

ХРИСТИАНСКОЕ ЧТЕНИЕ

Научный журнал
Санкт-Петербургской Духовной Академии
Русской Православной Церкви

№ 1

2021

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К церкви встречи. Развитие евангелическо-лютеранской церкви Финляндии с 1970-х годов

DOI 10.47132/1814-5574_2021_1_222

Аннотация: До Второй мировой войны Евангелическо-лютеранская церковь Финляндии (ЕЛЦФ) была национально ориентированной церковью. После войны ЕЛЦФ начала развивать свои международные связи, став членом-основателем Всемирной Лютеранской Федерации (1947 г.) и Всемирного Совета Церквей (1948 г.). Цель статьи — показать, как деятельность ЕЛЦФ развивалась в этом направлении. Основное внимание уделено церковно-государственным отношениям и развитию экклезиологического и богословского самоопределения ЕЛЦФ. Отмечаются определенные тенденции: сокращение церковно-государственных контактов, превращение ЕЛЦФ в «народную церковь», что поставило ряд богословских вопросов перед церковью, решавшихся в том числе и в межцерковном диалоге, а также попытка ответить на современные цивилизационные вызовы.

Ключевые слова: Евангелическо-лютеранская церковь Финляндии, богословие, экклезиологическое развитие, народная церковь, межцерковный диалог, современные цивилизационные вызовы.

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Ссылка на статью: Карттунен Т., пастор. К церкви встречи. Развитие евангелическо-лютеранской церкви Финляндии с 1970-х годов // Христианское чтение. 2021. № 1. С. 222–233.

KHRISTIANSKOYE CHTENIYE
[Christian Reading]

Scientific Journal
Saint Petersburg Theological Academy
Russian Orthodox Church

No. 1

2021

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Towards a Church of Encounter.
The Development of the Evangelical Lutheran Church
of Finland since the 1970s

DOI 10.47132/1814-5574_2021_1_222

Abstract: Until the Second World War the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) was a nationally oriented church. After the war the ELCF began to redevelop its international relations and was a founding member of the Lutheran World Federation (1947) and the World Council of Churches (1948). The aim of this article is to show how the ELCF has developed since then. Its focus is on church-state relationships and the development of the ELCF's ecclesiological and theological self-understanding. Certain tendencies are noted: the reduction of church-state contacts, the transformation of the ELCF into a «folk church», which raised some theological questions, which were also resolved in inter-church dialogue, as well as an attempt to respond to modern civilizational challenges.

Keywords: Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, theology, ecclesiological development, folk church, inter-church dialogue, modern civilizational challenges.

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Article link: Karttunen T., Dr. Towards a Church of Encounter. The Development of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland since the 1970s. *Khristianskoye Chteniye*, 2021, no. 1, pp. 222–233.

The Loosening Ties between Church and State in Finland

Until the Second World War the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) was, like many Lutheran churches, a nationally oriented church. After the war the ELCF began to redevelop its international relations, and was a founding member of the Lutheran World Federation (1947) and the World Council of Churches (1948). Since the 1960s it has developed both internationally and ecumenically. At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s it began to assume an acknowledged ecumenical profile as “Lutheran and ecumenical”. New Finnish ecumenical Luther research especially contributed to this development. It was influenced by the discoveries of the roots of Luther’s theology in the heritage of the undivided church. The new approach had been inspired by the theological dialogue that began with the Russian Orthodox Church in 1970. The aim of this article is to show how the ELCF has developed since then. Its focus is on church-state relationships and the development of the ELCF’s ecclesiological and theological self-understanding.

Until Finland’s annexation by the Russian Empire in 1809 the ELCF was part of the Church of Sweden and had been a state church since the 17th century. After the annexation it retained the Church Law from the Swedish era. The church’s identity as a distinctly Evangelical Lutheran Church for Finland was encouraged by Tsar Alexander I when he appointed the Bishop of Turku as Archbishop of Finland in 1817, an event which marked the independence of the ELCF from the Church of Sweden. Together with the emerging revival movements within the Lutheran Church, which also contributed to the development of Finnish civil society, the ELCF gradually developed into a special Finnish form of the “folk church” idea.

Institutionally, the Church Law of 1869 and the establishment of the General Synod in the 1870s strengthened the church’s self-understanding as a folk church. At the same time the position of the Orthodox Church in Finland was strengthened. The religious landscape became gradually more pluralistic, and in 1923 the Freedom of Religion Act came into force, which, based on historical legacy and the religious distribution of the population, accorded public legal recognition to the ELCF and the Orthodox Church of Finland. Registered religious communities constituted a distinct third legal category. It is on this tripartite status under public law that the sources of income and financial support the churches and religious communities receive from the state have since been regulated [Kotiranta, 2009, 273; Sorsa, 2015, 10].

Sociologically, the idea of the Lutheran Church as the Finnish folk church was further strengthened by its increasing popularity, given that it had shared the nation’s fate and offered support to the people during the hardships of World War II. Until the beginning of the 1980s more than 90% of Finns belonged to the ELCF. That the Lutheran Church is understood as part of Finnish civil society rather than as a state church is also the result of its long-standing independence in decision-making and governance in comparison with the other Nordic majority churches.

The ELCF retains some links with the state. Perhaps the most visible feature of this is its public legal status. Strictly speaking, the ELCF has not been a state church since the Church Law of 1869 and the Constitution of 1919. The big picture is that Finnish church-state relations have been dismantled in stages without a complete separation [Kotiranta, 2009, 277].

The *status quo* in the Finnish church-state relationship following independence in 1917 persisted until the increasing radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, demands to amend the Freedom of Religion Act and for a radical transformation of church-state relations received insufficient support. In response, the parliamentary Church and State Committee began its work, conducting a thorough process between 1972 and 1977. Specialist church lawyers, university theologians, and researchers in the theory of law participated in this endeavour. The committee’s report constitutes a basic document in any examination of Finnish church-state relations in the 1980s and 1990s. The changes it proposed were somewhat cautious. The aim was not conclusively to separate state and church, but to strengthen the churches’ internal independence. This coincided with the objectives of the Lutheran Church, which sought to maintain an independent and visible place in society and its positive cooperation with the state. The committee’s work initiated a

process in the Lutheran Church, leading to gradual change over three decades [Kotiranta, 2009, 276; Sorsa, 2015, 10].

Finland became a member of the European Union in 1995, and since then church-state relations have returned to the agenda. This development is connected with the growth of immigration and the development of a more pluralistic and multicultural society. This underlines the future importance of freedom of religion and the place of the churches and other religious bodies in Finland. In the 1990s the human rights documents of the Council of Europe and of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and European integration forced the Nordic churches to re-evaluate the organisation of church-state relations in the light of new perspectives concerning the freedom of religion that underlined the religious freedom of the individual. In Finland two churches, the Lutheran and the Orthodox, continue to have a legal and economic position that differs from that of other churches and religious communities. This is not to suggest, however, that the state thereby adopts a more favourable attitude towards the Lutheran Church, but rather that there is an emphasis on a positive interpretation of religious freedom in line with international documents since the Second World War. There is a positive right to religion and its communal practice, not merely a negative “freedom from religion” [Kotiranta, 2009, 276–279].

Between 1993 and 2000 church-state relations underwent some changes, resulting in their growing mutual independence. In 1993 the Lutheran Church law was divided into two sections: the Church Law, passed unchallenged by parliament on the basis of the General Synod’s proposals, and the Church Order, passed by the General Synod, by which the church regulates its doctrines and life [Kotiranta, 2009, 279]. A proposal regarding the codification of the Church Law is currently under discussion in the General Synod. If approved, it will mean that the areas governed by the Church Order will grow, while the area governed by the Church Law will diminish.

Between 1997 and 2000 ELCF bishops moved from being officials of the state to servants of the church. As a consequence, bishops are no longer nominated by the President of the Republic of Finland. Instead, after his or her election the bishop receives a letter of appointment from the cathedral chapter. The stipends of bishops and the costs of cathedral chapters are now funded by the church [Kotiranta, 2009, 279].

A new Law on Religious Freedom was passed in 2003. The Law gave all Christian churches and other religious communities more equality in Finnish society. An illustration of this is that teachers are now permitted to provide religious education for pupils not belonging to their own denomination: a Catholic may now teach Lutheran religious education, for example. Another sign of equality is that seceding from a church or religious community has been made easier [Kotiranta, 2009, 279]. Following the adoption of the new Law on Religious Freedom in 2003 the Tampere Finnish Freethinkers opened an internet portal called “Resign from the Church” (www.eroakirkkosta.fi). The portal provides an easy method of resigning from a church or religious community and a useful tool for campaigners to promote this. The webpage has promoted a decline in ELCF membership (about 73% of the population in 2016). In 2011 97.5% of resignations came via this portal. The ELCF has opened its own portal, “Join the Church” (www.liitykirkkoon.fi), and the number of those returning to the church has grown.

Since the beginning of 2016 the state has no longer given the ELCF a percentage of community tax, but instead contributes a fixed sum from the state budget as compensation for the societal tasks the ELCF undertakes: preserving graveyards and buildings of cultural and historical value, and some functions in relation to the registration of the population.

However, many forms of cooperation between the state and the ELCF remain. As a public corporation, the Lutheran Church is more closely regulated by state legislation than other churches in Finland. In addition to the state constitution the Lutheran Church is bound by legislation concerning administration, public servants, and equality, as long as there are no norms in the Church Law, based on the church’s confessional independence and religious freedom, in conflict with the legislation concerned. Moreover, it is possible, for example, to make complaints about diocesan chapters’ decisions to the Supreme Administrative Court.

The state licenses clergy as marriage registrars. The state pays the salaries of military and prison chaplains. This is compensation by the state for the restriction of religious freedom when a person spends time in these public institutions. The church is also allocated slots for religious programming on public radio and television. Ecumenical worship is offered for the opening of parliamentary sessions and on Independence Day [Sorsa, 2015, 11].

The ELCF is autonomous, and can seek to exercise an active influence on the state. The state cannot legislate concerning the ELCF without its cooperation. However, not everyone accepts that the Finnish state is constitutionally neutral and that the Lutheran Church has a separate legislative process. Although the ELCF does not see itself as a state church, it is perceived as such by atheist criticism, and there are human rights lawyers who share this view, as at least some minority churches also did in the past. The argument is confused by associating the specific legislative positions of the ELCF and the Finnish Orthodox Church with the cultural and societal position of the ELCF, which is considered too strong [Sorsa, 2015, 11–13].

Folk Church Theology and Sacramental Communion Ecclesiology

The growing juridical and administrative independence of the ELCF is linked with the theological development of the church's self-understanding. Especially since the 1960s there has been discussion about the theological and ecclesiological understanding of the historical and sociological reality of the "folk church" (*Volkskirche* – German, *folkkyrka* – Swedish). In a secular and pluralistic society the weaknesses of this concept are increasingly apparent.

In a background paper for the ELCF Church Order Committee report in the late 1970s the bishop and professor Kalevi Toiviainen wrote:

A danger for the folk church is a problem that afflicts it from within, even as its position seen from the outside remains unchanged over a long period. This happens in such a way that, lacking a particular identity on the basis of which its nature as the people of God might be made obvious, it can no longer influence its members. In such circumstances the church's members cease to know what faith is all about. It becomes impossible for Christian heritage to be passed on through further education, for example, and the church gradually becomes meaningless, because it no longer bears any intrinsic feature that its members might not meet elsewhere [Toiviainen, 1980, 123].¹

This analysis grows out of the "folk church" discussion in the ELCF during the 1970s. The theme was also taken up in several publications in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The discussion has continued since the turn of the millennium: Björn Vikström, Bishop of Porvoo, has studied the folk church in the postmodern age, with particular reference to the Swedish folk church debate (2008); Seppo Häkkinen, Bishop of Mikkeli, has tackled the question of the tension between reality and ideal in the Finnish folk church in his doctoral thesis (2010); and Patrik Hagman has addressed the issue in his book "After the Folk Church" (2013).²

¹ Report of the Church Order Committee, Annexe 2, spring session of General Synod, 1980.

² Presentations from the ELCF seminar on the folk church held in 1975 were published in the Finnish Journal of Theology (FJT) 2/1976. Especially interesting for our theme is [Häkkinen, 2010, 248, 259]: "The church's identity and its different interpretations affect the tension between ideal and reality, which manifests itself in the church's work and the dimension of private spirituality (practical commitment). A feature of modernisation is that it has resulted in the church's internal differentiation. It is thus able to maintain its structure as a folk church, but at the same time it has lost opportunities to form a clear identity and shore itself up internally. The church has adapted to a changing society by increasingly treating faith's external impact (performance) in parallel with the purity of the message of faith (function). The development of working practices and a broadening of the opportunities for participation have brought new people into the orbit of mission, but it has yet to see increasing

Discussion has for the most part focused on the interaction between sociological and historical realities. However, as early as the 1970s, Toiviainen underlined the call for every local church, whether it was a folk church or not, to represent the one, undivided, and apostolic Church of Christ and the faith taught in all places, at all times, and by all Christians. He emphasised that the Reformation did not seek to establish a separate church, but to return the church to her original apostolic and catholic doctrine and essence [Toiviainen, 1980, 122].

More specifically theological are the ecclesiological themes treated in ecumenical doctrinal conversations. The most significant theological dialogue in which the ELCF has engaged was the series of conversations undertaken with the Russian Orthodox Church from 1970. Ecclesiology was a specific theme for the first time in this theological dialogue in Leningrad in 1983. In the section “The Nature of the Church” early forms of a communion ecclesiology understanding can be identified in these summarising theses:

6. In participating in the Holy Communion the Christian is strengthened as a member of the Church, the body of Christ. So, all Christians together are the mystical body of Christ. Unity in God as well as unity in faith and love between the members of the whole Church is realized in the Holy Communion.

7. The celebration of the Holy Communion and the Church belong together. As there is no Holy Communion outside the Church, neither can there be the Church without the Holy Communion [Dialogue between Neighbours, 1986, 99].

However, the ecclesiological work undertaken in preparation for and in evaluation of the Porvoo Common Statement, in which ELCF representatives actively participated, is even more significant. In this work a communion ecclesiological approach was especially fruitful. A sacramentally understood model of ecumenical ecclesiology was also considered relevant for Lutheran-Catholic and Anglican-Catholic theological dialogue.³ Behind this ecclesiological vision and joint understanding of the church as a “sign, instrument, and foretaste” of “the Kingdom of God” the influence of the Vatican II constitution *Lumen Gentium* is clearly evident. The Porvoo Common Statement describes a communion ecclesiology of which both Anglicans and Lutherans can approve:

17. Into this life of communion with God and with one another (koinonia), we are summoned by the gospel. In baptism the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:1–11; I Cor. 12:13); in the eucharist we are nourished and sustained as members of the one Body by participation in the body and blood of Christ (I Cor. 10:16f). ... the communion of the Church is constituted by the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments, served by the ordained ministry. Through these gifts God creates and maintains the Church and gives birth daily to faith, love and new life.

18. The Church, as communion, must be seen as instrumental to God’s ultimate purpose. It exists for the glory of God to serve, in obedience to the mission of Christ, the reconciliation of humankind and of all creation (Eph. 1:10). Therefore the Church is sent into the world as a sign, instrument and foretaste of a reality which comes from beyond history [–] the Kingdom of God [Porvoo Common Statement II A para. 17–18].

This sacramental communion ecclesiological approach afforded the making of easy ecumenical connections with the emphasis of Finnish Luther research, which underlined

involvement in the church’s activities. ...Societal change has challenged the church’s traditional community, whose weakening has contributed to a weakening of the sense of belonging to the church... A second factor in relation to ideal and reality is the declining consciousness of membership. It has weakened the passing of the tradition among the declining younger generations.”

³ For a Lutheran perspective of the Porvoo Common Statement and the Statement’s significance for Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue see [Vikström, 2016, 31–40].

the realistic, “ontic” character of Martin Luther’s theology, based on the idea of “Christ present in faith” (*in ipsa fide Christus adest*). From this perspective a balanced relationship between word and sacrament, the imputative and effective aspects of justification, and the church as a communion of faith and love can be formulated within a Lutheran theological framework. Moreover, the theology of priestly and episcopal ordination can be understood sacramentally in this light. In the framework of a sacramentally understood action in word, prayer, and the laying on of hands and the transmitting of the gift of the Holy Spirit ordination is understood as an instrumental-effective act. By extension, the ministry of bishop is seen from a pneumatological perspective in the context of a spiritual leadership serving the apostolicity of the whole church personally, collegially, and communally. This opens new ecumenical possibilities, as the Porvoo Common Statement and its reception indicates.

Professor Tuomo Mannermaa, the father of the new paradigm of Finnish Luther research, in concluding his analysis of communion ecclesiology after the Faith and Order Conference in Santiago de Compostela in 1993, sketched a draft for a “basic Finnish ecumenical theology” which to him meant “that justification and sanctification are not separated from each other as [done] in the so called purely forensic doctrine of justification in <...> later Lutheranism...” [Mannermaa, 1993, 9]. When he compared this approach to the theology of Santiago de Compostela, he was delighted that the basis of all ecumenical models in the F&O conference was the concept of *koinonia*. This is the biblical framework and theological basis of ecclesiological thought. He sees the concept as offering potential to correct one-sided conceptions and to serve as a basis for a more holistic ecclesial understanding. He also deems it positive that the theological core here is “participation in the Holy Spirit through Christ into God”. The Trinity is understood within the framework of essence, and not simply from a one-sidedly relational perspective. The content of Christian faith and doctrine may also, therefore, be expressed more widely. Mannermaa summarises: “The communion between people and the communion between humans and nature is based on the participation of humans in the inner communion of the Triune God, which is love” [Mannermaa, 1993, 10–11].

In the 1990s there were also discussions within the Lutheran World Federation concerning the nature of the communion of the Lutheran churches after the declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship between its members at the Budapest Assembly in 1984. In the LWF publication *The Church as Communion* (1997) Simo Peura, now Bishop of Lapua, writes of communion as a basic concept in Luther’s Reformation theology: “Luther recovers the early Christian community’s concept of *koinonia* – as described by Luke and Paul – ... His main interest is to commit himself and others to a betterment of this wrongly directed and distorted ecclesial reality. So by re-thinking ecclesial reality from the aspect of *communio* he wanted to change things, not to destroy them” [Peura, 1997, 90].

The church is thus a communion of faith and love in Luther’s theology. As members of this communion through Christ, our task is to share the community of goods (*Gütergemeinschaft*) with our neighbours. This happens when we carry their burdens, both by making their ills our own and sharing what we have with them. In this context Luther emphasises the importance of the image of the church as the body of Christ. Theologically, this can be understood primarily in the sense of the sacramental *unio cum Christo*. Word and sacrament and the sacramentality of God’s word are the basis of the *unio* in faith in which Christ is present and gives faith its form (*Christus forma fidei*). Participation through faith in the life of the Triune God in Christ, through God’s giving of himself in the church through word and sacrament, constitutes the *communio sanctorum* [Peura, 1997, 98–99, 100, 109–111; Karttunen, 2010, 136–137]. *Unio* and *communio* belong together, as do person and community in the communion of the church, in the church as the body of Christ. The purpose of God’s self-giving love is salvation and the realisation of love [Karttunen, 2010, 138].

In Luther’s theology the understanding of *communio* is linked with word and sacraments, that is with the congregation as a Eucharistic communion. Ordained ministry is divinely instituted to serve the word and sacraments. It was the intention of both Luther and Melancthon to preserve episcopal order and to revitalise the early church’s

understanding of the *communio sanctorum* as a witness to the gospel of Christ as they understood it.⁴ Accordingly, there seems to be a solid basis for at least a differentiating ecumenical consensus on sacramental communion ecclesiology as a basic ecumenical model. This also follows the core intentions of the Lutheran Reformers. Here the role of the ordained ministry and episcopacy has been – and continues to be – ecumenically challenging. Accordingly, that the Porvoo Common Statement (PCS) succeeded in creatively formulating the role of episcopal ministry within the framework of a communion ecclesiology serving the apostolicity of the whole church has had practical implications:

The ultimate goal of the fidelity of the Church, in continuity with the apostles, is the promise of the Lord and the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in the whole Church. The continuity of the ministry of oversight is to be understood within the continuity of the apostolic life and mission of the whole Church. Apostolic succession in the episcopal office is a visible and personal way of focusing the apostolicity of the whole Church [Porvoo Common Statement, IV C 46].

Trinitarian, Christologically anchored, and sacramental communion ecclesiology underlines the presence of Christ in the church through the work of the Spirit in word and sacraments and in the ordained ministry, serving as the ultimate guarantee of the church's apostolicity. The personal, collegial, and communal aspect of apostolic succession and the apostolic faith are core elements of apostolicity in the church's life. The PCS understands this in the light of the Lima Document (BEM): "Apostolic tradition in the Church means continuity in the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles: witness to the apostolic faith, proclamation and fresh interpretation of the Gospel, celebration of baptism and the eucharist, the transmission of ministerial responsibilities, communion in prayer, love, joy and suffering, service to the sick and needy, unity among the local churches and sharing the gifts which the Lord has given to each" [BEM, *Ministry*, para. 34].

The PCS and the Lima document have contributed to a fresh articulation and renewal of those traditional and ecumenically relevant features of Lutheranism which in Finnish (and Swedish) Nordic Lutheranism were already evident in the Church Order composed by Laurentius Petri (1571). It referred to previous Catholic ecclesial tradition wherever this was seen as theologically possible. Unlike Germany the Nordic Lutheran churches preserved the historic episcopate. In the Church Order of 1571 the office of bishop was explained as given by the Holy Spirit, universally adopted by the church, and remaining in perpetuity. The apostolic succession, understood as transmitted from bishop to bishop, thus remained [Justification in the Life of the Church, para. 73].

There have also been practical implications of this understanding of the Lutheran tradition in the ecumenical context. When the ordination of women was discussed in the ELCF in the 1980s it was concluded that the ordained ministry serving the proclamation of the gospel and administering the sacraments was divinely instituted, and not only for good order in the congregation. It was understood as constitutive of the church. The ecumenical strategy of the ELCF for the period ending in 2009 stated: "Faithful to the principles of the Reformation, our church emphasizes the Word of God and the sacraments as the foundation of faith and salvation and as the true constitutive elements of the Church together with the ordained ministry of the Word and sacraments" [Our Church, 2009, 17].

In November 2015, for the first time, the General Synod of the ELCF's statement on the F&O document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* approved communion ecclesiology

⁴ See, for example: Apologie XXVIII: „Die jetzt Bischöfe sind, erfüllen nicht die Pflichten von Bischöfen gemäss dem Evangelium; aber sie mögen immerhin Bischöfe sein gemäss der kirchenrechtlichen Ordnung...“ and Schmalkald Article 10: “Wenn die Bischöfe sein und sich um die Kirche und das Evangelium annehmen würden, so könnte man um der Liebe und Einigkeit willen, jedoch nicht aus einer Notwendigkeit heraus, das zugeben lassen, dass sie uns und unsere Prediger ordinierten (in ihr Amt einsetzen) und bestätigten...“.

as having the potential to express the convergence on a shared vision of an ecumenical ecclesiology:

The communion ecclesiology represented by the document and the Lutheran incarnational and justification-centred approach ... might be seen as representing a difference of perspective. The doctrine of justification, the doctrine of the sacraments and the incarnation, and the doctrine of the Trinity form three concentric circles, through which the work of God may be viewed from either a narrower or broader perspective. Although the document's language about the life of the Holy Trinity in relation to communion ecclesiology is not typical of Lutheranism, from our church's perspective it can be considered legitimate. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland aims to be an embodiment of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, that is, of the heritage of the undivided church.

Communion ecclesiology's holistic understanding of the mission of the church is also approved in a statement from the perspective of Lutheran and Luther's theology in which faith and love belong together in Christ, who is present in faith:

Faith and love belong together in Christ, who to the Christian is both the gift given in justification (sacramentum) and the example we are called to follow (exemplum). This accords well with the document's conclusion, which emphasises that koinonia or communio "is manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and mission)" (§ 67). On this basis our church emphasises diakonia and mission as a task arising from the church's essence.

Finally, it is significant that the Synod's statement bridges the divide between a "sacramental" and "word-theological" ecclesiology in line with traditional Nordic Lutheranism and the Porvoo Common Statement. Describing the church as a "sacrament" is recognised as legitimate:

The Lutheran Confessions emphasise that the church stands for ever. In essence it is a spiritual people, the righteousness of the heart. In this world this spiritual reality cannot, however, be separated from the external church (CA VI & VIII; Apol. VII & VIII). The Lutheran Church is also comfortable with the New Testament's language of the church as a mystery (Eph. 5.32). In a spiritual sense it extends to the other side of this visible reality. Our church therefore sees it as legitimate to speak about the church as an instrument of God and as a sacrament.

It may be concluded that since the 1970s the ELCF's theological self-understanding has developed in interaction with contextual realities in a more pluralistic and intercultural environment, ecumenical dialogue, and international encounter. There is also a deeper understanding of the Lutheran tradition, in which the impulses of ecumenical Finnish Luther research, whose origins lie in dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church and the ecumenical opening of the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II, have been decisive.⁵

This theological framework has in general served as an impulse not only for the ELCF's practical work in ecumenical dialogue, but also in its understanding of worship life and spirituality, diaconal work, global mission and evangelism, pastoral counselling, social ethics, and in discussions about ordained ministry and the nature of the church. However, theological challenges have grown in recent decades. Pluralism, secularisation, new spiritual movements, and the relationship between doctrine and moral discernment present acute challenges for the ELCF.

⁵ For an understanding of sacramental communion ecclesiology in the ecumenical context see also the report [Justification in the Life of the Church, 2010, 4.3]. The Sacramental Nature of the Church and Bishop Matti Repo's presentation for the ELCF dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church in Siikaniemi, 2011 in: [Repo, 2013, 345–363].

The Response of the ELCF to Contemporary Contextual Challenges

In recent years debate about the place of the folk church has again intensified in Northern Europe. This debate may be linked with discussion about the rise of civil religion in Russia, and in the post-socialist countries in general, found in the thinking of Robert Bellah. The 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, the 2011 Arab Spring, and tensions related to issues of gay sexuality have contributed to a changed situation – in connection with the debates about religion in society and about the presence of religion in the public square. In the church's internal debate there has been a concern about declining membership, in the background of which is an accelerated weakening of people's sense of identification with the church.

The new framework policy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland until 2020 "A Church of Encounter" is a response to the diagnosis of the church's four-year report published in 2012:

The connection of the Finnish people to the church has weakened rapidly in recent years in terms of their commitment to church doctrine, activities, and membership. This weak commitment to the church is not a reflection of an indifference towards issues of spirituality or philosophy of life. Alternative forms of spirituality are increasing. People expect the church to take a more visible role in discussion on life values. The spiritual identity of church employees needs to be supported. ...The weakening of religious education and detachment from a religious community are key factors underlying secularisation. ... The church needs to develop the ability to integrate its unchanging message into a changing missional environment. Central to this challenge is the need to learn to live with the disparity between a person-centred society and a communitarian approach. The church must be able to take into account the individuality of people while honouring the corporate fellowship that is fundamental to it [A Church of Encounter, 2015, 13–14].

The importance of a theological and spiritual orientation in "A Church of Encounter" is emphasised as the basis of the practical vision and values of faith, hope, and love in the work of parishes, dioceses, and the central administration of the ELCF. The setting of the communion of the Triune God as the basis for ecclesiological self-understanding and, in accordance with the principle of the *missio dei*, for its practical work in witness and service and in its striving towards fellowship and the visible unity of the church in ecumenical encounter, makes this clear. The guidelines until 2020 thus theologially grow out of the findings of Luther research and the influence of international ecumenical doctrinal discussion, which on the one hand has emphasised Christ's presence in the church as a community of faith and love, and on the other the church's participation in the life of the Triune God.

As a counterbalance to the divisiveness of exclusivism and the fragmentation of individualism, and no less to the church's internal secularising tendency, these missional guidelines unfold the four key objectives from the perspective of a Trinitarian-Christological understanding of the church's life and the basis of her mission:

"1) *We emphasise the message of the church* – "The content of the message is constant; only its form alters in response to the surrounding conditions ... Christ is the public truth – not a private truth that is only valid as a separate spiritual aspect of our lives. The Christian message cannot be differentiated from daily reality, but rather, it injects a new, expanding perspective into our reality."

2) *Encounter has meaning.* The basis of this encounter is clearly Trinitarian: "God created human beings to live in fellowship with him as well as with our neighbours and all of creation. The persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are in constant reciprocal union with one another.

God's Son was born in human form in order that all who have fallen into sin may come face to face with God. He reminded humanity of its mission to love God and neighbour. Human life means living in fellowship with others. Many of the church's challenges afford an opportunity of encounter.

... A focus on encounter highlights what is happening between God and people as well as between one person and another. The significance of encounter derives from the missionary nature of the church. God works through encounter. It forms and sustains individual connections to the parish, and moulds the lives of individuals and the community in various ways."

3) *We love our neighbours* and

4) *We value membership*: "The Bible describes the church as the body of Christ. As members we belong to a living entity. Each member is different, but plays an essential part in the whole. ... In addition to acknowledging difference and individuality, it is important to convey the importance of connectedness. Members are connected through Christ, not through their mutual uniformity. Connectedness with Christ motivates us to seek connectedness between people, even when there is great dissension."

There is a clear alignment between the guidelines' theological and missional criteria. At the same time the church's work is governed by the Church Law and Church Order. The divine is inseparable from the church's human reality, for all that they should not be confused with each other.

The publication of the four-year report *Community, Participation and Faith* (2012) was shocking for many, because it revealed dramatic changes in the beliefs of Finns: "In the Gallup Ecclesiastica 2011 survey, only about a fourth of Finns said they believe in the Christian God. Compared with the 2007 survey, their share had dropped by ten percentage points" [Community, Participation and Faith, 2013, 35]. The message of the latest four-year report of the ELCF (2016) is already less dramatic and indicates that creativity in church work has produced encouraging results. In its summary the report concludes:

The church is required to give arguments for its existence and presence in the public square. The division of the working environment into a range of smaller and multiform subcultures has challenged the church's traditional working methods. Religious pluralism also presents challenges to the functioning of the church. A growing range of religions, worldviews, and customs requires the church to express the nature of its identity. The next four-year period includes the anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. This guides the church towards a renewal from its core, while also attending to the challenges of its context and time [Eri-laistuva kirkko, 2016, 51].

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