

Pastors Sued for Alleged Hate Speech

These Swedish cases are said to be part of a larger trend in Europe toward stifling religious freedom

In June a Swedish Pentecostal pastor was sentenced to a month in prison for preaching against homosexuality.

Pastor Ake Green of Borgholm Pentecostal Church in eastern Sweden told his congregation in a 2003 sermon that “abnormal sexual practices are like a cancerous growth on the body of society.” Finding Green guilty of offending homosexuals, a Swedish court sentenced him to jail in the first-ever application of a unique Swedish law passed in 2002 in the face of severe criticism not only by Christians, but also by legal experts.

Drawing on the laws adopted in many European countries after the Nazi era to protect Jews and Gypsies against hate speech, the new law defines homosexuals as a people group in need of collective safeguarding.

The government claimed that the law was targeting neo-Nazis and not churches, but Prime Minister Göran Persson said in an interview with Swedish media that he “expected” pastors branding homosexuality as a sin during church sermons to be tried under the new law.

Johan Candelin, executive director of the Religious Liberties Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance and the group’s spokesman to the United Nations, said the law placed Sweden

“on level with China,” with the government deciding “which theology is permissible.”

The Slovakian Christian Democrat Party protested Green’s sentence, which the pastor planned to appeal, and two U.S. TV stations—the Christian Broadcasting Network and Progressive Vision—were to cover the case. But Christians in the nation say this is part of a more alarming trend toward stifling religious freedom in Europe.

In August prominent charismatic pastor Ulf Ekman was sued for “hate speech against homosexuals.” After only a few days, authorities decided not to prosecute the high-profile founder of Uppsala Word of Life Church, but the incident further inflamed the already heated debate on the future of religious liberties in the northern European country.

“There is a deliberate political move in all of Europe toward restricting the freedom of religion, with Sweden serving as a sort of European Union pilot project,” Ekman told Charisma. “Unless we now claim the freedom to preach the gospel in all of its facets and consequences, we soon will not be allowed to preach it at all.”

Though defending Green’s right to preach freely, most Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical church leaders in Sweden have been reluctant to take a strong stand for their elderly colleague. His sermon, many said, was “too unwisely phrased.”

Speaking to 5,000 believers at a conference in the Uppsala Word of Life Church that he founded in 1983, Ekman criticized his fellow church leaders. “I, too, would have chosen other

words [than pastor Green]," Ekman told Charisma, "but that is not the issue. The freedom of religion and of speech are interrelated. We must stand up for the right of all citizens to believe and speak without government censorship."

Willy Fautre, founding director of Human Rights Without Frontiers in Brussels, Belgium, the leading European secular nongovernmental organization focusing on religious liberties, told Charisma that since the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, European governments and strong lobbies are quick to restrict religious groups.

"Governments and human-rights organizations that used to keep a watchful eye on the freedom of religion now focus exclusively on the war on terrorism and offer little resistance," Fautre said. "Many terrorists are religiously motivated, and this has created an atmosphere in which it is easier to restrict all 'politically incorrect' religious groups—not only Islamists, but also Christians questioning modern-day views on homosexuality or on Islam."

In recent years the window of religious freedom that opened up in Europe in the early part of the 20th century has started closing again. Historically the European governments always claimed a monopoly for one state church—the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe, the Catholic Church in the south and the Lutheran State Church in northern Europe.

When the revivals hit in the 19th century they were, in consequence, illegal. In Sweden the citizens were not even allowed to attend the Lutheran State Church in a parish other than their own. Gathering in private homes for worship was forbidden.

Fautre, Ekman and others say the principle of the government having the last word on religion was never totally abandoned in Europe, and it is again gaining ground.

In post-Communist Eastern Europe the Orthodox Church has been reinstalled as the “most favored” church. In the predominantly Catholic countries in southern and central Europe, Pentecostal and charismatic churches are generally “unrecognized” by the government, rendering them ineligible for the tax exemption granted to “recognized” churches, as well as other privileges. Also, because these churches are “unrecognized,” they are commonly branded as cults.

In France a recent law criminalizing the “persuading of the weak” to “change religions” can potentially be used to forbid “evangelism among the sick, the young and the elderly,” Fautre explained. He also mentioned that the French tax authority, applying a long-neglected but still valid law from 1905, has started collecting 60 percent in taxes on offerings in “unrecognized” churches.

In northern Europe the freedom of organization has not yet been challenged, but, Fautre pointed out, some lobbies, especially the gay lobby, and the governments seek to outlaw opinions that are considered “undemocratic” or “in disagreement with human rights.” He said “human rights”—as defined by secular humanists—is about to replace Christianity as the “state religion” of northern Europe.

Candelin of the World Evangelical Alliance called these developments “alarming,” and said the Protestant churches “must wake up and realize where Europe is heading.”

Ekman urged the European church to “lay aside its timidity, its policies of silence and compromise, and raise its voice now, or [the believers] will soon be facing very dangerous times indeed. The agenda of the political left in Europe—socialists and liberals—is by no means secretive. The church must get involved politically, too, forming a counter-lobby.”

Now residing in Jerusalem and committed to international missions, Ekman added: “We must preach the gospel unashamedly. I firmly believe that revival can turn a country around, but revival does not come without our preaching a supernatural gospel.”

Tomas Dixon in Sweden