

Reformation Sunday, 29th of October, 2023.

Presentation made to Underdale-Glandore congregation.

Where are we and where are we going?

Let us consider our situation and future reflecting on these questions:

- [1] What is our problem?**
- [2] What really is happening?**
- [3] What are we facing?**
- [4] What may our future hold?**
- [5] What shall we do?**

[5th point in this document is modified for more general use.]

[1] What is our problem?

What is going on with the LCA? Often there is a big difference between what public perception is, what seems to be happening, and what really is happening. That is certainly true in our situation. The evil one has done a good job to distract us from what really is happening and to deceive us about the state of affairs in the LCA.

What seems to be the main issue? The question of the ordination of both men and women. We have been engaging with it since the early 1990s. For five synodical terms (2000, 2006, 2015, 2018, 2021-23) the spotlight has been on this issue. It has consumed incredible amounts of time and energy and finances. No one can quantify how much the LCA could have done if all those resources had gone into “making disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19).

Many wonder, what a big deal – there are women in positions of responsibility everywhere, at least in the Western world. Many have come to the point of saying: “I disagree, I don’t like it, but... I could live with it, if only it helps to move on.”

We have been distracted and deceived. How? Because the ordination issue is not the real issue. It is just a symptom of something much more serious. Reflect on this, how often have we worried about and discussed these problems:

- Doubting the authority of the Scripture or denying their clarity; but it takes away our very assurance of faith (Ps 119:105, 2 Pet 1:19, 1 Tim 6:3-5).
- Members of the LCA being more shaped by the culture than by the Word of God; embracing cultural values and virtues more than Biblical; but it robs us of rich and beautiful life that God intended for us (Rom 12:2, Eph 4:22-24).
- Members of the LCA exchanging true unity in shared confession to external institutional unity and making it into an idol; but it deprives us of true and intimate Christian unity in one true faith (2 Cor 6:14-16, Tit 3:10-11).
- Bishops and pastors not teaching the teaching of the church, allowing everyone to believe what they prefer; but it doesn’t foster true unity, being in full accord and of one mind (Phil 2:1-2, Eph 4:3).

- Bishops and pastors replacing the responsibility to teach, correct and rebuke to simply listening to different opposing views in an attempt to ensure external unity; but it doesn't build up sound faith, it leaves us an easy prey to human cunning and false doctrine (Tit 1:13, 2:15, Eph 4:13-14).
- Pastors not preaching the law, for that may offend their members and backfire, and, therefore not really preaching the Gospel either; but if we don't know our spiritual sickness, how can we be healed (Mat 9:12-13, 2 Tim 2:15).
- Members of the LCA having different ideas of what the Gospel is; but there is no other Gospel, just some who want to distort the Gospel of Christ (Gal 1:7, 1 Pet 3:8).
- Members of the LCA having different understanding about the Divine Service and Sacraments, different ideas on what the mission of the Church is; but that is where the heart of the Church beats and if we are not united in these, we are not united.

How often have these issues been discussed in Pastors Conferences or our synodical conventions? But it is these spiritual trends that have prepared fertile soil, powered and carried the ordination debate. And they have gone almost unnoticed.

We have been distracted and deceived...

[2] What really is happening?

To understand what really is going on, it is helpful to step back and take a look at a bigger picture. There is nothing new under the Sun. The same spiritual tension has been here since the beginning, pulling us toward two opposing poles.

They can be illustrated with the following questions. Who do we listen to – the Word or the world? (Gen 3:1) Who do we follow – Christ or culture? Who to love and fear – our God or people's opinions? (Mat 6:24)

This tension is not new and not unique to the LCA. That is an ongoing experience of the Church Universal, and of Lutheran churches around the world. This is why also the Lutheran world globally is moving in two opposing directions, gathering in two worldwide organizations, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and the International Lutheran Council (ILC). How do they differ?

(Forgive me for this very, very brief summary).

The ILC Churches	The LWF Churches
Teaching and practice are shaped by the Word of God	Departing further and further from the Word; teaching and practice more and more shaped by the world and culture
Teach God's law, His wisdom for marriage, family, sexuality, the Church	Embrace and promote anti-Biblical, anti-family worldly ideologies
Preach repentance and forgiveness	Preach inclusivity and acceptance
Main mission is to make disciples of all nations, to bring forth salvation and eternal life	Main mission is to bring forth social justice, to eliminate patriarchal and oppressive hierarchies

Movements into these same two directions, towards the same two poles we can see also in the LCA. There are many pastors and laypeople, who gravitate towards Biblical and confessional Lutheranism. Probably more than we know. Thanks be to God!

And there are those for whom the Scriptures are not enough (including many among our church leaders and pastors), who accept and endorse worldly ideas about marriage and sexuality, who instead of repentance and forgiveness preach inclusivity and acceptance, for whom focus is more on social justice issues than on making disciples and salvation.

To remind you of just a few of recent examples:

Melbourne Synod 2023. What did our leaders vow in their ordination vows?

Our previous national bishop Rev John Henderson said that we cannot decide the question of ordination by studying the Scriptures (p 55, Synodical Book of Reports). Further he said that he disagrees with the official teaching of the church, where he was a bishop with the responsibility to uphold and teach the church's teaching. When 5 times we did not change the Church's teaching looking in the Scriptures, our leaders decided to ignore the Scriptures and to introduce the ordination of women by administrative means (as every other church that has done it). Our national bishop Rev Paul Smith was "flirting" with the Synod saying that his wife very much wants to be a Lutheran pastor and studies towards that end. A congregation, where first assisting bishop Rev Neville Otto serves as their pastor, put forward a proposal to change the founding document of the LCA, The Theses of Agreement, so that only we can change our church's teaching. Another bishop Rev Mark Vainikka promoted proposal from QLD District to introduce women's ordination without any scriptural foundation, just because we want it. A member of the General Church Board Mr Mel Zerner stated before the Synod that the LCA cannot keep waiting for pastors to come up with a Scriptural solution to the ordination question, so it's time for laypeople to take the lead.

Add to that the attitude where pastors can say to their congregations not to take Scriptures seriously, or to publicly call the LCA foundational documents "Feces of Agreement", or for prominent person in the LCA to call the repeated decisions by Synodical Conventions to stay with the Church's teaching "satanic", or where after 2018 Synod 20+ congregations can ask women to preach on a given Sunday to demonstrate their defiance of the LCA teaching... and all of that without consequences. Where does this tell us, where are we heading?

The ALC, where future pastors are trained.

When the new strategic plan "ALC Towards 2028" was released, biblically faithful faculty members were publicly warned to get on board or to reconsider their calls. For they didn't want to embrace this new strategy which included "promoting and developing ... Indigenous theologies, gender and theology, changing culture (responding to the royal commission), climate change and sustainability," (ALC Towards 2028, p 11), but didn't include training of pastors at all. Half a year later calls of five faculty members were terminated.

What international speakers we entertain.

Group of people in the LCA who work to promote greater acceptance of the LGBTQ ideology, invited ELCA bishop Rimbo from New York to advance their cause. They are open about their vision that the next step after the ordination of women has to be embracing of the LGBTQ ideology. <https://katieandmartin.wordpress.com/tag/immanuel-college/>

Nadia Boltz-Weber (ELCA) has been invited repeatedly, to speak in the LCA congregations, and as one of keynote speakers in Lutheran Education Australia Teachers Conference 2017. She certainly is a colourful person promoting not only radical acceptance, but also rejection of Biblical vision for our sexuality and relationships. E.g., one of her projects: "I'm also instigating an art project where women mail me their purity rings. They'll be melted into a sculpture of a vagina." <https://pastorsblog.com.au/2018/11/07/the-pastrix-goes-pornstrix/> A

great role model for teachers and students in Lutheran schools. By the way, she was the only person quoted by Bishop Henderson in his synodical report in 2018.

Just this year Lutheran Education SA, NT & WA prepared a policy for respecting and valuing gender diversity, but refused to include in that policy any reference to Biblical teaching on marriage and sexuality.

Lutheran Care also goes with the times and encourages adoption by same sex couples: “Couples living together or married, including same sex couples, can all apply to become carers.” <https://www.lutherancare.org.au/who-can-foster-faq/>

The LCA motto “Where Love Comes to Life” is used to promote this other gospel of inclusivity and acceptance, with no recognition of our sinfulness, with no need for repentance and no need for forgiveness. This sad and troubling list could go on and on.

It is important to recognize that the push for the ordination of women is not one isolated issue. It is just one expression of that wider movement away from Scriptures, it is just one of the manifestations, even if the most visible, of that departure from the Word of God.

We are not talking here about minor changes in practice, we are ultimately talking about **different authorities, different gods, different gospels, different missions of the Church**, etc. That’s what is happening in the LCA.

We also need to note something that is easy to overlook. The world is not black and white, them and us. Not everyone, who has no firm position in the ordination debate or even may be in favour of abandoning our Church’s teaching, has necessarily embraced the whole agenda of that direction. Certainly not!

In most cases faithful Christian people may not be even aware of that wider agenda, of real causes of this debate and its consequences. Many God-fearing members of the LCA may be going along charitably trusting our leaders, and, perhaps, lacking information that would help them to see the bigger picture, and many of them, the Lord willing, will change their stance once realizing what really is going on.

On the other hand, those who actively push for the change of Biblical teaching on the office of public ministry, and that is a small, but very vocal and driven minority, they know what they are doing and where that path eventually leads. Many among them advocate not only for women’s ordination, but for other elements of that gospel of inclusivity as well. They do it because of their conviction.

May the Lord be gracious to them and turn them back!

[3] What are we facing?

We are facing the same choice that the Biblical story tells us from the very beginning. The choice between life and death (Gen 2:17), between blessings and curses (Deut. 30:19). We are at a crossroads. Our Church leaders have made it public and clear that in this case for them the Scriptures are neither authoritative, nor clear, nor sufficient. Members of the General Church Board have made it public and clear that they are done with listening to pastors, they are taking matters in their own hands.

Thanks be to the Lord who has used our leaders to shed light to this whole situation! During the last few weeks, with the release of the “Three Frameworks” it has been made abundantly clear that regardless of what decisions are made in the next synodical convention, every pastor and every congregation will have to decide which direction they

want to take in these crossroads. To listen to the Word or to the world. To follow Christ or to follow culture. To preach the Gospel or another gospel. To live according to God's wisdom or according to worldly foolishness. This decision is now imminent before us.

Now, we need to clear away one more common misunderstanding. This is not about us as individuals. Not about me, not about you. Not about our preferences. We all are members in the body of Christ. We are members of the Church of Christ and it is irresponsible for Christians to be concerned only or even mainly with themselves. You are a royal priesthood, God's holy people, redeemed not with silver or gold, called and sent to proclaim God's excellences (1 Pet 2:9-10).

We have received the Gospel message, the whole counsel of God, not for our own sake only, but to keep and guard it, to preach and teach and to deliver it to next generations. That is our responsibility. That our God given mission. This is why we are here.

And the clearer we see this situation, the better for us. The sooner any congregation confirms their commitment, which direction they will strive to go, the better. No congregation can really plan their future ministry unless they are clear about these very foundation things – who do they want to listen to, who do they want to follow?

I trust that there are many and many who want to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ, to listen to Him, to take up our crosses, whatever they may be, and to follow Him. My prayer is that we are as united in our confession and future vision as possible.

[4] What future may hold?

We don't know what the future will bring. But there are quite a few things that we can be sure about. Future will be different depending on what direction a congregation chooses to pursue. I will mention just three things here: fellowship, pastors and friends.

Fellowship. Cooperation. Depending on what direction a congregation decides to pursue, it will determine what they will be in fellowship with. With other Biblically and confessionally faithful Lutheran congregations, or with congregations which deliberately or by deception are turning away from the life-giving Word of God.

Pastors. Depending on what direction a congregation decides to pursue, it will determine what kind of pastors they will have in future. Either those who strive to uphold Biblical authority, preach and teach God's law and proclaim the Gospel, or those who listen to different authorities, embrace worldly ideologies and preach a different gospel.

Friends. International partners. Depending on what direction a congregation decides to pursue, it will determine whether they will be in fellowship with the ILC churches or with the LWF churches, whether they will have guest speakers from the ILC or the LWF churches, whether they will conform more and more to the priorities and direction of the ILC churches or the LWF churches.

This much is clear. It will happen. There really are no other viable options before us.

[5] What shall we do?

I wish I knew God's answer. Besides, situations will be different from congregation to congregation. But there certainly are things we should consider, praying for God's wisdom,

insight and guidance, and not for our comfort and preferences. Here are some ideas on what we could and should do.

- Let us not be indifferent and lukewarm! We don't want to be "spit out" (Rev 3:16). This is about the life-giving Gospel being preached, or not preached among us.
- Let us strive to be as informed about what is happening as possible. Double check what is written here, make sure it is true and objective, and then share such information with your fellow saints (Eph 4:15). Seeing what is really at stake, many may wake up and be ready to stand for what is true and good.
- Try to connect with like-minded fellow saints for mutual encouragement and support. The evil one would like to convince us that you are alone, that is not true. There are more God-fearing and Gospel-loving people than we know. Try to connect with them, in your own congregation, and whenever you can find them.

E.g., you could get in touch with like-minded fellow saints sending your details to LutheransConfessingChrist@gmail.com

- Prayerfully evaluate your congregation, and ask that the Lord of the Church would help you to see how He has prepared you for times like this and how your congregation, or at least part of it, may remain faithful to the One who is always faithful to us (Luke 12:8).
- If possible, suggest that your Church Council considers forming a working group to honestly assess what the options are, and what the future may hold, choosing one direction or other, life or death, where it will lead, what to expect, and then report back to the congregation, so all are well informed.
- Pray for God's wisdom and consider what may be the most faithful way to respond to the situation where we find ourselves, what could you do to keep and guard the Gospel for the sake of next generations (Luke 14:26-33).
- Communicate with other like-minded brothers and sisters near and far, have open ears and hearts and be attentive to the opportunities that the Lord may be opening before us (Is 43:19).

Perhaps, you are a small congregation. Perhaps, you are a small group of people. You may wonder: "But what can we possibly do? What difference could we possibly make?" Then remember what kind of God we have! This is what He says and how He operates: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples." (Deut. 7:7) And: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor 12:9)

Rejoice in your small numbers and rejoice in your weakness, for you may be exactly the people our gracious and almighty Lord is looking for. Perhaps, if He wills, and if we are ready to be used by Him, He could even enact a little reformation through us.

Soli Deo Gloria!