

## Opening of the Nordic Bishops' Conference in Akureyri 27 June 2022

Welcome to the Nordic Bishops' Conference, this time held here in Akureyri.

It was three years ago, in Finland, that we had a meeting and quality time together. Who could have envisioned back then that we would have survived a global pandemic, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions here in Iceland, a war in Europe, travel restrictions and even lockdowns in some countries upon meeting next? It is incredible that things we have only read about in storybooks, at least in this country, have now become a part of our reality. This reunion is thus a celebration, and we truly hope that everything goes according to plan.

We have come together on an island in the North Atlantic. A small, beautiful island often referred to as the land of fire and ice. The Gulf Stream has kept us warm, making Iceland habitable throughout the year. In the 78-year-long history of our republic, we have managed to create a society of equality and prosperity, made possible by the land's bountiful resources and valuable fishing grounds. Our nation managed to power through for centuries, and we sometimes like to say that hardship left only the toughest genes to be passed down to our generation. In general, people in this country are comfortable, although there is always room for improvement in regards to bettering our society.

It is considered that the first settlers arrived here around 870 AD and that Althing was founded in 930 AD, making it the oldest acting parliament in the world. Most of the settlers and their families were from Norway, but some were also from Ireland. They practiced paganism until the year 1000 AD, which is when we say that the conversion to Christianity took place. The church became the Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1550, and as of now, 60% of our nation is a part of it.

The church's mission is the same now as ever, as well as being the same worldwide: to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in word as well as in deed. The church can therefore never be impartial when it comes to social issues or other affairs. No more than our Lord and Saviour in his time.

When we, the three bishops, began preparations for this celebration, we were preoccupied with climate change and thought it only natural that this common task for all humanity would be the main subject. The churches of the world have engaged in environmental issues. The Lord himself took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. It is therefore our obligation,

as well as the church's obligation, to engage in the conversation and actions on the serious threat that is global warming. We, the members of our church, have been active participants in all discussions and actions related to that threat. A few congregations have turned green, and many are on their way to becoming fully green. We have plentiful land and have restored the marshes in several places. We have planted trees and systematically grown our forests. We have participated in the season of creation and been a part of the Arctic Circle for a few years, the largest network of international dialogue and co-operation on the future of the Arctic and our planet. It is an open democratic platform with participation from governments, organisations, corporations, universities, think tanks, environmental associations, indigenous communities, concerned citizens and others. It is non-profit and non-partisan.

We have held conferences in Skálholt on the climate crisis and actions taken in the interests of our planet's future. Our local partners come from the government, the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland, the Icelandic Forest Service, the Icelandic Environment Association, the United Nations Association in Iceland as well as partners from other religious communities. We hosted global conferences in Skálholt in both 2020 and 2021, in co-operation with the Icelandic government and the United Nations Environment Programme, among others. We have come to the conclusion that we need to work together in order to turn the tables and prevent further damage from climate change. In Skálholt, as well as worldwide, the topic was on what ideological grounds could we gather to call for the founding of a Global Alliance on Faith for this Earth, associated with the United Nations Environment Programme. Religious movements are a powerful force in this world. They are even considered to be the world's third largest economic superpower, possessing half of all schools and overseeing over 8% of all land. In many places, religious leaders have political influence as well as being able to affect public opinion.

Topics of democracy and human rights have been on the minds of many in these times of a pandemic and war. The lectures being held here take those topics into account. We will study those matters from the perspectives of different specialists on the topics: a doctor in eco-theology, a writer who has been active in the environmental debate both orally and in writing, an attorney at law, a woman of the synod who has greatly contributed to the discussion on the democracy and a reporter who has closely monitored world affairs for a long time. Where does the church stand in these circumstances?

The pandemic allowed us to discover that we absolutely can work together. We can educate ourselves together, research together, look into theological affairs and contemplate on our churches' position together. We can share our concerns regarding the public's altered attitudes towards things that once were considered general and natural. Christenings are high up on the list. What effect will fewer christenings have on churches of the future? Why is that? What can be done?

We have many mutual matters to discuss, and possibly we will have the chance to address them in between acts as well as when we introduce each country's report.

Employees of the Bishop's Office are ready and willing to assist you and provide you with all information you might need. They will be located in the hotel, here at the Church of Akureyri and in the congregation hall, where the meetings will be held. Scheduled trips will be available to those that do not wish to take the 111 steps between the church and the hotel. Our employees will take care of all arrangements for those trips.

Once again, welcome all and enjoy your stay, our time together and the programme in whole.

The Nordic Bishops' Conference 2022 is now in session.