Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to place the Church of Sweden within the contemporary ongoing discussion about the organisation and provision of welfare in Sweden. The point of departure is the processes of changes that the Swedish welfare state has gone through in the past few decades, implying far-reaching deregulations and patterns of privatisation and contracting. On the other hand, the Church of Sweden has, since its separation from the State in the year 2000, taken on a new status that offers opportunities but also challenges, not least in the area of faith-based care provision. This chapter will discuss what characterises the changes that have taken place and how these changes affect the Church of Sweden, notably in the area of welfare and care provision. How has the Church, to date, contributed to welfare and care? What are the possible ways forward for the Church and its welfare work? Should the Church strengthen its role as a welfare and care provider in civil society through increased community work and through the creation of ‘togetherness’ and networks within the parishes? Should it strengthen its religious voice and its distinctive, religious character, not least through its traditional social work? Or should the Church launch itself into the contracted-out ‘welfare market’ as one among many contracted welfare providers that exist in Sweden today? The chapter elaborates on these different options, focusing on their prerequisites and consequences for the Church.

Background

Who should provide welfare in Sweden, what kind of welfare and how should it be provided? These are questions that have been focused on over the past couple of decades in Sweden, a country usually considered as a prime example of the Nordic welfare state model, yet characterised by important transitions in welfare organisation and provision in the past 25 years. Private welfare provision, pluralism and customer choice are ideologically-driven issues that have marked public discourse. The debate has engaged politicians, policymakers and the public. There were few private (profit/non-profit) contracted providers of welfare in Sweden 25 years ago. Today, around 20 per cent of all staff in publicly-funded elder care and service to people with disabilities, for instance, are employed by private for-profit companies that work on con-
tracts and in a competitive market situation (Erlandsson et al. 2013). Similar patterns are found in other areas of welfare provision.

At the beginning of this transitional process (early 1990s) there were hopes that a deregulated welfare sector would give space and opportunity for involvement of voluntary, non-profit providers in welfare, not least in care provision. This has not taken place – it is mainly for-profit providers that have taken market shares. With these 25 years as background experience, the debate on how welfare provision should be organised now seems to have entered a ‘phase 2’, where, with various experiences of the drawbacks associated with for-profit solutions as a point of departure, once again, non-profit, voluntary, organisations in welfare have come onto the political agenda (Jeppsson Grassman 2014). The Church of Sweden and its role in welfare is an interesting case in this context. The Church has become increasingly visible in the past 20 years as an agent in welfare and care. This visibility takes on a particular significance for the Church at this time in history, since today, no longer a State Church and without the type of authority that came with that status, it is just one of many voluntary organisations that can act in the welfare market.

The Church of Sweden has gradually lost influence and authority over societal institutions and individuals. Sweden is generally considered to be a highly secularised country, as stressed in comparative literature (World Values Survey 2011). Yet the ‘religious landscape’ is more multi-faceted than that, not least due to extensive immigration of populations of various religious belongings. Sweden today is a society of religious pluralism (Sjödin 2011), but one in which the Church of Sweden is often not the religious body that attracts newcomers. The Church of Sweden, formerly a State majority Church with religious and administrative functions, dating back to the sixteenth century, has gradually lost members. This pattern of loss was accentuated by the deregulation of the State–Church relationship (2000), which has urged the Church to revise and partly redefine its role in Swedish society. It now constitutes the largest voluntary organisation in Sweden.

At the Church’s separation from the State, it was explicitly underlined that the State’s expectations – and financial prerequisites – for future support of the Church were that it should contribute to the solving of social problems in society (Swedish Government Official Report 1997). Today, with its gained freedom, the Church has the ‘right’ to pursue various social- and welfare-oriented projects more freely. It also needs to compensate for lost revenues, due to declining membership. The Church has a great wish and need to make itself useful – but how can this be achieved in a society where few people attend its religious services? Research in the past two decades has clearly illustrated how the Church struggles with contradictory expectations, from society but also from within the Church organisation itself (Jeppsson Grassman 2001, 2014; Jeppsson Grassman and Whitaker 2009). In line with this pattern it is interesting to note that during the past two years, an investigation within the Church has been initiated to explore whether it should now take an important step forward and launch itself into a role as a regular contracted provider of core welfare services (The Official Reports of the Church of Sweden 2013).

In civil society

The described processes coincide with more general patterns of change in Swedish society, not least implying an increased focus on the role of civil society. This concept has received considerable attention in social science in Sweden since the beginning of the 1990s. The research highlights the increasing importance attributed to local voluntary organisations, civic participation, networks and local belonging, for ‘voice’ and democracy, but also for various dimensions of
welfare (Jeppsson Grassman and Svedberg 2007; Trägårdh 2007). At the same time, in Swedish political discourse, a new ideological investment in civil society has taken place, based on at least two different interpretations of civil society and its role in welfare. The first discourse stresses the importance of local belonging, networks and civic participation for community and for welfare and care (Jeppsson Grassman 2001; Jeppsson Grassman and Whitaker 2009). Here, the concept is sometimes coupled with the concept of social capital, referring to networks and their attendant norms and trust, or addressing it as a personal resource of networks and belonging (Halpern 2005; Putnam 2000). Simultaneously, a second interpretation is connected with the previously described processes, i.e. the de-regulation of the Swedish welfare state, with new political expectations of pluralism and of voluntary organisations as actors in professional welfare provision, supported by volunteers and charity work. What is at stake is a development concerning civil society in another direction, based on a discourse with more distinct instrumental undertones. This way of interpreting civil society was rather unfamiliar to Sweden at the beginning of the 1990s. The country has an extensive voluntary sector, of a popular character, where membership is important and where around 50 per cent of the population is involved in volunteer work. However, it does not have its focus in social services (Jeppsson Grassman and Svedberg 2007). Church volunteering only represents a few per cent of all voluntary involvement.

What way in civil society?

The Church wants to play an important role in civil society – this is a clear pattern in the Church’s discourse. How might this be achieved? Should it try to strengthen its voice as an agent of Christian faith, focus on local community and belonging in the parish, and thereby contribute to welfare and caregiving? Or should it develop its role as a professional welfare provider? Can it have more than one identity? The worry of not doing the right thing was a distinct pattern in Church discourse and actions, as expressed in the results from a study I conducted in the early 2000s of diaconal social work in all parishes in one middle-sized town (Jeppsson Grassman 2001). What is the traditional welfare role of the Church in the local context? What is there to build on and develop?

The parishes and their diaconal work

The Church has been – and still is – organised into parishes on the local level. In 2014, there were 1,364 parishes, each with its own local territory. The implication of this is that the notion of geography is an important dimension of the Church; one that has religious and social, but also administrative connotations in Sweden. The concepts of membership and belonging are equally multi-faceted in this context. Since 1996, there has no longer been any ‘automatic adherence’ to the Church of Sweden. Around 65 per cent of the Swedish population were still formal adherents to the Church in 2014. Of those, few were active members (around 7 per cent). ‘The inner core’ of the parish’s religious life is probably even smaller. The traditional religious rituals of the Church (baptism, confirmation, marriage and funerals) still represent important links of belonging between the Church and the population, even if these links have also gradually weakened. Diaconal work, i.e. faith-based social work, is one of the cornerstones of the mission of the Church. Most parishes carry out such work, focusing on older parishioners, family carers and children, but also vulnerable groups such asylum-seeking immigrants and the homeless (Engel 2006; Jeppsson Grassman 2001). The Church’s diaconal work is not part of core welfare provision – it has a role as a ‘supplement’ to the services of the welfare state. Usually, deacons are employed for this work, i.e. specialised professional social workers.
The Church of Sweden also conducts outreach work in hospitals, prisons and nursing homes, etc. However, it is the parish that is the site for most of the diaconal work. The need to broaden and deepen this work through community building in line with traditional theology, and the difficulty of achieving this, was pointed out by pastors and deacons in a study of the role of the Church of Sweden parishes in end-of-life care. A problem seemed to be that the local diaconal activities did not necessarily suffice to create networks and personal relationships within the parish (Jeppsson Grassman and Whitaker 2009). Yet such relationships ought to be a cornerstone of a Church anchored in civil society. The need and desire to be connected to a place and to a local context may take on a particular significance today, when the relationship between time and place is more fragmented than before, and the possibility of individuals freely choosing local contexts and belonging has increased (Jeppsson Grassman and Taghizadeh Larsson 2013).

The Church of Sweden actually has a unique position in this respect, relative to other voluntary organisations, not least religious communities, through the parishes’ local attachment (Jeppsson Grassman and Whitaker 2009; Sandberg 2009).

Welfare and care in parishes

The Church is just one of many organisations in civil society that are expected, in various ways, to offer fellowship and community as well as caring and social support. Caring relationships can meet different types of needs, including practical, physical, emotional, but also spiritual. How, then, is care and support pursued through diaconal social work in the parishes? This was the central question in the previously mentioned research where the diaconal work in all the parishes in one town was studied (Jeppsson Grassman 2001). The deacons in the parishes were interviewed. A common theme was that they stressed activities to promote ‘social togetherness’. This seemed to imply social activities without constraints, where participants could meet, but were organised and structured by the deacons. Often, these gatherings seemed to be accompanied by some kind of programme, a speech or a film, etc. A very common ingredient was a meal to gather around – the Tuesday Soup, for instance. ‘The Open House’ was central in the narratives and it also illustrated the importance of the room – the premises where the gathering would take place. There seemed to be various forms of such activities. The results did not, however, really answer the question of whether ‘social togetherness’ was achieved, or how the participants themselves were involved in creating belonging and togetherness. Rather, it seemed to be that, most of the time, it was the deacons who staged and took responsibility for the ‘togetherness-making’. Engel (2006), in her extensive analysis of the diaconal work of the Church of Sweden, makes a similar reflection. She argues that her research points to patterns where these open activities within the Church’s diaconal work have a ‘consumer-oriented’ frame of reference, where ready-made programmes are offered to the participants, even in community-creating activities.

The second main orientation of the diaconal work, as illustrated by the results of the study, consisted of individual service to individuals. This was provided, on the one hand, by Church volunteers, for example in the form of visits to lonely parishioners who were old or disabled; on the other hand, this service was provided by the professional deacons. Counselling in stressful situations and in bereavement groups were situations where the deacons could use their skills, but also gave the diaconal work identity, the interviewed deacons maintained. Here, their role was service provision rather than activities in order to create belonging and community. These examples illustrate the issue of different care logics, which is further described in the next example.

The role as service provider seemed ‘easier’ for deacons and pastors to shoulder, than being actors in promoting community and belonging. The pastors and deacons did not personally know more than a fraction of their parishioners. The dilemma connected with this was
illustrated in a study of spiritual support provided by the Church to parishioners and their families in end-of-life situations (Jeppsson Grassman and Whitaker 2009). The Church by tradition has an important role in spiritual care. The results indicated that, while the support offered to families in grief was very common, inclusive and well established, spiritual care given to parishioners at the end of their lives, surprisingly, turned out to be a rare and rather exclusive phenomenon in the Church of Sweden parishes. According to the results of the study, a vast majority of the parishes offered individual support to the mourners. Group support in the form of grief counselling groups was also very common. By contrast, a third of the respondents stated that their parish very seldom offered support to dying parishioners, and only 9 per cent said that their parish often offered such care or support.

How are these patterns to be understood? A key element in understanding these contrasting patterns seems to be the differences in what might be called ‘care logic’ and the prerequisites that underpin these patterns. The core element of the spiritual end-of-life care offered by the Church to the dying usually seemed to be a previously established long-standing relationship, usually built on shared religious values. Such relationships were rare to start with. This implies that a relational logic motivated the spiritual care process and seemed to be built on different elements, such as reciprocal relationships, belonging, shared values, trust and community. While most respondents maintained that an established relationship was a prerequisite for carrying out spiritual care for a dying parishioner, this did not seem to be the case in the grief counselling situation. Rather than following the relational logic that the end-of-life care situation is based on, it seemed to follow a ‘service logic’, characterised by provider–consumer positions where no previous relations were required. Support activities for those in grief actually appear to be a prime example of how the Church of Sweden took a role as a modern service provider.

The distinctive religious character

The same study illustrated another key issue: the important question of maintaining a distinctive religious character and individuality in the care and welfare services offered by the Church. What is it that the Church can offer that is special? There were significant contrasts in the character of the support offered and the language used in the two described care situations. The support offered at the end of life to parishioners had a religious character and the language that was used was based on the traditional theological repertoire. The support to the mourners, on the other hand, particularly in the ‘bereavement groups’, was formulated in a completely different language, rooted in typical theories about crisis and bereavement and with a psychodynamic approach. This approach seemed rather ‘thin’ and the language fragmented. No religious elements were allowed; ‘they might scare the participants away’. While pastors and deacons who offered support to parishioners in end-of-life situations seemed well anchored in their capacity to give support with a distinctive religious character, those who provided support for the bereaved seemed vaguer about what was really the specificity of their contribution and uncertain if they really offered something that other professional groups could not provide just as well. One question that was fundamental to the study is the following: what is the significance of support and care provided by the Church if it has no religious particularity? This is a central question for the Church if it is to continue on into a professional provider’s culture.

Customer choice and welfare

What would a full scale ‘contracted provider role’ imply for the Church of Sweden? As a provider of services within the core areas of welfare, the Church, through some form of non-
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profit provider organisation of its own, would take on contracts within the framework of the present rule of public sector outsourcing and within the Act on System of Choice in the Public Sector (LOV), which implies customer choice in welfare services. One of the ideas behind the deregulation of the welfare sector was to allow for alternative providers and customer choice. As already mentioned, far fewer voluntary organisations are involved in contracted provision than expected. One explanation for this has been that the legal requirements for procurement of contracts so far have favoured large, resourceful organisations, i.e. large, for-profit companies and their market logic. Another is that for most Swedish voluntary organisations, taking the step to becoming welfare providers has been too radical, due to the structure, values and culture of the organisations but also because they lack the ability to compete (Jegermalm and Jeppsson Grassman 2012).

The described privatisation processes in the welfare state have had ideological motivations. Now, after 25 years, Swedish society is in a situation where there are reasons to evaluate the results. The debate today seems permeated by a lack of trust in the providers in the welfare sector. In the past couple of years ‘scandals’ of different kinds connected to privatised, for-profit welfare have received great attention in the media: poor elder care, schools that have gone bankrupt, and not least enormous profits made by large companies in the welfare sector. Surveys conducted in recent years indicate that, while customer choice as an idea has gained strong support among Swedish people, a majority of people are opposed to profit-making in tax-financed welfare (Nilsson 2013). With this in mind, it seems reasonable to assume that in this present context of choice, non-profit solutions in welfare would be preferred by citizens, if they can present a trustworthy alternative. A recent survey conducted on demand by the Church of Sweden concerning welfare provision gave support to this argument (The Official Reports of the Church of Sweden 2013). This support means that now ought to be a perfect time for the Church of Sweden to develop its role as a welfare provider in certain areas. One of these areas is elder care – an area where, according to the opinion of the Swedish people, the Church of Sweden ought to extend its involvement.

The Church would then become a provider among other providers; but it is anxious to keep its own distinctive ‘signature’. What would that imply in service provision? The Christian message? A diaconal frame of values? Is it possible to be a contracted provider of care and still keep one’s ‘signature’? Is it not precisely the theological and diaconal values that are the argument of the Church when it claims that it has something distinctive to offer as provider of welfare? The studies referred to earlier illustrate the dilemma connected with these questions.

The complications of being a welfare provider

Sweden is not the only European country to have deregulated welfare provision. Great Britain, for instance, implemented this type of process before Sweden. There, some of the consequences of this change for non-profit, voluntary organisations that carry out contracted welfare provision have been studied (Johnson 1992). Contracts implied less freedom vis-à-vis the public sector than before the arrangement. There seemed to be a tendency for the contracted organisations to narrow and specialise their programmes and activities. ‘Odd’ and unusual activities were abandoned so the organisations could focus on their contracted activities. Small voluntary organisations could not compete for contracts. The provider role increased efficiency but led to more bureaucracy. Contracted welfare provision presupposes specialisation and expertise, which, in turn, entails the need for employed professionals. The work can to a lesser extent build on volunteers and their involvement. Putnam (2000) found similar patterns in the US. Contracted relationships between the voluntary organisations and the public sector threaten
the autonomy and particular distinctiveness of the voluntary sector, according to some research (Scott and Russell 2001). Studies in more recent years seem to confirm this trend internationally (Henriksen et al. 2012; Milbourne 2013). This would imply that what the voluntary organisations have to offer as contracted providers has increasingly come to resemble the services offered by the public sector or by for-profit providers. Milbourne (2013) wonders if it is possible at all to maintain autonomy, distinctive goals and values in welfare as a provider in a competitive welfare market. As for the Church, what would happen to its distinctive character that has so often been stressed in the Church discourse?

The question of whether the above-mentioned type of ‘standardisation process’ could become a problem if voluntary organisations become contracted providers, has to date hardly been studied in Sweden, according to Hammare (2013). Neither, he maintains, has systematic analysis been carried out, where welfare provision by voluntary organisations has been compared to the equivalent welfare provision by for-profit organisations or by the public sector. In his own study, focusing on the expertise and values in social work provision carried out by non-profit, for-profit and public provider organisations, Hammare found very small differences between the different types of organisations in terms of values, ideas and ideologies. These results hardly give support to the thesis of pluralism, nor do they point to value distinctiveness in voluntary organisations; in fact, they rather signal the contrary.

Conclusion

The Church of Sweden is at a crossroads, where important decisions must be made with an eye on the future. By tradition, it conducts extensive diaconal work, trusted by the Swedish public. Contrary to other religious bodies, as well as other voluntary organisations with social aims, the Church of Sweden is already highly professionalised in the welfare and care area. It is a modern service provider in various ways, with the capacity of a very large voluntary organisation. Viewed from this perspective, it might be argued that the Church of Sweden has a potential lead as a service provider compared to other voluntary organisations. For the Church, to take another step forward – into competing for contracts in the welfare market – would in one sense probably not be a very great change. However, what it could imply in terms of complications has been mentioned, i.e. narrowing of activities, specialisation and the mentioned risk of becoming too similar to public and for-profit providers. Some of these processes are probably inevitable. The dilemma of safeguarding the Church’s own distinctive character and of providing welfare with a religious signature – actually the Church’s main argument for its role in welfare provision – has to be addressed. Furthermore, it has been made clear by the Church centrally that contracted welfare provision would be the responsibility of each local parish. That such involvement could imply a loss of resources for everyday diaconal work and for ‘odd’ activities in the parish should not be overlooked.

The modern world has great need for organisations in civil society that can promote social integration, community and belonging, and where people can be involved. Here, the Church has a central, important mission, which in fact is rooted in a traditional theological tradition. In this area, the Church of Sweden actually has another privileged position: it has to do with its geographical ‘lead’ through its local parishes, which are, or could be, valuable spaces for local belonging, informal networks and the sort of care creation that is embedded in such a context. But involvement by the members in the Church of Sweden is decreasing and the Church is rather anonymous to many parishioners, who themselves are not known by the pastors and deacons. This undermines the possibility of providing the type of welfare and care that is motivated by a relational logic. It is hard to avoid suspecting that the present plans the Church is currently
The Church of Sweden deliberating for a possible role as provider in the welfare market may be ‘instead of’ the kind of care and welfare that is formed through belonging and community, which the Church has difficulty creating. And, finally, if the Church takes on the role as contracted provider – what would happen to the religious part of it all, that which gives the Church its voice, its distinctive character and is, in fact, its raison d’être? So what should the Church of Sweden do? Should it work on developing its role as a welfare and care provider in civil society through increased community work and network creating within the parishes? Should it strengthen its religious voice and its distinctive, religious character? Or should the Church launch itself into the welfare market as one among many contracted welfare providers? Whatever road is taken, it will have consequences for the Church’s future in Swedish society and for its role in welfare. Is it possible to have more than one welfare identity? It is probably possible but it remains a problematic issue for the Church of Sweden: there is perhaps the risk that the Church will end up not having any distinct identity at all.

Note

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