



Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia  
**ESTONIAN FREE CHURCH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

## **RESEARCH PLAN 2020–2026**

Estonian Free Church Theological Seminary (in following text - Seminary)

**The main theme of research:** Free church identity and the relationship between church and society

### **Sub-themes of research or research focus areas**

In order to harmonize the research activities of the seminary, including those of faculty, staff and students, we focus on three main areas:

#### **1. Free church identity**

This theme explores the historical, theological and practical identity of the Free church movement. The theological foundations of the Free church tradition, its contextualization in Estonia and internationally, and its contribution to ecclesial and social development are addressed. A separate sub-theme is devoted to the Free church understanding of learning, including theological education.

#### **2. Relations between churches and society**

This theme focuses on the relationship between congregations and society, including the theological and practical implications of the priesthood of all believers. Research topics include servant leadership, the family, mental health and the promotion of civil society.

#### **3. Practical issues of church life**

This area of research focuses on congregational practice based on Baptist identity and the meaning of its various aspects, both in the congregation and society. Practice may be related to worship and ministry, mission, learning, church leadership or other issues.

### **The problem**

Religious identity and the relationship between the church and society is often explored from the perspective of the majority denominations. In reality, the relationships between the church and society in Estonia have been much more diverse. Thus, the Free churches, which have been in the role of minority churches, have filled an important task by cultivating democratic structures of leadership in the church life, using volunteers in congregational activities, and contributing to local culture. Unfortunately, the activities and convictions behind these have been examined only in fragmented ways.

Research of Free church identity and history, especially its role in society, often during the times of change, might offer an important addition for understanding social processes, including the citizenship society in Estonia. In doing so, it is important to compare these processes with those of the international context. Exploring the Free church identity is important also for the Seminary and its curricula, because it is the only theological university-level school with Free church identity in Estonia and in the surrounding region (Latvia, Lithuania, Finland).

In addition, the Free church identity needs to be compared with congregational practices, which have sometimes developed and been influenced without theological reflection. This is the case, for example, with ordination, mission, congregational governing bodies, and many other issues that require a deeper analysis, precisely from the perspective of Free church identity. Understanding these issues can help to clarify dialogue with other Christian denominations and with the rest of society.

### **The goal**

The Estonian Free Church identity will be described through the main characteristics and trends of development. The activity of churches, including their relationship with society, is reflected based on this description and on international discussion.

### **Sub-goals**

- To make information accessible to leaders and members of churches (there are videos, movies, podcasts and texts available about Free church identity).
- To better think through and map church-based initiatives in society; this will be expressed in scientific articles.
- To take part in the international discussion.

### **Activities and indicators**

- The Seminary will publish two collections of articles during the period of the research plan (2020–2026). These might be done as cooperative projects.
- The Seminary will organise at least five open lectures or discussions every year, which will aid in understanding free church identity and its distinctives. Some of them will be organised in cooperation between different denominations.
- Already, there are theological texts, audio- and video-recordings on the Seminary webpage. We propose to publish something new at least every third month.
- The Seminary faculty members will publish one to three scientific articles every year.
- The Seminary is organising at least one annual conference, which is connected to the main theme of the research. The materials of the conference will be available in the Seminary web page.
- We propose one international conference during the period of the research plan (possibly 2024–2026). This will include at least one of our partners (IBTSC in Amsterdam, Netherlands; Örebro School of Theology in Sweden; Elstal Theological Seminary in Germany or School of Theology and Leadership in Norway).
- Faculty members of the Seminary will contribute to the work of the Theological Committee of the Seminary, which explores practical topics, important for the free church identity and church life. The results will be published in written form.
- The better results of the students' research activity, including research papers, will be published in the journal of Teekäija, on the Seminary home page, as discussion articles in secular media or in web journal „Church and Theology“. Each year we will publish at least two to three articles written by students.

The realization of the research plan and its annual application plans will be evaluated at the end of the calendar year and presented to the Seminary Advisory Board. Each year the Seminary will ensure the resources for the fulfilment of the research plan. One of the directors of development in school leadership is responsible for coordinating the research activities.

The research plan was accepted in Seminary Advisory Board June 3, 2020. Edited and accepted again in December 3, 2021 and in December 6, 2024.