

The Mission Province in Sweden

Historical background

Christianity first came to Sweden in 830 with the visit of St. Ansgar to Birka in Lake Malaren, close to Stockholm. His mission had no long-term effects, and first in the end of the 10th century a more lasting mission to Sweden started, mainly by monks from England. The Swedish king Olov "Skotkonung" was baptised 1000 in Husaby spring in the western part of the country. In the 11th century the Church in Sweden was organised. Six dioceses were created (with two, Lund and Dalby, later merged into one, Lund, in Skane, at that time part of Denmark). In 1164 the Church in Sweden was organised as a province, with its archbishop in Upsala.

The Reformation in Sweden was mainly a peaceful event. Two brothers were the leading reformers: Laurentius and Olaus Petri. Both had studied in Wittenberg. Olaus was the preacher and teacher. He was archdeacon in Strangnas and became vicar in Stockholm at the time when the city was affirmed as the capital of Sweden. Laurentius was in 1531 elected archbishop of Upsala. The election was not sent to Rome for confirmation, but the present bishops in Sweden consecrated him. Already at that time it was noted that even if the consecration was schismatic, it was valid.

Later in the 16th century there were efforts, on one hand to bring the Church in Sweden back to the papal structure, if Reform catholic, on the other to make it Calvinistic. At an assembly in Upsala in 1593 it was decided that the Church in Sweden should follow the Augustana Confession and the Church Order of 1571 by Laurentius Petri.

In the Church Law given by the king in 1686 the confession for the Church in Sweden was stated that the Augustana Confession, accepted at the Upsala Assembly, was explained in the Book of Concorde.

The Pietistic movement in the 17th and 18th centuries influenced the life of the Church in Sweden, and several priests made a great impact on their parishes and the area around them. The bishops persecuted some of them. The most known is the curate at Lund Cathedral, Henrik Schartau, the years around 1800. He influenced priest candidates at the university, mainly from and later priests on the Swedish west coast. The tradition from him, usually called "Old Church tradition", is still alive.

The growing call for world mission in the 19th century led to mission societies, many in an Evangelical tradition, with activities also in Sweden. One of these is "Bibeltrue Friends" with mission mainly in East Africa. Other of these societies led to Free Churches. The Church of Sweden was in the early 20th century affected by the liberal theology. At the same time a High Church movement grew, influenced from the Church of England.

In 1958 it was decided to allow women to be ordained as priests in the Church of Sweden. To fight for an orthodox order of the Church the different traditions, Old Church, Evangelical, and High Church, started to cooperate. Later on, 1983, the Free Synod of the Church of Sweden was formed, which cooperated with similar organisations in Norway and England. The Synod also has good contacts with orthodox groups in Finland and Germany. In 1993 the bishops decided not to ordain candidates who would not work together with women priests. In 1997 the Church of Sweden got its first lady bishop, with one more the following year. To further the cooperation between the orthodox traditions the former bishop Bertil Gartner, acting as an unofficial "flying bishop", gather meetings in Linköping, 1997-2002.

In 2000 the Church of Sweden was disestablished, but the secular political parties still nominate delegates to the Church assembly and dominate the local Parish councils.

A further step away from orthodox Christianity has been taken this year when the Church assembly has asked for a ritual for blessing of same sex unions to be presented next year. Against that decision Church leaders from most of the other denominations present in Sweden has protested.

The background for the Mission Province

1. Mission.

Sweden is one of the most secularised countries in Europe. There is a need to proclaim the atonement and victory of Christ. But most of the congregations of Church of Sweden have adapted to what is politically correct and do not any longer follow the mission command of Christ. Surveys show that 70 % of the population do not want to have contacts with the church except for baptisms, weddings and funerals. They do not understand that they need the forgiveness of their sins. They need knowledge of the will of God and of what Christ has done for us. The love of God demands a renewed evangelisation.

2. Homelessness.

The faithful are more and more homeless in their church. Many priests are no longer proclaiming the faith of the apostles. The liturgical life of the Church is often empty. The Bible is no longer seen as the Word of God and the highest authority in the church. Biblical ethics are abandoned for modern norms. For many Christians it is now impossible to worship in a congregation with orthodox teaching.

3. Politicising.

The Church of Sweden has after the disestablishment in 2000 become a congregationalist church where secular politicians have the power. More and more they dominate the bishops and the priests. The present majority in the church assembly decides on the doctrine of the church with no regards to the will of the Lord in the Bible.

4. Spiritual leadership.

The bishops of the Church of Sweden are captives of the political system. They are not allowed to ordain orthodox priest candidates. The bishop of Gothenburg, Bertil E. Gartner, was the last bishop not to ordain women. He retired in 1991 but has continued to support orthodox groups in the church. There are many good spiritual leaders in the different orthodox traditions, but they are never chosen to church leadership.

5. Different orthodox traditions.

People from the different orthodox traditions in the Church of Sweden have not been used to cooperate. But in the last years they have met in different ways and friendship has been formed. There is a growing estimation of the importance to cooperate. The situation is now favourable for the traditions to come together and work for the future of the Gospel in Sweden. At the same time there is a need for further talks on how to understand doctrine, liturgy, ministry and Church order.

6. Denied ordination.

The Church order for the disestablished Church of Sweden does not allow those who will not work together with women priests to be ordained as priests or deacons. Neither are they eligible to be vicars or bishops. The orthodox part of the church is marginalized and will in some decades cease to exist. Many who are called by God to the ministry of the Word are not given the opportunity to fulfil that. Some wait and hope for a change, others seek education for secular jobs. There is a responsibility for the faithful to further God's calling.

7. Local worship communities.

In the different traditions people have gathered to pray and worship. Local worship communities, often-called "koinonias" after the Greek word for "fellowship", have been formed. There are some priests ordained abroad. Both the koinonias and the priests need a good Church structure, on local and national level. Out of this need the plans for a Mission Province has grown.

The plans for a Mission Province

To meet the needs of the orthodox groups in the Church of Sweden a conference was arranged in Sept. 2001 in Falköping. Regional committees, as well as a national one, were formed to give suggestions of what to do. Most of the groups favoured the idea of a Mission Province, so that the koinonias could work together and priests could be ordained. The Church was described as an ellipse with two focal points: worshipping congregations and the apostolic ministry. The different traditions stress one of these more than the other, but it was agreed that both must be part of the structure of a Mission Province. The High Church tradition demanded ordinations by bishops in apostolic succession, the Old Church tradition the Book of Concord as doctrinal basis, and the Evangelical tradition that there should be a place for lay preaching.

The report of the national committee called for a Mission Province with bishops, who could ordain priests and deacons. As it was felt that the stress would be too much for one bishop, the suggestion was three or four. In the province the koinonias and other institutions, among them the "Congregation Faculty" in Gothenburg, would be "mission stations".

At a new conference in June 2002 in Falköping it was clear that not all supported the suggested Mission Province. Many did not want to take action outside the official order of the Church of Sweden. Aug. 15th 2002 those who anyhow wanted to go on with the plans for a Mission Province met in Gothenburg. It was decided to continue even if not all wanted to take part. A committee was set up to go into the details of how to form a Mission Province.

Points discussed

1. Consecration of bishops.

A simple solution would have been a non-territorial diocese set up by the Church of Sweden. But there is no political will for that. The only way to get bishops is to have them consecrated by bishops abroad and then sent to Sweden as mission bishops. There already are some priests ordained abroad. Priests ordained in other Lutheran churches are recognised, even if they are not employed in any congregation. In the same way bishops consecrated by Lutheran bishops have to be recognised.

2. Presbyterial consecration of bishops.

The Lutheran confession allows presbyterial consecration of bishops in times of emergency. But if there are bishops in other Lutheran churches that are willing to consecrate there is no need for that. The Church of Sweden has in its tradition never had presbyterial consecrations. The Lutheran churches in Norway and Denmark was in such an emergency at the time of the Reformation, but the situation was different in Sweden. The Church of Sweden can thus claim episcopal apostolic succession, much in the same way as the Anglican churches. It was decided to seek Episcopal consecrations, if possible.

3. Double line of responsibility.

That congregations have the right to elect their own priests is not a result of secular democracy, but of the priesthood of all believers. The people of God are responsible for the Church, but priests and lay people have different tasks. Christ gave the Church the ordained ministry, but he calls all his people to evangelise. The vocation to priesthood is recognised and formed in the congregation. The bishop who sends the ordained priest to the congregation needing a priest then confirms it. The priests is both sent, by the bishop in a line back to Christ and his apostles, and received, by the congregation and the Christian people who need and recognise his apostolic teaching. The same is valid for the preachers in the Evangelical tradition, even if there is no ordination: the organisations send and the congregation receives. In the Mission Province this could be developed to same kind of episcopal approval and blessing.

Foundations for the Mission Province

1. The responsibility for mission in Sweden

Christ calls the Christians to act. "The love of Christ leaves us no choice." There are many who are not ashamed to follow the mission command of our Lord.

2. Doctrine and confession

In accordance to the Church law of 1686 for the Church of Sweden the doctrine, faith and confession of the Mission Province "is founded in the Word of God, as it is us given in the prophetic and apostolic books of the Old and the New Testament, and concluded in the Apostolic, Nicene and Athanasian Creeds and in the Augustana Confession, accepted by the Upsala Assembly in 1593 and explained in the Book of Concord".

The Mission Province wants to preserve and carry on the spiritual tradition of the Church of Sweden. It is stated that the Word of God is the highest authority for doctrine and life in the Church. How the Christian faith can be explained in the context of the modern society has been developed in the two documents "Foundation and frontiers I-II", which show that there is a basic common understanding in the different orthodox traditions in the Church of Sweden.

3. Koinonias

Where so is needed koinonias should be formed for teaching and liturgy in the apostolic tradition. That is a way to preserve the spiritual traditions of the Church of Sweden. They will be a kind of mission stations.

4. Mission bishops

Bishops in other Lutheran churches will be invited to consecrate bishops for the Mission Province. These can then ordain priests and deacons/ deaconesses for the province. The pressure on an only bishop would be heavy, and therefore three is needed. The Mission Province is still small, but Sweden is a large country. If there were bishops from the different traditions and from the different parts of the country, it would be easier to have a broad acceptance of the province. A new (actually the old) role for the bishop will take form, when he is not tied up with too much administration, but has to work together with the faithful in the koinonias.

5. International contacts

The Mission Province is part of the international Church. The hope is that the bishops could have good contacts with orthodox bishops in other Lutheran Churches, perhaps forming an international college of bishops. Orthodox bishops are to be finding in Scandinavia, East Europe and in Churches on other continents, which grew out of mission from Europe.

6. A parallel structure within the Church of Sweden

The Mission Province does not want to form a new denomination. It remains in the tradition and heritage of the Church of Sweden. There has always been space for groups and organisations alongside the congregations and dioceses. Communion will be kept with those who still have the opportunity to work in the ordinary congregations. The Mission Province will regard itself as a non-territorial diocese in the Church of Sweden.

A problem with the Church of Sweden is that it is isolating itself from the worldwide Church of Christ through new teaching. The Mission Province will keep Christians in Sweden in communion with the worldwide Church.

7. Definition

The Mission Province is thus a free, non-territorial province in the Church of Sweden in its spiritual tradition and based on its unchanged confession.

8. Ordinations

For the future of the Church in Sweden it is necessary to ordain ministers of the Word. Some do not want to go that far. The Mission Province understands that and still wants to have the best possible cooperation with them. But the consequences of not ordaining priest are worse than acting without the approval of the authorities of the Church of Sweden.

When the teaching and the liturgical life in the congregations are adapted to modern theology there is a need to give people the possibility to meet the Lord in the Word and the sacraments.

9. The need for a church structure

It is primarily the koinonias and the priests who are or will be ordained outside the Church of Sweden who need the Mission Province for support and oversight. But also many organisations, convents, groups in the ordinary congregations etc. could belong to the Mission Province. Even some ordinary congregations could state their support.

Priests still serving in the ordinary congregations could ask the mission bishops to give spiritual support and oversight, even if they stay within the jurisdiction of the Church of Sweden. Already now many priests are under the spiritual authority of bishop Bertil Gartner. The Mission Province is in one meaning already formed, because there is a number of koinonias. These local communities now need to be brought together in a church structure. There is already a split in the Church of Sweden when the present leadership has abandoned apostolic teaching and traditions. With living faith and worship in the koinonias more and more Christians will come to them.

10. Renewal

The Mission Province does not want to be isolated from the Church of Sweden. It wants to free the church from teaching that comes from other sources than the New Testament. It wants to renew the Church of Sweden. Where the Word is clearly preached and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ the Holy Spirit is active to build the Church.

11. Regions

In time there should be several regions in the Mission Province. In the regions cooperation is formed between the bishop and the koinonias and other groups attached to the province. In the beginning there could be a less formal regional cooperation. There should be contacts with groups that choose to stay in the ordinary congregations.

12. Mission Council

In the Mission Province there should be a governing through the Mission Council. The decisions should be taken in a spirit of consensus. If a unanimous decision not is possible, the minority should be respected.

13. Bishops and consistory

The bishops form a college cooperating with a consistory. This is elected by the priests and by the koinonias. The consistory should uphold the confession and examine the candidates for ordination

14. Preachers and evangelists

There are many charismas in the Church. Some are called to be preachers and evangelists. Their vocation should be recognised in some way, and the bishop should bless them. Even if preachers and evangelists come out of the need in the koinonias they should have a formal relation to the bishop, as priests and deacons have. The situation in other churches should be studied to get examples on how to form such an assisting ministry. They could form a local team under leadership of the pastor of the koinonia.

15. The vocation for women

The Lord of the Church has decided that women are not called to the ministry of the Word. But there are still vocations for women in the Church, the society and the family. It should be studied how men and women could cooperate with their different gifts. There is a place for women as deaconesses, teachers among women and children, and missionaries, but the relation to the ministry of the priest must be clear.

The Mission Province

- The committee to outline a Mission Province gave a report and called for a meeting in Jan. 18th 2003 to form a Support organisation of the Mission Province. This invited koinonias and organisations to be members of a Mission Province, and Priests and priest candidates were invited to form a College of priests.
- May 15th 2003 elected representatives of six koinonias, two organisations and the Support organisation (with at that time ca. 300 members) and the College of Priests (at that time ca. 25 members) met to inaugurate the Mission Province.
- Sept. 6th 2003 the representatives of the koinonias, the two organisations and the Support organisation together with members of the College of Priests met to formally establish the Mission Province.
- Nov. 15th the same representatives met to nominate bishop candidates. Dec. 6th a bishop election took place. Elected were the Rev. Arne Olsson, retired vicar from the western part of Sweden, 73 years old, the Rev. Goran Beijer, diocesan chaplain in Stockholm, 63 years old, and the Rev. Lars Artman, curate in the southern part of Sweden, 48 years old. It so happened that the three cooperating traditions got one bishop each, Olson being the main candidate of the Old Church tradition, Beijer of the High Church tradition, and Artman of the Evangelical tradition.
- Contacts have already been taken with various orthodox Lutheran bishops abroad. These contacts will now be continued and the bishops are invited to consecrate the elected bishops.

Basic points for the Mission Province

1. The Mission Province grows out of the mission commandment of Jesus, which is valid also for Sweden in our time.
2. The Mission Province is formed in the emergency situation when the Swedish people do not know their Saviour, when the Church of Sweden is incapable to preach the gospel, and when orthodox candidates are not ordained and cannot be elected as vicars or bishops.
3. The Mission Province is a free community on the basis of the confession of the Church of Sweden, preserving and renewing its spiritual heritage.
4. The Mission Province is a church structure for the koinonias, which are formed to proclaim the gospel and a network to support orthodox organisations for mission and revival.
5. The Mission Province gives a church order to ordain men to the ministry of the Word and to give the koinonias Episcopal oversight.
6. The Mission Province has on the national level a College of bishops, a Consistory, and a Mission Council. The Mission Province is divided into regions for cooperation with the bishop.
7. The Mission Province seeks international cooperation on a Lutheran basis and has contacts with other denominations when so is possible.

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