

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 2 C. CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

The Lutheran Church of Australia's application for associate membership in the Lutheran World Federation

Adopted by General Synod, 1993.

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1. WHAT **WAS** PRIOR TO 1966

- 1.1 Before the formation of the Lutheran Church of Australia, one church (United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia [UELCA]) was a full member of the Lutheran World Federation, the other church (Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia [ELCA]) was not. The UELCA participated in the activities and programs of the Lutheran World Federation wherever it could do so without sacrificing its confessional principles, while the ELCA believed membership involved such a sacrifice.
- 1.2 Agreement could not be reached at that time. But a way out of the impasse was found through the realisation that the Lutheran Church of Australia would be a new church without membership in the Lutheran World Federation. Any decision regarding future membership would have to be taken at a later date by the new united church.
- 1.3 The Document of Union did, however, say several important things about **full** membership in the Lutheran World Federation. It said that the holy Scriptures neither command nor forbid membership in an association or federation of churches. Such membership is a matter of free choice for the Lutheran Church of Australia. The church, the Document said, will make its decisions in the light of its commitment to true Lutheran doctrine and practice, and taking into account the general wellbeing of the church.¹

The Document of Union went on to refer to an important doctrinal question which at that time was unresolved within the Lutheran World Federation itself. The question was: can a federation with a clear theological basis do essential church work on behalf of its member churches without itself becoming a kind of 'super church'?

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA'S APPLICATION FOR
ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

Finally, the Document of Union said that both churches agree that the new, united church would not try to join the Lutheran World Federation until the implications of membership had been resolved to the satisfaction of the new church.²

2. WHAT DEVELOPED IN THE MEANTIME

- 2.1 After about fifteen years of growing together in the Lutheran Church of Australia, many people thought it was time to take up the question of Lutheran World Federation membership. After initial study by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations and pastors conferences, the 1981 General Synod resolved (not unanimously) that membership of the Lutheran Church of Australia in the Lutheran World Federation is possible and does not necessarily invalidate or contradict the teachings of the Lutheran Church of Australia. The following important provisos were added:
- Acceptance and entry of the Lutheran Church of Australia into membership of the Lutheran World Federation must not be understood to imply reciprocal church fellowship on the part of the Lutheran Church of Australia with any of the member churches; and
 - It must be made clear to the Lutheran World Federation and the Christian church in the world that the Lutheran Church of Australia continues to see itself as being in close relationship with those churches in the Lutheran family which have a doctrinal position similar to that set out in the Theses of Agreement. We are determined to cultivate this relationship, which is a gracious gift of God, and give our support to the witness and confession these churches give to the world.³
- 2.2 The same General Synod noted that many of the practical implications of joining the Lutheran World Federation had not been fully studied. It resolved that these implications should be investigated by the Commission on Theology and InterChurch Relations, the General Church Council, and all congregations. The whole question would be considered again at the 1984 General Synod of the Lutheran Church of Australia.
- 2.3 The 1984 Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, held in Budapest, signalled its intention to alter the Lutheran World Federation constitution. It was noted that the alteration, proposing that all member churches would automatically be in full church fellowship with each other, clashed directly with proviso number one of the Lutheran Church of Australia's 1981 resolution [see 2:1 above]. Nevertheless, the 1984 General Synod resolved that further study be undertaken on the implications of membership.⁴
- 2.4 The 1987 General Synod instructed the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations to study the Lutheran World Federation Executive's explanation of the meaning of the changed constitution. The Commission was also encouraged 'to develop acceptable relationships as heretofore'.⁵
- 2.4 The Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations reported to the 1990 General Synod that the Lutheran World Federation Assembly, convened at Curitiba, had ratified the new constitution, and that Article III stated that the Lutheran World Federation is a communion of churches which agree in the proclamation of the word of God and are united in pulpit and altar fellowship. However, it was observed that the new constitution introduced the possibility of associate membership.

The 1990 Synod resolved that the president of the church and the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations be encouraged to continue to investigate the significance, and possibility, of associate membership in the Lutheran World Federation.⁶

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA'S APPLICATION FOR
ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

3. WHAT IS NOW

- 3.1 Early in 1991 church leaders conferred with Lutheran World Federation Executive members in Canberra to hear firsthand the proposed details relating to associate membership. The proposal regarding associate membership became part of the bylaws of the Lutheran World Federation which were adopted by the Lutheran World Federation Council in Chicago in July 1991. The chairman of Committee 5 (Federations), a sub-committee of the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, was present to gain a full appreciation of the intent of the council.
- 3.2 The category of associate membership is open to Lutheran churches which accept the doctrinal basis set down in Article II of the Constitution, but are unable to accept the whole constitution (for example, Article III) and therefore wish to have the option of excluding themselves from particular activities of the Lutheran World Federation for reasons of conscience. Such associate members may participate in all the activities of the Lutheran World Federation; their representatives have the right to speak in assemblies; they may not, however, vote or hold elective office.⁷
- 3.3 On the one hand, it may be seen that the availability of the category of associate membership places our church in a roughly similar situation to that of the 1981 Synod resolution. In other words, it is now quite clear once again that we may have a membership which does not imply mutual or reciprocal church fellowship on the part of the Lutheran Church of Australia with any of the member churches.

On the other hand, it is possible to view the decision facing us now as a more straightforward one. In 1981 the question related to the possibility of **full** membership; this was met by those two provisos [2:1 above]. In 1993 it is a question of **associate** membership; and the provisos are already granted by the Lutheran World Federation itself.

4. THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE FAITHFUL TO THE INTENT OF THE DOCUMENT OF UNION

- 4.1 In proposing that we apply for associate membership we are being faithful to the important theological principles expressed in the Document of Union, 4-8 (see 4.2 below) and the Theses of Agreement.⁸ It is faithfulness to the content of those historic documents which has prevented us from applying for full membership — despite the 1981 Synod resolution — because of the changes to the Lutheran World Federation constitution since 1981. It is also faithfulness to the whole of the sections referred to that prompts us to seek associate membership now.
- 4.2 The Document of Union, 4-8, affirms these basic theological principles:
 - 4.2.1 The one, holy, Christian church is present where the marks of church are to be found. [According to the Lutheran Confessions, one can tell where the Christian church is by looking for its 'marks', namely 'the pure doctrine of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in accordance with the gospel of Christ']
 - 4.2.2 Altar and pulpit fellowship presupposes unity in the pure doctrine of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.
 - 4.2.3 We cannot acknowledge ourselves to be in fellowship with churches with which we are not one in doctrine and practice.

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA'S APPLICATION FOR ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

4.2.4 There then follows this significant paragraph:

There are, however, forms of cooperation between churches not in church fellowship that are not necessarily a witness to unity in faith. God's word does not explicitly or categorically justify or condemn such cooperation in special circumstances. Therefore all such extraordinary cooperation must be determined from case to case. Differences in judgment can be expected here and should be tolerated according to the law of love.⁹

4.3 The Document of Union continues by drawing some practical conclusions in paragraphs 9-11, the three paragraphs which the Lutheran Church of Australia's constituting convention resolved should form the basis for determining relationships with other Lutheran churches. In summary, these paragraphs state:

4.3.1 We are in church fellowship with all Lutheran churches which subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions and adhere to them in doctrine and practice (par 9).

4.3.2 We cannot acknowledge ourselves to be in church fellowship with Lutheran churches which do not express their adherence to the Lutheran Confessions in doctrine and practice (par 10).

4.3.3 The possibility or the extent of cooperation with other churches or associations of them must be determined according to the circumstances (par 11).

4.4 As long as some member churches of the Lutheran World Federation are seen by the Lutheran Church of Australia to be described by 4.3.1 above and other member churches are seen to be described by 4.3.2 above, the Lutheran Church of Australia is not in a position to seek **full** membership in the Lutheran World Federation. Seeking **associate** membership, however, is a positive practical fulfilment of the expressed resolve to define and decide the extent of our cooperation with such churches until the desired goal of unity is achieved.

This action is in keeping with the declaration in paragraph 10 of the Document of Union (4.3.2 above); and it is also in keeping with the whole of paragraph 11. The final phrase of paragraph 11 says that we are at liberty to determine the possibility or extent of our cooperation as long as we do not condone any improper union or cease our witness against improper unions of churches.

In actual fact, associate membership will place us in the situation where our representatives will have to witness for our confessional principles against what we regard as the improper union of churches. Our very application for associate membership will include such a witness.

5. THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE FAITHFUL TO THE CALL OF OUR LORD

5.1 The Theses of Agreement include in the section 'On the Church' a series of theses on 'The Church and Its Unity According to Article VII of the Augsburg Confessions'. Thesis 20 has this to say about the unity of the church:

The Church of Christ is essentially one... The doctrine of the Church is, therefore, at the same time a doctrine of the unity, of the oneness of the Church. The unity of the Church is a gift and a task (cf Thesis 3 and Eph 4:3,4; John 17; Acts 2:42ff).¹⁰

5.2 The history of the Lutheran Church in Australia reveals that there has been a genuine desire to acknowledge the gift of unity that has existed with Lutheran churches overseas, as well as a keenness to undertake the task involved where differences of doctrine and practice have been seen to exist.

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA'S APPLICATION FOR
ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

- 5.3 The existence of the Lutheran Church of Australia itself bears witness to the fact that both previously-existing churches undertook the task of reaching out to each other in dialogue — under God and his word — to discover God's gift of unity.
- 5.4 In these ways the Lutheran Church of Australia has shown that it is a church which wants neither to enter into an improper union with other churches nor to remain sinfully aloof. It is committed to seeking ways to express the unity of Christians in keeping with the directives of the Lord and his apostles. Hence the Lutheran Church of Australia has also been actively involved in dialogue with the mainstream non-Lutheran denominations in Australia.

To dialogue with another church with the goal of attaining unity is by no means an abandonment of one's particular confession of the faith. On the contrary, our own guidelines for all such dialogue clearly specify that such conversations are to be entered into 'with the testimony of the historical confessions of the church constantly in mind'.¹¹

- 5.5 In a somewhat similar way, associate membership in the Lutheran World Federation will give us the opportunity to be in dialogue with a very large number of Lutheran churches — churches which by their own testimony want to be Lutheran — without sacrificing any of the evangelical teachings which we hold dear.
- 5.6 This is our positive and constructive obedience to the call of the Lord to seek to maintain unity. We will be able to witness to our strong convictions as we seek appropriate ways to express unity with those with whom we are not in full church fellowship. And there is no reason to suspect that this associate relationship with those churches will dampen our eagerness to pursue the same goal with other Lutheran churches who are not members of the Lutheran World Federation.

6. THE REASONS FOR ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP

- 6.1 Associate membership in this large federation of Lutheran churches will clearly indicate that the Lutheran Church of Australia is genuinely interested and active in Christian and Lutheran unity, not only as gift but also as task
- 6.2 As an associate member, the Lutheran Church of Australia will have the right to have representation at Lutheran World Federation meetings with the privilege of participation in the discussions (even though without voting rights).
- 6.3 This right of representation and participation is a significant one. It means that the Lutheran Church of Australia will be in a better position to make its distinctive voice heard when the majority of Lutheran churches in the world are gathered representatively. By its very nature, associate membership will place greater demands on us to declare at assemblies and councils exactly what we believe, teach and confess. This confessional voice will serve to strengthen the other strongly confessional churches who need this support, and who, in some instances, have expressed the importance of our church's presence for this very purpose.
- 6.4 Our willingness to be in conversation with this very large federation of Lutheran churches will be helpful for the work which the Lutheran Church of Australia is convinced it must do both in Australia and in Asia. Ethnic groups and congregations (such as the German-speaking congregations in Melbourne and Sydney) have had some reservations about linking with a Lutheran church which seems to stand aloof from other Lutheran churches with whom they had or have connections.

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA'S APPLICATION FOR ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

There can be little doubt that our relationship with the churches with whom we want to work in the South East-Asia region will be helped considerably if we take up associate membership with the Federation to which most of these churches belong, and which in some instances founded them or rescued them from oblivion.

- 6.5 The Lutheran Church of Australia will be given the opportunity to have representatives on committees and commissions of the Lutheran World Federation, especially those relating to South-East Asia.
- 6.6 As an associate member, the Lutheran Church of Australia will be contributing in various ways to the welfare of small and/or struggling Lutheran churches throughout the world. These churches need the encouragement and support of stronger churches which are one in confessing with them the historic Lutheran faith.
- 6.7 For many years the Lutheran Church of Australia has been happy to participate fully in some Lutheran World Federation activities (e.g. Lutheran World Service; scholarship programs; attendance at conferences in Asia). Members of the Lutheran Church of Australia have occupied important staff positions in the Lutheran World Federation. Taking up associate membership will add a further significant witness to the Lutheran Church of Australia's desire to participate as far as we possibly may with a good conscience. It will also show that we are willing not only to receive the benefits of being associated with the Lutheran World Federation, but also to accept the responsibilities which belong to such an association.
- 6.8 By taking our committed stance into this arena of world Lutheranism we are showing that it is possible to steer a positive course between, on the one hand, a willingness to enter into an improper union and, on the other, an unchristian determination to remain apart from other Christians. With this action the Lutheran Church of Australia may well set the pattern for other confessional Lutheran churches.

7. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

7.1 **'Associate membership means membership in the Lutheran World Federation, and accordingly it involves us in pulpit and altar fellowship with all member churches.'**

No. Our application for associate membership will specifically state that the Lutheran Church of Australia cannot declare itself to be in pulpit and altar fellowship with all the member churches, but that all such declarations need to be made individually on the basis of unity of doctrine and practice. It is because we take this firm stand that we are proposing application for associate membership and *not* full membership.

7.2 **'Our confessional voice will be lost in so vast an organisation.'**

This is indeed a possibility; but if our voice is not heard, the fault will be ours, not the Lutheran World Federation's. Associate membership will always place the Lutheran Church of Australia in the situation where its representatives must bear witness to the reason for their associate (and not full) membership. Associate membership and witnessing regarding our theological position go hand in hand. Besides, there are churches already in the Lutheran World Federation who wish to be confessional Lutheran churches. Their voice will be supported by the Lutheran Church of Australia's voice, so that, at the very least, this voice will be heard more audibly.

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA'S APPLICATION FOR
ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

7.3 'This step would amount to unfaithfulness to the Document of Union and the Theses of Agreement.'

A careful reading of these important documents reveals that our application (with the public statement that we cannot be in pulpit and altar fellowship with all member churches) is in complete harmony with the principles stated there — and with the undertaking given to determine the extent to which we can cooperate with Lutheran churches with whom we have not yet reached the desired unity.

7.4 'Becoming an associate member will in fact mean that we are joining an organisation which will act as a super-church on our behalf.'

This objection fails to understand the nature of associate membership, and it ignores the constitution of the Lutheran World Federation. Although the latter seeks to effect the closest of unions between its member churches, it specifically states (in Article IV) that all member churches are autonomous, and that the Lutheran World Federation may act on behalf of its constituents only in matters committed to it by them.

7.5 'This action would ignore the synodical decisions made on the question of Lutheran World Federation membership since 1966.'

A close study of the early sections of this present document shows that the proposal in favour of associate membership, far from contradicting past synodical resolutions, is actually firmly based on them all.

7.6 'Applying for associate membership will mean that we are leaving in the lurch other confessional Lutheran churches who are not Lutheran World Federation members for reasons of conscience.'

Leaders of some of these churches with whom we have had recent discussions have actually expressed interest in, and encouragement for, our treading this new path. Besides, this application is not being made with the intention of loosening our close ties with all confessional Lutheran churches, wherever they may be. The Document of Union expressly says that 'we are ready to enter into full cooperation with them or associations of them'.¹²

Our presidents and the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations are at present involved in the preparation of the groundwork for the declaration of a 'Recognition of Relationship' between the Lutheran Church of Australia and other Lutheran churches in the world with whom we have contact and with whom we have so much in common. [see DSTO II C14 – C17] Again, both of these approaches toward other Lutherans are evidence of the Lutheran Church of Australia's commitment to the pursuit of true unity among Christians, in keeping with the Lord's directive.

7.7 'Associate membership will soon be followed by full membership and then membership in the World Council of Churches.'

While there may always be some members of the Lutheran Church of Australia who will want to go this way, this domino effect is neither envisaged nor intended by those proposing associate membership. There is nothing overt in the Lutheran World Federation constitution or by-laws which would demand progress toward full membership. The objection all too easily assumes either that our becoming an associate member will very quickly bring about complete unity of doctrine and practice in all the participating churches, or that our doctrinal position at present is so weak, or so insecurely founded, that we shall easily surrender it. Whatever happens in the future will happen only as the Lutheran Church of Australia itself determines that it shall happen.

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA'S APPLICATION FOR
ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP IN THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

- 7.8 **'Within the Lutheran Church of Australia and within officialdom in the Lutheran World Federation it may be known that the Lutheran Church of Australia is merely an associate member; but the popular perception worldwide will be that the Lutheran Church of Australia has become a member of the Lutheran World Federation.'**

This could be the case. To have such an associate relationship with the Lutheran World Federation may well mean that we shall be identified purely and simply with the Lutheran World Federation itself. But we shall make a point of informing other confessional Lutheran churches with whom we have contact of the true situation and of its implications. Beyond that there is little we can do to correct improper perceptions.

- 7.9 **'There will be so many other practical difficulties, not least being the massive financial obligations entailed.'**

Our main concern has been the theological question. Where there are seen to be positive reasons why we should be in a position to bear our confessional witness to other Lutherans, the practical difficulties do not loom large. Associate members pay fees on the same basis as full members. An unofficial inquiry has revealed that membership fees for the Lutheran Church of Australia would be roughly equivalent to those paid by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, that is, about US\$20,000.

References

- 1 Document of Union, par 15 (see *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions I* [DSTO I], A35)
- 2 Document of Union, par 16 (see *DSTO I*, A35)
- 3 Seventh General Synod of the LCA (Indooroopilly), Resolution 248 (see Report, page 87)
- 4 Eighth General Synod of the LCA (Croydon), Resolution 209 (see Report, pages 78-79)
- 5 Ninth General Synod of the LCA (Novar Gardens), Resolution 239 (see Report, page 80)
- 6 Tenth General Synod of the LCA (Canberra), Resolution 110 (see Report, page 50)
- 7 By-laws of the Lutheran World Federation, 2.4.1 and 2.4.3.1
- 8 Theses of Agreement V.25-29 (see *DSTO I*, A13 – A14). For the full text of the Document of Union, paragraphs 4-8, see *DSTO I*, A33 – A34
- 9 Document of Union, paragraph 8 (see *DSTO I*, A34); Theses of Agreement V.29 (see *DSTO I*, A14)
- 10 See *DSTO I*, A12
- 11 Dialogues with Other Church Bodies or Organisations: Guidelines for Working Committees, 3(b) [see *DSTO I*, G1(b)]
- 12 Document of Union, paragraph 9 (see *DSTO I*, A34)