



LCA BISHOP – REFLECTIONS ON THE CHURCH

June 2016 (updated)

I believe in one holy Catholic and apostolic Church
(Nicene Creed)

What makes a church Christian? There might be many answers to that question. Firstly, of course, it must confess Jesus as Lord. We would expect it to believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to preach the message of the Scriptures. And then, of course, we would want to know whether it practises what it preaches.

Is the Lutheran Church Christian? That might seem like a strange question since most of us are familiar with our church and its beliefs. But if you've ever mentioned our church to people who don't know us, you might have heard them ask, "And what's that?"

Nearly 1700 years ago Christians agreed on a statement to answer just that—what makes the church Christian. Drafting the statement and, even more importantly, agreeing on it, wasn't simple. Christians weren't neatly divided into all the labels we have today, such as Eastern and Western, Catholics and Protestants, evangelical and liberal, liturgical and charismatic, Pentecostal and mainline. All that history and all those caricatures didn't exist. The church was regional rather than denominational, and educated Christians from each region argued their point of view. No particular authority decided what was 'in' and what was 'out'. In the end the Roman emperor, the most powerful political authority at the time, called a global council of Christians to build consensus on the basics of the faith. To cut a long story short, the result was what we know as the Nicene Creed (325 AD, amplified in 381). It's been translated into many languages over the millennia but its content has stayed the same, although for a while some Western Protestants replaced 'catholic' with 'Christian' because after the Reformation they were sensitive about the Roman papacy.

The Nicene Creed was the first 'uniform' doctrine of the church. Understandably it majors in the big-ticket item of the Christian faith—Jesus as the Son of God and his relationship to the Father (Christology and Trinity). We can't take this belief for granted and it needs careful explanation. Ever since Nicaea, there are certain things Christians believe and certain things we don't. Agreement on the Nicene Creed as an explanation of our faith is often used to answer the question of whether a church is Christian. Even then, there are exceptions for non-creedal groups, such as the Salvation Army and

Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Neither did the Creed end the church's exploration of doctrine. Scripture is the living Word of God and each generation has continued to unpack what it means to be Christian and to believe in Jesus.

That's why our own collection of confessional documents (The Book of Concord) begins with the ancient creeds of the church rather than special Lutheran writings. In our worship, you expect to recite the Nicene Creed or the Apostles Creed (which is closely related) aloud at some point in the service. As we do that, we are joining millennia of Christians in a common confession. These ancient creeds define our Christian faith, what it is and what it isn't, and they tell us the most important things about our faith. They are part of what makes the Lutheran Church a Christian (catholic) church.

Regularly speaking and learning the Nicene Creed keeps us grounded as Christians with a genuinely ecumenical vision of God's church. This is not all about us. The Christian church did not begin with us. It well and truly predates the Reformation. It will not end with us either, no matter how indispensable we might think we are. It is not ours to create or destroy, despite what we might sometimes think in our weakness and fear. This is God's church. We have our part to play and we should play it well, but he creates it wherever and however he wills. The church is an article of faith rather than a human achievement. That continues to be so as we grapple with important issues and as we work to understand our place in the world, and how we can better share the gospel of God's love with all people.

ORDINATION

The big news LCA-wide last year was the October Convention of Synod in Rochedale, Queensland. The LCA website and *The Lutheran* have covered that event and its resolutions in detail.

Like the Council in Nicaea all those centuries ago, our Convention dealt with doctrine and teaching, and in our case, particularly the ordination of women. Some of us disagree with this method of determining doctrine, saying it should be drawn directly from the Scriptures (usually in agreement with their own understanding of the Scriptures), or it should be handed down by leaders and theologians. Some have even pleaded, 'Bishop, just tell us what to do and we'll do it'.

The church on earth has never discovered a useful shortcut for the development of doctrine. It has taken some wrong turns, such as the medieval papacy, but generally doctrine has developed as the community and its theologians have grown in understanding and applying the Scriptures as the living Word in their context. Christians have read and interpreted Scripture collectively, particularly in worship and preaching. At certain historic moments the church has come to consensus and said, 'This, but not that, is permissible'. There have been different methods for such consensus over the

centuries. Ours is to gather as Synod in Convention. To all appearances it is quite a human act and far from foolproof. We operate with a constitution and rules but we know these are only a means to an end. Synod is our way of being church together, and there's nothing new in that.

So, the last Convention of our Synod did not agree to ordain women. We have all heard that it was by a slim margin. Well over 50 per cent of delegates voted in favour. People are interpreting this vote in various ways. Is the conversation truly over when 64 per cent voted in favour? Has God spoken his 'no, never' quite clearly? Is continuing to discuss this issue direct disobedience (God's no means no), or is it persistent faithfulness (God has his own good time)?

These, and many other responses, will remain questions for us during this synodical term. I cannot will them away any more than you can. It seems reasonable to expect that Synod will discuss the matter again in 2018. This is so particularly because of Synod's resolution that the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations is to prepare a doctrinal statement for the ordination of women and men in preparation for the next Convention.

Where does this leave us for now? At the conclusion of the 2015 Convention, the General Church Council, the College of Bishops and I asked for a grace period to allow us all to take a break and rest. The lead-up and conduct of Convention was intense and placed a heavy burden on people. So we closed down the OWL website for a while and didn't say much for a bit.

It was sad to hear that some members thought this was an attempt to silence conversation and to embargo people from meeting or individuals from speaking. We meant merely that we needed time to draw breath, pray, celebrate Christmas, and begin the New Year without undue controversy and angst. We needed to recover our equilibrium and celebrate the core of our faith once more.

I do not believe that either the church or we as individuals can flourish and grow if we live under a cloud of oppression and fear. Christ has set us free from such machinations, and God forbid we should experience them again, especially in the church. The only times we should be quick to tell each other to be silent or desist is when a brother or sister selfishly turns on others to hurt or harm them (the 8th Commandment). Otherwise, patient and reasonable debate, critical enquiry, and theological and spiritual searching always play a part in our Christian experience.

Many of us are wondering what happens next. The Synod has clearly asked our Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations to prepare a doctrinal statement for the ordination of women and men, and explain why it need not divide the church. It has begun work on this project, with the support of the General Church Council.

- During 2016 the CTICR will prepare a first preliminary draft
- Commencing around March 2017 the LCA will conduct a church-wide consultation on the preliminary draft, involving regional meetings of Synod delegates and members, district pastors conferences and electronic submissions.
- In early 2018, the CTICR will complete its work on the preliminary draft for presentation to the July General Pastors Conference.
- By the time the draft reaches the General Convention of Synod in October 2018 delegates and members of the LCA will be familiar with its contents.

I pray that while this work is going on we will receive grace to apply the principles of mutual respect, listening, and patience that delegates learned and practised during the 2015 Convention.

The *Ordination We're Listening* website (owl.lca.org.au) remains available to you for resources and background information. Around November 2016, you will once again be able to post comments or papers.

HOW WE CALL OUR PASTORS

It is evident that we need to have a good look at the way we train, attract and call pastors to our congregations and ministries. At Convention it was one of those 'no brainers' when delegates readily voted that this be done.

Changing the call system is easy to say, difficult to do. Both pastors and lay people are not as clear as they once were about what pastors actually are and what they do; calls are not applied evenly across the church; pastors are increasingly less mobile; and the stresses on congregations to attract and retain pastors seem greater. Do we have a system designed under a set of assumptions that no longer fully apply?

Like the work on the draft ordination statement, a review of the Call system also needs consultation right across the church. The Australian Lutheran Institute for Theology and Ethics (ALITE) at Australian Lutheran College is undertaking this project, which is likely to begin in 2017. So be ready to have your say when the chance comes!

REVIEW OF THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

You may have heard of the College of Bishops desire to review the LCA's pastoral ministry. In 2014, it commissioned ALITE to undertake such a study, which involved surveying LCA pastors and congregational members. The purpose was to provide the College of Bishops and other key decision-makers in the LCA with accurate and up-to-date information about the shape, strengths, weaknesses, expectations, well-being and training of current Lutheran clergy.

At the time of updating these reflections for District Conventions, the College of Bishops had just received the report from ALITE, without the chance to read or discuss it. The contents of the report will be more widely distributed soon.

AUSTRALIAN LUTHERAN COLLEGE

Australian Lutheran College is the LCA's sole higher education and VET provider. Its core business is to teach and train people for service in and through the church, and it has done so effectively for many years. ALC also serves the church through research and non-accredited training, as Synod delegates experienced in 2015 with Grassroots Training.

Numerous investigations over recent years have convincingly shown that if ALC is to continue to serve us well it needs to change the model under which it operates. This is the outcome of many factors, such as declining church and student numbers, a change in the way people undertake vocations in the church, and the increasing cost of higher education.

It is clear that our training institution needs to change. The need is urgent. ALC is committed to innovation and flexibility in the tertiary learning experience. ALC will consult with the people, congregations, schools and ministries of the LCA as it examines and tests new ways of working in support of the mission and ministry of the church.

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Restructure is hardly the main game—faith and mission are our concerns! Nevertheless, restructure has been a topic over the last two Conventions. At the request of the previous Synod, General Church Council did intense work from 2013 to 2015, and a long list of recommendations emerged. Synod seemed satisfied with most of them.

The purpose of our effort in this area is to allow the church's physical and financial resources to serve us better in mission. The LCA is a transnational church (New Zealand/Australia) which lives and breathes in local places and local ministries. That is where the 'rubber hits the road'. The stronger our local ministries the better our church is. Collectively, the LCA is responsible for theological education, ministry resources, mission support, care for the church's finances and other assets, international and ecumenical relations, policies and procedures for best practice, and other things we need for the common good.

The desire to redesign the human part of our operation is no surprise. The way we do things was developed in a different time with considerable sacrifice on the part of many. We honour them, saints living and dead, and want to build on what they have done. The church is here for the worship and mission of God, not the preservation of structures. The organisational work is a prayerful attempt to improve our relationships, make the best use of resources, and

work together more effectively under God. We continue to work at it with patience and love.

PUBLIC THEOLOGY

It is commonplace for us to talk about the challenges of modern society. It is even more commonplace for us to say that we should do something about them. For all our talk, the LCA has relied on volunteers, such as the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions, to take on the task. Some groups, such as Lutherans for Life, operate in particular fields. Through ecumenical cooperation, we do our best to help in areas such as refugee advocacy and modern slavery, but there is so much more we could do in our response to contemporary issues. In 2016, with the support of the General Church Council, we have developed and advertised a new position in public theology.

As a result, we have called and appointed Mr Nick Schwarz to take on the role of Assistant to the Bishop – Public Theology, commencing in June 2016. Nick is an Australian Lutheran who has recently returned from Papua New Guinea, where he worked with the Melanesian Institute. While working in the Office of the Bishop, he will liaise and coordinate with existing groups such as the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations and the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions, work with LCA Communications, and engage ecumenically.

ABORIGINAL MINISTRY

The disarray among government and community services to Aboriginal people is no secret. It has been the subject of many press articles in recent times, including speeches and opinion pieces by indigenous leaders.

As successive governments search for the best way forward, and Aboriginal people themselves struggle to be heard, the LCA continues its ministry in relatively the same mode as it always has. We have ongoing work, of course, through Finke River Mission, Aboriginal Ministry SA, Far North Queensland Mission, the expansion of Lutheran Community Care (SA) in the Centre, and the education of young people from remote communities undertaken at Yirara College.

The question I continue to ask is how the LCA can do more to include the voices of Aboriginal Lutherans in its life and mission. There are rich streams of faith and understanding among indigenous communities that we can all benefit from. There are messages of patient endurance and hope in suffering that will enrich us and help counter the impatient materialism and frequent despair of our time. In this age of 'me', our Aboriginal sisters and brothers know what it is to find identity in family, community, and place, and they know what it is to grieve as their life and ways are under threat.

I hope we can soon discern how to ask this question across the church. I believe that all of us, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, can help each other grow in maturity in faith and in our practice as a Christian community in this land. An approach we are considering is developing a Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) for the whole of the LCA. Some LCA ministries already have such plans. If you would like to learn more about what RAPs, see <http://www.reconciliation.org.au/raphub/>.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Countering domestic (or family) violence and exposing it as an unacceptable brutality will be an important project for our church in this synodical term. In doing this we can and should take the lead from society, where domestic violence is now a major focus of concern.

We are working on a church-wide campaign to assist in prevention of domestic violence. We have formed a working group, and there is widespread support. This can only be a good thing, and we will need all the resolve and prayer we can muster. I am certain, from the evidence available that talking about domestic violence and exposing it as unacceptable and ungodly is going to bring some most uncomfortable truths to light. If ever there were a time to go back to God in repentance and for a change of heart, then this is it.

In these last few sections, I have referred to only three of the Convention resolutions that are important for us in this synodical term. Other resolutions involve important issues such as Creation, Refugees and Child Protection. We are also working on these and the relevant LCA ministries will be reporting on that work.

RENEWAL

“The Lord and the Spirit are one and the same, and the Lord’s Spirit sets us free. ¹⁸ So our faces are not covered. They show the bright glory of the Lord, as the Lord’s Spirit makes us more and more like our glorious Lord.”¹

I have always lived in a society where people have craved ‘real’ experiences. Young people do wild and crazy things just to feel they are alive. People take drugs to help them really ‘feel’ stuff. Quite normal things like finding a mate, planning a wedding, or cooking a meal are amplified on TV and in magazines so we can dwell over every second. Seniors develop ‘bucket lists’ of experiences that just have to be had before it’s all over.

It should not surprise us that modern Christians want to ‘feel’ their faith more. In our world, experience equals what’s real. Faith without feeling and

¹ 2 Corinthians 3:17–18. *Contemporary English Version*. (1995). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

experience is considered a dead faith. Whether or not this is true theologically, that's how many people feel, and they have a point. The Bible doesn't teach a faith that is dead and dry—it teaches a living faith that affects everyday living and makes a real difference among those it meets. In Romans 6:4 St Paul wrote, 'When we were baptised, we died and were buried with Christ. We were baptised, so that we would live a new life, as Christ was raised to life by the glory of God the Father.' [2]

Renewal which claims a more intense and immediate experience of God has long been part of the Christian church and we are hearing once more about renewal in the LCA. We have an inbuilt caution stemming from our belief in undeserved grace, God's work in Word and Sacrament, and a reserved nature, which doesn't like us to get too excited about things. We want to make sure that renewal doesn't distract us from trusting God's promises in His Word, baptism, and Holy Communion.

Renewal is a great blessing when it reminds us all to take our faith seriously. We worship a living God who is present among us. The most profound form of renewal, however, is a healed and transformed life dedicated to Christ and to others, loving and serving with all that it is and has. Sometimes we barely notice people who live that type of renewed life since they don't tend to draw our attention.

LUTHERANS SERVING IN THE DEFENCE FORCES

I pause here for a moment to acknowledge and honour those members of our church who serve or have served in the defence forces of Australia and New Zealand. Military service often comes at a high cost and is not easy on spouses and children. It puts pressure on regular church participation due to postings and deployments.

It is heart-warming that Australian Lutheran College has opened a wing of its under-utilised boarding facilities to the Returned & Services League of Australia (SA Branch). The project provides homeless veterans with a place to stay, in a move to prevent long-term homelessness. I pray for its success.

A number of our pastors have served the Australian Defence Forces as chaplains/padres. The LCA provides these pastors ecumenically as a member of the Federal United Churches Chaplaincy Board. Over many years, the responsibility for this involvement has fallen to the Vic/Tas District bishop, but the College of Bishops has now transferred it to the LCA Office of Bishop.

THE WAY OF LOVE

'There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us' (1 John 4:18-19).

Fear is a constant companion we know all too well. It lurks in dark places, pounces when our guard is down, feeds on our doubts and erodes our confidence when we most need it. Fear robs us of joy and paints life in dark, horrible hues. To give in to fear is to give up on God.

Our joy is that God has posted the antidote to fear, which is love—specifically his love in Jesus Christ. Love is more powerful than fear because no matter how destructive it might seem fear is only a phantom, and love is a Person, a real Person. Relationships are the most powerful and transformative influence in life and Christ is God’s personal saving relationship with us.

Over four years now, the LCA has used the tagline *Where love comes to life*. We are gradually coming to appreciate and act by this tagline. At first some people criticised it as being too human centred, as if love comes to life by what we do. If Lutherans know anything, it is that we are sinners and our love is imperfect at best. We must always look to God’s love, not ours. Now, some years on, the theme is beginning to mature and we are seeing how true it is. God’s love brings life and we are its ambassadors. Like all ambassadors, we carry the message but we ourselves are not the message. The message of God’s love, then, is carried in our actions and words as individuals and as church. His message has always been, and always will be, our mission to the world.

John Henderson

LCA Bishop

June 2016