



## **ORDINATION** *We're listening.*

### **INTRODUCTION TO 13 OF THE BEST DOCUMENTS IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA ON THE TOPIC OF THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN**

This collection of documents begins in 1991 with the Final Report of the Special Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA). Despite its title, the report did not reach a final conclusion at that time, and subsequent documents indicate that the LCA still has not done so.

In compiling this short collection care has been taken to present documents that show both sides of the current disagreement, and that also represent the underlying hermeneutical question. Here you can see significant theologians argue both sides of the question with equal vigour, although for the most part the authors are not specified, as they are documents of the church and not of individuals.

This collection is not exhaustive, but is offered so that current members of the church can grow in understanding the theological background to the question before us. Additional resources will also be made available for those who want to explore the issue more deeply.

Please note: initially these documents are being provided in their original formatting.

#### **How these documents came about**

The LCA's individual history on this matter begins with the Theses of Agreement Article IV paragraph 11, which says that the Bible prohibits women from being ordained as pastors. This paragraph was formally adopted by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia and the Evangelical Church of Australia in 1956 and 1959 respectively. It went on to become part of the formative documentation of the LCA at the time of its inception in 1966.

In late 1987 the LCA's Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations (CTICR) appointed a special committee to study the matter at length. After meeting 20 times, the committee submitted its 63 page report in April 1991. The report did not settle the matter one way or the other, but its authors were united in their convictions:

- (1) that they had isolated the main issues
- (2) that the debate was more complicated than some had thought, and
- (3) that most churches that had decided in favour of the ordination of women had done so after an extensive period of theological reflection rather than out of a desire to keep up with trends in society

This report is the first document in this collection.

The following year the CTICR prepared a popular study guide for use in congregations, “Women and the ministry: a study on women and the office of the public ministry”. This little red booklet presented both sides of the argument in a clear and accessible format, and is the second document in this collection.

During the following decade countless papers were written on specific topics identified in the 1991 report: biblical hermeneutics, gospel and culture, God’s ordering of creation, the order of redemption, the pastoral office, the priesthood of all believers, pastoral authority, women in the gospels, headship in the church and the family, church tradition and ecumenical practice, and, time and time again, papers on different aspects of the two key texts from Paul’s letters, 1 Corinthians 14:33b-38 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14.

The arguments presented on both sides of the debate were summarised in the CTICR’s initial report on women’s ordination in November 1998 and again in its final report in September 1999.

Leading into the year 2000 General Convention, the CTICR concluded that ‘on balance scripture and theology permit the ordination of women’. The voting that followed a day’s debate at the General Pastors’ Conference and another day’s debate at the General Convention showed that the pastors and then the synod delegates were fairly evenly divided on the subject, a slight majority favouring the CTICR conclusion.

The issue was not tabled for discussion at the next General Convention in 2003. But a decision to re-open the topic for debate at the 2006 General Pastors’ Conference and General Convention in Toowoomba, Queensland ensured that the topic was soon back on the table of the CTICR. To assist the church-wide discussion and to help people prepare for Toowoomba, the CTICR decided to prepare six major papers, one on biblical hermeneutics, two summary papers presenting the arguments mounted by each side in the debate as clearly and as comprehensively as possible, an exegetical paper on the two texts that have featured most prominently in the debate from the perspective of those who oppose the ordination of women, an exegetical paper on the two texts from the perspective of those who support the ordination of women, and a paper on the pertinence of Galatians 3:26–29 to the debate, giving both sides of that discussion. The papers were published in the May 2005 issue of Lutheran Theological Journal, the journal of the ALC faculty. Popular summaries of the cases for and against women’s

ordination also appeared in *The Lutheran* in 2005. A selection of these documents is included in this collection.

Voting at Toowoomba in 2006 closely mirrored the outcome at Tanunda in 2000, with a slender majority of pastors and then delegates to convention again favouring the ordination of women, far short of the two-thirds majority required for a change in the church's teaching and practice. The church had reached an impasse.

At the Toowoomba convention the first consensus task force was set up, chaired by the President of the church. Its reported to the 2009 Melbourne convention when it was decided to form yet another group, which resulted in the Ordination Dialogue Group consisting of five pastors not previously involved in the debates. This group is still in existence and has contributed to the resources offered through 'Ordination. We're listening.'

Included in this collection are also three documents resulting from the Hermeneutics Symposium called by the President of the Church in 2011. They represent international Lutheran viewpoints on the question of the interpretation of Scripture, particularly relating to the ordination question. The question put to presenters was: 'How does the evangelical Lutheran church derive its theology and practice from the scriptures when reflecting on controversial topics such as the ordination of women?' The three papers included here are by Dr Jeffrey Kloha from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, USA, Dr Stephen Hultgren, a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America now teaching at ALC, and Dr Joel Humann from Westfield House, Cambridge, UK. The full collection of papers was published in the May 2012 issue of *Lutheran Theological Journal*.

In view of the sensitivity surrounding the topic of the ordination of women it is vital that the church remain committed to the pursuit of truth, unity and love. Christians are called to hold fast to the truth, confess the truth and reject error. They also acknowledge that believers are called to grow in Christian knowledge as the Spirit leads Christ's followers in all the truth.

The Lutheran church understands that new insights can become new teachings as long as those teachings are consistent with the whole of the Bible and the teaching of the gospel. In view of the Spirit's gift of unity and Paul's admonition to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3) we remain alert to the threat of church division, whichever way the issue is finally resolved. The LCA cannot avoid this issue out of fear of division, nor should it paper over decisive differences. Unity at the expense of truth and Christian consciences cannot be countenanced.

The final factor that governs decision-making in the church is the Spirit's gift of love. It is always hard to love those with whom one disagrees on a matter as important as the matter of the ordination of women. We are easily tempted to let disagreements lead to the rejection of others or to divide into opposing camps. When we succumb to such temptations it is important

to seek forgiveness, practise mutual admonition, and pray that the Spirit would continue to endow the church's members with his gifts of truth, unity and love.

October, 2013