

# ‘CAN WE FIND OTHER WAYS FORWARD?’

## *Church Relations among Migrants and Non-Migrants in the Church of Sweden*

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### Abstract

Belonging to religious communities is of great importance for many migrants coming to Europe. This article focusses on one such community, a Lutheran Ethiopian/Eritrean Mekane Yesus association in Stockholm, and its relations with the Church of Sweden. The article discusses identity formation and belonging in a situation of living in the diaspora, as well as analysing the processes of integration that involve diversity work. This example shows how global power hierarchies in church relations are played out in the local arena - power relations that signal, but also sometimes challenge, a post-colonial order. Furthermore, an identity like Lutheran is highly contextual, as the article shows. While the role of Lutheran churches in the Nordic context is understudied when it comes to migration, this article – and the study it builds on – contributes to a deeper understanding of how the Church of Sweden is being both challenged and motivated to act in relation to migrants coming to Sweden.

### Keywords

Migration • Churches • Identity • Belonging • Integration

## Introduction

Without dismissing political and economic factors, there are also other reasons behind people's choice of migration, among them religious, both in the process of deciding to migrate and in the process of establishing oneself in a new country. Researchers from various disciplines have shown the importance of understanding the role of religion in relation to studies of migration (Connor 2014; Kivisto 2014; Saunders, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Snyder 2016). Religious belonging as a source of social, cultural and religious capital in a situation of migration (Adogame & Weissköppel 2005; Nyamnjoh 2014), the implication of religious belonging for individual migrants and for groups (Aschim, Hovdelien & Kringlebotn Sødal

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2016) as well as the changes that religious belonging and identities undergo in a situation of migration (Frederiks & Nagy 2016; Ebaugh & Chafetz 2000) are some of the themes brought up in the literature. The importance of identifying global patterns, without losing sight of local particularities in the study of religion and migration, is furthermore emphasised (Connor 2014; Kivisto 2014).

Church belonging among African migrants coming to Europe is another theme in the research literature on religion and migration (Adogame 2013; Alvarsson 2016; van Dijk 2004), which highlights post-colonial church relations on a global scale (ter Haar 2008). It is often the case that African migrants establish their own churches, and these churches seldom have relations with the established churches and denominations in the country of destination. However, there are also examples of church relations between the so-called migrant churches and the established churches in the host community. In this article, I analyse one such example from the Swedish context, which involves two Lutheran churches arising from very different contexts, namely, a local Mekane Yesus association (the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus), which is part of the Church of Sweden in one of the suburbs of Stockholm, and the Church of Sweden.

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (henceforth Mekane Yesus) was founded in 1959 and resulted from the mission work carried out by the Church of Sweden and its missionary branch *Evangeliska Fosterlandsstiftelsen* (EFS) in Eritrea from 1866 onwards, as well as in Ethiopia from 1904 onwards (Gebremedhin 2008: 89–90). Thus, there are strong connections between Mekane Yesus and the Church of Sweden, which go a long way back and which continue today, in particular, through the economic means that the Church of Sweden provides Mekane Yesus with in order to support the humanitarian work that it carries out in Ethiopia. Even today, the Swedish influence can be found in Ethiopian churches, for instance in the form of psalms and other elements in the church service.

By focussing on the relationship between Mekane Yesus and the Church of Sweden, I want to highlight how power dynamics in global church relations are played out in the local arena, relations that involve several of the themes brought up above, such as constructions of identity, religious belonging, as well as aspects of integration that involve diversity work. Integration in this context is about the mutual process among members and employees in these two churches to get to know one another, to find common ground for celebrating church services together and for social involvement with one another. Diversity work involves dealing with practical situations that occur, as well as processes of reflection among the employees and volunteers involved. The relationship between these two Lutheran churches is characterised by different expectations based on highly different experiences and needs. Theological and aesthetic differences are also stumbling blocks in the relationship. Building on anthropological fieldwork, the article gives voice to leaders and members of both Mekane Yesus and the Church of Sweden and points at dynamics that today are affecting migrants in Europe as well as the established European religious institutions and churches, such as the Church of Sweden. While the role of Lutheran churches in the Nordic context is understudied when it comes to migration (Aschim, Hovdelien & Kringlebotn Sødal 2016: 10), as are the topics on how beliefs and religious practices among 'non-migrants' in destination

countries are being affected by migration (Frederiks 2016: 25), this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how the Church of Sweden is being both challenged and motivated to act in relation to migrants coming to Sweden.

## Diversity Work, Identity and Different Capitals

The theoretical perspectives that I find useful in order to understand the empirical material in this study, are Sara Ahmed's (2012) perspective on diversity work and Afe Adogame's (2013) discussion on the various capitals that belonging to a religious fellowship brings about. These perspectives can help us understand the various positions that come out in this ethnographic case: on the one hand, the employees in the Church of Sweden, representing the majority society; and on the other hand, the leaders and members of the Mekane Yesus association, coming from Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Starting with Ahmed (2012: 174), literature emphasises that diversity work implies both practical and reflective processes that often go hand in hand. When a practical situation occurs, such as for instance in a church service where people with different cultural/national and/or Christian/religious backgrounds come together, there are differences that come to the surface regarding how to do things, and these situations often lead to reflective processes among those involved, reflections that not the least are about questions of identity. Ahmed (2012: 174–175) furthermore presents a picture of diversity work as a process of turning walls into tables, where it is possible to sit down and meet, as well as try to understand one another and – through dialogue – try to get closer to the questions that diversity imply. The wall does not disappear, but it takes on another form: 'Only the practical labor of "coming up against" the institution *allows this wall to become apparent*. To those who do not come up against it, the wall does not appear – the institution is lived and experienced as being open, committed, and diverse' (Ahmed 2012: 174). These 'walls' – norms, values and practices – can be found at various places within an organisation. By being situated in culturally and religiously diverse suburbs, my informants – the majority being employees in the Church of Sweden, representing the majority society – have become highly aware of many of these 'walls' in the Church of Sweden and, in different ways, they are challenging the norms and the more-or-less taken-for-granted practices. The empirical material for this study, a part of which is presented in this article, exemplifies such processes of turning walls into tables that both bring about conflicts as well as enable conversations and dialogue. They are by no means smooth and easy processes; rather, they involve practical situations where values, norms and practices are being challenged, and where human relations are both deepened and disputed.

Building on Bourdieu, Adogame (2013: 103–106) emphasises how the African churches and the Christian faith offer their members a social, cultural and religious/spiritual capital, which, in many ways, is decisive in a situation where they have left their country of origin and are in a situation where they need to re-establish themselves. The social capital consists of the relationships and networks that belonging to a church offer. This includes both

expectations and obligations, norms, support and reciprocity (Adogame 2013: 103–104). The cultural capital consists of values, knowledge and belief systems (Adogame 2013: 105), while the religious/spiritual capital comes with the involvement in a religious community and involves religious identity, values, moral and visions (Adogame 2013: 106). These different forms of capital are closely intertwined and need to be understood in relation to one another, as Adogame emphasises. They can work in both including and excluding ways, and they have both positive and negative effects on the lives of people (Adogame 2013: 106–110), for instance when it comes to processes of integration in the new country of settlement.

Both of these perspectives, namely Ahmed's approach to diversity work and Adogame's reasoning on the various forms of capital, deal with the construction of identities. Identities are complex: both constant and changing, situational (Goldstein-Kyaga & Borgström 2012: 14–15) and always constructed in relation to something or someone. The relationship that I describe in this article between the Church of Sweden and Mekane Yesus involves constructions of identities that simultaneously work in uniting and fragmenting ways, as I discuss later on.

## The Church of Sweden

The Church of Sweden has, for centuries, played an important role in creating a sense of a national Swedish identity. The idea of a 'folk church' combined notions of nation, people and church. Ever since the reformation, the Lutheran–Evangelical church has functioned as a kind of node for ideas about the Swedish nation (Gerle 2007: 173). In the year 2000, church and state separated, and in a changing society characterised by both secularism and religious diversity, the Church of Sweden is presently in a situation where it partly needs to redefine itself as one church among many.

Despite the changing role of the Church of Sweden, it still has >6 million members and continues to hold a strong position in society as the largest civil society organisation, and during the past few years, this has become particularly clear in relation to the relatively high number of refugees who have come to Sweden. The church is often taking a leading role in various projects in relation to refugees, and the Swedish government is also expecting the church to do that (Helgesson Kjellin 2015: 78). Research furthermore shows that the Church of Sweden continues to play an important role for many Swedes, particularly in the big events in one's life, such as baptisms, weddings and funerals (Bromander 2005: 71).

The Church of Sweden has long and often strong relations with churches globally, not least through the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches. These relations were often formed during mission work in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when churches from the North/West carried out mission work in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Over the years, these relations have changed, not least due to the political changes that have transformed church relations, for instance on the African continent. These changing power relations between churches on a global level bear consequences also

at the local level, for instance in the parish in southern Stockholm, which is the focus of this article.

With the legacy of being a state church, where church membership was closely connected to nationality and citizenship, and with the history of being a strong and rich-majority church on the global level, a changing Swedish society and the changing power relations globally among churches challenge the Church of Sweden in various ways.

## The Study

The present study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between March 2014 and May 2015 in one parish situated in southern Stockholm, Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Focus for the study that the article builds on is a network of parishes in the Church of Sweden, called 'The Future Lives with Us'.<sup>2</sup> The network consists of 25 parishes in the Church of Sweden, all situated in suburbs characterised by cultural and religious diversity, as well as by great social needs. The parishes in the network are all involved with diversity work, and one of the goals of the network is to raise issues of cultural and religious diversity in the Church of Sweden both for reflection and in order to challenge and question taken-for-granted ways of doing things in the church.

The overall aim of the research project was to describe and analyse the practical and reflective diversity work that is taking place in this context. Some of the questions that were guiding me in the overall study were as follows: What does diversity work entail in this context? How are both openness and boundaries being manifested? And how is power being shown in different kinds of situations? The empirical material and the analysis deal with issues of identity: What kind of church do we want to be? What values and theological interpretations are non-negotiable, and what is negotiable? How can churches be rooms for integration, where migrants coming to Sweden are given space to contribute as well as experience a sense of belonging? Whereas diversity can entail many things, for instance ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and diversity across religions, this study mainly deals with Christian diversity, when Christians with other national and/or cultural backgrounds get involved in the Church of Sweden.

The network is a grassroots movement among employees and volunteers, formed with the aim of supporting one another and to share experiences of what it means to be a Lutheran church in areas characterised by cultural and religious diversity, and where few of the residents are members of the Church of Sweden. The fact that these parishes have relatively few members does not mean that they do not have a lively church life. On the contrary, every day people come to these churches for various reasons, even if they are not members of the church or even call themselves Christians. The churches in these suburbs are experienced as 'living rooms'; people come there to have a cup of coffee, to read a newspaper, to participate in a language course, to pray or to talk to one of the employees. Not least is the diaconal work, of great importance. When all other doors are closed, the Church of Sweden is experienced to be a gateway into the Swedish society. The church services on

Sundays draw people from various Christian and religious traditions and, compared to the negative statistical curves when it comes to attendance in church services in the Church of Sweden as a whole, the employees and active members in the parishes in the network tell of full churches on Sunday mornings.

Although the focus for my fieldwork was the parish in southern Stockholm, I also carried out fieldwork in the network as a whole. Participation at various gatherings at the network level and undertaking shorter field visits in the respective city where the network is represented were combined with in-depth, semi-structured interviews and closer participant observation in this parish in southern Stockholm. I interviewed 30 people, both men and women, who in various ways were involved with the work of the parish, either as employees or as volunteers, or as involved church visitors. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, sometimes with the help of an interpreter.

## **Mekane Yesus and Its Relationship with the Church of Sweden**

Due to war, political disorder and violence, thousands of Ethiopians and Eritreans have – over the past few decades – fled their home countries. Some of these refugees have come to Sweden and, in 2015, there were approximately 40,000 Ethiopians and Eritreans living in Sweden. Due to their presence in the Swedish society, various religious groups have been established, among them the EECMY or the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.<sup>3</sup>

Mekane Yesus means ‘a house for Jesus’, and with its membership of 7.2 million members, it is one of the largest Lutheran churches in the world. It is furthermore growing rapidly, not least on the Ethiopian countryside (Gebremedhin 2008: 89–90). Mekane Yesus has to a great extent been affected by the war and political violence that has plagued Ethiopia and Eritrea. Over the years, many church leaders were arrested and put in jail, and religion was seen by the Marxist regime as something that ought to be fought, particularly churches with roots in mission movements from Western, capitalist countries (Gebremedhin 2008: 94). The war has also resulted in conflicts and division within Mekane Yesus; polarisation along political lines, class and ethnicity, as well as language lines, have caused turbulence and various loyalties exist among the members. These divisions linger on even today.

In the year 2013, the leadership of Mekane Yesus declared that it would end its official relationship with the Church of Sweden and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) due to different opinions on same-sex marriage. The decision resulted in a broken fellowship and has affected relations between Ethiopians and Swedes at various levels, also the relations in the parish in southern Stockholm. In my interviews, feelings of disappointment come across, and a deep mistrust as to how the church that once came with the gospel to Ethiopia and Eritrea has ended up in what is understood as being a fundamentally wrong interpretation of the Bible. This situation illuminates current global church divisions, not only among Lutheran churches, and can partly be understood due to the changing power relations between churches in the North and churches in the South.

These church relations have, to a great extent, been transformed during the second half of the twentieth century as part of the decolonisation process resulting in autonomous churches in the South wanting to decide themselves over theology and church politics (ter Haar 2008: 242). However, the fact that the Church of Sweden still provides support to the humanitarian work that Mekane Yesus is carrying out is just one example of many of how churches in the North continue to have strong power positions due to economic wealth. International church relations are still, to a great extent, affected by the colonial experience and the post-colonial situation.

There is a growing transnational fellowship of Mekane Yesus churches. Various networks exist, and the Mekane Yesus association in southern Stockholm plays a crucial role as one of the nodes for information and for networking internationally. Research shows how migration is an ongoing process, where home and belonging exist at several places at the same time (Adogame 2013: 9). In this situation, Mekane Yesus – as a worldwide church, with its head office in Addis Ababa – plays an important role in maintaining a sense of fellowship and common identity, despite long geographical distances.

This brief description regarding church relations between Mekane Yesus and the Church of Sweden is important in order to understand the relationship between the Mekane Yesus association and the Church of Sweden in the parish in southern Stockholm. The broken relationship at the official level between the two churches affects the relationship at the local level, although everyone involved is eager to emphasise the importance of having a continuous relationship, despite differences and difficulties in understanding one another.

## **Mekane Yesus in Southern Stockholm – Identity Construction and Belonging**

One of the members explains how it happened that a Mekane Yesus association was established in Stockholm almost 30 years ago: ‘We used to go to a [Ethiopian] Pentecostal congregation, but we didn’t feel at home there. Baptism and the communion were not done the way we’re used to’. He wanted to baptise his child, but not in the Pentecostal congregation. He knew some other Ethiopians living in Stockholm, among them a man who was working as a priest in the Church of Sweden, and together, they decided to form a Mekane Yesus association. Three families began meeting every Saturday to celebrate church services and pray together. That is how it started. Since then, the association has continued to grow and continues to do so until today. He emphasises the Lutheran identity as being very important and how Pentecostals often are sceptical towards them, particularly when it comes to baptism of infants. This example of the relationship between Ethiopian Pentecostals and Ethiopian Lutherans shows the importance of not homogenising migrants with the same ethnicity or nationality. There are many factors, such as religious belonging, that point towards what Vertovec has called ‘super-diversity’, the great diversity that exists among migrants with the same ethnic or national background (Vertovec 2007: 1044–1049).

Adogame (2013: 209–213) raises leadership to be of great importance in the process of founding a church or religious community. In this case, it was a combination of relations between three families that already knew each other hailing from Ethiopia and the fact that one of the men was already employed as a priest in the Church of Sweden that worked together and made it possible to become part of the Church of Sweden.

Then, why is it important to belong to Mekane Yesus? Language is a recurring aspect that is emphasised by those that I have interviewed. To be able to pray and sing in one's own language is expressed as a very powerful experience. But language is not the only thing, being Lutheran is a strong identity that several bring up in conversations with me. One of the leaders says: 'I grew up in the Lutheran church. For me, the Lutheran church is not a closed church, but an open church. This openness gives me security and I also see it as a bridge between many different churches and branches. This identity gives me great freedom and many opportunities. Another man emphasises the common historical background in Ethiopia and Eritrea to be of great significance:

*I think it has to do with a sense of home. Mekane Yesus is the oldest Evangelical church in the country that goes way back to 1866 in Eritrea. Our fathers in Mekane Yesus have paid a price, we have that kind of background. We have existed in tension with the Orthodox Church that was on the side of the political power. The first evangelicals were persecuted, imprisoned and killed. And the theology also played an important role. The gospel, the good news, there was something dramatic about it. It liberated us from evil spirits, from fear, and the sense that you had to work, work, work in order to be accepted by God. The message of grace. [...] In Ethiopia this was a revolution, it changed everything. And the songs, everyone sang, and women could sit next to the men in church, the children were there. Education, health care, to be clean and diligent...it was a revolution. That feeling... Our fathers received all this and passed it on to the next generation. Our psalms, our choirs...it is a sense of being at home, of fellowship, that we're brothers and sisters, and that is what everyone wants to have here as well.*

What he brings up is the importance of cherishing a heritage, a heritage that their forefathers and mothers fought and suffered for. He describes how the message of the missionaries revolutionised societies and churches; everyone was welcome, women and men could sit together and the message of grace was liberating. But, he raises yet another aspect of why the identity of being part of Mekane Yesus is important: 'Mekane Yesus was a respected church. There were diplomats and ministers that were members. So it is that kind of feeling...' Over time, Mekane Yesus became a respected church, a heritage that is important to cherish, particularly in a situation of coming as a migrant to another country. In Ethiopia/Eritrea, many of the members in this association had prestigious jobs and positions in society, while in Sweden, it is not uncommon that many are stuck in a negative loop of short-term jobs and unemployment. This has, in some cases, resulted in bad self-esteem and depression (Gebremedhin 1997: 11). In such a situation, it is even more important to remember where one comes from and the kind of respect and status that one once had. The Lutheran identity that repeatedly is being emphasised in the interviews encompasses

many things: a heritage to cherish, ways of practicing the Christian faith, in contrast to – for instance – Pentecostals, and the particular songs that are being sung in the church service. These aspects are all intertwined in the concept ‘Lutheran identity’. The Lutheran identity and belonging are also manifested through bodily attire, for instance among the choir singers through the wearing of a special dress.

Do religious communities, such as this one, contribute to integration in the new country, or does belonging to such a community hinder integration? According to Connor (2014: 72–76), whether religion is a bridge or a barrier to integration depends on many things, not the least being what religious affiliation one has, as well as the country of destination. And as Nordin (2016: 34) notes, one can imagine that belonging to a majority church such as the Church of Sweden or to, for instance, minority churches in the Swedish context such as Orthodox churches, or African Pentecostal churches, greatly affects the prospects for integration into the wider society. One young man from Nigeria who has chosen to get involved in the Church of Sweden told me that he used to go to an African Pentecostal church in the Stockholm region, but now has chosen to join the Church of Sweden instead, thus hoping to get closer to Swedes and to the Swedish society. His example indicates what Nordin suggests, that it might be the case that church affiliation affects prospects for integration into the wider society.

The importance of religious communities for the individual members when it comes to various forms of support while settling in a new country is undisputed, although there are particularities to each situation (see for instance Connor 2014; Rose Ebaugh & Saltzman Chafetz 2000; Straut Eppsteiner & Hagan 2016). Adogame (2013: 103–107) emphasises the importance of religious communities when it comes to providing the members with a social, cultural and religious/spiritual capital that, in many ways, plays a crucial role for individuals who have left their country of origin and are trying to establish themselves in a new place. The religious community offers relationships and networks that often work in supportive ways for the individual, as well as offering religious identity, values, morals and visions. Connor (2014) shows, from a life course perspective, how the personal faith changes in the lives of migrants. Alvarsson (2016: 183–187) similarly emphasises that there are different phases that migrants experience during the identity construction; the identity of being a migrant successively changes to an identity of being an immigrant, although I would like to add that there are no clear-cut distinctions between these different phases. In this process, the religious community often functions as a home where there is place for nostalgia, and where understandings of time, place and memory are intertwined. Furthermore, the religious community is a place where stories can be told and listened to, and where individual experiences are interpreted in relation to the Biblical stories and in the collective of the fellowship (Alvarsson 2016: 187–188).

Petros, one of the leaders of Mekane Yesus in Stockholm, confirms the importance of a fellowship where social, cultural and religious/spiritual capital are intertwined:

*We that meet here have a similar background, the same language, we can share problems and difficulties with one another. For example, recently there were thirty Ethiopians*

*executed in Libya, it was important to meet and talk about that. People came here and cried and talked and that means a lot. But it is important to continue to integrate in society, and not only stay in this community. But it is also very important to meet like this, many wounds are healed that way. It is important to share similar experiences with one another and to be able to do it in the native tongue.*

What he underscores in this quote is that migration is a lifelong process and not a process with a clear beginning and a clear end. Rather, it is a continuous process where belonging and home exist both 'here' and 'there'. Relationships with family and friends 'back home' are maintained and, through remittances, social media, email and telephone, people living in the diaspora are involved in various ways with what happens in the country of origin (Kubai 2015: 83–85). The people that I have interviewed express that they identify themselves as both Swedes and Ethiopians: 'When I'm in Ethiopia, I long for Sweden, and when I'm here, I long for Ethiopia', as one person puts it.

To the members of the Mekane Yesus association in Stockholm, the belonging and fellowship that they experience there is important in a situation of migration and of living in the diaspora. Language, the cultural background and the common history go hand in hand with religious belonging, what they describe as the Lutheran identity. Furthermore, sharing meals on Saturdays after the church service is important for the fellowship that exists among those that come.

### **'...maybe it is the case that you cannot stand African expressions...'**

Despite the long-term relationship between the Mekane Yesus association and the Church of Sweden in this particular parish, it is not always easy to understand one another and work together, as leaders on both sides tell me. It has become even more difficult after the broken official relationship between the two churches. There is a lack of trust, I am being told. The vicar in the parish tells about an episode that happened just before Christmas:

*Can I tell you about an episode...It was just before Christmas. We were out on the square handing out glogg and ginger bread to people passing by and telling about our Christmas programme. Then, we discovered that there was a group from Mekane Yesus on the square, evangelising with loud music playing. Those from us experienced that the woman evangelising was performing in a way that felt very different from what we are used to in the Church of Sweden. She was shouting out loud and waving her arms: 'Jesus!', in a way that is not at all congruent with our tradition.*

A person went in to the vicar and asked her to come out and see what was going on. She went to a person in the Mekane Yesus association and said that the way they were evangelising was not really working in the Swedish context: 'I said, "I don't think it works, because people out on the square are not speaking Amarinja and what are you inviting people to?"'

‘We want to tell people about Jesus’, he said. ‘Well, that’s great’, I said, ‘we want to do that as well’.

The woman who evangelised out on the square later came to the vicar and asked to talk to her. They sat for 2 hours and talked about the situation that had occurred:

*She said: ‘You must accept that we Africans think differently’. But I don’t agree with that, because we also have Africans that come to our ordinary Sunday service. So, I said: ‘I think we need to talk about how we express our faith and reflect upon what goes well in the Swedish society and how people that pass by on the square react. And also, that we are one church. If we instead go out and evangelise together, it gives a much stronger impression’. [...] But this woman repeated that ‘maybe it is the case that you cannot stand African expressions’. It is good that she reminds me that that might be the case, or at least, that it can be interpreted that way. [...] The conversation ended with us praying together. And she also said that: ‘I will try to act in a calmer way next time’. Because I said to her that I think you will be more successful if you act a bit calmer out on the square. ‘And I would also like to know when you will be evangelising next time, not so that I can control you, but because it is good if people come and ask. A lot of things have to do with information, and there are cultural differences as well in relation to that. Maybe it sounds as if I am a very controlling person, but I am not really’.*

She ends with a little laugh and states that it is so easy to misunderstand one another and that a lot has to do with a lack of communication. The situation that is painted in this quote points at the practical and reflective diversity work that the employees in this parish are involved in. It is a practical situation that occurs out on the public square, which leads to a dialogue that illuminates polarised positions but also results in an effort of finding common ground, not least through the act of praying.

Studies of African migrant churches in Sweden show that the religious fellowship works so as to strengthen a religious identity, an identity anchored in spirituality, ‘spiritual capital’, which stands in contrast to the mainline churches in the country that are seen as being too liberal. The African churches resist the acceptance of gay marriages, homosexuality, sexual relations outside marriage, divorce and abortion (Alvarsson 2016: 185–186; Kubai 2014: 174–176). Through the religious fellowship, they gain self-confidence that they also want to make visible in the public space, such as in the square (Knott 2016: 85–86; Kubai 2014: 184–185). The identity of being the ‘real’ Christians, in contrast to the liberalism of the majority of Christians in Sweden, is an important part of the identity construction (Alvarsson 2016: 186). The Swedish established churches, on the other hand, see the African churches as loud, charismatic and patriarchal, with a non-acceptable conservative theology in relation to, for instance, human sexuality and gender roles. The differences are experienced as being too big, therefore cooperation is unusual.

In this short example presented here, different opinions between the various actors involved arose regarding how the parish should present itself in the public space. The charismatic character of Mekane Yesus is a stumbling block for the Church of Sweden. Petros, one of the pastors in the Mekane Yesus association, states that the influence of

Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity is strong in Mekane Yesus and that there are great difficulties for many of their members to feel at home in an ordinary Sunday service in the Church of Sweden.

But it also had to do with differences in terms of planning and performing different activities. This has also become clear in the planning and implementation of the Saturday school, which the Mekane Yesus association holds every Saturday for the children, while the adults celebrate their church service. One of the employees of the Church of Sweden has been involved in organising the Saturday school and in teaching the volunteers who are involved in the school. From the side of the Church of Sweden, this was an important step in order to get more involved in the activities of Mekane Yesus, to get to know the people that come there every Saturday and to get an insight into the culture and the theology of the association. This was seen as a way to reach the children and youth so that they would get more involved in the other activities of the church. The organising of the Saturday school is an example of how diversity work also is about creating order and to find forms of cooperation that everyone involved can agree upon. In this case, it was not an easy process, and there are differences among those involved when it comes to visions for the Saturday school, not least when it comes to expectations directed towards the children and youth.

The vicar expresses a hope that over time, Mekane Yesus will come closer to the Church of Sweden, both in theology and in practices. The employees also have expectations that many of the youth involved in Mekane Yesus, who are also taking part in other activities organised by the Church of Sweden, will get closer to the Church of Sweden and experience that the Church of Sweden, rather than Mekane Yesus, is their church. It has to do with integration, as they put it. The vicar expresses that the theological stance that Mekane Yesus takes on various issues is very problematic, and she also states that, for the youth, it would be much better if they would find the Church of Sweden to be their religious home rather than Mekane Yesus, which is hardly present in Sweden, apart from in this particular parish. However, from the Mekane Yesus point of view, belonging to Mekane Yesus – for its members – has to do with a strengthening of their identity, of connecting back to their land of origin, something that they also want their children to experience. It comes through in my interviews that several parents experience the Swedish society to be good in many ways, but it is also a dangerous society, and they oppose the liberal attitudes in relation to issues of morality, attitudes they mean that the Church of Sweden has also adopted. This goes in line with research among immigrant groups in the USA, where parents who have migrated from various countries often find the American society to be morally dangerous for their children (Rose Ebaugh & Saltzman Chafetz 2000: 431–435).

The vicar expresses that she understands the importance of the fellowship that the members of the Mekane Yesus association share:

*This Ethiopian group, in many ways, they are integrated in society. They have good jobs, at least many of them. For them, there are many bridges into the Swedish society. While, for us, [meaning Swedes in the Church of Sweden], this is about trying to integrate with this group, for them coming here is an opportunity to meet with people from their home*

country, just like the Church of Sweden in London for instance, to come home for a short while.<sup>4</sup>

She reflects upon possible ways forward:

*Is it practicable for the future to have different groups celebrating church services in different languages, or can we find other ways forward? We have tried to have our church service interpreted into different languages, but we have not been so successful with that. Maybe it is the case that the first generation [of immigrants] have such strong roots with their native language so that the second language can never compete with that when it comes to reaching the heart?*

She is a person who, for many years, has been involved in diversity work and in supporting asylum seekers and refugees. She is highly committed to the Church of Sweden becoming a more-inclusive and open church, and she has a lot of experience in this area. As a vicar and employee in the Church of Sweden, her identity is closely intertwined with the involvement with refugees and asylum seekers. At the same time, she states how difficult it is to really understand one another and how easy it is to end up in misunderstandings despite good intentions. She expresses both joy and frustration: 'I think it is so exciting and rewarding; at the same time, I get so tired over things that keep repeating themselves, difficulties when it comes to understanding one another'. She ends by stating that diversity work probably demands much more time and effort than she and her colleagues have at their disposal.

## Conclusions

The case presented in this article illuminates post-colonial church relations and how these relations are manifested in various ways in the local arena. The case furthermore shows that long, deep-seated relations matter; it is more difficult to end a relationship that goes a long way back and that involves both shared and contested memories as well as personal relations.

The article illuminates several questions that established churches in Europe are currently facing: What does it mean to say that one is open for diversity? What does that openness mean when it comes to differences? And where are the lines drawn? What is negotiable and what is not? As the article shows, the differences that come to the fore are about ways of communicating, ways of expression, ways of worship, ways of evangelising, but also about theological differences and different expectations from one another. While the employees in this particular parish are consciously striving to be a church that is open for the cultural and religious diversity in this suburb – which is an important part of their identity as a church and as employees in the Church of Sweden – situations occur, such as the one described out on the square, where misunderstandings come to the fore. Stereotypes are also being reinforced in various ways. The parish is – for instance – collecting and transferring money for children's education in Ethiopia. This project, as important as it

is, mirrors the colonial times in many ways, with help coming from the North to help the poor and needy African children, while the episode out on the square echoes stereotypes of loud and dancing Africans. Positions from the colonial past are being repeated but also challenged to some extent. Returning to Connor (2014: 72–76), the charismatic character of Mekane Yesus is, in the context of the Church of Sweden, a barrier to integration, while adaptation to the Church of Sweden's theology and 'style' would probably function as a bridge to integration.

While the vicar in the parish expresses that she hopes for more integration with the Mekane Yesus association and that they would get theologically closer to the Church of Sweden, the ethnographic material rather shows that for members of Mekane Yesus, it is the sense of belonging and the fellowship that they experience that are the reasons why they come to this particular parish. There they can speak in their language, sing their songs, share their stories and transfer what they see to be a morally correct Christianity, a 'true Christianity', as well as cultural belonging, to their children. Ethnicity is downplayed due to the political tensions that come with that; rather, it is the common Christian/Lutheran and cultural heritage that is being emphasised in various ways. However, under the surface of things, the Mekane Yesus association is also a 'contested space' (Frederiks 2016: 17) between the generations, where youth question their parents' views on – for instance – homosexuality.

Despite differences and difficulties in cooperating and understanding one another, leaders from both Mekane Yesus and the Church of Sweden want to continue the relationship. To use Ahmed's (2012: 174–175) image of diversity work as transforming walls into tables, this is what they are trying to do. In the case of the woman evangelist and the vicar, the wall was transformed into a table, and it was possible to sit down, talk and try to understand one another. Power dynamics come to the fore in this conversation, and the act of praying was one way to find a way forward. Religious practices have the potential to enable continued dialogue, despite deep-seated differences. The prayer in this example opened up a 'space for change' (Knott 2016: 74), although what the outcome would be remained unclear.

The leadership of the Church of Sweden and Mekane Yesus respectively express that the fact that both churches belong to the worldwide Lutheran fellowship is enabling for the future. From the side of Mekane Yesus, they express a wish that the Church of Sweden would be more curious to learn about other Lutheran churches that are coming to Sweden. Their experience is that there is a great interest when it comes to international partner relations with churches in the so-called South, but when these churches come closer geographically, as in the case of the Mekane Yesus, the interest fades. The differences that are exciting at a distance come inconveniently close when they even end up in the same church building, as in the case presented in this article. Also, when church relations are at a distance, they often involve the transfer of money to various aid projects, and in that situation, the roles of the parties are given, in comparison to the roles described in this article.

What comes out strongly in the ethnographic material for this study is that what is considered to be Lutheran among the employees of the Church of Sweden is strongly rooted in a Swedish political context that emphasises gender equality and liberal values on various

issues (Blåder 2015: 9), and similarly, the Lutheran identity expressed in the context of Mekane Yesus is to the same extent characterised by the cultural and political context that it comes from. Thus, when looking under the surface of the concept of 'Lutheran identity', it is clearly the case that it is a deeply contextual concept, where the Christian faith and conviction are closely connected to various historical, political, social and cultural factors.

## Notes

1. The study was published in 2016 as *En bra plats att vara på*, Artos Academic, Skellefteå.
2. In Swedish: "*Framtiden bor hos oss*".
3. Other Ethiopian/Eritrean churches in Sweden are Orthodox churches, as well as various Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.
4. The Church of Sweden is present in 40 countries, with local parishes for Swedes living abroad.

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