

## A Smaller Church in a Bigger World?

### *Introduction*

First of all I would like to express my gratitude towards the conference committee for inviting me to this conference. It's an honour for me to be at the Gusavus Adolphus College in S:t Peter and meet all of you who are interested in Sweden, Swedish traditions and the Church of Sweden.

I will first give a short presentation of myself, even if professor Erling just have told you something about me already. Today I work as a researcher at the *Unit for Research and Culture* in the Church of Sweden and I have done so since I finished my doctoral studies at the Department of Theology at the University of Uppsala, in November 2001.

As a researcher in sociology of religion, with the Church of Sweden as my employer, I am responsible for the church statistics. This means that I every year collect, process and analyse statistical data that are sent in by all the 2200 parishes that constitute the Church of Sweden. The statistics are about church attendance, numbers of members, music and children's activities, numbers of baptisms, funerals and marriages and so on. I would say that this is one of the largest databases within the field of societal research in Sweden.

Beside this I also do different kinds of research about the church and the contemporary society. Lately I have done a survey on the relationship between the members of the church and the church of Sweden itself, if it's possible to distinguish a church from its members at all. But that's another discussion. I am going to talk about this study later on. It's not accomplished yet, but I think it could be interesting for you to hear about what I've found out so far.

The aim of this lecture is to give a presentation of the situation for the Church of Sweden, after the turn of the millennium in the year of 2000. That year, the legal relationship between church and state came to an end or at least the bonds were loosened up significantly. The process that led to this break had been going on for more than fifty years, and should be seen as a natural development. It was not a result of a conflict. It was rather the more and more pluralistic society that led to the conclusion that it was no longer possible to legitimate the state-church system.

I don't think it's possible to understand the situation in which we are living today, without taking a look at history. Therefore I will begin with some historical high lights. It will just be a brief presentation of the societal development during the last 150 years in Sweden. I don't

think it's necessary to go in to details, because I'm sure you already know a lot about this development.

Secondly I will give you some facts about the development of the number of members since the year of 2000. After all it is the number of members that affect what the church will be able to realise in the future. Each member pays a fee to the church of about 250 dollar a year. The fee is related the member's income so the 250 dollars is just the average fee. But it gives you some idea of the magnitude.

Thirdly I will say something about how people (the church members) in general relate to religion as well as the Church of Sweden. In this part I discuss geographical, gender and age differences.

Finally as a way of conclusion I will try to say something about the future for the Church of Sweden

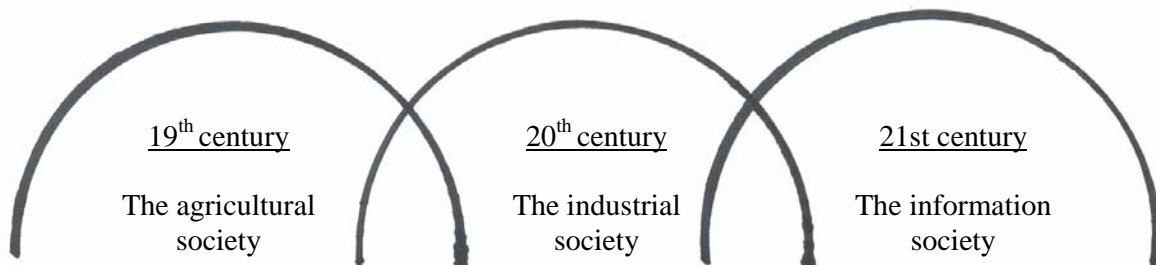
### ***Historical background***

During the last 150 years the Swedish society has gone through a lot of changes. These changes have influenced the development of the Church of Sweden until this very day.

Then, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, most people lived in the countryside and many were working as farmers. At that time the Church of Sweden and the Swedish society were closely connected to each other. The clergymen, and the church, were a self-evident arena for everyone who lived in the village.

Through a period of industrialisation with its ideal of collectivism, we today live in a society characterized of individualisation and secularisation.

Sometimes I describe this development with assistance from a picture, representing three waves, one for each century. I use to call the process *from pew to TV sofa*. Of course this is a simplification of a very complex process. But it serves our purpose to give a short presentation of history.



The first wave represents the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the second the 20<sup>th</sup> and finally the third represents the time in which we at this very moment are beginning to enter. It's important to note that today we are in the shift between these two waves.

During the first wave the production was concentrated on agriculture. It was a time when people lived their lives in close connection to the church. One could hardly divide church and state from each other. They were tied so closely together. Often the clergymen were the only scholars in the village. It was from them people learned what was right and wrong. The church was responsible for the education of the children. In other words, church and state were two sides of the same coin. Therefore the word of God was an important voice in the whole society.

For many people in Sweden the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a hard period and some came to seek their fortune in the United States. And today a lot of Swedes have relatives in the United States, descending from this time, as you all know.

During the second wave something new happened. The urban society grew stronger. People moved from the countryside to the cities. It was employment in the big factories that attracted them.

During this time, early 1900's, different kinds of people's movements were growing stronger. They had other ideas than the church. In their world God was no self-evident authority, rather it was the values of democracy, freedom and equality that dominated their ideological foundation. In the light of that, the interest for The Church of Sweden declined. The church became one movement among all other movements in society. As the whole society was divided into several specialized parts, the church became an institution specialized in religion, so to speak. It's all-embracing roll in life faded away. Consequently, in people's minds the church on the one hand and the state on the other already began to divide into two different spheres, even if it was still fifty years left to the "legal" divorce.

Now, during the third wave, in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are entering a new time again, characterized of new values and new structures. Of course we don't know what will happen in the future, but at least it is possible point out some interesting changes. Structures as well as values are changing. When it comes to structures we can see the amount of industrial workers declining, leaving room for people employed in service production. The new information-technology creates new possibilities for people's work and leisure. But more important, it gives us new opportunities to think in different ways and to get information from far away in a few seconds. If the church was the place where people got information about right and wrong during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the TV and Internet are the sources today.

Allow me to finish this historic background by giving you some head points to illustrate the development that influenced the Church of Sweden the last 150 years. Of course, each point is preceded and followed by discussions and events that are important too. But to illustrate the development during the last 150 years they will work.

- In the year 1860 it become allowed to leave the Church of Sweden on one condition, you had to enter another denomination.
- In 1951 church members were allowed to leave the Church of Sweden, without entering another denomination.
- In 1958 the bishops lost their right to inspect the education of Christianity in the schools.
- In 1991 the national registration was transferred from the Church of Sweden to the tax authorities
- From 1996 newborn children, with parents that are members of the Church of Sweden, no longer automatically become members of the church. Since then the baptism is the foundation of the membership in the Church of Sweden.
- In 2000 the state-church system came to an end.
- In 2001 members of the Church of Sweden for the first time saw at the income-tax return form how much they pay in their annual fee to the Church.

## ***Number of members in the Church of Sweden***

But what has happened after the state-church system came to an end? Primarily, this shift in the church-state relation was a legal change. The bonds between church and state became much looser, when the right to make decisions about important issues concerning the church moved from the national parliament to the church itself. I would say that people in general did not notice the difference, apart from the fact that they now see, and therefore know how much they pay in annual fee to the church. However, apart from this, it's possible to see some changes in how people relate to the church after the turn of millennium. Most of all these changes have to do with the actual membership, "should I stay or should I go"? rather than people's participation in different church activities. Let us therefore first of all have a look at the numbers of members in the Church of Sweden.

Today the Church of Sweden has more than 7,1 million members. That is equivalent to around 80 percent of the total number of inhabitants in Sweden. In other words, the Church of Sweden is the largest Evangelical Lutheran Church in the whole world, as far as numbers of members are concerned.

But the decline of members has been going on during the last thirty years. In other words, the decline has been going on since the middle of wave two, which I talked about earlier. And as I mentioned before, there is also acceleration in this process going on since the year of 1996. What happened that year? As I mentioned earlier newborns no longer automatically become members of the church. This is one of the reasons why the church is shrinking. Of course this is a slow and successive process, but in the statistics we can see that it has an increasing speed.

But is the not baptized newborns the whole explanation to the decline in membership? I know that it is not.

Since the year of 2001 the amount of people leaving the Church of Sweden has dramatically increased.

The amount of church leavers increased already in 1999. The explanation of this peak is that some of the free churches such as the Covenant Church and the Salvation Army recommended their members to leave the Church of Sweden. These recommendations resulted in large numbers of members leaving the Church of Sweden, especially in regions where free churches have a strong position. In småland, where I suppose that some of your

ancestors came from, the relative number of leavers was the highest compared to the rest of the country.

In the year of 2000 the exit levels almost returned to what previously was a normal level. But then, in the year of 2001, the numbers of church leavers increased again. And, as you remember from what I mentioned before, this year the members for the first time saw how much they pay in annual fee to the Church of Sweden.

It is important to say that so far the decline in the numbers of church members has not influenced the economy of the entire church in any appreciable way. But if the church leaver rates will stabilize at the relatively high level we have seen the last three years, it will be impossible to keep offering all the services and activities that the church offer today. So in the long run this development could become a serious problem.

I will address some questions about those who leave the church. Who are they? Why do they leave the church? Are they critical towards the church or is it only a question about economy? During the last two years my research has been focused on finding answers to this kind of questions.

First to the question about who they are: The statistics confirm that a typical church leaver is male in the age between 25 and 55. The fact is that 60 percent of those who leave the Church of Sweden are men, 40 percent are women. Since men in these ages have a relatively high income, some people regard this to be an indication that people leaving church for economical reasons. But they are not familiar with this classical sociological phenomena, namely that men in this ages are less interested in religion and spirituality than women are generally speaking.

Today (after some research) I am quite sure that almost nobody leaves the Church of Sweden only because of the high annual fee, on the other hand money is one of several important factors in this process. Often the recently acquired awareness of how much one pays to the church has the function of the last straw. Common features for those who leave the church, or planning to do so, rather seems to be that they combine several reasons for their exit. Often they combine a critical attitude towards the church with a feeling of having a weak relationship to the church (they don't believe in a "church way" and they don't take part of church activities).

Most of them have in common that they don't like that the church does not strongly enough exclude those against the ordination of women. This is a conflict within the Church of Sweden that goes back fifty years in time. But those intolerant groups that don't like the ordination of women are very small. They are around 2 percent of the total group of members. But they are very successful to create a picture of the Church of Sweden as an intolerant and

conservative organization. And they are also a very church active group. Until 1992 male students with this opinion had access to the ordination. Since then, no one who cannot cooperate with both male and female priests will be ordained.

Of course the Church of Sweden has done a lot to facilitate the situation for clergywomen. But for people in general these efforts are not well known. As a matter of fact it is today almost impossible to make a clergymen career in the Church of Sweden if you are against the ordination of women. Another indicator of the change in the church system is that the number of female students at the priest seminars exceeds the number of male students. So in a few years the clergywomen will constitute a majority among the priests in the Church of Sweden.

Anyway, if you want a general picture of those who leave the Church of Sweden I would say that they are:

- Critical towards the fact that the Church of Sweden allows an opposition towards the ordination of women.
- They are also critical towards other features in the church, for instance that the church is too conservative.
- They define their relationship to the church as weak. For instance they feel that their faith is not compatible with the confession of the church. What is more, they rarely take part in church activities.
- They are in the age between 25 and 55 years old.
- They are male

To sum up, you can say that these people do not consider the Church of Sweden to be a relevant institution in their life. And therefore they don't want to pay the fee for it either. But even if they constitute a group of around 50000 persons each year, this is less than one percent of the total amount of members. So it would be wrong to talk about it, as it was a catastrophe. But the situation is new in the Swedish context and therefore interesting. And I would also claim that those who planning to leave the church of Sweden can teach us very much about the Swede's attitudes towards the church in general.

## ***The role of the Church of Sweden today***

Sometimes people say that Sweden is the most secularized country in the whole world. And maybe that's true, at least if we define secularization as low numbers in the statistics of church attendance. But if we instead focus on what people in general believe in, a different picture emerges. The *Member 2004 survey* shows that most of the Swedes at least believe in something, but there are differences in what they believe. Only around 9 percent consider themselves to be atheists, in other words they don't believe in anything divine. A quarter believe in a personal God, 20 percent believe in some higher might or spiritual reality, another quarter say that God is something inside each person, rather than a transcendent reality and finally we have the agnostics, who don't know what to believe. They are over 20 percent.

As a conclusion of this I would say that the members of the Church of Sweden in general are religious, since most of them believe in some kind of higher reality that exceeds the everyday experience. But their religiosity is not necessarily in the line of the traditions of the Church of Sweden. Sometimes we talk about the religiosity in Sweden metaphorically in terms of a Swedish "smorgasbord". People pick and chose religious influences from different traditions and by doing so they create their own, individual religion. For some people this individual religion is very important in their everyday life, for others it is more in the background. In this pick and choice religiosity the Church of Sweden is a very important ingredient. It's possible to use the church in a variety of ways. Therefore it's not easy to describe the appearance of this religiosity. But still it is possible to say something.

Activities connected to the life cycle are very important for people in general. When a child is baptized, a couple gets married and at funerals family and friends come together. In the *Member 2004 survey* 70 percent of the members told us that they meet the Church of Sweden on this kind of occasions in a year. Swedes go to church to celebrate the important passages in life. It is the perfect place for welcoming the newborn, manifest the new family or take farewell of a relative or a friend who recently has died. As an institution for the "rites de passage" the church is trustful even for those not dealing with the church in their everyday life.

Other occasions in the Swede's life when the Church of Sweden is important, is when different kinds of crises occurs that affect the nation as a whole, or the local society. The murder of Anna Lind, the former Foreign Minister was such an occasion. Another example is when the ferry Estonia sank in the Baltic Sea. More than 800 people died, most of them from Sweden. In other words the Church of Sweden offers a place where you can come with your



questions about life and death. In these situations it seems like people instinctively come to the church, even if they don't are such diligent churchgoers in their every day life.

Besides "the rites de passages" and societal catastrophes it's possible to point out at least one more type of occasion that attract the masses to the Church of Sweden. And that is the *arts*. Fore someone interested in music, architecture and history the church offers a gold mine.

To summarize what I've just have said, the Church of Sweden is not only a community for those with the "right confession". For the masses it rather functions as a place for special needs and those needs are not related to people's everyday life. The average Swede comes in touch with the Church of Sweden in more sporadic intervals. Maybe ones, twice or three times a year. I have recently discovered in the Member 2004 survey that around 85 percent of the members have at least some kind of contact with the church in a year. This result indicates that a plausible conclusion is that around 15 percent of the church members are very distant from the Church of Sweden.

Besides what I already said, some (around 10 percent) of the church members are very closely related to the Church of Sweden and its traditions. They belong to the inner circle of the church. They regularly take part of activities in the church, services as well as other things. For these people the church is an arena for confession as well as other life important activities.

## **Conclusion**

It's about time to conclude, and pictures some scenarios for the future. I began this lecture with a brief presentation of Sweden's development during the last 150 years. In that presentation we saw that the society has went through a process of secularization, if we with secularization mean a decline in the interest for the established and traditional religions. And therefore it's possible to say that this process has nothing to do with the formal regulation between church and state, which came to an end in 2000. This change is rather an effect of the ongoing secularization.

Anyway; the decline in the interest of the Church of Sweden has been going on for a long time, and nothing indicates any changes in the direction of the process. However, since the shift in the relation between the state and the church we have seen many more of people leaving the church. Maybe this is something we have to get used to. In that case the church will become much smaller in a few years and the loss in annual church fee will dramatically increase. Of course that will lead to consequences for what the church will be bee able to do in the future.

Even if this development will continue, the church can still be an important arena for all the inhabitants in Sweden. And even if around 1 percent in a year leaves the church, we can work to a vision that 99 percent stay as members each year. As I pointed out earlier, when a church goes from having monopoly status, the direction is given beforehand. My point is that we should not get too depressed each time we observe that the church is shrinking. It's a natural effect of the development of the society as a whole, and the church must learn to live with it. In other words, it wouldn't have been realistic to expect that the Church of Sweden would keep its religious monopoly status. The societal development led to a more pluralistic religious market, where the Church of Sweden is one actor.

Even if the exit rates are high I will claim that people in general have a positive perception of The Church of Sweden. In the new *Member 2004 survey* I discovered that 60 percent of the members think that the church is important for the society. These findings point out that today the Church of Sweden has an excellent starting point, to go from, into the future. This is a fact, even if the relative number of members continues to decline.

But what does the church do to meet this development? I think that the church must take the following two steps. I also think that the church already has begun this journey. First of all we have to get better on communicating with those that not more than sporadically come to the church. Secondly we must put new life into all the work that is being done for children and youngsters. This has two reasons, first of all because we believe that the church can be relevant for young people today. Secondly because if we don't build a relation to people when they are young, it becomes much harder to reach them in the future.

Beside these two strategies it is important that each parish identifies its unique needs. By this I mean that each parish has to look at its specific environment. It is a fact that the conditions for the parishes differ a lot. Some of them have less than 50 members and some over 50000 members. Some of them are located in the cities and others in rural areas. The average income level is varying. The small parishes often have high relative membership level, almost 100 percent. Some of the larger has a much lower level, sometimes as low as 25 percent. These examples of differentiation indicate that it is impossible to find standard solutions that would fit all parishes and the people who live in them. Standard solutions were efficient in the past, now the Church of Sweden needs more flexibility. And I think the church does meet these needs. Today employees in every parish are working together in a systematic way with questions about "how to be a church in our environment".

I have given a picture of the development and the present situation of the Church of Sweden that could seem to be a quite depressing story. But I don't think it's necessary to see it that

way. Times change and so do organizations, that's life. What the church has to do is to see that the new age is full of opportunities. Large numbers of members isn't a goal in it self. The church can still be a relevant arena for a lot of Swedes, and I'm sure it will be so.

Now it's time for me to end this lecture. For me it has been interesting to do this and I hope you enjoyed it too.

Thank you very much for listening!