

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

### VOLUME 3

### C. CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

## Church fellowship and the LCA

*The following statement combines and builds on three doctrinal statements previously adopted by the LCA: 'Altar and pulpit fellowship' (1966), 'Fellowship and declared fellowships' (1968 and 1972), and 'Relationships with overseas churches' (1968). Part one traces developments in church relations between the years 1966 and 2000; part two summarises theological principles that govern church fellowship; part three describes how relations with Lutheran and non-Lutheran churches can be maintained and new relations developed; part four addresses practical implications for the future.*

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### A. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

#### 1. Relationships with Lutheran churches overseas

1.1 Prior to the formation of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) in 1966 the ELCA practised fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in America and with SELK and others in Germany. The UELCA was in fellowship with the American Lutheran Church and also a member of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Both Australian synods were involved in Papua New Guinea. But they had no formal fellowship with each other. The Intersynodical Committee discussed and produced theses on such issues as:

- Principles governing church fellowship
- Joint prayer and worship
- The church
- The office of the ministry

1.2 At the time of synodical amalgamation in 1966 the LCA severed all overseas fellowships and relationships (except those with Papua New Guinea). The Document of union asked the new church to act on a 'case by case' basis when dealing with relationships with overseas Lutheran churches. This 'special case' approach is outlined in a recommendation by the Joint Union Committee of the amalgamating churches to the Constituting Convention. The Convention resolved:

That although according to paragraph 12 of the Document of Union we cannot automatically invite members of Lutheran churches to our altars and pulpits until altar and pulpit fellowship has been established with their Churches, we nevertheless believe that in special cases the question of occupying pulpits should also be considered on the merits of each case, and shall require the approval of the Officials of the Church, and that the question of communing should be determined pastorally according to the past practice of the amalgamating churches.

1.3 The new church also gave itself the task of taking up overseas relationships as soon as the union within Australia was cemented. The following documentation of issues and statements indicates the LCA's progressive grappling with this task to the present day.

- a. In 1968 the Convention of General Synod adopted the statement 'Fellowship and declared fellowships'. This was reiterated by General Synod, 1972 Convention. This statement addresses:
  - i. our belief that 'the One, Holy, Christian Church is present in those visible churches where the marks of the church are to be found' and
  - ii. our belief that 'true Christians are found in every denomination in which to a greater or lesser degree the marks of the One, Holy, Christian Church are present in spite of existing errors and we rejoice in the unity of Spirit that binds all true believers to their one Lord.'

The statement affirms the position enunciated in the Document of Union (1966):

We acknowledge ourselves to be in church fellowship with all Lutheran churches which subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions in their constitutions and adhere to them in their public teaching and practice.

The statement spells this out in further detail, asking that the church with which fellowship is to be established subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions, in effect demanding that there be agreement in Word and Sacrament. According to the Augsburg Confession, Article 7, such agreement is sufficient for the true unity of the church. There must also be consonance between the formal acceptance of the Confessions and the actual teaching and ecclesiastical life of the church concerned.

- b. These difficulties were also recognised in 1968 (see DSTO 1C: 'Relationships with overseas churches'). World Lutheranism, this statement says, 'is in a state of flux'. The LCA admitted that 'the boundary lines between the genuine Lutheran Church and nominal Lutherans today are not everywhere so clear to allow for clear-cut and unambiguous choices.' It was acknowledged that it is not easy to arrive at responsible decisions with regard to overseas church fellowship. In view of this, the LCA asked overseas Lutheran churches for patience.
- c. Inter-Lutheran relationships overseas were addressed by the LCA, including membership in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), International Lutheran Council (ILC), and relationships with Indonesian Lutheran churches. Since its inception the ILC has invited the LCA to participate in its discussions and that invitation has been accepted. The LCA pays an annual membership fee and is afforded 'associate' status which allows LCA representatives voice but no vote in proceedings. The LCA has also been closely associated with Lutheran churches in Indonesia, especially with the Batak Church.
- d. The 1981 Synod declared that membership in the LWF 'is possible and does not necessarily invalidate or impair the confessional position' of the LCA. Two provisos were given:

- i. that membership does not involve 'mutual or reciprocal' church fellowship on the part of the LCA with any of the member churches, and
- ii. that it is made clear to the LWF that the LCA continues 'in close relationship with those Churches in the Lutheran family that have a confessional attitude similar to that enunciated in the Theses of Agreement'.

LCA discussions towards joining the LWF stalled with LWF's decision at Budapest in 1984 whereby member churches are to understand themselves as being in altar and pulpit fellowship with one another.

- e. In 1993 the LCA resolved to seek associate membership in the LWF, something which became a reality in 1994 (see DSTO 2C: 'The Lutheran Church of Australia's application for membership in the Lutheran World Federation').
- f. Also at the 1993 Convention of General Synod, the LCA resolved to enter into a Recognition of relationship with the Lutheran Church Canada (see DSTO 2C: 'Recognition of relationship: A confessional agreement between the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Lutheran Church - Canada').
- g. In 1998 the LCA in consultation with the LWF held a special *Communio* Consultation to discuss fellowship issues. Key points or questions emanating from this consultation were prepared for discussion by pastors' conferences and the church.
- h. In 1991 the College of Presidents produced 'Guidelines for the determination of pulpit fellowship'. In these guidelines safeguards are laid down so that the good of the LCA is served. Pastors/leaders from other Lutheran churches are to be accorded pulpit fellowship with the LCA only after due theological discussion. Favourable consideration for pulpit fellowship may be given to pastors/leaders from Lutheran churches which have a fraternal understanding with the LCA.

The guidelines emphasise that the exposition of the Word of God is the domain of the called pastor of the congregation.

## **2. Relationships with other Christian churches in Australia**

- 2.1 Relationships with other Christian churches in Australia was not a major consideration in 1966. In the 1970s the LCA commenced dialogue with other Australian churches - the Roman Catholic, Uniting, Anglican, and Reformed churches. Since 2000 the LCA has had a representative on the LWF-sponsored International Lutheran-Orthodox Commission. The progress of interchurch dialogue is reported to the LCA through the CTICR.
- 2.2 In 1990 Synod adopted the statement, 'Some Pastoral Guidelines for Responsible Communion Practice' (DSTO 2E). In this statement pastors are called upon to take responsibility in their congregations for those who may participate in the Lords Supper.
- 2.3 Discussions about joining the new National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) took place before, during and after the 1993 Convention of General Synod. In 1997 General Synod resolved that the LCA apply for full membership in the Council. The application was duly approved.
- 2.4 In 1993 the CTICR adopted Theses of Agreement I: 'Joint prayer and worship' (see Theological Principles below).

- 2.5 In September 1994, the CTICR and the Church Relations Committee adopted 'Pastoral care of isolated members of the LCA' (see DSTO 2G).
- 2.6 In 2000, the LCA-Uniting Church and LCA-Anglican dialogues presented reports dealing with relationships and 'covenanting' between our respective churches (see *Declaration of mutual recognition* [LCA/UCA] and *Common Ground* [LCA/ACA]).
- 2.7 In 2000, General Synod passed the resolution: 'Pastoral care in special circumstances (e.g. isolated areas):

**BE IT RESOLVED that the College of Presidents**

- i. establish and supervise local arrangements for pastoral care in special circumstances, e.g. isolated areas, on a church to church basis;
- ii. finalise the working proposals with the Anglican Church of Australia and the Uniting Church in Australia after considering the responses of District pastors conferences;
- iii. report to the next synodical convention with any recommendations.

## B. THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

1. The perfect fellowship that exists within the Godhead is the source of fellowship between the people of God. St John writes, 'We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ' (1 John 1:3). All in whom the Spirit of God creates faith through his holy word and holy baptism are united with Christ who is their way to the Father. As members of Christ's body, they are in intimate relation with him who is their Head, receiving from him their life through the Spirit by means of his word and sacraments.
2. Since there is 'one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, there is also one body' (Eph 4:4–6). This one holy church is 'principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons' (Ap. VII & VIII, 5). The church is therefore hidden in God (Col 3:3). Its unity is an article of faith, as confessed in the Nicene Creed ('We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church').
3. While hidden in God, the church is at the same time a public fellowship in the means of grace. '[It] nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognised, namely the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ' (Ap. VII & VIII, 5).
4. It is this proclamation of the gospel and right administration of the sacraments that is needed to maintain the unity of the church as a visible fellowship (AC VII). On the Day of Pentecost, those who were converted 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:42). While agreement in apostolic teaching maintains God-given fellowship, false teaching disrupts it.
5. Agreement in apostolic teaching is expressed especially by participation together in the Lord's Supper. Those who receive it thereby publicly proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again (1 Cor 11:26). All who receive it in faith are united in the one body (1 Cor 10:16,17). Participation in the Lord's Supper without agreement in apostolic teaching implies that matters of truth are unimportant and weakens the public proclamation of the gospel in the sacrament.
6. Public declarations of fellowship prior to participation in the Lord's Supper and the sharing of altars and pulpits make clear what a church's confession is and where that

church's loyalties lie. The apostle Paul, on his second journey to the church at Jerusalem, set before the leaders there the gospel he taught, as expounded in his letter to the Galatians. It was acknowledged that there was agreement in the gospel, and Paul and Barnabas were given the right hand of fellowship by James, Peter and John, the 'pillars' of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:8–10; compare also the strengthening of the bonds of fellowship by letter, Acts 15:22–35).

## C. STARTING POINTS AND GUIDELINES IN RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

### 1. Relationships with Lutheran churches overseas

- 1.1 The LCA is committed to the Lutheran Confessions. We start from the premise that the LCA is already in fellowship with all those who subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions unless there are clear doctrinal reasons why we must deny fellowship.
- 1.2 We continue to study the matter of full membership in the LWF, taking into consideration point 1 above as we assess on a case by case basis the practice of others who subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions and affirm the desirability of Lutherans world-wide being able to worship and work together.

### 2. Relationships with other Christian churches in Australia

- 2.1 We take seriously the principles enunciated in the Theses of Agreement on fellowship. We note especially the following statements in Volume 2 of *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions* (1966) which can serve pastors and people in the LCA well as they relate to others in the Christian church:
  - There are times when joint prayer/joint worship are appropriate and there are times when they are not.
  - Members of the LCA are to remember that they are confessing Lutherans as they determine and practise relations with other Christians.
  - Members of the LCA in determining their worship relationship (and all other church fellowship relationships) with other Christians will act in keeping with the Word of God and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church (see TA V.26 and the Document of Union, DSTO A28.5).
  - While members of the LCA will normally attend their own Lutheran worship services, there may be valid reasons for their attending on special occasions worship services of other denominations or services of an ecumenical nature.
  - There are levels of complexity in inter-church relationships and in confessional responsibility in the arena of joint prayer and worship. On the one hand, this complexity should challenge members of the LCA to work through the issues in the light of LCA fellowship principles so that they may act responsibly. On the other hand, this complexity should not become an excuse for actions which suggest that the issues have not been carefully worked through on the basis of these same principles.
  - When situations are complex, participation in joint prayer and worship come down to individual judgement and conscience on the basis of the application of the theological principles stated above. So it may happen that two individual Lutherans opt for two seemingly different behaviours in similar contexts. In such instances the issue is not the two different behaviours but the grounds on which the individuals base their behaviours. (TA II,10 and TA,DSTO 2A, sections 4.1-6)
- 2.2 We reaffirm the responsible communion practice statement, 'Some Pastoral Guidelines for Responsible Communion Practice' (see DSTO E2) whereby pastors are to act responsibly in the administration of the Sacrament of the Altar (see DSTO E2).
- 2.3 We affirm that pastors and presidents together are responsible for the word of God taught and proclaimed in the LCA. (See LCA document, *Guidelines for the Determination of Pulpit Fellowship*, 1991).

- 2.4 In urging pastors and congregations to work on the basis of the fellowship principles outlined in the *Theses of Agreement* and in the statement *Joint Prayer and Worship* (1993), we recognise that they are to work under the guidance of the College of Presidents in these matters.
- 2.5 As a result of inter-church dialogue General Synod has recognised that sufficient common ground has been gained to establish a program of pastoral care in special circumstances with the Anglican and Uniting churches (see 2000 Convention resolution 16, cited above in section A,2.7).

## D. A WAY FORWARD IN FELLOWSHIP

The theological principles of fellowship set out in section II above are not a set of abstractions that exist without regard to the context to which they apply. While it will not be easy, the LCA's adherence to and implementation of these theological principles must take account of the shifting context in which the church conducts its ministries; each must inform the other.

### 1. Relationships with Lutheran churches overseas

In respect of the international Lutheran church scene the LCA has expressed its wish to relate fully to Lutheran churches overseas. This is facilitated by its progressive recognition of shared theological bases and ongoing participation in inter-Lutheran groups as appropriate.

### 2. Relationships with other Christian churches in Australia

In the Australian church landscape, the fellowship, inter-church and denominational scene has altered dramatically in more recent times. The profile of Lutherans has also changed significantly. They were once predominantly rural; now they are largely urban. Substantive changes have occurred in the roles and expectations of women. The educational level of men and women alike has been raised. Many Lutheran people are highly mobile, and in moving their place of residence several times in a lifetime they are often in locations where there are no Lutheran churches. Where this is the case, they may have recourse to other churches to sustain their worship life. This is particularly evident in declining rural areas.

A well-defined range of factors has moved the LCA in recent times to modify its ways of relating to other denominations in Australia:

- 2.1 the unfolding recognition of common ground with certain other denominations as a result of dialogue and ecumenical relationships;
- 2.2 the recognition that members of the LCA can take their place in the Australian inter-church scene without damage to their confessional integrity;
- 2.3 the need for a cooperative approach to ministry in areas of declining membership;
- 2.4 the recognition that appropriate joint work in ministry may be able to take place in emergency situations prior to formal agreement in doctrine and practice;
- 2.5 the knowledge and understanding that the LCA has much to offer the wider church scene as well as much to learn from it.

The need for the LCA to maintain its confessional integrity as it continues to explore and develop its inter-church relationships is unarguable. Moreover, its Confessions will need clear articulation in the ongoing consideration of issues such as those referred to above.