



THE ARCHBISHOP
UPPSALA

The Official Council of Swedish Jewish Communities
Chairman, Aron Verständig

Uppsala, 26 November 2021

Open Letter

Dear Aron,

I remember with pleasure the celebrations and gatherings on the occasion of the 151st anniversary of the Great Synagogue of Stockholm. Thank you for your hospitality!

I am writing to you today in relation to the decision of our General Synod last Tuesday, 23 November 2021, a decision that I too found surprising: "To mandate the Central Board of the Church of Sweden to raise the issue of a review of the application of international law in Israel and Palestine, including the UN Apartheid Convention and the Rome Statute definitions of apartheid, in international and ecumenical bodies, in particular the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation."

I fully understand that the decision has provoked strong reactions, many of them outraged. The decision has led to disappointment and concern in the Jewish communities of Sweden. At the same time, I feel that there is a considerable gap between what the decision says and what is being heard. So please allow me to describe what happened.

The General Synod's Ecumenical Committee had a motion on international law in Israel and Palestine (2021:27) on its agenda. The Committee proposed that the motion be rejected. The General Synod usually complies with the proposals of the committees, as was the case in this instance. However, during the deliberations in plenary, the modified proposal referred to above was presented and then adopted by the General Synod by 127 votes to 103.

In accordance with that decision, the Central Board of the Church of Sweden, which I chair, has now been mandated to contact international ecumenical organisations, in particular the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches. How the task is handled will be a matter for the Central Board to decide. Sometimes, for various reasons, decisions cannot be implemented exactly as intended.

Under the terms of our Church Ordinance, Bishops and the Archbishop do not have the right to vote in the General Synod. Personally, I think it would have been wise for the General Synod to have gone along with the Committee's proposal, but that is not what happened. At the same time, international law is an issue that the Church is concerned with and that we defend in many contexts around the world. There is now a picture of the decision spreading that is not entirely accurate and can easily lead to misunderstandings and over-interpretation.

It is my perception that it is not the question of international law that is provoking strong reactions, since every democratic state is, after all, eager to respect it; it is the use of the word apartheid that is provoking anger and sadness. I myself would not have used that word in this context. But I am also

aware that Israeli and other human rights organisations such as B'Tselem, Yesh Din and Human Rights Watch have used the term in their reports. As I understand it, the General Synod considered these reports and therefore felt it relevant to also include the UN Apartheid Convention and the Rome Statute in the issue of compliance with international law. The decision also implies raising the issue of a review of the Palestinian Authority's and Hamas' compliance with international law. Even though I find the wording unfortunate, it is clear to me that the General Synod's decision is in no way directed against Jews as a people, neither in Sweden nor Israel, nor against the state of Israel. What is being referred to is violations of human rights and international law in Israel *and* Palestine.

The executive committee of the Church of Sweden Central Board is currently considering an updated version of the Church of Sweden's position paper for a just and lasting peace between Israel and Palestine. It clearly rejects violations of international law and attacks on civilians, regardless of the perpetrator's background, and states that we are committed to a solution to the conflict that is negotiated with, and mutually agreed by, the parties to the conflict. The Holy Land and its peace are of particular interest to Christian churches, because it is where Jesus was born and lived, and the church came into being. That said, the Church of Sweden undertakes extensive human rights work with partners in many places in the world. For example, similar position papers have been produced for South Sudan and Colombia.

The General Synod also rejected a motion calling for a special commemoration of International Holocaust Remembrance Day in the Church of Sweden. This is in no way due to a lack of understanding of the need to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, but quite the opposite: it is so important that we want to continue doing it, with you in particular, and with other groups.

I want to underline once again what the document *Guds vägar* (The Ways of God) and the Bishops of the Church of Sweden have said repeatedly: In our Church, we want to work to eliminate anything that could be interpreted as being antisemitic or showing contempt for the Jewish people, and to defend their right to their history, faith and customs. In this context, I particularly appreciated the involvement of the Official Council of Swedish Jewish Communities in the symposium on anti-Jewish church art in 2019.

On behalf of the Bishops' Conference, I want to assure you that we are determined to continue our work against antisemitism.

We greatly value both our bilateral contacts and our partnership in the Interfaith Council of Sweden. Fostering good, mutual relationships with the Jewish community is very close to my heart. So I hope that we will soon be able to continue our conversations.

Today, I would like to wish you Hanukkah Sameach, a blessed Festival of Light.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Antje Jackelén". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Antje Jackelén
Archbishop