

Momentous breakthrough: the Church says yes to women's ordination

By Rev Dr Peter Lockwood

On Saturday morning, the 5th of October, the retired New Zealand Bishop Mark Whitfield sang a prayer in both English and *Te reo Māori* that called on the Holy Spirit to guide delegates at the 21st General Convention of Synod as they debated the Way Forward proposal. The location was the Concordia College gymnasium in Highgate, transformed into a vast general assembly hall for the event.

General Church Board (GCB) member Tim Wiebusch presented the proposal on behalf of the GCB and the College of Bishops (CoB). Debate continued for about two sessions, coming to an end mid-afternoon when a proposal that the vote be put was accepted with a show of green cards. Tim summed up the case for the proposal, and it was carried with a vote of 269 (71.35%) in favour and 108 (28.65%) opposed. Bishop Paul immediately invited FRM support worker Pastor Malcolm Wilcocks, the chaplain for the day, to lead the gathering in prayer.

There was stunned silence in the auditorium when it was announced that the super-majority mark — two-thirds of registered delegates — had not only been reached but well and truly exceeded. Who dared hope that this moment would ever come? Who knew ahead of time that this would be the day that ushered in a fresh start in our Church's history? It was going to take a long time for the significance of such a turning point to sink in. No more synods when women's ordination would be the main item on the agenda. There were no whoops of delight, only tears spilling over from deep wells of pain and frustration that the Church had taken so long to reach the momentous decision, and on the other hand sorrow and anger among those who believed that the Church had taken a wrong turn.

The contents of the Way Forward Detailed Framework (WFDF) formed the bulk of the proposal, apart from some significant amendments drawn from the recommendations of the General Pastors' Conference (GPC) that had concluded three days earlier. The most important of these was that TA 6.11, the paragraph that forbade women's ordination, was to be removed from the Theses of Agreement, and that TA 6.1-10 would continue as the Church's teaching on the office of the ministry. TA 6.1-10 sums up the Lutheran teaching of the ministry as spelt out in the Augsburg Confession of 1530, articles 5, 14 and 28.

The proposal also picked up the GPC recommendation that a 'Doctrinal Statement on Ordination' be developed, which would include the following items:

- (a) The inclusion of the current paragraph 6.11 in a preamble.
- (b) The description of the exegetical difference amongst us concerning the question 'who is to be ordained to the office of the public ministry'.
- (c) A statement explaining how these exegetical differences impact church fellowship, because, while the exegetical differences may not be church divisive, the application of them may be.
- (d) A pastoral statement on our common life as one church.
- (e) The provision for conscience concerns regarding teaching about ordination.

A further part of the proposal consisted of the GPC recommendation that this statement be developed by the CTICR for distribution to the District Pastors' Conferences and District Conventions in 2025, and for review at an online General Pastors' Conference and an online Convention of General Synod in 2025. These are tidying up exercises that are not to be understood as prerequisites before the first women pastoral candidates are ordained.

For many long years Church members have appealed again and again to the College of Bishops to take a lead in resolving the divisive controversy over ordination. But the Bishops kept saying that their hands were tied because a change in LCANZ teaching can only occur if a super-majority of synod delegates votes in favour of the change. However, by this synod, the CoB and the GCB had decided the time had well and truly come to take a far stronger lead in promoting the issue. This time the proposal was their proposal rather than the proposal of a congregation or a number of congregations, a major factor in its adoption.

The Way Forward project team made every attempt to keep the opponents of women's ordination onside. Initially, they did so by proposing that a separate Church district be formed in which both women and men could serve as pastors. The rest of the Church would only have male pastors. When it became apparent that this would divide the Church down the middle, the idea of a 'Conference' for congregations that opposed women's ordination emerged. It even became the central feature of the first iteration of the Way Forward Proposal that was circulated.

The Conference wasn't to be a separate Church district, but a grouping of like-minded congregations that would stay within the overarching organisational structure of the LCANZ. But the concept of a Conference for congregations that were against women pastors enjoyed an even shorter shelf-life than the earlier proposal for a separate district in which women could serve as pastors. Another short-lived proposal to keep people with differing opinions at arm's length from one another was to divide the GPC in two, one group favouring the ordination of women and the other favouring male only ordination. After all, it was said, the pastors are the main ones who have a problem with female pastors. Although many fought for this proposal feverishly, it never gained widespread support.

Despite the inordinate pressure to do so, the Way Forward team members resisted the temptation to go down any of these paths. If they had succumbed, the changes in the Church's organisation and administration would have led to an unsustainable drain on the Church's financial and personnel resources. The drain on resources would have gone on indefinitely, first to make and then to sustain the changes.

The firm basis for the position that Way Forward presented and synod adopted is presented in *Principles governing Church Fellowship* (TA 1), the first set of theses in our Theses of Agreement (especially TA 1.4.e). These principles show unequivocally how to resolve entrenched disagreements on matters of doctrine. They show that if the debate on a contested LCANZ teaching is conducted in a prayerful manner, under the Spirit's guidance, and with full attention to the biblical witness, and it still doesn't lead to consensus, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that neither position can serve as the public teaching of the Church. Therefore, in the case of the ordination debate, both male only ordination and women's ordination simply have to be regarded

as non-Church divisive theological opinions, based on divergent interpretations of the scriptural witness.

Both positions can be upheld, both can be practised, and that leaves congregations and other calling bodies free to include on their call list women who have been formed for the ministry when a pastoral vacancy arises. In short, this is the Congregations Decide (CD) framework that was already endorsed by the majority of respondents in the early days of the Way Forward project.

With male only ordination no longer able to be regarded as a teaching of the Church, the only way forward was to remove from the Theses of Agreement paragraph TA 6.11 that forbade women's ordination and let the chips fall where they will. This understanding freed the formulators of the framework to make no provision whatsoever for dividing the Church into separate districts or into two pastors' conferences or any other groups that would only perpetuate the wrangling in our midst for ever and a day. The message had sunk in that it's only by staying united in the one Church that we will keep on working out how to live together amicably and respectfully, whatever our differences. But if we live apart from one another, the vitriol from our echo chambers will only become more heated, the animosity more hurtful, and the divisions more entrenched.

Not everyone has heeded this message, however. Early this year at a midway point in the Way Forward process a small breakaway body, Lutheran Mission – Australia (LM-A), was established, with its headquarters in western Victoria and its support coming from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in the USA. This fledgling synod accused those who supported women's ordination of failing to uphold the Scriptures and the Confessions. As a result, they said, they didn't want to be part of a church that had women pastors.

When Bishop Paul invited Rev Timothy Teuscher, the President of the Lutheran Church–Canada (LC-C), to bring a greeting from his church to ours following the communion service on the Sunday, the day after the vote, instead of bringing a greeting, Rev Teuscher took the opportunity to announce that the ties between the LC-C and the LCANZ had now been severed. Until that moment the LC-C was the only Lutheran church in the world with which the LCANZ had entered into a full altar and pulpit fellowship agreement. Together with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Teuscher said, his church would throw its weight behind the breakaway group in Australia, the only 'faithful' Lutheran church down under. It was already well known that LM-A was fully supported and largely funded by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The president of the LC-MS, Matt Harrison, was also quick to denounce the LCANZ for its disobedience to the supposedly clear message of the Bible. And there's little doubt that our Church's associate membership in the International Lutheran Council is in its last days.

One hopes and prays that no more than a tiny handful of congregations and individuals will be enticed to join LM-A. The financial, legal, constitutional, not to say relationship, costs of branching out into an unknown and uncertain future should be a sufficient deterrent. Honesty demands that people should be warned in advance of the consequences. Certainly, abandoning one's family doesn't sit comfortably with most. Besides, the Way Forward resolution assures congregations that they are free to make it known that they are 'male pastors only' congregations. And, congregations have always been free to call the pastor who is acceptable to them and meets their ministry needs.

With the vote now decided in the affirmative, we remember with deep affection the pioneers of the women's ordination movement who are no longer with us and would have rejoiced to hear the ground-breaking news. We also fully understand those who have left for other churches to fulfil their calling to the ministry. We grieve with those who have stayed on but have reached the age when it is no longer a realistic career choice. We mourn the loss of countless young people (and old) who have walked out of the Church in which they were baptised and confirmed, shaking their heads in despair and disbelief because of an outdated and offensive teaching.

Finally, we thank those who have kept up the struggle from the earliest days and have endured so many setbacks over the years. It remains for the women who have been the mainstay of the women's ordination movement to tell their long and involved story. But in short it is a stirring account of seemingly endless meetings and conferences, papers and presentations, pamphlets and booklets, crafting and speaking to synod proposals, on-line worship and e-newsletters, regular correspondence with the bishops, involvement in the Way Forward project, and constant interaction with the project team through the crucial final stage of the journey. It's also been a story of immense creativity that has produced a constant stream of items such as pens, notepads, scarves, tote bags, and badges, beautifully adorned with original illustrations, scripture texts and logos such as 'Women pastors: not a problem to be solved but a gift to the Church'. But the story now steps up several notches as the women who are called to the ministry are surrounded by everyone with the prayers, support and encouragement that are so desperately needed.

The ordination debate started in 1984 when a former district president placed the matter on the CTICR table for further discussion. Forty years later, long years marked by disappointment and heartbreak, it is hard to believe that we have actually arrived, and a future of hope and promise beckons. Time is needed, but it will soon be here, for the joyful celebrations to break out the length and breadth of Australia and New Zealand, culminating in the celebrations surrounding the first ordinations. Ministries are already well in place or will soon be arranged for the handful of women candidates who have completed the education and formation requirements for ordination. Soon the Church will start benefitting from the vast and diverse array of gifts and talents that women pastors will bring to the ministry. Meanwhile, as already mentioned, it is vital that the prayers, encouragement and ongoing support for the women who are embarking on pastoral ministry pathways become more and more intentional and all-encompassing.

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