



Report to the LCA NZ

on a special meeting of the
General Church Board and
the College of Bishops on the
**division within the LCA NZ
over the ordination
of women and men**

Background

On 20 February 2020 the General Church Board (GCB) and the College of Bishops (CoB) of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand (LCA NZ) held a joint meeting in North Adelaide, South Australia. This was their second such joint meeting since the 2018 General Convention of Synod.

The agenda of both meetings was to consider the situation of the LCA NZ in regard to ongoing disagreement in the church about whether the ordained ministry should be open to both women and men, a dispute that has been with us for many years. After many years of research, study of God's word, respectful engagement, dialogue and debate with each other in healthy, scriptural, Christ-centred ways and after several synods have debated and voted on the subject, we have not reached consensus. While we have attempted to avoid intransigence, nevertheless our differences on female pastors appear irreconcilable. Even more, they threaten to spill over into other areas of our faith and confession.

Therefore, it now seems apposite to ask how deeply this matter affects the unity of our synod. Until now this has been the unaskable question. Yet, is this disagreement of such a kind that we can live in reconciled diversity? Or is it at such a fundamental level, and has it reached such a depth, that conscience and conviction tell us we must go separate ways? We have been a single synod for 54 years. Will we continue to be one?

As the elected leaders of the LCA NZ in an organisational and spiritual sense, the members of the GCB and the CoB felt it was their called duty to take this step and look into this situation from this perspective. It was not easy task to undertake. Each of us believes strongly in the unity of the church, brought about by the Spirit and the good news of our Saviour Jesus Christ. We are each committed to God's word, the sacraments, and the Lutheran confessions. All of us have taken vows to uphold the unity of the church in peace and truth.

Nevertheless, we have come to realise that:

- The LCANZ's established methods of deciding theological issues through synodical votes has not settled this one.
- Within the LCANZ there are seemingly irresolvable differences on ordination and the pastorate.
- We are at an impasse to which your elected church leaders can see no simple solution.
- Things seem to be coming to a head. At first some individuals, and now also some congregations, are taking matters into their own hands. They are no longer waiting for the church to sort this out.

Many people and interest groups – from those who want a male-only clergy through to those who want us to recognise

the calling of women to be pastors, and many with views in-between – are asking us for clear leadership. Some have asked the GCB and CoB to bypass Synod and develop new approaches to allow the ordination of both men and women. Others have asked for strict discipline against parishes/congregations who dare, or have dared, to deviate from the synodical vote.

“ We have been a single synod for 54 years. Will we continue to be one?

The GCB and the CoB used the joint meeting to deliberate on how best to lead the LCANZ at this critical juncture in its life.

Historical review

Since 1966, after decades of work to overcome the hurdles to Church Union, the LCANZ has worked hard to resolve issues of teaching and doctrine using an agreed, orderly method, and so remain united. The ultimate step in that method has been a binding vote of the General Synod, which, under God's word and the Lutheran confessions, has the final authority to establish the LCANZ's scriptural and doctrinal stance on any particular matter. By our constitution, any change to our teaching needs the assent of two-thirds of delegates present and voting. That is the process we have followed on the ordination question, yet despite everyone's best efforts, we have failed to agree.

While the votes since 2000 have not reached the required

two-thirds majority to change our teaching of the ordination of men only, in excess of 50 per cent of delegates have repeatedly disagreed with that position. By and large these delegates have remained loyal to the church and complied with the vote, but en masse their point of view has not changed. The voting statistics remain remarkably similar after 18 years. Can the church continue to be closed to this reality?

To once again seek a single view on ordination using the same 'mechanism' at the 2021 or subsequent Convention of the General Synod would likely be another fraught exercise which, once again, would not resolve our dilemma. So, after 54 years, we must think deeply and prayerfully about how we want to proceed.

GCB and CoB joint meeting, February 2020

The GCB and the CoB are vitally concerned for the mission, objectives and viability of the LCANZ. As we reflected on the various directions people are seeking (or demanding), and what is being asked of the LCANZ's leaders, we recognised that we need to be open and forthright with the church about the practical implications of the remedies individuals and congregations are offering us. We also want to illustrate the potential consequences of the options that the church may need to face.

When we met for the second time in February, our task was not to decide on a 'preferred option', or to develop a 'work around' in relation to the synod. We were all highly conscious of our mandate to work within the decisions of Synod and through the processes of the LCANZ. We did, however, reflect that current circumstances could be such that leaders may need to 'make a call' – ie make a recommendation to the church, but not a decision.

Scenarios and principles

After considering all the information we have received, to make the task manageable we narrowed it down to considering three potential scenarios, while acknowledging that there may also be others:

Scenario One: A single LCANZ synod – one teaching, two practices

Scenario Two: A single LCANZ synod – status quo (current teaching upheld)

Scenario Three: Multiple Lutheran synods – we can no longer remain together

As we thought about these scenarios, above all things we wanted to honour Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and to demonstrate a passionate commitment to the freedom of the gospel.

“ We need to be open and forthright ... about the practical implications [and] ... potential consequences of the options that the church may need to face.

We used these guiding criteria as our template:

- unity
- confessional and biblical identity/integrity
- honouring/respecting people's conviction on this issue
- love and forgiveness – what are we prepared to sacrifice in love to each other?
- ecumenical witness
- sharing the gospel (mission and ministry)

We also included matters such as:

- viability/sustainability
- practicalities/legalities
- resourcing/finances
- reputational risk.

We by no means exhausted the implications of these three options, and you may well be able to think of others.

What follows is a record of the discussion and reflections of the joint meeting for each scenario.

1 A single LCA NZ synod – one teaching, two practices

Scenario 1a – Current structure, with one teaching of the ministry and two practices

Some people are advocating this flexible option as viable for the LCA NZ. Some respond that to ordain women would be to introduce a new teaching on the ministry. So, we would not have one teaching, but two, with two resulting practices.

We thought it was reasonable, however, to consider whether two practices of the ministry could co-exist within existing LCA NZ structures.

Naturally, a section of the church believes it would be able to live with this option, and another section believes it could not countenance such an approach.

From a churchwide perspective, operationally and in terms of governance, we saw implications and potential (likely) tensions in the model:

- ensuring the operational aspects of the churchwide office serves impartially.
- the effectiveness of a bishop leading a church with such an 'accepted' split personality?
- the makeup, shape and role of pastors conferences at district and churchwide level.

We would experience anxiety when two separate, informal, arms of the church which disagree with each other need to interact as a whole (e.g. during worship with communion).

At the parish or individual level, tension would exist within congregations and possibly within families in the need to make a choice. This could lead to splits in congregations, with the minority maybe needing to make the heart-wrenching decision to leave the congregation where they have been members for possibly all their lives. There would also be limited opportunity for those in regional and rural centres to be able to go to a Lutheran congregation which provides a form of ministry they believe is acceptable.

Some congregations could leave the LCA NZ, regarding such an arrangement as an unacceptable compromise. This could cut either way. Almost certainly it would affect the viability of the LCA NZ and its ministry, financially and in terms of its continuing ministry in some regions. If a congregation were to leave, it is quite possible that not all members of the congregation would leave with it – some might choose to remain. This could lead to significant local disputes over material things, such as property and money.

We found it difficult to see this as a viable option or as effective in stemming the long, slow membership bleed the

current situation is creating. We felt that this scenario would not ultimately meet the criteria of church unity.

Scenario 1b – One overarching governance framework containing two or more synods

Within Scenario 1 we then considered an alternative approach, that of a single overarching 'legal' governance framework (the 'LCA NZ') within which are nested two or more synods which agree on core teachings and to cooperate on core matters but maintain divergent teachings and practices on other matters.

This would be a new governance model for us and would take time to construct. We would need to disentangle matters of organisational governance from those of faith, teaching and doctrine. We would need to establish a firm, common agreement on what it means to be 'Lutheran' and a 'Lutheran church' that does not rely on unity in all things. The purpose of the overarching body would be common ministry and support services – the things we can do together (WHS, church worker support, professional standards, ALC, property, local mission, international mission, inter-church relations, commissions, reconciliation ministry, Lutheran Media, schools, ALWS). It would need its own governance structure ensuring fair representation from the various synods.

Each synod (with control over its own internal structures) would require separate leadership, meetings, committees and boards. (Note: we did not delve into how a comparable district structure to that we currently have might be represented in this scenario, but we did think that some of the potential synods would be too small to maintain such complexity.) The whole 'LCA NZ' would come together in General Convention to focus on the matters designated to it as the 'overarching body' for purposes of being the one 'LCA NZ'. We anticipated that when separate synods interact as a whole this would create quite some anxiety until we established trust and confidence in each other.

There would be implications for General Pastors Conferences and their work as advisors. How would this be managed in relation to General Convention of the whole?

In this scenario an obvious outcome would be duplication. Viability would be a real issue, especially for one or more of the internal synods. There is potential for hidden consequences in regard to resourcing, communicating and operating across synods. Any perceived partiality on the part of the overarching body would be disruptive to the purpose of the

new 'LCANZ'. Either because of this perception or naturally, the synods with their differing practices may well diverge on approaches to ministry and continue to lose common ground over time as they take more control over their own affairs. Each synod might duplicate the resources and ministry of the overarching body. This model, even if it could be enacted, might only delay a final split, or conversely, it might even hasten it.

Further, congregations would need to decide which synod they want to join. In many cases this could further split congregations and families. What would those in the minority do, especially if there is only one Lutheran congregation in their community? They may be forced into making the heart-wrenching decision to leave the congregation, and the Lutheran Church. History shows that when this happens, a number will leave the church altogether. Their only alternative might be to join another denomination, but some will not. Would the wider church have the capacity to support congregations as they work through such gut-wrenching decisions? We also considered the potential for congregations to 'synod hop', and the associated cost and resourcing to manage transfers.

Shortages in pastoral supply, already an issue in the LCANZ, would be exacerbated.

Outcomes

Guiding Criteria	Does option meet the criteria?
Unity	✓ On paper ✗ In practice
Our confessional and biblical identity/integrity	? for all but one teaching
Honouring/respecting people's conviction on this issue	✓ On paper ✗ In practice
Love and forgiveness – what are we prepared to sacrifice in love to each other?	✗
Ecumenical witness	✓ On paper ✗ In practice
Sharing the gospel (mission and ministry)	?

2 A single LCA NZ synod – status quo (current teaching upheld)

Some people are calling for the church to act against congregations which are doing things outside the decision of Synod, and therefore are in breach of the LCA NZ constitution and their own constitutions. The LCA NZ constitution allows for ecclesiastical discipline against a congregation if it ‘persistently disregards the Constitution, rules, or resolutions of the Church or of the respective District or parish’ (Article 10.1.3). This authority, however, is to be exercised in an ‘evangelical manner in accordance with Scriptural principles and upholding the rules of natural justice. At all stages of the procedure the purpose of all ecclesiastical discipline, to gain a member, is to be observed’ (Article 10.1.1). This is not, nor should it be, a quick process. In a best-case scenario, parties can reach mutual agreement (the object is always to bring peace between parties), but it can also end in negative discipline or a peaceful dismissal. The last two are not so desirable; a binary choice is not likely to be the preference of the majority of the church.

Reflections on congregations acting outside the decision of Synod

Those that operate outside the constitution need to be clear about the potential consequences. They are breaking our agreed unity. Their determination to act on their view without Synod could deny those that may support them on ordination of both men and women, but do not want to break the unity of the church.

In an extreme situation, congregations could face exclusion from the community/LCA NZ (Pastors Conferences, Conventions of Synod) and lose financial and resourcing support. They risk the disenfranchisement of people within the congregation and risk splitting congregations.

Reflections on congregations that may seek a peaceful dismissal

Congregations seeking a peaceful dismissal and withdrawal from membership of the LCA NZ would need to be aware that there could be a significant minority which is resolved to remain in the membership of the LCA NZ. This would raise difficult and sensitive questions about ownership and distribution of the congregation’s assets and resources. The withdrawing congregation would also no longer receive direct and indirect resources and support through their respective district or the LCA NZ.

Reflections on whether the church should discipline congregations

The implications are amplified. Matters of discipline will

become all-consuming for the bishops/districts and we would lose our focus on mission and care of the faithful. Our current discipline and adjudication systems do not have the wherewithal to handle all the cases that could arise. It sets a dangerous precedent.

A hardline approach may well see more people and congregations opting to walk out in protest. This would risk the loss of pastors and the viability of a depleted church. Although we don’t know the potential magnitude of such things eventuating, it would surely be a poor public display, dishonouring the gospel through the fighting and division, and a poor witness to Christ. The ‘winners and losers’ approach is never a good scenario for the people of God.

We thought that severe action, if followed through precipitously and without the concern to ‘regain the [sister/]brother’ would polarise us further, make an already fractured environment worse, create more distrust, promote feelings of being denied and outcast, and speed up the ‘long slow bleed’.

We also thought that this ‘solution’ lends supports to individualistic thinking that “I will get what I want, and you will agree with me, ‘or else’”. Forced uniformity (or the easy unity of those who already agree) and rejecting those who don’t, would not witness to Christ or real unity in him. It might not be a mark of faithfulness but rather of a demonstrated lack of concern (love) for the wellbeing of others and the church.

Outcomes

Guiding Criteria	Does option meet the criteria?
Unity	✗
Our confessional and biblical identity/integrity	Maybe but at a price/are we prepared to pay the price (one issue)
Honouring/respecting people’s conviction on this issue	✗
Love and forgiveness – what are we prepared to sacrifice in love to each other?	✗
Ecumenical witness	✗
Sharing the gospel (mission and ministry)	?

3 Multiple Lutheran synods – we can no longer remain together (we separate)

If our disagreement on this matter truly makes our unity untenable, the LCA NZ may choose to separate in a constitutionally ordered manner. Currently, the church is not calling for such separation. We thought it important, however, to consider outcomes that we find unpalatable, so we can think effectively about how we might respond should they arise. This helps us to be truly open and honest and to acknowledge what is at stake should the ultimate decision be made that we cannot live with this difference.

Technically, a decision to dissolve the LCA NZ and effect the process of separation requires a 75 per cent majority of Synod. That’s no straight-forward proposition! It would take extensive, detailed planning and constitutional work, and substantial resourcing, both for the existing entity and subsequent entities that may be created. It would require at least a synodical term to sort out the legal complexities before committing to any final vote(s). Consider:

- negotiating the separation of assets (eg properties, LCA NZ funds)
- determining how departments (eg Archives, Lutheran Media) and agencies (eg FRM, ALWS) would be managed (shared or split), and
- the relationships/ownership of aged care, schools and other entities (eg Lutheran Community Care (SA-NT) and Lutheran Services (Qld)).

These resources and ministries exist to serve the purposes of the gospel through the mission and ministry of the LCA NZ. Do they get to choose which church they will serve in? Can they be a shared resource? Do they become independent? These are unprecedented, risky questions to which we do not have ready answers.

If we were to seriously consider this scenario, as a church we would need to deeply search our hearts, and plead with God, ‘What is your will? Why are we separating? How are we serving you?’ Would the underlying theology of the ‘new’ churches be so fundamentally different? Would they be witnessing to a different Saviour? Wouldn’t a fractured, dispersed or devolved Lutheran Church result in a weakened public witness; or worse, be a witness to sectarian division and confusion?

Similar to the Scenario 1b, such a separated church of multiple new entities (bearing the same denominational identity) would inevitably be characterised by duplication of governance, resources, personnel, training and programs. There would be consequences and challenges to map out for church relations, ecumenically, in the Lutheran world, partner churches through our International Mission

Department and ALWS. A pertinent example of the consequences of separation is to ask how the Australian National Redress Scheme for child sexual abuse, and other such legal and accountability matters for which the LCA NZ is responsible, would be owned and managed.

Again, would these new, smaller Lutheran churches have the critical mass to maintain a viable and sustainable presence in the Australian and New Zealand landscape? The LCA NZ isn’t tiny, but neither is it a large church. Splitting it into smaller groups would push some or all the ‘new’ Lutheran churches below the threshold of viability.

Some could opt to switch denominations; others could decide to become Australian or New Zealand outposts of international Lutheran churches and groups, engaging with overseas resources for funding, personnel, programs and training institutions (acknowledging that to some extent the LCA NZ already does this in regard to Australian pastors and Australian Lutheran College).

Outcomes

Guiding Criteria	Does option meet the criteria?
Unity	✗
Our confessional and biblical identity/integrity	✗ ✓ each group would consider it so (one issue)
Honouring/respecting people’s conviction on this issue	?
Love and forgiveness – what are we prepared to sacrifice in love to each other?	✗
Ecumenical witness	✗
Sharing the gospel (mission and ministry)	✗

Prepared by the LCA NZ General Church Board and College of Bishops

Concluding remarks

At the time of first putting this report together, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and, along with many things, its completion was delayed. COVID-19 isn't over, not by any means, but it is time to resume some of our agendas. Things cannot stay on hold forever, and this disease might become the 'new normal' which we must learn to live with and cope with, as we have done with many other challenges in the past.

Although this final section is headed 'Concluding remarks', on the day of our meeting on 20 February, we did not reach a conclusion. We did not set out to decide on a one-size-fits-all solution, despite many requests, even demands, that we do just that. Under our structures, the GCB and the CoB do not have the authority to force their will on the church, even should we want to do so – which we don't. What we have received is the authority to serve the church and endeavour to fulfil its programs, as determined by Synod, to the best of our God-given abilities, using the resources we have at our disposal.

We do recognise, however, the need to offer the church guidance. We have done so in the past, and we will do so again over the coming months and even years, if God grants us such grace. In the immediate future our focus will be on preparing well for the 2021 General Convention. That will be no panacea to our problems. A common misconception in the church is that when something doesn't work, we think that if we just do more of it one day it will suddenly work. Repeating the practices of past Conventions of Synod will not solve this matter. So, what new approaches do we need? How will we prepare for the major meeting of our church where we join together, from Perth to Auckland, Darwin to Christchurch, to worship God and express our solidarity in faith?

All members of the GCB and the CoB remain committed to the one LCANZ, our unity as a synod and our common purpose in Christ. We are Lutheran, and we want to remain so, but first of all we are Christ's. Christ within us, Christ among us, and Christ between us. When we disagree with each other, when we argue or fight with one another, Christ is there between us. He takes into himself any hurt, accusation, verbal barb or violence. If we hurt each other, it is really him we hurt. He is our mediator with God, but also between each other. So, as you pray about this issue, as you think about what you are going to say, write or do on this issue, think first about Christ and his unwavering, indiscriminating, unending love for the sinner, the outcast, the broken.

While we didn't formally resolve it, our preferred solution is that we remain together and learn to love and accept one another, as past generations have shown us is possible, and as we already know from our own experience. It can be hard work – and why should it be otherwise? We are human, after all.

May the light of Christ dwell in our hearts, whatever the issue, and however passionately we feel it as it burns within us.



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