

Australian Lutheran Will Not Ordain Women - Yet
“There’s nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:9)
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To get the feel of the recent Synodical Convention of the Lutheran Church of Australia, at which 50.4% (a two-thirds vote was needed to pass) of delegates voted “That Scripture permits the ordination of women”, one might start by reading Galatians 2. Different issue, same politics.

Even before the Synod began we had been dismayed. We had heard that only 51% of Pastors’ Conference had voted “that Scripture permits the ordination of women”. Pastor’s Conference is always held prior to Synod (corresponding to the ELCA churchwide assembly); the pastors present discuss any theological issues that will be raised at Synod, and nominate the President (Presiding Bishop), and Vice-President. While the pastors of each District (regional group, corresponding to an ELCA Synod) elect the pastor delegates for synod, any pastor that is present – active or retired – may vote at Pastor’s Conference. A block of conservative pastors had arrived at the Conference just for the ordination discussion to add their “no” vote. A two-thirds majority vote is required from the Pastors to make a recommendation to Synod, and without it, it is much harder for a resolution to be passed at Synod. Pastors make up a third of Synod, and their influence is larger than their numbers.

The two services that opened Synod were glaringly male. I’d never call Linda – the very able editor of *The (Australian) Lutheran* - a token woman; however, if she had not read a lesson, the only roles taken by women at either service would have been in placing objects on the altar. Only men served communion. It hasn’t always been like this: somewhere a shift had occurred.

From the beginning of the proceedings it was apparent that the leadership had decided to keep a tight lid on Synod. The first woman to speak asked that one of the two nominees for the position of President share his vision for the church, prior to the election; the incumbent had just delivered his report and it seemed reasonable to be able to at least have heard from each of them. This request, repeated by another woman the following day, was immediately denied. A wave of incredulity and sympathy for the women was evident, and I wondered if the heavy-handedness might work against the conservative position. It felt as if, while the lid was on, the heat was still being applied. The only question was whether the pressure would be relieved by a little steam escaping or a dramatic boiling over. Only time would tell.

The ordination question was clearly established as something to be debated from opposing sides, rather than an issue that could be discussed collegially. On the Monday evening of Synod there was an “information evening” at which two seminary professors had been chosen to speak for 25 minutes – one presenting the position that only men could be ordained, and the other responding. Unfortunately it was the *No* position that established the parameters of the “information” presented. In the format chosen and the time limit given there was no opportunity to

address bigger questions of Biblical interpretation, or faithful decision-making. The chair contributed negatively to the debate, with a long, heavy-handed introduction, and unhelpful remarks.

The evening improved dramatically after proceedings ended, when I joined with others to share the points we thought were important to make the following morning, and ensure that someone was prepared to raise them. I hadn't met everyone in the group until that evening, but I felt relaxed, safe and very supported.

Tuesday morning arrived. Before going to Synod I had felt that I wouldn't know how to respond if the vote was positive, and found it hard to believe we could cross the magical 67% line. However, on Tuesday morning I felt a very faint glimmer of hope.

I joined the queue at the microphones and spoke my piece. I had chosen to state that for a woman who has sensed a Call to ordained ministry, it is a response of obedience to ask the church to test the Call. I compared it to the obedience (and joy) of a couple bringing an infant to baptism. Like infant baptism, there are no clear texts regarding women's (or any) ordination, but we are guided by the large themes of Scripture, and glimpses of probability in specific texts.

The chair had been clear in his direction that only Scriptural and theological issues were to be addressed, but this did not prevent some of the anti-women's ordination lobby using manipulative anecdotes and sweeping statements to support their arguments. The style of "debate" meant that there was no opportunity to respond to these. When the chair declared that only those waiting to speak would now be given an opportunity, and no more were to go to the microphones, the balance was such that the final five speakers were against the ordination of women. The chair urged people to abstain from voting if they had any doubts at all, or if they thought the time was not yet right. Then the votes were cast.

When the result was announced that women would not be ordained in The Lutheran Church of Australia, the business of Synod continued as if nothing had happened. On one level nothing had happened. However the tears and sadness of so many argued against that reality. Pastors were confused. How could they continue to minister, when they could not support the official position of the church? But where else could they go? Lay-people were hurt. How could they stay in a church where this particular vote was but one symptom of an apparently increasing conservatism?

I felt surprisingly free. I felt free to leave the LCA, and join another denomination. The reaction surprised me, but it felt as if the part of the race I needed to run was complete, and it was time to hand the baton over. I was overwhelmed by the people – many of them strangers – who thanked me for my words, and shared their sadness.

When I woke on Wednesday morning, I had moved to a position of feeling free ... to stay, at least for a while. To stay and to support others in being the church we believed we needed to be, even if this meant pushing boundaries. The nice, polite, official way of doing things seemed unhelpful; maybe now is the time to forget being "good." We need to name clearly the legalistic turn in our church. We need to work against the pressure being applied by LCMS and the ILC. We need to find ways to proclaim more loudly God's inclusive grace.

It could have been so different. Circles of people from one position or another could have engaged in conversation with the rest of us listening in. Speakers could have been asked to share points of agreement rather than disagreement. Following the announcement of the result, we could have immediately been given the opportunity to talk together about how to get on with being church, given the diversity that the vote expressed. The "Pastoral" statement issued by the leadership could have been directed at caring for those grieving, rather than the legalistic statement about the official teaching of the church.

[You can read it yourself at www.lca.org.au/lca/synod/WOvote2006.pdf]

The phone number named in the daily Synod newsletter as providing counseling for those distressed by the vote remained disconnected for at least the next five days (perhaps it was wrongly printed). This attempt at pastoral care that went awry seemed quite consistent with its context.

I agonized about participation in communion at the final service. Yes, it was Christ's invitation, but the men of the church just made it so hard. However, that barrier melted away when a (female) friend and I went to commune together, and served each other with the bread we were given, and requested the cup to serve each other. This one small symbolic action, not meant to be seen by anyone else, gave me much courage.

We had opportunity to read an internet account of Synod from one of the more conservative pastors of the church, before someone wisely edited it. "Liberalism is on the brink of collapse world-wide and the church catholic needs Christ-centered pastors to fight the good fight" remains in the edited, much less offensive version. It is intriguing to see how culturally different we can be. More than half of the synod delegates had voted for an issue that required 66% + 1. So more than half of the pastors and synod delegates are at odds with the official teaching of the church. I wonder how we can learn to talk together and to live with diversity.

It seems so right that the account of the circumcision debate in Galatians includes these words: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Amen. May we live this reality.