



NATIONAL PARISH COUNCIL ELECTIONS ON NOVEMBER 11

2000 churches are to elect 17,000 members, but interest is at a very low level



The official election poster 2008 asks "Is the Church just for fun? Your Choice"

The Danish Lutheran Church is holding parish council elections for the next 4-year period on November 11. In the majority of parishes councils are democratically elected on a list at a pre-election meeting. Only if this list is challenged by another list is there a contested election on the day with a secret ballot open to all parishioners. Normally this happens in only 10% of the parishes, but the figure is down to around 7% this time.

The smallest parish, Lodberg Parish in North Jutland, has just 34 parishioners, while the largest, Glostrup Parish in Copenhagen, has over 20,000. Whereas the average Danish parish has 80% who are church members, in the 'immigrant' parish of Gellerup in Aarhus the figure is only 26%. Of the 17,000 sitting church council members only 400 are under 35.

The women and the man on the street

NordJyske, a newspaper in North Jutland, went in search of local interest with the following results.

34-year-old Merete Kornum: "I'm a church member because I believe in the good values, but I'm not interested in the council."

30-year-old Rikke Clausen Nielsen: "I only go to church for Christmas, baptisms or weddings, the rest is of no interest."

47-year-old Allan Sand: "I don't care who's on the council, the church doesn't interest me. I pay my church tax so I have the right to go when I like. We've all got different interests."

Lack of interest

The lack of interest has led Kjeld Holm, Bishop of Aarhus, to propose that annually elected general assemblies should replace the councils. "Four years is too long a commitment, especially for young people," he says. "There would be more interest if people were elected for a much shorter period."

Speaking to *Fredericia Avis* organist in Vejgaardkirke, Peter Sloth Andersen, attributes lack of interest partly "to people wanting more explicit guidelines than the church can offer and partly it's because these days it's popular to be the central person in your own life, whereas in Christianity it's God and Jesus. But anyone can sit on the council, you don't need to pass an exam or read the Bible."

Council members and church attendance

It's a different story with current parish council members. A new survey by the National Association of Parish Councils reveals that 88% of them go to church at least once a month – as against 10% in the whole of Denmark. This lays to rest the myth that most council members never set foot inside the church door.

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SMALL BANK UNDER PRESSURE? GO TO CHURCH!

The Danish Lutheran churches are good for 3 billion Danish kroner

As the financial crisis deepens and the small banks in Denmark come under pressure, a number of them are inviting their local churches to transfer their accounts at an advantageous interest rate to this or that bank to help shore them up. And since the church has assets of at least 3 billion Danish kroner in the banks, a mass transfer of their capital from small local banks to the major Danish banks would be disastrous for the former.

Early this month parish council chairman, Kai Thomsen, at Hoejdevangs Church in Copenhagen, held a meeting with the church's local bank, Amagerbanken, where they have banked a considerable sum with a view to re-roofing their church hall.

"It didn't calm my fears," he says. "So I've summoned the church council to an extraordinary meeting with just one point on the agenda. It's up to them to decide, but I tend towards moving the money elsewhere."

Possible backlash

Torben Larsen, who sits on the budget committee for the Diocese of Copenhagen, warns against the offer because it clearly raises questions about the bank's solvency. "A number of church councils are thinking about matters they've not thought about before," he says. "It seems a bit of a desperate step by the banks."

Kastelskirke in Copenhagen is one of the churches that have declined an offer, in their case from Sparbank in Herning. Parish council chairman Arthur Moensted says to the daily, *Politiken*, "I didn't take up the offer to help them in what I regard as their emergency. If our church savings disappear, it will affect our church life and our church buildings."

But Sparbank deny the charge and say that their approach is nothing more than ordinary marketing. "We're always on the lookout for new customers," says its director, Henrik Hürdum. "We have a healthy balance between incoming and outgoing loans."



Kastelskirke in Copenhagen declined an offer from Sparbank in Herning. Photo: Arthur Moensted

NEW PRAYERS AND A SPECIAL HYMN

Working-group writing new prayers, while a gay wedding-hymn sees the light of day

A 7-man working-group of theologians and linguists from the Center for Theology and Religious Education at Loegumkloster, led by Pastor Joergen Demant, is preparing an entirely new set of prayers for use in the church alongside the current Hymnal/Prayerbook. "We can no longer relate to a distant and supernatural God," he says to the *Christian Daily*. "God must come down to earth as a conversation partner who can be accused and denied," he says. "Not so long ago prayer was reserved for the pious, but there is an increasing interest in the religious language."

Pastor Kirsten Joergensen from Kerteminde adds, "The language of the church must constantly be renewed in order to say the same thing, and we are also agreed that we should see God as one who accompanies us rather than as the Almighty." The new prayers are expected to be ready for the church year 2010.

Hymn for marrying gays

The soul goes ding-dong like a thousand bells (Sjælen bimler som tusind bjælder) is the title of a new 'wedding-hymn for both sexes' written by Rikke Birkeholm which is expected to become popular with gays at church blessings on their registered partnerships.

The hymn has been welcomed by the Danish National Association of Gays & Lesbians (founded 1948), whose spokesman George Hinge says "For historical reasons most of our love and wedding poetry deals with men and women. But love is not about gender, it's about people, and we admire a hymn which expresses love that is not bound to gender."

The first civil gay weddings took place in Denmark (and in the world) in 1989, but gay church weddings are still illegal.

Divided opinion

Bishop of Copenhagen, Erik Normann Svendsen criticises the hymn: "It seems to regard a wedding as a convention or an old tradition without explaining the church's role in the tradition. There are already plenty of wedding-hymns in the hymnbook which speak of love in a Christian perspective without being limited by gender."

In response Rikke Birkeholm says that she wanted to write a hymn that is accessible for the modern couple. "I don't directly specify the church's role in the wedding ritual, but that's because I have deliberately chosen to concentrate on Paul's words about "the love that binds them together in perfect unity" (Col. 3: 14).

“DEVILISHLY DELIGHTFUL BEER”

The tiny Devil Brewery (Djævelbryg) north of Copenhagen opened in December 2006 with the slogan: Devilishly delightful beer. Last month the brewery hit the international headlines with its new imperial stout named ‘Godless’, brewed in cooperation with the Atheist Society of Denmark.

The brewery’s webpage explains: “In these times, when companies are expected to show social responsibility, we have decided to follow suit: For each unit sold we donate 1 Danish Krone to the Danish Atheist Society.”

The society hopes to encourage people to leave the Danish Lutheran Church. Its vice-chairman, Jonathan Szpirt, says, “Atheists have more fun because they don’t have to live up to a load of ancient dogma but can

define their own lives.” The beer has been mentioned on an American TV network and there has been a lively discussion (more on the beer than the atheism) on the Official Richard Dawkins Website

With tongue in cheek Bishop of Viborg Karsten Nissen suggests that the Christians launch their own beer called Love thy Neighbour or Solidarity. But the last word goes to co-founder of the brewery Stinus Lindgreen, “Godless is brewed without any added superstition.”

See the next *Church News* for the church’s response!



BIG COFFINS IN SMALL CHURCHES EQUALS PROBLEM!

Deceased overweight Danes plus larger coffins are giving entrance and exit problems for small churches. Many with a single entrance/exit are faced with difficult choices when it comes to placing the coffin in the church.

Writing in *MetroXpress* Pastor Poul Joachim Stender of Saaby and Kisserup parishes on Zealand fears that the problem will increase concurrently with the number of deceased overweight people whose family wish to hold the funeral in the local parish church – built perhaps in the 14th century and ill-equipped for such an event. The funeral chain Fonus confirm that coffins are becoming too big to get through the porch and into the church itself. In the worst cases the gravedigger has had to widen the grave onsite before the

coffin could be lowered

“Obesity is a problem both before and after death,” he says. “The biggest problem is that obese people are looked down upon as being irresponsible. Obesity is fine when it’s a sign of cheerfulness, of rebellion against a society that sets control of feelings, the body, life as its highest priority. If that’s the case, then the church ought to invest in widening church doors and graves. But obesity is not so fine when it’s the result of spiritual laziness. Children sit all day at a Playstation instead of challenging their brains and bodies with physical exercise. Adults settle for miserable TV programmes and ton after ton of minced, cheap cowmeat instead of pursuing wisdom in theatres and mushrooms in the forests”.

News in brief from church life in Denmark

New hymnbook for Greenland

37 years after its last edition (560 hymns) the new Greenland Hymnbook (644 hymns) has just been published. Greenland is an independent bishopric within the Danish Lutheran Church and Bishop Sofie Petersen is delighted that now she can sing her favourite hymns from both Greenland and Denmark in her native language. “Images from Danish nature can be difficult to understand in Greenland, so our poets have rewritten these hymns to give them a Greenlandic slant,” she says.

Grundtvig digitalised

With an initial state subsidy of 2.7 million Danish kroner, the works of N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) are to be digitalised starting in 2009. Grundtvigsk Forum, the organisation behind the initiative, has appointed Kim Arne Pedersen to oversee the digitalisation and online availability of the massive 1,471 printed titles, plus Grundtvig’s unpublished works and original manuscripts. The Grundtvig Centre at Aarhus University is implementing the project which is expected to take up to 20 years and cost 160 million Danish kroner.

Tour de Fadervor

In a collaboration between church and school 7th-10th graders in Randers are currently embarked on the Tour de Fadervor (i.e. Tour of Our Father) to topicalise the Lord’s Prayer. They discuss prayer with the pastor, visit the Church Army to hear about ‘our daily bread’, watch a film for ‘Forgive us our sins’, followed by a play about chatrooms in cyberspace for ‘Lead us not into temptation’. The last stage is a talk and discussion on drug and alcohol abuse.

“IN ALL THY WAYS ACKNOWLEDGE HIM!”

Danes sing gospel like never before

200 gospel singers meet for two hours on a Tuesday at Skt. Markus Kirken in Frederiksberg to sing gospel ‘so it hurts’. Nationwide the figure is over 5,000.

Gospel came to Denmark at the end of the 1970s and has been popularised by among others Etta Cameron, who has given sell-out performances in Danish churches for the last 20 years, and the composer and conductor Hans Christian Jochimsen, who has travelled the world holding workshops and conducting concerts as well as composing outstanding gospel songs, such as his setting of The Lord’s Prayer, for his own choir, Opstand (Resurrect).



Gospel Concert in Copenhagen 2008.

Photo: Claus Kunckel

“Your faith doesn’t matter to me”

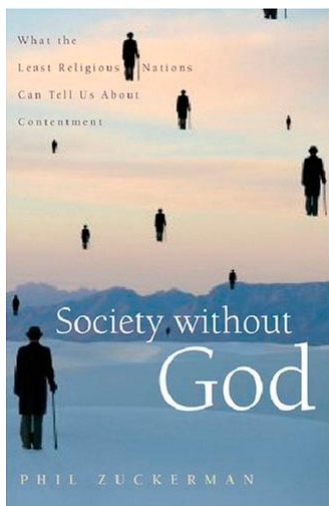
Interviewed by *Berlingske Tidende* at the beginning of a new season Hans Christian tones down the religious content: “Your faith doesn’t matter to me,” he says.

“Most people come to begin with because of the music’s energy and because they want to sing and dance –and I think they stay on because gospel is about faith, hope and joy.”

It’s the first evening for 19-year-old Johannah Bjarnason and she is really on a high: “You become so happy doing this. I’m not especially Christian, but this is what can make people go to church!”

CHRISTIANS ZAPPING AND SHOPPING

Reincarnation and clairvoyance also go into the basket



Over 80% of Danish citizens are members of the Danish Lutheran Church and around 50% call themselves ‘religious’, but in a survey carried out recently for the daily *Nordjyske* no fewer than 22% of church members also believe in reincarnation, 16% in clairvoyance, 14% in astrology and 7% in karma.

Joan Kirkebaek examined “The significance of

Christianity for the people of North Jutland” and was surprised to find the extent of beliefs that do not harmonise with the Christian faith – and also that twice as many women believe in reincarnation as men. “It suggests that religion is more fluid nowadays and that people are zapping between, and shopping among, the various religions.”

American religious sociologist Phil Zuckerman, who has just published a work on Danish religion, *Society Without God*, (New York University Press) notes that in comparison with the USA most social programmes are state-controlled rather than privately-run. “Religion is simply more public in the States,” he says. “When immigrants arrive in Denmark with a strong faith, and the Danes are unsure of their own, their insecurity may lead to fundamentalism. On the other hand the Danes’ tradition for being among the most rational people in the world may well stand its ground.”

Please send us your feedback

We would like to hear your opinion about Church News from Denmark - whether favourable or critical. Reactions are welcome by e-mail:

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