

# Opening Doors

## Strategy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland through 2026

### I Introduction

The upcoming strategy period will be significant for the Church in many ways. Nearly all the key figures concerning the Church indicate the need for it to adjust its strategies: the number of baptisms and weddings are decreasing rapidly, activities bringing people together are not reaching the same numbers as earlier, Church membership is dropping and, in some areas, less than half of the population belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Commitment to the teachings of the Church and religious education have weakened. At the same time, internal conflicts within the Church have grown stronger. Despite all of this, the Church still holds a meaningful position in Finnish society and people's minds. Particularly in crisis situations, such as during the coronavirus pandemic, the importance of the Church is emphasised as a source of security, hope, and consolation.

Measures implemented on the basis of this strategy will shape the future Church. We will be forced to consider, for example, whether the Church has the ability to courageously look outward and forward, while also respecting its history and traditions. Or the identity of parishioners: as mere target groups for our work, or active participants making the Church a vital aspect of life in their own area.

The common strategy for the Church is based on the identification of cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary phenomena that are essential in terms of the future of the Church. For the background of the strategy, we compiled a future vision, from which to derive the key phenomena related to Church life. In formulating this shared vision, we turned to the work of the recent working groups that have dealt with the future of the Church, statistics provided by the Church or other organisations, and a wide range of materials on the future produced by different parties. As part of the process, hearings were organised and discourse on the future was followed in social media. Employee meetings and surveys were also utilised. One interesting area of background material included the electoral platforms drafted for the General Synod and diocesan council elections. The core principles have included transparency, a broad foundation, and multifaceted preparation. The drafting of the strategy involved hearing the viewpoints of diverse people on the Church and its future. To some extent, earlier common strategies of the Church were also used.

The central themes are reflected in the name of the strategy: *Opening Doors*. The doors must remain open; we must reach out to people and invite them in. The Church's doors cannot be closed off to anyone. In this age, it is vitally important for the doors to remain open. The Church's mission is not simply to open its own doors in this world, but also to open the door to heaven through Christ. This mission calls for courage, vision, will, and a shared commitment.

### II Basic mission of the Church

An organisation must understand the fundamental reason for its existence. The basic mission of the Church is to advance God's kingdom and proclaim Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world. This is the Church's ultimate reason for existing. This mission guides and shapes all of its life and activities. It should also animate the lives of all Church members.

The basic mission of the Church can be expressed in different words in different places and at different times. Within this *Opening Doors* strategy, we turn to the definition set out in the earlier, *Church of Encounters* strategy: The Church's mission is to call people to be in fellowship with God and encourage them to care for their neighbours and all of God's creation. The definition emphasises the idea that the proclamation of the saving Gospel, inclusion, common responsibility, speaking on behalf of those who are weaker, pastoral counselling, support for equality and human dignity, and preservation of the integrity of God's creation are all interwoven and belong together.

### III Values

Values show what we hold as good and desirable. The Church's common values are defined, as for the previous strategy, in accordance with traditional Christian virtues: faith, hope and love (New International Version, 1 Corinthians 13:13). Thus, the common value base of the Church is set out in an enduring, explicit way. The connection to God, formed through faith, creates the foundation for the life of a Christian and the parish. Hope is based on Jesus' promise of God's justice, care, and eternal life. Love means caring for those around us, always and everywhere.

These values should guide the daily activities and decisions of the Church and its parishes. The values also spark discussion, both within the sphere of the Church and beyond.

### IV Opening doors – strategic choices

The entirety of the Church's work shall be reconsidered in accordance with its shared strategy. The strategy endeavours to create a more unified, long-term approach. Within the strategy, the focus will be on the essential entities as well as the choices and prioritising that concern all actors involved. On the local level, the Church must assess how to best advance these shared goals. While not all the strategic choices will affect the parishes, parish unions, diocesan chapters, Church organisations or National Church Council in exactly the same way, the background phenomena are, to some extent, true across Finland. Within the Church, we need a common will to solve our shared problems. The strategy endeavours to facilitate this objective.

The key strategic choices of the Church include:

#### 1. Opening doors outward

*Identified phenomena: missional context, individualisation, marginalisation, and insecurity*

The Church's life is missional in nature. It requires the Church to go out into the world to proclaim the Gospel and to serve. The Gospel is lived out among people. The need for diaconal work is growing. Increasing inequality, individualisation, marginalisation and insecurity among people challenge the Church to utilise new operational models and methods.

- We will boldly proclaim the Gospel of Christ within a changing societal and religious landscape. We will use language that people understand. We will recognise the significance of spiritual life, spirituality, mysticism, and personal experience.
- We will place ourselves on the side of those who are weaker and reinforce the voice of those lacking a voice in our society. We will increasingly concentrate our diaconal work in areas where difficulties are amassing and where other sources of help are inaccessible.
- We will take the initiative as active listeners and dialogue partners. We will talk about God, call people to fellowship with Christ, promote human rights, and advance positive freedom of religion.

- We will strive further to initiate dialogue with those who are not yet or are no longer members of the Church. We will establish a nationwide model intended to reach the Millennial generation.

## 2. Opening doors to the Church and to growth

*Identified phenomena: inclusion and community, spiritual growth*

The Church is an inclusive, hospitable community. The Church operates in such a way that everyone experiences their church relationship as a source of strength and church membership as personally meaningful throughout their life span.

- We will invite people to engage in spiritual growth throughout their lives. We will emphasise the significance of baptism and Christian education, and we will consistently and actively reach out to those relocating within Finland. We will raise awareness of the possibility of adult confirmation.
- We will strengthen the participation of children and youth, the well-being of families, and intergenerational interaction.
- We will reconfigure the use of Church facilities. We will open parish facilities for personal reflection, prayer, and volunteer activities. We will organise worship services in locations other than in churches. We will increase diversity in our worship service life and multilingualism within our parish work.
- We will develop forms of online spiritual and communal life, independent of location.

## 3. Opening doors to everyone

*Identified phenomena: dissolution of oppositions, securing of parish work*

Human value and dignity are inalienable and safeguarded by the Church. The Church is, by its very nature, an international, border-crossing institution. The Church of the future recognises the disparity between parishes and strengthens the internal solidarity of the Church.

- We will promote equality and non-discrimination. Our activities are intentionally attractive. All people will be welcomed at parish activities.
- We will actively reject hate and discrimination.
- We will shift our resources from administration to activities.
- During the strategy period, we will determine structures needed to secure multifaceted parish ministry in every corner of Finland now and in the future. We will make the most of opportunities arising from people residing in multiple locations.

## 4. Opening doors to shared work and partnership

*Identified phenomena: the changing nature of Church work, trust, collaboration*

Church work is collaborative. Its successful implementation relies on input from both Church employees and parishioners. The future organisation of Church work calls for goal-oriented cooperation between parishes, as well as cooperation with other actors.

- Parish life will increasingly rely on parishioners' initiative, abilities, and competence. We will nurture trust, community, and a culture of collaboration. The role of Church employees will shift toward that of facilitators and mentors.
- We will renew our approach to leadership. We will become more flexible in terms of change, transparency, and a culture of trust. We will assume a membership-driven approach to our work.
- The Church and parishes will seek out different types of partnerships. We will encourage our employees to take an active, broadly networked approach to their work.

## 5. Opening doors to new possibilities

*Identified phenomena: economic insecurity and polarisation, experimental approach, digitalisation*

The Church must have the ability and agility to change. Changes are increasingly rapid and unpredictable, and their impacts are not felt in the same way in all places. A solution that works in one town may not necessarily be viable for another town. For this reason, we must have the courage to experiment and test solutions.

- During the strategy period, we will determine how the Church's activities will be resourced in the future. Sufficient resources must be found for both parish ministries and the shared, common tasks of the Church-at-large.
- We will experiment and test solutions and reinforce a culture of trial and error without fear of failure. We will also provide financial support for such trials.
- We will set quantitative, qualitative, and impact-oriented goals. We will critically assess our work. We will dare to let go of activities that are waning and relinquish properties that are not being utilised to their full potential.
- We will strengthen digital work and further, systematically digitalise our services, taking into account the Church's essence and mission.

## 6. Opening doors to the future

*Identified phenomena: limited ecological carrying capacity, renewal of approach, hope*

Respect for God's creation, a moderate lifestyle, and responsibility arise from the Church's basic message. The Church of the future must be aware of Christianity's global development. We may either figure things out independently or learn from others. Now is the time to expand and extend our perspective. We are carried by hope.

- We will enhance ecological and social responsibility within the Church's activities. We will keep the perspective of our children's future strongly present.
- Our Church will operate across boundaries and engage actively in ecumenism, reflecting our activities against global Christian experiences, particularly in those locations where Christian churches hold a minority position.
- We will sustain hope in human life and society. We will be a reminder of the other-worldly voice and of the kingdom of heaven.

## **Background: Future vision**

### **1. Theological development**

When drafting the Church's strategy, we must consider what the Church is and its mission in the world. This section highlights several perspectives in light of developments in global ecumenical theology.

Presently, Christian theology is being practiced within a situation where the majority of Christians live in the so-called Global South, which includes Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As recently as a few decades ago, a large portion of these areas were still colonies and mission fields. Europe was seen as the centre of Christianity, from which the Christian message would spread and where theology would be devised, also for other continents. More recently, this conception has changed. The traditional pattern in which resources and ideas have flowed from north to south has been replaced by networking and collaboration. Reciprocal partnerships have been established between churches in various parts of the world. Theology is generally being practiced with an awareness that the theological processes are always affected by contextual aspects such as cultural, social, and political dimensions.

Contextual theology also holds significance when it comes to the self-understanding of the northern churches. Finnish Lutheranism is built on the tradition of Latin Christianity, but has been shaped by Martin Luther's theology and the Lutheran Confessions. This tradition remains essential to us, but we know that it is only one thread in the larger web of world Christianity. Thus, it is important for the Finnish Lutheran tradition to interact with ecumenical tides.

### **What are recent emphases in ecumenical theology?**

The foundation of the Church's existence is participation in God's mission, which Jesus articulated in these terms: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4: 18-19).

The Church's mission is holistic and liberative. By "holistic," we refer to the idea that God's redeeming work is directed toward humanity within its given, lived historic context. Proclaiming mercy, bearing witness to the kingdom of God, and neighbourly service are all part of the same process. Faith, hope, and love belong together. The Gospel applies to all people and all of God's creation, containing power to change our world.

In terms of the Church's mission, "holistic" refers to the fact that the Church must be prepared for its traditional structures and ways of thinking to change when facing poverty, exclusion, and marginalisation in this world. When proclaiming the Good News, the Church must remember that God exists in the world before the Church: Christ is, in a special way, present in the least of these brothers and sisters (Matthew 25: 37-40).

Shortly before His ascension to heaven, our Lord told his disciples of the far-reaching task (Matthew 28:18-20) to which the Church is committed: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." In modern mission theology, the Church's influence is understood to include both visible Church growth as well as the strengthening of God's kingdom (Matthew 13: 31-33):

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

Contemporary theology is network-based, crossing denominational boundaries. Given the interaction between confessional traditions and geographic polycentricity, we might say that we are living in exceptionally innovative times. For this reason, it would be wise for the strategic work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland to utilize key findings of ecumenical theology.

On the other hand, there is reason for our Church to consider what new contributions we might bring to interactions with other churches. Within this process, theologies of the Global South can help us see our special characteristics and contextual perspectives more clearly. For example, there is reason to include gender equality in global discourse, specifically as a fundamental, Christian value.

A strategic goal for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland within its current operational environment shall be to give a clear, intelligible witness of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world (John 14:6), in whom “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The Church must speak of God who “has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble” and “has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52–53). Seemingly radical, these excerpts from the Bible are relevant and timely for today’s society, in which prejudice, discrimination, and social inequalities are on the rise, and in which the welfare state built on a Lutheran faith tradition is being challenged. Within this setting, the Church can be involved, on the local level, in building a community in which parishioners serve one another and form connections among people on a broader scale.

It is also essential to remember that the Church proclaims hope in the midst of hopelessness. As signs of the end times began to appear, Jesus spoke encouragingly: “when these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28). Christian hope is grounded in the crucified and risen Christ.

## **2. Megatrends and matters of concern for the 2020s**

The Church is not alone in this significant time of change: the megatrends that define the 2020s include, for example, climate change, ongoing digitalisation, changing demographic structures, growing income disparity, and problems due to political polarisation. These megatrends are complexly interwoven with lifestyles, values, the economy, and politics, and they affect what people experience as being meaningful and what provokes concern.

### **Climate change**

Of the current megatrends, the most significant is climate change and efforts to curb it. In terms of climate change mitigation, 2020 was supposed to be a turning point: increasing global greenhouse gas emissions were to take a sharp downward shift. This would halt the rise in global temperatures to figures that would likely not be excessively dangerous. Unfortunately, this goal was not achieved.

In order to reach the targets set by the Paris Climate Change Conference, global emissions would need to be halved during the 2020s. As our entire economy and society rely largely on the use of fossil fuels, this has a widespread, societal impact. The effects extend to all aspects of life: food, housing, mobility, consumption, and leisure activities. Changes must also be made to daily habits: all forms of consumption and travel, for example, must be reduced. The social mood is greatly affected by whether we view ourselves as being on the journey towards a more balanced future or whether we see the era of fossil energy as the lost golden age.

Over the next decade, the impacts of climate change on our planet will become more apparent and worrisome. Signs of the destruction caused by climate change are already becoming part of our everyday lives: Greenland's melting ice sheet, forest fires in Siberia, wildfires over a greater part of Australia, and the fact that parts of Finland no longer have a proper winter every year. Studies show that these types of news are causing deep concern. According to a survey conducted by Sitra, as much one fourth of all Finns and up to 38 per cent of those under 30 years of age state that climate change elicits feelings of anxiety. Anxiety can lead to positive change and action, or it can cause withdrawal and cynicism.

## **Digitalisation**

Digitalisation will intensify throughout the 2020s. Digitalisation offers a host of new opportunities while also generating social changes.

The biggest breakthroughs concern the development and utilisation of artificial intelligence. Evermore proficient computers are taking over certain professions and specific functions, thereby replacing human labour. Massive amounts of data are being collected from people's online activities. Online advertising and other intentional communications are now able to specifically target individuals based on their online behaviours and personal traits. Questions concerning personal privacy are also increasingly important.

Artificial intelligence evokes even more extensive perceived threats as well as fear. Projections include scenarios where artificial intelligence could advance beyond the control of its creators and begin to realise unintended consequences. The darkest scenarios are not likely to occur, but still raise concerns and ethical issues. Are we developing a technology that will truly serve human needs, or could humankind become subservient to the systems it is developing – whether they be technologies, social ideologies or economic systems? Technological development also generates optimistic scenarios for the future in which technology will facilitate a freer, idler life, since robots will take over routine, tedious tasks. The Church could play a meaningful role in the discourse concerning the ethical and worldview aspects of technological advances.

For the Church, digitalisation offers new possibilities to encounter and interact with people. Conditions for carrying out such online work are already quite good. During the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, many parishes and Church employees successfully shifted a significant portion of their work online. This development should be continued and further strengthened.

## **Aging population**

According to population projections, the number of pensioners (older than 65) will exceed the number of young people (aged 18–40) during the coming decade. These projections are fast becoming outdated since, over the past eight years, the birth rate has rapidly declined. In 2018, the

birth rate was at its all-time lowest. As many Finnish children were born in 2018 as during the famine years of the 1860s; altogether 47,500 children, which was 2,700 less than the previous year.

The declining birth rate and changing age structure are global phenomena. By 2030, the number of people over the age of 60 will globally exceed the number of those under the age of 10. The number of those over 80 is expected to triple between 2017 and 2050. An aging population no longer concerns only the wealthy industrialised countries. A similar demographic shift is also taking place within middle- and low-income countries.

### **Growing income disparity**

Globally, growth in income disparity may accelerate during the 2020s. Global economic growth has increased wealth across all income segments, but absolute wealth has gathered consistently and rapidly at the uppermost level of the income pyramid. It has been estimated that, by 2030, the richest one per cent will own two thirds of all the world's wealth.

As economic disparity grows, there is also increasing dissatisfaction with the global system and demands for its renewal. The concentration of economic power in the hands of an increasingly smaller group is incompatible with the ideals of democracy. Income disparity is also closely connected to climate issues: the wealthiest tenth of the planet's population is responsible for nearly half of all the global carbon dioxide emissions. Efforts to find ways to challenge global capitalism as the reigning economic system have been sought at an increasing pace. A broad consensus exists concerning the need to reform the foundations of the global economic system. The churches, particularly through church federations, have been active participants in this discussion. The Roman Catholic Church has played an especially visible role.

### **Political polarisation**

The political field has become increasingly polarised. With regard to democracy, the most concerning global trend has been the questioning of democracy and simultaneous rise of authoritarianism. As recently as the 1990s, it appeared that the success of the market economy and liberalisation of international trade would inspire an even more expansive spread of democracy. Faith in the inevitable advancement of democracy has now disappeared. Even in Finland, there are a great many people who feel that their voices are not being heard.

Authoritarian populism is one response to global changes. It is mostly based on the idea of a golden age to which we should return. The future political lines of division may, also on the global level, be subject to the same dichotomy as is occurring within the Finnish political environment, where traditional parties are struggling. The strongest growth is found, not only among politically conservative groups, strongly oriented toward the past, but also among the politically liberal groups pushing most forcefully for change.

### **What is the global, mental landscape of the 2020s?**

The Church is incapable of having a direct impact on societal and global development trends. It is also not possible to predict all phenomena affecting people deeply on the local or international level. Such unpredictable phenomena include, for example, natural disasters and pandemics. The Church can, however, determine the degree to which its message and activities will focus on those issues and matters of concern characterising the lives of people in the 2020s. These questions are, in



many ways, different than those we have faced throughout history. Therefore, we cannot think that the answers lie only in the Church's history and reliance on earlier theological thought. Also, we need an even more open dialogue with the surrounding context. Just as the problems are global, many of the solutions will also need to be global. Thus, the significance of international collaboration and religious dialogue is growing.

### 3. Changes in the media

Finnish media habits have changed as a result of new communication technologies and the mainstreaming of social media. The media field has fragmented. Earlier, there were channels through which it was possible to reach nearly the entire population. Nowadays, different population groups use different communication tools. For example, following news on the television and radio is more common among the older age groups. The use of social media, on the other hand, is more prevalent among the younger age groups, but social media is no longer just a tool used by the young and trendsetters. It is now used by all age groups. The Finnish population spends an average of nearly seven hours a week on social media. Social media is an ongoing part of all aspects of life.

The thinking of media as a communication *tool* has aged along with the development that has occurred: media is not a tool, but a part of a living world, an inseparable aspect of today's reality. Through social media, users form and maintain social relationships, consumption, outlooks, and convictions.

Internet and social media have changed power relations. Anyone has the ability to publish whatever they want. The power of traditional media to guide public discourse has diminished. The shift of power in communications from media gatekeepers to people themselves has also changed people's relationship to information and authority. For the Church, this means that the Christian faith is no longer the obvious, default spiritual choice for Finns.

The viewpoints of the Church are competing with all other viewpoints offered globally through all forms of communications. People are not automatically turning to the Church as their primary source on spiritual matters. More tempting and relatable viewpoints can be found from anyone or anywhere. On the other hand, this often has the effect of forming a media bubble in which people seek out viewpoints from sources that echo their own.

The Church needs to find an appropriate way to express and justify its faith within a radically changed media reality. Impact is no longer gained simply through one's status or scholarship; it calls for dialogue and the consideration and pursuit of shared perspectives. There must be a shift from one-way communications to interactive communications in which all subjective viewpoints are held as equally valuable, even if they are not seen as being correct.

The opening of communications has also brought with it such forms of media and social media accounts that purposefully disseminate inaccurate information. Such "fake news" and "disinformation" have become a part of everyday discourse. Media literacy is ever more important.

In Finnish towns and villages, churches hold a visible position, whereas the Church's online presence is much less visible. Very few parish employees have been assigned to work in social media as part of their job description. The situation, however, has changed rapidly in response to the coronavirus epidemic. The work to be done within the national media is still, however, being conducted by quite a small group. Social media will become an integral part of the job for many Church employees, but the participation of Church leaders in contemporary societal discourse on social media remains less than that of other societal leaders. Social media offers the opportunity to

reach people, but, at the same time, it requires one to be ready to defend positions and be exposed to conflicts.

The mediatization of reality provides an opportunity for the Church. It provides an instantaneous “mirror” with which to assess the impact of one’s own message and, through feedback, to develop our own actions. The Church still has exceptionally extensive personnel and communications resources. If these resources could be used to serve both those attending services and others through the media reality, the Church would not fall by the wayside online either.

Throughout Church history, the Christian message has been articulated in fresh ways in response to the time and culture, language, emphases, and matters of concern of each new era. Along with communications methods, we also need theological reflection on what the Christian message is for this era and this global culture. On the basis of its core message, how might the Church create a better culture of discourse and an understanding, compassionate spirit on social media?

#### 4. Changing religious trends

##### **Change trends in Western religiousness**

Religiousness has changed dramatically in Western culture. In addition to institutional religious practice, religiosity is increasingly taking forms that are based on independent, individualised choices. Commitment to Church membership, the faith as presented in the Creed, and participation in church activities have weakened. This development is especially pronounced among young adults. The religious outlook, even of young Church members, is independent and individualised.

According to research, the change in religiousness is explained by two large trends: individualisation and secularisation. Individualisation emphasises the individual’s own religious choices. This also involves an assessment of one’s relationship to Church membership; one does not belong to the Church out of habit or tradition. Rather, membership is based on its significance to one’s life. In recent years, an experienced distance or disconnect with the Church or disbelief in the teachings of the Church have become common reasons for people to forego church membership in Finland. Secularisation arises, for example, in European comparisons that indicate that younger generations are less religious than previous generations. This manifests itself in participation, faith in the existence of God, the practicing of religion, and membership in religious communities.

##### **Breaking the chain of religious tradition**

A key factor in the change in religiousness is the fact that the process of transferring religious tradition from one generation to the next has weakened. When this occurs, children do not gain a connection with the community that practices their faith and fail to adopt the religious practices of their own religion in their daily lives. Both religiousness and irreligiousness are handed down from one generation to the next (cf. Bengtson).

In the Nordic countries, a break in religious tradition is most evident in people’s attitude towards baptism. A large portion of Church members are opting not to baptise their children. In 2000, around nine out of ten children born in Finland were baptised, while the comparable figure in 2019 had declined to only 62 per cent. The practice of baptism declined rapidly after 2010, particularly in the Helsinki metropolitan area. According to a baptism survey conducted in 2019, the primary

reason for not baptising a child was that the parents wanted to give the child the choice as to whether or not s/he wished to be baptised. This type of thinking is prevalent among women. The trend of not baptising is especially prevalent in families in which one of the parents is not a member of the Church.

Individualisation and secularisation are more common within age groups that are currently starting families. The decision of whether or not to baptise a child has often already been made prior to actually starting one's family. From the Church's perspective, it's challenging that, during the period between confirmation and starting a family, the majority of young people have no connection with the Church. Therefore, by the time the question of baptism arises, the Church has become a distant institution for many.

### **Changes in the religiousness of young women**

The share of those who do not belong to any religious community has grown radically. In 2000, ten per cent of the Finnish population did not belong to any religious community. By 2019, the share had risen to 29 per cent. Religious non-affiliation does not, however, always mean being non-religious. Many immigrants do not belong to any religious communities, even though they are religious.

Also, the share of those who do not follow any religion has increased in Finland. According to the international ISSP survey, just under half of Finns stated in 2008 that they do not follow a religion. By 2018, the share of those who think like this was already nearly 60 per cent. Particularly among young women, religiousness has changed in Finland in recent years. More and more young women identify themselves as a spiritual, but not religious, person.

In terms of religiousness, the generational changes become clear when one asks whether Finns believe in the existence of God. In accordance with the international ISSP survey (2018), three out of five Finnish women over the age of 65, but only one fourth of Finnish women under the age of 25 believe in God. More than half of women under the age of 35 do not believe in God. Among men, there are no such differences; one third of men over the age of 65 and under the age of 25 state that they believe in God.

Women have traditionally held a more central role in terms of the transmission of religious tradition. Traditionally, it has been women who have taught children the practice of evening prayers and who have taken their children to church activities. The changing relationship of women and religion will likely be reflected in a strong change in religiousness within the home.

### **Population changes**

Migration in Finland will accelerate in the coming years. The population will likely be concentrated in the country's three growth centres: the Helsinki, Tampere and Turku metropolitan areas. Overall population growth, as well as the working age population, will be concentrated around large cities. Population concentration occurs on multiple levels at the same time: from smaller cities to larger cities, from smaller regions to larger ones, and from the outskirts of larger cities and regions towards city centres. This migration trend and the shift of the working-age population towards a few growth centres will result in the polarisation of economic development. This heightens pressure to merge towns as well as parishes. The development also means pressure to reduce the number of Church employees and services in more remote areas.

In addition to the population concentration development, the current trend of living in multiple locations must also be taken into consideration. Nowadays, people are increasingly residing in multiple locations for different reasons and travelling regularly between them. The result is the generation of new types of location identities and community roles, which also brings many opportunities. People reside in multiple locations due to work, studies, leisure, family life, and relationships. More than 90 per cent of holiday homes are located in the countryside and around 2.2 million Finns spend part of their lives residing in them. Life in multiple locations is expected to further increase along with, among other things, the development of possibilities for remote working. This can affect the vitality of rural communities in a significant way.

The share of the foreign-born population in Finland started increasing in the early 1990s. According to Statistics Finland, the country's population included 412,000 people (seven percent of the total population) who speak a foreign language as their native tongue. The majority, or four fifths, of foreigners residing in Finland are not members of any religious community, but this is not a direct indication of whether or not they are religious. For example, approximately 16,700 people belong to Islamic communities, but the number of Muslims in Finland is estimated to be around 110,000–120,000. Religious diversity in Finland has increased. The number of registered religious communities has also seen continuous growth during the 2000s.

## 5. Changes in the Church's position

### **Financial challenges of the Church**

As this strategy is being drafted, we are living in a situation in which the world economy has been ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic, making it impossible to make any estimates regarding the development of Finland's national economy. Nevertheless, parish finances will almost certainly decrease, necessitating additional adjustment measures.

Even under normal circumstances, migration and increasing resignations from the Church have an impact on the Church's finances. The economic development of the parishes will become polarised. The Church of the future must carry out its work using fewer resources. The economic situation creates pressure to reduce the number of employees and relinquish real estate properties. The Church will no longer be able to afford all of its current operations. This should lead to intentional planning for the future: what tasks are most essential for the Church and how will they be resourced and implemented? How should employee groups be prioritised? Which properties should be relinquished?

Declining resources can also, positively, highlight the role of parishioners and alter the employee-dominant structure of the Church. The role of parishioners will grow naturally as the number of employees diminishes. The competence of volunteers and significance of volunteer work in strengthening commitment to the Church has long been discussed, but the role of the volunteer is still limited in many ways.

### **The changing role of the Church within society**

In 2000, 85 per cent of Finns were members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. By 2019, the membership had declined to around 69 per cent of the population. The declining membership

affects the Church's role in Finnish society. The Lutheran Church will likely remain the largest religious community in Finland for the foreseeable future, but will no longer be the religious home of a majority of the population.

Within this changing situation, it is essential that the Church assume an active role. The key question is how the Church will orient itself towards the world. Mission is the Church's way of being that serves as the background for everything: the evaluation of the internal and external activities of the Church in terms of structures, operational models, and language.

Activities directed outward should focus particularly on reaching the younger generation. A large portion of young people drift away from the parish after confirmation and resign from the Church. An increasing number of babies are not being baptised. An increasingly larger group of Finns remain outside of the activities and membership of the Church. In what ways is the Church relevant to this group and how does it speak to them? There is also reason to consider new ways of encountering people besides traditional church ceremonies, and ways in which we might birth a meaningful church relationship for them.

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Throughout its history, the Church has gazed towards the unknown future with courage and hope. As part of our strategy work, we join that group of visionaries. The present and the future, both permanence and change are intertwined in this *Opening Doors* strategy. We trust that the renewal of the Church will continue under God's mercy. The door to the future is wide open.