

# Country Report from Finland

*by Bishop Matti Repo at the Nordic Bishops' Conference 2022 in Iceland*

## **Statistical development**

The membership rate in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is presently 66,5 % which translates into approximately 3,7 million members. The numbers are gradually declining; last year, about 55.000 people withdrew their membership in the church whereas some 20.000 joined in. At the same time as we see a constant flow of baptized Christians leaving their membership, we witness a considerable counter-current of people either coming back to the church or becoming Christians for the first time. During the last five years, the number of baptisms has been in a slow decline, particularly in our major cities. What is most worrying, is that many parents belonging to the church do not find it meaningful to get their children baptized. They consider it an act against the independent choice of a child. Although the loss of members is reflected in the finances of the parishes, the church still is a considerably big employer with approximately 16.000 workers, half of which are active in spiritual services and the other half in various administrative tasks plus taking care of buildings and cemeteries. The church in Finland does not have a deficit of priests or deacons; we are lucky to get sufficiently candidates applying for ordination in all our nine dioceses. All applying for ordination into priesthood need to have a master's degree in Theology.

## **Recovering from the pandemic**

The local parishes suffered from restrictions during the two years of pandemic. For some months, worship services were only allowed to be held behind closed doors or with a limited number of people present. Luckily, most parishes quickly adopted a practice of live streaming their services. But it seems that many previously church going people have not yet found their way back. Many are still cautious for joining a crowd. On the other hand, in such a time of anxiety the visibility of the church in public media was strengthened. The national TV started broadcasting more services than before. The spiritual role of the church in underpinning resilience in the society was in many ways confirmed by state authorities.

## **Religion at school**

In Finland, all children receive instruction in their own faith at school; those of no faith are instructed in life skills or ethics and convictions in a broad sense. Religious education aims to equip children and youth in building their own identity and world view. There is no confessional religious instruction and no practicing of religion at school. However, there is a growing pressure in the society to restructure the whole model of education on religions or world views. It is not considered good to segregate children at school according to the faith of their parents. Since the local communities need to grant teaching of own faith to all children, the system has proved complex and expensive. However, the present model suits the interests of the church and serves best all religious minorities. In some cases, it has nevertheless been difficult to hire competent teachers. Lutheranism and Orthodoxy are the most commonly taught religious traditions. Primary school curricula have been designed for eleven other traditions, including Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Catholicism. There are now as many pupils being instructed in Islam as in Orthodoxy.

## **An overall plan for Christian education**

To enhance Christian education in parishes, the Church Council has adopted a strategy called *Path*. It aims to cover the life of a child from birth to age of 22. This overarching time is divided into eight phases of three years each, plus confirmation training as an independent part at the age of 15. Each section is given a theme that brings together relevant material and topics supporting the Christian growth according to the conditions typical to each age. The themes are: Gift, Joy, Adventure, Courage, Freedom, Miracle, Trust, Fellowship and Meaning. The local parishes are encouraged to arrange their work among children, youth, and young adults in using the idea of Christian life as a *Path* leading to participation in church and faith.

## **Reaching out to new generations**

Last year, the General Synod urged the church to take immediate action in response to the major challenges posed by the changes in the religiousness in Finland. In particular, the synod raised the need to connect with the Millennials and "Generation Z" members. According to recent surveys, many in the younger generations do not find any reason to be attached to such an old-fashioned institution as the church with its patriarchal values and practices. The General Synod also charged the Church Council with creating an action policy on evangelism that will pay particular attention to outreach work, e.g. by improving Church staff training and skills in evangelism and missiology.

Maybe it is in relation to this that we have started publishing "Bishops' Letters" to speak up more often on joint questions of interest in the church and society. We are thankful to the Church of Sweden for this pattern! The first one came out last autumn, and it was on the Holy Scriptures. The next one will discuss the meaning of Prayer. I am not sure if these papers on rather traditional topics can help in reaching out to new generations, but they nevertheless aim at supporting our members and employees in their spiritual life.

## **Consequences of Russian invasion to Ukraine**

Immediately after Russia had opened its campaign on 24 February, the bishops in the ELCF advised the local congregations to arrange prayer services for peace. We appealed to the Russian Orthodox Church and to other religious communities in Russia to take action to end the war and bring peace. In our joint Lenten letter from 1 March, we stated that Russia's attack on Ukraine is a crime against international justice and a sin against God and asked people to help the Ukrainians suffering from the war by donating to church relief agencies, and to prepare for receiving refugees. Also, we reminded that Russians living in Finland are not to be blamed for this war but instead, they must be treated as the neighbors they are. In May, the General Synod granted half a million euros to be used by the Finn Church Aid for Ukrainians suffering from the war.

On 1 March, Archbishop Tapio Luoma sent a letter to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia saying that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is deeply upset by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The archbishop appealed to the Patriarch and encouraged him to do all in his power to end the war and find a just peace. However, the ELCF has had to suspend all co-operation with the ROC. Our long theological dialogue is presently on hold, and as you know, the northernmost dioceses in our countries are not continuing their co-operation with the ROC in the Barents region. To maintain our relations requires that the Russian Orthodox Church does not give their support to Russia's illegal attack. As Archbishop Luoma put it, "Without this condition being met, the communication between our churches cannot continue."

### **Common statement with the Orthodox on baptism**

As it is known, the Finnish Orthodox Church is not under Moscow, but belongs to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This, of course, has created international tensions between the Orthodox, and the war has caused problems within Orthodox parishes in Finland. Many people attending the liturgy have relatives either in Russia or in Ukraine, and I heard from the local Orthodox priest that it had not been easy to maintain peace at the coffee table after the service. Quite apart from that, our relations with the Finnish Orthodox Church have developed favorably. We have this year adopted a common statement on baptism, according to which “no member of either church who decides to join the other will be rebaptized”. “In this sense, the churches recognize the validity of each other’s baptism.” As Lutherans and Orthodox, we both “encounter challenging questions regarding the transmission of the Christian heritage”, and “together we want to witness to the gift of baptism and to encourage all to learn more about it”, says the document.

There nevertheless remains differences in the theology of baptism. This statement does not change anything in the present policy the churches already follow, but it expresses it in a binding way. We hope that the document will strengthen the ecumenism in Finland, and maybe lead up into a wider common statement on baptism between churches of different tradition. Hopefully it will also contribute into an encouragement for the members in both our churches to bring their children to baptism.