

Lutherans Fire Finnish Pastor for Hosting Charismatic Miracle Services

The denominations cited vicar Markku Koivisto's 'extremism' after gold dust and oil appeared during meetings in Nokia

Lutheran vicar Markku Koivisto was thrown out of his parish in Nokia, Finland—a city world-famous for its cell phones—even though Markku had been leading weekly healing and evangelism gatherings of 1,000 people for 10 years.

That didn't stop Koivisto. Just last January, some 10,000 Finlanders flocked into the Pirkka Hall, an indoor sports arena in Nokia, to hear the locked-out vicar preach the gospel and pray for the sick during a 10-hour, nonstop, 2001 New Year's celebration.

In the secularized and scarcely populated European north, a crowd of 10,000 at a church service is exceptional. The Finnish population totals 5 million, with only 10 percent attending any kind of church service each month.

The typical charismatic church in Scandinavia averages between 100 and 200 attendants. Few conferences attract more than several hundred participants.

The local Lutheran Church council justified its pre-Christmas ban of Koivisto's meetings because of what Head Bishop Juha

Pihkala charged was Koivisto's "extremism." The accusations targeted occurrences such as gold dust falling in the parish church vestry and oil dripping from the hands of ministry-team members.

Koivisto told Charisma that "these things have not happened very often, and, although [I] am thankful for such 'divine surprises,' the meetings always focused on salvation and healing."

He said that 4,000 people have come to Christ at his Nokia revival services during the last 10 years and that "thousands" were healed. That claim, Koivisto said, can be verified by the thank-you cards that people filled out and left in the church after the services. Again, such figures are exceptional to the region, he said.

In the last five years Koivisto organized eight youth and children's camps, with some 70 participants each summer, and he planted numerous church cell groups in Nokia. "We reach lots of young people, in particular kids in difficulties, like drug abusers or orphans," he said.

When the parish church doors closed on those seeking God's supernatural intervention, Koivisto immediately took leave of absence from the Lutheran Church and started organizing an independent ministry. Within a month 1,500 believers had signed up pledging financial support.

"If anything, the anointing has increased after the exclusion," Koivisto said. "Lately, people had to support me physically during the services. The presence of God was so 'heavy' that I could not stand on my feet. Also, God seems to

be healing
more severe sicknesses now.”

Still, the split worries the former vicar.

“We hold the revival services in the Nokia Pentecostal Church for the time being, but that is less than ideal for reaching the unchurched. Culturally, a Lutheran church poses a lesser barrier.”

Also, the orphaned cell groups need a new spiritual home, but Koivisto said he has no intention of planting a new church.

“I am still a Lutheran,” he said. “At least I try to be.”

On a personal level “being banned from the church is tough indeed, especially on the family,” Koivisto admitted. Mass media exposure, typically negative, puts a heavy load on the vicar’s wife—a physician and psychiatrist—and their four children.

“Last spring, during a period of five weeks, there were only two days in which I was not featured in the media,” Koivisto said. “This year started off with reporters and photographers from 17 media companies visiting on the same night. It is too much.”

On the other hand, Koivisto reflects, the media actually helped kick off the revival. From the very beginning, the healing services in the Lutheran church caught the attention of the local reporters. Koivisto recalls one instance in particular.

"I had an appointment with a reporter in the church, but he got sick, and asked me to come visit him instead. I went—and he asked me to pray for him! Well, God healed the reporter, and the article turned out very long and very positive."

The Nokia revival dates to 1991 when Koivisto survived terminal cancer. One day, when Koivisto was about to leave for the hospital, a visiting Pentecostal preacher from Australia called and said God had awakened him three times during the night telling him to "go pray for the Lutheran vicar."

The vicar was theologically anti-charismatic and declined the offer, but the Australian insisted, and in the end Koivisto was prayed for and anointed with oil. He was not healed instantly, but during the ensuing medical treatment the doctors repeatedly testified to "astonishing" recoveries, and the vicar reviewed his theology.

"I started getting together with a few people to pray for the sick, and within months there were hundreds of people attending," Koivisto said. "I was really taken by surprise. I felt like a spectator in the theater."