

### Getting to Know the Swedish Church – Curates Conference 2013

Shepherded by Hugh White, Vicar of Deddington, a group from Oxford Diocese lined up at the ticket machines at Heathrow on Monday 16 September 2013 ready to embark on a visit to the Diocese of Växjö on a quest entitled 'Getting to know the Swedish Church'. The enterprise was designed for curates, and would qualify as IME (Initial Ministerial Education) but, in the event, numbers were made up by the addition of a fully-fledged priest, a couple of Licensed Lay Ministers (one about to be licensed), and a Church Warden as well as the delightful and ever effervescent twin pillars of Deddington Parish, Judy and Jenny.

After travelling through the day, by air to Copenhagen and onwards by train and then local bus, with little scope for sustenance on the way, the group arrived in the gathering darkness at St Sigfrid's Folk High School to be welcomed by staff member, Åse Aronsson and reinvigorated by a generous supply of *smörgåsar* (as in 'smörgåsbord').

Tuesday 17 September: After a night's rest, breakfast and chapel, the group was launched into the whirl of the tight programme, starting with a trip to Växjö Cathedral, where we were welcomed by the great St Sigfrid himself (aka Jonas Hammarström, suitably disguised), who emerged from the shadows to begin a very imaginative introduction to the history of the cathedral and a demonstration of how the building and stunning artwork is used to brilliant effect with confirmation groups as well as on other occasions.

In the afternoon, the group made its way to the magnificent conference room in the bishop's house, 'Östrabo', to meet Linda Muhr and hear about 'Till tro', which is an adaptation of the Oxford 'Living Faith' programme. Then it was off to the Mariakyrka, an imposing dome-crowned building for a session on the Eucharist liturgy followed by the Eucharist itself (which was also attended by a group of about 30 confirmation candidates) and a discussion with the pastor, Åsa Ingvert, about the challenges facing the church.

Wednesday 18 September: The day started off at a more leisurely pace, as the first substantive session was at St Sigfrid's, where group discussions were held with *pastorsadjunkter* (curates) of Växjö Diocese. The three Växjö curates present were all female, so there was quite a bit of discussion about women's ministry and the question of women bishops (they have them in Sweden) as well as some on the question of same-sex marriage (which is also possible in the church, albeit with a 'conscience' provision).

The afternoon was taken up with a visit to Teleborg Kyrka, to hear from Peter Alrikson about music in the Swedish Church. Teleborg church aims to be family friendly and worship is geared accordingly. Peter got us to try out one or two songs, which would stand us in good stead the following Sunday.

In the evening it was back to the cathedral for the Missa Inklusiva, an innovative Eucharist (deeply moving for some, but for others perhaps raising serious theological questions) conducted by and born of the experiences of Magnus Hedqvist in Costa Rica where he had become closely involved with people affected by HIV/AIDS. Växjö Diocese has a link with the Lutheran Church in Costa Rica.

Thursday 19 September: Again the day started at St Sigfrid's with Magnus Wåhlin, the school chaplain, taking us on a brisk and fascinating tour of the history of the Swedish Church and its relationship with society today. A striking aspect of this was the way secular political alignments are mirrored in the church, with candidates for office wearing their political labels.

This was followed by an opportunity to talk with some of the day students at St Sigfrid's, some of them immigrants with remarkable stories to tell of how they had left their homes in the Middle East and had finally landed in and been welcomed to Sweden. Clearly, their experience of the school has been very positive.

No time to relax, as it was off to Skogslyckan Kyrka in the afternoon to hear something about 'diakoni' – the programme for social work and pastoral care which, based on Acts 6, is the main task of deacons in the Church of Sweden.

The evening Eucharist, after due preparation, was a 'do it yourself' affair with course members and others providing the bi-lingual ingredients, including two very different and commendably brief sermons on the same passage.

Friday 20 September and still going strong, it was off to the diocesan offices for sessions with Carin Frennevi and Jens Linder on Swedish church order and another take on the history. The coffee break provided an opportunity for Bishop Jan Olof to greet the group. After lunch at Östrabo there was, at last, the opportunity for rest and recreation, and there was a good take-up for Åse Aronsson's suggestion of an afternoon canoeing on the lake by St Sigfrid's. The weather was suitably favourable and a sublime interlude followed for those lucky enough to have (figuratively) taken the plunge.

R & R continued into the evening when, to varying degrees and possibly to a measure of bewilderment on the part of the Swedes present, the group let its hair down at a crayfish party hosted by Magnus Wåhlin. It should be explained that the *kräftskiva* is a popular Swedish tradition involving mastering the art of dissecting crayfish, calling out '*skål*' and knocking back at intervals tiny tots of schnapps, singing thereafter with spirit a number of generally meaningless ditties. The English contingent was not backward at contributing in a somewhat anarchical way a selection of English ditties. Enough, probably, about that.

The next day, Saturday 21 September, dawned bright and cheerful and, chauffeured by Olof Lindqvist and Aron Axelsson Bordon, the group took a trip to Kalmar on the east coast to visit the impressive and well-preserved castle – a bastion for a long period against the marauding Danes (the border with Denmark up to 1658 was just to the south of Kalmar) – and also the equally impressive and startlingly baroque cathedral, where we heard something of its history and role today from Anders Johansson. Up to 1915, Kalmar had been a separate diocese, hence the continuing designation of the church as a cathedral.

Sunday 22 September: Morning Eucharist was a conventional one in Växjö Cathedral, followed by a free afternoon for vigorous walking round the Växjö lake, or visits to museums etc, and then a less formal Eucharist in the evening at Teleborg Kyrka, where the earlier session with Music Director Peter Alrikson stood us in good stead. This was followed by *fika* (very strong coffee in this case) and the chance to chat with members of the congregation.

Monday 23 September: Time to depart, but not before the group split into curates and others to take stock of the week's experiences, which were overwhelmingly positive. Then, after giving due thanks to our hosts, Åse and Magnus, we were off by bus, train and plane, back to the old routine, albeit refreshed by the experience and with new perspectives for our respective continuing pilgrimages.