

PROPOSAL FOR AMENDMENT TO THE LCA THESES OF AGREEMENT

Be it resolved that in the interests of good order and the unity and well-being of the Church, the SA-NT District recommend to the 2021 LCA/NZ general convention that Theses of Agreement 6.11,¹ be removed from the Theses of Agreement.

Submitted by St. Stephen's Lutheran Church, Adelaide

The LCANZ teaches that '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'.² This statement has given the Church the freedom to study closely the teaching that only men may be ordained during the past three decades.

However, the protracted period of theological reflection regarding ordination, on the basis of the Scriptures, has failed to resolve the differences in teaching that are all too evident in the Church. In the Theses of Agreement (Theses of Agreement 1, 'Principles governing Church Fellowship' (DSTO, page A2, 4.c), the Church clearly states that 'there are some things hard to be understood in Holy Writ (2 Peter 3:16); and no doctrine can be based on Scripture passages that are not clear, especially if no light is thrown on them by clear passages'.

Those who formulated the Church's foundational documents agreed in advance how to deal with doctrinal differences that might emerge in the new Church. They stipulated that if the Church fails to reach 'agreement on the basis of God's Word' on a doctrinal matter after 'combined, prayerful examination of the passage or passages in question', neither of the 'divergent views' may be 'promulgated as the *publica doctrina* (public teaching) of the Lutheran Church, as laid down in the Confessions', if it lacks clear scriptural support, if it violates the central Lutheran teaching of justification by God's grace through faith in Christ, or if it runs counter to the Church's public teaching on the doctrine in question, in this case the ministry.³

- Neither those who support the ordination of both women and men and those who support the Church's teaching have been able to persuade *the whole Church* that their position alone has clear scriptural support, even though both make such a claim.

¹ Theses of Agreement 6.11 reads: Though women prophets were used by the Spirit of God in the Old as well as in the New Testament, 1 Cor. 14:34,35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-14 prohibit a woman from being called into the office of the public ministry for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. This apostolic rule is binding on all Christendom; hereby her rights as a member of the spiritual priesthood are in no wise impaired. 'Theses on the Office of the Ministry', paragraph 6.11; *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions*, LCA/NZ, page A17.

² 'The Permanent Status of the Theses of Agreement', *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions*, LCA/NZ (DSTO), page A31

³ 'Principles governing Church Fellowship', DSTO, pages A2-A3. The relevant section of this document is paragraph 4, quoted in full in the Appendix (below).

- Neither group has persuaded *the whole Church* that their position alone upholds the central Lutheran teaching of justification by God's grace through faith in Christ, even though both make the claim.
- Neither position has persuaded *the whole Church* that their stance alone is faithful to the Lutheran Confessions' teaching on the public ministry, even though both make the claim.

The Church's 'combined, prayerful examination' of the relevant passages has not led to 'agreement on the basis of God's Word' on the ordination issue. And it seems unlikely that further discussion and debate will lead to a breakthrough, given the firmly entrenched positions that have emerged. Therefore, strictly speaking, neither of the divergent exegetical conclusions that have been in evidence since the start of the prolonged debate—male-only ordination and the ordination of both men and women—meets the criteria for being promulgated as an essential part of the whole Church's teaching on the ministry. According to the principles of TA 1 (see Appendix) both positions should be regarded as acceptable theological opinions that can be held without dividing the Church.

The LCA/NZ already has a teaching on the office of the ministry that avoids the divergent conclusions that have surfaced in the debate in our circles. It is articulated in Articles 5 and 14 of the Augsburg Confession and Theses of Agreement 6.1-10. This teaching states that God has instituted the ministry so that people can be brought to saving faith and nurtured in the faith through the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments (AC 5). And the ministry requires an orderly process of call and ordination (AC 14).

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this (Augsburg Confession 5); and,

It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call (AC 14).

The emphasis of these statements on the ministry from the Confessions is rightly placed on the office, not on the gender, of those who fill the office. Removing the paragraph in the Theses of Agreement that prohibits women's ordination does not require a new Lutheran teaching on the ministry, different from the one that is articulated in the Confessions (above).

With both groups united in their commitment to the Confessions' teaching on the ministry, it would be a wise course of action for the Church to affirm this one unchanging teaching that Lutherans have inherited from the time of the Reformation, and leave congregations⁴ free to call as their pastor the one they believe will best serve with them in their mission, from those who are qualified for the office, ordained and endorsed by the Church.

Removal of Theses of Agreement 6.11, which is sanctioned by the Church's foundational documents, allows both those who are conscience bound to support the ordination of both women and men, and also those who are conscience bound to reject the ordination of both men and women to share common ground on the Lutheran doctrine of the ministry, and it frees the LCA to adopt a middle

⁴ Including other calling bodies such as aged care services and schools.

way that respects and honours the consciences of those who take either position.

The removal of Theses of Agreement 6.11 would in no way impinge on the right of congregations to call the pastor of their choosing, whether they be male or female. Reaffirming Augsburg Confession 5 and 14 and Theses of Agreement 6.1-10 as the documents that give the LCA's teaching on the ministry gives the freedom and flexibility that befits a gospel-centred teaching and a gospel-centred Church. And it would contribute to the peace and unity of the Church.

Appendix

'Principles governing church fellowship', paragraph 4; DSTO, A2-A3

4. (a) 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. Where a difference in teaching or practice is a departure from the doctrine of the Bible, such difference cannot be tolerated, but must be pointed out as an error, on the basis of clear passages of Holy Writ; and if the error is persisted in, in spite of instruction, warning, and earnest witness, it must at last lead to a separation.

(b) We believe that all doctrines of Holy Writ are equally binding; nevertheless, not all things in Scripture are of the same importance, when viewed from the centre and core of the Scriptures, Christ and justification by Him through faith.

(c) We admit that there are some things hard to understand in Holy Writ, 2 Peter 3:16; but no doctrine can be based on Scripture passages that are not clear, especially if no light is thrown upon them by clear passages.

(d) Differences in exegesis that do not affect doctrine are not church divisive.

(e) In case of differences in exegesis that affect doctrine, agreement on the basis of God's word must be sought by combined, prayerful examination of the passage or passages in question.

If this does not lead to agreement, because no unanimity has been reached on the clarity of the passage or passages in question and hence on the stringency and adequacy of the Scriptural proof, divergent views arising from such differences of interpretation are not divisive of church fellowship, providing that there be the readiness in principle to submit to the authority of the Word of God, and providing that

- (i) Thereby no clear Word of Scripture is denied, contradicted or ignored;
- (ii) Such divergent views in no wise impair, infringe upon, or violate the central doctrine of Holy Scripture, justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ;
- (iii) Nothing is taught contrary to the *publica doctrina* of the Lutheran Church as laid out in its Confessions;
- (iv) Such divergent views are not propagated as the *publica doctrina* of the Church and in no wise impair the doctrine of Holy Writ.