

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 2

F. WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Should women serve as lay readers in public worship?

A statement prepared by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations in 1993 answered the above question in the negative. However, this prohibition of women serving as lay readers was overturned by the fourteenth regular convention of General Synod held in October 2003 which resolved 'that the use of women lay-readers, using prepared material only, be allowed within the Lutheran Church of Australia'. Therefore, the 1993 statement no longer represents the current teaching of the LCA. However, it has been preserved below as an historical record.

The following points serve as guidelines for the appointment of women to the office of lay reader so that, in line with the apostolic injunction, all things may be done decently and in order.

1. Lay readers operate under the authorisation and supervision of the pastor, or in the case of a vacancy, the district bishop.
2. The person(s) elected as lay reader should have the necessary gifts and qualities to be able to lead the worship of the congregation in a dignified way.
3. Where there is sensitivity to the appointment of a woman, the matter should be discussed openly by the congregation, and if necessary, with the bishop.
4. The Church has approved the election of women to the office of lay reader, but only men are eligible to be elected as lay preachers since the office of lay preacher is an extension of the pastoral office.
5. Lay readers, both men and women, are to use prepared sermons that have been approved by their pastor.
6. Lay readers normally lead the service from the lectern.
7. Commission on Worship Statement 27 (The role of the lay reader in regular corporate worship) should be consulted.
8. Congregations that wish to appoint women as lay readers may need to amend their constitution to allow for this if it is based on the LCA's model constitution.

For the purposes of preserving the historical record, the earlier statement of the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, prepared in 1993, is given below. This statement, which speaks against women serving as lay readers, is no longer the opinion of the Commission or of the Church and should be read in that light.

Should women serve as lay readers in public worship?

Adopted by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, 26 March 1993.

Edited August 2001.

The Commission cannot at this time approve the practice of women serving as lay readers in worship. We recommend that the church does not adopt this practice. The reasons for this judgment or opinion are as follows:

1. When a layman conducts a lay-reading service, he is functioning in the place of the pastor as leader in worship. He serves in this role by appointment by the congregation and under the authorisation and supervision of the pastor. In other words, his function and work falls within the area of service with the word. It is carried out on the authority of the pastor as an extension of the ministry with word and sacrament.
2. Some would argue that, since a lay reader functions in the place of the pastor and since the pastor is really responsible for the service, it should not matter whether the lay reader is a man or a woman. However, leading in worship is more than merely a function; it presumes an authoritative role in the worshipping community. The present theological position of the Lutheran Church of Australia is against women serving with this kind of authority. Therefore it would not be appropriate for women to act as leaders in public worship.
3. We also believe that the church would be acting unwisely if it were to adopt this practice at a time when a church-wide study is being undertaken on women and the office of the ministry. Adopting this practice at this time would inevitably be seen by many either as pre-empting the church's decision on this question, or as a strong statement in favour of women undertaking a leading role in the liturgical community.
4. We believe it is wise at the present time for the whole church to become seriously involved in the ongoing discussions and debate and to await the consensus which we hope to achieve on this matter. Any action which could be seen as pre-empting the final decision, should be avoided.

Note: As a general principle the church has always recognised the need to take emergency measures to meet needs in emergencies.