

Shorn of tax support, Sweden church slips: Now member-supported by church fee

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Since the separation of state and church in 2000 when church revenues were untied from general taxation, the (Lutheran) Church of Sweden has lost more than 200,000 of its members.

“In the short-term, we are talking about relatively low losses, possible to handle. One percent fewer members per year during the last three years is not alarming,” said Gunnar Nygren, financial controller at the Swedish archbishop’s office. “But in the long-term, say ten years, we will face serious consequences,” he cautioned.

The Church of Sweden is now member-supported by a church fee equal on average to 1 percent of a member’s income. The fee finances about 80 percent of activities in 2,200 parishes. The system is seen by some as a demand for payment, leading them to leave the church for financial reasons.

The declining number of Lutherans in Sweden corresponds to a wider trend in Europe, where there were 36,001,617 Lutherans at the end of 2003, representing a decrease of 640,467 from 2001, according to figures released by the Lutheran World Federation at the end of February.

The largest non-Lutheran denomination in Sweden is the Pentecostal Church, which does not have a tight national structure. Sweden’s growing numbers of immigrant have brought with them their own religions, and about 250,000 people in the country are estimated to be Muslims.

Nygren emphasized that 80 percent of the population are still members of the Church of Sweden. In terms of revenue, a 10 percent decrease in members represents nearly a \$133 million loss to the church. The decline in membership is partly due to demographic changes: the deaths of members are outpacing the numbers of new baptisms. -*Ecumenical News International*