

## WOMEN PASTORS AND THE UNITY OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

When someone from outside comments on another church, there is a danger of misconstruing the situation. However, on the other hand, when someone is caught in a net, a person outside may well see the other's situation more clearly.

The LCA has been caught in a net over whether to admit women pastors. A majority of theological leaders are in favour. If the LCA adopts their recommendation in mid-2000, it is faced with the possibility that some individuals who remain opposed will leave. There is a remote possibility that some congregations would leave as units. However, the LCA by-laws have laid it down that they would need not only a two thirds vote to leave, but also another two-thirds vote (after their pastor had been dismissed) and after LCA representatives have tried to dissuade them before another two thirds vote is required three months afterwards. Many congregations might hesitate to contemplate such a move because the deeds to their church property have probably been lodged in the District Office.

There is the difficulty because of conscience. It will be particularly difficult for those who remain opposed if the local pastor is a woman, or if their pastor is in favour of women pastors. If the local pastor remains opposed, he will have to endure women pastors speaking and voting in conferences and synods. Lay people who are opposed in congregations where there is no woman pastor will agonise over whether to hear preaching from a woman and accept the Lord's Supper from the hand of a woman when they attend sister congregations or when they attend conferences and synods.

Since the LCA has adopted a deliberate ecumenical stance, it has two major ecumenical difficulties. The LCA has signed a very unsatisfactory agreement with the Roman Catholics over justification through faith, but signed it nevertheless, and the Roman Catholics do not have women priests. There are aboriginal congregations belonging to the LCA in the Centre and at North Queensland, and it is contrary to aboriginal customs to have women leaders, particularly also since issues like circumcision and discussions about drinking of blood (as in the Lord's Supper) are taboo.

A person who is caught in a net looks for holes to escape. The first hole is an alleged difference between exegesis and doctrine. Years ago an older Lutheran pastor pointed out that Theses of Agreement 1, 4 (e) preserved the position of the former Immanuel Synod about open questions. The idea is that, where Christians differ in exegesis, differences in doctrine may be tolerated. Roman Catholic notions that dogma is what synods have decreed are lurking in the background. This writer remembers Dr Sasse's misleading pronouncement years ago, "The Lutheran Church has never dogmatised over the length of the days of creation." Does a church create doctrine? However, the early Lutheran texts on doctrine, like Melancthon's *Loci*, had the name "*Loci*" simply because "*loci*" meant passages of Scripture. When the passages in God's Word that deal with a topic are carefully expounded, that is the doctrine, the teaching. Doctrine should not be what a synod has decided. Years ago there were pastors who walked out of a pastoral conference simply because a doctrinal issue was treated as if it were debatable. If God has said something in Scripture, that settles the question. Jesus did not recognise a difference between God's Word and doctrine. He often said, "It is written." This was a theological passive, which meant, "God has said in the Scriptures", and that was the end of the matter, even when the passage in question had not been used traditionally in support of the question.

What is the proper view about a difference in exegesis? If there are two explanations of a passage of Scripture that are both in harmony with the rest of Scripture, the difference should not lead to a division. For example, the "first resurrection" in Revelation 20 has been explained as 1) the time when a person comes to the faith in Christ, 2) the time when a Christian's soul is taken to heaven to be with Christ. However, where an exposition of a passage contradicts the clear words of the text, or disagrees with other passages, no matter how many people agree with it, it must be rejected. Theses of Agreement 1, 4 (e) is a hole that should not allow escape for those who want women pastors and keep the church united, because Paul could not have written 1 Cor 14:33-40 and 1 Tm 2:11-14 any more clearly. Doctrine that differs from these passages, and that is persisted in, must lead to a separation [*Theses of Agreement 1,4 (a)*].

Let us be blunt. There are some who have known throughout this debate, that, if they could create enough exegetical blue smoke for long enough, the *Theses of Agreement I 4 (e)* meant that their position would have to be tolerated. Rather than change the paragraph in the *Theses of Agreement* that excludes women pastors, the Commission on Theology should eliminate the offensive *Theses of Agreement I, 4 (e)*. The open-question approach is unfaithful to God's Word.

The Commission looks for a second hole out of the net in the question of the relationship between having women pastors and other articles of doctrine, the Trinity, justification, the means of grace, the ministry, and the church. The argument is that members who oppose women pastors should be more patient over this issue, because it is less central. The doctrinal article that the Commission on Theology does not include is the article on Scripture. If 1 Cor 14:33-40 and 1 Tm 2:11-14 are indeed God's Word, and inerrant, the proper response is obedience. Certainly, no teaching may contradict the central article of justification through faith. However, confessional Lutherans have not tried, and should not try, to gauge what another teaching of the Scriptures should be by harmonising it with other teachings. The clear passages in Scripture on a subject must alone determine the issue. Otherwise, human reason intervenes as a principle of knowing God's will.

The third hole is the possibility of members who are opposed to women pastors of remaining in the LCA, but in a state of protest. It has long been recognised that members who have the conviction that their church is in error should first endeavour to set straight what is wrong (Tt 3:10). Besides, both reason and history should show such people that those who are genuinely in a state of protest cannot continue indefinitely in that protest. Lutherans in Germany who remain opposed to women pastors are beginning to be excommunicated when they keep protesting. Error has often intruded into churches in three phases, first seeking toleration, then equal rights, lastly full domination. Then there is the question of conscience. Their remaining in the erring body will also be construed by their children and by others that their continuing support of the church by their attendance, service, and gifts shows that they do not regard the error as serious. Others will construe their remaining there as proof that the unscriptural practice can continue to be tolerated without damage to conscience. What God's Word says about the question at issue slips out of consideration.

A fourth hole is the church's correct answer to the schism of the Donatists in the fourth and fifth centuries. It is that the validity of the preaching of the Gospel and the distribution of the Sacraments does not depend on whether the human messenger is sinful or ineligible. See the Augsburg Confession VIII for the principle that the Gospel and the Sacraments are valid because of Christ's Word and institution. Paul did not mind that rivals were preaching the Gospel out of impure motives. Let us put the issue very bluntly: If the devil preached the Gospel correctly, we would treasure the correct Gospel as we treasure it from faithful preachers, even from the devil's mouth. However, would you trust the devil to preach it purely? If a woman consecrated and distributed the Lord's Supper, it would be a valid Lord's Supper, because of Christ's words in the institution. However, sincere believers would not attend her Lord's Supper, but rather go without it for the rest of their lives if they had to, because of the disobedience to the Lord's command that was involved. Their reception there would expose them to the danger that the Lord will not acknowledge them (1 Cor 14:37-38).

Those who remain opposed to women pastors in the LCA after mid-year 2000, if convention approves the arrangement, will have to be clear that, once women pastors are admitted, further discussion of the question will have to be squashed. Otherwise, many women pastors will be indignant. They will probably even resent special deference because such courtesy will be regarded as condescension. A lay person who remains seated in the pew in protest, or who walks out of a service, will probably find that other members will want to exclude him from the Lord's Supper.

Many members of the Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church will at this time thank God that He led them out of the LCA when the falsely ecumenical shifts first appeared (Rm 16: 17, Gl 1:8-9, 2 Jn 9-11). It will now be much more difficult for LCA members who think as AELC members do to extricate themselves from the net.