

Martti Esko

## 16. Sexual Health and the Evangelical Lutheran Church Of Finland

### Sexual Teachings and Values of the Church

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland views healthy sexuality as an important part of life and personal relationships. The position of our church is most clearly conveyed by the following statements in a booklet containing the address of the bishops entitled *Growing Together*, published in 1984 :

1. Sexuality is a strong, all-consuming and powerful drive which has an affect on multiple areas of life and is present in most human interaction.
2. A man and a woman are not complete entities by themselves, but they need one another to realize the full potential of life's experiences.
3. At its best, a sexual encounter between a man and a woman involves the total giving and receiving of one another.
4. Diversity of sexual expression has positive value.

These statements represent the Church's most recent official stance on sexuality. Since then, sexual issues have, of course, been frequently discussed by the bishops, various work factions in the Church and in the Church Assembly.

In contrast to popular belief, the Bible's position on sexuality is positive. The foundation for our belief does not support asceticism, nor does it accept total freedom of sexual expression or sexual interactions outside of loving relationships. In the first pages of the Book of Moses it is stated that, "God created humankind in his image, male and female he created them". In the second chapter of the same Book it is written that, "it is not good that the man should be alone". In another part of the Bible, The Song of Solomon, sexuality and love are boldly and openly praised. The central themes in the belief and teachings of Christian love and sexuality are expressed in the commandments about love: love your God, love your family and love your neighbour. The well-known and often quoted statement of Christ is applicable here: "Love thy neighbour as thyself". This principle should guide us in our interactions with others in all areas as well as in those that involve sexuality.

The Bible presents sexuality to us as a joyful, liberating and enriching experience. Christian belief regards faithfulness and honesty as the foundations for all loving relationships. Human beings differ from the rest of creation. The purpose of sex is

more than simply procreation and, therefore, men and women need to be socially responsible in their sexual relations and protective of new life. In every community, including the Church, there are general and common values regarding sexuality. Our community is changing to one of pluralistic values, and many people view some of these values as optional, matters of personal choice and reliant on a sense of personal responsibility. Our Church community has, at least, chosen to support the following four values :

1. The equality of individuals and respect for human dignity.
2. The acceptance of every person's right to self-determination.
3. A sense of social responsibility and neighbourly understanding.
4. The respect for truth, experience and knowledge.

These values are also closely connected to sexual behaviour, especially when we try to reconcile contradictory sexual values. The aforementioned values are as important as the following other central values of Judeo – Christian tradition:

1. Each person deserves respect regardless of her/his sex, colour or race.
2. Life has more value than death.
3. Promote love, not hate
4. Promote growth, not regression.
5. Individual freedom is a goal that must be pursued, but only within the appropriate social context and in a way that does not harm others.

The sexual teachings of our Church, when applied in accordance with these aforementioned general norms, permit sexual behaviour which takes place within the limits of responsibility and well-being of others set by the Christian community. The Church cannot accept sexual behaviour which involves abuse, violence or other forms of cruelty.

“Love is a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.” The Song of Solomon emphasises the power of sexual love, but also its danger. Everything has its own time and place; love should not be highly disruptive. Sexuality has its own limitations, and the Bible regards crossing the line as sin.

Fidelity and intimacy are inseparable aspects of relationships. Fidelity is the most vital path to true intimacy between a man and a woman. Fidelity is often considered an externally imposed burden and obligation. This view can be altered if, instead, we present the idea of fidelity as an opportunity with special rewards. Sexual therapists often emphasise that their counselling will not succeed unless both parties are fully committed to a monogamous relationship. Fidelity does not signify limiting oneself to interaction with only one person. There is much support for the view that a good long

term sexual relationship can be built with only one person at a time. This viewpoint of sexuality is also quite close to the ideals of Christian marriage.

## Tasks of the Church in Matters of Sexuality

The Church's first and, perhaps, most important task is to liberate people and relieve them of any burdens they carry with regard to their sexuality. Sexuality often causes anxiety, guilt, self-isolation and feelings and experiences of rejection. In addition, people often engage in sexual acts against their own conscience. The paramount and deep ethical responsibility of the Church surrounding issues of sexuality is in forgiveness, freedom, and the reduction of the burdens of guilt. If the Christian Church does not offer people the tools to liberate themselves, who will?

The second most important task for the Church is to develop and support programs that help people deal with problem areas of their sexuality. The Church is in close contact with people, especially during important years of growth and in times of crisis. For example, in the teachings and studies during confirmation, the Church tries to support the development of a responsible and healthy outlook on sexuality and a channelling of that sexuality into rewarding and positive personal relationships. In discussions preceding marriage ceremonies, as well as through work with couples and families, and in family counselling and crisis intervention, the Church faces important challenges surrounding questions of sexuality. During a span of over 50 years, the Church has already made systematic progress in the sexual education of couples and families.

The goal of the Church is to help people achieve harmony and happiness with respect to their sexuality and not to try to control a person's sexuality. To work toward this goal, we provide many trained personnel and other resources which help individuals deal with sexual issues, concerns, and problems. In these matters, the Church tries to assume an accepting tone as the foundation of all teachings dealing with sexuality. Control and punishment are inappropriate responses to sexual actions that have no negative consequences. Healthy and positive outcomes from sexual interactions can only be achieved when individuals are knowledgeable enough to avoid and minimise negative ones. Exploitation, rape, subordination and the selfish and ruthless pursuit of one's own sexual interests are all too common. It is the task of the Church to defend the weak and oppressed from various forms of sexual abuse and coercion, exploitation and subordination and the ruthless pursuit of one's own interests. The Church needs to actively work to decrease prostitution, the sexual abuse of minors, and worldwide underground child pornography profiteering. The Church needs to be involved in public discussions of these social issues and be a part of efforts to reduce sexual exploitation and abuse.

The Church has offered family counselling services for more than 50 years, and these services are currently available throughout the whole country. Family counsellors have

special training for counselling couples in crisis as well as for handling sexuality issues. Over the last year, 41 family counselling centres in Finland counselled more than 81 000 couples and families in crisis. Most of these sessions also touched on sexual relations as part of the counselling process.

In 1981, the Church family counselling unit, in cooperation with the Family Federation of Finland, organised Finland's first training course in sexuality counselling. The course was led by Dr. David Glegg and his wife, psychologist Alison Glegg, of Great Britain's National Marriage Guidance Council. Forty participants, including 15 family counsellors, took part in the course. The continuation course was held in 1983. This course included 27 of those who began their training in 1981. Today, a specific unit of sexual therapy is a mandatory part of the three-year family counselling training course.

Sexuality is also a central theme in Finland's confirmation studies, and especially in confirmation camps. Over 90 % of young people aged 15 attend these camps. Thus, the impact of these camps on youth cannot be overlooked or underestimated. The confirmation programme has been discussed thoroughly and has been formulated with the help of experts from a variety of fields. In dealing with community work, children, families and the elderly, it is always important to approach sexual issues with sensitivity. Fortunately, Church employees in these helping capacities come from diverse backgrounds and represent both sexes. In general, the Church offers an important supportive and healing network for parishioners in the areas of sexuality and relationships.