

# Family in Change

JOOA VUORINEN



Jooa Miriam Vuorinen was born in Tohmajärvi in 1981. She studied Orthodox theology in Joensuu University and graduated with master's degree in 2005. Currently she is living in Helsinki and writing a PhD in theology. She is the Links Coordinator of WSCF-E.

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## Church and Society

Churches live as part of society and the recent changes in society have affected the churches either directly or indirectly.

One of the basic units of society and churches which is strongly affected by these changes is family. In the middle of endeavours to establish a family, many young adults may realise that their efforts may not result in the type of family which would be fully supported by society. Perhaps even more often, one might realise that his or her own family does not meet the Christian ideal of a family.

## Nuclear Family

Family in the twenty-first century is a very multiplicative concept. The Christian ideal of family, popularly defined as the nuclear family with a married husband and wife and their children, forms only one part of the multitude of families. Alongside it, the numbers of single-parent families, new families of people with previous marriages and children from them, common-law marriages and rainbow families are increasing. In addition, growth also is occurring in different types of residential communities and in the numbers of people who belong to families that are not united by biological





relations but by friendship. The growth of extended family networks is also making its come-back into Western European society, especially in migrant families. Families are becoming more inter-cultural, interdenominational and inter-religious.

## Changes in Society

Society has tried to guarantee the juridical equality of the different models of families by making changes to legislation. Thus, civil marriage (which is needed when the couple does not belong to church or comes from different religions), inheritance rights and maintenance liability of couples in common-law marriages have become possible in many European countries. Among these changes, one of the most remarkable and opinion-dividing policies is civil partnership or registered partnership of same-sex couples. From the social justice and equality point of view, I find this well-argued and right, although many other well-argued opinions also exist.

## Justice?

Justice has been a basic value in Christianity since its early beginnings. It is also one of the nine themes of the third European Ecumenical Assembly that will be held in Sibiu, Romania in September 2007. Yet, many Christians living in non-traditional families might experience injustice and even feel despised by the church and, in consequence, might turn away from the church.

## Pastoral Economy

It is true that church has certain values which are the basis of its teaching and keeping those values is the strength of the church. Tearing down these teachings and forgetting ideals only to make everyone feel comfortable is not needed. Nevertheless, in addition to the teachings, one should remember the principle of pastoral economy, which makes an open-minded encounter of diversity possible. Many families are not living precisely as the church

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teaches them to do, but they still need the church's support, care and acceptance in their lives. They have the need for communication and dialogue with the church also, but are the churches willing to listen and understand? Besides, where, what and for whom would the church exist, if it didn't accept the reality of its members and the society?

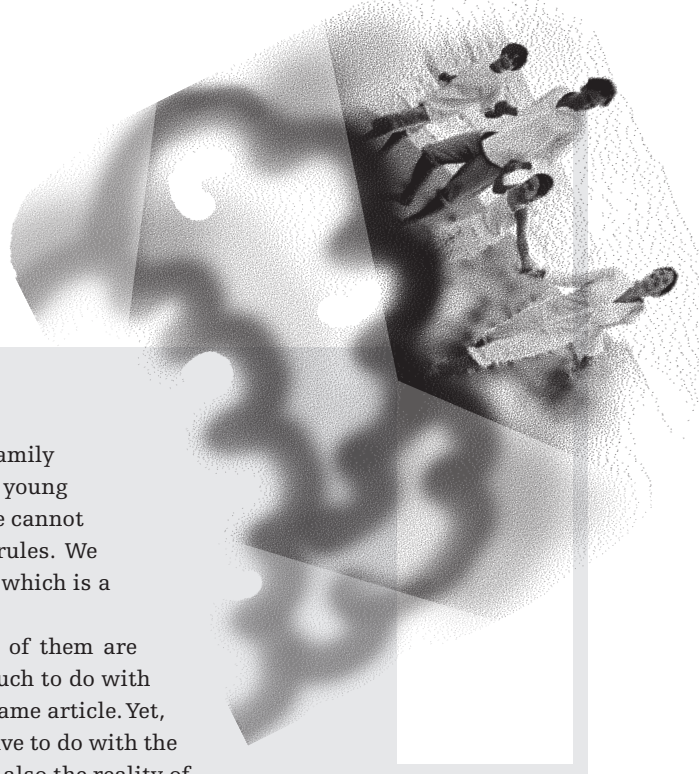
## The Eucharistic Family

A German friend of mine described the challenge of family in 21st century to the churches like this: "For us as young ecumenical people, I think the biggest challenge is that we cannot accept and treat each other as equals because of old rules. We cannot have bread and wine together with all Christians, which is a real pity and not understandable to me."

Herein lay two themes concerning family deeply. Both of them are very wide, and it may appear as if they don't have that much to do with each other and that they should not be addressed in the same article. Yet, it seems to me that they are linked because both issues have to do with the acceptance and encountering of diversity. Both issues are also the reality of the ecumenical student movement in that they are a dream we are striving for and have not yet achieved.

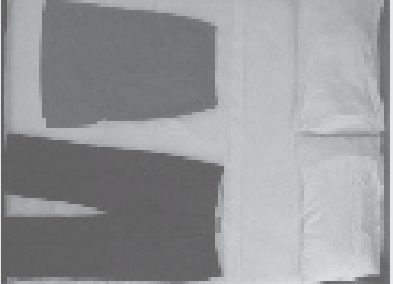
The first theme is the already mentioned inequality of various kinds of families and churches' disparate attitude towards them. Another challenge my German friend is presenting to the European churches is the common Communion, which is not an easy challenge but is even more important.

The lack of common Communion has been discussed in the ecumenical movement for decades without any visible results. While the high level ecumenical discussions once again begin in Sibiu, a European ecumenical family will go to Sunday mass in the church of the other parent. Loving each other according to the teaching of Christ, they cannot be united in the fulfilment of all love, in the body and blood of Christ. In Finland, for example, where most of the Orthodox people are either born from or living in interdenominational marriages, this has been an everyday reality in many families for a long time. These ecumenical families are creating ways to live together on the inter-sectional point of two or more Christian traditions themselves, but in the Sacrament of sacraments the traditions—and families—do not interconnect.



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After taking his small daughter to Communion in an Orthodox liturgy, one Evangelical Lutheran father told me that the most difficult issue for him in his ecumenical marriage is that he can not go to the Communion together with his wife and daughter. Orthodox and Roman Catholic masses have similar structures and both even include the Eucharistic prayers, yet an Orthodox and a Catholic spouse still lack the opportunity for communication with each other in the sacrament of Communion.

I do understand that the teaching of the church cannot be defined by values based on human justice alone. But what about love? Every family, even the family with two fathers or mothers or a family of a Christian and a Hindu, is born from and reflecting love. Love is the most essential teaching of the Gospel, which Jesus expressed in His instruction of the greatest commandment: we have to love God above all, and our neighbour as ourselves. Promoting and guiding a life filled by that love is the reason and aim of the teachings of the church, as a channel to unity in love.

## The Challenge

I therefore want to present a challenge to the European churches. It is large challenge and will not be solved over night; nevertheless it is sometimes better to set one's aims high to motivate efforts towards the goal. The challenge is this: How can the European churches together meet the needs and support the growth of all types of families in the church, and how can the love of Christ be made to come true among and between interdenominational families also in the Holy Communion?

