

Country Report: Sweden – Polarization, religious freedom, and interfaith cooperation in transition

Sweden has long been seen as a country where trust and social cohesion are taken for granted. Today, we are seeing this foundation erode. Polarization, hatred, and simplified conflict narratives characterize both public discourse and people's everyday lives. Terms such as islamophobia, antisemitism, and racism describe real experiences of vulnerability, but are also used politically in an increasingly polarized climate – something that is further reinforced during election years.

Political language has shifted from visions of the society we want to build to a rhetorical “us and them,” where distancing and suspicion have become normalized expressions. This is clear in migration policy. The government's tougher line – with the abolition of permanent residence permits, stricter requirements in several other areas of migration law and the ambition to align with the EU's lowest level – has contributed to a feeling that certain groups are considered less desirable.

At the same time, state support for Muslim organizations such as Islamic Relief and the study association Ibn Rushd has been withdrawn or questioned, often on unclear grounds. For many Muslims, this is perceived as a signal that their presence and involvement are no longer a natural part of the fabric of society, further reinforcing their sense of alienation.

A recent report from the Swedish Agency for Support to Religious Communities (SST) shows that over 70 percent of the country's religious communities have been subjected to hate- crime in the past year. When religious spaces—places that should be safe and identity-forming—are attacked, a feeling of vulnerability is created that can shape an entire generation.

Several significant changes have also taken place at a structural level that directly affect faith communities and interreligious cooperation. First, new **democracy criteria** have been introduced for state funding. These criteria are still unclear in terms of interpretation and have had a disproportionate impact on smaller faith communities, which often lack the administrative capacity to navigate the new requirements.

Second, the **Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (SST)** is undergoing a major structural transition. The Government has decided that SST will no longer function as an independent authority dedicated to faith communities; instead, it will be incorporated into the **Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF)**.

At the same time, the Government has allocated **SEK 2 million per year** to the **Swedish Interreligious Council (SIR)**. The purpose of this funding is to strengthen SIR's capacity to develop an **independent organisational structure** for interreligious cooperation among faith communities in Sweden.

The role of religious communities

In this situation, it is crucial that religious communities stay together, share information -and recognize that attacks on one group are, in practice, attacks on everyone. Hate crimes and

violations of religious freedom are not isolated incidents, but expressions of broader social problems that require shared responsibility.

For the Church of Sweden, this means:

- safeguarding freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental human right
- contributing to a social climate where trust, dialogue, and respect can grow
- strengthening interfaith cooperation and local meeting places

This requires both theological reflection and practical action: being a clear voice in the public sphere, but also building long-term relationships between religious communities, schools, civil society, and authorities.

Case studies of Interfaith cooperation as a counterforce

- **Örebro** – in the aftermath of the school shooting the 4th of February 2025 religious communities played a central role in crisis response efforts to promote safety and security, calm, solidarity, trust, and hope.
- **Trust Malmö** (Tillit Malmö) – a joint reception and parental support where both deacons from the Swedish Church and Muslim psychologists and family therapists cooperate diaconally.
- **No hunger in Gothenburg** (Ingen hunger i Göteborg) an interfaith community organising campaign, with a majority of Christian and Muslim parishes participating, which led the city's politicians to acknowledge that food poverty exists in the city and to decide on measures to reduce it.
- As **Lent and Ramadan** coincide this year, diocesan officials are encouraging congregations in Church of Sweden to collaborate with Muslim congregations and friends on shared meals where Muslims can break their fast (iftar). This can be seen in the context of Sweden's second largest party, the Sweden Democrats (SD), pumping out the message this year that Ramadan does not belong in Sweden and urging people on Facebook, Instagram and X to agree.
- **AWON** - A world of neighbors. There is a great need for practitioners to meet around all that is happening in migration issues. When it has become very hard to get asylum and Sweden has introduced measures to send refugees back in increasing numbers, we now need to take the next step for interfaith support and integration - living together as neighbors.
- **Together for Sweden** (Tillsammans för Sverige, TFS) has since 2011 been the main actor in Sweden addressing xenophobia, racism, and extremism by promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue among young Swedes. Several sister initiatives are also growing over Sweden.

Faith in You (Tro på dig) – a course for young leadership for women, where they can meet – talk about difficult issues such as honour-based violence, genital mutilation, vulnerability. It has been important that it is the religious communities themselves and not a government agency which creates a sense of security in conversations.

Conclusion: A time of trial and opportunities

Sweden is in a time of trial, where polarization and hatred challenge both social cohesion and religious freedom. At the same time, there is a strong desire for cooperation. By standing united, investing in young people, and continuing to develop interfaith structures- interreligious cooperation can be a force for trust, cohesion, and hope at a time when it is needed more than ever.

Links to items referred to in the report

The SST report on hate crimes against religious communities

<https://www.mucf.se/sites/default/files/2025/11/hot-och-risker-i-trossamfund.pdf>

Report on the role of religious communities before and after the Örebro school shooting:

<https://www.mucf.se/publikationer/trossamfundens-roll-i-krishanteringen-efter-valdsdadet-i-orebro>

The encouragement of cooperation during Lent and Ramadan

<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/goteborgsstift/nyheter/samverka-lokalt-kring-paskfastan-och-ramadan>

Together for Sweden homepage <https://fryshuset.se/verksamhet/tillsammans-for-sverige/in-english>

Trust Malmö homepage <https://tillitmalmo.se/>

No hunger in Gothenburg - appeal during Lent and Ramadan 2024

<https://izgbg.se/deavanja/upprop-under-fastan-ingen-hunger-i-goteborg/>

Good Neighbors homepage <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/katarina-/goda-grannar>

AWON homepage <https://aworldofneighbours.org/>

Faith in you homepage <https://interreligiosaradet.se/sir-projekt/projekt-tro-pa-dig-kvinnors-ledarskap-i-samfund/>