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Romantic Fairytale or Valuable Tradition? The Finnish Lutheran Bishops between 1945 and 2015 on Apostolic Continuity

Heidi Zitting

1. Introduction

The apostolic succession has been at the core of many ecumenical dialogues in the 20th and 21st century. Some scholars have noted that there seems to be a shift in the understanding of apostolic succession during the 20th century.¹ This article examines the development of the concept of *successio apostolica* in the writings of Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) bishops (henceforth, Finnish bishops).² The Finnish bishops have traditionally been productive contributors and they have written about apostolic succession especially in sections where they reflect on the theology of the ministry and other contemporary ecumenical questions.³

¹ John J. Burkhard, *Apostolicity then and now. An Ecumenical Church in a Postmodern World* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004) 201; Erik Eckerdal, *Apostolic Succession in the Porvoo Common Statement. Unity through a Deeper Sense of Apostolicity* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Thesis, 2017), 17–18, 424–434; Toan Tri Nguyen, *The Apostolicity of the Church and Apostolic Succession. The Impacts of This Relationship in the Post-Conciliar Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue* (Helsinki: Pontificia Universitas Sanctae Crucis Facultas Theologiae, 2016), 162, 315, 322, suggests several shifts in the understanding of apostolic succession.

² The ELCF is an ecumenically oriented member church of the Lutheran World Federation. The bishops of the ELCF are highly educated theologians, representative of the level of educated theological thought in Finland. Most of the bishops have completed a doctorate in theology, and many have been professors in different fields of theology. The timeframe of this article is 1945–2015. *Successio apostolica* is a teaching that has become a more widely discussed topic in the Lutheran churches due to the efforts of the ecumenical movement. The influence of the ecumenical movement only increased after the Second World War, making this an interesting period for studying this topic.

³ Osmo Alaja, *Pientä puhetta papeille ja maallikoille* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1959), 55–56, 58; Eelis Gideon Gulin, *Elämän rikkaus Jumalan seurakunnassa* (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 1944), 50–51; *Kristikunnan elämää vv. 1947–1952* (Keuruu: Otava, 1952), 32–34; *Kristikunnan tie vv. 1957–1962* (Keuruu: Otava, 1962), 88, 118, 123, 128; *Elämän Lahjat I* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1967), 225, 259–266; *Elämän lahjat II* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1968), 26–27; *Turvaton ihminen* (Keuruu: Otava, 1957), 110; Voitto Huotari, *Yhteyden aika* (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 1995), 195; Eero Huovinen, *Avoin Taivas* (Hel-

In this article, I first examine how the concept of *successio apostolica* is used in the writings of Finnish bishops from 1944 to 1982 to set the scene in this particular Lutheran Church by the time the Faith and Order document *Baptism Eucharist Ministry* (BEM) is published in 1982. I then ex-

sinki: WSOY, 2008), 225; *Baptism, Church and Ecumenism – Collected Essays – Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Seura, 2009), 340–341, 357; *Lähdön aika* (Helsinki: WSOY, 2010), 23; ‘Kuka paavi oikein on?’, in: Jan Aarts (ed.), *Paavi* (Pieksämäki: Kirjaneliö, 1989), 156–159; *Pappi?* (Porvoo: WSOY, 2001), 239; Erkki Kansanaho, *Suomen kirkon hallinto* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 1976), 13, 16–17, 20, 22, 26, 28, 35–36, 137; Ilkka Kantola, *Vastaan, siis kysyn. Paimenkirja* (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 2003), 10; Olavi Kares, *Päiväkirja* (Helsinki: WSOY, 1958), 159, 339; *Kallaveden rannalta–Päiväkirja valpurista 1964 valpuriin 1965* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1965), 20; *Seuratkaa tähteä* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1974), 174–175; *Olavi Kares kertoo elämästään: muistelmia vuosilta 1953–1974* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1979), 39, 362; Paavo Kortekangas, *Paimenkirje* (Kuopio: Kuopion Kansallinen Kirjapaino Oy, 1977), 15–16; *Paimenkirjeitä* (Tampere: Tampereen hiippakunnan 34. vuosikirja, 1982), 14; Alekski Lehtonen, *Paimenkirje 1945* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1945), 37–40; Jukka Paarma, *Arvot ja armo* (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 2001), 107, 147; ‘Apostolinen perintö ja kirkon ääni, Oulun piispat arkkipiispaa vihkimässä’, in: Jouko M. V. Heikkinen/Veijo Koivula (eds), *Crux spes unica Risti, ainoa toivo Piispa Olavi Rimpiläinen 75 vuotta* (Helsinki: Aurinko, 2012) 12–22; Juha Pihkala, *Piispa* (Helsinki: Minerva kustannus, 2007), 33–34, 41, 45, 211, 218–219; Matti Repo, ‘Piispan virka ja kirkon ykseys’, *Reseptio* 2015/1, 7–14; ‘Luterilais–anglikaaniset oppikeskustelut ja kysymys piispan virasta’, *Reseptio* 2015/1, 15–27; ‘Ministry and Episcopé in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland’, *Reseptio* 2015/1, 34–36; ‘Ykseyden ja jatkuvuuden merkki: piispanvirka luterilais–anglikaanisissa sopimuksissa’, in: Ari Hukari (ed.) *Signum unitatis. Ykseyden merkki. Piispa Juha Pihkalan juhlakirja* (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 2006), 303–335; Ilmari Salomies, *Henkilahjat kirkossa sen alkuvuosisatoina* (Helsinki: Otava, 1939), 59; *Suomen kirkon historia* (Helsinki: Otava, 1944), 185; Olavi Rimpiläinen, *Oot vappaa* (Hämeenlinna, SLEY-kirjat, 2002), 113–114; Matti Sihvonen, *Pyhä pysyy maisemat muuttuvat* (Helsinki: Kirjaneliö, 1995), 10–16; Martti Simojoki, *Kirkko* (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 1945), 46; *Kristus on ensimmäinen* (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 1952), 60–61; *Kirkko ja Nykyaika* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1960), 81, 89–90; Eino Sormunen, *Alttari ja Palvelu. Tutkielmia alkukirkon elämästä* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1953), 35–36; *Kirkko, Kristuksen ruumis* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1963), 43, 65–75, 80; Erik Vikström, *Gräsrots kyrkan. Herdabrev till Borgå stift* (Vasa: Borgå Stift, 1985), 83–84; John Vikström, ‘The Porvoo Common Statement from the Lutheran Point of View and the Statement’s Significance for the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue’, *Reseptio* 2011/2, 66–75; ‘Kirkkomme ekumenia sotien jälkeisenä aikana’, in: Rauno Heikola, (ed.), *Arkki ja Arki. Arkkipiispa Jukka Paarman juhlakirja* (Jyväskylä: Gummerus, 2002), 183, 192. The Latin term *successio apostolica* or its Finnish and Swedish translations – such as “apostolinen perintö,” “apostolinen seuraanto,” “apostolinen seuraamus,” “apostolinen perimys,” “apostoliska successionen,” and simply “successio” – are sometimes used in these writings.

plore how the concept of apostolic succession has developed in the writings of Finnish bishops after BEM from 1983 to 2015.

BEM is one particularly important multilateral ecumenical achievement on the topic of apostolic succession.⁴ According to BEM,

Apostolic tradition in the Church means continuity in the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles: witness to the apostolic faith, proclamation and fresh interpretation of the Gospel, celebration of baptism and the eucharist, the transmission of ministerial responsibilities, communion in prayer, love, joy and suffering, service to the sick and the needy, unity among the local churches and sharing the gifts which the Lord has given to each.⁵

Apostolic succession thus means the apostolic continuity of the church, comprising the succession of gospel, teaching, ministry, and tradition. The historic episcopate, on the other hand, can be considered its sign, though not a guarantee, of the apostolicity of the church.⁶ These theologies of BEM were further elaborated and put into practice in the Lutheran – Anglican bilateral *Porvoo Common Statement* (PCS) in 1992. This article examines the “shift” in ELCF and thus traces the reception of BEM on this particular topic.

2. A Magical Ingredient Contradicting the Gospel: the Finnish Lutheran Bishops on *Successio Apostolica*, 1944–1982

The ELCF is one of the Lutheran churches where the tradition of historic episcopate did not lapse at the time of the Reformation.⁷ The ELCF was thus naturally among the first churches to sign the PCS, a statement between certain Anglican, Baltic and Nordic Lutheran churches that, among other things, emphasized the preservation of the continuity of the historic episcopacy. However, that the succession of episcopal consecrations has not always been a highly valued and cherished tradition in Finland becomes clear from a careful reading of the writings of the Finnish bishops.

⁴ BEM is sometimes referred to as the “Lima document”.

⁵ BEM M34.

⁶ BEM M38.

⁷ The episcopal succession was, however, interrupted in 1884, when all Finnish bishops died within ten months, and the professor emeritus of dogmatics, Rev. Axel Fr. Granfeldt, was asked to perform the installation of a new archbishop. Episcopal succession was not reintroduced until 1934.

By *successio apostolica*, the Finnish Lutheran bishops refer in their writings most often to a chain of episcopal consecrations and ordinations that are administered by a bishop.⁸ This succession is understood as something that is neither relevant to the gospel nor Lutheran. It is rather considered to be a Roman Catholic or Anglican teaching, one that might even contradict the *sola scriptura*. In particular, Bishop Olavi Kares (1903–1988), one of the most vocal opponents of apostolic succession, criticized the notion in the following way:

We have somehow created in Finland an unfortunate tradition that only bishops are administering in the installation of a bishop. There is a fresh spirit of Reformation in Denmark and Norway, where *successio apostolica* is not acknowledged (...). Of course, we do not officially acknowledge it either (...) but Norwegians and Danes are more determined on this, since they do not permit any foreign bishops who have received their blessings from a “*successio man*” to administer in the installations of their bishops.⁹

Since apostolic succession is typically defined as something that is “mechanical” and “external,” a teaching that privileges the ordained ministry rather than the Word of God, the notion has been a cause for concern among Finnish bishops, as it would seem to contradict the priority of the gospel and the equality of all Christians.¹⁰ Bishop Martti Simojoki (1908–1999) thus rationalizes that

⁸ Alaja, *Pientä puhetta* (as note 3), 56; Gulin, *Elämän rikkaus* (as note 3), 50–51; *Kristikunnan tie* (as note 3), 88, 118, 123; *Kristikunnan elämää* (as note 3), 32–33; *Turvaton ihminen* (as note 3), 110; Kares, *Päiväkirja* (as note 3), 159, 339; *Kallaveden rannalta* (as note 3), 20; *Seuratkaa tähteä* (as note 3), 174–175; *Olavi Kares* (as note 3), 38, 362; Kortekangas, *Paimenkirje* (as note 3), 16; *Paimenkirjeitä* (as note 3), 14; Salomies, *Suomen kirkon historia* (as note 3), 185; Simojoki, *Kristus on ensimmäinen* (as note 3), 60–61; *Kirkko ja Nykyaika* (as note 3), 88; Sormunen, *Kirkko* (as note 3), 66–69.

⁹ Kares, *Kallaveden rannalta* (as note 3), 20. Here and below, all translations from Finnish are by the author, unless indicated otherwise. Cf. Kares, *Päiväkirja* (as note 3), 159, 339: “In our church, the authority of a bishop is based on something more profound than this *successio magic*.”

¹⁰ Gulin, *Elämän rikkaus* (as note 3), 50–51; *Kristikunnan elämää* (as note 3), 33–34; *Kristikunnan tie* (as note 3), 88; Kares, *Olavi Kares* (as note 3), 39, 362; *Päiväkirja* (as note 3), 159, 339; Lehtonen, *Paimenkirje* (as note 3), 37–40; Salomies, *Suomen kirkon historia* (as note 3), 185; Simojoki, *Kirkko* (as note 3), 46; *Kirkko ja Nykyaika* (as note 3), 81, 88–90; *Kristus on ensimmäinen* (as note 3), 60–61; Minutes, *the ELCF Church Synod Minutes* (3.10.1958), 32–35. Kares and Alaja stress that the apostolic succession is based on an idea of “higher ordination” and is not a Lutheran idea but “a Roman Catholic–High Church” one.

if we reflect on the relationship between the gospel and the office [of a pastor or priest], the latter is of greater value according to the teaching [of *successio apostolica*]. According to this, the office would be prior to the gospel. The authority of a priest would not depend on his proclamation and actions, but [on the fact] that he was ordained to represent Christ (...). According to the Lutheran confessions, the office [of a pastor/priest] is in the service of the gospel (...) the authority of the office is not based on succession, which was received at a single point in time.¹¹

For Bishop Simojoki, the apostolic succession contorts the standard hierarchy, where the priest should be the servant of the gospel and therefore lower in hierarchy than the gospel. From this passage, it is clear that Bishop Simojoki had a mechanical understanding of apostolic succession, considering it an ingredient of ordination that validates the ministry or adds something extra to make the ministry more important than the gospel. Furthermore, Simojoki underlines that the authority of the office for Lutherans is not based on the sort of “succession that is received at a single point in time.” Indeed, this specific aspect is not present in all Lutheran churches, nor do all Lutherans require the ingredient of succession in episcopal ordination to consider their ministry valid.¹² However, Lutheran pastors do get the authority to preach the gospel only once they have been ordained. Hence, the pastor’s authority does not in fact depend only on their “proclamation and actions” in the Lutheran churches, but rather they must be properly ordained. Nevertheless, for Simojoki, *successio apostolica* as a constitutive part of ordination clearly contradicted Lutheran teaching: “The High-Church party, in placing the office before the gospel in such a way that the validity of the word and sacraments derives from the fact that the person proclaiming and administering them is ordained in a certain manner, entails the abandonment of the most important truths of the Reformation.”¹³

¹¹ Simojoki, *Kristus on ensimmäinen* (as note 3), 60–61.

¹² There has been a presbyteral ordination in some of the Lutheran churches either at some point in their history or as a regular practice. Nevertheless, in all Lutheran churches, episcopal ministers and pastors are installed or ordained with a laying-on of hands.

¹³ Simojoki, *Kirkko ja Nykyaika* (as note 3), 81.

Bishop Simojoki is referring here to the teaching that the validity of the sacraments is not derived from the worthiness of the minister, something that Bishop Simojoki considered an “important truth of the Reformation.”¹⁴ He thought that this truth would be annulled were the succession in episcopal ordinations to become a necessity, as he considered pastors to be valid also without episcopal succession.

Although these sorts of suspicions toward the concept of apostolic succession is common in the writings of the Finnish bishops, some of the bishops did consider that there might be something valuable in the preservation of apostolic continuity as long as it is not understood as a “mechanical” or “external” act that somehow grants “mysterious powers” to a bishop.¹⁵ For instance, Bishop Aleksi Lehtonen (1891–1951) writes that

only a narrow-minded mind that has captured some misleading phrases could think that this is all about a somehow nearly magical conception, that “apostolic continuity” would mean that an external laying on of hands (...) could somehow mysteriously transfer powers to the person who receives this ordination by this mechanical outward act, [this is] a vulgar Catholic notion. However, the fact that episcopacy is transferred in historic episcopal consecrations from generation to generation reflects [the belief] that, behind this office, stands the entire Church from the past to the present.¹⁶

The continuity in and transfer of the episcopal office is valuable, since it is a sign that the office is valued by the entire church, past and present. For Lehtonen the continuity of the episcopal office is important also for practical reasons: it safeguards the church from secular forces.¹⁷ Notably, Bish-

¹⁴ Lutherans hold the sacraments to be efficient regardless of the worthiness of their administrator. CA 8: *Et sacramenta et verbum propter ordinationem et mandatum Christi sunt efficia, etiamsi per malos exhibeantur.*

¹⁵ Gulin, *Elämän rikkaus* (as note 3), 50–51; *Kristikunnan elämää* (as note 3), 32–34; Lehtonen, *Paimenkirje* (as note 3), 37–39; Kortekangas, *Paimenkirje* (as note 3), 15–16.

¹⁶ Cf. Lehtonen, *Paimenkirje* (as note 3), 38: “The foundation of the church is Christ, who holds it together. Yet at the same time we appreciate the valuable temporal orders God has given us. I repeat: form and essence, spirit and its temporal appearance are not against each other. Let us not slide into one-sided spiritualism. The soul has a body. And so the forms of our confessions (...) are all dear to us. The same applies to the traditional order of our church. It is indeed especially valuable, because through it we are deeply bound to past Christian generations” (translated by Mika Pajunen and Rupert Moreton).

¹⁷ Lehtonen, *Paimenkirje* (as note 3), 37–39.

op Lehtonen was in fact the first bishop in 50 years to be installed by a bishop through episcopal succession, since this chain had been broken in Finland in 1884.¹⁸ As a delegate of the dialogue commission between the ELCF and the Church of England, Bishop Lehtonen was also familiar with the importance of episcopal succession to Anglicans. Hence, this quiet reintroduction of the concept was hardly accidental.¹⁹

Bishop Lehtonen was not the only one at that time who saw potential value in the preservation of apostolic succession, as long as it was not understood mechanically; similar thinking can be found in the writings of Eelis G. Gulin (1906–1919)²⁰:

Some churches hold that this kind of continuity [*successio apostolica*] is nearly constitutive, as if it would guarantee the authenticity of the office, since it ostensibly witnesses the continuity of the correct tradition all the way from Jerusalem and our Lord Jesus Christ. As a member of an evangelical [Lutheran] church, we have to state that, if the apostolic continuity were understood as a privilege – which guarantees, like an external pledge, the authenticity of the correct teaching – we would be far from the evangelical faith. Nevertheless, if we understand apostolic succession as a gift, a valuable tradition (...) then it expresses in a visible form the invisible truth – that is, that our church has continued in living contact from the early church and Jesus Christ.²¹

Here, Bishop Gulin states that the apostolic succession is a tradition to be valued, one that evidences the church's continuity from the early church and can therefore even be understood as a "gift" from God. However, according to Bishop Gulin, apostolic succession should not be understood as a *guarantee* of the correct teaching or authenticity of the office. Rather, it could be considered as something that expresses in a visible form the con-

¹⁸ See note 1.

¹⁹ Mika Pajunen, "Towards 'a real reunion'?" *Archbishop Aleksii Lehtonen's Efforts for Closer Relations with the Church of England 1945–1951* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Seura, 2008), 20–42; Jenni Krapu, *E.G. Gulinin ekumeeninen työ ja ajattelu* (Helsinki: SKHS, 2009), 76.

²⁰ Gulin, *Elämän lahjat I* (as note 3), 107; Krapu, *E.G. Gulinin* (as note 19), 73–75: a pastor ordained Bishop Gulin, since the bishop was absent. According to Gulin, he received *successio apostolica* only when he was installed as a bishop.

²¹ Gulin, *Elämän rikkaus* (as note 3), 50–51; cf. *Kristikunnan elämää* (as note 3), 32–34.

tinuity of *the church* in the apostolic tradition.²² This notion of a “visible form” is similar to the understanding of episcopal succession as a “sign,” something that is a visual manifestation of continuity.²³ Furthermore, Bishop Gulin explains that apostolic continuity is understood differently in different traditions. For Lutherans and other Protestants, it means “the continuity of the congregation, in which the Gospel is rightly taught, and the Sacraments are rightly administered,” whereas, for Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics, “the succession of episcopal ministry” is the core meaning of the apostolic succession.²⁴ As Gulin is describing the Lutheran understanding of apostolic succession, he draws on the Lutheran definition of *the church*, found in paragraph 7 of the Augsburg Confessions (CA 7).

Thus, despite their ecumenical experience, Bishops Gulin and Lehtonen both seemed to think that Roman Catholics considered *successio apostolica* to be an outward, mechanical transfer of powers, an assumption that was not uncommon given the anti-Catholic climate of Finland at the time.²⁵ One of the bishops, Eino Sormunen, was, however, an excep-

²² Gulin, *Elämän rikkaus* (as note 3), 50–51; cf. Sormunen, *Kirkko* (as note 3), 65–75, 80. Bishop Sormunen writes about two forms of succession, *successio apostolica* and *successio functionalis*, in his 1963 book. In his understanding, both forms of “succession” denoted ordained ministry. For Sormunen, *successio functionalis* meant continuity in certain task or functions of an office. Furthermore, he states that this kind of continuity is accepted in Lutheran churches. However, for Sormunen, this “functional” form of *successio* was insufficient in comparison with *successio apostolica*.

²³ Already in 1934, Archbishop Kaila talks of “an external sign.” Later, in BEM, apostolic succession would be described as “a sign.” BEM also made a distinction between apostolic succession of the church and apostolic succession of ministry. Traditionally, in most Lutheran churches, there are no archbishops. However, the Church of Sweden and ELCF have always had such an office. The office of Archbishop in ELCF is rather similar to such an office in the Church of England. More of the Archbishopric in Nordic Lutheran churches see Klas Hansson, *Svenska kyrkans primas. Ärkebiskopsämbetet i förändring 1914–1990* (Studia Historico Ecclesiastica Upsaliensia 47; Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2014).

²⁴ Gulin, *Kristikunnan elämä* (as note 3), 32–34. This distinction reflects a time before BEM and PCS. Later, these two would no longer be presented as contradictory but compatible aspects. The apostolic succession of *ministry* is understood in BEM and PCS as belonging to the apostolic succession of *the church*.

²⁵ Before Vatican 2, anti-Catholic attitudes were widespread in Finland; see Heidi Zitting, ‘The Turning Point of Lutheran Anti-Catholicism: The Reception of the Second Vatican Council in Finland’, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33 (2017) 17–29; Mikko Ketola, ‘Did Finland Become an Ecumenical Model Country? Developments in Lu-

tion, proving more favorable to Catholicism already in 1958.²⁶ Interestingly, episcopal succession was easy for this bishop to accept. According to Sormunen all three – the Bible, the Apostolic Creeds, and the office itself – belonged to the essence of the church, *esse ecclesiae*, not only *bene esse ecclesiae*. Since episcopal succession is attached to the office, it must also be part of the essence (*esse*) of the church and be an important task of the church.²⁷ Bishop Sormunen was thus one of the earliest voices to emphasize the importance of episcopal succession in the ELCF, seeing no contradiction between the priority of the gospel and succession through a laying-on of hands.

Nevertheless, after the Second Vatican Council, fears surrounding the Roman Catholic Church in Finland were tempered.²⁸ As a result, anti-Catholic and anti-ecumenical arguments would gradually lose their credibility and soon faded away from the writings of the bishops. In this renewed atmosphere, it was also easier for Finnish bishops to see the value of episcopal succession. As Bishop Paavo Kortekangas (1930–2013) explained in 1977, “*successio apostolica* mirrors the *faith* and *tradition* of the *church*, though it is not a fundamental question for the church, as I recall it.” According to Bishop Kortekangas *successio apostolica* was simply a “metaphor” that reflected the fact that Lutherans belonged to the great Christian family of churches that was born in the Pentecost.²⁹ The tone of such arguments totally lacked the anti-ecumenical tendencies of nearly every description of *successio apostolica* prior to the Second Vatican Council. It is also interesting to note that Bishop Kortekangas understood apostolic succession not as fundamental to but rather simply “mirroring” the tradition of the church. Such views are similar to later findings of the BEM document.

theran–Catholic Relations in Finland from the 1960s to 1990s’, *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 30 (2018) 355–367; Tatu Kotilainen, ‘Vatikaanin II konsiilin vastaanotto Suomessa vuosina 1959–1966’ (MA thesis, University of Helsinki, 2005); Antti Laine, ‘Vuosien 1959–1960 salainen tutkimus roomalaiskatolisen kirkon lähetystyöstä Suomessa’, *Teologinen aikakauskirja* 2 (2009) 98–111.

²⁶ Zitting, ‘The Turning Point’ (as note 25), 20; ELCF, *General Synod Minutes* 1958, October 3, 1958, 35.

²⁷ Cf. Sormunen, *Kirkko* (as note 3), 43, 65–75, 80. Sormunen explains that, according to the Canons of Hippolytus, the laying-on of hands was primarily to be practiced during the ordination of a bishop. According to Bishop Sormunen, this act should not be weakened with ‘Reformed reasoning’ or ‘labeling it as magic.’

²⁸ See note 25.

²⁹ Kortekangas, *Paimenkirje* (as note 3), 15–16.

This change in Finland is most visible in that the vocal opponent of apostolic succession, Bishop Kares, seemed to belong to the minority already in 1979:

According to the Roman Catholic and Anglican teaching, the episcopacy is not valid without this apostolic continuity. I have always considered this kind of insight as a High-Church romantic fairytale. It is valuable that the blessing succeeds, but an unbroken continuity as a precondition of this succession is just plain superstition. This is not simply my own belief; the churches of Denmark and Norway reason likewise. Since the bishops from Sweden are attending the consecrations of our bishops, I guess we belong to this same circle of magic, according to this *successio* idea.³⁰

In this paragraph, Bishop Kares felt the need to conjure up further authority behind his reasoning, writing, “this is not simply my own belief.” His position in the minority compels him to emphasize that the churches of Denmark and Norway were in agreement with his thinking. While there seems still to be an anti-ecumenical tone in his reasoning, a closer reading shows that, in this paragraph, Bishop Kares is objecting to the idea that the ministry would be invalid without the episcopal succession but not to the blessing as such, writing “it is valuable that the blessing succeeds.” As a whole, this is somewhat similar to the understandings of Bishops Gulin, Lehtonen, and Kortekangas. That is, Bishop Kares considered the rite itself to be valuable, as long as the unbroken chain were not fundamentally considered a precondition or “guarantee.” Since the chain of episcopal consecrations has been interrupted in many Lutheran churches, the latter is an understandable proviso.

In sum, while the Finnish bishops generally presented *successio apostolica* in a narrow and mechanical way in their writings from 1945 to 1982, most often, they hold that apostolic succession to mean that the episcopal succession of consecrations and ordinations by bishops added something extra to the ordination. The problems with this understanding of *successio apostolica* for the Finnish bishops are, first, that episcopal succession should not be considered fundamental or necessary for the ordained office and, second, that it should not be understood as a guarantee of the authenticity of one’s teaching or of the office. If episcopal succession were understood as essential or as a guarantee, it would violate the Lutheran teaching of the equality of all Christian and the priority of the gospel. Word and sacraments constitute the church, and the ordained ministry only serve

³⁰ Kares, *Olavi Kares* (as note 3), 362.

them. Therefore, episcopal succession can never be fundamental to the church in the same sense that word and sacraments are.

On the other hand, bishops that understood apostolic succession in less mechanical terms saw some value in this tradition. According to them, episcopal succession can be understood as a valuable tradition that served as a visible manifestation of the continuity of the church. Furthermore, they saw instrumental value in the tradition, since it could “safeguard the church” from secular forces. Bishops noted that episcopal succession should not be taken as a *fundamental* aspect of or serve as a *guarantee for* the apostolicity of the office or of the correct teaching but rather that episcopal succession would only *visualize* or serve as a *metaphor* for the church’s continuity. One of the bishops also made a distinction between the apostolic continuity of the *church* and the apostolic continuity of the episcopal *ministry*. This bishop considered the former to be a Lutheran approach to apostolic succession, seeing the two not as overlapping but parallel approaches.

The writings of bishops present the main problems of the concept of *successio apostolica* for Lutherans before 1982. The next section explores the writings of Finnish bishops from 1983 to 2015, the time after the BEM document, during which many bilateral initiatives took place. I further investigate how the bishops explicate their understandings of *successio apostolica* and whether the findings of BEM do in fact resolve the problems Lutherans have expressed with the concept of *successio apostolica*.

3. An Important Sign: the Finnish Lutheran Bishops on *Successio Apostolica*, 1983–2015

The findings of the BEM document³¹, apostolic continuity as a broader term and episcopal succession as being in service to apostolic continuity, gradually became common topics in the writings of the Finnish bishops after 1982. Simultaneously, the episcopal succession of consecrations is presented in an increasingly positive light, both as a valued tradition and as “a sign” of the apostolic continuity of the church.³² Bishop Juha Pihka-

³¹ See notes 5–6.

³² Huotari, *Yhteyden aika* (as note 3), 179: “the apostolicity of the church means first and foremost the authenticity of the church”; Huovinen, *Avoin Taivas* (as note 3), 225; *Baptism, Church, Ecumenism* (as note 3), 226, 340–341; ‘Kuka paavi oikein on?’ (as note 3), 156–159; *Lähdön aika*, 23; *Pappi?* (as note 3), 239; Kantola, *Vastaan, siis kysyn* (as note 3), 10; Paarma, *Arvot ja armo* (as note 3), 107; Pihkala, *Piispa* (as note 3), 52, 211, 218–219; Repo, ‘Piispan virka’ (as note 3), 11; ‘Luterilais–anglikaan-

la (born 1942) explains that “although the so-called apostolic continuity, *successio apostolica*, is often linked narrowly to a chain of episcopal consecrations, which is at least ideally unbroken, it is, as a matter of fact, a broader ‘stream of life.’”³³ That is, both apostolic continuity as a broad concept and the episcopal succession as its sign were important to Bishop Pihkala.

The Finnish bishops have also not overlooked the importance of the gospel. Indeed, apostolic continuity as a broader concept proved easier to accept, since it did not seem to contradict the priority of the gospel, than did the more mechanical understanding of episcopal succession, which had prevailed among the Finnish bishops. For instance, Bishop Rimpiläinen (born 1937) emphasized that apostolic continuity was not about episcopal consecrations but about staying true to “the word of God.” As long as this hierarchy remains clear, Rimpiläinen reasoned, it would be possible to accept episcopal succession:

Apostolicity of the church means that the church is faithful to its apostolic tradition, retains it, and makes decisions in line with it, as it takes steps in ever-changing circumstances (...). Large traditional churches do consider the best guarantee for continuity in the apostolic teaching to be the office of a bishop in a chain of consecrations from the Apostles. If this challenges the church-workers, especially bishops, to be more careful and enthusiastic about retaining the apostolic teaching, then we have nothing against this emphasis.³⁴

Although Bishop Rimpiläinen is not overly enthusiastic about episcopal succession, he is clearly more receptive to the notion than the bishops of the writings investigated above. Bishop Rimpiläinen addresses politely the “large traditional churches” and sees some practical value in the historic episcopate. In his words: “[We] have nothing against [it].” However, apostolic succession must primarily mean the continuity of the *gospel* – or, in his words, “the word of God.”

iset oppikeskustelut’ (as note 3), 22; ‘Ykseyden ja jatkuvuuden merkki’ (as note 3), 303–304, 311, 319–326; Rimpiläinen, *Oot vappaa* (as note 3), 113; Sihvonen, *Pyhä pysyy* (as note 3), 10–13; Vikström, *Gräsrots kyrkan* (as note 3), 83–84; Vikström, ‘Kirkkomme ekumenia’ (as note 3), 183; cf. Kortekangas, *Paimenkirjeitä* (as note 3), 14, where the succession of ordinations is described as a “sign.”

³³ Pihkala, *Piispa* (as note 3), 211.

³⁴ Rimpiläinen, *Oot vappaa* (as note 3), 113–114.

Some Finnish bishops have been well aware of the findings of BEM and PCS as they examine these documents in detail.³⁵ Overall, these documents were embraced and discussed in positive terms. Bishop Eero Huovinen (born 1944) explains that, in PCS, the bishop is “a *servant* of the apostolicity of the *church*.” This is also the reason why PCS was easy to accept. According to him, the primary meaning of the apostolic succession is not *episcopal succession* but the apostolic continuity of the entire *church*.³⁶ Episcopal succession as a primary manifestation of apostolic succession would have been more difficult to approve for Lutherans than this formulation of PCS. Huovinen also noted the hierarchy of these concepts. According to him, *the gospel* is given the highest priority in PCS. After the gospel, first comes the apostolicity of the whole church (apostolic succession), then the apostolic (three-fold) ministry, and only then the ministry of oversight. Hence, both Bishops Huovinen and Rimpiläinen emphasize the role of the gospel.³⁷ The gospel comes first. Interestingly, the intra-Lutheran statements *The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church* (2002) and *Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church* (2007) do not lay such an importance on the gospel as these Finnish bishops.³⁸

Bishop Matti Repo (born 1959) also prized the achievements of PCS. According to Repo, the episcopal office is “a sign of unity and continuity” in PCS. This is a sign of the loyalty of God but also a sign of the church’s aim to the faithfulness in its calling and in its apostolic *mission*. In Repo’s analysis of the events of the Reformation and the history of the ELCF, he

³⁵ Huovinen, *Avoim taivas* (as note 3), 225; *Baptism, Church and Ecumenism* (as note 3), 331–332, 340–341, 357; Paarma, ‘Apostolinen perintö’ (as note 3), 20; Repo, ‘Piispan virka’ (as note 3), 11–12; ‘Luterilais–anglikaaniset oppikeskustelut’ (as note 3), 21–26; ‘Ministry and Episkopé’ (as note 3), 34–36; ‘Ykseyden ja jatkuvuuden merkki’ (as note 3), 311, 323–326; ‘Episcopal Ministry and the Diversity of Charisms. The Pneumatological Dimension in Anglican Lutheran Agreements’, *Reseptio* 2010/1, 84–95; Vikström, ‘Kirkkomme ekumenia’ (as note 3), 188, 192; ‘The Porvoo Process. The Main Concerns of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland’, *Reseptio* 2011/2, 63–65; ‘The Porvoo Common Statement’ (as note 3), 66–75.

³⁶ Huovinen, *Avoim Taivas* (as note 3), 225; *Baptism, Church and Ecumenism* (as note 3), 340–341, 357.

³⁷ Lutheran World Federation statements: *The Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church*. A Lutheran Statement (Geneva: LWF, 2002); *Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church* (Geneva: LWF, 2007).

³⁸ Huovinen, *Baptism, Church and Ecumenism* (as note 3), 341; cf. Vikström, ‘The Porvoo Common Statement’ (as note 3), 73–74.

concludes, that the Reformers and the ELCF had valued the episcopal succession. Considering his analysis, the episcopal office as a sign of unity and continuity could “hardly be considered alien to Lutheranism and the tradition of ELCF.”³⁹ According to Repo, the Finnish bishops were earlier perhaps overly cautious in their approach to the episcopal succession of consecrations. This heightened caution might have resulted in unintended consequences. According to Bishop Repo, it is important to note that there is deep liturgical meaning to the collegial attendance of bishops in this rite, as it is not only a symbol of personal relations or foreign relations or even a symbol of the “unity in faith.” The act of consecration is also a common prayer to the Holy Spirit and therefore a strong witness of unity at a pneumatological level.⁴⁰ In the end, Bishop Repo seems to cherish the achievements of PCS over the intra-Lutheran statement *Episcopal Ministry within the Apostolicity of the Church*. In his evaluation, however, he writes that

it is important that Lutherans have reached a common understanding of the episcopal office in service of the apostolicity of the church – meaning, first of all, within the apostolicity of the church and, secondly, as a specific spiritual pastoral office of proclaiming gospel, administering the sacraments and providing leadership.

Bishop Repo finds it also lamentable that the Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogue *Apostolicity of the Church* (2006) did not attain the level of accomplishments PCS did but rather settled for defining apostolicity as simply being without “the sign of episcopal succession.”⁴¹

Notwithstanding, as a whole, BEM and PCS have been received with widespread approval in Finland. Interestingly, when the apostolic succession was accepted as a broader concept, episcopal succession also gained in value. For instance, Bishop Juha Pihkala warns that the episcopal consecrations should not be undervalued, even though apostolic continuity is now understood more broadly. He explains that the bishop’s office has

³⁹ LWF statements on episcopal ministry have similar stance, see Heidi Zitting, ‘Toward a Definition of Episcopal Ministry: Lutheran World Federation Work on Episkopé, 1983–2007’, *Ecclesiology* 15 (2019) 207–232: 224–225.

⁴⁰ Repo, ‘Luterilais–anglikaaniset oppikeskustelut’ (as note 3), 21–26; ‘Ykseyden ja jatkuvuuden’ (as note 3), 311, 322–323, 326–327.

⁴¹ Repo, ‘Luterilais–anglikaaniset oppikeskustelut’ (as note 3), 26; cf. *The Apostolicity of the Church. Study Document of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* (Geneva: LWF, 2006).

been instrumental in maintaining the correct teaching: “[The] listings of bishops have functioned like guarantee certificates; only this teaching has the apostolic consumer protection.”⁴² This is an interesting choice of words, as it had been especially important for Lutherans to emphasize that the apostolic succession ought never to be taken as a guarantee of the apostolicity of the teaching.

Furthermore, Bishop Pihkala explains that, according to the ancient bishop chronicles, “the office of a bishop is always stronger than the person is.” For him, this is because, although there has been “some light as well as shadows” in the acts of the bishops in the history, the apostolic chain has never once been considered broken in these chronicles. For Pihkala, this is also in line with the Lutheran confessions – namely, CA 8.⁴³ Interestingly, this is precisely the same paragraph of CA that Bishop Sijojoki had earlier used in the opposite way, such that, if a pastor should be considered invalid without episcopal succession, then the teaching of CA 8 ought to be abandoned.

In some writings, the historic episcopate has been taken even beyond BEM and PCS. For instance, Bishop Matti Sihvonen (born 1932) explains, that, while the apostolic *teaching* is the primary meaning of the apostolic succession, the episcopacy is “the guarantee” of this teaching: “It is crucial to remain in the apostolic teaching. As a guarantee of this apostolic teaching, we have a bishop and the episcopal ministry.” This tone is softened when Bishop Sihvonen goes on to explain that apostolic succession is defined differently in different Christian denominations and that, for the ELCF, the primary meaning of apostolic succession is the apostolicity of the teaching of the church, not only the succession of ministry.⁴⁴

Finally, Archbishop Jukka Paarma (born 1942) writes that the ELCF has remained apostolic because of the office of the bishop:

The bishop is a follower of the apostles in a specific way. According to our understanding, our church has remained apostolic because of the office of the bishop. Bishops have been consecrated with a laying-on of hands administered by other bishops that have received similar consecration, throughout the

⁴² Pihkala, *Piispa* (as note 3), 212.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 216: to Pihkala CA 8 tells that the sacraments are valid regardless the worthiness of the priest. Hence, he considers that the office is “stronger than the person”; cf. Sijojoki in note 14.

⁴⁴ Sihvonen, *Pyhä pysyy* (as note 3), 10–16.

ages. This chain of consecrations is a sign of continuity and connectedness beyond geographical areas and over the centuries. The bishop is a follower of the apostles and, as such, is a warden and bearer of the message of freedom.⁴⁵

It is likely that such views stretch beyond the spirit of PCS because of the generality of the writings. The books written by these bishops are not academic dissertations but more or less popular works addressing all sorts of topics regarding the contemporary church. At any rate, it is apparent that the tone has changed dramatically from that of the bishops examined at the beginning of this article. It is remarkable to note here how rapidly something that was so widely considered to be against Lutheran teaching has become so universally accepted as “Lutheran” in the eyes of the Finnish bishops. The office of the bishop is now thought to safeguard the apostolic faith and is presented as a sign and servant of apostolic succession. Apostolic succession, on the other hand, is understood in a broad sense and is primarily defined as the succession of the *church in the gospel, the teaching, and faith*.

4. Conclusions

I have explored how the concept of *successio apostolica* is understood in the writings of Finnish bishops from 1982 to 2015. The aim of this study was to investigate how these the concept of apostolic succession is understood in these writings and how that understanding has developed over the years. This study has shown that the concept of apostolic succession gradually increased in value among Lutherans, as the primary meaning of this concept changed from the historic episcopate to a broader understanding of the apostolic continuity of the church. At the same time, the concept of the historic episcopate also increased in value.

As a whole, the concept of apostolic succession developed from a narrow interpretation of episcopal succession of consecrations to a more comprehensive understanding of the apostolic succession of the *church, teaching, and gospel* in the writings of the Finnish bishops. Since the chain of episcopal consecrations was interrupted in many Lutheran churches, the narrow interpretation of apostolic succession has traditionally proven to be an issue for Lutherans. The new broad understanding of apostolic succession has, however, gained acceptance among the Finnish bishops and

⁴⁵ Paarma, *Arvot ja Armo* (as note 3), 107–108. I have translated “erityinen” here as “specific.” This word could also be translated as “special.”

soon became highly valued. Interestingly, the historic episcopate also found new importance in the writings of Finnish bishops, once apostolic succession became accepted as a broader concept.

Most often, before 1982, when the Finnish bishops were criticizing apostolic succession, they were really describing *episcopal succession*. Their understanding was mechanical, and there were even some anti-Catholic and anti-ecumenical sentiments in their reasoning. Episcopal succession was, in general, presented in a negative light, styled as a superstition that is irrelevant to the gospel and not Lutheran. Bishops argued that, if episcopal succession should be considered necessity for an ordained office to be valid, it would contradict the fundamental Lutheran teachings of 1) the equality of all Christians and 2) the priority of the gospel. Although this critical attitude toward the concept of apostolic succession was prevalent at the time, some bishops saw at least the value in apostolic continuity and even in episcopal succession, approaching apostolic succession as a more diverse concept. According to this line of thought, episcopal succession was only one among other ways that apostolic succession became manifest. However, these bishops understood these different manifestations of succession as parallel, not complementary, with episcopal succession considered an Anglican or Roman Catholic form of succession, whereas the Lutheran form manifests itself, for instance, in the continuity of *the church* in the apostolic tradition. Only Bishop Sormunen thought that the historic episcopate should be understood as a part of the essence of the church also in Lutheranism.

The anti-Catholic and anti-ecumenical reasoning, however, diminished over time, leaving room for positive views about episcopal succession to germinate. Nevertheless, the apostolic succession as a broader concept and one that episcopal succession is in service to, did not become common until after 1982. Simultaneously, the episcopal succession of consecrations gained in value and came to be understood as a “sign” of the apostolic continuity of the church. This development was largely due to the work of the ecumenical movement. The influence of BEM and the PCS, a statement between certain Anglican, Baltic and Nordic Lutheran churches, is undeniable here. Moreover, in some of the writings, the importance of the episcopal succession was even taken beyond the spirit of PCS.

In light of writings of the Finnish bishops, it is understandable why BEM and PCS succeeded in the Finnish context. BEM allayed the fears the bishops had expressed and responded to their concerns. Furthermore, the language of BEM was already familiar from the writings of the bish-

ops. The bishops had already, before 1982, discussed apostolic succession as the succession of the *church* and the episcopal succession as a *metaphora*, something that *visualized* the church's apostolic continuity. However, it is nevertheless fascinating how rapidly a concept that had so widely been considered to be against Lutheran teaching became so universally accepted as "Lutheran" in the eyes of the Finnish bishops.

Overall, apostolic succession in its broad sense is received positively in the writings of the Finnish bishops of the 21st century, with episcopal succession prized as a valuable tradition, if not held up as an outright guarantee of the validity of the ministry or the apostolicity or the correctness of the teaching of the church. In general, the findings of BEM are accepted in the later writings of the Finnish bishops, the latter embracing also the PCS.

This study has shown, first, that there is much variety in the understanding of the concept of *successio apostolica*. The Finnish bishops posit more than one form in which apostolic succession in its broad sense becomes manifest. Second, *successio apostolica* transforms remarkably over the years in the writings of Finnish bishops as something to be abhorred to something to be embraced. Third, the BEM document and some bilateral documents, such as PCS, have been shown to have exerted much influence in this development.

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Zusammenfassung

In einigen lutherischen Kirchen wurde nach der Reformation der historische Episkopat beibehalten, in anderen wurden Ordinationen nunmehr durch Pfarrer erteilt. Folglich war die lutherische Position zur apostolischen Kontinuität zwiespältig. Dieser Beitrag untersucht, wie das Konzept der *successio apostolica* im Luthertum des 20. und 21. Jahrhundert verstanden wurde, insbesondere in von Bischöfen der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche Finnlands verfasster Literatur. Die evangelisch-lutherische Kirche Finnlands gehört zu den lutherischen Kirchen, die nach der Reformation die Tradition der historischen Kontinuität beibehielten. Jedoch war die Sukzession bischöflicher Ordination nicht immer hoch geschätzt, wie aus den Texten von Bischöfen der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche Finnlands erhellt. Doch in der in diesem Beitrag behandelten Zeitspanne verändert sich die Wahrnehmung der apostolischen Sukzession von einem nicht geschätzten «römisch-katholischen» Konzept zu einer geschätzten lutherischen Tradition.

Schlüsselwörter – Keywords

Apostolic succession – ordination – episcopacy – ecumenical movement – Lutheranism