

The way forward post San Antonio

During the month of August the Executive Committee of the Swedish Union of Churches Conference (SUChC) met twice to address the question of how the Adventist Church in Sweden should go ahead following the decision in San Antonio in July not to allow divisions to determine the ordination of women. Also in August, the Trans-European Division (TED) called the Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and Dutch Union Presidents to a meeting.

There was a need to check with those Unions in Northern Europe which for years have had as an objective to treat men and women pastors equally.

In their first meeting on August 16, the SUChC Executive Committee members made it clear what intentions they wanted the Union President Göran Hansen to convey to the TED leadership and neighbouring Unions.

Along with the leaders of TED, the Scandinavian and Dutch Union Presidents affirmed their determination not to act in a spirit of rebellion in the aftermath of the General Conference (GC) Session in San Antonio. Instead they want to work according to the General Conference *Working Policy*. At the same time, *the status quo* is not satisfactory since it damages the Church's ability to bring the Advent message to this part of the world. In Northern Europe gender equality is an ethical question of conscience both in society and among Adventist Church members. There are also questions regarding the Church's current policy vis-à-vis European working- and discrimination laws.

The TED will request the GC's Annual Council in October to confirm the role of women as leaders and pastors in the Church – decisions which was already made in 1985 and 1990 by the General Conference in Session, but overshadowed by this past summer's decision. The decision in San Antonio on July 8 has in no way altered the previous decisions which made it possible for female pastors to receive credentials as Commissioned Pastors and to be ordained as Elders.

The TED also wants the GC's Office of General Counsel to examine the legal situation in the EU and Norway in relation to the views on equality expressed in the GC Working Policy. It also wants the GC's Executive Committee to review the coherency between the *Fundamental Belief* number 14 and the Church's policy on discrimination (GC WP BA 60 10).

Equal treatment of all pastors

On August 23, following the Union Presidents' meeting with the TED, the SUChC Executive Committee discussed and decided on the further process in Sweden. The background for this decision is the Executive Committee's decision in December 2012 to promote a Biblical understanding of equality before God and the calling to serve as pastor without regard to ethnicity, age or gender, in the Church's Study Process on Theology of Ordination leading up to the GC Session in 2015. This decision was made into a motion to the SUChC Session in 2013, but it did not pass even though it in essence simply described how the Swedish Union for many years has applied the provisions given in the Working Policy. The Union Session resolved that the SUChC should wait until the GC Session before making any comments or taking any position regarding ordination of women.

On August 23 the Executive Committee decided unanimously to confirm previous decisions that the Adventist Church in Sweden "wants to treat all pastors alike ... from employment to any kind of public acknowledgment." In dialogue with neighbouring Unions, the SUChC wants to investigate, within current Working Policy, if "ways can be found for full equality in shapes which do not need to include ordination and commissioning." To this end a committee has been appointed to draft a proposal in dialogue with neighboring Unions. The committee members are pastor Liane Edlund, pastor George Filippou, Union President Göran Hansen, pastor Rainer Refsbäck, pastor Bobby Sjölander and pastor Karin Wiczorek. The aim of the Executive Committee is to make a decision on the matter by June 2016 and in everything else to support the process launched by TED and neighboring Unions.

The Executive Committee also decided to refrain from ordaining and commissioning pastors until an expedient proposal has been made and approved.

The Adventist Churches in Scandinavia together with the Adventist Church in the Netherlands have all in one way or another made decisions regarding the equal treatment of male and female pastors. In the Netherlands the

union session in 2012 decided with a great majority to begin to ordain female pastors contrary to Working Policy. In Denmark, the Union Session in 2013 decided that men and women in all positions of responsibility should be treated equally, and that it will refrain from ordaining pastors until the summer of 2015. In Norway the Executive Committee made a similar decision.

The committee appointed by the Swedish Union Executive Committee has already had two meetings and will continue to work through the winter.

I would appeal to you to pray for this work and that we all, men and women, young and old, continue to focus on our work and mission!

—**Göran Hansen** Union President of the Adventist church in Sweden.

Editor's notes: This article was written before the Norwegian and Danish Union's decisions. This SUChC Ex.Com. decision was based partly on the outcome of the TED consultation with the Union presidents in August, which recommended a dialogue between the Scandinavian Unions to come up with a common solution if possible. Now, when the final decisions has been made by the NORUC and DUChC, I guess the parts about dialogue in the Swedish decision are outplayed.

Also, to be noted: The SUChC has chosen a slower process than did the NORUC and DUChC, which in itself illustrates the cultural difference between our countries (Swedes are in general much more concerned with consensus and more afraid of open conflict than are the Danes and Norwegians). The reason the Danes and the Norwegians could make such a decided position at this time, is also that they already in 2013 made the decisions which the SUChC just made in August. The final decision of the SUChC Ex.Com. might come during the Fall, but no later than June 2016.