

An open letter to the College of Bishops and the General Church Board of the LCA/NZ

Date: 22 April 2022

Dear Bishop Paul Smith, Bishop Neville Otto, Bishop David Altus, Bishop Lester Priebbenow, Bishop Mark Vainikka, Bishop Mark Whitfield, Bishop Mike Fulwood and Bishop Robert Bartholomaeus and members of the General Church Board Pastor Tim Stringer, Kim Baumeler, Paul Argyle, Charmaine Harch, Tim Wiebusch, Mel Zerner and Peter Zweck,

Grace and peace in Christ to you.

We are encouraged to hear that the College of Bishops and General Church Board will meet in May to discuss the various issues before the LCA/NZ in the lead up to the in-person sessions of the 20th regular convention of General Synod in February 2023.

The purpose of this letter is to add insight to this discussion. We are providing the following stories so you can consider the reality of some women within the LCA/NZ who are called to serve in the ordained pastoral ministry in our Church.

Women continue to experience significant limitations within the LCA/NZ. Perplexingly, even when there are no males available to fill certain ministry roles, women who are theologically trained and equipped, and even invited into these ministry roles by the congregations, aren't being accepted and recognised in some ministry spaces because of their gender.

To illustrate this, we share the following realities of women called to serve the LCA/NZ in pastoral ministry.

Sue Westhorp

“God's call to ordained ministry has woven its way through my life from ‘playing’ church at home as a young girl of 6 to paid lay ministry work in the LCA/NZ and hospital chaplaincy ministry work in the health sector. After many years of shoe-horning my inner call into various aspects of ministry, I made the decision to intentionally re-engage with answering the call to ordained ministry last year. I converted my study in a Masters of Pastoral Care into a Masters of Theology at ALC (my BTh was completed at ALC in 2005) and have enjoyed studying alongside my full-time work, even though it is often exhausting. This study and its practical application have strengthened my sense of inner call. This inner call now also grows externally from my congregation as I serve in worship co-leadership roles and in other ministry leadership roles. I feel such joy at being able to serve in this way and yet am constantly reminded of the limits of lay ministry in sacramental ministry. The calling has grown ever-stronger over the past 40 years, affirmed by those I minister to, both within the LCA/NZ and outside of it. I have noticed that there are pastoral issues that people would rather share with a woman, and my experience of this has shown me the power of having both male and female ministers. Ordination is not something I feel entitled to, nor that I have a right to claim. I simply want to answer God's call to love and serve his people through the means of grace so that all may know his healing salvation. To serve in this way in the LCA/NZ would be a privilege and honour, as well as a faithful response to the ways in which God has shaped me.”

Tanya Wittwer

“It is now more than 62 years since my earliest memory of the certainty of knowing I would be a Pastor when I grew up. I was confused when I learned in Confirmation that this was not possible, as my conviction about vocation had not lessened, and the same Scripture used to prohibit the ordination of women included stories of women serving pastorally. While I initially put the calling aside, it was not many years before I not only received the affirmation of the church through formal calls to a variety of roles, but also extraordinary affirmations regarding my calling from family, friends, those I served, and strangers. God used these “angels” to uphold me in the face of stonewalling and verbal and written abuse. During my time at Wartburg Seminary the spiritual dissonance I experienced in the LCA faded.

I really don't know if I would have said no to a Call from a congregation in another denomination in South Australia, or to my congregation in the US, if I had known women's ordination would take so long within the LCA. At each of those times, and some subsequent ones, I've said, “Thank you, but no. My call is to the LCA. It is the church that has nurtured me.” My grief has intensified as each beloved older woman who had known God's call and not been able to respond to it nor seen women's ordination happen in their lifetime, has died, and as each younger woman has left to serve in another denomination. I cannot believe these grace-filled women have been wrong to perceive God's call, so can only conclude that the church has been wrong to not celebrate their call with them.

I have been sustained by the opportunity to serve at the Adelaide College of Divinity. I have had supportive colleagues, constant affirmation regarding wisdom and giftedness, and the blessing of watching students grow in their relationship with God alongside their skills in pastoral and preaching ministries.

I don't know what my calling has meant. Did God really call me into a perpetual wilderness or will I be able to support those women who are the first to be ordained in our church? I can only pray that the church will soon ordain those in whom the church recognises God's call. Then there will be greater integrity in my support for the two young women in my congregation that are clearly gifted and graced for ministry. Then there will be fewer reasons stopping me inviting friends to church. Maybe a few of those who have left the church over this issue will return. Maybe I will move from endless years of sojourning in Easter Saturday, and finally get to Sunday.”

Kathy Matuschka

“In around the year 2000 I first heard God calling me – out of the blue - toward ordained ministry within the LCA/NZ.

I have discerned this call through theological studies with Australian Lutheran College and leadership within my congregation. In 2018 I retired from my profession as a Physiotherapist to become a lay worker - serving within the LCAQD as Assistant Director for Ministry & Mission (ADMM). A key aspect of this role is supporting the missional health of congregations.

With each step forward I find that there is more heart work to be done and opportunities to dig more deeply into God's grace. When I am tempted to grumble, I remind myself that if I were a congregational pastor I would face many of the same challenges ... so I'd best address these soul issues now, or they will just come back again!

I am grateful for the numerous opportunities I have through my ADMM role to communicate the gospel in words and actions, and for the support, encouragement and instruction I receive within the communities of the LCAQD. I believe that my work also blesses others.

As I consider how God has formed me since I was first called, I often wonder ‘what’s next ... where is this going?’ While I was studying with ALC, the next steps were in my hands. Now I have the momentum to keep stepping forward, but the path is not open to me. I am not interested in battering down a locked gate, but I would like to do all I can to ensure that I am being faithful to my calling.

Not far from my home I notice two congregations that are understaffed – each has one pastor in place where they really need two. With my unfinished business, I wonder whether one of these ministry locations might present a mutually beneficial growth opportunity (i.e. for me and the congregation) in 2023.”

Maria Rudolph

“Since coming to faith in Jesus at Bethlehem Lutheran Church Adelaide as an 18 year-old, I have had a strong call into pastoral ministry. I have completed a Bachelor of Theology and a Bachelor of Ministry at Australian Lutheran College. As part of this study, I served in an LCA congregation as a pastoral ministry intern under the supervision of a pastor. My joy of studying was saddened by the acknowledgement of my male classmates as they received their preaching licence and were officially installed as vicars while there was no tangible way in which my studies were affirmed to serve my Church. I experience joy and warmth from the members of LCA congregations everywhere I go as I serve in their midst. This is mixed with the sadness people express about the current situation of our Church where women cannot be ordained and often results in whispered encouragement to ‘keep going and serve regardless of the lack of recognition.’ Because there is no clear pathway to ministry for me, I have often felt frustrated and wanted to give up pursuing my call within our Church. This has been amplified when males with lesser theological qualifications than me are accepted for Word and Sacrament ministry and as Special Ministry Pastors, by merit of their gender, while I was excluded from all of those roles simply because of my gender. I explored other denominations and ways to serve, yet God will not leave it alone. My call to serve as a pastor in the LCA/NZ remains strong despite the many obstacles and personal pain this causes. God has opened up many opportunities for me to serve, including currently leading the German speaking congregation of Perth, as I am also a native German speaker. But even in this context where no suitable male could be found to fill this role, Word and Sacrament ministry continues to be closed to me because I am female. Ministry in this context is limiting for the congregation members and restricts my potential and call. I also long to serve the LCA/NZ more widely as a general ministry pastor. I pray that together we can step into a new time for our LCA/NZ where my call and the calls and gifts of all our people are recognised and encouraged so we can serve God together.”

We would also like to draw your attention to the attached article by Dr Tania Nelson which has been submitted to Lutheran Theological Journal and shared here with her permission and support. This article clearly expresses the issue at hand from a practical perspective and emphasises the need for men and women to minister together as lay people and clergy.

Opportunities:

1. We share the common purpose you expressed in proclaiming the Gospel. What an amazing opportunity we have as a Church to share the Good News through all men and women of the LCA/NZ. The opportunity is to re-focus on the mission work at hand rather than focussing on the gender barriers that seem to restrict the work of the Gospel within the LCA/NZ.

2. We can achieve consistency between the theology of the LCA/NZ which teaches that all are equal in the sight of God and the way this plays out in practice, thus finally embracing all men and women in all ministry capacities in our Church.
3. Finally, there could be a clear pathway for long term ministry opportunities for women studying theology at ALC.

What next?

We invite you to discuss the following questions:

4. How the abilities and calls of these women can be used to their full capacity within the LCA/NZ?
5. How can women be encouraged by you as the leaders of the Church to work for the Gospel, rather than experiencing ongoing limitations and discouragement because of their gender?
6. How can women be reasonably rejected when God calls them to serve, and the Church has many pastoral vacancies and is praying for workers to bring in the harvest?
7. If the efficacy of Word and Sacrament ministry does not depend on the character or gender of the person who ministers, but on God's institution and his promise to build up and strengthen all those who hear and receive the Word with faith, how can the LCA/NZ limit Word and Sacrament ministry to males only?
8. Instead of limiting the discussion about how the Church can move forward to mostly what men can do, how can you open the discussion and decisions around using all our people to serve the Gospel together for the greater good of all within the LCA/NZ community?

Thank you for taking the time to hear and consider our voices. We will publish this open letter by 06/05/2022 on the public pages of Streams in the Desert (<https://www.streamsinthedesert.com.au>) and Women at the Well (<https://www.watw.com.au>) and would like to publish your response on these platforms with your permission.

Signatories

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|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Maria Rudolph | 9. Kathy Matuschka | 17. Dean Zweck |
| 2. Libby Jewson | 10. Sue Westhorp | 18. Bob Kempe |
| 3. Cathryn Hamilton | 11. Joy Christian | 19. Vic Pfitzner |
| 4. Liz Winderlich | 12. David Christian | 20. Shelley Koch |
| 5. Margaret Modra | 13. Geoff Burger | 21. Stephen Haar |
| 6. John Zeppel | 14. Steen Olsen | 22. Maurice Schild |
| 7. Helen Lockwood | 15. Robert Voigt | 23. Peter Lockwood |
| 8. Tanya Wittwer | 16. Jeff Silcock | |

Appendix as mentioned in the letter above

Implications of the call for gender equality on God's mission through the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand: a socio-cultural analysis

By Dr Tania Nelson

This paper provides a brief critique of the impact of the Australian and New Zealander social-cultural issue of gender equality on God's mission through the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. Gender equality is defined as the state in which access to rights or opportunities is unaffected by gender. Gender equity, which includes affirmative action, is defined as the means by which gender equality is achieved.

Historical considerations

In numerous instances, the Christian church has been a slow adopter of gender equality. Noting that women's right to vote was first given in 1895 in South Australia, it was as late as 1966 that women in the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCANZ) were given the right to vote in congregational meetings, with a later added qualification in 1968, 'That, when women are given the right to discuss and vote in congregations, the principle that in our congregations the woman is in subjection to the man be safeguarded by recognizing the right of the men to reserve the final decision on any matter to a male vote whenever the men desire to invoke this right.'¹ Varied interpretations of the concept of subordination (or subjection/submission) and varying opinions on whether a wife is subordinate to her husband, and women are subordinate to men may be one reason for the slow response of traditional Christian denominations to the notion of gender equality. An LCANZ document, edited as recently as 2001, gives one viewpoint on the matter:

The passages which come into consideration are 1 Corinthians 11:2-10; 14: 33b-36; and 1 Timothy 2:13,14. These lay down the principle of subordination and reserve for women in the church. Or to put it negatively: women are not to take a leading, independent, authoritative role in the church. Note: a congregation of women would, of course, have to have women officers.²

¹ p2, *Statement on rights of women to vote at meetings of the congregations*, Lutheran Church of Australia. The General Synod of 1968 resolved that the 'qualification' listed in the text of the essay be inserted into the constitutions of congregations.

² p2, *The role of women in the church*, Lutheran Church of Australia. Adopted 1978. Edited August 2001.

Interestingly, emeritus Bishop John Henderson gives the counter argument when he stated:

Some of us who hold passionately to a male-only pastorate now believe that the LCA needs to learn how to think rightly. They are tempted to include things the LCA does not teach, such as male headship and subordination based on orders of creation. Some of us have personal views on these matters, but pastors and teachers must not burden consciences by giving the impression that our church teaches them. What we do teach is that in Christ there is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) in which all are equal in him (Galatians 3:28).³

For the LCANZ, lived reality for many Lutheran congregations does not align with the LCANZ's doctrinal statements and theological opinions. There are many women who lead in governance, management, in key mission and ministry positions, as elders and as worship leaders in the congregations of the LCANZ.

The widely reported causal link between advocates of gender subordination and perpetrators of family and domestic violence⁴ has further damaged the reputation of the Christian church in the minds of many across Australian and New Zealander society. Though the Christian church condemns all forms of violence and abuse, some are asking whether the church is doing enough. In response, the LCANZ launched a 'Hidden hurts healing heart' campaign with an accompanying website. On the issue of submission, the website quotes emeritus Bishop John Henderson:

Any man among us who uses Christianity and the Bible to justify abuse of his wife or partner has clearly lost sight of his faith. If we are to use the word 'subordination' at all, it must relate to Christ's voluntary submission to the will of his heavenly Father when he went to the cross. Such submission is freely given and never demanded. It's a loving expression that marks the difference between Christians and the world (see the contrast Jesus establishes in Matthew 20:25-27). That does not mean that we encourage people, particularly women who are at risk, to stay in abusive relationships. We plead with such women: please actively seek help and support to protect yourselves and your children.⁵

³ Bishop John Henderson <https://www.lca.org.au/heartland-enews-post-convention-message-to-the-church/>
14 November 2018

⁴ Piosadlo and Fonseca, *Gender subordination in the vulnerability of women to domestic violence*

⁵ <https://www.preventdfv.lca.org.au/faq/>

The view, in some areas of the church, that God created women to be submissive to men and that this submission is part of the created order of the world, and not a cultural practice or a result of sin entering the world, will continue to tarnish God's mission in Australia and New Zealand through His church as long as that view persists.

As I complete this paper on the eve of International Women's Day 2022, it is timely that the LCANZ considers, as do I, how we can collectively #BreakTheBias. The International Women's Day website calls us to

Imagine a gender equal world. A world free of bias, stereotypes and discrimination. A world that's diverse, equitable, and inclusive. A world where difference is valued and celebrated. Together we can forge women's equality.⁶

This imagining, for many Christians in Australia and New Zealand, includes imagining equality in leadership and in governance within the church, as well as the ordained ministry.

Women leadership and the mission of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand

This section does not provide a theological argument for encouraging women leaders, nor does it provide another commentary that advocates for permitting women into the ordained ministry, as the latter topic has been well argued within the LCANZ.⁷ This section challenges us to consider how just and good is the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand's (LCANZ) stance on women in leadership generally and, specifically, how just and good is the stance that women may not be pastors of the LCANZ. How does the LCANZ's current teaching demonstrate that our churches are joining in with God's mission in Australia and New Zealand?

The LCANZ, as an institution, has done little proactively to promote and encourage women leaders. When experience has variously shown that affirmative action and the setting of quotas has been an

⁶ <https://www.internationalwomensday.com/> Accessed 7/03/2022

⁷ Peter, Lockwood. *The ordination of women: assessing the counter claims of complementarianism*. Lutheran Theological Journal, May 2021; Noel Schultz. *Neither Male nor Female: the Bible, women and the ministry of the church*. 2020; <http://owl.lca.org.au/>

important factor in improving the status of a women⁸ there has been, to date, no call for affirmative action and quota setting for women in leadership - for gender justice - in the LCANZ. Many individuals however, have graciously, faithfully and courageously inspired women to leadership within the Church and for these individuals I express my sincere gratitude. The Lutheran World Federation (of which the LCANZ is an associate member) has a Gender Justice policy⁹ which includes a quota for women on all committees, for attendances at meetings/events and for scholarships. The LCANZ has applied a quota at its synod of 2018 for youth – defined as under 30s - on governing boards and committees of the Church, though has shown little interest in gender equity or mandating such a quota system for female membership on boards and committees. “It’s not enough to merely articulate a scriptural case for biblical equality. And it’s not enough to give intellectual and theological assent to equality in ministry, and then do nothing about it.”¹⁰ Hill, in *Holding up half the sky: a Biblical Case for Women Leading and Teaching in the Church*, advocates to:

1. Get real about empowering female leaders
2. Enable women to sit at the table
3. Help women see women at the table
4. Transform male-dominated cultures
5. Model and esteem real professional and personal partnerships
6. Build cultures where women and men can equally succeed
7. Stop talking and start listening
8. Honor all women
9. Examine your beliefs and practices
10. Embrace reciprocal mentoring
11. Get proactive about women speakers
12. Ask what you’re willing to give up (and gain)
13. Profile female Christian leaders
14. Pray with women
15. Make honoring women and girls a lifestyle and an institutional value¹¹

⁸ In 1986 the Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act was passed. It is ‘An Act to require certain employers to promote equal opportunity for women in employment, to establish the office of the Director of Affirmative Action, and for related purposes.’

<https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2004A03332>; and ‘Party commitment to gender equity’ in Representation of women in Australian parliaments https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2011-2012/Womeninparliament#_Toc318895786

⁹ https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-WICAS_Gender_Justice.pdf

¹⁰ p83, Graham Joseph Hill, *Holding up half the sky*, 2020.

¹¹ pp 95-102. Hill

There is much that women and men of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand can do to empower, honour and raise the profile of women to further the culture of the church toward one that truly embraces equality in Christ.

The LCANZ, at its synods, has narrowly rejected proposals for the ordination of women,¹² though at each vote the majority of delegates desired change to the current practice. Despite extensive debate both for and against the ordination of women, and despite many well-written papers and careful churchwide consultation, the issue has become an increasingly polarising one. The LCANZ has long considered that the issue of ordination of both women and men should be decided on the basis of Scripture, as is the practice for all doctrinal matters, however when Biblical scholars come to conflicting conclusions on the issue, when does reading Scripture through the lens of a missional/cultural hermeneutic better serve the debate? To what extent have the scholars considered the missional direction, missional purpose, missional locatedness and engagement with cultures/context¹³ of the key texts espoused to argue their respective positions?

I hold the view that our knowledge of God and His ways are limited by our own blinkered capacity, and that Scripture - the divinely inspired Word of God - does not speak specifically into every issue with which humans struggle. Therefore, using a hermeneutic of cultural analysis, we ask of difficult passages of Scripture “which of these instructions from Scripture are still in force for us today exactly as they are articulated on the page [of Scripture]” and which instructions are “still in force today only in part or in a modified fashion.”¹⁴ A consistent application of these questions is important. As an example of inconsistency, scholars agree that despite the words on the page saying that ‘women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety’ (1 Timothy 2:15), we know from other parts of Scripture that women, and all people, are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (and not from an act such as the ability to give birth to a child). Scripture interprets Scripture. Rather, the verse honours women’s important role in the family and is part of Paul’s call for propriety from women in worship. So, when we acknowledge that verse 15 requires a hermeneutic of cultural analysis, why do some scholars decide that a preceding verse ‘I do

¹² The LCA constitution states: For a resolution on a matter of doctrine to be deemed to be the official position of the Church it shall require a two-thirds majority of all the registered delegates at the convention.

¹³ Hunsburger, *Proposals for a missional hermeneutic*.

¹⁴ Webb, *Slaves Women & Homosexuals*, 2001.

not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet (1 Timothy 2: 12)' must be taken literally and not viewed through a cultural lens? We rightly need to ask what was going on that Paul was compelled to write to Timothy, and include instructions on respectful and decent worship practices.

Right theology is important (as far as we can claim right theology this side of heaven) and equally important is right practice. The LCANZ's tagline is 'where love comes to life'. Is the LCANZ showing the people of Australia and New Zealand that we are a place where love comes to life, or are we demonstrating that there are limits to our love, and the enactment of life, in the case of women? If the LCANZ's primary missional action is reaching the lost with the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection (being God's hands and feet in His mission – the *missio Dei*), is the LCANZ striving to be 'all things to all people, that by all means I might save some' (1 Cor 9:22) or is it limiting its gospel message through its social-cultural stance on women's leadership including ordination? Are our limitations on women an example of our espoused theology (which advocates that all are equal in the sight of God) not aligning with our operant theology?

Considerable energy has been spent since 2000 – when women's ordination was first debated at a churchwide synod - which has drawn our collective attention away from the mission of God in Australia. Some members and friends are leaving the church over the issue of inequality for women, while others are waiting patiently (and increasingly impatiently) for change. Together with Hill, I affirm that:

Men and women are now one in Christ. Women and men are brought together as equally and completely as Jews and gentiles. All are equally honored in the family of Jesus Christ. All the barriers separating women and men that are keeping us from being one body in love and worship are now done away with in Christ. Just as Gal 3:28 has social implications for slaves and gentiles, it also has social implications for women. Gal 3:26-28 is both a theological and sociological declaration. In Jesus, racial, class, and gender divisions are broken down. Women and men are equally valued, equally loved, equally honored, and equally included, and equally able to use their gifts to serve Christ and his body (Gal 3:28).¹⁵

¹⁵ p115, Hill

For the sake of God's mission to Australians and New Zealanders, the LCANZ must be proactive in honouring, promoting and encouraging the leadership of women, and this includes ordaining willing, dedicated and trained¹⁶ women as well as men.

¹⁶ The LCANZ Constitution states: '**Candidates for the Ministry**

5.1.1 A candidate for the office of the Ministry in the Church shall be a person who has

5.1.1.1 indicated willingness for and dedication to this office;

5.1.1.2 been found as being of sufficient standard in theological knowledge for this office and of sound confessional standing;

5.1.1.3 indicated willingness to accept a call or appointment; and

5.1.1.4 whose ordination has been approved by the College of Bishops.

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