

The ordination debate in the LCA: background

The Lutheran Church of Australia has public teaching regarding women being called into the office of the public ministry. This teaching can be found in the Theses of Agreement, a document that was accepted by the two Lutheran churches that came together at the formation of the LCA in 1966. The teaching is briefly given in section VI, *Theses on the Office of the ministry*: 'Though women prophets were used by the Spirit of God in the Old as well as in the New Testament, 1 Cor. 14:34,35 and I Tim. 2:11-14 prohibit a woman from being called into the office of the public ministry for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. This apostolic rule is binding on all Christendom; hereby her rights as a member of the spiritual priesthood are in no wise impaired.'

This teaching is, however, open to amendment. In 1975 the LCA General Synod, after receiving recommendation from the General Pastors' Conference, officially adopted a statement called *The Status of the Theses of Agreement and other Doctrinal Statements*. In this statement, there is official acknowledgment that 'explanations and amendments' can be made to the public teaching of the LCA. This involves any proposed explanations and amendments being submitted to the entire Church, undergoing thorough theological examination and discussion, and being officially adopted.

That 'explanations and amendments' can be made to the LCA's public teaching is not necessarily controversial. It is part of the LCA's public teaching that the church has the right and duty, as it faces new challenges, to define more clearly how it understands the Scriptures and Confessions. Explanations and amendments to the public teaching of the LCA that arise in response to new challenges, and that are officially adopted after due process, have the same authority in the LCA as the Theses themselves.

Over the last decades there has been extensive debate throughout the entire LCA regarding the public teaching prohibiting the ordination of women to the office of the public ministry. During the 1980s and early 1990s the Commission on Theology and Inter-church Relations (CTICR) worked through a number of the arguments for and against a change in the public teaching of the LCA on this issue. The commission published an extensive report on their work in 1991, after which the President (i.e. Bishop) of the church invited congregations to take up the discussion at a local level.

In order to help congregations in their discussions, in 1992 the LCA published the document *Women and the ministry: a study on women and the office of the public ministry*. This document did not make a case for or against a change in doctrine, but aimed to introduce readers to the central arguments that had been dealt with up to that time by the CTICR.

The 1997 General Convention of the LCA gave the CTICR the task of studying the issue of the ordination of women, reporting to pastors conferences and congregations, and presenting a Final Report with recommendations to the 2000 synod.

In response to that resolution, the CTICR released an Initial Report to the church in 1998. The main purpose of this paper was to present the issues to the church. The report outlined

the areas of agreement as far as the doctrine of ministry and the understanding of scripture were concerned. It also included brief summaries of the case for the ordination of women and the case for the ordination of men only so that the whole church could also share in the process of evaluating arguments and weighing the evidence.

Members of the CTICR also led series of forums throughout the church, both to outline the content of the Initial Report and also to receive feedback from the church. In addition the issue was studied at pastors conferences throughout Australia and New Zealand. Feedback from individuals and groups was received, tabulated, studied, and considered.

After this extensive discussion on the issue in the church, the CTICR put forward its Final Report to the 2000 General Synod in Tanunda, together with the proposal that the synod accept the majority conclusion of the CTICR report: that scripture and theology permit the ordination of women.

In 2000 the General Pastors' Conference and General Convention of the LCA voted on the proposal. The General Pastors' Conference was not able to give clear guidance to the General Convention. The General Convention, although voting slightly in favour for a change in doctrine, did not arrive at the two-thirds majority necessary to change doctrine. A similar process and outcome occurred at the 2006 General Pastors' Conference and General Convention at Toowoomba.

The issue of the ordination of women was not officially debated at the 2009 National Convention of Synod in Melbourne. The synod did, however, pass a proposal stating that if the ordination of women is approved, then the implementation phase should be of some duration to help maintain unity and harmony in the church. The convention also resolved to ask the GCC to convene a 'dialogue group with balanced representation from all sides of the issue, to work towards consensus within the group itself and across the church, with reference to the published findings of the CTICR, and with a focus on biblical interpretation'. This group began to meet officially in 2011, and made a presentation on its progress at the 2013 Convention.

At the 2013 General Pastors' Conference and National Convention of Synod, the issue of women's ordination was again the subject of discussion (although it was not put to the vote). The convention, mindful of the decades-long debate on the scriptural arguments for and against ordaining women, again asked for a more consensus-based approach to dealing with the issue. In response to this urging, and under the direction of Bishop John Henderson, the Dialogue Group has formulated five principles of dialogue in the LCA.

These Five Principles focus more on the process of how discussion on the issue of women's ordination can happen in the LCA, rather than on any particular scriptural and theological arguments. This focus on good process is part of recasting the decades-long debate on ordination in terms of the wider context of the consensus that we already have as members of the LCA. It is hoped that keeping this wider context of existing consensus in mind will help ensure that debate on the scriptural and theological issues relating to the ordination of women will be as inclusive and as conducive to good order in the church as possible.

