Convocation 9.26.14

It was an honor to be able to say something about the Lutheran Church in Sweden, in which I was ordained and served my first call. Later I was being all enthusiastic beginning my first call in the USA and about to learn how things are done here. At that point I assumed that the interest was mutual when it comes to how things are done in other parts of the world, but I was quickly cut down with, “We are not in Sweden.” and “We don’t care”. So I am particularly appreciative of Bishop Crist’s interest today.

Due to my cataracts suddenly getting much worse at the time for the convocation I could not really prepare a full manuscript, so I simply collected a time-line for the developments in Sweden.

The difficulties I have watched here when it comes to the situation of gay and lesbian people did not take place in Sweden. Maybe that has something to do with the fact that Sweden still had a state church when the issue came to the forefront. And to state the obvious, with a state church you cannot really protest what the authorities of the state decide. We took great care to follow what the regulations were.

When I went to seminary in January 1996, what was guiding the church at that time was “Svenska Kyrkans utredningar of 1994”, a state investigation of the issue from 1994. One of the people in this task force was the principal at the seminary in Uppsala. At that time it was not even in the more liberal circles, which the seminary represented, accepted that homosexual people should be able to get married or to adopt children

The important years of the developments in the church of Sweden are as follows.

1951 The Swedish Bishops stood up against homosexuality being considered a crime punishable by law.

1972 The conference of Bishops initiated an investigation , radical fir its time. They spoke up for the need for homosexual people to develop and nurture long term stable relationships. No principal hindrances should prevent homosexual people from being employed by the church. Some kind of rite of blessing should be considered.

1988 the equivalent to the US church-wide entertained a motion that marriage should be considered for same gender couples. A task force investigating the matter was put in place.

1994 the report resulting from the investigation I mentioned above was published. The same year the house of parliament, the state, decided to introduce what was referred to as “registered partnership”, for same gender couples, which took effect 1995. The conference of bishops gave advice on prayers of intercession for such couples.

1997 the Swedish equivalent to the US church-wide entertained a motion about a publicly held blessing of same gender unions.

2003 The Swedish Church’s organization for congregations began working with organizations outside the church against discrimination due to sexual orientation.

2005 the Swedish equivalent to the US church-wide decided on a formal order for a blessing of same

gender registered partnerships. It was also stated that the church SHALL actively work to counter

discrimination due to sexual orientation.

Further that the church ought not to conduct any activity aiming at “curing” people of homosexual

orientation.

Also that homosexual orientation is no hindrance for those seeking employment or to serve in the

church.

2009 The house of parliament decided in favor of same gender marriages. The Swedish conference of

Bishops at this point attempted to altogether give up the right for the church to marry people and

to make marriage solely a civil matter. However, the Swedish Church-wide defeated their suggestion

with between 60-70 percent of the vote.

2010 the Swedish church-wide encouraged all dioceses (US synods) to engage in education on matters

of homosexuality.

2012 the church distributes a suggestion for a gender neutral new handbook on marriage.

In the Church of Sweden the congregations have an obligation to marry those who are members of the

church. The equivalent of the US senior pastor is mandated to see to that this can take place. However,

an individual pastor can refrain from marrying a homosexual couple and claim he or she is bound by

conscience in his or her interpretation of Scripture and then is not forced to perform such a ceremony.

But pastors ordained after 1 April 2009 will before they are ordained be asked if they are willing to

officiate at same gender marriage ceremonies and I assume if not they will not be ordained. The right to

claim a bound conscience rests with those previously ordained. It was my experience during my first call

in Sweden that it was easier to be a male homosexual pastor than a female pastor.

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