

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

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Prophecy in the church

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PREFACE

From 2006 to 2010 several papers on the topic of prophecy were prepared and tabled for discussion at successive meetings of the Plenum of the Church's Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations. This paper brings together the chief insights that have arisen as a result of that process, and it offers guidance to the Church for ministering in situations where people claim to have received the gift of prophecy.

When Christ ascended on high ... he gave gifts to his people (Eph 4:8).

A. MAIN INSIGHTS

1. Background in the Old Testament: The use of the words 'prophet' and 'prophecy' in the New Testament indicates that the early Christians understood that there was continuity between the phenomenon of prophecy in their own midst and the prophets of the old covenant.
2. The true prophets in biblical times are caught up into God's council (*sōd* – Jer 23:18), from where they *forthtell* the word of the Lord, applying God's law and promises to the present situation, and *foretell* future events: 'Being therefore a prophet (*prophetes*) ..., [David] foresaw [*proidon*] and spoke' ... (Acts 2:30,31); compare Agabus's prophecies in Acts 11:27,28; 21:10–14. Jeremiah, the true prophet of God, is called and commissioned to be a prophet (Jer 1:2), whereas the false prophet Hananiah is neither called nor authorised to speak on the Lord's behalf.
3. In the New Testament, prophets make their appearance already in the Lukan infancy narrative (Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna). All four gospels call John the Baptist a prophet. John is the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets (Matt 11:11–14).
4. Jesus is The Prophet—the prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15; Matt 17:5; Acts 3:22, 23) who was to come at the end of time to bring salvation. In him 'something greater than Jonah is here' (Matt 12:41). Jesus is the one 'who brings the new age which the Old

Testament prophets had only foretold' (Gerhard Friedrich, 'prophecy', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol 6, p 843). Now 'in these last days God has spoken to us by his Son' (Heb 1:1,2).

5. Peter's Pentecost sermon recalls the words of Joel: 'I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy' (Acts 2:18). Luke shows that indeed they did (Acts 2:1–42; 10:44–48; 19:1–6). In early Christianity, prophecy is not restricted to a chosen few, but all are filled with the prophetic spirit and all may prophesy (1 Cor 14:1,5).
6. In early Christian communities women also prophesied (Acts 21:8,9; 1 Cor 11:2–16), and there are examples of women prophets also in the Old Testament (Ex 15:20; Judg 4:4; 2 Kgs 22:14–20; Isa 8:3).
7. While all men and women *may* prophecy, only some actually do, and only some are called prophets (1 Cor 12:29). In contrast to apostles and pastors who are entrusted with an ongoing ministry, some prophets have received only a momentary gift. As far as we know, Saul's gift of prophecy lasted only for a day (1 Samuel 19:23, 24). Amos received a series of prophecies, but he still insisted: 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son' (Amos 7:14).
8. In the Pauline letters, 'the prophets' are listed after 'the apostles' (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; see Rev 18:20). Certainly, the apostles also functioned as prophets. Paul is identified as such (Acts 13:1), and examples of his prophecy are given in 1 Corinthians 15:51–58; 1 Thess 4:13–18. Both apostles and prophets spoke the word of the Lord under the Spirit's inspiration. But the two groups are clearly distinguished (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11).

On the basis of the priority given to the apostles over that of prophets, any prophet in the LCA (no matter how much they feel themselves sent or 'burdened' by the Lord with a message; see Zech 9:1; 12:1) must subordinate themselves to the office of the ministry since, according to the New Testament, the pastors of the church stand in continuity with the apostles and continue the spiritual functions of the apostolate in their ministry of the Word and the sacraments (Theses of Agreement VI,6).

9. According to Rev 19:10, 'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy'. Faithful prophecy is always Christ-centred. It is the testimony of Jesus and the testimony *to* Jesus.
10. Paul's teaching on prophecy may be summarised briefly:
 - Prophecy is a grace-gift (*charisma*) to be exercised in keeping with the Christian faith (Rom 12:4–6).
 - Paul encourages the gift ('Do not despise prophesying') (1 Thess 5:19–21).
 - Prophecy is superior to tongues, because it is made in intelligible speech (1 Cor 14:1–5).
 - The context for proclaiming and hearing the prophetic word can be a worship service (1 Cor 14:26–31; Rev 1:9–11). However, Elizabeth and Zechariah prophesied in their home in the Judean hill country, as did Mary (Luke 1:39–56; 67–79), Simeon and Anna prophesied in the temple (but not necessarily during a service – Luke 2:25–38), while Agabus and the evangelist Philip's daughters seem to have prophesied in Philip's home (Acts 21:7–11).
 - Prophets must participate in worship in an orderly and edifying manner as appropriate to the circumstances of the time (1 Cor 14:29,33,40).

- Consonant with this principle of propriety in worship, women who pray or prophesy should be veiled (1 Cor 11:10).
 - Paul understood that prophecies would continue in the church until 'perfection [or 'completion'] comes', when they would cease (1 Cor 13:8–10). Commentators debate whether Paul means by the coming of 'perfection' (a) Christians coming to spiritual maturity; (b) the completion and acceptance of the New Testament 'canon' – the 27 books that make up the NT; or (c), the most likely interpretation, the coming of the last day. See the summary of various views in Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans 1987), 644–45, note 23.
 - There is some overlap between the roles of apostles, prophets and pastors/teachers, because all of them proclaim God's word to his people and yet they are also distinct. For the specificity of these roles, see H Sasse, 'Apostles, prophets, teachers: concerning the early history of the office of the ministry' (1942) in *Scripture and the church: selected essays of Hermann Sasse* (Concordia Seminary monograph series 1995), 15–30.
 - Nonetheless, it is inaccurate when Bible versions (e.g. the *Good News Bible* and J B Phillips) translate the verb *prophēteuō* as 'preach' or 'speak God's message'.
 - Just as Paul distinguishes between apostles and prophets, so he also distinguishes between prophets and pastor-teachers (1 Cor 12:28, 29; Eph 4:11).
 - The prophets were not mindless robots, without any awareness or self-control; 'the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets' (1 Cor 14:32).
 - The New Testament distinction between 'pastor-teacher' and 'prophet' does not exclude from prophecy the exposition of Scripture.
11. After the New Testament era, prophecy began to wane in the early church as the New Testament writings gained in acceptance. By the middle of the second century prophecy was in decline, because, as 2 Peter puts it, 'we have the prophetic word made more sure' (2 Pet 1:19). Another reason for the decline of prophecy was the prevalence of false teachers, notably the rise (and demise) of the Montanists ('The new prophecy') in the second century AD (Friedrich in *TDNT* 6: 860,861).

B. BIBLICAL PROPHECY AS THE FRUIT OF DIVINE INSPIRATION AND DIRECT REVELATION

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, David composed a psalm that also served as a prophecy concerning Herod and Pontius Pilate forming an alliance 'against the Lord and against his anointed' (Ps 2:1, 2; Acts 4:25–28). Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elisabeth prophesied that Mary would be the most privileged of women (Luke 1:41–45). Similarly, the Spirit inspired Zechariah and Simeon (Luke 1:67; 2:26), as he inspired all the biblical prophets. Last but not least, John was 'in the Spirit on the Lord's day' when he received 'the revelation of Jesus Christ' (Rev 1:1, 10). This theme of the Holy Spirit inspiring the biblical prophets is crystallised in the Nicene Creed: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit... who spoke by the prophets'.

Just as the prophecies recorded in Scripture are always seen as the fruit of divine inspiration, so they are consistently said to be the fruit of divine revelation (e.g. 1 Cor 14:30; Rev 1:1–3; 22:18,19). According to Gerhard Friedrich, 'all prophecy rests on revelation'. Prophecy, he says, 'is a word of revelation that a Christian has received. It is a word from the Lord given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit' (*TDNT* 6:853).

In the light of this biblical background, there is a sound basis for distinguishing between prophecy as immediate (direct) revelation from God - the kind of prophecy most richly represented in the Scriptures - and prophecy as inspired preaching and application of the Scriptures already given by God (mediated prophecy).

We find an example of prophecy in this latter sense in Luther's treatise to the councilmen of Germany, where he states that a Christian teacher well versed in the biblical languages deserves to be called a 'prophet' (*Luther's Works* 45: 363; compare *LW* 24: 366; 30:165; 40: 383-94). Luther himself was sometimes called God's 'prophet to the Germans'.

But we may not generalise that for the Reformer prophecy meant no more than the faithful preaching and wise application of the Scriptures. We must always ask: 'When did Luther say that? What was the context?' Does he never distinguish between the way pastors like himself go about their work, beginning with prayerful hearing of the word already given in the biblical canon, and the prophets of biblical times who received new revelations that would later become part of the canon? The Reformer certainly drew the distinction, especially when responding to the claims of the fanatical, self-appointed 'heavenly prophets' of his day, men like Carlstadt who claimed they were 'taught by the heavenly voice' (*LW* 40:117) rather than by paying careful attention to Scripture. Luther himself would never presume to call himself a prophet on a par with those of biblical times:

A prophet is one who gets his understanding *immediately* from God, into whose mouth the Holy Spirit puts the right word. No one can make a prophet by human instruction; and even though it is God's word and I [Luther] preach the word most purely, I still cannot be a prophet; a learned and wise man I can be. For example, in Matthew 23 those are called 'wise' who derive the doctrine from the prophets, for God speaks through people and not without means. *But prophets are those who have their doctrine from God without any means* (Commentary on several chapters of Exodus, 1525, St Louis edition III:785, trans alt; compare 'Against the heavenly prophets in the matter of images and sacraments', *LW* 40:73-223; see also *LW* 40:65-71; 36:335-61).

C. LUTHER AS PROPHET

The above passage from Luther's *Exodus Commentary* calls for a few words on Luther's role as prophet. Although the reformer himself refused the title and saw himself as only as a preacher and teacher of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, he was nevertheless hailed a prophet by his followers. His authority as an interpreter of Scripture soon replaced that of popes and councils. His followers believed that he was God's special agent sent to speak a word of divine judgment on the corruption of the medieval church and to bring about a reform based on the Scriptures. It was his authoritative teaching, based on the Bible, that gave Luther his prophetic authority. This was also the reason that people hailed him as a prophetic hero. He announced God's judgment on the errors of the papal church and gave people new hope as he held high the lamp of God's Word which allowed him to distinguish truth from error, or in the case of the 'heavenly prophets', to distinguish between spirits. Luther's prophetic authority was inextricably connected with his office as teacher and preacher. His role as prophetic teacher comes to the fore especially in the republication of his works so that, long after his death, his prophetic authority was still invoked by his followers to settle disputes such as those that arose after his death (see Robert Kolb, 1999, *Martin Luther as prophet, teacher, and hero*, 17-136).

D. THE INSEPARABILITY OF WORD AND SPIRIT

Although Lutheran theology has always stressed the inseparability of Word and Spirit, not all Christians accept this and many argue against it since they claim that it is not scriptural. However the inseparability of Word and Spirit is clear already from Psalm 33:6: 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth'. Here

word and breath, or word and Spirit (since breath and spirit are the same word in Hebrew), are set in parallel. If we use picture language, we could say that when God speaks, he breathes out his Spirit. Therefore it is impossible to separate the Word he speaks from the Spirit by which he speaks. As Luther says in a sermon (1521), anyone who refuses to hear the voice gets nothing out of the breath either (WA 9,632,6–8).

There are several New Testament passages which confirm the interconnectedness of Word and Spirit. Jesus' promise of the Spirit in his farewell discourse to the disciples (the so-called Paraclete saying, in John 14 and 15) demonstrate the linkage between the Word (in this case, the incarnate Word) and the Spirit. The promised Spirit is the executor of Christ, the one who continues his ministry in and through the church today. After his resurrection, Jesus empowers the disciples to be his witnesses by giving them his Spirit (John 20:21–2; Luke 24:48–9). Yet the external Word that he speaks remains crucial. Jesus says to his followers: 'If you continue in my word ... you will be free' (John 8:32) while Paul writes that 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor 3:17). Therefore, the Word and the Spirit are united in producing the same effect. Again, Jesus says to his followers, 'the words I speak are spirit and life' (John 6:63). Thus, Jesus' words are already 'spirit and life', yet it is the Spirit who gives life through the Word. Once again this shows the interconnectedness and inseparability of the Word and the Spirit. Many other examples could be given, such as Paul's teaching that the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God (Eph 6:17), but these will suffice.

Luther was convinced that the inseparability of Word and Spirit was solidly scriptural and so he had to fight against those who wanted to pull Word and Spirit apart. His main opponents were the radical reformers on the left wing of the Reformation (the forerunners of modern Pentecostalism) whom Luther called 'spiritualists' or 'enthusiasts'. They claimed that the direct revelation of the Holy Spirit (the inner word) was the only authority needed in theological matters, not Holy Scripture. Luther, on the other hand, did not believe every prophet who claimed to have a revelation from God but took seriously the apostolic admonition: 'Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world' (1 John 4:1).

Luther's teaching against the spiritual enthusiasts in the 1520s has become the norm and standard that has guided Lutherans of all generations in their dealings with people who publicly teach on the basis of an alleged inward call or private revelation given by the Holy Spirit. Luther repeats his basic principles even more emphatically in his *Smalcald Articles* of 1537 where he states:

In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts, that is, the 'spirits', who boast that they have the Spirit apart from and before contact with the Word. On this basis, they judge, interpret, and twist the Scripture or oral Word according to their pleasure. Müntzer did this, and there are still many doing this today, who set themselves up as shrewd judges between the spirit and the letter without knowing what they say or teach (Book of Concord 2000, 322).

Luther holds that God deals with us in two ways: inwardly and outwardly—inwardly, by means of faith and other spiritual gifts; outwardly, through the gospel, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar, through which, as through means or methods, the Holy Spirit comes to us. The relationship between these two ways is crucial. Luther argues, against the spiritualists, that the divinely established order is from heaven to earth, from God to his creation, from outside to inside, and not the reverse. Therefore, while Word and Spirit remain inseparable there is also a proper God-ordained order: the external written and proclaimed Word comes first, then the Spirit which works through the Word. To ensure that the external Word remains primary and that the Spirit is not pulled apart from the Word, the church needs people who can exercise the Spirit-given *charisma* of 'distinguishing

between spirits' (1 Cor 12:10), a gift that the church must pray for wherever Christians claim to have the gift of prophecy.

However, the charismatic work of the Spirit is wider than prophecy. It may be that the Lutheran tradition has not always taken seriously enough Jesus' healing miracles and their implication for his ongoing healing ministry in and through the power of the Spirit. Perhaps we need to emphasise more the inextricable connection between the forgiveness of sins and the healing of the sick (Mark 2; James 5:15). The classical Pentecostal tradition presents us with a challenge that we cannot afford to walk away from. Rather, we need to engage with this tradition, learning from it where it preserves elements that are in agreement with Scripture, while rejecting those things that are clearly contrary to Scripture.

E. CHARTING A MIDDLE COURSE BETWEEN AN OVERLY 'CHARISMATIC' POSITION AND A 'CESSATIONIST' POSITION

While we may conclude that prophecy had its special place in the church's foundational period, it would be hazardous to claim this gift could never be poured out again. St Paul warns against supressing the Spirit (1 Thess 5:19). Certainly, no one on the CTICR holds a strictly cessationist position but all hold that the Holy Spirit continues to work in the church today, also through the grace-gifts (*charismata*) that he freely bestows as he wills. Opinions may differ, however, on the extent to which the Spirit works through the gift of prophecy outside the ordained ministry. But we agree that we should not close our minds to the possibility that the Spirit may confer special gifts as needed for building up the church in particular times and places.

In spite of his sharp criticism of the spiritualists of his day, Luther is not a complete cessationist who could never admit the possibility of a person today receiving a direct revelation from God, as did the prophets of old. On a few occasions he does admit that this is possible, but he also insists on certain safeguards. He stresses three things in particular: 1) extreme care needs to be taken with all such revelations, since the devil can easily produce counterfeit signs and revelations; 2) all such revelations must be thoroughly tested (LW 9:129–30, 187–90; 18:109; 21:270–80), and if they cannot be tested then we should take the advice of Gamaliel and postpone judgment (LW 48:365–7); and 3) although such revelations may be helpful in providing us guidance in temporal matters, they are not necessary for our faith and cannot compare with what has already been revealed and attested in the scriptures (LW 24:365–71). In a particularly instructive passage Luther writes:

I suppose, however, that some appearances, like those related about Dionysius and others, are true. Yet they are of no concern to me. It is not that I utterly despise them; it is because I know that they are nothing in comparison with Baptism, the Lord's Supper, yes, even in comparison with a godly conversation which I can have with any godly brother or sister. For these appearances are available to all and are most reliable, and they cannot deceive.

Learn, therefore, that throughout one's life, in every work, and in every situation one must give attention above all to the Word of God. To the patriarchs and prophets God appeared in an extraordinary manner, in dreams, in a vision, or through the words of the patriarchs and sometimes even of angels. We do not long for such revelations or appearances; we are satisfied, and we thank God to the best of our ability for our own appearances and faces of God, which we behold in Baptism and in the entire ministry of the Word. It is there that a brother or sister becomes an angel for his or her brother or sister. The former absolves the latter from sins, comforts, instructs, strengthens, warns, admonishes etc. (LW 3:166–7; Lectures on Genesis, 1535–1545).

If we allow Luther to be our teacher here, he would advise us to be open to the possibility of a person today receiving a direct revelation from God but not to expect that this will be the norm. The norm rather in the church today is that God speaks through the words of the

prophets and apostles from of old contained in the biblical canon. These old words are made ever new by the life-giving Spirit who breathes new life into the old books and letters of the Bible. Here we find the true 'word of wisdom', the Spirit-given 'word of knowledge', and the authentic, God-given 'word of revelation' that guides God's people in every age. Where a prophet today claims to be in receipt of a new word from God, the best rule of thumb to follow is to greet this claim to a new revelation with caution, according to the apostolic injunction not to believe every spirit until they are tested (1 John 4:1).

There are many instances of rampant spiritualism ('enthusiasm') in contemporary churches which would be unacceptable to the LCA. For example:

- Many churches in Africa, the South Pacific and elsewhere have suffered from the separatism fostered by extreme revival movements. Independent churches have sprung up in which free rein is given to the display of signs and wonders. This can often create chaos produced by the countless self-anointed and self-appointed apostles and prophets at work who claim, among other things, that pastors are not needed. Liturgical worship focusing on sound gospel preaching and the celebration of the Eucharist has largely given way to singing, lengthy preaching, choral music and extended periods of prophetic praying. The inspired messages and inspiring choirs seem to have taken the place of the Sacrament.
- Closer to home we observe the emphasis on 'fivefold ministry' in some Australian [and New Zealand?] churches today: the belief that all the five offices of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher, referred to in Ephesians 4:11, remain active and valid offices in the contemporary Christian church. Of most concern here is the apparent sidelining of the New Testament apostles and their writings, with their unique and irreplaceable witness to the risen Lord (Acts 1:21,22; Eph 2:20; 3:5)? We may also ask whether the 'fivefold ministry' approach doesn't tend to erase any distinction between the foundational role of the biblical prophets (Eph 2:20; 3:5) and God's gift of prophecy in the contemporary Christian church?

The Lutheran Church has always emphasised *sola scriptura* vis-à-vis Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and all expressions of 'enthusiasm' which deny the connection between Word and Spirit (see John 6:63b).

F. ARTICULATING AND UPHOLDING PROPER DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT TYPES OF PROPHECY

1. Prophecy in its truest sense: The highly significant words, symbolic actions, and visions divinely imparted to the OT and NT prophets. For example, the prophet Jeremiah was appointed 'over nations and kingdoms' (Jer 1:10). He was divinely authorised to bring God's Word not only to the people of Judah and their kings but also to the ambassadors of surrounding nations (Jer 27:1–11). The Book of Revelation, the most extensive prophecy in the New Testament, uncovers God's plans for church and world to the end of time. By contrast, much of what passes for 'prophecy' in our day pales into insignificance (see F [c] below).
2. Helpful prophecy in a broader sense: In this category we may speak of Paul's admonition that believers strive for the gift of prophecy by which the church is built up, the gift of clearly proclaiming and teaching the gospel in such a way that outsiders are instructed, called to account and brought to faith (1 Cor 14:1–4,24,25,31). We may also refer again to Luther's comments on Christian teachers who are competent in Hebrew and Greek and are thus able to 'dig into Scripture, expound it, and carry on disputations' (LW 45:363). There will be others in this broader category who give leadership to the church in a way that is well-grounded in

Scripture. Until the end of time, the church will always have her 'two olive trees and two lampstands' – her faithful prophetic witnesses to Jesus (Rev 11:3–12).

3. So-called 'prophecies' of a far less significant nature: What is the LCA to say to her people in a day when many are claiming the gift of prophecy? How will we characterise prophecies of this kind? Someone says they have received a prophecy about the person they should marry. Another speaks of a prophecy revealing that a certain church member has committed a grievous sin. In another setting, the recipient claims to have been given a prophecy leading them to know how the congregation should vote on a matter that has come before the annual meeting. Another 'prophet' informs a fellow believer that the Lord is pleased with them but still has great and mighty plans for their life that need to be discovered and acted upon.

It may be unfair to call these prophecies 'trivial' by comparison with categories (a) and (b) above. Such prophecies may have high personal significance for those who claim to have received them. But what are we to say about them? What are we to teach Lutheran people concerning them? Can we leave them with the impression that 'prophecies' of this nature are on a par with biblical prophecy, and are a genuine continuation of what happened in biblical times?

G. DISCERNING PROPHECY: A GUIDE FOR PASTORS MINISTERING IN SITUATIONS WHERE PEOPLE CLAIM TO HAVE RECEIVED THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

Introduction: a handy definition

What is prophecy? It is a word of revelation that a Christian has received. It is a word from the Lord given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is spontaneous speech. Christians should not oppose the gifts of the Spirit; or, as St Paul writes, they are not to 'quench the Spirit' (1 Thess 5:19). Rather, Christians should encourage one another to exercise the spiritual gifts, especially prophecy, because it is the only gift that occurs in all the lists of *charismata* in the New Testament. Again, St Paul writes, 'Do not despise the words of prophets' (1 Thess 5:20). It is important to note that the Christian prophet cannot be said to be 'possessed' or to be in a state of ecstasy. Although the message is given by the Spirit, it is a clear and intelligible message designed for the instruction, encouragement and upbuilding of the church (1 Cor 14:3–5, 12, 26, 31). The recipient delivers the message while fully in control of his or her mental faculties (1 Cor 14:19, 31).

Testing the prophetic gift

- Is the prophecy in harmony with the Scriptures?
- Study the prophet's character, conduct, confession and attitude to the church. Initially focus on the prophet rather than the prophecy.
- Since this is a 'supernatural' gift, a gift 'from above', confirm that the prophet confesses Christ's weak humanity, his coming in the flesh, his crucifixion and bodily resurrection (1 John 4:1–6).
- Does the prophet respect the biblically-based divine service as a God-pleasing means that preserves the gospel and the sacraments?
- Does the prophet willingly submit to the community of faith, the pastor and the words of Jesus Christ? Does he or she wish to dominate the worship service? Does he or she

regard the worship service as the proper setting for the practice of the gift of prophecy?

- Does the prophet love to receive holy communion and thereby proclaim the Lord's death till he comes (1 Cor 11:26)?
- Does the prophet bring a hymn, a lesson or a revelation that will instruct, encourage and build up the church, or is he or she more concerned about self-promotion (1 Cor 14:26,32,33)?
- Is the prophet ready to wait patiently for his or her turn and make way for another prophet when necessary (1 Cor 14:29–31)?
- Is the 'prophet' an itinerant, just passing through, and lacking in credentials apart from self-approval?
- Without quenching the Spirit, it is appropriate to treat with caution the neophyte Christian 'prophet'.

Pastoral counsel

- If a member of your congregation believes he or she has received the gift of prophecy and wishes to practise the gift, engage other leaders in your pastoral interactions with him or her. Work with your pastoral assistants or ministry team; if you believe it is necessary, consult your zone counsellor, fellow pastors or District president.
- It may be appropriate to appoint a mature member of the same gender as the prophet, who is well grounded in scripture and the *charismata*, as supporter, friend or mentor.
- It is important that you engage in a process of testing, so that things are done 'decently and in order' (1 Cor 14:40).
- Do not attempt to test the prophet on your own. Rather, he or she should be heard and tested by those who themselves have been tested (2 Cor 13:5–10).
- This process cannot be rushed. Jesus says that false prophets wear clever disguises; they are 'ravenous wolves' in 'sheep's clothing' (Matt 7:15), not easily detected at first glance. In order to distinguish true prophets from false prophets, it is important to allow time to see if the prophet's ministry bears good fruit or bad fruit (Matt 7:16–20). We might say that the gift of prophecy is self-authenticating.
- Pastorally, we note how prophecy can be used as a tool in a power struggle (but so can pastoral authority).
- Ask yourself whether the situation requires that the congregation be taught about this grace gift.

CONCLUSION

It is the prayer of the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations that our church may grow in the refreshing communication and rich generosity of the Holy Spirit.

APPENDIX 1: LUTHER'S BATTLE FOR THE INSEPARABILITY OF WORD AND SPIRIT

No Lutheran treatment of Word and Spirit could omit discussing Luther's own teaching on the topic which emerges most clearly in connection with his battle with the radical reformers on the left wing of the Reformation, the forerunners of modern Pentecostalism. These people were unhappy with the conservative Reformation led by Luther and his co-worker Philipp Melanchthon. They wanted a Reformation that would reject all aspects of Catholicism and completely revolutionise society. Luther called them 'ravers' or 'enthusiasts' (*Schwärmer*) and it was in his dispute with these charismatic types that Luther clarified his understanding of the interconnectedness between the Spirit and the Word. His main opponents were the key leaders of the radical faction: Thomas Müntzer, Andreas Karlstadt (a former colleague of Luther), and the three Zwickau prophets (Nicholas Storch, Thomas Drechsel, and Marcus [Thomae] Stübner). Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Zwickau prophets was their spiritualism, which led them to claim that the direct revelation of the Holy Spirit (the inner word) was the only authority needed in theological matters, not Holy Scripture (the external Word).

When Luther was absent from Wittenberg in 1521 and Melanchthon was left to deal with the unrest caused by these radicals who wanted to implement Reformation teaching by force, he appealed to Luther for advice. In reply, Luther urged Melanchthon to test their spirit. The main matter to be determined was whether the three prophets could attest their divine calling, 'for God has never sent anyone, not even the Son himself, unless he was called through men or attested by signs.... I definitely do not want the "prophets" to be accepted if they say they were called by mere revelation' (LW 48:364–6). Luther took seriously the apostolic admonition: 'Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world' (1 John 4:1).

On one occasion, Müntzer wrote to Luther and Melanchthon and personally charged them with worshipping a 'dumb God', one who no longer communicates revelation to his elect. 'Beloved, make the effort to prophesy, otherwise your theology isn't worth a red cent' (Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career*, 150). Müntzer also claimed that the Spirit of God was revealing to many that a new Reformation was needed, one where the Spirit would no longer be constrained by the outward means of Word and Sacrament. Luther was increasingly worried about a new alliance being formed around Müntzer and Karlstadt (who became Müntzer's successor) whose members boasted (he says in a letter) 'that they are being moved by pure spirits, without the testimony of Holy Scripture' (LW 49:82). Luther held that Müntzer's preaching was fanatical (*schwärmerisch*), for he held that the Word of God works immediately in the human heart through inner illumination and visions given by the Holy Spirit, without any external means. He denounced the spiritualists as false prophets in a letter to Melanchthon where he says that they know of no suffering and cross, but only of glory and triumph (LW 38:366).

To combat this new radical spiritualism promoted by Karlstadt, Luther wrote his famous tractate *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525). In it Luther criticised him and 'his prophets' with respect to two main problems. First, 'they run and teach without a call', a practice condemned by God in Jeremiah 23:21 ('I did not send them, yet they ran. I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied'). And second, while Karlstadt and the prophets claimed to possess the Spirit, they 'avoid, run away from, and are silent about the main points of Christian doctrine', having 'no idea how a good conscience can be gained or ought to be constituted' (LW 40:222–3). Luther summed up his polemic against Karlstadt thus: 'With all his mouthing of the words, "Spirit, Spirit, Spirit," he tears down the bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit comes to you' (LW 40:147).

According to Luther, both errors stem from inverting the proper relation between the Spirit's activity and the divinely appointed external means. The inward experience of the Spirit properly 'follows, and is effected by' the outward means of grace. 'God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him...' (LW 40:146). By contrast, Karlstadt and his prophets had set up 'a contrary order', subordinating God's outward order to 'an inner, spiritual one.' For Luther, Karlstadt's repeated appeals to the Spirit's direct and inward inspiration finally amounted to the elevation of his own idiosyncrasies over Holy Scripture (LW 40:157). Luther's teaching against the spiritual enthusiasts in the 1520s has become the norm and standard that has guided Lutherans of all generations in their dealings with people who publicly teach on the basis of an alleged inward call or private revelation given by the Holy Spirit. Luther repeated his basic principles even more emphatically in his *Smalcald Articles* of 1537 where he states:

In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts, that is, the 'spirits', who boast that they have the Spirit apart from and before contact with the Word. On this basis, they judge, interpret, and twist the Scripture or oral Word according to their pleasure. Müntzer did this, and there are still many doing this today, who set themselves up as shrewd judges between the spirit and the letter without knowing what they say or teach (Book of Concord 2000, 322).

Luther holds that God deals with us in two ways: inwardly and outwardly—inwardly, by means of faith and other spiritual gifts; outwardly, through the gospel, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar, through which, as through means or methods, the Holy Spirit comes to us. But the relationship between these two ways is crucial. Luther argues, *contra* Karlstadt and the spiritualists, that, according to the order established by God, the external mode comes first and forms the basis for the internal mode (LW 40:146). The direction, therefore, of the divinely established *ordo* is from heaven to earth, from God to his creation, from outside to inside, and not the reverse. But the heavenly prophets 'reverse this order' and preach their own enthusiasm in place of the divine Spirit who works in the heart from outside through the gospel (LW 40:146-7). He remarks sarcastically that 'Dr. Karlstadt and these spirits replace the highest with the lowest, the best with the least, the first with the last. Yet he wants to be considered the greatest spirit of all—he who has devoured the Holy Spirit feathers and all' (LW 40:83).

The spiritualists objected to the idea that the Spirit could only be mediated by outward means or signs. They claimed that since visible physical things are fundamentally different from invisible spiritual things, they cannot convey the Spirit or grace. On the other hand, Luther asserted emphatically that the Spirit cannot be given except in material and physical things as in the Word, water, and Christ's body and in his saints on earth (LW 37:95). In a sharp polemic in his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), he asserted that those who want to change God's Word from being something fleshly into being something spiritual end up changing themselves from being spiritual into being fleshly (LW 37:322). In sum, the burden of Luther's argument against the *Schwärmer* is that the gospel, and hence the Lord's Supper, cannot be disconnected from the outward physical means of the Spirit. He would say the same about prophecy. If the word of the prophet is disconnected from the external Word of the Spirit, that immediately raises the question: how can we be certain that this is indeed a word from the Lord through the Spirit?

There are people inside and outside the Lutheran church that object to the teaching that the Spirit does not work apart from the Word that is read and preached and enacted in the holy sacraments. Their number one objection is that this teaching limits God's sovereign freedom. This criticism is strongest in Reformed circles, because of Calvin's

emphasis on the sovereignty and freedom of God. The Lutheran answer is that God does not limit himself to the means of grace (better: the means of the Spirit) since he is free to work where and when he wills. God does however bind us to the Word and the sacraments because this is where we can be certain that he is present—and not just present in a general sense, but present 'for you', which is the gospel emphasis of the Lutheran confessions.

Luther is not the only one to emphasise the authority of the external Word and the inseparability of Word and Spirit. The fourth century Church Father, Basil the Great, in his tractate on the Holy Spirit, said much the same thing. He was critical of new and further revelations beyond the biblical canon through the Spirit. His criticism was taken into the Nicene Creed (381) and is reflected in the words: who (referring to the Holy Spirit) spoke by the prophets—and we can add apostles, because the New Testament apostles, like the Old Testament prophets, are mouthpieces of the Lord.

APPENDIX 2: SIX PRINCIPLES FOR WISE DISCERNMENT

Discernment of True Prophets/Prophecy		
Criterion	References	Manifestations of false prophecy
Scripture principle	Deut 18:9–14; 1 Sam 28:9–10; Ezek 13:1–9; Mt 10:33; Acts 13:10; 1 Cor 14:29, 37; 2 Tim 4:15; 2 Thess 3:6; Tit 1:16; 1 Jn 4:6; 2 Jn 1:9; 2 Pet 2:1; Rev 16:13; 19:10	True prophets accept <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ words of OT prophecy ▪ words of Jesus ▪ words of the NT apostles ▪ the inspiration of the Holy Spirit
Ecumenical principle	Mt 28:18–19; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:46–48; Jn 17:1–3, 20–23; Acts 1:8; Rom 8:19–21; 16:16; 2 Cor 11:28; Eph 4:1–6, 13; 6:18; 1 Tim 2:1–8; 1 Pet 3:8; Rev 2:20	True prophets show <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ concern for apostolicity ▪ concern for mission ▪ concern for world ▪ concern for holiness ▪ concern for unity
Fruit principle (A)	Mt 7:16–23; Acts 8:20; Rom 16:17–18; 1 Cor 14; 1 Thess 2:1–6; Tit 1:16; 2 Pet 2:3, 18; Rev 2:20; cf. <i>Did</i> 11:10; 12:5	True prophets are motivated by a desire for building up the body of Christ rather than for personal gain or glory.
Fruit principle (B)	Deut 18:21–22; Jer 28:9; Matt 7:15, 21, 24; Gal 1:8, 9; 2 Tim 2:16–19; Rev 16:1, 8–14	False prophecy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ fails to come true ▪ fails to produce life, peace, hope, love and all the other fruit of the Spirit ▪ fails to proclaim the will of God ▪ fails to call people to repentance ▪ fails to proclaim God as the source of forgiveness
Confession principle	Deut 13:1–2; 1 Cor 12:3; 15:13–19; 2 Cor 10:5; Gal 1:8, 9; Phil 1:9–11; 2 Thess 2:3–4; 3:6; Heb 13:15; Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 1:7; 2:13; 2 Pet 2:10; 1 Jn 4:2; Jude 1:4, 8	True prophets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ confess Jesus as the incarnate Son of God ▪ confess Jesus as Lord ▪ confess the universal significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus ▪ submit to the authority of Christ ▪ glorify Jesus ▪ lead people to worship the triune God
Body-health principle	2 Cor 11:12–13; 13:11; Eph 4:1–3; 1 Thess 5:12; 2 Thess 3:14; 2 Tim 2:22; Heb 13:17; Jas 3:15–17; 1 Jn 4:7, 16; 5:2; Jude 1:8, 19	True prophets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ promote things that lead to peace, unity ▪ fulfil the command of Christ ▪ prevent party spirit ▪ give or receive correction in love ▪ acknowledge any authority other than self ▪ submit to the authority of pastors and other church leaders