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Groop, Kim; Dahlbacka, Jakob; Illman, Ruth; Bugge Amundsen, Arne; Stengs, Irene ; Gunner, Gunilla; Nordbäck, Carola; Seits, Irina ; Holmes, Janice; Andersson, Erik J; Hellöre, Lise-Lotte

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## When Magnus Johanson turned fifty

Materiality, place-making and early-twentieth-century Swedish Baptist birthday parties

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This article examines birthday party decorations as a way of understanding the materiality and religious place-making of an expanding Baptist congregation in central Sweden in the early twentieth century. The fiftieth birthday party for Magnus Johanson, held at Salem Chapel in Falun, Dalarna county, in 1906, was decorated with birch branches, large Swedish flags and bunting and an elaborately laid table featuring coffee cups and refreshments. From an analysis of these material elements and a deeper investigation into the lives of Johanson and his wife Kristina, it can be seen that evangelicals had a flexible approach to their 'sacred' spaces. Social activities and the act of decorating them created not only a sense of congregational fellowship and belonging but also the opportunity for congregations to display their connection to external cultural and political identities. Through the construction of chapel buildings and their subsequent decoration, male and female members were able to demonstrate a complementary creativity. Together they contributed to the creation of Salem as a multi-purpose, comfortable and accepted place within Falun's evolving religious landscape.

IN SEPTEMBER 1906 the Baptist congregation in Falun, a small town in central Sweden and the capital of Dalarna county, held a birthday party for one of its members. Magnus Johanson, a local clothing merchant and faithful member of the congregation for over twenty years, was turning fifty, an age that in Sweden was cele-

brated with an extra degree of festive spirit. In preparation for this party, the sanctuary of Salem Chapel, the modest timber-framed building where the Baptists met for worship each Sunday, had been lavishly decorated. Swedish blue and yellow bunting adorned the galleries on three of the room's sides and cut birch branches were placed on either side of the party's focal point in front of the pulpit. There stood two long tables, each covered with a tablecloth and set out for the serving of coffee and cake. The patterned arrangement of the coffee cups and the serving dishes was interspersed with vases full of flowers and small table flags (Figure 1). Everything stood in readiness for the party guests to arrive.

Such social occasions were a regular occurrence at Salem Chapel and within the Swedish evangelical<sup>1</sup> community more

- 1 This term is used to represent the Swedish *evangelisk(a)*, the word traditionally used to describe a set of faith practices which place emphasis on the Bible, personal conversion and the centrality of Jesus' death on the cross and which spread across Western Europe and America through a series of revivals and awakenings starting in the 1740s. It should not be confused with the Swedish *evangelikal*, which is frequently associated with conservative fundamentalism. See Gunther 2019.



Figure 1. Magnus Johanson's fiftieth birthday party, Salem Baptist Chapel, Falun, September 1906. Photo 693/98, Falun Baptist congregation archive (FAW/42.1988).

widely at this time. Birthday parties, auctions, musical evenings and other social gatherings were an integral part of Swedish free-church congregational life. At the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century, free-church social events were regularly decorated in this elaborate fashion. As Colleen McDannell's study of the religious objects that decorated many American homes in the nineteenth century demonstrates, physical objects play an important role in constructing everyday religious beliefs and practices (McDannell 1986: 152–3). The decorations for Magnus Johanson's birthday party should not be seen as objects of devotion, nor should they be embedded with notions of the sacred. But as materiality associated with a faith-based community they can be understood as a manifestation of the 'lived religion' of free-church

congregations in Sweden and in particular the role that parties and other acts of sociability played in the construction of a particular religious identity.

What makes Magnus's party particularly interesting is the way it acts as a site for the exploration of existing discussions about religious space and place-making. Magnus's party was held in Salem's sanctuary, which raises the question of evangelical conceptions of religious space. As Sune Fahlgren notes (2008: 53–4), Swedish evangelicals do not locate 'the sacred' in their religious buildings. Although places of worship are regarded as special or different, it is not through any sacred mediation of the room itself, but because of the holiness that occurs when believers gather together and worship within it. Using Salem's sanctuary for a birthday party, therefore, was no

act of transgression or 'sacrilege'; rather it reflects the flexible and pragmatic understandings of religious space that came from a low-church theological perspective.

Decorating Magnus's party was also an opportunity for the Salem congregation to practise what David Gilbert and his colleagues (2019: 23–41) describe as religious place-making. The hanging of bunting, the collecting of birch, the arranging of the tables were all acts of 'vernacular creativity' which allowed Salem's members to recast this space into a festive mode. Place-making, therefore, is the process whereby religious communities adapt their physical environment to reflect both their beliefs and their local practices. The fact that religious priorities can change and that the material fabric of a religious building often needs modernising, improving, renovating or extending means that religious spaces are always being made and remade, a continual process of what Ruth Slatter describes as 'material becoming' (Slatter 2019: 38–9).

This article, therefore, aims to examine what the materiality of Magnus Johanson's birthday party says about Baptist place-making in early-twentieth-century Falun. After a brief survey of the origins of Baptism in Dalarna and a short account of Magnus Johanson's life, the article will move on to consider the different material elements visible at Magnus's birthday party: the sanctuary itself, the greenery, the flags and the decorated coffee table. From this analysis it can be seen that the sacred and the social took place in a shared space. Social activities and the act of decorating them created a sense of congregational 'fellowship' and belonging, but they also provided opportunities for congregations to display their connection to external political identities. Through the construction of chapel buildings and their subsequent decoration, male and female members were able to

demonstrate a complementary creativity. Together they contributed to the creation of Salem as a well-loved, multi-purpose and accepted place within the Falun religious landscape.

### **Magnus Johanson and the Baptists in Falun**

Dalarna was an early centre of Baptist activity. Starting in the late eighteenth century, poor farming communities in northern Dalarna had come into contact with new religious ideas that articulated a more individual form of personal piety. Seasonal workers and craft sellers encountered pietists, or 'Readers', on their trips to Stockholm, the northern markets of Hälsingland and abroad. The relative tolerance for these ideas on the part of Lutheran clergy in the 1820s and 1830s gave way to hardline resistance in the 1840s, including arrest and persecution under the terms of the conventicle act (Sw. *konventikel-plakatet*) of 1726, which prohibited religious services outside the Lutheran church. By the 1850s, such hostility had pushed many pietist groups into outright separatism and the adoption of adult baptism, a key marker of Baptist theology. By 1853 the first Baptist congregations in Dalarna had been formed in the northern districts of Orsa and Älvdalen. More groups were formed across the county because of the work of the travelling Baptist preacher Ferdinand Hejdenberg. Although theological in-fighting nearly destroyed this infant movement in the late 1850s, enough adherents remained from which to form a basis for further growth in the 1860s and beyond (Herlenius 1930; Fält 1967: 186–239; Akenson 2012: 71–81).

As the county capital and the location of the courts and prison, Falun was a natural centre for the exchange of new ideas. Although Baptist prisoners from northern Dalarna had the opportunity to speak in

public in Falun on their way south for trial, their ideas were not taken up by anyone in the town in the 1840s and 1850s. Baptism in Falun was instead established as a work of church extension in 1864 by a congregation founded a few years earlier in Vika, a village not too far distant. Of the eight original members, all of them were migrants from other parts of Sweden and half were women. Within a year the group had grown to fourteen members and started to gain support in the form of visiting preachers from the coastal city of Gävle, which had a thriving Baptist community. The next decade was not promising, but by 1874 their numbers had grown to twenty-eight and they were able to hire a preacher and build their first chapel. This they achieved in 1877 with the assistance of the clothing merchant Pontus Ljungdahl, who donated a piece of property he had purchased on Svärdsjögatan, not a stone's throw from the Lutheran Kristine Church (Jubileumsskrift 1924: 7–16).

It was at this time that Magnus Johanson moved to Falun. Johanson was born on 12 September 1856 as a 'late baby' into a family of small farmers in Skuggarvet, a small village just north of Falun. In 1874, just a few months before his eighteenth birthday, his father and uncle died of smallpox. This prompted the sale of the farm and the breakup of the family unit. No doubt to find work, Magnus moved to Mora, an important market town about 90 km away, where he was employed as a shop assistant in a general store. In 1877 he moved back to the Falun area, where he eventually got a job in the town as a bookkeeper for Thunmark's wool and textile firm. Four years later, in 1881, he married Charlotta Johansson, who he knew from Skuggarvet, and started his own small mail-order business. When he and his growing family moved to another part of Falun in 1882,

their neighbours were Baptists. It may have been through the Lindströms that Magnus was introduced to the Baptist faith, for it is certainly around this time that his life starts to change. In 1883, for example, after joining a local temperance society, he decided to stop selling alcohol. This must have caused a reduction in his income and might explain why, in 1884, he closed the rest of the business and took a job as a shop assistant. The fact that his new employer was Pontus Ljungdahl, an important member of the Falun Baptist community, also helps to confirm that it was around this time that Magnus affiliated himself officially with the Baptists and stopped attending Lutheran services. From this point on his life was defined by his Baptist identity and by his active promotion of the Baptist cause and its related interests (Till Magnus Johanson 1926: 8; Svenska kyrkoarkiv 1856–84).

Over the next few years, Magnus continued to work for Ljungdahl. By 1887 he and his wife had five children at home: Charlotta's illegitimate son born in 1879 and the three sons and one daughter they had together. Then quite suddenly and aged only thirty-one Charlotta died of a stomach ulcer. Accounts of Magnus's subsequent actions are dominated by the contemporary awareness that he urgently needed to find someone to care for his young family. Thus, only a few months later, in 1888, Magnus married Kristina Norgren, a friend and co-worker at Ljungdahl's. Also a Baptist and a temperance advocate, after her marriage Kristina quit her job and focused on raising Magnus's five children. For a time she ran a successful home machine-knitting business. Over the next fifty years Magnus continued to work in the clothing trade. He was promoted in 1888 and in 1895 took over Ljungdahl's business. His attempt to turn it into a limited company was not successful and he eventually opened a smaller

clothing shop under his own name, which he ran together with Kristina from 1909 until her death in 1929. He continued to run the business on his own until his death in 1943, by which time he and his shop had become a well-known fixture in the Falun mercantile landscape (Hjelm 2006; Hjelm 2018: 35–41; Till Magnus Johanson 1926: 1–2; Svenska kyrkoarkiv 1884–1942; Falu Lanstidning 22.9.1932).

During this time Magnus and Kristina led lives of intense activism, both within Falun's Baptist community and the town's wider temperance networks. Magnus was a long-standing member of Salem's Building and Property Committee and Kristina was secretary of the Sewing Society. Magnus was a core member of the International Order of Good Templars (IOGT), joining lodge 92 Mandom in 1884 and 904 Dalpilen in 1886 as well as setting up in 1899 'Joined Together' (Sw. *Vi förenade*), its property and building committee. Kristina was also involved in Dalpilen and together with Magnus in 1927 set up lodge 4858 Edvard Wavrinsky (Hjelm 2018: 61–8). Magnus was also involved in local politics, interested in local history and active in the promotion of Falun's civic culture. By the time he was in his seventies he was a prominent figure in Falun, well known for his love of gardening and fishing and his tiny summer cottage on a small island in Lake Vällan. He was frequently invited to give talks and write for the local newspaper. In 1941 he was a guest of honour at the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the awarding of Falun's town charter, where he was congratulated by the then Swedish crown prince. At this point his reputation was such that Karl Erik Forsslund, the well-known antiquarian and writer, included an account of Johanson's life in his monumental work of Dalarna local history that was published between 1918 and 1939. Himself

no stranger to the workaholic lifestyle, Forsslund marvels at Johanson's accomplishments: 'He had at one time 22 different appointments, 6–7 with the local council, was simultaneously committee chairman for a number of societies and has never had a free evening, has never had a holiday' (Forsslund 1939: 77).

### **The fiftieth birthday party in a Swedish context**

In early-twentieth-century Sweden birthday parties were still a relatively new social practice. They reflected the new understanding of time that accompanied the emergence of modern industrial society. In rural society, as Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren point out, the passage of time was seen in a cyclical way. It was rhythmic and repetitive. Work and rest were connected to the nature of farm work, the weather and the passing of the seasons. In this type of society birthdates were often unknown. It was more common for individuals to celebrate their 'name day' or to celebrate as part of a wider group the holidays associated with the church, such as Christmas, or with ancient cultural practices such as Midsummer. With the emergence of modern market economies and the time pressures of factories, trains and office life, time came to be seen as something linear and progressive, a steady climb up an individualised career ladder. Celebrations now shifted away from the collective to the individual and from the commemoration of events determined by a particular season to those determined by an arbitrary date (Frykman and Löfgren 2019: 22–38).

As a 'rite of temporality' (Shoham 2021: 78), birthdays were thus firmly associated with the emerging Swedish middle classes like Magnus Johanson and from the mid-nineteenth century a particular set of customs emerge around the Swedish

birthday celebration. Early in the morning on the actual birthday, the celebrant was woken up by friends and family, who sang a congratulatory song, perhaps read an address and presented gifts and flowers. A coffee party was held later on in the day with cake and invited guests. These practices were magnified for ‘even birthdays’, those that fell on the turn of the decade, particularly the fiftieth, but also on the sixtieth, seventieth and eightieth. On these occasions telegrams, formal printed addresses and articles in the local newspaper were all extremely common (af Klintberg 1995: 191). The celebrant would frequently have their picture taken with their gifts and surrounded by their ‘bouquet harvest’ (Sw. *blomsterkörd*) (Rättvik kommun’s picture archive). It is still unclear why the Swedish fiftieth birthday became so remarkable and was so widely and extensively celebrated. Frykman and Löfgren suggest that at fifty, most middle-class men were at the height of their careers and that a party could serve to reinforce male professional life (Frykman and Löfgren 2019: 43–4). However, the fiftieth could also be popular for the more commonplace suggestion that ‘fifty is just half of a whole hundred’ (Holmes 2023). This notion of fifty as marking life’s halfway point could in this sense be understood as a continuation of an older idea expressed in the popular Swedish folk illustration ‘The stairs of life’ (Sw. *ålderstrappan*), where a couple are shown getting older as they ascend a set of steps, by decades, up to a peak at fifty, after which they descend towards death at a hundred.

As the details of Magnus’s birthday celebrations show, members of the Swedish free churches also celebrated birthdays in this way. Although there is no evidence from 1906 about how Magnus started his day, the newspaper account of his eighty-fifth birthday in 1941 records that

In the early morning Johanson was ‘woken’ by his closest relatives with presents and flowers. Later on he was ‘woken’ by the representative of the building company Stigaren, the representative of the Temple Knights’ building committee Lieutenant A. Bergsman, who presented flowers. For the Edvard Wavrinsky Good Templar Lodge he was ‘woken’ by the chairman S. Winkler and for the Baptists by Mr E. Rylander and Mr Conrad Berg. The Temple Knights’ best wishes were presented by Mr G. Blid.<sup>2</sup> (Falu Lanstidning 15.9.1941)

While this account confirms the male domination of the ‘waking’ ceremony, the other activities attached to Magnus’s fiftieth celebrations demonstrate how religious affiliation could cut across these cultural practices. Unlike many professional men, who had parties at their workplace, Magnus’s celebration took place at Salem Chapel. According to newspaper reports, the two hundred invited guests were presented with a programme that consisted of speeches by leading members of the congregation, a representative of the IOGT, Salem’s pastor and two of Magnus’s sons. Telegrams were read and he was presented with a ‘beautiful silver jardinière’ by the congregation and ‘a pair of elegant silver candelabra’ by the Good Templars. Coffee and cake were served and music was provided by a string sextet and the Salem congregational choir (Falu Kuriren 14.9.1906).

While this may appear as an event that the congregation staged in Magnus’s honour, it is important to remember that, as is still the custom in Sweden, it is the

2 Translated from the original Swedish. All translations are my own.



Figure 2. A birthday party for Magnus Johanson, wrongly attributed as his fiftieth but more likely his sixtieth or seventieth. Photo 694/98, Falun Baptist congregation archive (FAW/42.1988).

celebrant who does the inviting. Therefore, it was Magnus who planned this party, invited the guests and paid for the food and drink. His party was not a spectacular display which reflected his special status within the congregation. Rather, it was part of a regular routine of chapel celebrations of this kind. Salem hosted two other birthday parties along similar lines in September 1906 and celebrated on average between three and five birthdays a month throughout the decade (FAW/43.1988, A1:8). While Magnus and Kristina may have helped with the decorating, the materiality displayed here belonged to the chapel and can be seen decorating other party events. What can this materiality tell us about Magnus, Salem Chapel and the place-making practised by the Falun Baptist community?

### Birthday decorations

Magnus's birthday party was held in the Salem Chapel sanctuary. With wood-panelled walls, a wooden floor and galleries on three sides, this was a very typical free-church interior. Figure 1 shows that it had moveable seating, gas lighting and doors leading to a small area where there was a kitchen and a back entrance. The party decorations are concentrated at the focal point of the room. The balcony bunting draws the eye towards the centrepiece, where several birch trees flank an array of gathered Swedish flags with two larger flags hanging from the galleries. The coffee table is elaborately set, with fine tablecloth, candelabra, small table flags and tiered serving dishes full of food. At each end stands a chinoiserie vase full of flowers. All of the decorations seem intended to focus attention on

a single point, the shield bearing Magnus's dates. Another photograph (Figure 2) in the Salem chapel archive has also been labelled as Magnus's fiftieth birthday party, but several features make it more likely that it was his sixtieth or seventieth. The gas lighting has been replaced by electricity, there is a clock to show the time, there are new plant pedestals, a piano and a sofa for the guest of honour with a carpet, all suggesting a more modern and affluent interior.

What is most interesting about both images are the signs that this interior is also a religious space. In Figure 2, for example, the pulpit is clearly visible. In Figure 1 it is just possible to see, painted on the back wall, a large mural. This was the chapel's 'sanctuary painting', a common practice in Swedish free churches of decorating the space behind the pulpit with a colourful visual image, in this case a copy of Doré's illustration of Jesus's agony in the garden of Gethsemane entitled 'Not my will but thine' (Sw. *Icke min vilja utan din*) (Holmes 2023, forthcoming). Such partial sightings of religious materiality point to the blending of sacred and social within early free-church religious spaces. Sanctuaries were used for a variety of activities. This may have been as much the result of necessity as it was theology for young congregations with limited resources who did not have many other options. Six years later, when Salem was a thriving congregation of over three hundred people, it had the financial resources to hire an architect and build a considerable brick and plaster sanctuary complete with bell tower. The 'old' sanctuary was converted into a minor hall for social events, thus allowing the new sanctuary to serve an exclusively religious function. These changes to the Salem chapel space echo a concurrent trend towards more 'churchly' interiors noted in other free-church denominations at this time (Holmblad

2002: 214–26; Lindahl 1955: 146–7) and signal a growing division between sacred and social in free-church spaces as the century progressed. The rest of the paper will take a closer look at how the different material elements of Magnus Johanson's birthday party reflect this process of place-making within a Swedish Baptist context.

### 'Leafing' the sanctuary

Bringing elements of the natural world indoors is closely associated with all manner of Swedish festivals and celebrations. This process of 'leafing' (Sw. *majning*) means 'to clothe in leaves and flowers' and is most evident in Sweden in the traditions around Midsummer and the decoration of a maypole. Leafing can also mean decorating both indoor and outdoor spaces with cut whole trees, branches, plants and flowers. Some explanations point to a connection between green decorations and the magical world of pre-Christian seasonal and fertility rites (Wall 2022: 148–9). More prosaic but possibly more likely explanations might be their ready availability and cheap cost coupled with the rise of urban middle-class respectability. For as more and more people stopped relying on the land for their livelihood, so emerged the romanticisation of nature and the idea that it was something to be packaged and consumed. Wallpaper, potted plants and birthday party decorations could therefore represent the 'taming' of nature within respectable indoor spaces (Frykman and Löfgren 2019: 65). For the Swedish temperance movement, which drew on a considerable free-church demographic, nature symbolised purity and goodness. Green decorations were a connection to the idealised community to be found in small village life of the past (Edquist 2001: 162–216).

Magnus is an excellent example of this respectable middle-class affection for

nature. He and Kristina were known as keen gardeners. Their garden on Ölandsgatan was described in typically nostalgic terms as 'a lovely, quiet corner in the middle of town but still far from its crash and the clang of our times' (Forsslund 1939: 77). As a member of Falun's town council Magnus was a driving force behind several improvement schemes. He was involved in initiatives to clean the town's water supply, give more suitable names to its various quarters and to commission public statuary. Decorating with greenery was clearly a practice that Magnus enjoyed and felt worth noting. In a manuscript account he wrote about Kristina the year after she died, Magnus describes how the two of them decorated Salem for their wedding in 1888: 'Mother and I did it the night before. We got help with the binding of the garlands, those we hung in half-moon formations around the pulpit. On the arms of the kerosene lamps we hung pots full of blossoming plants, in the corners and around the ugly heater we placed birch branches. The whole thing was for the time very nice.' The next day, when the couple had wedding guests to their house, Magnus had 'leafed' the entrance with birch as well (Hjelm 2006: 22). For Magnus and the Falun Baptist congregation, green decorations were respectable and wholesome ways of beautifying special occasions.

### Flags and liberal politics

What is most striking about the decorations for Magnus's fiftieth birthday party is the overwhelming display of Swedish flags and bunting. They are constant and dominant objects in the photographs that survive of Salem's birthday and anniversary celebrations, and, alongside greenery, can be seen in other free-church celebrations across the country (Östhammar 1910; Vänersborg n.d.; Delsbo, Hälsingland n.d.

in Holmblad 2002: 184). Such a display on the part of Falun's Baptists might be seen as surprising and unexpected, given that Baptists were a religious minority and within recent memory had suffered persecution for their religious beliefs. Although religious tolerance started to be introduced from 1858, a solid legal basis for religious freedom was still a political work in progress when Magnus joined the Baptists. Although raised a Lutheran himself, Magnus recounted the discrimination Kristina experienced when growing up in a Baptist family in south-east Dalarna. Over the years she had often told the story about how her neighbours used to say that 'the Norgrens keep Satan in their woodshed' (Hjelm 2006: 13). This local antipathy may have been part of the reason why Kristina's family moved a few years later to Gävle and talked about emigrating to America.

Discriminatory practices around marriage also had an impact on Magnus and Kristina. In Magnus's account of Kristina, when they were young 'non-confirmed people could not enter into a legal marriage' and members of the free churches, even if they had undertaken a marriage ceremony in a free church, would only be noted in the population registers (Sw. *husförhållanden*) as 'engaged'. The recording of births, deaths and marriages was still at that time controlled by the Lutheran church. Kristina's desire to avoid this status of 'engaged', and, Magnus implied, to be officially recorded as a respectable married woman, was the reason why, as an adult, she underwent a Lutheran confirmation (Hjelm 2006: 14). This Lutheran control over the documentation of civil society relationships meant that Baptists in Falun were officially differentiated from their neighbours. The Lutheran priests who maintained the population registers for Kristina's parish visibly mark Magnus's neighbours the Lindströms as

Baptists (Svenska kyrkoarkiv Falu Kristine 1877–83) and his own children and grandchildren in later years as uncatechised and ‘unbaptised’ (*ibid.* 1900–9, 1922–33). Low-grade discrimination like this, noted in other European countries like Belgium and the Netherlands, often led to displays of ‘pillarisation’ (Dobbelaere 1988), when minority religious groups sought to maintain their identity through exclusive living, shopping, working and socialising. Pillarisation might therefore account for the frequency and intensity of the Falun Baptist social displays, but they do not account for the prominent presence of Swedish flags.

If we accept that a display of a national symbol equates to some measure of affinity or association with the political entity that symbol represents, then it would seem that Magnus Johanson and the Falun Baptist congregation felt a strong measure of ‘Swedishness’ and had little difficulty displaying the country’s most visible political symbol, the national flag. Such an affinity can be understood from two complementary perspectives. On the one hand Baptists may not have been wedded to the Swedish state *per se* but flag displays like this can be read as a positive affinity with a broader, more cultural expression of nationalism that was reaching the height of its popularity in the 1890s. The romantic nationalism of Scandinavianists like Artur Hazelius and their efforts to preserve the Swedish built and material past in open-air museums was complemented by the temperance movement, who, through their meetings and publications, promoted an idealised vision of rural Swedish society. At their meetings and events, they frequently flew the Swedish flag and sang the national anthem (Edquist 2001: 290–6). The flag displays at Magnus’s party show the free churches equally enthusiastic in their nationalistic displays.

One of the factors which contributed to the increasing presence of the Swedish flag in popular print culture and public spaces of all kinds was the ‘flag crisis’ which accompanied the deterioration of the political union between Norway and Sweden in the 1890s. As an early act of autonomy, Norway ceased to fly the union flag. This flag was the traditional Swedish blue field and yellow cross with the addition of the Norwegian colours in one corner, known as the ‘herring salad’. When Norway left the union in 1905 a new flag was created and a comprehensive set of flag laws were implemented for the first time. These political, and symbolic, readjustments created a greater popular interest in the ‘purified’ Swedish flag. By September 1906, only ten months after the new Swedish flag laws had been introduced, Salem had already replaced their old flags with a new regulation set, as Magnus’s birthday display shows. Displays of the Swedish flag at Magnus’s birthday party can, in this reading, be seen as an expression of ‘everyday’ nationalism, as an example of how ordinary people were increasingly using the flag as a popular form of decoration (Knott 2016).

On the other hand, the flags on display at Magnus’s birthday party could point to a more interesting connection between Falun’s Baptists and the Swedish polity and in particular to the role that the free-church movement played as a driver of wider democratic and social reforms, both at a national and at a local level. Salem’s flag display could indicate that, rather than retreating from the state and remaining aloof from local issues, as evangelical groups in other contexts have done, Swedish evangelicals were committed to engaging with wider society and seeking its improvement. Today the Swedish folk movement (Sw. *folkrörelse*), including members of the free churches, are increasingly acknowledged

as laying the foundations for modern Swedish democracy and religious pluralism (Johnson 1998; Lindvall and Svärd 2018). Magnus's political outlook and areas of activity illustrate how the free churches were able to effect political change at a local level.

As a small-business owner and Baptist Magnus was an advocate of free trade and political reform. The threat to roll back on free-trade policies which emerged because of a conservative election victory in May 1887 persuaded Magnus to become engaged in liberal politics at the county level. In September, at a public meeting in Salem Chapel called to oppose economic protectionism, Magnus was selected as chair, presiding over the decision to nominate O. V. Vahlin as a liberal candidate for the Swedish parliament in the upcoming election (Tidningen för Falu Län och Stan 10.9.1887). As election manager for the liberal party between 1887 and 1893, Magnus's 'organisational ability and indomitable energy' was instrumental in securing Vahlin's election as Dalarna's first liberal parliamentary representative. As a now key figure in Dalarna's liberal politics, it was through his negotiation that in 1894 *Falu Kuriren* was established as the first liberal newspaper in the county (Till Magnus Johanson 1926: 20–4).

While Magnus's actions can be seen as supporting liberal aspirations more generally, the involvement of men of his calibre in the early Baptist movement was essential for its wider social acceptance as a religious group. As several of the contributions to Magnus's seventieth-birthday festschrift suggest, there was considerable opposition within Dalarna to religious pluralism on many levels. Magnus's 'personal efforts in the working life of the Falun Baptist congregation', the Salem Baptist pastor G. Broberg wrote, 'together with that of other good

members, has contributed to the respect in society and the press that the congregation commands and in no insignificant way has contributed to the success that has been bestowed on the Baptists in Dalarna and especially in the county capital' (Till Magnus Johanson 1926: 3). Displaying flags at a Baptist birthday party, then, can be read as the free churches reflecting a new popular trend. It can also be seen as a symbol of the determination of a religious minority to bring about political change and a future, more tolerant society.

### **The decorated table (*det dukade bordet*)**

The final element of materiality to examine from Magnus's birthday party is the decorated table. The table linens, the serving dishes, the bouquets of flowers in their chinoiserie vases, the table flags and the patterned layout of the coffee cups reflect the wider social trend in the early twentieth century towards the 'coffee party', a more informal social event that was practised amongst the Swedish middle classes (Wikström 2012). While coffee parties started out as domestic events, with the growth of the temperance, labour and free-church movements, so the number of opportunities grew for people to drink coffee together in public spaces. Nowhere was this practice more prevalent than within free-church circles, where the commitment to temperance (a cause close to both Magnus's and Kristina's hearts) meant public sociability needed to be performed elsewhere than a pub or beer house. It is important to remember that the physical setting for this social practice was only just literally being constructed when Magnus and Kristina were active. Magnus was involved in the building societies attached to the Baptists and the Good Templars and was responsible for securing for both groups property and premises. Buildings

gave 'liberal' groups of all kinds places to meet, places to discuss ideas, and practise their faith and their social interaction. As Torbjörn Larspers has pointed out in his study of the Mission Covenant chapels in the Siljan region of north central Dalarna, chapels facilitated meetings of all kinds and soon became resources that could be shared with the wider community (Larspers 2020a, 2020b: 120–6). Men, therefore, displayed their 'vernacular creativity' through the construction of sacred spaces that also served a sociable purpose.

Women, on the other hand, were responsible for decorating these spaces and making them comfortable. While Magnus paid for his fiftieth birthday party, it was the congregation's women's group, the 'Sewing and Mother's Society' (Sw. *Sy- och mördrarförening*), who did all of the preparations. Free-church sewing societies were important groups in early free-church congregational formation. Their remit was to raise funds through auctions and the sale of work to help pay off a chapel's debts. However, they were also important players in the decoration and improvement of chapel interiors. Given that social occasions often became opportunities for fund-raising, sewing societies often became the facilitators for much of a congregation's income generation. It was, for example, the money that Salem's Sewing Society had earned from the sale of their handiwork which enabled the chapel in 1897 to purchase a set of three dozen coffee cups (FAW/43.1988, A3a:1, 1897). It was, therefore, the female members of the society who had baked the buns, arranged the flowers and set the table for Magnus's party.

Kristina joined the Sewing Society in 1884 and served as its secretary for many years. Her annual reports show that the society also used its funds to add to and improve the chapel's internal comfort and

appearance. In 1896–7, for example, the society used its earnings to replace the 'ugly' heaters (which Kristina and Magnus had hidden with birch branches on their wedding day in 1888) with more hygienic and attractive ceramic versions (Sw. *kakel-ugnar*) (FAW/43.1988, A3a:1, 1897). This then paved the way for other improvements, such as the painting and wallpapering of a small all-purpose room (Sw. *den lilla salen*) and the addition of curtains. As Magnus later recalled, 'Mother, who was always anxious to keep her own house attractive, was no less anxious that their Sunday home should be pretty and attractive' (Hjelm 2006: 41). Similar moves to beautify and improve the comfort of places of worship were taking place in Britain and the United States. The dominant discourse within British and American reformed Protestant congregations was shifting from one of 'piety' to one of 'fellowship', where comfort and attractiveness were increasingly important and desirable aspects of sociable church life (Cashdollar 2000: 241). Women's role as church decorators and furnishers in Protestant congregations across the American south meant they were responsible for the aesthetic appearance of their chapel interiors (Wright 2019). Falun's Baptist women operated in a similar way. It was their material choices which decorated the table at Magnus's birthday, and thus it was women who shaped this material display of Baptist sociability.

## Conclusion

The study of Magnus Johanson's birthday party and its elaborate decoration has provided a case study for the role that materiality played in the religious place-making at Salem Baptist Chapel in Falun. Magnus's party shows that Swedish evangelicals were flexible when it came to the use of their religious spaces and that secular activities



Figure 3. Magnus and Kristina Johanson surrounded by other members of Salem Baptist Chapel, Falun, probably at the opening of the new chapel sanctuary in 1916. Photo 672/98, Falun Baptist congregation archive (FAW/42.1988).

were easily accommodated within 'sacred' spaces. The display of greenery and flags showed that Baptists were not disconnected from their broader culture, despite their status as religious minorities. Rather, these symbols suggest that they were influential promoters of cultural practices and political attitudes that would have a significant impact on Swedish society. As venues for both religious worship and social activities, the construction and decoration of Baptist chapels reflect the gendered nature of religious place-making. While men exercised their creativity through the purchasing of property and the construction and maintenance of religious buildings, it was women who made the interior spaces comfortable and attractive.

This division of labour is well represented in the shared contributions which Magnus and Kristina made to the congregational space at Salem. Both of them were

important actors in the creation of Salem as an established and accepted site within the Falun religious landscape. For Magnus, birthday parties were events to be noted and remembered. In his account of his wife he devoted an entire chapter to 'special family days' (Sw. *familjehögtider*), where he noted the decorations and presents for special birthdays and anniversaries with particular fondness. But as he acknowledged himself, this materiality was but a vehicle for the expression of something much more important. When Kristina turned seventy-five and her presents and flowers started to arrive over the course of the day, he recalled that 'no one had ever seen a "bouquet harvest" so big before ... but it was more than the flowers, it was the circle of friends who stood behind them. O, what riches to have good friends' (Hjelm 2006: 35) (Figure 3). ■

**Janice Holmes** is a historian of religion living and working in Dalarna, Sweden. She is former Senior Lecturer in History at the Open University (UK), where her research interests have focused on the social and cultural history of the evangelical movement in the English-speaking world and she has written on aspects of revival, female ministry, Methodism and Irish Presbyterianism. Since 2020 she has been Honorary Research Associate at Högskolan Dalarna, where she is currently examining material practices within the Swedish free-church movement.



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