

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

Date: 11 November 2022

Dear Bishop Paul Smith, Assistant Bishop Neville Otto, Bishop David Altus, Bishop Lester Priebbenow, Bishop Mark Vainikka, Bishop Mark Whitfield, Bishop Mike Fulwood, 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,

Christ's grace and peace be with you.

In your joint September meeting, you received our previous letter (dated 9 September 2022). It highlighted the role culture, morale and safety play within the broader LCA NZ community, such as ALC, committees and commissions, the church-wide and district offices and local parishes as well as district and church-wide gatherings such as Synods and Pastors' Conferences. We have not yet received a response from you, and General Pastors' Conference has since taken place. General Convention of Synod is also only three months away. These are major events in the Church during which culture, morale and safety play a key role.

There is no doubt that the safety of all participants is paramount and fostering a culture of shared learning, mutual respect, and openness to feedback where everyone feels safe to express their opinion, is critical. It is our prayer that we can learn to work together and foster a culture where there is less anger, less undermining behaviour, less passive aggression. We pray that we can move away from an environment where only loud and intimidating voices are being heard.

The purpose of this letter is to raise awareness regarding the safety of all women and men in the lead up to, during, and after the February 2023 Melbourne Synod. Only by intentionally addressing this issue can changes be made so that the previous experiences of General Synod (and Pastors' Conferences), and negative experiences that have become commonplace in parishes across Australia and New Zealand, especially in relation to the debate on the ordination of both women and men in the LCA NZ, will not be repeated.

We realise that we are all in a very difficult situation. For a few people in our Church, the concept of ordaining women is unimaginable and confronting to their very core. For others in our Church, the non-existence of the ordination of both women and men has created such an unsafe culture of toxicity and exclusion that they cannot imagine serving in such a Church any longer.

When church culture is safe and inclusive, it creates space to discuss and act on what is core for our Church and mission: The Good News of Jesus Christ. The topic of women's ordination need not be divisive, because it opens the way for all our women and men to work together in our congregations for the Gospel in all the various ways we are gifted, called and equipped.

Currently, the way the debate on the ordination of both women and men is handled in local parishes may reflect what happens on the floor of GPC and Synod. Imagine a woman in her local congregation who brings a request to discuss the ordination of women and the three options for the Church suggested by the Bishops to her local pastor. Her request is rejected by him multiple times. He finally asks her to show him where the Bishops had written in their report that it was encouraged to have discussion about the ordination of women in congregations. After receiving a copy of your report published in 2020, he finally agreed. Since attending GPC in October 2022, he announces to the

congregation that it is now necessary to have a gathering to discuss the big, imminent, negative changes that he perceives may come about in the LCANZ with the possible ordination of women. It is clear that this pastor's personal negative view on the ordination of women influences the culture and nature of the discussion. Reflect for a moment on how vulnerable this woman now feels in her congregation.

On the other hand, there are many examples where congregations have a safe discussion space with room for questions and diverse opinions on the topic. Usually, the pastors of such congregations are not strongly opposed to the ordination of women. This is what a constructive and open learning space looks like.

In the same way, at GPCs and Synods, people who have spoken out for the ordination of women in the LCANZ have on occasion been personally pursued by high-ranking individuals who are very strongly opposed. These individuals express their personal disappointment about the views held and expressed. It seems there is little respect for Christian brothers' and sisters' differing views and little room afforded for people to have diverse opinions on certain topics. It seems that only one view on the topic of women's ordination, and on other topics, is deemed the right one, and every other opinion strongly discounted. This attitude largely contributes to an unsafe culture for discussion and debate to take place. It leads to people with views in favour of the ordination of women withholding their voice because they become fearful and wary to speak in such an environment. Likewise, there is clear use of fear and anger tactics, for example in the sending out of emails by leading individuals to tell pastors and other delegates to vote against the ordination of women with fear-instilling warnings for what might happen to the LCANZ or to their own conscience if they condoned the ordination of women. We wonder what your response is to some of these serious situations?

You may wonder why many women in the LCANZ feel like second class citizens.

Let's take the example of committees and commissions of our Church. These positions are mostly voluntary roles for women, added to their paid and domestic work duties. They often work alongside male clergy who include their participation in their paid role. Or let's take the example of any woman who is seriously called into full time (pastoral) ministry in our declining Church which is crying out for more clergy. For a woman, there are no opportunities to serve the LCANZ in full-time pastoral ministry and only very limited full-time positions in our Church structure are available to women at all. Few existing positions for women are focussed on pastoral ministry, and are mostly administrative. At the most, a woman could hope for a layworker position with little job or financial security. This stands in stark contrast to the opportunities for men in the LCANZ.

The only way this current situation can change for women and therefore also create a healthier church culture for all people, is through a vote for the ordination of both women and men in the LCANZ. Unfortunately, many Synod participants spend months preparing themselves mentally for, and recovering from, the trauma and hurt of Synod. Our current Synod structure does not invite open and safe discussion about the ordination of women even though the majority at every Synod since 2000 has voted in favour of it. What steps need to be taken by the chairperson of Synod to moderate the same people lining up multiple times at the microphone, and delivering prepared speeches to make their point while deviating from the actual topic of discussion?

It is very difficult for women, in particular, to speak openly and honestly in this environment, particularly since most positions of leadership in the LCANZ are held by men. Women called into pastoral ministry in the LCANZ are yet to be invited to speak about their call at GPC or at Synod. GPC continues to have discussions about the ordination of women without the presence of any women.

Where are the voices of women here and how are they considered? Would you consider inviting women of the LCANZ who are called into ordained pastoral ministry to speak about their call at the February 2023 Synod?

When we look into the reality across the LCANZ, we hear a different story. Already the “dam has burst”, with congregations realising they need to use the gifts of those women that God has sent them, in order to grow and to be ministered to as faith communities. In our home mission field women are active in the leadership of newly budding congregations. In many places women are ensuring the continuity of worship. Where they are “illegally” preaching and even presiding it is in obedience to God’s call and embraced by their local Lutheran communities. How can the LCANZ continue to officially treat these women with contempt and as renegades, while simultaneously these women are encouraged and received with gratitude by congregations, and by many LCANZ leaders in private conversations? Can the leadership of our Church find a way to encourage Synod to embrace what is happening in local congregations instead of simply continually placating these women? Your voices and opinions on the ordination of both women and men in the LCANZ are crucial and should be heard publicly.

Beyond the two guidance documents on safe discussion that were sent out to delegates in the Resource Kit, we need to work together on ways to ensure that Synod is a safe place for all.

For example, in order to address some of the unsafe behaviours, those chairing the meeting could:

1. Discuss how to continually practise mutual respect by reminding delegates before every discussion and every round table that an environment of respect is expected and that diverse opinions are welcome and are going to be heard. This was modelled most recently by the facilitators of the recent LCANZ’s Digital Mission and Ministry Conference. There was a reminder given at the beginning of each session that this is a safe space in which we will hear and respect each other’s diverse opinions on the given topic. This is a good format to use, so that fear (of expressing one’s opinion) is not used as a threat.
2. Name the unsafe behaviour and then agree on actions put in place to deal with this behaviour on the floor of Synod immediately.
3. Limit the number of speaking times for an individual to two, so that the loud voices can’t get up multiple times and dominate the microphones - a balanced voice must be enabled.

Furthermore, the practice of counting those who are absent or who abstain from voting as an automatic “no” vote perpetuates an uneven playing field from the beginning.

We want to engage with you to help develop a format that is going to be safe for all participants, and to reduce the risk of trauma during and after Synod, nurture a culture of openness, shared learning, mutual respect, respecting diverse opinions and celebrating differences instead of seeing them as a threat.

Thank you for taking the time to hear and consider our voice. It would be very helpful if you could address our questions either in a direct response or publicly. We will publish this open letter 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.

In God’s grace and peace

Signatories

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2. Libby Jewson
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20. Shelley Koch
21. Stephen Haar
22. Maurice Schild
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24. Louis A Moss
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31. Monica Christian
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35. Ian Graue
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38. Anna Watson
39. Jennie Jones
40. James Jones
41. Margaret Mickan
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65. Wendy Begg
66. Allen Kloeden
67. Martin Albrecht
68. Tick Zweck
69. Chris Mann
70. Lynette Williams
71. Jim Strelan
72. Joy Strelan
73. Alison Jarick
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75. Alison Short
76. Anita Short
77. Roger Hunter
78. Marie Miegel
79. Rick Strelan
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82. Karen Dymke
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