

Church of Finland Threatens Confessional Lutherans

Church of Finland Bishop Seppo Häkkinen and Archbishop Kari Mäkinen have threatened to defrock any Church of Finland pastors who participate in the newly formed *Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland*. The new Confessional Lutheran diocese was formed in March and consecrated its first Bishop, Risto Soramies, in Helsinki on May 4.

Bishop Matti Väisänen, who is retiring as Auxiliary Bishop for Finland in the Mission Province, conducted the consecration. He was assisted by Bishop Roland Gustafsson of the *Mission Province in Sweden* and Bishop Thor Henrik With of the new *Evangelical-Lutheran Diocese of Norway*

The Finnish bishops' threats come as the Church of Norway defrocked Bishop With on May 16, in the wake of the April 20 formation of the new Confessional diocese in Norway. Bishop With has served as a pastor in the Church of Norway since 1979, when he was ordained by his father, the long-time bishop of Bjørgvin diocese.

The Finnish bishops said in a joint statement that a pastor cannot belong to both the Mission Diocese and the Church of Finland. They note that when the new diocese consecrated Bishop Soramies, it laid the foundation for its own church body.

“The Mission Diocese now has the marks of an independent church, and is therefore separated from our church,” said Archbishop Mäkinen in an interview with the Finnish newspaper Kotimaa.



Bishop Thor Henrik With of Norway presents the crozier to newly consecrated Bishop Risto Soramies May 4 in Helsinki.

Foto: Jouko Makkonen

The Mission Diocese, however, does not consider itself a separate church body, but rather an “independent ecclesial structure under episcopal supervision” outside the administrative structure of the Church of Finland. It contends that CoF leadership has adopted unbiblical doctrines and practice and abandoned the Lutheran Confessions. Like the Confessional movements in Sweden and Norway, the Mission Diocese emphasizes that it is a part of the “one, Holy, Catholic and Apos-

tolic Church” as confessed in the Lutheran Confessions.

The new diocese has refrained from registering as a religious society. It is rather an organization of member congregations. One reason for this is that, as is common across Scandinavia, many congregation members also retain their membership in a CoF congregation, even though they no longer worship there for doctrinal reasons. Several, or many, generations of ancestors may have worshiped in the old church, and be buried in the churchyard. These sorts of ties lead people to retain CoF membership even if they wish to find a believing worship fellowship.

The Scandinavian Confessional movements have resisted identifying themselves as new church bodies for several reasons. They point out that they have remained faithful to the doctrines that all Lutheran pastors and bishops vowed at their ordinations to maintain. If anyone ought to start a new church, they argue, it should be those who have violated their ordination vows and abandoned apostolic doctrine – who now control the church structures. There are also strong cultural obstacles that would face a “new” church body in Scandinavia.

The CoF bishops’ threats would affect less than half of the new diocese’s pastors. The majority have been ordained through the Mission Province in Sweden and in Finland. Many of the diocese’s pastors who were ordained in CoF are retired or not serving a CoF congregation. If defrocked by CoF, these pastors would presumably no longer be able to preach or officiate in a CoF congregation.

A possibly more serious threat would be to current CoF pastors who might wish to assist a congregation or mission plant of the new diocese. The Gothenburg diocese of Sweden recently threatened Church of Sweden pastors

who assist Mission Province congregations or fellowships. Across Scandinavia national church bishops have forbidden the renting or use of their facilities by the confessional groups – even though use by other religious groups is permitted.

Some in Finland are criticizing the Church of Finland’s pressure against the Confessionals. Antti Kylliäinen, a liberal pastor, argues that there should be room in a “pluralistic church” even for conservatives. He notes that the question is power rather than spiritual issues. Kylliäinen says that the Confessionals are now oppressed in the same way that homosexuals had been earlier, noting that the Church that claims to be tolerant can be very intolerant against those with differing views.

In an editorial in *Sändebudet*, an evangelical publication, Leif Erikson writes, “Because of church rules, one now wants to defrock pastors who are concerned about central Christian truths. At the same time, those who openly deny basic Christian truths are allowed to continue as pastors.”

Erikson notes that the Mission Diocese services are well attended and gather both young people and families with children, which the Church of Finland finds difficult to attract. He notes, however, that the situation may be different now that Luther Foundation has changed itself into a diocese.

This article draws in large part upon an article published May 14 in the Swedish-language Finnish newspaper, Kyrkpressen:

<http://www.kyrkpressen.fi/aktuellt/55293-Tonen-skarps-mot-Missionsstiftet.html>

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