



THE BACKGROUND TO THE CONFLICT ON ORDINATION IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

When our Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand (LCANZ) was formed in 1966, we united two preceding churches on the basis of a 'Document of Union', which included a series of agreed theological statements called the 'Theses of Agreement'.

Section Six of these theses, which address the 'office of the ministry', includes the LCANZ's public teaching regarding women being called into the office of the public ministry. Thesis VI:11 reads:

Though women prophets were used by the Spirit of God in the Old as well as in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 14:34,35 and 1 Timothy 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 LCANZ General Convention of 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 an official acknowledgement that 'explanations and amendments' can be made to the public teaching of the LCANZ. 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 LCANZ's public teaching is not necessarily controversial. It is part of the LCANZ'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 LCANZ that arise in response to new challenges, and are officially adopted after due process, have the same authority in the LCANZ as the theses themselves.

Over the last decades there has been extensive debate throughout the entire LCANZ 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 arguments for and against a change in the public teaching of the LCANZ on this issue. The CTICR published an extensive report on their work in 1991, after which the president (ie bishop) of the church invited congregations to take up the discussion at a local level.

To help congregations in their discussions, in 1992 the LCANZ 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.

In 1997 the Convention of General Synod of the LCANZ 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.

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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 a 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 conclusion of the CTICR report: that Scripture and theology permit the ordination of women.

At this same time, a minority report was produced by some members of the CTICR, which outlined an alternative conclusion, asserting that Scripture and theology support the ordination of men only.

In 2000, the General Pastors Conference and Convention of General Synod of the LCANZ voted on the proposal. The General Pastors Conference was not able to give clear guidance to the Convention of General Synod. The Convention of General Synod, although voting slightly in favour of 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 Convention of General Synod at Toowoomba.

The issue of the ordination of women was not officially debated at the 2009 General Convention of Synod in Melbourne. The General Convention 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 General Convention also resolved to ask the General Church Council 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 General Convention.

At the 2013 General Pastors Conference and General Convention of Synod, the issue of women's ordination was again the subject of discussion (although it was not put to the vote). The General 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 the following years, a series of churchwide consultations was implemented, and a website was developed for the people of the church, making available various documents addressing the question of ordination.

Two subsequent Conventions of General Synod have considered proposals regarding the ordination of both women and men: 2015 in Brisbane and 2018 in Sydney. The vote at these conventions did not achieve the two-thirds majority required to change the public teaching of the church.

In the church's 1992 booklet on 'Women and the ministry', there is a prayerful encouragement from the chairperson and secretary of CTICR at the time, doctors Weiss and Leske. These faithful pastors of the church wrote, 'We pray that God's Spirit will bless our discussions, preserve us in unity and harmony as we engage in debate, and guide us into a clear consensus on this challenging issue'.