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Review article

Peter Lockwood Victor C. Pfitzner. *Early Christian Witnesses: Biblical and Theological Explorations. Selected Essays by Victor C Pfitzner.* Adelaide: ATF Press, 2021. 105

Abbreviations

AC	Augsburg Confession
CTICR	Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations
FC Epit.	Epitome of the Formula of Concord
LCA	Lutheran Church of Australia
SC	Small Catechism
TA	Theses of Agreement
Tractate	Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

Commonly cited works

DSTO	Lutheran Church of Australia, Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations. <i>Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions.</i> https://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr/ .
Kolb and Wengert	Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. <i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.</i> Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000.
LCA By-laws	Lutheran Church of Australia. <i>Constitution and By-laws.</i> 2018. https://www.lca.org.au/about-us/structure-governance/ .
LCA Constitution	Lutheran Church of Australia. <i>Constitution and By-laws.</i> 2018. https://www.lca.org.au/about-us/structure-governance/ .
Tappert	Theodore G. Tappert, trans. and ed. <i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.</i> Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1959.
Theses of Agreement VI	Lutheran Church of Australia, DSTO Volume 1 A. <i>Theses of Agreement. VI: Theses on the office of the ministry</i> (1950).

Beyond an earthly reign: changing custom to meet context

Alison Short

The bursting forth of Christ into the world fulfilled scriptures but disappointed followers' expectations of an overt earthly kingdom (Mk 1:14–15; Mt 6:10; Acts 1:6). Here we see the shambles of a Jesus casually born from a pregnant fiancé amidst government mandated travel (Lk 1:26–27,34; 2:1–7). Here we see a man fraternising with tax collectors, cheats, street people with demons and deeply distrusted foreigners.¹ Where are his doctrinal standards? Has he not understood the Torah? How could this be the Christ?

And yet he is. Tangible evidence of a love so great that the Samaritan woman at the well became his first disciple (Jn 4:28–29,39–42), that Zacchaeus climbed a tree to even get a glimpse of him (Lk 19:1–4) and people came to him for healing, inspiration and rest despite heavy-laden lives of relentless labour.² Despite the jostling of the disciples for power and attention (Mk 9:33,34; Mt 18:1–5; Lk 9:46–48), a new and dangerous Christian enclave emerged where a subversive equality based on pure love reigned, no matter whether slave or free, reaching beyond boundaries of gender and household hierarchies (Gal 3:28).³ Followers of Christ no longer lived under the pervasive and restrictive hegemony of prescribed societal and religious practices of the time.⁴

Through Jesus, God opened up a powerful space for change, leading to a deeper understanding of how God can meet our spiritual and human needs for connection and support. A space to help us to grow and develop in love towards ourselves and others around us. A space that leads us to a crossroad where Jesus challenges us to rethink the place and role of God in our world, to look beyond ourselves and our ingrained expectations, to find new ways to show God's love to all people in mission and outreach. It might be argued that the Lutheran church in Australia has not always lived up to God's Great Commission (Mt 28:19,20) in the local community. For example, commonly there have been multiple discussions about overseas mission and specific initiatives for church planting and cultural groups at churchwide synods, yet limited attention has at times been spent on everyday congregational support needs with regard to community outreach.

1 Mk 1:21–27; 2:15–17; Mt 8:31; Lk 3:12–14; 8:30; 15:1–7; 17:11–19; 19:1–7; Jn 4:4–42.

2 Mk 1:32–34; 6:31; Mt 5:1–12; 6:31; 8:14–15; 9:1–8,32–34; 26:45; Jn 4:43–54; 11:1–45; 16:33.

3 Richard S. Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philipians and 1 Thessalonians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 129–149.

4 Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 243–277; Aida Besancon Spencer, 'Jesus' Treatment of Women in the Gospels,' in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 90–107; Cynthia Long Westfall, 'Male and Female, One in Christ: Galatians 3:26–29,' in *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 159–184; Dorothy A. Lee, *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament: Reclaiming the Biblical Vision for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 5–7.

Perhaps it is the hankering for a structured earthly kingdom with rules, hierarchies, permissions and approvals that can curb efforts to exercise our individual and collective agency as children of God, especially as lay pioneers seeking to make changes to meet the needs of local communities.⁵ One example of this is the ongoing and complex debate surrounding the ordination of women and men. As Lutherans, we know that each one of us is vocationally called to live out God's love into the world,⁶ yet it can sometimes feel as if the fire of our desire to make a difference is damped down by clerical and authoritative processes to which we feel we are required to conform, based on existing socio-cultural norms within our church. At the local level, barriers exist, such as ordained minister and intensive theological approvals, these even extending to lack of 'permission' to foster community engagement accepted by other denominations, such as local inter-church ecumenical activities and ecumenical Christian Meditation (ICCM) practices. Such barriers can lead to a 'why bother' approach by members who already have busy professional lives and feel that their knowledge and contributions, as valued by secular society, are not even seen and certainly not valued within context of the Lutheran church in Australia.

Christ still breaks barriers. Barriers crumble as we join together in grace, as they did for the brothers and sisters working together in the early church. Our new identity as co-heirs with Christ makes all the difference and permits us to challenge the existing structures around us. It allows us to step beyond the bounds of our boxed-in habits and inner cultural constraints to spread Christ's good news of love and acceptance beyond the church doors and approved preachers. Every single interaction we undertake can be infused with God's presence, be it with bus driver or lawyer, supermarket checker or musician, teacher or road worker, telemarketer or lollypop lady. God's grace is for all people in their everyday lives. God's love shown to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus cannot be contained within church infrastructure or doctrinal tenets, and arguments exist that if we do not break out of our perceived formal constraints as a religious community, our beloved Lutheran church will die. As with other denominations,⁷ there is a current need to empower lay members who are the backbone of the LCA NZ.

The Australia-wide census reveals two-thirds of our population live in greater capital cities within a wide mix of culture and language contexts.⁸ The census also documents a general trend of affluence in our living standards.⁹ Speaking to contexts similar to those

5 James Butler, 'Setting God's pioneers free? The need to release lay pioneers from the Church of England's narrative of resourcing and equipping,' *Ecclesial Futures* 3, no. 1, 32–35.

6 Stevens, R. Paul, *Work Matters: Lessons from Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 9–15; 169–171; Gene E. Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 2021), 89–114.

7 Butler, 'Setting God's pioneers free?', 38.

8 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Snapshot of Australia. A picture of the economic, social and cultural make-up of Australia on Census Night, 10 August 2021,' 28 June 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/snapshot-australia/2021>; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Cultural diversity: Census. Information on country of birth, year of arrival, ancestry, language and religion,' 28 June 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/cultural-diversity-census/latest-release>.

9 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Household income and wealth, Australia. Key information from the Survey of Income and Housing 2019–20 including distribution of income and wealth by various household

facing many of us —the known affluent, business-based multicultural cities of Colossi and Philippi—Paul reminds us that God accepts and uses all people within the church as brothers and sisters to address the needs of the local community (Rom 7:6; 12:1,2;9–13; Phil 2–4).¹⁰ The gospels document many female disciples (Lk 10:38–42; 24:1–11; Jn 4:28,29,39–42),¹¹ and throughout his writings Paul clearly accepts both male and female co-workers as bishops, deacons and ministers in the early church,¹² including sending Phoebe as a trusted deacon to deliver and no doubt speak Paul’s letter to the church in Rome (Rom 16:1–2). Broad scholarship suggests that there is no impediment to women engaging in church leadership and ministry roles.¹³ Indeed, Paul’s supportive and friendly letter to the church at Philippi affirms Euodia and Syntyche as his co-workers in ministry (Phil 4:2,3) and we are reminded again and again of inclusiveness and respect within the early church (Acts 16:12).¹⁴ This occurs within a radical approach to leadership which advocates humility, grace-filled openness and deliberate imitation of Christ (Phil 2:6–11).¹⁵ In today’s world this could be termed ‘authentic and distributed leadership’ within communities of practice.¹⁶ It is time to embrace and apply this early church mentality of inclusiveness, mutual respect and inherent collaboration from a grass-roots, lay church foundation in order to save our organised church in Australia.

The big question is—how can this knowledge be applied to our Australian Lutheran context? Derived from Paul’s example (Phil 2:6–11)¹⁷ evidence suggest that top-down leadership needs to be replaced by a more egalitarian, inside-out leadership structure as the needs of our various community members are considered—and all of this occurring within the framework of retaining God’s love and the dignity of the individual at the centre of every leadership interaction. When the voices of lay members representing a variety of minority groups including (but not limited to) gender, age and cultural background are sourced, foregrounded and included, this can assist with mission and outreach within their local communities according to their skills and gifts. However, my observations, experiences and the reports of others across many regions of Australia suggest that ordained ministers and other gatekeepers may need to open up more space and shed their assumed power to allow lay and minority members to express and practice their ideas, rather than be ‘shot down in flames’ or mansplained at first breath. An open, lay missional forum may be useful

characteristics,’ 28 April 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/finance/household-income-and-wealth-australia/latest-release#fact-sheets>.

10 Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 250–277.

11 Lee, *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament*, 15–95.

12 Lee, *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament*, 97–135; Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, 206–219; 243–277; Robert Murray, ‘Philippians,’ in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (online version), ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Phil 4:3; Acts 16:12, Rom 16:1–7,12.

13 Lee, *The Ministry of Women in the New Testament*, 153–170.

14 Robert Murray, ‘Philippians;’ Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 129–149.

15 Karl I. Tangen, ‘Leadership as participation in Christ: Paul’s theology of leadership in the Letter to the Philippians,’ *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 8, no.1 (2018), 288–289.

16 William L. Gardner, Claudia C. Coglisier, Kelly M. Davis, and Matthew P. Dickens, ‘Authentic leadership: a review of the literature and research agenda,’ *The Leadership Quarterly* 22, no. 6 (2011), 1120–1145.

17 Tangen, ‘Leadership as participation in Christ,’ 278–279.

to promote equity and involvement. Clearly, an authoritarian, 'holier than thou' or 'my way or the high way' approach under predominantly older, white, male leadership, as is often seen in strong discussions at synod and also by some pastors in their local congregations, no longer works for today's society—which mandates representative and respectful interactions and community engagement from its societal leaders.¹⁸ From personal experience, this apparent lack of awareness regarding current societal expectations has caused a disconnect and disengagement on the part of many members, with the result that unfortunately many members have left the church, including young people and others known to the author.

How then can congregations be empowered and how can a return to a grass-roots approach like that of the early church be facilitated? How then can the documented power of male clerics within an identified culture of submissiveness and deference in Australian churches be countered?¹⁹ Although originally often seen as a male domain, the theological training at the Lutheran Seminary (now ALC) has increasingly been open to female students, although significant impediments to inclusion still exist, as noted by multiple discussions and personal experiences. More work needs to be done to level the playing field by providing theological education which is safe from ingrained gender bias, personal ridicule, and claims of male headship. This education needs to be available across all districts and regions of Australia to guide and support spiritual formation for every member of our Lutheran communities. Ideally, this should include smaller online micro-credentialling initiatives rather than conventional large study commitments. In addition, the use of current best practice business and educational strategies²⁰ can be beneficial in supporting effective reflections and debate which result in all class members feeling valued and supported by lecturers. At the same time, the church's educational facilities will benefit from welcoming, attracting and seeking out voices from all geographically diverse areas of Australia and New Zealand, not just those who have been privileged to attend a Lutheran school or to grow up in a Lutheran hub such as Adelaide or Brisbane.

This leads to the question: who is our community? The experience of some might be that

18 United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>; Australian Government Fair Work Ombudsman, *Consultation and cooperation in the workplace. Best Practice Guide, 2022*, <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/best-practice-guides/consultation-and-cooperation-in-the-workplace>; Patricia Karvelas, 'Women are again raising the alarm over the Liberal Party's lack of diversity, and the Coalition can't ignore them,' *ABC News*, 14 Aug 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-14/women-raising-alarm-liberal-party-diversity-coalition-electoral/101327332>.

19 Kathleen McPhillips, 'Religion after the Royal Commission: challenges to religion-state relations,' *Religions* 11, no. 44 (2020), 7.

20 John Price, 'Business ethics: new challenges, better theories, practical solutions,' Keynote address at the Australasian Business Ethics Network (ABEN) Conference, Melbourne, 9 Dec 2019, <https://asic.gov.au/about-asic/news-centre/speeches/business-ethics-new-challenges-better-theories-practical-solutions/>; Lawrence Ingvarson, Michelle Anderson, Peter Gronn and Andrew Jackson, *Standards for School Leadership: A Critical Review of Literature* (Melbourne: Teaching Australia, Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2006), 20–26, https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=teaching_standards; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*, 2015, 10–16, http://www.npbea.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Professional-Standards-for-Educational-Leaders_2015.pdf.

for too long, the Lutheran church in Australia and its forbears has maintained a narrow and inward-focused approach, perhaps fuelled by the collective trauma of wartime.²¹ A narrow group mentality is also common amongst migrant communities seeking to hold onto traditions of homeland, often linking to an ongoing cultural bereavement and the broader acculturation process.²² Despite these historical influences on our church, now is the time to embrace change and look beyond habitual approaches by turning to meet the evolving needs of local communities and of the world around us; to burst free from our cocoon into a new and fresh day filled with possibilities for spreading God's love. Many people in our society no longer trust the goodwill and intent of the Christian church,²³ and this fear and lack of safety within religious organisations is deep and pervasive.²⁴ It seems obvious that more work needs to be done to address their valid concerns, and to overcome any possible ingrained repugnance that the church may have about the values of secularism within a civil society.²⁵ The Royal Commission states clear recommendations about the inclusion of both women and men in leadership roles within the church, providing a much more open and transparent contribution to order in the church of the future.²⁶ Including a greater variety of voices at the table provides a wider representation of the needs of society and leads to a questioning of assumed practices and the dominant ideation of a single power bloc. In my opinion, we are past due for this change, and the re-shaping of our attitudes in line with societal expectations will help us re-connect with our community.

The reputation of the LCAZ as an organised church is of particular concern when considering the needs of emerging adults (early adulthood to almost middle age), as this group seems to struggle to find meaning and identity in their life.²⁷ This group have been particularly vulnerable to deep spiritual and emotional hurt caused by forces such as the pandemic and associated mental health challenges, and remain deeply distrustful of organised church.²⁸ Many reports and surveys document their needs and attitudes which

21 Sven Sterken and Lisa Marie Daunt, 'From Austria to Australia: three Lutheran churches by Karl Langer,' *Lutheran Theological Journal* 54, no. 3 (Dec 2020), 181.

22 Dinesh Bhugra and Matthew A. Becker, 'Migration, cultural bereavement and cultural identity,' *World Psychiatry* 4, no.1 (Feb 2005), 18–24.

23 Danielle Kutchel, 'Leadership index reveals public distrust in NFP sector,' *Probono Australia*, 24 July 2019, <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2019/07/leadership-index-reveals-public-distrust-in-nfp-sector/>; Carole Ardell, *The Relationship Between Trust and Perceived Relevance of Local Christian Churches in Prince George, British Columbia, Canada*, Doctor of Ministry Dissertation (New York, NY: Alliance Theological Seminary, 2021), 120–126, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/482dcf4893c2971c43658144afece279/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

24 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report: Religious Institutions*, Vol. 16, Book 1 and 2, <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/child-abuse/final-report>; Frank Newport, 'Why are Americans losing confidence in organized religion?,' *Gallup*, 16 July 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/260738/why-americans-losing-confidence-organized-religion.aspx>.

25 McPhillips, 'Religion after the Royal Commission,' 7.

26 Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, *Final Report Recommendations*, 51 (Recommendation 16.7).

27 Melinda Lundquist Denton and Richard Flory, *Back Pocket God: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 222–231.

28 Alison Short, 'Hope-makers in an un-peaceful world,' *Lutheran Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (Aug 2020), 115–117; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Health of young people,' accessed 24 July 2022

have also been observed in prolonged personal interactions,²⁹ and now is the time to act for the future. This generation of spiritual seekers are tomorrow's societal leaders; in many cases they are already unmistakably doing so as can be seen in the news every night. Adults in this demographic need our missional love, support and respect in order to grow into the next phases of their lives, with strong roots built upon a firm foundation. For those few already active in our church, it is time to get out of their way and let them speak—loudly and long—to make a difference for the better. Enabling the spiritual development and ministry of each and every one of the church's lay members to meet God's vocational expectations of spreading love as we live out our lives in community with one another will help ministering to the needs of our neighbours of all ages and life stages, incorporating both the needs and wisdom of our emerging adults.³⁰ The LCANZ's future clergy at all levels arise from the lay community, so increasing lay education and agency to all ages will mean that the church continues into the future. Learning from others who have re-engaged with grass-roots lay pioneers in reciprocal and mutual relationships will improve collaborative efforts to discern God's mission.³¹

Despite many challenges in these difficult times, there is much to celebrate and be thankful for as members of God's church in Australia in our world. We can be of good cheer as we find ways to recognise and support the vocational work of our current dedicated members by bringing together inclusive and egalitarian groups of lay and clergy across state lines around particular topics and issues of relevance to specific communities. Doing so fosters a groundswell of healing words of love and compassion surging outwards into our whole society within our missional call. Boldly, this can be achieved through any means possible, by extending on from old structures³² to call into question any latent nostalgic hankering for a human-constructed earthly kingdom. I see the Lutheran church of tomorrow as offering theological and missional training to lay people with micro-credentialling, supporting a range of roles within a mutually inclusive respect for diverse views. Current active and creative engaged models of adult education need to be strongly incorporated. When such an educational approach is carefully designed to connect and engage well with

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/health-of-young-people>; Maretha Visser and Eloise Lawvan Wyk, 'University students' mental health and emotional wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown,' *South African Journal of Psychology* 51, no. 2 (2021), 229–243, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00812463211012219>; Zheng-He Wang et al., 'Prevalence of anxiety and depression symptoms, and the demand for psychological knowledge and interventions in college students during the COVID-19 epidemic: a large cross-sectional study,' *Journal of Affective Disorders* 275 (2020) 188–193, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32734907/>; Thomas Kelsall, 'Does the church have a future in Australia?,' *On the record*, 5 June 2018, <https://ontherecord.unisa.com.au/2018/06/05/does-the-church-have-a-future-in-australia/>.

29 Eddy S.W. Ng, Linda Schweitzer and Sean T. Lyons, 'New generation, great expectations: a field study of the millennial generation,' *Journal of Business Psychology* 25 (2010), 281–292; Carina Paine Schofield and Sue Honoré, 'Generation Y and learning: a changing world,' in *The Future of Learning*, ed. S. Voller, E. Blass and V. Culpin (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 106–123, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230306356_9; Short, 'Hope-makers in an un-peaceful world.'

30 Ian Hussey, 'Preaching for the whole of life,' *The Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 20, no. 1 (March 2020), 65–84, esp. 74–75.

31 Butler, 'Setting God's pioneers free?', 25–37.

32 DSTO Volume 1 A. *Theses of Agreement*.

whole societal attitudes regardless of gender, culture and social status, a distributed and authentic approach to the leadership of spiritual formation with every lay member will inevitably result in better alignment with local communities and assist in creatively and collaboratively addressing the needs of people in community settings, as part of whole-of-life discipleship.³³ It might even be argued that there is a need to re-think traditional ideas about the role and significance of our customary Sunday worship by considering other ways to support spiritual seeking, depth and commitment.

As we consider radical change in our Australian Lutheran context, God gives us the burning desire of the Holy Spirit (Lk 24:32; 2 Cor 1:3,4) leading and comforting us as we try on new ways of 'being church' together under God's dominion. We need to heal the rift between lay members and the religious hierarchy, a rift which we see reflected in churchwide synod and local discussions, including people leaving the church which they claim is 'out of touch'. We need to especially value the work of lay members and support them with education and collaborative mentorship as we work together to co-design the future of our church. Existing educational and support initiatives for church workers³⁴ are often not cutting through to become known to local congregational members and the formation of every congregational member at grass-roots level needs to be considered, not only those members who are blessed with additional time and funds for further formal study. By combining lay and ordained workers in effective mutual working relationships, we can increasingly create welcoming communities who effectively listen to the needs communicated to them by their members and the wider community as the extended family of Christ. We will then be empowered to show inclusive love both within and outside of the church to all people without exception, living out our birthright as co-heirs together in our missional endeavours. In this way, by stepping out each day in faith, even if we 'fail' we are more than conquerors in Christ, and Christ holds us all individually and collectively dear to Him. Now is the time to take our courage in both hands and embrace change for our future and our world.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38,39).

Dr Alison Short is a lifetime committed Lutheran with local, national and international experience, recently completing her Diploma of Theology at Australian Lutheran College, University of Divinity. Vocationally, Alison's current secondment role progresses community and industry engagement across all medical, nursing and allied health disciplines at Western Sydney University. She is highly respected as a well-qualified and innovative educator, leading international studies on educational practices in her field of professional music therapy.

³³ Hussey, 'Preaching for the whole of life,' 81–82.

³⁴ Lutheran Church of Australia, *Vocational Development and Training Policy* (2018), <https://www.lca.org.au/services-resources-training/policies/>.