

A message to members of the LCA NZ from the College of Bishops

Come, listen, live...

The 20th Convention of General Synod for the LCA NZ, held in Melbourne, has come and gone.

Delegates came before God each day in worship with listening ears, and with the desire to live to God's glory in the decisions we made.

We came together as God's people, listening to each other, and sharing life together for the days of Synod as brothers and sisters in Christ.

For some, the outcomes will have landed much where they expected, and even hoped for. For others, there may be disappointment, frustration, disillusionment, and even anger. The College of Bishops are praying for all members of the church as you process the decisions that were made, and the meeting itself.

We thank all the delegates who took the time to prayerfully craft their thoughts but who did not have opportunity to speak on the floor of Convention. In reflecting on the meeting of Synod, the bishops observed that significant time was taken on points of order and clarification, which reduced the already limited time for discussion on the substantive issue itself each day. Hence the laity especially who came prepared to speak did not have the voice they could otherwise have had. This is something we suggest needs consideration for future conventions.

The proposals

Some members of the church may have questions about the proposals, particularly those regarding the ordination of women and men in the LCA NZ.

(1) On Friday, the Box Hill congregation brought before Synod a proposal to recognise the impasse faced by the church on this matter over many years. The proposal sought to provide a way to acknowledge the conscientious views of people on both sides of this debate. It called for the church to remain one, while providing for two practices of ordination. This involved a change to the teaching of the church in order to permit the ordination of both men and women, from February 2024. Because this proposal called for a change in the church's teaching and an amendment to the LCA Constitution, a two-thirds majority (230 votes) was required for it to be passed. Fifty-nine per cent (203) of delegates voted in favour of the proposal; 136 voted against it; and 3 delegates abstained. Thus, this proposal was lost.

(2) On Saturday, delegates voted on a proposal by the Queensland District asking General Synod to direct the LCA NZ General Church Board and the College of Bishops to work through the theological, constitutional, and governance requirements to operate as one church with two different practices of ordination and establish a detailed framework through which this could be accomplished, and to bring this work back in the form of a proposal to the 2024 General Pastors Conference and the General Synod. An amendment was added, stating that It is the expectation of this Convention of General Synod that both women and men will be ordained in a District of the LCA NZ during the 2024-2027 synodical period. (You will find the full text of the resolution below.)

For the sake of clarity, the College of Bishops, after meeting with the General Church Board immediately after Convention, offers our understanding of this resolution and some comments on the pathway ahead.

The resolution

That General Synod direct the LCA NZ General Church Board and the College of Bishops to:

a) Work through the theological, constitutional, and governance requirements to operate as one church with two different practices of ordination and establish a detailed framework through which this could be accomplished, such as one or more existing LCA NZ Districts becoming Districts that teach and practice the ordination of both women and men to the office of the public ministry or by establishing a non-geographical LCA NZ 'District' that does so, and

b) Submit the fruit of this work in the form of a proposal that should be discussed by the LCA NZ General Pastors Conference for Convention of General Synod 2024.

c) It is the expectation of this General Convention of Synod that both women and men will be ordained in a District of the LCA NZ during the 2024-2027 synodical period.

Clarifying comments

In the lead-up to the in-person sessions of General Synod 2021-2023 the College of Bishops urged a way forward that did not leave the church in an ongoing adversarial state on this issue, which has become debilitating in so many ways for relationships, and in carrying out the mission of the church.

The intention of this adopted proposal is to find a practical way forward to allow communities with different convictions regarding the ordination of women and men to co-exist, and to practise differently within the wider context of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand.

It needs to be made clear that this proposal is charging the leadership of the church to do the work needed to bring a proposal to that end to the 2024 Convention, with an expected outcome. The resolution does not allow for the ordination of women and men right now, but this is an expected outcome of the 2024 synodical convention, if the proposal/s to be worked on together are passed. We ask individuals and congregations to be respectful of our synodical processes and the people who will be charged with leading us through them.

The wording under point c) above endorses the word 'anticipates' in the advice to this General Synod by the General Pastors Conference. The GPC advice said:

'General Pastors Conference acknowledges that the Queensland proposal anticipates the ordination of women to the office of the public ministry in communities of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. General Pastors Conference acknowledges that the Queensland proposal also anticipates the continuity of the ordination of men only in communities of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand.'

At GPC, pastors were advised before voting on the Advice that 'anticipates' means 'expects'. It is expected that the work to be done will lead to change. We share this for clarity and transparency.

What happens from here?

General Church Board will oversee the delivery of what is required for the church to deliver the resolution. Guiding principles for this work have been identified. Some of these are:

- That the work is within the doctrinal integrity of the church.
- That there is adequate budgeting for the work.
- That there is openness and transparency in the work.
- That voices involved in this matter are equitably heard.

At the centre of this work is the establishment of a project management office. This office will oversee working groups established to address key elements of what is required to be delivered by the resolution. These working groups will include experienced and (or) expert people of the church, representing the diversity of stakeholders involved. While time is tight, of course the whole church will have opportunity to contribute your thinking in some way in the lead-up to the next Convention of Synod. As the people of the church of Jesus Christ, we commend this work to our Lord, trusting in his mercy and his guiding hand upon us.

The College of Bishops are acutely aware of the range of emotions that have been impacting members of the church on this issue over a long period of time. These or new

emotions might have been brought to the surface with this latest decision, which is significantly different from those that have gone before it.

We also know that some members have been hurt or wounded by other members in our conversations around this issue. We plead with all members of the church to speak carefully and sensitively with our brothers and sisters in Christ as we embark on enacting this resolution of Synod.

We want to listen to you and pastorally care for the church in ways that are most appropriate and helpful to each of you. For some that will take place locally in your congregations. For others there may need to be further ways provided for you to be best ministered to. The College of Bishops welcomes your suggestions regarding what is most helpful at this time and as we progress forward.

We urge you as dearly loved brothers and sisters in Christ to stay with us, and to help us together with GCB to find the way forward, so that we can come to the Convention of Synod in 2024 with confidence and in peace.

Come, listen, live ...

It is our prayer that you will continue to come humbly before God to listen to him together, that you might find joy in the grace that we live in, and confident hope from the substance of the faith that we share. We also pray that together we might live and serve in peace and to the glory of God in this next significant period in the life of the LCANZ.

‘Come to me, listen, that you may live ...’ (Isaiah 55:3)

LCANZ College of Bishops

Bishop Paul Smith, LCANZ

Assistant Bishop Neville Otto, LCANZ

Bishop David Altus, SA-NT District

Bishop Robert Bartholomaeus, NSW and ACT District

Bishop Mike Fulwood, WA District

Bishop Lester Priebbenow, Vic-Tas District

Bishop Mark Vainikka, Qld District

Bishop Mark Whitfield, LCNZ

15 February 2023