

Focusing on the Goal, not Finances

Nils Nordung
March 2010

The Church of Sweden is facing dwindling membership and income. Changes in lifestyle, community structure, organizational status and membership rules have created challenges for the church. In response to such challenges, small parishes in the countryside are being merged together into church districts, with one vicar covering several parishes. This integration raises considerable questions of identity and strategy. This paper describes my experience in trying to assist one church district develop its priorities for the future. I learnt the value of not just chasing the money, but looking up and focusing on ultimate goal – encouraging people to identify the overall and often unstated aims behind their activities. But I also learnt that change is more than simply analysis. I ask myself how I can help a church move beyond analysis to actual change.

Chasing the money?

Last year a church district with six parishes and one vicar asked me to help them to find tools or criteria to help them prioritise as they faced a darker economic future. It was about funding. I've met similar situations before, and found that focusing on the financial imperative can limit the search for solutions to a narrow economic perspective.

I therefore broadened the approach to look at the continuously interacting relationship between economic buoyancy; democratic buoyancy and ecclesiastical buoyancy. This relationship is illustrated by the system map below:

The democratic buoyancy consists of membership and the volition to take responsibility in governing bodies. The economic buoyancy gets its power from the democratic buoyancy and nourishes the ecclesiastical buoyancy. The quality of the ecclesiastical buoyancy is the crucial point. It links the church to the people, and is therefore the seedbed for democratic buoyancy. When the church is true to itself and relevant and important to people, they are engaged – and that is the starting point for the energy that keeps the system alive. Even if the economic and democratic systems collapses, the link between ecclesiastical buoyancy and the people can keep the system alive. It's a crucial subsystem inside the organizational system.

I used this system map to convince the client of the need to focus on the desired outcome of church activities, rather than on the finances or the structure.

Focusing on the Goal

I was asked merely to investigate the situation. But because this involved collecting data from important actors, the way in which I did it had an important influence on the outcome and the organisation itself.

Introductory event

I met all the church employees (25–30 people) and elected officials (about 30 people of about 100 possible) to present the approach to the investigation.

Creating an image of the organization (a one-day workshop)

All employees and interested elected officials took part in a one day workshop (repeated once). We got participants in groups to portray their experience of the church district organisation in the form of a humanoid creature. The method quickly generated a multifaceted picture with lots of information but also key themes emerging.

Inventory of activities and analysis of goals

At this step I met all the teams of employees to inventory all activities and find the explicit and implicit goals. Here, I used the simple "so that..." approach to quickly capture the overall goals. I asked the teams to finish the sentences:

The four focused terms are central when the Church of Sweden describes its main tasks, and are often used as sections in business descriptions. The phrase "so that..." directly leads on to a wording that expresses the current situation when the action has achieved its desired effect - the goal (or the fruit).

Presentation of present state

The next step consisted of a half-day workshop with all relevant employees and elected officials. Here I presented the findings so far, and got complementing views and aspects from group discussions.

Forward-looking Objectives Process

Until now the perspective had been from "down to up" – deriving higher goals from activities and goals. The other half of the same day, with the same group, was focused on the top of the goal hierarchy:

What is really the purpose of the Church of Sweden, and its local presence?

A cantor, two priests and a deacon took up the challenge to give a 10 minute response to this question of purpose (using the key concepts in the Church Ordinance). We began to look at questions like:

- *How do we translate Church Ordinance formulations of the objectives of our own reality?*
- *How do we describe the desired current situation when this is achieved?*
- *What alternative ways is there to reach the goals?*

Prioritisation

I next met each of the six parishes church councils. We summarised the results of the investigation so far and processed these questions together:

- *What is most important for the church to achieve in our specific parish?*
- *How do we rank the objectives?*
- *Which additional important goals do we want to achieve if the resources were available?*

Even here, I used the "so that..." approach for a few minutes on the overall question "The Church of Sweden is present, so that..." I was amazed how quickly it led to well-targeted formulation of the objectives, which also very well matched the staff's equivalent formulations.

Presenting back the overall picture

I then compiled and analyzed all material, and composed a preliminary report, which I presented to the clients steering committee for the project. This report presented the findings from each step, painting a broad picture of both the desired focus of the church life and the present organisational status.

I presented the findings at a half-day seminar inviting all the participants in all the steps. Once I received comments, I finalised the report.

Moving beyond analysis?

A few months have now passed. What has happened since? The church client still is a bit stuck and frustrated. They do now have a thorough analysis of where they are now. This looks at the broad role and activity of the church, not merely reducing the challenge to finances. But they are still struggling with what to do with this analysis. They are still grappling with the challenge of prioritisation. This leaves me with uncomfortable questions:

*Did I stop short with just the analysis, which was all I was asked to do?
What else should I do to move beyond analysis and contribute more to actual change?*

Clearly there is more to learn. I continue the dialogue with my client...

So that approach

The Church of Sweden is present, *so that...*

We celebrate worship, *so that ...*

We practise diakonia, *so that ...*

We teach, *so that ...*

We practise mission, *so that ...*