

## **How to lead congregations and communities toward new opportunities for ministry**

### **Introduction**

It's a pleasure to tell my story, give my testimony in this subject today, thank you! I am Karin Wiborn, Ordained Baptist pastor in Sweden 1984. I started with ministry among children, youths and families and after that as a senior pastor in the same congregation, a Baptist Church in a Suburb of Stockholm.

My next challenge was to lead the Baptist Union as a General Secretary during a time of big changes. Now I am working as a General Secretary in the Christian Council of Churches, an ecumenical platform for 26 member churches including several orthodox and eastern Churches, the Catholic Diocese of Stockholm, Lutheran Churches, and some Free churches, among them Uniting Church in Sweden, where you find the Baptist's in Sweden today, and the Pentecostals.

I am married, and we have six grown up children and one grandchild, still living in Stockholm.

### **How to lead**

I grew up in a Baptist-church in Sweden in a quite small town, and I am very thankful for the skills I had opportunity to develop in this church. I went to several youth groups, among them I was a girl-scout.

Being a scout is the best leader-training you can get. I learned and trained to be a piece of a smaller group with responsibility together with others to keep calm, warm, fed, satisfied and to orientate in the forest.

We learned how to act if we got lost, and we were trained to respect each other's skills and missions. That experience taught me trust, not only in myself but also in the group among me, today the one I am set to lead.

Everyone is important, and you have to be in a constant dialogue; you have to talk about your ideas and you have to listen to other's before making decisions. I learned that you don't need to be alone in a leadership, you have great possibilities in leading together with others, even if you have the final responsibility in decisions-making.

In my leadership today I am leading the Christian Council of Sweden as I was leading a scout patrol in the forest: Is everyone warm, fed and ready to walk? Do we know where we are and do we know how to reach the goal? Are everyone clear about their tasks and what they have to do for participating on the road in a proper way?

I was also a daughter of a Baptist pastor and could early see how important the dialogue and collaboration with the elder, the deacons and the board was to my father. They made friends and stayed close to each other. They were simply working together in leadership.

In my understanding that is a way for a Baptist-leader to lead, maybe I think so because of the history in Sweden, where the first Baptist Church in 1848 also was the first association in our country who gave everyone, male and female, poor and rich, the same right to vote. The power is in the community, among the people, even though someone are appointed to lead.

If someone would ask me for the most valuable word in leadership I will answer confidence....and trust. You need confidence in God, in yourself and in the process as well as the congregation and community to lead.

You need to **have** confidence **in** those you are set to lead, and you **need** confidence **from** those you are set to lead.

I have seen good pastors and good congregation where the lack of confidence has made the ministry impossible.

## Changing process

In 2003 I was appointed to General Secretary for the Baptist Union in Sweden, 155 years old denomination and declining. We were in a situation of re-thinking; what is our specific contribution to the Christianity in Sweden and to the society? How could we face the future?

For several years, decades, actually, we had been close to the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden and the Methodist Church in Sweden. Could we be stronger together? The first thought of one strong free-Church together was mentioned so early as 1905. Since 1970 the three denomination's had met for conversations, writing papers, books, and been in dialogue about the future. It has been a matter for the annual conferences, but yet not with a positive results.

On a local level a quite big number of Churches already were merged into one church, and the theological seminary for pastor's training was one and the same. We had already started to build us together.

There is a lot to say about the process; why, how and what about Baptists and Methodists together, what about theology, and what did you find out in the conversations, but this is not the time for sharing that. I will tell you about how we led the process.

So when I took the leadership for the Baptist Union, we had to come to an end in the dialogue; either – let's do it or – let's don't do it. It seemed that it was important to come to a conclusion in the process.

The three of us who led the unions started to discuss what we could do, and together with the board's we decided to go away to seek the mind of Christ together by dialogue and

praying. Two from each churches, we were six of us, went to Italy for some days just do be together with no distractions.

We started the dialogue with sharing our life-stories. After that we asked the two important questions for the moment; “Do you believe in a merging process, and do you want it?” and “Do you think you may find support for this in your church, and are you willing to ask?” We knew that we had to come to a sustainable conclusion, we cannot afford being in a never ending process about this.

There were a third question; “Do you think this is the will of God?”

When we were done we saw that we were united. We shared the same vision, we were longing for the same situation. We had a vision for our churches, and we had confidence and trust.

So what would the next step be? We made three decisions: To pray for each other and our churches every Wednesday morning. The second decision was to ask the congregations; do you believe in this? Can you see the will of God? The third one was to write a prayer about unity among us and handle out to our congregations.

In the response we found – of course – a lot of questions, but also a great support. The most local churches could see a future together, but not all. A few felt that this is really not the will of God.

And we took our time for planting the vision by meeting congregations and gave several options to dialogue and discussions in the churches, challenged churches in the same area to have conversations together and we invited representatives for participate in different process in building this new united fellowship.

We also asked our international fellowships for advices, for me it was an ongoing dialogue with BWA and EBF.

In the end we made a decision-making process during three annual Assemblies before the final step was done, and then the time for the building of Uniting Church we had a clear support and a strong feeling that this is how God want to use, our three unions, in the future – uniting in one body. That is how we better could make ministry in our society and world today. Rooted in three different Christian families, but one uniting Church from now and in to the future.

In another paper I could tell you about difficulties, failures, theological problems – not yet overcome, that’s another part of the story. But as a part of the leadership at the time I am happy to say that I felt God’s hand in every step. We learned to be patient and we learned to go on, even if someone were hesitating, with tenderness. We learned that praying is helping, and we experienced how important it is to be in a dialogue among the leaders, but also in a constant dialogue with the congregation’s.

I felt as I was Miriam. My leading brothers were Moses and Aron. We were a joint leadership during a pilgrimage through the desert to a promised land. We had to go, but we couldn't walk a step not knowing that the people we were leading was going the same way. And when we stood in front of the new fellowship, the Uniting Church, we had to leave. I am very happy that the new leadership still is three church-leaders leading together. I believe in shared leadership. To seek the mind of Christ could sometimes be a matter for an individual process, but you have to try your ideas about it with others. I am strongly promoting a shared or a joint leadership.

### **Congregations and communities**

A congregation and a community are people believing, seeking and wanting together. It is something more than a fellowship with the same interests, I think of my congregation as my bigger family. My church is a place where I can grow as well as contribute to other person's growth, a place where I can be cared of and a place to care.

There is a big challenge in being a congregation through the call to ministry. We are not only a feel good place for ourselves; we need to reach out to other places with the gospel. We are called to be the body of Christ, and to love as Christ and to be in the world as Christ.

The world is a changing place. The congregation is also a changing organism, living stones. New people belonging should mean new ways in ministry. When you are leading a congregation you need to be aware of these changes. And you need to be aware of changes in your society – it could mean new ways in ministries. And as a congregation and community we need to read the world, and especially the needs where a congregation has a saving task, where we really could heal the world, the society and a person.

How to find our way to serve? I will give you to questions to bring into your congregation and your society;

1. What are the needs in the congregation? Why are people there? That's a good starting point to search for a congregation's ministry. What do you really want to do, and how do you get strength in church-life? How do you want to support in being church? During my time leading the Baptist union I could see a real difference between churches – sometimes small churches that had asked that question and made it possible for dreams to come true. One example; In a small congregation in a small village one of the member said that I really want to start a choir. I want to sing gospel, but I don't have time, I have small children. Another member said: I really want to take care of your children so that you may start this choir. It happened, and people are driving quite a bit for singing in this choir. You need to find what is in the heart of people being the congregation. It is not possible to run a choir if no one wants it. Or a Sunday school, or a youth work. You need to find the

possibilities and then support the dreams to come true. There are a lot of possibilities, and sometimes they are not there or how you expect them.

2. The next question I got from my youth, coming home from bible school with *wwjd* on their wrist. What would Jesus do? In your society; what would Jesus do? There is where your possibilities to serve in society appear.

A Swedish movie maker made a statement in one of his movies; “Jesus didn’t have any business idea, he had just hurt” I like that. No congregation nor community, nor society is exactly the same. We can learn from each other, yes, but we have to find our own identity and to find our own common interest. There is no universal ministry idea working at every place, but there is a hurt in the world we can – and have to - share and answer to.

### **Toward new opportunities for ministry**

Since I am who I am today, an ecumenical worker, I have to say something about unity and diversity. All over the world and in several societies we notice a multicultural era. It is beautiful in all its expressions, but it is also demanding. We have different back-grounds, faiths and understanding and that can make us tear apart as humans. There is no doubt that peace is threatened, and unity has turned into diversity, sometimes hard to carry.

We are also facing a global threat in the climate-change. I do believe that Christianity has a message to give about our human life-style, economics and how we are using the limited resources.

I am very much aware of my background and my roots. I am a Baptist-pastor working and belonging to the Uniting Church in Sweden. You are my home, my family, my comfort-zone. But as I read the bible I realize that my belonging is more, I am Christian, and share my faith with people very different from me. We have the same bible, but understand it in different ways. We are praying and worshiping to the same God, but we do it differently. Still we are called to unity. Still we are called to build Christ together. I have this thought in my head that we – in this special time – are called into unity in Christ. We have a possibility to show the world reconciliation in diversity, and that is something needed today.

I do not say that we all shall merge into one only Church, that is not possible, but it is possible to cooperate and work together, being Churches together.

Among young people in Sweden there is no interest in different denominations or unions, but there is an interest, perhaps more than twenty years ago, of spirituality, believing, having a faith. One of my daughters decided some years ago to be baptized right after Ramadan. She had friends that had been taking part in Ramadan and saw they took their religion seriously. She wanted to be serious in her faith too.

Sweden is known as one of the most secular country in the world, but we are changing because of migration. New religions take place in our society. That wakes fear and sometimes hate. I am convinced that we have to face a new society that challenge us to stand up for religious freedom, as Baptists always have, and find a way to make ministry in this new society by seeking reconciliation and work together, first as Christians but also as humans of different faith to overcome violence and hate and to overcome the Climate-change.

...But is this important, someone asks. We have to preach out the gospel of salvation. Yes, that is what we have to do. And salvation today is this. We are standing in front of big global problems, as Christians we have something to say about this.

We have to ministry and preach the message of God who created – and still is creating his world and we have to preach his son Jesus Christ who loved everyone into death and is calling humanity to unity. We have to believe in the Holy Spirit who can change our minds and make us see clear the way to go.

As Christians we have stories, pictures and faith in a trinity, a seeking fellowship and belonging that join us and not tear us apart to isolation. Those are a huge contribution to the world today, a contribution for all human beings, about reconciliation.

This is important in a collective sense, but also in an individual sense. The lack of peace in the world as well as the climate changing is in every person's life. Longing – or the need of reconciliation is global, but also individual.

Let me conclude by remind about confidence, trust and dialogue, the most important part in leading congregations and communities towards new opportunities for ministry.

Put you ear at the ground and listen, reach your ear up high and listen Ask brothers and sisters about dreams and visions. Tell them about yours. Seek the visions and answer the society in the love of a loving God.

Karin Wiborn 2015-07-23, BWA congress, Durban