TOWARDS THE SACRED

Interreligious Encounter in the Ministry of the Church

Publications of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland 6

The Church and Action

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The Bishops' Conference

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Contents

Interreligious encounter in the work of the church

In the last few decades, Finnish society has become more multifaceted and pluralistic than previously was the case. With immigration, a variety of Christian and other religious communities have settled in Finland. At the same time, new forms of religious expression are influencing the membership of our church.

Alongside new forms of religious expression, irreligion has emerged as an observable Finnish reality. The Finn increasingly feels that he or she does not belong to any religious community.

All this has an impact on the church's life. In their parish work, the church's workers increasingly come into contact with those of other faiths in their midst. It is a development which challenges us to consider the relationship of Christianity with other religions.

The occasional services present one place of encounter for the religions which raises a new kind of pastoral challenge. If a family circle has more than one religious tradition, the most important moments of its members' lives will bring this encounter to the surface through the ministry of the church. Parish workers may find themselves expected to include elements from other religious traditions in a ceremony. This raises new questions: How should a wedding be conducted if one of those getting married is a Hindu? Is it possible to include Buddhist elements in a Baptism if the father is a Buddhist? Is it possible for a funeral to be based on both Islamic and Christian tradition if the deceased converted from one religion to the other just before their death?

Arising from growing confusion at parish level, the national Church Council resolved on August 18 2011 to request the Bishops' Conference to work towards issuing guidelines on this matter.

At its Salo meeting in September 2011, the Bishops' Conference established a working group to prepare practical guidelines for the parishes based on rigorous and theologically defensible recommendations. The Bishops' Conference stipulated that the guidelines should be "based on ecumenism and the theology of interreligious dialogue, and should consider the experiences and solutions of other churches. They should accord with the principles of Christian love and hospitality, but at the same time should be careful to maintain sufficient distance from the practices of different religions so that the wrong kind of syncretism is avoided."

According to Lutheran teaching, the church is "the communion of saints, in which the gospel is preached in its purity and the sacraments properly administered" (Augsburg Confession, VII). Religious expression must be subordinate to the

gospel. It is essential that the grace of God in Christ is declared through the church's ministry and structures. This is the aim of the guidelines. Even though their perspective comes from the encounter with other religions, similar principles can also be applied in our approach to those without faith.

The Lutheran Confessions emphasize that the marks of the church do not depend on the immutability of liturgical rites. It is therefore possible to conduct occasional services, carefully and in accordance with church order, in a way that best serves and builds up the parish.[1]

It is impossible to give detailed, one-size-fits-all guidance. There will always be specific pastoral judgements to make. These guidelines therefore highlight the basic perspectives required for such judgement, which must be exercised within the framework of the confession and order of the church. They therefore include perspectives based on theology, and the regulations and liturgical texts of the church.

1 The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord (10, 9): "Therefore we believe, teach, and confess that the congregation of God of every place and every time has, according to its circumstances, the good right, power, and authority to change, to diminish, and to increase them [i.e. matters truly adiaphora], without thoughtlessness and offence, in an orderly and becoming way, as at any time it may be regarded most profitable, most beneficial, and best for [preserving] good order, [maintaining] Christian discipline, and the edification of the Church."

PART ONE:
Principles

Interreligious encounter belongs to the Christian life

The bible encourages encounter

The faith of the church is based on the Bible (Church Law 1:1). The Bible is a collection of diverse texts, whose gestation spans a period of some thousand years. However, its common thread is the recognition of the saving work of God in human history, culminating in the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Bible does not give an unambiguous answer to all our questions. For example, it contains conflicting perspectives on interreligious encounter. The church's fidelity to the sacred texts which have formed it requires the consideration of diverging perspectives in the quest for a balanced overall understanding.

Too often, Christians have read God's word in isolation, and this is reflected in the theology of interreligious encounter. To the fore has been a critical approach based on the concern of the prophets of Israel with the religions of the surrounding nations (e.g. Is. 46.1-7; Jer. 10.2-5). Indeed, in some passages the prophets make stern declarations based on the Ten Commandments, according to which the people of Israel should not bow down to other Gods or make idols for themselves (Ex. 20.2-5).

Texts like this are a reminder to Christians that they are called by the law of the people of Israel to devote themselves to the Lord. The command of Jesus obliges the church to make disciples of all nations (Mat. 28.18-20). Thus, the pursuit of interreligious dialogue cannot require the concealment of our basic beliefs or the abandonment of mission. The gospel is especially revealed in the church's worship, which is always an invitation to follow Christ.

On the other hand, the Bible tells us that the saving acts of God are not limited to his chosen people. The Old Testament refers to a number of occasions when God was actively involved outside Israel. In particular, this is seen in the accounts of God blessing his chosen people through external agents like Melchizedek or Balaam (Gen. 14.17-20; Numbers 22-24).

The chosen status of Israel does not rule out the possibility of God's involvement in other nations. In the book of Amos (9.7), we are told that the Ethiopians are as important to God as the children of Israel, and of the God who led the migrations of both the Philistines and the Arameans.

In the New Testament, the Gospels tell us that Jesus was prepared to recognise the example of the faith of a non-Israelite (Mat. 15.21–28; Luke 7.9, 10.29–37). In his speech at the Areopagus, the Apostle Paul understands Greek religion as a sign of the Athenians' reaching out towards God (Acts 17.16-30). He also reminded the inhabitants of the city of Lystra that God had not left them without a testimony concerning himself (Acts 14.17).

The eschatological vision of the Bible encompasses the idea that the riches and beauties of the nations will find their place in the kingdom of God (Isa. 60.4-11; Zec. 8.22; Rev. 21.24-26). The cross and resurrection of Christ point to the fact that renewal, transformation and new hope belong to the whole of creation. Christ is described as the new light, which enlightens everyone (John 1.9).

The Bible teaches Christians to value all that is true and holy in the religious traditions of the world. We can therefore engage boldly with our neighbours of other faiths. God is already present wherever we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Lutheran heritage emphasizes the grace of God in Christ

The Confessions of the Lutheran church arose in response to the church's internal disputes at a time when Europe was uniformly Christian. They therefore do not contain a theology of interreligious encounter in the modern sense. Rather, the Confessions introduce more general principles that shed light on the quest for answers to new challenges.

Perhaps the most important perspective Lutheran doctrine brings to bear on questions of interreligious encounter is the principle that in his work of salvation the triune God gives us good gifts. In the explication of the creed in the Large Catechism, we are presented with a God who is the source of all that is good: as Creator, he has given for our use all that is in heaven and on the earth. As well as temporal gifts, God gives eternal gifts in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In this way, God gives his very self, for the overflowing of his love is of his nature.

The Lutheran understanding of faith emphasizes that grace is a gift of God. According to the Large Catechism, the recognition of God as one who shares of his love and bounty is a feature which distinguishes Christian faith from other religions. With their emphasis on the grace and good gifts of God, Lutherans should be able to make a special contribution to interreligious dialogue.

The radical gift of faith has important consequences in practice. In his mercy, God gives to all believers so that they in turn may give to all their neighbours. Martin Luther emphasized that faith and love belong closely together: in the life of faith, Christians are enabled to participate in the life of the divine, becoming "masters" of all; but love compels all of us to become "servants" of all.

The Lutheran doctrine of faith as a gift to be received and of love in service of our neighbour is an affirmation of hospitality as a Christian virtue. The classic teachings concerning hospitality and love for the stranger have shed new light on the ecumenical debate about interreligious dialogue.

The experience of ecumenism sheds light on interreligious encounter

Our church is involved in many ecumenical processes, in which interreligious encounter is explored. A number of useful insights can be found in ecumenical documents.

Firstly, ecumenical work on interreligious encounter stresses that both witness and dialogue belong at the heart of the mission of the church. On the one hand, the church is called to bring the gospel to all nations (Mat. 28.18-20). On the other, witness to Christ must take place in a spirit of Christian love and hospitality. Proclamation and dialogue essentially belong together, as can be seen from Paul's speeches in the Acts of the Apostles, in which he searches skilfully for similarities between the gospel and the religious beliefs of his audience.

Secondly, the Christian faith in the triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - can serve as a resource and encouragement in interreligious dialogue. The persons of the triune God are in continual conversation with each other and work together in harmony. Dialogue is thus inherent to God's being, and for this reason Christian faith calls us to dialogue. Christians are sent out into the world as bearers of the news about the God who became flesh in Jesus and who thus can identify with what it is to be human.

Thirdly, in interreligious encounter Christians are called to act in accordance with the values of the kingdom of God. Christian witness should take place in a spirit of freedom. Pressure, compulsion and arrogance of every kind are contrary to the example of Christ (Phil. 2.3-8). The principle of fairness demands the rejection of those approaches in which the best features of one's own religion are contrasted with the lesser vision of another. The eighth commandment offers helpful guidance in interreligious encounter.

Ecumenism has brought Christians together from all over the world, showing that faith needs to adapt to different cultural contexts. Religion plays a central

role in most multicultural environments, so to separate it from culture would be artificial, if not impossible.

"Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World", a document issued jointly by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Evangelical Alliance, offers the following summary: "Christians recognize that the gospel both challenges and enriches cultures. Even when the gospel challenges certain aspects of cultures, Christians are called to respect all people. Christians are also called to discern elements in their own cultures that are challenged by the gospel."

Of itself, Western culture, for all that we are most familiar with it, is no more sacred than any other cultural tradition. The gospel requires the critical examination of every culture, but that examination does not rule out an acknowledgement of those features it may have in common with them.

Theology, regulations and context inform pastoral judgement

Church order and the church's liturgical texts are the foundation of its services

Parish workers need to exercise good judgement in situations involving interreligious encounter. The Christian can indeed be confident that God acts according to his will to bring salvation in ways we do not see. This allows for appropriate courage in dialogue, and a proclamation free of pressure or compulsion.

The conduct of the ceremonies of the church is provided for under church law and in church order, which regulate the use to which a church building is put, requiring that a consecrated church is used "only as conforms to its sacred function" (Church Law 14:2).

Church law defines those ceremonies for which the parish is responsible (Church Law 4:1-2). Chapter 2 of the Church Order, together with the liturgical texts approved by the General Synod, cover the provision of these ceremonies in detail. The guide to the conduct of the ceremonies of the church approved by the Bishops' Conference *Sinä olet kanssani* ("You are with me", 2006) requires that the ceremonies of the church be conducted by a priest.

The ceremonies of the church must be conducted using its approved liturgies (Church Law 2:1). The service books of the church contain prescribed orders of

service, while providing for alternative approaches at certain points where pastoral discretion may be exercised and, when possible, where the wishes of those taking part in the ceremony may be taken into account.

Some freedom is allowed, especially in the drafting of the ceremony's introductory words and in the homily, and also in the choice of music. For example, the order of service for adult Baptism allows "other suitable music" to be used in place of the opening and closing hymns. This is qualified by a rubric according to which "due regard should be paid to the nature of worship in the selection of music".

In a multicultural context, a parish worker should be alert to people's needs and "strive in a pastorally sensitive manner to bring together various requests in a single entity that is at the same time consistent with the Lutheran understanding of the faith and the tradition of the church".[2]

Various wishes may be considered in connection with the ceremonies of the church, provided that

- they respect the ceremonies of the church as acts of worship;
- they are not in conflict with the sanctity of the church building;
- they are consistent with the Lutheran understanding of faith and the Christian tradition.

Parish ministry is governed by rules which indicate the areas in which individual workers may exercise pastoral discretion. At a parish level, the vicar is responsible for ensuring that the ceremonies of the church are conducted correctly (Church Law 6:13). If required, the diocesan chapter may give additional direction (Church Law 4:2).

To respond to the demands of the parish's work in the multicultural field, the vicar should build relationships with the religious leaders working in the area. This will enable him or her easily to contact the representatives of other religions in potentially problematic situations. Discussions with a rabbi, imam or Buddhist monk can ensure that a particular pastoral measure will be neither problematic nor offensive to another faith tradition.

2 *Sinä olet kanssani*, p. 152.

Christian witness takes place in an atmosphere of freedom

Freedom of religion as guaranteed by Finnish law informs pastoral discretion. Our church has been given independent decision making powers to regulate and provide for its own work.

Church officials are bound by the provisions of church order in the exercise of their office and the conduct of the ceremonies of the church. Church order makes no provision for what parishioners do outside the ceremonies of the church. For example, a couple are free to exercise their own discretion as to whether the blessing of a marriage in the Lutheran church is followed later by a ceremony of another faith tradition.

It is the duty of parish workers to offer guidance to parishioners in issues of interreligious encounter. In this respect, it is important to avoid unnecessary tension between members of a multifaith family. The church is called to serve all people in accordance with the principle of neighbourly love.

The parish worker should make it clear that what is sought is a ceremony of the church and that to assist at it is to take part in it. It is possible that a gesture offered as a sign of hospitality may be perceived as offensive. Open discussion and sensitive consultation are needed if the emergence of problematic situations is to be avoided. In multicultural situations, discussing the meaning of a ceremony is especially important.

The New Testament exhorts Christians always to be "ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you" (1 Pet, 3.15). Indeed, experience of interreligious encounter confirms that conviction openly brought to the table is not an obstacle to dialogue, but its prerequisite. Parish workers do not need to be shy of being open about their Christian faith.

A secure identification with one's own faith, when combined with a respectful and interested approach to another's, is the best way to relate to our neighbour. Aggression and prejudice have no place in the proclamation of Christ and his love.

The ceremonies of the church should be seen as affording a unique opportunity to witness to the love of Christ in the presence of representatives of other religions. Hospitality is made real in concrete gestures, and the church's blessing is extended to each of those present.

Is prayer together possible?

When people of different faiths share each other's lives, sooner or later the question arises as to whether prayer together is possible. This especially happens when life's turning points of shared joy, shared anxiety or shared grief coalesce, calling us to consider the ultimate reality of life.

The prayer life of a multifaith family results in a quest for a form of religious diversity as well as some friction in that family's life together. It is easy to find a plethora of views and opinions about such a family's spiritual life and their children's religious education, but ultimately how to deal with this is a matter for the family itself.

When the spiritual life of a multifaith family is brought into the context of the ceremonies of the church and the life of the parish, the situation changes. When the private becomes public, freedom to find individual solutions is replaced by the need for a consensus that seeks to respect the identity of the respective faith communities.

Where the question of praying together is concerned, three approaches from a Christian perspective give rise to three respective responses.

Firstly, it may be asked whether a Christian may be present when prayers of another faith tradition are offered. There is no obstacle to this.

Christians may be relaxed about respectfully observing the prayers or rituals of other religions. Being present is not the same as taking part, nor can finding oneself in a highly charged religious atmosphere undermine the foundations on which Christian life depends and from which we survey the diversity of the world's religions (Romans 8.38-39). Likewise, Christians can welcome a representative of another religion to a Christian act of worship.

The second question concerns whether representatives of different religions can pray according to their own tradition on the same occasion. There are many examples of this, in the light of which a cautious answer in the affirmative can be given, provided the prayers are kept separate. For the most part, such acts of multifaith worship arise in specific circumstances, such as at a time of national crisis or at celebrations of multifaith community.

It is also conceivable that at multifaith family celebrations different traditions find their expression separately in prayer. It is important that on such occasions the respective traditions are kept quite separate. This allows those whose tradition it is to participate in the prayer, and others to be present as guests.

Thirdly, the question arises as to whether it is advisable to bring together the traditions of different religions and offer prayer together. This approach to multifaith prayer is theologically problematic and is potentially the cause of misunderstanding, and from the perspective of the confession of our church is something to be avoided.

Is it permissible to borrow elements from other cultures and religions?

The occasional services are part of the worshipping life of our church, so the various moments of prayer during their celebration are informed by a liturgical context. In most cases they are also held in a consecrated building, which should be used in a way that conforms to its sacred function. (Church Order 14:2)

However, church order defines neither what constitutes suitable use nor what is meant by sacred space. Ultimately, it will be for the vicar, working with the church or parish board, to decide.

However, it should be noted that:

- the occasional services are part of the worshipping life of the church;
- activities associated with our church must not contradict its faith;
- everything should happen in accordance with the principle of neighbourly love.

In the best case, the incorporation of various cultural elements into occasional services may serve to express that the ceremonies of the church connect us to the God "who is in the midst of human life and its inherent constraints". Since "the physical, mental, social and spiritual are inseparable elements" of a person's life, the dialogue between God and humanity cannot avoid a person's cultural circumstances. God continues to give of his bounty, even though our reality is overshadowed by the Fall.[3]

The cultural practices with which we are familiar are not necessarily more Christian than those with which we are less familiar. Some gestures and symbols are so widely used in other cultural spheres that credibility in a multicultural context depends on their acceptance. A good example of this is the "*Namaste*" greeting, when the palms are brought lightly together and which is in wide use in Asian culture. In Arabic culture, the phrase "*Bismillah*", meaning "in the name of God", is very commonly used. Although such symbolic gestures and words derive – at least in some sense – from another religious tradition, many Christians have embraced their use for cultural reasons. The adoption of such gestures and symbols as cultural loans in the liturgical life of our church is thus permissible.

3 See *Sinä olet kanssani*, pp. 7–8.

The use of an individual text, song or symbolic gesture of another religious or cultural tradition is not of itself an impediment to the life of our church, as long as such elements do not conflict with our confession and the Christian principle of neighbourly love.

Firstly, all genuine religious traditions seek to express something about human experience and the longing for holiness in this world. As Christians believe that God created humanity, it is logical to suppose that the human longing for God is reflected in the religions of the world. The Christian can regard the sacred texts and rituals of other religions, along with their visual art and music, as significant cultural achievements which may be appropriated judiciously.

Secondly, there is no clear boundary between "culture" and "religion". No universally accepted distinction is made between the religious and the secular in modern society: culture and religion are so closely intertwined in Asia, for example, that it is impossible to exclude "religious" elements from our "cultural" borrowing.

Thirdly, a praying church can respond positively to the world around it. In its liturgical prayer, the church groans with creation and waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God and the freedom of glory (Rom. 8.18-30). From a theological perspective, the church's liturgy is therefore tightly bound up with the renewal of creation, which is the work of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1.9-10, 4.10). As is borne out by the history of human religion, the Christian spiritual life has always drawn from the riches of culture. When the church borrows such things, they become part of the Christian life.

As Christians understand their own concept of God to be in a direct continuum from the religion of Israel, Jewish tradition is the easiest from which to draw. Many features of Jewish spirituality can easily be incorporated into Christian liturgy, for the historical starting point of Christian worship is the Jewish tradition of prayer. Ceremonies where both Jews and Christians are present may draw heavily from Old Testament material: the psalms, for example, provide an inexhaustible resource as a tradition of prayer and incantation.

The texts or practices of other religions which may be incorporated into the occasional services should be considered on a case by case basis. For example, texts containing specific names for the divine used in another religious tradition should not be incorporated into a Christian liturgy. This is not simply a question of the doctrinal content of a particular text, because interreligious encounter always entails a criss-crossing and creation of new meanings.

Indian Christians positively disposed towards Hindu culture have borrowed this verse from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad for liturgical use:

> *Lead us from the unreal to the Real, lead us from darkness to Light,*
> *lead us from death to Immortality.*

When a classic Hindu text is incorporated into a Christian liturgy, it is interpreted within the framework of Christian faith, and, in spite of its origin, it becomes a Christian prayer. Regardless of this, if a Hindu is present, he or she can still approach the text as understood by his or her own tradition. In the same way, he or she will approach scriptural texts from his or her own religious standpoint.

According to the faith of the church, the whole service takes place from start to finish within the context of the Christian faith, whatever meaning each person taking part gives to it. It is therefore possible, for example, for an adherent of another religion to be asked to read at a service, even though he or she does not share our church's faith.

The parish worker involved in preparing services in multicultural contexts needs equal measures of discretion and courage.

Discretion is needed, for not every approach can be defended. It would be a step too far, for example, if a priest officiating at a wedding were to present the holy book of another religion along with the Bible to a couple.

Courage is needed, for it is pastorally important to do what is possible. A song or reading from another religious tradition may be chosen if its content does not conflict with the Christian creed. Suitable points to incorporate quotations from the scriptures of other traditions are, for example, the service's introductory words, the sermon or the prayers, although Bible readings should not be replaced by other texts. There are various opportunities in the selection of music to incorporate other music in place of a hymn.

Mistakes can be avoided with careful planning and research. Whenever possible, representatives of other faith communities should be consulted. Yet ultimately the church must own the conduct of its occasional services: if there is any lack of clarity, it is for the parish worker to make the final decision and take responsibility for it.

The parish worker must be prepared for the fact that a multicultural service will require of him or her familiarisation with new things and a particular ability to listen to the wishes of parishioners. It will also be important in organising the

parish's roster to take into account the fact that preparing for such multicultural occasions requires more time than is usually the case.

In spite of all the care that is taken, the worker must also be prepared for the unexpected in the course of a ceremony. Any spontaneous prayers and blessings are best responded to with equanimity and tolerance. As long as there is no disruption or latent aggression, such things can be considered good insofar as the service meets with positive emotions and responses.

PART II:
Practice

Different ceremonies allow different applications

The rites of Baptism, Solemnisation of Matrimony, Blessing of Marriage and Burial are sacred ordinances of our church. As such, church order makes specific provision for them (Church Order 2:13-23; 3:5).

In a certain sense, the approach of church law to each of these ordinances is the same: they are provided for in church order, and a priest is required for their conduct.[4] From a theological perspective, however, there are significant differences between them:

- Baptism is a gift of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and the promises made at it are essential to it. As it is the sacrament of Christian initiation, it is by its nature strongly Christian. This applies also to Confirmation, at which the faith given in Baptism is professed.
- The Solemnisation of Matrimony and Blessing of Marriage fall within the scope of God's creative work. In a multicultural marriage, the religious and cultural backgrounds of the couple are by definition significant factors, which can be reflected in the ceremony itself.
- At a funeral, the departed is entrusted to the care of the triune God. There is an emphasis on the hope of eternal life imparted at Baptism given by the resurrection of Jesus. On the other hand, the departed is remembered and loved ones are comforted in their grief: if other religious traditions were an influence in the life of the departed or are represented among their close relatives, this needs to be considered.

There are thus varying degrees to which these ceremonies may be subject to multicultural application. The sacramental nature of Baptism as the means by which a person becomes a member of the church has to be emphasized. On the

4 Confirmation may also be conducted by a lehtori (= lay reader). Although no specific provision is made concerning the officiant at a marriage blessing, the service book's rubric may be taken as meaning that such a blessing be given by a priest.

other hand, at marriage blessings and funerals there is more room to accommodate the traditions of other religions and cultures.

If it is desired to include various religious traditions on their own terms within a ceremony, it is important that the respective rituals be kept clearly separate. For example, at a funeral representatives of other religions may express their grief in turn in accordance with their tradition (perhaps before or during the laying of flowers at the coffin), after which the prescribed funeral service of the church should continue. Elements from different cultural and religious traditions may also be brought in after the ceremony, at a wedding party or memorial gathering, for example.

Solutions following a natural sequence are often easier to achieve than it is to import elements of another religion into the occasional service itself. This may also be the least theologically problematic option; and in cases where there is a desire to place strong emphasis on the presence of another tradition, it may be the only one.

Such a desire may arise especially in the context of the blessing of a home: when people of different faiths live together, there is an expectation that one's own family circle should be blessed according to one's own prayer tradition. The Lutheran service for the blessing of a home may therefore follow or precede the equivalent ceremonies of other religions.

Baptism is the sacrament of Christian initiation

Baptism is the sacrament through which we become members of Christ and his church. According to ecumenical tradition, the core of Baptism seems very simple: it is done with water "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Mat. 28.19), by which we are united with the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom. 6.3-5).

It is for the parish worker to ensure that guardians understand the nature of Baptism and that through it the baptized becomes a member of the Christian church. Indeed, this is required by the Freedom of Religion Act, according to which "the religious status of a child is decided by his or her guardians" (1:3). In the event that parents cannot agree on the matter, the law stipulates that "the mother, as the child's guardian, may within a year of the child's birth decide to which religious community the child will belong".

It should be acknowledged that such a decision concerning Baptism may require a long and difficult process. The most important issue for the church is that Baptism communicates the grace of God and calls those who are baptized to follow Jesus in their lives. The obligation, with godparents and the parish, to take care of a child's Christian upbringing (Church Order 1:5) is therefore an integral element of Baptism. This needs to be made clear if future tension is to be avoided.

The Church has to uphold the principle that its members "should bring their children for Baptism without undue delay" (Church Order 2:15). In multicultural situations, however, it is possible that a Lutheran guardian may wish their child to be baptized, while the other guardian opposes this and the child's resulting membership of the church. In these exceptional cases, for pastoral reasons prayer for the child and family may be offered, but it is important to emphasize that such prayer is not a substitute for Baptism.

Commitment to support the family belongs to good pastoral practice. If there is tension in the family, the parish worker should be careful to avoid inadvertently imposing additional requirements.

Pastoral sensitivity should not result in the truncation of the baptismal rite's liturgical content or Christian symbolism. On the other hand, consideration may be given to conducting the Baptism at the family home rather than at church. In some cases, this may ameliorate any anxiety on the part of those who do not belong to the church.

Members of our church may not simultaneously belong to another religious community (Church Law 1:2). However, the concept of formal membership of a religious community and the maintenance of registers of membership is unknown in many religious traditions. It is therefore possible that a parent of another religious faith may wish their child to be received into their own tradition, even though the child will be a member of the Christian church.

This is problematic for our church. Yet however difficult the question is theologically, in practice an individual may grow up influenced by more than one tradition and feel that they have a multifaith identity. As marriages cross religious boundaries, this phenomenon is becoming more common.

It is the task of parish workers to support each member in fulfilling their Christian vocation in their lives. In a situation where a member is born between two traditions, this needs to be done in such a way that helps them to see, as far as is possible from a Christian perspective, the positive aspects of the other tradition.

In multifaith situations the question of godparents also arises. According to church order (2:17), those to be baptized should have at least two godparents, who are "confirmed members of a church confessing the Evangelical Lutheran faith". In exceptional cases, at the discretion of the vicar, a single godparent is sufficient (Church Order 2:16, subsection 2). In addition, a person may act as a godparent "who belongs to another Christian church or religious community which accepts the Baptism of the Christian church as received by the Evangelical Lutheran church".

Only members of the Lutheran church or Christians whose denomination accepts the baptismal practice of our church may therefore be nominated as godparents. Pastorally, it is sensible to offer those present from other faiths the role of witnesses to the Baptism. According to church order (2:17), at least two godparents or other witnesses should be present at the Baptism.

It is possible to ask a representative of another faith to assist in the baptismal ceremony. They can be asked to read, for example, if this does not make them uncomfortable. During the baptismal service, they may also appropriately be included in the blessing of the child.

The service book instructs the priest to ask "parents and godparents" to lay their hands on the child's head. They represent the parish and God's people, into which the child is received. If the number of those witnessing a Baptism is small, the rubric allows anyone who wishes to take part in the blessing.[5] In such a situation, to exclude someone from sharing in the blessing would convey a problematic message. At the same time, those invited should be aware that the candidate is blessed in the name of the triune God. The laying on of hands and the sharing of blessing involve strongly Christian symbolism. It is therefore perfectly acceptable for a person not to participate in the blessing.

Confirmation preparation affords an opportunity to explore the Christian faith

Confirmation preparation is so popular in Finland that many non-members take part in it every year. Among them are young people from other religious backgrounds. As a foundation course in Christian education, it must therefore be open to all.

5 *Sinä olet kanssani*, p. 43.

Confirmation preparation is above all teaching about Baptism, the purpose of which is to bring the baptized to Confirmation and the unbaptized to Baptism and membership of the church. At the same time, it may afford an opportunity to explore Christian faith or to prepare for Baptism.

As the foundation of Confirmation is Baptism and its purpose is to strengthen the baptized in their faith, Baptism is the prerequisite for Confirmation and participation in the Holy Communion (Church Order 2:1; instructions in the church's Confirmation liturgy). At Confirmation, we profess the universal faith of the church, and thereby receive the rights of parish members, among them the right to participate independently in the Holy Communion and to act as a godparent.

If, having attended Confirmation preparation, a young person does not wish to be baptized and become a church member, or if perhaps their parents' opposition prevents them from doing so, he or she cannot participate in the rite of Confirmation alongside their friends. This needs to be seen as a pastoral challenge. Whenever possible, it should therefore be emphasized during the ceremony, in a prevailing atmosphere of Christian hospitality, that there is a shared journey.

Having taken part in Confirmation preparation, a young person who does not belong to the church may, for example, join in the procession behind the cross and come to the altar for a blessing during the administration of Holy Communion.

As the young people who are confirmed are usually minors, it is important for parish workers to explore the various options and their legal implications with their guardians.

It should be pointed out, for example, that under church law (1:3) a member of our church cannot at the same time belong to another religious community. Yet it should be emphasized that there are positive bridges between the old and the new, and that there is openness in relation to other religions in the parish's activities: when a young person is baptized and joins the church it does not require a breaking of connection with their family and its religious heritage.

The parish should see it as a unique opportunity when a young person from another religious tradition wishes to take part in our church's Confirmation preparation. For such a young person, Confirmation preparation can function as an exploration of the Christian faith, and in the best case scenario as a preparation for Baptism. Parish workers should do all that they can, but trust ultimately that the Holy Spirit will indeed lead the way to Christian faith and membership of the church. It goes without saying that there must be no coercion. Pressure of any kind would be contrary to the freedom inherent in Christian faith. At the same time, it would

be against freedom of religion and the mission of the church to prevent anyone from voluntarily converting to Christianity.

Marriage blessing creates a foundation for the multifaith family

When people form relationships across religious boundaries, interreligious encounter becomes part of family life. Interreligious marriage may be seen as the beginning of a shared journey, during which the respective religions interface with life's stages. The blessing of such a marriage should therefore be seen as a pastorally important task which will lay the foundation for future ceremonies.

Theological reflection about multicultural marriage is assisted by the fact that marriage between a man and a woman is a universal institution, known in one form or another in all cultures.

There are, however, significant cultural differences in marriage practices: in many countries marriages are arranged and polygamy is sometimes also accepted. The parish worker will rarely meet such cases. By their very nature, arranged marriages usually take place within single religious communities. It must be acknowledged, however, that multicultural and multifaith marriages may involve a couple forming a relationship that breaks traditional standards.

It is wise to allow plenty of time for a meeting to discuss the ceremony. It may be necessary for it to function as a forum for the raising of broader questions about understandings about life together in different cultures. Couples may find it difficult to discuss religious issues, so such a meeting with a parish worker may be an occasion of some significance.

According to church order, a marriage blessing can be sought when the marriage has been solemnised somewhere other than an Evangelical Lutheran church (Church Order 2:20).

In practice, this means that:

- a marriage previously contracted legally is blessed by the church;
- such a blessing is requested on the basis of the couple's shared reflection;
- marriages where one of the parties belongs to another religious tradition may receive a Christian blessing.

There is an important consequence where the latter case is concerned: a marriage blessing may be granted to couples in which one of the parties does not profess the Christian faith. It is good to be informed about this and consider how this affects each couple's case.

In practice, the rite resembles the Solemnisation of Matrimony. The essential difference is that the marriage has already taken place, which means that the legal components of the ceremony are absent. Often, the marriage will have been solemnised by the registrar, after which the couple arrange a celebration, which may include a religious ceremony.

In various cultures and religions there are well established practices associated with the solemnisation of marriage. For example, in classical Hindu culture, the bridal couple are tied together with a thread and they walk seven times around a sacred flame. Such practices and symbols should be treated with respect by our church. In spite of their religious dimension, from a Christian perspective they may be regarded as primarily cultural practices, which may therefore be incorporated into a Lutheran blessing of marriage.

If in addition to the marriage blessing the couple takes part in other religious ceremonies, this arrangement falls under the scope of the freedom of religion. In this event, there is less pressure for the Lutheran ceremony to have a pronounced multicultural character.

In Jewish tradition, the marriage ceremony takes place under a special wedding canopy (Hebrew: *huppá*), which symbolizes the couple's home and the temple at Jerusalem.

As the marriage is blessed, the officiating rabbi blesses some wine as well as the couple, which the bride and groom share. After the marriage vows, the groom breaks the fabric-wrapped wine glass with a kick in memory of the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem.

If one of the couple is Jewish and they wish to have their marriage blessed according to Lutheran tradition, these practices may suitably be incorporated into the marriage blessing. The symbolism is powerful and also has meaning for Christians. It should be possible for the wine to be shared as a sign of the union without any suggestion of sacramental significance.

Funerals give comfort at times of sorrow

There are basically three kinds of multifaith funeral:

- The departed belonged to the church, but in their immediate circle are members of other religious traditions, or those traditions have been an element of the departed's life.
- The departed did not belong to the church, but to another religious tradition, yet their relatives wish to have a Lutheran funeral.
- The departed died before the Baptism for which they were preparing.

In the first case, there is no legal obstacle, but in the other cases the regulation concerning the burial of non-church members applies (Church Order 2:22). For a funeral to take place, it must be at the request of the relatives, and the departed should not have expressed any wish to the contrary. Even if these conditions are met, the priest has discretion to form the opinion that there are insufficient grounds for a church funeral to take place.

Affiliation with another religious tradition is not of itself a bar to a Lutheran funeral, but the departed should have had some connection with the Lutheran church, whether in the course of their life or through close family members.

If a priest concludes that the criteria for conducting a church funeral for a non-member have been met, it is important to contact any community to which the departed may have belonged beforehand. While church law only requires that notification be given afterwards (Church Law 16:13), it is good practice in ecumenical and interreligious relations to give prior notice.

When planning such funerals, it should be remembered that funerals are also organised for relatives. Funerals are occasions for acknowledging grief and hearing the good news of the Christ who has overcome death.

Funeral arrangements are agreed with the relatives: unless the departed has set down their wishes in writing, those wishes cannot be known. In a multifaith context if wishes have not clearly been expressed or if there is disagreement among the relatives, the situation may become complicated. In such cases, parish workers should seek to reduce any conflict and assist in finding a compromise; and before any agreement is made it can be a great help to have discussed matters confidentially with local leaders of other religions beforehand.

When the mourners belong to more than one religion, the simplest solution is to plan the funeral so that the farewell in accordance with the different traditions follows a pre-agreed order. For example, it may be agreed that the funeral be

conducted according to the Lutheran rite, while the prayers at the grave be done according to the other religious tradition.

Relatives and other mourners may express their grief as they wish, at the laying of flowers at the coffin for example, or when the coffin is interred. If any mourner prays spontaneously according to their own tradition, this should be accommodated for pastoral reasons, even if it happens during the service.

Practical challenges arise as the burial customs of different cultures can differ greatly. For example, in Islam, the funeral should be conducted without delay, and the departed should be buried resting on their right side towards Mecca. There is no theological problem of itself with this from the church's perspective, but it may result in practical problems.

In some cultures, funeral rituals are observed in such a way as may give rise to misunderstanding, given the Finnish tradition of silent mourning. In East Asian cultures, for example, the ceremony at the cemetery may include the letting off of fireworks. Behind this tradition is the essentially religious idea that various evil spirits impeding the departed's journey to the hereafter are driven out by the noise.

In preparing a funeral, it should be the goal to allow mourners to feel secure in expressing their grief in their accustomed manner. There may be other mourners in the cemetery at the same time. If the wishes of those participating in the ceremony are to be taken seriously, and the requirements of church order met in accordance with the Lutheran confession, it will be important to seek negotiation and compromise in the context of careful reflection.

CONCLUSION

In an increasingly multicultural and multifaith society, the church needs to be able to approach the familiar from multiple perspectives.

Christian hospitality and courage in pastoral encounter will contribute to Finnish social peace if those of other religions feel that the majority church listens to and treats them with respect. In multifaith situations, the church can witness strongly to Christ in the celebration of its occasional services.

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