

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Religion in Finland

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1. General Presentation

Covid-19 pandemic reached Finland in the beginning of the year 2020. In March the situation was deemed so serious that the Emergency Powers Act (1552/2011) was put into force. Finland was declared in a state of emergency twice during the pandemic: during the first wave from 3 March to 15 June 2020, and the third wave from 1 March to 27 April 2021. In addition, several measures decreed in the Communicable Diseases Act (1227/2016) were also applied use during the entire period of the pandemic. This meant that the Finnish government restricted the basic constitutional rights of citizens in a manner that was entirely exceptional since the 1993 constitutional reform of those rights in Finland.

During the first shutdown, all schools were closed (except early education), most government-run public facilities were closed, at most 10 people were allowed to participate in a public meeting and people over 70 were advised to avoid all human contact if possible. In addition, outsiders were forbidden to enter hospitals and healthcare facilities, and plans to restrict movement crossing national borders were initiated. On 27th March, the borders of the region of Uusimaa were even temporarily closed until 15th April to all but work related and other necessary traffic, to avoid the spread of the virus. Several hundred police officers and the Finnish Defence Forces were employed in guarding the borders of Uusimaa to avoid the spread of the virus. The restaurants were closed until the 1st of June, after which eating at restaurants and sports events was allowed with special arrangements. The maximum number of people in public meetings was raised to 50. On 13th August the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare issued a recommendation to use face masks in situations with unavoidable contact.

During the second shutdown, the measures were less stringent than for the first one and they varied more between regions. The Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVI) were responsible for deliberating the measures according to the regional situation.

In this report, the focus will be on issues related to religion and religious life. The Finnish situation is characterised by the special relationship between the state and the two national churches, which operate under public law but are nevertheless administratively independent from the state. Thus, the restrictions on public gatherings and businesses placed by the government did not apply to worship services and other religious gatherings. Nevertheless, the majority churches and also other religious communities followed the state regulations closely on these matters. Because of this situation, there was scant public discussion concerning the restrictions on the freedom of religion. The most heated debates revolved around the restrictions on freedom of enterprise, equally guaranteed by the constitution. However, the lack of public reactions doesn't mean that religious life remained unaffected by the pandemic. On the contrary, the religious communities had to adjust their activities in some rather drastic manners during the periods of shutdown.

2. Legal Aspects

The most important law during the pandemic has been the Communicable Diseases Act (1227/2016). It specifies the measures to be taken when a pandemic threatens the whole society. However, the powers specified by the law were often deemed inadequate, and the Act has been changed at least ten times during the pandemic (Junni 2021, 367). Some of the changes have concerned temporary powers to restrict passenger transport and customer services of bars and restaurants.

An interesting situation concerning religion arose when the Regional State Administrative Agency (AVI) informed on 13.10.2020 that the restrictions on public gatherings did not apply to religious services:

“Restrictions on gatherings imposed by the Regional State Administrative Agency shall not apply to worship services and other similar services organised by religious communities which are part of the normal religious activities of the communities, and which are held for the purpose of public practice of religion on the community's own premises or equivalent. In addition to services, these include fairs, vespers, and religious processions. The Regional State Administrative Agency has no legal authority to restrict such opportunities.” (quoted by Taira 2020)

This decision was based upon the Assembly Act (530/1999), in which the scope of application (section 2) states that “this Act does not apply to official events arranged by public corporations, nor to the characteristic events of religious communities where these are arranged for the purpose of public worship in the community’s own premises or in a comparable place”.

This rose some public discussion as to whether such special treatment of the religious gatherings was justified or not (see Taira 2020). There were some isolated instances where the virus was spread among participants of a religious gathering. For instance, in one Pentecostal-Charismatic community in Jyväskylä, 50 people were infected and about 700 were exposed to the virus and held in quarantine after a religious service in September 2020.¹

In any case, the instructions given by the AVI meant that the religious communities had to issue their own instructions and guidelines concerning religious services and other events, which had, of course, already taken place among most of the religious communities. The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) gave general instructions already on the 2 and 12 March 2020 on how to prepare for the pandemic in parish activities. According to the Church Act (1054/1993) of the ELCF, it was the responsibility of each Diocesan Chapter, under the direction of the bishop, to instruct their parishes concerning the religious events during the state of emergency. For instance, the instructions of the bishops concerning church services were issued on 16 March, the arrangement of the funeral services on the 18th, and the instructions concerning religious activities outside the state of emergency were given on 5 May, 19 May and 1 June 2020.² In addition, the Church Council of the ELCF has given numerous more specific instructions for different areas of church work. For instance, the instructions concerning confirmation training, diaconal work and the burial services were all issued by the end of March 2020.³

The church administration of the Orthodox church gave similar instructions. On 16 March 2020 it instructed the parishes to continue the church services, limiting the participants to ten people. Other parish activities were completely closed during the shutdown. Beginning in June, services held outside

¹ <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11591402>.

² <https://sakasti.fi/kriisit-ja-varautuminen/koronavirus/>.

³ <https://sakasti.fi/kriisit-ja-varautuminen/koronavirus/ohjeita-eri-tyoaloille/>.

were allowed, while continuing to limit participation to ten inside the church buildings (Ahonen et al. s.a.: 1).

The general principle of the ELCF bishops' instructions concerning church services was that the services were to be held, but without the physical presence of the parishioners and with no more than 10 people present. The situation during the first shutdown was especially acute for the Christian churches because it was the time of the Easter, during which the communion service is especially important. The bishops of the ELCF had agreed among themselves that the holy communion could be celebrated during Easter. However, there could be at most only ten people present: one pastor, along with parish employees and parishioners in service duties. The instructions left room for discretion to each parish. It was possible, but not mandatory, to celebrate the communion during the state of emergency. According to a survey among the vicars of the ELCF, three fifths (60 %) of the respondents reported that there was no communion at all in their parishes even during the Easter services in 2020 (Kallatsa & Mikkola 2020).

3. Sociological Aspects

The pandemic, especially during the shutdowns in the state of emergency, had a significant impact on religious life in religious communities. The severe restrictions on public gatherings affected the church services, life-cycle rites, youth work, and diaconal work, very significantly. Members of the religious communities often had mixed feelings about how things were organised by the churches and other communities.

During the state of emergency, the church services in the ELCF were conducted mostly without communion service and behind closed doors, without the physical presence of parishioners. The situation gave a strong boost to the "digital turn" in Finnish church life. Although streamed church services and other internet services have been provided by around a third of the parishes since 2016, the shutdown resulted in a veritable digital leap in the ELCF parishes. During Easter 2020, almost all the parishes provided access to their services through the web by streaming (Kallatsa & Mikkola 2020, 11). The popularity of the radio services and the televised services also increased markedly during the initial weeks of the shutdown.

The digitally mediated church services also generated discussion within the churches on the theological possibility of a "distant communion", that is to say, a communion service in which the participants' presence was mediated through digital means and in which they administered the sacramental substances themselves, each in their own locations (see Mikkola 2020). In their instructions to their dioceses, the bishops explicitly prohibited distant communions. However, only a few of them gave detailed justification on the ban based upon the Lutheran confession (Mikkola & Kallatsa 2021, 330-331). According to a study conducted among the vicars of the ELCF and a small sample of church members, about three quarters of vicars held a negative view on the possibility of distant communion and only one in ten held a favourable view. Among church members, however, almost a third held a favourable view. In both samples, women were more in favour of distant communion than men (Mikkola & Kallatsa 2021, 334).

According to a representative survey among Finns during April-May 2020, 14 per cent reported following the streamed church services. The same study indicated that about half of Finns considered it important that people could participate in church services in web-mediated ways during the pandemic (Salomäki 2020, 11-12). Statistics also indicate that far more people than normal participated in the church services through the streamed services (Kirkon tutkimuskeskus 2021). The

experiences of the parishioners of both the ELCF and the Finnish Orthodox Church were, however, mixed. Some experienced their spiritual connection to the church being enhanced by the new technologically mediated services. However, many also felt that the distant, web-mediated services were alienating and hollow (Metso et al. 2021).

The ELCF parishes spent some 6.6 million euros through diaconal work to financial aid. During the year 2020, the total sum used for financial aid was raised to 8.4 million euros, which is a 27% increase over the previous year (Gävert 2021, 114). The diaconal work was increasingly directed to individual encounter, which increased 34% in 2020 over the previous year. The most important form of aid was the food relief, in the form of food bags given out by the diaconal workers. Their number doubled in 2020 compared to the previous year. The largest single group seeking the help of the church were the single people of the working age. Food relief was a quick response to the situation of the sudden drop in income experienced by many people to which the state reacted only slowly (ibid, 113-114).

During the initial shutdown, the bishops instructed that all weekly activities of the parishes except the church services were to be closed down during the state of emergency. Although the restrictions were subsequently loosened up during the summer, it nevertheless meant that confirmation training, which in Finland mainly takes place in the form of summer camps, needed to be reorganised somehow. The Church Council of the ELCF issued its guidelines for the confirmation training in April 2020, which instructed the parishes on how to organise distant, web-mediated confirmation training. The basic idea was that the distant learning was to be thought of as an auxiliary learning method. The bishops instructed that it was not possible to organise the entire confirmation training in a distant form. Some parts of the training had to involve physical presence of the trainees. (Tervo-Niemelä et al. 2021)

There were three basic models in which the parishes organised confirmation training during the pandemic: 1) intensive (unchanged) form of the summer camp, 2) postponing the intensive period; and 3) changing the training into day-training periods. Thus, during the June 2020, there were only 131 confirmation camps whereas in the previous year there were 458. On the other hand, whereas during 2019 there were 632 confirmation trainings courses during August-December, during 2020 there were 1,189 such trainings altogether (Tervo-Niemelä et al. 2021, 350).

According to a study concerning the confirmation trainings during the pandemic (Tervo-Niemelä et al. 2021, 351-352), about one fifth (18%) of the confirmation trainings sessions did not involve a stay in a camp. About one in ten of the sessions involved only a short, 1-3 days period in camp environments. A third involved a 4-6 nights, and approximately a third involved a whole week-long camp period. Almost half of the respondents said that there were no distant learning episodes during the confirmation training.

Church rites were a further area in which the religious communities were forced to reorganise their services sometimes drastically. During the periods of the shutdown, at most 10 people were allowed in these events. What made the situation worse were the rapidly changing rules and restrictions. In addition, there appears to have been much local variation on how the restrictions were interpreted. For instance, in some parishes the ten-person rule included the pastor and church director of music, whereas in others the ten-person rule referred to the participants only. In their instructions on 18 March 2020, the bishops decreed that the ten-person limit may be exceeded for near relatives for special pastoral reasons. When the state of emergency was over, the limit was increased to 50 people.

According to a study concerning the experiences of the burials during the pandemic (Vähäkangas 2021), many people experienced frustration and anxiety over the organisation of the funerals with severely restricting rules. Many people also experienced conflicting emotions: on one hand, safety was

considered important, on the other hand, being able to be physically present in the occasion was sometimes equally vitally important. Again, there were strong emotions linked to the inability to express one's feelings through bodily contact, such as hugging and touching. In processing grief, bodily expressions are vital when verbal expressions seem unsatisfactory, yet concerns over safety precluded such bodily expressions to a large extent. The special conditions also highlighted the existential themes concerning the meaning of life and death in an exceptionally acute way for some participants.

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