



A Protest and Call for Free Religious Speech in Finland: An International Lutheran Condemnation of the Unjust Criminal Prosecution of the Rev. Dr. Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen, and a Call for All People of Good Will to Support the Freedom of Religious Expression in Finland

“The blood of Jesus, God’s Son, cleanses us from all our sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:7–9).

As living heirs of the Lutheran Reformation and leaders of our respective churches, we confess that these apostolic words are addressed to each of us daily, and this is our message to the world. When government curtails and attacks this message, it ceases to function as God intended. The undersigned confess that good government and the guaranties of freedom of religion, speech, and all basic human rights are good gifts from God. The Augsburg Confession (AC) states that the Gospel

does not overthrow civil authority, the state, and marriage, but requires that all these be kept as true orders of God, and that everyone, each according to his own calling, manifest Christian love and genuine good works in his station of life. Accordingly, Christians are obliged to be subject to civil authority and obey its commands and laws in all that can be done without sin. (AC XVI; Romans 13:1-7)

But authority holds only in its own jurisdiction. The government holds sway over externals, the Word of God over internals. “The civil magistrate protects not minds but bodies and goods from manifest harm. The Gospel protects minds from ungodly ideas, the devil, and eternal death. Consequently, the powers of church and civil government must not be mixed.” (AC XXVIII). Since faith must remain free, AC XVI concludes that when the commands of government cannot be obeyed without sin, “we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).” Indeed, if government oversteps its bounds and encroaches on religious freedom and religious speech, what other rights shall it take away?

We therefore protest the unjust treatment of the Bishop Elect of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland (ELMDF), the Rev. Dr. Juhana Pohjola, and of Dr. Päivi Räsänen M.P., a longstanding member of parliament. The actions of the Finnish State in prosecuting Christians for holding to the clear teaching of the very words of Jesus regarding marriage and sex (Matthew 19:4–6) are egregious. And this particularly so since the accused clearly affirm the divinely given dignity, value and human rights of all, including all who identify with the LGBTQ community. Christ Himself mandates love for all. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31).

We Lutherans make this strong confession along with Drs. Pohjola and Räsänen. The vast majority of Christians in all nations, including Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, share these convictions. Would the Finnish Prosecutor General condemn us all? Moreover, shall the Finnish State risk governmental sanctions from other states based on the abuse of foundational human rights?

- The following cause us grave concern:
 - > The decision of 29 April 2021, taken by the Prosecutor General of Finland, to charge the Rev. Dr. Pohjola, Diocesan Dean and Bishop Elect of the ELMDF and Dr. Räsänen, a longstanding member of parliament, former Minister of the Interior, and physician, with the alleged offences of “ethnic agitation” under Chapter 11, Section 10, of the Finnish Penal Code.
 - > The criminal prosecution of the Rev. Dr. Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen based on a 2004 pamphlet titled, *As Man and Woman He Created Them: Homosexuality and the Challenge to the Christian Concept of Man*, published by the Luther Foundation of Finland, and containing statements such as, “According to the Christian concept of humanity, everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, is equal and of equal value” (p. 13).¹ These charges, based on a document that has already been in the public domain for seventeen years, demonstrate an outrageous overreach and agenda.
 - > Two further charges brought against Dr. Räsänen. One is based on a short June 2019 tweet, after the national church (Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church) announced its official partnership with the LGBT event “Pride 2019.” In the tweet, Dr. Räsänen questioned the action in light of Scripture, and attached an image of Romans 1:24–27. The other charge is based on a short excerpt from a December 2019 one-hour Finnish Broadcasting Corporation radio program on theology, sexual ethics, and politics. On the program, Dr. Räsänen said that God did not create man as a homosexual.
 - > The criminal prosecution of the Bishop Elect of the ELMDF, along with a leading Christian public figure, for public expressions of faith. This raises serious and troubling questions regarding the right to freedom of religion and freedom of speech in Finland. With that in mind,
- We urge the Finnish authorities to ensure the protection of human rights for all people in Finland. International human rights law robustly protects the right to freedom of religion and freedom of expression, as does the Constitution of Finland. Under Articles 9 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Articles 18 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, everyone has the right to manifest their confession of faith in worship, practice, and teaching, and to express their deeply held beliefs publicly.
- We note that democratic societies worldwide guard religious freedom and freedom of expression as vitally important. Legal protection of these rights is founded on the inherent dignity of the human person who has the natural right to engage in public discourse on issues related to the meaning and purpose of society and human flourishing. The actions taken by the Prosecutor General of Finland against the Rev. Dr. Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen not only undercut these basic freedoms, but also introduce the risk of sanctions by other democratic governments based on the serious abuse of human rights.²
- We are all diminished by the overreach of prosecutorial and state power manifest in arbitrary and egregious interferences with the rights of Christians to proclaim their beliefs openly and publicly. This is, in effect, an attack on all citizens.
- We believe, teach, and confess that the Lutheran Christian faith calls on us to share the Good News of the free forgiveness of Christ with all people (John 3:16; Acts 1:8) in a spirit of joy and love. We are fully aware of our own sins, failings, and need for forgiveness. While it is understandable that some persons may feel challenged or upset by the message of the Gospel of Christ and its universal call to repentance and faith, we believe that an appropriate public space for dialogue in society necessitates guarantees in law that preclude individuals, organizations, or the state from unjustified curtailment of the fundamental right of Christians, and indeed all individuals and groups, to engage in public discourse.

¹ Päivi Räsänen, *As Man and Woman He Created Them: Homosexuality and the Challenge to the Christian Concept of Man*, ed. Juhana Pohjola, Morning Star, no. 29 (Helsinki: Luther Foundation of Finland, 2004), English trans. at lhp.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Male-and-female-He-created-them.pdf.

² Peter Berkowitz, Robert P. George, and other human rights lawyers and academics have petitioned the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to designate and sanction Prosecutor General Toivianen for “a gross violation of human rights,” realeclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/05/28/a-letter-to-the-us-commission-on-international-religious-freedom-145839.html.

Therefore, we the undersigned condemn the unjustifiable criminal prosecution of the Rev. Dr. Juhana Pohjola and Dr. Päivi Räsänen M.P. for their public expressions of faith. We call on the Finnish authorities to immediately discontinue their efforts to punish Rev. Dr. Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen, to cease the prosecution of persons for the public expression of their faith, and to recommit to protecting the freedom of religion and freedom of speech in Finland.

We call on all people of goodwill, whether they agree or disagree with the statements made by Rev. Dr. Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen, to express solidarity with them and all those in Finland who stand for the right to freedom of religion and freedom of expression as the quintessential perquisites for a free society.

Subscribed June 25, 2021, the Commemoration of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession,

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Copies Furnished

Office of the Prosecutor General of Finland
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief
United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Opinion and Expression
United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Points of Contact

International Lutheran Council ... for international confessional Lutheran conciliar membership and statements, info@ilcouncil.org, ilc-online.org, and "Same-Gender Relationships and the Church," ilc-online.org/news/ilc-statements.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod ... for LCMS updates and statements, matthew.harrison@lcms.org, lcms.org/president, and "Finnish Bishop Charged over Biblical Teaching on Human Sexuality," reporter.lcms.org/2021/finnish-bishop-charged-over-biblical-teaching-on-human-sexuality/.

Lutheran Center for Religious Liberty ... for Lutheran engagement for religious freedom and against government intrusion, gregory.seltz@lcrifreedom.org and lcrifreedom.org.

Other International Organizations and Their Statements of Condemnation and Calls for Justice

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