

# *Transforming Church Strategies in a Changing Social Landscape: Sunday School Statistics from a Swedish Diocese, 1920–1990*

by ERIK SIDENVALL

Lund University

E-mail: [erik.sidenvall@ctr.lu.se](mailto:erik.sidenvall@ctr.lu.se)

---

*This article offers a reconsideration of religious mobilisation in the inter- and postwar periods. It focuses on how the Church of Sweden gradually altered its catechetical activities aimed at children to meet changing needs. Built on a range of statistical sources, this article calls for a reconsideration of the ways in which larger Protestant denominations adjusted to meet declining religious practices. With a focus on how laypeople became involved in these efforts, it is argued that institutional history, rejuvenated by the introduction of a gender perspective, is essential for our understanding of postwar religious mobilisation in north-western Europe.*

---

A little more than ten years ago, Jeremy Morris called for an alternative approach to the history of modern British Christianity. Against the backdrop of overarching, and hotly debated, narratives of ‘secularisation’, Morris pointed out ‘that ecclesiastical history in Britain has never been drawn into the rich synthesis of social and demographic analysis

SNA = Swedish National Archives, Arninge; SNAV = Swedish National Archives, Vadstena

An early version of this article was discussed at joint seminar of religious historians at the Universities of Glasgow and Lund. I am grateful for all comments offered by those taking part in this event. I am also indebted to the two anonymous readers for their generous and helpful remarks. Dr Janice Holmes generously stepped in at the very last moment to shape up both language and my line of reasoning.

All translations in this article are the author’s own.

with institutional history'.<sup>1</sup> With teleological 'theories' of the inevitable decline of religion in the West being step by step dismantled, it is now time for present-day historians 'to concentrate more attention on the particular adaptive and evangelistic strategies of churches and religious groups'.<sup>2</sup> Several of the most influential recent studies of religious change in modern Europe have argued that the term 'pluralism', and not secularisation, best captures the types of change occurring in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup> These studies argue that with modernity came variety in ideas and popular expressions. Churches, some of which had been national institutions enjoying the privileges that came with state support, found themselves in a market-like situation where they had to compete with powerful rivals for the affection and allegiance of the people. Since religious decline eventually became a reality, we may conclude that they all lost this struggle. Yet, bearing Morris's suggestion in mind, one may ask: is it not a presumption to assume that the Churches always failed in their efforts? Historians such as Hugh McLeod have pointed at the ways in which smaller, conservative, denominations were able to successfully modify their operational mode in the radical climate of the late 1960s.<sup>4</sup> But what about the larger Churches with a national reach? Could they not, at least momentarily, successfully change their ways in order to halt their downward slide?

To better understand this transition to religious pluralism, this article focuses on Sweden during the years from 1920 to 1990 with attention directed to the Lutheran Church of Sweden. Until the turn of the twenty-first century this episcopal body was an established Church with a membership quota still in excess of 80 per cent of the total population – the epitome of a national Protestant institution.<sup>5</sup> Historians of religious change in Sweden have in general been content with working within a narrative that links 'secularisation' to 'modernisation', finding the roots of declining religious practices and the disintegration of a collectivistic religious culture in over-arching, structural, processes of change.<sup>6</sup> As may be

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Morris, 'Secularization and religious experience: arguments in the historiography of modern British religion', *Hjlv* (2012), 195–219 at p. 219. <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> For some highly influential studies exposing this line of argument see Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a secular society: Lambeth, 1870–1930*, Oxford 1982, and Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in western Europe, 1848–1914*, Basingstoke 2000. See also several of the chapters included in Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (eds), *The decline of Christendom in western Europe, 1750–2000*, Cambridge 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Hugh McLeod, *The religious crisis of the 1960s*, Oxford 2007, 207–12.

<sup>5</sup> Svenska kyrkan, 'Svenska kyrkans medlemsutveckling år 1972–2018', <<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/filer/Medlemmar-Svenska-kyrkan-1972-2018.pdf>>, accessed 26 February 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Among the most influential studies are Carl Henrik Martling, *Nattvardskrisen i Karlstads stift under 1800-talets senare hälft*, Lund 1958, and Hanne Sanders, *Bondevækkelse og sekularisering: en protestantisk folkelig kultur i Danmark og Sverige, 1820–1850*, Stockholm 1995. For

expected, few attempts have been made to ponder seriously the impact of expressions of church activism and parish renewal.<sup>7</sup> By investigating children's catechetical activities and analysing statistics related to, among others, lay leadership and teachers, this article argues that the Church of Sweden demonstrated a considerable ability to effectively adapt to changing social conditions during this period.<sup>8</sup> The case presented suggests that a religious establishment was able to postpone the demise of some popular expressions of Christianity by unremitting adjustments to meet contemporary demands.

With statistical data ranging from the 1920s to the late 1980s, this article sets out to examine the diocese of Växjö, a predominantly rural diocese located in southern Sweden. The diocese covers a majority of Småland county and is, in its present-day form, the result of an amalgamation with the diocese of Kalmar in 1915. Even though the diocese has shown relatively high levels of lay activity,<sup>9</sup> the manner in which the church-oriented activities analysed in this article evolved is fairly similar to that of most other Swedish dioceses.<sup>10</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that this regional study can serve as a model for the processes of change occurring in other parts of Sweden.

### *Sunday schools in a mobilising Church*

It was the Low Church segment within the national Church that first advanced the idea of Sunday schools in Sweden during the first half of the nineteenth century. The inspiration came mostly from like-minded groups in Britain, but when compared to Britain the advent of Sunday

studies applying the pluralist frame of reference see Stefan Gelfgren, *Ett utvalt släkte väckelse och sekularisering: evangeliska fosterlands-stiftelsen, 1856–1910*, Skellefteå 2003, and Erik Sidenvall, 'A classic case of de-Christianisation? Religious change in Scandinavia, c. 1750–2000', in Callum G. Brown and Michael Snape (eds), *Secularisation in the Christian world: essays in honour of Hugh McLeod*, Farnham 2010, 119–34.

<sup>7</sup> For an early examination of Sunday school teachers and similar categories of lay church functionaries see Naomi Stanton [Thompson], 'A culture of blame: Sunday school teachers, youth workers, and the decline of young people in churches', *Crucible* (Oct. 2014), 32–46.

<sup>8</sup> Naomi Thompson argues that the decline of Sunday schools in Britain was largely owing to their institutionalisation and growing rigidity when faced with young people's changing ways of life. A similar process is discernible in Sweden, yet there is ample evidence to demonstrate the resourcefulness of the Swedish Churches when encountering, above all, young families: *Young people and church since 1900: engagement and exclusion*, London 2018, 39–50, 183–4.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the national survey published in *Svenska kyrkans årsbok 1962*, Stockholm 1962, 76–81. See also Berndt Gustafsson, *Svensk kyrkogeografi: med samfundsbeskrivning*, Lund 1971, 20–1.

<sup>10</sup> Ingmar Brohed, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria, VIII: Religionsfrihetens och ekumenikens tid*, Stockholm 2005, 49–51.

schools in Sweden was faltering and late.<sup>11</sup> At first they were established to provide basic education for the poor; it was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that they gained their exclusively religious connotations. Such activities were in general sponsored by independent groups of believers, forming self-governing 'mission societies'. In some localities they were aided by a benevolent local clergyman.<sup>12</sup>

However, Sunday schools were far from welcomed by every representative of the national Church. First and foremost, a majority of the clergy saw them as unnecessary. The Compulsory School Act of 1842 (*folkskolestadgan*) aimed at creating a parish-based schooling system for younger children (up to the age of twelve). These schools were firmly integrated into the national ecclesiastical system. Local school boards were organised as committees under the parish council with the minister acting as the statutory chairman. Until the 1920s instruction in the Lutheran creed formed a central part of the curriculum. Therefore, it was not far-fetched to claim that these decentralised educational institutions actually provided fundamental Christian instruction, administered by a trained and committed teacher, to every baptised child. With such provision, the need for additional teaching activities did not seem like a pressing concern. In addition, Sunday schools also suffered by their association with schismatic Evangelical revivalism. From the 1850s onwards large sections of the Low Church phalanx were beginning to look with unease at their continued association with the national Church. Despite official antagonism, they started to form independent groups of believers and worked strenuously for the religious uplift of the populace at large. Sunday schools were a device in their activist toolkit. Many of those who espoused such autonomous religious sentiments and thus provoked the ire of stalwart churchmen formed a separate religious body, the Swedish Covenant Church (*Svenska missionsförbundet*), in 1878.<sup>13</sup> In such a situation, Sunday schools organised by the Evangelical Free Churches seemed like 'proselyte schools for the sect system', to borrow the words of one early twentieth-century bishop.<sup>14</sup> It goes without saying that local Sunday school enthusiasts could not count on the endorsement of the ecclesiastical leadership.

This hostile position began to change around the turn of the twentieth century. Traditional visions of the parish as a unified religious community were by now merely a mirage. Urbanisation and signs of declining parental

<sup>11</sup> Anders Jarlert, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria*, VI: *Romantikens och liberalismens tid*, Stockholm 2001, 194–5.

<sup>12</sup> George Fridén (ed.), *Svensk söndagsskola genom 100 år: en krönika i ord och bild*, Stockholm 1951, 15–19.

<sup>13</sup> Oloph Bexell, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria*, VII: *Folkväckelsens och kyrkoförnyelsens tid*, Stockholm 2003, 108–30.

<sup>14</sup> 'proselytskolor för sektväsendet': *Handlingar rörande prästmötet i Kalmar år 1909*, Kalmar 1910, 117.

religious socialisation, the growing political strength of the Evangelical Free Churches and the rise of anticlerical Socialism led many loyal supporters of the established Church to fear for the future. Save the staunchest reactionaries, there was a growing sense among leading ecclesiastics that something new was needed to meet the threat that seemed to be mounting. Activities that had hitherto been frowned upon, such as Sunday schools, were now being seriously contemplated among a broader segment of church people, clergy and laity alike.<sup>15</sup> Their vision was mostly rooted in a resolute political conservatism, now forced into action. Sweden as a nation was in danger; what was needed was a rejuvenated and vigorous Church. In a much-read pamphlet from 1909, Manfred Björkquist (1884–1985), a future bishop of Stockholm, declared that ‘The Church wants to gather all of the people (*folk*) of Sweden. Not that they shall be only a one-church people, but that all shall become part of God’s fold through Jesus Christ. By its very existence, Sweden’s church dares to believe that the Swedish nation can become a people of God.’<sup>16</sup>

As civil servants, the clergy were bound by oath to adhere to the ordinances of the Church Law (passed by the absolute monarch Karl XI in 1686) and the Municipal Act of 1862. These pieces of legislation, together with detailed instructions issued by the Swedish government and by the diocesan chapters, structured the religious duties of the local clergy and by extension every parish within the realm. In these statutes one could find (often detailed) instructions for conducting the religious life that revolved around the parish church. If previous generations viewed these ordinances as sufficient for maintaining the spiritual vigour of the nation, the generation that rose to maturity towards the end of the nineteenth century began to see them as just the first steps towards the building of an ecclesiastical edifice fit for its present-day task. Clerical opinion began to talk about the need for ‘non-compulsory work’ (*frivilligarbete*). In this context ‘non-compulsory work’ refers to religious activities that were not prescribed by the then existing religious legislation. Ideally, it was to be performed by small teams consisting of both clergy and lay members of the parish. In the first number of the recently launched church magazine *Församlingsbladet* (Parish Gazette) that appeared in 1902, the editor expressed a need to ‘enliven and strengthen a concern for the tasks that not only fall on the church and her representatives, but on every Christian as a member of this body’.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Bexell, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria*, vii. 227–30.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Kyrkan vill i sig samla allt Sveriges folk, icke på det att det må bli endast ett kyrkofolk, utan på det att Sveriges folk må bli till ett Guds folk genom Jesus Kristus. Sveriges kyrka vågar genom själva sin tillvaro tro, att Sveriges folk kan bli ett Guds folk’: Manfred Björkquist, *Kyrkotanken*, Uppsala 1909, 4.

<sup>17</sup> ‘väcka och stärka intresset för de uppgifter som åligga icke blott kyrkan och hennes män, utan varje kristen som en medlem av denna kyrka’: *Församlingsbladet* (Oct. 1902), 1. For studies of ‘non-compulsory work’ in the Church of Sweden see,

In order to preserve the integrity of the national ecclesiastical fabric (much had been learnt from the rift of 1878), the clergy were placed at the centre of these activities. Without their participation and leadership, all advances in parochial life could be understood as but the first step to dissent. No autonomous societies, in which people applied for membership, were to be created. Instead, loosely organised groups of volunteer workers were formed around the local minster. They were, using the terminology of the time, his 'helpers'.

The evolution of 'non-compulsory work' in Church of Sweden parishes was greatly aided by the advancement of a new understanding of the role of Christian laity. With inspiration from reform-minded German Lutherans, one of the leading champions of renewed parish life, Professor Olov Holmström (1854–1921), filled the sixteenth-century concept of the priesthood of all believers with new and activist content. Pastors who had hitherto toiled on their own in populous parishes (which was how Holmström described it) should from now on be aided by groups of committed parishioners. Together they should be able to make the local church better suited to the many needs of the present age.<sup>18</sup>

Several influential clerical groupings gave vigorous support to the idea of local parishes as hubs of activity. The most important of these was the National Union of Swedish Clergy (*Allmänna svenska prästföreningen*), formed in 1903. This association, which enjoyed widespread support, was above all intended to advocate for the formation of church youth clubs led by the local clergy (the preferred Swedish term was 'youth circle' [*ungdomskrets*]). A separate Board of Youth Care was organised in 1904 with Holmström as chairman. The board also published a monthly, at first heavily nationalistic and royalistic, church youth magazine, *Sveriges ungdom* (Sweden's Youth).<sup>19</sup>

At this time 'non-compulsory work' had begun to grow rapidly within the national Church, above all in the central parts of Sweden. After some considerable manoeuvring in the National Synod, it was decided in 1910 that a national body supporting these activities should be formed. The objective of this new institution within the state Church apparatus was to strengthen the novel expressions of parish activity that now were springing to life.<sup>20</sup> In other words, after having gained government approval, the Church of Sweden's Diaconal Board (*Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelse*) organised itself

for example, Lennart Tegborg, *Församling: vision och verklighet*, Skara 1978, and Erik Sidenvall, *Medarbetare: en historia om organisation och lekfolksuppdrag i Svenska kyrkan*, Stockholm 2022.

<sup>18</sup> These ideas were put forward in a work much read at the time: Olof Holmström, *Evangelisk-luthersk församlingvård med särskildt afseende på förhållandena inom vår svenska kyrka*, Lund 1898.

<sup>19</sup> Sture Fjellander, *Korset och ringen: det kyrkliga ungdomsarbetets organisationshistoria, 1905–1945*, Stockholm 1972, 147–50.

<sup>20</sup> Brohed, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria*, viii. 45–6.

as a kind of state department for a mobilising Church. Young and energetic clergy, fired by the vision of a rejuvenated national Church, immersed themselves in the work of this agency.<sup>21</sup> From its onset the Diaconal Board engaged in vigorous publishing activities which produced a range of church magazines and instructional manuals aimed at various kinds of volunteers.<sup>22</sup> Regular instruction courses were arranged to equip groups of committed parishioners for new tasks. These courses, together with separate youth conferences (*ungdomskurser*), toured the country during the 1910s and 1920s.<sup>23</sup> To provide further support to the new kind of lay workers that emerged during the first decades of the twentieth century, the Diaconal Board set up a Church of Sweden layman's school (*Svenska kyrkans lekmannaskola*), located in Sigtuna on the outskirts of Stockholm in 1922. More substantial courses, lasting for up to two months, for Sunday school teachers and youth group leaders were a priority. Young women, above all, flocked to these courses.<sup>24</sup> In response to the secularisation of the Swedish primary school system (primary schools were removed from the responsibility of the parish council in 1930), the layman's school offered hugely popular teacher training courses between 1930 and 1956. All of these were intended to offer further instruction in the Lutheran creed, but also served to prepare lay individuals for service in Church of Sweden Sunday schools.<sup>25</sup> Primary school teachers, many of whom received training at the layman's school, were to become key figures in local 'non-compulsory' church teaching activities.

Starting in the 1920s, additional bodies were organised with the aim of supporting the 'non-compulsory work' of the church. These took the form of regional Diocesan Councils (*stiftsråd*) headed by a bishop and composed of interested clergy and lay parish representatives. In the Växjö diocese such a body was formed in 1923.<sup>26</sup> Gradually, these regional organs assumed responsibility for the educational activities previously organised by the Diaconal Board. The Växjö Diocesan Council organised its first course for Sunday school teachers in January 1925.<sup>27</sup> These courses were to become staple parts of diocesan life for many years. During the 1940s there was a further decentralisation of educational management for Sunday school volunteers. With the rapid increase in the number of parish Sunday schools, there was now a solid base for organising shorter instruction courses at the deanery level. For those unable to attend

<sup>21</sup> Fredrik Santell, *Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelse: tillflöden och tillkomst, organisation och verksamhet intill 1938*, Uppsala 2016, 151–63.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 148–51.

<sup>23</sup> Fjellander, *Körset och ringen*, 84–8.

<sup>24</sup> Algot Tergel, *Svenska kyrkans lekmannaskola 50 år i kyrkans tjänst*, Sigtuna 1972, 45–7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 71–2.

<sup>26</sup> Lars Aldén, *Stifts kyrkans förnyelse: framväxten av stiftsmöten och stiftsråd i Svenska kyrkan till omkr. 1920*, Lund 1989, 290–5.

<sup>27</sup> Växjö Domkapitlets cirkulär (1924), 48.

these, the Diocesan Council recommended the formation of local study circles. It was even possible to take a correspondence course, designed by the Sunday School Committee of the Diaconal Board,<sup>28</sup> that promised to provide the essentials for a prospective, but untrained, Sunday school teacher.

### *The rise and fall of parish Sunday schools*

It is impossible to tell when and where the new kind of manifestly church-oriented Sunday school emerged within the Växjö diocese. Autonomous groups of believers had already organised Sunday schools during the first decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Some of these groups were steadfast in their loyalty to the national Church; others drifted towards secession. By the early twentieth century there were still only a handful of parish Sunday schools within the old diocese of Kalmar.<sup>30</sup> Largely owing to the disinclination of its backwards-looking bishop, N. J. O. H. Lindström (1842–1916), no such figures exist for the diocese of Växjö for this period. With the arrival of Ludvig Lindberg (1860–1928), first bishop of the now merged diocese, however, the clergy had gained a superior who was a fervent believer in the need for a forward movement in parish life, including the organisation of Sunday schools in as many parishes as possible. At first, however, the results were meagre. Figures presented in 1921, communicated during the first clergy conference of Lindberg's episcopate, reveal that church-oriented Sunday schools were to be found in only twenty-three out of a total of 255 parishes. Examining these statistics more closely, it is evident that some of these schools were considerable enterprises. In one rural parish 125 children were enrolled in the Sunday school, and in Jönköping, the largest town in the diocese, 375 children went to class before Sunday morning worship began.<sup>31</sup>

The statistics further demonstrate that there was a rapid expansion of Sunday school provision during the next couple of decades. In 1927, Sunday schools were organised in sixty-seven parishes. Seven years later that figure had risen to 103 parishes.<sup>32</sup> By 1944 it was estimated that Sunday schools were organised in more than 75 per cent of the parishes in the diocese.<sup>33</sup> In other words, in a little more than twenty years the

<sup>28</sup> Svenska kyrkan centralråd arkiv, Söndagsskolnämnden, Styrelse och AU protokoll, 1934–49, protokoll från stiftandet av Kyrkans brevskola, 1942–3, SNAA, A1:1.

<sup>29</sup> Fridén, *Svensk söndagsskola*, 15–19.

<sup>30</sup> *Handlingar rörande prästmötet i Kalmar år 1909*, Kalmar 1910, 117–18.

<sup>31</sup> *Handlingar rörande prästmötet i Växjö 16, 17 och 18 augusti 1921*, Växjö 1922, 61.

<sup>32</sup> Figures for both years found in *Växjö stifts prästmöteshandlingar, 1934*, Växjö 1934, 102.

<sup>33</sup> *Kyrka och Hem* (1944), 46.

number of parishes in Växjö diocese with a Sunday school had multiplied more than eight times. By the 1950s, the existence of a Sunday school seems to have been taken for granted in most Church of Sweden parishes. Save a few minuscule parishes, some of which consisted of less than a hundred parishioners, Sunday schools were a universal phenomenon within the diocese of Växjö. Statistics gathered for the 1955 clergy conference are as exact as they are impressive: 15,403 children were enrolled in parish Sunday schools. This translated to an average of sixty children per parish, but, in reality, size varied greatly.<sup>34</sup> On a national level, the church Sunday schools peaked in Sweden, unlike in Britain,<sup>35</sup> during the late 1950s. National statistics reveal that a total number of 134,963 children aged between four and fourteen attended a Church of Sweden Sunday school in 1954 (11.2 per cent of the total number of Swedish children aged between four and fourteen); five years later that figure had risen marginally to 135,963 (11.6 per cent). Statistics which include figures from the Swedish Protestant Free Churches reveal that no less than 35 per cent of all Swedish children attended a Sunday school in 1959. At this time Sunday schools run by the Church of Sweden far outnumbered those organised by all the Free Churches put together.<sup>36</sup>

However, just as the advocates of the Sunday schools were beginning to celebrate the successes of recent years, the first signs of decay set in. In spite of the introduction of an age-based class system and various efforts to renew and ‘modernise’ its gatherings, contemporaries began to complain that it was primarily younger children who were attending. Pre-teenagers were no longer so easy to attract. Postwar youth culture was beginning to find the kindly teaching offered in Sunday schools rather suffocating, and parents were less and less likely to force their young people to attend.<sup>37</sup> As one of the ministers in Växjö phrased it in the mid-1960s: ‘It is not cool to be in Sunday school when you are twelve or thirteen years old.’<sup>38</sup> A similar pattern is discernible in other Church of Sweden dioceses.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Handlingar angående prästmötet i Växjö, 1959*, Växjö 1959, 93.

<sup>35</sup> C. D. Field, *Counting religion in Britain, 1970–2020: secularization in statistical context*, Oxford 2022, 164.

<sup>36</sup> Statistics as presented in *Svenska kyrkans årsbok, 1962*, Stockholm 1962, 76–81. It should also be mentioned that, unlike their Free Church equivalents, the Church of Sweden Sunday schools appear to have held their ground relatively well during the 1960s: Berndt Gustafsson, ‘The decline of Sunday schools in Sweden, 1950–1965’, *Social Compass* xv (1967), 297.

<sup>37</sup> Gustafsson, ‘Decline’, 297.  
<sup>38</sup> ‘Det anses icke tufft att gå i söndagsskolan, när man är tolv och tretton år’: *Prästmötet i Växjö 1965*, Växjö 1966, 192. See also *Handlingar angående prästmötet i Växjö 1953*, Växjö 1954, 91.

<sup>39</sup> Sven-Åke Selander, ‘Från ungdomsvård till ansvarstagande, från fostran till delaktighet’, in Anders Ranger, Gunilla Selander and Sven-Åke Selander (eds), *På en gång så djupt och så vitt som möjligt: om kyrkligt ungdomsarbete i Lunds stift, 1900–1975*, Lund 2007, 155–313.

In order to meet the needs of pre-teen youths, there was a push for weekday 'junior clubs' (most of which were organised as Scout clubs) designed to offer Christian instruction to those who had abandoned Sunday school. In 1965, these junior clubs had about 2,500 members in the Växjö diocese.<sup>40</sup> Membership figures remained stable throughout the period covered in this article.<sup>41</sup>

Starting in the 1960s, Sunday school numbers dropped slowly but steadily. In 1959, for example, there had been 371 Sunday schools (organised in 649 classes) within Växjö diocese with a total of 13,950 children enrolled.<sup>42</sup> Twelve years later that figure had dropped marginally to 10,350 children.<sup>43</sup> After that a period of rapid decline set in. Between 1971 and 1977 the numbers of children attending Sunday schools fell by almost half.<sup>44</sup> In 1983, only 2,666 children attended Sunday schools within the diocese.<sup>45</sup>

By the 1970s, the evidence was irrefutable. With every year that passed parents were less and less inclined to send even their younger offspring to Sunday schools. To those with children in the 1960s and 1970s, Sunday schools increasingly seemed obsolete, a remnant from a less affluent, leisured and mobile past. Family and vacation patterns started to change. In 1963 the government instituted a fourth week of statutory vacation, the five-day work week was gradually introduced in the latter half of the 1960s and in 1968 teaching on Saturdays was abandoned in all Swedish schools. Swedish post-war prosperity had made the family car a reality even for working-class families. With the car came new opportunities for weekend travel and social activities away from home. For the modestly prosperous, a countryside cottage became a hallowed retreat filled with idyllic dreams of cross-generational summer vacations and male DIY work. In such a scenario, when weekends became a time of relaxation as well as an opportunity to escape the tedious routines of work and school, it was only too easy to leave Sunday schools behind. The vision of Sunday as a day apart drifted away. There was more than one parent in Sweden at this time who would have agreed with the man cited by Hugh McLeod who declared that church activities just tend to 'bugger up Sundays'.<sup>46</sup> This did not, however, mean that parents were averse to church activities

<sup>40</sup> *Prästmötet i Växjö, 1965*, 193.

<sup>41</sup> Ansgarsförbundets arkiv, Medlemsstatistik, 1974–1992, SNAA, E5:1.

<sup>42</sup> Statistics presented in Växjö stiftsråd, *Växjö stift, vårt stift* iv (1964), 11, and *Svenska kyrkans årsbok, 1962*, 79.

<sup>43</sup> Figures presented in the diocesan monthly, *Kyrka och Hem* (1973), 16. For Sunday school decline in Britain during this period see C. D. Field, *Secularization in the long 1960s: numerating religion in Britain*, Oxford, 2017, 42–6.

<sup>44</sup> *Prästmötet i Växjö, 1978*, Växjö 1979, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Sören Ekström, *Svenska kyrkan: organisation och verksamhet på församlings-, stifts- och rikspan*, Stockholm 1985, 121.

<sup>46</sup> McLeod, *Religious crisis*, 203.

as such, or that church-sponsored religious socialisation declined altogether.

That church-based teaching classes still enjoyed a considerable popularity, especially in expanding suburban areas, is demonstrated by the manner in which mothers with pre-school children immersed themselves in the weekday activities that now were organised as an evolution of the Sunday school model. For a brief interval, from the late 1960s until the early 1980s, 'children's church hour' (*kyrkans barntimmor*) achieved an enormous popularity. 'Children's church hour' was a teaching concept that emerged 'from below', originating in the diocese of Härnösand in the late 1950s.<sup>47</sup> It spread gradually over the country in response to changing demands and declining Sunday observance. It should be noted that this teaching concept had a much freer form than the Sunday schools (which had a syllabus decided by the national board of bishops [*biskopsmötet*]), allowing for experimentation and local adjustments. In the diocese of Växjö it was estimated that 4,900 children aged four to five took part in these activities in 1971.<sup>48</sup> Seven years later there were 420 'Children's church hour' groups within the diocese. Similar figures were presented for other Church of Sweden dioceses.<sup>49</sup> The total number of participants was at this time not even counted. A cautious estimate of fifteen children per group would give a total of about 6,300 attendees in the Växjö diocese. If added to the existing Sunday school figures, a total of no less than about 11,700 children were involved in church teaching activities in Växjö in the late 1970s. But these were far from the only activities on offer at this time. In bustling church community centres, a majority of which were erected in suburban areas during the 1960s and 1970s, children could also be found in other new kinds of age-based initiatives.<sup>50</sup>

These numerical tabulations of Sunday school participation may actually be more important than might be at first assumed. Sunday school statistics are regularly counted among the so-called 'indices of religion', readily used by present-day scholars to demonstrate shifting religious trends during the twentieth century. It is easy to forget that Sunday schools were not the only children's activity on offer and that there was considerable creativity among the Churches (not only in Sweden) in adjusting to contemporary demands. Without paying close attention to the ways in which the Churches responded to the decline of Sunday schools – by forming alternative groups which were in turn highly popular – we may miss the finer points of the religious history of north-western Europe. The statistics presented above could be used to call recent claims about an accelerating

<sup>47</sup> *Härnösands stifts prästmöteshandlingar 1958*, Härnösand 1959, 107.

<sup>48</sup> *Prästämötet i Växjö, 1972*, Växjö 1972, 114.

<sup>49</sup> *Prästämötet i Växjö 1978*, 108.

<sup>50</sup> Sidenvall, *Medarbetare*, 124–31.

mass exodus from church activities during the 'long 1960s' into question,<sup>51</sup> at least if looking at Sweden.

However, the 'Children's church hour' and the successes of the 1970s did not last for long. These decades saw the far-reaching expansion of the Swedish welfare state. In order for the social adjustments that this required to take place, an expansion of the female workforce was a prerequisite. By the 1980s it was more or less taken for granted that women with children were expected to work, at least part time, outside the home. Domesticity had at last come to an end in Sweden. This change was eased by the tax reforms implemented in the first half of the 1970s and by the swift development of a modestly-priced childcare system. In this context, the Church's efforts at social provision, manifesting itself in the 'Children's church hour', became rapidly obsolete. It vanished almost as quickly as it had once appeared. No popular alternative was ever able to take its place.

### *Sunday school teachers, c. 1920–90*

As an expanding venture, Sunday schools were in constant need of more people willing to assume teaching responsibilities. Long before the peak years in the late 1950s, contemporaries frequently complained about the lack of volunteers. In *Kyrka och Hem* (Church and Home), the Växjö diocesan magazine, the, at the time, influential area dean Arvid Karlsson (1880–1945) expressed the feelings of many by alluding to Matthew ix.37–8: 'The church waits and prays to God for many more faithful and persistent labourers in the plentiful harvest. This is not the time to delay, or to resign in hopelessness before the superficial advances of dark powers.'<sup>52</sup> In spite of such fears, even in a thinly populated diocese, there were many who gathered to take care of the 'plentiful harvest'.

Who were these volunteer teachers? How many were involved in this line of church activity? What can be said about their social characteristics? Given the informal and semi-organised nature of local 'non-compulsory work' few manuscript sources (minutes, lists of participants etc) exist that could offer a clearer view of the men and women who were involved in these activities. Not even records of those who attended the diocesan Sunday school instruction courses have survived to any great extent. However, at irregular intervals the Diaconal Board and the Diocesan

<sup>51</sup> Research into religious change in Scandinavian countries during the 1960s is still in its infancy. For some early results see Sidenvall, 'A classic case'.

<sup>52</sup> 'Kyrkan väntar och beder Gud om många, många fler trogna och trägna arbetare i den myckna skörden. Här får icke bliva ett avstannande, icke något av hopplöshetens resignation inför mörka makters skenbara framsteg': *Kyrka och Hem* (1935), 14.

Council gathered some rudimentary figures for the teaching workforce. A close and contextualised reading of these documents allows a partial answer to these questions.

In general terms, the number of teachers seems to have grown as the number of Sunday schools increased. It should be noted that the figures for the period from 1930 to 1960 include clergy actively involved as Sunday school teachers. During the relatively early phase of the late 1920s, a statistical survey conducted by the Diocesan Council reveals that in Växjö there were 310 Sunday school teachers active within the diocese.<sup>53</sup> In 1948, that figure had risen significantly to 791.<sup>54</sup> Eight years later available statistics indicate a further rise. A total of 888 Sunday school teachers were active in 1956 (indicating an approximate average ratio of seventeen children per teacher).<sup>55</sup> According to the comprehensive survey of the 'non-compulsory work' conducted by the Diaconal Board in 1959, the Sunday schools in Växjö diocese were served by no less than 983 teachers.<sup>56</sup> To a considerable extent, these people also served as leaders in the emerging junior clubs. As may be expected, a consequence of the years of slow demise in the 1970s was that this group of Sunday school teachers also diminished in size. Yet the decline was not as fast or as sizeable as may have been expected. Even when Växjö's Sunday schools were but a shadow of their former glory, there were still large numbers of people involved as teachers in the diocese. For the 2,666 children that still went to Sunday school in 1983, there were no less than 480 teachers (about five children per teacher).<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, a core group of Sunday school teachers was loyal right to the bitter end.

It is hardly surprising that throughout the period covered in this article there were considerably more women than men involved in Sunday school teaching. Save the clergy, there are only a handful of men to be found on Växjö's rosters. The statistics for 1948, for example, reveal that only 5 per cent (forty-one out of 791) of Sunday school teachers were non-ordained men. All of these men were active as primary school teachers.<sup>58</sup> Throughout the 1950s the proportion of non-ordained men appears to have remained the same.<sup>59</sup> These figures should of course be related to the gender regime of the era according to which the care and education

<sup>53</sup> Växjö stiftsråds arkiv, Växjö stifts nämnds för kyrkans barn- och familjearbete arkiv, Förteckning över söndagsskolorna 1928, 1938, 1945, 1954, SNAV, DII.

<sup>54</sup> Svenska kyrkans Diakonistyrelses arkiv, Söndagsskolnämnden, Statistik över söndagsskolor, SNAA, H:1.

<sup>55</sup> *Växjö stifts hembygdskalender* xlvii (1956), 61–9.

<sup>56</sup> *Svenska kyrkans årsbok 1962*, 79.

<sup>57</sup> Ekström, *Svenska kyrkan*, 121.

<sup>58</sup> Svenska kyrkans Diakonistyrelses arkiv, Söndagsskolnämnden, Statistik över söndagsskolor, SNAA, H:1. See also *Kyrka och Hem* (1945), 217.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Diakonistyrelsen, Församlingsutskottet, 1960 års utredning om den frivilliga kyrkliga verksamheten, SNAA, F6bb:8.

of children primarily was seen as a woman's task. An essentialist assumption about the caring nature of women was taken for granted in largely conservative-minded church circles. Women seemed naturally inclined, and by nature well equipped, for the formation of young minds. Such widely-held beliefs added to the 'feminising' drift of much of modern church life.<sup>60</sup> The constant stream of complaints that men were missing from the ranks focused on the disciplinary authority which Sunday school teaching lacked as a result. Men were needed to keep track of unruly boys. As one clerical observer remarked in the 1950s, male teachers were desperately needed 'for the boys who are difficult to retain'.<sup>61</sup>

Such effusions should not distract us from the fact that men did feature within Sunday school circles. At least until the 1960s, a large segment of the (at this time all male) clergy formed part of the committed core of teachers. Statistics from Växjö in the late 1940s indicate that a total of 217 ministers (about 70 per cent of the active diocesan clergy) were active as Sunday school teachers.<sup>62</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, as early as the 1950s the clergy started to excuse themselves from taking an active part in Sunday schools. Statistics from 1959 reveal that out of a total of 358 active clergy only 197 were directly involved as Sunday school teachers (55 per cent).<sup>63</sup> In quasi-normative documents produced around this time, the clergy were being attributed with a monitoring and organising function. Ideally, it was the laity who should act as teachers.<sup>64</sup> The reason for this change in attitude remains unclear, but it is probable that the 1950s increase in the number of active laity paved the way for this shift in roles. This trend continued, and became even more visible, during the following decade. By the 1970s, very few of the clergy were directly involved in the day-to-day business of Sunday schools. Clergy had receded into the background and had become merely their supporters and well-wishers.

It had never been the clergy who were the central figures in Church of Sweden Sunday schools. It was in fact their wives. For the maintenance and assurance of adequate teaching quality, clergy wives were of

<sup>60</sup> For a recent assessment of the so-called 'feminisation thesis' see Patrick Pasture, 'Beyond the feminization thesis: gendering the history of Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', in Jan de Maeyer and others (eds), *Gender and Christianity in modern Europe: beyond the feminization thesis*, Leuven 2012, 7–33.

<sup>61</sup> 'Manliga lärare med hänsyn till pojkar, som äro svåra att hålla fast': *Handlingar angående prästmötet i Växjö, 1953*, Växjö 1954, 90.

<sup>62</sup> The active clergy consisted at this point of 310 men. Figures taken from Sven Håkan Ohlsson (ed.), *Statistisk matrikel över svenska kyrkans prästerskap 1947*, Lund 1947, 66–80.

<sup>63</sup> See idem, *Statistisk matrikel över svenska kyrkans prästerskap, 1960*, Lund 1960, 70–85; *Svenska kyrkans årsbok 1962*, 79.

<sup>64</sup> *Handbok i kyrkligt söndagsskolarbete*, Stockholm 1963, 218–20.

inestimable importance. In the statistical summaries of Sunday school workers they are not counted as a separate group. Yet everybody knew that they were ubiquitously present. Bishop Lindberg stated what was obvious to everyone at the clergy conference of 1921: 'A clergyman has a good, yes one may say the best, co-worker in his wife. This is as it should be. United, their labour produces manifold blessings.'<sup>65</sup> Until the 1970s it was taken for granted that involvement in Sunday schools was one of the duties of a clergyman's wife. However, that is when conditions started to change for them. Younger generations of often well-educated clergy wives were not unaffected by changing attitudes *vis-à-vis* an expansion of the married female workforce.<sup>66</sup> On top of that, new groups of paid parish functionaries were now increasingly put in charge of managing a whole range of parish activities. Suddenly, the unpaid services offered by clergy wives were not in such high demand as they had once been. Oral history enables a glimpse of a shift that was expressed with not a few notes of bitterness by an older generation. One informant, born in 1926, remembers how, after moving with her husband to a new (urban) benefice in the 1970s, she was suddenly deprived of most of her former areas of responsibility. The parish community centre seemed to be filled with salaried staff 'who did the things I had done without pay, but with a more limited scope'.<sup>67</sup> At least for an older generation of clergy wives, Sunday schools were something like a last bastion. They remained at their posts even when the crowds of children had vanished.<sup>68</sup> Together with likeminded sisters, their continued presence accounts for the fact that there was still a large group of Sunday school teachers in Växjö during the waning years of the 1980s.<sup>69</sup>

Statistical figures reveal that another clearly defined group of women should be counted as amongst the pillars of the Sunday schools. It is possible to identify a group of male primary school teachers in the statistics, but these individuals were by far outnumbered by their female colleagues. In 1945 no less than 56 per cent of all lay Sunday school teachers within the diocese of Växjö were in fact trained primary school teachers (304 of a total

<sup>65</sup> 'En god, ja, man kan säga bästa medhjälpare har prästen i sin hustru. Detta är, som sig bör. Förenade i arbetet verka de mångdubbelt till välsignelse': *Handlingar rörande*, 61.

<sup>66</sup> Alexander Maurits, 'Prästfrurollen under förändring. Prästfruar i Växjö stift berättar', in Ulrika Lagerlöf Nilsson and Birgitta Meurling (eds), *Vid hans sida: svenska prästfruar under 250 år: ideal och verklighet*, Skellefteå 2015, 75–100.

<sup>67</sup> 'gjorde sådant som jag utfört oavlönat ... – om än i mindre skala': quotation from Ingrid Diös's account, 9 Aug. 1995, but see also Brita Söderwall's account, 15 Sept. 1995 (both from Lund): Lunds universitets kyrkohistoriska arkiv, Swedish National Archives, 22.

<sup>68</sup> Lennart Tegborg, *Församlingen – vision och verklighet*, Skara 1978, 31.

<sup>69</sup> Ekström, *Svenska kyrkan*, 121.

of 546). 65 per cent of these (197) were women.<sup>70</sup> This illustrates the strong connection between church and school that still existed during the 1940s. The separation of church and primary school was a protracted affair. The disappearance of the Lutheran catechism from the curriculum in 1919 did not stop teachers (above all female) loyal to the national Church from believing that a catechetical function was at the heart of their professional identity. That the primary schools from the 1930s and onwards were run by the (secular) municipalities had, at first, little impact on such ideals. In fact, before the construction of church community centres, Sunday schools often gathered at the rectory or at the teacher's 'home arena' – the local school building. Only gradually did teachers begin to see their calling in a new, and less religious, light. Clergy and teaching staff drifted apart. And just as the clergy started to fade away from active participation in Sunday schools during the 1950s, so too did the teachers. From the 1950s onwards, statistical surveys indicate that it was not as easy to enrol younger generations of female professional teachers in Sunday school work as it once had been. However, since older generations of teachers remained loyal, there was still a significant proportion of primary school teachers active in Sunday schools during the final years of the 1950s. In Växjö diocese, 14 per cent of all Sunday school teachers belonged to the teaching staff of a local school in 1959.<sup>71</sup> After that point in time teachers were no longer singled out as a separate category in statistical summaries of Sunday school staff, a clear indication that their former numerical strength had gone.

In spite of the fact that a typical Sunday school teacher was likely to be a middle-aged woman, young people (aged fifteen to twenty) frequently became involved in Sunday school work. This was particularly the case before the 1960s. To be a Sunday school 'helper' was listed among the activities suitable, not only for children of the clergy, but also for the committed church youth club member and for young students at teacher training colleges. Their numbers appear never to have been significant, and, for natural reasons, they may have served in this capacity for only limited periods of time. The comprehensive statistics gathered by the Diaconal Board in 1959 indicate that about 10 per cent of Sunday school teachers in Växjö diocese were below the age of twenty.<sup>72</sup> During the following decade the young seem to have been less and less motivated to do volunteer work in Sunday schools. In 1974 the Växjö Diocesan Council stated

<sup>70</sup> Växjö stifts nämnds för kyrkans barn- och familjearbete arkiv, Förteckning över söndagsskolorna 1928, 1938, 1945, 1954, SNAV, DII.

<sup>71</sup> Diakonistyrelsen, Församlingsutskottet, 1960 års utredning om den frivilliga kyrkliga verksamheten, SNAA, F6bb:8. This survey, which covered all Swedish dioceses, reveals that in Växjö the quota of professional teachers was uncommonly high.

<sup>72</sup> *Svenska kyrkans årsbok*, 1962, 79.

as a well-known fact that young ‘helpers’ had abandoned Sunday schools.<sup>73</sup> However, this should not be taken as a sign that young people had stopped volunteering for church activities altogether. It was in fact the Sunday school itself, an institution that by now had acquired a certain degree of ‘stodginess’, that failed to attract a younger generation. As volunteers they instead joined other church-sponsored children’s activities or immersed themselves in a still vibrant church youth movement.<sup>74</sup>

A bird’s eye view of the statistics indicates that new categories of women must have committed themselves to Sunday school work during the 1950s. The gradual withdrawal of the professional clergy and female schoolteachers led to a ‘democratisation’ of the teaching staff. This fed into the overall strategy of the postwar national Church. In order to maintain its position within the population at large, there needed to be a far-reaching mobilisation of the laity to serve alongside the clergy in all kinds of parish activities – study groups, youth and children’s clubs and, above all, in Sunday schools.<sup>75</sup>

Regrettably, little is known about the women who now became involved in Sunday school teaching activities. Fragmentary evidence implies that they were, as might be expected, housewives with younger children.<sup>76</sup> Over the coming decades, however, these women were less and less likely to volunteer as Sunday school teachers. Instead, they started to contribute to the by-now immensely popular weekday teaching activities such as the ‘Children’s church hour’. In most cases they had first attended these groups with their own children. After their offspring had reached school age, some of them remained to volunteer, performing duties that to them still seemed fulfilling. There is no contemporary estimate of how many volunteers were involved in these instructional activities. Official documents recommended that each group should be served not only by an organising member of the parish staff (or equivalent), but also by a volunteer who could be a parent or a parish trainee.<sup>77</sup> Even though this ideal was unattainable in many parishes, it suggests that somewhere between five and six hundred women acted as volunteer leaders in Växjö diocese during the peak years of the late 1970s.

At this point it becomes evident that the postwar mobilisation strategy was beginning to produce some unexpected results. At a time when employment levels among married women was rising, and when parish finances were solid, it seemed only natural that women, instead of

<sup>73</sup> Växjö stiftsråd, *Växjö stift, vårt stift* xix (1975), 12.

<sup>74</sup> Växjö stifts ungdomsråds arkiv, Handlingar rörande juniorsektionen 1974 and n.d., SNAV, A IV:1.

<sup>75</sup> Brohed, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria*, 223–5.  
<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Växjö stifts nämnds för kyrkans barn- och familjearbete arkiv, SNAV, F I:1, Handlingar rörande kurser, läger och konferenser 1966–8.

<sup>77</sup> Christina Ekstrand (ed.), *Kyrkan och förskoleåldern*, Stockholm 1971, 21.

working as volunteers, should receive some monetary remuneration for their services. What had once been a volunteer activity was transformed into a part-time 'job', paid for by the church taxes that parishes had the right to levy on the local population until the turn of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the new instructional activities, such as the 'Children's church hour', needed an organisational backbone. This was provided then, not by the clergy or their wives, but by this new group of part-time, salaried, predominantly female, teaching staff who step-by-step became the nexus of many parish community centres. Between 1973 and 1983 the total number of employed teachers in Church of Sweden parishes (many of them working on a part-time basis) rose by 47 per cent (from 2,329 to 3,419 people).<sup>78</sup> In Växjö diocese alone there were sixty people in full-time employment performing such duties in the final years of the 1970s.<sup>79</sup> When the century was drawing to a close their numbers had risen to 194.<sup>80</sup>

This article demonstrates how the Church of Sweden during the latter half of the twentieth century was able to adjust its teaching activities to changing circumstances in several successive stages. First, when Sunday schools were declining in popularity due to changing trends in society, parishes were able to both conceptualise and organise alternative instructional activities. This led to an overall rise in children's religious participation throughout the 1960s and 1970s (a period now associated with a decline in religious practices in the West). By implication, this suggests that the standard indices of religion should be used with some caution. If figures for alternative and newly-established church activities are not included, these sets of statistics may be misleading. They may seem to signal a decline in participation when in fact the opposite was true, and that growth was taking place, only elsewhere. Second, when participation in Sunday schools was declining on the part of both the clergy and primary school teaching staff, new groups of women were recruited to fill the vacated positions. To some extent this indicates that the postwar strategy of the Swedish national Church was successful. New lay groups were willing to engage in volunteer work. An expansion of the church workforce was a precondition for the church's achievements in the 1960s and 1970s. Thirdly, the extension of its salaried female workforce during the 1970s forced the Church of Sweden to make additional adjustments. With the intention of recruiting a new generation of working women, parishes were now forced to turn

<sup>78</sup> Statistiska centralbyrån, *Kommunal personal 1973, Del 2, primärkommunal och kyrkokommunal personal*, Stockholm 1974, 144; Statistiska centralbyrån, *Kommunal personal 1983, Del 2, primärkommunal och kyrkokommunal personal*, Stockholm 1984, 160.

<sup>79</sup> *Prästmötet i Växjö, 1978*, 88.

<sup>80</sup> *Prästmötet i Växjö, 1996, Växjö 1997*, 105–6.

the tasks that had been seen as volunteer work into regular jobs. To a considerable extent this evolution still characterises the Church of Sweden and sets it apart from Protestant Churches with a similar pedigree in, for example, Britain, Germany and the other Nordic countries. This demonstrates the need to infuse a gender perspective into institutional history if we are to understand the postwar activities of Churches and other Christian groups. A focus on the behaviour of women may be essential for our understanding of the demise of religion in north-western Europe,<sup>81</sup> but to an equal extent for our reconsideration of postwar religious mobilisation in the Western world. While the modifications the Church of Sweden introduced around teaching the young may not have stemmed the rising tide of secularisation, it may have, for some time at least, slowed the rate of its flow.

<sup>81</sup> Famously and controversially argued in Callum G. Brown, *The death of Christian Britain: understanding secularisation, 1800–2000*, 2nd edn, London 2009.