

It's has been a long, long journey!

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For one who has almost reached four score years and ten, one of the many special reasons for thankfulness is that I have witnessed, from the beginning, the many decades in which Lutherans in Australia have debated, prayed, struggled and disagreed over the way women should be regarded in their church. It has been a sad and challenging experience.

In 1950, my first year in theological studies at Concordia College, the Rev Dr Fred Blaess (ELCA) and the Rev Dr Sieg Hebart (UELCA) wrote a theological statement concerning the ministry. 'Theses on the Office of the Ministry' was later endorsed by the Inter-synodical Committees of the two churches, who at the time were seriously exploring the possibility of uniting, after decades of not always peaceful coexistence and obvious division. Ten of the paragraphs stated clearly their endorsement of the Scriptural and Lutheran Confessional writings concerning the office of ordained ministry. The final paragraph, however, the 11th, has proved to be the source of 70 years of debate for Lutherans "down under". For it stated "...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..."

I cannot recall any ELCA church member wanting to raise questions about this prohibition in the dozens of congregations in Queensland and South Australia where I was a student guest-preacher in the early 50's. Maybe the document was not widely distributed, but more likely, it would have been accepted without hesitation, because males had always been their pastors! When one of the lecturers talked about the 11th paragraph, he explained that some Lutheran Churches in Europe had recently ordained women as pastors and still others were debating the issue. "We cannot allow this aberration to happen in our church!" was his response. I regret that I was too naïve and uniformed in those days to raise questions about women's exclusion from the ministry, because they were deemed to be subordinate to men!

In my first year after graduating, I became aware that there were men and women in the New Zealand Lutheran Church who were upset because in 1954 the Rev Dr Clemens Hoopmann had presented a paper at the church's conference at Upper Moutere in which he stated that "according to the order of creation a more subordinate position has been given to woman than to man". He argued that "this subjection is a biblical principle referred to in many passages of Holy Writ". He claimed that Genesis 3:16, 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-14 not only prohibit women from speaking and teaching in public Christian assembly, but also prohibit women from casting votes on equal terms with men at congregational meetings. Some of us pastors were not satisfied with these applications made of the biblical texts, and we asked the Faculty of Concordia Seminary for an exegesis. I am not aware that our request was addressed.

Thus began my long journey in questioning the interpretation and application that my church's leaders had given to texts to support their notion of women in subordination to

men and therefore their exclusion from shared leadership in the church. For the next 20 years I was so involved in parish, synodical and youth leadership responsibilities in New Zealand, New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland that these areas of ministry took priority over trying to refute the misuse of Scripture by those who claimed women's subordination to men. But the discrimination against women in my church was never far from my mind.

The opportunity came to deal with the issue when I was selected by LCA officials to accept a scholarship offered by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the USA to take part in a "Ministry in Pastoral Care Program in the Midst of Social Change" offered at Luther Theological Seminary, St Paul Minn. on behalf of the Consortium of Minnesota Theological Faculties. Now, I would have the time and resources to pursue a study of the biblical basis for women's alleged subordination to men. There were four added incentives to undertake this challenge. When we arrived in San Francisco we attended a Sunday service at a local Lutheran Church, where to our surprise and delight the minister and celebrant was female! Then later, one of my field placements in St Paul, Minn. was as Associate Minister of a suburban congregation and the regional bishop for this area was female. She was an outstanding leader. A third incentive was the encouragement given to me in a course on continuing education by Dr Henry Gustafson when I had expressed my uncertainty about Paul's teaching on women's role in the early church. He challenged to me to make that very issue a major ongoing study area. A final incentive was provided, perhaps unintentionally by the LCA, when the 1978 synod refused to give women the right to represent their congregations at synods. (The 1968 synod declared that women could vote at congregational meetings, but only if the men agreed!) There was therefore more than sufficient motivation to undertake years of research and writing, leading in 1981 to the acceptance by Luther Seminary (St Paul) of my Doctor of Ministry thesis "Neither Male nor Female: Towards a Theology and Practice of Equality of the Sexes in the Lutheran Church of Australia".

It was my underlying hope during the writing of this document that the studies it embraced would provide a stimulus for at least some sections of the LCA to move away from a literalistic interpretation of several verses in the Scripture, whilst maintaining the *solā scriptura* principle. To this end, 30 pastors of the LCA, chosen indiscriminately, agreed to read and respond to the material I was sending them, namely i) the exegetical studies (Galatians 3:26-29; the Creation and Fall narratives; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:34-35; Ephesians 5:21-33; and 1 Timothy 2:8-15); ii) Summary of hermeneutical principles employed; iii) Some practical implications for the life and practice of the LCA, and iv) A response guide. Their responses were included in the thesis. Copies of the DMin thesis were made available to theological libraries in Australia and the USA. I forwarded a copy to the editor of the then functioning Open Book and offered to write a book based on its contents. He declined the offer because he rightly recognised that my thesis did not support the current LCA teaching on women's subordination to men and therefore their exclusion from the ordained ministry. Forty years later "Neither Male nor Female – the Bible, Women and the Ministry of the Church" was published by Coventry Press.

In 1980 I was approached by a large city congregation in Melbourne to become their 'Director of Pastoral Care and Community Education'. After ten years ministry in Brisbane, during which time the two inner city congregations had agreed to unite and a strikingly contemporary church was built in Wickham Terrace, I was ready for a move and the Melbourne offer was challenging. In accordance with the then LCA protocols I sought five years leave of absence from the LCA to accept the call to a congregation of the Uniting Church in Melbourne. When my request was refused, I resigned from the LCA ministry and was gladly welcomed into the ministry of the Uniting Church in Australia. It was a painful decision to make, but I have no regrets for making that momentous decision. Now followed ministry in two Melbourne parishes, during which I was able to develop and utilise gifts in ministry for previously unimagined outreach and service. (See "Neither Male nor Female" pages 128ff for details.)

After many decades of debating the issue of the role and status of women in the church, leaders of the LCA have now conceded that agreement on the teaching and application of several biblical texts is so remote that an alternative approach is needed to resolve the issue. Hence it is now proposed that the forthcoming conference of the LCA's pastors give consideration prior to the 2021 synod to the 1948 thesis on 'Principles Governing Church Fellowship', in particular the statement that "Differences in exegesis that do not affect doctrine are not church divisive" (4.d). I would not be so rash as to suggest possible positive outcomes flowing from this initiative.

But I live with the hope and with the prayer that one day, after 70 years of division, Lutherans in Australia and New Zealand will finally and unitedly accept the theological judgement of the great majority of Lutherans the world over who have agreed to cease their discrimination against their female members and have welcomed them **to share fully in all aspects** of their church's leadership and ministry.

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