

Q&A 8, Does the ordination issue have to be church divisive?

One of the concerns raised in discussions about the ordination of women is that it could ‘split the church’. Over the years the LCA has been blessed with remarkable unity, even amidst diverse opinions on many matters. But now, those on both sides of the question recognize that proceeding with the ordination of women could result in a rupture within the institution of the LCA. While no one can predict what in fact *will* happen given either outcome, the question addressed here is whether the ordination of women *has* to be divisive. In other words, would certain outcomes on the ordination question leave some members or congregations conscience-bound to separate from the LCA? Before we explore some of the theological and practical issues surrounding these questions, there are a few contextual matters worth noting.

First, and most importantly, synod will primarily be addressing the theological issue of whether it is biblically permissible to ordain women to the public ministry of word and sacrament. The practical implications of any decision for the unity of the church flows on from this theological deliberation. Care needs to be taken that what might happen as a result of either decision does not predetermine how we think biblically and theologically about this issue.

Second, it helps to define what we mean by unity and division. Here we can make a broad distinction between ‘baptismal unity’, ‘sacramental unity’ and ‘institutional unity’. The first is the foundational unity all Christians share with each other based on a common baptism and confession of faith in Jesus Christ. In a more narrow sense, there is also the sacramental unity of Christians who demonstrate their common confession by sharing together in Holy Communion. Happily, such sharing often extends across institutional boundaries; therefore we speak of the altar and pulpit fellowship of different church bodies. More narrowly still, there is institutional unity, which in this case concerns the teaching and organization of the LCA. Of course, other forms of unity are important too, such as cultural and family ties, for example. But our focus here is particularly on the sacramental and institutional unity of the LCA.

Third, as already mentioned, the question cannot be whether or not the ordination question will be church divisive. Rather, we are asking whether or not it *has* to be church divisive. It is neither possible nor prudent to predict how people might react in certain circumstances, but we can gauge whether or not scripture and theology actually direct us to give up visible unity when full doctrinal agreement is lacking. Obviously this is not a settled question. For some, the ordination question is a weighty enough matter to divide over, in spite of their concern for the unity of the church; for others, the sacramental and institutional unity of the LCA is itself of greater theological value.

With this in mind we now turn to a few core theological issues, followed by some further practical questions, before concluding with some recommendations on more or less helpful ways of proceeding.

Theological issues

Unity

Unity is a gift of God, and is ultimately an expression of God’s will for all creation (Ephesians 1:10). As a foretaste of this, the Triune God creates the unity of the church by uniting us with himself and with each other, through baptism into Christ and by the gift of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6). This unity extends across the generations with Christians of all times and places, and can be seen as the

Father's answer to the prayer of his Son (John 17:20-23). Therefore, as we confess in the creeds, we can make the audacious claim that the church is indeed 'one' and 'holy'.

This gift of unity is effected by the Holy Spirit, expressed by his people in a common confession of faith, and enacted sacramentally in the worship of the local congregation. Through the preaching of the gospel and the celebration of Holy Communion, Christ unites us with himself and each other, and he equips us for service in the world. We recognize that this 'participation in holy things' is the presupposition for all the other kinds of unity we enjoy in the LCA, such as a common mission, governance, and practice. Finally, the gift of unity also entails an ongoing task, that of preserving the gift of unity as much as is humanly possible (Romans 12:18). We are called to 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit' (Ephesians 4:3).

Disunity

Sadly, division is often the reality in a sinful world, including visible divisions in God's church. To some extent, disunity expresses the continuing influence of our fallen nature, both individually and communally. This does not mean that Christians should in every circumstance perpetuate an outward show of unity where a common confession of faith is lacking; sometimes faithfulness to God's word and the gospel leaves no other option but to separate.

Similarly, not every doctrinal controversy leads inevitably to division. It does so if there is a clear denial of the central tenets of the Christian faith. If one of the parties departs from those core doctrines confessed in the ecumenical creeds (e.g. the Trinity, or the person of Christ) or the Augsburg Confession (e.g. justification by faith, or the means of grace) separation becomes inevitable. However, false teaching, which may not in itself be a core issue, will impinge in some way or another on things that are considered 'central tenets', even if all false teaching is not on the same level.

The question for us then becomes: how does the ordination of women relate to these central doctrinal tenets? Some will maintain that because the ordination of women does not impinge on these central matters, it should not be a church divisive issue. Others, however, will claim that it is possibly church divisive because the ordination question touches on a central matter, namely the authority of scripture, and the ordination of women is seen to disregard scriptural authority.

Unity and division in the LCA

Before we address some possible practical outcomes, it is worth pausing to consider why this issue of unity and division looms so large in LCA thought and history. The very formation of the LCA came about through a decades long effort to overcome the disunity that separated the two former Lutheran synods. Such union did not come cheaply. Only through years of discussion was a church union achieved that maintained the theological integrity of each group. Both synods knew all too well the reality of church division. And so considerable care was taken to clarify key issues, overcome misunderstandings, and lay a synodical foundation that could support a common confession and mission, even while allowing a certain breadth of theological opinion.

In its [Theses of Agreement](#) (TA), the new church spelt out its principles governing [church fellowship](#) (TA, I). Here two specific points continue to guide our discussion concerning the ordination question.

- First, the Theses maintain that if a 'difference in teaching or practice is a departure from the doctrine of the Bible, such difference cannot be tolerated, but must be pointed out as an error, on the basis of clear passages of Holy Writ; and if the error is persisted in, in spite of instruction, warning, and earnest witness, it must at last lead to a separation' (TA, 1.4a).

- Second, while the Theses hold that false doctrine and practice are church divisive, they also remind us that any ‘differences in exegesis that do not affect doctrine are not church divisive’ (TA, 1.4e).

A key point, at least from the perspective of the Theses, is that the ordination question is not simply an isolated matter of biblical exegesis, but a specifically doctrinal matter (see TA 6.11). Because the ordination of women relates to the divine ordering of the ministry, the Theses view the question as impinging on a core doctrinal matter, and therefore require unanimity.

However, in 1976 the LCA’s Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations (CTICR) considered the question of the [permanent status](#) of the LCA’s Theses of Agreement and offered the following advice to the Church: ‘Like all confessional statements, the Theses of Agreement are always under the authority of God, and therefore there must always be a readiness to submit them to the critical scrutiny of God’s Word and accordingly confirm them, or amend or repudiate them when further study of God’s Word shows them to be inadequate or in error’ (‘The Permanent Status of the Theses of Agreement’, DSTO A26).

The question for the LCA at this point, then, is whether it can, with good conscience, change its previously stated doctrine and practice. In other words, can the LCA show that the issue of ordination involves differences of exegetical opinion that do not affect doctrine and so are not church divisive?

Practical questions

Whatever the actual decision will be at the upcoming synodical convention, there could be a number of practical outcomes. While we tend to associate such outcomes with a decision in favour of ordaining women, maintaining the status quo might also have ramifications of a practical nature.

A decision to retain the current teaching of the Church could lead to outcomes such as these:

- It could precipitate the departure of LCA members who have till now remained loyal to the Church while waiting and hoping for a change in teaching and practice.
- It could further hinder the perception of the Church’s attitude to women, both in the LCA and in the wider community.

A decision to change the current teaching of the Church could lead to outcomes such as these:

- Individuals may feel conscience-bound to leave a congregation when they can no longer worship in it, or a congregation or a group of congregations may feel conscience-bound to separate from the LCA because in their opinion it has moved away from one or more of its key doctrinal commitments.
- Individuals or congregations might remain within the LCA, but under protest. Their protest could be that they continue to state publicly their opposition to the decision of the LCA, or perhaps even work towards having the decision reversed following due synodical process.

In addition to these issues of conscience facing members and congregations, there are further practical questions that bishops and pastors have a special responsibility to address, even though they ultimately concern all members of the church:

- At present, pastors, though holding divergent views on this issue, can worship together. What are the implications for a united pastorate once a decision is made?

- How would bishops and pastors relate to dissenting pastors and congregations who wish to stay within the LCA?
- How would pastors care for dissenting members who wish to remain within the LCA but also voice publicly their opposition to the church's decision?
- Would the right of congregations to call pastors of their own choosing from the LCA Roll of Pastors remain unchanged?
- Would it be theologically feasible for a district, group of congregations, or an individual congregation to remain in the LCA while maintaining a different theology and practice with respect to ordaining women?
- How would a decision affect synodical functions, both services and debates on the floor of convention?
- What would be the possible implications for the church's mission, in Australian society generally, and also in specific cultural situations where the role of women might differ?
- How would our decision affect church relations with other Lutheran bodies, and with other Christian churches?

Conclusion

The main question underlying this discussion has not been whether the ordination of women *will* divide the church, but whether it *has* to divide the church. In thinking this question through, we stressed that the first question the LCA has to address is the biblical and theological permissibility of the ordination of women. The implications of whatever decision is reached for the LCA's unity is strictly speaking a secondary issue, although it was also noted that the unity of Christ's church is itself a theological issue that needs to be kept in view.

Because of the apostle Paul's words to 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3), the attitude with which we discuss the ordination question is of the highest importance. Even if church separation cannot be ruled out, it should always be our goal to avoid such an outcome. To this end, we commend [A Message from the LCA Bishop](#) to readers for some very helpful steps towards the making of a healthy dialogue.

As we continue to discuss this matter, it is faith that leads us to listen as attentively as we can to God's word; it is hope that keeps us listening as attentively as we can to each other, and it is love that binds us together as we do so.