

“At the Wellsprings of Courage”

Speech at the 70th anniversary celebrations of Finn Church Aid, 27.9.2017, 13.20-13.30

Today, as we celebrate Finn Church Aid and look back at its 70-year history, we find ourselves considering not only the key moments of one organisation's history but a breakthrough (?) that has fundamentally changed the churches' perception of their identity and role in the world.

This happened as people were waking up to the reality of the Second World War. The tragedy was of a scale hitherto unimagined. A Europe that had believed in development – and moral development too – had been mired in lawlessness and immorality. Millions of people were embittered and wounded by war and without shelter.

The churches' perspective at the beginning of the century had been dominated by criticism towards political and philosophical ideas seen as threatening to the churches and Christianity's place in the culture. These were positivism, fascism, and communism. They had been resisted.

After the Second World War the churches understood that they were part of a reality in which people's basic security had been shaken, image of the world had crumbled, and morality had been tested. The scale of the material emergency was enormous: millions of refugees were without shelter. A struggle of ideologies or worldviews was no longer enough. Talk of a loving God rang hollow if people were not fed, clothed, and cared for. The task of the churches was to stand alongside people without discrimination or question, which was not easy in a divided world.

Of course, the churches had helped the poor, the sick, and the homeless before. It's how the churches have always understood their mission in the world. Now a new kind of courage was needed, the courage to go forward in the midst of horror and hopelessness. This courage did not arise from a desire to build a better world or from a sense of charity or moral obligation. It arose from an understanding that the churches were not outsiders but participants. It was Christ himself who now wandered through the ruins of Europe without protection and a future.

This new courage brought churches together in partnership with all the actors who sought to defend people. The World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation were formed for this very purpose. “Grace's ambassadors must now fly to the ends of the earth and bind its wounds. God has no other hands now,” said Sylvester Michelfelder, who organised the churches' relief activity.

This turning point in the churches' self-understanding also lay behind the birth of Finn Church Aid. Initially, Finland and our Lutheran Church were themselves recipients of aid. We needed much support, and we received it from large numbers of foreign churches. This involved more than the aid received for the churches in Lapland and the construction of the church's educational centres. Government assessments suggest that children in Lapland would have died of cold and hunger in the first winter after the war were it not for the food, vitamins, clothes, and shoes sent by the churches of the United States.

The foundation of the churches' work was the principle of mutual dependence and reciprocity. God's world is one; its hope and despair are common to us all. When we were back on our feet, we gave the help we ourselves had received. And so here we are today, celebrating seven decades of Finn Church Aid.

These roots are an integral part of the story of Finn Church Aid. They tell us that it does not exist to gain more of a stake in the aid organisation market, that it is not about doing the church's charity work or burnishing its public image, and nor should it be engaged in political or ideological struggle. Finn Church Aid exists because this is how the church understands its place and role in the world.

Finn Church Aid draws its courage from the same roots as the churches after the Second World War: from the awareness that Christ is in the midst of this world, wherever people are defenceless, at the mercy of circumstance and each other. Courage grows from these roots, even when we are confronted by our own inadequacy, failure, and bitterness.

This is the courage that is needed now, as Finn Church Aid works around the world, whether in Central Africa, South Sudan, Syria, Nepal, or Europe. We also need to be alongside those looking for security as refugees and asylum seekers or those who find themselves beyond the protection of the law. The vulnerable must be protected, the hopeless must be afforded hope, peace must be brought to places of violence.

Finn Church Aid has networked extensively and skilfully, collaborated openly with various actors, especially religious organisations. It is appreciated and trusted.

Such courage is possible when it recognises its roots and identity and draws from them. This is how Christ's Church exists in the world. Ultimately, when all the challenges, strategies, and visions are over, only one thing is left:

Matt. 25: 31-40

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;

for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?"

And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?"

And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

I wish Finn Church Aid and all who work for and support it strength, wisdom, and courage to live as Christ's Church in this world, and the richness of God's blessing.