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Strategy for theological education in a global context 2020–2025

The Church of Sweden’s strategy document for theological education in a global context aims to clarify departure points and strategies in the work with theological education within international relations. The document shall be a guide in planning and prioritisation within this work area. It is written with the background of current ecumenical debate on the position, relevance, and design of theological education.

The strategy relates to sub-goal 2, especially sub-goals 2 A-C in the Church Board's document on activities and finances for the Church of Sweden’s national level 2020-2022 to coordinate and develop international mission and diakonia.

Sub-goal 2 A – Recognised party for the development of society

Efforts: Have a strategic prioritised collaboration with regional and global ecumenical organisations and alliances on common strategic policy issues.

Sub-goal 2 B – Ecumenical and interreligious relations as well as culture

Efforts: Develop and support education and church employees to have increased knowledge on ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, as well as methods from these fields.

Sub-goal 2 C – Partnership

Efforts: Develop collaboration with sister churches and collaboration partners to contribute to mutual understanding and to positive sustainable change for people living in vulnerability.

The strategy also relates to Act Church of Sweden’s strategic plan 2018–2022. It describes theological education as a meeting place for learning and dialogue – not least in an interfaith perspective. It also highlights the importance of theological education in the context of diakonia and in relation to issues on freedom of religion and beliefs. Additionally, theological education is an important tool when “to work theologically on sensitive matters with churches and educational institutions”. For this, a solid theological education is a crucial building block.

About the document

The strategy document has been developed within the Central office. The international work is governed, among other things, by Act Church of Sweden's strategic plan 2018–2022. The strategy document for theological education in a global context provides support and guidelines for the continued work and planning of the work in this field. The strategy document should influence the design of a new strategy period for Act Church of Sweden after 2022.

Introduction and contemporary analysis

For the Church of Sweden's collaborating partners, theological education primarily aims to educate, support, and equip people for various leadership assignments in the church. The majority study in order to serve as evangelists, priests, and teachers, either in local congregations or at various institutions owned and run by the church. The subject theology / religious studies is an independent academic field and is considered as a highly valued activity in the global Lutheran context.

Inter-disciplinary collaborations are common and aim to provide tools for a critical and constructive societal analysis. Among the Church of Sweden's partners, theological education is conducted in close collaboration and with the support of multilateral ecumenical organisations such as the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) or the World Council of Churches (WCC). In addition, the Church of Sweden works in, and through, bilateral partnerships and together with national or regional actors in the education sector.

The concept of theological education is ambiguous. It involves a wide variety of educational efforts at different academic levels and is provided within the framework of Bible schools, seminaries, colleges, universities, or other academic centres. This strategy document primarily describes the Church of Sweden's priorities and working methods in the field of theological education. However, such work is not separate from other ecumenical and international collaboration, which is why synergies and interactions between and within the national and international parts of the field become important for the work as a whole.

A changing world

Support for theological education has always been an important part of the Church of Sweden's ecumenical commitments in a global context. In interaction with churches and mission societies, the Church of Sweden Mission (CSM) contributed early on in establishing educational institutions. These educational efforts were primarily aimed at training priests and evangelists for ministerial duties in local congregations. However, the education was not without problems to implement in practice. Curricula, theological departure points, and ideals were often direct copies from Western churches and academies.

The forms of both bilateral and multilateral cooperation changed over time, not least in connection with decolonisation and the independence of the churches. The tensions between a strictly Lutheran denominational theological education and a more ecumenical character were periodically strong, both locally and regionally. In such situations, the main line of the Church of Sweden was characterised by the Evangelical-Lutheran identity always having had an ecumenical sounding board.

The work with theological education included several different educational efforts in the short- and long-term. Support for undergraduate education, thematic and interdisciplinary educational programmes at the advanced level, financial support through various funds and scholarships as well as courses in popular Bible reading and development studies have all formed the cornerstone of both bilateral and multilateral collaborations. In addition, international courses have also been conducted annually at the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem (STI), which brings together participants from churches and ecumenical organisations around the world.

During the 2000s, special initiatives were initiated at the advanced level in the form of master's programmes in close collaboration with a number of different educational institutions. These educational programmes focused, among other things, on issues of HIV and theology and later also on gender issues, health and theology. Today, more and more churches around the world state that theological education is an important area of activity to develop further for the future. Approaches, methods and collaborations among the actors involved within the field vary, depending on the socio-political context, economic and structural conditions as well as set time frames. Common for all is to strengthen and develop existing structures for theological reflection, learning and education. An increased need for well-educated leaders and teachers in the churches is often cited as the main argument for strengthening individual educational initiatives.

The fact that most churches today own and run their own educational institutions presents the churches with enormous structural and financial challenges. Teacher capacity can be good, but, at the same time, financial stability can often be uncertain. Increased demands for institutional and academic quality assurance or strengthened internationalisation in the education market are just some challenges that individual churches have to deal with in the field. Furthermore, competition between the various institutions has increased markedly, as has the opportunity to link partners to the field that can ensure long-term financial and institutional sustainability for the future. At the same time, the student base in theology has broadened and expanded, as demand from several churches and denominations, which have historically shown very little interest in formal theological education, has increased over the past decade.

The role as education provider may not be new to the churches, but many of them have recently faced completely new questions that challenge both their own self-understanding and the churches' room to manoeuvre.

In recent years, theological tensions within and between different Lutheran churches in the world have increased, which is partly due to the churches' divergent views of biblical hermeneutics, Bible application, denominational identity or in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). It is against such a background that the issue of theological education has become important for the member churches in the LWF to pursue. The vast majority of churches within the LWF already today accept both women and men in the ordained ministry and as leaders in the church. As the financial support for theological education for women is still limited, the LWF has set up special support for such activities. From a broader perspective, the role of church leaders as actors for change is central in both church and society.

When the Church of Sweden today enters into collaborations on theological education with other churches, theological institutions and multilateral organisations, it carries its above-described historical heritage further into a new era. The reflection on the role and task of the churches in the public space has recently gained increasing importance, not least among the member churches in the LWF. A central departure point in that work is that the churches' societal role is defined on the basis of an in-depth theological reflection.

Strategic Collaborations

Throughout the years, theological education has been and still is a central area of work for both the WCC and the LWF, even though both organisations struggle with limited personnel and financial resources in this field. It is clear that they could play a crucial role in the ecumenical cooperation between donor organisations, churches and theological institutions. However, this area of work today lacks stable network and cooperation structures compared with how international diakonia, development cooperation, and humanitarian relief work. Such structures are crucial for being able to strengthen institutions, develop theological education, and to make them relevant in their contexts.

The work within the WCC Commission on Education and Ecumenical Formation as well as within the WCC programme for Ecumenical Theological Education focuses on regional and global collaboration. It deepens the dialogue with various evangelical and Pentecostal churches on theological education and deals with issues of institutional capacity development and forms of academic quality assurance. The work within the Pan-African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network, with GlobeTheoLib (Global Digital Library for Theology and Ecumenism) and with a global network for teachers in the subject of ecumenism are some examples of the multilateral responsibility that the WCC bears in this

area with limited resources. With the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI), the WCC gathers theology students from all over the world for an academic seminar at various major conferences. Moreover, through the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, the WCC promotes an in-depth study of ecumenical theology as well as builds informal networks between the member churches. The Church of Sweden also sends students to these courses. An important part of the WCC's work is to support regional ecumenical cooperation bodies and to strengthen them in building contextual work.

The LWF today prioritises the field of theological education, based on the resolution from its General Assembly in Namibia 2017 and relates it to the issue of the theological identity of the Lutheran churches and their role in society. The LWF Theological Education Network plays an important role in this work. The network aims to deepen and exchange knowledge and experiences in the field and to facilitate institutional collaboration between different actors around the world. In addition, the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg and the Wittenberg Centre constitute important environments for teaching and research for the member churches in the LWF. Furthermore, the LWF expands the existing scholarship fund for theological education in order to increase its ability to allocate financial resources to individual students to pursue studies in theology and leadership. In this context, the various regional networks serve as an important resource in contextualising the various initiatives locally.

The work with theological and ecumenical education in both multilateral organisations is of great importance to the Church of Sweden. These collaborations show a potential for further development of collaborations between different churches, donor organisations and theological institutions that promote a contextual and coordinated capacity- and competence development in different parts of the world.

Theological education and development issues

During the last decade, the view on the importance of religious actors and thus also the importance of churches in societal development has changed significantly in the development cooperation sector, not least in Sweden. This development has also affected the view on theological education. Religious actors play a crucial role in the development of values and in promoting social cohesion and trust. Thus theological education is not only considered as important for the churches internally, but it also, to a very high degree, shapes and affects society as a whole. It becomes apparent in the thematic areas in which Act Church of Sweden works, specifically in issues related to: peace, gender issues, SRHR as well as in interreligious dialogue and in poverty reduction. Church leaders also influence what role churches and denominations take when actors in societies use religious motives to spread extremism and polarisation. That church leaders are led by a deep theological reflection and a critical approach in the interpretation of sacred texts, in the church's self-understanding and in its theological interpretation of the context becomes a prerequisite for the churches to play a constructive and challenging role in the public sphere. This can lead to churches, to a greater extent, contributing to the promotion of dialogue, not least the interreligious one, questioning populist interpretations and thus contributing to sustainable development in societies. Another important function for theological institutions is to provide safe spaces within the framework of an academic environment. The aim is to reflect on developments in society and meet their contemporaries critically in a world, where there are more and more countries that have/develop shrinking democratic spaces. The educational context can become a space of freedom, where an open dialogue is cultivated.

Act Church of Sweden's strategic plan also shows the importance that theological education has within the Church of Sweden's development cooperation and indicates a general change of perspective to recognise the importance of religion in development contexts.

Strategic Goal

A well-developed theological education system must have a basic structure with, among other things, qualified teachers, access to current literature, good financial conditions and national and international exchanges. Focus on women's theological education is particularly of importance. An integrated gender perspective in theological education provides tools to combat unequal power structures in church and society. A well-developed theological education prepares Church members to interact with their environments so that in the challenges of society they engage in a holistic mission.

Theological education at the undergraduate level

The need for public education as well as academic education for deacons, priests, leaders, employees and others involved is very large in all churches. Studies conducted at the undergraduate academic level lead to some form of college or university degree. Many churches, however, lack priests with adequate theological basic education, which affects teaching, leadership, development and opportunities to meet the needs of parishioners. Churches often address the need for trained priests and evangelists through shorter courses or distance learning.

An important aspect of theological education at the undergraduate level is the ability to develop contextual theology and popular Bible reading. The gospel is interpreted based on the social, economic, political, religious and cultural environment in order for the church's prophetic mission to become visible and give rise to societal changes. Churches' support for theological education at the basic level, for example, gave the churches in South Africa the opportunity to develop a theology to fight apartheid. Other examples are the Latin American liberation theology or Dalitte theology in India, which have helped to protect human dignity and defend human rights.

Strategic path

The Church of Sweden wants to

- especially support theological education at the undergraduate level to enable an appropriate and good clergy education.
- support the development of contextual theology.
- support a gender-integrated perspective and approach within theology education.
- support theological education that increases the ability to critically analyse the society.

Theological education at advanced and postgraduate level

An advanced level leads to a master's degree, and postgraduate level ends with a doctoral degree. Studies at master's and doctoral level are important for strengthening capacity and developing higher theological education, both locally and regionally.

The Church of Sweden has, on some occasions, financially supported master's programmes at some institutions within a specific thematic theological area for church leaders. The efforts with master's programmes have been significant; however, they should only last for a limited

time to make an important area visible and not create a dependence on the Church of Sweden. The students' intention to be trained for church ministry in these master's projects aims to enable them to contribute to a change process within the churches.

The activities at STI are important, especially the international courses that focus on the intercultural context in the Holy Land with a focus on leadership and reconciliation.

Strategic path

The Church of Sweden wants to

- support higher theological studies primarily through the LWF's scholarship fund.
- support thematic master's programmes for limited periods.
- support women's higher theological education, so that they can gain access to leading positions in their churches.
- strengthen and deepen mutual learning between churches and institutions in a global context
- further develop and strengthen STI as a place for theological reflection, ecumenical learning and interreligious dialogue.

Exchange of students and teachers

World Christianity has shifted its focus from Europe and the West to the global South. The Church of Sweden's need for contact with churches and theology from other contexts is therefore particularly important. Exchange programmes for students exist within the EU, but there are fewer opportunities with educational institutions in the global South. Mutual learning is important for the Church of Sweden in order to be challenged and partake in the theological reflection from other churches.

Long-term seconded teachers from the Church of Sweden have the possibility to build relationships and bring home the theological reflections of other churches to Sweden. A basic rule is that the seconded person should never replace a local teacher with equivalent competence. The seconded teacher's task is to add special competence to develop a subject, add another pedagogical approach or to create an exchange of experiences with the Church of Sweden.

Short-term seconded teachers are also motivated in order to support another church's educational institution in special situations. It is important to create possibilities of exchange for teachers, and the goal is to enable teachers from other churches to teach in Sweden. Invited teachers from other churches and institutions could teach at the Church of Sweden's educational institute (SKUI) as well as strengthen dioceses in education courses and conferences. Teachers from other churches support the Church of Sweden in intercultural learning and challenge it with other pedagogical and theological perspectives.

Strategic path

The Church of Sweden wants to

- share in theological reflection in the worldwide church and encourage mutual learning, for example, by stimulating studies at theological institutions in the global South and at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey.
- assist with financial support for courses, exchanges and conferences between churches in the global South to stimulate a mutual exchange of knowledge.
- send staff to theological educational institutions in the global South to stimulate reciprocity and exchanges.

- promote exchanges with teachers from the global South to teach at SKUI and at the diocesan courses and conferences from time to time.

Scholarships

Many congregations in the global South have limited financial resources to support their churches' general central functions. There are few opportunities for them to assist joint educational institutions, which affect theological education at the undergraduate level. Support for scholarship funds is therefore important in order to be able to give students with limited financial resources the opportunity to pursue theological studies. Advanced and postgraduate studies are often dependent on external scholarships. The Church of Sweden has previously given scholarships to individuals, but this is now only provided through support to the LWF or directly to churches or educational institutions.

Strategic path

The Church of Sweden wants to continue to give

- grants for scholarships for undergraduate studies.
- financial support for the LWF's scholarship fund.

Library and literature support

Most theological institutions in the global South work hard under difficult conditions to gain access to current theological literature. Libraries often have outdated literature, lack of IT equipment and problems with electricity supply. In Africa and Asia, the literature is usually written in English, as well as French or Portuguese, and produced in Europe or North America, while Latin America is better equipped with literature in Spanish. In general, there is a great shortage of literature from the global South. Support for the refurbishment of libraries is important for raising the level of education and enabling educational institutions to have their educations accredited. The Church of Sweden has, for example, contributed to the construction of libraries at the United Theological College (UTC) in Bangalore, India and the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology (EGST) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The WCC's engagement in GlobeTheoLib (Global Digital Library for Theology and Ecumenism), which provides a large collection of free online resources for theological and ecumenical research, is significant in this context. Today, the Church of Sweden annually applies for external funding for the purchase of current theological literature and improved IT equipment for libraries in the global South.

Strategic Path

The Church of Sweden wants to develop the possibilities of finding external funds for the development of theological libraries in the global South.

Conclusion

Theological education is an important prerequisite for the churches to be able to carry out their mission in a credible and powerful way. It is a key issue for the spiritual depth and theological relevance of churches. To be able to act in the public sphere, leaders and theologians are needed to interpret current times on the basis of a theology that is able to engage in dialogue with its social context and integrate human rights into its own theological processing. Therefore, educational institutions are needed for theological education of good academic quality that constitutes safe and creative learning environments for both women and men.

An important aspect of the Church of Sweden's interaction with and support for churches in the global South therefore consists of strengthening and developing the churches' mission as

community actors. Women play a crucial role in this regard. Furthermore, the Church of Sweden wants to offer alternatives to a theological discourse, which, with influential financiers behind it, contributes to dividing church families and communities by opposing SRHR or the ordination of women to the priesthood.

In order to implement the intentions of the strategy document, it will be particularly important for the Church of Sweden to consider the following strategic paths:

- To work for an increased and regularly coordinated multilateral collaboration with the LWF and the WCC and to strengthen these organisations' coordinating function regarding theological education.
- To intensify the work with new forms of financing for education, above all through external institutional financing, in order to ensure long-term sustainable commitments.
- To strengthen the interrelation between the Church of Sweden's commitments in the global ecumenical context and in the national context. The work with theological education includes mutual learning and in-depth church relationships. This presupposes a well-functioning coordination within the Central office, an in-depth collaboration between church and academy and an in-depth collaboration between the national level and the dioceses.

Follow-up and update

For each term of office, the Church Board examines whether the document is relevant, and the Secretary General is responsible for providing the Church Board with a decision basis for updating the document.