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BRITISH LUTHERAN



From the Chairman



Rev. George Samiec
Chairman of the ELCE

Recently, I was in an ecumenical meeting, and someone made the following comment: aren't things terrible in Gaza? What should churches be doing about it? And so began a brief discussion about news, social media, and historical perspectives and the general conclusion that no matter what was said, it could, and probably would, be labelled as either

anti-Semitic or Islamophobic. And so all the churches could do was call for people to pray for peace. (Of course, praying isn't a poor response!)

Today there are many self-proclaimed truths competing for prominence, and the number of conspiracy theories testifies to the reality that the former empirical foundations of 'facts' (repeatable demonstrations of evidential

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ON THE COVER



The chancel of
Luther-Tyndale
Memorial Church

Photograph by Tapani Simojoki

proof), or artefacts, or our usual way of determining historical truth are no longer solid. It has become ‘your truth’ against ‘my truth’! After all, everyone is entitled to their opinion. To which Harlan Ellison (American writer and author of the Classic Star Trek episode ‘The City on the Edge of Forever’) replied, “You are not entitled to your opinion. You are entitled to your informed opinion. No one is entitled to be ignorant.” But of course, the question remains: ‘ignorant’ according to whom?

Social cohesion relies on an agreed truth. The more rival truths there are, the more societies will be bound by a legal system – which only works as long as it promotes a broad truth and accepts conscientious objection. Otherwise, it becomes coercive and repressive.

Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32). Jesus is the Word (of God) made flesh. He is the truth. And he reveals truth, about us and this world, no matter our century or country. That each one of us is precious to God, from conception to death – so loved by God that Jesus came to rescue us so that we can live with him now.

The world, our sinful self and the demonic realm will always fight this truth, – fight Jesus, and – challenge his Word. The Bible is God’s Word. It conveys Jesus to us. If it doesn’t convey Jesus, it isn’t doing its job. I don’t use the Bible as my cookbook in the kitchen, my car manual in the garage, my advice for my computer problems, or as my science textbook. However, reading and hearing the Law, Prophets, and Psalms, and the teachings of the Apostles, all point me to Jesus and away from the forces of this world that would have me live in fear and confusion. The Bible reminds me of my identity in Christ and helps me live in my world.

We cannot impose our truth on the world. We live our truth in the world, even as the world rejects it and makes it difficult for us – and, yes, we can defend our truth. Moreover, we proclaim and testify to our truth in Jesus whenever we have the opportunity, faithfully and in humility. Life in the world may not always be easy, but our freedom in Christ gives us joy and security despite everything – and that’s the truth.

THE BRITISH LUTHERAN IS RECRUITING!

We are looking for an eager volunteer to take on the task of

Layout Editor

responsible for designing and laying out the visual appearance of the magazine

Anyone interested should contact the Editor:

editor@tbl.lutheranchurch.org.uk

Putting Christ and Mass Back into Christmas

Christmas is prime time for Christian anxiety about the state of the world – more so, it seems than Easter. It's at Christmas that we find ourselves lamenting most loudly, persistently and at length at just how far secularisation has advanced. Not a single Christian carol at Sainsbury's, no manger scene in M&S, cards galore with snowmen and Father Christmas, "Season's Greetings" everywhere.

All that people care about is the shopping, the presents, the food, while the Baby is left out in the cold (to paraphrase a Finnish carol).

And then the inevitable city council which decides to celebrate Winterval and erect a Festival (or Winter) Tree, so as not to offend or to appear too Christian in a multi-cultural community.

Whatever happened to Britain as a Christian country?

Give me back my festival! Put Christ back into Christmas!

While these are not illegitimate complaints, we should exercise great caution in shouting at the world about them.

Why? Here are a couple of reasons.

First, Christmas as a Christian festival is just that, a Christian festival. That is to say, it is a festival of the Church. It's not the job of a city or borough council to uphold the festival of Christ's birth. They are responsible for bins and roads and public build-

ings and schools and such like—together with community cohesion, law and order and other such things. If it promotes community cohesion to have a festival tree, so be it. If they do choose to promote the festival of the Church, all the better. But it is not their job to do so. Therefore, if they choose not to, we should not be surprised.

Nor is it the job of a Sainsbury's or an M&S to promote the Christian message. They are in the business of selling things to people. Christmas suits them well, thanks to the Magi and St. Nicholas and all that, but if they choose to do it in a non-religious way, we should not be surprised.

All they are doing is reflecting the general culture, which has been unmoored from the Christian faith a long time ago. If there was popular demand for Christian messages from politicians, we would no doubt them. If promoting Jesus sold more mince pies, clothes or gadgets, many shops would gladly do that.

Secondly, Christmas as a Christian festival is, by definition, a festival for Christians. That many unbelievers, for reasons of history, culture and tradition, have a party time that goes by the same name at the same time, and is based on the Christian original, should not take away from our joy at Jesus' birth. That non-Christians sing 'Away in a Manger' for the wrong rea-

sons, and some even go to Church for those wrong reasons, is in fact a bonus and we should pray that the word accidentally heard may not return void but does its work in those lives.

After all, the tragedy is not that unbelievers celebrate Christmas, but that they are unbelievers, missing out on the salvation brought by the Christ-child.

There is in fact another problem, which holds the mirror up to the church: not that unbelievers or politicians or merchants are not putting “Christ” into Christmas in places that are not places for the worship of Christ. A deeper problem is found at the other end of the word: that too many Christians are leaving “Mass” (*i.e.*, the Divine Service) out of Christmas.

Too many churches are half-empty on Christmas morning, with even the usually pious people absent. Why? Because for many Christians, too, Christmas has become above all family time: a day that is, in reality, about spending time with relatives, exchanging presents, preparing and eating a Christmas dinner – so much so, that there is no time left for attending Divine Service.

More than ever, the world needs Jesus. And the Jesus that the world needs is not only in a story from the past, but the living Lord, who sits at the right hand of the Father, and who continues to come to us.

Every celebration of the Lord’s Supper is an echo of the Incarnation:

he, who came to the world bodily in the womb of the Virgin Mary still comes to us bodily in the Sacrament of the Altar. He who came to the Holy Family in Bethlehem comes to us in the bread and the wine. He, of whom the angels sang to the shepherds on Christmas night, is proclaimed to us in the Gospel.

Not that long ago, every Lutheran church in Europe would have held a Divine Service on each of the first four days of Christmas, as well as Christmas midnight, not to mention New Year’s Eve, New Year’s Day and Epiphany, plus all the Sundays. They also exchanged gifts and ate and drank well, to celebrate the gifts they had first received – but it was those Divine gifts that took centre stage.

If we wish the world to see Jesus, the world needs to see and hear His people gather where He is to be found. Faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (Rom. 10:10). There are worse ways to make that Word audible to the world than for Christians to make renewed efforts to put Christ back into Christmas by putting the Mass back into Christmas. Perhaps, by the grace of God, those who celebrate the season without reason, overhear the Church’s song on Christmas morning, and are drawn to celebrate with us Jesus, the Saviour of the world, who still comes to us today.



Rev. Tapani Simojoki,
Editor

On Trial for the Word of God

The Editor

All kinds of people find themselves in trouble with the law. Very few of them come across as less likely to be in such trouble than Dr. Päivi Räsänen.

The Finnish doctor and politician was in London earlier this year, and she was kind enough to grant *The British Lutheran* an hour of her time between meeting British MPs and speaking at a dinner organised by her UK supporters.

I met a petite pastor's wife, mother of five and grandmother of 12, who exuded warmth and charisma, and appeared to be smiling almost constantly.

Indeed, her warm and friendly tone has become a hallmark of her public appearances ("I'm not really aware of that. I suppose I have a cheerful resting expression!") – even when under great pressure.

Yet she has been cast in the role of villain by no lesser an authority than the Prosecutor General of the Republic of Finland. For what crime? Essentially, for quoting the Bible.

This is not a role Räsänen ever sought, though the road that took her there is one she has pursued from an early age.

In the Shadow of a Prison

Päivi Räsänen grew up in a small village in South-Eastern Finland, a few



Photo: Tapani Simojoki

miles from the Russian border. The village was dominated by a large prison, where her father worked. Growing up in this environment had a profound impact on the little girl:

"In the setting of the prison, the concepts of sin, guilt, judgement and grace in Jesus' sacrifice were concrete, and as a small child I understood that I have the same potential for evil as the prisoners. I thought that someday I could be in jail as well."

Although the family were not active in the church, little Päivi was sent to Sunday school from a young age, and also came across numerous Christian volunteers who visited the prison to bring the gospel to the inmates. As a result, she came to know Jesus already in childhood.

"I remember having enormous joy

when praying that Jesus would forgive me my sins and keep me as his own. Jesus heard my prayer and has been faithful during these decades.”

From Medicine to Politics

Growing up, Räsänen moved to Helsinki to train as a doctor. In her student years, she became involved both in student evangelism and in campaigning about medical ethics (issues such as abortion and euthanasia). The former led her to meet her husband on a mission trip to London. The latter would in due course develop into a passion for making a difference to society at large and, hence, a political career.

In 1995, Dr. Räsänen was elected to the Finnish parliament, representing the Christian Democrats. At the time of writing, she is the second-longest serving MP in the current Parliament.

To the wider public, Päivi Räsänen became a household name in 2011 when she became the Minister of the Interior (Home Secretary), a role she held for four years.

In the Eye of a Twitter Storm

However, her “fame” took on entirely new proportions in 2019, when she found herself being investigated for a hate crime. Depending on your perspective, the storm brewed over a brief tweet, or over the Bible itself.

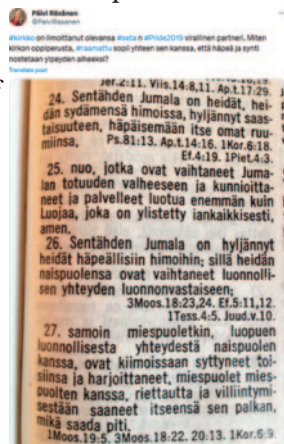
In June that year, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland was listed amongst the official sponsors of Helsinki Pride, an event promoting the visibility and rights of sexual

minorities. The news shocked Räsänen.

“I didn’t know what to do, so I prayed for guidance. I had this incredibly strong sense of the church being like a sinking ship, harassed by false and misleading teachings, and no one was speaking out in public. I decided that it was not the time for me to jump off this sinking ship. I resolved to say something so loud that people would take notice, so that they could be saved.”

And so she took a photo of Romans 1:24–27 and posted it on Twitter with the brief question:

“How is the Bible, the foundation of the Church’s doctrine, compatible with the promotion of shame and sin as matters of pride?”



Accused

“I was expecting a reaction. However, not in my wildest dreams did I anticipate what would follow.”

After a few days of ‘robust exchanges’ online, someone reported the tweet to the police as a hate crime. Following an initial investigation, two further reports of a crime were made: one concerning comments she made in a discussion programme on national

radio; and the other about a pamphlet written by her in 2004, arguing against same-sex marriage from the Bible.

“After the Finnish parliament approved the registration of same-sex relationships, I had been approached by Luther Foundation Finland [the charitable body behind the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, a sister church of the ELCE] to write this pamphlet. I rushed it off quickly, and LFF printed it as teaching material for their congregations.” By 2019, she had forgotten about the whole booklet, until a concerned citizen unearthed it from the depths of the internet and reported it to the police.

Bible Studies at the Police Station

Even though the police ultimately decided that no crime had been committed, the Prosecutor General stepped in ordered an investigation. This led to an 18-month process that included 13 hours of police interrogations about the Bible and its interpretation.

“On social media there was a joke about me going to have a Bible study at the police station once again!” But since Räsänen declined to withdraw her writings, the matter went to court, with bishop Juhana Pohjola as co-defendant (as the person responsible

for publishing the offending pamphlet).

The Verdict

The case was prosecuted in the spring of 2021 as a crime of incitement, on the basis of a law originally designed to deal with persons accused of genocide – and which was not even on the statute books when the pamphlet was written. It came to trial the following year at the Helsinki District Court, which threw out the prosecution case and acquitted both Räsänen and Pohjola on all counts, as was reported previously in *The British Lutheran*.

Unhappy with the verdict, the prosecutor appealed; but the Court of Appeals upheld the original verdict in a judgement delivered last month (see pp. 16–17?). At the time of writing, it is not clear whether the prosecutor will appeal to the Supreme Court.

Was It Worth It?

So much trouble over a few words on social media! Was it really worth it? And if a Christian is going to stand



Photo: Lehtikuva/Antti Aimo-Koivisto

Arriving at the first court hearing.



Dr. Päivi Räsänen and bishop Juhana Pohjola at the Court of Appeals. Photo: lhpk.fi

up in public, would it not be better to be speaking about the gospel rather than about morality, about Jesus rather than homosexuality?

“I have no regrets – though if I had known what was to come, I would have written a much better pamphlet!”

“Of course, what I want most is to tell people about Jesus and what he has done. But in fact, this process has given me many opportunities to do that, as I have had to explain the Bible’s solution to the problem of sin – on TV and radio, in the police station and the court room.”

Staying Silent Is Not an Option

But ultimately, for Räsänen, staying silent is not an option. First, as an MP, since these matters have been brought to Parliament by others, she has a duty to pass comment on them. But, as a Christian and a member of the church, there is a more serious concern:

“It really is about the whether we

can trust the Bible and its teaching. God is the one who tells us in the Bible what is sin – and the Bible is very clear on these matters.”

The smile vanishes, as Dr. Räsänen ponders: “If we can’t trust the Bible when it speaks about sin, can we trust it when it comes to the Gospel, the teaching about Jesus and His redeeming work? This is a very dangerous road to take.”

“At the same time, we are dealing with fundamental questions about what it is to be human. So many young people are confused because they are told that they have to choose their own identity, rather than trusting the identity they have been given by God. Not only is it wrong : it is psychologically damaging!”

For the Sake of the Young

This is another reason why she has been determined to speak her mind openly in the public. “Freedom of

speech must be exercised. Otherwise, we will lose it. Often, when one person speaks out, it gives courage to others to do the same, knowing that they are not alone.”

The conversation keeps returning to Räsänen’s concern for the young. “I’m 63 years old. I have nothing to lose. But the young do.”

“Standing up for the truth can be very costly as young people come through the education system and start out on their careers.”

This calls for strong support networks, Räsänen argues.

“Christians need congregations that form strong communities, praying communities.”

Even if we are worried about consequences, Räsänen is convinced that being silent will not help.

“On the contrary, the more we stay silent, the more the room for the freedom of speech and of religion will shrink. It seems to me that we need to speak openly about our faith, and also about the conflict between the Bible and today’s values.”

“If we try to hide in the corner, they will find us even there.”

The Importance of Bible Knowledge

And since all of this –the knowledge of both sin and salvation – is about God’s word, it is crucial that Christians know their Bibles so that they are able to stand. Räsänen is concerned that many younger Christians no longer study the Bible. “When I was a young Christian, I was taught that I should read the Bible every morning,

and read it systematically through so that I get to know the whole Bible.”

“We should speak and teach more about the importance of knowing God’s word from beginning to end. We need the whole armour of God, and God’s word, which is the sword of the Spirit.” (Eph. 6:10–20)

We need the whole armour
of God, and God’s word,
which is the sword
of the Spirit.

Jesus Will Never Leave Us

Finally, Räsänen offered this encouragement: Jesus has promised to be with His children every day, even before courts, and never to leave them.

“He is able to give us much more than we are liable to lose in these situations, so long as we stay on the foundation of God’s word.”

After our conversation drew to a close, Dr. Räsänen gave a presentation about her case to a roomful of Christians involved in public life in Britain. When she finished, the room erupted in a prolonged standing ovation. As I stood at the back, a stranger turned to me and whispered, “If only we had bishops who proclaimed the Gospel as clearly as this lady does, what a difference that would make!”



Rediscovering Our Story

Rev. Wade Bellesbach,

St. Columba Lutheran Church, East Kilbride

We identify, know, and understand ourselves through the lives and stories of other people. We enjoy the stories and histories of our family members, friends, and the lives that they live and have lived because they provide us with a sense of meaning and belonging. These narratives give us something of an answer to the complex question of identity.

We see this need for storytelling in all aspects of human life. Sports teams and their players; politicians and their platforms; actors and their roles; authors and their characters; musicians and their hearers; painters and their subjects all provide us with something or someone to relate to and means by which we might understand our existence. Whichever story we attach ourselves to – imagined or real – through it we may come to know and understand that we are not isolated individuals in a world without meaning or purpose. Or so we hope.

Why We Tell Stories

Narratives gesture towards an attempt at understanding because they are inherently meaningful. You cannot have a story if you do not have characters, plot, focus, and purpose. Ultimately, we like stories because we like to feel that somehow and in some way we fit.

We like stories because they provide us with a sense of belonging to this great – or not so great – drama of what it means to be a human being.

For as much as we enjoy experiencing stories, we also enjoy crafting them. Sometimes they are harmless – but, often they are not.

Turning the World into Our Stories

This past year has been another uncomfortable display of persons and communities attempting to fit the confusing and unsettling events unfolding around them and in their world to a story that they can understand and control.

This behaviour is not new to us. Spend time with a newspaper or on social media and you will soon realise just how good humans think they are at chronicling their circumstances and contexts. All around us are narratives and sub-texts of power, wealth, health, environment, and authority. Some of these may be true. And some may be false.

Write or Read Them Off

The truth is that we find it easier to deal with the present difficulties and confusions of this world – and our immediate lives – if we can write or read them off. We find it easier to have stories about refugees and terrorists; protesters and tyrants; liberals and con-

servatives; corrupt elites and government officials; conspiracy theorists and fake news pundits, than we do in simply confronting the reality that our fellow human beings live just as similarly confused lives as ourselves.

If you can devise a plot, cast the characters, and give the stage directions, you no longer need to worry about getting to know and understand others. You can instead carry on writing and thinking up as many and as varied stories as you wish about the people who confuse, irritate, or frustrate you.

The World Has Lost the Plot

A famous theologian once remarked that the world has lost its story. What he meant was that the world had lost the narrative of Sacred Scripture. It had lost the story of Jesus Christ.

We might push his thought a bit further and suggest that the world has always somewhat lost the plot, if you will. Why? Because the world is preoccupied with scripts which ignore that one narrative to which we all belong: the story of humanity, sin, and promised redemption.

God's Story Lives on in the Church

The world may have lost that story – however, the church has not. The church's story starts again at Advent and tells of the coming King. It tells of the King who comes first to His crib-throne in Bethlehem, but ultimately to that harsher throne upon a hill in Jerusalem.



The season of Advent invites us each year into this sacred story. Ancient Christians called this invitation 'the way.' They called it the way because they knew that in reading the Sacred Scriptures, in hearing them again, God's purposes were revealed anew. They knew they were journeying into the very heart of God. In hearing, they believed. They found themselves in the Sacred Scriptures because they knew they belonged to the author of such wonderful mysteries.

The Season of the Story

As we wait for Jesus to come again, we do what we as humans do best. We tell stories. Let the season of Advent not only be an invitation to the Christmas story, let Advent also be an invitation to you to journey into the heart of God again.

Let Advent be an invitation to hear anew those ancient and cosmic stories; to hear once again who you really are in life of the God who indeed became one of us in the fulness of time.

The church's story starts again at Advent and tells of the coming King

THE 69TH ANNUAL SYNOD OF THE ELCE AND THE AGM OF THE ELCE TRUST LTD

Resurrection Lutheran Church, Cambridge
November 17th-18th 2023

Arno and Lizani Bessel (Synod Reporters)

The 69th Annual Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England (ELCE) took place on November 17th-18th 2023 under the theme: “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9). Resurrection Lutheran Church, Cambridge, kindly hosted the event.

The opening and closing services of each day gave opportunity to rejoice in God’s faithfulness.

Greetings and prayers for God’s blessings were received from The Lutheran Church of Australia, The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Denmark, The Evangelical Lutheran – Synod of France, and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). The ELCE has been in fellowship with LCMS for many years. However, this year the fellowship was commemorated with the LCMS presenting the ELCE with a beautiful plaque at a meeting of heads of LCMS Partner Churches in Wittenberg in October. The plaque was in view for both days of synod.

Annual reports were shared by committees and boards as well as by the Executive Council, Westfield House, and the Chairman of the ELCE, Rev. George Samiec. The extraordinary hard work and the overwhelmingly busy agenda of Rev. George Samiec were noted with heartfelt thanks and applause. Equally, the efficient work and dedication of Dr. Cyndy Lumley, treasurer, and Mrs. Doreen Rosser, secretary, were acknowledged with gratitude.





Clockwise from top left: Tapani Simojoki, Wade Bellesbach, Didzis Stilve, Claudio Flor, George Samiec, Jaime Kriger, Boris Gunjević, Joel Humann

Time was allotted in the agenda for the AGM of the ELCE Trust and the ELCE Budget Conference. Wise administration and money are required in the running of the church so that she can fulfil her main purpose: proclaiming the gospel of Christ. Most of the work of the Central Office (all congregations benefit from it) is done on a voluntary basis. The aim is to hire a full-time staff, and to that end financial resources are needed. Congregations are contributing towards the ELCE and loans are being paid back. However, an increase in contributions and more substantial loan paybacks are welcomed.

Six resolutions were brought to Synod's attention: 1) Gratitude for the Churches of the European Lutheran Conference, the International Lutheran Council, and the worldwide church of God; 2) Reappointment of Chater Allan LLP as Auditors for the ELCE and ELCE Trust Ltd; 3) Retirement Housing (purchase of a property at the maximum of £300,000). These resolutions were carried.

Resolution 4 proposed the suspension of the present restructure process of the church (each congregation becoming a Charitable Incorporated Organization) and the ELCE becoming a single



In Memoriam: The Memorial Rite Photo: George Samiec



ELCE Secretary Doreen Rosser reading the Executive Council report, with Vice-Chairman Jon Ehlers and Chairman George Samiec in the background.

Photo: Tapani Simojoki

charity instead. Resolution 5 advocated the urgent finalization of the restructuring process. Neither of the resolutions was carried. Resolution 6 focused on updating pastors' salary considering the inflation index. It was decided to continue to use the current criteria – set by Synod in 2005 – to adjust pastors' salary.

In the memorial rite, brothers and sisters in the faith whom the Lord called to the eternal glory last year were remembered.

Regarding elections, most of the positions were filled with the re-election of the previous holders.

Congregations reported on their work highlighting blessings and challenges.

Yes, the life of the Chairman, Rev. George Samiec, was celebrated as the Synod delegates sang with powerful voices "happy birthday to you!"

Resurrection congregation has been a marvellous host offering a warm atmosphere and serving very delicious food. Thank you!



The Survivors: Delegates after the closing service. Photo: George Samiec

SYNOD ELECTION RESULTS

Names in **bold** were elected at this Synod

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

Rev. Jon Ehlers (Vice Chairman), **Ms. Lynn Robinson** (Lay Councillor), **Mrs. Doreen Rosser** (Secretary), Mrs. Mairi Cowie (Lay Councillor), Rev. Jaime Kriger (Pastoral Councillor), Dr Cyndy Lumley (Treasurer), Rev. George Samiec (Chairman)

COMMITTEE ON WORSHIP

Miss Hanna Simojoki, **Mrs. Helena Simons**, Rev. Wade Bellesbach, Mrs. Rosemary Gowers, Rev. Tapani Simojoki

CONGREGATIONAL LIFE COMMITTEE

Mr. Geoff Gowers, **Rev. Claudio Flor**, Mr. Jonathan Flor, Rev. Dr Didzis Stilve, Mrs. Doreen Rosser

BOARD FOR OVERSEAS MISSIONS

Mr. Paul Hill, **Mrs. Joanna Passmore**, Rev. Dr Arno Bessel, Mrs. Helena Simons, Mrs. Rosanna Kriger

NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE

Rev. Jon Ehlers, Mr. Paul Hill, Mr. Alberto Garcia

BOARD FOR YOUTH

Rev. Tapani Simojoki, Mr. Daniel Wan, Ms. Dipuo Mataboge, Rev. Dr Arno Bessel, Ms. Grace Fleming-Williams

SALARY REVIEW COMMITTEE

Dr William Scott, **Rev. Dr Arno Bessel**, Rev. Claudio Flor, Mrs. Rosanna Kriger, Mrs. Michelle Harrison

COMMISSION ON THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

The Chairman of the ELCE and the Westfield House Faculty are permanent members of the CTSC

Mr. Jonathan Fletcher (2024), **Mr. Aleksander Berezyanchuk** (2025), **Rev. Dr. Arno Bessel** (2025), Rev. Tapani Simojoki (2024)

FROM THE BOARD FOR YOUTH: DATES FOR YOUR DIARIES IN 2024

16–18 February 2024	Youth Rally	Oxford
22–26 July 2024	Corpus Christi Conference	Wittenberg
23–26 August 2024	Summer Youth Rally	Herefordshire

NEWS FROM THE WIDER CHURCH

Finnish Bishop and Member of Parliament acquitted in “Bible Trial” appeal

Source: www.ilc-online.org

Bishop Juhana Pohjola of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland (ELMDF) and Dr. Päivi Räsänen, Finnish Member of Parliament, have been acquitted on all charges in a unanimous decision by the Helsinki Court of Appeals. The two had been charged with hate crimes for their expression of historic Christian teaching on human sexuality.

“For me, this has been not only a legal but also a spiritual battle,” Bishop Pohjola said. “It is important for our church to be able to teach publicly what we understand to be the Word of God, the created order, and natural law. I have a calling as a Christian, as a pastor, to guard the faith and to teach it publicly—and then to carry the cross. Carrying the cross is the price we pay in this age to be witnesses for Christ.”

“We were united all the time with Dr. Räsänen,” Bishop Pohjola continued. “There was no discussion that we step back but instead wholeheartedly stand together for the Word of God, for the Gospel of Christ.”

The charges stemmed from a 2004 booklet written by Dr. Räsänen and published by Bishop Pohjola which articulates the historic Christian understanding of sexuality. The decision to prosecute the prominent Finnish politician and a Lutheran cleric drew widespread international concern over the state of religious freedom and free speech in Finland.

“While I celebrate this victory wholeheartedly, I’m also saddened at the thought

Bishop Pohjola addresses supporters outside
the Helsinki Court of Appeals.
Photo: lhp.fi



of the enormous state resources expended over the last four years to prosecute us for nothing more than the peaceful expression of our Christian faith,” said Dr. Räsänen. “The basic human right to free speech remains under serious threat in Finland and around the world. No one should be punished for peacefully expressing their beliefs, and we are grateful that the court has upheld this core freedom.”

“There have been some difficult moments,” Dr. Räsänen continued. But, she said, “I decided that whatever comes—whatever the consequences will be—I will not give up. Because I felt that this is not only my opinion, it is the Word of God.”

Bishop Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen initially faced trial in 2022. A panel of three judges ultimately ruled that they be acquitted on all charges, stating that “it is not the role of the district court to interpret biblical concepts.” But the prosecution appealed, leading to hearings at the Helsinki Court of Appeals from August 31 to September 1, 2023.

The decision from the Helsinki Court of Appeals to uphold the district court’s decision may not be the end of the story either. The prosecution has indicated it may seek permission to appeal to the Supreme Court of Finland.

Church of England Divided over Same-Sex Union Proposals

Meeting in November, the General Synod of the Church of England passed by a narrow margin a proposal by the House of Bishops to allow clergy to bless same-sex unions. However, the Canon Law on marriage remains unchanged, meaning that the Church of England will not allow same-sex “marriages” to be solemnised by clergy.

The move was opposed by representatives of clergy and laity who are committed to upholding the biblical view on human sexuality.

The Rev. John Dunnett, National Director of the Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC), said,

“CEEC is grieved and saddened that the General Synod passed a motion earlier this afternoon to continue with the implementation of the bishops’ proposals. These proposals depart from a biblical understanding of sex and marriage, in particular by enabling blessings for same sex couples in parish churches. This decision follows a process that has been widely observed as unduly hasty, incomplete and haphazard.

“This is, however, more than just a departure from the biblical understanding of sex and marriage. Sadly, today marks a ‘watershed’ moment, in that it appears that the Church of England no longer sees Scripture as our supreme authority.”

Why Are You So Afraid?

Pete Myers,

Resurrection Lutheran Church, Cambridge

Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?" asked Jesus (Mark 4:40).

Why were these sailors afraid? The taste of salt water, sound of the storm, sight of the lightning, feel of the wind, and smell of the sea. All five senses, and years of professional experience, conspired together to say: "You will die".

God's Word provides no promise that we will be safe on the sea. No guarantee that the water would not consume them that day. No assurance that the evident danger was not real. And yet Jesus asked, "Have you still no faith?"

We have just returned from over four years on the mission field in Ethiopia. It has been stressful. We have been betrayed, attacked in the street, fired, had money stolen; experienced education problems, housing problems, conflict, trespassers at home, regular sickness, civil war, evacuation; years of experience conspiring together ... and yet Jesus asks, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"

How do we, regular, limited, sinful human beings, understand Jesus' words in the light of the experiences we all walk through that tell us we should fear?

Both Katy and I grew up with Baptist convictions. Reading the Bible thoroughly in our early twenties, we

became Anglicans. And in the last few years we completed that journey to become Lutherans.

It's a journey that in some senses started at our baptism. But, in another sense it started during the six years we were in Cambridge while I studied for my MA and PhD, served my Anglican curacy, and chatted about the Bible with some LCMS friends living nearby studying at the same time.

In 2019 we moved to Ethiopia, where I served as the acting Rector of the Anglican Church in Addis for 6 months, before we moved to a Lutheran church (a member of the mostly liberal Lutheran World Federation) when the Covid crisis kicked in. I served for a stint on the pastoral team, while Katy served in welcoming and practical service. That was until late 2021 when we were forced to evacuate to Tanzania due to the civil war: forced to leave our home, by no choice of our own, in highly stressful circumstances. This led to the eventual collapse of our ministry there entirely.

Until that time, I had always assumed that, as an Anglican, he was "basically Lutheran," just with a few odd bits of Reformed theology here and there. I had always agreed with the Augsburg Confession, just with a bit of frowning over one or two places. But since we were now serving in a

Lutheran church, and being evacuated we had time on our hands, I set to reading some Confessional theology in earnest.

It was there, in a strange house in Tanzania, evacuated from our home, scared about our future, that I read Martin Chemnitz' book, *The Two Natures in Christ* – and it clicked. What Jesus meant started to become clear in a way I had never seen before.

“Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” Our experience and our reason tell us this: we can discern that “God is here!” or “God is not there!” And so we instinctively either fear or rejoice.

The eye of our reason, and the senses of our experience, cannot see where God is, nor where he is not.

But, Jesus says: no, this is not the way. God is hidden in this world. Moses only sees his back. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God. The eye of our reason, and the senses of our experience, cannot see where God is, nor where he is not.

God's stance of loving grace toward us is seen by the eye of faith as we cling to him through the works that reveal him to us: the cross, the empty tomb, etc. And these we find only as we look outside ourselves and place our faith externally in his Word, preached to us

from the pulpit and in the sacraments.

“Why are you so afraid?” The disciples could not see past their own experiences. It is true, there is no promise that we will not suffer, that we will not die—quite the opposite in fact. Jesus said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” But the disciples' fear was driven by looking in the wrong direction. They gazed at what they could see with their eyes.

“Have you still faith no faith?” God is hidden. Our experience, our reason: these do not grasp him. They are unable to catch the comfort of knowing him. God is revealed to us in Jesus by his Word and Sacraments, and these we receive by faith.

This is our journey to Lutheranism. It began at our baptism with the great promise made to us that we are born again in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. A calling that reaches its fulfilment in all of us, as we let go of what we discern by our experience and reason, and embrace his Word by faith.



Pete and Katy Myers with (L to R) Josiah (15), Levi (7) and Seth (13)



How the Bible Made Our World

Hanna Simojoki,

Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Fareham

The *Air We Breathe* is a remarkably clear and immersive account of the influence Christianity has had on the formation of Western culture. While it maintains an accessible and somewhat colloquial tone throughout, it nonetheless touches on a great range of ideas, events, and time periods, from the Roman arenas through to modern day courtrooms. The picture it paints of a society irrevocably changed and overwhelmingly shaped by what Scrivener terms the 'Jesus Revolution' is absorbing and convincing.

Scrivener's writing is by and large both illuminating and highly enjoyable. It is a particularly good starting point for those wishing to learn more about the reliance of modern culture and values on Christianity.

Scrivener attempts the difficult task of addressing several different imagined audiences – the 'nones' (non-Christians), 'dones' (people who have purposely distanced themselves from Christianity), and the 'wons' (Christians) – at the same time. Thus, he intersperses interjections addressed to possible sceptics, regularly reminding his reader that the issues he is addressing are relevant to them.

To the Christian reader, whose aim is likely not to be persuaded of the continued relevance of Christianity, but rather to be informed about its in-

fluence, these interjections may seem somewhat unnecessary.

However, they serve as a sobering reminder that a sizeable proportion of the population has no idea the influence Christianity has had on their lives and beliefs, let alone understands the significance of the Christian message.

Furthermore, even lifelong Christians often need reminding of just how remarkable the values that the Bible teaches, such as compassion, equality, and freedom, are. As *The Air We Breathe* makes so clear, these values have become so embedded in contemporary society that most of us have come to regard them as self-evident.

And yet this is far from the case – and this is the point that Scrivener repeatedly stresses. We cannot rely on society, or the idea of humanity, for the values that give our lives dignity. Rather, we must acknowledge that the Gospel is the only sure and unchanging foundation for such beliefs. And for those of us who have become too



The Air We Breathe:
How We All Came to
Believe in Kindness,
Progress and Equality
 Glen Scrivener
 (The Good Book
 Company £8.49)
*Also available as an ebook
 and an audiobook*

secure in the ideological comfort of the modern age, the increasing pervasiveness of “cancel culture” and everything it entails – inability to forgive, lack of compassion, the inferiority of some based on their beliefs – should remind us of the fundamental insecurity of a “morality” unmoored from its roots.

As Scrivener moves through the seven fundamental values which he argues make up the air we breathe – equality, compassion, consent, enlightenment, science, freedom, and progress – he illustrates in detail not only how these values came to underpin the societal foundations of the West, but also what society would be like (and indeed was like) without them.

Particular highlights occur when he undertakes the task of myth-busting, for example of the mistaken belief that the institutional church was the one thing holding society back from scientific progress in the Middle Ages, showing with convincing poise how in fact the opposite is the case. Rather than seeing the Enlightenment as a rebellion against the Church, he demonstrates how it naturally grew out of the attitude towards the natural world that the Bible cultivates.

Other popular, and mistaken, beliefs are dispelled, and readers are just as



Glen Scrivener.

Photo: Speak Life

likely to cast aside false knowledge through reading this book as they are to come across information previously entirely unknown to them. This double-pronged

approach gives Scrivener’s overall message a sticking power which it might not otherwise have: the experience of being proved wrong tends to be (at times painfully) memorable.

Scrivener’s perfectly reasonable assumption that many readers have limited prior knowledge means that the better-informed reader may at times feel that some of his explanations are perhaps slightly over-simplified. This, however, is no reason to avoid reading the book, as its value does not only lie in its ability to provide facts, but also in its perceptive analysis of contemporary cases, such as the prosecution of Larry Nassar for sex offences, in light of much earlier foundational developments in Christian thinking.

Regardless of how much you know about the contribution of Christianity to the development of the West, Scrivener’s analysis of the real modern outcomes of this development is fresh and insightful, and the slight flattening of complex concepts that sometimes occurs in the process is ultimately forgivable due to the productive purpose it serves. Indeed, the direction he provides towards other, potentially more complex texts on the same subject is acknowledgement of the enormous complexity and breadth of this area.

However, *The Air We Breathe* is not only a wonderful introduction to it, but also and most importantly a compelling and persuasive account of why it *matters*, and the great danger that lies in forgetting that the core values of our lives are not merely human, but God-given.

Confessional Lutherans Organising in Poland

Grzegorz Żarnecki

The author is a Polish physicist and one of the organisers of the Konfesyjni Lutheran network in Poland



It all started with an internet forum. Or rather, I should say, two internet forums. In 2006, the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in Poland launched the pastoral webpage *duszpasterz.pl* ('pastor'), which included the *Defragmentacja* ('defragmentation') forum.

It soon received interest from Lutherans from all over Poland and it wasn't long until tensions arose between conservative and more liberal users. Eventually, in January 2010, a group of users decided to leave *Defragmentacja* and start their own forum, *Konfesyjni* ('Confessionals'), where administrators embraced orthodox Lutheran theology. Soon, more and more people joined the new forum which still exists after almost 13 years (while *Defragmentacja* is no longer active). It became clear to its first administrator, Tomasz Płaziński, that there was potential for something more than just an internet discussion board.

In 2011, the *konfesyjni.pl* webpage was established. A year later, it was registered officially as the journal *Konfesyjni*. The webpage started publishing articles, sermons and news about the Lutheran Church in Poland. An important contribution came from Rev. Jan Gross, a former chairman of

the Church Synod and a well-known pastor with many connections. In 2011, he started organising liturgical retreats which became a biannual opportunity for *Konfesyjni* forum members to meet in person. In 2013, the fanpage *Luteranie Konfesyjni* was found on Facebook.

This dynamic development came to an abrupt end in 2014 when Pastor Gross passed away. Meetings in person were not continued and over time activity on the forum began to decrease. It seemed that the young confessional movement would slowly decline.

Fortunately, this was not to be the case, thanks be to God. In the late 2010s, the new administrators of the forum, Aleksander Bieriejzanczuk and Grzegorz Żarnecki, started posting new articles more frequently. The first online conference was organised in 2020 during the pandemic, attracting 15 followers of the *Konfesyjni* forum. Rev. Jakub Retmaniak led online Vespers. The next year, the conference was organised in person, and the biannual meetings are still running!

October 2020 brought political and cultural divisions in Poland to a whole new level. The Constitutional Tribunal ruled that a legal abortion in case

of foetal disability conflicts with the Polish constitution. As a result, the existing status quo in Polish legislation ended after over 20 years. Massive protests broke out. The Roman-Catholic Church was seen as the main advocate of pro-life views. For the first time in modern Polish history, numerous acts of vandalism were directed against church properties.

Most of the Polish Lutherans were mildly sympathetic with the protestors. A statement issued by the Bishops said that the Church should bear witness about morality but not force it on others through the legislation. The Lutheran congregation in Wrocław communicated that it “supports free choice”. However, the most controversial blow came from the Synodal Commission for Women which published an appeal where the abortion was referred to as a “reproductive right”. At this point, *Konfesyjni* had to react.

After several days of preparation, a statement was published on *Konfesyjni*. It was deliberately written with a focus not on the legal status of abortion, but rather on the moral evaluation. To start with, authors took the biblical truth that man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Subsequently, various historical Christian positions followed, which embraced the value of the unborn life (including the teaching of the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession from

1991). The statement clearly communicated that from the Christian perspective, abortion is evil. It was signed by 39 members of the Church and was cited by another internet journal. Altogether, the statement received over 25,000 views. Never before had the website received so much support and attention. This was very encouraging.

The year 2021 opened a new chapter in the history of our movement. Based on the initiative of Grzegorz Żarnecki, Mateusz Minkus and Igor Mędela, a new legal entity was created: the Evangelical Association of Confessional Lutherans (Ewangelickie Stowarzyszenie Luteran Konfesyjnych - ESLK). The official goals of the association are evangelisation, worship and the promotion of the knowledge about confessional Lutheran church bodies. Currently there are 11 members of ESLK, including two ordained pastors.

The future of ESLK remains uncertain. It is possible that with time it will form a foundation for one or more new congregations, although more members would be required to do so. The current rules for new people to join ESLK are quite inclusive. An informal policy, accepted in 2022, consists of 5 necessary points that each candidate must agree with: (1) Scripture is inspired by God; (2) Luther explained faithfully the meaning of sacraments in his Small Catechism; (3) Christian marriage is sanctified by God as a union of one woman and one

man; (4) the commandment “You shall not kill” includes unborn human life; and (5) according to the Scripture the office of the Minister within the Church is intended for men. These five points correspond to contemporary controversies within Lutheranism and set the frame for different view-

points within ESLK. At the same time, they are not detailed and give room for quite a variety of theological views. The idea is to gather orthodox, conservative and centrist Lutherans into one organisation opposed to purely modern tendencies in the Lutheran Church.

SELECTED CHRISTMAS SERVICES AROUND THE ELCE

Ascension Lutheran Church, Brandon		
Christmas Eve	11 am	Online Service
Christmas Day	11 am	Divine Service
Christ Lutheran Church, Petts Wood		
Christmas Eve	6.30 pm & 11 pm	Candlelight Service
Christmas Day	10 am	Lessons and carols
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Coventry		
Christmas Eve	4 pm	Divine Service
Christmas Day	10 am	Readings and Carols
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Tottenham		
Christmas Eve	11 am	Divine Service
Oxford Lutheran Mission		
Christmas Eve	2.15 pm	Divine Service
Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Fareham		
Christmas Eve	10.30 am	Divine Service
	11 pm	Midnight Mass
Christmas Day	10 am	Divine Service
Redeemer Lutheran Church, Harlow		
Christmas Eve	11 am	Readings and Carols
Resurrection Lutheran Church		
Christmas Eve	11 am	Divine Service
Christmas Day	10 am	Christmas Service
St. Timothy’s Mission, Sunderland		
23 December	1 pm	Divine Service

Map of ELCE Congregations



Congregation	Address	Service Time
Ascension Lutheran Church	Brandon Methodist Church, London Road, Brandon, Suffolk, IP27 0EL	9 am, <i>except 5 pm on the 1st Sunday of the month</i>
Brighton Lutheran Mission	Holland Road Baptist Church, 65–71 Holland Road, Hove, BN3 1JN	3.30 pm on the 1 st Sunday of month
Bristol Lutheran Mission	Contact St. Peter's Lutheran Church for details	
Cheltenham Lutheran Mission	Contact Luther-Tyndale Memorial Church for details	
Christ Lutheran Church	227 Poverest Road, Orpington, BR5 1RD	10.30 am
Edinburgh Lutheran Mission	Contact Christ Lutheran Church for details	
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church	49 Eastern Green Road, Coventry, CV5 7LG	4 pm on the 2 nd & 4 th Sunday of the month
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church	53 Antill Road, London, N15 4AR	11 am
Ipswich Lutheran Mission	St. Luke's Church, 78 Cliff Lane, Ipswich, IP3 0PJ	6 pm on the 3 rd Sunday of the month
Luther-Tyndale Memorial Church	9 Leighton Crescent, Kentish Town	10 am
Our Saviour Lutheran Church	10th Fareham Scouts, 20B Highlands Road, Fareham, PO16 7XN	10.30 am
Oxford Lutheran Mission	Marston United Reformed Church, 352 Marston Road, Marston, Oxford, OX3 0JB	4.30 pm on the 2 nd , 3 rd & 4 th Sunday of the month
Rainham Lutheran Mission	Contact Christ Lutheran Church for details	
Redeemer Lutheran Church	22 Tawneys Road, Harlow, CM18 6QS	11 am
Resurrection Lutheran Church	25 Westfield Lane, Cambridge, CB4 3QS	11 am
St. Andrew's Lutheran Church	Whitby Road, Ruislip, HA4 9DY	11.30 am
St. Columba Lutheran Church	151 Westwood Hill, East Kilbride, G75 8QA	11 am
St. David Lutheran Church	St. Fagans Road, Fairwater, Cardiff, CF5 3EU	11 am <i>except 6 pm on the last Sunday of the month</i>
St. Paul's Lutheran Church	St. Paul's Close, Cranes Way, Borehamwood, WD6 2DB	9.30 am
St. Peter's Lutheran Church	21 Larkham Lane, Plympton, Plymouth, PL7 4PG	11 am
St. Timothy's Lutheran Mission	Queen Alexandra Road, Sunderland, SR2 9AA	11 am on the 1 st & 3 rd Saturday of the month

THE COMING

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

R.S. Thomas

Why did God come to earth, humbling himself by taking on the form of a servant? This poem shows us the compassion of Christ by depicting the world he came to save. It is tiny, nothing more than a 'small globe', and filled with images. These images are incredibly poignant, both beautiful and broken: The river uncoils like a 'Serpent', making reference to the Fall, it is 'radiant', but radiant 'with slime'. Most poignant of all are the 'People' with 'thin arms' held out towards the 'bare tree'. While this evokes the helplessness of humanity before Jesus came into the world, barred from the Tree of Life, this image also looks forward to the crucifixion, and the sacrifice on the hill of Golgotha, a connection made more explicit later by its 'crossed / Boughs'. Finally, the closing lines of the poem are powerful in their understated simplicity. The Son demonstrates his love for the people in the scorched, far-off land, by willingly entering into it, to become the hope of the hopeless, and the Saviour of the lowly.

— **Hanna Simojoki**

R.S. Thomas (1913–2000) was a Welsh poet and Anglican priest.

