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*For the On-line Porvoo Theological Conference: A Vision for Communion*

*Third Session – Emerging Challenges for our Communion*

**Planetary urbanization and changing religious landscapes – shaping the world and the work of churches**

This is my first time attending a Porvoo communion theological conference, so I want to thank you for having me. It is a joy and honor to participate in these discussions, and also to be able to present some ideas on the current challenges for the Porvoo communion.

My work draws from empirical religious studies, sociology of religion, and urban research, and these are also the directions from which I draw today, as I discuss the challenges for the Porvoo communion and its member churches.

I would like to start with the framework of planetary urbanization. This framework is motivated by the obvious fact that our world is becoming or has actually already become urban. More than 50 percent of people globally live in cities, and in 2050, the proportion has been estimated to be 70 percent. Urbanization affects the lives of people living in cities, but also elsewhere. Urban researchers (Brenner & Schmidt, 2015; Brenner, 2018) use the term planetary urbanization to underline how urbanization shapes the entire planet through, for example, inter-metropolitan networks stretching across countries and continents, restructuring of traditional hinterlands through global sweatshop regions, data processing facilities, and industrial agriculture, and the operationalization of rainforests or atmosphere to serve the growth imperatives of capitalist urbanization.

Thus, urban is not something that only affects city regions or people living in cities. I really like the definition of urban by Emerson and Knight Johnson (2018), who define urban as an “emergent, complex, adaptive system of social networks in physical space, which results from continuous human exchange of information, resources, social connections, social support”. These networks are at their densest in cities, but also spread to other areas as people, their relationships, information, resources, produce and economic flows move between cities and between cities and other areas. Our planet is continuously surrounded by a network of transport routes and vehicles transporting people and produce, by flows of capital and information and so on. And planetary urbanization intertwines with other processes such as the weakening of nation states, increasing power of global markets, global consumerism, and in general, global networks, which have, for example, enabled the covid-19 pandemic to become global so rapidly.

Together these processes make our world, on one hand, connected, diverse, dynamic, and innovative. Urban contexts are also contexts of resources, toleration (albeit also of conflict), dialogue, and innovation, and as such they provide churches vast opportunities and resources for theological reflection, collaboration, and for fulfilling their mission in different ways. Yet at the same time planetary urbanization and intertwining processes make the world unequal, polarized, and self-destructive through overconsumption, pollution, and their consequences such as climate change and the accelerating extinction of species. These challenges, of course, pose demands for practical means and answers from churches, but they are also existential in nature. They leave the world in desperate need of hope, justice, and meaning. In this sense current developments highlight the need for the practical work, the message, and the theological reflection of churches.

At the same time especially the European religious landscape challenges the ways in which churches can operate. The density, diversity, increasing amounts of subcultures, their differentiation, and individual choice and freedom typical for (Western) urban contexts makes also the religious landscape increasingly diverse and individual. This diversity, which escalates in urban contexts means increasing diversity within churches, increasing amounts of different churches and different religions, as well as non-religion, secular world views, and demands for secular urban space. Individualization highlights the autonomy of an individual to shape one’s own religion or world view. This means increasing diversity of individual interpretations, individual spirituality, and forms of lived religion, which often result in combining traits from different traditions. Weakening of religious tradition and religious memory make new generations ‘religiously amnesic’ or illiterate as religious memory and tradition weaken. With these developments the public roles of churches are questioned in societies and communities and the space for their voice and work becomes narrower. At the individual level, increasing amounts of individuals find it hard to turn to churches in their existential needs and questions, and the language churches use can be misunderstood or is not understood at all. Thus, at the same time as global challenges call churches to take a stance, churches have lost their positions as the ones that are automatically turned to in these questions. The call for hope, justice, and meaning, which churches have always answered, is increasingly difficult to answer, if the voice of churches is not heard, or the language they use is no longer understood.

However, at the same time as global urbanization and the changing religious landscape pose challenges to churches, I suggest churches still have many opportunities. Even if the explicit theological language of churches may have become unfamiliar to many, churches also have other ‘languages’ that are still understood. Churches have in all times given people hope, sense of security, and meaningfulness, which derives from a transcendental reality and faith, but churches have in all times also given people hope, sense of security, and meaningfulness, which derives from the community and other people – from the need and opportunity to live together, to be cared for and to care for others. Churches can also use their prophetic voice and influence urgent societal questions in many ways, give a voice to people at the margins and question unjust structures and practices. In the diversity of urban Europe, many churches have also adopted a central role in promoting dialogue between different (religious, societal etc.) groups and individuals.

In contexts, which are increasingly illiterate regarding religion, these are theological ‘languages’ which people still understand, and connect with. And there is a desperate need for them in today’s Europe, and today’s world.

These are also roles for churches, which are still societally accepted. Churches sill have access to carry out such work in European societies, and they are even expected to do so. For example, in Finland a majority of all citizens – whether they are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church or not, support both the practical work of churches in working among those in need, and the societal role of churches in speaking about social justice and the rights of those in difficult positions (Grönlund, 2021; Grönlund & Pessi, 2012). These are the arenas where the message and mission of the church can be carried out in the current religious landscape, and this is, of course, done by numerous churches around Europe (and the world).

Furthermore, a more explicit theological reflection is brought into dialogue with the urgent challenges of our time. This can mean specific theologies such as ecotheology, liberation theologies or public theologies, which examine these challenges through the lenses of Scripture and Christian tradition and combine them with socio-cultural analysis, while they also take in to account and scrutinize the oppression included in the history and present of churches. But theological reflection on the urgent challenges of our time can also mean a more everyday theology in the work of churches, their worship and teaching.

My question for the Porvoo community amidst the urgent challenges of our time include: 1. How are the practical work among those in need (love for ones neighbor), societal influencing (prophetic voice), and explicit theological reflection combined? Do churches have the space in current European societies to use their theological voice? And do they use it? It can be easy to accept a role of an assistant to the state, for example. To carry out practical work for those in need without societal influencing or explicit theological voice. Or to focus more on the organizational aspects or ‘inner circle’ of church life instead of a more straightforwardly missionary role. 2. How do churches interact or collaborate with other fields working with the same urgent challenges of our time, their practical work, their societal influencing and philosophical analysis of the challenges? Do, for example, ecotheology, feminist theologies or public theologies discuss with Friday’s for future, the Me too -movement, or the Black lives matter -movement locally and globally? Is such dialogue promoted or carried out? 3. As the urgent challenges of our time are in many ways global, do churches (or the church as one body of Christ) have a joint vision and a joint voice in them? How can churches as a community join together in the urgent challenges of our time?

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