Approved by the Board of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission on 10 December 2024

POLICY ON CHRISTIAN WITNESS

Mission work, that is, witnessing about Christ in words and deeds, is a task given to every church and every Christian. The core of the identity of Christians and churches is built on the teachings and deeds of Jesus. Without this spiritual and functional calling, the church is not a church.[1]

1. Purpose and objectives of the policy

The guidelines on Christian witness outline the Felm's understanding of what it means to convey the Christian message in the current operating environment. It explains which principles define it and how they affect our ways of working. This document is based on our broader theological document "Towards Life and Justice. Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission's Theological Foundation and Principles of Cooperation"[2], its updated summary "The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission's understanding on missionary work"[3] and the strategy "Strategy of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (Felm)[4]. The guidelines direct all our work. They inform our stakeholders about our stance, recommendations, and approach in our key areas of work.

2. Theological foundation and principles

According to its statutes, the purpose of the Felm is to participate as an international actor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in the mission of the Triune God (Missio Dei) in the world. Felm serves our church, its congregations, and foreign churches as part of Christ's worldwide church. Felm is committed to the confession, ministry, church order, and ecumenical agreements of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. [5]

The task of Felm is to reach people outside the Church and strengthen existing congregations and churches. Felm's view on mission work is based on the Great Commission given by the risen Christ and the example set by his deeds and teachings.[6] The gospel and the faith that comes from hearing it transform individuals and communities, creating hope and a desire to act so that God's goodness becomes a reality in the world. We carry out the mission together with local churches and other partners.[7]

We work holistically: this means proclaiming the gospel in words and deeds and working for justice. We support our partners in church work, peace work, development cooperation, humanitarian work,

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[1] For example, the evangelism strategy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) Mission and Evangelism.
[2] Towards Life and Justice, 2015.
[3] missä tiivistelmä?
[4] Strategy of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (Felm)
[5] Towards Life and Justice, 2015; Mission in Context. Transformation. Reconciliation. Empowerment. An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Mission. Lutheran World Federation, 2004.
[6] Towards Life and Justice, 2015; missä tiivistelmä?
[7] missä tiivistelmä?

and advocacy. Holistic mission recognizes all dimensions of God's creation and therefore considers the various spiritual, physical, psychological, and social needs of people, as well as the connection of humans to the rest of creation. We are committed to a mission that arises from the margins, growing out of contexts of poverty, suffering, and violence. We see that the Church has a societal and social-ethical task to stand alongside the weak. We emphasize the importance of human dignity, human rights, and the protection of creation in the mission task. We pay particular attention to the rights of people with disabilities and gender justice. God's work of salvation concerns not only the whole person but also the whole creation, and Christ is present in all creation. Love and care for creation are also essential for Christians.

The gospel is contextual: it always engages with the current environment, culture, language, and reality. This is a fundamental characteristic of Christianity. Just as God became human, the message about Him becomes real and concrete again and again. The gospel engages with the context but also transforms and challenges it. The surrounding reality is the soil in which the Holy Spirit works and makes the Good News a reality.

In our work, we strive for dialogue with our partners. We recognize and acknowledge that the Triune God works everywhere in the world He has created, and the joy of the gospel can be found together, in interaction and dialogue. The values of Felm, namely love for one's neighbour, justice, responsibility, and working together, are universal. Mission work includes dialogue with different religious traditions and transcends religious and ideological boundaries. We respect our partners who come from different belief traditions. We uphold the uniqueness of Christ while recognizing the work of the Triune God in other religions.

3. Operating environment

Our partners operate in very different environments. Societal polarization, the decline of religious freedom and democracy, crises and conflicts, climate change, and economic uncertainty affect life and everyday reality everywhere. The reality of life with its challenges is also the reality of spiritual life. The role and significance of religions in people's lives are significant from the perspective of values, morals, and choices. Religious leaders have the opportunity to influence structural injustices as well. Many religious actors maintain basic functions in their societies, such as schools and hospitals. The significance of religions has been rediscovered in Western countries. Politically, religious actors are often seen as channels for societal change. Christianity is growing in developing countries and is the world's largest religion. According to estimates, this situation will remain at least until the 2050's [8].

When selecting partners, we prioritize Lutheran or Christian churches and organizations with a Christian value base. Our partner churches are very diverse, which is reflected in both their activities and their expectations of partnership. Partner churches can be roughly divided into three categories. The first category includes churches that emerged as a result of Western mission work, with a strong Lutheran identity and often a heavy administrative burden modelled after Western structures. In Africa, churches are large in terms of membership and impact, while in Asia, they are small and slowly growing but significant in their communities due to their diaconal work. The second category includes newer church partners that operate with external project funding and have significant societal activities. At the same time, they seek support for strengthening their Lutheran identity and congregational life. The third category consists of churches operating in very challenging conditions,

[8] https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/

such as restrictions on religious freedom or being in the midst of war. In such cases, the key issue is ensuring some level of operational capacity.

Lutheran churches are caught between two differing theological perspectives, which also reflect on the ecumenical movement. Felm identifies with the theological views of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), which emphasizes contextual biblical interpretation, the church's social responsibility, and the diversity of leadership and ministry. The other theological line is represented by the International Lutheran Council (ILC), whose member churches emphasize confessional Lutheranism, literal biblical interpretation, and a ministry view that only men can serve as pastors. Economically weaker churches face challenges if wealthier churches support them with their own demands and bring their church-political battles into partner churches. This affects the theology and life of our partner churches, especially as the anti-gender movement ideology, which prevents women and other minorities from acting as equal actors alongside men. The Bible and its interpretation can also be used as a tool of power, leaving no room for partner churches to develop their own theology. Additionally, Lutheran churches, especially in Africa, face challenges as members move to denominations and communities that promise worldly success, challenging Lutheran theology of the cross (so-called prosperity theology).

Future key issues identified by our partner churches include leadership and theological education. Church leaders often have a heavy workload and need support in leadership, both in terms of skills and peer support. Many seek more opportunities for theological, professional development, work development, further studies, or ecumenical relations. Sharing leadership, raising new leaders, and especially bringing young people, women, and minorities into decision-making positions can be practically challenging, even if these issues are theoretically supported. In some communities, some congregants resist leaders' potential modern ideas or changes in practices. Harmful cultural values, such as views on power, gender, age, disability, or hierarchy, prevent leadership from developing in a way that meets the needs of the church and congregants.

Theological education is seeking a new direction in terms of funding, pedagogical expertise, and human resources. With the decline of Western funding, networking among educational institutions is increasingly important, as is the possibility of digitalization and blended learning. Traditional vocational thinking seems to have weakened, and churches are not necessarily seen as attractive employers, for example, in terms of salary or workload. Lutheran identities and ministry are under consideration both in individual churches and ecumenically. In the future, ministry could increasingly be realized partly serving the congregation and partly in other employment, which should be considered in educational institutions' curricula. Contextualizing study programs and theology and preparing content for the challenges of everyday work are increasingly central.

Despite the challenges, many of our partner churches are growing, spiritually vibrant, and significant actors in society. Church growth occurs organically and with small financial resources. Often, significant responsibility is borne by volunteer congregants. Supporting growth requires education and planning. Churches need networks through which they can learn and gain new ideas for their work. The significance of the ecumenical movement and mission organizations is great in this regard, as they bring their networks to the use of partners. The decentralization of the ecumenical movement and the development of a new kind of mission theology are already ongoing processes. The living spirituality and relevance of partner churches in people's everyday lives are something from which Western churches and Christians can learn.

Education and leadership also involve the possibilities and challenges of technology, artificial intelligence, and social media. Churches are concerned about fake news and AI surveillance but also

want to learn to use social media as a tool for outreach. Social media is also important for diaspora communities that arise in Western countries due to migration and refugee movements.

4. Key Guidelines

4.1 Evangelism

> In communicating of the gospel, it is essential to support churches and Christian organizations in their mission work, as well as to work for the realization of religious freedom.

The gospel is a message of hope and salvation. Christian faith includes an eschatological dimension, the expectation of a future world and time that is greater and better than the present reality. It is anchored in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection and sends people to act here and now in God's mission. This hope is concrete, tangible, unifying, inspiring, and courageous. Instead of apocalyptic anxiety, we believe that God will make everything new and that the suffering of humanity and creation will end. Eschatological hope frees from despair, and its significance and power become real when shared and lived out with others.[9]

At the core of the Christian faith is the understanding that the good news of the resurrection and the salvation and hope it brings belongs to the whole world. The Church's task is to call all people into communion with God, and this call transcends national, economic, social, and individual boundaries. The local presence of the church is realized in congregations: in people's daily lives, and mutual fellowship, where the word and sacraments, along with love for one's neighbour, bring grace into people's reality. Sharing the gospel is a task that belongs to both churches and individuals. As a mission organization, we fulfil the Church's mission.

Felm supports existing churches and Christian organizations to ensure that the work is sustainable and long-term. Partnership involves supporting churches in their own mission work and efforts to grow and strengthen. We support the ownership and independence of churches as they share the good news in their own environment. In our joint work, we implement the principle of reciprocal sharing and learn from each other. This includes sharing resources and expertise as well as spiritual fellowship.

Many of our partners live in very challenging conditions in terms of human rights. Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is challenged alongside other human rights in the countries where the Felm operates. Felm monitors the situation through context analyses and seeks to influence the realization of religious freedom in these countries in cooperation with partners. Felm aims to raise human rights issues in its international advocacy work.

We want to increase the visibility and appreciation of our partners in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, for example, by highlighting their theological thinking and practical Christian life. Felm supports the practice of spiritual life and creates space for experiencing spiritual fellowship in our own work communities and with our partners, so that we practically implement what we outline in this document. At the same time, we reject the idea that people can or should be converted against their free will. We do not accept that a person must convert to Christianity to receive help, nor do we accept

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[9] Sivin Kit: Abound in hope: An invitation to a hopeful theological agenda after the thirteenth assembly of the LWF. 2024. Abound in hope: An invitation to a hopeful theological agenda after the thirteenth assembly of the LWF - Kit - Dialog - Wiley Online Library; One body, one spirit, one hope: Report of the thirteenth assembly. (2024). The Lutheran World Federation. 2023A – Assembly Reader EN final.pdf (lutheranworld.org)

proselytism, which means attempting to convert a member of another Christian church or community to one's own denomination.

4.2 Supporting the Strengthening Churches

We support the growth of churches based on the principle of partnership. This is achieved through theological education, leadership support, outreach work, and diaconal work.

We support churches and their growth through partnerships.

Felm has, throughout its history, been involved in founding some churches and has joined the lives of many churches soon after their establishment. We see this long history as valuable. At the same time, we acknowledge that we are now living in a very different era. The Christian church, including the Lutheran church, has spread to all continents during the 20th century. In many of the Felm's partner countries, churches are vibrant, growing, and fulfilling their mission as churches. Local leadership and ownership of the churches are prerequisites for the church to be genuinely local. Through mission partnerships and mutual agreements, we strengthen churches in the following themes:

We support our partners' theological education, leadership, and outreach work

According to our church partners, theological education and leadership support are key to the spiritual, theological, diaconal, administrative, and financial strengthening of the church – and thereby to the growth of the church.

Churches need trained workers and various skills, including leadership, to strengthen and grow. Congregational life includes worship services and the administration of sacraments, Christian education, diaconal work and service, supporting the spiritual life of congregants, and mission work. All these require up-to-date theological education and the ability to lead both spiritually and administratively. When there are few paid workers, the role of volunteers becomes emphasized. They also need training and the development of various skills. Many partners face the challenge of the anti-gender movement concerning women's ordination and leadership. Theological influences that emphasize success and prosperity challenge Lutheran theology of the cross but also highlight the shortcomings in Lutheran church life and teaching. It is necessary to make room for Lutheran charismatic expressions. Similarly, it is essential to develop a Lutheran contextual theology of blessing that takes into account the reality, poverty, and various needs in which people live.

Theological education leading to a degree is conducted in cooperation with the LWF by funding studies with scholarships and supporting students in career and spiritual life issues. Additionally, we support theological institutes and educational institutions in our partner countries. We strengthen cooperation between different educational institutions and funders to make studies as accessible and attractive as possible. We develop cooperation to improve the quality of education so that studies can meet the challenges of today's real life.

We particularly support partners in ensuring gender justice and the inclusion of young people and people with disabilities in education, as well as in church recruitment and decision-making bodies. We actively highlight the rights of people with disabilities and their full participation in the life of congregations. Based on the expressed needs of partners and mutual agreement, we send workers to develop church leadership, administration, planning, and theological education. In all our work, our approach is coaching, dialogical, and strengthening mutual learning. We bring churches together to learn from each other's practices, especially related to outreach work.

Outreach work is crucial for church growth. Our partner churches are in very different situations in terms of size and societal status. Some churches are growing, while others struggle with declining membership. All churches have expressed a common concern for young people, who are hoped to become both congregants and workers. Church growth happens in many ways. However, the common message from our partners is that the greatest impact comes from Christians inviting new people to the congregation. Another significant factor is diaconal service, which testifies to Christ's love for all creation in the community. Diaconal work should be unconditional and open to all, but this does not diminish its witness.

Our partner churches in Africa conduct outreach work systematically and with various methods. These include planned visits, evangelism events of different sizes, Christian education for all ages, and the use of social media. We see our role in the partnership as ensuring pastors and volunteers for new congregations through training and developing Christian education. Smaller churches hope for new ideas either through peer learning or staff exchanges, as many workers or congregants have never had the opportunity to see how other churches operate.

One part of outreach work is the ideal of an open church. We advocate for the inclusion of different minority groups in the life of the congregation at all levels. We believe that the gospel advances best through local efforts, as the native language and contextual understanding of the gospel open people's hearts. At the same time, we want to bring our expertise and knowledge to the use of partners so that congregational work can be developed in the spirit of decolonization to reflect their own culture and be available in their own language.

We support the diaconal work of churches

Our partners live amidst various societal and political situations. Diaconal and peace work are natural ways for our partners to witness about Jesus and the Christian faith. We engage in joint advocacy work with our partners to change those oppressive structures and injustices that create social and economic inequality, crises, and conflicts. The church engages in diaconal and peace work because they testify to the goodness and love of the Triune God, the Church's mission in the world, and the calling of Christians. In this way, we acknowledge that every person is equally valuable as God's creation, regardless of religion or belief.

5. The added value of Felm

Our work is based on mutual partnerships and it has a long history. These together provide us with direct and confidential connections to various churches and other partners. Trust is a prerequisite for learning from each other, developing work, and engaging in dialogue on difficult issues. We are not a funder but a partner, and in this, Felm differs from many other international actors. Our goal is to influence structures and root causes so that justice and equality are realized. Our overarching goals are gender equality and the rights of people with disabilities.

Churches live in various contexts that we know well. Knowledge of the local language remains an important value for Felm. Partners expect Felm to collaborate in building relationships and enabling peer learning. Felm has strong connections to the ecumenical movement and many partner churches whose learning needs correspond to each other. We primarily operate in a way that enables partners' active participation in the global Lutheran community and the ecumenical movement. We encourage and support especially young people to participate in international forums.

We balance between tasks that require sending Finnish missionaries and situations where local expertise is more valuable to partner churches. This is evident, for example, in theological education and gender justice issues, where local expertise can advance the work more effectively. In the future, enabling partner staff exchanges will also be important for our organization. At the same time, we maintain the significance of mission work and missionaries, as the church is the body of Christ, which functions and builds only in real connection with each other.

As the mission organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, we convey the views and ways of living out faith of our partner churches to the Finnish church life. We promote constructive dialogue in ecumenical networks and better representation of our partners' voices in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and other cooperation networks. We provide young people and young adults with perspectives on international Christianity and opportunities to influence mission work and its future. We invite all church members to participate in God's mission, Missio Dei.

We are actively involved in national and international networks defining what mission is and who is a missionary in the 21st century.