

Together or apart?

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Integrating and Disintegrating Factors in the Relation between Migrants and the Church of Norway

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My work started in a Lutheran Church in Manhattan, New York, three years ago. I was an observer to the UN general assembly and on a Sunday morning I walked to the nearest Lutheran Church for worship. This particular church had a rather high church liturgy, but nevertheless: There was something about the atmosphere – it felt open, warm and including. It was certainly multicultural; you could spot people from most comers of the world. And those who took active part also reflected this wide spectre of people.

This caused me to reflect: What is it that make me feel included in this church, what makes me feel welcome and taken care of – even if I did not take any initiative to speak to other people?

The experience from my home church was that it is not easy to become a multicultural worshipping community.

This led to an application for one year of study leave to dig deeper into the issues of migration and migrants within the Church of Norway.

We know that migrants tend to gather in faith groups based on nationality, ethnicity, language or culture. They choose faith-based **segregation** – or maybe this was not their first option?

Many places in Norway, migrants are so few that separate faith groups is not an option. What happens then? Do they become **assimilated** into Church of Norway congregations – as backbenchers? Or are they **integrated** and welcomed as partners of faith – where a new multicultural congregation evolves? Or are they becoming **marginalised** and passive as they can not find the style of church they are used to?

I have conducted field research in three congregations along the coast of Norway – in the east, south and north. I will present some of my findings.

Along with this, I have read literature from other countries on issues of migration – to look for common trends and something to learn from others who have lived with larger numbers of migrants over a longer period compared to what is the case in Norway.

Numbers

Out of a total population in Norway of about 4.7 millions approximately 10% are immigrants. They come to work, to study, as family members and as asylum seekers. They are spread all over the country, but in Oslo the migrant population is 25%.

During the past 30 years, some 230.000 new Norwegians have become citizens.

We often seem to think that these numbers are record high in history, but in comparison: In 1915, 21% of the population of Europe lived outside of Europe.

The most visible group of migrants are the Muslims, and we tend to think that they are the vast majority of migrants. However, approximately 40% of all migrants in Norway come from a Christian background

Who are they? Many are Catholics – for example Filipino wives or au pairs and domestic workers and Polish guest workers in the building industry. The Catholic church in Norway has a hard time trying to accommodate all these newcomers.

Among the Christian migrants are also groups of Orthodox Christians from Ethiopia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and new congregations are being established.

We also have Protestants of all kinds from all over the world among our migrants.

This is being done today

The Christian Council of Norway organises a Churches Network on Integration of Refugees and Immigrants by. This network has become a place for networking and contact between established and migrant churches. The Norwegian Mission Society has established multicultural congregations in the largest cities and is working to get them recognised as congregations within the Church of Norway. There are churches that are renting out rooms for worship to groups of migrants and some congregations have also formalised cooperation with migrant groups. And some congregations are engaged into diaconal work with migrants.

The General Synod has had migration on its agenda twice during the last years.

But in general, we have to admit that minority churches have done much more to accommodate Christian migrants. In addition to the Roman Catholic Church, both the Baptist Church and the Pentecostal Church have developed new forms of co-operation with migrants.

To see the same context

In one of the congregations I visited, there were different notions of what the context looked like. One person said:

“There are very few immigrants here. That is the main thing. This is a white society; we see very few immigrants or they are very well integrated.”

Where as another person said this:

“There are quite a few immigrants here – so many that ethnic Norwegians would not believe it.”

If multicultural integration in church life should be given priority, we need to see the same context. And if we do not see the same, we need to investigate and talk us through together in order to see the same reality.

Even if we see the same context, we need to go a step further in order to realise what consequences this has for us as a local community and congregation. Unless there is a strategy and a focus, not much will be done in congregations that always have more challenges than resources. The challenges vary: In some communities the majority of migrants are not from a Christian background. Or they could come from a predominantly Orthodox or Catholic background with 100 miles to their nearest congregation. Some have come here to work; they have an income and can go home whenever they wish. Others are refugees or married to a Norwegian. All of these represent different challenges for a multicultural and multilingual worshipping congregation.

Diakonia

The first “language” we use in church when we meet new groups of people or new needs in the community, is *diakonia*. We wish to help, to console, to comfort, to integrate, and *diakonia* seems to be an important way of meeting new people in the community who feel foreign to most things in their new life. In all three congregations I studied, the deacons were the first person to make contact with migrant newcomers. Some places this area of work continues as the responsibility of the deacon. Other places, the deacon manages to involve the whole congregation and community in a process of integration.

It was migrants who first came to the local church – it was not the church that offered an invitation. One can wonder whether separate migrant faith groups are the migrants' first option or if it is their only option to preserve faith in a new and strange environment.

Worship

Most Christian migrants are longing for Christian fellowship in worship. Whereas the deacons are essential in the first phase of contacts, the pastors become instrumental in this phase. Many are not satisfied with their pastors. They wish they would open up much more for different cultural expressions. Not only for the sake of the migrants in the congregation, but for the benefit of the whole congregation!

One person says:

"Worship – I understand very well that they go to the Pentecostal congregation. I have experienced African worship, it is a different spirituality. The togetherness around their faith feels stronger, the unity. It would have been beneficial for our congregation if the Africans were allowed to participate more. More people would have come."

A pastor says:

"We found that we could not change our worship a lot – we could not be African. We have a responsibility for our own culture. It is not ok to act as an African even if it is colourful and happy."

What kind of theology is this? What kind of responsibility for our own culture does a church have? It is not hard to understand that we should not give up all that is dear to us in cultural ways of worshipping or in language. There is no help in marginalising the Norwegian part of the congregation – if that was what this pastor meant.

But if 50% of the people in the pews on a given Sunday are visibly African – who are the "we" that celebrate? Is it the 50% Norwegians and the rest are strangers or visitors or backbenchers? Or do we need to change the way we constitute who the "we" are that celebrate together?

Sometimes our self-understanding as a folk church does not help us. We say that we are an open church, open to all people. But if we never invite (at least not non-members), and never use other languages than Norwegian, we will not be viewed as open to large groups of people. As I have read official Church Synod documents, I also discover that we tend to say that we wish to be part of Norwegian heritage and tradition; we want people to feel they belong. But if the belonging is tied up to tradition, language and common history, the mission perspective of our Church in today's world will loose.

Sometimes I wonder whether we are capable and willing to enter into the new landscape of change that migration implies.

In the European study "Mapping Migration", they comment on this issue: (page 10)

"Migrants are portrayed as strangers and strangers are a major irritant because they disturb the logic of a given society. The presence of strangers interferes with the dichotomy between inside and outside, friends and enemies. Enemies stay on the other side of the battle line, but strangers do not maintain their distance. No one knows whether they are friends or foes. Modernity's response to the disturbing presence of strangers has been typically to adopt one of two strategies: assimilation or exclusion."

Integration as our societies and our faith is calling for, is not an easy option!

Mission

Only one of the congregations I visited seems to be willing to work towards a multicultural worship community. This is a congregation with a vivid mission tradition. Many missionaries were and are recruited from this town and when they settle here after their mission work, they are not afraid to face the newcomers in their home congregation. There is a notion of “mission that has come to us” and a willingness also among the lay people and the volunteer workers to see migrants as a new challenge for their congregation.

One of the other congregations runs a kindergarten with a multicultural group of children. However, this is not used as an entry point for children and parents to become more active members of the congregation. So again: One need both to see the context and to act as an inviting worship community and fellowship if things are to change in favour of a multiethnic faith community.

Ecumenism

The Church of Norway has changed its attitudes towards ecumenism during the last decades. Yes, we are the majority church, but not the only church. There are good working relations between congregations of different church families locally. This also seems to effect the way we look at migrants – for good and maybe also for not so good!

We are good at drawing local maps for migrants who come for their first time to our church.

We tend to ask where they come from and what church they belong to. If they have a Pentecostal background, we will gladly show them to the nearest Pentecostal congregation!

On the one hand, this is positive and in accordance with our policy of non-proselytism. On the other hand: If a person comes to my church and the only welcome she gets, is a map of how to find the closest Pentecostal congregation – have I done what I need to do when a newcomer comes to church? She will hardly feel very welcome...

There is a difference between sheep-stealing and welcoming new guests or potential members. And there is no law against changing church affiliation as long as it is the individual's free choice.

With Orthodox and Catholic migrants, I see quite an effort from our pastors to accommodate their needs. They invite priests to celebrate masses in the local church and so forth. But if the Catholic mass is once a month, how can we help to accommodate Catholics for the rest of the month?

Catholics who come from majority churches sometimes seems to feel more at home within our majority church than within the minority Catholic Church in Norway. How can we welcome these people without being accused of proselytising?

There are further challenges with faith education of children of Lutheran/Catholic parents.

Often the Catholic part is the newcomer to Norway and the Norwegian spouse is often a secularised member of Church of Norway. Often they live far from the nearest Catholic church and the Catholic church has asked Church of Norway for co-operation in order to accommodate these families and their needs.

The presence of migrants challenges us ecumenically to find new ways of working together locally.

Religious dialogue

Much effort has been made over the last few years to get congregations involved in religious dialogue in the community. The government has seen this as an important tool for improving integration. However, my findings are that it is hard for the same congregation to do both mission with migrants and religious dialogue. One of my informants from the congregation that worked hard to become multicultural said:

“We are not very good with Muslims. How shall we meet them? Evangelise? It is difficult for them to come to Christian gatherings. Do we have a big mission field here? We want to be friends, show respect and at the same time try to get them over to us? It is very challenging.

One example: We had a couple where the husband was Catholic and she was a Muslim. She was baptised and that became so difficult in relation to their Muslim friends here that they moved to Oslo.”

Many Christian migrants have had negative experiences as a Christian minority in a Muslim country. For them it is hard to accept and understand the need for dialogue. For Muslims it is still extremely hard to accept a Christian conversion. Maybe we need to say that congregations need to specialise: Either to be welcoming to Christians from different cultures or to concentrate on religious dialogue in the community. This needs however not to be the case forever.

Membership

One normal way of belonging to a Christian fellowship, is to become a member. This is however not an issue in any of the congregations I visited. On the contrary, it seems like pastors avoid this because they do not want to evangelise or proselytise in a situation where a couple are getting married or they come to baptise a child. One says:

“This is certainly not an issue in relation to weddings or baptisms.”

Another says:

“Some get baptised and become members. Otherwise I do not find this very important.”

Yet another says:

“In relation to baptism, we do not meet this very much. They have their religion and I am very reluctant to wriggle them out of their religion. They are welcome, but it is not my responsibility to take them out of where they belong. I am not pushing for people to get baptised.”

I think we would all agree that it is not wise to be pushing for people to be baptised, but if we do not at all invite people to talk about faith and present the faith that they are now giving their child, have we not deceived our mission?

By accident, I heard a story from two sides. One of my informants told me about a Lutheran/Buddhist couple. The pastor had married them and visited them at their home. The wife seemed to be interested to know more about the Christian faith and the pastor hoped that she would make contact on this. One day, both spouses came forward for communion. The pastor was happy about this and continued to hope that she would soon make contact.

A pastor from Norwegian Church Abroad also told a story – and from the details told, it has to be the same couple. They lived close to his church in Spain part of the year and both were very active in the work there. He knew that the woman was a Buddhist, but congregations abroad are wide open to all people as a principle. One day this woman makes contact with the pastor, telling him that she wants to become a Christian. He welcomes this decision and asks her to make contact with her local pastor back home in order to enter into a baptismal program.

And here we are: This woman does not need to be pushed. But there is no one inviting her either.

Theological obstacles

Being a majority church, we might have lost the ability to be welcoming in a way that newcomers in the community can understand. Besides, we have an unhappy story of trying to get our membership lists in order by removing people who are wrongly in them. I have never seen a welcoming brochure to the Church of Norway – except for invitation to baptism for newborns with one or both parents as members of our church.

Some of the theological tensions lie in the New Testament itself. On the one side, the global Christian family is portrayed as one body or as one tree. On the other side is the story of Pentecost where the gospel was contextualised into all the mother tongues that were present in Jerusalem on that day.

There is a strong emphasis on unity and at the same time also on context.

Migration challenges this in new ways since we now live in mixed and multicultural communities and need to show both unity and respect for different contexts within in the same community.

The two most important experiences we have in this field, is the story of the Norwegian Church abroad (the Seamen's Church) and the establishment of a Sámi church life. We use great resources every year both human and economically, to be church for Norwegian citizens who live abroad for shorter or longer periods. And the Seamen's church is not only a church – it also claims to be “a home away from home”, a place where people meet traditions, culture, fellowship, food and worship that are familiar for any Norwegian.

During the work with Sámi church life, we have come to understand the need for Sámi language in Bible translations, worship material and catechesis. This also includes cultural ways of celebrating faith.

We have acknowledged and developed faith communities out of Norwegian and Sámi language and culture. How do we respond to migrants with the same needs?

Needs of first generation migrants

To move to a foreign country with a new language, culture, climate and traditions is a challenge for all, regardless of reason for migration.

When everything is new and a lot of energy is used in order to learn everything that is new in the host society through language courses, work and school, religion can be an important fellowship and identity mark.

Some people come to our congregations wishing to be assimilated into the Norwegian way of doing things. I met some of these, but they do not seem to be many. When we talk about integration into our congregations however – this is often what we mean: “They are heartily welcome to become like us.”

But most people cherish their familiar ways of celebrating their faith. To get together with “their own clan” in a way that they know all the cultural codes, where people care for each other and help each other in a social fellowship, where there are people to ask when you have questions about the Norwegian ways of doing things – that can be a very important social factor for migrants. It offers social capital to new Norwegians, which is important in order to adjust to the new society.

By first sight, this might seem like pure segregation. But it is the same as we have acknowledged for Norwegian Church abroad and for Sámi church life.

In my material, I found that the African group in one of the congregations has gathered in the form of a choir. Besides coming to worship in the local Church of Norway congregation (only one hour per week!), they also meet in the premises of the Pentecostal church to worship there. Their leader has become a member of the Church of Norway parish and is also an employee there.

In another congregation, they wish to employ one of the migrants as a deacon for migrants. They want this because they realise that migrants have a lot in common and should be helped to help themselves within the framework of the local parish.

Even if the number of migrants in the community is not large enough to provide for a full congregation, they anyway seem to tend to organise in groups out of the same need for a fellowship that it is hard for the Norwegian part of the congregation to provide.

Integration and culture

Integration into our church can be difficult because of the differences in culture that also implies different understanding of the Bible. We are generally speaking, marked by secularism, individualism, equality and weakened family institutions. We have adjusted our lives and theology to these values.

People from other Christian faith traditions fight secularism and are often marked by strong religious systems and traditional values. It is easy to feel threatened by our "dissolving" values.

If we want to work seriously with integration, I believe it is important to understand these cultural differences. It is important in order for migrants to be equal co-operators – not only guests or exotic inputs in our worship services. It is only when both parties are ready to give and receive, that we will have an integration that can function in the long run.

Second and third generation

Whereas the first generation feels a need to preserve their own religious traditions, that might not fully apply to second and later generations. They grow up here, go to school and socialise here and many will, as time goes by, have Norwegian as their first language. Their parents' way of worshipping is not necessarily very attractive to them and might be rather foreign compared to the daily life they live. If they do not get help to translate faith into "Norwegian", they might become as secular as their Norwegian friends. Most parents see this as a great loss and want help to avoid this. If we are not able to make good working relations with Christian groups of first generation migrants, there will be little communication also with second and later generations.

Our work with children and youth need to be in co-operation with groups of migrants for the benefit of both!

Individual or organisational integration

As a church, we are not as welcoming as one could wish or even expect. At the same time, it seems to be difficult to integrate people individually. Often that ends up more or less as assimilation. Individually, new members are not "strong" enough to make a difference.

On the other hand, we are very good in organising. If a group of migrants come to our church, we are more than happy to share some services with them, having their choir to sing or do different activities together. We are ourselves structured in a way that organised groups are more easily integrated than individuals. This is also the experience from the Danish research on this. Migrants in Denmark say that they have more contact with Danish Christians after they formed their own faith group of migrants.

Legal obstacles – new structures

This however, leads us into new challenges. If a group of Catholic Croats comes to the Catholic church in Oslo, the Catholic bishop will try to find a Croat priest to minister to them. That is all it takes to integrate them into the Catholic church the way they are working. If a group of migrants linked to the Baptist church, wants to form their own Baptist congregation,

this is no problem. If they want to be part of an existing Baptist congregation, that is also no problem.

With the geographical parish system as the only way of organising congregations, the Church of Norway has a distance to go in order to facilitate new groups of people into the church. If the American and German Lutheran congregations in Oslo wish to be part of Church of Norway – there is actually no way they can be so, since they are not geographically organised. If a multicultural group of Protestants or an Ethiopian Lutheran group want to become members, there is no way they can become so with today's legal structure.

Our geographical based parish system system has worked for centuries and it works well. But there are challenges and questions that are not answered if this is the only way of organising church. We need to investigate more in order to facilitate those who actually want to become full members of the Church of Norway with another organising factor than geography. In addition, we need to elaborate on light structures and more ad hoc co-operation with groups of migrants as well as formal structures for contact between the Church of Norway and Christian migrants. We have such a forum for contact with Muslims and need the same priority given to Christian groups.

Summary

Migrants both in the USA and in Europe seem to form their own Christian groups and congregations. Maybe it is up to us whether this will function as segregation or as integration in the long run.

If we are willing to enter into processes of change and redefine our own ecclesial thinking in line with the new reality in all our local communities, lots of good and exciting things can happen. At the same time, we should not be naïve. There are real challenges, but I do not see that we have other options as Christians than entering into these challenges if we want to be followers of Christ. If we are not entering into this new landscape, we will get both Christian and political segregation as a result.

We need to look at ourselves and migrant groups as equal partners and we need to enter into the dialogue with migrants with both humility and respect and a wish of both giving and receiving.

The starting point has to be that we are all part of the one, global body of Christ and a fellowship of Christian sisters and brothers regardless of what might keep us apart.

The luck is still on our side in Norway. We still have not done too many mistakes. We can learn from churches abroad and make the right choices and priorities now – in order to get good co-operation with migrant groups – and a good integration in the long run.

We often have the notion that an immigrant or a migrant has dark skin and is a Muslim.

Knowing that 40% of the migrants come from a Christian background, this should lead us to rethink our mission as the majority church of the country.