



Baptism in Times of Change: Learnings from the Joint Nordic Project

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In the Nordic region—Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark—the Lutheran folk churches still hold a majority of the population as members. The situation for these churches—the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (Þjóðkirkjan), the Church of Norway (Den norske kirke), the Church of Sweden (Svenska kyrkan), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (Folkekirken)—is quite comparable in terms of theology, history, and sociology. However, due to falling numbers of baptisms relative to the population and declining membership, much attention has been given to baptism in recent years. The joint Nordic project “Baptism in Times of Change” is a study project aimed at gathering and analyzing existing material and practices, and stimulating common reflection, discussion, and ecumenical learning in the Nordic region among researchers as well as practitioners and church leaders. The following article

In the rapidly de-Christianizing countries of Northern Europe, the Lutheran folk churches are wrestling with falling numbers of children being baptized. In a joint project of these churches, a study group sought to analyze the trends and the reasons behind them and to offer suggestions to pastors and leaders about how to address these trends.

introduces findings and insights from the study project and presents the recommendations on baptism developed at a concluding consultation.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This is a meta-study of existing material on baptism in the Nordic region during the last two decades, and includes statistics, practice, liturgy, communication, education, social science and empirical theology, and theological studies.

For the group of national researchers, the first step in the study project was to identify all relevant material and to develop a fifty-five-page annotated bibliography, offering short descriptions of each entry. The second step was to develop nine webinars based on the themes and questions discussed in the material. The webinars were conducted from February to November 2021 and involved thirty presenters and 350 persons in the discussion of the findings in all the relevant areas. Based on feedback from the webinars and the annotated bibliography, the researchers formulated several recommendations for the concluding consultation for a fifty-person group of church leaders, practitioners, and researchers from the Nordic area. The participants at the consultation refined the recommendations, which were offered back to the constituencies of the churches for inspiration and discussion.¹

Decline in numbers of baptisms has led to interest in the role of baptism in church and society. Questions of baptismal theology and practice are not isolated areas but are closely connected to other central issues for the life of churches and their role in society.

Not only was the study a joint Nordic project, but it was also a Lutheran World Federation (LWF) collaboration in the sense that the participating churches were all Nordic members of LWF and that the outcome of the project feeds into the LWF study process on Lutheran identity. In this way it was envisaged that the process, as well as the results of the study, might offer inspiration for other LWF regions.

INTRODUCTION TO CONTEXTS AND THEMES

Decline in numbers of baptisms has led to interest in the role of baptism in church and society. Questions of baptismal theology and practice are not isolated areas but are closely connected to other central issues for the life of churches and their role in society. Researchers from the social sciences, religious studies programs, and theology have tried to identify the reasons behind the declining numbers,

¹ All material is found at the webpage www.churchesintimesofchange.org.

and churches have developed strategies, new practices, and campaigns to counter the decline. So, what has happened? What factors can explain the drop in baptism numbers across Nordic Lutheran churches?

STATISTICS

In premodern Nordic societies, Christian baptism was mandatory for all citizens, and most baptisms were infant baptisms. In modern societies, growing religious tolerance, increasing secularization, and religious pluralization have led to the decline in the percentage of infants baptized in the Lutheran folk churches. While the decline was slow during the twentieth century, in the last two decades the decline has been accelerating in all Nordic countries. In the year 2000, Iceland (89.2%) and Finland (88.7%) had the highest percentage and Sweden (72.8%) the lowest percentage of infants baptized in any given year, with Norway (81.4%) and Denmark (77.2%) placed in the middle. By 2018, while Finland was still at the top (64.9%), the common picture was that the baptism percentage had dropped in all countries, and Iceland (45.7%) was now almost on the same level as Sweden (40.2%). Norway (51.4%) and Denmark (58.7%) are still in the middle. Below is a chart showing the general tendency in all five countries:

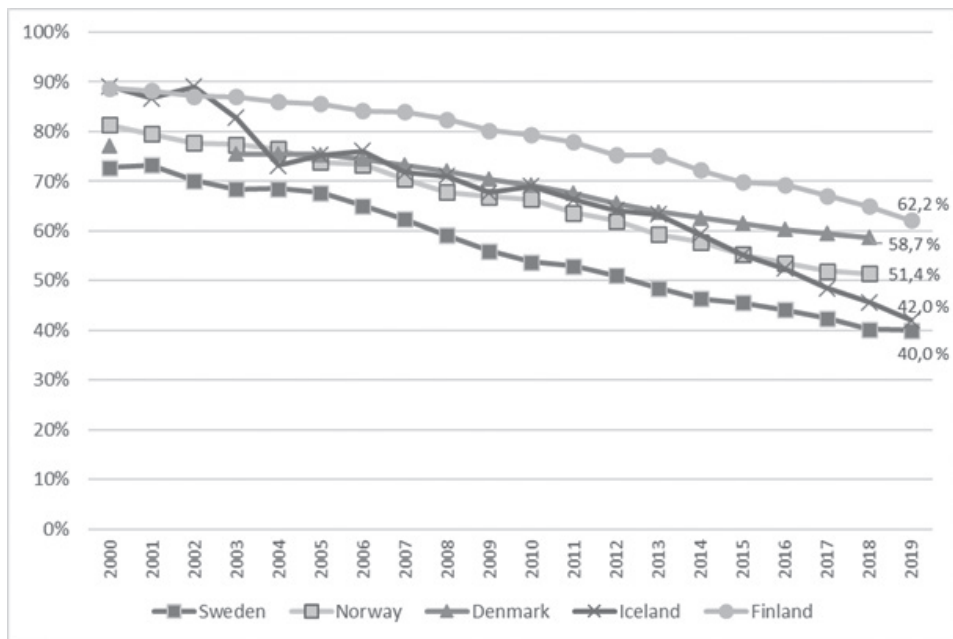


Illustration: Research Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland. The chart shows the number of baptisms in relation to infants born in the country each year.

On a statistical level, one important factor behind the decline in baptism percentage is the religious pluralization that is a result of immigration. Migrants often belong to a religious tradition other than Lutheran Christianity, and at the same time members of the folk churches have left the church in favor of other religious communities or no community at all. So, relative to the total population, there is a decline in number of baptisms.

However, this is not the only factor. If one looks at the percentage of baptisms relative to the percentage of folk church members in each of the countries, numbers indicate that even members of churches are less willing to have their own children baptized in the church. An important caveat is that membership percentage is not the same in all age groups, and membership among parents with infants might be lower than average. However, the overall conclusion is that there is no doubt that even church members do not baptize their children in the same numbers as previously.

SOCIAL SCIENCE AND EMPIRICAL THEOLOGY

Social-scientific and empirical-theological perspectives focus on social, cultural, and theological processes encouraging or discouraging baptism. First, several positive factors seem to emerge across studies: Cultural and family traditions—and to a lesser degree, religious traditions—seem to be positive factors. The reasons for infant baptism identified among church members who have their children baptized relate to cultural and family traditions as well as to the aesthetics of the ceremony itself and the religious tradition. Tradition and custom were earlier main motivations for baptism. Even if this motivation is not as strong as earlier, and baptism to a higher degree is seen as an active choice, the role of tradition and choice of traditional ritual seem to be positive factors in baptism. The pattern is confirmed in reports from all Nordic countries.

Theology of baptism is a positive factor: Baptism as mediating God's blessing or making the child a child of God remains a factor. The role of godparents should not be overlooked: in the Finnish material, it is noted that the wish for godparents is a positive factor, though this remains less certain in the other countries. Finally, there seems to be a gender factor: Swedish research indicates that baptism occurs to a higher degree in families where a female relative influences the choice (mother, grandmother). The same pattern might be expected in other Nordic countries.

Negative factors affecting baptism can also be observed: In a number of articles, pluralization and secularization are identified as key negative factors. Reasons given by parents against baptism include postponing the rite in favor of a (future) free decision by the individual, pressure against baptism from a spouse, and poor quality of relations with a church. Pluralization in terms of religion affects parents considering baptism among a broader variety of options when it comes to organized forms of religious life. The pluralization itself relativizes the individual religious tradition because any religious tradition becomes the choice of the individual. This is common for all Nordic countries.

If we take secularization to mean a weakening of the given character of a religious outlook, religious competence, and relation to religious institutions,

secularization is certainly a factor in declining baptismal numbers. If we take secularization to mean emphasizing individual rights, the Nordic countries are also highly secularized, as reflected, for example, in views on the individual's role in choosing for himself or herself. Both meanings of the term might go some way toward explaining why the frequency of baptisms is falling. In the Finnish material, the idea that the child should decide for him or herself is the second-most important negative factor in deciding not to baptize, whereas the most important factor is that parents do not identify with the church.

Several ambivalent factors are observed in the literature: socioeconomic factors, age of parents, urbanization, and multicultural environment. These factors remain ambivalent as their effect is not easily determined.

PRACTICE

In Iceland, the most common practice is to baptize in the home. In Sweden and Denmark, the most common practice is to baptize in an independent, separate service on Saturdays. Whether baptism takes place in an independent service or as part of the main Sunday service is largely due to geographic considerations. In Norway, it is most common to baptize as part of the main Sunday service, yet home baptisms occur as well, particularly in northern Norway.

One practice that is gaining prominence is “drop-in baptisms,” a practice that has been introduced in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. This practice means that it is possible to be baptized without prior registration and in a casual setting.

An important feature of the baptism service is the conversation with parents and/or family before the service. The material collected in the annotated bibliography shows several examples of how parents and godparents are met by the church, especially through the conversation preceding baptism. Practices related to the follow-up after baptism as well as educational aspects are different in the Nordic countries. Examples include the handing out of Bibles, trees or something similar as decoration in the church, or the planting of a baptismal forest.

Furthermore, the issue of baptism in relation to asylum seekers is a matter of debate in the entire Nordic region. In Sweden and Norway, the bishops' conference has released instructional materials on this issue, and in Denmark there is a document titled “Guidelines for Asylum Seekers.” A subset of this material discusses baptism of asylum seekers, something that emerged with renewed intensity after 2015. Also, the question of “double religious belonging/membership” surfaces in more recent discussions, reflecting the increasingly religiously pluralistic nature of society at large and of individual families.

LITURGY

Both Sweden and Norway have revised their liturgical handbooks recently. The baptismal liturgy is still a debated topic, even after the authorization of the service

handbooks. Discussions also exist in Denmark, Finland, and Iceland concerning new liturgies, especially in relation to baptism.

When examining the liturgies comparatively, a few elements stand out. One is the role original sin plays in the liturgy. Most of the Nordic countries discuss this doctrine in relation to baptism, but the actual application of it in the liturgy differs. The discussion in Denmark has resulted in the replacement of words and phrases connected to original sin with other theological concepts, such as thanksgiving, blessing, grace, and the forgiveness of sins. These concepts are worded in almost every section of the liturgy. Similarly, in Norway, phrases connected to original sin have been replaced with references to humans being created in the image of God.

Norway and Denmark have an explicit renunciation of the devil in the liturgy, whereas in the Finnish and Swedish order, a prayer of liberation exists which is a theological remnant of exorcism. There is no similar section in the Icelandic ritual. The baptism as a washing away of sins is only formulated thus in the Finnish and Swedish material, with the Swedish order standing out as more strongly formulated: “. . . so that the one baptized in this water will be cleansed/purified from the guilt [burden] of sin.” In the pouring of the water just before the baptism ceremony, the Norwegian, Icelandic, Finnish, and Swedish prayers include alternative wordings, including an epiclesis.

EDUCATION

Traditionally, teaching religion in public schools in the Nordic countries was based on Lutheranism and under a certain control of the church. This situation has changed. Finland is the only country where there exists a curriculum that is confessionally based. This is only compulsory for members of the Lutheran church, and there are alternative curricula for members of other churches. Neither the curriculum nor the teaching is controlled by the church. In Denmark there is a reminiscence of the confessional instruction in the 1975 school law, where instruction in Lutheran Christianity is emphasized for all levels in public schools for historical and contextual reasons. Instruction can be very scarce and dependent upon the individual teacher's interests and abilities. In the other countries, religion is taught on a non-confessional basis for all students in public schools. Over time, this has led to less knowledge about the Christian faith among the population, especially on the part of younger people. This situation has led to discussions and new initiatives in the churches.

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In Norway, the church initiated a large-scale reform in 2004, organizing an educational program for all baptized between birth and eighteen years old. Through a national curriculum and financing, this program is mandatory in all congregations. In Sweden, a program for education was introduced recently on a smaller scale. Dioceses and congregations have their own programs to a varying degrees. Local programs are also the case in churches with no national programs. All churches see education in the Christian faith as an important part of preparation for or follow-up to baptism.

COMMUNICATION

First, there is communication aimed toward pastors and congregations to encourage and equip them for the task of their respective communications to parishioners. This is done using brochures, magazines, and websites. The materials include outreach ideas, liturgical suggestions, discussions on baptism with parents, and so on. In Norway, extensive online resources for baptismal work include short videos for distribution on social media.

Second, campaigns to raise awareness among the public have been conducted by the central church authorities, individual dioceses, and parishes using booklets, brochures, websites, and other means. Creative ideas include videos shown in cinemas throughout Norway. Similarly, the diocese of Oslo advertised on public transportation, and the Helsinki Parish Union conducted a campaign in which families of newborns were approached and followed up on for years.

In Sweden, half of all dioceses have coordinated campaigns, including a special baptismal project by the Diocese of Lund spanning a decade, focusing on all aspects of baptism, such as theological reflection, communication strategies, statistics, and education. In Finland, a project titled “Baptism and Sponsorship” included questionnaires to parents to better understand the reasons for their decisions for either baptizing or not baptizing their children.

Despite various projects and campaigns, the decline in the number of baptized children and newborns continues. While statistics and information describing the relative success of different projects is not readily available, the continuing decline does not necessarily mean that campaigns have not worked. First, the numbers for the countries listed here do not show the whole picture (i.e., they are not divided into areas), and second, we do not know how the situation would look if nothing had been done. In this context, it should be noted that no comparative campaigns have been conducted in Iceland and that Iceland as a country has seen the steepest decline within the last two decades. However, other contributing factors might also be at work concerning the case of this specific country.

THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

Several theological studies on baptism highlight the need to have novel forms of interaction between church doctrine and the contextual realities of postmodern

society that challenge the traditional Nordic ways of being a folk church. There is also an emphasis on “lived theology” which takes into consideration myriad ways of living out and interpreting the Christian faith at the grass-roots level. Sometimes this takes place in a direct fashion that involves reinterpreting doctrines or developing liturgies based on explicit dialogue with contextual findings and demands. This may also involve new hermeneutical tools, such as hospitality.

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In addition to studies seeking fresh understandings of baptismal theology, are studies expounding on the basics of Lutheran sacramental theology and mapping traditional Lutheran positions and disagreements with meticulous attention to history.

In Sweden, there has been significant discussion concerning Christian baptism as exclusive or inclusive. One reason behind this is the Swedish culture which has put emphasis on the rights of an individual as well as on openness: Could it be that the rituals of the Lutheran-majority church come across to some people as exclusive?

In Finland, theological studies on baptism have mainly focused on historical Luther studies with motivation to find solutions and inspiration from the earliest tradition of Reformation theology. Due to ecumenical discussions with Orthodox and Catholic traditions, Finnish theologians have been writing more on the eucharist than on baptism. However, a need for specific studies on baptismal theology was prompted by the unsanctioned baptisms conducted by pastors of the Lutheran Foundation in Finland in 2008. These baptismal acts drew media attention and entailed the theological question of whether such baptisms violating church order are valid, especially when there was no intention for the baptized to become a member of a Christian church.

In Denmark, there has been some interest in seeing baptism in the framework of ritual theory. This relates to the theological question of passivity or activity on the part of the one who is baptized vis-à-vis God’s primary action.

In Norway, there has been some discussion on baptism and creation, to what extent salvation given in baptism is related to what has been given already in creation. Moreover, the bishops’ meeting and the National Church Council have been very active in producing material and promoting research on baptism.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CONCLUDING CONSULTATION OF THE PARTICIPATING CHURCHES

Based on the annotated bibliography, the researchers prepared recommendations in four areas presented for discussion when a larger group of engaged practitioners, academics, representatives from the LWF communion office, and church leaders in the Nordic area met in an online consultation on January 19–20, 2022. The recommendations identify themes in the annotated bibliography, challenges and relevant questions, and examples or “best practices” in relation to baptism, without necessarily entailing endorsement by all participants in the consultation. Furthermore, the recommendations are not binding policies for participating churches, as each national group needs to continue working on how they will use the recommendations in their own context and constituency. In short, the recommendations are best viewed as learning points from a joint study and discussion.

A. Church in wider society (statistics, qualitative aspects, societal change)

Churches are recommended:

1. to consider the profound social changes transforming our societies as a renewed call to be churches in mission.
2. to view our Nordic societies as inviting us to theologize contextually.
3. to explore contemporary idioms in dialogue with biblical and traditional symbols in order to make Christianity relevant to people in modern society.
4. to learn to be churches in a pluralistic society sharing public space and working together with people of other faiths and convictions.

B. Theology (Lutheran, ecumenical, contemporary)

Churches are recommended:

5. to work with theologies of baptism in ways that are accessible and understandable.
6. to develop a rich and comprehensive understanding of the gifts of grace and discipleship received in baptism as giving us new relationships to participate in God’s mission in the world.
7. to develop the relationship between baptism and all of creation including the wider human family as well as the ecological environment.
8. to develop an understanding of baptism not exclusively related to infant baptism but including baptism of children, youths, and adults.
9. to work with the understanding of baptism together with ecumenical partners.

C. Communication (meeting members, education, campaigns)

Churches are recommended:

10. to improve dialogue-oriented communication on baptism, including the theological aspects of baptism.

11. to communicate about baptism in a way which emphasizes belonging, community, and relationship.
12. to equip members to consider their own baptism as a “mission to communicate.”
13. to develop programs to teach Christian faith for baptized and non-baptized.

D. Practice (liturgical development, new forms of baptismal practice)

Churches are recommended:

14. to explore greater variation in baptismal practice, e.g. special baptismal services, drop-in services, and services outside the church building.
15. to reflect on the role of and provide resources for godparents.
16. to explore ways to relate to multifaith families and parents opting for delayed baptism, affirming that the child “belongs to the kingdom of God.”
17. to develop liturgies and hymns suitable for various ages and circumstances.
18. to constantly review and revise the liturgical language and practices of baptism.

CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVE: LUTHERAN IDENTITY

For Lutheran churches in the Nordic region and in changing societal and cultural environments, the challenge of the falling number of baptisms is a common challenge. By gathering and analyzing material from the five countries over the last two decades, the project has stimulated discussion among more than 350 practitioners participating in the webinars and in a set of recommendations brought back to the participating churches. In this way, the project as a whole and, not least, the concluding consultation might best be viewed as a step toward realization of our common Lutheran identity in a time of change for the Lutheran churches. ☩

THE AUTHORS AND LEADERS OF THIS STUDY are theologians and church leaders from the Lutheran churches in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland.