



Section 18

2014 Convention of Synod

Lutheran Church of
Australia Bishop's Report



2014 QLD District Convention LCA BISHOP

“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.” (2 Timothy 4:1–2 NRSV)

The church faces an endless task – it is never done. Every day when we go to bed, and every morning when we get up, the task is still before us, unfinished. How will we ever know when we have done enough? How will we ever know when it is to end?

The LCA, its people and leaders, can face the temptation to give up. While Australians, including Lutherans, live lives of unparalleled luxury, never before seen on such a scale, we can feel as though the church is going backwards. Is this true? Is it a lie propagated by Satan? Is it a test given us by God? Are we to blame for going too much the way of the secular world? Or have we stood apart too much, judging, condemning, and failing to love those whom God has given us to love?

Whatever your take is on those questions, the church is not giving up! Yes, there is change, but that should not surprise us. Change is part of life. Our bodies change, the seasons change, and time moves on for all created things. That’s what it’s like living in the world while it is fallen, separated from God who gave it life. Tides rise and tides fall – change is constant.

As those tides rise and fall the church is like the buoys used in marine navigation. They reveal the safe channel to left, and to the right. The buoys are anchored firmly by a chain. They are not rigid posts driven into the ground. So they give a little, go up and down with the tide, and can move side to side, especially when the water is low. They ride out the storms. Day and night, however, they point the way, without fail. They remain firmly attached to their anchors even while on the surface conditions change.

How does our LCA point the way for us? Our safe passage is Jesus Christ, keeping us off the concealed shoals and rocks. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It is not up to us to know when we have done enough. Jesus has done it all, identified with us, taken our sin, and risen from the dead. Everything we do now is part of his completed, finished work. We won’t give up, because he doesn’t give up on us.

1. Communication

The LCA/NZ covers a large geographical area crossed by deserts and seas. Even larger, however, can be the social, political, and societal divisions that circumstances force on us. As we are more and more an Australian and New Zealand church and less a former migrant and family church, so intentional and thoughtful communication becomes more important. You can no longer assume that the majority of the membership knows who all the congregations, pastors, and leaders are.

And so we keep trying to communicate across the church, aware that there are many voices clamouring for attention. As part of our Strategic Direction the LCA is

becoming more deliberate in how it communicates. In October last year, GCC approved the LCA Communications Plan. As from 1 January, the new LCA Communications Unit (in the office of the Executive Officer of the Church) is responsible for the implementation of the plan. A major challenge for LCA Communications is keeping traditional communication channels operating (primarily our cherished *The Lutheran*), at the same time expanding into the demanding world of e-communication and social media.

From my angle here are a few of the things I see happening, and I hope you are able to make use of them to keep yourself informed about what is going on in our church and to support it:

- a. **The Lutheran** – always a traditional favourite, and always with something useful inside. Now it is not only a print magazine, but also a top-of-the-range interactive app, available on iPads, iPhones and android tablets (<http://www.thelutheran.com.au/our-app>) Inside *The Lutheran* we have reimagined a few things, including the bishop's 'Heartland'.
- b. **Subscription emails** – these include LCA eNews and Heartland eNews. You can sign up for these for free, and they will keep you posted on current news (LCA eNews) and thoughts from the bishop (Heartland eNews). I hope that all church leaders, office-bearers and Synod delegates are subscribed to these and other LCA emails. If not, visit www.lca.org.au/enews and sign up as soon as you can.
- c. **LAMP** - We use the details in LAMP to contact you when we have important information to share with you. Please make sure that your congregation or ministry details are current on LAMP (www.lamp.lca.org.au)
- d. **Website** – always a challenge, an up-to-date and easy-to-access website is a vital tool of communication in the 21st century. The LCA is doing the best it can, within its resources, to refresh the LCA website, and you can expect to see improvements as the LCA Communications Plan is implemented. Check the website periodically (www.lca.org.au). If you have a congregational website, make sure it has a clear link to the LCA.
- e. **District and local newsletters and bulletins** – these are produced in huge numbers across the LCA, mostly in print and sometimes electronically. As I travel around I notice that many local publications do not pass on information supplied by the wider LCA while promoting activities by other organisations. I appeal to those who put these publications together to check what's going on in the LCA and support our own church by including a note, a news item, or a link, so that those who pick them up and read them gain something of a feel for the wider LCA and we are encouraged to pull together as one church. The LCA team is working hard, and we all need to help them by passing on the information
- f. **LCA Communications** – A key goal under the LCA Communications Plan is to streamline and integrate communications across the church so that it will be easier for you to share key messages with your members. As the LCA Strategic Direction is implemented, LCA Communications will be keeping congregations informed about important developments. I urge you to subscribe to *The Lutheran* (www.thelutheran.com.au), or sign up to LCA eNews (www.lca.org.au/enews), or, ideally, both, so that we can keep in touch with you.

2. 2015 LCA Convention of Synod

The life and journey of our church is marked by its Synods. They form the rhythm of our decision making both as a church and as an organisation.

Information so far about the XVIII Convention of Synod is as follows:

- The LCA Convention of Synod is to be held from Tuesday (evening), 29 September to Sunday (morning) 4 October, 2015. The venue will be Redeemer Lutheran College, Roachdale, QLD
- The associated General Pastors Conference is to be held from Tuesday 7 July to Thursday 9 July 2015 in South Australia.

This will separate the Pastors Conference from the Convention by nearly 3 months. It is the first time that we have done this, and the intention is for the Pastors Conference to provide wise advice to the church on theological issues, in this case particularly the ordination issue. The time interval will allow for reception of this advice by the wider church, and a period of reflection.

To that end, we will close of the period for submitting proposals of a theological nature to the Convention before the Pastors Conference. This means that if your congregation wants something of a specifically theological nature to be considered by the Convention, you will have to get it in to the National Office before the end of June 2015.

Congregations and other ministries who appoint Synod delegates will be asked to appoint delegate/s and communicate who their details to the National Office before the end of January 2015. This is to allow delegates to receive communication and induction/orientation in plenty of time to prepare them for their attendance, contribution, and final voting. It is important at this Synod that your congregation appoints the delegate/s you believe can best contribute to the conversation of the whole church. While the role of leaders and officials is often highlighted, Synod is actually the sum of its delegates. You are the ones who make a difference, and who decide the directions of the church as a whole. So please, hold a congregational meeting to elect your delegates ASAP.

You will also have noticed that the 2015 Convention will be held over 4 days. This can be a big ask for some delegates, and it means you have to be very intentional about your attendance. We are planning to use those 4 days very well, and some changes are being made to the usual Convention procedures. Some of these are likely to be:

- Different types of sessions on different days: e.g. information gathering (*hearing*); dialogue/conversation (*listening/respectful debate*); and decision making (*voting*).
- The timetable will be clear and specify when various sessions are to be held. You will know when things are happening.
- A measured pace which allows evenings for reflection, informal discussion between delegates, and prayer.
- A full day to discuss whether women should be ordained in the LCA, with the decision (*voting*) session on the next day. It was clear from the 2013 Convention that this will be a major issue in 2015 and we need to find fresh ways of approaching it, minimising the risk of any split in the Synod while remaining faithful to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions.
- Visitors may be asked to sit and observe in a different part of the room for some sessions, particularly during voting. This is to create greater clarity

around who is the decision making body, focussing on those whose carry the constitutional duties of a delegate.

- Consensus will be given consideration throughout the Convention. This means discerning the mood of delegates, their readiness to vote on matters (particularly ordination), listening to vulnerable or marginalised voices, and reducing, as much as possible, a winners and losers way of thinking. Please note that consensus is not meant to replace voting on vital issues. Consensus can mean a general feeling among the delegates that:
 - Everyone has listened carefully and is able to articulate the viewpoints of those with whom they do not agree
 - Minority voices have been heard and do not feel forced out of the conversation
 - All possible options have been considered
 - There is a combined sense that now it is time to vote, or not vote, or whatever the case may be.

Consensus, therefore, is quite a rigorous process, and can never mean 'lowest common denominator'. Rather, it raises the bar on our thinking, praying and decision making. It encourages us to be 'Christlike' in our Convention behaviour and language. As it is written in Hebrews 10:24: "... *let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds...*"

ORDINATION 3. *We're listening.*

I hope most, if not all of you, have heard by now of the website, documents, and conversations under the banner 'Ordination: We're listening. This heading can carry a number of meanings, such as:

- As a church we are listening to God
- As a church we are listening to Scripture
- As believers, and Lutherans, we are listening to each other
- As congregations, we are listening to the decisions of Synod

Congregations, ministries, Districts, Zones and individuals are being encouraged to engage in respectful dialogue so that, by the time we reach Convention, everyone who wants to has had the chance to have a say in some way or other. This will not only have the benefit of helping us dialogue more meaningfully at Convention, it may teach us new ways of being together and learning to understand the viewpoint of others. That will benefit us in the many difficult decisions that lie ahead in the future. In doing this we are not ignoring our history, or the decades of work that have gone into this topic. Many of these are reproduced on the website, and you can explore them for yourselves.

In addition to your own dialogues, people are writing to me and offering comment, criticism, and suggestions. Thank you.

Some people are discouraged by the tone of some of the published letters to 'The Lutheran'. I encourage you not to be discouraged. Even when we feel dragged down, and perhaps especially then, it is important to at least try to listen and hear what is in the other person's heart.

The General Church Council has met in February for its own dialogue day, led by the Ordination Dialogue Group instituted after the 2009 Convention. By the time of the

QLD Convention there might already be some online footage about the experience of these Church Councillors in dialogue for you to watch.

4. College of Bishops

The College of Bishops is a gathering of the District and LCA Bishops, and the Secretary of the Church. There's always a lot going on in these meetings, as you can imagine. The College carries delegated responsibility for the oversight of a number of LCA ministry areas, particularly our pastors.

The LCA has a clear teaching on the ordained ministry which is articulated, for example, in number 6 of the Theses of Agreement (TA) and documents such as "The Ministry of the People of God and the Public Ministry" (2001). (Find them at <http://www.lca.org.au/doctrinal-statements--theological-opinions-2.html>).

The question about ordaining women, which has been with us now for some time, (see *Theses 6 Article 11*) is not meant to imply that the LCA is stepping away from its foundational teaching on the office of the ministry and its role in the church. "*The office of the ministry is an office which is simultaneous with the Church and to which the Church is bound from its beginning to the end of time.*" (TA 6 Art 11)

The bishops have a great deal of anecdotal evidence about how this ministry is being carried out in the church among its people and pastors, but the pressure of individual circumstances and decision making makes it difficult to see the total picture. People often tell us what is 'wrong', but we rarely get insights into what is 'right'. Therefore the bishops are initiating a project to examine the ministry of the LCA and its objective practice in the 'real world' after 50 years as Synod. This will take up to 2 years to complete through the Australian Lutheran Institute for Theology and Ethics (ALITE).

5. Ministry by, to, and among Indigenous people

I am quite keen to learn everything I can about the LCA's ministry among aboriginal Australians. We carry quite a bit of history here. I am hoping we can learn from that history, get past it where we need to, and move into a future where we promote recognition, equality before Christ, and a learning attitude that will make us a truly authentic church in our local place. So much of what we have learned so far is as a migrant church, and that is precious, but what about those who were here first? Do we all have to adopt western forms, a European colonial way of thinking, and define ourselves through white language and customs, before we can fully recognise each other as equals before the Lord, and in the church?

So many people are working sacrificially in this area, but carrying the message back into the institution of the LCA, its leadership and decision making, is difficult on so many levels. We can often decide what is best before we have listened fully to those who are most immediately affected. I know I am making blanket statements which can be easily criticised, but I feel the more people instruct me about our ministry in this area, the less I really know.

I have immense respect for those who have laboured hard in this ministry over the decades. Now we need to carry on this good work, give it fresh expressions, to listen all the harder, indigenous and non-indigenous sisters and brothers together. Are we ready to do this as a church? Do we have the mechanisms that allow it to happen?

I am currently writing to a number of pastors of the LCA encouraging them to consider serving in central Australia, specifically as the Finke River Mission is

seeking a replacement Support Worker and the Alice Springs congregation may soon be looking for an additional pastor to bring the team up to full strength.

6. Australian Church relationships

The LCA continues its membership in the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), and former LCA President Mike Semmler is the current President of the organisation. I have taken his place as a member of the Executive, and also participate in the accompanying National Heads of Churches meetings.

As your new bishop I am gradually become re-acquainted with our fellow Christians in Australia and New Zealand. This is a new perspective on ecumenical relations for me, quite different from my former experience as the General Secretary of the NCCA.

7. International Church relationships

The LCA retains close relationships with a number of overseas churches and operates in collaboration with them in partnership arrangements, predominantly in SE Asia. While this is usually reported through Mission International, the handling of church to church relationships is actually a matter for your national bishop.

In January I attended the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea (ELCPNG). The LCA's close relationship with Lutherans in PNG is an enduring one that was maintained throughout our union process in the 1960s, while all other external church relationships were dropped until they could be re-established by the new church.

That's about where things have remained, and apart from the Lutheran Church Canada and an arrangement for Finnish migrants with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland called the Suomi Conference, our official bilateral church relations are very limited.

We have a close working relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria, a Lutheran church within the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD). EKD is a combined Lutheran and Reformed church, and we find common cause with the Lutheran parts, particularly those where there is a mission connection. The former Löhe Mission School in Neuendettelsau Bavaria is the strongest and most enduring of these. In July I will be visiting Bavaria in the company of a team of school leaders, including the Director of Lutheran Education Australia, Mr Steve Rudolph.

Historically the LCA has had connections with English speaking Lutherans in North America. The scene in the USA has been a little fluid of late, with the bigger players of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) being joined by the emerging North American Lutheran Church (NALC). This is a particularly North American phenomenon, but the effects are felt internationally, including in Australia. Historically the LCA has had links with both LCMS and some of the former synods now represented by the ELCA. In the course of this year I will be visiting both of these USA churches, and the Lutheran Church Canada. I am meeting with the 60 bishops of the ELCA in October. Bishop David Altus will also be visiting the next Convention of the Lutheran Church Canada in June.

Additionally the LCA holds 'associate membership' in the Lutheran World Federation and also the International Lutheran Conference. Between them these two organisations include almost all of the world's Lutherans. I am continuing our links with both organisations, and joined Asian church leaders in Malaysia in March and

will be observing at the LWF Council (the governing body between international Assemblies) in Indonesia in June.
God be with you, especially in the deliberations of your District Convention.

Pastor John Henderson
Bishop
Lutheran Church of Australia
4 April 2014