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Feb 17 2024

Sydney, NSW 2000

Dear Lindsay,

The following letter was drafted by the Rev'd Dr Craig Thompson on behalf of the UCA dialogue team, feedback given and agreed to unreservedly by the team.

The future of the Lutheran-Uniting Church ecumenical dialogue

The Dialogue between the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) and the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) has spanned some forty years. It has produced a number of significant statements, most recently *At the table* (2022).

Nonetheless, the Christian ecumenical landscape has shifted enormously since its mid-twentieth-century heyday, such that the older impetus towards denominational unions is almost totally lost. This is in part on account of the ongoing effects of the demise of Christendom, reducing time and energy for “external” conversation, and in part reflects the development of a global Christian reality which is not invested in the older western ecumenism. While the LCA continues to participate in several dialogues, the UCA now invests little in direct ecumenical conversation towards the kinds of ends which brought it into being, apart from the LCA-UCA Dialogue.

In view of these changed circumstances, recent LCA-UCA Dialogue meetings have been re-considering the Dialogue’s reason for being. We doubt that there is much benefit in continuing the kind of work which has been attempted over the last forty years or so. This work has tended to focus on doctrine comparison and the reconciliation and mutual recognition of our respective modes of theological expression. As useful as this has sometimes been, further work in this direction does not seem to be the best use of the dialogical space, or of the time and energy required in the Dialogue itself and the reception of its efforts in our wider denominations.

So far as the LCA-UCA relationship goes, we have already endorsed statements which reflect a high level of agreement and mutual recognition. The principal points of ongoing difference are the official doctrinal stance of each church on the ordination of women and (possibly) differences in practice around the ethics of sexual orientation and identity.

Yet while, for example, the question of the ordination of women is an official stumbling block between the Churches, we note that it is also a point of

considerable contention *within* the LCA and also with the UCA (although now, in the latter case, to much less an extent than forty years ago). That is, while there is a difference in official positions between the Churches, this division is variously present within the respective Churches themselves. The same could be said for many other issues – sexual identity and marriage, climate science, post-colonial responsibilities, and so on. This is to say that the kinds of things which might officially separate the Churches are also live within the respective Churches. It is difficult, then, to be confident that the Dialogue members can speak for either denomination when, internally, there is ongoing conversation which might yet change a Church's position.

As such, the Dialogue proposes that, rather than wrestling with each other's theological minutiae, there may be rather great value in addressing together some of the shared challenges in the denominations with a view to cooperative problem-solving and development of our common missional vocation in Christ.

Precisely what these challenges are, or which should be prioritised, is not clear, but working together towards a better understanding of common issues (looking forward in the same direction) might be a more promising future for ecumenical engagement than working on things we separate us (looking at one another). This is at least the case for the conversation between the Uniting and Lutheran Churches, which seems to have reached agreement that each is, indeed, the church.

We propose, then, that our respective Churches consider such a shift in the intention and form of the LCA-UCA Dialogue (and, by extension, any other dialogues) as would enable a further growing together by working more on the challenges we have in common and less on what we imagine might still divide us. This might include collaborative work on things like poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, social justice, post-colonial realities, faith education, multicultural (including indigenous) ministries in and of the church, identity politics, contemporary atheism, interfaith dialogue, and the dynamics of intra- and inter-denominational identity-with-difference, among other possibilities.

Theological discussions remain essential, but an approach that addresses common challenges might contribute to a more unified and impactful role for Christian denominations in the world. We believe that such a paradigm shift in ecumenical dialogue would have the potential to inform our experiences of ourselves and each other as Churches, and to strengthen the collective voice of the Christian community in addressing the pressing issues of our time.

We would appreciate your feedback on this suggested way forward,

Peace and with Grace

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anna Grant-Henderson", written over a horizontal line.

Rev Dr Anna Grant-Henderson

Co-chair LCA/UCA Dialogue