

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 2

G. INTERDENOMINATIONAL COOPERATION – CHURCH MOVEMENTS

Pastoral care of isolated members

Adopted by the Church Relations Committee of the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, September 1994.

Edited September 2001.

INTRODUCTION

Lutheran pastors take very seriously their responsibility to ensure that church members are cared for spiritually. Hence, the prime concern of pastors who want to minister to members living in isolated parts of Australia and New Zealand is the members' spiritual welfare. This is best served when members regularly receive a ministry of word and sacraments within a worshipping community.

The Lutheran Church of Australia [LCA] has always tried to avoid providing rules and regulations designed to govern every pastoral situation that might arise. It has done this

- a. in the conviction that the 'rules-and-regulations' approach to pastoral care easily degenerates into unhelpful hairsplitting and legalistic quibbling; and
- b. in the confidence that pastors are well equipped to apply the theology of the LCA to whatever situation they face.

A. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

1. All members of the body of Christ are in fellowship with one another and have responsibilities towards one another, in keeping with their abilities and gifts (1 Cor 12).
2. Christians are called to hold fast to the truth and to bear witness to the truth which has been revealed in God's word. They are to do this in a spirit of gentleness and respect for people (2 Thess 2:4; 1 Pet 3:15–16).
3. Christians are called to avoid those who do not teach what God's word teaches (Rom 16:17–19; Gal 1:6–9; 2 Pet 2: 1–3; 1 John 4:1–6; 2 John 7–11).

4. The Holy Spirit uses the ministry of word and sacraments to reconcile people to God and keep them in the state of grace (Augsburg Confession, articles 4, 5, 6). Therefore, a pastor should refer members to others for pastoral care only after making sure that in the new worship situation the gospel will be proclaimed and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution.
5. If for some legitimate reason Lutherans attend services outside of their own fellowship, their attendance on such occasions should not be taken to mean that they don't care about church fellowship issues. The circumstances will have to decide whether Lutherans can join in the prayers and to what extent they can take part in the worship (compare Theses of Agreement II, 4 [DSTO I A5]).

B. PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS ¹

1. Some pastors are able to provide education and pastoral care for members in remote areas by telephone, mail, email or other means.
2. Some pastors can readily extend pastoral care to members in remote places because they have adequate resources, and they and the members concerned are open to developing a house-church which is led by lay people and served by a pastor on occasional visits.

If there is sound leadership and internal cohesion in a family in a remote area, that family could well function as a house church. Such a family could even serve as an outreach centre if it could provide Christian nurture and instruction.

3. Some pastors may have no option but to refer isolated members to the pastoral care of other Christian pastors who are known to preach the gospel and to have a biblical understanding of the sacraments. In this situation the Lutheran pastor must try to make sure that the pastor or priest of the congregation to which the Lutheran member is directed does not preach 'another gospel' (Gal 1:6,7) or engage in pastoral practices which will damage the spiritual life of people. This may have to be monitored on a regular basis.
4. It is recommended that pastors encourage members in isolated areas to remain official members of the LCA, even though the members' best interests may be served by worshipping regularly in a church of another denomination.
5. Pastors should continually evaluate the advice they offer, and make sure that it has a sound theological basis. Some doubtful beliefs include:
 - the only way to grow the church is by developing large congregations
 - there is little difference between Lutheran distinctives and the beliefs of other mainline Christian churches
 - regular reception of the Lord's supper is necessary for salvation
 - Christians living in isolated situations will eventually become dead branches on the vine of Jesus Christ.

¹ This document makes no reference to the LCA's transfer procedures. This is another issue. The information can be obtained from District Presidents or the National Office.

C. PERSONAL ISSUES

Pastors should pay close attention to the personality, values, beliefs, social and religious background, and physical circumstances of those with whom they are discussing the question of worship in remote places. Pastoral care that fails to treat the situation of the church member with the utmost seriousness, may well be inappropriate and spiritually harmful.

Some of the many factors to be borne in mind are:

- Some people need social contact and find it hard to maintain their sense of belonging to Christ's body unless they can participate regularly in congregational worship. Others are more individualistic and imagine (perhaps wrongly) that they can remain in robust spiritual health without regular contact with fellow believers.
- Some Lutherans value their Lutheran heritage to such an extent that the suggestion of worshipping in the church of another denomination - let alone joining another denomination - sounds to them like an invitation to be disloyal to their church and even to God.
- Given the ecumenical spirit of the age, however, it is not surprising that many Lutherans relate easily and readily with Christians of other denominations. Some who come into this category clearly confess the distinctive teachings of the Lutheran church, and witness appropriately to doctrinal differences. At the same time they rejoice in the unity of the gospel they have with members of churches whose teachings differ at various points from those of the Lutheran church.
- Other Lutherans have a different kind of ecumenical spirit. They have little time for denominational differences and have few qualms about joining another denomination if one of its churches is near at hand or its services are more appealing.

CONCLUSION

When advising far-flung members in matters which affect their worship and witness, it would be irresponsible of the pastor to operate with predetermined policies. The theological foundations are clear. However, as pastors seek to apply the LCA's teachings they will be hard pressed to find two situations that are the same. The advice they give in one situation may well differ from the advice given in another situation. The goal is to give appropriate advice.

Pastors face a complicated task as they try to ensure the best possible pastoral care for those who in the short or long term live in places far removed from regular preaching of the word and regular celebration of the sacraments by a Lutheran pastor in a Lutheran congregation.

Note: In July 2000 the General Synod of the Lutheran Church of Australia instructed the College of Presidents 'to establish and supervise local arrangements for pastoral care in special circumstances (e.g. isolated areas) on a church to church basis' (Resolution 16). In mind in particular were the Anglican Church of Australia and the Uniting Church in Australia.