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# The Role of Migrant Churches in Danish Integration

by  
Julie K. Allen

Christian religious belief has been a central factor in the creation and maintenance of Danish cultural identity for more than a thousand years, but it has also been an integral part of Danish interactions with the rest of the world. Although the Frankish monk Saint Ansgar (801–865)—the patron saint of Scandinavia—is often given credit for converting the pagan Danes in the ninth century, it was King Harald Bluetooth’s baptism in 965 CE that made religious identity and religious conformity a fundamental principle of membership in the Danish state. For the next nine centuries, the exercise of religious belief in Denmark adhered to the principles of *cuius regio, eius religio*, and *jus emigrandi*: i.e., the ruler determines the religion of the country and if you don’t like it, you have the right to leave. Harald Bluetooth’s decision was largely a political one, designed to reduce the interference of the country’s powerful southern neighbor, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, in Danish affairs, but his decree that all Danes follow his example ensured that Christian belief became an essential part of the Danish lifestyle.

Nearly five centuries later, when King Christian III introduced the Protestant Reformation in Schleswig-Holstein and the kingdom of Denmark, he relied heavily on the German Lutheran Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), who had been Martin Luther’s pastor in Wittenberg. Bugenhagen created the rules for the new Danish Lutheran church, which encompassed religious practice, schooling, and social issues. The Danish people remained Christians, but they adapted to a new way of expressing that Christian belief. The Danish monarch became the leader and protector of the Danish church, a relationship that was formalized and heightened by the 1665 *Lex Regia* or *Kongeloven* (King’s Law), which established absolute monarchy in Denmark and specified not only that the religion of the state was the king’s religion, but also that it was the king’s responsibility to ensure his subjects’ conformity to that religion, which meant that being Danish was

essentially identical with being Lutheran. For the next two centuries, there was not just complete unity between church and state; there was no distinction between the two. The Danish monarch functioned as the head of the church and its pastors in many instances as an extension of government bureaucracy.

In June 1849, Denmark became a constitutional monarchy and adopted a constitution written almost single-handedly by Bishop Ditlev Gothard Monrad (1811–1887). Drawing his inspiration from American and British models, Monrad included a provision for the free exercise of religion, which broke with the long-established precedent that you had to be Lutheran to be fully Danish. Paragraph 81 of the June Constitution (paragraph 67 in the current version) decreed that “citizens shall have the right to gather together in communities to worship God in the manner consistent with their convictions, as long as nothing is done that contravenes civic order and common morality.” Although the convention decided to omit the first few words of Monrad’s proposal, which declared explicitly that “religious freedom is hereby granted,” the inclusion of *de facto* religious freedom in the June Constitution represented a significant step beyond the almost complete lack of religious liberty in Denmark up to that point. Rather than establishing a level playing field for all religions, however, the June Constitution simply legalized the existence and activities of other religious communities in Denmark while preserving the dominant position of the state church, which the June Constitution also established as *Den danske Folkekirke* or simply *Folkekirken*. In my recent book, *Danish but Not Lutheran* (2017), I tell the story of how the establishment of religious freedom in Denmark came about and how various parts of Danish society reacted when around twenty-three thousand Danes took advantage of that right and converted to Mormonism between 1850 and 1920.

In this article, I explore how the correlation of Danish identity with Christian belief intersects with the pressing questions of immigration and integration in Denmark. Even before the establishment of religious freedom, a few alternative religious communities were allowed to exist and function in Denmark, such as the *Brødremenighed* (Brethren’s Congregation) of German Moravians in Christiansfeld in southern Jutland, which dates to 1773, but, as a rule, non-Lutheran

religious communities in Denmark prior to 1800 were made up of foreigners. Members of these churches were subject to a plethora of legal restrictions on where they could worship, whom they could marry, and what kind of religious education their children could receive, all of which served to underscore their cultural difference from the Lutheran Danes they lived among. King Frederick III granted religious freedom to all inhabitants of the newly established fortress town of Fredericia in central-eastern Jutland in 1682, in order to entice settlers to the area. The tactic worked and the town soon became home to both a garrison of Catholic mercenaries and Denmark's largest Jewish community, made up primarily of Ashkenazi Jews from Germany who worked in tobacco manufacturing and retail trading. A smaller group of Jews in Copenhagen, led by the court jeweler Meyer Goldschmidt, were granted the right to hold private religious services in Goldschmidt's home in 1684, which they did for the next fifty years. Similarly, Catholic and Reformed services could only be conducted in chapels attached to foreign embassies (notably the Austro-Hungarian Embassy) at first and later in a few specially designated churches, such as the Reformed Church on St. Kongensgade in Copenhagen. Members of non-Lutheran groups who married Danes had to get permission from the king and commit to raising their children as Lutherans.

The tradition of churches made up of foreigners led by an immigrant pastor, holding services in Denmark usually in a language other than Danish, gave rise to the concept of the *migrantmenighed* (migrant church). The term encompasses congregations from all manner of Christian religious traditions and ethnicities, from Greek Orthodox to French Reformed to Korean Presbyterian, but usually 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—such as the International Church of Copenhagen, which was founded in 1962 as a branch of the American Lutheran Church (ALC)—while others collaborate informally with individual churches in Denmark. As of 2009, there were approximately two hundred registered migrant churches in Denmark, representing a wide range of theological views and styles of worship (Sørensen 2009, 4). They are categorized as ei-

ther historical, international, or ethnic. Over the centuries, migrant churches have 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.

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, dogmatik og kirkehistorie" (9) (living, pulsing communities that neither conform to Danish church norms nor can be tamed by tradition, dogma, or church history),<sup>2</sup> 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 Robert Putnam's concept of "bridging" or inclusive social capital than of its counterpart, bonding social capital (Putnam 2000, 22). Bonding social capital 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 2012, 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.

What the longstanding existence and recent growth of migrant churches in Denmark reveals is that, contrary to popular perceptions that Denmark has traditionally been ethnically and culturally homogeneous, Danish society has been multicultural for centuries, with German speakers, Jews, French Huguenots, Greenlanders, and the children of Danish officials and Ghanaian women, to name just a few groups, leavening the Danish Lutheran mainstream. Today, the multi-

cultural 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. Moreover, the recent growth in migrant churches in Denmark has taken place in inverse relation to declining attendance and membership in *Folkekirken*. Danmarks Statistik estimated that in 2016, approximately 76 percent of Danes were nominally members of *Folkekirken*,<sup>1</sup> yet less than 10 percent of them attended worship services regularly (Jenkins 2014, 236).

Migrant churches offer a way for newcomers to Denmark to find a community and begin to integrate themselves into Danish society, but active involvement in a migrant church also marks people as different from other Danes, who are generally passively religious or even more secularly oriented. As Norwegian scholar Marianne Gullestad (2002) has shown, equality is often regarded as synonymous with sameness in Scandinavia (68), with the result being that integration efforts often serve, according to Danish scholar Karen Fog Olwig (2012), to designate “who belongs—and by implication who does not belong” (2). 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 (2014) 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). In 2009, for example, approximately 40 percent of all first- and second-generation immigrants in Denmark self-identified as Christian (Sørensen 2009, 4). Aside from immigrants from within the European Union and other Nordic countries, many Christian immigrants like these 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. As Thomassen et al. note, the concentration of Christians in the world has shifted over the past hundred years

from approximately 80 percent residing in Europe and North America to roughly 65 percent living in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Thomassen 2004, 9). This paper attempts to address the gap in scholarship about African Christians in Denmark, particularly women, based on the oral histories of African Christian women in Denmark that were collected between 2015 and 2017.

Like all immigrants, African Christians in Denmark experience a period of adjustment to their new country, 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 behavior can be radically different between countries. Marked as non-Danish by their skin color and speech, their visible difference can trigger what R. D. Grillo (2003) describes as “cultural anxiety” (157) for some of their Danish neighbors, 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.

### **New Covenant Church of Jesus Christ**

One of the women I interviewed was Rebekah, a home health aide in Aarhus who came to Denmark with her mother and brother from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2004 at the age of fourteen. She grew up Catholic in the DRC, but her family was not able to continue attending Catholic services regularly after their resettlement in a rural village in northern Jutland. Even when they did attend, it didn’t feel the same as what she was used to from home because of cultural differences in worship style. She recalled,

In the beginning when we first came to Denmark we didn’t learn the language, we didn’t know even where the church actually is. And when we found out, it was far away and we

have to you know go there and once in a while we did, but the beginning it was so different. The culture, the Danish culture was so different. It was quiet. And that was a turn-off because it was completely quiet. Because in Africa, when I say church I mean music I mean dancing, people are there, they're alive. And then I got to the church here and it was just so boring. I fell asleep the first day. I woke up when it was time for communion but I slept through the rest of the sermon. It was just so quiet. It was just so boring. And my mom and I were looking at each other and plus we did not understand.

After several experiences like this, Rebekah gave up attending church and lost all belief in God for the next few years. When she turned eighteen and moved away from home, however, she felt a renewed need for spiritual guidance and recommitted to her Christian faith. At a friend's invitation, she attended the New Covenant Church of Jesus Christ (NCCJC) in Viby, a migrant church congregation founded by a Congolese pastor named Daniel Mbala, whom his parishioners address as Apostle Daniel.

The lively style of worship and tight-knit community at NCCJC appealed to her, and the church soon became the center of her social life. 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." One of the things that distinguishes this church is the members' decision to abstain from drinking alcohol. Although she spent most of her formative teenage and young adult years in Denmark and graduated from a Danish high school, Rebekah 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 and motivates her to turn even more to her church community for her sense of belonging.

Pastor Mbala is conscious about the church's role in facilitating integration, not just of immigrants into Danish society but also as a means of contributing to Danish society. He founded NCCJC in 2012 in order to bring about a religious revival in Denmark. When he first arrived in Denmark from the DRC, he was concerned at the peripheral role of religious belief and practice in Danish society. He believes that he was called of God to establish a non-denominational church in Denmark and to preach to the Danish people. Services are held in English, in order to make his message available to the largest possible number of people, and about sixty people attend services each week, the majority of them young people. The congregation is largely made up of Africans from many different countries, many of whom have lived in Denmark since childhood. He tries to reach out to Danes as well, but he worries that Danes often feel judged by the immigrants' religiosity and scared off by the exuberance of the NCCJC services. He believes that his calling to preach to the Danish people will be fulfilled through his parishioners, who embrace Christianity and share it with their friends and neighbors.

He is also explicit in his sermons about the need for his parishioners to integrate into Danish society, though not at the expense of compromising biblical values. At one Wednesday evening Bible study with about twenty-five young men and women, he told stories of some African immigrants who receive financial assistance from the state but drive flashy cars, buy expensive furniture, and throw parties. He warned his parishioners that that kind of behavior alienates their Danish neighbors and advised them to be humble and resist the temptation to flaunt their possessions. At the same time, however, the pastor was uncompromising about his view that the Danish approach to marriage as an equal partnership conflicted with the biblical injunction that women have primary responsibility for their homes and families. As an example, he expressed disdain for women who can't cook and praised a wife who is willing to get up at 2 a.m. to make the traditional West African dish of ground plantains called "fufu" for her husband.

## ICC

In Copenhagen, I interviewed several members of the International Christian Community (ICC). ICC was founded in 2002 by Pastor Ravi Chandran, who was raised a Hindu in Singapore, but was baptized a Christian at age eighteen 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 counseling 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 with 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 have rented 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 marriages 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, 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, when Danish is used. The service is quite informal, with potluck Q&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, was familiar.

One of the ICC parishioners I interviewed was Oni, a woman from Rwanda. 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 she got a visa for, she struggled with the weather, the tasteless food, and loneliness (despite the crowding in the asylum center), 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 Dan-

ish culture 100 percent, 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, they don’t 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 honor-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.

## **Conclusion**

The complex challenges of integrating immigrants into Danish society require many different approaches, from public policy initiatives to individual outreach efforts. From my interviews with African Christian women in Denmark, it becomes very clear that migrant churches can and do play a pivotal role in helping newcomers, immigrants for whom religious belief and practice is or becomes important, to find a community in Denmark through which they can make contributions to Danish society and thereby integrate themselves. Just as the introduction of religious freedom in Denmark in 1849 seemed to pose a threat to the stability of Danish social order, the religious activity of immigrants, outside the *Folkekirke* mainstream and in contrast to widespread Danish secularism, can appear at first glance to be an obstacle to integration by emphasizing difference rather than sameness. However, when sameness is no longer prioritized as the primary goal, immigrants of many different backgrounds have a great deal to offer Danish society, from a renewed interest in spirituality and religion to a more colorful, vibrant approach to everyday life.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/emner/folkekirken/medlemmer-af-folkekirken>, accessed January 17, 2017

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Danish are my own.