SWEDISH METHODISTS IN AMERICA AND THEIR QUEST FOR IDENTITY

An identity-struggle as mirrored by the magazine Sändebudet in the 1860s

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Swedish Methodism emerged in an almost parallel fashion on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. This article helps us to get some insight into American Methodism and gives us a new perspective on The United Methodist Church in Sweden.

For this article primary sources are used. The main primary source was Sändebudet, which is available on microfilm in the United Methodist Archives at Drew University with only very few issues missing. Besides that I used Annual and General Conference journals and the autobiographical writings of Andrew Haagensen¹ and Victor Witting. As one of the main secondary sources I mention Timothy L. Smith’s article, “Ethnicity and Religion in America,” which helped structure observations regarding the ethnic and religious identity of the early Swedish Methodists.

For analysis around twenty issues of Sändebudet were chosen with a special emphasis on the publication in 1862, which means that we mainly deal with the editorial policies of Victor Witting, the first editor. Many new perspectives would arise if one more systematically went through the entire publication during the 1860s. And doubtlessly strong personalities like Nels Olof Westergren and Lars Vilhelm Henschen, who were editors in the 1870s and 1880s gave a very different profile to the magazine.²

It was a thrilling experience to go through primary sources. The style of language, the wholehearted commitment of the writers, the excitement about new and growing communities of faith, and the strong emotions evoked by the turmoils of the early 1860s (Civil War, confrontations with native Americans, and hardships of a settler’s life are some things that would not have been observable by consulting only secondary sources.

¹Haagensen claimed to write a history of Danish-Norwegian Methodism, but since he was one of the key figures in the beginning of this history, his book to a large extent has an autobiographical character. Andrew Haagensen, Den Norsk-Danske Methodismens-Paa Begge Sidor Havet (Chicago: Norsk-Dansk Bokhandel, 1894).
²Liljegren/Wallenius/Westergren, Svenska Methodismen i Amerika (Chicago: Svenska M. E. Bokhandels-Förenings Förlag, 1895), 542.
Swedish immigration to North America did not start in great numbers before the 1840s. It was during the same period that Swedish-speaking Methodists in America organized for the first time. The first Swedish Methodist local church, consisting of five persons, was founded in Victoria, Illinois, December 15th, 1846. During the 1850s and 1860s immigration from Scandinavia in general and from Sweden in particular increased considerably, mostly due to harsh economic and social conditions in Scandinavia. Accordingly, the number of Swedish Methodist local churches increased and the need of a Christian magazine in Swedish was felt in the growing community. During the closed session of the Swedish-speaking clergy at the Central Illinois Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) 1859 in Kewanee, Illinois, "the necessity to get our own magazine as soon as possible" was emphasized. During the General Conference of the MEC in Buffalo 1860 preparations were made for the publication of such a magazine and the Swedish preachers were hoping that the work would start with financial support from the church by 1861. But the Civil War came in between and the question obviously was not given any urgency on the part of the church.

In spring 1862 a gathering of Swedish Methodist preachers in Chicago dealt with the question again. By that time one of the preachers, Victor Witting, had already made preparations. He had talked to a printer in Rockford, Illinois, who was prepared to do the printing. Witting himself was ready to be the first editor of the magazine, without expecting any payment. The preachers agreed that a paper should be edited without further delay and supported after a long discussion Jonas Östlund’s suggestion that the name of the magazine should be Sändebudet (The Messenger).

Victor Witting’s original plan was to start the publication on July 4, 1862 an indication of his personal loyalty to the government in Washington and the northern states. But the first issue was not published before July 18. There he apologized for the delay, explaining that it had not been possible to order types for the Swedish letter "å" from New York and that it had to be sent for
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from Philadelphia. "The printer and the editor were ready, but what could we do without the letter 'å'"?\(^9\)

In his first editorial (July 18, 1862) Witting gave an extensive account of the purpose of the new Methodist magazine. The proposed policy of Sände bubdet, which is the main part of the editorial, can be divided into six paragraphs. First, to “mention . . . interesting and important political news, national and international, as well as informations from the Fatherland . . . .” Second, “as a religious paper . . . in the first place to represent and defend doctrine and discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church,” but—by following the principle to live in peace with all humankind—without engaging in “arguments with other denominations.” Third, “to mention . . . what of interest is happening in the religious world, both within our and other branches of Christ’s Church.” This information should be impartial, because “we have great joy to see and to hear that the work of God is successful among people, even if they do not follow us.” Fourth, to inform about missions. Fifth, to publish “useful and interesting articles for the family, the farmer, . . . .” Sixth, not to have “political discussions” or to make the paper to a “battlefield about all kinds of spiritual and religious questions without any end,” since Sände bubdet should be a messenger coming with “peace and blessings to all classes and generations among fellow-countrymen.”

Witting closed his editorial by reminding the readers that the purpose of the magazine is “holy” and that he wished it should become “a welcome guest in the huts of the fellow-countrymen.”\(^10\)

Sände bubdet was a paper with great impact on all Swedish Methodists and a significant number of Swedes who were not Methodists. “There were very few members . . . who did not subscribe to the paper. In many local churches the number of subscribers exceeded the number of members.”\(^11\) For Swedish immigrants in the early 1860s it was the only alternative to the polemical Lutheran magazine Gamla och Nya Hemlandet (English, The Old and the New Homeland), which had been published since 1854.\(^12\)

It is very obvious where the model of Sände bubdet is to be found. In most respects the new Swedish publication was very similar to the Methodist Christian Advocates, which by 1860 were published in many places in North America. The main similarities are the following. Both Sände bubdet and contemporary Christian Advocates were magazines mainly for the education and spiritual edification of Methodists. Both contained a broad variety of religious, moral, pedagogical, political and commercial (advertisements) mate-

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\(^{9}\) Sände bubdet, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 18, 1862.
\(^{10}\) All quotations from the editorial in Sände bubdet, Vol. 1, No. 1, July 18, 1862.
\(^{11}\) Liljegren/Wallenius/Westergreen, 540.
rrial. Both were to a large extent distributed and propagated by traveling Methodist preachers. Finally, both had a typical four-page\textsuperscript{13} format.

There is nothing new in the structure and character of Sändebudet. It could well be described as a Swedish Christian Advocate.\textsuperscript{14} Nevertheless, the order of Witting's six policies mentioned above is remarkable. While he asserted that the presentation and defense of the doctrine and discipline of the MEC should be "in the first place," he still mentioned the political news first, and they indeed take up the most space in the first issue, and a considerable space in the following issues as well. The fact that the first issue of Sändebudet was published during the Civil War contributed to the emphasis on political issues in the magazine. Victor Witting read and quoted regularly from the North Western Christian Advocate. His commitment to the case of the Union seems to be a slightly less ardent echo of the war-rhetoric in that magazine during the early 1860s.

II

The very fact that Sändebudet started to be published as a Swedish magazine and was well received in spite of the turmoil of the Civil War, indicates that there was a strongly felt need of being strengthened as an ethnic minority. During the whole war Swedes continued to immigrate to America and quite a few joined the Swedish Methodists. Sändebudet for many years played a significant role in giving these people a sense of identity both as Methodists and as Swedes. Almost every issue of the paper contained news about political and/or religious developments in Sweden. The goal to preserve Swedish ethnicity and the bonds with the old homeland are obvious.

However, in the first issues of Sändebudet Swedishness does not seem to be emphasized. Victor Witting left his readers in very little doubt as to his opinions regarding another part of the identity of the Swedish Methodists, their being Americans and their need to support the cause of the Union. The first article in the first issue\textsuperscript{15} is titled, "Fourth of July," and the heading has bigger letters than any other heading in the magazine. There he first praised "Columbus' children" and the brave deeds of the "fathers" who 86 years earlier had declared the independence of the country "from England's proud

\textsuperscript{13}Some Christian Advocates such as the North Western Christian Advocate, had eight pages, but of the same size.

\textsuperscript{14}Witting used much of the material in other Christian Advocates especially from the North Western Christian Advocate published in Chicago since the early 1850s. In the first issue of Sändebudet he quoted an article written by Bishop T. A. Morris which had earlier been published in the North Western Christian Advocate. In issue 4 he published a lengthy report from a traveling preacher, which prior to that was published in the North Western Christian Advocate. Sändebudet. Vol. 1, No. 4. September 1, 1862. The North Western Christian Advocate seemed to have been one of his main sources of information.

\textsuperscript{15}Sändebudet, Vol. 1, No.1. July 18, 1862.
tyranny . . . England's army could not succeed, because God was with the oppressed.” The next article is a translation of the complete “Homestead Bill,” which was as an encouragement to the Swedes to make “the land” of America their home. In the second issue Witting reported on mass demonstrations in favor of the continuation of the war and cited a proclamation which ordered all anti-government forces to lay down weapons within sixty days. He commented: “If that proclamation became known in the Southern states, I do not doubt that its effect would be to knock down the rebellion and to lead them back to faith and obedience . . . .”

In the third issue we can continue to follow his conviction that the Union has to be supported by all means. Regarding the recruitment to the Northern army he wrote: “Quite many Swedes and Norwegians are members in special companies. Our little congregation (around three dozen members) has given as many as three to this necessary case. God bless all of them . . . . May they trust the Lord, then their strength will be great and their victory certain.”

The pro-Union war rhetoric continued and came back, for example, in an article published before the election in the fall of 1862. Commenting on the upcoming election, he wrote: “We are happy that, with few exceptions, one opinion seems to prevail among all classes, and that is: suppress that ungodly rebellion of slaveowners.” One issue later Witting finally said explicitly that every Swede and every Norwegian should support the President in his “noble actions” by voting for the loyal O. Lovejoy as Governor of Illinois. “We want especially to encourage the Swedes to vote for the right man. . . . O. Lovejoy is that man.”

Sändebudet from the very beginning of its existence was a tool for supporting a sense of Swedish identity among the Swedish-speaking Methodists. But it is likewise obvious that this Swedish identity was not advocated as opposed to the American identity. There is no sense of any anti-American or isolationist attitude. The opposite is true. For Swedes, the argument seems to go, participation in and the contribution to American matters is natural. But there remains a certain ambiguity between the Swedish and the American identity of the Swedish-speaking Methodists.

The General Conference of the MEC seems to have had its struggle integrating the “Scandinavians” into the ecclesiastical body and was suspicious as to their loyalty to America and the church. In the journal of 1868 one can sense the hesitation from the side of the General Conference to allow too much ethnic plurality in the church. It may have been perceived as a threat to the unity of the country and the church. A classical way of dealing with such a threat is to lump different groups into one, which would be easier to deal

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17 Sändebudet, Vol. 1, No. 3. August 18, 1862.
with. Such an attempt was made at that General Conference, for example by deciding to substitute “Scandinavian for the word Norwegian, wherever it occurs in the resolutions.”20 A little later in the same Journal the support for the Swedish Methodist magazine was formulated very cautiously: “All foreigners coming to our country to make it their future home ought, as soon as practicable, to make themselves familiar with our habits and language; nevertheless, as the necessity exists to furnish the Scandinavians with the Gospel in their own language . . . we recommend to the Church at large the contribution of twenty-five thousand dollars additional toward this desirable object.”21 This resolution approved the support for the Swedish Methodist magazine Sändebudet, which is called “Scandinavian.” It deals with Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes as one group (Scandinavians), something which Danes and Norwegians eventually firmly protested against, not least because of the differences in language.22 The church seemed to have viewed the Scandinavians as a single nation or ethnicity.23 But what is specifically interesting with regards to American identity is the implicit assumption in that resolution that the continuation of the publication of Scandinavian papers would become an obstacle for their assimilation to American life. The felt threat against “our habits” could be explained by the fact that the first large groups of Swedish immigrants came during the 1860s.24 The concentration of many Swedes in Illinois perhaps caused fear of a Swedish sub-culture within the local Annual Conference which influenced the formulations of the General Conference too.

The tensions eventually were resolved by the organization of the North Western Swedish Annual Conference in Galesburg, Illinois 1877. It is interesting to note that this new Annual Conference came into being without explicit approval from the General Conference, which took place the year before in Baltimore.25

III

The struggle for identity was, of course, not only about Swedish and American identity. It was also a struggle among Scandinavians, who suddenly found themselves in a different context. The national and religious tensions

20Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Chicago 1868, 260.
21Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Chicago 1868, 261.
22Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Brooklyn 1872, 347.
23A curious example of that perception is an article about “Scandinavian” work in San Francisco in the Missionary Advocate. Sändebudet quoted its source (obviously the only one) by referring to “worships in the Scandinavian language (we do not know whether the preaching brother is Swedish or Norwegian),” Sändebudet, Vol. 2, No. 1. January 5, 1863.
24Janson, 3.
25There it was resolved that the Scandinavian work in America should continue within the boundaries of other Annual Conferences. Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Baltimore, 1876, 379.
from the "old world" got a different twist in the "new world." The fact that those around them often looked upon Danes, Norwegians and Swedes simply as Scandinavians certainly didn't make it easier to deal with these tensions.

The Swedish immigrants came from a country where the Lutheran state church had had a monopoly over religion for centuries. Accordingly, in the mind of the vast majority among Swedes, being a Swede was equivalent to being a Lutheran. In the middle of the 19th century the organization of any other church besides the Swedish Lutheran state church was still forbidden in Sweden. It is, therefore, not surprising that Swedes, both clergy and lay, didn't immediately upon their arrival in America give up their opposition to other Swedes who abandoned the Lutheran confession. In his autobiography Victor Witting wrote about a Swedish Lutheran pastor who went to Chicago at the end of 1852 in order to preach "about Christian caution regarding foreign religious denominations" to the newly founded Swedish Methodist society. It is remarkable to read about a Swedish Lutheran pastor calling the Methodist Church in America a "foreign religious denomination." However, he succeeded in dissolving this newly founded Methodist society.

In 1854 the Swedish Lutheran pastor Tuve Nilsson Hasselquist started with the publication of Gamla och Nya Hemlandet (English, The Old and New Homeland), the first Swedish Lutheran newspaper in America.\(^2^7\) The paper soon became strongly apologetic, warning Swedes against proselyters from other denominations, especially after it was taken over by the Swedish Lutheran Publication Society in 1858.\(^2^8\) In 1856 Den Swenske Republikanen i Norra Amerika (English, The Swedish Republican in North America) was first published. Its editor Svante Ulrik Cronsoe opened the columns to "anyone with a grievance against the Lutheran church." However, the paper only lived two years until 1858. The next enterprise opposing the Swedish Lutherans was the publication of Frihetsvänne (English, The Friend of Freedom) in 1859. The publishers were Baptists and they eagerly published news of religious persecution in the Old Country. However, even Frihetsvänne did not live long and ceased to exist in 1861 due to lack of subscribers.\(^2^9\) The third attempt of creating an alternative to the Lutheran paper Hemlandet was the establishment of the Methodist paper Sändebudet in the summer of 1862. It becomes clear in Victor Witting's first editorial that the magazine had a much wider goal than opposing Swedish Lutherans, even if it did not lack polemics and anti-Lutheran generalizations.

An article in Sändebudet referred to Lutheran opposition close to Andover, Illinois in 1857, where during a revival many Swedes joined the Swedish speaking Methodists. One of the converts had earlier been warned

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\(^2^6\) Witting, 351.
\(^2^7\) Janson, 187.
\(^2^9\) Stephenson, 198.
by the Swedish Lutheran pastor regarding the Methodists, “who would destroy both soul and body of those they get a hold of.”30 And when the Methodists were hauling material for their church at Chisago Lake, Minnesota, the pastor of the Lutheran church is reported to have said in a sermon: “When God builds a church, Satan builds a chapel.”31

But these tensions certainly were less serious than in the old homeland Sweden. One should take into account that in America, unlike Sweden, there was no mighty Swedish Lutheran church to “threaten” the Methodists. The first Swedish Lutheran ministers who left Sweden to go to America were not very loyal to the state church system. With regards to their basic religious and political convictions many among them probably were much closer to the Swedish Methodists than they realized. “It is highly significant that the first three ministers to emigrate and to lay the foundations of the Swedish Lutheran church—Esbjörn, Hasselquist, and Carlsson—had come under the influence of pietistic and liberal pastors and had thereby jeopardized or ruined their chances of promotion (in Sweden).”32

Other examples of imported tensions can be found in the relation between Swedes on the one side and Norwegians and Danes on the other side. One reason for these tensions was that Swedes came from a country that ever since the 17th century looked upon itself as the natural leading nation in Scandinavia. Norwegians and Danes reacted strongly against all kinds of patronizing from the side of the Swedes, especially in the new context of American life.

These tensions crystalized in the question whether there should be one magazine and one theological school for all Scandinavians, which the MEC would have favored. The heated discussions around these issues can be followed in Sändebudet during the 1860s. It was certainly to a large degree due to the fear of the Swedish dominance that Scandinavians went separate ways both with regard to the magazine33 and the theological school.34 Besides that, the ever increasing number of immigrants provided the base which made such a division possible.

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30Sändebudet, Vol. 1, No. 7. October 17, 1862.
31Stephenson, 206.
32Stephenson, 156.
33In January 1870 the first issue of a Danish/Norwegian magazine called “Missionaeren” was published. In 1877 it was succeeded by “Den Christelige Talsmand.” Arlow W. Andersen, The Salt of the Earth—A History of Norwegian-Danish Methodism in America (Nashville: Partenenon, 1962), 211.
34In February 1870 the Swedish education was begun in Galesburg, Illinois. In 1873 the plan for a common Scandinavian theological school was abandoned altogether. The Danish/Norwegian school-society was founded in July 1875. Haagensen, 68.
As pointed out earlier, Swedish religious life was totally controlled by the Lutheran state church during most of the 19th century. Only in 1873 did the Swedish dissenter law under certain conditions permit religious practice outside the Swedish state church. Instrumental for the development of a larger dissenter movement in Sweden was the English Methodist minister George Scott, who in the 1830s began to preach for English workers in the Swedish capital Stockholm, but soon attracted adherents among Swedes as well, not least ministers in the Swedish state church. Laypeople as well as clergy who sympathized with that new religiosity met with considerable difficulties.

It is therefore not surprising that the majority of the Swedish immigrants before the 1860s were people opposed to the Swedish state church system in one way or another. Their identity was to a large extent rooted in religious convictions rather than national sentiments. Many had a "lukewarm attitude . . . toward Sweden" and at the same time the Church of Sweden was indifferent "to her wayward children." Of course the Swedes' ethnic identity was challenged as well once they had arrived in America.

In an article about religion and ethnicity in America Timothy L. Smith stated that migration to America caused three major alterations in the relationship of faith to ethnic identity. First, a redefinition of the boundaries of peoplehood. Second, an intensification of the psychic basis of theological reflection and ethnoreligious commitment. Third, a revitalization of the conviction that the goal of history is the creation of a common humanity. To what extent do these findings fit the Swedish Methodist community in America in the early 1860s?

The first alteration can clearly be traced in the first issues of Sändebudet. An example for the redefinition of peoplehood can be found in the loyalty of the Swedish Methodists to their American denomination, the MEC, which certainly was stronger than their loyalty to Swedish Lutherans. The alienation from the Swedish state church, which in most cases seemed to have started in Sweden, was deepened in the American context, leading to a new understanding of peoplehood.

The second alteration Smith refers to can be seen in Sändebudet's reports about conversions among Swedes and specifically in Victor Witting's autobiography. The emotional consequences of uprooting and repeated re-

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35 Scott was very much in favor of the revival staying within the Church of Sweden and fiercely criticized the American Methodists for organizing a separate Methodist mission in Sweden in 1868. Sändebudet, Vol. 8, No. 30. July 26, 1869.
36 As a consequence of an economic crisis in 1864/65 and three years of crop failures, large numbers of the Swedish rural population fled the country, going mainly to America. Janson, 222ff.
37 Stephenson, 195.
settlement, as Timothy L. Smith stated, did play a crucial role in Victor Witting's conversion and ethnoreligious commitment. The same was undoubtedly true for many settlers who had to deal with extreme psychological and physical hardships in the new situation in America. The difficulties in Sweden, which the settlers had fled, were often replaced by new difficulties, now combined with a sense of alienation. It is perfectly reasonable to see these conditions as a major cause for a deeper theological reflection and a new ethnoreligious commitment.

As to the third alteration Smith mentioned, there is no clear evidence for it in the sources. There are no signs of a "revitalization of the conviction that the goal of history is the creation of a common humanity." But there is evidence that the Janssonist sect was convinced of the creation of a "chosen humanity," a "religious communist society" as Witting calls it. Even if people seemed to have come with the dream of an equal and just society, there is no proof for the revitalization of the conviction that a common humanity was the goal of history. Timothy L. Smith referred to Count Zinzendorf's dream of establishing a congregation of God in the Spirit in Pennsylvania and to John Wesley's inclusive notion of a world parish, but at the same time admitted that "the countercurrents were formidable." (Maybe the Janssonists can be seen as representatives for such a countercurrent.)

Nevertheless, there was a widening of the horizon of the new Americans. Also noticeable is a great deal of tolerance towards other denominations (for example in the third paragraph of Witting's first editorial), which probably not had been the case in "old Sweden."

V

In this article we observe some aspects of the struggle for identity among the growing number of Swedish Methodists as mirrored in their earliest publication Sändebudet. This identity was from the beginning a very complex one, influenced not only by ethnicity and religion but by numerous other factors. The constant change of identity was intensified by a significant increase in the Swedish immigration, which reached its peak in the late 1880s.

Sändebudet not only mirrored the struggle for identity of the little portion of Swedish immigrants that the Swedish Methodists constituted, but it actively recognized and shaped the identity of this community. Furthermore, the magazine played a crucial role in the establishment of the Swedish theo-

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39 Witting, 127f.
40 The Swedish traveling preacher E. Shogren reports to Sändebudet how isolated settlers in Minnesota were moved to tears by his preaching to them in the snow. Sändebudet, Vol. 1, No. 1. July 18, 1862.
41 Witting, 102.
42 Smith, 1183f.
logical school in 1870 and in the organization of the Northwestern Swedish Annual Conference in 1877, which were key events for the shaping of identity of Swedish Methodists. Up to 1969, when it was published for the last time, it gave a sense of belonging to the Swedish Methodists in America whose ancestors had started to organize themselves as Methodists more than 120 years earlier.

⁴In August 1936 the publishing committee announced that further on Sändebudet would be published as a bilingual and bigger magazine with the double name Sändebudet—The Messenger. Sändebudet, Vol. 75, No. 15. August 27, 1936.