

LUTHERANS AND ABORIGINAL MEMBERS

A Statement by the Council of Presidents of the Lutheran Church of Australia.

This Statement was prepared before the report and recommendations of the Committee on Aboriginal Issues and Ministry of the LCA was handed in to the General Church Council. That report, entitled *We're All People*, is being distributed widely in the church. Copies will go to all pastors and Convention delegates and to certain politicians and Heads of other churches. Recommendations emanating from the Report will be on the Convention agenda. These recommendations cover such issues as reconciliation, racism, land rights, involvement of Aboriginal people in the church, confidence building and leadership, training for ministries, women, education and youth, and community issues.

The Council of Presidents' Statement is presented to you for your earnest consideration and attention as you prepare to study *We're All People*.

The Lutheran Church of Australia has almost 100,000 members. Over 6,000 of these are indigenous Australians. That means that 6% of our members are Aboriginal, a percentage far greater than the ratio of indigenous people to the general Australian population.

The Lutheran Church in this country has been closely associated with Aboriginal people. In fact, even before Lutherans settled here, Lutheran missionaries came to work among the indigenous people of this land. For well over 100 years we have had Aboriginal mission centres and congregations in the Northern Territory, Queensland, and South Australia. Names like Hope Vale, Koonibba, and Hermannsburg have been household names among us. From the beginning our church has been concerned about the translations of Scripture into Aboriginal languages, and it made early use of Aboriginal evangelists. Our missionaries working among the indigenous people have been instrumental in warding off many assaults by non-Aboriginal Australians.

Aboriginal people do not always feel that they are welcomed and accepted by non-Aboriginal members and so do not always feel comfortable in church. Aboriginal members say they no longer want to be treated as objects of mission but simply want to be seen and accepted as a part of the church.

Aboriginal people are hardly represented on decision-making bodies in the church. Furthermore, bodies responsible for the church's work with Aboriginal people are in most instances located a long way from the areas involved and in some cases have little or no Aboriginal representation.

All of us, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Lutherans, need to recognise that over the years we have not always acted as the people of God should act. We have to admit that racist thoughts and actions have been part and parcel of our attitude and conduct on occasions. We have not always shown love and concern. Certainly non-Aboriginals have not always fought for justice for Aboriginal people who have often been the victims of injustice. Nor have non-Aboriginal people always pleaded with governments to do even more than has been done previously for the well-being of indigenous people. Nor have they always listened to the needs and plight of our indigenous people.

Over the years we have allowed ignorance, prejudice and discrimination to divide us. Many Aboriginal people have lost life, land, language, culture and dignity, and the rest of us have all too often been silent. Social indicators still place indigenous people in the most disadvantaged socio-economic group, despite the provision of special services in recent years.

We cannot undo the past. Some aspects of it we can and should deplore and deeply regret. We might even learn from the past. But we can't undo it. What we can do is to heed the call for reconciliation and justice. We can go with penitent hearts to our merciful God and ask him to change our heart and attitude, to create in us new hearts with a spirit willing to work together with each other for each other's good.

God does not want us to mull over the past and continue to build on the bitterness, hatred, enmity, injustice, ignorance, and failure to bend over backwards in the interests of each other. God wants us to work together, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to serve each other, our nation, and our God. To this end we, the Council of Presidents, call on the members of the Lutheran Church of Australia to commit themselves:

- to walk hand in hand as brothers and sisters of Christ, serving each other and especially those in need.
- to be concerned not only about mission but also about solidarity, Aboriginal with non-Aboriginal and vice-versa.
- to seek to involve Aboriginal people more fully in all aspects of the life of the church.
- to openly and honestly acknowledge also the negative side of the history of the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, also in the church, and be prepared to seek forgiveness for past wrongs.
- to extend the hand of forgiveness, fellowship, and reconciliation to each other.
- to get to know each other better with the aim of building bridges and building trust, since trust in each other will be the biggest factor in bringing about the desired reconciliation.
- to work with the state for satisfactory support of the indigenous people so far as land, employment, housing and general social conditions are concerned.

We have a long and difficult journey ahead. The journey starts at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ. From there we walk together, forgiven and forgiving, to build a future based on trust and acceptance with a fervent desire to love each other as Christ loved us and gave himself for us. To this we commit ourselves.

Lance G. Steicke

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