

Swedish ecumenical work to promote freedom of religion or belief

The Swedish Christian Council (SCC) and the Swedish Mission Council (SMC) cooperate in working to promote freedom of religion or belief in Sweden and in working for a greater focus on freedom of religion or belief in Swedish and EU foreign policy.

Key activities:

1. Awareness raising

- a. In 2010 SMC produced a “What religious freedom involves and when it can be limited – A quick guide to religious freedom”. This has proved a popular information resource for politicians, journalists and other interested members of the public. The document is available from the SMC in Swedish, English, Russian and Arabic and is being adapted and translated by other organisations for their own use into French, Russian, Turkish and Urdu. The alliance of protestant churches in Turkey for example is translating it and adding Turkish examples in order for them to use it in awareness-raising with media and authorities. The quick guide currently can be downloaded from SMCs website in English, Swedish via the following link. Russian and Arabic versions will be available on the same link by the end of 2011
www.missioncouncil.se/quick_guide_religious_freedom
- b. Seminars are carried out at various public events to educate people about what religious freedom is and why it is important.
- c. SMC, SCC, the Church of Sweden and the inter-religious council are collaborating in the production of a resource for primary and secondary school teachers on freedom of religion or belief. This resource will include lesson plans that aim to make children aware of what freedom of religion involves and why it is an important human right for them and for others.

2. Advocacy on religious freedom in Sweden

SMC and SCC are engaged in an active dialogue with the Integration minister and will shortly be publishing a joint debate article in a national newspaper.

3. Advocacy on freedom of religion or belief and foreign policy

Within Europe there are a number of organisations that focus on highlighting the situation of religious minorities in a range of countries. The Swedish Mission Council seeks to complement the work of these organizations by taking a different approach, focusing on influencing the structures of European foreign policy.

In 2009 SMC published a report on the importance of religious freedom in foreign policy “Faith, freedom and change – integrating religious freedom into Swedish foreign policy” which highlights the significance of religious freedom for peace, democracy and development and makes recommendations for foreign policy. The report can be downloaded at the following link:

www.missioncouncil.se/faith_freedom_change

The SMC advocacy officer works to build relationships with a number of European national foreign ministries and with the EU’s European External Action Service in order to influence them to increase their prioritization of the issues and to provide proposals as to how European action on the issues can be strengthened – for example promoting:

- improved training of foreign-service personnel on the issues
- a clearer integration of the issues in the EUs primary human rights strategies for third countries
- a particular focus on a number of priority countries
- methodological development to enable diplomacy to be more effectively combined with development assistance, support to inter-religious dialogue and to civil society’s work to promote religious freedom (for more details see separate paper).

SMCs focus is on the long term promotion of improved freedom of religion or belief.

The SMC desk officer has been nominated by Sweden as a member of the OSCE expert panel on freedom of religion or belief.

Katherine Cash 23 November 2011