

Climate resilience policy in the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission

Introduction

In September 2024, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated: "We are in a climate meltdown. Extreme temperatures, raging fires, droughts, and epic floods are not natural disasters. They are human disasters — increasingly fueled by fossil fuels." (UN 2024a). The rapid progress of climate change is reflected in the daily work of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (Felm) and in our future-oriented climate resilience policy.

Purpose and objectives of the policy

The climate resilience policy describes our aims and approaches to our different stakeholders. The policy is a continuation of Felm's strategy (2024a), in which climate justice and sustainable solutions to the climate crisis are one of the priorities. At Felm, climate resilience refers to mitigating and adapting to climate change, preparing for disasters and irreversible changes, climate advocacy, and increasing climate awareness.

Responsibility is one of our values. The climate crisis and biodiversity loss serve as drivers for many megatrends in the world. Changes in local climate conditions and long-term conflicts increase poverty, inequality and the number of refugees. (Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission 2024a). Cooperation with churches is at the heart of our work. The climate crisis is causing significant and irreversible impacts and jeopardizing the human rights of people, especially those in a vulnerable position.

Felm has an environmental management system, the Church's environmental diploma (2021), which was renewed in 2023 (Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission 2024b). In accordance with the Church Energy and Climate Strategy (2019), we are aiming for carbon neutrality in our operations by 2030 at the latest. The environmental programme applies to all our units, and we strive for high-quality environmental work in all our activities.

Theological foundation and principles

Felm's mission statement is expressed as a holistic mission. The message of the Gospel belongs to every human and to all creation. God is present in everything that has been created, and creation is a place where the presence of the holy God may be found. Creation and humankind interact with and are dependent on each other. Humanity cannot survive without creation but according to the Christian faith, creation has inherent value regardless of what it can produce for humanity. Human beings are one creation among many, and they must use nature with care and moderation.

The world created by God – creation – is invaluable: The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth opened the door to eternal life in connection with God, and the promise of this life applies to all creation – not just humanity. Creation not only participates in salvation, it also communicates the good news. Nature speaks of God as the Redeemer of everything that has been created. Christians are responsible for promoting and protecting the well-being of creation. Instead of controlling, damaging and overusing natural resources, humans should look after creation, promote its well-being and praise God together with it.

Another theological perspective on climate work arises from loving one's neighbour and justice. The devastating effects of climate change have the greatest impact on those who are in the most vulnerable positions and living in poverty. Christians are responsible for other people: Jesus taught his followers to defend the weak, the poor and the oppressed. According to his example, we promote justice through climate work. Doing so makes the kingdom of God visible. Good news is a message of hope. The hope anchored in the resurrection of Christ is capable of turning hopelessness and anxiety into a conviction that God will recreate everything and bring an end to the suffering of humankind and creation. Christian hope releases people from despair and its significance and strength becomes concrete when shared and lived out with others. Hope sends people out to act here and now on God's mission. (Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission 2015)

Operating environment

Global frameworks, such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, UN Sustainable Development Goals, Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework and Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNFCCC 2024; UN 2024b; CBD 2024; UNDRR 2021, 2024) also guide the activities of Felm in the climate crisis.

In its 6th assessment report (IPCC 2023), the IPCC states that the likelihood of weather events causing multiple hazards has increased. Many of the changes taking place in the seas and continental glaciers are already irreversible or very slow to reverse. The scale of future changes will depend on how greenhouse gas emissions, especially carbon dioxide, develop in the future. Studies (Konapala et al. 2020; Nauman 2018) identify areas where annual rainfall is increasing and systems that fluctuate on a seasonal basis are becoming more variable. Although average rainfall is increasing, evaporation is increasing even more as temperatures rise, which exacerbates drought conditions in many regions. For example, the water supply deficit in many parts of Africa will already increase fivefold in the 1.5-degree scenario. A study conducted by Lenton et al. (2019) warns of climate tipping points, which refer to points at which the climate is rapidly and irreversibly changing. There are many tipping points affecting the global climate. The lower limit for realisation has already been passed in five of them, for example, the Greenland ice sheet collapse and the death of low-latitude coral reefs.

The historically high carbon footprint is linked to a high standard of living, and the higher standard of living in Western countries has been achieved in an unsustainable manner. At the same time, emission levels have continued to be high (Figure 1).

Annual CO₂ emissions by world region

Emissions from fossil fuels and industry¹ are included, but not land-use change emissions. International aviation and shipping are included as separate entities, as they are not included in any country's emissions.

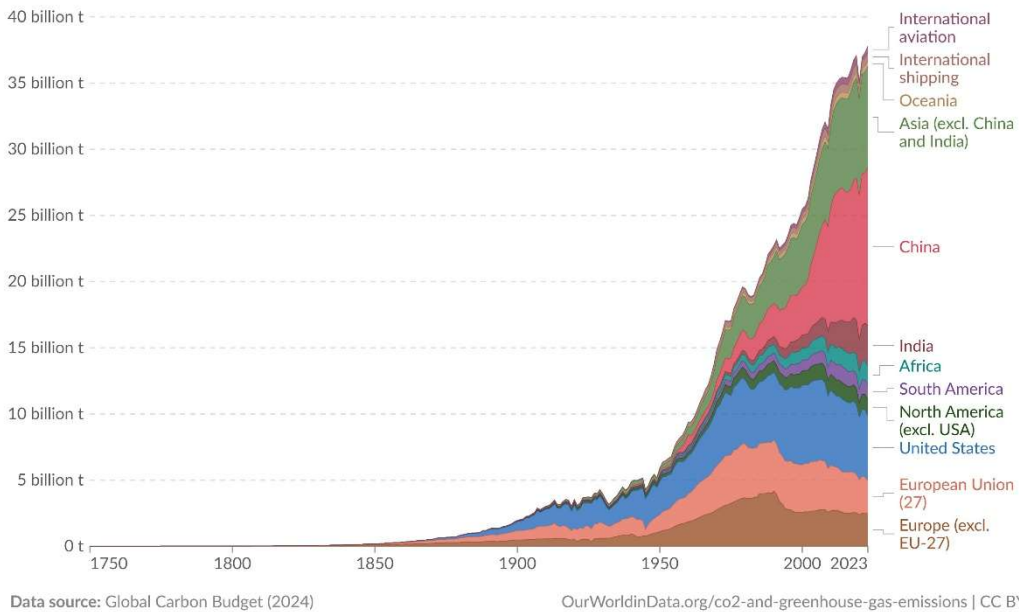


Figure 1. Carbon dioxide emissions by region. Source: Our world in data (2024).

1. Fossil emissions: Fossil emissions measure the quantity of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emitted from the burning of fossil fuels, and directly from industrial processes such as cement and steel production. Fossil CO₂ includes emissions from coal, oil, gas, flaring, cement, steel, and other industrial processes. Fossil emissions do not include land use change, deforestation, soils, or vegetation.

We want to strengthen communities, so they choose clean energy, implement a circular economy and thus achieve a sustainable and good standard of living. At Felm, we work with duty bearers in different countries – including Finland – such as state organisations, municipalities, parishes and companies. Influencing them is in line with our climate policy and our responsibility. The role of duty bearers is to make far-sighted sustainable choices.

Climate justice

Felm observes the climate justice principles of the Lutheran World Federation and Act Alliance (LWF 2024; ACT 2024). Although climate change affects all people on our planet, it does not have an equal effect on different people, ethnic groups, professions and genders. Climate change exacerbates the situation of the most vulnerable people. Climate change deepens underlying social inequality. Increasingly extreme weather, a change in seasonal variations in seasons and natural disasters pose a disproportionate threat to people who are in the most vulnerable position. For example, see OHCHR (2019), World Vision (2024).

Children are extremely vulnerable to disasters. They are also a group with limited opportunities to influence or participate in decision-making. Migration due to climate change endangers the status and safety of children and causes the breakup of families. Other impacts of climate change include malnutrition, lack of clean water and waterborne diseases as well as disturbed or interrupted school pathways. Persons with disabilities are also particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and often have limited opportunities to participate in decision-making and adaptation actions. Climate catastrophes increase the amount of care work performed by women and their responsibilities.

Unsustainable land use and the biodiversity crisis worsen the effects of climate change. Animals and ecosystems suffer, and animals can also be climate refugees. Many climate change adaptation and sustainable agriculture and forestry actions also improve the ability of organisms and ecosystems to adapt to a changing climate. Biodiversity, ending deforestation and strengthening carbon sinks are important for future generations of people and animals.

We want to promote solutions that enable long-term and flexible work in the areas of adapting to climate change, humanitarian work during disasters and recovery from climate disasters. Respect for human rights is an essential condition for various climate actions. A human rights-based approach to implementation increases the acceptability and sustainability of climate actions.

Climate justice and economic justice are key themes in terms of solving the current planetary crises. Developed countries are committed to spending 0.7% of their GNI on development cooperation, eliminating environmentally harmful subsidies and directing financing to limit climate change (UN Association 2024).

It is also important to note that development aid alone is not a solution to global problems: solutions require private sector participation and the ability of developing countries to develop their resources. We want to make the climate emergency of our partners visible to Finnish parishes. Climate change has the greatest impact on people who are already in a vulnerable position, and Felm helps them to cope. Our perspective in missionary work is to take care of people living in the midst of the climate crisis so that they do not need to go hungry or leave their home as refugees. Climate work is love for one's neighbour.

Food security

Climate change weakens food security and leads to urbanisation as small farms are no longer viable, for example, after a sequence of droughts or climate disasters. When combined with other planetary crises such as land degradation and overconsumption of natural resources – like water – climate change can make an already fraught situation untenable. Ninety per cent of the world's refugees originate from countries that are already impacted by the climate emergency and have the least capacity to adapt to an increasingly hostile environment. At the same time, food security and food logistics are being used as a weapon in conflicts. (UNFCCC 2022)

Extreme weather events caused by climate change, such as droughts, floods and storms, have become more widespread and intense, which has already led to significant economic losses and undermined food security. A European Commission (EC 2024) study underlines how agricultural production is particularly vulnerable to changes in temperature, precipitation and weather conditions caused by the climate crisis. Food security is also affected by population growth, poverty, inadequate warning systems and poor agricultural infrastructure.

Climate work guidelines

1. Adaptation. Felm's climate work emphasises adaptation to climate change and a comprehensive increase of climate resilience in the communities that suffer most from its impacts.
2. Preparation for damage and irreversible changes. All Felm projects, especially climate projects, recognise the possibility of climate change-related disasters and irreversible changes.

Cooperation with the administration and other actors will help in the transition from emergency assistance and reactive adaptation to risk reduction and improvement of community resilience.

3. Mitigation. Felm's climate work includes reducing emissions, strengthening carbon sinks and promoting clean energy. We implement our environmental programme and the carbon neutrality target for our activities.
4. Our advocacy work strives to identify the most important decision-making processes and forums in the climate policy and funding architecture. We want to promote fair solutions that bridge geographical distances and administrative boundaries.
5. Persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups are active participants in our climate work. Gender equality is a systematic part of our climate work, and we want to support our partners to participate in the climate movement.

We also focus on the most effective climate actions and peer learning. We systematically take climate resilience into account in the different stages of programme planning, monitoring and project work in order to strengthen the impact. We are open to new climate work partnerships and funding opportunities.

Felm's added value

Our strength is the fact that we work with, among others, churches and faith-based organisations. Our climate work is effective (Fingo 2024). The Church is close to the community and is closely involved in the challenges affecting it. This is the reason why churches and church actors have the opportunity to influence the promotion of climate resilience in society – both at the grassroots level and on a broader scale. When climate damage occurs, churches provide spiritual and community support to victims of destruction and help with rebuilding. Participation in the global Act Alliance coalition and its various working groups is our most important tool in terms of climate impact on a global basis. The climate work we support is community-based and locally managed. Best practices to promote climate resilience have been identified as good and suitable for the circumstances by several partner organisations.

We use proven and knowledge-based methods to increase the range of options available to communities to meet the impacts of climate change. We also support recovery from climate disasters and offer alternatives for earning a living alongside traditional livelihoods. Our climate work particularly supports opportunities for women and persons with disabilities to encounter the climate crisis as active actors, because climate change has a greater impact on them than on the rest of the community.

We implement our own environmental programme in a cross-cutting manner. We learn from and listen to our partners so that together we can strengthen our ability and confidence to create a sustainable future in our communities.

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