

“The Pamphlet” The Persecution of Bishop Juhana Pohjola, Dr. Päivi Räsänen and Orthodox Lutherans in Finland

Imagine that out of the blue you received a phone call ordering you to report to the local police station. You ask “Why?” and are told that you are being charged with hate speech. How would you react? For Pastor Juhana Pohjola, this is not a hypothetical situation, but real life. In summer 2019 he received a letter from the Helsinki Police Department that said a man (who happened to be a theologian) had pressed charges against him and Dr. Päivi Räsänen, a medical doctor and member of parliament, for their role in producing and disseminating the booklet *Male and Female He Made Them—Homosexual relationships challenge the Christian concept of humanity* (2004). What is happening to Dr. Räsänen and Bishop Pohjola is taking place with increasing and alarming frequency in many so-called free western nations including America.

Pastor Pohjola was summoned to the Helsinki Police Station and questioned for five hours. According to Pohjola’s account, the last question the police asked was, “Are you willing to take the pamphlet away from your website in two weeks?” I said, “No. There is no legal and theological reason to do it.” The authorities concluded no law had been broken. The case then went to a determined Prosecutor General. Pohjola has since noted, “It was not a surprise but still a shock when on the 29th of April she announced that she will press charges.” Dr. Juhana Pohjola was charged because he is Editor in Chief of the Lutheran Foundation Finland which distributes the booklet. Dr. Päivi Räsänen was charged because she authored the pamphlet albeit fifteen years previously. As reported by Bishop Pohjola, “The indictment is for incitement to hatred against a group, which fall under the section of ‘war crime and crimes against humanity.’”

The International Lutheran Council responded by working with LCMS President Matthew Harrison to produce “A Protest and Call for Free Religious Speech in Finland: A Global Lutheran Response to the Unjust Prosecution of Bishop Elect Juhana Pohjola and Member of Parliament Päivi Räsänen.” The letter, dated June 25, 2021, was signed by 48 ecclesiastical leaders representing 45 Lutheran church bodies and associations and sent to the Office of the Prosecutor General of Finland, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Pastor Pohjola was charged on April 19, 2021. On Sunday, August 1st he was consecrated as bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland. So, the target has “moved up” a notch from pastor to bishop. The liberal media operates with the assumption that if they do not cover a story, it never happened. It is more difficult to perpetuate their alternative reality when the legitimate non-mainline news media speaks. Pohjola’s ten-day speaking tour helped counter the mainline delusion. The ILC organized a ten-day, three city speaking tour for Bishop Pohjola in Washington D.C., Fort Wayne and Boston. As word got out about his visit to America, it was impossible to schedule all the journalists who requested interviews. He was however interviewed by Joy Pullman, Executive Editor of the *Federalist*, Rev. Todd Wilken of *Issues Etc.*, Mathew Block, ILC journalist, plus the Alliance Defending Freedom International, LCMS media, and the Indiana District Newsletter. *The Christian Post* and *Christian Today* also covered the story. A quick search on the web will bring up additional reports. This media attention is sending a message to Finland that the world is watching.

And there is more. The first stop in Bishop Pohjola’s speaking tour was on November 10 at the office of the Alliance Defending Freedom International. When ADFI Attorney Sean Nelson welcomed the guests who came to hear Pohjola speak he held up his mobile phone and announced a breaking news story in the *Federalist* by Joy Pullman that “Six Republican U.S. representatives issued a letter demanding that the United States take action against Finland for criminalizing Christianity through its hate crime laws.” This really woke everyone up!

The second city on the tour was Ft. Wayne, Indiana, where Bishop Pohjola preached in the Concordia Theological Seminary chapel on Mark 13:1-13. The theme for the speaking tour was “On Account of Me You Will Stand,” which comes from this text: “For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and king for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the Gospel must be proclaimed to all nations.” The busy day went on to include a trip to the WOWO 1090 AM radio station for a live interview with Pat Miller, the most popular radio talk show in Fort Wayne. Then back to Concordia Theological Seminary for an evening fireside chat with seminary students plus nine students from Concordia University Chi-

cago who came down just to hear Pohjola speak on Saturday.

On a cold and rainy Saturday morning, over 200 people came to the historic downtown St. Paul’s Lutheran Church to listen to Pohjola speak and then stayed for a magnificent choral Matins. The people came from Fort Wayne churches and from as far away as Indianapolis, Ohio, Illinois and Michigan.

The final stop took place at the historic First Lutheran Church in downtown Boston which again followed the pattern of lecture, Q & A, and a traditional choral Matins including the amazing First Lutheran Church choir. The tour was framed by Washington D.C. and Boston, Massachusetts, two symbols of religious freedom enshrined in the First Amendment which protects the right to freedom of religion and freedom of expression from government interference. In his interview with the *Federalist*, Bishop Pohjola noted, “I am not waging a cultural war, but have a spiritual concern that in our churches and society we can teach the whole biblical truth. It is a spiritual battle for me more than a legal battle.” The simultaneous attack on leading figures in both church and state is intended to make people afraid and promote “self-censorship,” which has been described as a form of “soft totalitarianism.” In his speech delivered in all the three cities the bishop explained, “God, creation, fall, atonement and the Christian way of life are the teaching of the Church through the ages. As a Lutheran Bishop it is my calling and duty to hold on to this truth and publicly teach it no matter what the cost. Not because we want to wage a cultural war in the society but to call people to repentance and through faith in Christ receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This is not primarily a legal issue but the Gospel of Christ is at stake!”

“I love my country and cherish its rich heritage. I want to be obedient to our government and legal system. But what did the apostle Peter write? ‘Fear God. Honor the emperor.’ I haven’t received any promise from the Lord for my nation but I have the promise for his Church that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. My profound concern is how to pass on the Christian faith to the next generation and how to prepare them to face growing hostility toward Christians.”

“Many people have asked: ‘What can we do for you?’ We are very blessed to have so many individuals and organizations like the Alliance Defending Freedom (giving) legal help and our International Lutheran Council from five continents, who stand with us, pray for us and have shown their support in various ways privately and publicly. We have felt that we are one Body in Christ. The best thing for us is that you remain faithful in your vocations, and good confession of the natural order and biblical truths. But what I am asking you is the same that the apostle Paul requests in Ephesians: ‘To make supplications for all the saints and also for me that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly (*parrhesia*) to proclaim the mystery of the gospel! (Eph.6:19)’ Pray also for our country and Prosecutor General. Pray that this court case could be in the hands of our Lord a blessing for us and glorify our Lord’s name!”

Before Juhana flew home, he sent an email in which he wrote: “Thank you once again for all the arrangements, joyful company, brotherly support and spiritual encouragement.” And then he added, “The work of the International Lutheran Council is a concrete sign of hope in the middle of a cultural and ecclesial crisis. I hope that this tour will have been a little step forward in getting the ILC known among LCMS congregation.”

So, permit me to repeat the question, “What can you do?” You can give thanks to God for Bishop Pohjola and Dr. Päivi Räsänen for their courageous confession and for strength, encouragement and wisdom in the days to come, especially on January 24, when the case goes to trial in Finland.

It started with a little 24-page pamphlet written by a laywoman. The pamphlet went virtually unknown for 15 years. She was a faithful Lutheran living out her vocation as wife, mother, doctor and member of parliament. In her little booklet she gave witness to the truth about the nature of marriage as revealed in Holy Scripture and confirmed in natural law. Suddenly everything has changed. Despite facing jailtime, she boldly told reporter Jennifer Lee at *Christian Today* that “she will not be silenced and has encouraged other Christians who share her views to speak up.”

When we give witness in the vocation into which we have been called it may seem insignificant, but just wait and be prepared to buckle up. A few words, a little pamphlet, “One little Word can fell him.”

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