

## **The General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland discusses, among other things, the future of the church and cooperation with other churches.**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland's highest decision-making body, the General Synod, met for its spring session in Turku from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> May 2017. Among other things, the Synod discussed the renewal of the church's organisational structure, the extension of the church's understanding of marriage, and cooperation with other churches.

### **Representative-initiative to extend the church's understanding of marriage to be discussed in committee**

The Synod held a lively debate on a representative-initiative concerning the church's understanding of marriage. On 1st March 2017 a Marriage Act entered into force in Finland which made possible marriage between two people of the same sex. According to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland's current doctrine, a church marriage is a union between a man and a woman. A priest or other parish worker may pray with and for those contracting a civil marriage.

The initiative presented at the meeting proposed that the Synod should decide to undertake to prepare the changes necessary to extend the church's understanding of marriage to couples of the same sex. At the same time, it is proposed that proponents of traditional marriage should be treated equally in the exercise of both their membership of and functions within the church. The initiative considered it important that the opposing views on marriage should not constitute a church-dividing issue.

In total 63 speeches were made in the preliminary debate at the Synod, among them speeches both for and against the expansion of the understanding of marriage.

A report about the initiative will be drafted by a committee, which, when completed, will be considered at a plenary session of the Synod. Decisions about marriage require the support of a ¾ majority of the Synod.

### **Clergy of other Christian churches may preach by invitation at Lutheran worship**

The Synod approved a change in the Church Order which will in some cases allow clergy of other Christian churches to preach at the worship of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Vicars of parishes may extend such invitations to preach.

This change in the Church Order is intended to develop local ecumenism. An invitation to preach does not extend to the clergy of other Christian churches or communities any other rights or responsibilities in the conduct of worship.

The change comes into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2017.

### **The church concludes an agreement with the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church**

The Synod approved a cooperation agreement with the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church. It provides for the continuation and development of cooperation between the churches on an equal basis. Among other things, the agreement seeks to support members of the Finnish and Estonian churches who have moved from one country to the other to make a connection with the parish of their new place of residence.

### **Structural solutions for the renewal of the church approved**

The Synod decided to charge the Church Council to explore or undertake 17 tasks to renew the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland's organisation and to promote the active role of parishioners. The issues to be resolved relate, among other things, to employment contracts, diocesan administration and area divisions, the development of church property and the fostering of a sense of parish belonging.

The need to renew the church's organisation stems from, among other things, the changes taking place in Finnish society and the decline in the church's membership, which have caused financial challenges for the church.