Dear friends,

May I share with you a personal experience. Before joining the staff here at the Church House I used to be for many years a vicar in a small country parish in Eastern Finland. It is called Hirvensalmi. There is a beautiful, grey stone church, looking very traditional. The Church building and its altarpieces became very familiar to me over the years.

When I had been working there about six years I once sat in the church at a service with my wife. During the sermon I started watching the altarpiece. It is a painting by an artist called Aukusti Koivisto. The theme is Christ’s resurrection. Christ is standing in the picture raised from the dead and risen from the grave with hands up as a sign of victory.

When watching the painting I suddenly noticed something strange: there was a whitish patch or stain roughly on the chest of the Saviour. I began to think what it was. I suspected that perhaps somehow the sun had created a reflexion although it was a cloudy day. I asked my wife if she saw the same stain on the painting. Yes, she noticed the same. I was wondering if our cleaner had dusted the painting and destroyed it! On the other hand, the stain was high up several metres. When looking even closer at the altarpiece I noticed that the stain was much wider than I had first realised. There was a line from one side of the painting to the other side. I had difficulties to sit still in the pew because I felt that I ought to find out immediately who had messed up our altarpiece. Whenpondering this, my wife pointed out that there was another line on the painting as well. I was astonished when she showed me another line from top to bottom on the painting. Then I saw it. There was a huge cross on the painting. The painting which described the joy of Jesus’ resurrection also included the cross of sorrow and suffering.
When I told about the cross on the painting to the parishioners a couple of weeks later one elderly lady came to thank me for opening her eyes. She had regularly come to church all her life and had not seen the cross before.

Dear friends.

Architecture and church art may carry with them, in them and in their unity many different signs and hints about the sacred and holy. The holiness of a church building itself challenges us to stop and be open to silence. Sometimes this holiness must be explained to a person watching a church building. Furthermore, hints hidden to even minor details need time, silence and perhaps something spoken in words.

A modern pilgrim of our time is much more at a loss compared to pilgrims in previous centuries. The pictures and the biblical stories used to be common and well-known to all. Even a small hint to the salvation history was understandable to the viewer. This is no longer the case. Today a tourist visiting a church faces pictures, images and symbolism which are unfamiliar to him or her. A tourist needs more support, more time and more silence. Right there we have an opportunity and a chance to help people to rediscover the church building.

With the help of architecture and many details the huge richness of the church’s message and the mystery of holiness may become understood. It is also a great opportunity to convey Christian message and to start a dialogue. At best this may happen in church when a tourist meets a person there to talk to and who has time to talk. Church voluntary work has many possibilities here.

Church buildings are mostly heritages from previous generations. The best way to honour their work and offerings is to use these treasures and unfold their message. Then many people would share the experience I had – or quite the opposite: behind the ordinary daily life there shines the joy and light of the gospel.

Dear friends.

For my part I would like to thank you all for your contributions and for sharing your experiences with us at this conference. We have common challenges ahead of us in the Nordic and Baltic countries and in our churches. Therefore, it has been useful to evaluate where we stand today.

Thank you so much!