

THE AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2006

EDITORIAL

2006 and BEYOND

Members of the AELC, particularly leaders and office bearers, families, university students and school children absorbed in planning their careers, may not have given enough thought to just how important they are in the worldwide scheme of things. We should be more conscious of the vital role that we have either accepted or, that perhaps by circumstances, has been thrust upon us.

Although we know that ultimately all things are in the hands of our Triune God, we recall the story of Dr. Martin Luther who was asked what he would do if God told him the world would end in 8 days. He replied that he would go out and plant a little apple tree. In some respects Luther was demonstrating that it was a silly question, but he was also saying that regardless of what we think might lie ahead, life, work and some planning must go on, as we trust in the Lord that ultimately all things are ordained for our good.

We cannot foretell the future, but we can look carefully at the present and study the trends of our times, paying close attention to what the Bible says.

In many respects the world around us is not a place that excites much optimism. The mainline Christian churches in the Western World have declined to a point where they have little or no effect on the affairs of their respective nations. The laws that once helped to preserve a moral standard in the community have been all but discarded. Homosexuality and advocacy of gay marriage is the order of the day, and sexual promiscuity is considered by the magazines in our newsagents as an exciting headline.

There are predictions that migration waves into the Western World, coupled with the drastic decline in birth rates, will produce far-reaching changes in the composition of culture, religion, and race. In a study on this subject, American syndicated columnist Mark Steyn, writing in *The New Criterion*, said, "*We are living through a remarkable period, the self-extinction of the races who, for good or ill, shaped the modern world.*"

Add to this the constant news of terrorists, wars, dire predictions about the environment, and the thrust of pagan religions - the list could go on and on.

In an issue of *Logia* last year, American Frederick Baue wrote that we face a "*civilisation that is innately religious but hostile to Christianity. Or, perhaps worse, a dominant but false Christian church that brings all its forces to bear against the truth of God's Word.*"

We are acutely aware that these conditions apply in Australia. We too have gone down a path where the legislation of both Federal and State governments has produced a climate of moral decline.

The backbone of our ancient inherited legal system, based on the Laws of God, have been disregarded or rejected on the grounds that in a democracy people are

entitled to freedom of expression and practice. The result has been a slippery slide to moral bankruptcy.

We constantly see the leaders of mainline churches side step or reject basic tenets of the faith they are supposed to promote.

But wheels turn full circle. Hopefully, and before total disintegration of our society, both people and governments will realise the need for moral regeneration. Then we will see a search for the answers that have been available all along and to whom will the searchers turn? To those who have preserved the faith.

Christians may feel disillusioned in the present apostate world, but can pray for a time of renewal even in this present world, and they certainly have the hope of renewal in the world to come.

This is why we stated at the beginning that faithful Christians today may not realise just how important they will be if they stand firm now. They are the standard bearers who will preserve the Word for the benefit of future generations.

So this is not a time to be reticent, fearful, or, above all, quiet. We can look forward to 2006 and beyond with boldness and confidence.

In a paper titled "*Some Thoughts about the Future We Face*," Pastor C.R. Priebsnow wrote, "*Things are in disarray, but Christ is working in them. People are being saved, even by the most mediocre preaching. Souls are sealed for eternity through baptism. God mercifully hears the feeblest prayers. People persist in faith in spite of setbacks. Ministers have low prestige and work under high stress, but somehow men keep answering the call to the ministry. Persecution is increasing, but Christianity (not Islam) is the fastest-growing religion in the world. False doctrine seeps in everywhere, yet the lamp of God's pure revelation is never completely extinguished.*"

What is Epiphany?

Everyone, including most non-Christians, can explain something of Good Friday, Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas. How many know the meaning of Epiphany?

Epiphany is a Greek word and means "appearance." It originated in the early Eastern Church and soon was one of the most important festivals, and it is still one of the chief festivals of the Orthodox Church.

The early Christians celebrated Christ's birth and the coming of the Wise Men at Epiphany, the 6th January; hence there was an emphasis on mission and bringing light to gentiles. In the fourth century Epiphany was regarded as "The Festival of Lights," one of the chief days, together with Easter and Pentecost, when catechumens received baptism.

The season of Advent was actually a much later development, and originally the Church year began on 6 January.

Following the Reformation the Reformed Churches

dropped Epiphany but Luther insisted on keeping it as he regarded it as a post-celebration of Christmas. However the nearness of Christmas has always put the festival of Epiphany in the shade in the Western Churches.

The first Sunday after Epiphany was also a minor festival, which commemorated Jesus Christ's baptism in the Jordan. The descent of the Spirit marked Him out publicly as the One anointed by the Holy Spirit, the Messiah, who then began His ministry, full of the Spirit. That was when His work of salvation was made manifest to man.

This was captured magnificently by Christopher Wordsworth in his hymn "*Song of Thankfulness and Praise*," number 47 in the Lutheran Hymnal, and number 81 in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer.

Wordsworth published this hymn in 1862 with the heading:- "*Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany - Recapitulation of the Subjects presented in the services of former weeks and in Anticipation of the future great and glorious Epiphany, at which Christ will appear again to judge the world.*"

The whole of this hymn is worthy of reading again, but we print the last two stanzas as they are so relevant in today's apostate world, where many signs point to the possibility of Christ's return.

Sun and moon shall darkened be,
Stars shall fall, the heavens shall flee,
Christ will then like lightning shine,
All will see His glorious sign,
All will then the trumpet hear,
All will see the judge appear,
Thou by all will be confessed,
God in man made manifest.

Grant us grace to see Thee, Lord,
Mirrored in Thy holy Word,
May we imitate Thee now,
And be pure, as pure art Thou,
That we like to Thee may be,
At Thy great epiphany,
And may praise Thee, ever blest,
God in man made manifest.

A Warning – It's Sick

Here is an item of news, the sort that never gets a mention in the regular news services or current affairs programmes.

On 23 September 2005 a married Dutch couple, Victor and Bianca de Bruijn presented themselves to a notary public in the town of Rosendaal for a second wedding. With them was a lady friend; Mirjam Geven dressed in wedding clothes. The notary validated a cohabitation contract for the three, rings were exchanged, a wedding feast took place, after which the three departed for a honeymoon.

The two women in this strange affair are bisexual, and although the man claims he is heterosexual, he claims the trio's success is due to their bisexuality.

There are legal implications being debated but it is considered that the De Bruijn's triple union is an unmistakable step along the path to legalised group marriage.

Dutch laws have set a precedent by forbidding employer discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.

A small religious group challenged Justice Minister Piet Hein Donner to annul the notary's cohabitation order, but Donner refused to ban such contracts and re-affirmed the legality of multi partner contracts, which had been introduced to legalise "gay" marriage contracts.

Apart from some small conservative Dutch groups who have protested vigorously, but without any effect, the Dutch community at large has accepted this without a murmur. The De Bruijn neighbours have made the trio welcome.

In many countries polygamy is illegal, but this triple cohabitation is presented as polygamous. It is claimed that polyamorists practice responsible non-monogamy, an open and loving relationship between two people or more.

The worst aspect of this alarming situation is that legal "experts," some with great influence, offer opinions which support this abomination. Elizabeth Emens of the University of Chicago Law School puts forward the view that for biological or cultural reasons some people cannot live without multiple sexual partners and that therefore the current system of marriage laws is unjust and discriminatory. Who called the law an ass?

So far there are no reports of Christian churches mounting a fight to speak up and stop this abomination.

When we hear of weird and horrendous happenings in far away places, there is always the tendency to bury heads in the sand; we can convince ourselves that it cannot happen here. Don't be so sure! Anti-discrimination laws are enacted in all States of Australia and these could easily provide the basis for a campaign where the proposals for change use the same legal formulae and reasoning that is being promulgated in the Netherlands and America. In Western Australia the State government has claimed credit for the way it has "reformed" the laws that formerly controlled homosexuality.

How long will it take for a campaign to start in Australia? Politicians have at times genuinely declared their opposition to "gay marriage," but when subjected to voter pressure at election time it can be a different story.

If a campaign for "cohabitation contracts" starts in Australia we can only hope and pray that a combined Christian church force can defend the Christ given sanctity of marriage and the family.

Steady Progress

This is the time of the year when congregations are holding Annual General Meetings, compiling reports and planning for the future.

Pastor Phil Mueller offers a very positive and encouraging report on the year's activities for Toowoomba/Hivesville/Clifton Parish.

Although the parish extends over a very large area,

services have been held every Sunday this year in a continuous worship programme with no gaps. In addition, a small but faithful group based on Rockhampton has functioned all the year round under the leadership of Paul Schultz.

Clifton, a small congregation, nevertheless has continued successfully supporting the wider aims of the parish.

At Toowoomba, Bible Studies centred on Chiasm and the Beatitudes, causing much interest, regularly attracting a third of the congregation to the studies – quite a remarkable figure.

A small but regular Sunday School operated successfully throughout the year and was well attended.

Sadly, Pastor Mueller was required to officiate at two funerals during the year.

A wedding created much joy and indicates that Toowoomba is not a congregation of “oldies” as the average age is 50 or slightly less.

Young people are also very much in evidence at Hivesville, in contrast to so many Christian congregations around Australia. For the Christmas service 31 book prizes were required for the children.

Five baptisms during the year brought much joy to this solid faithful community.

After last year’s Boxing Day tsunami the organisation *The Voice of the Martyrs* sponsored an appeal to help rebuild Christian Churches, and considerable support was rendered, as was support for the valiant but struggling church in Nigeria.

The Parish is looking forward to another solid year, with the prayerful hope that they will be able to welcome more people into the fold.

Stable and Progressive

Pastor Mark Hampel reports that for the Parish of Marburg, Minden and Lowood, the key words to describe the year 2005 are “stable and progressive.”

There is a fine spirit of co-operation amongst the people as the Parish settles into the third year of Pastor Hampel’s ministry. Progress has been made in many areas, both spiritual and material.

A study group of three families has operated at Esk, with the hope that eventually a new congregation will be formed.

A heartening sign in any congregation is when new members are confirmed. A warm welcome was extended to seven new members who were confirmed during 2005.

Pastor Hampel undertook an extensive programme of visiting, with visits combined with home studies where practicable.

A feature for Lent in 2006 will be a 13 part study of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology. Each week the study groups rotate around the three church localities and participating members travel to their sister congregations to join in a continuous programme. A fine way of study combined with fellowship.

The hall at Marburg has undergone extensive renovations, including re-stumping of the foundations and

modernisation of equipment.

Where do you put the surplus gear or equipment that is not in continuous use? Minden solved the problem with the purchase of a shipping container.

The Parish is looking forward to another year of steady progress.

Brisbane to Plan Ahead

A meeting will be held at Holland Park in Brisbane on Sunday, 19th February after the service which is scheduled on that date.

At present there are two groups, the original St. Luke’s, serviced by Pastor Peter Ziebell, who worship at the Holland Park State School, and a new group founded by the Ohlsen family at Bethania, under the spiritual care of Pastor Mark Hampel from Marburg. Both groups are working together but in different areas of Brisbane. The meeting will endeavour to find the best way to use limited resources in the most efficient way.

It has been stated often that the wonderful balance of the Law and the Gospel which was such a feature of the Lutheran Reformation, has all but gone from both the Lutheran churches and other mainline churches. The importance of the Law as a path to faith, as well as its value for the good order and discipline of society has been sadly neglected. In a recent book, author/farmer Don Pinwell makes a timely and fresh appraisal of The Law as it applies to us personally and the nation. We print excerpts from the introduction by Mr Pinwell to his summaries of each Commandment.

We must understand from the beginning that God, as the Creator of all that exists, has the legal right and also the moral authority to make the laws and the rules that He wants us to follow in the game of life. Following His rules can be a tough assignment. But then, how can our belief and faith in Him be tested if all we ever have to do is take the easy road? It is only when we depart from our own wishes and start doing the wishes of another, that our love for another becomes apparent. There is no glory in following the rules only when it suits our own plans - we must be prepared to follow the rules even when it can make life difficult for us in the short term. God’s law is based on truth and truth is eternal. Therefore God’s wisdom makes no allowance for political correctness, prideful man, or selfish desires - there is just the stark reality of “timeless truth.” Remember also, the wisdom God has given us for our own benefit, yours and mine, not His. We have God’s word that following His wisdom as best we can will make life rewarding. We ignore His wisdom at our peril.

The lawgiver of any society is the highest authority. It is the law that establishes the framework under which we operate as a nation and as an individual. **Whoever it is that originates a nation’s law is that nation’s supreme authority - or god.** We live in a Christian civilisation because the laws under which we operate are the laws given to us by our Christian God. That does not suggest that all of us are practicing Christians - but it does mean

that everyone residing in our nation, irrespective of personal beliefs, is expected to obey the primary Christian laws of the land. And the primary Christian law that was adopted by our ancestors so long ago, and is still operating to this day is **“The Ten Commandments.”** By virtue of our acceptance of God’s law, we are defined as Christian people. God is the originator of our law; therefore God is recognised by us as being our personal and national God.

We should keep this in mind when considering the Ten Commandments.

Last year we advertised and distributed a number of booklets that contained a series of devotions for Lent, written by Pastor Tim Pauls of Boise, Idaho, USA. We have much pleasure in printing one of these devotions on a subject which is such an important part of Christian life.

A Word about Worship and the Liturgy

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Heb. 10:22

Worship is determined by faith, in other words, what you believe will determine how you worship. If a church believes that we are saved by the works that we do, then the worship service will focus on those works. Likewise, if a church teaches that we are certain we are Christians because of our feelings or behaviours, then worship will be focused upon inspiring those feelings and behaviours, so that we may be certain of salvation.

In some of the devotions in this booklet phrases appear in bold face. These are phrases that you hear and sing in the historic liturgy of which the Lutheran Church has made use since its inception, and which dates back into the early centuries of Christianity. We use the liturgy, but why? The answer is often, “Because we’ve always done it that way.” As mentioned before, that’s not a good enough answer to keep doing something. So why is the liturgy invaluable for worship?

Here’s a clue; as a general rule, you will find that the liturgy is used by those churches which believe that Christ is present in the Sacraments (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox). The liturgy is rarely used in church bodies which believe the Sacraments are only symbols, nothing more. Why? *Because the liturgy proclaims the truth that, in Word and Sacrament, the Lord Jesus comes to His people.* It declares that the Bridegroom comes to tend His bride by His means of grace. It tells you, again and again, that you are not alone, but that the Lord draws near to you.

This is why when we speak of worship; we often speak of “Divine Service.” Jesus, the divine Son of God, comes to serve us by forgiving our sins and strengthening our faith. That is why, as Hebrews 10 declares the marvellous works of salvation by Jesus, it then bids us not to forsake the gathering of believers (10:25), because there the Lord comes to serve.

Worship flows in one of three directions. In a church that has forsaken the Word, it will flow from people to people and speak of meeting physical needs and justifying

life styles. In a church that emphasises feelings and behaviour, worship will be about man lifting his praises and showing his love to God in heaven. In Lutheran worship, in Divine Service, the flow is mostly from God to man. Jesus visits His Word and Sacraments to forgive sins and strengthen faith.

Lutheran worship is sometimes criticised as passive, that worshipers seem to do little. I sometimes use the example of undergoing surgery: even if I am unconscious on the operating table, I’m an important part of the procedure, which is for my good. Likewise, while we respond with prayer and praise, Divine Service is first and foremost about our Saviour who comes and heals us with His grace and mercy. In other words, the greatest joy of Divine Service is this: **there He is, with salvation for you.**

Directory Update

This is a special request to all congregations to furnish us with the relevant information concerning your area. It is time to update our Directory, particularly as Annual General Meetings of congregations and parishes are being held at this time of the year.

Basic information for each parish and congregation is:-

- Phone and email of your Pastor.
- Phone and email of President or Chairman.
- Phone and email of Secretary.

Private addresses may be included if appropriate.

Please forward your information to Newsletter by email or post to the address provided below.

THE EMAIL POST

Our email news service has been launched with a number of news items not normally seen in the press or on TV being emailed out to those people on our address list.

More subscribers are welcome. Write, phone, or email your wish to be included in this up to date service. The editor can be contacted at the address below.

We also appreciate receiving Letters to the Editor. If you would like to comment on anything, please let us know.

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