

“The future lives with us”: Diversity work and processes of change in the Church of Sweden

Helgesson Kjellin, Kristina (2016). *En bra plats att vara på. En antropologisk studie av mångfaldsarbete och identitetsskapande inom Svenska Kyrkan [A Good Place to Be. An Anthropological Study of Diversity Work and Identity formation in the Church of Sweden]*. Artos & Norma Bokförlag.

Kristina Helgesson Kjellin introduces her book *A Good Place to Be. An Anthropological Study of Diversity Work and Identity formation in the Church of Sweden* with the story of how a small Marian side altar suddenly appears in a church in the suburb Skärholmen outside Stockholm. This type of side altar, common in Catholic and Orthodox Churches, is usually not seen in the Lutheran Church of Sweden. Its appearance in the suburban church can be related to the presence of migrant communities with their roots in other (Christian) traditions, members of which today make up a considerable part of the churchgoers in Sweden. The story of how the side altar became integrated in this Swedish church is one of the examples offered by Helgesson Kjellin of the multifaceted encounters between the tradition of the Church of Sweden and different migrant communities. Through ethnographic studies of such encounters, Helgesson Kjellin aims to illuminate what she refers to as “diversity work” [mångfaldsarbete]. As the term can signify the promotion of diversity regarding a range of categories such as gender, age, sexuality, functionality, ethnicity and religion, the author clarifies that her focus is the “cultural and religious diversity, mainly the Christian diversity” (p.15) that characterize the congregations she has studied. These all belong to a network named “The future lives with us” [Framtiden bor hos oss] formed in 2001 by congregations in a number of urban centers in Sweden around a common vision of the Church of Sweden as “a church for everyone, irrespective of cultural and/or religious background” (p. 15). Fieldwork was conducted among employees and volunteers active in the network, with a special focus on the church in Skärholmen.

The criteria for joining the network is to be a minority congregation (meaning that less than 70% of the inhabitants are members of the Church of Sweden) and to be located in an urban, culturally and religious diverse community. An important feature of these congregations is that in spite of low numbers of members, the level of activity is high with many people coming to the church to pray, to ask for aid and to attend church services. For the churches in the network the burning issue is how to be relevant in their communities under these conditions, including the economic challenge for a post-state church that now depends on membership fees.

Helgesson Kjellin's book could be read as a study of diversity work in a Swedish organization like any other and the author opens up for such a reading as she draws on Sara Ahmed and other scholars researching diversity work in different contexts. Ahmed's (2012) understanding that practical diversity work carries with it a certain reflexivity is important in this study as is her suggestion that diversity work can be thought of as "turning walls into tables." The metaphor implies that organizations have different invisible "walls" that hinder diversity but if they can be made visible and turned into tables for discussion things can move forward. Helgesson Kjellin structures her ethnography around the church building as a physical place that offers different rooms for encounters between people, such as the premises of the congregations where "språkcaféer" (language cafés) or soup kitchens can be organized, "kyrkbacken" (the space outside the church interior) for spontaneous meetings and the church interior for church services, spontaneous visits and individual prayers – the latter practice led to the creation of the side altar mentioned above. Helgesson Kjellin shows how the abstract notion of being an open and inclusive church literally is put at stake in the daily efforts to keep the church premises open to all visitors. Churchgoers with a non-Swedish cultural-religious background bring new practices or habits to the church that in many cases start a series of negotiations with the employees to find a solution acceptable to all – the women of Catholic origin who started to pray to a Marian icon in the church of Skärholmen is one such example as it eventually led to an official inauguration of a side altar in this church. Another example that is explored in detail is the case of a group of Syrian and Iraqi men who regularly come to the so called "kyrkbacken," an open space outside the church interior with tables where one can drink coffee and read newspapers. The men's habit of occupying this space also when services were held led to certain frictions; the employees engaged in a communication with the men that resulted in a better mutual understanding and the start of a "language café," a space to practice and learn Swedish in an informal setting.

In ethnographic descriptions of situations like these, Kjellin brings home her main point: practical, reflexive work for diversity is carried out on a daily basis in a myriad of ways in these churches, experiences of which are highly valuable to the Church of Sweden generally – and beyond since the described situations are not unique to religious spaces.

In the unfolding ethnography, one sometimes wishes that general insights or patterns were spelled out more clearly. The author typically stays close to her interlocutors and returns to their questions about how to build an open church throughout the book. There are, however, various interesting suggestions on how to understand what the walls that Ahmed talks about are made of in this specific case. A key point is that the frictions often originate in a Swedish norm about how to behave in religious contexts. It is worth noticing that many of the examples of negotiations that turn walls into tables also shows what norms could not be transgressed. The Marian side altar that became officially recognized ended up without the plastic flowers put there by the Catholic women. When funeral processions passed the group of Syrian and Iraqi men outside the church interior, they used to rise and bow as a sign of respect, something which by some grieving families was perceived as a disturbing behavior. An important result of the study is that it uncovers in detail the ways in which a norm of “Swedishness” is intertwined with the religious culture of the Church of Sweden, a sort of Swedish Lutheranism bound up with national identity developed over the centuries. In light of this, it is interesting to note that the ideal of an open church includes the radical notion of the “open communion table.” This means that communion is given to everyone who wishes so without any questions asked about faith or baptism - in spite of the existing church order that states baptism as a requirement for receiving communion. A key regulation of religious ritual simply had to be abandoned, judging by the ethnography, without causing major frictions.

Throughout the book, Helgesson Kjellin stresses how easily an “us and them” is re-created, but also seeks to show the genuine efforts in the network to avoid that kind of thinking. Reflecting on how to handle the inequality in the relationship experienced by the most vulnerable, such as undocumented migrants, is one such reflexive practice that is integral to diversity work for employees and volunteers. At the same time, they express a feeling of being left alone without guidelines from the church leadership.

The establishment and integration of the association Mekane Yesus in the church of Skärholmen has its own fascinating story that Helgesson Kjellin dedicates one chapter to. The

Lutheran church Mekane Yesus was founded in Ethiopia by Swedish missionaries in 1959. The association Mekane Yesus in Skärholmen, founded by Ethiopians in the diaspora, is the first and largest Mekane Yesus community in Europe. The association arranges regular church services in amarinha that have been essential for the strong community of Ethiopians and Eritreans in Stockholm. Recently, the long relationship between Mekane Yesus in Ethiopia and the Church of Sweden changed drastically. In line with the idea of “reverse missionizing” based on the perception that Christian churches in the global North has sold out to secular liberal values, Mekane Yesus in Ethiopia broke with the Church of Sweden in 2013 due to differing standpoint on gay marriage. This did not affect the association in Sweden directly, since it technically does not belong to the official Ethiopian church, and both sides in the congregation of Skärholmen wanted to keep things the way they were. This solution is facilitated by a priest of Ethiopian background who holds a key position as a mediator between the different groups in the congregation of Skärholmen. Nevertheless, tensions arise and differences in views on homosexuality need to be handled upfront. The conversations with this priest and other church employees of different African backgrounds that Helgesson-Kjellin relate in this chapter offer a much-needed perspective on diversity work; they stress the dire need of creating cultural diversity among the staff in the Church of Sweden.

The central dilemma faced by the people in the network boils down to the question: If we embrace the notion of being an open church, do we not risk losing our own identity as a church? As put by one of the employees: “what happens to a church...if it lets the walls tumble down?” In the absence of a common agreement about which boundaries are unnegotiable, these evolve in daily practice. What employees and volunteers in the network emphasize vary: combatting racism, xenophobia and homophobia is a key point: “if you have a problem regarding veiled women, you have to go to another church” as one priest puts it. Different aspects of the Lutheran tradition are brought up, such as openness to change and constant reformation in close interaction with society. Further, the notion of “popular/lay priesthood” [allmänna prästdömet] is important, i.e., everyone’s right to interpret the gospels, a right that evens out the authority of the clergy.

Here, Helgesson Kjellin’s book opens up for further inquiries the current processes of change in the Church of Sweden. It is worth noticing that the people coming to the church with varying religious-cultural backgrounds have already brought about change and created new shared experiences. As church historian Bergman (2006) reminds us in his article “Strangers becoming family,” such processes are not new; “strangers” have contributed to change

throughout the history of the Church. The network “The future lives with us” finds itself right at the center of such a current wave of change.

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