

Baptism in Times of Change: Learnings from Joint Nordic Project

Jonas Adelin Jørgensen, Harald Hegstad, Jyri Komulainen, Steinunn Bjornsdottir, Karin Tillberg, and Magnus Evertsson

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Introduction

In the Nordic region – Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark – the Lutheran folk churches still hold a majority of the population as members. The situation for these churches – the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (Þjóðkirkjan), the Church of Norway (Den norske kirke), the Church of Sweden (Svenska kyrkan), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (Folkekirken) – is quite comparable in terms of theology, history, and sociology. However, due to falling numbers of baptism relative to population as well as membership in recent years, much attention has been given to baptism in recent years. The joint Nordic project ‘Baptism in Times of Change’ is a study project, aiming at gathering and analyzing existing material and practices, and stimulating common reflection, discussion, and ecumenical learning in the Nordic region among researchers as well as practitioners and church leaders. The following article introduces findings and insights from the study project and presents the recommendations on baptism developed at a concluding consultation.

Methodological Considerations

The study is a meta-study of existing material on baptism in the Nordic region the last two decades, and includes statistics, practice, liturgy, communication, education, social science and empirical theology, and theological studies.

For the group of national researchers, the first step in the study project was to identify all relevant material and to develop a 55-page annotated bibliography, offering short descriptions of each entry. The second step was to develop nine webinars based on the themes and questions discussed in the material. The webinars were conducted in the period from February to November 2021 and involved 30 presenters and 350 persons in the discussion of the findings in all the relevant areas. Based on feedback from the webinars and the annotated bibliography, the researchers formulated several recommendations for the concluding consultation for a 50-persons group of church leaders, practitioners, and researchers from the Nordic area. The participants at the consultation refined the recommendations which were offered back to the constituencies of the churches for inspiration and discussion. All material is found at the webpage www.churchesintimesofchange.org

Not only was the study project a joint Nordic project but it was also a Lutheran World Federation (LWF) cooperation in the sense that the participating churches were all Nordic members of LWF and that the outcome of the project feeds into the LWF study process on Lutheran identity. In this way it was envisaged that the process as well as the results of the study might offer inspiration for other LWF regions.

Introduction to Contexts and Themes

Decline in numbers of baptism has led to interest in the role of baptism. Questions of baptismal theology and practice are not isolated areas but are closely connected to other central issues for the life of the churches and their role in societies. Researchers from social sciences as well as from religious studies and theology have tried to identify the reasons behind the declining numbers, and churches have developed strategies, new practices, and campaigns to counter the decline. So, what has happened? What factors can explain the drop in baptism numbers across Nordic Lutheran churches?

Statistics

In premodern Nordic societies, Christian baptism was mandatory for all citizens and most baptisms were conducted as infant baptisms. In modern societies, growing religious tolerance, increasing secularization, and religious pluralization led to decline in the percentage of infants baptized in the Lutheran folk churches. While the decline was slow during the 20th century, in the last two decades the decline has been accelerating in all Nordic countries. In the year 2000, Iceland (89,2%) and Finland (88,7%) had the highest percentage and Sweden (72,8%) the lowest percentage, with Norway (81,4%) and Denmark (77,2%) placed in the middle. By 2018, while Finland still in the top (64,9%) the common picture was that the baptism percentage had dropped in all countries, and Iceland (45,7%) was now almost on the level with Sweden (40,2%), Norway (51,4%) and Denmark (58,7%) still in the middle. Below is a chart showing the general tendency in all five countries:

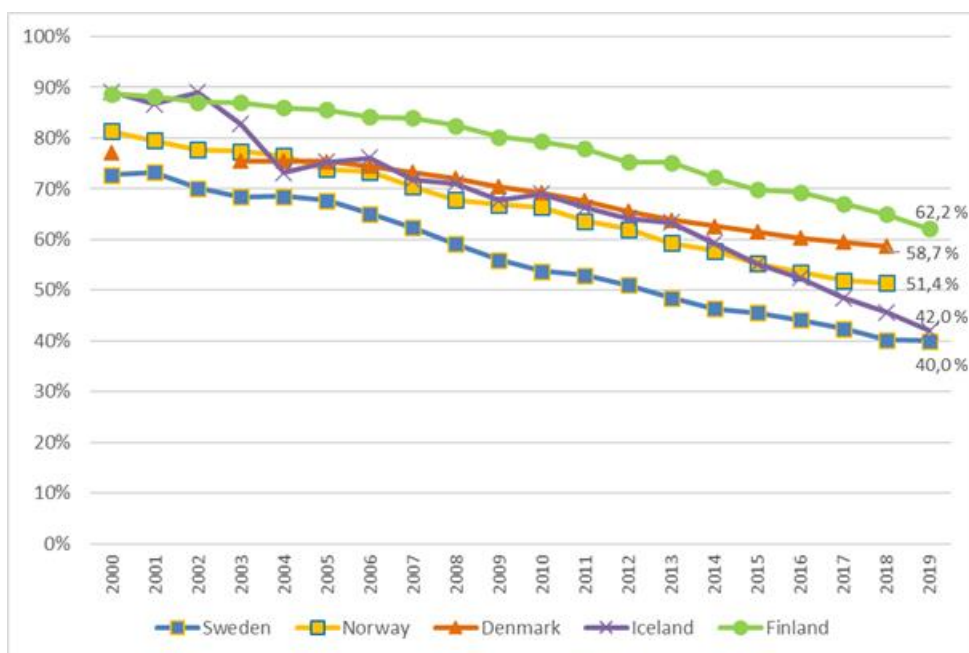


Illustration: Research Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland. The chart shows the number of baptisms in relation to infants born in the country each year.

On a statistical level, one important factor behind the decline in baptism percentage is the religious pluralization that is a result of migration. Migrants often belong to a different religious tradition than Lutheran Christianity, and at the same time members of the folk churches have left the church in favor of other religious communities or no community at all. So relative to the total population, there is a decline in number of baptisms.

However, this is not the only factor. If one looks at the percentage of baptisms relative to the percentage of folk church members in each of the countries, numbers indicate that even members of churches are less and less willing to have their own children baptized in the churches. An important caveat is that membership percentage is not the same in all age groups, and membership among parents with infants might be lower than the average. However, the overall conclusion is that there is no doubt that even church members do not baptize their children in the same numbers as earlier.

Social science and empirical theology

The social scientific and empirical theological perspective focus on social, cultural, and theological processes encouraging or discouraging baptism.

First, several positive factors seem to emerge across studies: Cultural and family traditions – and to a lesser degree religious traditions – seems to be positive factors. The reasons for infant baptism identified among members of the churches who have their children baptized relates to cultural and family traditions as well as to the aesthetics of the ceremony itself and the religious tradition. Tradition and custom were earlier a main motivation for baptism. Even if this motivation is not as strong as earlier and baptism to a higher degree is seen as an active choice, the role of tradition and choice of traditional ritual seems to be a positive factor in baptism. The pattern is confirmed in reports from all Nordic countries.

Theology of baptism is also a positive factor: Baptism as mediating God's blessing or making the child a child of God remains a factor. The role of godparents should not be overlooked: In the Finnish material, it is noted that the wish for godparents is a positive factor, whereas this remains more uncertain in the other countries. Finally, there seems to be a gender factor: Swedish research indicates that baptism occurs to a higher degree in families where a female relative influence the choice (mother, grandmother). The same pattern might be expected in other Nordic countries.

Secondly, a number of negative factors affecting baptism can be observed: In a number of articles, pluralization and secularization are pointed out as key negative factors. Reasons against baptism include postponing the baptism in respect of the (future) free decision of the individual, pressure against baptism from spouse and poor quality of relation to church. Pluralization in terms of religion affects parents considering baptism within a broader variety of options when it comes to organized forms of religious life. The pluralization itself relativizes the individual religious tradition because any religious tradition becomes the choice of the individual. This is common for all Nordic countries.

If we take secularization to mean a weakening of the given character of a religious outlook, religious competence, and relation to religious institutions, secularization is certainly a factor in declining baptismal numbers. If we take secularization to mean emphasizing individual liberal rights, the Nordic countries are also highly secularized, as reflected in e.g., views on the individuals' role in choosing for himself or herself. Both meanings of the term might go some way towards explaining why frequency of baptisms is falling. In the Finnish material, the idea that the child should decide for itself is the second most important negative factor in deciding not to baptize whereas the most important factor is that parents do not identify with the church.

Thirdly, several ambivalent factors are observed in the literature: socio-economic factors, age of parents, urbanization, and multi-cultural environment. These factors remain ambivalent as their effect is not easily determined.

Practice

In Iceland, the most common practice is to baptize in the home. In Sweden and Denmark, the most common practice is to baptize in an independent, separate service on Saturdays—to have an independent service or baptism as part of the main Sunday service, is largely due to geographic variations. In Norway, it is most common to baptize as part of the main Sunday service, yet home baptisms occur as well, particularly in northern Norway.

One practice that is gaining more prominence is “drop-in baptisms”, a practice that has been introduced in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. This practice means that it is possible to be baptized without prior registration and in a casual setting.

An important feature of the baptism service is the conversation with parents and/or family before the service. The material collected in the annotated bibliography shows several examples of how parents and godparents are met by the church, especially the conversation preceding baptism. Practices related to the follow-up after baptism as well as educational aspects are different in the Nordic countries. Examples include the handing out of bibles, trees or similar as decoration in the church, or the planting of a baptismal forest.

Furthermore, the issue of baptism in relation to asylum seekers is a matter of debate in the entire Nordic region. In Sweden and Norway, the Bishops’ conference has released instructional materials on this issue and in Denmark there is a document: Guidelines for Asylum seekers. A subset of this material discusses baptism of asylum seekers, something which emerged with renewed intensity after 2015. Also, the question of ‘double religious belonging/membership’ surfaces in newer discussions, reflecting the increasingly religiously pluralistic nature of society at large but also of individual families.

Liturgy

Both Sweden and Norway have revised their liturgical handbooks recently. Discussions exist in both Denmark, Finland, and Iceland concerning new liturgies, especially in relation to baptism. In Sweden and Norway, the baptismal liturgy is still a debated topic, even after the authorization of the service handbooks.

When examining the liturgies comparatively, a few elements stand out. One element is the role original sin plays in the liturgy. Most of the Nordic countries discuss this doctrine in relation to baptism but the actual application of it in the liturgy differs. The discussion in Denmark has resulted in the replacement of words and phrases connected to original sin with other theological tropes, such as thanksgiving, blessing, grace and the forgiveness of sins. These tropes are worded in almost every section of the liturgy. Similarly, in Norway, phrases connected to original sin have been replaced with references to humans being created in the image of God.

Norway and Denmark have an explicit renunciation of the devil in the liturgy whereas in the Finnish and Swedish order, a prayer of liberation exists which is a theological remnant of exorcism. There is no similar section in the Icelandic ritual. The baptism as a washing away of sins is only formulated thusly in the Finnish and Swedish material, with the Swedish order standing out as more strongly formulated: “...so that the one baptized in this water will be cleansed/purified from the guilt [burden] of sin.” In the pouring of the water

just before the baptism ceremony the Norwegian, Icelandic, Finnish and Swedish prayers have alternative wordings including an epiclesis.

Education

Traditionally, teaching religion in religious public schools in the Nordic countries was based on Lutheranism and under a certain control of the church. This situation has changed. Finland is the only country where there exists a curriculum that is confessionally based. This is only compulsory for members of the Lutheran church, and there are alternative curricula for members of other churches. Neither the curriculum nor the teaching is controlled by the church. In Denmark there is a reminiscence of the confessional instruction in the 1975 school law, where instruction in Lutheran Christianity is emphasized for all levels in public schools for historical and contextual reasons. Instruction can be very scarce and dependent upon the individual teacher's interests and abilities. In the other countries, religion is taught on a non-confessional basis for all students in public schools. Over time, this has led to less knowledge about Christian faith in the population, especially by younger people. This situation has led to discussions and new initiatives in the churches.

In Norway, the church initiated a large scale-reform in 2004, organizing an educational program for all baptized between 0 and 18 years old. Through a national curriculum and a financing, this program is mandatory in all congregations. In Sweden, a program for education was introduced recently on a smaller scale. Dioceses and congregations have to a varying degree their own programs. Local programs are also the case in churches with no national programs. All churches see education in Christian faith as an important part of the follow up or preparation of baptism.

Communication

First, there is communication aimed at pastors and congregations to encourage them in their respective communications to parishioners as well as equipping them for the task. This is done using brochures, magazines, and websites. The materials include outreach ideas, liturgical suggestions, discussions on baptism with parents etc. In Norway extensive online resources for baptismal work includes short videos for distribution on social media.

Secondly, campaigns to raise awareness among the public have also been conducted by the central church authorities, individual dioceses, and parishes, using booklets, brochures, websites, and other means. Creative ideas include videos shown in cinemas throughout Norway. Similarly, the diocese of Oslo advertised in public transportation, and Helsinki Parish Union conducted a campaign where families of newborns were approached and followed-up on for years.

In Sweden, half of all dioceses have coordinated campaigns, including a special baptismal project by the diocese of Lund spanning a decade, focusing on all aspects of baptism such as theological reflection, communication strategies, statistics, education etc. In Finland a project titled "Baptism and Sponsorship" included questionnaires to parents who had baptized their children or had not baptized, to better understand the reasons for their decisions.

Despite various projects and campaigns, the decline in number of baptized children and newborns continue. While there are no statistics or information easily available which describes the relative success of different projects, continuing decline does not necessarily mean that campaigns have not worked. First, the numbers for the countries listed here do not show the overall picture (i.e., not divided into areas) and secondly, we do not know how the situation would look if nothing had been done. In this context, it should be noted that no comparative campaigns have been conducted in Iceland and that Iceland as a country has

seen the steepest decline within the last two decades. However, other contributing factors might also be at work concerning this specific country-case.

Theological studies

Several theological studies on baptism highlight the need to have novel ways of interaction between the Church doctrine and contextual realities of postmodern society that challenge the traditional Nordic ways of being a folk church. There is also emphasis on “lived theology” which demand to take into consideration myriad ways of living out and interpreting the Christian faith at grass-roots level. Sometimes this takes place in a direct fashion that involves reinterpreting doctrines or developing liturgies based on explicit dialogue with contextual findings and demands. This may also espouse new hermeneutical tools such as hospitality.

Next to studies searching for fresh understanding of baptismal theology, there are studies content with expounding the basics of Lutheran sacramental theology or mapping traditional Lutheran positions and disagreements with historical meticulousness.

In Sweden, there has been significant discussion concerning the character of Christian baptism as exclusive or as inclusive. One reason behind this is the Swedish culture which has put emphasis on the rights of an individual as well as on openness: could the Lutheran majority church exhibit exclusiveness in its rituals?

In Finland, theological studies on baptism have mainly focused on historical Luther-studies with motivation to find solutions and inspiration from earliest tradition of reformation theology. Due to ecumenical discussions with Orthodox and Catholic traditions, Finnish theologians have been writing more on the eucharist than on baptism. However, a need for specific studies on baptismal theology was prompted by the illegal baptisms conducted by pastors of “the Luther Foundation Finland” in 2008. These baptismal acts drew quite much media attention and entailed theological question whether baptisms violating the Church Order are valid especially when they did not have an intention to annex the baptized into the membership of a Christian church.

In Denmark, there has been some interest in seeing baptism in the framework of ritual theory. This relates to the theological question on passivity or activity of the one who is baptized vis-à-vis God’s primary action.

In Norway, there has been some discussion on baptism and creation, to what extent salvation given in baptism is related to what has been given already in creation. Moreover, the Bishops’ meeting and National Church Council have been very active in producing material and promoting research on baptism.

Recommendations from the concluding consultation of the participating churches

Based on the annotated bibliography, the researchers prepared recommendations in four areas presented for discussion with a larger group of engaged practitioners, academics, representatives from the LWF communion office, and church leaders in the Nordic area met in an online consultation on 19th-20th January 2022. The recommendations take as point of departure the themes identified in the annotated bibliography, identifies challenges and relevant questions, and points to examples or ‘good practices’ in relation to baptism, without necessarily entailing endorsement from all participants in the consultation. Furthermore, the recommendations are not binding policies for participating churches as each national group needs to continue working on how they will use the recommendations in their own context and constituency. In short, the recommendations are best viewed as learning points from a joint study and discussion.

A. Church in wider society (statistics, qualitative aspects, societal change)

Churches are recommended

1. to consider the profound social changes transforming our societies as a renewed call to be churches in mission.
2. to view our Nordic societies as inviting us to theologize contextually.
3. to explore contemporary idioms in dialogue with biblical and traditional symbols in order to make Christianity relevant to people in modern society.
4. to learn to be churches in a pluralistic society sharing public space and working together with people of other faiths and convictions.

B. Theology (Lutheran, ecumenically, contemporary)

Churches are recommended

5. to work with theologies of baptism in ways that are accessible and understandable.
6. to develop a rich and comprehensive understanding of the gifts of grace and discipleship received in baptism as giving us new relationships to participate in God's mission in the world.
7. to develop the relationship between baptism and all of creation including the wider human family as well as the ecological environment.
8. to develop an understanding of baptism not exclusively related to infant baptism but including baptism of children, youths, and adults.
9. to work with the understanding of baptism together with ecumenical partners.

C. Communication (meeting members, education, campaigns)

Churches are recommended

10. to improve dialogue-oriented communication on baptism, including the theological aspects of baptism.
11. to communicate about baptism in a way which emphasizes belonging, community, and relationship.
12. to equip members to consider their own baptism as a 'mission to communicate'.
13. to develop programs to teach Christian faith for baptized and non-baptized.

D. Practice (liturgical development, new forms of baptismal practice)

Churches are recommended

14. to explore greater variation in baptismal practice, e.g. special baptismal services, drop-in services, and services outside the church building.
15. to reflect on the role of and provide resources for godparents.
16. to explore ways to relate to multifaith families and parents opting for delayed baptism, affirming that the child 'belongs to the kingdom of God'.
17. to develop liturgies and hymns suitable for various ages and circumstances.
18. to constantly review and revise the liturgical language and practices of baptism.

Concluding perspective: Lutheran Identity

As Lutheran churches in the Nordic region and in changing societal and cultural environments, the challenge of falling numbers of baptism is a common and comparable challenge. By gathering and analyzing material from the five countries in the last two decades, the project has stimulated discussion among more than 350 practitioners participating in the webinars and in a set of recommendations brought back to the participating churches. In this way, the project as a whole and not least the concluding consultation might best be viewed as a step towards realization of our common Lutheran identity in a time of change for the Lutheran churches.