

Changed relations between the State and the Church of Sweden



FACT SHEET

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Efforts to bring about the historic reform of the bond between State and Church have been on the political agenda in Sweden for many years. In 1999 this work was concluded and the reform took effect as of 1 January 2000.

The reform is based on a decision in principle taken by the Riksdag in 1995, following consultations, *inter alia*, with the General Synod – the Church of Sweden’s highest decision-making body. As a result, the Ecclesiastical Act was abrogated and replaced primarily by two new acts: an act on religious communities and an act on the Church of Sweden.

Amendments have consequently been made to the Instrument of Government and the Freedom of the Press Act. New laws and ordinances have been passed and amendments made to a long number of existing laws and ordinances. The amendments to the Instrument of Government mean that regulations on religious communities and the bases for the Church of Sweden as a religious community shall be laid down in law. The enactment, amendment or abrogation of such a law requires a qualified majority vote in the Riksdag.

Wide support for the reform

A general aim, when drawing up the terms of the reform, was to secure wide support both from the State and the Church. More than three thousand advisory bodies had the opportunity to comment on the proposal, thus making it the biggest circulation process ever. The response was predominantly positive and the decision was passed with broad majorities, both in the Riksdag and in the General Synod.

The decision means that the Church of Sweden has left the public sector and is thus on more of a par with other religious communities. The principle of public access to official documents of the Church of Sweden will nevertheless be retained. The basic identity of the Church will not change and has been defined in the Church of Sweden Act in keeping with the Church’s own picture of itself. The aim of the definition was to emphasise that, despite the change in its relations with the State, it is still the same religious community as before the reform. The change does not affect the membership of all those who already belonged to the Church of Sweden when the reform was implemented. On the whole, the reform has not had an impact on Church property either.

The reform has given the Church of Sweden full freedom, within the framework of the new legislation and existing system of rules, to decide over its own business. This means,

among other things, that the Government will no longer appoint bishops and deans or decide over other ecclesiastical appointments. Certain state bodies that have been responsible for the administration of Church matters will be wound up or integrated into the Church of Sweden. The Church has adopted a church ordinance which supersedes the abrogated Ecclesiastical Act and sets out the basic structures and decision-making procedures of the Church of Sweden.

Parish tax replaced with a fee

Parishes and church associations no longer enjoy their status as local authorities and their right to levy taxes has been abolished. However, the Church of Sweden will continue to receive free help from the State with the collection of fees from its members. The Government can also decide to grant help to other religious communities, provided that they fulfil certain conditions. The parish tax has been replaced by an income-related church fee to be paid by all members of the Church of Sweden. The fee consists of both a local and a regional charge.

Funeral activities

The Church of Sweden parishes will continue to be principals for almost all funeral activities in the country. At present, as before, only the municipalities of Stockholm and Tranås have assumed responsibility for these activities. Funeral activities will be financed by an income-based, compulsory funeral fee. Special rules have been created for those who are not members of the Church of Sweden in order to provide for their interests. As principal for funeral activities, the Church of Sweden is responsible for ensuring the availability of burial grounds for all and of premises that are free from religious symbols for the holding of funeral ceremonies.

Ecclesiastical heritage

As of 2002, the Church of Sweden will receive financial compensation from the State for the care and maintenance of its cultural heritage. Between 2002–2009 a total of SEK 1.9 billion will be paid out for this purpose. The State and the Church of Sweden have reached a long-term agreement on issues concerning Church property of cultural value.

Support to religious communities

The new Act on Religious Communities makes it possible for all religious communities that want to, and that fulfil certain – mainly organisational – requirements, to become registered. A registered religious community can, *inter alia*, receive help from the State with the collection of fees from its members or followers. The principles governing State support to religious communities have been laid down in a special act of law.