

## Theological Observer

### The Present State of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church

*[This is an edited version of the personal assessment by the Rev. Dr. Veiko Vihuri of the Lutheran identity of our sister church in Estonia that was offered during his visit to Fort Wayne in January 2008. The Editors]*

Many Lutherans in the United States do not know the situation of the Baltic Lutheran Churches because we are rather small and quite distant. I will give a general overview of the Lutheran tradition in Estonia and some key elements of our Lutheran identity. Although this is my personal assessment, I attempt to reflect accurately Lutheranism in Estonia, including the current problems we face.

#### *Historical Background*

Estonia has always been a borderland, located in northeastern Europe between the Roman Catholic (and now also Protestant) West and the Orthodox East. In the thirteenth century when German and Danish knights conquered Estonia and baptized Estonians by "sword and fire," it became an outpost of the Roman Catholic Church "at the end of the world," as a local bishop wrote to the Pope. The Russian Orthodox Church has always been our big neighbor. It has played an increasingly important role in the religious life of Estonia, especially since the nineteenth century.

The Lutheran Reformation reached the towns of Old Livonia already in the 1520s. Martin Luther himself wrote several letters to the city councils of Livonia and sent his former students from Wittenberg to introduce the teaching of the pure gospel in this part of Europe. Unfortunately, the history of Estonia that followed became complicated as the country was conquered by different neighboring powers: Sweden, Denmark, Poland, and Russia. Estonian Lutheran spirituality has been influenced by German and Scandinavian Lutheranism. From Germany we received the Lutheran Reformation, Pietism, and a more Protestant understanding of Lutheranism. From Scandinavia we received a more "high" view of the church, ministry, sacraments, and liturgy. Under the Swedish rule, the office of bishop and traditional liturgical vestments were retained until the eighteenth century when Estonia was conquered by Russia.

In the eighteenth century, the Moravian movement emerged in Estonia and was popular among Estonian peasants. As the official church was ruled by the German speaking upper-class (until the second-half of the nineteenth century all pastors were Germans or, in some cases, Swedes), the Estonian-speaking people found their outlet in the simple prayer halls with those of similar social class. For a long period, the official Lutheran Church remained reserved, if not hostile towards the Moravians. Today, it is a very small

movement within the church. Moravian and the low-church piety, however, is now an element of Estonian Lutheran spirituality. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when Estonia was part of the Russian Empire, tens of thousands of Estonians converted to the Russian Orthodox Church. They were unhappy with the social conditions, German barons, and perhaps also the German pastors. The Russian Orthodox Church became the state church. The Eastern Orthodox beliefs and practices, therefore, have influenced the Estonian people as well.

Estonia became an independent state in 1918. The Lutheran Church in Estonia which had been part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia, also became independent and was formed as a free people's church. It was the first time in history that Estonians were able to take the church into their own hands. Estonia's independent existence, however, only lasted little more than twenty years. It was occupied by the Red Army in 1940. German occupation followed, but Soviet rule was restored in 1944. In the autumn of 1944, about 70,000 to 80,000 Estonians were forced to flee the country because of the approaching Red Army. There were approximately 60,000 refugee Lutherans. Among them was Bishop Johan Köpp together with 72 pastors, a few members of consistory, and 12 graduates and undergraduates of theology. In the following years, the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad was born.

The Lutheran Church in Estonia stayed under the strict control of the Soviet authorities for almost fifty years. The public activity of the church, including the youth work and catechetical work, was strictly forbidden. The property of the church was nationalized, so congregations had to pay very high rent for their church buildings. During these very dark decades, the church lost most of its members, and the Soviet authorities said publicly that the church would die out soon. Perhaps the only positive side of this was that the Estonian Lutheran Church was cut off from the liberal theological developments in the large western Lutheran churches.

In 1988, Estonia began to move towards independence, which was achieved in 1991. This was accompanied by a remarkable blossoming of church life. But it lasted only a few years; Estonia is now perhaps one of the most secular countries in Europe. According to the census held in 2000, 13.6% of the population over the age of 15 considered themselves as Lutherans, 12.8% said they were Orthodox. The percentage of the other denominations is very small. Approximately two-thirds of Estonia's whole population does not belong to any church or religious movement. It is true that the majority of Estonians would still say they are Lutherans, but it does not necessarily mean they consider themselves believers. As a man said once to his pastor: "I am not a believer, I am a Lutheran."

This also means that we as Christians and Lutherans are living as a minority in a very secular society. We cannot expect that the society and the politicians accept Christian faith as a natural part of our culture. In fact, our

culture has become predominantly secular. In the past, the Lutheran Church was the nation's largest church, but this is now changing. Because the Russian-speaking people who arrived here during the Soviet times tend to be more religious, the membership of the Russian Orthodox Church in Estonia is growing or at least stable, while the number of Lutherans is going down.

### *Some Elements of the Identity of the Estonian Lutheran Church*

**Episcopal-Synodical Church Order.** Estonian Lutheranism has adopted episcopal-synodical church order. Although the office of bishop was introduced immediately after becoming independent, the first Church Constitution (1919) stated that the basic unit of the Lutheran Church in Estonia was the local parish. So the church was actually formed as a free association of local congregations. It was considered as a very Lutheran and truly evangelical understanding of the church order. The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church was defined as a free people's church. The key point was that each parish had the right to leave the church, if the parish council made such a decision. During the theological quarrels between the conservative and the liberal wings in the 1920s, some congregations used that right, and the church was split.

There are still tensions between those who would like to stress the importance of democratic, congregational, and synodical aspects in church order and those who tend to think that the church manifests itself at the diocesan level rather than at the parish level. The problem is that the episcopal level is too far from parish pastors and congregations: there are over 160 congregations in the EELC, and a single bishop cannot visit every parish often. Besides, the archbishop must also be active externally. The functions of the bishop have been given over to the area deans, who are ordinary priests and do not have the authority of a bishop. That is why discussions on the creation of new dioceses have existed since the 1930s. For example, the Church of Latvia now has three bishops.

There are many who think we do not need any changes at all. They say we should remain as a free people's church. They oppose a centralized and hierarchical church organization. I think it is typical Estonian peasant kind of thinking: let us run our farm ourselves; we know better than anyone else how to do it. But it is not very much a democratic people's church kind of thinking, but a very pastor-centered vision of the church. It is up to the local pastor to decide on the matters of doctrine and practice. *Cuius regio, eius religio!*

**The Office of Bishop and the Threefold Ministry.** The office of bishop has become part of the Estonian Lutheran identity. There may be various "high" or "low" views on the office of bishop within our church, but the general understanding is that the bishop is the head of the church and the *pastor pastorum*. In the last decades, the understanding of ministry has been influenced by the more "high" views as well as by the Porvoo Agreement. The office of bishop was reintroduced in 1919 with the new church order. Jakob

Kukk, the first bishop, was consecrated in 1921 by the famous Archbishop of Uppsala (Sweden), Nathan Söderblom, and a Finnish bishop. The low-church conservatives, including the Baltic German clergy, were extremely annoyed over the "high" liturgy of the consecration service and the rumors that Söderblom intended to introduce the apostolic succession in Estonia and Latvia in order to promote his vision of "evangelical catholicity."

We now have had nine bishops and archbishops as the heads of the church (the archbishops of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad, and the suffragan bishop are not included). Seven of them were consecrated by Swedish, Finnish, and later also by Anglican bishops in the historic apostolic succession. The episcopal consecration in historic succession, however, is not an absolute condition. For example, the first archbishop after World War II was only installed rather than consecrated, as it was impossible to ask foreign bishops to come to the Soviet Estonia.

The office of deacon was introduced after World War II. The reason was actually not theological but practical: there was a lack of ministers, and the Soviet authorities had promised to close down every congregation that had no minister. Facing a new Soviet occupation in 1944, more than half of the Estonian clergy had left the country, and the Theological Faculty at Tartu was immediately closed down by the Soviets. In such a desperate situation, the church decided to ordain lay preachers as deacons or assistant pastors. They did not have a full theological education and were subordinated to the pastor-in-charge, but they acted as local ministers and, in the eyes of the parishioners, were like ordinary pastors. Later in the 1970s and 1980s, many young students of theology were ordained as deacons and sent to vacant parishes. The church came to consider them also as part of the ministry.

The three-fold ministry is clearly stated in the Church Constitution of 2004, although the administration of the sacraments is reserved to priests and bishops only. Deacons assist the local parish pastor or their direct *ordinarius*. In practice, many deacons serve parishes where there is no local pastor, and the priest-in-charge is too busy to visit the congregation every Sunday. The problem is that many pastors still serve two, three, or even more parishes because some congregations cannot afford their own minister. The archbishop can give special permission (always for a limited period) to a deacon to celebrate the Lord's Supper, a doubtful practice both theologically and in terms of church tradition. A Swedish bishop asked me once: "Why doesn't the Archbishop of Estonia ordain them as priests?" Thankfully, sixteen deacons were ordained priests last year, but there are other deacons who have not yet completed their theological training. If some of them become permanent deacons, then I think that we should reconsider the role and meaning of the office of deacon in our church. This discussion has already begun.

**Liturgy and Piety.** The Lutheran Church in Estonia has always been a liturgical church. Until the eighteenth century, the traditional liturgical

vestments were used. The Swedish handbook was used in the congregations until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The order of service in the imperial agenda of 1834 and its revised versions was also quite "high." For example, the liturgy had to be sung throughout. The people of Estonia, however, have been influenced by the piety of the Moravian or Herrnhut Brethren. This type of piety is very low church and individualistic, focusing on the Bible, prayer, hymns, and sometimes on mystical visions. For them, the liturgical aspect of church life is not important. There is a trend to consider the "high" liturgy as alien to the true Lutheran tradition. In this view of Lutheranism, preaching is at the center of the service and the Lord's Supper need not be celebrated frequently.

The liturgical renewal movement of the twentieth century, however, has also influenced the work on the new church handbook in Estonia. It is characteristic that the high-church and liturgical movement has been more attractive to the clergy than to the laity, but it is definitely there. Before World War II, it was the more liberal wing that was interested in high liturgy while the low-church conservatives remained reserved. Now it is precisely the high-church wing that is theologically much more conservative, defending the catholic truths and traditional teaching of the church and the Lutheran heritage of the Reformation era. As a consequence, the Lord's Supper is celebrated every Sunday in most parishes, and the number of communicants is increasing.

The first attempts to revise the imperial agenda of 1902 were made as early as the 1920s and 1930s, but World War II stopped the process. In the Soviet period, the question of survival was much more important for the church than liturgical renewal. It was only in 1991 that the liturgical commission started its work. The new handbook was finally completed in 2007. Regarding the service order, it follows the same principles of recent liturgical reforms in other Lutheran Churches (Sweden, Finland, Germany, and the like). The question of the new handbook of liturgy (which has been approved by the Episcopal Council but not the Conference and General Synod) has divided the church into different factions. The high-church wing and many other pastors support the liturgical reform. The revised version of the imperial agenda of 1902, which is still used in some congregations, has its supporters as well, mainly among clergymen with low-church or liberal Protestant views. Many of them believe that behind the liturgical reform is the hidden plan of the high-church advocates to catholicize the Lutheran Church. They also claim that the new liturgy is ineffective in bringing people back to the church. They argue that we are going to lose even more members if we change the traditional—that is, the nineteenth century—liturgy.

**Moderate Theological Position.** The theological position of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church can be described as moderate. What do I mean? There is a trend to avoid "extremes" of both liberal and conservative theology.

We do not have radical feminist theology or a Bible translation with "inclusive language." On the other hand, the terms "Confessional Lutheranism" or "traditional Christian doctrine" alarm many. Being moderate in terms of theology, the Estonian church can be described as a mainline Protestant church. Of course, we are still much more conservative than the churches in Scandinavia or Germany. Yes, we have women pastors, but we have not accepted same-sex partnerships as some Scandinavian churches have. You can find many pastors whose understanding of the Bible is conservative, even fundamentalist. There are, however, some young theologians and pastors who say they represent the middle-way theological position. They consider the Reformation as a transformation from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism, and they adore Martin Luther as the founder of Protestantism. They consider the historical-critical method as a norm. One of them, a young biblical scholar, expressed his wish to make the historical-critical method the only exegetical method in the church. The doctrinal commission did not accept his proposal. We are also an ecumenical church. We are a member of the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches. We have signed both the Leuenberg and the Porvoo agreements. In Soviet times, it was extremely important to have contacts with international ecumenical organizations. It was our only "window" to the free world.

The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church is among those churches that ordain women as priests. It is striking that the Episcopal Council and the Consistory decided in 1938 that the ordination of women is contrary to the Scripture. Only a few years later, in 1945, the Episcopal Council decided that it was possible. As I mentioned before, many pastors had left the country during the war, and the church government faced the problem of vacant congregations. There was a desperate lack of ministers, and the archbishop had to ordain several lay preachers. They did not have a proper theological or pastoral training. There are still divergent views on whether women's ordination is compatible with the Bible. Although the final decision about the ordination of women was made in 1967 by the General Synod with no theological discussion whatsoever, almost all women pastors that are working in the church today have been ordained since 1994 (there are about 40 women pastors and deacons out of 220 ministers in our church).

There are many male priests among high-church as well as low-church conservatives who are unhappy with this decision, but it is only the high-church wing that openly opposes the ordination of women. Yet it seems we cannot change this practice in the foreseeable future. I am not sure whether it is possible to become a bishop if such a candidate would publicly say he is not going to ordain more women pastors. I think many people in our church, especially among the clergy, share a democratic, Protestant, and also low or pietistic understanding of the church and ministry that sees no essential difference between the ordained pastor and the layman. From that point of

view, why should we exclude women from the activity of the church? We are brothers and sisters, all called by the Lord to preach the word!

Regarding theological education in Estonia, the oldest and most famous university in Estonia is the University of Tartu (German name: Dorpat), which was founded as the *Academia Gustaviana* in 1632 by the Swedish Lutheran king Gustavus II Adolph. It was reopened as an imperial university in 1802. For a long time, the theology faculty at Tartu was the only place to study Lutheran theology. The faculty was closed down by the Communists in 1940 as a part of their anti-church policy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was reopened. At the beginning of the 1990s, a private theological academy was founded in Tartu by a Lutheran pastor who represents a more low-church and pietistic theology. In Tallinn, the Theological Institute of Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church continues its work. It was founded after World War II to train Lutheran pastors, and was the only place in Estonia where theology was taught throughout the Soviet period. The theology that is taught in the University and the Theological Institute is moderately liberal. The historical-critical method is widely used in the study of the Scriptures. The systematic theology is focused on modern Protestant theology. The most influential foreign Protestant theologians for Estonian theological thinking during the past decades include Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich. Most Estonian Lutheran theologians are more open to German theology than Anglo-American or Scandinavian theology.

There are some striking examples of liberal theologians within our church as well. The professor of church history at the Theological Institute has recently written a book in which he states that Jesus began his ministry after the death of his wife and that his real father was a Jewish priest or rabbi, for the name of the angel Gabriel who visited Mary means "the man of God," and that is exactly why twelve-year old Jesus was hoping to find his father in the temple. One may ask how such a man can teach theology at the Theological Institute owned by the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church. The answer is that the Theological Institute desperately needs academically qualified tutors in order to meet the criteria required by the state. Expressing such views then is considered as a matter of academic freedom. The Theological Institute is not deliberately producing liberal pastors, but one could expect that our church would take the question of proper theological training more seriously. The attitude is this: Let the academic theologians do their work and the pastors in the congregations do their work.

What about the Lutheran Confessions? According to the Church Constitution, the sacred Scriptures and the Book of Concord are the basis of doctrine. Each candidate has to take an oath before ordination that he or she will follow the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions. Before World War II, each pastor knew German (and many had learned Latin as well) and was able to read the Book of Concord in its original languages. There was no need to

translate it into Estonian. The younger generation of ministers, however, speak and read English rather than German, and there is an urgent need to have the Lutheran Confessions in Estonian. Thankfully, the translation has already been made, although it is not yet published. The process of editing may take a few more years, but at least we can hope that in the near future our pastors will be able to read what Lutheranism is and teaches in Estonian.

### *The Ongoing Discussion on Lutheran Identity*

Recent years have seen a heated debate on Lutheran identity in the Estonian church. Let me quote an Estonian theologian, Professor Dr. Alar Laats, who sees the Lutheran Church in Estonia as standing between German and Scandinavian Lutheranism. In his article in *Theology for Europe: Perspectives of Protestant Churches* (Frankfurt: Lembeck Verlag, 2006), he states:

Instead of becoming a blessing, this orientation in two different directions has become a misfortune for our church. The church is internally divided. There is a party that is more high-church orientated. Sometimes one can even notice catholic tendencies. The other party is with evangelical inclination and its aim is to follow the Lutheran tradition that has stamped our country historically. This division in the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church is not to Christianity's advantage in Estonia.

In my opinion, it is not only a conflict between the high-church and the low-church parties over the liturgy or church order; it is about the theological understanding of the church and role of doctrine.

Two years ago the *Martin Luther Society* was formed. The founders of this group said in a public declaration that they would stand for the Lutheran teaching, including the ordination of women. They seem to believe that Lutheranism means a very Protestant understanding of Christian faith. This group includes some low-church or pietistic pastors, some rather liberal theologians, and, of course, many women pastors and theologians. Despite their different theological views and piety, they became united in the face of a common enemy: the conservative and the more confessional wing which, in their understanding, seeks to "catholicize" the church's theological position and liturgical practice.

On the other side, the *Society of the Augsburg Confession* (*Societas Confessionis Augustanae*) was founded. It is not a "party" or "wing" in the church, but an organization to promote the traditional and catholic doctrine of the Lutheran Church. I must publicly state that I am a member of this society. The important issues before us are the catholicity of the church, the Lutheran Confessions, and traditional Christian doctrine. This society includes the more high-church and conservative Lutheran pastors, although its membership is small. Now we are establishing contacts with pastors of the Latvian and the Lithuanian churches, as well as the conservative groups in Finland and Sweden. This society runs a conservative website: "Meie Kirik" or "Our



Church" ([www.meiekirik.ee](http://www.meiekirik.ee)). We hope to publish brochures and books on traditional Christian faith in the future.

### *The Lutheran Church in Estonia at the Crossroads*

The Lutheran Church of Estonia is facing rapid changes in a predominantly secular society. Some years ago the General Synod passed a new church constitution. The first paragraph of the constitution states: "The EELC is a free people's church. . . ." This definition goes back to the very beginning of the Estonian Lutheran Church as it was formed in 1917-1919. Our problem today is that after fifty years of Soviet rule we are not a free people's church. It is true that the Lutheran Church still has a nation-wide network of parishes in Estonia. It could function as a good operational basis for missionary activity. On the other hand, local pastors and congregations have to deal with the maintenance of church buildings. Much energy and money is spent on buildings rather than missionary or pastoral work with the people. A local pastor is sometimes expected to be a good manager rather than a man of prayer. The church does not have a reliable economical basis. In Estonia, many people think that the church is financed by the state and that they do not have to support it financially. The truth is that the church was disestablished a long time ago, and the only financial resources are freewill offerings and, in a few cases, income from property. The ability to cope with economic problems differs from parish to parish.

The main reason why the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church cannot remain (or become again) a people's church is that there is an important characteristic missing: there is no operational Christian education system. In the old days, local pastors were responsible for Christian education. Everybody had to pass the confirmation classes as well. Now religion is taught only in 5 or 6% of Estonian public schools. The only chance to get some Christian education is through the Sunday schools and confirmation classes, as well as Bible classes. The Estonian Church has come to recognize in recent years that we need to pay more attention to being a mission-minded church. First, it is obvious that we are living in a secular country. There are many places (e.g., new growing towns) where the Lutheran Church is not present. Second, we should reconsider our working methods. Third, we should reassess our use of resources.

There is also the question of whether our church is going to change or correct its theological position. It seems that the Scandinavian folk churches have chosen their path. They have accepted the dominant ideology of the secular society. The ordination of women and the blessing of same-sex couples belong to their ideology. The three Baltic Lutheran churches are still influenced by continental Protestantism and Scandinavian Lutheranism, which are now rather liberal. Due to the Soviet occupation and the Iron Curtain, our societies in the Baltic countries are not very developed, but this is changing fast. The question is: How long can the churches resist?

There is no doubt that our closest partner is the Church of Finland. The Estonian and Finnish languages are related. There are many relationships between the congregations and people of these two churches. If the Church of Finland decides to accept homosexual relationships (and I think it is just a matter of time), then should we stop all official relations with that church? It seems in this issue that the Lutheran churches of Latvia and Lithuania have made up their mind. On that account, I am glad that the cooperation between the Baltic churches has deepened in the last years. The very fact that the Archbishop of Estonia signed the joint letter of the Baltic primates to the Church of Sweden and the Lutheran World Federation is a remarkable sign of this. On the other hand, the leadership of the Estonian church would like to keep good relations with the German and Scandinavian Lutheran churches, which are our traditional partners, although the official acceptance of the so-called same-sex partnership by some of these churches may cause problems.

The Estonian Lutheran Church is standing at a crossroads right now and must decide whether it wants to become a more confessional and confessing missionary church or remain a people's church with a moderately liberal theological position to please everybody who would like to belong to it. I am not very optimistic about the first option as long as there will be no change in theological training and education. On the other hand, the number of clergy that are unhappy with the developments in Sweden and Finland is growing. We see the possible collapse of traditional Lutheranism in the churches we have loved and admired. There is nothing we can do except to pray and remain faithful to our Lord. It is extremely important that we deepen our contacts with the Latvian and Lithuanian churches and other conservative and traditional Lutherans, to arrange seminars or conferences on Lutheran theology for pastors, students of theology, and laymen, and to publish good Lutheran theological and devotional literature. I would be grateful if The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod can help us a little in these matters. And, of course, please pray for us and for our church.

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