

How does the LCA deal with disagreement over doctrine?

From time to time, questions about the veracity of a particular teaching of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) are raised. This has been so in regard to the LCA's teaching that only suitably qualified and approved men can be called into the office of the public ministry and therefore be ordained as pastors. Women are not permitted to be called and ordained as pastors. This teaching has been open for debate over the last twenty years or more. It is important therefore to understand how the LCA deals with disagreement over doctrine (that is, teaching and its consequent practice).

First, some foundations.

The Lutheran Church of Australia describes itself as a 'confessional' church. This is because, before anything else, we hold to a particular 'confession' or expression of belief. This is given effect by Article II of the LCA's Constitution which is as follows:

ARTICLE II. CONFESSION

1. The Church accepts without reservation the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as a whole and in all their parts, as the divinely inspired, written and inerrant Word of God, and as the only infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine and life.
2. The Church acknowledges and accepts as true expositions of the Word of God and as its own confession all the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, namely, the three Ecumenical Creeds: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed; the Unaltered Augsburg Confession; the Apology of the Augsburg Confession; the Smalcald Articles; the Small Catechism of Luther; the Large Catechism of Luther; and the Formula of Concord.

Furthermore Article XII of the constitution describes how the constitution itself can be changed, but specifically excludes Article II's primary statement of confession from any possibility of change at all. It therefore sets this as the 'unalterable' confession of the LCA. When pastors are ordained they publicly declare the above two statements as their own belief as well, and sign a statement to this effect. The constitutions of congregations, parishes, schools and Districts repeat this confessional article.

Now the landscape takes on more detail because the LCA has other statements of teaching and practice as well as the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions. These apply the Scriptures and Confessions to particular situations and needs which arise from time to time. Key among these are the Theses of Agreement which were prepared to bring consensus and unity in doctrine and practice between the two Lutheran churches in Australia and New Zealand prior to their 1966 union to form the LCA. One of these (Article VI paragraph 11) precludes the ordination of women. Other Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions ([DSTO](#)) have been prepared and adopted at various levels since then, as have key worship resources such as the LCA's Lutheran Hymnal and Supplement and Church Rites. In their ordination vows, pastors promise to uphold this public teaching and practice too, and to be under the oversight of their bishop for this.

Does this mean that the LCA has all the teaching it ever needs completely in place and that there is no disagreement in relation to some of it? No – and our DSTO actually address these possibilities. The very first article of the Theses of Agreement has a considered section on dealing with differences and says, in part,

We believe that where differences in teaching and practice exist or arise between Churches uniting, these differences are to be removed by willingly submitting to the authority of the Word of God... (Theses 1.4a)

The 1984 statement *Public Doctrine and Pious Opinion* contains guidance when working with differences of opinion in the church, and highlights the fact that public doctrine is established by the Scriptures themselves.

Clearly this puts into practice the primary confession that the bible is the only infallible source and norm by which all teachings and teachers are judged. And it means that study and application of the Scriptures, informed by the Lutheran Confessions, becomes the primary method for dealing with matters of disagreement. The nature and proper use of the Scriptures and Confessions themselves are therefore very important. These too are guided by the Theses of Agreement (such as *Principles Governing Church Fellowship*, *Scripture and Inspiration*, and *The Lutheran Confessions*), and also by other LCA General Synodical statements such as *The Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy* (1972), and *A Consensus Statement on Holy Scripture* (1987). Pastors commit to these approaches and do their theology accordingly.

The LCA has also explained the status of the Theses of Agreement and the process involved in making any change to them,

Like all confessional statements, the Theses of Agreement are always under the authority of the Word of God, and therefore there must always be a readiness to submit them to the critical scrutiny of God's Word and accordingly confirm them, or amend or repudiate them when further study of God's Word shows them to be inadequate or in error. (DSTO A 26)

Should explanations or amendments to the Theses of Agreement or other doctrinal statements be considered desirable, these need to be submitted to the Synod for its own consideration and decision. If adopted then they carry the same authority as other doctrinal statements (*The Status of the Theses of Agreement and other Doctrinal Statements*).

The LCA Constitution lays out the process by which matters of doctrine and theology are to come before the Synod for decision.¹ In summary,

- A matter of doctrine or theology is put to Convention by a body with rights to do so (ie, a congregation, parish, Board, pastors' conference, District synod, District or General Church Council).
- The matter is considered by General Pastors Conference first, and it makes a recommendation about the proposal – including both its content and the advisability of Convention dealing with it at all.
- The proposal and the advice from General Pastors Conference are considered by Convention, with any resolution requiring a two-thirds majority of registered delegates to be adopted.

¹ SECTION V. THE MINISTRY, Section V.F, GENERAL PASTORS' CONFERENCE

2. The General Pastors' Conference shall serve as a theological adviser to the General Synod and in fulfillment of such function

- (a) shall consider those questions, issues and statements of a theological and confessional nature which appear on the agenda of the Convention of the General Synod and are referred to it by the General Church Council;
- (b) may voice its opinion with regard to the advisability or non-advisability of dealing with any such question or issue or of adopting a particular statement; and
- (c) may recommend amendments, corrections, additions or explanations concerning proposed statements.

SECTION VII. THE GENERAL SYNOD, Section VII C. PROCEDURE IN TRANSACTING BUSINESS

28. (1) Matters of conscience and of doctrine shall have precedence over other matters and any rules relating to time limits and number of times a person may speak may be suspended by the ruling of the Chairperson or by a majority of those delegates voting.

(2) A matter deemed to be of a theological and confessional nature which has been referred to the General Pastors' Conference for consideration shall be considered by the Convention only after a recommendation has been received from the General Pastors' Conference.

(3) For a resolution on a matter of doctrine to be deemed to be the official position of the Church it shall require a two-thirds majority of all the registered delegates at the Convention.

Now this sounds quite clinical but in practice there is a long and collegial journey toward most doctrinal and theological proposals for Convention. Often the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations would have studied the matter in detail first and proposed a particular statement re the matter. Drafts of these are usually presented to District pastors' conferences for study and feedback along the way. In this way consensus, even more than a two thirds majority, is fostered as the proposal is honed.

While consensus is difficult to achieve, and from a human perspective might appear impossible, nevertheless the LCA has that as its goal with respect to any change in teaching. The LCA seeks to maintain and practice a common confession and for that reason any change or elaboration to teaching or practice should be agreed together. The constitution requires a two-thirds majority for the adoption of a doctrinal proposal at Convention. For the sake of unity however, the LCA will always work towards consensus - and even unanimity. This flows from the confession that Christ is one and that his Word is true and does not contradict itself. If there is disagreement, the problem is on our side of the equation, not on the Lord's, so we keep working at the problem, asking what's behind any disagreement. This is what the two Lutheran synods did for more than twenty years prior to union in 1966; it's why we have formal theological dialogue with other denominations; and it's why we've been working at the question of the ordination of women for twenty years too.

In more recent years the focus has turned from the basic arguments for and against the ordination of women, to how these arguments are drawn from Scripture, and even from the same passages of Scripture – those which the Theses of Agreement cite as the reason why only men can be ordained, 1 Corinthians 14:34,35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14 (Theses of Agreement, Article VI paragraph 11). The study of how Scripture is interpreted is called hermeneutics, and this has been given particular attention over the last few years, including a 2011 symposium with speakers from overseas Lutheran churches.

Another recent focus has been on the process of listening to one another about the matter, moving from formal debate to dialogue. This is a movement from presenting arguments to listening carefully to one another and the stories behind how we come to the positions we hold. It is designed to assist people to understand different points of view. This in turn helps the church as together we then continue to listen to what the Scriptures, the Confessions and our own Theses of Agreement are saying. Dialogue aims to bring people with different views together on the basis of our unity in Christ and his presence and blessing where two or three are gathered together in his name (Matt 18:20).

Attention to consensus, hermeneutics and dialogue, were all requested by the 2013 General Convention. An LCA ordination dialogue group has been functioning for several years, and the process of dialogue on this matter is now being promulgated throughout the LCA. Resources for local dialogue and other documents relating to the matters are available on the LCA's website under [Ordination: We're Listening](#). The 2013 Convention also asked that General Church Council bring recommendations about the ordination matter to the next Convention, so there is focused effort on that right now.

In all this the church encourages us in its [prayers](#) to put ourselves in the Lord's hands:

Heavenly Father, you inspired the writers of the Scriptures so that your word would come to us. Thank you for the opportunity to study your word and the important issue of the ordination of women. Bless our study. Make us ready to listen attentively, think clearly, speak carefully, and to discern your will for our church. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.