

A Brief History of the Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church



The following is not intended to be an exhaustive history of the AELC, but to give a background account of why the AELC came into existence, and a short history of the AELC. Our prayer is that God would continue to bless His Church on earth, until we hear that mighty trumpet sound, and see the Lord coming again.

Part 1

A SHORT HISTORY OF LUTHERANISM IN AUSTRALIA

During his reign (1797-1840) King Frederick William III of Prussia¹ wanted to unite the Lutheran and Reformed churches in his country, the latter being a small minority. Spiritual conditions were poor, there was much confusion in the liturgy, and Frederick William deemed himself quite competent in these areas. Therefore, as early as 1817 he decreed a union of the Lutheran and the Reformed Church, and in 1821 issued an Order of Service in which he himself had compiled. King Frederick planned to bring both churches into common worship through this liturgy.

Lutherans confess the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in (under) the Lord's Supper, while the Reformed say that Christ's body and blood are now present locally only in heaven and are not present in the Lord's Supper. Here on earth they are received only spiritually. In the liturgy for the Lord's Supper in the "uniert" *Agenda*, which was first used in the royal chapel of King Frederick III in Prussia, there was an attempt to fuse the two. The minister said, "Take, eat. Jesus says, 'This is My body.'" The *Agenda* deliberately left it to each communicant to understand the words as he wished. While many accepted the King's will, some did not, and government authorities persecuted the Lutheran pastors and their congregations who rejected this "unionism." That was the reason why many of them, including Pastors Augustus Kavel and Gotthard Fritzsche, left their homeland in 1838, travelling to a place on the other side of the world, to a strange climate and a language foreign to them, in order to escape the enforced union and its resultant persecution by government authorities. Others went to Perry County in Missouri, USA also from about 1838. The loyal Lutherans who remained behind were referred to as the "Old Lutherans" or "The Breslau Synod."

The first of a group of about 500 Lutherans led by Pastor Augustus Kavel arrived by boat on 20 November 1838 and established settlements at Klemzig and Hahndorf in South Australia. On 27 October 1841 Pastor Gotthard Fritzsche arrived with some 220 of his flock. There had been about 50 deaths

¹ Born 3 August 1770, Died 7 June, 1840

during the 14-week voyage. The two groups worked together in the new homeland until 1846 when the different personalities of the pastors resulted in a schism.

One of the ostensible reasons for the separation of the congregations of Pastor Fritzsche from those of Pastor A Kavel in 1846, had been Pastor Kavel's protestations against some points in the Lutheran Confessions. His protestations were about Melanchthon's enumeration of three sacraments, prayers of the dead, the power of the emperor to appoint bishops, Luther's advice about how to deal with children who refuse to learn the Catechism, and the baptising of infants whose parents are not members of the church. Besides, Pastor Kavel's church order was legalistic. It assigned considerable responsibilities to church elders² in the affairs of the congregations. It held that elders were in a special office established by God, distinct from pastors, and that their duties included the supervision of the life and teaching of the pastors. Kavel was influenced by Pietism and also held to pre-millennialism. Fritzsche rejected pre-millennialism.

There were many divisions in the early period but tracing the main lines the story is as follows:

Fritzsche line - ELCA

The Fritzsche line was continued by pastors from the Dresden and later the *Hermannsburg Mission Society*. In 1887 it established a link with the conservative *Missouri Synod* in America and was characterised by strict adherence to all doctrines in the Symbolical Books. It established Concordia Seminary in 1893 for training its ministers and regarded the other main body of Lutherans as tainted with 'unionism.' From 1874 it conducted mission work with aboriginals at Finke River (South of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory) but for financial reasons passed it to the Immanuel Synod (see below) in 1894. By 1908 there were 38 pastors and 2,500 communicants in 154 congregations. This church was known as the *Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia* (ELCA). By 1937 there were 90 active pastors, 320

² Or deacons as opposed to the Scriptural use of the word elders, which refers to pastors.

preaching centres and 24,960 baptised members of the ELCA (15,917 being communicants).

Kavel line - UELCA

The Kavel line was by 1874 called the *Immanuel Synod* and its pastors came chiefly from the Neundettelsau and Hermannsburg Missions in Germany. It had begun mission work in central Australia in 1864 and in 1886 helped open a mission in Papua-New Guinea. In the 1850s there was a large influx of Germans to Victoria and Queensland. A conservative Queensland Synod of German and Scandinavian Lutherans joined the Immanuel Synod in 1910 to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church Federation. Another Lutheran body, the General Synod, embraced Lutherans in several states who were largely from the Prussian Union church. In 1907 the *Moravian Brethren* (active particularly amongst the Aboriginals) joined this Synod, and in 1920 the Synod joined the ELC Federation. On 21 March 1921 the federated churches became the *United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia* (UELCA) with 58 pastors and 12,710 communicants. Immanuel Theological Seminary was established in Adelaide in 1923. In 1926, 6 parishes, 7 pastors and 1,375 communicants were received who were part of the group resulting from the expulsion from the ELCA some 20 years before. By 1937 the UELCA had 76 active pastors, 312 preaching centres and 28,691 baptised members (20,488 being communicants) so it had more people but fewer pastors than ELCA.

During the First World War the use of German was forbidden, and many Germans were interned. This accelerated use of English in both churches. The Second World War made the churches fully indigenous and new challenges were presented by the influx of 100,000 Lutherans during 1946-66.

The ELCA introduced the 'Lutheran Hour,' the radio programme of the Missouri Synod in 1945, while in 1947 the UELCA joined the more inclusive Lutheran World Federation (LWF). In 1949, Professor H. Sasse relocated from Erlangen University to the UELCA Seminary. He was to be a catalyst in bringing the two churches together. On 27 August 1956, the UELCA and ELCA both adopted the *Theses of Agreement*, which set the stage for the merging of the two organisations. The final merge occurred in Tanunda, South Australia, at a joint synod held on 29 October to 2 November 1966. To

facilitate this the ELCA separated formally from the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, and the UELCA from the American Lutheran Church and the LWF.

The *Theses of Agreement* were basically sound (they can be found at www.lca.org.au/lca-foundational-documents.html).³ They lacked sufficient and specific rejections (*negative*) which they might well have contained to avoid misinterpretation. Time has shown that on some matters they were not as explicit and specific as they should have been, because they were very soon being misinterpreted by liberal leaning theologians. Nevertheless, they were basically sound, and cannot, in themselves, be regarded as false and heretical.

But the tragedy lay in the fact that there was no effective discipline to maintain the position of the *Theses of Agreement*. When the *Theses of Agreement* were being misinterpreted or deliberately twisted by pastors and theologians to allow positions which were not originally envisaged in the *Theses*, such action was not vigorously disciplined by officials of the LCA. Neither did officials require a public apology from those who maintained false positions.

It soon became clear that despite good written statements, yet, in practice, the *Theses of Agreement* were not going to be held to be binding upon the teaching and practice of pastors and theologians. Pastors even openly stated at Pastors' conferences that they would not be bound by the *Theses of Agreement*, and they got away with it. They were not publicly corrected. The great problem was that the very ones whose duty it was to exercise doctrinal discipline, were the ones who were lenient about the enforcement of the official doctrinal position of their church. Every attempt of conservative pastors to insist upon sound evangelical doctrinal discipline failed. At best, the doctrinal aberrations were merely covered over, and the errorists encouraged to be more discreet. Every attempt was made to excuse them, but the errors were not effectively

³ The contents of the *Theses of Agreement* are as follows: Principles Governing Church Fellowship, Joint Prayer and Worship, Conversion, Election, The Church, The Church and Its Unity according to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, Church Fellowship and Cooperation, The Office of the Ministry, Eschatological Matters, Scripture and Inspiration, The Lutheran Confessions. Appendix: Statements on Practical Matters: 1. Lodges, 2. Marriage and Betrothal, 3. Marriage with the Deceased Wife's Sister.

rejected or finally removed. Pastors could misinterpret and ignore the *Theses of Agreement* as they wished for they knew that there would be no doctrinal discipline.

The inevitable result of this was that while the doctrinal position of the LCA looked good on paper; and while the officials of the LCA cited the *Theses of Agreement* as proof for the sound position of the LCA, yet, in practice, there was a great diversity of doctrinal positions being permitted in the LCA among the pastors. The laymen of the church, generally speaking, would have held to the position of the *Theses of Agreement*, and so, there were often divisions between laymen of the church on the one hand and some of the pastors and officials on the other hand.

INCREASING DISSATISFACTION WITH THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

It became evident that a doctrinally liberal element was spreading in the LCA, sometimes emanating from the Luther Seminary in Adelaide. This was also evident at synodical conventions in later years. The chief causes for concern were lack of commitment to the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, unwillingness to speak about the third use of the Law, unwillingness to affirm creation in six days, an openness to evolution as an alternative explanation of the origin of the universe, the failure to discipline pastors who had adopted Charismatic and Pentecostal views, growing lack of clarity about the invisible nature of the church and its unity, an unwillingness to apply passages such as Romans 16:17 and Galatians 1:8 to people and denominations that were perceived to be Christian, a reluctance to continue the practice of closed communion, growing advocacy of women suffrage in congregations and synod, the practice of having women read lessons in church services, and, in some quarters, advocacy of women pastors.

Concerned people from the Darling Downs area in South East Queensland, and further to the north, in the South Burnett region⁴, had for a number of

⁴ Pastor Melvin Grieger and the members of St Mark's Hivesville and Bethlehem Tingoora had been actively campaigning against false doctrine in the LCA for a number of years before the foundation of the AELC. St Mark's Hivesville and Bethlehem Tingoora would later merge to become the one St Mark's Hivesville.

years been writing letters to officials and to *The Lutheran* (the official publication of the LCA) stating their grievances, with few real answers being received. Sometimes no real answers were given, or else, if replies came from District and General Officials, they were very disappointing.

A group formed in South Australia in 1982, called “Australian Lutherans Alert,” which tried to encourage Lutherans to hold fast to the Lutheran Confessions and also alerted members to the new directions many of the leaders of the LCA were taking. In July 1982 the first issue of the *Australian Lutherans Alert* was published.

Another group had formed in Queensland in about 1981. It comprised laymembers of a number of congregations who wanted to correct changes within the LCA. It adopted the name “Chapter One Lutherans,” hoping that similar “chapters” might form in the church elsewhere. It met with considerable criticism from District Officials. Some of the COL representatives arranged a series of meetings with the LCA President of the time, Dr Lance Steicke and other officials of the LCA.

In 1984, a General Convention of the LCA was held at Croydon, Victoria. At this convention, LCA officials had to face the many divergent views coming from within the LCA. Various congregations had sent many propositions against the new directions of the church. Proposals on the agenda for Convention dealt with subjects such as the denial of the full authority and inspiration of the Bible, acceptance of the higher critical approach to Scripture, a desire by many LCA members to join the Lutheran World Federation⁵ and to join in ecumenical activities, a denial by some of the immortality of the soul after death, and a weakening of the doctrine of Creation, with a bias towards evolution as God’s way of creating the world.

Some confessional pastors and laymen at that time were also raising concerns about a lecture of Dr H Hamann at a Pastors’ Conference at Tatachilla, South Australia, in which he spoke about “minor errors” in the Scriptures. Dr H Hamann was asked to make himself available to discuss theological matters

⁵ In 1981 the LCA did decide to apply for membership, subject to two provisos that safeguarded its doctrinal integrity. However, the LWF foreshadowed a change to its constitution, reflecting the desire that member churches understand themselves as being in altar and pulpit fellowship with one another. Consequently, the 1993 convention of the LCA decided to seek only associate membership.

with concerned brethren. This meeting was announced for 23 May in Toowoomba, 1984.

On 1 May 1984, a group of men from a number of congregations met at St Paul's Lutheran Church Greenwood, in Queensland, to prepare questions for Dr Hamann. They complained about the infiltration into the church of a new theology by stealth. They deplored the difficulty that those who defended the traditional position of the church had, because the officials of the church, who should have been supporting them, were advocating change or protecting those who advocated change. They expressed concern about words and actions of various church officials and Seminary lecturers that were not in keeping with the *Lutheran Confessions* and the *Theses of Agreement*. They mentioned especially the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, membership in the Lutheran World Federation, closed communion, creation and evolution, the immortality of the soul, and the changing attitudes about speaking roles by women in the church. They also deplored a current lack of openness in doctrinal matters, positions held by some lecturers at Luther Seminary.

The officials did not want lay delegates to discuss any of these matters on the floor of Convention. Members of the Seminary Faculty took part in the preparation of a *Consensus Statement on Scripture* (www.lca.org.au/doctrinal-statements-theological-opinions-2.html). At these meetings President Clem Koch in particular upheld the doctrinal position of the LCA. Delegates had little opportunity to discuss the issues. They could merely vote for it or against it. In the *Consensus Statement*, people on either side undertook to refrain from using words like "liberal" and "fundamentalist." The Convention at Croydon passed the *Consensus Statement* without amendments, but no real changes for the better took place subsequently. If the Lutheran Laymen's League had not provided funds to publish the *Consensus Statement on Scripture*, then the General Church Council would probably never have distributed it. LCA officials had gained temporary peace, and apparently hoped that the *Consensus Statement* would soon become a dead letter. After this, *Australian Lutherans Alert* ceased publication, while a new publication, *The Lutheran Observer* continued in the role that *Australian Lutherans Alert* had played.

Also, in 1984, some Queensland congregations submitted proposals to the District Synod at Coolumb, on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, against membership in the Lutheran World Federation. Letters were also appearing in

The Lutheran, affirming the desire to maintain the official position on the role of women in the church that the *Theses of Agreement, Article VI, 11*,⁶ expressed very clearly. Statements by pastors favouring evolution were continuing to cause concern. When members sent letters during these years to individuals and officials of the LCA, replies to them often fobbed off the concerns with generalities or words that seemed deliberately to miss the point.

Activities of a Standing Committee on procedure at Queensland Synods were making it difficult for proposals from congregations that officials opposed to get a fair hearing. The Standing Committee sometimes laundered proposals before they came before the convention.

At one Convention, in about 1985, Pastor Melvin Grieger, of Hivesville, Queensland, had placed a proposal about doctrine on the agenda. Officials delayed discussion about it until the end of proceedings. When the officials saw that the vote would be close, the proposal was defeated when scrutineers counted all the people who were standing outside the building as voting against it.

In July 1985 members of some congregations expressed concern about the *Youth Resource Bulletin number 10*, published by the Board of Congregational Life. The Bulletin had urged youth to picket churches that did not support socialist issues.

In 1986 further concern arose about an advocacy for the use of the term “bishops” that was being advocated for the General and the District Presidents. This issue surfaced at General Convention, but the Conventions in 1987 and 1990 voted it down.⁷

Another area of concern was the increasing involvement of various congregations in ecumenical services.

In 1987, resolutions appeared on the agenda of the General Convention that opposed membership in the Lutheran World Federation until the concerns of

⁶ 11. Though women prophets were used by the Spirit of God in the Old as well as in the New Testament, 1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-14 prohibit a woman from being called into the office of the public ministry for the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. This apostolic rule is binding on all Christendom; hereby her rights as a member of the spiritual priesthood are in no wise impaired.

⁷ At the 17th General Convention of Synod, held 21-24 April 2013, LCA delegates voted strongly to change the designation of their presidents to ‘bishop.’

members about doctrine in the LCA were resolved, and in that same year, some members expressed dissatisfaction about a public statement by Pastor Renner, the Queensland District President, about condom vending machines on tertiary campuses.

In 1988, some in the LCA advocated individual speaking roles for women in the church and some opposed them.

In 1989, Pastor Clarence Prieppenow left the Faculty of the Seminary, after accepting a call to the Oakey Parish in Queensland. Since 1987 he, together with Pastor Vernon Grieger and Pastor Melvin Grieger had been working on the book, *The Word Shall Stand*.⁸ In it they dealt with current concerns that were troubling conservative pastors and laymen. They published the book in 1990, with private financial backing. This book contains twenty-eight articles on Scripture, the substance of the faith, and practical issues that were causing concern at the time.

At this time there was also concern about Dr D Stolz's *Open Letter to Scorsese* regarding the film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The film repeated blasphemous allegations about Jesus that appear in the Babylonian Talmud. Dr Stolz said, among other things, that it was possible for Jesus to harbour sinful thoughts as long as His relationship with God was right.

At the General Convention in Canberra in 1990, a proposal to "loosen up" the practice of closed communion was adopted. The President, Dr Grope, announced that those who had objections to the change should write to officials in Adelaide for consideration. However, before the General Church Council considered any objections, the change in practice became official, through a statement in *The Lutheran*. In future, full agreement in doctrine was no longer a requirement for altar fellowship. People who wanted to commune at LCA altars had merely to be repentant, believe in Jesus Christ, and accept

⁸ The American paper, *Christian News*, one of the world's most widely distributed Christian journals with a circulation of well over a million copies, reviewed *The Word Shall Stand* in these terms: "THE WORD SHALL STAND is by far the best contribution we have seen for a Twentieth Century Formula of Concord. Every Christian pastor should get a copy. It should be studied by seminary Christian college faculties, particularly those of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod." Not a bad endorsement for a work by three Australian country pastors who had been largely ignored and rejected by the hierarchy in Australia!

the real presence. On this basis, a Roman Catholic, a high church Anglican or a member of one of the Orthodox churches could commune, if the LCA pastor consented. The paragraph in many, if not all congregations constitutions, *“It regards unity in doctrine and practice the necessary prerequisite for church fellowship, and therefore adheres to the rule: “Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors only, and Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only”, and rejects religious syncretism or unionism in all its forms,”* no longer mattered.

On 1 November 1991, the Queensland District Vice-President Pastor John Vitale sent a letter to pastors informing them about progress with the formation of *“Queensland Churches Together.”* This was an ecumenical organisation of many of the other denominations in Queensland. Its constitution pledged member churches to respect each other’s doctrines and bound them to cooperate in evangelism and in other ways. He announced the inaugural service of QCT at St Peter’s College Chapel in Indooroopilly, Brisbane. He made a draft of the QCT constitution available at about this time.

The aims of the revised Constitution of Queensland Churches Together were as follows:

To encourage and enable Member Churches:

1. To pray together and share their faith, and to find ways to worship together, while respecting each Church’s disciplines, doctrines and traditions;
2. To foster Christian unity through dialogue;
3. To discuss in common the following issues and to join in common action where possible in - evangelism, church renewal, social welfare, public issues [and] education.

In the early months of 1992, the officials of the LCA presented a change in the practice of closed communion to Pastors’ Conferences. At the Pastors’ Conference at Maroochydoore, Queensland, before the Convention at Caloundra, on Queensland’s Sunshine Coast, the following draft of an insert into pew bulletins about “Responsible Communion Practice” was issued to Pastors:

RESPONSIBLE COMMUNION PRACTICE

Pew bulletin insert concerning LCA communion practice:

In Holy Communion (the Lord's Supper) we receive together with the bread and wine the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ given and shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins.

Those who receive the sacrament worthily are those who repent of their sin, trust in Jesus Christ as their only Lord and Saviour, recognise his Real Presence in the sacrament, and intend to lead a holy life in obedience to God's Word.

If you are not a communing member of the Lutheran Church of Australia, and desire to receive the sacrament, would you please speak to the pastor before the worship service.

Pastor Clarence Priebbenow spoke against this at the Pastors' Conference. This change in doctrinal practice and the membership in Queensland Churches Together was perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back. The false doctrine promoted by the LCA could no longer be tolerated. It was beginning to dawn upon many people at this time that it was humanly impossible to change the direction and correct the LCA from within, but that it would be necessary for conservative people to leave the LCA if they wanted to preserve confessional Lutheranism in Australia.¹

PART 2

THE FORMATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

The recognition of the above facts led to a group of concerned people being called to a meeting in private premises in Toowoomba, Queensland, on Monday, 18th February 1991. At this meeting everyone present was asked to put forward his views and ideas on what should be done to ensure the survival of a confessional Lutheran church in Australia. This initiated a great deal of discussion. Some important and far-reaching resolutions resulted from this meeting. These should be given here because of their historical significance.

1. Resolved that it is the firm policy of this meeting that individuals and congregations leave the organisation of the LCA and establish a new Lutheran church body, the Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church.
2. Resolved that individuals and congregations raise important issues in their congregations which will furnish demonstrable grounds for their becoming independent of the LCA.
3. Resolved that when the AELC is established it shall continue to watch the doctrinal position within the LCA and to warn and admonish individuals within the LCA, and the LCA itself when such doctrinal aberrations arise or are tolerated within its midst, and, if necessary, in accordance with Titus 3:10, to sever church fellowship.
4. Resolved that when the AELC is established it shall initiate discussions with other conservative Lutheran groups with a view to recognising church fellowship with such bodies and to enjoy co-operation with them in the sacred functions of the church.
5. Resolved that we keep before us the aim of establishing a seminary for the AELC.
6. Resolved that it be part of this group's policy to encourage similar action all over Australia.

Constitution - Pastors Melvin Grieger, Vernon Grieger and Clarence Priebbenow were asked to prepare a draft constitution of the AELC.

These resolutions were carried unanimously.

It was evident from the support for these resolutions that concerned people at that time saw that the proper way for individuals or congregations to go would be first to remove themselves from the synodical organisation of the LCA, without breaking fellowship with the people and congregations of the LCA. Later, however, when the doctrinal issues had crystallised, they should warn and admonish those within their fellowship in the LCA, as directed by Scripture, and if persistence in error became evident, they would have to sever church fellowship from those guilty of false doctrine.

This meeting at Toowoomba, in February 1991 must be recognised to be the conception of the AELC, however, it would not be born as a church organisation until almost two years later, on the 14th of February 1993.

At a special meeting at St John's Lutheran Church, Aubigny, Queensland, that had been announced to consider the Caloundra decision on *Responsible Communion Practice*, on 31 May 1992, Pastor Clarence Priebbenow presented a paper entitled, "*Statement on the Doctrine of the Church in the LCA.*"ⁱⁱ The meeting adopted it. The Aubigny congregation then immediately resolved to leave the LCA and called on a number of other congregations to do the same and form *The Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church*. It also stated its intention to support the formation of a confessional Lutheran congregation in Toowoomba, Queensland. The congregation made a number of resolutions. Among them were:

1. We declare that sufficient has been said and written against the new LCA policy on communion practice to discharge our responsibilities to warn our brethren.
2. We recognise that very many members of the LCA have not had these serious issues presented to them. Because of their ignorance, they cannot now be expected to decide correctly. Sooner or later, however, they will have to choose whether to follow LCA officials in their false practices in the doctrine of the Church or follow faithful pastors. However, we herewith reject the false practices into which the officials of the LCA

have led the church, or have, to their shame, tolerated. We accordingly herewith solemnly reject fellowship with the officials of the LCA. We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ at this sad hour requires such obedience of his people. For the reasons in the statement we have adopted, this decision is final, and we do not wish discussion with LCA officials, which are clearly pointless.

3. We herewith announce the establishment of a separate Lutheran Church, to be called *The Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church* (AELC), to be formally inaugurated on 19 July, 1992. We call on congregations and individual members of the LCA that share our concerns to join us in this Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church.
4. At this time, as an initial step, we request the congregations of St Paul's Oakey; Bethlehem Norwin; St Mark's Hivesville; Zion Minden; St John's Minden; Trinity Marburg; and St Paul's Greenwood; to respond to our solemn action in the preceding resolutions. We cordially invite them to join us. We welcome an invitation from them to our pastor and chairman or other representatives to explain and defend what we have done.⁹
5. We declare our intention to establish, as soon as possible, together with others, a preaching place in Toowoomba for individuals who may wish to follow our solemn lead.
6. We appoint a committee of three to prepare an initial draft of a constitution for the AELC. This synod shall be purely advisory to congregations and respect the integrity and autonomy of its member congregations.

On the next evening, 1 June 1992, St Paul's Greenwood adopted similar resolutions. A fortnight afterwards St Paul's Greenwood also called Pastor Clarence Priebbenow as its pastor.

⁹ St John's Aubigny, St Paul's Oakey, and Bethlehem Norwin were being served by Pastor Clarence Priebbenow. St Mark's Hivesville was being served by Pastor Melvin Grieger, Zion Minden, St John's Minden, and Trinity Marburg were being served by Pastor Vernon Grieger.

The Aubigny congregation had originally planned to inaugurate the AELC on Sunday 19th July 1992 in a service at the Toowoomba Showgrounds. However, some legal matters relating to the ownership of the congregation's properties were not yet decided. This meant that the inauguration of the AELC should not yet take place. However, since the service had been widely advertised, it had to go ahead, but it would be held as a celebration of thanksgiving and praise to God for His goodness and blessing in bringing His people to their present position and clarity of confession.

Between 500 and 600 people attended the service, with people attending who had travelled from as far away as New South Wales and Victoria.

By celebrating the Sacrament, the service was also intended to express the unity that is shared in the confession of God's truth. It was clearly announced prior to the distribution that concerned members of the LCA who were sympathetic to the action being taken were welcome to attend the Lord's Supper, but church officials of the LCA were not welcome to attend the Lord's Supper, since church fellowship had been severed from them due to their false doctrine.

The afternoon session was devoted to a discussion on the principles underlying the proposed constitution of the AELC.

This celebration demonstrated the tremendous support that had for a long time been evident far and wide in the LCA for the establishment of a church that would more faithfully adhere to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, and which would not, in a cowardly, or shameless and insolent fashion, simply follow and mimic the direction and ways of the secular world. Greetings and well-wishes were also received from all over Australia. Certainly, this service was a great encouragement for the congregations and individuals who had so courageously taken a stand against the hierarchical tendencies and the erroneous practices of the LCA church officials based, as they were, upon a false doctrine of the Church and Church Fellowship. The congregations were encouraged to proceed as quickly as possible with the actual formation and establishment of the AELC. It was up to the congregations now to meet together and to draw up a constitution which would adequately express their principles and regulate their practices together.

Pastor Melvin Grieger prepared a rough draft as a working document to facilitate the drawing up of a constitution for the AELC. This was made

available to the other congregations interested in forming the AELC for their consideration and adjustment. It was considered of paramount importance in drawing up a constitution for the AELC that basic principles should be clearly enunciated there, which should, as far as humanly possible, prevent the AELC from going down the same familiar path towards centralised hierarchical power, as was evident in the LCA, to the detriment of the congregation's autonomy. When the matter was sufficiently advanced, meetings were held of representatives of the congregations interested in forming the AELC. At these meetings, and after subsequent discussions, the constitution of the AELC was completed to the point that it would be accepted as a sufficient working basis to enable autonomous congregations to function together as a united body.

It must be noted that St Paul's Oakey, Bethlehem Norwin and Zion Minden voted to remain in the LCA, thus declining the invitation from St John's Lutheran Church, Aubigny, to join the AELC. Members of St Paul's Oakey who were dissatisfied with the LCA left and established their own congregation, Trinity Lutheran Church (see below).

1993 proved to be a big year for the AELC. On the 14th February 1993 the constituting convention of the AELC was held once again at the Toowoomba Showgrounds. About 400 people were attended a most inspiring service. As at the service held in July 1992, Pastors Clarence Priebbenow, Vernon Grieger, and Melvin Grieger officiated at the service.

In the afternoon session the AELC was formally constituted. This was done by the reading of letters of commitment from the seven congregations forming the AELC, namely: St Paul's Aubigny, Bethlehem Toowoomba, St Paul's Greenwood, Trinity Oakey, St Mark's Hivesville, Trinity Marburg¹⁰, and St

¹⁰ Trinity Marburg and its pastor had been involved in a messy, and costly court case with the LCA over property. The outcome of this court case was that the presiding judge ruled that Trinity Marburg were still members of the LCA, even though the congregation itself had voted to leave! Thus, the congregation, although in full fellowship with the AELC, could not actually become a member. However, in 2011, the A.E.L.C. members of the Marburg congregation were urged to retain their previous Marburg constitution for "legal reasons", and were further urged to write their own 'in-house' rules and confessions to be submitted to the other A.E.L.C. congregations to seek their adoption as another member congregation of the A.E.L.C. on September 9, 2011, Trinity Marburg were unanimously accepted by other congregations of the AELC into membership in the AELC.

John's Minden. The constitution was formally accepted, and mutual covenants given. Aubigny, Greenwood, Toowoomba, and Oakey were served by Pastor Clarence Priebbenow, St Mark's Hivesville by Pastor Melvin Grieger, and Trinity Marburg and St John's Minden by Pastor Vernon Grieger.

A Co-ordinating Committee was formed with a representative from each member congregation. The Coordinating Committee was, for the time being, to function also as the mission committee. Others might also be added to that body. A Seminary Committee to be responsible to oversee the training of pastors for the church was also appointed.

In the concluding session Pastor Clarence Priebbenow led a discussion on The Missouri Synod's *Brief Statement* which had been included in the confessional paragraph of the AELC constitution.¹¹ This discussion was well received and was of value to the unity and mutual understanding within the new synodical organisation.

Later that same month the Seminary Committee met for the first time. While still in the LCA, members of Chapter One Lutherans saw that it was imperative to establish a seminary that would be independent of the control of the LCA officials. This thought was totally repugnant to the LCA officials, since it would obviously not be under their control. They did all they could to prevent the establishment of such a seminary, but to no avail. A block of land was purchased by *Chapter One Lutherans* on the outskirts of Toowoomba. A building was moved onto this land and has since become the regular place of worship for Bethlehem Lutheran Church. Pastors Clarence Priebbenow, Vern Grieger, and Mel Grieger prepared a seminary course to be used in the AELC Seminary. Dr Glen Zweck was issued with a call to be a seminary lecturer. At that time, he was a Tutor at Westfield House, Cambridge. He declined the call, and so it was left to the 3 pastors of the AELC to train the seminary students.

All the congregations of the AELC, with the exception of the Oakey folk, retained their church buildings. The Oakey members of the AELC formed Trinity Oakey and began to worship in rented halls. Soon after, a Lutheran Church building was offered to the AELC members of Oakey. This building

¹¹ On the 5th of June 2010, *The Brief Statement* was replaced in the AELC Constitution by the AELC's own *Statement of Faith*.

belonged to Zion Lutheran Church, Peranga, whose congregation had disbanded. A block of land was purchased on the edge of Oakey, and the building shifted. Later, thanks to private donations, a hall was erected next to the church.¹²

Although the AELC had its beginnings on the Darling Downs, there were several people from the southern states who were concerned about the state of the LCA. Trips were made by our pastors and elders to visit concerned people in New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia. Eventually congregations would be established in the southern states at Frankston and Horsham, Victoria, and Tanunda and Adelaide in South Australia, while in Queensland, congregations would be formed at Lowood, Nambour and Brisbane.

In April of 1993, two men, Wayne Steinhardt and Peter Ziebell (both from the Darling Downs) began seminary studies. Two months later Michael Rosenzweig and Philip Mueller (both from the Adelaide Hills area in South Australia) began their seminary studies via correspondence, until both these men moved to Queensland. Patrick Maweu from Kenya also began studying via correspondence. In 1994, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Frankston Victoria, called one of their own members, David Priebbenow, to be their pastor.

Thus, the AELC began to flourish, however, the Lord would call Pastor Melvin Grieger home in 1995, after a battle with cancer. The Hivesville parish would be without a pastor for about 12 months, until Philip Mueller was ordained and subsequently called to Hivesville. He also accepted a call to Bethlehem Toowoomba as well. Around this same time, 2 new congregations were established; Steadfast Truth at Nambour, and St Luke's at Brisbane. These two congregations called Michael Rosenzweig, who, after his ordination, began to serve. Another congregation would form at Clifton, south of Toowoomba, and be served by Pastor Mueller.

During the next few years, theological discussions continued to take place within the AELC. The AELC would continue to warn others of the false doctrine in the LCA and also met with American representatives of the ELS

¹² The church building was re-dedicated on 9 January 1994. The church hall was dedicated on 10 June 2001.

and WELS and Pastor Daniel Schroeder of the ELSA at Kallangur, north of Brisbane, to discuss such topics as the church, the ministry, and fellowship.

Gatherings also took place where a variety of papers were presented. Talks were held on the publication of an AELC hymn book, and by now, the *Statement of Faith* had been prepared. An independent Lutheran congregation would be formed at Murray Bridge, South Australia. This congregation, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, would call Dieter Winkler, a former LCA seminary student. Dieter was first colloquised and then called to this congregation. Although independent, they were in fellowship with the AELC. The congregations at Horsham, Tanunda, and Adelaide would come together as a parish, and in time called Pastor Michael Rosenzweig to serve.

In 1998, Patrick Maweu visited Australia, and was ordained, and in November of that same year, Peter Ziebell. Pastor Maweu returned to Kenya, and Pastor Ziebell would eventually receive and accept a call to be co-pastor with Pastor Priebsenow in the Downs Parish. He was also invited to lead services at Steadfast Truth, Nambour, and St Luke's Brisbane. Pastor Patrick Maweu would be critically injured in a car crash in Kenya, passing away in December 2001.

Various meetings would continue to be held with concerned pastors in the LCA, but none of them were prepared to leave the heterodox church, in which they were pastors. They would stay in the LCA and try to fight the 'unwinnable' battle from within.

PART 3

ENTER THE DEVIL

Pastor Michael Rosenzweig received and accepted a call to serve Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Tanunda, South Australia. He would also serve St Paul's Lutheran Church, Horsham, and St Martin's Lutheran Church, Adelaide. Steadfast Truth then called Peter Ziebell, who had also at the same time received a call as co-pastor for the Darling Downs Parish. Pastor Ziebell declined the call to Nambour and accepted the call to the Darling Downs. Steadfast Truth Nambour suffered from internal problems, and eventually closed, while St Luke's Brisbane sought to become a member congregation of the Darling Down's Parish. When the Darling Downs Parish accepted St Luke's as a member congregation, they issued a call to Pastor Ziebell, who accepted. Services were held in Brisbane every fortnight in a local school classroom.

In early 2003, Pastor Vern Grieger decided to retire from the ministry. At this time, an LCA Pastor, Mark Hampel, had been becoming more and more despondent in the LCA. Pastor Hampel was serving in a Lutheran College in Alice Springs. Pastor Hampel objected when an ELCA woman pastor was invited to attend and teach at the college and ultimately left the LCA and held a meeting with the pastors of the AELC, and after a colloquy, was accepted into the AELC. The Marburg Parish called Pastor Hampel, and he was installed in May 2003. Another group to the south of Brisbane in Bethania soon formed. This little group became Eternal Word Evangelical Lutheran Church and met at the home of Owen and Dot Ohlson. Owen and Dot, and a few others, had left the LCA over doctrinal concerns, and had linked up with the Marburg Parish. Eternal Word joined the Marburg Parish and called Pastor Hampel to serve them. It soon became obvious that it was uneconomical having two small congregations in Brisbane, so St Luke's formally closed, and members joined Eternal Word. Not long after, Owen Ohlson began studying for the ministry. He was later ordained and was called by Eternal Word to serve them as a co-pastor with Pastor Hampel.

In late 2005 and early into 2006, it became obvious that tension was brewing in the AELC. In its early days, because of a lack of pastors, and the vast areas

between congregations, it was the practice of the AELC to inform congregations that if they so desired the sacrament, to call one of their elders to consecrate and distribute the sacrament. This was seen as an emergency measure.

The unfortunate thing was that this was happening in the AELC outside an emergency measure. When Pastor Melvin Grieger passed away, for a time the Hivesville congregation was without a pastor, and so, the congregation appointed their elders to consecrate and distribute the sacrament. However, what was an emergency, soon became the norm. When Hivesville called Pastor Phil Mueller, and he accepted the call, this practice should have ceased. This did not happen. At times when Pastor Mueller was not available, even for only one or two Sundays, the Hivesville congregation continued to practice lay-consecration. This had also happened in the past at the Marburg Parish while Pastor Vern Grieger was serving. When Pastor Hampel was called to Marburg, certain elders who had been consecrating and distributing the sacrament refused to give up the practice. Some of them did not want to give up their ‘authority’ and this led to many papers being delivered in the AELC over lay-consecration. The pastors in the AELC opposed to lay-consecration were Clarence Priebsenow, Peter Ziebell, Mark Hampel, and Owen Ohlson. The pastors who did not oppose it were Vern Grieger, Phil Mueller and Michael Rosenzweig. Various papers were prepared and distributed. A Pastors’ Conference was held in November 2011 to discuss the issue of lay-consecration.

The issue came to a head at the CoC (Co-ordinating committee) in June 2008. The following from the minutes of this meeting speaks for themselves:

Resolution 080601 *Whereas at this time it is apparent that no agreement has been reached amongst the members of the A.E.L.C. as to the precise meaning of Article 14 of the Augsburg Confessions even after repeated meetings and lengthy discussions, and whereas this is widely considered to be church divisive, therefore the CoC recommends to the congregations that the A.E.L.C. be dissolved.*

May the Lord God, in whom we all trust and follow, in time heal our wounds and differences that we may again be united in true fellowship.

Carried (9 for and 4 against)

This motion went back to member congregations, 12 in number. All 12 congregations stated that they were not in favour of dissolving the AELC.

The chairman stated that 7 of the 12 congregations had agreed that the congregations opposing the matter of lay-consecration should remain the members of the AELC and the other 5 congregations be expelled. The 7 congregations that opposed lay-consecration were: St Paul's Lutheran Church, Greenwood: St John's Lutheran Church, Aubigny: Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Marburg: Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Oakey: Eternal Word Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bethania: St John's Lutheran Church, Minden and Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church, Toowoomba.

These 7 congregations of the AELC accepted the following as the official position of the AELC:

1. Whereas our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, having completed His work of redemption, committed the task of preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments directly to the apostles (Matt 28:16-20; John 20:21-23; Mark 16:14-16; Luke 24:44-48; Acts 1:1-8) and indirectly to those who followed them in the holy ministry (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17, 28; Gal 1:1; Eph. 4:8-11; 1 Cor 4:1; Tt 1:5, 7); and
2. Whereas in the history of the church over many centuries, although deacons assisted the public ministry in many ways, even they were not permitted to consecrate the Lord's Supper; and
3. Whereas the Augsburg Confession Article XIV expressly says that no one should publicly administer the Sacraments without a rightly ordered call; and
4. Whereas the words "Our churches teach," in Augsburg Confession Article XIV, declare that this is part of Lutheran doctrine; and
5. Whereas the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope says that the Gospel assigns to those who preside over churches (i.e., those whom the church has the right to elect, call, and ordain, § 67) the command to teach the Gospel, to remit sins, (and) to administer the Sacraments (§60); and
6. Whereas from its inception the AELC not only recognised the emergency situation at Hivesville during the illness of Pastor Melvin Grieger and after his death, but also maintained the regular principle stated in The Word Shall Stand, "7. We reject and condemn the view that people who

function regularly in the public proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the Sacrament may continue to be regarded as ‘laymen’” (page 155, §7); and whereas what should have continued to be regarded as an emergency has become a rule that is recognised by some as a normal and regular practice; and

7. Whereas the Statement of Faith says, “Christians have the right and duty to call men to serve them in the public ministry of the Gospel and the Sacraments,” and “that the office of the ministry is derived from the apostolic office rather than being a kind of extension of the universal priesthood of all believers” (page 54);

Therefore, the seven congregations of the AELC declare –

1. The membership in the Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church shall continue to belong to those who maintain this Scriptural and Lutheran position: and
2. That those who have been members of the AELC and continue to maintain that their rejection of lay consecration is Scriptural and Lutheran declare that they will continue alone as the AELC: and
3. That according to the AELC constitution the only recourse that can be taken against member congregations that refuse to accept and practice the confession of faith as set out in Article 2 of the AELC constitution is to expel them from membership, therefore be it resolved that Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Tanunda: St Mark’s Lutheran Church, Adelaide: St Paul’s Lutheran Church, Horsham and St John’s Lutheran Church, Clifton and their pastor or pastors be expelled from membership in the Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church.
4. That all previous member-congregations submit to the Treasurer a claim on the proportion of the funds to which they are entitled as a reimbursement: and
5. That it be clearly recognised that the Darling Downs Parish has been incorporated as “The Darling Downs Parish of the Australian Evangelical Lutheran Church”, and consequently the AELC cannot be dissolved without consent of the Down Parish.

Pastor Mueller and the Hivesville parish left the AELC, and also resigned from Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Toowoomba. Bethlehem consequently called Pastor Ziebell and sought membership in the Downs Parish. Pastor Michael Rosenzweig and his 3 congregations, namely, St Martin's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Adelaide: St Paul's Lutheran Church, Horsham: and Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Tanunda, all left the AELC, while the Marburg Parish would split. The AELC members were served by Pastor Mark Hampel, while those who supported lay-consecration would issue a call to Pastor Phil Mueller to serve them. These two churches would share the buildings. Pastor Vernon Grieger also left the AELC.

Much, much more could be stated on this dark time in the history of the AELC, but what has already been said will suffice. The AELC had begun some 20 years ago with much celebration, but now, as a church organisation, it was almost destroyed. But events were still not over.

Pastor Mark Hampel would resign from the AELC and return to the LCA late 2009. Among his reasons for leaving were as follows:

- financial reasons
- changes had occurred in the LCA that meant that our original disillusionment and reasons for leaving were somewhat alleviated
- the dire predictions of Pastor Grieger and others of the direction the LCA would take in the short term had not happened, and Mark saw reasons to hope that future directions would be more confessional. Whether he is proved correct I guess only time will tell.
- that being faithful, Lutheran Christians wasn't limited to one organisation, that we (AELC, LCA) were all part of Christ's body - the Church.

When Pastor Hampel left, the Marburg parish was without a called pastor. Pastor Priebbenow was asked to help out, and served them on a fort-nightly basis, until the parish decided to call Pastor Ohlson as their pastor.

Pastor Priebbenow retired from full-time ministry in 2005, but continued to be active in taking services, and attending meetings. Recently he has slowed down, and only takes services here or there, when needed. He is still a called pastor of the Darling Downs Parish, serving with Pastor Peter Ziebell. The Darling Downs Parish consists of Trinity Oakey, St Paul's Greenwood, St

John's Aubigny, and Bethlehem Toowoomba. The Marburg Parish consists of Trinity Marburg, St John's Minden, Our Saviour Lowood, and Good Shepherd Tin Can Bay,¹³ and continues to be served by Pastor Owen Ohlson. The small congregation at Bethania is no more, since all its members have moved away.

In 2014 discussion was held between the AELC and the OLCC (Orthodox Lutheran Church) and the ACLC (Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches). This led to a combined conference being held in Princeton, Minnesota, USA, in July of that year. Representatives from the AELC along with Pastor Ziebell travelled to Princeton. While the conference was a wonderful time for meeting together, it became apparent that no fellowship could be forthcoming with the OLCC. The main reason being that the OLCC insisted that it is unscriptural to have any elements remaining after Holy Communion. They believed the AELC and the ACLC were sinning in not consuming all the elements. At the end of the conference the pastors and representatives of the ACLC met privately with the members of the AELC to discuss having further talks that would lead to fellowship. The AELC representatives returned to Australia encouraged that talks would soon be progressing with the ACLC. Sadly, within months of returning, it became clear that there were cracks appearing in the ACLC.

So, the AELC today (2015) has 3 pastors, and 8 congregations.

Our future lies entirely in the hands of God. We do not know what lies ahead, but we do know that His Word will not return to Him empty (Is. 55:11). We continue to battle the devil in the AELC, and from time to time he rears his ugly head, and we suffer. However, we praise God that He has brought us out of the darkness into His marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9), and that we are still able to freely gather around Word and Sacrament.

¹³ Our Saviour Lowood was originally a congregation of the ELCR (Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Reformation), and was served by Pastor Gavin Winter. They are now part of the Marburg Parish. Tin Can Bay is a small congregation that meets in a private home. They were formally accepted into membership in the AELC on 4 September, 2010.

¹ It must also be reported that in 1997 the Roman Catholics and the Lutheran World Federation accepted a common statement about justification, called “Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification.” The signing was done at Augsburg on 31 October 1999, by Cardinal Edward Cassidy, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and Rev Ishmael Noko, the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation.

The Roman Catholics and representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia have also issued their own “Common Statement” about this central teaching of the Christian faith. This “Common Statement” claims that there is “substantial agreement”. It would be more accurate to say that the representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia have betrayed the Scriptural doctrine, and betrayed the Lutheran Confessions they ought to have upheld.

The “Common Statement” is not based on the primary passages of the Bible that deal with justification through faith. Scripture has not fulfilled its proper role. The RC-LWF statement and the Australian one are betrayals of genuine Lutheranism.

The Statement should have roundly rejected the Roman Catholic position that justifying faith is a virtue, alongside of love. It should have rejected the argument of straw, that confidence in Jesus Christ, which justifies before God, is “intellectual assent”, and the Roman Catholic assertion that faith must produce works to justify.

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia should have rejected the Roman understanding of original sin as a wounding, rather than as a total corruption of human nature. They should have rejected the attempt to define faith as “free acceptance”, because of the bondage of the human will in spiritual matters. They should have insisted that “concupiscence” (sinful desire) is itself sin, and rejected the Roman Catholic view that sinful desire is not itself sin but only an inclination to sin.

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia should have rejected the Roman position that an unregenerate person can contribute towards his coming to faith, and the Roman Catholic view that human co-operation with justifying grace is part of grace. It should have rejected the Roman Catholic view that good works contribute to growth in grace.

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia have betrayed the position they should have defended, that justification is God’s counting, reckoning, or imputing righteousness. They have accepted the position that justification is both God’s declaration and making righteous. The Common Statement should have rejected the Roman Catholic view that it is through sanctification and renewal that an unjust person becomes just.

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia have not rejected the position that justification includes human co-operation, sanctification, or inner renewal. This is both a logical blunder and a blatant mixing of Law and Gospel. Logically, if I water the garden, I can say that the watering produces flowers. However, it is absurd to say that the flowers are part of the watering. Theologically, the inclusion of the new life within justification brings the principle of works and the Law into justification.

There is the classic modern “ecumenical” mistake in the Common Statement that differences in doctrine are called “differences of emphasis”, when the differences, from the point of the Scriptures, are conspicuous, and should have been insurmountable barriers.

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia should not have let hints of universalism go unchallenged, such as the view that “the Holy Spirit has been present to human beings through the whole of human history.” For the Holy Spirit has bound people not to expect His work apart from the hearing of the Gospel and the reception of the Sacraments.

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia should have disallowed as unscriptural the Roman Catholic rejection of the teaching that the justified person is justified and a sinner at the same time.

Claims by Roman Catholics that they teach “assurance of salvation” are hollow without the rejection of the unscriptural cult of the saints and teaching about purgatory.

Another major omission is the failure to reject the Roman view that God’s grace is infused into human beings, and that grace is in human beings. This confuses grace and the effects of grace. Rather grace is God’s unmerited favour towards sinners, which remains solely in Him. In spite of the claim that there is “substantially the same doctrine” it is not so.

There is an awful implication for the representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia in withdrawing the condemnations of the Roman Catholic position in the Lutheran Confessions — as if they had authority to do it on behalf of anyone except themselves. The awful implication for them is that, if the Lutheran Confessions were correct, their condemnations now fall on them also!

ii THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH IN THE LCA

C R Priebbenow

13 May, 1992

This document traces a number of ways in which the LCA’s teaching on the true Unity of the church has been eroded in a series of false practices, which are contrary to our own congregation’s constitution. With only one exception (the practice of selective fellowship), these have been introduced within the past six or seven years.

Let us begin with a summary of what the Lutheran teaching of the church and its unity is. Because God’s Word does not return to him without results, we say that wherever the Gospel is preached we expect to find people who believe in Christ. People of all times and places who believe in Christ are members of the one holy Christian Church, the body of Christ. It has always been one in the Father and the Son, in sweet communion. Its unity is hidden, just as the unity between the Father and the Son cannot be seen. The church in the strict sense is hidden. Only God knows those who truly belong to him.

The church as people see it is the church in an improper sense. It is like the wheat with tares in it. Various denominations have differing teachings, which cannot all be correct according to the Bible. So the question is: With which people who profess to be Christians may we worship? Which pastors are permitted to preach in our pulpits, and with whom may we commune?

The answers in this modern ecumenical age are various. Some of them go like this: Christians need to unite to put up a common front against all the unbelief and attacks on the Christian faith today. Some people think that if only all Christians got together in one visible body, the world would believe. Many people wrongly understand the unity of the church as a visible unity. They know that Jesus prayed “that they may all be one” (John 17:21-22), but they assume that his prayer has not been fulfilled yet. For them visible organisational unity is the big thing, even at the expense of the truth. They forget that this hidden unity comes through the word of the apostles (John 17:20). When Paul says that we should “endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’, (Eph 4: 3) they misread that as ‘endeavour to reach the visible unity of denominations in the bond of peace.” They make a lot of “love”, as if the loving thing is to act as if others’ differences were not there, or were not serious.

The warnings of the Bible against false teaching are both many and strong. The Bible tells us to teach everything that Jesus has commanded us, and continue in the word of Christ and his apostles. It tells us to beware of false teachers that cause offences against the doctrine that we have learned, turn away from them, and avoid them. Paul says of anyone who falsifies the Gospel, “A curse be on him.” There is only one Gospel, and if the Gospel is falsified, it is not really a gospel at all (Matt 28:20; John 8:31-32; Acts 2:42; Matt 1:15-16; Rom 16:16-18; Gal 1:6-9; Gal 5:9; Eph 4:3-5; 2 Thess 2:3; 1 Tim 1:20; 1 Tim 5:22; 1 Tim 6:3-5; 2 Tim 2:17-19; Titus 3:10; 1 John 4:1-6; 2 John 10; Rev 22:18-19. To summarise, fellowship is one, based on the right teaching. If the teaching is false, we must avoid those who teach it.

“This means that, to please God, only people who are agreed in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the right administration of the Sacraments (*Augsburg Confession*, article 7; *Theses of Agreement V*, # 26) should share worship, receive Holy Communion together, and preach and spread the pure Gospel together.

FALSE PRACTICES THE LCA HAS INTRODUCED

After I had made a case at the Maroochydore Pastors’ Conference that the fellowship practices of the LCA indicated that what the LCA taught had changed, Dr Steicke replied that the LCA’s doctrine the agenda had not changed. He said that the agenda had changed. Is this really the case?

1. Surrender of proper practice of close communion.

The truly Lutheran position is that fellowship at the altar presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel. This confessional principle is expressed in our congregation’s constitution, II, 3 in the rule, “Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only,” and in the *Theses of Agreement V*, #26.

Since the general pastoral conference and the General Convention at Canberra in 1990 a different position has been adopted, which admits to altars in LCA churches any Christians who are repentant and accept the real presence. In May 1992 a statement for LCA pastors to put in their pew bulletins was distributed. It says that those who may commune are: Those who receive the sacrament worthily are those who repent of their sins, trust in Jesus Christ as their only Lord and Saviour, recognise his Real Presence in the sacrament, and intend to lead a holy life in obedience to God’s Word.

I refuse to use that statement, because it does not include enough. It leaves out the confessional principle. If you read it carefully you realise that the rule “Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only” in our constitution has been abandoned. There is now nothing to prevent a Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or High Anglican bishop from attending. Werner Elert was a Lutheran professor of historical theology at Erlangen in Germany from 1923. He wrote an important book on Lutheran doctrine, and another important study of the church fellowship practices of the Christian church of the first four centuries. He put the true case very clearly: By partaking of the Sacrament in a church Christians declare that the confession of that church is their confession. Since people cannot at the same time hold two differing confessions, they cannot commune in two churches of different confessions. If they do this nevertheless, they deny their own confession, or have none at all.”

It ought to be unthinkable that anyone who has last week communed in a church of his own denomination, which has a different confession from ours, should commune with us this week, and then back in his own church the week after that. The practice of the Church from the very earliest times has always based fellowship at the altar on membership in a denomination with a particular confession.

2. Ecumenical worship services

The truly Lutheran position is that those who preach the Gospel in Lutheran pulpits should be agreed in the pure doctrine of the Gospel. This principle is expressed in our congregation’s constitution, II, 3, in the rule, “Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors only.” The congregation regards unity in doctrine and practice as the necessary prerequisite for church fellowship.

During the past six years or so there have been a number of so-called “ecumenical” services arranged at various places, many of them reported with approval in *The Lutheran*. On 1 Dec 1991 the Roman Catholic Archbishop Rush preached the sermon at St Peter’s Lutheran College Indooroopilly, in a service to inaugurate Queensland Churches Together. Invitations to attend this were sent out to Lutherans far and wide by the LCA Queensland District office.

On 26 February 1992 there was a joint conference of Roman Catholic Priests and Lutheran Pastors at Ashgrove. This conference ended with prayer, song, Scripture reading, a sermon preached by Pastor Larsen, and a closing benediction. According to proper Lutheran practice that kind of fellowship should not have taken place until there was complete agreement in the pure doctrine of the Gospel. The *Theses of Agreement* made up the statements of doctrinal agreement between the UELCA and the ELCA before the formation of the LCA in 1966. If Article II of the *Theses of Agreement* had intended to approve of such ecumenical services, many would never have agreed to them in the first place. If these kinds of ecumenical services are permissible, the only kind that are still not possible are those where the Lord’s Supper is also celebrated. But then the close communion practice in section 1 above makes even them possible with representatives of the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox, and High Church Anglicans!

Previously, when a Lutheran married a non-Lutheran in a non-Lutheran church, the Lutheran pastor was quite properly restricted to giving a greeting after the close of the service.

The non-Lutheran minister was also restricted to giving a greeting after the close of the wedding service in a Lutheran church. In August 1988 the CTICR made a deliberate change to this. Now, after consultation with the District President, a Lutheran pastor may take the Scripture readings, deliver the sermon, and pronounce the blessing on the couple, in a non-Lutheran marriage service. A non-Lutheran minister may be invited to take the Scripture readings and give a blessing in the Lutheran church (*Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions C7*).

Previously the LCA had a fine statement on Women's World Day of Prayer. It was adopted in August 1968 and reaffirmed by the General Synod in 1978 (*Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions G3-4*). It recommended that women of the church should not take part in such ecumenical prayer meetings. However, in 1987 the CTICR adopted a new statement on World Day of Prayer. It decided that the previous statement should no longer be regarded as the rule, but merely seen as pastoral advice "in its historical context." The 1987 General Convention also adopted this (*Doctrinal Statements... G4a*).

LCA officials have been misusing *Theses of Agreement* Article II, on joint prayer and worship, to defend these kinds of ecumenical services. These theses were drawn up in 1948 with basically two questions in mind: 1) Is it right for Lutherans to attend at the home devotions of non-Lutheran friends and at the wedding and funeral services of non-Lutheran friends, or to attend services to find out what different churches teach, and how they do things? 2) Is it right, for Lutheran representatives who meet in dialogue with representatives of other denominations to try to reach agreement, to begin with a prayer to the Holy Spirit to lead them towards unity before the Word of God? This latter example was described as "joint prayer", in distinction from "prayer fellowship." Article II then discusses ecumenical services. It was recognised that sometimes attendance at specially arranged ecumenical services was not wrong. At the time the example was given of an air crash where victims were burnt beyond recognition. It was agreed that in such a situation clergy from different churches might take part together in the committal in the cemetery.

The *Theses* state the general rule, #4, that Lutheran pastors and lay people should avoid services conducted by churches that are not in fellowship of faith, since loyalty to Christ and obedience to His Word require them to avoid promiscuous worship. When an ecumenical service is unionistic in purpose, Christians should refuse to take part, and bear witness against such "unionism." For it is not good enough simply to say that the order of service has nothing objectionable in it. The *Theses* quite correctly say that there may be exceptions, provided that error is not given equal right with the truth and that an impression of unity in faith is not created where it does not exist. The disappointing thing about the debates at Maroochydore and Caloundra was that people quoted the sections of Article II that dealt with the exceptional cases referred to above, and ignored or down-played sections #2, #4, #8 and #9, which state the general rule and warn against unionistic practice. These sections very clearly rule out the kind of unionistic activities so far practised in the services connected with QCT, and those that it clearly intends to continue. Pastor J Vitale had also argued for QCT on the basis of #1, #3, #7,

and #10 in his reply to the Oakey congregation about QCT! The exceptions have become the rule!

The *Theses of Agreement* Article II are badly misinterpreted if they are supposed to allow even Lutherans to take part in ecumenical services with representatives of churches with different teachings. The rule ought to be that if there is agreement in doctrine and it has been publicly established, there ought to be full fellowship: common prayer, preaching, and Holy Communion. If there is no agreement, there should be none of these, except in the exceptional cases referred to above. The *Theses of Agreement* are very clear:

According to the Word of God and our Lutheran Confessions, church fellowship, that is, mutual recognition as brethren, altar and pulpit fellowship and resultant co-operation in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the right administration of the Sacraments (V, 26).

Late in 1965, after the establishment of consensus in the *Theses of Agreement*, the UELCA and the ELCA entered into altar and pulpit fellowship, with special communion services. That was a far more significant event than the later constituting Convention at Tanunda. The actual amalgamation of the two synods in 1966 at Tanunda, with adoption of a constitution and election of officials, was a series of organisational procedures. Fellowship is a human expression of the hidden but real fellowship of believers in the one body of Christ. The former is the important thing. Organisation is a human arrangement and less important. Since then the LCA has tended to act as if organisational matters were the really big things, and as if fellowship depended on them. The treatment of the Hivesville congregation shows up very inconsistent practice in the LCA. Hivesville broke organisational connection with the LCA because of the bungling of LCA officials over Dr D Stolz's open letter to Scorsese about the blasphemous film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Hivesville wishes to remain in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCA. It welcomes LCA members at its altar. However, the LCA has replied that Hivesville can no longer be in fellowship with the LCA because it has broken off from the organisation of the LCA. The LCA has not, to this day, accused Hivesville of false doctrine. Yet that should have been the only basis for a refusal of church fellowship. In spite of that, since then the Pastor of Hivesville and many of the Hivesville members have been admitted to the Lord's Supper in LCA congregations. But, apparently, it cannot work the other way around. About a week before Easter, because their Pastor had been out of service, having treatment for cancer, the Hivesville chairman asked me to take a Communion service at Hivesville on Good Friday evening. After Pastor Vitale consulted the LCA officials, he told me that I could go there to preach, but could not administer the Lord's Supper! Strictly, the only valid reason for refusal of communion in such a case would be that individuals had given offence and had not removed it. But if pulpit fellowship is possible, altar fellowship ought to have been possible, too. Communion is one. A sermon is not just a lecture for people to take or leave, as they may prefer. A sermon proclaims the Gospel, and calls forth the response of faith in those who hear, within a worshipping context.

3. Membership in ecumenical organisations

CCANZ

In April 1988 the New Zealand District of the LCA became a full member of one of the two councils of churches in New Zealand, the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa / New Zealand. Dr J Strelan, the representative of the LCA who attended the synod that made this decision, took the view that this was the New Zealand District's affair, and did not actively oppose the decision; and the LCA officials did not later repudiate New Zealand's action.

QCT

On Saturday 2 May 1992, at Caloundra, the Queensland District of the LCA decided, by an 84% majority vote, to join the ecumenical organisation Queensland Churches Together. It made this decision after a series of discussions at the Pastors' Conference at Maroochydhore and in the Synod sessions at Caloundra. Paragraph 3.1 of the QCT constitution says that the aims of QCT are, first: *to pray together and share their faith, and to find ways to worship together, while respecting each Church's disciplines, doctrines, and traditions.*

Imagine Paul joining an ecumenical organisation at Galatia between the Christians who held the true Gospel and the Christian false teachers who were insisting that the Gentile converts had to be circumcised and keep the whole Law of Moses! Would Paul have undertaken to "respect" their doctrine, and aimed to find ways to pray together and to find ways to worship together? Read his answer in Gal 1:6-9. The amended wording in the revised constitution, "*to find ways to worship together...*" was merely a form of words to get what was wanted, because QCT had already been inaugurated by a full worship service. The New Testament regularly uses strong language against those who represent false teaching. To "respect" what is false means to withhold one's protest against it. That is not a loving thing to do, but a failure to fulfil one's proper duty to those who have espoused false teaching.

The amendment that the Caloundra synod made to the decision to join QCT towards the end of the debate shows more inconsistency. We had argued that membership was wrong, because the fellowship in worship already practised, and intended in future, was contrary to the *Theses of Agreement*. To join QCT, with the proviso that the *Theses of Agreement* should be observed is a contradiction to anyone who takes the *Theses* seriously. Imagine a young man who tells his parents he is leaving home to live with his girlfriend as a de facto. His parents tell him, "No! That is against the sixth commandment." And then imagine the young man replying, "I am going to live with her as a de facto, but according to the sixth commandment"!

The only way 'towards real unity in the sad division of visible Christendom in many denominations is the difficult way of serious dialogue before the Word of God. However, the aim in 3.2 of the QCT constitution, *to foster Christian unity through dialogue* is also an excuse, because everyone knows that genuine dialogue between the LCA and other churches must take place on the national level, not on the district level.

Point 3.3 of the aims of the QCT constitution is: *to discuss in common the following issues and to join in common action where possible in evangelism, church renewal, social welfare, public issues, [and] education.*

It was argued that joining QCT would help proclaim the Gospel better. It is one thing for church bodies that are not agreed in doctrine to work together in matters that do not involve doctrine, like a joint publication of a translation of the Bible, for example. But how can

churches that are not agreed in doctrine really act in common in evangelism and church renewal? Which “Gospel” will they preach?

The point about “public issues” in 3.3 is a special problem for Lutherans, because none of the other churches holds the Lutheran teaching about the two kingdoms. The Roman Catholic Church holds the view that the spiritual is superior to the secular, and where it can do so, the Roman church exerts strong influence on government policies. The Reformed churches generally regard the church as the conscience of the state. For the Lutherans it is simply not the business of the church to advocate that the government should ban whaling, protect rain forests, provide more aid to third-world countries, give Aborigines more land rights, and so on. Whatever Lutherans wish to do in these areas they should do as responsible citizens, not as the church. The church’s task is to preach the Gospel of salvation from sin and death through Jesus Christ. The Lutherans say that, when the church does legitimately speak to the government, it can only be in the area of the law as a curb. What it says will almost always come across as a negative: “Do not go down that path. You are violating one of God’s Ten Commandments. If you do that, God will punish you.”

Currently negotiations are in progress for the LCA and the Roman Catholics to join a re-constituted Australian Council of Churches. Churches that join such an organisation, which embraces churches that are doctrinally diverse, and which, as the ACC, in the past has promoted a whole array of politically “pink” issues, are saying a great deal about themselves: that they think they belong there!

The LCA is also now applying for associate membership in the Lutheran World Federation. It has to be recognised that many of the Lutheran churches of the world today are not genuinely Lutheran. A number of member churches of LWF do not uphold the inerrancy of the Scriptures, practise fellowship in the Lord’s Supper with some Reformed churches, and have women ordained in the ministry. Almost all of them are also members of the World Council of Churches, to mention only a few points. At the General Synod at Indooroopilly the LCA resolved to apply for membership in the LWF, with the proviso that membership would not mean that it was in church fellowship with other member churches. The LWF replied at its Assembly at Budapest that the LCA could not do that. It expected all its member churches to be in full fellowship with one another.

That should have settled the issue. But some people still want membership in the LWF. Associate membership is one way in. The real problem is a fixation on the name “Lutheran” without being concerned about the genuineness of the Lutheran confession. What would you say of someone who wanted associate membership in the Freemasons’ Lodge? Of course, the Freemasons would not permit that. But when you take out membership or associate membership in an organisation you are saying a great deal about yourself. You are saying that you belong there, or in part belong there. The track record indicates that if some LCA members were even prepared to receive communion at the World Council of Churches Assembly at Canberra in 1991 (*The Lutheran*, 18 Mar, 1991, 91), they will receive it at LWF assemblies too, even if the LCA is only an associate member of LWF. Such ecumenical

associations cannot but weaken confessional consciousness. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (Gal 5:9).

Our constitution says very clearly that the congregation “rejects religious syncretism or unionism in all its forms.”

4. Selective fellowship

There is only one point, but an important point, where a mistaken practice of fellowship goes back further than six or seven years. It is the practice of selective fellowship. The LCA officials have been unable or unwilling to establish fellowship relations with overseas Lutheran churches. They are too complicated, they say. So it has handed over to individual congregations and individual pastors the responsibility of deciding which Lutherans who come from overseas may be admitted to communion in their churches. If the officials of the LCA cannot make decisions about fellowship with churches overseas, how can they expect individual pastors and congregations to do that? This practice of selective fellowship has now been extended in various directions. For example, when the Oakey congregation objected that St Peter’s chapel at Indooroopilly should not have been used as the venue for the service to inaugurate Queensland Churches Together, Pastor Vitale replied that even although the District President was aware of the request of the QCT Interim Planning Committee and consulted about it, the decision was not one for the Synod but for St Peter’s College. Dr H Sasse was a well-known Lutheran theologian in Germany. In his younger days he was involved in the ecumenical Faith and Order movement. After he became disappointed over the loss of Lutheran consciousness in Germany he came to Australia, and became a lecturer at the Lutheran seminary at North Adelaide. He was one of those who worked in the discussions that produced the *Theses of Agreement*. His opinion was that selective fellowship is unbiblical (H Sasse, “Selective Fellowship”, in *The Australasian Theological Review*, vol. 28, no. 3, September, 1957 49-62). The practice of church fellowship is not a private or an arbitrary matter, but a public one. Those who belong to the LCA ought to be responsible for what is done in all other member churches of the LCA. As long as members of the LCA belong to it, decisions they make that involve doctrine should be made in harmony with the church body. The congregation at Antioch did not make its great decision about Gentile Christians on its own, but in consultation with the church in Jerusalem as the mother church (Acts 15). The greetings and the references to the kiss of peace at the end of the letters of the New Testament are more than ordinary human greetings. They express unity in the Lord, and in sacred things (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:13; 1 Pet 5:14 Rev 22:21). The kiss of peace was parallel to the “anathema” (curse) on those who do not love the Lord or who cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine of the apostles (1 Cor 16:22; Rom 16:16-17).

It is sometimes argued that membership in a denomination nowadays is not what it used to be. The truth is that whether people attend communion in a church has never depended on personal convictions of a minister or a lay person, but solely on membership in a particular church. By their membership in a church, people declare their allegiance, and by their support of it also promote its continued existence. The practice of church fellowship and the seeking of outward unity ought to rest on the public recognition of agreement in the pure

teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. Selective fellowship cannot be the answer to the sad problem of Christian disunity. It is not we who build God's church, but God. He does it through His Gospel and sacraments. The true nature of the church and its unity is seen there and only there. Congregations that are in real harmony ought to be one in public communion or fellowship. That is the practical application of the grand hidden fellowship of believers with the Father and the Son and with one another, just as the ice at the top of an iceberg is the visible indication of what is hidden below it.

In summary, the decision with whom to practise fellowship in our sacred things is a very clear one. If there is a confession of the truth, we are obliged to recognise the truth there and endeavour to extend the hand of fellowship. Such fellowship involves responsibility for each other. Wherever continued co-operation in the preaching of the Gospel and fellowship in worship and in the Lord's Supper exist, there is a witness to the world of unity in the faith, and a profession of church fellowship. If there is a denial of the truth, our duty is to beware, to mark, and to avoid.