

Churches and the Finnish EU-presidency



Finland holds the Presidency of the European Union from July 1st to December 31st 2006. In matters related to the Presidency Finland cooperates closely with the preceding and following Presidencies, Austria and Germany. The Council's three-year strategic programme for 2004–2006 also provides guidelines for the agenda of the Finnish Presidency. The Council's annual programme for 2006, which has been drafted in cooperation with Finland and Austria, is also the basis for the work. Finland's aim is to deal with the Presidency well and in an efficient and objective manner. Priorities for the Presidency are i.a. improving the competitiveness and employment of the Union and the discussion about the future of the Union. Finland has emphasized the Union's own intrinsic value as a guarantor of peace and stability and the Union's character of a community based on shared values focusing on human rights, citizens' welfare, equality and sustainable development. The enlargement of the Union and the globalisation bring on the other hand new demands and challenges for the Finnish Presidency.

The Church Council of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland also follows, in its general monitoring of EU-

issues, issues relating to the Finnish EU-Presidency. In this respect, the Church Council cooperates closely with the Finnish Ecumenical Council.

The common objective of the Churches for the Finnish EU-Presidency is to generally present their perspectives and to tell more widely about their work on both a national, ecumenical and international level in issues that are of importance for the Churches.

The Churches wish to support the public administration in issues related to the Presidency. The aim is a regular dialogue especially with the Government Secretariat of EU Affairs in issues which are of importance for the Churches and in which they can give added value to the general debate.

The Churches' priorities for the Finnish Presidency are as follows:

Meeting other religions, European Identity and Tolerance

In the light of recent events, the mutual relationship between freedom of religion and freedom of speech and the need for interreligious dialogue will

most likely be discussed during the Finnish Presidency. The Churches emphasize the importance of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and the importance of tolerance. A true dialogue and respect for others presumes knowledge about one's own conviction and identity. It is important that people respect what is sacred for others. The Churches have plenty of expertise and practical experience in meeting other religions on both a national and international level, and are prepared to enter into a broad discussion in this respect.

In the opening of the Bishops' Convocation of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland on February 14th 2006, Archbishop Paarma suggested that Finland, where the co-existence of Churches and other religions has worked in an exemplary co-operative and peaceful manner, would consider bringing the drafting of a Charter of good practices for inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue to its agenda.

The Value Dimension of the European Union and the future of the Constitutional Treaty

The Churches hope for a broad discussion about how to strengthen the value dimension of the Union and how to promote as well the well-being of its citizens and the environment as its peaceful, socially equitable and equal development. The Churches are prepared to participate in this discussion.

The enlargement of the Union also brings new challenges. The Churches emphasize the character of the Union as a community of values. New member and candidate countries ought to respect human rights and other fundamental rights, such as freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. Special attention is to be paid to the rights of minorities.

Value-related issues also appear in the Constitutional Treaty for Europe, the future of which is likely to be discussed during the Finnish Presidency. The Churches are especially in favour of the aim of the Constitutional Treaty to strengthen the character of the Union as a community of values. When realized, the Constitutional Treaty would also strengthen the fundamental and human rights dimension of the Union. Article 1-52, according to which The Union respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States, is of special importance for the Churches. According to subparagraph 3 of the article, the Union shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with churches, religious associations or communities and philosophical and non-confessional organisations, recognising their identity and their specific contribution.

The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland has supported the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty, as this would promote the discussion about its future and the development of the Union during the Finnish Presidency.

Social Policy Issues

One of the priorities for the Finnish Presidency is the efficient implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, focusing especially on growth and employment, and emphasizing the importance of innovation policy for European competitiveness.

The Churches emphasize the social dimension of the Lisbon strategy. Social equity and sustainable development should be stressed besides economic competitiveness. Sufficient attention should also be paid to environmental aspects.

In the discussion about the European Social Model the Churches support the Nordic universal welfare model, according to which the society is to take care of all its members. This model has proven to be efficient in levelling down inequalities between different social groups, sexes and areas. The ageing of the population brings on the other hand new challenges. The Churches especially stress the need to help socially excluded persons and the most vulnerable in society. The Churches support their members to responsibility for one's neighbour both in their work and in their private lives. The whole society has to bear the responsibility for the disadvantaged.

Combating trafficking

The Churches consider all human beings created by God; every person is an image of God. Therefore every person, his human value and integrity are to be respected. Trafficking is often based on exploiting the financial em-

barrassment of other people and on treating them with contempt with regard to their human dignity. The Churches emphasize that another human being can not be bought, and should not be used as merchandise in order to satisfy one's own desires; human beings are not for trade. The Churches support those means by which trafficking can be reduced, noting that trafficking appears both in the form of prostitution and as forced labour.

The Churches stress the protection of the weaker party. Thus the helping and versatile supporting of victims of trafficking, including promoting activities, are important.

The Churches consider preventive work, education and training of attitudes to be of crucial importance in combating trafficking, and consider such activities well suited for themselves.

Immigration and Refugee Policy

The Churches support a comprehensive and coherent approach in issues related to immigration and refugee policy. The starting point should be to promote democracy, fairness and human rights and to eliminate poverty and economic inequality. People should be treated on an equal basis. On the practical level, the aim should be a policy based on solidarity and human dignity. In promoting democracy, fairness and human rights, measures should be taken to move from words to deeds in order to preserve the credibility of these principles. The

Churches hope for a broad debate about the values of immigration policy within the Union.

International protection should be strengthened and safeguarded, and the main aim should be a fair sharing of responsibility and finding enduring and viable solutions.

The Churches are anxious about the so-called warehousing-phenomenon and consider the development of resettlement programmes important. The Churches have already for a long time participated in integrating activities and on a global level (World Council of Churches) committed themselves to the resettlement of refugees. The Churches hope that Finland during its Presidency could promote the development of resettlement programmes for refugees in the European Union.

According to the Churches, the Union's common asylum system should also be promoted. The aim should be the adoption of a common asylum procedure and the definition of an equal status to those granted asylum or subsidiary protection. The Churches are critical to so-called lists of safe countries of origin.

Environmental Policy

Environmental aspects should also be taken into account comprehensively and coherently in all policy areas in the Union. The Churches are committed to environmental protection on the principle that the whole creation should be included in the sphere of responsibility and love for one's neighbour.

During the Finnish Presidency, among other issues the new generation of environmental policy, the framework programme for sustainable consumption and production, limiting greenhouse gas emissions and climate changes will be discussed. The Churches also hope that Finland during its Presidency could focus on the protection of the Baltic Sea and the importance of environmental protection in the new programme for the Northern Dimension.

Cooperation partners, meetings and events

In issues related to the Finnish EU-Presidency, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland cooperates closely with the Finnish Ecumenical Council, other churches and religious communities, NGOs and public authorities.

On the international level, the Church Council cooperates with ecumenical communication offices and other partners, the most important of which is the Church and Society Commission (CSC) of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). Other important cooperation partners are Eurodiaconia in social issues, Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) in issues relating to immigration and refugee policy and the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) in matters relating to environmental protection.

For the Church Council other important cooperation partners are the Evangelical Church in Germany, EKD – as Germany holds the next Presidency after Finland – and the Church of Sweden, with whom cooperation in EU-

issues is being intensified together with the Baltic sister Churches. One aim is to create a Northern Dimension also in the Church activities sector.

The director of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CSC) and the General Secretary of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) will, together with representatives of the Finnish Churches, meet Foreign Minister Tuomioja on June 30th, 2006 in order to tell more about the Churches' priorities during the Finnish Presidency.

During the Finnish Presidency, the Church Council will, in cooperation with the Church of Sweden, the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Theobalt-network and the Swedish Ecumenical Office for EU Relations (Kyrkornas EU-kontor) arrange the first part of a two-part seminar "*Clash or Cooperation – Intercultural Dialogue and European Values around the Baltic Sea*" in Brussels. The latter part of the seminar will take place in spring 2007 in Tallinn, Estonia.

In the beginning of 2006, a letter was sent out to all dioceses of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland and to those parishes, where meetings related to the Presidency will be arranged, encouraging to on a parish level arrange different kinds of programmes such as cultural and musical events, worship services, evening prayers, discussion forums etc. in connection with these meetings. The events are, when possible, to be arranged ecumenically and in English.

The Churches will also participate actively in the cultural forum "Religions and Cultures – from Confrontation to a true Dialogue" which is to be arranged in Espoo 30.11–2.12.2006.

This document has been drafted in Finnish, Swedish and English. The document has been approved by the Church Council of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland and by the Finnish Ecumenical Council.

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