

After Ulf Ekman's Catholic Conversion, Charismatic Leader Rises to Fill Void in Sweden

When Sweden lost one of its most influential leaders in this highly secularized country's tiny charismatic movement, Christian scholar and theologian Anders Gerdmar heard the Holy Spirit telling him to step up.

Specifically, Gerdmar felt led by the Lord to open a new school of charismatic theology to help train the next generation of Spirit-filled ministry leaders. The Scandinavian School of Theology started classes in Uppsala, Sweden, on Sept. 8, with 60 students enrolled.

Gerdmar's move comes just a few months after Ulf Ekman—his colleague, pastor, friend and mentor for almost 30 years—decided to convert to Roman Catholicism. The unexpected move sent shock waves throughout Sweden's small community of charismatic Protestant believers—most of whom were raised Lutheran.

"Ulf Ekman's conversion has been a cause of much turmoil, because he did fantastic work over the course of 30 years," Gerdmar said in a telephone interview with Charisma News. "People are confused and so on. The [new] school is like a lighthouse. There are fresh energies for the gospel. We are filling a void."

Still, Gerdmar emphasized, Ekman left behind a strong church—Livets Ord, which means "word of life"—and a vigorous network of congregations, which comprise 250,000 believers. A new senior pastor has stepped up and is receiving rave reviews so far, he said. The church in Uppsala is one of the few

megachurches in Europe with 3,500 members. Pastor Joakim Lundqvist, who has an international ministry, started an evangelistic association for high-school students that has 20,000 members before coming to Livets Ord.

"In a formidable way he has been able to regain steam and lead the church with hundreds of people saved during his first year. [That is] very rare in Sweden," Gerdmar said of Lundqvist's leadership.

Statistics say that Sweden is one of the most secular nations in the world, Gerdmar says, with only about 1 percent of the population attending church on a regular basis, and just half of them are born again—though some 70 percent of Swedes identify themselves as nominal Lutherans.

"The situation is really like a missionary field," Gerdmar says not only of his native Sweden but also of Europe as a whole. Not only are Europeans leaving Christian churches in droves, but Islam is a rising force across much of Europe—especially in such traditional bastions of Western culture as France and the United Kingdom. There is an aggressive gay-rights movement throughout Scandinavia, and abortion is rampant.

"We feel that we have a double calling—one to train pastors and workers for evangelism but also to be the Christian voice in society," Gerdmar said, "because the moral situation in Sweden and the rest of Europe is not very nice."

Gerdmar's new school is receiving support from some key charismatic and apostolic leaders. The late Lester Sumrall prophesied that there would be a large Christian university in Uppsala, Gerdmar recalled. Lester Sumrall Jr. expanded on that word saying that a new shoot would spring forth from the old root (see Is. 11:1-2). Mark Rutland and David Yonggi Cho have brought encouraging words and tangible support to Gerdmar.

Oral Roberts University had a close affiliation with the now-

closed Livets Ord University, which Ekman led for many years while also pastoring a large charismatic church. Students from there are being allowed to finish their course work at ORU, but a spokesperson for the Oklahoma-based school said Friday that no decision has been reached on a future relationship with Gerdmar's new school.

The Scandinavian School of Theology has retained much of the faculty and many students from the former Livets Ord, where Gerdmar was president from 2012 until it closed during a financial crisis last spring. The new school, however, is enjoying a new infusion of financial support from charismatic leaders and believers.

"What we have today is a much broader base for the school. Before it was only Ekman's church, but today we have key leaders from around the world to support us," Gerdmar said. "To people in the States who care about missions in Europe, they should invest in training a new generation of leaders."