

# General Pastors Conference

## Advice to the 19<sup>th</sup> General Convention of Synod (2018)

### Preamble

The General Pastors Conference (GPC) of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) met from 10-12 July 2018 at St Michael's Church and School Hahndorf South Australia, in order to fulfil its duty to give guidance and to serve as a theological adviser to the 19<sup>th</sup> General Convention of Synod in matters of doctrine and confession [LCA By-Laws 5.6.2.1, 2.2 and 2.3]. The business of the meeting was to consider the proposals referred to it by the General Church Council (GCC) at its meeting of 15-16 June 2018 in preparation for the forthcoming 19<sup>th</sup> General Convention of Synod to be held from 2-7 October 2018.

The GPC was mindful of its responsibility to assist the 19<sup>th</sup> General Convention of Synod according to the 'Procedure in Transacting Business at a General Synod' [LCA By-Laws 7.3.28.2] which states '*a matter deemed to be of a theological and confessional nature...shall be considered by the Convention only after a recommendation has been received from the General Pastor's Conference*'.

The guidance contained in this document represents the earnest and prayerful endeavour of the GPC to offer advice and recommendation to the 19<sup>th</sup> General Convention of Synod in regard to the proposals referred to it.

*Please note: the text contained in boxes is the result of work done by the College of Bishops (CoB) after the conclusion of the GPC, at the request of the GPC.*

### Theological and confessional matters considered by the GPC

The GPC considered the following items:

1. 18<sup>th</sup> General Convention of Synod (2015) resolution

*2015:0216: RESOLVED: that Synod requests the CTICR to build on its earlier work regarding the ordination of women and men to develop a draft doctrinal statement for GPC and the 19<sup>th</sup> Convention of Synod that presents:*

- *A theological basis for the ordination of women and men.*
- *A theological basis for why the ordination of women and men need not be church divisive.*
- *And that GCC resource it.*

The two 'theological basis' statements were before the GPC.

## 19<sup>th</sup> General Convention of Synod (2018) proposals referred by GCC to the GPC

### Ordination of women and men

- a. 20 proposals that *'the Lutheran Church of Australia amend its public teaching to accept the ordination of both men and women'*;
- b. One proposal that *'the Synod not endorse "A Theological Basis for the Ordination of Women and Men: Draft Doctrinal Statement"'*;
- c. One proposal that *'no further discussion come before Synod to amend the Theses of Agreement VI regarding the Office of the Ministry'*;
- d. One proposal *'that Synod not endorse the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations (CTICR) paper " Theological Basis for why the ordination of women and men need not be Church divisive"'*;
- e. One proposal that *'before any vote is conducted regarding the ordination of both men and women, no less than one hour be set aside to allow the clear presentation of the Scriptural case for the ordination of men only'* was shared with the GPC for information only;

### Infant Communion

- f. One proposal that *'the LCA encourage the practice of admitting very young children, including infants, to Holy Communion'*;

### Full membership in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF)

- g. Two proposals that *'the Lutheran Church of Australia becomes a full member of the Lutheran World Federation'*;
- h. Four proposals that *'the Lutheran Church of Australia applies for full membership of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF)'*;

### Full membership in the International Lutheran Council (ILC)

- i. Two proposals that *'the Lutheran Church of Australia becomes a full member of the International Lutheran Council'*.

## **With respect to the ordination of women and men**

In discussion on the first day of Conference pastors were asked to reflect on the business before the conference and to offer input to assist the planning of business.

Input from those discussions identified common threads, which included connecting the discussion of proposals on the ordination of women and men with the Draft Doctrinal Statement (DDS) on that issue, ensuring a plenum discussion to share views on the DDS, and allowing the pastorate to be heard by way of some type of vote.

The DDS on the ordination of women and men was the first item of business.

## **Recommendation 1**

**The GPC recommends** to the Convention of Synod that any proposal to change the teaching of the Church in relation to the question of the ordination of women be done in the form of a proposal to adopt the Draft Doctrinal Statement prepared by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations called 'A Theological Basis for the Ordination of Women and Men'.

### **The GPC discussed the DDS on the ordination of women and men**

In the discussion about the DDS on the ordination of women and men many points were made. We make the Convention of Synod aware of some of them with the understanding that they do not represent a consensus among the pastorate.

- In paragraphs 1-3 of the DDS the data may be relatively uncontroversial but questions were raised about whether the data warranted the conclusions drawn;
- Paragraph 4 was affirmed in light of the early church experience of living in a united way with theological differences;
- In paragraph 4 the use of cultural arguments was questioned;
- In paragraph 5 the relevance of Galatians 3:26-28 to the issue to this discussion was questioned;
- In paragraph 6 the inclusion of 'male and female' in relation to the Apology to the Augsburg Confession 7/8, 28 was questioned;
- Paragraph 6 was highlighted as significant to the case for the ordination of women and men, especially in terms of guiding the LCA in how it reads scripture;
- Reference to the LCA's teaching in Theses of Agreement 6:1-10 should be incorporated within the DDS.

After discussion the GPC voted on the following statement: *'Do you support changing the Church's teaching to that contained in the Draft Doctrinal Statement on the Ordination of Women and Men?'*

The result was: Yes 44.5%, No 55%, one ballot was returned blank. The GPC noted a lack of consensus in the pastorate on the sufficiency of the DDS as a basis for changing the church's teaching. This vote taken at GPC is not necessarily indicative of how pastors might vote on the proposals that have been submitted to the 19<sup>th</sup> General Convention of Synod.

### **The GPC then discussed the DDS on church divisiveness**

Various points were made including:

- Matters of conscience regarding any synodical decision are relevant to those who hold a committed view on the question;
- Questions of clarification or definition about issues were raised such as:
  - Are there different types of unity and at what point may division arise?
  - Is agreement on foundational doctrines only sufficient for church unity?
  - What is an 'open question' and what can remain an 'open question'?
- There were expressions of a united commitment to Scripture but exegetical differences remain. Implications drawn from those differences impact approaches to what teaching and pastoral practice are acceptable;
- What might this mean for how pastors best serve the church in light of the possible divergence between the thinking of pastors and lay people in relation to these issues?

### **The GPC then discussed the congregational proposals referred by the GCC**

The GPC advises the Convention of Synod of the need to allow focussed time for a discussion around the issue of unity in the church. The GPC expressed a pastoral concern for the unity of the church whatever the outcome of any synodical vote.

## **Recommendation 2**

**The GPC recommends** to the Convention of Synod that in light of GPC concerns for the unity of the church, GPC recommends to Synod that time be given at Convention to discuss the matter of the unity of the Church.

### **Recommendation 3**

**The GPC recommends** to the Convention of Synod that the Draft Doctrinal Statement 'A Theological Basis for Why the Ordination of Women and Men Need Not Be Church Divisive' serves as part of the discussion rather than being presented for adoption by the Church.

#### **In peace and with love - a pastoral word from the Bishops.**

The God of love and peace will be with you (2 Cor.13:11b).

In spite of differences, the pastorate of the LCA is united in its concern for the unity of the church and has asked the Bishops to provide pastoral advice regarding the possible outcomes of the vote on the DDS on the ordination of women and men. We acknowledge that this discussion leads to anxiety and pain for many. Whether the church decides to retain or change its teaching, there are likely to be those whose deeply held convictions put them at odds with the church's teaching on this matter.

As we work with the outcome of any synodical decision, the Bishops encourage people to respect the burden of conscience for some. This can be done when we all:

- Recall that through our common baptism into Christ we remain united with each other;
- Put the best construction on the motives of others (Luther's Small Catechism explanation to the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment);
- Make every effort to avoid unnecessary damage to the church and the proclamation of the gospel.

The Bishops encourage all of us as God's people to enter into prayerful reflection in the days leading up to and beyond the synod and to continue to be patient, showing restraint, whatever may happen.

In the name of the Triune God, let us all strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3)

The GPC noted that the following issues raised in 2015 CoB advice continue to require attention and discussion in the church

- 1) The ongoing question of how the LCA understands and interprets Scripture.
- 2) The parameters of unity and diversity in the church – how much diversity is possible within our Church while still preserving our unity.
- 3) The pastoral implications for the church and its pastorate of either maintaining or changing the present teaching on the ordination of women and men.

#### **With respect to Infant Communion**

The GPC discussed this matter and resolved the following:

**The GPC resolved to** affirm the conclusions of the 2012 CTICR statement on Infant Communion, namely, that there is no change to the Church's position as stated in the 1986 Doctrinal Statement and Theological Opinion (DSTO) document 'Infant Communion' but that the Church offer to families the preparation and admission of children to communion at the earliest possible age, paying due attention to the connection between communion and life-long catechesis.

The GPC requests that the Convention of Synod note the resolution from the GPC as it considers the congregational proposal about Infant Communion.

The CoB considers that this resolution is a recommendation to the Convention of Synod

### **With respect to the LWF and the ILC**

The proposals submitted by various congregations regarding the LCA becoming a full member of the LWF and becoming a full member of the ILC were referred to the GPC by the GCC.

The conference received the following advice from LCA Bishop John Henderson in his report to the GPC, '*Membership in the LWF has been regarded as a theological matter for some years, particularly since the LWF voted to become a 'communion' of churches in 1990. Membership in the ILC has not been regarded as a theological matter.*' The Bishop recommended handling these two membership issues together.

After discussion the GPC resolved the following:

#### **Recommendation 4**

**The GPC recommends** to the Convention of Synod that the LCA commission a study of the implications and advisability of full membership in both the LWF and the ILC and arrange for the presentation of a report with recommendations to the 2021 GPC and Convention of Synod.

### **Late Proposal regarding the National Redress Scheme**

The GPC discussed and resolved the following:

**The GPC notes** with gratitude the decision of the General Church Council that the LCA join the National Redress Scheme following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and encourage the CoB and GCC as they deal with the range of issues that arise. The GPC encourages pastors and members of the LCA to greater awareness of the impacts of all kinds of abuse on individuals and on the whole community, as we demonstrate concern, care, and compassion, working together as the people of God to prevent and respond to abuse, making genuine efforts to reduce its incidence in church, community, and family settings.

## Pastoral Conclusion

Led by the Holy Spirit and with thanksgiving, the GPC offers this advice to the delegates of the 19<sup>th</sup> General Convention of Synod.

Together with you, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we share a deep commitment to our Lord and his church. The GPC was immersed in worship and prayer, and its conversations were marked by considerate language and a gentle spirit. The foremost concern of the pastors was for the well-being and advancement of the church.

The pastors pray that this advice is beneficial to you as we prepare for the 19<sup>th</sup> General Convention of Synod in October. As we get ready to gather in Sydney may we:

- uphold the truth of the gospel in our words and our deeds;
- work to maintain the unity of the church through the power of the Spirit;
- make sound and healthy decisions based on Scripture and guided by our Confessions;
- conduct our business in ways that are life-giving for the whole church;
- commit to work charitably, peacefully and patiently with those who struggle with the outcome of any synodical decision;
- join together in thanking and praising God for his goodness to us;
- commit to a common life of discipleship and witness to our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we prayed in 2015, so we pray again:

*Heavenly Father thank you for your church into which you have graciously called us.*

*Thank you for your Word through which you reveal your will and work in this world.*

*As we look forward to and plan for our General Convention of Synod, give our delegates wisdom, guidance and patience. Open our hearts to your leading so that we may speak and act in ways that will honour your name.*

*Continue to give us unity as we consider the business before us, especially matters of a theological and confessional nature.*

*Focus our attention on you and empower us with your Holy Spirit so that we continue to bring the joy of your salvation to our communities and your love to life in our world.*

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*