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Editorial

Arising from its deep commitment to ecumenical relationships, the LCA (now LCA NZ)¹ has been heavily engaged in inter-church dialogue ever since the amalgamation of its predecessor bodies in 1966. The dialogues with the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting churches have continued to the present day, impelled by our Lord's prayer that his followers might reflect the unity that he enjoys with the Father (John 17:20,21), and by St Paul's plea that the church make 'every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3). A sound Lutheran maxim has it that Christ's gift of church unity remains an essential work in progress. This edition of *LTJ* has been designed chiefly to give readers a snapshot of the current state of play in the three dialogues in which the Church is involved.

After the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue completed its work on the Petrine Ministry (the Papacy) in 2016, it took up an invitation from the Vatican and Lutheran World Federation to participate in a world-wide joint reflection on the *Augsburg Confession* in the lead-up to the quincentenary of its signing in 2030. In 'Reflections on the Australian Lutheran-Catholic dialogue on the *Augsburg Confession*', Lutheran team member, Rev Dr Roger Whittall, provides the background to the present discussion, offers fascinating insights into its 'range, complexity, and longevity', outlines the methodology that is employed to keep moving the discussion forward, suggests the conclusions and outcomes that are hoped for, and touches on the learnings and the joys that inevitably flow from such intensive and long-running discussions.

The Anglican-Lutheran dialogue came to a stand-still after the adoption of *Common Ground* in 2001, which included previous agreed statements on topics such as baptism, the Eucharist, the ministry, and *episcopate* and unity. The dialogue believed that the statements provided sufficient basis for 'a national covenant for eucharistic hospitality and a recognition of each church's ministry', initially for implementation 'at the local level for the pastoral care of our members' (from the foreword to *Common Ground*). The dialogue resumed in 2013 to undertake a thorough-going study of the two churches' understanding of mission. The document that arose from this phase of the dialogue's work, *Common Ground: Perspectives on Mission*, calls on churches to work together intentionally on a large range of local mission and ministry ventures. In his essay, 'Good news and godly action: Anglicans and Lutherans working together in God's mission', the Lutheran co-chair, Rev Dr Steen Olsen, points out that the dialogue partners reached full agreement on their understanding of mission, together with the conviction that mission is no optional extra for the church.

As an important step along the way to a Concordat of full communion between the Uniting Church in Australia and the LCA, the dialogue between our two churches

¹ LCA and LCA NZ are used interchangeably in this issue of *LTJ*.

completed a comprehensive agreed statement on the Lord's Supper, titled *At the Table: the Eucharist*. This document was adopted by the UCA in 2022 and the LCA in 2023. The dialogue decided at an early stage to offer our respective churches a chronicle of the deliberations within the dialogue as it wrestled with the complexities of our respective understandings and commemorations of the Eucharist, and as it worked its painstaking way from suspicion and misunderstanding to full agreement. In 'A chronicle of joy: plotting the path to full eucharistic agreement between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Lutheran Church of Australia', Rev Dr Peter Lockwood highlights the sticking points in the dialogue's deliberations on the Eucharist and the 'Aha' moments that marked memorable breakthroughs at every step of the way.

Rev Dr Jeff Silcock's long-standing fascination with the Orthodox Church culminated in his appointment by the Lutheran World Federation to the International Lutheran-Orthodox Commission in 1999, on the recommendation of the LCA. In 'Where East meets West; International Lutheran-Orthodox conversations 2000-2018: a personal reflection', Dr Silcock shares with readers a helpful outline of Orthodoxy in general and the delights and insights that came from the theological discussions during his years of service. Silcock describes the substantial rifts between the Eastern and Oriental branches of Orthodoxy, and highlights the major roadblocks that impede the path to rapprochement between Orthodoxy and the rest of the Christian world. The paper is an edited version of an oral presentation that Silcock gave at the annual Fritzsche Oration in September 2022.

One of the many positive features of Receptive Ecumenism is its invitation to churches to engage in critical self-reflection, the kind of reflection that mixes deep love for one's church with the honesty to face its shortcomings and address them in a spirit of humility. The flipside of this coin is the reminder that God is present and at work in the people, the mindsets and the practices of other traditions, even a tradition with which we have, or think we have, little in common. Rather than being set on convincing 'the other' that they are wrong, and we are right, Receptive Ecumenism challenges us to keep asking ourselves what we need to learn from the other. During 'the ecumenical winter' of the early 2000s, the then Executive Officer of the South Australian Council of Churches, Ms Geraldine Hawkes, decided to invite member churches to draw on the insights of Receptive Ecumenism to help them work energetically and authentically towards greater unity and mutual understanding. Now well into retirement, Hawkes kindly accepted the invitation to assemble her ever evolving thoughts on Receptive Ecumenism for this volume of *LTJ*. In 'Receptive Ecumenism: a journey in patience, love and humility', she invites us to join with her and countless others in this crucial space.

In an edition of *LTJ* devoted to ecumenical relations it seemed fitting to invite a number of people to put in writing their reasons for leaving the LCA and making their home in another denomination. Invariably their appreciation for what they have gained from their upbringing in the LCA and their ongoing love and respect for their mother church resound through their stories. As a result, in most cases any constructive critique of the

LCA can only be inferred by attending to the powerful drawcards that have led these people to place their allegiance elsewhere.

It would be nothing more than an exercise in self-congratulation to gather committed LCA members to heap praise on the LCA by itemising what is already well known. Such writers would catalogue the distinctive marks of Lutheranism: its firm foundations in the bible and the Confessions, its liturgical worship, its sacramental teaching and practice, its welfare agencies, and its catechesis and nurture of the young. Quite rightly, such writers would point out that these very hallmarks of Lutheranism provide the driving force behind multiple LCA churches that take Christ's call to discipleship with the seriousness that it demands.

You are urged to honour the writers with an open heart and a generous spirit. They have been drawn beyond our walls by those features that all would agree contribute to a healthy and vibrant church life. So, they write that the church—not necessarily the denomination—where they have found a home stood out for displaying some, if not all, of the following characteristics: it practises hospitality, worships joyfully, proclaims the gospel clearly, teaches the bible intentionally, reflects deeply on matters of social justice, and engages in ongoing gospel outreach and targeted community care projects.

Dr Peter Lockwood
Guest Editor