

Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference

Turku, Finland, September 2009

Lennart Sjöström served for 10 years at Seamen's Churches in Europe and Africa and also 25 years as Rector of the Swedish Church in London. He has now returned to Sweden and was asked by the committee to share his impressions of the present role of the Church of Sweden in Sweden.

A Personal Reflection on the Challenges and Opportunities facing the Churches in Sweden.

'The Church in the Market Place' is the title of a book by Lord Carey about an Anglican parish in Durham. Like that parish, national churches abroad have been enjoyed a particular blessing in being granted a very central role in the life of an ex-patriot community. Until recently, such a role was enjoyed by the national Church in Sweden. However, today the Church is losing that position.

The Church is losing members. In 1972 the church counted 7.7 million members or 95% of the total population. In 2008 we had 6.8 million members or 73%. This may be due in part to the arrival in Sweden of a considerable number of immigrants from of a non-Christian background. But it is also a fact that many people are leaving the Church, particularly since disestablishment in the year 2000.

This is in sharp contrast to what happens in the parts of the world where Christianity is growing and growing strongly. It has been calculated that Christianity is growing by some 100,000 people per day, and that some 3,000 parishes are created each week. Today, 33% of the world's total population are baptised Christians, and 90% of the world's population belong to one religion or another. But in Sweden, and in much of Western Europe, the general opinion, supported by politicians, seems to be that religion has no official place in Society.

Yet the Church is still there, in the Market Place, and in times of desperate need, after a catastrophe like the Tsunami or major accidents, the Church is the place to which people turn in distress. This has not changed in Sweden, in spite of the fact that the church has been chased out of the market place by politicians and by public opinion.

A challenge for the Church in Sweden must be to regain the Market place. The Christian Council of Sweden should, I think, initiate a process by which Churches and Faith Communities seek ways of becoming involved in the educational system, so as to offer pupils proper knowledge of the Bible, of Churches and of other faiths.

A church in the Market Place is not only able to influence society. It is at the same time influenced by society. That is today very obvious in Sweden. In Parliament the political parties of Sweden have agreed, with one exception (the Christian Democrats), that Sweden from now on will offer and register same sex marriages in a civil registration. The Church of Sweden now has to take decisions in Synod very soon this autumn regarding in what way and to what extent it, the Church, shall be part of the new order.

The Central Board of the Church of Sweden has proposed to Synod that Canon Law should be altered so that the Church of Sweden can seek approval from the Government so that it can continue to solemnize marriages in Sweden, including those for same sex couples. The Board claims that these proposals to Synod are guided by self initiated theological reflection rather than by political or media pressure. However, many church members are doubtful of that claim. Indeed, 7 out of 14 diocesan bishops openly oppose the measure and disagree with the theological reasoning behind it.

The whole process is very controversial both at home and abroad. Archbishop Wejryd has written to the primates of the Porvoo Churches and other ecumenical partners explaining both the background and reasoning behind the Proposals to Synod. But has he listened? From the Church of England two bishops, John Hind of Chichester, and Christopher Hill of Guildford, have responded with a warning that ecumenical relations may be greatly harmed if the Church of Sweden takes this step to offer same sex weddings or blessings. They conclude that a measure opening up the possibility of same sex marriages in the Church of Sweden could indeed damage the Porvoo communion.

I know that Anglicans themselves are not spared disagreement surrounding same sex relations, as we have learnt from what has been going on across the Anglican Communion. However, I have a degree of sympathy for the Anglican inclination to deal with blessings of homosexual couples only in the context of Pastoral Care.

In Synod later this month and in October the question of same sex marriages will be debated and several motions will be heard to alter the otherwise generally expected outcome. Some will advocate a simple 'NO' to the proposals. Others will seek to modify them in order to bring calm to ecumenical partners' concern by suggesting further ecumenical conversations prior to any decision. Some will seek to modify the proposals in order to satisfy a considerable unrest in the Church of Sweden. In October we will know for sure what Synod thinks.

My personal wish is that the Church may find ways to deal with this question with dignity and wisdom - possibly by declining the role of being official Registrar at Weddings and instead offering blessings to married couples and registered partnerships.

A Church can't be in the Market Place without being involved in the big contemporary questions. And in that situation the Church has to return to and find strength in the Gospel. St John 17.15f: 'My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.'

It is for the Church to keep that old balance right. To be in the Market Place and still not be absorbed or ruled by the Market, by public opinion or political pressure. The Church should not leave the Market Place, where it may mean a lot to many. It may support those who are weak or vulnerable. It may grant homosexuals a natural and honoured place in Society and Church without any excesses and after careful theological consideration.

Above all, the Church is called to help many to find faith and strength in life, by making God visible on the human horizon and by making the Church a relevant institution in Society and contemporary life. Let us never discontinue praying for the Church.