



# INTERNATIONAL Lutheran Council

## An Update and Reaffirmation:

### **“A Protest and Call for Free Religious Speech in Finland: An International Lutheran Condemnation of the Unjust Criminal Prosecution of the Rev. Dr. Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen, and a Call for All People of Good Will to Support the Freedom of Religious Expression in Finland”**

“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21). In this short sentence, Christ Jesus teaches His followers to honor and obey two different authorities, each in its proper sphere. Give to Caesar (government) what is rightfully his: honor and obedience regarding *external* matters such as taxes, laws that protect the body and punish evil, and earthly justice. And give to God what is rightfully His: honor and obedience regarding *internal* matters such as baptism into Christ, a clean conscience through forgiveness, speech that praises God and witnesses to others, love that shows mercy, and hope that looks to God. But where the government trespasses into God’s sphere of internals, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29; see also Augsburg Confession XVI, XXVIII).

Outrageous government trespass has again occurred. In a pamphlet written in 2004, the Rev. Dr. Juhana Pohjola, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, and Dr. Päivi Räsänen, Finnish member of parliament, expressed their deeply held, historically Christian beliefs on male-female marriage and human sexuality, emphasizing God’s good creation and the inherent dignity of all people. In 2021 (!), the Prosecutor General of Finland saw this as “hate speech” toward those with a different sexual orientation and brought charges. In 2022, the Helsinki District Court issued a unanimous, clear, and total acquittal adding that “it is not for the court to interpret Biblical concepts.” Unfazed, the prosecutors appealed the acquittal (allowed under Finnish law) and won a second trial to convict Drs. Pohjola and Räsänen of “hate speech.” This trial will be held August 22–24, 2023, at the Helsinki Court of Appeals. This represents nothing less than a yearslong relentless attack against free speech, religious expression, personal moral integrity, and limited government’s proper sphere of jurisdiction as articulated in the Constitution of Finland, the European Convention on Human Rights (articles 9, 10), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (articles 18, 19).

**We reaffirm** the comprehensive June 25, 2021 International Lutheran Council statement, “A Protest and Call for Free Religious Speech in Finland: An International Lutheran Condemnation of the Unjust Criminal Prosecution of the Rev. Dr. Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen, and a Call for All People of Good Will to Support the Freedom of Religious Expression in Finland,” signed by 48 ecclesial leaders and 45 church bodies and associations, but representing the moral commitments of hundreds of millions worldwide. The full text is available for study at <https://ilconline.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/A-Protest-and-Call-for-Religious-Freedom-in-Finland-English.pdf/>.

**We call on all people of good will** to condemn this unconscionable prosecution, to take a stand for freedom of speech and freedom of religion for all, and to pray for Bishop Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen and their acquittal. When we compromise on freedom for just one or two, we ultimately place freedom at risk for all.

Subscribed July 20, 2023, the Commemoration of Elijah, the Prophet:

Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison  
President

Rev. Dr. Jonathan E. Shaw  
Director of Church Relations

Rev. Dr. Timothy C. J. Quill  
General Secretary

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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