



## Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion: The Case of Sweden

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### General Presentation and Legal Aspects

In contrast to most other countries in Europe, Sweden did not impose a full lockdown to stop the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather, Sweden kept a large part of society open. Shops, schools, bars and restaurants stayed open during the whole pandemic and focus was on each individual's responsibility to follow non-binding recommendations to reduce the risk of transmissions. However, this said, between 2020 – 2021 the Public Health Agency of Sweden established several preventive measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus, many of which affected all kinds of public gatherings and public places like shops, restaurants, etc. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, there was no already existing legislation to regulate religious life in the event of a pandemic or natural disaster. During the Covid-19 pandemic, no special regulation of religious life was introduced. Religious services and other religious gatherings were regarded as different kinds of public gatherings in similarity to theatre performances, concerts, demonstrations, etc.

More specifically, the following restrictions were introduced on public gatherings by the Swedish government during 2020-2021, all of which had a considerable impact on faith communities.

- ❖ On March 12, 2020, the first restrictions were introduced, banning public gatherings with more than 500 participants.
- ❖ On March 29, 2020, the limit was lowered to 50 participants.
- ❖ On November 1, 2020, an exemption was introduced for public gatherings and public events with 51-300 participants, but with certain added conditions. These conditions meant that each participant should be assigned a seat at least one metre away from other participants and remain seated during the event. Various other conditions were created for participants to keep this distance to each other.
- ❖ On November 24, 2020, the earlier exemption was removed, and the limit for any kind of public or private gathering was lowered to only eight participants. After criticism from religious leaders, funeral ceremonies were excluded from the restriction, however, with a limit of 20 people maximum.
- ❖ On September 29, 2021, restrictions on public gatherings and the limit of the number of people that could gather was removed.
- ❖ From the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 2021, it became a requirement to have a valid Covid-19 vaccine in order to participate in at public gatherings with more than 100 people. However, this was only required if the gathering did not have that any other infection-control measures in place.
- ❖ From the beginning of February 2022, all measures in response to Covid-19 were gradually removed, including control of vaccine passes.

Despite the rather different strategy of Sweden in handling the spread of the coronavirus, the debate was limited. Most Swedes refrained from criticising the government during the pandemic and so did religious leaders. Yet, there were naturally those who argued that that there should have been further restrictions to

stop the spread of a deadly virus in the churches, whilst others argued that there should be more consideration to the rights to meet for prayer and worship. Not least, this was raised in relation to the constitutional rights where the opportunity to practise religion individually and together is a constitutionally protected right. As such, whilst the debate was limited, it was clearly focused on the issue of restrictions vs freedom of religion.

The Christian Council of Sweden has been one of the most active voices in the debate, both by debate articles but also in the referral processes and through open letters to ministers. One of the questions they rose was regarding the inconsistencies that the regulations entailed. This issue was also highlighted by many other religious leaders (Lundgren, 2022). The main point was that public gatherings had much stricter rules than for example shopping malls and bars that were regulated through a different law, meaning that more people could meet in those places. This was considered problematic. In an open letter to the government from the Christian Council of Sweden, they raised the example of the Cathedral of Uppsala.

*“In many cases, our church premises are large and could gather significantly more than eight people if the square metre rule was applied [this was the rule that was applied to shopping malls and shops]. As an example, Uppsala Cathedral could offer space for 273 people to celebrate worship on site if you started from the square metre rule.”* (The Christian Council of Sweden, 2021)

During the last years, several research projects in Sweden have measured the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on religion. Some have already published results whilst others are forthcoming.

One of the studies, focusing on how the Church of Sweden has adapted and adjusted to the Covid-19 pandemic – not least regarding digital transformation – have studied how parishes adapted, cancelled or continued as usual (Fransson, Gelfgren, & Jonsson, 2021). The study shows how most parishes have turned towards more digital solutions rather than cancelling. Yet, it also shows that many postponed and cancelled a lot of activities.

Similar results have been found in a study concerning minor protestant churches (Josefsson & Wahlström 2022) showing that many turned towards digital solutions, offering digital worship, rather than cancelling activities. The study also shows that there was a general negative feeling among the members of missing physical meetings, and that the sense of community and participation was negatively affected in many congregations.

In a survey focusing on how the Covid-19 pandemic affected minority religious communities in Sweden, commissioned by The Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities, it was shown that a large number of the local congregations adapted to the new situation both by cancelling some activities and by gathering online for worship for example (Lundgren, 2022). The study also shows how half of the congregations in the survey experienced that their financial situation worsened because of the pandemic, with larger congregations (those over 500 members) being hit harder than smaller congregations.

## **Sociological aspects**

Although Sweden did not employ a full lockdown, during the winter of 2020/2021 restrictions meant that faith communities could only gather up to 8 people in their premises. Given the importance of religion and support given by faith communities during a crisis, the restrictions challenged their ability to act. The studies published so far show that many congregations adapted to the new situation. Importantly, however, large differences can be seen between different activities and different congregations (Lundgren, 2022). In terms of minority religious communities, 7 out of 10 congregations offered digital worship/prayer and meditation while very few offered digital alternatives for their activities for vulnerable individuals, old people etc. Interestingly, there seems to be large differences in how well different congregations adapted to digital alternatives. While many say that they experienced fewer people at their digital services compared to ordinary

physical activities, a considerable percentage (30% in one study) experienced an increase in the number of people participating. Also, apart from adapting to digital alternatives, many congregations from different faith traditions opened up for more outdoor activities, . for example, worshipping in nature, pilgrim walks, etc.

In terms of volunteering in congregations, two studies, one concerning the Church of Sweden and one concerning minority religious communities have shown that the number of volunteers seems to have decreased in many congregations during the Covid-19 pandemic, thereby leaving more responsibility to the employees in the congregation (Fransson, 2022; Lundgren, 2022). Unsurprisingly, many minority religious communities are worried that the volunteers will not return.

It is most likely too early to say whether the pandemic has led to secularization or de-secularization. A number of studies show that that the pandemic has led to a loss in the sense of community and participation. For example, statistics from the Church of Sweden shows a dramatic fall in the number of baptisms during the last three years (see table below).

2019:	42 267
2020:	28 429
2021*:	10 347

However, other studies show the opposite, mixed results can be seen concerning whether people seem to have more or less interest in religious issues as a result of the pandemic. Consequently, it is too early to identify a trend, to say whether there will be less marriages, baptisms, etc. taking place in churches as too short time has passed since the restrictions were taken away. It will be interesting to follow the numbers in the years to come.

The relationship between religious groups and the state during the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden can, overall, be seen to have been quite neutral. Even though some religious leaders spoke up against injustice during the pandemic there has, at least to our knowledge, been no situations where religious groups have tried to hinder the adherence to public health measures. Rather, the opposite is true. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Swedish government highlighted faith communities as central actors in reaching out with information to people both regarding the pandemic and regulations in general but also at a later stage regarding vaccination. As it seems, many faith communities have adhered to this call and been engaged in spreading information concerning public health measures to their congregation. Many national religious leaders have been engaged together with public agencies in producing films to reach out with information about vaccination to their members.

## References (publications, reports, surveys...)

Fransson, S., Gelfgren, S., & Jonsson, P. (2021). *Svenska kyrkan online: Att ställa om, ställa in eller fortsätta som vanligt under coronapandemin*. In: Svenska kyrkan.

Josefsson, U. W., Magnus. (Ed.) (2022). *Svensk frikyrklighet i pandemin. En studie av församlingen i corona och corona i församlingen* (Vol. 09)

Lundgren, L. (2022) *Trossamfundet och Covid-19. En undersökning om hur pandemin påverkat lokala församlingar i Sverige*. Stockholm, SST.