



Common Witness 2023

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Introduction

Common Witness is the global mission policy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. This policy consists of two parts. The first part describes the church's basic theological understanding of mission. All the church's life and activities are guided by its mission. Every community needs to know its reason for being. The church and its members should lead a missional life. The church's mission can be expressed differently at different times and in different contexts. The second part of the text lists the document's key policy principles.

Missionary organizations and organizations working in the field of international diaconia that have signed a framework agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland are committed, as stated in their respective agreements, to the Global Mission Policy approved by the Bishops' Conference and the principles contained within the policy. Both framework agreements for mission and for international diaconia are valid for a five-year period. The Bishops' Conference monitors annually the compliance of the mission organizations with the framework agreement for mission. The Church Council monitors annually Finn Church Aid's compliance with the framework agreement for international diaconia.



Hand sanitizing station at Hudur school in Somalia.
Photo: Finn Church Aid



Church is fundamentally missionary

The purpose of the church, its mission, is to proclaim Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world and to promote the realization of the kingdom of God. The church exists because it has this mission. The church's future is bound to this mission. The church proclaims Christ's unique Gospel always and everywhere. The church and all Christians are in the service of God's Mission (Missio Dei) (Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 4:16-22; John 20:21; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; 2 Cor. 6:1). Mission should instruct all the life and activities of the church and its parishes.



Witness, Service, and the Unity of the Church

The church's being, its mission, is realized in common witness, service (diaconia) and advocacy for the common good. God's love leads Christians to proclaim the Gospel, serve their neighbour, and pray together with other churches and Christian communities. Christians are one, because they were all baptised into Christ, into Christ's church, and into one another. As God has promised so God calls, sends, and walks alongside the church in its mission.



Nyakato Bible School Tanzania.
Photo: Virve Rissanen, Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission



The church is local and universal

The unity of Christ's universal church is realized in every local parish. The church is one, although it may appear different in different parts of the world. The world-wide Christian community is God's pilgrim people (1 Peter 2:10), the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27) and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). The Holy Spirit creates and sustains the church. We become part of the church by faith and by baptism (Mark 16:16). The church is a community of faith and love. Christians are called to follow the example of God's love. The church witnesses in words and in deeds to the triune God's salvific work towards humankind and the whole creation.



The Holistic Nature of the Church's Mission

The church's mission is holistic. It takes into account the entirety of created reality. Mission becomes tangible in all the church's activities. Holistic mission recognises various physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs, as well as the connection between human beings and the rest of creation. Holistic mission encompasses proclaiming the Gospel, diaconal service, and advocacy for the common good, both locally and globally.

Gospel invites people in faith and love to communion with God through word and sacraments. The gospel also encourages service, caring for one's neighbor and for all of creation. In obedience to God's will, the church advocates for the common good and for a more just world, proclaiming the reality of eternal life.



School backpacks for children in Egypt 2022.
Photo: Finnish Bible Society



A shared mission

All Christians, according to their gifts and capacities, are invited to participate holistically in the fulfillment of God's mission. The church lives out its mission by giving all its members space and opportunities to contribute. This means inviting parish staff and parishioners to commit jointly to the planning and implementation of activities and trainings.

Opportunities for volunteering strengthen the sense of community in the parish.



Media mission Messengers' partner distributed radios to residents of a rural village.

Photo: Annaleena Pakkanen, Media Mission Messengers



Partnerships and cooperation in Finland

Parishes and members of the church are to promote missionary work and diaconia. The church's holistic mission is carried out in cooperation with partners. Cooperation is about interaction, sharing common resources and mutual learning.

Signatory organizations to the framework agreements with the church partner with parishes to fulfil the church's missionary calling. Church-related actors will jointly evaluate how best to promote the set common goals.



Discussion before the service.
Photo: Jarkko Viljanen, Finnish Lutheran Mission



Partnerships and cooperation in international work

“International partners” refers to partner churches and organizations, communions, and Christian and other organizations and networks abroad. Cooperation with international partners should be reciprocal, respectful, and include listening to and learning from each other. The idea that mission is “from everywhere to everywhere” highlights the equality of partnerships and mutual learning.

An equal partnership involves respect for the independence and decisions of international partners. Dialogue with partners can also be critical. The aim of the dialogue is to achieve mutual learning and greater common understanding.



Teaching literacy to women in Africa. Namibia 2022.
Photo: Finnish Bible Society



Partnerships, cooperation, and official decisions on the ordained ministry

In accordance with the decision of the General Synod, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland both men and women can enter the ordained ministry. The Bishops' Conference has been tasked with monitoring the implementation of this decision of the Synod and to intervene in case any problems in the implementation of this decision should arise. Various theological opinions exist within the church on the theology of ministry. The Bishops' Conference has issued guidelines for situations where differences of opinions over the ordained ministry create problems in parishes (2006).¹

As a member of the Lutheran World Federation, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland has altar and pulpit fellowship with all the other member churches of the Lutheran World Federation. In addition, the church has been involved in approving a policy of the Lutheran World Federation, in which the possibility of studying theology, entry into the ordained ministry and leadership positions for both lay and ordained, are not gender-specific.

Ecumenically, a consensus has been reached on the ordained ministry among churches of the Porvoo Communion. A wide-reaching understanding on ordained ministry also exists with the Methodist churches in Finland.

1 Piispainkokouksen tiedoksianto 1/2006 kirkkohallitukselle, liite 1 Piispainkokouksen selonteko erilaisten virkanäkemyksien aiheuttamien työyhteisöongelmien hoitamiseksi.



Proclaiming the Gospel in Different Cultures and Contexts

The church has a mission to boldly proclaim the Gospel of Christ in a changing society. The church should use language that people understand and the media they use. The gospel is lived out among people, in different cultures and contexts. A church is missionary when it seeks, proactively and open-mindedly, ways to proclaim the gospel.



Dancers in Sinai Parish in Bolivia.
Photo: Anna Lundén, Finnish
Evangelical Lutheran Mission



Interreligious encounter and Interreligious dialogue

The church's holistic mission includes dialogue with people of other faiths. Dialogue with people of other faiths does not imply a religious pluralism that understands different views as ultimately conveying the same truth. The Bible instructs Christians to be prepared to share of their own faith (1 Peter 3:15). A Christian testifies to Christ with all their life. Mission is conducted in a respectful dialogue with people of other faiths and convictions. Witnessing to Christ is a dimension of interfaith dialogue.

“Interreligious encounter” refers in general to all the kinds of interactions that people and communities from various religious and philosophical or ideological backgrounds have in everyday situations. “Interreligious dialogue” denotes specifically arranged, goal-oriented interaction between people with different religious backgrounds. In interreligious dialogue, participants share about their own faith and religious traditions and listen to each other. Interreligious dialogue aims at mutual learning. Depending on the particular social and religious context, interreligious dialogue may take various forms.

Interreligious encounter can be facilitated or hampered by national legislation of a given country, the historical balance of power between religions and many other factors. The ability of people from different religious backgrounds to meet each other respectfully and peacefully is a prerequisite for the realisation of religious freedom and peaceful societies.



Policy principles

1. The church's mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world and to promote the Kingdom of God. All activities in the church should be informed by mission. The church's mission is holistic. Holistic mission includes proclamation of the saving Gospel, diaconal service, and advocating for the common good. Different church-related actors may participate in God's mission differently, reflecting their contextual realities.
2. Parishes and parishioners are to promote missionary work and practice diaconia. Parishes partner with missionary and diaconal organizations contracted by the church to advance the church's holistic mission. These organizations with their expertise and networks support the calling of both parishes and dioceses pursue their mission and do missionary work. Dioceses, parishes, and signatory organizations to the framework agreements commit to continuing and developing their cooperation.
3. Organizations whose main activity takes place abroad may become a signatory to the framework agreement for mission or for international diaconia. Signatory organizations may have differing strategic foci. Missionary organizations support partner churches and networks' mission in various ways and send missionaries to international missions. For activities taking place in Finland, organizations agree on forms of partnership separately with dioceses and parishes.

4. Both the church and signatory organizations to the framework agreements promote the participation of all members in the church's holistic mission. One of the main ways of doing this is by supporting parishioners' voluntary activity. Volunteering may take place in local parishes or through the activities of missionary organizations.
5. Missionary organizations participate in the church's training program for missionaries and in developing mission-related communications. The church and the signatory organizations to the framework agreement work together to promote mission education and global education and contribute towards increasing missiological knowledge, especially in studies qualifying people for various positions within the church and the continuing education of employed staff. Mission education and global education should promote opportunities for volunteers in positions of trust and especially youth and young adults, to participate in the church's holistic mission.
6. The church's mission has an ecumenical and interreligious dimension. Where possible, missionary work is carried out ecumenically together with other Christians and always in a respectful dialogue with persons of other faiths. In countries where there are several Lutheran churches, the aim is to find new partners among the existing member churches of the Lutheran World Federation. Signatory organizations to the framework agreement on global mission inform the Bishops' Conference of significant extensions and changes in their activities.

7. In cooperation between parishes and missionary organizations, missionary organizations comply with the General Synod's decision to open the ordained ministry to women (11/1986, § 34). If differences in theological understandings of the ordained ministry compromise cooperation, both parishes and missionary organizations are to follow the guidelines outlined by the Bishops' Conference (Piispainkokouksen tiedoksianto 1/2006 kirkkohallitukselle, liite 1 Piispainkokouksen selonteko erilaisten virkanäkemyksen aiheuttamien työyhteisöongelmien hoitamiseksi). Signatories to the framework agreement on mission and diaconia respect partner churches' decisions and internal discussions on ordained ministry and must not by their actions cause harm to their partners.²



Mobile phone users in Bangkok.
Photo: Ilkka Kastepohja, Media Mission Messengers

2 The Finnish Bible Society is an ecumenical organization whose membership includes not only parishes of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, but also the Orthodox Church of Finland, the Catholic Church in Finland and the Free Christian Council of Finland. The Finnish Bible Society is not required to commit to decisions on the General Synod regarding the ordained ministry.



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