Celebrating 175 years of Lutheran theology in Australia—a journey in grace

A presentation given at the General Pastors Conference of the Lutheran Church of Australia, 17th April 2013

Dean Zweck, Erich Renner, Vic Pfitzner, Jeff Silcock

At Australian Lutheran College (formerly Luther Seminary) Erich Renner is Lecturer emeritus in Old Testament, Vic Pfitzner is Lecturer emeritus in New Testament and a former Principal, Jeff Silcock is Associate Dean for Research and Lecturer in Theology, and Dean Zweck is Lecturer in Church History.

Historical overview of the first 100 years

Dean Zweck

The theology we celebrate today with thanksgiving enlightens our church like a wondrous chandelier lighting up a darkened sanctuary. A chandelier is one light, yet many lights—light that is beautifully refracted through the skilful use of cut glass and crystal and jewels. Similarly, the true light that enlightens everyone has come into the world, and true theology refracts that light in all manner of wondrous ways. As we celebrate 175 years of theology in our church we have nothing to boast about, as Paul reminds us in Galatians 6 (v 14): ‘May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ And we have nothing to glory in except the foolishness of the cross. ‘We proclaim Christ crucified, [writes St Paul], a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (1 Cor 1:23). At the heart of our theology is the theology of the cross. It is the message of the self-giving of God in his Son through the Holy Spirit for our salvation. ‘God is the source of our life in Christ Jesus [to quote Paul again] who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord (1 Cor 1:30-31).’ So, then, as Dr Renner so often reminded us, true theology is doxology, praise of the triune God.

Sadly, our history shows that not all our theology has been brightly-shining doxology. Rather, from beginnings until now it has been a tortuous and troublesome journey, fraught with dissension, party spirit, division, pride, arrogance, judgmentalism; in one word, lovelessness. All too often our doing of theology has not been the place where love came to life—rather, it has been the place where love died, where love was crucified. When we look back on the story of our theology, we see that we have nothing to boast about except the grace of God. But for the grace of God, we would have become nothing but a handful of warring sects.
But for the grace of God, we could have lost our way entirely and disappeared from the pages of church history. We have walked this journey in, with, and under the grace of God. Celebrating our theology is like celebrating the saints in the way that Article 21 of the Augsburg Confession instructs us to: ‘The saints should be kept in remembrance so that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith.’ Our theology likewise should be kept in remembrance when we see what grace our forebears and we ourselves have received and how we have been sustained by faith.

That is exactly what we see in our founding narrative: the story of Kavel and his people and how they came to these shores 175 years ago. For faith and freedom they came, to use the title of Ev Leske’s fine book on our history. For faith and freedom they came, but, as David Schubert asked in an LTJ article more than 20 years ago, ‘Should we be here?’

Die Alt-Lutheraner, the old Lutherans, came here, to put it in a nutshell, because in 1830, on the 300th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, the church union and worship book promoted by the King of Prussia were made compulsory. With deep roots in orthodoxy, pietism, and the confessional revival, the Old-Lutherans were not about to compromise their faith. In our telling of the history we have tended to demonise Friedrich Wilhelm III and to paint a picture of Kavel as the bold confessor leading his flock into exile rather than compromise their faith by conforming to the Agende, that much maligned worship book. This is all true, but it needs to be nuanced. The reality is that the king was no ogre, no Hitler, and the Lutherans who stayed gained all the concessions they needed to stay truly Lutheran. The reality is that Kavel and the Old-Lutherans were uncharitable in designating the Reformed church and the union as ‘heathen’, they were stubborn in spurning the king’s attempts to grant them concessions and meet their objections, and they were unorthodox in insisting that there is only one form of church government which is scriptural. So there is a kind of ‘What if…?’ question right at the beginning of our history. The undisputable reality is that they did come here, and in their sea chests they brought with them their big family bibles, their chunky Breslau hymnals, their catechisms, and even revered copies of the Book of Concord. For faith and freedom they came, and by the grace of God we their descendants in faith are here too, 175 years down the track.

‘What grace they received and how they were sustained by faith’! Yes indeed, in no time they were building healthy little communities gathered around Word and Sacrament, with church and school, pastor and school-teacher, growing wholesomely in grace and in knowledge of Jesus Christ, and growing wholesome food for themselves and the wider community. Good at growing wheat they were, and, later, good at making wine. Bread and wine, how theological is that, especially when you call the wine ‘Hill of Grace’. But then, within a few years, came sad division, and then more divisions. They split over Kavel’s so-called Apostolic constitution and his chiliastic notions. They split again over where sound confessional Lutheran pastors can be sourced from, and with whom, or not with whom, one can be in fellowship. At one time, when numbers were still very small, there were no less than five synods. Lutherans in Australia were in serious danger of losing their way and becoming thoroughly sectarian.

1 LTJ 25/3 (Dec 1991), 147-56.
But ‘what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith’! The thing that brought them together was the call to mission. When explorers returned from the outback with reports of various tribes of Aboriginal people living there, the two major synods established in 1864 a confessional union that enabled them to cooperate in mission. They repented of their sins and past controversies, and established an alliance based on acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions. They appealed to the confessional Lutheran seminary at Hermannsburg in Hanover, which sent missionaries to work among the Dieri people, and later on, among the Aranda people of central Australia. Later on, when relations with Hermannsburg soured, an appeal for confessional pastors and missionaries was sent to Neuendettelsau. More than 100 missionaries and pastors from these two seminaries found their way into the life of Lutheran synods in Australia, and the influence can scarcely be over-estimated.

If there were more time, we could dwell on the huge influence for good that came into Australian Lutheranism from the deeply confessional theology, piety, liturgical practice and commitment to mission that came to us from Wilhelm Löhne via the Neuendettelsau tradition. The other major influence, beginning from about 1890, was from C F W Walther and the Missouri Synod. In no small way we are a church with a strong sacramental theology and practice because of Wilhelm Löhne; and in no small way it is because of Walther that we are a church with a strong theology and practice of law and gospel. The irony is that although Löhne and Walther parted company, especially on the doctrine of the church, they were not theologically far apart; indeed, a large number of early Missouri pastors were Neuendettelsau-trained.

A hundred years after the Alt-Lutheraner first arrived there were, after a series of mergers, just two major Lutheran synods in Australia. The UELCA continued to be strongly linked to the Löhne-Neuendettelsau tradition. The ELCA, on the other hand, continued to be strongly influenced by the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. Both synods were deeply committed to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. How could the scandal of division ever be overcome? That story is taken up by Dr Renner in the next section.

The long path to the formation of the LCA

Erich Renner

‘A people without remembrance is like a plant without roots.’ Erika Steinbach

In this presentation an attempt will be made to highlight the major matters theologically and church-wise that led by God’s grace and patience to the formation of the LCA in 1966. It was 120 years after the split between the two congregations of Pastor A Kavel and Pastor D Fritzsche at a Synod in 1846 at Tanunda, SA, on matters such as the Apostolic Constitution and the serious millennium issue. Some pietistic and orthodox influences and the migration not only of those who came for ‘faith and freedom’ to South Australia but also those who sought economic security and progress here, caused
unhappy divisions and long-standing splits and sometimes souring of attitudes in these separatistic groups.\footnote{For greater details on some of the issues that were at stake which prevented amalgamations reference may be made to the works of church histories such as Th Hebart's \textit{VELKA} (1938; also in English: \textit{The United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia: its history, activities and characteristics}; reprint ed, Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide,1985); Alfred Brauer's \textit{Under the southern cross: history of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia} (Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1956; reprint ed, 1985); Otto Theile's \textit{One hundred years of the Lutheran Church in Queensland} (1938; reprint ed: Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1985); and in more later times Everard Leske's \textit{For faith and freedom} (Openbook Publishers, Adelaide,1996). Victorians are probably aware of W H Paech's \textit{Twelve decades of grace} (Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1974). Recently discovered in the Lutheran Archives is 'A monograph of the events leading to the formation of the Lutheran Church of Australia', by F H Schmidt, 1976.}

To name a few of the ‘coming togethers’ on this way of union there was a ‘confederation’ of two bodies, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia (ELSA) and the Immanuel Synod in respect to mission work, but after 10 years it came to an untimely end since the Hermannsburg Mission Institute, Germany, ‘joined’ the State Church, which was held to be a ‘unionistic’ act. This matter of ‘sinful union’ was to plague the churches in the future and often held up progress on the convergence front.

A union occurred in 1890 when the General Synod was reconstituted under the strong leadership of President Hermann Herlitz, a Baseler, with its centre in Melbourne. The Basel Mission Institute, Switzerland, was strongly ‘unionistic’ as its constitution clearly indicated and many of its pastors who came to Australia were ‘latitudinarian’ when it came to admitting persons to the Lord’s Supper. As can be easily understood, the conservative wings of Lutheranism in Australia, that is, the Immanuel Synod (pastors coming from Neuendettelsau and Hermannsburg) and ELSA (which received pastors from the St Louis Seminary in Missouri USA), were opposed to such practice. ‘Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors and Lutheran communicants for Lutheran altars’ was their mantra, in the main. Despite these differences in background, the General Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church Federation (Immanuel and allied synods) overcame their differences and, on a confessional basis, formed in 1921 the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia (UELCA) at Ebenezer, SA, partly as the result of an agreement that only pastors from Lutheran seminaries could be admitted to the new church. A colloquy was required for any who came later from overseas before admission could be granted.

It is sometimes forgotten that in 1926 another amalgamation was made possible when the UELCA was expanded by the inclusion of the small synod called the ELSA–aaG (‘auf alter Grundlage’, on the old basis) which had seceded from the ELSA after a Synod in 1902 at Eudunda SA. That left in broad terms two Lutheran churches in Australia, namely, the ELCA and the UELCA; both were confessional Lutheran bodies.

What were some of the issues that still kept them apart? How were they debated and finally thankfully overcome? The main hurdle in the early days were the questions
surrounding the understanding of church fellowship in which the concatenation theology was strongly held by one group, and related to that was the issue of prayer fellowship in which Romans 16:17-18, a passage which speaks of avoiding those who teach falsely, figured prominently. It was a great day in the inter-synodical discussions which had been revived in the early 1940s when Pastor Graebner, co-chairman of the meetings, opened with a prayer on 10 March 1949. Before that date meetings were prayerless. As one who was present at that historic meeting, I can testify to the change of atmospherics in discussions and debates which followed.

Rather strangely, the eschatological teachings which had contributed to the break between Kavel and Fritzsche were on the agenda for a number of years, especially also the confessional statement that ‘the Pope is the antichrist’. This latter matter was only fully settled after the union.

At this stage it may be appropriate to include some of the outside influences on the journey to consensus. A listing here included is not in order of importance: The Australasian Lutheran Association (a movement of laymen), the Lutheran Student Fellowship at the universities, the ecumenical climate that was emerging, the war years in which both bodies were almost compelled to cooperate (both having been attacked because of their German roots by German haters and baiters), and after the war years the influx of migrants from Germany and the Baltic states, whose faith had been shattered and who were confused to find two small Lutheran churches competing with one another over what seemed to be minuscule matters.

Most important, apart from the fellowship problems mentioned before, was the theological understanding of the Scriptures (hermeneutics) and the extremely sensitive subject of the inerrancy of the Scriptures. The final results of this ever-recurring issue can be found in the Theses of Agreement which were adopted by both bodies and churches. (Of course it is still in the air and always will be in respect to other theological problems; cf the ordination of women debate and the dialogues with other churches.)

When also the fellowship matters were clarified and taken off the agenda to the satisfaction of both churches, the doors were finally opened (thank God) for a union between these two Lutheran bodies in Australia. Little wonder that the exclamations of Kyrie eleison, Hosannas and Hallelujahs were on the lips of many Lutherans in this country when after 120 years of splits, competiveness and hard and frustrating debates the precious gift of union was supplied by the Lord of the church to a people who knew they were unworthy of it. This spirit of deep thankfulness for an unmerited gift is reflected in the preamble of the Document of Union:

By the grace of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit we, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia, and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia, have been led together in the confession and unity of the one faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and of the one doctrine of His holy Gospel. We accept this unity as an unmerited gift of our God, in sincere repentance for what lies
behind us since our fathers went their divided ways, and in humble gratitude for all that God in his mercy has worked through each of us in the years since 1846. He has kept us and blessed us and for this we magnify His holy Name. (DSTO: A27)

‘Perhaps the age of miracles’, as someone has said, ‘is not past, only the belief in them is at risk.’

Theology in the LCA’s formative years

Vic Pfitzner

When faced with the theological problem of unfaith on the part of some of his fellow Jews, the apostle Paul breaks out into a song of praise to the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God (Romans 11:33-36). It is precisely at this moment in our history, when the LCA is (still) faced with seemingly insurmountable problems that we should remember our past as cause for thankfulness and praise to the Lord of the church who has promised that Hades will never post a final death notice for the church (Matthew 16:18).

This particular church body, our beloved LCA, has survived many a theological crisis and by God’s grace will continue to do so. Clearly, the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations has played a major unifying role, in clarifying and formulating our confession of faith and in guiding our church practice. The function of the CTICR, after the formation of the LCA, was immediately twofold. In the first place, it had a healing and consolidating purpose. Union did not remove all the scars of past division, nor was union established on the basis of absolute unanimity in all questions. The growth of theological trust required an ongoing process of intense grappling with diverse positions that could have threatened the union. The Theses of Agreement had to be tested; more precise answers to remaining disagreements had to be sought.

The second function of the Commission was to provide theological guidance on new questions facing the LCA in such areas as the nature of the church, its mission and the ordering of its ministry, the challenge of charismatic renewal, what Bible translations to recommend for private and public use, the possibility of membership in international Lutheran associations (specifically, the Lutheran World Federation and the International Lutheran Conference), the establishment of dialogue with other Australian church bodies, and the regularisation of sacramental practice in congregations.

A note on the changing composition and competence of the CTICR is in place. From the outset the Commission included at least four members of the teaching staff of Luther Seminary as full members. However, from 1971 all members of faculty (as they were then called), plus emeriti, were allowed to sit in on Commission meetings as consultative members. Lecturers of the Lutheran Teachers College and the Mission Director were then added as non-member consultants. Seminary lecturers were heavily involved in writing research and position papers for the Commission. In fact, many matters were immediately referred to the faculty for advice and direction, a situation that
tended to bestow on it a teaching magisterium over the whole church, a rather unhealthy situation for the additional reason that it limited the field of competent theologians who could work on an issue.

While wide-ranging participation in the CTICR was perhaps helpful in the early years, it was eventually replaced by a different structure: to the plenum and executive committee of the Commission were added a number of working committees (up to a dozen eventually), each assigned a discrete area of study and, in some cases, involving people not on the Commission itself. Thus, in the nineteen eighties, there were working committees on the Scriptures, on Bible translations, on membership in LWF and ILC, committees relating to our several dialogues with other Australian church bodies, and committees devoted to other specific areas.

The Commission’s competence has been more specifically defined in later years. A glance through the pages of the LCA’s Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions (henceforth DSTO) shows that a number of past statements were simply adopted by the CTICR as guidelines for Church practice. Thus we have, for example, ‘Guidelines for Inter-Church Marriages’ (DSTO C7); ‘What is a Call?’ (D10); ‘Guidelines for Dialogues with other Churches’ (G1-2), ‘Guidelines on Participation of Pastors in Protest Marches’ (H5). Some Commission statements have been adopted only by Pastors Conferences, some only by the General Church Council. In a more orderly process, the Commission now gives theological advice to the General Pastors Conference before doctrinal matters are presented to General Convention for discussion.

Without question, the big theological issue in the LCA’s formative years was the authority and interpretation of Scripture especially, the interpretation of the Genesis creation accounts. Two major Commission statements sought to clarify what is meant by the inerrancy of Scripture, the human and divine character of the Scriptures, and the importance of the formal (canonical) and material (Christological) principles in defining scriptural authority. Both statements were finally adopted by General Convention: ‘The Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy’ (adopted in 1972; DSTO B1) and ‘A consensus Statement on Holy Scripture’ (1987; DSTO B9-14). Interestingly, in each case definition largely proceeded by way of rejecting false or one one-sided positions. This was the case also with ‘Genesis 1-3: a Doctrinal Statement’ (also 1972; DSTO B2-5); this did not offer a complete exegesis of the Genesis texts but warned against what one could not say. In hindsight, and putting the best construction on things, one might suggest that definition via negation was not the product of compromise, but rather reflected the difficulty of the subject matter and the limitations of human language when attempting to speak meaningfully of divine mysteries. In any case, the agreement eventually reached was certainly a cause for thanksgiving.

The second major issue facing the young LCA was that of church fellowship. It is part of our Australian Lutheran history – our ecclesial DNA – that altar and pulpit fellowship presupposes a clear confession of faith based on the Scriptures and the historic confessions. As outlined in the Document of Union, past affiliations and formal
fellowships ceased at union, though partnership with Lutheran Churches and missions in Papua New Guinea was maintained. The severing of former strong ties brought pain to both uniting Churches, and the quest to redress that situation continues into the present. After long debates on possible membership in the Lutheran World Federation, that issue is still not yet resolved, largely as a result of the LWF’s understanding of itself as a fellowship of Churches that are automatically in communion with each other. The LCA has, thankfully, maintained associate membership in both the LWF and the International Lutheran Council. It has also developed with Lutheran Church-Canada the one and only ‘special relationship’ established in the decades since union.

That Australian Lutherans continue to commune in overseas Lutheran Churches and cooperate with them in various activities, including mission, theological education and service, suggests a shift from a more legal concept of declared fellowship to one that is dynamic, to the perception of *communio* as something graciously given and discovered as we find our brothers and sisters in the faith in common confession, worship and work. For our partnership in the gospel with Churches in Papua New Guinea and in South East Asia, and for our special relationship with Lutheran Church-Canada we thank our gracious God.

Historians may one day judge the LCA’s dialogue with other Churches in Australia to be one of its greatest achievements – if not the greatest – humanly speaking. The Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue has been marked by its depth of theological engagement and by the clarity of its documents on the sacraments, on ministry, on the doctrine of justification, on communion and mission, on Scripture and tradition. A direct result of this dialogue is the LCA’s answer to the question, ‘Is the Pope the Antichrist?’, adopted by the CTICR in 1993 (DSTO I3b). The Theses of Agreement had repeated the charge that ‘the papacy is part of the kingdom of Antichrist’ (VII.7; DSTO 1, A16). Thirty three years later the Commission did not shrink from a ‘critical review’ of the Theses at this point. Doubtless, the changed attitude to the papacy was partly due to changes within the Church of Rome, but it was also the product of better understandings as a result of dialogue (DSTO I3b 3.2). It is important to note that the new document did not seek to reject any statement on the papacy in the Book of Concord. Historical judgments that are now no longer valid may regain their validity in a new age!

We thank our gracious God also for deepened mutual understanding also between Anglicans and Lutherans in this land, as evidenced in the production of joint statements contained in the report titled, Common Ground. Here as in the case of dialog with the Uniting Church, theological engagement has led to important practical results: the sharing of pastoral ministry to people in isolated locations within our land. In all dialogues (including that with the Dutch Reformed Church) we Lutherans have come to be respected as people who take their confession of faith seriously.

Another major area of theological discussion can be summed up under the heading of ministry, including the public office on the one hand, and the participation of all members in the Church’s ministry and mission on the other. Our Church has a high
view of the public office and clearly distinguishes it from the priesthood of all believers (see ‘The Ministry of the People of God and the Public Ministry’ (1992; DSTO 2 D1). However, our dialogues with other Churches have challenged us to ask whether ministry can take multiple forms, including the office of bishop and deacon. Renewed interest in the personal exercise of oversight (episkope) in the church is behind the practical question before the synod: whether our LCA presidents should be called bishops. That question, like the current debate on the validity of ordaining women to the public ministry, has a long history. The LCA has changed its practice in the past, first allowing women to vote at all church meetings (1978), then allowing them to serve on boards and committees of the Church (1984), then as elders (2000). With reference to the ordination of women, the CTICR has laboured long and hard to give guidance to the Church, but the final decision will have to be made by the whole Church.

In conclusion, the theological work done by the CTICR, by sub-committees, by district and General Pastors Conferences is evidence of the LCA’s commitment to faithfulness to its Lord and the desire to seek God’s will when faced with changing circumstances, new questions and challenges. The range of topics covered, from the *Theses of Agreement* to the full corpus of *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions* and ongoing theological work, is truly impressive. In all this, in our common confession and in our quest to be obedient to the Lord’s will where there is still disagreement, we acknowledge both the Spirit’s guiding and our human fallibility. There is still much cause for thankfulness. The LCA takes its confession seriously.

This moment of thankfulness and celebration is also a moment to issue a caution. We are Lutheran because of our commitment to the historic Confessions. Subsequent statements of doctrine and theological opinion are not on the same level. In 1976 the CTICR wisely stated that the *Theses of Agreement* ‘are always under the authority of the Word of God…[T]heir permanent status and authority are entirely determined by the faithfulness and accuracy with which they reflect the teaching of God’s Word, in particular the doctrine of the Gospel’ (DSTO A 26). What is true of the Theses is true of all doctrinal statements of the LCA. Every statement is open to critical review, for the LCA is not infallible, nor is the theological heritage we have received from the past a compendium of unalterable dogmatics.

In 1989, the then General Secretary of the LCA, Kevin Schmidt, finished his foreword to Volume 1 of *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions* with the sentence: ‘This volume should be seen, not as a compendium of doctrine, but as a set of historical guideposts as the church confronts the world in its journey this side of the great day of the Lord’. That remains true. We should gratefully accept our theological heritage not as a finished product, but as a call to affirm, confess, and live the truth of God here and now even if that means rethinking past positions.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*
Current issues in theology

Jeff Silcock

There are many topics that could be taken up on this occasion as we celebrate the theology of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA). You only have to consider the agenda of the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations (CTICR) over the last ten years to get an idea of the scope of the Church's theological engagement. After having been pre-occupied with the ordination issue and the matter of full membership in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) for some two decades, the commission has recently been working on a variety of projects including human sexuality; spiritual warfare and deliverance ministry; ecology and the care of God's earth; infant communion and prophecy. During the previous triennium we looked at issues such as multi-religious gatherings, principals as spiritual heads (a major topic at the 2009 synod), a diaconate for lay church workers, Christian vocation and discipleship, and private confession and absolution (which might well have been the most important topic, spiritually, considered by the 2009 synod, growing out of concern for the seal of confession).

Any brief retrospect of current issues could not fail to include the topic of hermeneutics which, in one way or the other, the Church has been wrestling with from the start of its discussions about the ordination of women. The focus of attention today is more on our context rather than the biblical content: how do we hear and understand Scripture today? An important milestone in this journey was the international hermeneutics symposium hosted by the LCA in October 2011. This event, which by all accounts was a stand-out success, was initiated by President Mike Semmler, and we thank him for his vision in bringing together theologians from across the world and from across the Lutheran family to discuss together issues concerning the contemporary interpretation of Scripture. The question now is *quo vadis* LCA?—where to from here in thinking about the role and significance of hermeneutics in the interpretation of Scripture?

As we look at recent and current issues in theology and church there can be no doubt that the ecumenical involvement of the LCA has become increasingly important and may yet be its most important achievement in its first fifty years which, by God's grace, the LCA will celebrate in 2016.

Already the LCA's entry into the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) in 1998 marked a growing maturity and self-confidence that allowed us to take our place in the ecumenical world. And, given our small size and conservative character, our contribution to the NCCA has been remarkable. Bishop John Henderson served with distinction as the second General Secretary for eight years (2001-2009) before becoming Principal of Australian Lutheran College, and former President Mike Semmler also made a sterling contribution as a Head of Church for some thirteen years.

However, in those early days, the main thing that drove the LCA to enter into ecumenical dialogue was the great zeal we had to share the treasure of the Lutheran confessional tradition with its clear distinction between law and gospel, and its emphasis on
justification as the central doctrine of the faith. There was the conviction that we had hidden our gospel light under the bucket for too long. Now was the time to put it on the lampstand to let it shine its illuminating rays into the fog of ecumenical confusion. If I exaggerate, it's only to make a point.

While all that might be true, today talk like this can sound a little too proud and boastful. And this kind of paternalistic attitude can easily give rise to an approach to ecumenical dialogue that sees it mainly as an opportunity for us to teach and impart rather than to receive. However, today we see things differently. Not that we are any the less confident of our great confessional heritage. But we are becoming far more aware that we not only have much to give but also much to receive from others. We do not have a monopoly on the truth. Today there is a new way of approaching dialogue, which is rapidly gaining traction, called 'receptive ecumenism'. This approach suggests that we come to the table with a sense of humility and brokenness, not to offer others what we think they need, even if they haven't realised it yet, but to ask what gift or charism the other has that the LCA needs and that would enrich our life, theology or spirituality. In other words, part of our growing maturity is more of a self-critical awareness that invites others to help us see things about ourselves that we cannot see by ourselves. This is of inestimable value in dialogue because humility begets humility; it deepens the bonds of trust between dialogue partners, transforms attitudes, and brings about a new level of honesty.

The LCA is in dialogue with three churches: the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, and the Uniting Church. All began within the first decade after union. These dialogues have been tremendously important for the Church because from the outset they forced it out of its early ghetto-like mentality that it had inherited from its pietist roots. We commend and honour the foresight of our early LCA leaders who saw to it that the Church would engage in dialogue with other churches from the start.

Our conversation with the Roman Catholic Church is our oldest dialogue (almost 40 years old) and in many ways the most important because of its depth of theological discussion and the significant documents it produces. The highlight of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogue, both globally and here in Australia, would have to be study on the doctrine of justification in the 1990s culminating with the publication in 1999 of Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) at the international level and a parallel document here in Australia, Justification: A common statement of the Australian Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue (1999). The international document was signed by the Vatican and the Head of the Lutheran World Federation in a liturgical ceremony in the German city of Augsburg. The LCA and the Catholic Church in Australia also marked the event with joint thanksgiving services in several of the capital cities. We have every reason to celebrate with pride the Australian document on justification because, by common consent, the locally produced version is arguably superior to the international one. Of course, not everyone was cracking open the champagne. The international document had many critics and it's true that some criticism was justified. But we need to remember that this is only a beginning. There is not as yet full agreement on all aspects of justification. The Annexe to the JDDJ already points out the deficiencies and the
areas that still need further study: such as the doctrines of sin and anthropology and the Lutheran axiom that Christians are simultaneously saints and sinners.

If we were going according to chronological order, we would mention the Anglican—Lutheran dialogue next but this dialogue has unfortunately been inactive for the greater part of a decade due to circumstances beyond our control but is now being reactivated and its first topic of study is missiology. Its last great achievement, which we celebrate today, is the production of *Common Ground*, which was launched in a service at St Peters Cathedral in 2001 at which Dr Vic Pfitzner was the preacher. This document laid the groundwork for partnerships between Anglican and Lutheran congregations in special situations.

The Lutheran–Uniting dialogue is the third dialogue group that is doing enormously important work. As with the Anglican Church, one of the fruits of dialogue with the Uniting Church has been the establishment of cooperative ministry arrangements between local congregations of our two churches. Just as the arrangement with the Anglican Church is based on *Common Ground*, so too the arrangement with the Uniting Church is based on the *Mutual Declaration of Agreement* which was accepted overwhelmingly by the LCA’s 2009 synod.

The LCA–UCA dialogue is different in two respects to that between Lutherans and Catholics: First, it doesn’t normally study a topic for as long or as deeply as does the Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogue—although the four year discussion held by the LCA–UCA on the interpretation of Scripture in connection with the topic of homosexuality is an exception. Secondly, the work of the dialogue often has an immediately practical application. One such example is the recent production of a commentary on the *Great Prayer of Thanksgiving*, selected by agreement from the UCA’s *Uniting in Worship*. This prayer of thanksgiving, along with the accompanying commentary, will be a useful teaching device in all co-operating congregations. But it will also be used more widely by both our churches as an educational resource—beginning with an information evening that was held in Horsham on 13 May 2013 for all members of the LCA and UCA in the Wimmera—Mallee region.

This has been just a brief snapshot of some of the milestones we can celebrate in our ecumenical journey together with other churches. We need each other, for we can never properly be the church catholic in isolation but only as we engage with other churches and help each other in grappling with the big issues that confront us all, which these days lie more and more in the area of ethics than doctrine.

At the end of the day all that we do in theology is not the final word but only stages on the way, for as we know, all our theological formulations this side of heaven remain purely provisional. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but when the *teleios*, the perfection comes, we will see face to face.
Today, as we celebrate the theology of the church looking back to the past, we give thanks to God for these modest successes in our ecumenical endeavours. We thank him for these milestones along the way and pray that he would give us the grace to continue along the same path in the future.

**Conclusion**

Our founding narrative shows that our ancestors in faith left their country and came to Australia impelled by a deep theological concern. After courageous beginnings, the fledgling community was soon seriously divided by dissension on theological issues, so much so that for 120 years there were various separated synods. Despite division, a strong theology and practice of mission has given successive generations of Lutherans common cause in the gospel. Even when divided, faithful confessional theology united Lutherans in Christ, even when they scarcely acknowledged this. During the course of the 20th century, hard-fought agreements in theology brought into being a new unity and a new church. Ongoing theological struggles have taken their toll on the LCA but at the same time have also enabled us to grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. Our theology is taught in our seminary, now ALC, is given fruitful expression in our theological journal LTJ, is hammered out in the sometimes gruelling work of CTICR, is overseen by our bishops, is faithfully proclaimed by our pastors, is expressed in our worship and hymnody, our catechesis and our schools, and is lived out by thousands and thousands of faithful Lutheran Christians. Blessed to be one Lutheran Church in Australia, we celebrate almost 40 years of fruitful theological dialogue with other Christians. In our partnerships in the gospel, neighbouring Lutheran churches in PNG and SE Asia look to us especially in theology, and how to do theology the Lutheran way. At the heart of all our theology is the theology of the cross, for ‘we proclaim Christ crucified’ (1 Cor 1:23), and we are ‘not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith’ (Rom 1:16).