

**Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church**  
**THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE STRATEGY FOR 2024-2029**

**1. Introduction**

**1.1 . Reasons and goals for drafting a theological dialogue strategy**

In recent years, the church has experienced frequent polarisation over issues that cause divisions in society at large. We all share the responsibility for having let things go that far. However, it is also our shared task to find a way out, to enable the church to speak in a communal, pastoral and prophetic manner even on difficult issues. As Christians, we need to pray specifically for the issues that divide us and cause strife, and we need to introspect and ask why have relations in the church and society become so strained and what could have been done differently. It is important to focus on moving forward together. For this, we need increased attention on theological dialogue and reflection on our faith. Theological dialogue will not threaten the religious identity and faithfulness of any member of the church. Instead, it will provide an opportunity to share our beliefs and examine our faith.

The communion between the members of our church is based on us all being created by God. Communion is not based on a similarity or difference of opinion, nor any other personal characteristics, because having been joined to Christ through baptism, we as Christians are members of a single body. Communion is strong and enduring when we focus on Christ. With a respectful and friendly attitude towards each other, we express our gratitude for God's creation.

The declaration drafted in 2017, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church as a free people's church, includes the following statement: "The free people's church differentiates between communal life based on faith and conscience and the societal political matters. We emphasise the social importance of public debate and dialogue on religion and worldviews. As the free people's church, we live in a society of diverse worldviews and religions. Any attempts to ignore the significance and social impact of various guiding beliefs, or to regard them as a merely private matter, have proven to be

short-sighted, unrealistic and dangerous. We emphasise the importance of public discussion on issues related to religion and worldviews. It is important to bear public witness to religious and worldview convictions and to hold dialogue about and between them. As the free people's church, our mission is to profess and interpret Christian faith in a public dialogue."

The aim of the theological dialogue strategy of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church is to establish a framework document, which could be used as a basis for theological discussions in the church, and to reach an agreement on the ways of holding religious dialogue in the church. It is important to come to an agreement and commit to a manner of talking with each other and a procedure of organising discussions. This is required in order for our faith to remain firm and for us to learn to listen to and respect other members of the church who have different theological views. As part of the universal Christian church, we need to maintain contacts with other churches in Estonia and worldwide; to be able to do this, the church must be capable of dialogue and discussion.

The theological strategy pertains to issues that require a church-wide dialogue, and includes the following:

- definition of theological dialogue in the context of evangelical theology and church;
- historical overview of theological dialogues in the local Lutheran church;
- good practice of theological dialogue (debate culture);
- list of topics requiring church-wide theological dialogue, and a time schedule;
- model (roadmap) for conducting church-wide theological dialogues.

## **1.2 Definition of theological dialogue in the context of evangelical theology and the church**

‘Theology’ means the word of God or the word about God. A religious person uses their own words to talk about the Word of God and consequently, theology is the word of a believer about God. This word is uttered in the church, which is why the word about God is also the word of the church.

‘Dialogue’ means a collective sharing of ideas, or discussion. The collective in question encompasses both modern and historical human experience. In theology, it means relating to both contemporary experiences and problems and the historical experience of the church, weighing it all in the light of the Gospel to strengthen the communion of believers.

‘Evangelical theology’ means an account about God based on the Gospel. It means proclamation of Christ’s salvation and justification to everyone who believes, as well as intellectual conceptualisation and explanation of the Gospel and weighing the life of a believer and of the church in the light of the Gospel.

The church is a communion of believers that originates from Christ’s salvation and the proclamation thereof. “And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: “One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all,” Eph. 4[:4f]” (Augsburg Confession: VII. What the Church Is).

Theological dialogue is informed, i.e., it reflects the best knowledge available in relevant fields.

Theological dialogue is critical and self-critical. ‘Critical’ means informed assessment, weighed in the light of the Gospel. It includes self-criticism as an integral part, as the premises of one’s views are weighed in the light of the Gospel.

A church-wide theological dialogue is held in the fields where contemporary practical matters require reasoned deliberation, adoption of a position, or advisory guidelines. The matters requiring theological guidelines can be related to personal issues, medicine, society, environment, church, ideology or other fields.

Prerequisites of church-wide theological dialogue include formulation of questions for debate and a dialogue framework, as well as a genuine intent by the participants. The aim is to arrive at a shared view, but it is also recognised that sometimes it may not be possible. Evangelical theology permits communion in diversity, i.e., it recognises the possibility of different opinions on many issues.

A coordinated and moderated dialogue is positive already by virtue of enabling Christians with different views to come together and formulate and express their positions and beliefs in a safe atmosphere. It contributes to strengthening of communion and edification of the church.

### 1.3. Overview of theological dialogues in the EELC in an historical context

Since the establishment of the free people's church in 1917, theological dialogues have been held in the statutory bodies of the church, academic organisations, at meetings organised by groups representing diverse theological positions, and in publications.

The purposefulness and consistency of the theological dialogue has depended on the work procedures and capacities of the dialogue bodies, as well as on the political and social setting, which has either amplified or inhibited public theological dialogue.

After the establishment of the free people's church, the church adopted a traditional format for discussing theological matters. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, annual Conferences of Theologians, or so-called 'January conferences', were held in Tartu as the most representative and authoritative forum of theological dialogue among clergy members and theologians. The central role of the Conferences of Theologians as a forum of theological dialogue continued in the 1920s and 1930s when the conference participants included all clergy members of the church, as well as theologians with academic degrees who were in the service of the church. The teaching staff at the theological faculty of the University of Tartu was also included among members of the conference.

At present, the function of the forum of theological (or doctrinal) dialogues is fulfilled by the Clerical Conference as successor of the Conference of Theologians. According to the church law, both the Conference of Theologians and the Clerical Conference have served not only as a forum of discussion but also as a decision-making body on doctrinal matters.

The theological faculty of the University of Tartu played an important role in theological dialogues both in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first period of Estonia's independent statehood. Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theological debates were held on the pages of the theological faculty magazine, *Dorpater Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, as well as in the principal Lutheran publication, *Mittheilungen und Nachrichten für die evangelische Geistlichkeit Russlands*. These were supplemented by the writings of the teaching staff of

the theological faculty, published as special treatises, reflecting the 19<sup>th</sup> century discussions in the church (on inspiration of the Bible, on the movement of Brethren, etc.). In the period of Estonian independent statehood, the main academic theological publication was *Usuteadusline Ajakiri*, with the current *Usuteaduslik Ajakiri* being its successor.

In addition to the Conferences of Theologians and the theological faculty of the University of Tartu, professional academic societies played an important role in covering theological questions. Established in 1867, the Theological Society (*Theologischer Verein*) was an organisation for all students and teaching staff of the theological faculty, preparing students for their future work in the church and academic theology. In addition to this, the Estonian Theological Society was established in 1921, and it organised annually 4-6 theological presentation meetings that were followed by discussion.

In the 1920s and the 1930s, theological schools formed in the church with their own publications. As the differences between the schools were related to both theology and the organisation of the church, theological issues were also discussed in the publications (*Meie Kirik* and *Protestantline Ilm*, respectively) of the two opposing schools – liberal and conservative. Opinions differed mainly on questions of the Bible and ecclesiology, and the same issues were also included in the agenda of the Conference of Theologians. In addition, clergy members published their own treatises on particular topics. Back then, the theological debate was fierce, often even becoming personal, and it undermined the unity of the church, but eventually it enabled the church to continue in greater unity, encompassing different theological views.

The tradition of the Conferences of Theologians was interrupted in the Soviet period and the anti-religious Soviet regime banned the activity of academic theological societies and the printing of virtually all theological publications. For this reason, public debate was inhibited in the anti-religious environment and many established traditions in the church were disrupted. Academic theological discussions took place at the Institute of Theology and in smaller groups led by clergy members (such as Rev. Elmar Salumaa), as well as through distribution of handwritten and self-published manuscripts.

Of the organs of the church, the format of information meetings is notable in the context of the Soviet period. It was used, for instance, in 1966 for a theological discussion on the ordination of women. The information meetings were attended by members of the EELC Consistory, deans, and teaching staff of the Institute of Theology. In addition to theological discussions on the ordination of women, there were presentations on the practices of various churches. The EELC started to ordain women in 1967.

Over the past 30 years, the forums of theological discussions from Estonia's first period of independence (Clerical Conference, faculty of theology at the University of Tartu, with the addition of the EELC Institute of Theology, Academic Society of Theology, and various theological publications) have been largely restored, but the number of issues requiring theological analysis has increased. Online and social media have reduced the quality of theological dialogue and, in the case of theological debates, have led to more verbal attacks ad hominem between church members with different theological views. This points to a need to agree on the rules of theological debate and on the ways religious dialogues can be conducted.

## **2. Good practice of theological dialogue (debate culture)**

Based on our knowledge of the history of Christianity, a diversity of theological viewpoints and a strive for unity have existed in the church from the very beginning.

Recognising the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions as the foundation of the EELC's doctrine and understanding unity of the church primarily as a shared faith in Christ, the church accepts the fact that opinions on certain theological issues are divided in the EELC.

The church encourages its members, clergy and theologians to express their different positions in internal and public discussions forums, inviting the participants to observe the following principles:

- Dialogue is held in the spirit of mutual respect and fellowship;
- Participants remain civil in debates and avoid ad hominem attacks;
- The rationale for one's statements is presented in as much detail as possible, avoiding superficial slogans;
- The fact of holding a dialogue does not in itself alter the doctrinal positions of the church;
- Participants take into account both the historical traditions and contemporary published research results in Lutheran theology as an academic discipline, as well as the current state of research in other scholarly fields;
- Conversation partners are open to listening to the other side, to learning from them and to reviewing their own positions if necessary. It is important to understand mutual starting points, inferences and arguments even when the final conclusions are different;
- Everyone can only speak for oneself in a dialogue. If an EELC official speaks as a representative of the church, it is important that they differentiate between their personal opinions and the official positions of the church. If the personal opinion of an official in theological dialogue differs from the official positions of the church, the dissenting opinion should be expressed with pastoral sensitivity and in a reasoned manner;



- In case of dissenting opinions, it is not appropriate for participants to make remarks that could result in a loss of communion between church members. Participants refrain from personal attacks, insults, taking offence, redirecting the discussion to other topics, and intentional misunderstanding;
- The Gospel of Christ must retain its primacy over any differences on particular theological issues.

The goal of dialogue is concordance – diversity in unity, which is not contingent on particular theological ideas but on a shared faith in and witness to the God who has revealed himself in Christ.

### **3. Model (roadmap) for conducting church-wide theological dialogues**

The theological dialogue strategy is based on the principle that the entire church – clergy, theologians and lay members – is involved in church-wide theological dialogue. If necessary, international theological competencies can also be used in discussions and experiences of partner churches in organising similar dialogues can serve as a model.

Dialogues are organised using the decision-making bodies of the church, and working groups are established for different topics. Maintaining a balance in theological dialogues is upheld as an important principle, which means inclusion of representatives of different theological positions and forms of observance that exist in the church. In addition, attention is paid to communication to ensure that theological dialogues and the resulting documents stimulate discussion and feedback in deaneries and congregations as well. The dialogues coordinated by working groups result in summary resources (pastoral guidelines, theological documents that serve as guidance), which will be submitted to the Consistory for deciding whether further deliberation is warranted in the decision-making bodies of the church.

Church-wide dialogues are overseen by a committee established for this purpose by the Consistory. The committee prepares a detailed annual action plan and monitors the implementation thereof. The committee organises its work according to the principle that theological dialogues are held consistently on the agreed topics as set out in the strategy and following the time schedule.

The Consistory establishes working groups for studying the topics set out in the theological dialogue strategy. The working groups include relevant experts from higher education establishments and research institutions.

#### 4. List of topics requiring church-wide theological dialogue, and a time schedule

In January 2023, the working group for the theological dialogue strategy conducted brainstorming to identify the theological topics that require church-wide theological dialogue. The brainstorming was open to both the clergy and congregation members of the EELC. A total of 32 proposals on topics requiring church-wide dialogue were received during brainstorming. The working group for the theological dialogue strategy analysed the proposals and grouped them by topics.

As a result, church-wide theological dialogues will be conducted from 2024 to 2028 on the following topics:

Start of dialogue	Topic
2024	Presentation of the theological dialogue strategy and preparations for church-wide dialogues
2025	Authority and interpretation of the Bible
2025	Conservation of nature (creation) and sustainability of the living environment
2026	Beginning and sanctity of life
2026	Gender and sexuality
2027	Meaning and sanctity of marriage
2027	End of life, death and eternal life
2028	Lutheran identity and the doctrine of justification
2028	The Gospel and the mission of the church in contemporary Estonia
2029	Holy Communion, admission to the Lord's Supper, and eucharistic communion

The Consistory has the right to add or reformulate the topics of dialogue, depending on needs and proposals submitted, and to modify the time schedule of dialogues.