



Report to General Pastors Conference – LCA Bishop July 2018

1. Introduction

It has been an honour and a privilege to serve you as LCA 'Churchwide' Bishop over the last 5 years. In accepting the nomination for President in 2013 I had not expected the swift change to 'Bishop' that Synod made. Overall I think the change has worked well for us, but I see that one congregation has submitted a proposal to the 2018 General Convention that we replace it with another term.

In the LCA we benefit from a relatively 'flat' structure among our pastors and leaders. We enjoy an egalitarian relationship of mutuality. We do not 'lord it' over each other, but serve one another [Matthew 20:25]. This 'flat' structure not only fits well with the gospel message, it works well with our local culture. Few other Lutheran churches share the same equality we do in terms of call, conditions, and remuneration. One difference we do have, however, is that Bishops are elected only for a term at a time. Whether I continue in the role will be decided by your GPC ballot and the Synod vote.

The position of LCA bishop carries a unique set of responsibilities. Churchwide and national realities differ significantly from those of congregations, parishes, schools, aged care, chaplaincy, and even Districts. The LCA/NZ is present in two countries. National realities in Australia mean that 'LCA' is as much a concept as it is a reality.

We choose to organise ourselves this way, but in doing so we do not create the church. God creates the church locally and eternally in every baptism, communicant and deed of faith. I am not among those who believe that the days of the church are numbered. In faith they are numberless. Every day is the Lord's Day, and every day his church gathers to 'call upon him, pray to him, praise him, and give him thanks.' [Small Catechism, 2nd Commandment]

Nevertheless I am fully aware, and remain immersed, in our shared difficulties and challenges. The church expects this Conference to be a theological and spiritual advisor to its Synod, which, God willing, is just around the corner. This is no light-hearted or easy task. Please join me in praying for our Chair, Dr Andrew Pfeiffer, and each pastor present, that the Holy Spirit may be in our hearts and our meeting will be marked by faith and an attitude of mutual love. For surely we will advise and serve the church as much by *how* we act as by *what* it is we have to say.

2. Vision

Those who founded the LCA set up its structures in a way that established a kind of 'status quo' among us, one that makes the concept of a vision or Strategic Direction for the LCA somewhat problematic. Our documents, including the Constitution, seem to picture a settled way of doing things in which various controversies could be considered one by one, argued, debated, voted on and solved.

In recent years nearly all those who worked to establish the LCA have gone to their heavenly home. We can no longer go to them and ask, 'Why did you do it this way?' or 'What did you mean when you wrote that?' Now, for the first time, all we have are their

writings – the Document of Union, the Theses of Agreement, the Constitution, and various other papers of assorted standing. It has always intrigued me, for instance, that we have a collection of 'Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions' without going to much effort to distinguish the one from the other, other than a note in the document to say which body adopted it and when. Why did our fathers do things this way? What did they intend? To compound it further, in the early days the collection was published in a series of loose pages inside coloured ring binders, implying that documents could be added, or even (!) subtracted. This fluid approach was further compounded when the internet came along and the printed versions were abandoned in favour of web based pages. In doing that we discovered that no one was actually responsible for curating the collection. The CTICR's role ended when it handed over the documents, and no one was particularly paying any attention after that. The net result was that occasionally variant versions, or 'non-authorised' draft versions were in circulation. I hope you have noticed over the last few years that the web based collection has now been curated, formatted, and arranged in a logical sequence. That sequence, however, still follows the layout of the original loose leaf binders. I hope that in the next iteration we can move past that and arrange them according to their relevant authority, topic, and purpose.

Nowhere is the apparent fixed nature of our doctrine and teaching and the paradoxical possibility of fluidity more apparent than in the renewed discussion over the Theses of Agreement. What do we do if the church wants to change a teaching contained in the TA? Theologically and confessionally the answer is obvious – subject them to the scrutiny of Scripture (the ruling norm) and Confession (the ruled norm) and see how it stacks up. Scripture and Confession override the TA should we find there to be a disagreement.

In church terms, however, it's not so simple (not that it really is simple, as we all know). The TA are constitutive of the LCA itself. They are included in the Document of Union, which says, *'We accept the Theses of Agreement as the expression of the common consent of our two Churches on matters which were in dispute between us, and these Theses are hereby made part of this Document of Union.'*

The Document of Union was adopted respectively by the two former Synods, but not, as it turns out, by the Constituting Convention of the LCA, which simply appended it to the Book of Reports as 'information'. Nevertheless the common understanding is that the two former Synods found sufficient agreement in the TA to lay aside their former differences and come together as one Synod. Therefore, to change anything contained in or implied by the TA feels like an offence that disrupts the fabric that holds us together.

An anthropologist once told me that the worst offence one can commit in our church is to offend the 'ancestors', our forefathers in the faith. That is what, to some, the thought of changing a teaching in the TA feels like. It's not just the difficulty of the debate over ordination that has kept us at it for 20 to 30 years, it's our cultural and ecclesiastical heritage.

The world today does not feel as static as it once was. In the early to mid 20th century we experienced a sense of convergence, as though the globe was moving towards a common future, and us with it. It's no wonder that the LCA found its genesis in that period. Today, however, we feel a sense of fracturing. We aren't so certain what the future will bring. Some interpret this as the end of the optimism of modernism and humanism, the collapse of confidence in our human ability to renew the world and the consequent turning inward, resulting in isolation and depression of the soul. In other words, the old spiral of death has re-emerged.

OK, so enough of the metanarrative. But it can feel as though a culture of despondency and death is taking over. If so, then this is a time when the LCA should really be able to get going, because we have a faith, and a message, which is tailor made for times such as these. We know, and are confident, that death is not the final word, that we have a Saviour who has overcome it, and that we don't depend on the philosophy of the day to

find our purpose or meaning. We have the Word of God, and that word is the word of the gospel, of Christ, of resurrection, and of the end of fear and death.

So if you want my vision for the LCA, that's probably it. It's nothing new, yet it's always new. God has placed us here, in this time, for a purpose. If the current slough of despond that seems to be afflicting our society is real, then this is the time for us to step forward with the gospel of hope. We won't do that by hiding behind a glittering theology or sharply defined orthodoxy. We will only do that when we follow the way of Christ, the way of love, and place him above all others, and all others above ourselves.

For me that's the true culture of the church which rises above our history, and the confines of human expectations. The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, and that includes all of us and the Lutheran Church of Australia.

3. The Pastoral Ministry and the General Pastors Conference

I have the (almost) unique privilege of attending pastors conferences in every District of the church. This experience gives me a wide view of our collective reality. We do things a little differently from District to District – those who have served in more than one District experience that – but there is no mistaking our shared identity. It comes, in part, from our training, but even more significantly it comes from our shared faith.

As I get the chance to speak to pastors in Districts and answer questions there I won't repeat that information in this report. I will focus instead on the General Pastors Conference. GPC is different from our District gatherings. Not only are we a larger and therefore more formal body, we have the Constitutional responsibility of serving as a theological adviser to the General Synod (LCA By-Laws 5.6.2), a task that has had its difficulties in recent years.

Our gathering this July in Hahndorf is a deliberate and significant investment by the people of the LCA. As in 2015 we have scheduled the GPC three months in advance of the General Convention. Last time we found that to be of great benefit in terms of the well-being of both pastors and the church. The change avoided the frenetic pace of moving directly from Conference into Convention. It gave members and delegates time to hear the advice/recommendation of the Conference. While this system costs more in terms of time and finance, it has proven to be well worthwhile. Let's again make the best use of the opportunity we have.

I have heard a few grumbles about having the GPC in the same location twice. There are sound reasons for doing this, and they have nothing to do with advantaging or disadvantaging various sectors. One of the main reasons is that holding our Conference where the fewest need to travel significant distances reduces costs substantially. Additionally, organising the Conference is a great deal of work. A place where people on the ground are already familiar with us reduces that workload enormously. Nevertheless, in 2021 I expect the GPC will be held elsewhere than South Australia.

But to other matters. Pastors will remember the 2015 debate about whether the GPC is required to deliver 'advice' or 'recommendation' to the Synod on matters of a theological and confessional nature. The rules of the GPC speak of 'advice' and the rules of the Synod speak of 'recommendation'. Last time we took the view that both terms could be used interchangeably, since the Constitution does not define either term. That view was challenged on a point of order and so according to the rules of transacting business it was put to the vote. Synod overwhelmingly decided to continue to discuss the issue and ultimately to put it to the vote, where it failed to gain the required 2/3 majority.

The matter of advice/recommendation, however, has not been entirely settled and still requires attention. Some have made proposals on the matter, and the Standing Committee on Constitutions has been working on it. I expect there will be proposals to the General Convention which will attempt to clear this up, as well as standardisation of the rules for quorums and voting majorities.

In the lead up to General Convention I encourage this GPC to be as diligent as possible in providing the Synod with 'recommendations' on the theological and confessional matters referred to it by the General Church Council. I will now make a few remarks about those matters.

4. General Convention of Synod – proposals on matters of a theological and confessional nature

In 2015 we handled only a single theological issue, that of the ordination of women and men. This time GCC has referred to us proposals on three such issues.

The procedures in transacting Synod business say: '*No motion may be brought forward which is the same in substance as a matter which has already been resolved by the convention unless a motion calling for a reconsideration of the matter previously decided is moved and seconded by persons who voted with the majority when the matter was originally put.*' (LCA By-Laws 7.3.19) In effect this means that when there are multiple proposals on the same matter only one of them will go to the vote. This was the case in 2015, when the agenda listed fourteen proposals for the ordination of women and two for the current teaching of the church. Only one proposal on the matter could go to the vote. That time it was a proposal for the ordination of women and men. To vote on a proposal in support of the current teaching of the church would have been a substantial risk if it were not to receive the 2/3 majority required for a proposal of a theological and confessional nature, which would significantly undermine the LCA's official teaching. The GCC plans to once again avoid the possibility of such a negative situation arising in 2018.

4.1. Ordination of women and men

- Nineteen congregations have submitted an identical proposal that the LCA amend its public teaching to include women in the ordained ministry. This proposal does not reference the Draft Doctrinal Statement requested by the 2015 Synod and prepared by the CTICR.
- One congregation has submitted a proposal that Synod not endorse the Draft Doctrinal Statement on the basis that it is inconsistent with Biblical teaching
- One congregation has submitted a proposal that there be no further discussion at Synod to amend TA VI 11 on the Office of the Ministry.
- One congregation has submitted a proposal that Synod not endorse the theological basis for why the ordination of women need not be church divisive on the basis that it fails to adequately address the issue (based on the rejection of the DDS).
- The GCC has referred one congregational proposal for information only, that there be an hour long Scriptural presentation on the position of the church before any vote is taken on the ordination of women. (This is for information only since it is a procedural rather than theological proposal.)

The proposal most likely to be put to Convention on the ordination matter is the one submitted by the Manawatu Parish (New Zealand), the first of the batch of 19 proposing that the LCA change its teaching to include women in the ordained ministry.

The wording of the proposal, however, presents a dilemma. Similarly to 2015 it simply says that the LCA amend its public teaching and invite women and men into the ministry. It makes no reference to the Draft Doctrinal Statement. Since Manawatu is not able to change the wording, the GCC is considering what other proposal/s we might need to ensure that Synod does effectively respond to the DDS. That certainly seems to have been the intent of the 2015 Synod when it adopted the resolution to prepare it.

I suggest that this is something the GPC needs to attend to in making its recommendation/s to the Synod. Is the GPC able to recommend an amendment or another proposal which would ensure that the vote on the ordination of women is based on, or refers to, the DDS? Otherwise the LCA could risk adopting a teaching without adopting the doctrinal content of that teaching.

It would also be useful for the GPC to consider giving advice on whether the proposal not to endorse the statement on church divisiveness is substantively the same matter. The ordination question might be seen as one thing, and the question of our unity yet another. Note, however, that this proposal bases its argument on the argumentation (or perceived inadequacy of it) in the DDS, so the two are closely linked.

While we have to pay attention to these matters, i.e. what is actually discussed and how it is decided, the matter of the ordination of women and men goes far deeper than that. For many it cuts to the heart of the church's teaching and practice, and therefore the gospel itself. As I listen around the church to our pastors, lay leaders and parishioners, I get the same feeling of uncertainty about the outcome of this as I had in 2015. People regularly ask me what I think will happen, and I have to answer that I really don't know.

While many people believe they know my mind on this matter, I have never spoken publicly or advocated about it. In the lead up to this GPC I have debated long and hard within myself on whether I should do so. I have prayed about it and taken counsel from others. What I can say here is that I believe we each need to prepare to live with a situation where personal opinion and church teaching may differ. This applies whichever side of the question you are on, or whether you are like so many and stand in the middle undecided.

When we were ordained as pastors we vowed to uphold the public teaching and practice of the LCA, come what may. Each of you has done just that. We know it sometimes means putting aside a personal preference or even a strongly held opinion. That's the nature of making a vow – not my will, but yours, O Lord.

Those who feel strongly will also have to decide whether this issue is sufficient to break those vows and retire from them. Up until that extreme point, however, each of us must remain committed to serving our church as a whole, ministering and working together in the gospel, sharing the good news wherever God calls us to go.

4.2. Infant communion

One congregation has submitted a proposal that the LCA encourage the practice of admitting very young children, including infants, to holy communion and that it prepare materials to promote this practice.

In preparing for this matter, it will be useful for pastors to be familiar with:

- DSTO 1.E *Infant communion* (GCC 1986)
- DSTO 3.I *Infant communion, a reappraisal* (CTICR 2012)

CTICR's report to the 2013 Synod on its reappraisal of the matter is brief: '*Work on this topic has now been completed and a final report prepared for GPC. In spite of the broad (though not total) theological agreement in the commission and across the pastorate that there is no compelling biblical or theological objection to the practice of infant communion, the commission nevertheless decided to recommend that the LCA's practice remain unchanged, mainly for pastoral and practical reasons. However, while not recommending infant communion, it does recommend that the age of first communion be significantly lowered. But no age has been specified since the decision as to the earliest appropriate age should be made by the pastor in consultation with the parents.*'

Since no change was recommended to the practice of the church the Synod passed no resolution, giving the appearance that the matter might be inconclusive. That apparent hesitation is now being challenged by this proposal that the LCA encourage the practice not only of admitting young children, but also infants to holy communion.

In making a recommendation to Synod the GPC will need to consider the CTICR's 2012 advice that the LCA's non-practice of infant communion is primarily pastoral and practical rather than biblical and theological.

4.3. Full membership of the Lutheran World Federation and the International Lutheran Council

- Six congregations have submitted proposals to the effect that the LCA applies and becomes a full member of the Lutheran World Federation. (Currently we are an associate member.)
- Two congregations have submitted proposals that the LCA becomes a full member of the International Lutheran Council. (Currently we are an associate member.)

In preparing for this matter, it will be useful for pastors to be familiar with:

- DSTO 3.C Church Fellowship and the LCA (GCC 2003)
- Lutheran World Federation:
 - DSTO 1.A, *Document of Union*, paragraphs 15 and 16
 - DSTO 2.C, *The Lutheran Church of Australia's application for associate membership in the Lutheran World Federation* (General Synod 1993)
 - DSTO 3.C Membership in the LWF (CTICR Executive 2002)

Our current status in the LWF, as far as I am aware, is to be the only associate member – indeed, in 1991 the LWF created this category in its Constitution specifically for the LCA. The smaller organisation of the ILC is less structured. While the LCA regards itself as an associate member, there does not appear to be a formal category for that purpose.

The LCA pays full fees in both organisations and participates in as many conferences, meetings, programs and activities as practicable.

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 International Lutheran Council has not been regarded as a theological matter. We have a practice, however, of 'twinning' these relationships, so what we do in respect to the one we also do in respect to the other.

Since, this time around, we have no current work on the theological and confessional implications of full membership in the LWF, I suggest that GPC considers putting an alternate motion that Synod asks the LCA Bishop to commission a study of the implications and advisability of full membership in both LWF and ILC, and arrange for the presentation of a report with recommendations to the 2021 GPC and Synod.

I am suggesting that Synod asks the LCA Bishop to commission this study because the Constitution appoints him to 'officially represent the Church in relations with other church bodies and other agencies'. Evidently the CTICR would be a key player in leading the study. The Bishop may be better able, however, to engage the broader sweep of LCA departments and agencies involved with or linked into LWF and ILC activities – for example, International Mission and ALWS.

5. General Convention of Synod – proposals on matters other than confessional and theological

Among the many proposals received in preparation for Synod, seven relate to matters of complaints handling or the Tribunal. Since these have become recurring issues in some quarters of the church, I will make some brief comments from my perspective:

- The powers of the LCA complaints handling system and the Tribunal are generally limited to investigation and recommendation. In most situations their actions are restorative rather than punitive. Unfortunately right now we are experiencing a negative reaction to one or two cases which have unfolded more negatively.
- Some of us confuse the Professional Standards Department and the Tribunal. The PSD is a department of the church, accountable through the Executive Officer. It represents an early step in handling complaints and protecting the vulnerable when resolution of a matter has not been possible between individuals or locally. The PSD cooperates with Reconciliation Ministry as it discerns the best response to a situation. The outcome for a PSD matter is generally in making recommendations to the relevant persons or bodies.
- On the other hand, the Tribunal operates further 'downstream' depending on the type of matter, or once a matter has not been able to be settled by other means. The Constitution places it at arm's length from the leadership and administration of the church, much as a law court operates separately from the Parliament and its ministers. Unlike a law court, however, it can only deliver recommendations, which are received, negotiated and implemented by the relevant body, often a District Bishop or Church Council.
- Neither the PSD nor the Tribunal, or Reconciliation Ministry, can override statutory requirements for mandatory reporting and the protection of vulnerable persons, especially children. In cases of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, the LCA is committed to doing all it can to protect those at risk. In that respect we have a 'victim' centred approach rather than the traditional and often criticised institutional tendency to protect itself. This approach can feel uncomfortable to those of us in positions of 'power', and inevitably results in controversy from time to time, especially when an accusation of abuse may not be fully proven.

5.1. Ecclesiastical discipline – the judicial system

Article 10 of the LCA Constitution and By-Laws outline the system of Discipline, Adjudication and Appeals. This is where the Tribunal is established under the section 'Judicial System'. A tribunal is simply a panel which is appointed to 'hear' a matter. Panel members are appointed by the GCC from among the pastors and members of the church. The Tribunal Administrator calls panel members together as and when cases require it.

At this stage two proposals are coming before Synod in respect to the Tribunal: one that every effort is made to bring resolution and reconciliation before referral to the Tribunal; and another that *'all parties are enabled and financially assisted to have an appropriate advisor to assist them in navigating the processes of the tribunal, and are provided with pastoral care throughout the process.'*

In respect to the first proposal, the intent of the church is indeed that, in cases of conflict every effort should be made between the individuals concerned, and then with local leaders and the congregation, to resolve the matter and arrive at reconciliation. This principle is strongly enunciated in the Constitution, although perhaps not strongly enough for some of us. There are occasional cases, however, when the matter is not one of interpersonal or community conflict, but may relate to professional conduct in a more public sphere. In those cases it is not always appropriate to seek personal reconciliation and the Tribunal may be more apposite.

In respect to the second proposal, in light of a very few recent cases, it might well be a useful addition to the process to have some kind of 'advisor' available to help both an accuser and a respondent understand and prepare for the process. It might well help avert some unfortunate misunderstandings that in a time of stress and uncertainty tend to escalate. I would not want that 'advisor', however, to quickly turn into legal counsel, as that is usually quite unnecessary and tends to work against the restorative intent of the system.

In selecting the members of the Tribunal panel the LCA does engage the best volunteers it can, and some will have legal qualifications. They aren't there, however, to prosecute a case or defend it, but simply to ensure that it is conducted fairly and according to the principles of natural justice.

Under normal circumstances actual legal support is unnecessary, as has been so for the great majority of cases over the 52 years of the Tribunal's existence. We must not interpret 'all parties' in the proposal to mean that respondents, accusers, and the church itself would each have legal counsel for a Tribunal hearing. I pray God such a thing would never happen.

5.2. Complaints handling

The Professional Standards Department is part of the church's necessary response to the presence of unacceptable harm and behaviour that, despite our every desire, still exists in the church. Perhaps the title, which is drawn from terminology common in the wider community, is unfortunate, but the Department itself, and those who staff it, base their work on the gospel practice of mutual accountability.

There was a time when perhaps we thought that a department like Professional Standards would be unnecessary in a Christian community. That age of innocence ended in Australia, somewhat abruptly, with the advent of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The realisation had been coming for some time, however, that all was not well and the church needed to up its game in responding to complaints of all types. Too often past processes ran the risk of 're-abusing' people by sending them back to the very people who had either abused them, or failed to deal with the abuser. So something had to be done to allow the vulnerable and the marginalised to find a voice, which the gospel itself calls us to do. So the LCA committed to, and strongly supports, the operations of its Professional Standards Department.

The work, however, has only just begun, and we are learning to find our way. As I have said in District Pastors Conferences, because we are learning we will make mistakes and we want to improve and grow from them. When you observe or experience what you think is a mistake in complaints handling, please be sure (using Matthew 18 if you will) to tell someone responsible what it is that you have seen. In a recent case the leadership of a congregation, who felt an injustice had been done to them, wrote a well-researched and thoughtful letter to their District Church Council. The DCC Executive deliberated and passed on the relevant sections to me so I could address them. Through the local leaders and pastor taking this constructive approach to complain about the complaint handling process, we have been able to effect changes to the system to alleviate the chance of the injustice happening again. In contrast, at other times I hear of verbal complaints doing the rounds among pastors, but have no means of examining or understanding them so that we can work together to make improvements. So in respect to PSD I guess this is a chance for all of us to practice what we preach.

In 2017 the College of Bishops asked Reconciliation Ministry and Professional Standards to work together to develop a unified approach to complaints handling. Around the same time that Professional Standards was being formed, the pastoral leaders of the church had felt it was important to better understand

and implement the principles of a lifestyle of biblical reconciliation. Reconciliation Ministry emerged out of this, alongside of, but separate from, PSD. The two remain distinct operations, but it is important that they agree and cooperate as they respond to issues.

The two departments have established a good collegial spirit, but once again we are still in the early stages. We are working to establish their respective roles in any given situation, and under what principles they each operate. Both have the opportunity to be 'upstream' operations, training and inspiring us to think and act in gospel terms, tackling small issues before they become mountains that would divide us. The bishops would like to strengthen the training aspect of Reconciliation Ministry, and roll it out more comprehensively across the LCA.

I stress that neither PSD nor Reconciliation Ministry are just responses to community pressure to public awareness of incidents of abuse in church institutions and a growing culture of complaint in our society. They are, rather, responses to the gospel imperative to care for the needy, the vulnerable, and the marginalised, just as Christ would have us care for them. We want to be ahead of the game in terms of community expectations, to demonstrate to each other and the world the love of Christ who saves sinners like us.

At this stage two congregational proposals are coming before Synod in respect to Professional Standards: one that there be a review of the Department; and one that PSD and Bishops develop a timetable to assist congregations in identifying and addressing their existing and potential risks.

6. Contemporary Issues in Church and Society

This report is already getting too long. I was going to write here about a range of issues, including sexuality, sexual abuse, marriage, religious freedom, euthanasia, substance abuse, refugees and asylum seekers, the environment, Indigenous recognition and modern slavery. I have written about most of these elsewhere, however, so in this report I am only going to comment on one, Australia's Indigenous community.

In the late 1990s the LCA, under Dr Lance Steicke, conducted a rite of reconciliation, a sorry event with Indigenous participants at a Synod. We produced some excellent material, including a report 'We're all people' and a video 'Out of the shadows'. Somehow those resources were slowly forgotten and we didn't have the energy for a coordinated follow up plan to determine exactly what this 'sorry' might mean for us as a church.

Over the last 12 months the leadership has been reviewing what we did and where we are now. The LCA continues to work hard in the complex and demanding ministries around Central Australia, Cape York, and South Australia's West Coast. In some senses we are right there where it counts, and we understand the problems and the possibilities. Yet we are fractured in our approach which we carry out through various ministries we have 'siloes' so that they rarely collaborate on a level playing field.

Something else I have observed is the lack of Indigenous leadership in our church, at least beyond the local and the immediate areas of work. Our Synods, Councils and Committees proceed largely without Indigenous participation. We rarely pause from our pre-occupations to ask our Indigenous members what they think, even though a remarkably large percentage of Lutherans in Australia are Indigenous. Because they are not organised into constituted congregations, and because English may be their second or even fourth language, it takes a special acumen, and a great deal of time, to listen and to hear the message.

So we can easily put it into the 'too hard' basket and just get on with business. In the end, however, that's not enough. To become a truly local church, and not just a European

transplant into the southern hemisphere, we need to include, and allow ourselves to be changed by, the Indigenous voice.

Recently there have been commendable efforts to find a way to 'legitimise' Indigenous representation at Synods – in other words 'recognition'. Only a few congregations with substantial Aboriginal membership currently have the right to send voting delegates. All attempts at finding a way to widening this representation have so far ended in circular arguments. Congregations are the members of the church, and if you aren't a constituted and recognised congregation you aren't an official member. Simple as that.

One solution, reasonably new and so far untried by us, although it has worked in other churches, would be to change the constitution and create a legal separation between the LCA as a church and the LCA as a legal person. We need to be a legal person (incorporation or association) in order to own property, be sued, and all that other stuff. We don't need to be a legal person, however, to organise congregations, conduct mission, and preach the gospel! If we separated these two then many of the current barriers to Indigenous recognition would cease to exist.

Another issue, which I have only just begun to think about, is the reality that introducing a stronger, recognised Indigenous voice into the affairs of the LCA must substantially change the way we do things. In other words, we must be willing to receive from each other, as well as to give, and Indigenous Australians have many gifts to give their non-Indigenous fellow believers.

So there is work to be done here, and it's the work of a lifetime. In the short to medium term we have searched for a mechanism to get us on the road to continue the journey we began in the 1990s. We are working on developing a Reconciliation Action Plan, and a proposal will be coming before Synod to resource the development of such a plan. We have already begun a series of deep consultations, and with Neville Otto have gathered a steering group of Indigenous and leadership representatives. It's slow work but extremely rewarding and worthwhile, and I hope you will give it your support.

7. Conclusion – personal note

Thank you to all of you who have prayed for me and offered me your support. 2017 was a difficult year for me in terms of my health, but the doctors tell me that my heart attack caused no lasting damage. Events like that, however, force a reassessment of one's values and how one is spending the gift of one's life. We only get one, and when it's over there's no going back. So every day must count towards the things that matter.

You are all people who matter, and if you feel that I have neglected you or not been there for you, I can only ask your forgiveness. Our futures are in God's good hands, and my future in terms of the office of Bishop is in yours as you conduct the nominating ballot during this Conference. Should you find a better person for the job you will have no argument with me. In the meantime I will do the best I can to serve you, and to serve God's people in the LCA.

I end this report with the words of St Paul that were given to me at my confirmation and have always given me strength: *'For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes...'* (Rom 1:16)

*Pastor John Henderson
Bishop, Lutheran Church of Australia
Toowoomba, 23 June 2018*