«Whose churches are they, after all?»

By Special Director Oddbjørn Sørmoen,

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The European landscape

On my way home from Easter holiday this year, I changed plane in Munich. It was on a most beautiful day. The sun was shining over Bavaria. After take-off, I could follow and read the landscape from above for a long time.

The landscape consists of countryside, with open fields, forests and a number of villages. All of them had one building that stood out from the others. The vertical line, which reflected the sun on that day, made them more visible than usual: ***Each village had a church in its midst.***

Europe is changing and will change even more in the years to come. This also means the landscapes, but still the basic character is very much intact.

The sound from the church bells are a part of the soundscape at least on Sundays. Depending on where you are, they give the rhythm of the days as they have always done. The churches are materialized faith and signs of community and culture: the Christian European culture.

This also applies to my country, Norway.

Who built the churches?

Christianity was introduced in Norway about 8th or 9th century. The major historical milestone came with the battle of Stiklestad in 1030, when Christianity became the "state religion". Already in 1024, the king decided that the local community, the farmers, should build the church, and the king would provide the clergy.

This tradition continues through the centuries, also after the reformation in 1537, when the Roman Catholic Church was prohibited and the king's preferred denomination, the Lutheran, became the only legal practise.

Up to 1720, the local communities owned the church buildings. The fact that the Danish Norwegian king then sold the rural churches to cover the costs of the expensive wars against Sweden, does not change this. The legal issues concerning this "sell-out" is very much disputed, as he did not own them.

Many villages or individuals bought their own church back from the king. In the 19th century, with the forerunner of the municipalities, the local communities became once more the *legal* owner of the churches. As late as 1995 the ownership was transferred to the parish.

Legal issues are important, of course, but when I ask my question: “Whose churches are they, after all?” I will analyse the ownership in a broader sense.

This close link between the local community and the church, as building and institution, is deeply rooted. In the old rural economy, the church was the hub of the society, the place all had to be. In some periods because that was the law, but always because that was where the authorities were, where people met, where they exchanged news and did business: religious, private or public or where the young men, after service, had their military training. In periods, the church itself, or the adjacent house, was the storage for military equipment.

The whole nation was ruled with parishes and dioceses as units. In 1814, when the electors for the coming national assembly was called, which gave Norway its constitution, the churches were the natural place to cast the ballots. The religious and secular were both closely linked to the church building.

The central role of these buildings and sites, explains the obvious role the churches play in the heritage sector. To preserve the history of the Norwegian nation, one must preserve the churches.

In addition to this comes the emotional side of the matter. People are attached to their church, regardless of their relation to the church as institution or the Lutheran faith and practise.

A church under transformation

Since the World War II, our European societies have undergone monumental changes. Not the least when it comes to faith, demography, and ethnicity.

Subsequently, in 2012 the Norwegian constitution was altered. The King, who had been the formal head of the church since the reformation in 1537, in modern times “king” meaning “king as government”, stepped down from this position. This was a key point in the split between the Lutheran Church of Norway and the State of Norway.

At the moment, The Church Act, the laws regulating faith matters, faith societies, public finance of the same societies, are being recast, and will be debated in the parliament early next year, and end up in one completely new law.

Whatever happens, one thing is certain: The state will not increase the church budget.

Two weeks ago, the Lutheran synod decided that it wants the present financial system to continue, which means that the local church is financed by both the state and the municipality. If the parliament follows this advice, the local community will continue to pay for the maintenance of the church buildings, also in the future. The general tendency of decline in members, however, means the justification for public financing will weaken.

Local responsibility for the church buildings means that the situation varies around the country, depending on the local political as well as financial situation.

Both history and current trends have a huge impact on the future of our churches. The key question is of the various meanings of ownership, and how this ownership comes into the

decision processes. In the following, I will present some cases that can shed some light on this.

In the city of Oslo, the situation has become dire. There is simply not enough money for the regular maintenance and running of all the churches. The church authorities, namely the Joint Parish Council, three weeks ago distributed a report saying that 10 of the parish churches will be closed as such, 9 of them owned by the parishes.

There are 66 Lutheran churches in Oslo. 24 of these have some kind of heritage protection.

The capital is the city with the highest percentage of immigrants, and even if many of them are Christians, they are not Lutherans. In the Lutheran church, attendance is, on the average, low.

The possible closures have reached the news headlines. Some voices have been particularly strong. Among these is the one of the Labour party politician, non-church attender, Jan Bøhler.

On his Facebook page, which was reproduced in many newspapers, he is concerned about the fact that most of the closures will be in Groruddalen, the suburb with highest percentage of immigrants, and he asks:

> ***"Will the anchorage point be closed?***
>
> *This is about balance, belonging, fellowship and anchorage points for our values and heritage in areas where there are many with a background from other cultures and religions.*
>
> *We fight so all with traditional Norwegian background will remain, move in and feel at home in this valley. In this the church is one of the key points. Its significance must be measured in other ways than the number of attendants at the service at 11 Sunday morning. Even if many of us are not active users of the local church through the year, there will be a big empty space if it was not there for the ceremonies in life, for Christmas and other festive occasions, in local social life and when we need to gather. The church is simply a girder in the local community which I doubt we can be without."*

Even in the secular State of Norway, this politician seems to feel ownership to the church. Interestingly enough, his argument is not the traditional: The visual, historic and architectural monument, but its function.

The most powerful example of the cultural, religious use, was the aftermath of the Utøya killings in 2011, when almost the whole population gathered in the Cathedral of Oslo, be it atheists, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, or non-attending Lutherans.

Regrettably many Norwegian churches have been struck by fire the last decades. Most of these are of wood, which means that often, but not always, the building is lost completely. Every time this happens, the immediate reaction is that the local community wants to re-erect a copy of the old church. This is usually not just a wish, but more often a demand. In

some cases, people get organised, try to influence the church council and local politicians to reach their goals. This can go on for years, sometimes till the day the new church is opened.

The churches are iconic buildings, with a high identity value, and there is a strong feeling of ownership.

After the fire in **Østre Porsgrunn** 2011, a campaign was launched to influence the new project. The goal was a copy of the lost 18th century church. The campaign was headed by highly qualified people from the heritage sector, as well as art historians and architects. Looking closer up, it was easy to see that many of the leading figures did not *live in* Porsgrunn, but *came* from the city, and many *were not* members of the Church of Norway.

The motivation might be diverse, but the goal was a return to history, regardless of the changes of use, needs and service through the last 300 years.

They felt that the church case, the lost church, was their too.

The new church is now being built, but in a contemporary style, not as a copy.

Våler kirke, was a similar case, but this was not in a town but a village, "in the middle of nowhere". The old church from 1805 was set alight and burnt down in 2009. There was a fierce local debate about what the new church should look like. The division in the village was very real. People stopped greeting and talking to each other, and worked to influence local elections.

The end result was a new church inaugurated in 2015 with a very conscious architecture, with no reference what so ever to the old church. The new church became an architectural icon, attracting an international audience of architects. Busloads of visitors now travel far to see the church, and a special service for the visitors has been opened.

The village is now on the map, due to its new church. No need to mention the pride of the villagers who, regardless of their role in the process, feel they own the new church.

Whose churches are they, after all?

In the diocese of Stavanger, the situation is very different from Oslo: New churches are built to house growing congregations. This means that the old church is not needed, or rather that they do not see the need of it. Ålgård and Tananger are two such cases.

Ålgård old church was not regarded of national interest by the national heritage authorities. The local parish *and* the municipal authorities therefore decided to pull it down and build the new church on the site.

A private, local campaign was launched, to save the old church. The local opposition grew and the municipality withdrew the permission to tear down the church, at least for a period. The new church was built 100 meters from the old.

The legal issues about ownership was raised. Could the church of Norway sell the church to others, since the church was surrounded by a church yard?

Another question is how wise it will be, for the Church, to tear down the church many locals feel ownership to.

The church has decided not to sell it, to have control over the future use of the church. Even in this situation, a member of the local community has promised to give more than 50 thousand euros for its maintenance.

This case has not yet been closed.

The other similar case is in **Tananger**, also in the diocese of Stavanger.

Tanganger is a village that grew to the size of a town, due to the growth of the oil industry. The congregation thrived and clearly needed a new, bigger church, which could host the many activities as well as the church administration. A new and modern church was built, and the old church went out of use.

Tananger old church is of heritage value. The local church authorities still claim it is out of use, since it is not used in the local Lutheran context.

It is in fact, however, the home of a not so wealthy immigrant Ethiopian orthodox congregation. The church is packed with people every Sunday. But the rent does not cover the costs of maintenance. The local church administration wants the church to be pulled down, to save money and work.

An old example from 1900, of a local community raising up for its old church, after having built a bigger new, is **Gimmestad** gamle kirke. The church is almost unique as a time capsule for church historians, art historians and the general heritage community.

Today, the municipality does not want to support it, since it is out of use. If nothing is done, it will vanish in only a few years' time.

Whose churches are they, after all?

The Norwegian experience goes in many directions. I will also give some examples which might be of inspiration to others. The key seems to be "think outside the box", and think about what local ownership really means.

Modern Oslo is diverse and constantly changing. This means that a suburb built for the growing number of people coming into the city from the provinces in the 1960s now also houses a growing number of multi-ethnic groups coming from the whole world. A huge number of immigrants are from predominantly Catholic countries in Europe and Asia.

After the Lutheran church in Oslo last time took stock, one of the least used churches was let to the Roman Catholic Church, and renamed from **Bredtvet kirke to Sankt Johannes**.

The church is now full at mass every weekend and used through the week. The church remains a local church for services of the same faith, but another denomination.

Another church is **Markus kirke**. A very central, beautiful church of high heritage value. The Lutheran parish merged with a neighbouring, and the church was let to a young Pentecostal congregation, "Jesus Church". It is also full every Sunday and much used through the week.

The pastor says that they originally used a “black box” church, at an industrial plant in the outskirts of the city. Thinking this was what they needed.

They grew and wanted to move to a more central venue, and now see how this old church influences positively their way of celebrating their service, free of traditional liturgy.

Jakob kirke in Oslo was an early church taken out of use as parish church, in the 1985. The part of the city where it is situated was turned into offices, shops and schools. The residents moved away.

To prevent the diocese from pulling the church down, it was listed because of its heritage values. The church was designed by an important architect and had played an important role. The desire to pull it down came to prevent it from being used as night club or other purposes not in tune with its history, as “a house of God”.

After 15 years, and after being deserted and illegally used for rave parties and other purposes, the church was taken over by Kirkelig kulturverksted, a creative and progressive Christian arts centre, and is now an important venue for cultural events, performances, concerts, exhibitions and recordings. Their contribution as an innovative centre for Christian art in the whole country has been great.

Sankt Petri Stavanger

In Stavanger we find Sankt Petri kirke, which has been meticulously restored and fitted with public facilities. The distance between the churches in the city centre is short, and the number of churches relatively high. The Lutheran church wanted to specify the use of certain churches, to meet new needs.

Petri kirke is a huge late 19th century church, not far from the very much used medieval cathedral. It was in need for restoration.

The church is still a parish church, but has in addition been turned into a concert hall or culture venue, with artists facilities, secondary meeting and gathering rooms, extra toilets for the visitors, and kitchen facilities for meetings and intermissions.

One of the successes of Sankt Petri is the restoration of the original church, combined with architecturally high-quality additions and adjustments to make it the popular cultural venue it now is. For this work it received The Civic Trust Award in 2008.

The need and use of Cultural churches in city centres are not so hard to imagine. The countryside might seem a different challenge.

Sveio is a rural municipality on the west coast. Here we find **Valestrand kirke**, from 1873. Its situation can hardly be called a village, since there are not many farms or houses near the church. One can almost wonder why it was built. Not untypical of the situation in rural Norway.

Here a group of enthusiasts in 2004 started what they called a Culture Church. There was a need to make some changes to the church, but rather low cost and moderate.

The success was the revitalisation of the church through the activities brought in: Literature evenings with presentations, interviews with authors, readings etc. Concerts with popular music as well as classic. Art exhibitions, dance performances, drama etc. The clue seems to be the right mix of amateurs and professionals, local and national.

The catering on events when food is needed, is done by engaging refugees and immigrants whose food give interesting cuisine and colour for the visitors, as well as work for people in a vulnerable situation.

Whose churches are they, after all?
The clue to the future of these buildings must be a combination of the answers to this question.

A church that is commercialised through ownership and use, or used in an ironic way, is no longer respected for its immanent values.

These buildings are local. They should continue to serve the local community in the future, and the ownership should not be privatised.

These buildings are religious buildings, meaning they are built to satisfy spiritual needs, reflection, and fellowship. They are built for culture in the narrow as well as wide sense of the word.

These buildings are heritage. A future use of the them should respect this fact and build upon these heritage values.

These principles ask for a creative and close cooperation between local, regional and national authorities, religious and secular.

At the moment, it is hard to see that this happens in a planned and controlled way in Norway. Even if there are many exceptions, it does not seem that the Lutheran church is aware of the situation or able to handle it in an adequate way, and the secular authorities are too cautious to touch this matter, since this is about faith and religion, and hard to handle without someone being hurt or felt discriminated against.

We are facing an interesting time.

Whose churches are they, after all?

Special Director, Oddbjørn Sørmoen, mag. art.

KA Norwegian Association for Church Employers


Oddvar Tvedten

Det ringes for ni av Oslos kirker

FRA ÅR TIL ÅR er det færre par som gifter seg i kirken. Færre pr. år blir døpt og konfirmert. Langt færre går i gudstjeneste på søndager enn hva som var vanlig for noen tiår siden. Og dermed kommer også den triste diskusjonen om hvor mange kirkebygg vi som samfunn skal ta oss råd til å drifte.

For kirken er noe mer enn et hellig hus. Den norske kirke er også en stor institusjon som må drive alminnelig budsjettstyring og foreta noen valg når tallene ikke går opp.

I OSLO VURDERES nå ni kirker tatt ut av bruk. Åtte av dem ligger øst i byen. Forslaget til kirkebruksplan, fremmet av Oslo bispedømmeråd og Kirkelig fellesråd, er sørgelig lesning for menighetene på Romsås, Stovner, Ellingsrud, Østre Aker, Iladalen, Klemetsrud, Lilleborg, Sofienberg og Bakkehaugen på Tåsen.

«Vi må spare minst 10 millioner kroner», forklarer Oslos kirkeverge Robert Wright til Vårt Land.

Noen av reaksjonene er sterke.

«GLEM DET!» skriver stortingsrepresentant Jan Bøhler (Ap) i et innlegg på sin Facebook-vegg. Bøhler, som selv ikke er av Groruddalens aller ivrigste kirkegjengere, mener med rette at kirkenes fremtid må drøftes som et mye større samfunnsspørsmål enn at det nå må spares noen millioner.

«Det dreier seg om balanse, tilhørighet, fellesskap og ankerfester for vår verdi- og kulturarv i områder med mange med bakgrunn fra andre kulturer og religioner. Vi kjemper for at alle med tradisjonell norsk bakgrunn også skal bli boende, flytte hit og føle seg hjemme her i Groruddalen», skriver Bøhler.

Sofienbergparken i Oslo var før en kirkegård. Nå kan også kirken selv tas ut av bruk.

Men økte budsjetter er ingen løsning i seg selv. Som alle andre virksomheter må også Kirken vurdere hvordan den best disponerer sine ressurser og får «mer kirke ut av pengene», som det helst vil hete på moderne styringsspråk.

Å tviholde på bruk av alle kirkebygg kan i stedet ende med oppsigelser av kirkelig ansatte – noe som fort kan vise seg som en vel så dårlig løsning.

OSLO BISPEDØMMERÅD og Kirkelig fellesråd legger i juni ut sin høringsplan, og menighetene har frist til oktober med å svare. Forhåpentlig kan det komme gode forslag ut av prosessen. For selv om det begynner å bli bekymringsverdig seniorpreg over mange av de vanlige søndagsgudstjenestene i Oslo, øker tallet på konserter og kulturarrangementer. Aktiviteten er også høy og stadig økende i mange av Oslos kristne migrantmenigheter.

Å få utleieavtaler med flere av disse, kan for folkekirken være én av flere veier å gå.

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Jan Bøhler
for omtrent 2 uker siden

SKAL ANKERFESTER LEGGES NED? Ellingsrud kirke i mitt nærmiljø er en av de ni kirkene i Oslo som Kirkelig Fellesråd foreslår at skal legges ned. Åtte av dem ligger på østkanten. Hardest rammes Groruddalen - hvor det gjelder Stovner, Østre Aker, Romsås og altså Ellingsrud. Dette handler om mye mer enn at kirken vil spare ti millioner. Det dreier seg om balanse, tilhørighet, fellesskap og ankerfester for vår verdi- og kulturarv i områder med mange med bakgrunn fra andre kulturer... Se mer

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