

Church of Sweden apologizes for abuse of Sámi people

News in the [December 29, 2021](#) issue



Church of Sweden archbishop Antje Jackelén kneels before a group of Sámi representatives during a special service on November 24 in Uppsala Cathedral. (Magnus Aronson/Ikon)

During a special worship service at its general synod, the Church of Sweden formally apologized to the Sámi people on November 24 for centuries of “mistreatment and complacency.”

Non-Sámi and Sámi people, as well as Lutheran church leaders from neighboring Nordic countries, encircled a flame at the front of the Cathedral of Uppsala as Archbishop Antje Jackelén referenced the story in Luke’s Gospel of the woman who suffered a crooked back for 18 years.

“As archbishop of the Church of Sweden, I stand before you, the Sámi, and confess that we have not engaged with you at eye level,” she said. “We have been curved inward on ourselves, we have not stood up to racism and abuse of power. Our backs are bent by the guilt we carry. We have placed unjust burdens on you. We have burdened your ancestors with shame and pain that has been inherited by new generations.”

Jackelén continued, “We cannot undo what has been done. But we can feel remorse for our part in Sweden’s colonial history. We can feel remorse for our inability and unwillingness to accept the truth and meet you at eye level.”

Sámi representatives shared personal accounts of mistreatment, the colonization of Sámi land, and horrific boarding school experiences.

The Sámi are the nomadic, reindeer-herding indigenous people of the northern Scandinavian peninsula. Today, they live in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and northern parts of Russia.

November’s apology was the culmination of decades of diffusion between the Church of Sweden and the people it tried to forcibly Christianize, beginning in the 1500s. Sámi spiritual beliefs were often denounced as devil worship, and in the 17th century, Sámi people were often tried for witchcraft. At least one Sámi was burned at the stake.

“As we apologize to you today, we cannot determine how you will receive this apology,” Jackelén said. “It is not our place to demand to know when a response will be given.”

Members of the Sámi community attending the service described the event as the beginning of a long journey.

“My hope and belief is that this apology will lead to a change,” said Ingrid Inga, chair of the Sámi Council of the Church of Sweden. “I feel very humble to be part of this apology, and that it isn’t just empty words from the church. It comes with commitments and a ten-year process where they will be realized.”

In 2019, the Church of Sweden published a 1,100-page document chronicling the ways the church had participated in the attempted erasure of Sámi culture.

In June 2021, the central board of the Church of Sweden decided that an official apology would be made to the Sámi. As part of the reconciliation process, work is also underway on eight commitments and objectives for the Church of Sweden that would help pair the church's apology with tangible action over the next ten years.

A second public apology is planned during the Sámi church conference in Luleå in October 2022. —World Council of Churches, Christian Century