

“The Church of Sweden’s work to counteract the persecution of Christians”

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**Response to criticism. In 2014 the Church of Sweden’s help reached more than two million refugees. We cooperate internationally to counteract the persecution of Christians, and for security reasons we sometimes do this work covertly. But our commitment to helping vulnerable people cannot be limited to those of a certain faith, writes Archbishop Antje Jackelén.**

In recent weeks, claims that the Church of Sweden is indifferent to the persecution of Christians have been circulated in various contexts. Such accusations gain extensive media coverage and are very popular in social media. But that doesn’t make them true.

The reporting on terrible persecution and suffering for Christian ethnic groups and other minorities in the war in the Middle East continues. At an accommodation centre for asylum seekers in Mönsterås in Sweden, Christians have felt forced to move following harassment by Muslim residents at the centre. A recent report from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention shows that the reported hate crimes increasing the most are those with Christianophobic motives.

**Is the the Church of Sweden** doing enough for vulnerable Christians – in Sweden and in other countries? For as long as people are still being harassed, persecuted and killed for their faith, *no one* can say that enough is being done.

It is relatively simple to condemn the persecution of Christians; the Church of Sweden has often condemned it and together with many others – in statements, demonstrations, prayer services and discussions with the government. However, finding the best ways of helping is more complicated. Providing one-sided aid to Christians may paradoxically increase their vulnerability, which Christian brothers and sisters in situations of oppression have asked us to bear in mind. Many actors and different strategies are required to provide support wisely and effectively.

Internationally, the Church of Sweden mainly works on strengthening Christians locally, forging relationships that cross religion boundaries, educating and researching, sounding the alarm, and operating covertly – not least for security reasons. The strategies for this part of our work are described on the Church of Sweden’s [website](#) in Swedish under the heading *Förföljda kristna och utsatta troende* (Persecuted Christians and vulnerable believers).

**We often cooperate** with churches and local Christian organisations. In Egypt, for example, we work with CEOSS, the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, on issues such as conflict management between young religious leaders, Christians and Muslims.

Another partner is Daughters of St. Mary, a diaconal order of nuns who work in the garbage district Ezbet El-Nakhl. We provide extensive humanitarian aid to refugees in Iraq, Syria and Jordan. In the past year alone, more than SEK 8 million have been donated to these countries. In northern Iraq we cooperate with two organisations that help IDPs and Syrian refugees by providing food, water, sanitation and other necessities as well as psychosocial support. In Syria we support an organisation that above all works with food in the Aleppo region. In Jordan we help Syrian and Iraqi refugees in camps and areas where they have settled. The humanitarian support is implemented in accordance with the humanitarian principles. In 2014 the members of the Church of Sweden alongside Lutheran sister churches worldwide have provided help to more than two million refugees.

Parishes and dioceses have principle responsibility for the situation in Sweden. In the Mönsterås case the Bishop of Växjö Diocese, Fredrik Modéus, highlighted the exemplary work that is being performed by the local parish. The parish includes the people affected in their fellowship and provides practical assistance. This is work that takes place outside of the media spotlight.

**To support** the parishes' efforts for refugees, the Central Board of the Church of Sweden has this year earmarked a further SEK 5 million for such work. Over a period of six years the Board also wishes to reinforce the work for persecuted and vulnerable people in the Middle East by allocating SEK 30 million.

Sometimes support for Christians is contrasted with help for vulnerable people of other faiths. Or the assistance for vulnerable people is contrasted with our work on climate change issues. Such contrasts are not, however, compatible with following Jesus. Baptism creates a special connection between Christians. But Baptism calls us to a life of faith and love, which also means that our commitment to vulnerable people cannot be limited to those of a certain faith. There is a joint mandate to safeguard people in need and take care of the creation that is the prerequisite for everyone's life. The Church of Sweden, as part of the worldwide church, can never be a one-issue actor.

The report from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, which shows an increase in the number of reported hate crimes against Christians, Muslims and Jews in Sweden, has attracted attention. But this development is not surprising. Tendencies in Swedish society that have formed the foundation of these statistics have existed for a long time. Six years ago the Equality Ombudsman at that time pointed out that discrimination due to religion was the area around which she had found it most difficult to create dialogue. "People perceive religion as a phenomenon that is a danger to society," she said.

**An at times arrogant** disdain for knowledge regarding religion leaves its mark. When faith is seen as a burden rather than an asset, it becomes easier to make someone else's faith an object of hate.

Factors that may have made a concrete contribution to the development shown in the report published by the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention comprise the increased visibility of religion in general and the Swedish public sector's blindness to religion and lack of experience in managing the public aspects of various religions. The appalling advance of IS (Islamic State) has also made us more aware of religiously motivated fanaticism and persecution for reasons for faith. Conflicts from elsewhere around the world have moved here, both physically and through the media; no country can live like an isolated island. There are also forces that focus on the persecution of Christians to fuel negative attitudes to Islam. As polarisation grows, hate rhetoric increases, and thereby also the tendency to report hate crimes.

**Hate is often related** to self-hate. The hater depends on the image of his or her enemy to be able to live and maintain their own image as a hero. That's why it is so difficult to use arguments to reach the hater. Simplifications play into the hands of the haters because they cannot or do not want to accept complex contexts that make even the enemy appear to be a fellow human being.

Using this analysis as a basis, the Church of Sweden is building on what is already being carried out:

- Provision of knowledge and education for individuals, groups and authorities, such as the Swedish Migration Agency, as part of the endeavour to counteract dangerous simplifications.
- Stable cooperation in solidarity with churches through the Christian Council of Sweden, on which many immigrant churches are also represented.
- Support in and to parishes through employees and volunteers; church services of worship with fellow members of the congregation are one of the few contexts in which new arrivals to Sweden can contribute right from the start.
- Intensified work in and through the National Interfaith Council of Sweden, which gathers representatives of the world's religions together.
- Initiatives to strengthen the sense of social fellowship through cooperation between various entities in society and faith traditions, such as Open Skåne.
- Prayer and intercession.
- The shaping of public opinion in order to counteract hate and confirm human value and to highlight the relationship between freedom of expression and the responsibility to speak out.

Together with good forces in society we wish to and need to activate the often silent and invisible majority of people who oppose marginalisation and hate mechanisms.

**Antje Jackelén, Archbishop of the Church of Sweden**