

Call for Papers

Places of Worship

Their Cultural and Social Significance

Interdisciplinary Symposium
18–19 November 2026
Humlab, Umeå University, Sweden

Places of worship have never been merely buildings. They are arenas in which faith is practised, identities are formed, communities are shaped, and power is negotiated. Across the Nordic countries, the state churches historically defined what constituted a legitimate sacred space. Yet over the past two centuries, revival movements and free churches (among others) have challenged, complemented, and reshaped these boundaries by establishing new spaces for religious life.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, prayer houses were built by free church and inner mission movements as sites for cultivating religious faith and practice – sometimes in cooperation with, and at other times in opposition to, the Lutheran state church. In response, the state churches developed parish houses and other institutional spaces that introduced and integrated social and community-building functions into ecclesiastical life. Within local communities, these different actors negotiated religious authority, cultural practices, and social belonging – occasionally in conflict, sometimes separately, and at times in close interaction.

As societies modernised and democratised, places of worship became central not only to religious life but also to local civic culture. They could serve as hubs of voluntary association, education, political engagement, and welfare activities. At the same time, they were sites where religious and secular interests intersected – and sometimes clashed. In certain contexts, such spaces reinforced majority cultures; in others, they provided crucial gathering points for minorities. Their meaning and function were always shaped by local, regional, and national dynamics.

From the mid twentieth century onwards, processes such as secularisation, urbanisation, and institutional specialisation led to the reconfiguration, and in many cases the decline, of prayer houses and other communal religious spaces. Religious and societal institutions became increasingly differentiated. Although these developments followed broadly comparable trajectories across the Nordic countries, important variations remain.

Aim of the symposium

This symposium seeks to explore the cultural and societal significance of places of worship from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective. We invite contributions that examine these spaces across regions, nations, and historical periods.

Themes and questions may include, but are not limited to:

- Are there regional, national, or transnational patterns in the emergence, transformation, and decline of places of worship? How might these be explained?
- How can the rise and fall of the prayer house movement be understood in relation to internal religious developments and wider societal change?
- In what ways have places of worship intersected with institutions such as the media, schools, and welfare organisations?

- How do religious and secular discourses interact within these spaces?
- Are majority and minority cultures intertwined or in tension?
- What roles have places of worship played in shaping local communities—historically and in the present?
- How are religious faith and practices lived, embodied, and transformed within these spaces?
- How are such places connected to patterns of gender, demography, education, and political affiliation?
- How are local religious communities embedded in national and international networks?
- What role do the architecture and physical expression of places of worship play, and how are they linked to sociological, demographic, cultural, and theological differences?

We particularly welcome contributions that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches and that engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue.

A Nordic context

The symposium is a joint initiative of the Religious History of the North network (REHN) and the Nordic Places of Worship project. While centred on the Nordic context, we encourage comparative perspectives that situate Nordic developments within broader international frameworks.

Board and lodging

There will be no conference fee. Lunch, coffee, and dinner will be provided during the symposium. The organisers aim to raise financial means to cover the cost of two nights' accommodation in Umeå.

Place and dates

The symposium will be held at Humlab, Umeå University, on **18–19 November 2026**. The conference language will be English.

Abstracts

Abstracts of proposed papers should be submitted to stefan.gelfgren@umu.se no later than **30 April 2026**. Besides name, academic title and affiliation, the abstract should outline the theme of the paper, and the theories, methods and sources used. Maximum length is 300 words. Notification of acceptance will be sent out no later than 15 May.

Publication plans

In addition to providing a forum for scholarly exchange, the organisers aim to publish a selection of papers in an international peer-reviewed book series.

Welcome to make the planned symposium into an exciting scholarly meeting!

Stefan Gelfgren, co-ordinator of the Nordic Places of Worship Project (NordPoW)

Daniel Lindmark, co-ordinator of the Religious History of the North Network (REHN)

Questions? Please email Stefan (stefan.gelfgren@umu.se)