, and the New Christian Church of Jesus Christ (NCCJC) in Aarhus.

In the first category, two of the interviewees came to Denmark as asylum seekers in the mid-1990s fleeing civil war: Mariama from Burundi in 1996 and Oni from Rwanda via Ivory Coast in 1999. Both of them pursued higher education in Denmark after receiving refugee status and permanent residency. They are employed full-time: Oni as a software test manager, Mariama in a biochemical company.

In the second category, three of the interviewees came as economic migrants in search of employment: Balinda is a home health aide from Uganda who came to Denmark in 1991 for a change of scenery and ended up staying after a messy divorce from a Muslim man she met and married there; Esinam is an accountant from Ghana who came to Denmark with her husband and children in 2006 after living in Italy for a decade and who now works as a school janitor; and Ada, from Zambia, was educated in the UK before taking a job with UNICEF that had posted her to Tanzania and Kenya before she and her daughter came to Denmark in 2012.

Finally, the seven interviewees in the third category came to Denmark primarily because of family connections: Urenna is a computer programmer who accompanied her parents in 1986 when her father became the Ghanaian ambassador to Denmark; Fembar is a nurse, who came to Denmark as a teenager with her parents from Liberia via Sierra Leone in 1995, fleeing civil war in both countries; Zeinab, a health care assistant from Sierra Leone, lived in England for a couple of years before coming to Denmark in 1996 to be reunited with her daughter and her daughter's father, whom she then married; Tirunesh is a pharmacist from Nigeria who accompanied her husband to Denmark in 2010 when he decided to pursue a PhD at the University of Copenhagen; Rebekah is a home health aide who came to Denmark with her parents from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2004 at the age of fourteen; and both Emmah, a student of international business, and Maria, who is studying to become a home health aide, came to Denmark from Kenya to join their Danish husbands.

While many of the details of the interviewees' lives are very different from each other's, what emerges from each of their stories as a common theme is the central role of a welcoming, English-speaking Christian church congregation in

helping them to make a home for themselves in Denmark, to feel at home in a place whose climate and culture are very foreign to them. The Zambian UNICEF manager Ada reported that the first step for her, whenever she arrives in a new place, is always to find a school for her daughter and a church for both of them. Attending church is a self-evident part of her life, as it is for most Africans, she asserts. Both she and her Nigerian co-worker Tirunesh recalled feeling astonishment upon arriving in Denmark and discovering that none of their neighbours or Danish co-workers attended church services regularly on Sunday mornings, preferring instead to run errands or go on outings. Tirunesh explained, “You know it amazed me when I first came here that on a Sunday morning the churches are empty. Because back home everybody goes to church, you know?” For all of the interviewees, involvement in a migrant church offers a sense of continuity with the religious traditions of their native countries and a way to attempt to bridge the cultural and social gulf between the country of origin and their new home. Even though she is married to a Dane, Emmah found it difficult to break into her husband’s social circles after moving to Denmark and felt very lonely and isolated until finding her church through a fellow Kenyan.

It is rare for African Christian women to turn to the Danish Lutheran *Folkekirke* to fill their spiritual and social needs, largely because of the unfamiliar and subdued style of worship in Danish Lutheran churches. Rebekah reported that she fell asleep the first time she went to a church service in Denmark in 2007 because “it was so quiet and boring. And plus we did not understand [the language]. It disappointed me so much.” Urenna described attending a Sunday service in *Folkekirken* with her mother shortly after they arrived from Ghana in 1986:

My mother sent me out to go and look for a church. I went 'round and 'round and 'round and then I found a church, it took me about one week to find a church. I looked at the time it starts and everything so I said, Mom, this is the time it starts, it is only a one-hour service. She said what? Okay, let's go. So Sunday we took the car, my mom drives, we drove and went to the church. There, there were not more than 5 elderly people in the church and it was just—I don't know how to describe it—we were shocked because we've never been to a church with only 5 people and the pastor comes in with the black robes and the white ruff around the neck. And then he started preaching. It was boring! It was in Danish too, that made it worse. So maybe after one hour you know, after one hour it stopped. I looked at the time and both of us went to the board and looked, yes, just a one hour service. So we decided to find another church.

Alienated by this spiritually and socially anaemic experience, Urenna and her mother sought out other churches, first a Baptist church, then the above-mentioned International Church of Copenhagen, followed by the International Harvest Christian Center, where she met and married a Danish man.

Oni had a similar experience when she arrived in Denmark as a refugee from the Rwandan civil war in the early 1990s. After being granted permanent residency, she attended a few worship services in a Danish Lutheran church, but even though she understood Danish, she was bored by the monotonous delivery of the sermon and the sparse attendance. She asked around among other immigrant friends until she found a more dynamic congregation led by an Indian-born pastor that made her feel welcome and provided spiritual uplift. Unlike nineteenth-century Afro-Danish men from the former Danish slave forts on the Gold Coast of Ghana who often found their niche in Denmark, if at all, in *Folkekirken* (cf. Ipsen), many of the African immigrants in Denmark today create a sense of home for themselves through participation in migrant church communities.

In addition to the spiritual appeal of migrant churches, the main thing that migrant churches seem to provide for African Christian women in Denmark is bridging social capital that enables them to feel integrated into a broader, multicultural Danish community. Some of the interviewees had blood relatives in Denmark—a brother, an aunt, a cousin—who had been instrumental in persuading them to come to Denmark in the first place, but most of them lacked the strong family and community network they had back home. Whether they sought out a church immediately upon arrival in Denmark, vacillated between a number of different churches before settling on one, or only gradually came to the decision to renew a dormant interest in religion, all of these women were able to find a substitute or supplement for this familial system in a migrant church family, which provides emotional and practical support in times of crisis or illness as well as offering opportunities to be of service to others, whether it be through supporting the Children’s Church or through fundraising, for example, to buy books for Ethiopian Christians living in Israel.

The International Christian Community

Half of the women I interviewed are members of the International Christian Community in central Copenhagen. ICC was founded in 2002 by Pastor Ravi Chandran, who was raised a Hindu in Singapore but was baptized a Christian at age 18 after a profound spiritual experience. He went on to earn a BA in theology from the Asian Theological Seminary for Evangelism and Mission in Singapore and an MA in Christian counselling from Zoe University in Florida. Ravi and his ethnic Chinese wife, whom he met while they were both doing missionary work in Kenya, came to Denmark in 1993 to accept a job in the International Pentecostal Church in Copenhagen, which he left in 2002 to found ICC. Before doing so, he conducted a survey of the existing churches in Copenhagen and discovered that nearly all congregations belonged to a particular denomination, but that few interdenominational churches existed. ICC is registered as an evangelical free church, but Chandran describes the church’s theological position as close to “the

Lutheran church, Baptists, and Pentecostals” (Chandran 166). For the past five years, ICC has held its services in Fredenskirke on Ryesgade, which they rent from *Folkekirken* at a reasonable rate. The charismatic style of ICC’s worship services is reminiscent of a Pentecostal church, but somewhat more restrained. No ordinances are required for membership in ICC, though baptisms and weddings are performed on request.

The cultural bridging function of migrant churches is quite visible at ICC. Along one wall of the sanctuary, glass cases contain copies of the Lutheran Bible and silver chalices, alongside shelves of Danish hymnbooks. To open Sunday services, a small band, made up of two guitars, drums, a synthesizer, and a few vocalists, warms up the crowd with half an hour of Christian pop songs, the lyrics of which are projected onto large wall-mounted screens. On any given Sunday, the congregation numbers approximately eighty people of twenty-plus nationalities. The majority of attendees are African, but there are also several Asians, Indians, and Filipinos, as well as Americans, Brits, and Danes. A few women wear traditional African dress. The entire service is conducted in English, except when the children are being addressed and Danish is used. The service is quite informal, with potluck Q and A services once a month and occasional guest pastors or musical performers. On one Sunday in 2015 shortly before Christmas, a speaker spent twenty minutes telling jokes about his difficulties learning Danish. On one occasion, he tried to buy a *pølse* [sausage], but he ended up ordering a *pose* [sack] with ketchup instead because he couldn’t pronounce the letter ø. On another occasion, he joked, he had planned on taking his coins [*mønter*] to a *Møntvask* [coin laundry], until his Danish-born son told him it wasn’t for washing coins but for washing clothes! Empathetic laughter from the congregation confirmed that the speaker’s experiences, or at least the sense of linguistic confusion and frustration they conveyed, were familiar.

Many of the African women who attend ICC were founding members of the congregation, having followed Pastor Ravi, who insists that parishioners use his first name, from the International Pentecostal Church. One of these is Oni. She serves on the ICC board, which makes decisions concerning both programming and realizing the vision of the church. She was raised Anglican in Rwanda, but she wasn’t particularly committed to her faith until becoming a refugee. Pregnant and alone upon arrival in Denmark, which was simply the first country for which she got a visa, she struggled with the weather, the tasteless food, and loneliness (despite the crowding in the asylum centre), but her faith became her pillar in this time of adversity. Reflecting on this ordeal, she says, “Maybe God took me away from my family to get to know him again, to discover him again. My faith was strengthened in Denmark. While many people’s faith is weakened because people are not so religious here, I always say that this is where I met God.” She misses her family and has considered returning permanently to Rwanda, but her daughter was born in Denmark and it is the only home she has ever known. Oni

has gone back to visit Rwanda five times in the past twenty years, but ICC has become her spiritual family. By serving on the ICC board, Oni feels able to serve her new, adopted family as well as her adopted homeland.

The other African women in the congregation have become her sisters, she explains, with whom she shares the common experience of not quite fitting in, either in Denmark or back at home, and of having created a hybrid culture made up of aspects of both Danish and African culture. “When we get here,” she reports, “we get a clean sheet. We can choose, we can decide what is best for us. So we always say that people who have been here for a long time, we’re another species. When we go back home, we don’t fit as we used to, we don’t fit in Danish culture 100%, but we have our own culture—and that’s why we are connected, we are bonded.” Most of her friends are from ICC. Her Danish coworkers are pleasant and friendly, she says, but they haven’t become her friends in the way they would have back in Rwanda. For one thing, many of them don’t seem to share her values, which makes it hard for her to want to spend time with them outside of work. For another, Oni regards her coworkers’ reserve as part of their culture, which she feels honour-bound to respect, however much she may want to get to know a person. She invites them to church occasionally, but, knowing that Danes are very private people, she wouldn’t dare invite them to her home, because, as a guest in their country, she feels that it is their prerogative to invite her before making up their mind about her.

Most of the interviewees did not feel that Danes discriminate against them—although Oni recalled being asked once at work if she was the cleaning lady at her job on a day when she had forgotten her I.D.—but they all faced challenges in adjusting to Danish cultural norms and regarded ICC as a haven where they could be accepted without reservation, particularly since the congregation’s multiculturalism sets it apart from Denmark’s apparent racial homogeneity. Urenna, who came to Denmark from Ghana with her parents in 1986 at the age of 26 in order to seek better medical care for her epilepsy, does feel that her skin colour has been a barrier to acceptance in Denmark during the three decades she has lived there. When she first arrived in the wealthy suburb of Charlottenlund, no one would respond to her smiles and greetings on the street, which made her feel unwanted. Recounting this experience, she explains,

I was brought up to respect elderly people, so any elderly person I meet I say hello, or good morning, good afternoon, good evening. But there was no answer, and I was surprised, and I said what country is this? And when I came, I said Dad, what country is this? Nobody answered me. Nobody would even reply! I had never experienced anything like that in my life. So it was surprising, you know? What country is this, you know, that people don’t even talk to you? Was it because of my colour?

Shaken by this culture shock, Urenna retreated into her parents' house for several months, but taking Danish classes forced her out of her shell (although she thought Danish grammar was terribly hard to learn, unlike the grammar of Akan, Ga, and English). In 1988, she married a Gambian man, in both a traditional Ghanaian and a Danish civil ceremony, for which reason she stayed behind in Denmark when her parents were posted to Yugoslavia in 1993. Unfortunately, her husband's abuse of illegal drugs brought the marriage to an end after a few years. She later began a long-term relationship with a Danish politician whom she met after he helped her during an epileptic attack at church. Although she is very grateful to the Danish state for the medical care and financial support she has received, a series of negative experiences she had with prominent Danes at events she attended with her partner soured her on Danish society and made her decide to stop speaking Danish after nearly two decades of residency.

For Urenna, ICC, like several other similarly international migrant churches she attended before finding it, offers her a safe space to be African in Denmark without encountering either prejudice or ignorance. A few years ago, she founded an African Women's Group at ICC that meets once a month, in order to give the African women in the congregation a chance to get to know each other and strengthen their ties. Despite the cultural differences between, for example, East and West Africans, their common bond, according to Urenna, is that they can communicate freely because of their shared African identity. "When you need something, you can ask your fellow person, you know. It made us more free to know each other better. We are proud of ourselves. We are proud to be African. We accept it. No matter how people think of us, that is who we are. Nothing can change us." Being at ICC has made her a happy person, she says, in large part because it gave her enough bonding social capital with other Africans and bridging social capital with people from many cultures to counterbalance the frustrations she felt about being an outsider in Denmark.

The Copenhagen Community Church

Emmah had a similarly welcoming experience with the Copenhagen Community Church (CCC), which meets currently in rented facilities on Sunday afternoons in Valby, on the outskirts of Copenhagen. CCC was founded by two Danish pastors in the Kastrup area near Copenhagen in the early 1990s as part of the Danish free-church movement, but it gradually transformed itself into a charismatic-style migrant church after a large contingent of Filipinos began attending services. For five years, services were translated between Danish and English, then the two pastors held separate Danish- and English-language services for three years before deciding to hold all services in English in order to be as inclusive as possible to people of all nationalities. Services are relaxed, opening with forty-five minutes of gospel-pop music led by a group of young people of

different ethnic backgrounds, predominantly southeast Asian and Danish, followed by a session of free-form group prayer that coalesces around various individuals in need of healing. One Sunday afternoon in June 2017, when the congregation consisted of approximately twenty-five men and women, congregants stood around two Filipino women who are battling cancer, holding out their hands to touch the women and praying aloud in turn as they felt moved to do so.

Emmah, who believes strongly that her journey to Denmark was guided by God, initially chose to attend CCC because she was raised in a Pentecostal tradition and the services were held in English, but she explains that the reason she stays is because of “the way the word is preached and the way everyone is connected. You’re allowed to be you and people are not coming there to show off. If you have a problem, it is shared by everyone. Everyone is genuine. I feel I belong. I have my sister in America, but I feel I have a family now in Denmark.” She feels that her involvement with CCC has had a healing effect on her as well, both in terms of recovering from a difficult pregnancy/post-partum experience and saving her cross-cultural marriage from the strains of adjusting to life in Denmark. After a few years of increasing tensions in their marriage, her husband Jens, who was a typically areligious Dane when they married, began praying and coming to church with her, and now he even attends when she cannot.

The New Covenant Church of Jesus Christ

The newest of the three migrant churches I observed is the New Covenant Church of Jesus Christ (NCCJC), which meets in a suburb of Aarhus. Daniel Mbala, whom congregants call Apostle Daniel, founded the church in 2012 after receiving a spiritual call to preach the gospel to the Danish people. Mbala finds it amazing that people from countries colonized by Europe are now bringing the gospel back and hopes to appeal to people of many different cultures, including Danes, but he feels that most Danes, with their ingrained cultural scepticism about religion, are scared off by the newness of the charismatic style of his church. At a mid-week Bible study in June 2017, the congregation is made up predominantly of young people, fairly evenly divided between men and women, primarily from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Apostle Daniel does most of the talking, explaining his view of doctrinal questions, including on this occasion the question of whether marriage is ordained for all people, and preaching the importance for African immigrants in Denmark of living modest, hard-working lives instead of living up to the stereotype of Africans as lavish spenders on showy items. The tone of his remarks underscores the church’s function of providing bridging social capital for its members.

One of the NCCJC parishioners I interviewed is Rebekah, who came from the DRC to Denmark a few days after her fourteenth birthday. The busyness of life in Denmark and difficulty of attending a Catholic church from the small village in

northern Jutland where they had been resettled led Rebekah and her family to abandon the regular Catholic church attendance that had been part of their life in the DRC. Rebekah says she gave up all belief in God for several years, but when she turned eighteen and moved away from home, she felt a renewed need for spiritual guidance and recommitted to her Christian faith. The first time she attended NCCJC, she had trouble taking Apostle Daniel seriously “because he is so funny, you know,” but the fellowshiping efforts of the other parishioners after her friend was in a car accident made her feel valued and receptive to spiritual guidance. These friendships were instrumental in her decision, despite her family’s disapproval, to join NCCJC, which has become the centre of her life outside of school and work. She estimates that she spends four to five evenings a week at church activities and her fellow worshippers have become her primary social network, in part because they share a similar approach to life, despite their different ethnicities. Rebekah explains, “Even if we come from the same country, we have completely different backgrounds, but when we are there, in that place [in church], it doesn’t matter.... It’s like we have our own mentality, that’s the Bible. So the thing is, when we are in there, we let go of all the things we are outside of church.” Although Rebekah has spent most of her formative teenage and young adult years in Denmark, she feels that her refusal to drink alcohol forms a nearly insurmountable barrier to full social integration with her Danish classmates, which makes her feel like “a leftover, an outcast” in the country where she has spent most of her life. Rebekah’s sense of social identity and individual well-being is so intertwined with NCCJC that she cannot even conceive of living anywhere but Aarhus, though she would like to visit the DRC again someday.

Conclusion

History makes it clear that both immigrants themselves and the countries that take them in are changed by the encounter with each other, an observation which holds true for the African Christian women I interviewed in Denmark. Except for Ada, who came to Denmark knowing that it would just be a five-year posting with UNICEF, and Tirunesh, who still hopes to return to Nigeria, nearly all of the interviewees described feeling at home in Denmark and planning to stay there permanently. Although they miss family and food from their native countries, they not only appreciate the practical benefits of living in Denmark but have also been changed by their residence in Denmark, so that they no longer feel that they fit in completely in their native countries. By way of example, Urenna, who has lived longest in Denmark, complains that everything moves so slowly in Ghana and the buses don’t run on time; Fembar, the nurse from Liberia who arrived as a teenager, finds it hard to deal with the fact that people back home don’t lock their doors or make appointments before dropping by. Both women have internalized certain Danish social norms that diverge from their

cultures of origin. While they don't think of themselves as Danish, they regard Denmark as home and are invested in playing an active part in Danish society, but without surrendering their individual cultural identities.

Although religious activity may seem an atypical path to integration into today's secular Danish society, the experiences of the women I interviewed leave no doubt that involvement in a migrant church community can be an important step toward more complete integration into Danish society. Their open and active embrace of religious belief and practice contrasts with the secular Danish norm and thus challenges the notion that integration requires sameness, but their own personal narratives reveal the extent to which activity in migrant churches has enabled them to develop deeply-rooted emotional and social connections to their new homeland. Maintaining and increasing their religious activity allows many African Christian immigrant women in Denmark the chance to develop relationships with Danes and people from many other countries, to contribute to strengthening Danish society, and to invest themselves both physically and emotionally in their adoptive country, while benefitting from the sense of acceptance and belonging that they feel from their fellow worshippers. All of these activities contribute to the bridging social capital that has enabled these women to adapt in positive ways to a new country and help their children feel like full-fledged members of Danish society. In the longer term, the growth and proliferation of migrant churches in Denmark suggests the possibility that religious belief and practice as a part of Danish identity may yet be socially rehabilitated to some degree, countering the two-hundred-year-old drift toward secularization through impulses from the postcolonial periphery, but that story cannot yet be fully told.

NOTES

1. All translations from Danish are my own.

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