



The current Norwegian Union Conference office at night.
Photo courtesy of Tor Tjeransen/ADAMS.

Norwegian Union Conference

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The Norwegian Union Conference territory is the country of Norway and consists of three conferences: East Norway Conference, North Norway Conference, and West Norway Conference. Statistics (June 30, 2019): churches, 62; membership, 4,536; population, 5,345,000.¹ The office is located at Røyseveien 41, 3530 Røyse, Norway.

Organizational History

The Norwegian Union Conference began operation on October 1, 1992, after an action to split the West Nordic Union Conference into two entities, the Danish Union of Churches Conference being the other one.²

A number of internal and external factors led to the establishment of two separate unions from Denmark and Norway. Internally, it included imprudent borrowing and poor financial management of several large institutions within the union.³ A major external element was a society-wide financial crisis.⁴ Both factors affected the operations of several church-owned institutions in the West Nordic Union Conference: Oslo Health Home (Kurbadet)⁵, North Norway Conference Old People's Home (Riarhaugen Aldershjem), and in Denmark the Nutana Health Food Company (established 1898)⁶ and Skodsborg Sanitarium (established 1898).^{7,8}

The West Nordic Union was not in a position to cover the debts of the institutions in addition to a large pension liability, and the union leadership called for a special constituency meeting at the Danish campsite, Himmerlandsgården on February 16-17, 1992.⁹ It elected Helge Andersen to replace Rolf H. Kvinge as union president with the understanding that Andersen would act as an interim president for some months while the West Nordic Union reorganized into two separate unions.¹⁰

For several years prior to 1992 the church in Denmark and Norway had discussed the issue of organization and what model to use.¹¹ Prior to the formal split of the West Nordic Union, members in both countries had expressed a desire to use fewer resources on administrative matters to ensure that more employees were assigned to evangelism. However, nothing had yet materialized when the financial crisis hit the church in the early 1990s. Now a committee tasked with finding new ways of to structure the church in Scandinavia proposed the creation of separate unions for Denmark and Norway.¹²

Subsequent to the constituency meeting of the West Nordic Union in February 1992, the leadership and executive committee of the union had experienced an extremely hectic period. They either closed or sold the institutions in financial peril and put processes in place to formally establish the two new unions.

The Danish part of the union applied for a union of churches status, and the first constituency meeting for the Danish Union of Churches took place July 1992 at Vejle fjord Junior College. The Norwegian part opted for a union conference status at an extraordinary session of the Norwegian section of the West Nordic Union held at Tyrifjord videregående skole (Norwegian Junior College) August 9-11, 1992.¹³ The General Conference annual council in 1992 ratified the actions to split the West Nordic Union Conference into the Danish Union of Churches Conference and the Norwegian Union Conference.

The first constituency meeting of the Norwegian Union Conference elected Roger Robertsen as president and Jóhann E. Jóhannsson as secretary/treasurer.¹⁴ The new union owed large amounts to the Trans-European Division and the Danish Union of Churches Conference. One of the main tasks of the new administration was to seek to liquidate the debts. In the January issue of the union magazine, *Evangelists Sendebud*, the two union officers informed the membership of a combined debt of NOK 24.2 million and the plans to eliminate it during a period of six years.¹⁵

They encouraged church members to contribute generously and set an ambitious goal of raising NOK 5 million by August 1995. The treasurer reported that by March 15, 1993, the union had received NOK 1.280.286.¹⁶ The General Conference and the Trans-European Division voted extraordinary appropriations of USD 450.000 to the Norwegian Union on condition that the union raised an equal amount. By the end of April 1993, after five months of active fundraising, the union had repaid NOK 11.45 million, reducing the debt to NOK 12.75 million.¹⁷ Throughout the period of repayment, the union did not reduce the number of pastors, but continued evangelistic activities at the same level as previously.¹⁸

By October 1994 the total debt had been reduced to NOK 7 million.¹⁹ The Norwegian church had met and exceeded its goal of raising NOK 5 million by the time of the union session in 1995. In addition to the regular debts, the Norwegian Union had a large pension liability for its own workforce and the employees of the Skodsborg Sanitarium, Nutana Health Food Company, and the Oslo Sanitarium.²⁰

Organizational Model

In order to save money on administrative positions throughout the church in Norway, leadership initiated a study to look at a more efficient organizational structure than having three fully-fledged conferences within a union in a country of only approximately 4.6 million inhabitants.

The administration presented a proposal for a new hybrid organizational model to the constituency meetings of the three Norwegian conferences in the spring and summer of 1992.²¹ The suggested model entailed that all financial matters and responsibility for the departmental work would be handled at the union level while the conferences would retain a president and an advisory committee responsible for its evangelistic work. The North Norway Conference²² and East Norway Conference²³ accepted the new model, while the West Norway Conference adopted a slightly modified version.²⁴

In 1995 the constituency meetings of all three conferences confirmed the new organizational model, in which the Norwegian Union would handle all secretariat and treasury functions, as well as departmental activities.²⁵ The structure has served the church in Norway well since then, although some argue, that due to its size, the church would be better served in a union of churches framework.

Sale of Institutions

The Adventist church in Norway owned three sanatoriums at the time of the formation of the new union in 1992: Jeloy Sanitarium (70 beds),²⁶ Skogli Medical Center (154 beds),²⁷ and North Norway Rehabilitation Center (95 beds).²⁸ In January 1994 Eva and Daniel Joensen, an Adventist couple, purchased Jeloy Sanitarium for NOK 10 million.²⁹ The union did not employ the net funds from the sale of the institution to pay debts, but placed them in an account for future use.³⁰ In 1999 another Adventist family, Synnøve and Raymond Knudsen, bought the North Norway

Rehabilitation Center, with the official handover taking place on July 1, 1999.³¹ The last institution, Skogli Medical Center, was reorganized into two limited Companies, Skogli Helse- og Rehabiliteringssenter AS (operating) and Skogli Eiendom AS (property holding company), on July 1, 1999. Located in Lillehammer, Norway, the institution remains an important part of the work of the church in Norway.

Old Peoples' Homes

The new union in Norway also took over the operations of three Old Peoples' Homes.

It transferred ownership of the Riarhaugen Old Peoples's home in Melbu to the local municipality in 1993 after years of substantial operating losses. On June 30, 1999, the "Sakshus" Old People's Home near Trondheim closed its doors after 47 years of operation, and the property sold.³² The church continues to operate the Mosserod Old People's Home (Mosserødhjemmet) (60 beds, established 1982) in the East Norway Conference.

Relocations

The offices of the Norwegian Union were initially in the same facility occupied by the West Nordic Union at Holmenkollveien 31, Oslo. After the sale of that building in 1992, the union administration moved to John G. Mattesons vei 13 in Oslo, offices belonging to the East Norway Conference.³³ The departmental directors were located in Akersgata 74, Oslo.

In 1992/1993 the Norwegian Publishing House (established 1879) also experienced financial challenges. The union leadership requested the Trans-European Division and General Conference to appoint a special commission to look at the publishing operations and make proposals for the future. The commission met in February 1994 and its recommendations included discontinuing the print shop. The factory shut down in stages and sold the presses and other equipment. By May 1996 the Norwegian Publishing House had sold its property for NOK 7,5 million and moved to rented offices.³⁴

Around June 1998 the union office moved to Akersgaten 74 in Oslo where the departmental directors were already situated. In order to use resources more effectively, the union sought to relocate with the Norwegian Publishing House and the Voice of Prophecy Bible Correspondence School outside of Oslo. Another reason for transferring to another area was that many employees commuted long distances, as housing was expensive in Oslo. However, both sides of the relocation issue had strong views on the matter. A special constituency meeting of the union convened at the Norwegian Junior College on October 18, 1998, to make decisions regarding three pressing issues: pension liabilities, ownership of institutions, and relocation of the union office. Delegates gave the union executive committee authority to continue the process to relocate.³⁵ That resulted in the purchase of a property and the move to Vik, located 45 km from downtown Oslo, effective December 22, 1999.³⁶ The new property and location has served the church well, and most of the employees live near their workplace.

Institutions

The Norwegian Union Conference operates the following institutions:

Norwegian Publishing House (established 1879).

Norsk Bibelinstitut (Voice of Prophecy Bible Correspondence School, established 1947).

Skogli Health and Rehabilitation Center (established 1946).

Norwegian Junior College (Tyrifjord Videregående Skole, established 1958), a boarding school that attracts about 50 percent of its 200 students from the local community.

Mosserødhjemmet Nursing Home (established 1981).

Kurbadet, Oslo, an evangelistic and student center with meeting facilities and accommodation for 40 Adventist university students.

Hope Channel Norway.

Agencies

ADRA Norway has a donor office supervising substantial development projects in a number of countries.

Mission

The financial crisis that precipitated the establishment of the Norwegian Union Conference diverted a lot of energy toward financial and administrative matters rather than a focus on evangelism. The indigenous Norwegian population has shown a declining interest in religious matters and Christian denominations apart from the Lutheran Church of Norway saw stagnation or decline in membership.³⁷ Due to immigration, the Roman Catholic Church in Norway had increased membership during the two first decades of the twenty-first century to 153,881.³⁸ During the same period, it has become increasingly difficult to attract an audience for religious programs. Despite such issues, the number of people with membership in Christian communities has risen from 216,141 in 2006 to 339,492 in 2017.³⁹

The Norwegian Union organized nationwide evangelistic efforts, supported by video programming, for several years at the beginning of the millennium. The efforts were unable to reverse the trend of declining membership. However, a net result in 2005 of the same number of members at the end of the year as at the beginning has been a turning point in which losses have not been as pronounced as in the previous 12 years.⁴⁰

Membership Development

The Adventist membership in Norway has shown a slow, but steady, decline since 1992. Most years between 1993 and 2019 have resulted in negative membership growth, averaging a loss of 58 members annually in the period from 1993 to 2004. Between 2005 and 2019 the annual membership loss has been 11. The year 2015 is a notable exception to these statistics. In that year the membership increased by 41 members for the union.⁴¹ A combination of an unusually high number of accessions by profession of faith and an unusually low number of deaths accounted for the positive result.

Executive Officers

Presidents: Roger Robertsen (1992-2000); Tor Tjeransen (2000-2010); Reidar J. Kvinge (2010-2017); Victor Marley (2017-).

Secretaries: Jóhann E. Jóhannsson (1992-1995); David Havstein (1995-2000); Robert Hansen (2000-2005); Finn F. Eckhoff (2005-2020).

Treasurers: Jóhann E. Jóhannsson (1992-2004); Terje Wollan Dahl (2004-2013); Jóhann E. Jóhannsson (2013-).

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