

## THE ROUTE

THE UNITING CHURCH IN SWEDEN - ITINERARY FOR  
CONGREGATION RENEWAL, DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH



# Eumeniakyrkan

En kyrka för hela livet där mötet med Jesus Kristus förvandlar - mig, dig och världen

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## Preface

The itinerary for congregation renewal, development and growth, is called the Route as it expresses a direction and a way to move forward, not a static "program". Based on our vision, the goal can be described as a community for life where the encounter with Jesus Christ transforms - me, you and the world.

The Route is a theological as well as practical material which has our Theological foundation document as a starting point and elaborates further on the experiences from our founding churches as well as our own church. Congregation development in our church will continue to be diverse. The Route indicates, in this diversity, a common posture and direction towards the main goal: the congregations' renewal, development and growth.

Lasse Svensson, president, Uniting Church in Sweden

## Introduction

The purpose of this publication is to provide a travel guide for the Uniting Church's route regarding congregation renewal, development and growth. We briefly describe a common posture and language for this prioritized work. The first section describes the conditions for the Route. For supervisors, there is a second section which describes in more detail the different methods and tools used when meeting the congregations.

Since the formation of the Uniting Church, the local congregation and its renewal, development and growth has been in focus. The two areas, congregation development and church planting, have gradually moved towards common ground based on the idea that church planting is a consequence of congregation development and that existing as well as new congregations need to work with renewal, development and growth. The work is implemented in close collaboration with the youth organization Eumenia. Its program *Grow in Faith* is vital.

The Uniting Church has various experiences and resources e g Natural Congregation Development (NFU), various forms of supervisor and mentor programs, the book Growing Congregations, SMK/Equemenia's initiative *We want to grow*, and the method Resource-focused survey. Veritas, an extensive roadmap for congregation revitalization, developed by the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC), has also influenced the work with the Route.

## What do we mean by "Congregation"?

The Theological foundation document for the Uniting Church in Sweden describes the essence and task for the Christian community: The congregation is a "visible expression of the worldwide church". This church is "a single body, holy, universal and apostolic". The three latter words are interpreted as follows:

*"The Church is holy because it is created and chosen by God. The Church is universal because it transcends all boundaries and proclaims the gospel to all people and to the whole creation. The congregation is apostolic because it is transmitted into the world. "*

The words express a missional view. The congregation is "sent to the world". The congregation does not have a mission, but the mission has a congregation. The mission is best expressed through Jesus Christ and the congregation, which is "the body of Christ, where divinity and humanity meets". In Theological foundation, it is further stated that through the life and service of the congregation, "Christ becomes visible in the world" and it is the Spirit who "calls people into fellowship in the Christian congregation."

These statements clarify the divine origin of the congregations, their context and purpose. While our congregations are organized as associations, it is also evident that the greatness described in the New Testament and Theological foundation regarding church and congregations does not include the idea of associations. The congregation is ultimately God's creation and part of God's mission and presence in the world.

When working with congregation development, we need to understand that the greatness we relate to is the body of Christ, the work of the Spirit, God's congregation, and being a part of God's mission. Everything necessary for renewal, development and growth already exists there.

### *Congregation for the whole life*

Under the heading "Fellowship" in Theological foundation it is stated: "The fellowship includes different generations, cultures and activities to make the Uniting Church and the congregations accessible to all people". This attitude is further reinforced in the interpretation of the Mission: "The congregation wants to meet people's needs, in all ages and life situations". This is also described in the Uniting Church's vision: **"A church for the whole life where the encounter with Jesus Christ transforms - me, you and the world."**

With the material "Grow in Faith", Equemenia has formulated a mindset based on the needs of children and young people of different ages, from 0-25 years. It is not only during the first 25 years of life that we have different needs. Adult life is also characterized by different phases and life situations that the congregations need to meet in order to be a community "for the whole

life". It regards parenting children of different ages, marriage, single life and divorce, age-related crises, working life, exclusion and retirement, illness, aging and death etc. A congregation for the whole life needs to create meeting places for people who are in all these phases of life.

“The congregation has a special responsibility to continuously support the life process of faith among the young”. In practice, this can be something that the local youth association is involved in and performs, but it is the responsibility and task for the whole congregation. The Christian community, when it is functioning well, lives in an age-crossing and reciprocal flow, in which everyone learn from each other. It is therefore not just about creating meeting places for different life situations, but also meeting places where different ages can meet and enrich each other.

The term "all people" also includes issues of migration and diversity. The Old as well as the New Testament present an encouraging attitude to the reception of the "stranger", i.e. the immigrant and the refugee. It is the congregation's call to stand on these people's side, both in advocacy and action. It is about diaconal work as well as an inclusive approach within the fellowship. On the one hand, people who have left their homeland are in a very vulnerable situation and need support. On the other hand, many of them bring a rich spiritual and cultural heritage that can enrich the congregation both quantitatively and qualitatively. To welcome and include people with a different ethnic background is therefore an evangelical command as well as a great opportunity for the congregation's renewal, development and growth.

The congregation's mission is described in Theological foundation and in the Strategic platform adopted by the church conference in 2012. The latter describes a number of approaches that the new church is to be characterized by and give direction to the local congregations' mission. The characteristics can be summarized as follows:

- Mission - direction outward
- Prayer and the Word of God
- God's forgiveness and deliverance
- Diaconia and sustainability
- Diversity and relationships
- Locus for discipleship and responsibility

The Strategic platform and Eumenia's "Growing in Faith", together with Theological foundation, are a good starting point for discussing the essence and mission of the congregation. A congregation who wants to grow needs to have a clear understanding of what it means to be a congregation.

## What do we mean by "renewal, development and growth"?

The words "renewal, development and growth" derives from the work plan and one of the long term goals for the Uniting Church in Sweden. Renewal, development and growth are outermost the work of God. But God collaborates with us. Paul describes this in 1 Corinthians 3: 4-9 with the image of a field. It is God who gives the growth and this is decisive, but at the same time someone needs to plant and water for anything to grow. Both aspects need to be emphasized; our responsibility as well as the life-giving power of God. In the parable of self-growing sowing in Mark 4: 26-29 there is the same duality; the farmer sows but the growth comes when he sleeps,

it grows by itself (Greek automate). In God's creation there seems to be a kind of universal renewal, development and growth factor.

Each congregation carries many experiences and gifts that are essential for positive change. The very foundation of growth is therefore already in place from the start.

The congregation is also a place where "divinity and humanity meets". Congregation development counts on dimensions and resources that other organizations do not. A very clear expression of that approach is the prayer; we pray to God that the congregation will grow. On the other hand, we believe that God works throughout creation. This means that methods and approaches that have emerged in non-religious contexts can very well be used in congregation development work, not unreserved and never so that it makes prayer redundant.

We also know that there is a limit to all growth and life in this world. The leaves wither and tree dies, but both eventually also become the prerequisites for new life. Even the seed that is laid in the ground dies in a sense, but arises to new life. For the congregation, therefore, closure can be a good ending that provides economic opportunities for other congregations to grow. In meeting with a congregation, the best help might be to guide it to a worthy dissolution. In other cases, there may be potential for a restart/replanting where new life begins to sprout and the expected decline is reversed.

### *Quantitative and qualitative growth*

The Uniting Church's work plan has a clear quantitative goal. At the same time, we are reminded that when we speak about the renewal, development, and growth of the congregation, it is the Lord's work. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the plant."

In Theological foundation, under the heading "the Mission" we read; "Through the congregation God calls people to repentance and faith". On the one hand, it is Jesus who calls for repentance, on the other hand, we are called to cooperate in the mission commandment Jesus invited us to: "to go out into the world and make all people disciples."

Furthermore, Theological foundation emphasizes the personal decision as an important legacy of our founding churches. In the latter there is a clear thought of freedom. Christian faith must not be something that is forced on someone, rather something that grows. It comes from the fact that, based on a free personal decision, the individual acknowledges God's invitation.

The encounter with Jesus is often a breeding ground for qualitative growth in our lives and in our congregations, but when we share the gospel, it can also lead to a quantitative growth. These two definitions of growth should not be opposing each other but understood by the fact that one leads to the other and vice versa.

Another aspect of growth in number is that it is vital for the congregation. Nothing threatens a fellowship as much as when it becomes too homogeneous and when new thoughts and actions are not brought in by other people. A major factor of revitalization is when refilled from the outside. Renewal and development are therefore often a natural consequence of quantitative growth.

The goal for congregation development would, based on what has been written above, therefore be:

A congregation is a community/fellowship:

- aware that it is a meeting place for the divine
- that makes Jesus Christ visible in the world
- that meets people's needs in all ages and life situations
- which is radically cross-border in the meeting with "the other"
- which is characterized by life and growing and plants new congregations

Another way of expression is to use the Uniting Church's vision and apply it to the congregation: "A congregation for the whole life where the encounter with Jesus Christ transforms - me, you and the world".

### *New Congregations*

The prerequisite for congregation development is that there are congregations. Even if the congregation is a work of the Spirit, every Christian community was once formed by a number of determined people. When the Uniting Church's founding denominations emerged, there were already congregations and parishes in all communities in Sweden, yet it was considered natural and important to establish new congregations to reach more people. Where this is not an obvious and natural attitude today we need to recapture it.

Church planting is a task for the whole church and all congregations. Each congregation can join and sow a seed of another community by being a mother congregation or a support congregation for a pioneer project. When becoming a mother congregation and begin working with the goal to form a new community, pioneer staff in the church can assist and some financial contribution is available. Experience shows that the congregation that takes the leap to form a new community, by giving time, money and a number of involved people in the process, revitalizes its own life and grow, even if it at first means sending off a group of people. Church planting can actually contribute to congregation development.

Congregation development and planting belong together. Both areas are prioritized within the Uniting Church. A congregation develops through building a new congregation and a new congregation needs to develop to become a fellowship characterized by renewal, development and growth.

## Support and help

The Uniting Church has from the start prioritized congregation development. Each region has a congregation developer employed. This person has in turn connection to a number of supervisors which are at the disposal for the congregations' efforts for renewal, development and growth.

The supervisor's task is to initiate and support a development process and in the process pay attention to the good efforts and inspire new ways of thinking. Briefly, their task can be described as follows:

- Give the congregation an outside perspective
- Ask questions about "blind spots"
- Encourage and support the congregation in a process
- Help the congregation to conduct and interpret surveys
- Be a link to regions, national office and other networks
- Inform about materials, courses and other resources

Asking for help from outside can be experienced as difficult and sometimes as a failure. However, the experience shows that those who seek support and inspiration from outside have more opportunity to succeed. Therefore, the supervisor idea is, in principle, important. It implies that no one - not even the most successful congregation - is sufficient in itself. We need each other as a church. The supervisor, in his role, represents the church as a whole.

The supervisors are continuously trained and bring a number of different tools when they visit a congregation. Which tools and methods that will be used are decided jointly by the supervisor and the congregation on one of the first meetings. A development work needs to be long-term. Transformation is never a "quick fix" but always a consistent and sustainable work. Together we decide on the direction and the "Route".

### *Examples of tools*

Some of the tools that the supervisor can use when assisting congregations are listed below. However, the congregation has always the option to find other material and tools.

- Natural Congregation Development (NFU) provides a questionnaire survey. Results present a so-called profile from the congregation's self-assessment in eight different areas. This material provides a clear basis for the congregation to focus on for 1-2 years to strengthen its so-called "minimum factor".
- Resource-focused survey can be a complement or an alternative to a NFU study. The starting point is the congregation's "life-giving stories"; when and how have I experienced that the congregation functioned at its best? This information will paint a picture of the congregation's experiential resources.
- Veritas is a material taken from our sister church, the Evangelical Covenant Church in the United States. It will help to understand the present situation of the congregation and which journey/route it needs to take to be a "healthy and missional" congregation.
- The triune compass is another fruitful method of interpreting the congregation's position. With the help of examples and ideas from the NFU founder Christian Schwartz, different colours can represent different areas of the work of God and the life of the congregation, areas in which a congregation reflects and lacks respectively.
- Congregation culture with values and behaviour is another important area that the congregation, with the support of the supervisor, can identify. Often one becomes blind for the obvious and it is then especially valuable with "eyes from outside".
- External analysis is the survey that will answer the question on the position of the congregation in its context, i.e. in which context and in which time does the congregation act.

## Contacts

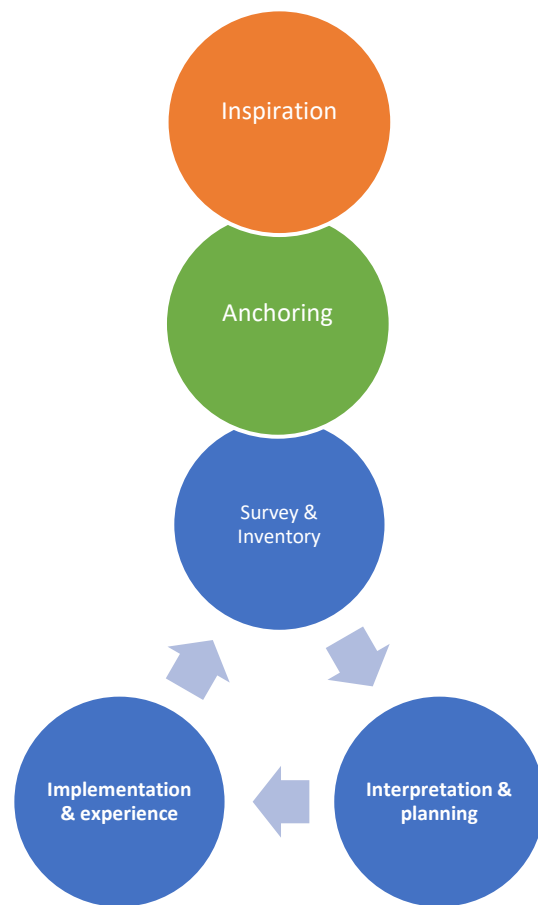
The first step is to contact the regional congregation developer. Contact details can be found on the Uniting Church website: [www.equmeniakyrkan.se](http://www.equmeniakyrkan.se) or directly via the regions. A date will be set when the developer visits the congregation for a first inspirational meeting where information is shared about how a process can take place. If the congregation decides to continue, a supervisor is selected for you.

The supervisor then meets with the board, staff and/or congregation to anchor the process and create as much participation as possible, and choose the route.

A recurring cycle will follow:

- 1 / Examination & Inventory,
- 2 / Interpretation & planning,
- 3 / Implementation & Experience

The main point of the Route is not to offer a certain period of tutorial or to test some tools and methods. Instead, the desire is to start an ongoing process which helps the congregation to live in continuous renewal, described by the blue circles in the model.



## Costs

Transformation work is never easy or free of charge, but requires courage, commitment and time by the congregation, its members and the board. However, the supervisor visits are free for the congregation. Fees to the supervisors are covered by the Uniting Church's funds, since this is a priority for the church.

(Translation April 2019)