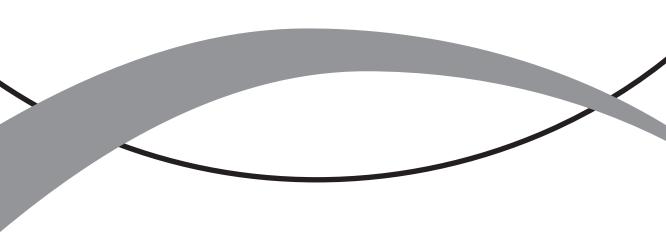
# UNITING CHURCH STUDIES UNITING CHURCH STUDIES UNITING CHURCH STUDIES



### **EXTRACT**

## SALVATION, DISCIPLESHIP AND EVANGELISM



# A Twenty-first Century Uniting Church: the ongoing work of union in the Uniting Church in Sweden.

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#### **Abstract**

Founded in 2012, the Uniting Church in Sweden is the second youngest member of the global United and Uniting church family and represents a somewhat unlikely fusion of the United Methodist Church, the Baptist Union of Sweden, the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden and the Swedish Salvation Army. This article surveys key historical and theological factors that made union possible, gives insights into the state of ecumenism in Sweden and reflects on the theological and ecclesial self-understanding of the new movement, sometimes by comparison and reference to the Uniting Church in Australia. It finds that the dream of greater unity and future unions is an energising and ongoing work, charged with possibility.

#### Introduction

During my work for the Act2 project of the Uniting Church in Australia my identity as a minister of the Uniting Church in Sweden (UCS) would usually be met with curiosity – even more so when I explained that our northern sister church only came into union just over a decade ago, as a somewhat unlikely fusion of Swedish Methodists, Swedish Baptists, the Swedish Mission Covenant Church and the Swedish Salvation Army.

This article is my attempt to tell more of its fascinating story than I ever had time and opportunity to do then, in the hope that it might inspire, challenge and, if necessary, provoke the UCA as it continues to "take a long, loving look at the real" of its life since 1977.<sup>1</sup>

What were the contributing historical, ecclesial and theological factors that led these Swedish churches to turn towards one another and ultimately enter into union? What theological convictions continue to fuel the second youngest church in the United and Uniting church family in its self-understanding and mission? And how far away are we from seeing yet another church come into union?

Walter Burghardt, S.J., "Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real," Church No. 5 (Winter 1989): 14-17 cited by Bethany Broadstock, "New Act2 Report is ready to launch", June 27, 2023, https://uniting.church/launching-act2-report/.

Older by less than two years than the United Protestant Church in France, founded in 2013, from Reformed and Lutheran Churches.

#### The state church context

Firstly, it would be impossible to say anything at all about Swedish church history without reference to the Swedish Lutheran Church. Much of the church landscape in Sweden has come into existence in continuity with, in reaction to, or in defiance of the state church, whose dominance has shaped Swedish Christendom from the Reformation until it was formally stripped of its special privileges in 2000.<sup>3</sup> The churches that would come into union all trace their origins to 19th century popular revival movements that swept across Scandinavia in spite of widespread official condemnation. Since the institution of the Conventicle Act in 1726 it had been outlawed to gather a group of believers in private homes without the presence of a state church priest. Penalties were harsh and included being sent into exile. While some of the strictest laws were lifted in the 1850s, Sweden would only gain full freedom of religion, including legally sanctioned departure from the state church, as late as 1951.<sup>4</sup> God could not be so easily boxed or constrained, of course, and both revival as well as an openness to ecumenism came through many different currents, both inside and outside the state church.

#### **Swedish Methodism**

Methodists came to Sweden early on as a result of immigration and emigration. In the early 1830s, Scottish Methodist missionary George Scott helped found the 'English Chapel' in Stockholm, with connections both to Great Britain as well as to Swedish Methodist congregations in America. Methodism, while remaining numerically quite small in Sweden, served as a significant catalyst for change. Its emphasis on prevenient grace, personal choice, holiness, and social justice extended well beyond the Methodist Church. It influenced the established state church and contributed to the rise of several free-church-style "movements" *within* it, such as the Swedish Evangelical Mission movement, and closely related to it, and beyond it, the Mission Covenant Church, the Alliance Mission and the Baptist Union. Thaarup makes the poignant observation that, in a way, the formation of the Uniting Church in Sweden is a uniting of three free churches in Sweden that were all influenced by Scott's work in one way or another. At the time of Union for the UCS, there were approximately 3,000 Methodists, 20,000 Baptists, and 60,000 members of the Mission Covenant Church. The province of the Mission Covenant Church.

#### **Swedish Baptists**

The first Swedish Baptists trace their origins to the baptisms as expressions of civil disobedience that took place in 1848 on the Swedish West Coast, where five men and women entered the waters and were baptised by a Danish Baptist pastor. A local former sailor, Fredrik Olaus Nilsson, who had previously been

Even then, the Swedish Parliament still ruled that the former state church should 'operate throughout the whole kingdom' and 'be an open church for the whole people and organised democratically' (Church of Sweden Act 1989:1591). For an assessment of the important contributions of Catholic faith in pre- and post-Reformation Sweden see also Magnus Nyman, Förlorarnas historia: katolskt liv i Sverige från Gustav Vasa till drottning Kristina (Veritas, 2017).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> By the passage of the Act on Religious Freedoms 1951:680.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Hans Andreasson, Liv och rörelse. Svenska Missionskyrkans historia och identitet. (Verbum, 2007), 22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Jørgen Thaarup, Wesleyan Theology in Europe: Christian Thought in European Wesleyan Tradition (Tro-fast, 2022), 32.

According to the Swedish government Agency for the Promotion of Faith Communities (SST) which collates annual statistics and administers significant state grants. See e.g. Swedish Agency for the Promotion of Faith Communities, "Bidragsstatistik", https://www.myndighetensst.se/bidrag/bidragsstatistik

influenced by Baptists down on the European continent would take on the leadership of the first Baptist congregation until he was sent into exile less than two years later, while other early Swedish Baptists were imprisoned. The religious authorities were ultimately powerless against the movement, and the Baptists grew tremendously, especially in the second half of the 19th century. Anders Wiberg, who had been ordained as a Baptist pastor in the United States, emerged as the de facto leader of the nascent Baptist union and served as one of its early unifying forces. The Baptists were staunch congregationalists, highly dedicated to Scripture and firmly believing in the individual's ultimate freedom to choose faith, baptism, and church membership. In spite of its initial focus on congregationalism, after Wiberg's death the movement would nevertheless come to organise itself as a denomination. The growth continued, and at its peak in 1936, the Swedish Baptist Union counted 65,000 members.8 That number would soon be more than halved, as Pentecostals were excommunicated, and various other Baptistic groups parted way. Many who stayed nevertheless came under the heavy influence of those who left, by Wesleyan thought, and by Waldenström and others from what would become the Mission Covenant Church. It is perhaps some of this shared history, culture and common beliefs that would cause the Baptists to ultimately lean towards the Misson Covenant Church when some of the movements it had birthed were themselves coming together as the Evangelical Free Church in 1997. This move further shone a light on some of the complexity, showing it was always something far more complex than merely groups united by shared views on baptism.

#### **Swedish Mission Covenant Church**

The Mission Covenant Church, which also spread beyond Scandinavia into North America through Swedish emigration as the Evangelical Covenant Church, stemmed primarily from Lutheran pietism. Originally an intra-Lutheran missionary initiative, it facilitated and organised missions within Sweden and internationally. These missions extended to regions such as Sápmi as well as distant locations including Congo, China, Russia, and the Americas. It started as one of several missionary movements within Lutheranism at the time. The individuals referred to as "Mission Friends" were ecumenically inclined and highly engaged congregationalists. Their primary focus was on faithfulness to Scripture, love, personal piety, and missionary pragmatism, rather than necessarily striving for doctrinal perfection. Nevertheless, many, attracted to the teachings of Lutheran priest P.P. Waldenström, came to take exception to the Augsburg Confession, favouring instead an atonement theory less centred on penal substitution but instead on God's reconciling of humanity to Godself. As a result of adopting an open table approach to the Eucharist, particularly through sharing communion outside of approved church services, the state church and the Mission Friends

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Sune Fahlgren, Vatten är tjockare än blod (Stockholm School of Theology, 2015).

Sápmi is in reference to the northernmost area of Scandinavia and Russia's Kola Peninsula, traditionally inhabited by the indigenous Sámi peoples. While there remains a strong affinity for the Sámi within the UCS, and a Sámi Church movement within both the Swedish Lutheran and Swedish Uniting Church, many Sámi remain ambivalent about the missions as an extended arm of the state apparatus and the devastating impacts on their ancient culture and religion. Both churches have engaged in truth-telling and apology to the Sámi peoples. There has not been the same depth of commitment, however, as the UCA's covenant with the United Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, and much is still left to be desired in terms of meaningful commitments to justice, mutuality and reconciliation. I reflect further on this issue in Ingen rättvisa värd namnet utan rättvisa för samerna! (Hela Hälsingland, February 6, 2020), https://www.ljusdalsposten.se/2020-02-06/debatt-ingen-rattvisa-vard-namnet-utan-rattvisa-for-samerna/. UCS International Missions Director Gerard Willemsen has also written an insightful and inclusive account of God in Sámi culture in Gerard Willemsen, Gud i Sápmi: Teologiska funderingar i samiskt perspektiv (Vulkan, 2009).

P.P. Waldenström, "Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity (1872)" in Covenant Roots: Sources and Affirmations, 2nd ed., Glenn P. Anderson (Covenant Publications, 1999), 101-102.

eventually separated. This separation eventually led to the official establishment of the Swedish Mission Covenant by Waldenström in 1878.

#### The Swedish Salvation Army

The Salvation Army arrived in Sweden in the late 1870s through visits by Bramwell Booth, son of co-founders William and Catherine Booth, and the work of Swedish woman Hannah Ouchterlony, who would become the movement's first leader in Sweden. Over the span of the coming two decades, however, friction arose between many prominent leaders in Sweden and international headquarters in London. In 1903, a number of Swedish Salvation Army officers had appealed to General Booth, seeking more democratic forms of local decision-making and more flexible practices in relation to baptism and communion. When their requests and concerns were not heeded, nearly half of all Salvation Army Corps in Sweden at the time banded together to form the Swedish Salvation Army in the summer of 1905 under the leadership of Kaleb Swensson-Tollin. For most of the history of The Salvation Army, then, Sweden has known not one but two Salvation Armies, one 'Swedish' and one 'international' or 'British'. Some towns, including my own hometown in northern Sweden, even had both corps represented for quite some time! Both remained true to their Army particularities, Wesleyan sensibilities and deep-seated commitment to social-diaconal work.

Over the years, however, both Armies saw their numbers shrink significantly, but the decline of the Swedish Salvation Army was particularly steep. The two Armies evolved in different directions over the years, and in 1988, the Swedish Salvation Army signed an agreement to become associated with the Mission Covenant Church while maintaining the independence to operate their own Corps. Of note, the parents of the Swedish Salvation Army's first Colonel had both been early pioneers within the Mission Covenant Church, so there was always a strong affinity between the two. By 2005, The Swedish Salvation Army was welcomed as a non-territorial region within the Mission Covenant Church. Special consideration was also given to the group in the work leading up to Union. By 2016, the denomination was officially dissolved and the remaining Corps integrated within the new Uniting Church. Using some of the remaining assets of the now defunct denomination, a foundation was created, which continues to fund ongoing ministry and diaconal work in the same spirit as the Swedish Salvation Army.

#### The state of Swedish "free churches" and Nordic ecumenism

At this stage, it is evident that a significant interrelationship existed among the churches that united in Sweden. This interconnectedness varied in strength, being more pronounced between certain churches than others. There was also a sense of connectedness and culture that was perhaps derived from being independent free churches vis-à-vis the dominant state church. While some historic wounds were profoundly painful, it is also important to note that the state church itself was also changed and shaped in many ways by the free churches and popular movements. The Swedish Lutheran Church itself has also played a significant role in the global ecumenical movement. Notably, the contributions of Nathan Söderblom, an

<sup>&</sup>quot;Historia", Stiftelsen Svenska Frälsningsarmén (Foundation Swedish Salvation Army), https://www.stiftelsensfa.se/historia/.

Stadgar för Gemensam Framtid (Regulations for Common Future [the working name for the UCS before the final name "Equmeniakyrkan"/"Uniting Church in Sweden" was adopted by the 2013 Assembly]), 2011, Para 21.

early 20th-century Lutheran archbishop and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, were instrumental in promoting Nordic ecumenism and advancing Christian unity on a global scale. By 1992, the Mission Covenant Church and the Swedish Lutheran Church had signed an ecumenical agreement, where they, amongst other things, sought to heal past wounds, and fully recognised each other's ordination as well as gave one another full permission to preside over the sacraments in church services. A great degree of exchange of ministers between denominations, increased ecumenical cooperation, and closer reciprocal relationships between the two churches became very visible fruits of this arrangement. A renewed and deeper ecumenical agreement was again entered into in 2006 between the Mission Covenant Church and the Swedish Lutheran Church, and in 2015 between the new Uniting Church and the Lutheran Church.

All of these factors would continue to converge at various points throughout Swedish church history. Eucharistic renewal movements that affected the Swedish Lutheran Church did not leave the free churches unaffected. Swedish Lutheran priests and congregants would participate in church services where communion was shared with many free church congregants. As early as 1905 the first free church conference was held in Sweden, at the large Immanuel (Mission Covenant) Church in Stockholm. Baptists, Methodists and Mission Covenant leaders were well-represented. There was a real sense in which this newfound unity was but a provisional arrangement, awaiting the full and visible unity of the Christian Church. The organic work would be formalised somewhat by 1918, and three of the founding churches formed a common organising committee and began collaborating more deeply and visibly in between conferences as well. By the end of World War II, virtually all free church denominations were actively involved in this work. There were also significant disagreements at times, however. Efforts to unite the Alliance Mission with the Mission Covenant Church failed, and views became increasingly polarised. The Alliance Mission disagreed with the Mission Covenant Church over the nature of Scripture and landed on very different interpretations and conclusions of the same Scripture. Others, including some Pentecostals and Charismatics, were treated with a degree of suspicion, and were themselves suspicious of modern biblical criticism and what they perceived to be liberal theology. While this galvanised a degree of difference in the ecclesial landscape, it also saw others double down on Christian unity. The national leader of the Swedish Baptist Union, Hjalmar Danielson, began canvassing the possibility of a federated union of free churches in Sweden as early as 1944.14 In the next fifteen years, substantial progress was achieved, and Mission Covenant leader Ansgar Eeg-Olofsson determined in 1948 that a federation was insufficient. Rather, he asserted that establishing a unified free church was both feasible and attainable.<sup>15</sup> By the mid-1950s, a union of Baptists, Mission Covenant and Methodists seemed close, but failed as the Baptists were unable to convince the other Baptistic denominations to join the venture. By the late 1960s, seven free church denominations were engaged in active negotiations regarding union. However, there was no denying the most significant and enduring relationships had been established between the Baptists, Methodists, and Mission Covenant Churches. Although discussions among these three churches persisted for several years, they ultimately concluded unsuccessfully in 1971. The resulting disillusionment experienced by many was profound.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Swedish Lutheran Church and Uniting Church in Sweden, "Ekumenisk överenskommelse mellan Svenska Kyrkan och Equmeniakyrkan med kommentarer," dnr. 2016:0019b, March 2, 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Sune Fahlgren, Predikantskap och församling: Sex fallstudier av en ecklesial baspraktik inom svensk frikyrklighet fram till 1960-talet (Uppsala University, 2006), 201-236.

Torsten Bergsten, Frikyrkor i samverkan: Den svenska frikyrkoekumenikens historia 1905-1993 (Libris/Verbum, 1995), 138.

#### **Ecumenism from below**

Interestingly, however, while "top down" ecumenism and talks between leaders had failed, there remained an unstoppable force of grassroots ecumenism, which ultimately would pave the way for Union. Local ecumenical congregations were emerging across Sweden, uniting Methodist, Mission Covenant, Baptist and, in some cases, Swedish Lutheran congregations. In the southernmost town of Höör a local Baptist and Mission Covenant congregation merged to form a new ecumenical congregation and resolved all prior disagreements about baptism and church membership through a couple of years of close collaboration. Having unanimously resolved to come together in union locally, the congregation wrote to the denominational leadership of both denominations in 1969 with the simple plea, "now make our paths straight." <sup>17</sup>

The groundswell of ecumenical congregations would continue, and the national leaderships were permissive and tolerant, at times encouraging, but it would take until the 1990s before formal joint talks would again restart. In 1992, the Mission Covenant Church Assembly in session passed a declaration of intent to form "a free and open church" along with the Baptist Union and the Methodist Church, and, if possible, also the Swedish Lutheran Church. 18 Years of increased collaboration would follow, with both progress and setbacks. Progress was made on a joint formation program and shared ordination pathway for all churches as well as to form one joint theological college in Stockholm. After new attempts to unite with other Baptistic denominations as well as the Alliance Mission had again failed, the three churches continued their journey to form a new uniting denomination. By 2004, the three churches gathered for the first joint church conference and shared a joint ordination service at the conclusion of the Assembly. In 2006, national leaders for all the churches gathered in Tuscany to spend time together with one another and in prayer. The motivating factor for the gathering was not rationalisation but Christ's prayer "that they may be one" (John 17:21). When asked on the final night whether the time was right to form a new church, all participants responded in the affirmative. Answers ranged from "Yes, I want to! Where we build something new together from below," "I want to form a new Church and would like us to start today" and "May we find ourselves in a Church where we share all things with one another, where we have the courage to be open." Importantly, what proved to be the way forward was adopting the idea to build a new Church, not to merge or merely combine something pre-existing. So these profound insights from the Tuscany talks: "We three traditions are going to build something new together ... three proud traditions that are all willing to lay something down."20 This was further crystallised in the "Way Forward" document published in 2009:

We believe that we all have something good to receive from that which is new, and we are challenged to reassess earlier approaches for the sake of unity and renewal. Unity is for us a clearly superordinate value in relation to dividing lines. This is something other than compromise.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Sune Fahlgren, "De förenade församlingarna och förändringarnas vind. Några ecklesiologiska reflektioner," Tro & Liv, 2 (1992), 33–38.

<sup>17</sup> Alluding to Matt. 3:3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Svenska Missionsförbundet/Missionskyrkan, 1992 års generalkonferens, protokoll.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Olle Alkholm, Sofia Camnerin, Lasse Svensson, Christina Larsson, Resa till enhet (Verbum, 2019), 8-16; my translation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Alkholm, Camnerin, Svensson and Larsson, 8-16. In addition, "creating something new together" had also been the position of the 2008 publication "Gemensam framtid?" ("Common Future?"): Per-Magnus Selinder (ed.), Anders Svensson and Karin Wiborn, Gemensam framtid? – en rastplats för eftertanke på vandringen med Baptistsamfundet, Metodistkyrkan och Missionskyrkan. (Svenska Missionskyrkans kommunikationsavdelning, 2008), 102-104.

This is an exercise of the mind of Christ and to refrain in order to give place to others. ... We seek to be a church of relationships – personal, local, regional, national and global – relationships characterised by love, mutuality, solidarity and dialogue. Love is the foremost landmark...<sup>21</sup>

The Nordic context of local uniting churches affiliated with multiple denominations at the same time is distinctive and quite unique on an international level. At the time of Union, nearly two-thirds of Baptists were part of ecumenical congregations with various combinations including Baptist, Mission Covenant Church, Methodist, Evangelical Free Church, and Pentecostal Churches. In the Methodist Church, one fifth of local congregations were ecumenical, often linked to the Mission Covenant Church, Baptist Churches, or Pentecostal Churches. Nearly a fifth of Mission Covenant congregations were ecumenical, with many linked to three denominations, including the Mission Covenant Church, the Alliance Mission, the Swedish Lutheran Church, the Swedish Evangelical Mission, and the Pentecostal denomination.<sup>22</sup>

#### The youth leading the way

The youth organisations of the three churches formed a federation and established a national secretariat in 2007, adopted the name "Equmenia" and the vision "where children and young people grow in fellowship with each other and with Jesus." By the following year, the assemblies of each founding church decided to unite. In 2011, the new church was formally established, initially using the name "Common Future" before changing to "Equmeniakyrkan" (i.e. "the Equmenia Church") in 2013. The church consciously adopted the name "Uniting Church in Sweden" for English and international contexts.<sup>23</sup> The name "Equmenia" honours the pioneering youth who united first, blending words like "ecumenical" and "EQ" (emotional intelligence) creatively. The logotype of the new church is a mosaic cross, incorporating the colours of the graphic profiles of the churches that first united as well as signalling diversity and the collective identity of the union.<sup>24</sup> There is a palpable sense of enthusiasm as the Church has united for the benefit of future generations. The Uniting Church in Sweden is deeply rooted in the antecedent traditions, balancing various perspectives while collectively adhering to its unifying vision: to be "a church for all of life – where the encounter with Jesus Christ transforms me, you, and the world." While there are many aspects open to debate, this intent has served as a guiding principle.

#### Theological foundations and self-understanding

The strategic platform adopted by the 2012 conference of the UCS begins with the assertion that "we have to be honest about our own history. We have not succeeded in giving expression to the gospel which transforms the world, or ourselves be transformed. Now we need to take new steps [on the journey]." It also finishes by the expressing a desire to "stand for renewal and seek new ways to be church, better suited for our time

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Metodistkyrkan i Sverige, Svenska Baptistsamfundet and Svenska Missionskyrkan, "Vägen vidare" (2009), 20; my translation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Sune Fahlgren, "Equmeniakyrkans ecklesiologiska äventyr", SvenskTeologisk Kvartalsskrift vol. 90 (2014), 133-148.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Alkholm, Svensson, Camnerin and Larsson, 16.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Equmeniakyrkan,"NamnetEqumeniakyrkan,"https://equmeniakyrkan.se/kyrkan/equmeniakyrkans-historia/namnet-equmeniakyrkan/.

... This means that we follow Jesus in every new time."25 This propelled and fuelled the emerging church to focus on this vision over differences and to adopt a genuine posture of urgency: "it's now or never." 26

Like the UCA's Basis of Union, the UCS has also articulated a "theological foundation" which, along with the agreed regulations for the new Church, gives us some further insights and clues into noteworthy characteristics. Like the UCA's formulation about being "a pilgrim people", our Swedish counterparts remind us that it is a church formed from three traditions. This is a richness to protect, "but we must also receive the new. This means that not everything is complete. We are a church on the way."27 It goes on to highlight some of the key features of this heritage as "the emphasis of personal commitment to Christ, the responsibility of the individual as part of the congregation and society, and the democratic forms in decision making."28 It is a very socially conscious and politically involved community. Through a commitment to "reconciliation, fair distribution and care for others" and in considering what it also means to "proclaim the Gospel to all people and all creation," the UCS prioritises social justice, environmental stewardship, and human rights, in living out the gospel in contemporary society.<sup>29</sup> The church has also publicly participated in and provided chaplaincy to Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future movement, and the 2021 Assembly passed motions to "declare a climate emergency." 30

The consensus decision-making practices also implemented by the WCC and the UCA have in this context been described as a real gift to the church, allowing for all voices to be heard as we "seek the will of God and consensus."31 Following the legacy of Mission Covenant great, P.P. Waldenström, the new church wants to resist any sectarian tendencies and repeatedly affirms that "the Church is one," "universal," "transcends all boundaries" and is, in any case, "in this time provisional, awaiting the visible unity of the Church of Christ."32 This is very good news to a world in the post-denominational era.

On Scripture, the UCS affirms that "the Word of God is revealed in Jesus Christ," "given in the Bible" and "is interpreted by the Church throughout history."33 Further, and importantly, that the Bible is to be "interpreted and expounded on the basis of its centre, Jesus Christ and his work of salvation."34

True to the vision to be "a church for all of life," the UCS states that it "embraces different generations and cultures and is seeking to make the Uniting Church in Sweden and its congregations accessible to all people."35 Herein is found a deep desire to be a truly intergenerational church, in collaboration with Equmenia, and a truly multicultural community. The UCS has theologically reflected on disability and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Equmeniakyrkan, "Strategisk plattform för Equmeniakyrkan (antagen av kyrkokonferensen 2012)."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Sune Fahlgren, "Equmeniakyrkans ecklesiologiska äventyr," 145.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Equmeniakyrkan, "Teologiskt arbete," https://equmeniakyrkan.se/tro/teologiskt-arbete/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Uniting Church in Sweden, "ATheological Foundation for the Uniting Church in Sweden", Para 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> "ATheological Foundation for the Uniting Church in Sweden", Para 2, 28.

<sup>30</sup> Equmeniakyrkan, "Klimatnödläge," https://equmeniakyrkan.se/vart-arbete/klimat-hallbarhet/klimatnodlage/. See also "Lena strejkar varje fredag för #FridaysforFuture" (February 1, 2019), https://equmeniakyrkan.se/lena-strejkarvarje-fredag-fridaysforfuture/.

<sup>31 &</sup>quot;A Theological Foundation for the Uniting Church in Sweden", Para 21. See also Equmeniakyrkan, "Manual för beslutsfattande. Konsensusmetoder i Egumeniakyrkan" (2019).

Theological Foundation," Para 2, 3, 4, 6. Theological Foundation," Para 18.

<sup>34 &</sup>quot;Theological Foundation," Para 18

<sup>35 &</sup>quot;Theological Foundation," Para 19.

accessibility in many forums, and counts in its ranks and leadership positions pastors with cerebral palsy and physical disability.

A commitment to inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people had already been discerned in all the founding churches prior to union, and the new church has affirmed this position, with the express desire to "be an inclusive church, where everyone can feel safe and welcome" while still allowing for difference and congregational discernment.<sup>36</sup> The new church handbook, the first published by the Uniting Church itself following a six-year process aimed at giving "stability, distinctiveness and identity", contains a variety of liturgies, including gender neutral marriage liturgies.<sup>37</sup> The Church also makes available a growing online service planner tool which pulls together a variety of resources, including lectionary readings, theological reflections, additional occasion-specific liturgies, prayers and recommended hymns and worship songs.<sup>38</sup>

#### **Present challenges**

The UCS continues to face many of the challenges it brought into union. Although, as we have discovered, the main motivation for union went far beyond trying to stem the flow of decline, the new denomination continues to face numeric challenges. The new church is still only as numerically strong as the Swedish Mission Covenant Church was at its peak. In real terms, in 2024, the new Uniting Church had approximately 750 congregations and 67,000 members, while Equmenia, the Uniting Church youth association counted approximately 320 local associations and 13,500 members. The denomination also reported having 124,000 people regularly involved in its services, ministries and activities.<sup>39</sup> The Uniting Church newspaper, Sändaren, was recently discontinued after facing significant economic challenges and a decline in government funding available for independent newspapers. This, however, led to massive public outcry, and an online-only version was reinstated pending further decisions at the next annual UCS Assembly. Organisationally, while bold decisions were made at the time of Union for structural reform, some of the forms adopted, with their roots in the respective antecedent traditions, have rightly begun to be called into question and subject to review and further change. This, however, is not inherently a bad thing, but rather, a reflection that, like the UCA, it continues to "keep its law under constant review."

#### The ongoing dream of greater unity

In spite of major challenges in what has been called the most secular nation in the world, the coming into existence of the UCS in Sweden has provided a strong impetus for ecumenism and Christian unity in Sweden. Never before have there been such thin demarcation lines between denominations in Sweden. The trajectory towards further unions seems set. The dream of further union and greater unity is very much still alive and has a lot of energy behind it. The new national church leader of the UCS, like many others in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> The Church has made available a wealth of materials to enable local congregations to engage with these questions and come on a journey towards greater inclusion and non-discrimination. See Equmeniakyrkan, "Equmeniakyrkan och HBTQ", https://equmeniakyrkan.se/vart-arbete/manskliga-rattigheter/equmeniakyrkan-och-hbtq/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Equmeniakyrkan, *Kyrkohandbok för Equmeniakyrkans församlingar, provutgåva.* (Verbum, 2016), 7. And in its final form as: *Kyrkohandbok för Equmeniakyrkan* (Verbum, 2019).

<sup>38</sup> See www.gudstjanst.se.

<sup>39</sup> According to statistics reported to the state funding body, the Swedish Agency for the Support of Faith Communities, for the purposes of receiving significant state funding.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Uniting Church in Australia, "Basis of Union," (1992) para 17.

leadership, has played significant roles in the national ecumenical body, the Christian Council of Sweden. The Eucharistic and high church new monastic renewal movement at Bjärka-Säby has continued to bring together people from the full spectrum of Swedish Christianity. A recently elected new UCS assistant church leader, having previously led the flagship Pentecostal Church Filadelfia in Stockholm for over a decade, publicly returned to the UCS and to national denominational leadership. The national secretariat and denominational headquarters of the UCS collocates with, among others, the Pentecostal denominational headquarters, the Swedish Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Swedish Council of Churches, a national diaconal coordinating body representing 12 denominations, a free church study association, the Catholic ecumenical commission and the government Agency for Support to Faith Communities. The Uniting Church looms large in its leadership in ecumenical issues and is a driving force for further dialogue and collaboration across the board. Much has happened since the tentative collaboration begun in 1905. We are at least much closer to fulfilling our Lord's prayer "that they may all be one" than we were a hundred years ago. The dream of further and future unions is energising and continues to shape the present.

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# **About Uniting Church Studies**

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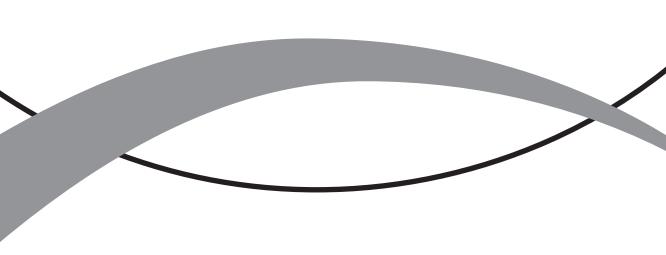
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