

# Time of Encounters

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Work with Asylum Seekers and Newly Settled  
Persons in the Church of Sweden's Parishes  
2015-2016

**Short version**



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## Aim and method

The aim of the study is to investigate the extent of the Church of Sweden's work at parish level concerning asylum seekers and newly settled persons<sup>1</sup>, as well as how the work is organized and which experiences are acquired in the work. The focus in this report is on the high influx of persons seeking asylum in Sweden in 2015 and 2016, with the peak in October and November 2015 when almost 10 000 persons applied for asylum every week. At the same time the work is put in a longer time perspective – for some parishes the work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons have been part of the parish life since decades.

Church of Sweden is an Evangelical Lutheran Church and the largest civil society organization in Sweden, with over 6 million members. The primary unit of the Church of Sweden is the parish. There are currently (2017) 1 367 local parishes that together cover the whole country. A parish is the name of a particular geographical area and implies a pastoral responsibility for all who live or reside there. The parish is at the same time a community of the people that are members of Church of Sweden living in the parish. Parishes are self-governing, while they are part of a diocese and the Church of Sweden Faith Community. Two or more parishes can cooperate in an association of parishes with a shared vicar (head) and joint finances.

The study focuses on the work of the parishes and mentions only briefly the work that takes place at the diocesan level and at the national level in the Church of Sweden. The study does not deal with the extensive humanitarian assistance that Church of Sweden conveys to people in refugee situations around the world.

The study is based on a national survey and five case studies. To get an overall picture of the content, scope and organization of the Church of Sweden's parishes' work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons, a national survey was conducted in October 2016, asking about the work carried out in the last year (October 2015 till October 2016). The survey was sent to all Church of Sweden's associations of parishes and parishes with separate economy with questions that touched on operations in the past 12 months. Of the total of 688 units 65 percent have responded to the survey. The responding units are found in 224 of the country's 290 municipalities. A few follow-up telephone interviews have also been made in response to the questionnaire.

To deepen the understanding of the variation in the work and the diverse local conditions case studies were carried out in five parishes. The parishes were selected in municipalities with a large reception of asylum seekers, while at the same time representing different municipality types and different geographical parts of the country. The five parishes are St. Johns' parish in the municipality of Norrköping, Hammarby parish in Upplands Väsby municipality, Karlskoga parish, Teckomatorp parish in Svalöv municipality and Pajala parish. In every parish both employees, elected representatives and people who are included in the work on a voluntary basis have been interviewed. A total of 35 semi-structured interviews have been carried out.

## Overall picture of the work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons in the Church of Sweden

Church of Sweden has with its nationwide organization the possibility to engage people throughout the country in the local work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons. The broad engagement in this work – the national survey shows that more than 80 percent of all associations of parishes and parishes with separate economy have been involved – implies that the Church of Sweden's activities were carried out both in rural areas as well as in urban settings all around the country. The scope of the work is also reflected in the estimates of how many people participated in the activities. An average month during the period October 2015 till October 2016 parish activities had approximately 37 000 participants that were asylum seekers or newly settled persons. The great interest to contribute to the Church of Sweden's work with asylum seekers among the volunteers has been a necessary condition for the scope and breadth of this large work. An average month

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<sup>1</sup> With newly settled persons we refer to persons that recently have been granted a residence permit in Sweden - after being granted asylum or after coming as a family member of someone granted asylum in Sweden. In Swedish "nyanländ".

during the studied period the national survey tells us that there were approximately 8 000 volunteers involved. The growing commitment among church volunteer also follows a general trend of increased interest in voluntary work.

The scope and extent of these activities are also based on the Church of Sweden's access to personnel and facilities throughout the country. The survey shows that the work has been primarily financed with the parishes own funds. Resources such as personnel and facilities represents a major advantage in connection with rapidly emerging needs in the local context. Not least, it provides space for a flexibility that allows to start new areas of work or expand existing activities in order to respond to an emergency situation.

Parish employees also possess a professional knowledge that is of great asset in the local work. Individual counseling which is an integral part of pastoral work form an important tool in engaging with asylum seekers and newly settled persons.

The national survey shows that it is common to collaborate with other organizations in this work. The parishes in Church of Sweden differ from the findings of earlier studies of other civil society actors' involvement in the reception of asylum seekers by having more cooperation with municipalities and Government agencies, as well as through giving extensive counseling.

## Important preconditions for becoming a relevant actor

The five case studies show that networks already established, with other organizations and with the municipality or Government agencies, are important to quickly get started with activities to meet urgent needs. The five especially studied parishes have all been part of networking in relation to reception of asylum seekers and work for integration already before the fall of 2015. The examples show that networks, collaborations and regular consultations can be initiated by Church of Sweden, the municipality or other civil society actors. The interviews show that cooperation with other organizations often is based on personal relationships which have been build up over time and that employees that are good in building up relations and have an outgoing way of working are crucial.

To be able to quickly start new and extensive activities for asylum seekers the five especially studied parishes have been able to take advantage of resources that were not already being fully used. Human resources have been made available through re-prioritizing tasks among existing staff or recruiting project staff. Volunteers came in large numbers thanks to established networks, good reputation of the work in parish in combination with media attention on the refugee situation which made it easy to mobilize for. Many of the Church of Sweden's parishes also have resources in form of premises not being fully used that could be mobilized e.g. for collection of clothes and language cafés.

The study shows that the geographical location of the parishes' premises influences the possibility to attract asylum seekers and newly settled persons to Church of Sweden's activities. With premises which are located well visible in the center or adjacent to areas where a high proportion of asylum seekers and newly settled persons live, the thresholds becomes lower to spontaneously seek out activities and regularly come back to it.

Available resources and big need are however not sufficient for getting started. From the case-studies it is clear that individual employees with driving spirit and commitment are required, what in Swedish is called a "fire-soul". These persons need to be given a mandate to move ahead and get support from the organization in terms of colleagues to collaborate with and space to prioritize the work.

Another important asset is language and cultural competence among employees and volunteers as well as individuals' ability to be bridge builders. Financial resources and support from elected representatives is also important. It is clear that during the studied period there have been extensive possibilities to receive extra financial resources for the work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons.

## Challenges for management and leadership

The material shows that there is a tension between how difficult or easy the work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons is perceived to be. While some respondents state that it is both difficult and complex,

other stresses the need to not make things more complicated than they are, and that simple solutions are often good solutions.

Language cafés is the most common form of activity which has been launched in the parishes and initially many parishes also worked with collection and redistribution of clothes. Experiences show that a good organization and administrative support structures are needed when the work involves many volunteers. It is important that someone in the team gets the over-all coordination task. It is also important that there is a functioning leadership. A manager who can prioritize, give staff assignments, clear tasks and provide a common direction and focus is important.

Rapid changes and needs for flexibility are recurring themes especially in the national survey. The work has demanded quick changes and the ability to think outside the box and not to lock one into ready-made templates.

When asylum seekers feel that they are welcomed and that there are relevant and meaningful activities they spread the word and more and more people will be coming and be involved. It is also important to dare to close down activities that don't work.

The material shows that many parishes have a vision to create an integrated parish life where asylum seekers and newly settled persons are in the same groups as the Swedes and old parishioners, but the vision is not so easy to achieve. What seems to work best are common celebrations and parties, sports activities and joint excursions.

Working with asylum seekers and newly settled persons is a work that easy becomes without limits. The needs are great and many people are caught in difficult and vulnerable situations. It is therefore important to find limitations and structures that allow employees and volunteers to be nurtured in the long run. The importance of good and functional networks, both within the Church of Sweden as with other actors and organizations is seen as important, as well as co-operation with the municipality, and that both employees and volunteers get opportunities to develop their skills and build up their competence.

## The involvement of volunteers

According to most of the parishes, it has been easy to recruit volunteers for the work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons. The activities have been attracting new groups of volunteers, both young people and people that do not have a close contact with the parish from before. However, it is clear that there are differences in local traditions when it comes to volunteering, in some cases it rather occurs spontaneously through already existing personal networks outside of established organizations. The influx of many asylum seekers in recent years have also inspired new local associations and groups that have emerged through social media.

The especially studied parishes have recruited volunteers by advertising in the local press, via social media and by directly asking people at worship services or in connection with other activities. In few cases it has been reported difficult to get enough volunteers.

What has been the driving forces for those who have chosen to engage themselves as volunteers is the opportunity to contribute to something meaningful. The interviewed volunteers refer to values and behavior passed on from their parents, personal experiences of vulnerability due to for example sickness or own migration story, as well as knowing others who started to volunteer as an inspiration.

For the parishes voluntary work is a huge asset, but it also requires organization and leadership. If it is messy, information is lacking or there is uncertainty regarding tasks, it may hinder the ability to maintain engagement and commitment over time.

## Joys and difficulties in meeting with people seeking asylum

The interview-material clearly shows that employees and volunteers feel the work with asylum seekers brings meaning and joy to their lives. Many of the personal encounters have touched and involve them in

depth. There is the joy of getting to know new people and learn about different countries and cultures. Some volunteers mention that their daily routines have become more interesting thanks to doing something new and inspiring.

Almost all employees and volunteers put emphasis on the reciprocity that they have found in the meeting between people. They experience to get a lot of affection and care back from their involvement, but also concrete help with tasks from the persons they have got to know.

When being asked about difficulties in the encounters with asylum seekers the interviewed mention that the hardest thing is when there is no common language. This is particularly difficult when people are in need of pastoral care and counselling. Interpreters are costly and sometimes there is no access to professional interpreters. Although the language barrier is a problem it can, in most cases, be overcome. It may be someone in the group of asylum seekers, a volunteer or staff member who can help out. It can also be done through, for example, using dictionaries and translation via mobile apps. Also various art forms and laughter can help to create a sense of communication and companionship without a common language.

Another difficulty can be to encounter ingratitude when one expects gratitude for the attempt to do something good. There can also be clashes due to cultural values or habits. For example, it may be about food, how to greet each other, Swedish laws on road safety and the perception of gender equality. It can also be difficult for volunteers when the people they have made connections to face difficult decisions such as involuntary transitions to other towns and refusals on their asylum claim.

## Strategies for responding to hostility, prejudice and racism

In the interview-material, many emphasize the importance to clearly indicate against biased and racist comments or disrespectful attitudes. The strategy that most believe in and work for is to let people to get to know each other, and that this is a way to give local communities an injection against xenophobia and racism. Another strategy is to give local people the chance to help and demonstrate care for example by donating clothes and toys. Those who are engaged as volunteers can make a difference by telling their friends about the personal contact they had with asylum seekers. Another strategy is to arouse empathy, asking people to put themselves in the situation of asylum seekers.

Several also mention that they stress that in rural areas and smaller towns asylum seekers and newly settled persons can be a matter of survival for both school, business and football teams, as well as to cover the coming year's labor shortage.

Accurate information on benefits and regulations around asylum seekers can create a more positive climate. There are many misconceptions and fears especially when it comes to Muslims, and to some extent also to people with black skin, that the parish employees can help straighten out. It is also important to equip asylum seekers and newly settled persons in order to understand their rights in Sweden.

The needs of vulnerable groups are often seen as a zero-sum-game. Many emphasize the importance of not making comparison between different vulnerable groups but rather work for social change for all. Many employees believe that general and agreed principles of the diaconal aid work is an asset, for example to give priority to families with small children.

In this study there are only few examples of parishes encountering organized racism. There are nevertheless thoughts on the importance of local mobilization for inclusion and human rights for all as a way of countering organized racism and sometimes parishes are involved in such initiatives.

## Collaboration with the public sector

The material shows that the parishes have an extensive collaboration with the public sector, particularly with local authorities but also with the Swedish Migration Board and the Swedish Employment Agency. Of the parishes involved in work for asylum seekers and newly settled persons, almost half collaborates with the municipality. It is experienced as easy to interact with the municipality, and many parishes have already before the fall of 2015 established relationships with officials in the municipality concerning issues around asylum

seekers and integration. There is in the interview material some reflections related to upholding the distinction between the responsibility of public actors and the Church of Sweden's responsibility. What kind of responsibility should the local parish be prepared to take on and what not? Where to draw the line in order to safeguard that public actors take the responsibility they should take?

The material also shows discontent with the interaction with public actors, particularly in relation to the Migration Board. One example is the great amount of work that Church of Sweden made for finding acute accommodation for asylum seekers in the autumn 2015, after inquiries from the Migration Board. Very few of the 3 000 places that Church of Sweden offered for acute asylum accommodation were taken into use. The feedback from the Migration Board was perceived inadequate or non-existent. Also the rapid movements of asylum-seekers due to asylum centers suddenly being opened up or closed down is often experienced as problematic. Information to the local community as well as to asylum seekers concerned is perceived as insufficient. The sudden rupture of relationships is difficult and the sudden moves makes it difficult to plan local activities.

One difficulty in co-operation with public actors is what is perceived as too rigid bureaucracy. It is often perceived to exist watertight bulkheads between different public actors. The parish employees often gets the role to investigate on what grounds different decisions related to an asylum seeker or newly settled person have been taken and how the different decisions are interrelated, in order to propose solutions to the authorities on how things can be settled in a better way. Another difficulty is that knowledge about the Church of Sweden has diminished among public officials. Many do not know for example the role a deacon or the purpose of diaconal work. The knowledge about other faith communities is even lower.

## Why do asylum seekers come to the Church of Sweden?

The material shows that the most common reason why persons seeking asylum come to the Church of Sweden is that there are good activities which are of great help for people. Coming to church activities poses a break in the boredom that many experience in everyday life. There is someone who listens to you and can offer help to solve practical problems. Large play-rooms and good activities for children are a motivating factor.

It is often through activities in the church that asylum seekers get their first contact with Swedes. The relationships that are built in the church is more informal and more equal than relationships that the asylum seekers and newly settled persons have with authorities. Acceptance of cultural and individual differences is often large. Both Christians and Muslims attend the activities. Many asylum seekers say they think that "people in the church are kind".

Some come mainly to attend worship and practice their faith. To choose to participate in the Church of Sweden's worship services, even though one comes from a different Christian denomination may be due to many reasons. It can be practical reasons that this is the church which is closest to where you live. If you choose to remain in the parish it is often because you feel warmly welcomed and included in the parish life. Some Muslims appreciate that the church is a house of God and therefore attend services and some are also curious in Christianity.

## Advantages and disadvantages of being a church in the work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons

From the interview material, it appears that one of the benefits of being a church when starting up and carrying out work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons is that there are clear values to build the work upon. There is a clear link between the Christian faith and the church's mission. It has also been easier to gain confidence among asylum seekers thanks to the fact that the Church of Sweden has a religious identity.

Church of Sweden also welcomes people whether you believe or not. This applies to both asylum seekers, newly settled persons as well as volunteers. The objective of the Church of Sweden's diaconal activities are not to make people Christians but rather the commandment from Christ to love your neighbor. The church is also a natural place for life's various celebrations and rituals and there is place for both joy as well as sadness and regret.



At the same time, the denominational nature of the church can be a disadvantage. It is not easy for all Muslims to participate in an activity in a Christian church. Sometimes the fact that Church of Sweden welcomes all regardless of faith as well as the aim of diaconal work has to be explained. From the interview-material it seems however more positive than negative for most Muslim groups to attend an activity in the church. It can in some cases be necessary with some adjustment for making everyone feel welcome. One also needs to accept and respect that some will never participate in activities in a church.

## How are the parishes influenced?

Both the interview-material as well as the national survey show that church life has been revitalized through the work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons. Rooms are filled with activities and more people attend the worship services. The opportunity to get to know other cultures and religious traditions have enriched the parishes. It has become more natural to talk about belief in God.

Many respondents state that the work with asylum seekers has made them rediscovered their vocation as a church. Parish life has deepened when the diaconal work has been moved into the center. It has become clearer what the parish can contribute with in local cooperation – competence and skills have become more visible. The work has sometimes led to parishes deciding on new priorities.

Thanks to the work the parishes have gained new knowledge and insights on the situation of refugees and the situation for asylum seekers in Sweden. These insights have had concrete consequences in several parishes, by supporting both people in the asylum process and those newly settled, as well as those whose applications for asylum have been refused.

All types of changes also raise some resistance. One such example is that many of the Christians come from Oriental churches with another liturgy and teaching. It's not always that Christian immigrants with roots in other denominations, countries and cultures share the theology of Church of Sweden. Cultural misunderstandings or different understandings on how you do things can also lead to clashes.

In the material, many expresses that the parishes commitment to work with asylum seekers has led to new contacts, new volunteers and more people in the local community that are aware of the parish's diaconal work and has a positive image of the local church. The parishes have also sometimes gained new members.

## Where are we going? Thoughts on the future

The work in parishes have gradually shifted from responding to an urgent situation to a more long-term work on language training and outreach activities. Many respondents see the need for continued activities in the coming period to support the newly arrived immigrants' integration into the Swedish society and establishment in the labor and housing markets. What role the parish can play in this context is not always given sharper contours and the experience in this type of work varies between parishes. The concrete examples that exist are often about making room for interns and various forms of employment in the Church of Sweden and contribute to contacts with employers. Several express hope that the local church can serve as a meeting place where people, natives and immigrants, can meet and develop new social networks that can contribute to integration. In rural communities, people are more uncertain about the future. They hope but do not know to what extent the asylum seekers will choose to stay in the rural area if they are given asylum in Sweden. In parishes that are located in cities, it is estimated that the activity which has so far targeted asylum seekers and newly settled persons in the future will be replaced or developed as an integral part of the parish's ordinary activities. It is above all the diaconal activities which are believed to develop and change due to the changing needs.

The fact that social support for adults (without children) whose asylum application have been refused (in terms of accommodation and daily allowances from the Swedish Migration Board) have been removed from June 2016, more people are expected to turn to the Church of Sweden's parishes for support, especially those who already have a relationship with the parish. Something that will put parishes into difficult dilemmas.



There is a concern that the financial resources will not be sufficient in the future for the diaconal needs. One of the reasons for this are fewer members, representing a shrinking economy for the parishes. Another is that it is not obvious, in the future, that the state can finance the welfare needed. More actors might need to take responsibility. Such a change can create new expectations on the Church of Sweden to step in and take more responsibility.

## Summary conclusions

In the autumn of 2015 organizations, faith communities and spontaneous networks was of great importance to solve the practical problems stemming from a large influx of asylum seekers. Church of Sweden was one of these. Eight out of ten associations of parishes and parishes with separate economy all over the country, organized activities for and with asylum seekers and newly settled persons during the period from October 2015 to October 2016. Half of the parishes/associations of parishes started new activities. A third of them extended existing activities for asylum seekers and newly settled persons. It is estimated that the parishes' activities for asylum seekers and newly settled persons in total had about 37 000 visitors during an average month.

### Nationwide infrastructure makes it easy to mobilize

Church of Sweden is a large organization with the advantage to have staff and offices across the country, both in cities and in rural areas. In this way, there was already a good infrastructure on which to build. With local staff-persons, it is easier to maintain networks and have both broad skills as well as excellence. At the same time, the large and often urgent needs that arose when a large number of asylum seekers came at the same time could not be met within existing frameworks. The ability to enlarge the number of employees with project staff and benefit employees as well as to mobilize volunteers have been decisive.

The work include a wide range of activities, e.g. language cafés, clothing distribution, and help with government contacts as examples of common tasks. Unlike other actors in civil society also individual counseling with a priest or deacon is an important part of the support that the parishes offer.

In our study, similar to other studies of civil society, it appears that many parishes experienced it easy to mobilize volunteers to this activity. Only 5 percent of those surveyed parishes has not had volunteers in this work. Many individuals felt that they wanted to be involved and contribute when they saw the images in media of all those who had to flee their homes and tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea and were on the road through Europe. This has meant that new groups of volunteers has been mobilized. However, it is clear that there are different traditions in different places for volunteer efforts and the extent to which they channeled through organizations or individuals' own initiatives. It can also be difficult to reconcile the objectives of individual volunteers with the parishes' goals. It may be the case regardless of whether the volunteers has earlier roots in the Church of Sweden or not. Fewer of the committed volunteers are members or otherwise engaged in the organization they volunteer for, a challenge that the Church of Sweden shares with many other member-based organizations.

### Employed staff gives opportunities for long term persistence

It is also a challenge to shift from mobilization in an emergency to long-term operations. Parish activities are primarily carried out with the parishes' own resources but it has also been possible to seek earmarked funds from the diocese and the national level in the Church of Sweden to work with and for asylum seekers and newly settled persons. Sometimes the parishes have received contributions from public sources such as the municipality. This has created some flexibility and parishes have not needed to downscale other activities to a large amount. New needs have been met by expanding existing operations, utilize the premises more, engage volunteers and have temporary employees. Perseverance in the long run in the work ahead, however, will demand to make priorities. Certain types of labor-intensive efforts are perceived to be difficult to manage with only volunteers. A functioning operation often requires that staff leads and coordinates the work. This requires in turn that there is a functional organization and clear leadership when important decisions about priorities and how to staff activities need be taken. In the future it will be more difficult for Church of Sweden to maintain extensive operations with its own resources. More and more parishes will have a tight economy while the diaconal needs increase, such as in depopulated parishes with many older people, as well as in cities with

socio-economic vulnerable neighborhoods and a smaller proportion of the population being members of the Church of Sweden.

The importance of working with long term perspectives and with an inherent resilience in the work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons are emphasized by many informants. The conditions for a more long-term work is, in some respects, particularly good in an organization like the Church of Sweden with resources in terms of staff and offices across the country. But in order for the work to be sustainable it needs to become and be seen more as an integral part of the regular parish work. For some of the especially studied parishes the work has implied a challenge not to develop "two parishes in one" where part of the staff team is occupied by more traditional church activities while another part of the team along with new volunteers, trainees and benefit employees, develop new activities based on the needs they meet and the gifts and talents that people bring.

### The work is done in collaboration with both public and civil society actors

In 95 percent of the Church of Sweden's parishes' work for and with asylum seekers and newly settled persons are done in collaboration with other actors. Other Christian faith communities, the Red Cross, community groups, Save the Children and sports clubs are common partners. The variation, however, is large and the survey reveals a multifaceted and varied cooperation that can include everything from the local asylum groups to chess clubs. In the especially studied five parishes, it is clear that the local community had a tight network of personal relationships and mutual trust since long and that this was relatively easily to mobilize in connection to the large reception of asylum-seekers in Sweden in 2015 and 2016.

The survey shows that the most common partner of the parishes are the municipalities – 59% of the associations of parishes and parishes with separate economy which carries out work for asylum seekers and newly settled persons report they are cooperating with the municipality. The five especially studied parishes all experience that it has been relatively easy to interact locally with municipalities, something that previous studies of civil society also have pointed out. Many parishes also interact with state authorities, 22 percent co-operate with the Migration Board and the 18 per cent with the Employment Agency. In this regard, Church of Sweden stand out in relation to other civil society organizations. A study conducted by the Agency for youth and civil society issues (MUCF) of civil society's role in asylum reception 2015 shows that co-operation with municipalities and Government agencies among the NGOs that were subject to investigation is not as common as it is in the Church of Sweden.

The prominent cooperation with public actors probably derives from the fact that Church of Sweden until 2000 had a State Church form. But also the fact that the Church of Sweden's parishes, unlike many other local actors in the civil society, have locally employed staff, facilitate contacts with the public sector. Not least, the role of deacons is important in this context.

### Dilemmas of being both partner and advocate

This study shows that parishes' activities for asylum seekers and newly settled persons are mainly financed with own funds. A third of the associations of parishes and parishes with separate economy have also had support from the diocese and the Church of Sweden's national level. This means a relative financial independence of local authorities and other public funding agencies. While many other civil society actors are largely dependent on the organizational support from the municipality, Church of Sweden has its own resources. A large part of these come from the church fee that members pay.

In the contemporary discussion of possible roles for civil society there are mainly three roles described. One role is about to advocate for rights, speak for those whose voices are not heard, to form public opinion and safeguard interests. Another role is about to be a welfare service producer as an alternative or complement to publicly owned and profit-driven service providers within the welfare sector. A third role is about to be partners in a more general sense.

To offer asylum seekers help with government contacts and monitor the rights of vulnerable groups is found in both the questionnaire and the interview material as a regular role. There are in the interview material reflections over Church of Sweden as a bridge that tries to ensure that people do not end up trapped in a dead

end because of how regulations are interpreted or because of a lack of communication between the various authorities and public entities.

When it comes to being a welfare service producer Church of Sweden parishes often do this without public funding. The idea is rather to fill the gap and help people who fall through the cracks in the public system, while working for change of the system. This gap grew rapidly in a short time when the number of asylum seekers increased in 2015. However, to care about the people that are falling through the public systems can be described as a regular role for the parish diaconal work, not only during exceptional circumstances such as the fall 2015. One of our especially studied parish describes *"vulnerability when it comes to economics and ethnicity"* as a focus area.

With a more restrictive asylum legislation, it could in coming years become even harder to be an advocate for rights, support those who are in vulnerable situations and at the same time be a partner to public actors. When civil society is increasingly faced with people who had their asylum application turned down, there may be conflicts of interest that can make cooperation with public authorities more complicated at the same time as the needs of the target group will be even greater.

### Religious capital is an asset

An advantage that Church of Sweden and other faith communities have in working with and for asylum seekers and newly settled persons is that religion is an integral part of life in most of the countries the people fleeing from. Previous studies show that religion becomes more important for those who had to flee and experienced extreme hardship on the escape. Through the possibility to practice their religion a sense of security and recognition is being created, which may facilitate the establishment. In the encounter with the new country's established religious representatives bridges and social capital for increased integration can be built. Parishes in Church of Sweden have the advantage of "a religious capital", professional diaconal work and in some cases, network and expertise in interreligious dialogue. This study demonstrates that both Christians and Muslim asylum seekers seek out the work of the parishes in the Church of Sweden. This may however vary depending on where the asylum seekers come from and the local tradition they carry with them.

The Christian faith as a value-base has also been important for the parishes' decisions to act and take on a role in relation to the large influx of asylum-seekers. Our interview material shows that many see the parish's commitment to work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons as a natural Christian response when meeting with people in a vulnerable situation. It's about to see one's neighbor and her needs. Those interviewed highlight that the work is done mostly "for the sake of the fellow human being" and also "for the sake of the world" and in order for the society to function. A common value system of this kind is a strength for an organization and make it easier to quickly get started with new activities, and then continue to pursue long-term work.

In some respects, however, it may be perceived as a disadvantage to be a religious community in this work. There may be an uncertainty among Swedish authorities whether to cooperate with a religious community. Some Muslims and other groups can have doubts whether it is compatible with their own faith and conception of life to participate in activities of the church in Christian buildings. This study does not capture how these groups look at the Church of Sweden's activities, but many of the interviewed employees highlight the importance of that the activities are open to all without making a distinction between people on the basis of what faith they have, and that in some cases they have worked to find ways to adapt the work to make it possible for more people to participate.

### Encounters with asylum seekers and newly settled persons rejuvenate

From the material it is evident that for many parishes, the work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons, has brought a distinct revitalization of the parish life, its worship and activities. Asylum seekers and newly settled persons have arrived in large numbers and in some cases themselves knocked on the door. Many thousands of new volunteers have come. It provides a foundation for a continued strong voluntary engagement in the civil society in general and for the Church of Sweden's parishes. In the interview material emerges the image of that work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons have opened a new space in

the parish life. Through a more visible diversity and new dynamic also other new groups have found a place in the parish.

Those who engaged in work with asylum seekers and newly settled persons in the parishes, testify that the work is very rewarding – it is perceived as meaningful to help others and the encounters with people create friendships and provides new insights and new knowledge. There are many stories about reciprocity in the interview material and that it is not always clear "who is helping who". At the same time, the activities are designed primarily with the aim to be of help and support for asylum seekers and newly settled persons to be able to orient themselves in a new country, a new local context and a new language. When winter clothes are redistributed to those that have none and when Swedish language is taught to those who do not have Swedish as their mother tongue, it is inevitable that one party increasingly feel that it helps and one party increasingly feels being helped. This can create an asymmetry in the relationships that can be difficult to relate to for both parties.

It is not always easy to socialize over language- and cultural barriers. This is also visible in the material. A despair that exists beneath the surface, people who are not feeling well, or are behaving badly, uncertain waiting periods and negative decisions are also part of the material. This can be difficult to deal with and a professional and a well-functioning organization that provide support is vital to endure.

There are many testimonies about how much the new inhabitants have come to mean to the local context, both for the town and for the parish. Not least in sparsely populated areas the new people has created a new dynamic and contributed to a better basis for local schools and reinforcement of the local football team. The large reception has put a stress on local communities and its public service, but many express hope that at least some of those who have come will be able and will choose to remain in the small towns and villages. In the current situation, when the Migration Board are phasing out many asylum centers because there will be fewer asylum seekers coming to Sweden and when many of those who come are expected to have their application for asylum turned down, that means that in many places those hopes will not materialize. Is it then possible to think as one informant who is saying *"At least I could walk a part of the road with them"*, or will it lead to great disappointments and make a future mobilization more difficult?

### Bridge builder in a segregated society

Despite the fact that more people than ever are in situations of flight in the world, the Swedish Migration Board calculate that far fewer people will seek asylum in Sweden in 2017 compared to 2015. The development in the future is uncertain and dependent on what is happening in the world around us. Many of those who sought asylum in the autumn of 2015 will now receive a decision in their asylum case. Those who receive a residence permit will begin their establishment programme in a municipality. Many will only get 13-month residence permit with continued uncertainty as a result. Others will be refused.

One way forward is the development of a more integrated church life where people with different backgrounds also meet in other contexts than in activities specifically targeted at asylum seekers and newly settled persons. As the interview material shows this requires an openness to changes and adjustment of activities in the parishes.

The increasing segregation, with a divided urban landscape along ethnic and socio-economic divisions, characterizes many Swedish cities. It is a development that the local parishes which operate in these environments hardly can influence. Much is also pointing towards that the recent relatively high immigration numbers in combination with housing shortage leads to the increasing challenges of this nature. Church of Sweden has the potential to create bridges between the various neighborhoods in the segregated city. In the results of both surveys and interviews, it appears that the encounters between people of different religion and ethnicity in the parishes are creating bridges between people and reduces prejudices and xenophobia. Church of Sweden can also help to increase the contacts between Swedish authorities and migrant-led faith communities where both parties often have poor knowledge about each other's role and potential. The contacts and relationships established in the work for and with asylum seekers and newly settled persons between native Swedes and immigrants may be the glue that is needed for the society to handle a large reception of asylum seekers and a good integration between people of different backgrounds. Other potential roles for the Church of Sweden's parishes is a more systematic approach to help people enter the labor- and

housing markets. In the interviews, several reflections are being made on the importance of the parishes seeing themselves as part of the local community and seeing its mission as larger than its own activities.

Also the Church of Sweden is affected by segregation. There is a risk that activities in parishes in different parts of the country and in different neighborhoods in larger cities are more likely to reflect the lack of integration in society at large than to help improve it. But with a nation-wide geographical organization that includes people from different walks of life, different social classes and with varied ethnic backgrounds, there are possibilities to in some way break this pattern. The challenge for the Church of Sweden and its parishes are to engage in activities that are open to an increasingly heterogeneous population and which in different ways can overcome the mental and physical limits that exist both in the segregated city and in the country as a whole. The work that this study describes is largely about interaction between people on different sides of these borders. A further development of this work can make an important contribution to a more coherent Sweden.