

International Lutheran Council greetings to the Lutheran Church of Australia at the 19th General Convention of the Synod

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I bring you greetings in the Name of Jesus on behalf of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) and her member churches on the occasion of the LCA's 19th General Convention of the Synod. It is an honour and privilege to be here with you today.

First, I would like to share a little about the ILC with you. The people who formed the ILC first met after the July 1952 Lutheran World Federation General Assembly which was held in Hannover. The concern for the churches that first formed the ILC was de facto fellowship within the LWF. An Australian, transplanted from Germany, Dr Hermann Sasse, played a small role in the formation of what would become the International Lutheran Council. In a letter dated 6 June 1952 from Dr Sasse to the Missouri Synod President, Dr Behnken, Sasse writes, 'As to Uelzen Dr Hoopmann [of Australia] asked for my opinion, and I have him some material for a constitution'. Sasse contributed to the ILC's first constitution. The founding churches of the ILC, including Australia, met in Uelzen, Germany, after the LWF meeting in Hannover. The Lutheran Church of Australia has had connections to the ILC from its very beginning.

As of last week, the International Lutheran Council has 54 member church bodies representing a total of 7.15 million Lutherans worldwide. You can find out more about the ILC on its webpage <http://www.ilcouncil.org>, including the prayers the ILC posted for the Lutheran Church of Australia, and on the ILC's Facebook page.

I know some of you may find this hard to believe, but other ILC member church bodies have had difficult and potentially divisive conventions in the past. In 1959, seven years before the Lutheran Church of Australia was formed, the Missouri Synod was at the beginning of a long period of tension that eventually resulted in a division of the LCMS and the formation of the Association of Evangelical Churches (AELC – now ELCA). Already in 1959, a professor at St Louis seminary said that the book of God's truth contains errors. The Missouri Synod seemed poised for conflict and possible division. At the Missouri Synod's 1959 convention in San Francisco, Dr Hermann Sasse was asked by Dr Behnken to give a lecture on 'The Ecumenical Movement and the Lutheran Church'. Ultimately, Dr Sasse stated that the ecumenical movement needs to be a quest for the truth. I would like to quote a portion of Dr Sasse's address:

'For it was the quest for the true church that caused our fathers to leave their country, their people, their earthly possessions, after they had come to the conviction that the territorial churches of the Old World, which comprised all people irrespective of their actual faith, could no longer be what they claimed to be: churches confessing before God and the world the truth of the gospel as it was testified to in the *Book of Concord*. Some people call that separatism. You know from the history of your church how seriously your fathers searched their own conscience, asking themselves in the sight of God whether they were guilty of the sin of schism. Thank God for these consciences! Thank God for holy separatism! The blessing of their faithful confession is

still a very great reality in your church. And it is generally admitted that the faithful witness of the true confessors of that time has saved what has remained of the Lutheran church in the old country' (H Sasse, *'The Ecumenical Movement and the Lutheran Church'* in *The Journal Articles of Hermann Sasse*, p 454).

In this passage, Sasse called for the Missouri Synod to remember its past and why it was formed. The Missouri Synod, along with the free churches in Germany, and yes, the Lutheran Church of Australia, established themselves to be 'churches confessing before God and the world the truth of the gospel as it was testified to in the *Book of Concord*'. Such a confession is the lonely way; it is the narrow path that Christ has called us to walk. It is the way that does not bind people's consciences but allows the word of God free course. At the 19th convention of the Lutheran Church of Australia, know that the churches of the International Lutheran Council are praying, as 2 Thessalonians 3:1 says, 'that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you'.

Just as the Missouri Synod faced challenges and possible division in 1959, I hope we can provide you with some encouragement as Hermann Sasse did to us almost 60 years ago. You face the decision regarding women's ordination at your convention. No-one can dictate to you what you should do, but we can encourage you to hear the word of Scripture. The position of the ILC is no secret regarding the ordination of women. The ILC holds what we believe to be the Scriptural and Confessional position of the Lutheran church. The ILC holds to the historic tradition which the church from the time of the apostles has held with other historic churches such as Rome and the Orthodox. As St Paul handed down what he had received (paradosis), we pass to you what we have received from the apostles, the historic catholic church, and the Lutheran Confessors. May Christ grant you wisdom and guidance as you deliberate.

In closing, please hear the report of Dr Hoopman from Australia at what would be the first meeting of the ILC in 1952: 'We are in the minority. We stand alone; but as the men who after mature deliberation signed the Formula of Concord did so as men who desired to appear before the judgement seat of Christ with intrepid hearts, thus we are also mindful of our responsibility to God and all Christendom and of the fact that we have vowed "that we will neither privately nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to our Confessions, but by the help of God's grace we intend to abide thereby"'. I believe that these words are as true and valid today, perhaps even more so today, as when they were spoken 66 years ago. Thank you and may the Lord guide and bless you this week.