

The Rev. Juhana Pohjola, Dean of the recently formed Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, has been defrocked by the nominally Lutheran Church of Finland. His offence was participating as a founder and leader of the Mission Diocese, which the CoF considers to be “violating his ordination vows.” Dean Pohjola earned a STM at Concordia Theological Seminary in 1999 and will defend his doctoral dissertation at the University of Helsinki on August 15.

The following report is written by The Rev. Samuli Siikavirta, a doctoral candidate in New Testament at Cambridge University who was ordained in the Mission Diocese earlier this summer.

Dean of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, Rev Juhana Pohjola, Defrocked by the National Church

On 5 August 2014, the Cathedral Chapter [Consistory] of the Diocese of Oulu ordered Rev Juhana Pohjola to forfeit his pastoral office in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, invoking ELCF legislation (ELCF Church Law 5:3.3). The decision came into effect immediately.

Rev. Pohjola was ordained by former Bishop of Oulu, Rt Rev Olavi Rimpiläinen, in 1999 to serve the newly founded Luther Foundation Finland within the Church of Finland. The intention of Rev Pohjola’s work in the Luther Foundation was to build up confessional Lutheran liturgical life within the ELCF and to insure that members holding to the apostolic view of the Office have places where they can receive the Sacraments and hear the Word.

In 2013, the congregations that were part of the Luther Foundation Finland and a handful of other independent ones formed the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland. From 2005 until last year, the LFF was a supporting member of the Mission Province in Sweden. What began as the work of one part-time Pastor (Pohjola) and one congregation in the capital city in 1999 has today grown into a network of 30 congregations and missions nationwide. The Mission Diocese sees itself as an independent, confessional and non-geographical churchly structure in Finland that lives out the official confession of the ELCF that the ‘national church’ has largely abandoned.

The Cathedral Chapter of the ELCF Diocese of Oulu argued for its decision in the following manner:

“The Cathedral Chapter deemed it to be clear that Juhana Pohjola, who had been a member of the clergy of the Diocese of Oulu, has acted contrary to the duties of the pastoral office and transgressed the ordination promise [vow] that he had made on 18 Dec 1999, and turned out to be obviously unfit to be a pastor by becoming the Diocesan Dean of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, by directing the head office of the Mission Diocese, by belonging to its College of Pastors, by acting as a member of its Consistory and under it, together with being under the pastoral oversight and acting as the aide of the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, Risto Soramies.”

“The Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland was founded in March 2013. The said community that is an unregistered association [a Finnish legal term] has organized itself resembling a Christian church by having its own congregations, diocese and bishop. The Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland have stated together in March 2013 that the newly formed Mission Diocese has no organizational status in our church and neither is it attached to the structure of our church. According to the Bishops’ statement, a Pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland who acts in the Mission Diocese stands in obvious conflict with the loyalty expected of a pastor and with the ordination promise.”

The defrocking of a pastor is the most severe punishment that the ELCF can issue. Excommunication or the revoking of membership is no longer a possibility. The Diocesan Chapter appealed to paragraph 5:3.3 of the ELCF Church Law, stating,

“A pastor who acts against the duties of the pastoral office and the ordination promise, or neglects them or behaves in a way unfit for a pastor, may, according to the quality of the matter, be given a written warning or suspended from the pastoral office for a minimum of one and a maximum of six months by the Diocesan Chapter. If the pastor’s unseemly behaviour, neglect in the pastoral office or other behaviour indicates him/her to be obviously unfit to be a pastor, the Diocesan Chapter can order him to forfeit his pastoral office [i.e. be defrocked].”

In a blog post on the Mission Diocese website, Rev Pohjola acknowledges that the decision to be defrocked pains him deeply but that it was also to be expected in the current church-political situation.

“The words ‘obviously unfit’ leave no room for interpretation. They are rough especially when talking about the office in which one is to act constantly with the great Day of Judgment in view. Being defrocked also contains shameful dimensions. Hardly anyone wants to be unfit and dismissed.”

The defrocking of those Mission Diocese pastors and bishops who were ordained in the ELCF before the Luther Foundation or Mission Diocese were formed may also have wider consequences on the identity formation of the Mission Diocese.

“The message, ‘you are obviously unfit for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland’, has been sent to thousands of people attending Mass in the Mission Diocese”, Rev Pohjola writes.

He maintains that the decision shows the theological decline that is going on in the ELCF.

“This decision of the Diocesan Chapter is yet another step within the reformation [in Finnish: ‘purge of the faith’] that is going on in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Instead of the Church being purged with God’s Word, she is being purged from God’s Word.”

Despite being now defrocked by the national church, Rev Pohjola will continue preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments, now as a pastor only of the Mission Diocese.

“What now after this? One friend reminded me of a liberating Bible verse: ‘set apart for the Gospel of God’ (Rom. 1:1). That gives me, too, enough to do in the Apostolic Office until the end of my life!”

An interesting church historical quirk is that Rev Pohjola will be defending his doctoral dissertation at the University of Helsinki on 15 August on the topic of ordination rites in the ELCF between 1963 and 2003 and their understanding of ordination and the pastoral office. His Opponent at the defence will be Rt Rev Jari Jolkonen, ELCF Bishop of Kuopio.

Samuli Siikavirta

Link to Dean Pohjola’s statement (in Finnish):

<http://www.lhpk.fi/blogi/erotettu/>

Links to reports on the confessional Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland:

<http://simonpotamos.org.uk/new-confessional-lutheran-diocese-in-finland/>

<http://www.ielchurch.org/bishop-risto-soramies-consecration-ceremony/>