

Precis of presentation:

What does it mean to be a confessional Lutheran in a church planting context? When you have people who are coming to faith who have never encountered the Bible before, let alone the Lutheran confessions, where do you begin in living and giving the treasures of our confessional heritage? How can a church planter remain authentically Lutheran while living in a mission context, and are there some boundaries that have to be stretched a little? These questions and more will be the ones that Nathan begins to explore in his presentation as part of the 'What does it mean to be a confessional Lutheran in your context of ministry' presentation.

Brothers in ministry,

I thank God for your partnership in the Gospel. It's a privilege to speak to you today about what it means to be a confessional Lutheran in a church planting context. In a way, I wish I'd been given either five minutes – in which I would enthusiastically tell you that the Lutheran Church of Australia has a church-wide church planting strategy, that I'm a church planter, and ask you to pray for me. Or else I wish I could talk to you for several hours, telling you stories of how God is at work through church planting, sharing the latest research, and inspiring you to rejoice that this is happening in our own LCA. Instead I've got around 20 minutes. So I'm going to do neither of those things – I'm going to share a parable with you and unpack it, because I believe like Jesus that sometimes stories stick around in the mind after the dot points are forgotten.

But first, very briefly, I want to ask what we mean, what you mean, what I mean, by that word 'confessional.'

Is it, similar to what James Haak suggested in his wonderful exegetical paper yesterday, a claim of privilege, which helps determine who is 'in' and who is 'out', who we can take seriously and who we don't really have to? Is it capitalised and used either positively or negatively as a 'box' to put people in?

Or is it rather an understanding that the Lutheran Confessions, as the Norm which is Normed, give shape to the practice and teaching and day to day aspects of our pastoring, and breathe life into all that we do as pastors and people? Of course you will see that I favour the latter interpretation.

And now on to the parable.

You may think you've heard something very much like this before. But stick with me.

What is church planting like in the Kingdom of God? Or what shall I compare it to?

[The parable of the surf school and the young surfer: a picture of church planting and evangelism in the Kingdom of God.](#)

Once there was a surfing school down on the Great Ocean Road. The surfing school was well situated, close to the beach and the wonderful, world-famous waves of the Surf Coast in southern Victoria. This surf school was well known for its technical brilliance, research, and understanding of the theory of surfing. The members of the surf school had amongst them brilliant surfologists who knew all about wave formation, wind and water currents, the technicalities of water flow and surfboard design and the physics of balance and momentum that go into successfully catching a wave.

But there was a problem. The surf school had hardly seen any graduates go out and actually catch waves.

Then along came a young and enthusiastic student who desperately wanted to learn to surf. There was a ripple of excitement around the surf school. A few of the best teachers accompanied him on his journey to learn to surf. They gave him a great surfboard and all the equipment he needed. They taught him the theory of surfing, and practiced riding and balance and 'getting up' on the surfboard as they lay on the beach – the first steps in learning to surf, and absolutely necessary.

Eventually, they took him paddling out into the waves.

That was when the young surfer learnt that surfing is HARD. It was in fact one of the hardest things he had ever learned. More often than not, the waves that he was meant to be catching ended up dumping him painfully into the ocean, and sometimes pile driving him into the ocean floor. Or he would just manage to get up to his feet and then would lose his balance, over and over. The water was bone chillingly cold. He had to learn all sorts of practical things like counting sets of waves and working out which was going to be the best to try to ride on. He spent a long time waiting, while the ocean seemed to go as flat as a pancake and no waves came. He spent a lot of other time looking wistfully at other surfers who were so much more experienced than him, seemingly catching the waves with effortless grace. He wished he could do that. He thought about getting a different board, maybe giving up altogether, or joining a different surf school.

But with the help and encouragement of his teachers and mentors, the young surfer kept at it. He got to his knees a few times. He caught the exhilaration of riding the power of the waves. And eventually, he got to his feet on the board and rode all the way in to the beach. His teachers and mentors whooped and hollered encouragement and their own sense of exhilaration. He emerged from the shallow waves near the shore with the widest grin on his face, yelling in glee.

'That is the BEST!' he enthused. 'That is so good that I can't keep it to myself. I want to teach others to learn to surf as well.'

What is the meaning of the parable?

Let me tell you how church planting in the LCA is like learning to surf.

The sad and painful fact is, that despite our well deserved reputation for theological and biblical rigour, the LCA is a bit like a surf school with very few graduates. Whether you think of new surfers as church plants or as new disciples, new followers of Jesus, the story is not good. The NCLS data shows that we have one of the lowest rate of newcomers in the whole of the body of Christ in Australia. It's about 3% newcomers or converts, people new to the Christian faith within the last five years. That means for every 30 Lutherans in Australia, it takes five years to make a convert, a new disciple of Christ. In fact our rate of adult baptisms paints an even bleaker picture. As someone who identifies as an evangelist and a missionary to the West, I'm deeply saddened by this. This is a far cry from Jesus' parable of the sower, where he talks about 30, 60 or hundredfold *growth*.

I have a friend who is a pastor (yes, that happens) who says 'We are really good at getting the message *straight*. But we're not very good at getting the message *out*.' I would argue that being a confessional Lutheran is not just about getting the message straight, but also about getting the message out. 'Getting it out' is an indispensable part of 'getting it right.' The Reformation, shaped and empowered by the confessions, launched some of the most powerful and effective missions the

world has ever seen. Evangelism and discipleship are indispensable expressions of theology, and deeply embedded in our confessions¹.

As I said, we are a bit like the surf school in my parable. We have a very low rate of new surfers. Many LCA members I know cannot name a single adult convert. We haven't planted churches in an intentional way for more than a generation.

And yet – there is hope. We are seeing the beginnings of a church planting movement in the LCA. I've been praying for this (a church planting and discipleship movement) for over 20 years. What a privilege and pleasure it is to be part of it! We are also seeing young, enthusiastic people wanting to 'learn to surf' and to 'teach others.' Or, to plant churches and make disciples and obey the great commission.

So, on with the explanation of the parable.

To learn to surf you need:

- To be in the right place
- At the right time
- With the right people – teachers and mentors
- In the right conditions (waves, catching the power of the Holy Spirit)
- On the right platform (with the right equipment – the surfboard)
- Doing the right things (skillset)

When all these come together – the surfer gains the energy from the waves, catches the momentum of the Holy Spirit's power. It's not our own power in church planting and discipleship – it's the Holy Spirit's power.

But learning to surf is hard. Ministry comes with a cost, a cross to bear, and I know that each of you bear that cost and carry that cross in various ways. Without claiming privilege, let me say from personal experience that learning to plant a church in mission is the hardest thing I've ever done, in a ministry or personal capacity. The spiritual warfare has been vicious, sustained, intense and seemingly overwhelming. The enemy does not like his turf being challenged.

As I'm learning, I often feel like I am getting smashed by the waves. It's easy to fall off the surfboard. There seems to be a long wait between waves, a lot of work for little fruit or few new disciples. Sometimes I fail to stand up and catch the wave. It's easy to say 'Look at that experienced surfer, I wish I was him' or 'If I was only on a different board, or in a different place, I would be catching waves.'

¹ Listen to the discipleship implications involved in Luther's explanation of the first two petitions of the Lord's prayer. "*Hallowed be thy name.*" What does this mean? Answer: To be sure, God's name is holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may also be holy for us. How is this done? Answer: When the Word of God is taught clearly and purely and we, as children of God, *lead holy lives in accordance with it*. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven! But whoever teaches *and lives* otherwise than as the Word of God teaches, profanes the name of God among us. From this preserve us, heavenly Father!

"*Thy kingdom come.*" What does this mean? Answer: To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us. How is this done? Answer: When the heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so that by his grace we may believe his holy Word and *live a godly life*, both here in time and hereafter forever.

Confessions: the leg rope and wetsuit: ties you to the right platform (Scriptures, the Living Word, Jesus)

So where do the Lutheran confessions come in as a church planter? And what does that have to do with the surf school and the young surfer?

I'd like to suggest that in this parable the confessions serve as two pieces of perhaps neglected but vital equipment: the *leg rope* and the *wetsuit*. The *leg rope* serves to fasten me as a church planter to the right platform, the surfboard which is the word of God, speaking as Law and Gospel, which alone allows us to ride the waves of the Spirit. Without a leg rope, the surfer and his surfboard will soon be parted. The platform will go one way, the surfer will go the other, and never the twain shall meet again, and you won't be catching any waves real soon. The confessions serve to tie me to a right understanding of God's word, when it is tempting, to look wistfully or jealously at other church plants, and say 'If only I was on *that* platform, I'd be catching waves for sure.' (Planetshakers and Follow – maybe if I could tie myself to one of those platforms things would be working for me!) The confessions also act as a wetsuit, without which a surfer would not survive long in the frigid waters of the southern ocean, which, as brother Mat Ker from Warrnambool pointed out, have nothing between themselves and Antarctica. That water is freezing. It wouldn't surprise me to see icebergs bobbing around in it in midwinter. Riding waves is exhilarating. Catching the waves of the Holy Spirit who is drawing people to Christ is the best thing in the world, and I want to teach others. That water is powerful and exhilarating. But go into it without a wetsuit and it will kill you. I wouldn't last long by my own power without the protection the confessions bring from the attack of the freezing cold water.

The leg rope of the confessions ties me to the treasures of Grace alone/Faith alone/Scripture alone/Christ alone in a mission context when it's tempting to pursue other methods that might 'work,' or just give up and go sit comfortably by the fire.

Let me give you a couple of real life examples. And it gets right back to basics.

- In our church plant, we are seeing people come to faith in Christ for the first time. Hence we are encountering people who've never read the Bible before. This year on Palm Sunday was the first time they'd ever heard or read the Palm Sunday reading of the triumphal entry. The confessions say that the Scriptures are the first and primary Confession. Leading people into the Scriptures, and an understanding of them based on Law and Gospel, is a primary task in church planting and evangelism. Formula of Concord: Law and Gospel (FC Epitome V) is a gem of the confessions. And so vital in a mission context².
- Scriptures as the first of the Confessions³! (FC Epitome Summary)

² 1. We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between law and Gospel is an especially glorious light that is to be maintained with great diligence in the church so that, according to St. Paul's admonition, the Word of God may be divided rightly.

2. We believe, teach, and confess that, strictly speaking, the law is a divine doctrine which teaches what is right and God-pleasing and which condemns everything that is sinful and contrary to God's will.

3. Therefore everything which condemns sin is and belongs to the proclamation of the law.

4. But the Gospel, strictly speaking, is the kind of doctrine that teaches what a man who has not kept the law and is condemned by it should believe, namely, that Christ has satisfied and paid for all guilt and without man's merit has obtained and won for him forgiveness of sins, the "righteousness that avails before God," and eternal life.

³ 1. We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged, as it is written in

As we see new people coming to faith in Jesus, the use of the ecumenical creeds, particularly the Apostle's Creed, in preparation for baptism is really important. And using the Creed or explanations of it in worship is not only a confession of faith but a teaching about the content of the faith. Important in Christian formation! The creeds in worship and catechesis shape us and our behaviour and our belief. We're not doing something new but something very ancient. We are not the only Christians there ever were, and we don't make up the content of our faith, it is given to use by the one holy catholic and apostolic church⁴ [as the Formula of Concord – Epitome – says in the Summary].

Luther's small catechism as a tool for catechesis and discipleship – baptism, Holy Communion preparation.

Being Lutheran in a College in mission with 15 % Christians and few Lutheran staff: teach 'what it means to be Lutheran' – law and gospel, doctrine of vocation.

As I conclude, let me return to the parable one more time. For a surf school, seeing new people surf is fantastic. It's actually what life is all about. For the church, *church planting* is actually good for *church renewal*. Seeing new people come to faith in Christ is one of the highest joys. Think back to an adult baptism you have been to in the Lutheran church, the sense of solemn joy and celebration with the angels as one of God's lost children comes home. The research into evangelism and church planting shows that *if you want to make new disciples, the best way is to plant new churches*. I'll say that again, because at first it seems like it should be the other way around. *If you want to make new disciples, the best way is to plant new churches*. New churches reach new people. Church plants see between 30% and up to 70% new Christians – or more than ten times the percentage of converts that established churches see.

Not every church can plant a church. But every church can be a *partner church* for a church plant, share the partnership in the gospel, pray for church planters and church plants, hear the life giving and joyful stories of new life in Christ, and support the church plant financially to their own capacity. I want to challenge you today: your congregations could become partner churches for the growing number of church plants in the LCA. You can whoop and holler with joy and share the exhilaration as you see a young surfer getting up on the board and catching the wave of the Holy Spirit.

In the end, as the LCA, we are called by God not to just launch one surfboard (a church plant/a new disciple) but actually a flotilla of surfboards, and a suite of surf schools, teaching others and multiplying the skill. We haven't completed our task until that surfer is competent to teach others who are competent to teach others.

Pray for God to send out workers into his harvest fields, for the harvest is indeed plentiful in our lands, but the workers are few.

Pastor Nathan Hedt, 11th July 2018

Ps.119:105, "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." And St. Paul says in Gal. 1:8, "Even if an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed."

⁴ 2. Immediately after the time of the apostles—in fact, already during their lifetime—false teachers and heretics invaded the church. Against these the ancient church formulated symbols (that is, brief and explicit confessions) which were accepted as the unanimous, catholic, Christian faith and confessions of the orthodox and true church, namely, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. We pledge ourselves to these, and we hereby reject all heresies and teachings which have been introduced into the church of God contrary to them.

Questions for discussion:

How do the Lutheran Confessions shape your practice and teaching of the Christian faith in your context? In what ways could you envision your congregation or parish becoming a partner church with a church plant? How might such a partnership benefit your local congregation?