



**EBF Theology and Education Division**

**Symposium “Baptist Churches and Changing Society: West European Experience”**

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## **Baptist Churches and Nordic society: A challenge for incarnated mission**

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Speaking about the society we are part of, in my case Sweden and Nordic society, and the cultural shifts that are occurring today is in some sense a daunting task; partly because the subject matter is complex, and any attempt runs the risk of being overly generalised or shallow, and also because the challenges that we are facing are numerous and they profoundly affect us as a Church – across the denominational spectrum –and raise difficult, and sometimes painful, questions. Also, borrowing the words of Dr Stuart Murray; “in light of the cultural shifts that we are experiencing in our part of the world, who is to say that the questions we are asking even are the right questions? ” No one really knows. We are in the middle of a significant paradigm shift, and churches that seem successful today, are they successful because they have found a way to connect with the changing culture, or are they merely drawing from the remnants of a Christendom culture that is quickly fading away? Time will tell if the questions we asked were the right ones and the conclusions and choices that we made were correct. Perhaps one of the most important challenges that we are facing as Baptists is to allow ourselves the freedom fail, to experiment and trust that the Spirit of God is part of and leading the process. This in itself is by no means a small thing.

I approach this subject from various standpoints, as an academic, as a practitioner and church planter, as well as working with national strategies for pioneering ministry and church planting within the Baptist Union of Sweden. I do not claim to be an expert on Nordic society, and I will primarily speak about the context with which I am most familiar, Sweden and Swedish society.

### **Sweden as context**

#### **Post-Christendom**

I would argue that one of the most appropriate and fruitful ways to describe Sweden, and Nordic society as a whole, is in the language of Post-Christendom. I assume that you are familiar with most of the things I will say in this matter; Sweden and the Nordic context share this experience with the rest of Western Europe. Nevertheless, it may be valuable to briefly describe the context, if only as a

reminder.

Stuart Murray writes, in his book *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange new World*:

*"Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitely shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence."*

There are of course differences between the Nordic countries, but using Sweden as the example one can see that the place for religion and spirituality, and Christian faith in particular, has changed dramatically within a historically brief time period. Sweden has, as example, had no state church since 2000, a shift that did not occur in a vacuum but is a result of decades of change on cultural and political levels.

The shift towards a Post-Christendom culture gained momentum in the 1960s. Since then the number of church weddings has decreased notably, as well as the number of infant baptisms, teenagers participating in confirmation classes, and the place for Christianity in schools has changed dramatically during this time period. Young people growing up today have a meagre, if any, understanding of the Christian faith, other than what they meet in the sometimes ill-informed mass media. This does not however, but any means, mean that young people lack interest in spirituality and existential questions.

Eva Hamberg ("Christendom in decline: the Swedish case" in *the Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*) writes:

*"Recent survey data indicate that particularly among young persons interest in various occult phenomena, such as astrology, ghosts and extra-terrestrial beings visiting earth, is fairly common. Thus, both a decline in traditional Christian beliefs and an increase in other types of religious faiths characterise Swedish society today."*

The cultural contexts from which a majority of the Baptist churches in the Nordic countries emerged simply do not exist anymore. The page has turned, society has moved on, and the Christian faith has become one voice among many, more frequently pushed out on the margins of public life.

A great challenge is therefore to come to terms with this new reality, and I believe that that is where we are today as Baptists. My experience is that members of Baptist churches recognise these changes, but perhaps lack strength, ability, or will power to face these challenges in a meaningful way. The changes in our culture are also sometimes underestimated, and one fails to see the profound and deep changes that are needed within their congregations.

When visiting Baptist churches in Sweden, addressing these issues, I normally try to challenge them with the following question; *Imagine that you and your church, or part of your church, come to your town or community today as missionaries to start a church – what would you do, i.e. what would you do differently, what would be the same?* This usually sparks some interesting and important discussions, but when forced to – at least in the mind – leave the comfortable and familiar place of the church context one is accustomed to, I have found that people frequently struggle to

imagine something different. Many ideas are merely more of the same, perhaps just slightly different. I do not say this to judge anyone, but to highlight how difficult it is to think in new ways – to suddenly think as *missionaries* in an alien and non-Christian context.

If an ability to read current culture is important for Baptists and the Church as a whole today, perhaps the ability to dream new dreams and imagine new ways of being church, participating in God's mission and living together as Christians is even more important. Without this imagination, and the willingness to act on it – with the risk of failing, I must add - we will hardly be able to face the shifts we experience in society, let alone engage in mission in an incarnational and creative way.

### **Secularisation and Sacralisation**

It needs to be said that Post-Christendom Sweden does not mean the demise of spirituality and religious interest, at least if we look at non-institutional and less traditional forms of religion. Sweden is one of the most secular countries in the world, but studies indicate at the same time an increasing *sacralisation* among younger generations. Generation X seems to adhere to Postmaterialistic and religious values, although showing the same lack of attendance in terms of traditional religious meetings as Boomers. What may be regarded as New Age or alternative spiritual practices – such as yoga, meditation etc – are common practices among many Swedes today, part of a wider interest in a healthy and holistic lifestyle. This does not necessarily mean that one defines oneself as “religious”, but spirituality as a phenomenon is not dead, even in such a secular country as Sweden.

### **Urbanisation, Multiculturalism and Globalisation**

Following the trend globally, Sweden is becoming more urbanised. More and more people are moving into the larger cities (Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö), and the rest of society is experiencing an urbanisation process in terms of culture, media and life styles. One may add to this the emergence of a network society, where people increasingly tend to spend the majority of their time in places other than where they live geographically, instead they live their lives and make meaningful relationships where they work, participate in sports activities, hobbies, through ethnic groups, subcultures, and the like. This is a radical shift from the local, parochial identity that many Baptist churches may be familiar with.

Sweden is also becoming increasingly multicultural and global, both from immigration, as well as social media, the Internet and travelling. By simple walking down to the local main street, buying a cheap last minute ticket to an exotic country on the other side of the globe, or merely surfing the Internet one has access to a vast number of cultures, life styles and worldviews, other than the Christian faith, or traditional Western thinking.

In the wake of an increasingly urban and multicultural society, we also see less favourable developments, such as segregation (both in terms of social class and ethnicity), isolation and loneliness. Stockholm has the highest percentage of single households in the world (how does this affect our churches that tend to be more family oriented?), suburbs around the larger cities in Sweden where 60-80% of the

population are immigrants is now common, and the welfare state has experienced a dramatic dismantling in the last 20 years. These are merely examples, but they affect society in deep ways and leave Baptists and Christians as a whole with a missional challenge that is difficult to ignore.

## **Incarnated mission in Sweden**

### **What is incarnated mission?**

By adopting an incarnational approach to mission one no longer view the Incarnation as merely an irreducible part of the Christian confession, but also as a theological prism through which the entire missional task in the world is viewed.

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch write,

*When we talk of the Incarnation with a capital I we refer to the act of sublime love and humility whereby God took it upon himself to enter into the depths of our world, and our reality in order that the reconciliation and consequent union between man and God may be brought about. This “enfleshing” of God is so radical and total that it is the bedrock upon which rest all subsequent acts of God in the world. A halfway house on the way to God would not do for a lost humanity, and so God had to come down to man, not halfway but the whole way ... It is from inside the human condition and experience that God fulfils his own requirements for the salvation of the human race.<sup>1</sup>*

This carries several missiological implications:

→ **Identification with “the other”** – as the people of God sent out into the world, we are to identify with the people, just as God identified with us in Jesus, without compromising the truth of the gospel itself.

→ **Listen, learning and empowering**, rather than coming with preconceived ideas, models and methods.

→ **We adopt appropriate methods of contextualisation** – incarnated mission seeks to plant the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God deep within cultures, letting faith and forms emerge from within. It means letting the gospel become a genuine part of a people group without damaging the innate cultural framework that provides that people group with a sense of meaning and history.

→ **It is mission “from below”, on the terms of “the other”** – serving, rather than mastering; becoming nothing, rather than gaining status.

→ **It is to seek proximity** – cultural, geographical and relational; a real and abiding presence among a group of people.

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<sup>1</sup> Hirsch and Frost, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (2003), p. 35

→ It carries a **sending impulse**, out into the world, rather than an extractational one, where we pull people out of their contexts to join us.

### **The need for incarnated mission**

More can be said about the nature of incarnated mission, but I would argue that the need for this approach to mission in Sweden, and the Nordic context as a whole, is great, and I believe ripe with possibility.

→ Fewer and fewer people come to church when we invite them to our services and programs; we need to go out, rather than expect them to come to us (this is a significant paradigm shift, which I will address further below).

→ Sweden is today a pluralistic society, with a great number of subcultures (that could be viewed as unreached people groups, similar to those we send missionaries to overseas), as well as ethnic groups.

→ There are people on the margins in society (e.g. immigrants, the gay community, the poor) who are far away from church culture.

→ “No size fits all” in a pluralistic society. There is a need to, using the words of John Drane, move away from *the McDonaldization of the Church* (in his book with the same name he compares current church culture in the West with the fast food industry, which is governed by predictability, control and efficiency).

### **Pursuing incarnational mission, what challenges are we facing?**

The church as a whole in Nordic society faces several challenges, and statistics show that we seem to struggle to cope with the paradigm shift we are experiencing. There are, however, exceptions – e.g. in Norway the number of Baptist churches has increased from 65 to 85 in six or seven years, mainly due to new congregations started by Chin and Karen groups (similarly in Sweden, the majority of new churches started within the Baptist Union are ethnic congregations). We have also seen a slight increase in the number of churches planted in urban areas.

Nevertheless, although the number of Baptist members has stayed the same, the number of Baptist congregations in Sweden (i.e. part of the Baptist Union of Sweden and/or InterAct) has decreased from 552 to 474 in ten years (a 14% decrease). 37% of the congregations have had a decrease in terms of number of members within this time period, 48% have been on a stand still, and merely 15% of the congregations have seen an increase. It is not my intention to sound overtly pessimistic, but I believe it to be crucial that we look soberly on the situation that we are in.

## **Facing an increasingly urban, multicultural and pluralistic society?**

How do we face the challenges presented to us in an increasingly urban society? Only 12% of Baptist congregations (17% of its members) are found in the inner city or suburbs of cities in Sweden. Approximately 28% of the congregations are found in larger towns, and 60% in rural or sparsely populated regions.<sup>2</sup> It seems to indicate that Baptists today are far from an urban movement, shaped by urban culture. Generally, for the Baptist Union in Sweden, congregations in urban areas have struggled for a long time, are now made up of ageing congregations and are seeing negative membership statistics. We seem to find it very difficult to connect with urban culture in a fruitful and meaningful way.

One missional challenge is then to seek to understand the urbanisation process Sweden is experiencing and urban culture as a whole. Some missiological questions to consider may be,

→ What does a church within a “24 hours per day, 7 days per week” networked society look like, that follows the sometimes chaotic and messy rhythm of urban culture, rather than weekly Sunday services at 11am? How do you build a sustainable community in such a context, which is fluid in nature, where people live within a large geographical area, and within a culture that is struggling with long-term commitment?

→ How do we plant the Gospel among the poor and marginalised, in communities that people seek to *move away from*, rather than are *moving to*? One important aspect to consider is moving people strategically to these locations. This often does not happen as it usually involves a great deal of sacrifice, as well as loss of comfort and prestige.

→ How does a, for the most part, middle-class church culture meet a multicultural, messy and pluralistic urban culture? Neil Cole once said, “If you’re going to win the world for Christ, you’re going to have to sit in the smoking section.” With its alternative lifestyles, great number of ethnic groups and subcultures, church as we like it and are accustomed to is just not going to cut it or even make sense. How do we respond to that?

→ In a context where many people commute long hours, have busy schedules with work and spare time activities, what does a simpler and less time consuming urban church look like? What does a simple urban church look like, that does not so much consume people’s time with internal affairs, but frees people’s time and empowers them to have deep and meaningful relationships with neighbours, co-workers, friends, etc? Meaningful relationships in the city demand time.

### **A paradigm shift in how we think about church**

Perhaps the most difficult challenges we are facing as Baptist churches has not so much to do with methods, but more deeply Ecclesiological questions – e.g. what does it mean to be church?

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<sup>2</sup> *Sverigeundersökningen 2010*, a study undertaken by the network for Natural Church Development in Sweden as well as the Church Planting Network in Sweden.

I would argue that Baptist churches, for the most part, are *maintenance oriented* revolving around the Sunday service and caring for the members. This is by no means bad, but mission and evangelism will most likely be a programme alongside many other programmes, or something that we do or support overseas. A focus on maintenance and caring for those who are already believers is perhaps sustainable in a Christian culture, where the majority confess to be Christians and the church is a familiar place. It is, on the other hand, unsustainable in a Post-Christendom culture.

→ Recognising that Sweden is a mission field in its own right, how do we, as Baptist churches move from maintenance to mission as an organising principle? What would that look like, if all that we are and do revolved around mission? It cannot merely be one among many of the church's programmes or merely something we do in other countries; it ought be the very thing that binds us together as community, gives us a sense of identity and purpose, and governs what we do and do not do, how we worship, disciple people and live our lives. In this sense an incarnational missiology challenges us as Christians and churches to the chore of our very identity.

→ Incarnational mission demands an understanding that the church – in its identity and purpose – is an agent participating in God's mission – *we are the sent ones*. As people no longer come to us, and the Incarnation is a fundamental framework for understanding God's purposes *we are to go out, rather than expecting people to come to us, extracting them from their contexts*. This is a great challenge to us as churches, as many of our strategies – in terms of mission and evangelism – usually revolve around getting people to come to us, to our buildings, our programmes and events. We expect people to come to us, on our terms, to experience God.

...What can church look like among subcultures like skaters, metalheads and bikers?  
...Or among Somali refugees living in the multicultural suburbs in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö? ...If the Gospel was planted in an incarnational way, what kind of churches would emerge among young people and teenagers?  
...Are we prepared to welcome and embrace these kinds of Christian communities, which very likely will look and feel very different from the ones we are accustomed to?

### **Learning the lost art of contextualising the Gospel**

This leads me to the next challenge I believe we are facing as churches in Sweden; recovering the lost art of contextualisation. Contextualising, or incarnating the Gospel, is a far deeper process than merely attempting to be "relevant".

Contextualising the Gospel is not an alien concept to the number of missionaries we have sent overseas over the years, but we are less familiar to the process at home. My hypothesis is that we simply have forgotten how to do it, because there has not been any need in a culture that, at least on the surface, could be regarded as Christian. To people brought up in Christendom Sweden, the language of the church, its stories and customs were not so distant as they are to people today. Contextualisation is a creative process that involves both listening to the culture and a deep understanding of and commitment to the Gospel; we need to learn to think as missionaries, working with the two parts in creative ways.

## **A challenge to the seminaries and educational institutions**

My last question is how this will affect our seminaries and institutions that educate our pastors and church leaders? What does pastoral training look like that not merely trains pastors to maintain existing churches, but trains them as missionaries in Sweden? What skills and experiences are needed, what kind of gifts and people are we looking for?

Within the Swedish context, at least, I would argue that we mainly train pastors (shepherds) and teachers in our seminaries. These are important gifts, of course, that edify the body of Christ, but these are by their very nature geared towards caring for the already saved, they tend to be more inward than outward looking. In a Christendom culture this makes sense, and there are historical reasons why these are the functions we associate with ministering as a pastor. But what about the apostles, prophets and evangelists? These are also to equip the saints, working alongside and in cooperation with the teachers and shepherds (Eph. 4).

Traditionally, in our churches, these people too often have been forced to use their gifts elsewhere; apostles becoming entrepreneurs in the business world, and evangelists needing to find a place in parachurch organisations, as an example. In Post-Christendom we are in dire need of these gifts among our leaders in our churches, as they challenge the status quo and have a natural movement out into the world among the lost. Without allowing these gifts to function within our churches in healthy balance with teachers and shepherds, I believe it to be very difficult recapture the missional impulse, being sent out over cultural gaps to incarnate the Gospel in meaningful and fruitful ways among people groups in Post-Christendom Sweden.

- Do we recognise these gifts among the Baptist Churches?
- Do we know how to train them in the seminaries and theological institutions?
- Do we know how to support them and release them?

Much more can be said about Swedish and Nordic society, and the challenges that we are facing in terms of incarnated mission. Time will not allow it, instead I will end with a passage by the apostle Paul:

*Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)*

In these verses Paul captures the essence of incarnated mission, it is this kind of heart – the heart of a missionary – we need to recapture as Baptists living in an alien and Post-Christendom culture.