

# THE AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

## NEWSLETTER JULY 2006

### EDITORIAL

#### FUTURE MISSION

The world future is in some respects a dangerous world, because nobody can predict what will happen next year, or for that matter, tomorrow. So if we devote time to planning Christian mission we must bear in mind that our best laid plans may not coincide with what an Almighty God has in store for us.

However, having said that, we still need to look at the state of the world around us, and be guided by what the Scriptures tell us. We must always endeavour to go about our role in implementing the Great Commission, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations by baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you." Mt. 28:19 (1) Whilst this commission instructs us to teach **all nations** it does not necessarily give an indication of how successful the teaching will be.

The word "mission" in former years gives rise to pictures of Christian missionaries sailing off to heathen countries to bring the light of the Gospel to people who had no knowledge whatsoever of Jesus as the Saviour of the world. We thought of Koonibba, Hermannsburg, or Rooke Island in New Guinea, and the British and Foreign Bible Society which organised and financed the colporteurs, who walked through vast tracts of China and India teaching and distributing Bibles, often at personal risk and enduring hardships.

But this era is a bygone age when Christian churches were well attended by large proportions of the community. In recent decades there has been a shift in objectives and methods to meet the need of declining numbers, and we saw the growth of a movement labelled "Church Growth." The theory was that building big organisations in the community would attract the unchurched and gain the popular support of citizens, plus people of influence such as local or state dignitaries. Campaigns involved the use of radio and TV programmes, community activities, setting up kindergartens and pre school centres, schools, and involvement in local charity work. However important these activities are, and they are important, when measured in the light of spreading the Gospel their contribution has never been accurately assessed. In fact, this activity has taken place during a continuing drastic decline in church attendance and Christian influence in the life of families and the wider community.

The real problem here is that this type of mission in the Christian church is misdirected. It seeks popularity and endorsement of "the world," a popularity suitable for and aimed at by large commercial corporations or political parties.

In fact, when a Church gains the universal popularity

and plaudits of the world it is usually a sign that the Church has lost its reason for being. Early in His ministry Jesus said, "Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for that is how their fathers used to treat the false prophets." Luke 6:26 (1)

The true Church of God is not popular with the world; it is ridiculed, despised, and persecuted. It will always be a remnant. This may seem a depressing or defeatist picture, but it is exactly what we are told. In speaking about the signs of His coming, Jesus said "But even parents, brothers, relatives and friends will betray you, and they will put some of you to death. And because of My name they will hate you." Luke 21: 16-17. (1)

St. Paul, writing of the last days, says that difficult times will come. People will be blasphemous, disobedient to parents, treacherous, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. "They will have a form of Godliness but will have denied its power, keep on avoiding such people," and again, "Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Jesus Christ will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 5, 12.) (1)

In the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, St. John writes to the church at Laodicea, warning that it has become lukewarm, neither cold or hot, rich and wealthy, needing nothing, a description of many of today's churches.

So the Scriptures paint a stark picture of the church in the end times, and the church in our present era accurately fits this description. It is of course not given to us to know where we stand in relation to God's plan for the world, and whilst we should be aware, watching and praying, we should not disturb our minds with needless guesswork, but simply be prepared.

Scripture gives a clear indication of where our mission lies. It is to preserve the Word through faithful pastors and small groups, standing firm and with an open and friendly welcome to all the faithful. The Word is preserved in the family home where people pray together and stay together. The mission of today is right here in our own back yard, among neighbours and friends, gathering small groups through teaching, learning, and by example.

This is not just the mission of the AELC, herein lies the future mission of the whole of Christendom.

A re-enforcement to this view comes, perhaps with some surprise to many, from Cardinal Ratzinger, now elected as Pope Benedict XVI. In commenting on the state of the world, particularly the decline of the church in the West, he refers to a "conviction that the great curse of our times is the 'absence of God'." He says, "Perhaps we must abandon the idea of national or mass churches. It is likely that there lies before us a different epoch in the history of the church, a new epoch in which Christianity will find itself in the situation of the mustard seed, in tiny groups apparently without influence which nevertheless live intensely, bearing witness against evil and bringing good

into the world. I see a great movement of this type already under way.”

The Pope may be thinking in terms of the Roman Catholic Church, but his comments apply to the Christian churches world-wide. (2)

This statement adds weight to our suggested mission task, a task which starts at the foundations, in the home, the family, in teaching our children, and with relationships with our neighbours. We pray that we may be equal to this task and that it be carried out successfully and in accordance with His divine command.

(1) *God's Eternal Word* (Translation by Pastor C.R. Priebbenow).

(2) *Let God's Light Shine Forth. The Spiritual Vision of Pope Benedict XVI* edited by Robert Moynihan.

### **BEWARE THE JUDAS GOSPEL**

There is quite a bit of interest about at the moment about the discovery of an ancient document called the Gospel of Judas. Is it a new Gospel? Is it accurate? The Gospel of Judas has been known since around AD 180, when it was mentioned in the writings of the early church fathers. There's nothing secret about it. Recently it was announced that the oldest manuscript of this supposedly lost Gospel had been discovered. The Gospel itself is not something new or theologically significant. It does however paint a different portrait of Judas, turning him from betrayer to confidant, a man who hands our Lord over to the authorities at Jesus request. The fact is that this so-called Gospel can't be from the time of Jesus since it contains concepts that would have been foreign to a first century Jew. For example, in a key passage Jesus tells Judas, "You will exceed all of them." In other words, Judas will be the one who frees Jesus from the "prison" of His human body, a neo-Platonist concept that wouldn't arise for nearly 200 years after Jesus death. As New Testament scholar Simon Gathercole explains, "The Gospel of Judas is certainly an ancient text, but not ancient enough to tell us anything new. It contains religious themes completely alien to the first century world of Jesus and Judas, but which did become popular later. An analogy would be finding a speech claiming to have been written by Queen Victoria, in which she talked about The Lord of the Rings and her CD collection." The Gospel of Judas is an example of an ancient Gnostic document. "Gnostics" were second and third century sects that taught that spiritual growth came through the acquisition of mystical knowledge and secret truths. Gnostic teaching was esoteric (hidden, understandable only by certain individuals). Christianity, on the other hand, has always been exoteric (intended to be understood by all). The world deserves credible answers regarding the Gospel of Judas. Christians should also be prepared to discuss accurately the larger issue, that of canonicity. The term canon means "measuring stick." God has given the world the canon of Scripture as a tool for separating truth from error. But without printing presses, mass communication or research aids, how did the people of God recognise which books were canonical, or "divinely inspired"? Some of the tests for canonicity were:

Authorship: Was the book written by a recognised prophet of God or one of the Apostles? Credentials: What acts of God validated the author's credibility? Content: Does the book contain truth about God corresponding with other known revelation, such as that in the O T? Power: Does the writing instruct, build up, equip and edify the readers? Acceptance: Has it been received by the people of God? God has both inspired and preserved His Word. From as far back as A.D. 100, individuals had compiled listings of and citations from the canonical books. By the end of the second century, every New Testament book had been cited as authoritative, if not fully endorsed by recognised leaders. At both the Council of Hippo (AD 393) and the Council of Carthage (AD 397), leaders collectively went on record as accepting the 27 books of our New Testament as the full and final form of God's revelation, written by credible witnesses. Pop media notwithstanding, teenagers and adults may confidently depend on the trustworthiness of Scripture and the means by which God has delivered it to us, Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Psalm 119:89

Adapted from Alex McFarland, *Exposing the Gospel of Judas*, Plugged In, Vol 11 No 7

Article kindly supplied by Pastor Mark Hampel, Marburg

### **THE ESSENCE OF OUR FAITH**

Several years ago we promoted and enjoyed talks by Ron Wyatt, and came away with the conviction that what was said showed that the Scriptures were right after all about the crossing of the Red Sea, Mount Sinai, and other things. In many of our AELC meetings we have heard talks by creationists, where we have admired God's wonderful works. We have come away with the conviction that evolutionists do not have the right answers. Many of our people keenly support the fine work of creationists.

Because we promote such things, people can easily conclude that these are the most important things.

God's power and divine nature, His invisible qualities, are perceived through His creation (Rm 1:20). However, God is not seen through His creation. Whilst it is important to refute evolution, the real content of our faith consists of "things that are not seen" (Hb 11:1). We do not see God face to face, and we shall not do so until the life to come. Even Moses was denied the full blaze of God's glory (Ex 33:20).

We do not see God as He is. In His works of nature He is a hidden God. He is also hidden wherever He has not revealed Himself in His Word. He has revealed Himself finally in His incarnate Son, the Word (Jn 1:14; Hb 1:1-3). Yet, even when Jesus became Man to reveal the Father, His complete and genuine human nature was like a veil, which mostly hid His divinity. As Man, His life was not a glittering success story. He was rejected, and had no home of His own during His ministry. John wrote that, when Jesus changed water into wine at Cana, He "manifested His glory." Yet even His miracles can be mistaken as a theology of glory. We are not told that the wedding guests believed in Him. Only His disciples did so, and one was Judas. The five

thousand did not understand the meaning of Jesus' feeding miracle. Even Christ's empty grave did not convince the Jewish authorities that He had risen.

The truth is that the most important things in our faith are hidden under Christ's cross. The passion of Christ hides God's true nature, and yet, where God turned earthly success on its head in Christ's unjust and painful public execution as the worst of criminals, we come closest to understanding what true theology is. Christ's cross is the place where God truly reveals Himself, but that revelation was hidden under Jesus' cry, "Why have You forsaken Me?" The most important thing for us is the preaching of the Jesus' crucifixion, which is the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:18-25). We see the wisdom of God when we correctly answer the question, "What does it mean for us that God the Son suffered and died?" That Christ's innocent death atoned for our sin flies in the face of every noble thought that natural human beings have. God regards this apparent foolishness as truly wise. That is what is ultimately important. God forbid that we should boast except in our Lord's cross! (Gal 6:14).

When our *Newsletter* has stated our opposition to many current evils on the basis of Scripture, it should be understood that, here too, although we are saying very necessary things, such condemnations do not proclaim the Gospel, which is so precious to us. This is not to deny that what we write is motivated by the Gospel. This Gospel of Christ's cross is what we hear every Sunday and treasure, as the centre of our faith and life.

The theology of the cross should be central in our lives as Christians. What are important are not health, success, and riches. God may see such things as harmful to us. God may regard failure, suffering, and even a slow death as more precious and beneficial for us, like Paul's thorn in the flesh. Abraham must often have thought that God was a conundrum in the ways He treated him. When God makes alive, He does it by killing. When He justifies us, He does it by first condemning us for sin.

These apparent contradictions, which are other aspects of the theology of the cross, are true also of the church. Its nature and its unity are hidden, to be found under the visible marks of the Gospel and the Sacraments. The ecumenical movement is ultimately a theology of glory. What matters pre-eminently in the church is its message of our Lord's cross.

Some recommended reading: H Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross", in *We Confess Jesus Christ*, (translated by N Nagel, St Louis: CPH, 1973, 36-54).

Pastor C Priebbenow

### **DO YOU NEED HELP IN BRISBANE?**

In cases of specialised medical treatment many people from country areas find it necessary to spend time in Brisbane hospitals. It is not always possible for country people to visit relatives or friends regularly or as often as desired when those relatives are hospitalised. Owen and Dot Ohlson of our new congregation at Bethania have made a fine offer to help out whenever possible. If you know of

anybody in this situation, do not hesitate to let them know particulars of name and hospital. Of course, circumstances may make it impossible to visit everybody all the time. However Owen and Dot will do whatever is humanly possible to help.

Eternal Word Bethania extend an invitation to friends and relatives of members of AELC congregations who might be living in Brisbane, either temporarily or permanently, but are unaware of their existence.

Readers are asked to supply names, phone numbers and addresses so that Dot and Owen can issue personal invitations.

Forward information to: Owen and Dot Ohlson, 24 Montrose St, Bethania, 4205, or Phone 07 3200 3605, email: ofdro@ozonline.com.au

### **THE MINDEN STORY**

Newsletter recently published a story about the locality of Minden in Queensland and asked how it got its name. Mr Doug Steinhardt of Minden has kindly written up a brief history of the area and stated the reason for the name. The history of congregations is more important than we think and sadly efforts to put together the facts and figures are often left until after it is too late. Congregations are asked to compile and preserve their stories, and Newsletter would be delighted to tell our readers your story. Here is a brief history of St. Johns, Minden by Doug Steinhardt.

Soon after the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 a number of plain, hard working German immigrants, with land entitlements in hand, passed through Ipswich heading west to a vast tract of land open for settlement called the Rosewood Scrub. The Rosewood Scrub was a dense forest of a wide variety of trees, undergrowth and vines that covered the ranges and hills. Described as "impervious" by early explorers, the Scrub stretched from Rosewood to Lowood, and from Haigslea to Hattonvale.

Their destination was Back Plains. This locality years later, about 1900, was named Minden, so called by the early settlers who came from the town in Germany called Minden.

Little did they realise the hardships and heartaches they would encounter in this strange land, but there was no turning back. Pre 1870 settlers, mainly British and Irish, naturally chose the more open country which was easy to clear, work and farm. It was only after all the open country was taken up that settlement began in the Rosewood Scrub.

As time passed by some 30 families had settled in the district. Included in these were some pious Christian people. Their language and culture were German, and their religion was mainly Lutheran, but of various descriptions. Soon the need for a church arose. A house of worship was erected on two acres of land presented by a Mr Christian Zillman. It was dedicated in 1875 by Pastor Gaustadt, who was the first pastor of St. John's, Minden. Grave trouble when the President of the Queensland introduced a new

minister by the name of Christian Behrendt. The result was a split in the congregation under Behrendt and a new congregation was formed, and a church built and dedicated in 1878, which was called Zion.

Further trouble arose in 1889, resulting in 8 members leaving St. Johns congregation with Pastor Behrendt and forming a new congregation at Hillside, now Coolana. Pastor M. Millat from Tilsit in East Prussia was installed at Hatton Vale in 1891, and also became the pastor for St. Johns at Minden. Under his pastorate the congregation enjoyed peace for many years. Pastor Millat was succeeded by Pastor F.W. Noack in 1923, its membership being 49, and this gradually increased to 80. The old church, which had weathered many a storm, was replaced and a new church dedicated in 1961.

After 39 years of faithful service at St. John's, and also being President of the ELCA, Pastor Noack could no longer the congregation on a regular basis and suggested that Pastor Vern Grieger of Marburg would be a suitable pastor to serve the congregation.

Although previous attempts to include St. John's in the Marburg Minden parish had failed, the latest attempt being in 1927, the Re-alignment Committee of the ELCA and members of all the churches concerned came up with an amicable arrangement to suit all parties, and this became a reality on 1 January 1963. At this stage, Pastor Vern Grieger became the new pastor of St. John's, Minden. This arrangement has worked well and is still operating today. All glory to God. St. Johns joined the new church of the LCA in 1966, and terminated it in 1992 to join the newly-formed AELC. Pastor Grieger's final retiring service was held on 18/5/03 after serving the parish for 39 years. The congregation was very sad to see him go. The following Sunday Pastor Mark Hampel was installed and is ably serving this congregation today.

### NEWS FROM THE DOWNS

Congregations of the Darling Downs Parish of the AELC have now had their half-yearly meetings. The congregations at Oakey, Aubigny and Greenwood are running very smoothly, with thanks to God.

Working bees have been held at St Paul's Greenwood, where vestry steps were replaced with a cement ramp, and a new boundary fence erected. New aluminium windows have also been installed in the church. St John's Aubigny have also held working bees to replace a tank stand, and also to build up soil under the church to stop water running under the church when it rains (we do all believe it will rain again one day!) It continues to be very dry, and we are all feeling the effects of such dry weather.

On June 25, we held a parish service at St John's Aubigny, commemorating the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession. Pastor Ziebell preached on 2 Corinthians 4:13. After the service we held a shared lunch, and many enjoyed the fellowship we had that day.

We have just completed a Bible Study on how to explain our faith to the Muslim Community, and how to answer to a Muslim who asks us what we believe. We tend

to look down on Islam and its adherents, but really, we must pray for these people's eyes to be open to the truth, and so we need to know our Bible, and show God's love.

### AELC WEBSITE

The Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church website, [www.aelc.org.au](http://www.aelc.org.au) continues to receive many visitors. Messages of support come from far away places such as the United States, Brazil, Israel, and closer to home, New Zealand. Sermons, weekly bulletins, Bible Studies, and other material are readily available from the site, and each week more material is added. St John's Marburg now provide the site with MP3 recordings of their services, so people can now download and listen to the service. Numerous Bibles, Catechisms and Statements of Faith have also been given away to people requesting them.

We have also received, and continue to receive, orders for the Hymns of the Church DVD. Many people are grateful that they now have access to these hymns, and here again; they have been shipped all over the place.

As Luther was able to use the printing press during his time to spread God's Word, so we are able today to use the Internet to further God's Cause.

### ERRATA

A list of errors detected in *God's Eternal Word* is available from Pastor C. Priebbenow at 1 Fiona St., Kingsthorpe, QLD 4400. Those who have computers are invited to ask for a CD with the corrected text.

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

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