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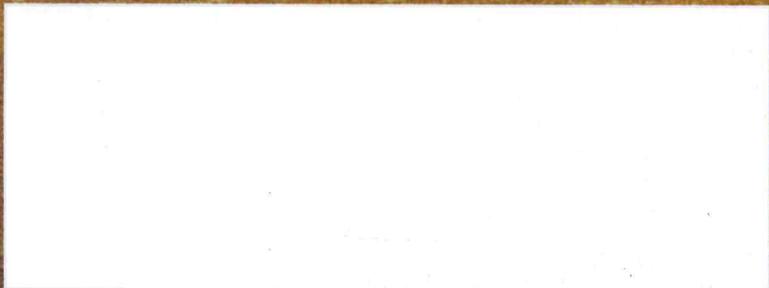
THE COVENANT

COMPANION

OCTOBER 2011



Stepping
outside
our
**COMFORT
ZONE**





Facing the Future TOGETHER

A look at the reasons for and the implications of the merger of the Covenant, Methodist, and Baptist churches in Sweden

MARK SAFSTROM

On June 4, more than 400 delegates from three separate church denominations gathered in Stockholm, Sweden, in one joint annual meeting. The road to the meeting had been a long one, with precedents of formal dialogue dating back to 1905. The goal this time: to create one new church out of three.

While the history of Christianity is filled with stories of competition, division, and even enmity between various denominations, stories of mergers and cooperation are perhaps all too rare. That three churches—each with its distinct history, traditions, and theologies—could successfully broker a difficult merger says much about the vision and resolve of the leadership. It is also a humbling commentary on the challenges faced by churches in Scandinavia, a region that has grown increasingly unreceptive to Christianity over the past century.

The main characters in this historical drama are the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden (*Svenska Missionskyrkan*), the Swedish Baptist, and the Swedish Methodist churches. This trio is often referred to as the original “free churches” in Sweden, and came into being in the mid-1800s during the revival that challenged the religious monopoly of the Lutheran state church, the Church of Sweden.

Since the Reformation, all Swedish citizens had been obligatory members of

this state church, and strict regulations limited all practice of religion outside the supervision of the Church of Sweden’s clergy. Thus, when many Lutherans who were filled with enthusiasm for revival and reform (known as “Pietists” or “Readers”) began lobbying for the right to hold private Bible studies, communion services, and adult baptisms, the resistance by the establishment caused many to leave the Church of Sweden and form their own denominations. The first were the Baptists (in 1857), followed by the Methodists (1868), and the Covenant (1878), which was the largest. Whereas before the splits the Pietists had often cooperated in various mission societies and joint ventures, once they evolved into Methodists, Baptists, and Covenanters, they funneled their activity into separate denominations.

This denominational, market-driven model of Christianity became standard practice in the years to come, although many people still retained dual membership in the Church of Sweden. For a time, it worked; the independent churches continued to thrive and grow through the early twentieth century. However, by the 1930s, the revival had begun to peak, and then the numbers of participants in the free churches began to decline steadily. That decline has continued to the present day, and in recent decades, the aging members of these churches have recognized that the extinction of their institutions is a real possibility.

And so, three churches with common history have long been speculating about a common future. As the challenges of promoting congregational activities and community life in this secularized, prosperous, and individualistic northern society increased, repeated attempts to unite all denominations also increased, particularly after World War II. However, it was not until the 1990s that the most concrete steps were taken. In 1991, the three churches began to coordinate their national youth programs, which were eventually united in a jointly run organization called Equmenia (2007). In 1992, the Baptists and Covenanters pooled resources to form one joint newspaper, *Sändaren*, and the following year the two churches also merged their seminaries to form Teologiska Högskolan Stockholm. The Methodists also became joint owners of this school in 2008. The successes of these earlier ventures have often been held up as proof that the ultimate merger could work.

Serious discussion of full merger came in 2006 at a meeting in Tuscany, which became a pivotal moment. A group of leaders from each church had gathered for a retreat to pray, seek each other’s counsel, and share their experiences, including the denominational heads Göran Zettergren (Covenant), Karin Wiborn (Baptist), and Anders Svensson (Method-

ist). During this retreat, they glimpsed the possibility for much more, and returned to Sweden galvanized in the intention not only to cooperate, but to develop a strategy to unite their churches. Letters of inquiry were sent to the respective congregations, and the leadership found that their own sentiments were widely shared among the membership as well. In 2009, at each denomination’s annual meeting, delegates voted to proceed with plans for merger, and the date was set for a final vote at this year’s meeting.

Part of the reason why the merger could work now, as opposed to even in 2000 when previous talks stranded, is that the religious paradigm in Sweden has shifted significantly in the last decade. In 2000 the Church of Sweden formally ceased to be the state church and thereby also became a “free church.” As this great oak of Lutheranism also began to lose members and as the place of Christianity in Swedish cultural life was questioned anew, the historical roles of the other free churches were again thrown into question. Where they had once protested the established church and competed with each other to develop denominational brands in the religious market, it now became apparent that they were all churches on an even footing, and furthermore were all faced with similar crises. (It

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was shortly thereafter that the Swedish Mission Covenant changed its name to Swedish Mission Church to reflect this change; previously, it had operated under the Waldenströmian principle that it was merely an ecumenical “mission society” and not a denomination in the proper sense.)

However, this formal secularization was merely a symptom of long-term problems that the congregations had been struggling with for decades. Church historian Torsten Bergsten, who has carefully followed the ecumenical discussions of the free churches, shared this sentiment with the newspaper *Sändaren*, and explained that before now the time had simply not been ripe for merger. As examples, Bergsten pointed to several local congregations, which out of necessity had already been cooperating across denominational lines. “Now we are confirming at a central level what we have known on the local level for many years: We need each other, for both practical and theological reasons. The natural foundation for all of this has been Jesus’ words about unity.”

As much as the desire for ecumenical unity has been a sincere goal, though, it is important to remember

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that reaching this point was not simply an idealistic move, but also a practical one, which may not have succeeded if the respective churches had not been in such difficult straits. Once the honeymoon is over, it remains to be seen what the future holds for this new marriage. In particular, the risk remains that dissatisfied congregations will leave the new church. There has been discussion about whether some Methodist congregations will choose to affiliate with other international Methodist bodies instead of the new denomination. In large part, talks stranded in 1971 and 2000 primarily because the Methodists got cold feet. The new church could still lose congregations and individual members to other denominations.

The desire to preserve denominational identity and affiliation has often proven to be a major obstacle to merger. This is less of a concern for Covenanters, as not only are they significantly larger than the other two groups, but the new church will likely not alter their operation and structure. It will have to be flexible theologically, and democratic and decentralized in its governance—traits that are traditional hallmarks of Covenant identity. The Covenant church also has a long history of functioning as a “mission society” rather than as a denomination, so practice is emphasized over theology and congregations are more or less autonomous even as they cooperate in joint mission activities and resource development (as opposed to denominations with more hierarchical structures and rigid theologies). Because the Baptists and Methodists have more established international “brands,” they quite simply have more to lose than the Covenanters do. As such, many have called on the Covenanters to be especially humble in accommodating their new partners.

Easing this transition is the fact

that the churches share many cultural traits. Because of the centuries-old dominance of Lutheranism in Sweden, many of the free churches have always operated within the shadow of Lutheran practice, liturgy, and hymnody, such that the differences between Methodists, Baptists, and Lutherans in Sweden are not as great as between those same traditions in North America. In fact, several of the free churches, including the Covenanters, have been using a common hymnal for decades. The Methodists and Covenanters both have signed communion agreements with the Church of Sweden, as well, which will likely extend to the new church.

Another strategy in gaining support for the merger has been for the leadership to help the churches “remember” their common past, that is, present the history of all the interactions between them in a way that emphasizes joint ventures, shared historical figures, and common values. This is not difficult, as there are many valid examples of shared history, such as the fact that all three churches can claim George Scott, nineteenth-century Methodist evangelist and founder of the journal *Pietisten*, as a spiritual forebear.

Nevertheless, the merger will not be easy for any of the participant churches. The new body still has no name, and it will continue to be referred to as *Gemensam Framtid* (“Common Future” or “GF-Church”) until at least the annual meeting next year. The formal operations of the new church are set to begin with the new year in 2012.

As Göran Zettergren told *Sändaren*, success will depend on capitalizing on the current enthusiasm and vision within the first year of joint operation. “Every organization can wind up faltering in one way or another. Now we have the opportunity to coordinate our resources and

become a more visible church in our country. If we can communicate the strategic goals that were presented in advance of the first year of operation, I am hopeful that this will result in a renewal of energy and love for the cause.”

Zettergren’s sentiments reflect a widespread hope that the merger will inspire new enthusiasm and confidence for the daily operations of both the national leadership and local congregations. In addition, there is the hope that the merger will cause the general Swedish public to take notice of their cooperation and perhaps be more receptive to a unified Christian presence instead of the “club” mentality that outsiders may have perceived in the past.

Covenanters in North America have a long history of partnership with the Swedish Mission Covenant Church, including exchange of clergy and members, college and seminary exchanges, and fruitful joint ventures in mission fields (such as Congo, Alaska, and China). As well, they share an enormous cultural heritage of Pietist theology and hymnody. When the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) was founded in 1885, it was heavily inspired by the precedent set by the Covenant back in Sweden. As the new church is born next year, there are great possibilities for continued cooperation if leaders and laypeople from the ECC invest the necessary time and effort to reach out to the new church.

It may also be important for churches in North America to study the experience of European churches closely. The challenges currently faced by congregations in Sweden are not dissimilar from conditions in various parts of the United States and Canada, where popular culture is increasingly secularized and weekly church participation is more infrequent than it was a generation ago. Our common future—the future of Christianity in

the West—may well depend on our ability to engage in the challenges faced by our brothers and sisters in similar industrialized, secular cultures and develop creative ways of meeting these challenges together.

Ecumenism, or the dialogue and cooperation between church denominations, has not always met with success in the past century. The hopeful burst of ecumenical conversation surrounding the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 and the subsequent developments that stemmed from it, such as the World Council of Churches in 1948, have often been viewed with skepticism by evangelicals. That is not least because even the most limited cooperation can be seen as an approval of controversial differences in theology, culture, and lifestyle. The Evangelical Covenant Church is perhaps unique among evangelical churches in North America in that, like its Swedish sibling, it was born out of an ecumenical revival movement, and has remained interested in ecumenical cooperation throughout its history.

Many Covenanters may remember how, in the 1960s and ’70s, the denomination considered mergers with other churches, but because it could not find sufficient interest among potential partners, tabled the issue. The recent experience of the Swedish Covenant Church may indicate that mergers are more likely to be successful when churches are struggling, not when they are prospering. But there is also a case to be made that the discussions with the Baptists and Methodists, which began in better days, are bearing fruit now when these churches need it most. The ecumenical partnerships that we in the ECC nurture today, including our continued friendship with the new Swedish denomination, can prove to be an important investment in the future of both of our churches. ■

OUR READERS WRITE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

which affects my skin and spine. Both are chronic; my doctors and I seek to control, knowing no cure for either disease. I trust that the Holy Spirit can cure in God’s time, but in the meantime I, like many of us, will to live and serve as best we can.

In short, I could be labeled as “damaged goods,” but through God’s love and care, many of us can yet serve God’s purposes that a peaceable kingdom might come.

Richard W. Carlson
Oak Park, Illinois

We applaud the *Companion* for addressing mental illness.

Our son Hans was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age nineteen as a sophomore in college. He fought the ravages of the disease with courage and compassion until he took his life at age thirty-two, ten years ago.

We were saddened to read the stories of those whose mental illness was exacerbated by the church and/or clergy. We want readers to know that in our son’s illness the church, clergy and laypersons alike, were totally supportive of both him and us. It was the loving and accepting church at its best, and we will be forever grateful.

We want to give special thanks to the members and friends of Hillside Covenant Church in Naugatuck, Connecticut, and to clergy who visited him in the hospital, took him out to dinner, prayed for him, and wept over him: Rev. Dwight Carlson, Rev. Robert Dvorak, Rev. Alden Johnson, Rev. Allan F. Johnson, Rev. Dr. Timothy Johnson, Rev. Arthur A. R. Nelson, Rev. Mark Torgerson, and Rev. John Weborg. We would also like to mention two Covenant friends: Phil Karlson and Quiwie Magnuson, who gave so much.

Ann Elise and Earl Lindgren
Naugatuck, Connecticut

I was so overjoyed to see the cover of the July issue and the article “Erasing the Sigma.” It had a lot of good information.

As a psychiatric patient on medica-

tion for the past thirty-seven years, I feel strongly that there is a large physiological component of mental illness based in the chemistry of the brain. More states now are passing parity laws so that mental illness is treated as any physiological-physical illness and insurance companies should treat mental illness the same as physical.

My other comment is that I agree with the statement in the article that “healing often begins when someone listens and offers acceptance.” It would have been great to elaborate on that by mentioning that reflecting feelings and paraphrasing events and actions is how to do it and is the basis of therapy. We can all do that to everyone. It’s good communication skills.

Name withheld by request

In response to Stan Friedman’s article, I would like to make the following point. In the cases of persons with severe mental illness, Bible-based counseling is almost inevitably ineffective and can be detrimental. The New Testament writers are addressing people of sound mind and the difficulties they face, like modern day self-help and inspirational literature do. This kind of teaching simply cannot be successfully applied to the problems of people whose thought processes are warped and twisted, or whose minds have been shattered by childhood trauma, or who are psychotic.

In my personal experience, the best thing a pastor can do when faced with such a person is to listen and respond directly to what the person is saying, no matter how irrational, in a loving and accepting way. Perhaps ask, as I was asked recently by a pastor I came to for crisis counseling, “Let’s just think about today. What can I do for you today? How can I help you today?” Being Christlike is the best application of the Bible to helping the severely mentally ill.

Pris Wilson
Ceresco, Nebraska

Additional letters on this article will appear in the November issue.

—Editors