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Innovative Religious Education NEtwork:  
educating to the religious diversity

KA2 - Agreement Number: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-080071

## Summary of the outcomes of the survey in Estonia

### 1. Background of the study

The Estonian interviews were conducted between 22.03.-30.04.2021 by two researchers - PhD Liina Kilemit and Kerstin Kask (both from the Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church). The interviews were transcribed and the report composed by Liina Kilemit. The interviews were conducted in the Zoom online environment, as face-to-face meetings were not possible due to the epidemiological situation in the country. The interviews were based on an interview schedule developed with the partners as part of this project. The interviewees were recruited from a diverse range of people with experience in teaching religion, preferably those who would teach religion to children (e.g. in general education) and adults (e.g. in a church or in some other institution in the form of adult continuous education, confirmation classes or similar). However, not all interviewees currently teach in schools, but some carry out their teaching responsibilities mainly among adults in church environment. One informant also interested us because he has developed a programme of religious education for adults, which is about to be launched in a public institution.

Four of the 9 interviewees were women and 5 were men. All were clergy and had studied theology. 8 of the interviewees were Lutheran and one Baptist. The interviews were transcribed with the help of the corresponding software. The interviews were conducted anonymously and in Estonian. The duration per interview was approximately 60 minutes.

All those who were asked for an interview were happy to be interviewed and there were no refusals. Neither were there any significant problems or bottlenecks in the process itself. We would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank all those who took part in the survey.



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## 2. Background of the informants and the teaching situation

As this is a case study, we first need to reflect and analyse in more detail the background of the informants and their teaching situations (interview questions 1-8b). Brief descriptions of these are given below.

### Informant 1.

Male. 63 years old. Teaching religion for 10 years. Master's degree. Professional background: theologian, first degree in engineering. Teaches religion in a church. Religious. Christian, Lutheran. Profession: parish pastor. Teaches: in two small villages and one large town. The villages are mono-ethnic and -religious, the town is multi-ethnic and -religious (with a predominance of population which doesn't belong to the majority ethnic group of the country and to the majority religious group).

Background of pupils: mainly of one nationality and non-religious. Individuals coming to the course: 'the braver ones alone, the less brave ones in pairs'. Most are non-religious, but there are also a few believers. Mostly adults over 25, with an average age estimated at 40. Prior knowledge of religion is very poor. Prior expectations: „*There are no expectations. Actually they don't know what to expect. The attitude is rather one of a certain fear of the unknown; the feeling that one doesn't know what is ahead. It is fine if it turns out that there is nothing to be afraid of.*“

### Informant 2.

Male. 42 years old. Has taught religion for 20 years. Higher education. Professions: theologian, pastor. Teaches religious studies in church. Christian, Lutheran. Profession: parish priest. Teaches in a large, predominantly mono-religious and -denominational town.

Pupils' background: mainly of one nationality and non-religious. The course (confirmation class) is mainly attended by people who mostly register in groups of two to three persons (often families). Mainly non-believers, but there are also believers, mainly adults over 25 years of age, with very poor prior knowledge of religion. Expectations of students to the course: „*They hope that one doesn't need to learn too much, mostly they don't come to find answers to religious questions, but come in order to be able to marry in the church, to become a godparent, etc. For them it seems to be like something that needs to be done. There are very few who come with a desire to learn about God, the Bible, the church. There are quite many with previous contacts with esotericism.*“

### Informant 3.

Male. 50 years old. Has been teaching religion for 15 years. Master's degree. Specialisation: theologian. Teaches subjects related to religion: church; public secondary school; private higher education institution. Christian, Lutheran. Title: parish pastor in church, teacher in school, lecturer in



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a higher education institution. Teaches in a large town as well as in a small one. The larger town is multi-ethnic and -religious, the smaller town is predominantly monoethnic and monoreligious.

Pupils' background: pupils are mainly of one nationality and non-religious (with a few exceptions, including Catholics, Orthodox and Free Church members). In the church, the course is mainly attended by persons who have registered individually, in schools the registration is organized by classes, i.e. by groups. In both church and schools, the majority of those who attend are under 25 years of age. Prior knowledge of religion is very poor. Expectations: *„Most of the time they want to get information, they're so far away from religion that they want somebody trustworthy to tell them anything at all about religion. There are prejudices inherited from parents who were educated during the Soviet era. They have learned that the church is a big manipulator and spreads lies. They are also not positive towards other religions. Religion equals violence, especially in the case of Islam. [There is a lot of] negative prejudice. /---/ There is a big difference if the pupil attends school or confirmation classes (i.e. in church - researcher's note). It's different in confirmation classes; there is generally an interest for coming there; some people come, because they want to get married or to become godparents. There it is not about religion in general, but about Christian faith.“*

#### Informant 4.

Woman. 50 years old. Teaching religion for 30 years. Master's degree. Specialisation: theologian, religious education teacher. Teaches subjects related to religion in church and at primary school. Clergy. Christian, Lutheran. Profession: parish pastor at church, teacher in public school. Teaches in a village. The village is mainly mono-ethnic and -religious.

Pupils' background: pupils are mainly of one nationality and non-religious. In churches, the course attendants mainly register alone or in couples, in schools by groups. The attendants at schools are mainly children and young people under the age of 25, in church mainly over 25. Previous knowledge of religion is very poor. Expectations: *„the bond has been broken between generations. They don't know anything neither about the religious feasts nor about the Bible. In the church, people come to the course with pragmatic expectations - to get married, to become godparents, to baptise children. But they have prepared themselves for this - they know what awaits them. The website helps. Schoolchildren: the children have (at first) a positive attitude, [but] when they go home with this message (that there is a religious education course), then after this you can see how children's attitudes*



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change. In every class, there are 1-2 parents who ask the school "why does my child have to study this".

#### **Informant 5.**

Male. 40 years old. Has been teaching religion for 23 years. Two Master's degrees. Specialisations: theologian, communications manager. Teaches subjects related to religion: in a church, in a private primary school, in a public and in a private secondary school (grammar school). Clergy. Christian, Lutheran. Title: parish pastor in a church, teacher in public and private schools. Teaches in a smaller town. The town is predominantly monoethnic and -religious.

Pupils' background: pupils are mainly of one nationality and non-religious. In the church, one most often registers to the course alone; at schools one registers in a group. Both in school and in church, the attendants are mainly children and young people under 25. Prior knowledge of religion tends to be poor. Expectations: „Attitudes have been positive, the ones who come, have interest. They are curious. One wants to know things, there are also expectations to be able to marry and to be able to have a baptism".

#### **Informant 6.**

Woman. 50 years old. Has been teaching religion for 32 years. Master's degree. Professional background: theologian, English and French teacher, cook in a large restaurant, actress, salesperson, public relations, team management. Teaches subjects related to religion: church, national internal security agency (adult complementary education). Clergy. Christian, Lutheran. Title: parish assistant pastor, chaplain. Teaches in a larger town, which is multi-ethnic and -religious.

Pupils' background: pupils are mainly of one nationality and non-religious. To the church course people mainly register alone, whereas the course at the organisation for inner security is meant for a group. In both groups, half of the people are under 25 years of age and another half is above 25. The



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students' prior knowledge of religion is rather poor. Expectations: „*The expectation of the people who come to church is to be eligible for religious rites [such as marriage, to be able to be a godparent, etc. – L.K.] Religion is not a relevant topic for them, one doesn't want to talk about faith at all. If [there is] any interest at all, it's about how God or faith can help and how blissful it is to sit in a church.*”

### Informant 7.

Woman. 52 years old. Has been teaching religion for 30 years. PhD degree. Professions: theologian, teacher. Teaches subjects related to religion in church, at private university, private adult education centre. Clergy. Christian, Baptist. Title: Rector, deacon in a parish. Teaches in a large town, where the main ethnic group in the country dominates, but where other ethnic groups are represented as well. The region is multi-religious.

Õpilaste taust: õpilased on peamiselt ühest rahvusest, kuid vähesel määral on ka muid rahvusi. Peamiselt ühest konfessioonist. Enamasti tullaakse õppima rühmadena. Enamiks neist on eelnevalt juba usklikud. Vanuselise koosseisu poolest on enamus üle 25 eluaasta. Õpilaste eelnevad teadmised religioonist on olnud pigem head.

Pupils' background: mainly of one nationality, other nationalities are also represented to a little degree. Most of them come from one denomination. The majority of attendants come to the course in pairs. Most are already believers. In terms of age composition, the majority are over 25 years old. The pupils' prior knowledge of religion tends to be good.

### Informant 8.

Woman. 39 years old. Has been teaching religion for 12 years. Master's degree. Specialisations: religious education teacher, theologian, training for the ordained ministry. Teaches religious



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education in a church and in a private primary school. Clergy. Christian, Lutheran. Professional title: pastor. Teaches in a larger town with one predominant ethnic group, but with significant

Pupils' background: mainly one religion and nationality. One usually registers for the course in groups. The majority are believers, but there have been a few non-believers as well. (In the church) there are mainly adults over 25, at school children and young people under 25 years of age. It is difficult for the respondent to assess their prior knowledge of religion.

### Informant 9.

Male. 49 years old. Has been teaching religion-related subjects for 25 years. Higher education. Specialisations: youth work, theology (not finished). Teaches religion in a church and in a private primary school. Clergy. Christian, Lutheran. Title: school teacher. Teaches in a larger town which is multi-ethnic and multi-religious.

Pupils' background: mainly mono-ethnic but multi-faith. Students register for the course in groups. Most pupils are mainly from a religious background, most of whom are Lutheran, but there are also children from free churches. The main age group is under 25 years. Their prior knowledge of religion is rather good.

A brief summary of the background of the informants and their students:

Firstly, the interviewees stand out for their remarkably long experience in teaching religion. Three of them have been teaching religion for 30 years or more. They started with teaching religion in quite a young age, right after finishing their studies in theology or at the same time. They are also quite highly educated. Several have obtained or are in the process of obtaining a doctorate. All of them have studied theology, several have also studied pedagogy in addition. Many have attended complementary training. Thus, the interviewees can be considered highly qualified and very competent in teaching religion.



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About half of the interviewees teach in Estonia's larger cities, where, in addition to ethnic Estonians (Lutherans make up the majority of ethnic Estonian believers), a significant number of people of Slavic background - Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians - live. Most of the believers among this group are Orthodox. In smaller towns, villages and rural areas with scattered settlements, the majority of the population are ethnic Estonians and the majority of believers are Lutherans.

The teaching background diverges in three different directions:

- 1) Teaching in the church (mainly adults attending Lutheran confirmation classes),
- 2) Teaching in public general education school,
- 3) Teaching in a Christian private school.

In the first case, students come with the desire to be baptised and confirmed in the Lutheran Church. Their prior knowledge of religion is either poor or rather weak. Often there is no deeper interest in religion at first, but a desire to receive ecclesiastical services (baptism of a child, getting married in church, becoming a godparent). Fewer are those who have developed a deeper interest in religion as such and a desire to become a member of a church. This group is mostly mono-ethnic (ethnic Estonians) and not previously religious. The worldview of their teaching is Christian, Lutheran. Students/course attendants are prepared to become members of this church. They usually come alone or together with a family member.

The second group are students from general education schools, who come to the class, which is mostly an optional elective, and during which students are also given a basic knowledge of the different world religions. These lessons are called differently in different schools, e.g. religious studies, cultural studies, etc. Knowledge about religions may also be shared in philosophy or history lessons. These lessons are based on a neutral worldview. Pupils' prior knowledge of religion is almost non-existent and, as some respondents argued, has even deteriorated over time (although one would expect the opposite to be true following the change in the societal background since 1991). As most of the



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informants teach in Estonian-language schools, the pupils are mainly of the same nationality, but there are exceptions.

The third group consist of pupils from Christian private schools. In that case, the teaching is based on Christian worldview and a significant proportion of pupils come from either Christian backgrounds or from families with a positive attitude towards Christianity. Pupils' prior knowledge of religion tends to be good. The majority of informants taught in private Lutheran schools, although one respondent reported that children from other denominations also attend the lessons.

Although there were exceptions (e.g. private Christian schools), informants characterised their students' prior knowledge of religion as very poor or even non-existent. Moreover, there are many fears and prejudices about the church and religion, which is characteristic of Estonia as a largely secular country distanced from Christianity. Against a background of poor basic knowledge, teaching must begin with the most elementary basic knowledge. Students who come to attend confirmation class are rather cautiously mindful of what is going on, and the teacher must take this into account. Teachers in public schools noted that the attitude of the home towards the teaching of religion in schools may not be benevolent. Thus, teachers of religion in the field of religious education in Estonia have to "fight" not only with the lack of knowledge but also with negative preconceptions about religion(s).

The conditions, possibilities, starting points and content of the teaching varied considerably between the three strands. Some of these differences are described in the following sections of the report.

### 3. Subjects taught and ways how one has come to attend the courses (questions 20-26).

**Teaching in church.** Most of the Lutheran informants were teaching or had taught a confirmation class in a Lutheran church. These classes/courses are preparatory courses for persons who would like to join a congregation, and they precede the confirmation. The purpose of the confirmation class was aptly described by informant 1: "*It is a pre-baptismal teaching, a teaching about the most important points in the life of a Christian, that a new member of the congregation should know*" (I1).







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It is evident that this course is based on Christian worldview. The course is open to students from the age of 15, but the attendants are usually older. The confirmation class is a stand-alone course and its content is put together by the course leader. There are, however, a couple of popular books that many churches use as textbooks for confirmation: Toomas Paul's „Halfway through the Earthly Journey“ and Jaak Aus' and Meelis Holsting's „Is there Anybody?“. Some respondents also mentioned Jaan Lahe's "The Essential Question of Christianity". The first one was considered a little difficult and more suitable for advanced learners. However, these books were generally praised. One respondent (I1) mentioned that he follows the structure of the first book when developing a study programme, as the necessary topics are well covered in it.

However, a lot of material for carrying out the confirmation classes is searched for by the teachers themselves, including sources from the internet; also references and links are provided to literature that is recommended for students to be read independently. Some respondents have also suggested watching films on YouTube, e.g. about the life of Jesus. The general opinion was that the situation is currently quite good as far as materials for confirmation classes are concerned. While in the early 90s the Germans and Finns were envied for their excellent teaching materials, and some of them were translated into Estonian after a while, almost everything needed is now available in Estonian. Informants also mentioned the "Credo" or "Journey to the Land of Faith" materials as positive examples.

The objectives of the course were formulated by the respondents in different ways and with varying degrees of detail, but in general terms it is an "introduction to the life of a parishioner".

One respondent (Informant1) also highlighted Bible classes as a way of teaching religion in the church, usually attended by adult members of the congregation, with the aim of gaining a better knowledge and understanding of the Bible. The content of the Bible lessons is also entirely up to him/her as the facilitator. He found (and this has been confirmed by several other sociological studies of religion carried out in Estonia) that Lutherans are very knowledge-oriented. Many of the new parishioners feel that something is missing after completing the confirmation class, and think that



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there could be a 'course for advanced learners', i.e. some kind of common endeavour oriented towards the improvement of knowledge. In response to this need, a Bible course has been initiated in this congregation, which has been very well received by the congregation members.

**Teaching in general education.** As mentioned above, lessons on teaching religion are generally optional. If the school has a humanities strand, these are compulsory subjects for that strand. Common names for this subject are 'religious history', 'religious studies', 'world religions', etc. A few informants, however, talk about religion as a subject in history or philosophy. In the case of informant 4, however, an even more interesting connection emerged: in the course she teaches (cultural history), the teaching of religious knowledge and the local history of the region are intertwined.

Religious studies, religious history, etc. are separate subjects with no prerequisites. In the case of religious studies, it is possible to base the content on the religious studies curriculum of general education schools, but nevertheless, e.g. informant 4 indicated that she had modified this official programme according to her needs. Since the official title of her subject is 'local history', which in turn is expected in this school to be linked to the local history of the area, the 'official' programme must inevitably be adapted to the school's expectations.

Again, informants said that they still search for learning materials themselves if necessary, although textbooks and booklets are available for the respective subjects. This is often done with the help of the internet.

The basis for teaching is strictly neutral (worldview-wise). Informant 3 gave a nice example of this, comparing religions to buildings and the student of religion to the researcher moving between different buildings objectively observing and analysing them:

*"Every religion is like a building, a system built on different principles and beliefs. And this building is one system, just like everywhere, there is a system of spaces, so it is one idea, one system and we as scientists are like guests who go and look at it and try to understand how this building is built, why is it important, what are the principles that are there and because*



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*we are just guests, we go in, we look, we go out again afterwards and it is not inevitably necessary that we stay in it (to understand it – the emphasis of the researcher)."*

**Teaching in a Christian private school.** Compared to the previous group, there are several differences: the pupils are generally younger and have a Christian worldview, and they have a better prior knowledge of the faith and lack the usual fears and prejudices about it. The subject is called 'faith education' (NB: not 'religious studies', which deals with all religions on an equal basis). Such schools also base their teaching and education on Christian foundations.

**Ways how one has come to attend the course.** In general education schools, students come to attend the courses on religions as they progress through the curriculum. Religious studies are mostly optional in general education schools and compulsory in private Christian schools.

By contrast, there are many different ways how one comes to attend confirmation classes, which are voluntary and mostly attended by adults. In most cases, clergy informs about the beginning of a confirmation course either through the parish website or social media channel, or by placing an advertisement in the local newspaper or on the notice board of the church or cultural centre. Sometimes the information is passed on orally as well. However, personal invitations seem to be very rare - only a few informants mentioned this possibility:

*„personal contacts, meeting people, asking if they have been baptised and confirmed, and if not, I invite them“.* (I1).

Such a possibility is, of course, is only conceivable in a smaller community, e.g. in a small town or a rural area, where the clergy personally knows many of the community members and knows their interests and wishes. However, it is mainly assumed that the person has a thoroughly felt personal desire and will for such a step (confirmation), since it is not simply a matter of sharing knowledge, but of preparing for baptism and membership in the congregation.



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#### 4. Teaching methods/principles used (question 27).

In the most general terms, all informants were in favour of active learning methods and most of them use them. This is true for all three target groups mentioned above, although the teaching situations and assumptions vary. What was meant by active learning methods? In particular, methods where the learners could, for example, ask questions during the lesson, give feedback, give their opinion on what is being taught, discuss, search for relevant information in books or on the web, etc.

Of those informants who conduct confirmation classes (which means mainly teaching adults), none do so in the traditional monologue form, but in a conversational way. A couple of informants also claimed that there has been an increase in the number of confirmation class attendants who want to read and research independently during the course. In their case, this has mainly been due to lack of time or working far away from their home congregation and not always being able to be present. In the last year, physical meetings have also been hampered by the epidemic. However, those who do attend are keen to talk, ask questions, express their views and discuss issues. In most cases, the number of confirmation class attendants in Estonia is also rather small, which allows for this kind of learning.

A good example for active learning methods used in confirmation classes was given by informant 1:

*Well, I've noticed that if you have the course attendants do some kind of exercises, some kind of group work together that interests them, they're engaging, they get excited ... that's one of the many methods I've used myself. I've also shown films and then explained on the basis of those. Watching a film together which might be about the era or, or the people who are being talked about, for example, biographies of biblical characters (11).*

However, informant 2 told us that he considers it very important to start the confirmation class with a personal informal setting - coffee and biscuits on the table, quiet background music, a discussion about how someone's work or personal life has been during the previous week, what events have taken place, and then the minister helping to interpret and explain these private events and



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impressions in a Christian way. As many of the people who come to the course come from a fairly unreligious background, this approach helps them to become accustomed to Christian ways of thinking.

Active learning for school pupils has different methods, but here too it was noticeable that the informants wanted to leave as much space as possible for the pupils to search and discover for themselves, with the teacher only as a "guide". Students also need to be able to discuss and ask questions. Here, of course, the age of the pupils is an important determinant - the choice of topics and active learning methods should be based on the age and maturity of the pupils. Informant4, who teaches groups of children of different ages, gave in her interview good examples of this problematic: which worldview/religious issues can be addressed with older children and which with younger children, who do not yet have the abstract, general and symbolic thinking skills to understand more complex religious categories. She gave the following example of teaching in the younger age group:

*Of course, in the second class there are also a lot of hands-on activities that they love to do, drawing, painting, making things, and our school lessons are sixty-five minutes long, so that already means that I have to use a lot of different methods there. So games are very important in the fifth grade as well as in the second grade. And also in the confirmation classes the games play a big role (I4).*

*Well, there's a lot of active learning in the school, and I only have about ten or fifteen minutes for this kind of presentation, the rest is all active learning with the pupils. Because otherwise it's just not possible there, and as much as I have access to a computer classroom, we also do many things online. On the computers they do their presentations or research papers, for example. /---/ For the adults (confirmation classes), I have structured it so that the presentation part is even longer but I have still structured it based on conversation, as discussion groups. If you think about the confirmation class for youngsters, which we also offer, whether it's every second year or how it happens to be, the method is still learning in a camp for two weekends per month. Then we live together and learn together, there are also*



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*presentation parts and all the active learning methods, then it is used in a completely intertwined way (I4).*

What are the principles behind this preference for active learning? Mainly on the desire that active participation, exploration and discussion of religious topics will help participants to better accept the views and perspectives that are being taught. In this case, learning is like an expedition in which the student 'discovers' the necessary knowledge on his own from among the material which is being offered, and the teacher is merely a facilitator and careful guide. From informant 3, it can be understood that when he talks to grammar school students about world religions, he first introduces them to scientific thinking as such: how to approach phenomena such as religions scientifically, in a phenomenological approach to religion. The way in which he guides his students to think, investigate and deduce on their own is in fact more than just providing a basic knowledge of world religions. It also provides the basis for a scientific, neutral and objective approach to other social phenomena.

##### **5. What additional knowledge/training the informants think they need? (questions 28 and 30).**

On this question, the interviewees' answers diverged quite strongly. They depended on what specialisation (besides theology) the informant had studied and worked in. For example, if the informant had obtained a teaching qualification as an additional specialisation and had also attended further training, (s)he considered her/his pedagogical knowledge to be sufficient for teaching the given religious subjects. There was also a correlation in that younger informants were more willing to have complementary courses, i.e. they indicated more areas in which they would like to acquire additional knowledge. For example, informants I4, I6, I5, I2 and I8 indicated that they would like to learn more in all the areas offered.

Probably the least sought-after is additional knowledge in theology. Those who had previously studied pedagogy also considered their knowledge in this area to be sufficient. Most wanted to learn more about psychology (in particular how to motivate and engage people), group work methods (in particular active learning methods) and digital skills, e.g. how to conduct online courses. The latter has become topical due to the limitations imposed by the COVID pandemic, when it is not possible



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to physically attend classes. This is likely to be a very topical complementary education need for all educators, not just teachers of religion.

In addition to the above, one respondent suggested foreign languages: Greek, Hebrew and German (I1) and another suggested knowledge of management and knowledge of research (I7).

## 6. Training courses considered most relevant for the teaching of religion (question 29).

Once again, the courses stand out that use interesting group work and active learning methods. also courses that involve excursions, visits and practical activities, are mentioned positively.

Some of the attended courses were also criticised - "*you go there but afterwards you don't really remember anything about it*" (I5). These were probably courses that used "dry", monologue-style teaching methods.

Which courses were highlighted? Some examples:

Teacher traineeships at school (I3)

Bible drama, symbol drama (I1, I6)

Teamwork processes (I6)

The Institute of Theology's various training courses for clergy (I1)

Training of instructors of the Defence League, during which active learning methods were learned (I5)

Training on confirmation class methods, which included group work practice (I5)

A course for teachers of religious education run by the University of Tartu, which included visits to places of worship of different religions, including a mosque and a synagogue (I5)



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## 7. The importance of dealing with topical social issues in the teaching of religion (question 31).

On this question, too, respondents' opinions diverged quite significantly, and there was a noticeably high proportion of "don't know" answers.

If one tries to generalise the responses, it can be said that the first three questions in the block (relations between nations and races, issues related to refugees and migration, and issues related to sexual minorities) are perhaps considered somewhat less important to address than the next three. One of the reasons given was that these subjects are already covered in other lessons in general education. However, some informants also gave the opposite assessment. For example, informant 5 said that the topics of ethnicity and race and refugees and migration became important when refugee families came to his area and were helped by the church to receive them. Clearly, in such a situation, the topic needs to be addressed in the classroom, even if the topic was not initially planned to be part of the curriculum.

Informant 4, however, said that while she does not specifically raise issues related to ethnicities and races and refugees and migration, she is able to express a Christian view on these issues, for example by telling Bible stories. She gives the following example:

*Well, it means that I don't speak, because it is expressed, isn't it, through some of these Bible stories, how the people, the nations, interacted with each other. For example, the story of the Good Samaritan. That there is an example like this, that he who is the enemy, comes and helps you, right?(I4).*

The situation is somewhat similar in view of the topic of sexual minorities. It turned out that most respondents don't raise the issue themselves, but if students ask about the church's stance on the issue, it needs to be discussed. The exceptions were informants I8, I4, I6, who considered it important that the clergy themselves actively raise the issue and talk to the pupils/students about it. On the subject of sexual minorities, one might perhaps suggest that there is a fear of raising a subject on which the participants' perceptions might differ sharply and provoke emotional reactions. It is also evident that



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the assumptions for dealing with the subject are quite different in general education schools and in confirmation classes.

The fourth area of the tables, that of the beginning and end of life, was interpreted in different ways by respondents: some understood it as a cloning and euthanasia issue, while others viewed it more broadly as a religious understanding of the world in general, and considered it to be the most important issue that must necessarily be addressed in religious education. For the former, there was more reluctance to address the issue, or it was felt that it should remain a pastoral subject (e.g. I3).

Questions 5-8 were generally considered somewhat more important to address.

Issues related to societal crises (e.g. disasters, conflicts, pandemics and natural disasters) seem to be particularly topical due to the current pandemic.

The climate justice issue was rather popular. A good example is the sentence from informant 5: "*this is an issue that concerns the future of us all*". It is possible that the fact that the Estonian Council of Churches declared 2020 as the Year of Caring for Nature "Let Us Love Nature", helped to highlight this issue. It is likely that themes related to nature and climate were also more prevalent than usual in religion classes this year. The clergy interviewed also dwelled at length on this topic and mentioned the importance of dealing with it in the context of the church.

The issue of human rights was also considered important. Informant 5 aptly mentioned "*human rights is a timeless issue*". Some clergy mentioned that they also address the first three aspects (relations between nations and races, refugee and migration issues, and issues related to sexual minorities) primarily in the context of human rights.

The issue of inner-Christian and inter-religious dialogue was also considered to be very important.

Mostly, informants discussed topics already proposed. However, some informants also wished to add topics:

Theme of family models, „honeycomb-families“ (‘my, your and our children’) (I4)



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Politics (I1). Informant 1 thought that this was probably somewhat feared to be dealt with because congregations are apolitical organisations, but inevitably life itself presents situations arising from politics that confirmation class attendants would like to discuss.

Fair trade in the context of Christian ethics (I2).

## 8. Respondents' knowledge of the availability of/need for teaching materials on 'topical social issues' (questions 32, 33).

In general, one's own knowledge of these topics was considered to be sufficient and one did not see much need for additional teaching materials. Rather, it was felt that a foreign language learner would have access to everything he or she needed via the internet and that the problem was that there was so much material that it was difficult to work through everything that was available. Given the rather high educational and professional level of the Estonian informants, one can agree with this. Only a few informants mentioned that such learning materials would be welcome in some areas mentioned. However, they felt it necessary to stress that such materials should either be thoroughly contextualized or developed in Estonia in order to avoid the feeling that "something has been handed down from Brussels again" (I2).

Creating uncontextualized materials would be like going back in time to the 1990s, when religious materials were not available in our country and had to be translated from other languages. However, materials intended for pan-European use are not sufficiently sensitive to the social context here and may have an alienating effect.

One informant, however, raised the need for additional climate-related knowledge from an interesting angle in the interview.

*Informant4: „And I don't remember in which TV programm I heard it, but it came as a surprise to me as a Christian that Christians are being accused of destroying the world. That Christianity is to blame. That with their capitalism and everything“*



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*Interviewee: So like Max Weber's Protestant ethics - making the world rational? Weber is interpreted as if Protestantism has directed us to rationalize the world according to our own interests.*

*Informant4: „And to see that it's about heating up the globe? (astonished) It's not related to Christianity in the sense that, well, ... how to express it...? God has given us the task of cultivating and preserving the Earth, hasn't he? That's the way I've always understood it. So in that sense, some training is definitely needed on this subject“*

## 9. Innovative and digital solutions used (questions 34, 35).

In general, informants mainly understood innovative solutions as different group work and active learning methods or digital solutions. A lot of respondents had been affected by the pandemic situation, which had already lasted for a year, during which social distancing measures were implemented and a lot of things have to be done online.

This has led to ambivalent attitudes towards the use of digital solutions - on the one hand, there is a realisation that the old days are not coming back, and that we are likely to become even more dependent on the internet in the future, an area that needs to evolve rapidly. On the other hand, it was felt that there is perhaps even too much 'digital stuff' and that at least the lessons should involve close, personal face-to-face interaction. For example, two young male informants (undoubtedly with good digital skills) mentioned:

*"Rather, maybe we try to keep the confirmation classes such as... to have as little technology and screens in the lessons as possible. It seems to me that for people today, specially those who are attending some kind of training courses, it's a kind of innovation for them, that no screens are put up and communication takes place face to face and directly" (I2).*

*(On school pupils) "But we don't really try to win them over with screens, they have media education at school, where there is also this screen economy and a hobby group on robotics.*





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*There are so many screen characters as it is. But rather some kind of excursions, field trips, outdoor education, that kind of thing" (I5).*

But what digital tools would you recommend to others?

Informant 1 mentioned an Estonian Bible App for children, and also highly praised a video game that his grandchildren use, which he thinks gives a fairly comprehensive overview of the Bible. In this informant's opinion, it is precisely such innovative, digital tools that could be used to make the subject interesting for children, as "screens" are the easiest way to catch their attention and children really like these things.

## 10. Receiving regular feedback (question 36).

Getting regular feedback from RE students was considered very important by informants. In one way or another, this was collected by all respondents. The way in which it was collected depended on whether the teaching was in general education or in a confirmation class. In general education, feedback is obtained either through active learning, in the form of seminars and discussions with students, or through individual interaction.

Confirmation classes usually end with either an interview, oral or written exam (the written exam is usually an essay). During this period, the opportunity is also taken to obtain feedback. Several clergy highlighted that the feedback has always been very positive. As the interviews conducted in other studies show, positive evaluations of their own experience of the confirmation classes are quite common among those who have joined Lutheran congregations.

However, this raises the question of whether people dare to give objective and honest feedback to clergy in person if there is no anonymous way to do so. As the groups are usually relatively small, this is unlikely to happen. In larger urban congregations, however, the possibility of collecting feedback anonymously, e.g. through a questionnaire survey, could be considered. Then, more



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objective (and, of course, more critical) feedback could be obtained. Also, it would not be worth collecting feedback before the confirmation class is passed, which was also referred to by one interviewee.

## 11. The main findings of the survey carried out in Estonia.

Estonian interviewees stood out for their high level of education and good professional skills. At the same time, they have to work in a rather difficult teaching situation: students' knowledge of religion(s) is limited or almost non-existent, negative attitudes and cautious attitudes towards church and religion are widespread. Often people come to attend a confirmation class with a desire to be participate in church sacraments or celebrations (baptism, marriage) but do not have a deeper and more personal desire for religious development.

The situation in which teaching takes place is largely determined by where it is taught and to which target group. The three main target groups were: 1) Church confirmation classes for those wishing to join congregations, 2) Pupils in public general education schools, 3) Pupils in Christian private schools. Accordingly, the teaching objectives, opportunities, resources, prerequisites and willingness and motivation to learn vary.

The content of the curricula of the confirmation classes and Christian private schools is based on Christian foundations, while in general education schools the starting point is worldview-neutral and rather scientific.

All the teachers interviewed advocate and use active learning methods in their teaching, regardless of the target group they are teaching. There are different active learning methods for each target group. The main reasons for the use of active learning methods are to make the learning process more lively and interesting, and thus to make the material more memorable, and, on the other hand, the hope that the views and opinions presented will seem more meaningful and important to the students personally



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if they 'discover' them on their own. The role of the teacher is more that of a 'guide' on the journey of discovery.

As the interviewees had quite different professional qualifications, the need for further training also varied. Psychology and group and active learning methods were the main subjects mentioned. Altogether there was no clear gap or single common training need.

Opinions differed on the importance of teaching of so-called topical social issues. There were slightly more respondents who felt that it would be necessary to talk about climate-related issues, human rights, issues related to social crises, inner-Christian and inter-religious dialogue and issues related to the beginning and end of life. The need to address issues related to sexual minorities, racial and ethnic relations and migrants and refugees was seen as much less necessary. However, there was no negative attitude towards these issues, but rather they were simply considered not urgent enough in their own context (a small Estonian town or a rural area). The most common view was that the students would ask and raise the issue, or that if everyday events were somehow related to these issues, they would certainly talk about them.

With some exceptions, the teaching materials were considered sufficient to cover these topics. They can always be found on the Internet and translated and reproduced for students if necessary. However, if such materials were to be created, they should certainly not be simply translated materials, which would be a step back in time in our context. Such teaching material should take into account the local context and history and be adapted to our circumstances.

Innovative learning methods were mainly understood as either active learning methods or digital learning. While there was a positive consensus on active learning methods, this was not the case for digital learning. On the one hand, there is an understanding that digital learning is the future and cannot be ignored. The "flashing screens" attract children's attention and appeal to them. It has also proved to be an indispensable solution in the year of the pandemic, when ignoring it would have



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meant the discontinuation of religious education. On the other hand, it is felt that there are too many digital tools around and why could not precisely religious education be the place where the most personal and direct face-to-face interaction takes place. As a young male informant put it, "nowadays it's an innovation not to have a single blinking screen in the room".

Collecting regular feedback from students of religious education was elementary for the Estonian informants, without which the learning process would be unimaginable. Feedback can be collected in all possible ways, the most important of which is considered to be personal face-to-face interaction and conversation. Although the author of this report is aware that some confirmation class teachers also use anonymous feedback forms at the end of the course, none of the informants in this study specifically mentioned this. In schools, the objective feedback channel is certainly also the means of monitoring learning outcomes, such as examinations and assessments, and in some places anonymous feedback through electronic learning environments may also be available.



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