

Response by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland to the CEC Open Letter *What Future for Europe? Reaffirming the European project as building a community of values.*

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) - being an active, committed CEC Member Church and actively engaged in European Affairs - wishes to thank CEC for this analytical, well-elaborated document, inviting Member Churches to participate in the very topical and highly significant discussion on the future of Europe.

A thorough discussion and in-depth reflection on what kind of Europe we want, and how CEC and its Member Churches can contribute to developing the European project is perhaps needed more than ever today, when Europe - and the European Union - are facing multiple challenges, ranging from disillusionment and the risk of disintegration to geopolitical challenges, climate change and the migration crisis.

The Open Letter is an excellent document, providing an analytical background to the theme. However, we think that the document is too long, a bit too negative and too backward looking, as there is a need to look forward - with fresh ideas and new visions - focusing on solutions and possibilities, instead of problems and challenges. Throughout the document, there is also a certain perception of a clash between an anonymous 'EU elite' and 'the grass-root level', which we find unnecessary and misleading.

Whilst we acknowledge that Europe is indeed larger than EU, our points of view mainly concern the European Union. A more united, democratic EU, acting in accordance with its common values, can also have significant, positive impact on both its neighbouring countries and globally. The Council of Europe is also an important institution that would have deserved more attention in the document.

Our considerations below are based on both the Open Letter and the discussions held in the regional consultations in Reykjavik (March 2017) and Prague (December 2017) and the Nordic-Baltic CEC General Assembly preparatory meeting in Sigtuna (March 2018), in which representatives of ELCF have participated.

Our key message - which we hope could perhaps also be reflected in the declaration on the Future of Europe to be given at the upcoming CEC General Assembly in Novi Sad - is:

1. What kind of Europe do we want - a need for hope and new visions for the future

With regard to the multiple challenges facing Europe and the European Union today, there is a need to rethink, revive and reaffirm the European project. New, fresh ideas and courageous visions are needed, as is a debate on all levels of what kind of Europe we want for the future.

CEC and its Member Churches need to take part in this debate, bringing forward the message of joyful hope, raising from our Christian faith. We need to build bridges, promote peace and reconciliation, and foster a sense of community, belonging and inclusion throughout Europe.

2. We need to reaffirm EU as a community of shared values

The European Union is based on common, fundamental values – respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law – enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. The main goal of the EU is to defend these shared values and promote peace and wellbeing of the citizens in Europe, and to work for sustainable development and cohesion, combat social exclusion and discrimination and promote social justice and solidarity among Member States.

As the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker said in his State of the Union-speech in September 2017: *“Our values are our compass. For me, Europe is much more than just a single market. More than money, more than a currency, more than the euro. It was always about values”.*

These shared values must be the guiding star for the EU and at the heart of all European policy-making. CEC and its Member Churches need to constantly remind political decision-makers on both national and European levels of these common European values, so that they are implemented in all policy areas – from migration policies to promoting human rights, social justice and sustainable development. There is also a need to constantly debate the notion, impact and relevance of these common values in today’s increasingly multicultural Europe.

3. Churches have an important role to play in shaping the vision of our future European home

CEC and its Member Churches have an important role in adding value to and being constructive and positive – albeit sometimes critical – partners in developing the European project. Churches have vast expertise and extensive experience in a number of policy areas – from promoting human rights including freedom of religion or belief, enhancing humane migration policies and working for climate justice to combating poverty and social exclusion. Churches are working on all levels – from local, regional and national to European and global, connecting European citizens across the continent.

The open, transparent and regular dialogue between the EU institutions and Churches, enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty (Article 17, TFEU) is of paramount importance in this respect, and needs to be further strengthened and developed. In order to be credible and competent dialogue partners, CEC and its Member Churches need to have good knowledge of both contents and structures, including decision-making processes on both European and national

levels. Networking and collaborating with ecumenical as well as other relevant cooperation partners is also essential, as is setting clear priorities and strategic objectives.

The discussion about the future of Europe certainly needs to continue in the coming years, especially on the local, regional and national level, and CEC and its Member Churches should continue taking active part in these discussions. We hope that CEC could provide a platform for its members to discuss, debate and exchange best practises in this respect. Our Church has, for example, invited all dioceses to arrange discussions on the future for Europe in 2018. The aim is to bring together bishops, church representatives, young people and representatives for the civil society to discuss with Finnish MEPs and political decision-makers from national and local level about what kind of Europe we want and about the role of Churches in this respect.

As Churches, we are called to bring forward the message of faith, hope and love. We need to have confidence and trust in the European project and contribute to developing this, together with political decision-makers and other cooperation partners. Our task is to build bridges, promote peace and solidarity and enhance mutual trust, tolerance and respect. We need to work together for a better Europe and a more just, sustainable, democratic and inclusive European Union, thus promoting the common good also on European level.

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