The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland

Report to the Nordic Bishops’ Conference 2019

Statistics and surveys
Church membership of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland is 69.7% in 2018. The number is for the first time below 70%, in 2009 it was 80%.

Survey by the Research Institute of the Ev. Luth. Church of Finland 2018:

Question: Which things are most important for you in the Ev. Luth. Church of Finland?
Top-5 answers: Work among elderly people, support to those who are in need, it arranges meaningful activities for children and youth, it gives support when you confront difficulties in life, and it takes part in important occasions in life.

Question: In which of these tasks has the church succeeded best?
Top-3 answers: it makes it possible for me to be a Christian in my own way, it arranges meaningful activities for children and youth, the congregation takes part in important occasions in life.

Question: In what ways have you been in contact with the church/your congregation during the last year?
Top-5 answers: I have visited a church (71%), through media (65%), I have taken part in a baptism, confirmation, wedding or funeral (53%), I have got mail from my congregation (41%), I have discussed with an employee of the church (38%).

When asked about their relationship to church membership, the age is a very important factor: people over 65 years are not pondering the alternative of leaving the church, while in the age between 18-34 about 31% (men) and 23% (women) have thought about the alternative. Among men the number is almost as high even in older groups. In the group 45-55 years 24% have been thinking about leaving, but on the other hand about 75% do not consider it likely at the moment.

Question: How would you describe your attitude towards the church?
Depending on age and sex of the respondents the number of those having a positive attitude varied between 45-74%, while the number having a negative attitude was 5% or below. The rest chose the answer “neutral”.

Given the opportunity to choose between words describing the church the alternatives “good” and “reliable” were frequently used, but also “cautious” and “follows routines”.

Ecumenical and inter-faith relations
The ecumenical work inside the Finnish borders is active with strong traditions and a dedicated involvement from the member churches. Since the participants of the Nordic Bishop’s Conference will get more information during these days for example about the dialogues between our church and the Roman-Catholic Church and our church and the Russian Orthodox Church, this topic will not be discussed in this report. Good and close inter-faith relations are crucial in a multireligious society, but above all when tragical events with possible religious backgrounds are happening in our own country or abroad. At the moment there are functioning co-operation between the leaders of different denominations, but, as in other European countries, there are difficult questions raised concerning immigration, cultural traditions, conversion etc.

Frequently discussed topics
Same-sex marriage
The parliament passed in 2016 a law that made it possible for same-sex couples to get married. The legislators underscored however, that the churches could follow their own regulations concerning marriage. An initiative to the synod of the Ev.Luth Church making it possible for same-sex couples to get married in the church, while securing that pastors are not forced to perform such weddings, was turned down by the General Synod in May 2018 (it would have needed a support of 75% of the delegates). At the same time the synod asked the Bishop’s conference to ponder alternatives, in order to avoid that this issue would become church dividing.

The bishop’s have prior to this given advices to the pastors, how they could pray for and together with the same-sex couples, who have got married. Some pastors have performed church weddings, and in some dioceses this has led to disciplinary measures. One of the current issues in the debate is whether the churches should have a paragraph in their law or in their constitution specifically declaring, that weddings of same-sex couples are not possible. For the Ev.Luth. Church of Finland the situation is delicate, because it isn’t likely that an initiative specifically forbidding same-sex marriage would get 75% support behind it in the synod, either.

The financial challenges and their consequences
There is a fundamental agreement among decisionmakers in the church that decreasing membership and rising costs are creating a need for considerable changes in the church. The continuing urbanization creates challenges for the congregations on the countryside, especially since the inhabitants moving to the towns are to a large degree young people or people with working opportunities. In the future the number of employees in the church will decrease, and the congregations will be more dependent on lay people for different activities. This is of course not only a problem, but also an opportunity. Much work is done currently in the church concerning the task to make it easier for lay people to feel part of both decision making, services and church activities.
The synod has together with the church council during the last years gone through a large process, where different rather radical solution for how the organisation and the life of the church could be modified in order to be better equipped to handle the challenges of today and tomorrow. One central aim is to shrink the central administration, but there is no consensus concerning how this should be done. The experiences of different projects during the recent years aiming at concentrating certain tasks to large unites (for example economic transactions, salary payments and so on) are very disappointing: the costs have risen, and the programs are felt to be difficult to use. One important issue for the dioceses during the following year is how the need to decrease the costs of the central administration will be divided between the church council and the dioceses.

**Co-operation between congregations and schools and day-care centres**

The co-operation between congregation and schools have traditionally been good and close. Today this is challenged above all by parents or individual teachers, who doesn’t want to have any religious influence on their children and schools. In a more multireligious and secular society the co-operation has to be developed along new lines. One strategy has been to point out, that the Ev. Luth. Church of Finland shares the underlying values of the National core curriculum for early childhood education and care: The intrinsic value of childhood, growth as a human being, the rights of the child, the aims of equity, equality, and diversity, the diversity of families, and healthy and sustainable way of living. The congregation can be an important partner in the education, but also in the wellbeing of children, youth and teachers. The different levels of co-operation are visualized by a model of four baskets:

First basket: Teaching of general knowledge, where the pedagogical responsibility is borne by the day-care centre or school, but the congregation can be a learning environment and the employees can function as experts in their field.

Second basket: Traditional feast days: feast days traditions with religious references are part of the Finnish culture. These may include a single hymn, but does not constitute practice of religion. Parish representatives are guests during these occasions.

Third basket: Religious events; practice of religion in accordance with the principle of the positive freedom of religion. The children’s guardian decides whether the child participates. Meaningful alternatives are arranged by the school for children not taking part.

Fourth basket: Support for student welfare and well-being at work, crisis co-operation and so on.
Other topics

The me-too campaign raised the question about sexual harassment in church activities. The dioceses have improved their strategies both to prevent these harassments and to enhance the abilities of the congregations and their employees to handle such situations.

Church employees are educated in how they should communicate about baptism to parents. The experiences from our neighbour churches in the Nordic Countries are implemented. The General Synod voted in May 2019 to support a representative’s proposal to allow a baptised person to have only one godparent if circumstances so require.

A new plan for confirmation work “A Great Miracle” was adopted in 2017. Guiding principles are that the young people are involved, heard, and have influence on the education. Among the aims are also that the young people experience joy, holiness and safety, and that they want to be part of the Church of Christ. The youngsters are encouraged to a spiritual life in action, in silence, and in engagement. This involves among other things taking part in the celebration of eucharist from the early stage of the confirmation class. One new feature is also a church-wide on-line system for evaluation of the confirmation work.

The General synod passed in May 2019 a proposal that suggested that parishes should be required to establish influencer groups for the young. These groups would offer young people more involvement and allow them to have their voice heard within the Church.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. The Church Council approved the Church’s energy and climate strategy, titled Carbon Neutral Church by 2030, in its meeting in February 2019.

The increasing numbers of poor families is a challenge for the diaconal work of the church. In order to handle these challenges, the congregations are encouraged, in co-operation with the municipalities, to take part in the creation of centres, where families can get all the support they need from the same place.

The consequences of digitalization create another type of challenge for the diaconal work. More and more contacts with the administration are taking part over the internet, but people with poor language and reading skills or little experience with computers find it extremely difficult to fill the applications.

Among questions discussed in Finland during the last years are also the support to undocumented migrants and church shelter for people in need. The issue of euthanasia is also frequently debated.