

# Joint statement to the members of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand

on the third special meeting of the General Church Board and the College of Bishops on the **division within the LCA NZ over the ordination of women and men**

March 2021 (this statement April–May 2021)



## Background

In August 2020, the General Church Board (GCB) and the College of Bishops (CoB) released a **Report to the LCA NZ on a special meeting of the General Church Board and the College of Bishops on the division in the LCA NZ over the ordination of women and men.**

The report reflected on the division among Australian and New Zealand Lutherans over the sex of the ordained pastor. Many years of studying the Scriptures and listening to the word of God and several formal votes at Conventions of Synod have not resolved our differences on the admissibility of ordaining both men and women to the holy office of the ministry of word and sacrament. Accordingly, the LCA NZ continues to uphold a male-only pastorate.

The August 2020 report was an attempt by the GCB and the CoB to hold a mirror up to the church that would reflect, in summary-form, the conflicting 'scenarios', or 'pictures' that as leaders we hear pastors and members saying they want to see:

- Scenario one: a single LCA NZ Synod – one teaching, two practices
- Scenario two: a single LCA NZ Synod – status quo (current teaching upheld)
- Scenario three: multiple Lutheran Synods – we can no longer remain together.

We are thankful to those people who sent us written responses. We learned more about our church and the wonderful people God has called together. We also learned more about our fears, desires and the fixed lines of division that sadly lie among us.

In total, we received 48 formal or written responses from individuals and congregations and many more informal ones that were not recorded. One district held a workshop, and a parish videoed a panel discussion and published it online. People and pastors are still talking about their responses to these three scenarios.

# Responses to August 2020 report

In March 2021, the GCB and the CoB met to analyse and reflect on the responses to the August 2020 report.

- We are grateful to those who expressed their prayers for us as leaders.
- Most respondents gravitated to one or another of the three scenarios.
- A small number praised us for our frankness in naming the division.
- Quite a few, from both sides of the debate, criticised us for failing to lead – that is, to pursue the ‘right’ solution they want to see.
- One or two proposed their own solutions.

Across all responses, there was a trend towards believing that the GCB and the CoB were proposing options that would somehow solve the problem. This was never our intention. We did not create these scenarios or present them as solutions. Individually, GCB members and bishops have their own preferences, but as a group of leaders, we presented the scenarios as summaries of what we see and hear from church members.

We reflected them back as in a mirror to show not only how serious our situation is but also how incompatible the different demands seem to be. If forced upon the whole church, none of them will bring about the unifying, loving outcome we need as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

The GCB and the CoB noted, in summary:

- Most respondents reinforced existing positions and did not offer anything new.
- The majority of responses expressed individual views, and only a few expressed the considered responses of groups or congregations.
- Women’s voices were underrepresented in the responses. (We have no way to accurately gauge the age of respondents.)
- Unity appears to be important to most, and they are keen to find a way forward that does not result in separation.
- One or two thought that unity might have become a kind of idol.
- One congregation proposed a geographical or a non-geographical ‘district’ that teaches and confesses the ordination of all suitably qualified persons to the office of the public ministry.
- The relevance of Thesis of Agreement (TA)1 *Principles governing church fellowship*<sup>1</sup> was a reasonably new contribution from some respondents.

Overall, the GCB and the CoB found that the responses confirm the church’s continuing division over this matter. Further proposals to Synods seeking a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answer are not likely to bridge the gap or serve the unity of the LCA NZ.

We considered whether TA 1 or at least its principles and processes offers a way through the deadlock. TA 1 describes what is essential for church fellowship and what happens ‘where differences in teaching and practice exist or arise’. These principles were prepared in the late 1940s as the two Lutheran bodies in Australia began working towards union. More than 70 years later, and 56 years since that union took place, are these principles still relevant to our situation? TA 1 also outlines a process of discernment for when everyone has willingly submitted to the word of God, as the GCB and the CoB believe the LCA NZ has, yet have not reached agreement or unanimity on the outcome, as we also have not. The principles and the process are centred on Holy Scripture, the central doctrine of justification through faith in Jesus Christ, and the public doctrine of the church as laid out in the Lutheran Confessions (specifically, the *Book of Concord* of 1580).

## Three actions

Together, the GCB and the CoB agreed on three initial actions in preparation for the General Pastors Conference (GPC) and the General Convention of Synod in 2021.

- (1) The GPC is a theological advisor to the Synod<sup>2</sup> and is scheduled to meet in July 2021. The GCB is formally asking the GPC to provide advice in advance of the General Convention on the relevance of TA 1 *Principles governing church fellowship* to the ongoing discussion about the ordination of both men and women in the LCA, with specific attention to the intent of TA 1.4 and the applicability or inapplicability of the process outlined in TA 1.4.e to the current debate.
- (2) The Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations will work (with the CoB) on framing questions and providing background papers for the GPC on the applicability/inapplicability of TA 1.
- (3) The GCB and the CoB will work together to frame any questions and/or proposals on the ordination matter that might be useful for the 2021 General Convention and for the wellbeing of the church.

<sup>1</sup> Go to [www.lca.org.au](http://www.lca.org.au) > Departments & Agencies > Theology and Inter-Church Relations > Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions > Volume 1 > Theses of Agreement, or download directly via <https://lca.box.net/shared/static/47fo39f7doy97f56jneo.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The LCA NZ has consistently regarded this as a doctrinal matter, and, therefore, LCA By-Laws 5.6.2 and 7.3.28.2 apply. <https://www.lca.org.au/download/lca-constitution/>

# Pastoral considerations

Thirty years of debate tell us that somehow, for some reason, the sex of a pastor matters – one way or the other, depending on your view. But do we really know why it matters so much to us in the LCAANZ and why for some of us, it seems to have become the proverbial line-in-the-sand, the issue of such gravity that it threatens to divide us?

God calls us in the midst of our marvellous, God-given diversity, telling us that we are united in Christ, each one of us part of his family, uniquely chosen, loved, reborn and redeemed by him. What does that unity as God's dearly beloved children look like when we have such strongly differing understandings on the proper sex of a pastor?

We are all baptised believers, confident in the new life of the Spirit and our freedom in Christ. We are also Lutheran Christians who learn in the Small Catechism: 'We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.'<sup>3</sup> Yes, God loves us, even to death, and we love and trust him. We believe in the truth of the Scriptures.<sup>4</sup> Yet, we differ on this aspect of what it means to fear, love and trust God. How much must this divide us, if at all, and why?

Sometimes, sadly, the weight of passion we have invested in this debate has caused us to turn on each other, putting members of the LCAANZ into different sides or camps. We have heard, thought and even voiced self-righteous and hurtful remarks. It is time to humble ourselves before God and pray that he will show us the better way. In Luke's Gospel, Martha thought she was doing the right thing serving Jesus and that her sister Mary was in error. Both were followers of Jesus, so Martha rightly took her concern to him. Jesus gently reminded her of the one thing needful – to sit at the Lord's feet and listen to what he is saying.<sup>5</sup> That's what we have been trying to do as a church. Now, after many years of careful scriptural debate among theologians, pastors and lay people, and no resolution in sight, what is the Lord saying to us? Surely it is not that we should recklessly hurt one another but that we should peacefully work out what this means in practice, and with God's help, love one another, even as he loves us.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, please be gracious to your church and all those who serve – lay and ordained – in your mission. Unite us in faith so that with one mind, one heart and one voice, we always give glory to you.

We ask that our pastors walk with you in humble service. As you sent John the Baptist into the wilderness to prepare your way, may they announce your coming, making straight ways for you.

We ask that our congregations and communities grow in faith, love and joy. Grant them open hearts to work alongside their pastors in joyful sharing, patient partnerships and gracious forgiveness as they work together for you.

We ask you to use us in your work to save the world from which you have called us and into which you send us. Jesus is the Light of the World. He shines clearly in the darkness so everyone may believe in him. Keep us believing in him. Keep us shining with his light. Protect us from everything that would separate us from you.

Holy Spirit, please guide us as the people and pastors of the LCAANZ, that we may remain constant in baptismal grace, courageous in the face of adversity, honest and transparent in everything we say and do, and above all, keep us united in the one true faith all the days of our lives.

In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

**Pastor John Henderson**, Churchwide Bishop  
**Dr Nigel Long**, Secretary of the Church

On behalf of the General Church Board: Paul Argyle, Charmaine Harch, Faye Schmidt, Tim Stringer, Tim Wiebusch, Mel Zerner and Peter Zweck, and the College of Bishops: David Altus, Mike Fulwood, Rob Bartholomaeus, Andrew Pfeiffer, Lester Priebbenow, Paul Smith and Mark Whitfield

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<sup>3</sup> The Small Catechism of Martin Luther, Explanation to the First Commandment

<sup>4</sup> LCA Constitution, Article 2 'Confession': 'The Church accepts without reservation the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as a whole and in all their parts, as the divinely inspired, written and inerrant Word of God, and as the only infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine and life.'

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:41,42 (CEV): 'The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha! You are worried and upset about so many things, but only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen what is best, and it will not be taken away from her".'