

Meet the Church of Sweden's archbishop-elect

Martin Modéus will lead the national church during a time of profound change.

by [Gary G. Yerkey](#) in the [December 2022](#) issue



Church of Sweden archbishop elect Martin Modéus (Photo by Daniel Lönnbäck)

In June, the Church of Sweden selected a new archbishop. Martin Modéus, who is currently bishop of the Diocese of Linköping, will take office in December, replacing Antje Jackelén, who has served in the post for the past eight years. In a wide-ranging interview with the *Century*, Modéus said that he will continue existing efforts to reverse the decline in church membership, as well as to speak out on issues where human dignity and all of creation are threatened. Such issues are “not beyond the religious,” he said. “They are religious.”

Modéus said that the continuing decline in church membership—at the rate of 1 to 2 percent a year over the last couple of decades—is serious. But he pointed out that more than half of the Swedish population still belongs to the national church. “That is the big news,” he said.

The latest Church of Sweden statistics (2021) show that 5,633,867 people, or 53.9 percent of the population, continue to be members of the church, down from 5,728,746 in 2020. At the same time, the number of people who say that the Church of Sweden has an important role in society has grown from 40 to 58 percent.

After the Church of Sweden, the largest religious denominations in Sweden, as of 2020, were officially registered Muslims (2.3 percent), members of the Orthodox Church (1.4 percent), Catholics (1.2 percent), and members of the Swedish Pentecostal Movement (1.1 percent).

About 250,000 people belong to so-called free churches, according to the Swedish Free Church Council.

Ann Heberlein, a Swedish commentator who writes and speaks extensively on theology and ethics, said that the loss of members represents a serious threat to the Church of Sweden. She said that membership fees (averaging about one percent of a person's annual income) account for about 60 percent of the church's income.

Writing in the independent online magazine *Kvartal*, Heberlein said that part of the reason for the decline in membership is that the church continues to suffer from an identity crisis. What does the church want to be? she asked. A communion of believers or an opinion-maker?

"The Swedish church has unfortunately become a part of the culture war that is wrecking public discourse in Sweden," Heberlein writes. She said that the church has all too often "stoked the fire" by taking positions on controversial issues, adding that there appears to be a lack of "self-awareness" within the church leadership of the current crisis.

Modéus conceded that a decline in membership also means a loss in church revenue. "If we lose members, we lose money, and it becomes more difficult to do what we do." He added, however, that if the decline is a result of people losing confidence in the church, "that is, in fact, worse." He said that "when we think about resources, we should not start with money; we should start with people."

Other commentators have argued that the Church of Sweden has become too politicized under Jackelén's leadership. They argue that she has allowed—even encouraged—the church to move too far to the left, leaving many Swedes who consider themselves to be on the center-right of the political spectrum to wonder

whether there is a place for them in the national church.

As for Modéus, he said that the church “follows Christ, and sometimes that [means] people consider us [too far] right and sometimes they consider us [too far] left. And that’s something we have to live with.”

But some Swedes say that the church should refrain from weighing in on issues—such as climate change and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—that they argue have little to do with religion and should be left to others. As one life-long church member put it, “There’s enough political confrontation everywhere else [in society], and the church doesn’t benefit from taking part in it.”

Modéus maintained said that the church remains committed to promoting interreligious cooperation, even as it has been attacked by Swedish nationalists for reaching out to the country’s growing Muslim community. “They don’t want us to [even] talk with the Muslims,” he said.

Joel Halldorf, a Swedish church historian, said that the election of Modéus to replace Jackelén represents a “pendulum swing” from the “battle-ready” Jackelén to the more “inward” and “reasoning” Modéus.

“He has few enemies and is reluctant to get into hot debates,” Halldorf writes, adding that Modéus is not given to soundbites or startling statements. “He provides space for analysis, not just opinions. More radio than Twitter, in other words. It can be a test of patience, but if you give in to patience, it pays off.”

Halldorf wrote in the Swedish national daily newspaper *Expressen* that Modéus has demonstrated a willingness to move the Church of Sweden—the official state church until 2000—from being a “large-scale government identity” to an institution characterized by “relationships, participation and community.”

Modéus’s approach to governing, according to Halldorf, will be “more free church than state church.” He said that, as head of an institution that has been accused of being overly bureaucratic, Modéus will likely “use bureaucracy to push back bureaucracy.”

“That makes him a suitable church leader for our time,” Halldorf said.

For her part, Jackelén said that what may be considered to be “left” or even “far too left” in the eyes of some may nevertheless be “the theologically reflected voice of

the gospel. My principle continues to be: if it is not grounded in the gospel, I won't say it."

Jackelén acknowledged that it is tempting to speak in terms of a pendulum swing. "But if the swing in this case is perceived as moving from opinion to analysis, from soundbites to reflection, from Twitter to radio, from polemic to irenic," she said in an email, "then it certainly is a misperception."

After being elected bishop of the Diocese of Lund in 2006, Jackelén said, she found that the Church of Sweden had become rather "internal."

"Hence," she said, "I made deliberate efforts to reflect on and strengthen the missionary role of the church in the public space. As a systematic theologian rooted in Lutheran theology, I regard it absolutely necessary that there be a theological foundation to whatever I as bishop and from 2014 as archbishop contribute in the public space."

Modéus says he wants to broaden the "base" of the church. He said that some people think only in terms of being "customers" of the church, where "the church is producing something that they are consuming." He sees this as "very dangerous for a church We must go from [being] consumers to [being] carriers."

He said that some people see only the benefits of being a paying member of the church—of access to a place that can be used for baptisms, weddings, and funerals, for instance. But "we need the church," he said, "and therefore we must carry it [and see it as] something for the good of all of us." Therefore, he wants to encourage members and other non-staff to play a greater role in the daily functioning of the church.

Asked whether the Church of Sweden requires its members to believe in Jesus Christ, Modéus replied that in his view, there are two ways to guarantee that a church is a Christian church. One way is that "believers together carry faith and guarantee, in the congregation." The problem with this, he went on, "is that when the congregation is a relational community, when faith is the reason that you are allowed to be here, you will not be very eager to talk about your disbelief, your pain in faith, your anger with God—because faith is why you're here and faith is why you're accepted. Those congregations get strong, but in the heart [they are] vulnerable."

In the Church of Sweden, on the other hand, “we put the responsibility of being a church, of carrying faith in the future, on the ordained—the bishops, the priests, and the deacons. We take [on] the responsibility that this will continue to be a Christian church. That construction gives us the opportunity to be very generous to people, to be very open.”

The Church of Sweden was founded in 1536 when King Gustav Vasa broke with the Roman Catholic Church. It became Lutheran at the Uppsala Synod in 1593 with the adoption of the Augsburg Confession. Currently headquartered in Uppsala, it is the largest Lutheran denomination in Europe and the third largest in the world. It is a member of the Porvoo Communion of Lutheran and Anglican churches in Europe; since 2015 it has also been in full communion with the Episcopal Church in the US.

Today, while most Swedes would describe their country as highly secular, they also point with pride to what some outsiders may see as their almost obsessive observance of traditional Christian traditions and rituals, such as christenings, marriages, and funerals, which are performed regularly by the Church of Sweden at its 3,700 or so parishes in 13 dioceses throughout the country.

The Swedish people also enjoy considerable time off from work thanks to a host of Christian holidays that pepper the Swedish calendar, including Easter, Christmas, Twelfth Night, Ascension, Pentecost, and All Saints’ Day—all official holidays in Sweden.

“However secular modern-day Sweden may be,” says the government-run Swedish Institute, “these holidays are certainly welcomed by religious and non-religious Swedes alike.”

Modéus’s election as the next leader of the Church of Sweden came at a time of profound change in Sweden. In May, in the most significant foreign-policy shift in the country in decades, the Swedish government abandoned the country’s long-standing policy of neutrality and applied for membership in the NATO military alliance, a response to Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. A closely contested general election this month has created uncertainty as well.

Asked to comment on Sweden’s potential NATO membership, Modéus declined to take a position. But he did note how quickly the Nordic region’s security situation has changed, saying that a decade ago the only place where you could find Sweden and Finland in conflict with Russia was in the hockey rink. “Obviously, we were

naive.”

Modéus said that, when he isn’t working, he often takes walks in the woods, sometimes with a camera. He has just published a collection of his photographs of birds. “It’s a form of recreation,” he said. “But it’s also a way of seeing God, a way of training myself to see God in all creation.”