

## **Why St Stephen's congregation supports the ordination of women**

St Stephen's has supported the ordination of women from the time the debate first arose in the LCA/NZ, based on the congregation's understanding of the Scriptures and the Confessions, and it has written to the College of Bishops and the General Church Board to formalise its position that the pastoral office be open to women and to men.

### ***The Scriptures***

Christ has built the church on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20), and the Bible gives clear evidence that women served in both of these offices, among others (e.g. Ex. 15:20; Judg. 4:4; 2 Kgs. 22:14; Isa. 8:3; John 20:17,18; Acts 2:17–21; 18:26; 21:9; Rom. 16:1,3,7; 1 Cor. 11:5). This continued in the early church until the church started to exclude women from the ministry in the fourth century.

Texts used previously in the LCA/NZ to exclude women from such activities as leading Bible studies, lay reading, voting at congregational meetings, serving as synod delegates, and chairing congregations (1 Cor. 14:33–36 and 1 Tim. 2:11–15) are now used only to exclude women from the public ministry. A contextual understanding of these passages, however, shows they have to do with none of these matters. Rather, they express Paul's sincere concern that the Lord's command to love God and one another (Matt. 22:34–40; 1 Cor. 14:37) was to govern all worship practices (1 Cor. 8:1; 13:1–13; 14:1). For the sake of the proclamation of the gospel and the conversion of outsiders and unbelievers (1 Cor. 14:23–25), Paul called on those who were using worship to make a proud display of their spiritual giftedness (1 Cor. 14:1–33), or the group of wives who were proving disruptive (14:34–36), to show deference to one another so that worship could be conducted decently and in good order (1 Cor. 14:40). In that way the message of the gospel could be proclaimed clearly, and people would be drawn to Christ and built up in faith, hope and love (1 Cor. 13:13).

New Testament texts that provide evidence of a vast array of ministry roles in the early church — apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, overseers (bishops), deacons, elders, and even enrolled widows (Rom. 16:1, 7; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3–5) — do not say that they must be males, an interesting omission if Christ had prohibited the ministry of women. The one exception is the position of 'overseers' (bishops) in the church at Ephesus (1 Tim. 3:1–7), where the time was not yet right to accept women in that position for various reasons peculiar to the church in that place.

In face of the claim that women are meant to be subordinate to their male heads in keeping with the so-called orders of creation and therefore cannot become pastors, we point to the texts that show that the subordination that Paul calls for is reciprocal (Eph. 5:21; Gal. 5:13; Phil. 2:3) rather than unilateral, and to the texts that demonstrate that the ministry is exercised through loving service, rather than conferring on ministers a licence to exercise authority over others (Mark 10:42–45; 1 Pet. 5:3). Far from the Scriptures prescribing an exclusively male pastorate, they demonstrate that all unnecessary barriers of race, class and gender have been broken down in the equal standing of all believers through baptismal incorporation into the body of Christ (Gal. 3:27,28).

### ***The Confessions***

Lutherans teach that Christ has instituted the ministry for the sole purpose of drawing people to faith in Christ and sustaining them in faith. The primary Lutheran statement on the ministry, Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession, mentions faith three times, once in each of its three brief sentences. Saving faith is what it's all about. As pastors proclaim the gospel, administer the sacraments, and announce the absolution, the Spirit engenders faith and nurtures it in human hearts (Matt. 28:16–

20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26; John 20:19–23). That’s where the weight lies in the Lutheran teaching on the ministry, not on the gender of the pastor. While it is true that the Reformers did not seriously consider introducing the ordination of women, given the traditional place of women in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, it is equally true that the Confessions nowhere call for an exclusively male pastorate.

The ordination of women in our Church would lead to a renewed emphasis on the steps that candidates take on the path to ordination and then throughout their ministry. In order to ensure that diligent and loving pastoral care remains front and centre, the Lutheran church requires an orderly process of admission to the ministry (AC 14): a candidate’s experience of the internal call of the Spirit, the encouragement and endorsement of significant others, thoroughgoing theological education and ministry formation, the call of the church, ordination, and ongoing professional development. With men and women encouraging and supporting one another, this vital formative process would become much more wholistic.

### ***Call and gift***

The ordination of women means that women who hear God’s call to ministry can have their calling tested in their own church, enabling them to be faithful to that call within their own church. The personalities and characteristic gifts that women bring to the ordained ministry supplement and complement those of their male colleagues, to the enrichment of the church as a whole.

While ordination does not make pastors any more saintly than other church members, and it does not stamp them with an indelible mark (Theses of Agreement 6.5), the sound character and conduct of pastors is non-negotiable (see e.g. Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; Heb. 13:7, 17; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). A pastorate of both women and men ensures that a greater range of experience and perspective enriches discussion and practice.

### ***Pastoral care***

In the same way that many women may prefer to have a female doctor, and many men may prefer to have a male doctor, many parishioners have difficulty receiving pastoral care from pastors of one or the other gender, for profoundly personal reasons. While laity also provide pastoral care, many women in our Church, and also some men, feel keenly that they are denied the opportunity to receive the most profound form of care from women—the pastoral care afforded by the public proclamation of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, and the announcement of absolution. This lack is felt most intensely when people are at their lowest ebb; it has serious implications for the overall spiritual health of the Church.

### ***Gospel outreach***

Australians today take it for granted that women have equal access to all trades and professions. As a result, growing numbers of people, especially the young, find that the exclusion of women from the ministry prevents them from identifying with our Church. It has even become for them a stumbling block to faith (Matt. 18:6,7). To ordain women today is to take seriously St Paul’s determination to remove all obstacles to the free course of the gospel: ‘I have become all things to all people, so that I might by all means save some’ (1 Cor 9:22).

### ***World-wide Lutheranism***

The LCA/NZ is completely out of step with world-wide Lutheranism. Eighty-eight percent of the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation practise women’s ordination, and roughly 90% of Lutherans in the world belong to churches that ordain women.

### ***Movement for Change***

After extensive theological study in the 1980s and 1990s, the Church's Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations reached the conclusion that 'the Scriptures and the Confessions endorse the ordination of women', with 11 members voting in favour of the conclusion and five opposing it (*Final report on the ordination of women* (CTICR, 1999)). Starting at Tanunda in 2000, the four general conventions that have voted on women's ordination have all failed either to record a majority of delegates in favour of the Church's official teaching that only men may be ordained, or to record the two thirds majority required to change the teaching.

Continuing to insist on an all-male pastorate perpetuates a prohibition that is not found in the Scriptures or the Confessions and therefore continues to undermine and subvert the gospel. Just as Paul reprimanded the Galatians for submitting once more to the yoke of slavery to the law, he would call on Christ's followers today to celebrate their freedom in Christ by turning their back on laws that find no support in the Scriptures. However tiny, the leaven of legalism soon permeates the whole batch and replaces faith in Christ with soul-destroying confidence in our fulfilment of the law (Gal. 5:1,9).

### ***Deep yearning***

In May 2021 the SA-NT District synod voted to support the St Stephen's proposal, that the clause in the Church's Theses of Agreement that prohibits the ordination of women, namely TA 6.11, be deleted. The proposal will be forwarded by the District officials to the next Church-wide convention—now deferred till October 2022. The members of St Stephen's long for the day when the LCA/NZ joins those churches that have acted on their conviction that ordaining women is a vital part of faithfulness to the gospel.