

## **Bishop's Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland proposes a model of two parallel concepts of marriage**

The question of same-sex ecclesiastical marriage or blessing of marriage has been the subject of lively discussion in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland over the past decade. The issue continues to divide opinions strongly and has been discussed on several occasions both at the General Synod and at the Bishops' Conference.

At its meeting on 10 April 2024, the Bishops' Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland decided to propose to the General Synod that a provision on parallel concepts of marriage be added to the church order. In one, marriage is understood as being between a man and a woman, and in the other, marriage is understood as being between two persons. The concepts are theologically justified in different ways. One member of the Bishops' Conference delivered a dissenting opinion to the decision, according to which the matter should be further prepared.

At the General Synod, approval of the proposal requires the support of three quarters of the representatives. The next meeting of the General Synod will take place between 13 and 17 May 2024. The General Synod has 109 representatives.

If the proposal were to be approved by the General Synod, the priests of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland would be entitled to act in accordance with both accepted concepts of marriage. It would be a question of the right to choose between two parallel and equally accepted Church concepts of marriage.

The priest would have the opportunity to marry same-sex couples or bless their marriage, but they could also refrain from doing so. The right of same-sex couples to have an ecclesiastical marriage ceremony would be made the duty of the parish and ensuring its implementation a task for the vicar.

## **Different views, same respect – side by side**

According to the Bishops' Conference, the existence of parallel concepts of marriage means acknowledging a de facto disagreement, but in such a way that it does not break down the unity of the Church or infringe anyone's rights.

Acknowledging two parallel views, therefore, does not require accepting both views, but accepting the existence of two concepts of marriage within the Church.

The Bishops' Conference reminds us that the prevailing disagreement should not lead to situations where the representatives of another view are pressured, deliberately misunderstood, defamed or knowingly insulted. Work arrangements must also be made in such a way that employees with different views are respected, and no one is forced to act against their conscience when marrying a couple or blessing a marriage.

The purpose of the proposal of the Bishops' Conference is to ensure that every couple wishing to marry can be married in their home church. At the same time, it strives to ensure that both Church members and employees who support and oppose the marriage of same-sex couples could be true to their convictions and remain members and employees of the Church. At the same time, it is hoped that the debate about marriage, which has strongly divided our Church and has been going on for years, could subside.

## **Based on long-term work**

An amendment to the Marriage Act entered into force in Finland in March 2017. According to it, same-sex couples can also be married. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland - as well as numerous other churches and religious communities - has the right to officiate marriages in Finland. The officiation of an ecclesiastical marriage is not only a spiritual ceremony but also a legal one.

The official view of our Church is that an ecclesiastical marriage is between a man and a woman. However, a clear majority of our clergy (and members) are in favour of same-sex couples being married. Many priests have already married same-sex couples. The bishops

have recommended to dioceses not to punish priests even if they violate Church regulations when they marry same-sex couples.

The proposal of the Bishops' Conference is based on the previous work of the Bishops' Conference, as a result of which several different solutions were presented to the General Synod in August 2020 to resolve the disagreement concerning the concept of marriage. In May 2022, the General Synod asked the Bishops' Conference to continue working on the issue. Now the matter is referred to the General Synod.

Helsinki 10 April 2024

The Bishops' Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland