

# The Baptist Witness in Scandinavia and the North

## Introduction

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Lutheran Established Church held sway over church life in the Scandinavian countries and Finland. State and Church joined hands in trying to safeguard religious unity through compulsory legislation. Below the surface, however, forces were working toward freedom and religious democratization. Pietism and the Moravian Brethren movement made their impact on culture and religion. The increasingly lively communications with Baptist and Methodist church life in England and the USA stimulated the revival movement and ideas about a church of believers, independent of state rule and control in Scandinavia. Although general criticism of the Lutheran authorities was well justified, one should not overlook the fact that there existed a common inheritance of Christian faith and outlook on life.

Norway received limited religious liberty in 1845 and Denmark in 1849. In Sweden the first law concerning dissent was not passed until 1860. It might therefore be supposed that the conditions for the success of Baptist principles would be more favourable in Norway and Denmark than in Sweden. In reality it turned out to be the opposite. The stern attitude of rejection shown by the Swedish Lutheran Church leaders promoted the forming of independent churches outside the framework of the national church, while in the neighbouring countries the revival movement was to a great extent led into the main stream of the Lutheran Church. In Finland a new law of the church was issued in 1869.

The Nordic peoples have close historical, political, cultural and religious ties. To promote Nordic fellowship and exchange experience a "Scandinavian Joint Committee" has been formed. On initiative from Norway the Scandinavian Seamen's Mission was organized in 1946, the first harbour chosen being San Francisco. American and British conventions have displayed a keen interest in the work of the Baptists in the North, and the Baptist seminaries in Scandinavia have received considerable contributions for the erection of new buildings from both the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and the Southern Baptist Convention.

## Sweden

Among the Pietists of the eighteenth century there were some who leaned towards faith in believers' baptism, but it was not until the 1840s that the Baptist doctrine gained a firm footing in the country. The impact came partly from the USA and partly from Germany. F. O. Nilsson (1809-1881), a Methodist and colporteur, was im-

mersed by J. G. Oncken in Hamburg, and on 21st September 1848, the first Swedish Baptist church was organized in Borekulla on the west coast. The little flock suffered severe persecution, which culminated in Nilsson's banishment from the country in 1850. The sentence was strongly criticized in the liberal press, and Sweden became the object of some uncomplimentary attention abroad. The Swedish Minister in London wrote: "The English cannot conceive a free social order in which the principle of freedom or liberty of conscience is lacking to the extent that a person may be convicted for no greater an offence than having expressed a belief in a different form of Christianity from that prevailing in the land." Ten years later the sentence on Nilsson was rescinded.

The actual founder of the Baptist faith in Sweden and its great leader was Anders Wiberg (1816-1887), a former minister of the Lutheran Church. He resigned from his priestly office on account of his doubts about the Lutheran doctrine and was baptized in 1852. The uncompromising adherence to his conviction is shown in the preface of his book about Christian baptism, where he accounts for his faith: "I have no wish to be offensive and still less to be misjudged, ridiculed and condemned by God's people. But I cannot, in conflict with my conscience, distort the Scriptures to please folk or to preserve confidence and affection even among Christians. I have lost this world, I do not wish to lose the world to come as well." (Wiberg's book, whose title may be translated *Who should be baptized and what does baptism mean?* was published in Stockholm in 1852.) The influence which Wiberg exerted was apparent in almost every sphere of the expanding Baptist movement. He proved himself to be a clear-thinking interpreter of Baptist faith and a brave defender of religious liberty.

The repeated actions of the authorities against the Baptists contributed towards the fall of the old religious legislation. The banishment of thousands of men and women was impossible, and in a few decades the traditions of hundreds of years were broken. Politically the Baptists were radicals. It was true that Baptists saw themselves first and foremost as a revival movement where the dominating interest was the salvation of the individual, but the condition of Swedish society stimulated practical social and political activity. In the beginning of the twentieth century eight Baptists were members of the Swedish Parliament (Riksdagen). During his twenty years as a MP the well known Baptist leader and publicist Jacob Byström (1857-1947) was particularly engaged in matters related to religious liberty, national sobriety and social justice.

The Baptist Union grew rapidly but outward progress and enthusiasm were not matched by inward maturity and firmness. The rise of "the new movement" (the Pentecostal movement), with its features of the outpouring of the Spirit, baptism in the Spirit and speaking in tongues, added thousands of new members to the Baptist churches but also created internal criticism and conflicts. In 1913 the Filadelfia Baptist Church in Stockholm was separated from the Baptist Union

because it refused to conform to the doctrine of closed communion which prevailed in the union at that time. The decision of separation was a regrettable mistake with tragic consequences for the future. Within the Baptist Union the "new movement" continued to thrive with Örebro as the centre and with John Ongman (1845-1931), pastor of the Filadelfia Baptist Church in Örebro, as the powerful leader of the Örebro Mission Society's extensive enterprise in Sweden and abroad. The rift between the Baptist Union and the Örebro Mission Society took place in the 1930s, after Ongman's death. In recent years, however, a many-sided cooperation has developed between the two conventions, particularly in the fields of pastoral training and foreign mission. The Örebromissionen (formerly called the Örebro Mission Society) has a Baptist profile but does not as yet belong to the Baptist World Alliance. The present membership of the Baptist Union is 22,480 in 443 churches and of the Örebromissionen 20,936 in 280 churches.

Betelseminariet (the Bethel Seminary), the first institution on the European continent for training pastors, is at present in a period of dynamic development. More than forty pastoral candidates study at university level for three years, the Bible Institute receives a growing number of laymen for one-year courses, and a special department for church music, offering three-year courses, was opened in 1977. Other new departments are evening classes in biblical studies and advanced classes for ordained ministers. The total number of students is 127. The Foreign Mission acts in cooperation with independent church bodies in Zaire, India, Japan and Thailand. The missionary workers abroad number eighty-five in all. The activities within Sweden of the Baptist Social Mission are particularly focused on the problems of youth and of immigrants. The work abroad includes disaster relief and health projects. The Women's Association was formed in 1914 with the aim of giving financial assistance to pastors' widows and pastors' families hit by sickness. Today the association is working to support home and foreign mission projects, and has in recent years laid special emphasis on leadership training. The Youth Association has been active since 1905 and had a membership in 1978 of 22,866 children and young people in Sunday schools and various groups. "A home for everybody" is the overall theme for studies about the Christian fellowship, the meaning of the family, the earth as a home for all nations, etc. Sjöviks Folkhögskola (Folk High School) completed its fifty-seventh year in 1978. The new ordinance for this type of school extends the right of each school to create its own profile in regard to ideology and curriculum. Sjövik has also developed into an important place for conferences and courses. The number of regular students in 1978-79 is ninety-eight. The short courses last year were attended by 678 men and women.

With regard to ecumenical activity, it should be said that the idea of cooperation between local churches dominates over denominational planning in sparsely populated regions as well as in the new popu-

lation centres. The Baptist Union is a member body of the Swedish Free Church Council (including its relief organization the Free Church Aid), the Swedish Mission Council and the Ecumenical Council. In 1951 the Swedish Parliament passed a law of religious liberty which, remarkably enough, was the first of its kind. It did not, however, change the Lutheran Church's status of being the Established Church. In the old Swedish society Christian politicians played a decisive role in the struggle to overcome social distress. Today Sweden faces the problems of alcohol and drugs, unemployment among young people and tendencies to racism, caused by an increasing influx of immigrants and political and religious refugees. The Jesus movement and the charismatic revival of the 1970s have had a good effect on the Swedish denominations and particularly on the young generation of the Swedish Lutheran Church. Several churches of the Swedish Baptist Union give thanks to the Lord for the blessings of the revival on individual members. We pray that the spiritual awakening may also have such an influence on today's generation of Christians that they take their responsibility in Swedish society as seriously as the members in the first six decades of the Baptist movement.

### **Denmark**

In the nineteenth century Sören Kierkegaard's criticism of the Church and N. F. S. Grundtvig's ideas about liberty and cultural openness gave support to the spokesmen for the revival movement in Denmark. A Lutheran free church movement was limited in its scope, but the free church idea itself could not be arrested and the Baptist Union became the pioneering free church in Denmark. When Baptist teachings were first introduced, it did not happen through any outside influence but as a result of Bible studies among Christian people. A young engraver, Peder Christian Mönster (1797-1870), was converted in the early 1830s and started witnessing to his faith. He became the object of persecution and went to Copenhagen where he got in touch with Julius Köbner, the son of a Jewish family and the co-worker of J. G. Oncken. On 30th October 1839, Mönster was baptized and on the same day the first Baptist church in Scandinavia was founded with eleven members. The insistence on confessional uniformity in Denmark ended with the new constitution of 1849, and when Julius Köbner a few years later became the leader of the Danish Baptist movement several successful decades followed. Organizations for foreign mission, education and distribution of literature, as well as for social work, were founded during the first decades of the twentieth century. There are now about 6,500 members in forty-one congregations in Denmark. The foreign mission work is carried out in Burundi-Rwanda in Central Africa, and the two independent Baptist conventions have 25,000 members. The Danish missionary staff numbers about twenty men and women. The Danes were pioneers among the Scandinavian Baptists in introducing scouting. There are now 2,252 members in the scout group and two-thirds of them come from homes otherwise unassociated with Baptist work. In other youth groups and Sunday schools the enrolment com-

prises 4,225 children and young people. Attempts to create a Sunday school for all ages have been less successful.

In Töllöse the Danish Baptists have had an educational centre since 1928, which has become a meeting place for conferences and courses. The first school at Töllöse was the "folk high school", a free school run on college lines for young people (who may or may not be qualified for university studies). This kind of school, originally a Danish idea and creation, is based on principles of the rights to freedom of thought, faith and speech. Other institutions at Töllöse are the "real-skola" (corresponding to junior high school) and the theological seminary. The overall number of students is about 225. A Baptist Temperance Mission aims at counteracting the social problems caused by alcohol. The Women's Society has fifty-eight local branches with 1,800 members. Their activities are mainly to support foreign and home mission projects, and to win other women for Christ.

The Danish Baptists are sometimes described as "Lutheran Baptists" which is to say that they are more influenced by the general character of the national church than by the Calvinistic views of Köbner and Oncken. The firm basic principles of their pastors' theology have saved the Danish Baptists from division. The Baptists became a recognized church body as late as 1952, and it took another ten years before the Union was accepted as a member organization of the Danish Missionary Council. The ecumenical situation has nowadays changed in a positive direction. The General Secretary of the Baptist Union serves as the Free Church representative in the Bible Society, formerly a purely Lutheran organization. The position of the Baptists in the ecumenical work makes them well qualified as "bridge builders". The pastors and lay leaders with their Christian broad-mindedness and loyalty to their faith are good partners in the common tasks of the churches. The Danish Baptist Union belongs to the World Council of Churches. According to current legislation religious instruction in schools is no longer to be synonymous with the baptismal instructions of the Lutheran church. The subject of religion is to be taught objectively, including other Christian interpretations, and also other religions beside Christianity.

### Norway

A spiritual awakening, unquestionably the deepest experienced in Norway, took place through the work of Hans Nielsen Hauge, a farmer and powerful preacher of repentance. To him it was natural that the revival should continue within the framework of the Lutheran Church. However, through the connections of emigrants and sailors with the USA, free church ideas took root in Norway. The Methodists were the pioneers, and they formed the Norwegian Methodist Church in 1856. Since questions about believer's baptism were raised in Norway, Frederik L. Rymker (1819-1884), a former Danish sailor who had been baptized in the USA, was sent to work as a colporteur and preacher in Norway. He arrived there in 1857 and three years later the first Norwegian Baptist church was organized in Porsgrund-

Skien. At the end of the 1880s the number of churches had grown to more than twenty and these churches were scattered along the endless, ragged coast line from the Skagerack to east of the North Cape near the Russian border. The pastors and lay leaders were trained and hardened during their struggle against the stormy sea; the most serious hindrance came from the authorities and their persecutions of the small groups. Intolerance and harassment were checked through the new laws of 1888 and 1891.

The founding of the Baptist Union took place in 1879. Six of the fifteen churches chose to remain outside for the time being, obviously because of their concern for the independence of the local congregation. Most Baptists soon found, however, that the union could help them in rallying round common tasks, and at the same time the fellowship between the scattered groups grew stronger.

The training of the preachers was a problem only partly solved during the first years by sending young men to Sweden and America. But in 1910 the Norwegian Baptist Theological Seminary was established at Oslo. Last year a new and very modern and well-equipped seminary building was dedicated at Stabekk. Of the twenty students, ten have opted for the four-year pastoral training. Even the central offices of the Union have moved into the new seminary building. Like their brethren in the neighbouring countries the Norwegian Baptists have their own folk high school, which can take up to eighty students. At present there is special emphasis on leadership training and an extensive programme in teaching music and singing. In 1921 the Union built a home for deep sea fishermen at Honningsvåg near the North Cape. Because of changes in the fishing industry the building has become a centre for Christian activity among the local population. There is a national youth organization, founded early in the 1920s, and including Sunday Schools, scouting, teen age groups and young people's associations. Like the Danes, the Norwegian Baptists have been particularly successful in reaching non-Baptist families through scouting. In 1945 the Union bought a summer establishment at Langesund on the south coast. It is being used as a summer resort and conference centre. The foreign mission of the Norwegian Baptists started about sixty years ago in the Uélé district in the north of Zaïre. The churches are organized as an independent convention, *Eglise Baptiste du Bas-Uélé*. About twenty Norwegians work as assistants to the indigenous church.

The last twenty-five years in Norway have been a period of consolidation and of growing engagement in foreign mission. As P. A. Eidberg has said, "The contacts with people outside the churches are more frequent. The fact that our union is a small denomination contributes to keep us from the danger of division. We know each other personally and in spite of differing opinions we look on ourselves as co-workers in the same unit." It is symptomatic of the international atmosphere and interest within the Union that two general secretaries of the Baptist World Alliance came from Norway. Arnold Öhrn

served from 1948 to 1960, and Josef Nordenhaug succeeded him and was the general secretary till 1969. The Norwegian Baptists do not belong to the World Council of Churches but take an active part in the ecumenical activities of their own country. The Baptist Union is a member organization of the Norwegian Missionary Council, the Free Church Council and the Norwegian Sunday School Union. In 1969 a new law for religious bodies was introduced; on the whole it places the Free Churches in Norway side by side with the Norwegian State Church. In 1978 the Baptist Union had 6,316 members in sixty-four churches. The Baptists of Norway are a united and well-organized body. Their influence on religious life in Norway has been immeasurably greater than their numbers would indicate.

### **Finland**

Even though Finland gained its independence in 1809 and began to follow its own political and cultural development it was natural that it did not break the ties with its Swedish heritage. This was particularly true of the religious influence of the Swedish-speaking population. The first Baptist preacher, Karl Justus Mattias Möllersvärd (1832-1901), came to Finland from Sweden in 1854 and two years later the first Baptist church was constituted by six Swedish-speaking people in the island of Åland. On the Finnish mainland a baptismal service took place in 1869 near the city of Jakobstad, in the Swedish-speaking part of the province of Österbotten. During the following decades the Baptist movement developed very well, and churches were founded, mainly in Österbotten. The religious revival was followed by an intellectual awakening. Schools for children were organized until the 1880s when the public school system had developed so far that the private schools were unnecessary. In the 1870s contacts were established with the Finnish-speaking people. A Lutheran clergyman, John Hylander, began to doubt the Lutheran doctrine of baptism. He resigned from his ministry, went to Stockholm to be immersed and organized after his return a church of baptized believers. The churches of both language groups worked together for some years, but in 1903 the Finnish-speaking Baptists formed their own union. Now it seems as if this separation occurred too quickly and too soon.

The Swedish population comprises only eight per cent of the total population in Finland, but the Swedish work is stronger than the Finnish. The twenty-four Swedish churches have a membership of 1,700, and in the Finnish churches the membership is 825. The figures do not give the total picture since a large number of members have migrated to Sweden. A good united Christian activity is reflected in the Swedish folk high school which started on Baptist initiative in 1945. Of special interest at present is a two-year course in biblical knowledge.

The Swedish-speaking Baptists are deeply involved in world mission, and about fifteen missionaries have been sent out into the foreign fields from this small union. Both the Finnish Baptists and the Swedish Baptists are members of the Free Church Council. Today,

however, the most lively cooperative Christian witness is given by groups related to the charismatic revival. In accordance with the Law of Religious Liberty the Finnish Baptist Union has been registered as "a Religious Community". (The Lutheran State Church belongs to the same group.) The Swedish Baptist Union has preferred to be listed as "an Association", called the Swedish Baptist Conference in Finland.

ERIK RUDEN.

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## Ecumenical Pioneering at Selly Oak

THE Selly Oak Colleges have probably become the most comprehensive ecumenical centre for training Christian leaders in any part of the world. They are ecumenical in the ecclesiastical sense of the word, with almost all the major Christian traditions cooperating in a common educational programme: Quakers, Baptists, Reformed, Methodists, Lutherans, Anglicans and Roman Catholics. All are represented in the teaching staff and in the student body. The Orthodox alone are not officially involved, though students from this tradition and from a number of different patriarchates participate in courses from time to time.

But the colleges are also ecumenical in the broader sense of "the whole inhabited world". There are never less than about fifty countries represented on the campus in any one term and some of the colleges now have a preponderance of students whose first language is other than English. They come from Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Australasia and the South Pacific. Not all of them are Christians. There are a good many Muslims, adherents of the other world religions, humanists and Marxists who help to ensure that the campus is open to the challenge of conflicting beliefs and ideologies which characterizes the modern world. Situated four miles from the centre of the city of Birmingham, with its multi-cultural urban population, the colleges are strategically placed to grapple with the major problems that confront everyone today.

All the same, the foundation is explicitly Christian, with Evangelicals and Catholics living and working together in mutual respect for their differing insights and convictions. Ecumenical cooperation has