

31 March 2019

To the members of the College of Bishops: John Henderson, Andrew Pfeiffer, David Altus, Lester Priebbenow, Robert Bartholomaeus, Paul Smith, Mike Fulwood, and Mark Whitfield

Why St Stephen's cannot uphold the LCA's teaching on male-only ordination

Dear members of the College of Bishops

The members of St Stephen's congregation can no longer uphold the LCA's teaching and practice of male-only ordination. We firmly believe that the teaching has no basis in the scriptures or the Confessions, but it has come to be regarded as an unshakeable law in our Church through successive votes at synod. With Lutherans world-wide, we confess that the ordering (structuring) of the ministry, including the gender of the pastor, has no bearing on the doctrine of the ministry, and that women pastors should be permitted to serve in places where they would be well received. In this letter the congregation sets out the theological reasons for our disagreement with the Church's teaching and practice, it proposes a way of arranging the ministry that would also honour those who cannot accept the ordination of women, and it calls on the College of Bishops to put in place the steps that would lead to such an arrangement.

Theological basis: distinguishing between what is essential and what is beneficial

Essential to the Lutheran teaching on the public ministry is the confession that God has instituted the ministry so that pastors may proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, declare the forgiveness of sins, and administer the sacraments. Through these means of grace, the Holy Spirit inspires faith in human hearts and nurtures people in the faith. That's the essence of the Lutheran teaching on the public ministry, no more and no less. Lutherans also make a clear distinction between what is essential for the church's ministry and mission, and what is beneficial. Quite properly, Lutherans are interested in identifying those church practices that are 'neither commanded nor forbidden' by the word of God. In the interests of peace and good order, Luther and his fellow reformers agreed that certain inherited church traditions that were neither commanded nor forbidden, and even some scriptural commands such as abstaining from eating meat with blood in it, may be retained 'for the time being in order to avoid offence' (AC 28.65; see Acts 15:23-29). They may be retained for the health and well-being of the church; but they are not essential. However, when it becomes evident that such teachings and practices have become a burden on consciences and are proving a hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel, the church has the freedom of the gospel to discontinue them. St Stephen's believes that male-only ordination falls into that category and should no longer continue to bind the whole Church. Rather than serving the LCA well, it now proves a major stumbling block to its life-giving work.

The all-male clergy that has been in place in the LCA since union—and in the predecessor synods—was rarely questioned while women had few leadership positions in the wider community, and while the case for the ordination of women was rarely taught and barely known. However, 'for the time being' of male-only pastors has now become 'the time that has well and truly come and gone'. The prohibition has long since failed to serve the well-being of the Church. But it has also become increasingly clear that the Church majority that supports the ordination of women cannot achieve the percentage of votes required at synod to change LCA teaching. This impasse now proves a permanent barrier to the exercise of the LCA's freedom in the gospel. And this in turn has had the effect of redefining our Church as a church of the law, not only a supposed scriptural law but also LCA constitutional law. The law has become so embedded in our teaching and practice of the public ministry that it has virtually displaced the gospel as the heart of its teaching and practice. Luther called the law a pesky camel that has the habit of working its way right through the tent flap and

taking up all the space inside the tent. When that happens, the occupants suffer increasingly from a range of harmful effects. Some of these can be enumerated briefly.

1. The prohibition is causing major unease and upheaval that shows no sign of abating. The LCA faces the anomaly that a sizeable majority of its members disagree with the official teaching on the ordination of women. The vote at successive synods has disenfranchised a significant majority of our members. Many have felt constrained to leave the church; others have withdrawn their support; and others stay on in the Church, with their consciences compromised by the Church's teaching.
2. The prohibition creates the subtle impression that assent to male-only ordination is necessary for salvation. That is symptomatic of the all too prevalent view that people's standing before God finally depends on their assent to a list of doctrines, as defined by a specific group within the Church, rather than on God's gracious gift of redemption in Jesus Christ freely bestowed on the believer. The Church cannot maintain that justification is the totally gracious act of a loving God and then at the same time continue to imply, if not actually say, that it also depends on the 'good work' of believing the teaching of male-only ordination. Certainly, assent to the teachings of the church is a vital component of our church community life together. But by teaching what the scriptures do not teach—that God does not permit women to become pastors—the LCA has allowed the law to well and truly intrude in the domain of the gospel. In fact, to make male-only ordination an obligatory teaching is to create an additional sign of the true church, above and beyond the public ministry and the means of grace.
3. The teaching creates an insurmountable stumbling block to the proclamation of the gospel within Australia and New Zealand today, especially among the next generation, our 'little ones' (Matt 18:6,7). For most Australians it is unthinkable that women should be denied equal opportunity in the work-force. Who of us wants to tell enquirers that Jesus disapproves of women becoming pastors? Who would want to become a member of such a church? Outsiders to the faith can only conclude from our teaching that the scriptures are a vehicle for antiquated views, or those who know the scriptures well can only conclude that the LCA is out of step with the scriptural teachings on gender.
4. Those women of the Church who have been called to serve as pastors now suffer an unspeakable injustice. Without the Church's permission to prepare for ordination they are deprived of the opportunity to follow their calling, a calling that is felt very deeply, and in most cases has been confirmed by others. To make matters worse, their visceral anguish cannot be voiced at pastors' conferences or meetings of the College of Bishops, and when they do speak in other settings their words are often characterised as those of a shrill and unrepresentative minority. Above all, they cannot help but hear the crushing message that they have been sadly deceived in thinking that God has called them to become a pastor. In these ways our Church is perpetuating a fundamentally unjust practice.
5. The teaching of male-only ordination is a cause of shame to those who support the ordination of women. It puts our Church at odds with most Lutheran churches across the globe, including most of the ethnic Lutheran churches within Australia, not to mention most of Protestantism.
6. The prohibition deprives the Church of the gifts that women bring to the ministry. Women and men working together leads to more balanced insights and holistic outcomes for ministry. Many other blessings would flow from having women pastors. One deserves special mention. Stories abound of those women and girls who crave the opportunity to receive a full word and

sacrament ministry from another woman because of the harm they have suffered at the hands of men, including pastors.

One teaching, two pathways for the public ministry

St Stephen's congregation urges you, the members of the College of Bishops, to address the impasse and resolve the crisis so that the Church is preserved in peace and unity. We ask that you declare that there is only one doctrine of the public ministry, and that two practices may be held and observed with equal integrity. You could acknowledge that for some people and in some locations, male-only ordination truly does serve the church's well-being and its ministry and mission most effectively, because they sincerely hold that the ordination of women is contrary to the word of God. Elsewhere and for others, you would announce, the ordination of both men and women serves the church's well-being most effectively.

At your urging most people would be happy to have the two practices stand side by side, without condemning each other. At a significant moment in the deliberations of the CTICR before the October convention last year, the long-standing agreement was reaffirmed, that all of the Church's theologians confess the divine inspiration and final authority of the scriptures. Therefore, neither those who support the ordination of women nor those who oppose it may be accused of false teaching. Differences among us are differences of interpretation that should have no impact on Church unity. Accepting and practising these differences would result in a win-win situation, in place of our interminable and increasingly destructive win-lose scenario. If both positions were regarded as contributing in their own way to the well-being of the church, the dilemma would be removed. Every pastor, lay member and congregation could state where they stand, if they wished to do so, and their perspective would be honoured by those who didn't share it.

This two pathways approach does not change the Lutheran doctrine of the ordained ministry, as articulated in AC 5 and TA 6:1-10, but only the practice of the LCA. Nor does it suggest that we would be introducing two teachings on the ministry. There is only one Lutheran doctrine of the ministry.

Conclusion

St Stephen's believes that the scriptures are silent on the topic of the gender of pastors. The ordination of women is neither commanded nor forbidden. According to Lutheran teaching, therefore, the LCA has freedom in the gospel to introduce women's ordination when it becomes apparent that it would have great benefits for the Church's ministry and mission. St Stephen's also acknowledges that for some people and in some places male-only ordination is seen as an essential component of the ministry. But when male-only ordination has to be upheld by the whole Church it becomes an intolerable burden on the consciences of those who disagree and those who are called. It places an unscriptural law at the heart of the teaching on the ministry and defines the LCA as a church of the law, with devastating consequences for the well-being of the Church. Our desire at St Stephen's is that you may have the grace and courage to be honest about our confused Church, and that you would acknowledge the freedom that congregations and pastors have to practise according to belief and conscience.

St Stephen's members are committed to the unity of the LCA, but we also long for the day when women are serving as pastors alongside their male colleagues in places where they would be well received. You, our honoured leaders, have steadfastly abided by your mutually agreed role: to pray for the church, to foster healthy dialogue, to maintain impartiality, and to keep the peace. However, in view of the church's plight, whose wounds time will not otherwise heal, the moment has arrived for a recognition that far more decisive action is required. Our inability to break through the impasse after more than 20 years means that something new must be done. Hope is fading, but we still pray

that God gives you the courage and the will to act decisively for the well-being of the Church. Otherwise the Church will not be able to move on from its adversarial posture and start pursuing love and making peace. The situation the church faces is far too precarious for you to do otherwise. Meanwhile, St Stephen's claims the freedom of the gospel to act on its convictions.

We pray that you would take seriously our heartfelt concerns. They are grounded in a sincere love for the Church, and a deep desire that you will provide the kind of leadership that is so desperately needed.

Yours in Christ

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On behalf of the St Stephen's congregation