

## CHAPTER 16

# Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Religion

## The Case of Sweden

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### Abstract

Sweden did not follow the same route that most other European countries embarked on in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. When other countries closed as a response to the spread of the virus, Sweden decided not to impose a full lockdown. Rather, Sweden kept a large part of society open, such as keeping schools for children and bars and restaurants open, albeit with some restrictions. The focus was on information, relying on each individual to reduce the spread of the infection by following two clear recommendations: maintaining individual hand hygiene and physical distance between people. Public gatherings were regulated in terms of the number of participants, but never banned. Although the Swedish government followed a more liberal

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route in the handling of the pandemic, the recommended restrictions had a considerable effect on religious life. The aim of this chapter is to understand the background of Sweden's different way of handling the COVID-19 pandemic and what impact it had on faith communities in Sweden, from both legal and sociological perspectives.

## **Introduction – a Unique COVID-19 Strategy**

The fast development of the COVID-19 virus reported in China on 31 December 2019 surprised all countries, as well as the quick development in Italy a few weeks later, with overloaded hospitals and a massive death toll. Initially, most European countries reacted by activating their pandemic strategy plans, meaning closing borders with strict border control and closing public meeting places as much as possible, keeping people at home, isolated from others as much as possible.

Sweden's way of responding to the fast spread of the virus was different and an exceptional case in terms of its liberal way of handling the COVID-19 pandemic and the leading role of epidemiological experts (Askim and Bergström 2022; Kuhlmann et al. 2021). In most countries, politicians took the lead, using experts at state agencies for advice. However, the division of labour between the government and the state administration in Sweden differs from that in most other European countries. Swedish state agencies operate more independently, guided by laws and regulations enacted by the parliament. Government ministers are not expected to involve themselves in the agencies' daily operations. Thereby, the state epidemiologist jointly with other experts at the Public Health Agency (PHA) took the leading role deciding on the pandemic measures. The government and other politicians were largely passive in the initial phase and played a minor role during the entire pandemic period (Jerneck 2021).

While other countries had a more politically driven strategy, the Swedish strategy was described as science-driven, based on epidemiological research, theory, and statistics (Lindström 2021). Based on the initial reports from China and the following weeks, PHA experts stated that the virus was unlikely to spread to Sweden, indicating that there was no need to close the borders. In March, when it became evident that it was too late to introduce border controls, the PHA declared that maintaining secure distance between people and practising good hand hygiene would be sufficient. Facemasks were not recommended,

since it was stated that the virus was spread only by drops in close contact and not through aerosols. The overall strategy was to protect risk groups, i.e. the elderly and those with underlying health conditions, as the virus was not believed to pose a significant risk to most people.

When daily death rates increased to shocking figures in April 2020, the weakness of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy became obvious (Bergman 2023). It was not possible to protect the risk groups and the death toll became higher than in other Nordic countries with similar demographics. Despite the theoretical predictions, the experts at the PHA continued to defend their position. Several Swedish scholars from different scientific disciplines – as well as international experts – were heavily critical (for a comprehensive analysis, see Brusselselaers et al. 2022). Swedish politicians in opposition criticised the government for not regarding the pandemic as a national crisis and demanded extraordinary actions (Bergman and Lindström 2023). However, the government defended the different Swedish strategy and the PHA was the lead Swedish strategy throughout the pandemic.

At an early stage of the pandemic it became evident that mortality rates related to COVID-19 were disproportionately high for people born outside of Sweden. Thereby, light was shed on existing health care gaps and structures of inequality between people born in Sweden and people born abroad, who also often belonged to minority faiths (Socialstyrelsen 2021; Voyer and Barker 2023). The high death rates among immigrants have been explained as being related to socio-economic factors, language barriers, and the overcrowding in many households (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2021). Yet scholars have also argued that the explanations of Sweden's higher death rates among immigrants have been inverted, i.e. that, rather than looking at immigrants' risk as something that should be addressed and explained, the risk of immigrants was often blamed on the immigrants themselves (Voyer and Barker 2023).

## Setting the Context

A key background factor to consider when it comes to understanding the liberal policy in Sweden is Swedish people's generally high trust in state authorities. This general trust can explain both the authorities' choice of strategy, the politicians' trust in the authorities, and people's obedience of recommendations, which in practice were largely

voluntary (Ortiz-Ospina and Roser 2020). According to the long-term comparative World Values Survey (WVS), there are significant differences in social trust between different countries, and Sweden is one of the countries with the highest levels of trust. Around 70 per cent of Swedish citizens say that they generally trust other people, compared to 40 per cent in the US and Germany, less than 30 per cent in Southern Europe and down to 10 per cent in countries such as Iran, Zimbabwe, and Brazil (Holmberg and Rothstein 2017; Uslaner 2018). There is also high trust in state authorities in Sweden, and studies have shown that this trust increased during the coronavirus pandemic, despite international and scientific criticism of the PHA (Esaïsson et al. 2021).

The roots of the high level of trust in state authorities can, at least partly, be understood by going back to the 16th-century Protestant reformation and the building of an alliance between the Protestant Church and the state. The reformation resulted in a Swedish national state with an integrated national church, without the Southern European tension between strong separate national Catholic churches competing with the state. This development was similar in the other Nordic countries and formed a common ground to the subsequent development of social democracies during the late 19th and 20th centuries. The church's support for the development of democracy and comprehensive welfare systems in the Nordic countries fostered a foundation of trust in the state and strengthened the alliance between church and state (Stenius 2015). Even after the formal separation of church and state in 2000, the Church of Sweden retains a semi-official role, contributing to the Nordic religious complexity (Furseth 2019; Pettersson 2011).

Sweden is often described as one of the most secularised countries in the world regarding regular participation in worship and belief in traditional church teachings (Zuckerman 2008). A majority of people say they have no belief in God (64 per cent) and have not attended a religious service in the past year (68 per cent) (Weissenbilder 2020). However, the Swedish religious situation is ambiguous, most clearly highlighted by the prevailing high level of membership of the Church of Sweden and its persisting role in society (Pettersson 2015). A majority of Sweden's 10.5 million population, 52 per cent (2023), belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden (which was a state church until year 2000), 3 per cent are members of different minority Christian Protestant denominations, 2.5 per cent belong to the Roman

Catholic or Orthodox churches, 1.8 per cent belong to Muslim communities, and less than 0.6 per cent belong to other religious communities. This means that around 60 per cent of the population belong to some kind of organised religion (Church of Sweden 2023; SST 2022). Statistics from 2023 show that one-third of all children born were baptised in the Church of Sweden, a quarter of marriages took place in the Church of Sweden, and two-thirds of funerals took place in the Church of Sweden (Church of Sweden 2023). However, there are no comparable statistics for minority religious communities. The Nordic complexity of high levels of secularisation in some respects and relatively high levels of religious affiliation and presence of religion in other respects is sometimes referred to as the Nordic Paradox (Bäckström, Edgardh Beckman, and Pettersson 2004).

### **Legal Aspects for Faith Communities during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

After the separation between the state and the Church of Sweden on 1 January 2000, all faith communities should in principle be treated equally, and the Swedish state is officially neutral in relation to all faith communities. The Church of Sweden is, however, still regulated by a separate law and has particular responsibilities that give it a special position in society, which was clearly demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic as described below (SFS 1998:1591; SFS 1998:1593).

Individual freedom of religion, as well as from religion, is stated in the Swedish constitution (SFS 1974:152), and a general common understanding in Swedish society is that religion is regarded as a private matter. The public sphere should be a secular, non-religious neutral arena where all people are treated equally and expected to accept the same social rules regardless of gender, ethnicity, cultural background, or religion. No special recognition should be given to religion as a factor to consider in public contexts. Sweden differs from most other countries in that there are no exceptions or special regulations in current legislation with reference to religion and there are, for example, no laws prohibiting blasphemy. The principle of regarding religion as a private matter explains why the PHA made no specific notion of religion and treated the faith communities as just one kind of voluntary organisations among others.

However, the Swedish state has a positive view of faith communities and regard them as central civil society actors that can complement the state in various ways, e.g. in crisis management, which was particularly emphasised during the pandemic. The largest faith community, the Church of Sweden, maintains strong connections to the state and complements and cooperates with public and state authorities in numerous ways. Minority faith communities are also increasingly recognised by the state as a social resource and receive special financial support from the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (SST). They are particularly recognised for having an important role in the integration of immigrants, something that was emphasised during the pandemic (Lundgren 2023; Edgardh and Pettersson 2010). Yet minority faith communities have also both historically and today been regarded as a risk to social cohesion and Swedish values, and thus in need of regulation and control (Lundgren 2023).

The liberal approach to handling the COVID-19 pandemic meant that Sweden, unlike other countries in Europe, did not impose a full lockdown, and facemasks were neither mandatory nor recommended. The PHA's measures for individual citizens were based on each individual's responsibility to follow the recommendations announced by the PHA to reduce the spread of the virus. These specifically focused on individual hand hygiene and keeping a physical distance of a minimum of two metres from others (Håkansson and Claesdotter 2022; Kuhlmann et al. 2021). The overarching priority of the PHA was to protect vulnerable groups and to secure the capacity of the health care system, yet without affecting individual freedom and liberties, nor society or economy at large (Winblad, Swenning, and Spangler 2022). This meant that Sweden kept a large part of society open, allowing bars, shops, and restaurants to remain open while having to secure social distance between people. Apart from some local closures, schools for children under the age of 16 remained open (Askim and Bergström 2022; Håkansson and Claesdotter 2022). Public events and gatherings, including the activities of faith communities, were regulated in terms of number of participants, but gatherings were never banned.

The PHA's use of the word 'recommendations' was criticised for being confusing. Typically, the PHA uses this term for rules directed at medical personnel, with the expectation that these 'recommendations' will be strictly followed. However, using this word in mass communication to the general population led to a significant communication

problem. Most people understood ‘recommendations’ in the usual sense, as advice that could be voluntarily followed. However, with this said, data showed that most people did adhere to the recommendations to a high degree (Håkansson and Claesdotter 2022) and, to our knowledge, there have been no legal processes, penalties, or fines for those (business, individuals, shops) who did follow the recommendations and regulations. While there was critique of voluntary compliance in the public debate, the criticism mostly revolved around the need for stricter measures such as those introduced in other countries, like border control and facemasks (see for example *USA Today* 2020).

While the more liberal policy response to COVID-19 was surprising to many international commentators, it can be understood in relation to the legal framework that regulates the government’s leeway for action. First, as the freedom of movement is stated in the Swedish constitution, it is not possible to introduce a full lockdown and, second, it is not possible to announce a state of emergency in Sweden in peacetime (Winblad, Swenning, and Spangler 2022). Introducing strict rules is therefore difficult, albeit not impossible if the parliament takes action. This finally happened in January 2021 when the Swedish parliament introduced a temporary nine-month pandemic law, making it possible for the government to quickly ban certain activities, along with the possibility for the parliament to revoke the government’s decision within a week (SFS 2021, 4).

Despite following a more liberal approach, Sweden did introduce preventive measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus, which affected also religious activities. On 12 March 2020, the first restrictions on public events and public gatherings were introduced and affected all kind of religious gatherings, since they were recognised as any other public gathering such as theatre performances, concerts, demonstrations, etc. On 29 March 2020 it was decided that only 50 people were allowed to gather at public events and gatherings, and in November 2020 this figure was lowered to eight people. The restrictions on the number of people at public gatherings were lifted in September 2021, but distance between people in public spaces such as shops, restaurants, concerts, and churches was still recommended. In December 2021, a COVID-19 vaccine pass was introduced at public gatherings with more than 100 people if no other infection control measures were in place, like e.g. increased distance between chairs. From February

2022, all restrictions in response to COVID-19 were removed, including the need to show proof of vaccination.

### *Faith Communities' Response to the Restrictions*

Although Sweden did not employ a full lockdown, restrictions meant that faith communities could only gather in groups of up to 50 people, which for many congregations was fewer than under normal circumstances. Faith communities were even more affected during the period of ten months (from 24 November 2020 to 29 September 2021) when they could gather in groups of no more than eight people, in line with the restrictions for any social gathering. Restaurants could hold more people and during the same period had special regulations of a maximum of eight people sitting at each table, keeping at least one metre between the tables. The regulations for shops and shopping malls were different still and based on the number of people in relation to the area of the premises. Despite initially having to restrict their activities more than restaurants and shops, the critique among religious groups was limited, but many argued that the rights to meet for prayer and worship should be considered (*Dagen* 2021).

Many religious leaders refrained from criticising the government until the limit of eight participants was introduced in November 2020 and applied to all kinds of gatherings, including religious services. At this point, the Christian Council of Sweden and the Church of Sweden spoke up and criticised the decision, especially since it would limit people's opportunity to say a final farewell to loved ones at funerals. As a result of the criticism, funerals were exempted from the eight-participant restriction and a special limit of 20 people for funerals was set (SFS 2021, 3; SVT 2020). The Christian Council of Sweden was one of the most active voices in this debate, by writing opinion pieces but also by partaking in referral processes and writing open letters to ministers of the government. One of the questions they raised was regarding the inconsistencies that the regulations entailed (Alm et al. 2021), the main point being that public gatherings had much stricter rules than, for example, shopping malls, gyms, and restaurants, which were regulated by a different law. This perceived injustice was raised by the Christian Council of Sweden and the Church of Sweden Archbishop in March 2021, with Easter church services in mind (Alm et al. 2021;

SVT 2021). In an open letter to the government, the Christian Council of Sweden raised the example of Uppsala Cathedral:

In many cases, our church premises are large and could gather significantly more than eight people if the square meter rule was applied [this was the rule that was applied to shopping malls and shops]. As an example, Uppsala Cathedral could offer space for 273 people to celebrate worship on site if you used the square meter rule. (SKR 2021)

Except for this type of criticism, the relationship between faith communities and the state during the pandemic was characterised by cooperation and by being largely non-conflictual. Each faith community found its own way of adapting to the new restricted conditions, as described in the next section. To our knowledge, there have been no situations where religious groups tried to oppose the adherence to public health measures. On the contrary, the Church of Sweden and most other faith communities, such as the Union of Islamic Associations in Sweden and the Catholic Church, publicly supported the recommendations and regulations of the Swedish authorities (FIFS 2021; Katolska kyrkan 2021). Even groups that are often associated with having leaders that are more at odds with the majority, such as Muslim Salafi groups, encouraged people to follow the individual recommendations, although they simultaneously criticised the way of handling the pandemic due to the overrepresentation of deaths among certain immigrant groups (Sorgenfrei 2021).

Rather than seeing tensions between religious groups and Swedish authorities, there have been visible signs of partnership and cooperation. The Swedish state's Agency for Support for Faith Communities arranged meetings with representatives of minority faith communities during the pandemic to discuss issues of common concern (Löfgren 2021). One example of a result of these meetings was the joint production of online videos in which the main religious leaders spoke to their respective faith community (SST 2021). In line with this, the Swedish government highlighted minority faith communities as central agents in reaching out to minority groups with information about restrictions and vaccination practices (*Dagen* 2020; Lundgren and Fransson 2023). A recent study of minority faith congregations shows that most of them want to take a central role in the event of crisis or disaster and did so during the COVID-19 pandemic. A majority (65 per cent) of the congregations in the study helped to spread information regarding

COVID-19 and 25 per cent spread information about vaccinations. Most of the latter were congregations with a high number of immigrants (Lundgren and Fransson 2023).

## **Sociological Aspects on Religious Life**

Faith communities at the local level adapted to the new situation, either by introducing more outdoor activities, e.g. worshipping in nature, arranging pilgrim walks, or by switching to digital solutions, e.g. gathering online for worship. A lot of different types of social and diacocial activities took place in alternative formats outdoors. For example, social activities for the elderly became walks with coffee and youth activities could keep going outdoors during the whole pandemic.

The Church of Sweden did not make a common decision for all 13 dioceses on how the parishes should adapt to the pandemic restrictions. However, the bishops advised the parishes to continue worship in the way possible and provided common recommendations on how to handle baptisms, weddings, and funerals. Each bishop added special advice for the respective diocese, for example whether Holy Communion could be celebrated or not (Edgardh 2021). It was up to each parish in the respective diocese to largely find the best practical solutions.

Although it was initially possible to gather people as usual for worship, many congregations decided to introduce their own restrictions by either additionally transmitting services digitally or by canceling the physical services and turning completely to digital solutions (Edgardh 2021; Fransson, Gelfgren, and Jonsson 2021; Josefsson and Wahlström 2022; Lundgren 2022). In Stockholm diocese, where the infections were considerably higher than in other parts of Sweden, the bishop proposed in April 2020 that people should not at all physically gather in the church due to the infection rates at the time, even though it was legally possible to gather 50 people. Such ‘unforced’ changes, where religious organisations made their own risk assessments, are reported in several studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious life in Sweden.

One of the studies focused on how the Church of Sweden’s parishes adapted in terms of the use of digital media (Fransson, Gelfgren, and Jonsson 2021). This was based on two surveys, in September and October 2020, both of which were answered by the responsible priest in the respective parish, with response rates of 41 per cent and 47 per

cent. The studies show that most parishes turned towards digital solutions rather than cancelling services. Before the pandemic, only 12 per cent of the Church of Sweden congregations offered digital solutions as an alternative to being physically present in the church at the Sunday services. During the pandemic, this number increased to 84 per cent of the congregations offering digital Sunday services. It is interesting to note that the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have had long-term effects in this respect since statistics from late 2022 show that 21 per cent still offered digital services every week (SVT 2022), thereby indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic led to increasing digitalisation of the Church of Sweden. The digital transformation varied depending on the type of activity and congregation (Lundgren 2022).

A study on how minority faith communities' congregations were affected by the pandemic show similar results. Seven out of ten congregations offered digital worship/prayer or meditation, compared to 2 per cent before the pandemic (Lundgren 2022). There were minor differences between different faith traditions' use of digital solutions, but smaller congregations with fewer than 100 members did not go digital to the same extent as larger congregations (Lundgren 2022). The study shows large differences regarding participation rates between the congregations that turned to digital alternatives. While 36 per cent experienced fewer people at their digital services than at ordinary physical activities, 26 per cent experienced an increase in the number of people participating (Lundgren 2022). When it came to activities for elders, only 14 per cent offered digital alternatives. A separate study of only Protestant minority churches show that the levels of participation were negatively affected in many congregations by the digitalisation of services, and members missed the physical elements of meeting people (Josefsson and Wahlström 2022).

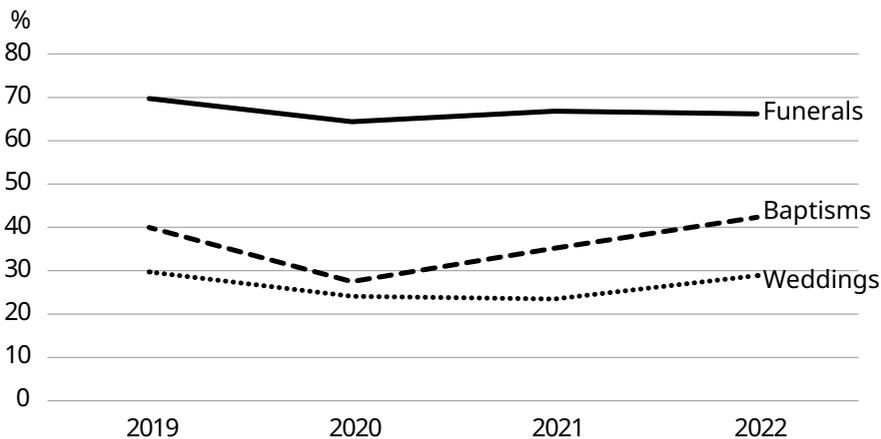
As mentioned previously, a basic principle in the Swedish COVID-19 strategy was to protect people in risk groups, i.e. people over 70, people with certain diseases, and other vulnerable groups. These groups were recommended not to meet other people, not even their relatives, and not to visit shops or similar public places. A lot of local initiatives were taken to organise help for old people, especially to buy and deliver food to them. Many of these local initiatives were taken by the Church of Sweden's local congregations, which geographically covered the whole of Sweden, and by minority faith communities (Bobrowicz 2022; Lundgren 2022). The Church of Sweden also used its

Facebook posts online to clearly focus on providing the lonely and isolated with hope during the pandemic (Johnsen 2023). This role of faith communities as a societal resource was stressed by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB). During the initial outbreak of the pandemic, the MSB contacted the Church of Sweden to sign an agreement regarding support to buy and deliver food and medicine for those in risk groups. At the national level, a coordinator for the Church of Sweden was appointed early on, working together with the MSB and four other voluntary organisations on a structure for how this effort would be carried out. For the next six months, the Church of Sweden, the Swedish Sports Confederation, the Red Cross, the City Mission, and Save the Children collaborated on the handling and delivery of food, medicines, and other necessary goods to those who did not have the opportunity to shop for themselves. The Church of Sweden took most responsibility in this work; it was mainly deacons, operating at local level in the Church of Sweden's 1,288 parishes, who were responsible for and often carried out this work (Moilainen, Ahlqvist, and Lundberg 2022). Many of the ordinary volunteers in faith communities were older people, who according to the PHA recommendations were recommended to be especially careful, to keep their distance from other people, and not to meet other people at all if they were over 70 years old. As such, it is unsurprising that surveys from the Church of Sweden and the minority faith communities show that the number of volunteers decreased in many congregations during the pandemic, as well as many minority religious communities, raising concerns that the volunteers would not return (Fransson 2022; Lundgren 2022). Some even thought that the pandemic might have led to a professionalisation of church life (Fransson 2022).

Given the limited time since the pandemic, it is too early to say whether the pandemic has had any long-term effect on religious belief, practice, or belonging. A recent Pew study comparing how the pandemic affected religious beliefs and family life in different countries shows that the pandemic seems to have had limited effect on people's religious life in European countries. For example, 3 per cent of Swedes said that their own religious faith became stronger and 2 per cent said it had become weaker during COVID-19, and 94 per cent said that it had remained unchanged (Sahgal and Connaughton 2021). However, this result must be understood in relation to the religious landscape in Sweden, where only 9 per cent of people say that religion plays

a very important role in their lives and the Pew study could show that it was mainly very religious people who had a change in their religious engagement (Sahgal and Connaughton 2021). This is in line with the result of the Swedish study of how minority Christian Protestant denominations were affected by the pandemic. A large majority (79 per cent) of members of the churches experienced an increased importance of faith and spiritual issues in their life, a change that could not be seen among the general population (Josefsson and Wahlström 2022).

The Church of Sweden is the only Swedish faith community with continuous collection of statistical data. According to these statistics, attendance at both physical and digital worship services has decreased since the pandemic. Statistics from 2022 show that those in the Swedish population attending religious service in the Church of Sweden at least once a month decreased from 11.7 per cent in December 2019 to 7 per cent in December 2022 (*Dagen* 2022). In terms of the number of life rituals, child baptisms, weddings, and funerals held in the Church of Sweden, there are only small changes between 2019 and 2022 with the most notable shifts observed in the number of baptisms and weddings (see [Figure 16.1](#)). Figures from 2022 are almost back to the pre-pandemic rates of 2019 concerning the share of children baptised in the Church of Sweden, the percentage of all weddings that took place



**Figure 16.1:** Percentage of baptisms, weddings, and funerals conducted in Church of Sweden 2019–2022. (Church of Sweden, 2023)

in the Church of Sweden, and the percentage of all funerals that took place as funeral services in the Church of Sweden. It is too early to say whether these figures are falsely alleviated due to postponed events during the pandemic and this needs to be followed up on in the coming years.

## Conclusion

The Swedish way of managing the pandemic was different from the rest of Europe. This difference can to a large extent be explained by Swedish people's comparatively high level of trust in state authorities, and the more expert- and science-driven Swedish pandemic strategy without direct political involvement. Sweden did not react with strict border control; no demands to wear facemasks were introduced. Public events and gatherings of all types, including faith communities' activities, were regulated in terms of number of participants, but were never banned. Individual freedom for people to move and socialise during the pandemic was maintained, if they kept a physical distance according to strong, although not binding, recommendations. There were, however, no legal processes, penalties, or fines for those who did not strictly follow the recommendations or regulations.

Faith communities' activities were regarded as any other public gathering, in line with the ordinary Swedish way of not having any special legal regulation of religion. Faith communities were expected to follow the general regulation of public gatherings and accepted this. There were, however, some discussions when the restriction of a maximum of 50 people at gatherings was lowered to eight people in November 2020. Religious leaders' actions led to a separate regulation of maximum 20 people at funerals, regardless of whether they were secular or religious funerals. Local congregations made their own choice on how to adapt to the restrictions of number of people at each activity. They introduced digitised activities, arranged outdoors activities, or continued indoors according to the regulations. Swedish faith communities' adherence to the restrictions and lack of criticism and protests most likely relate to the long history of peace, consensus, and trust between religion and state in Sweden.

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