

Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia

Brief History – Report to CELC 2011

In the mid 1960's the ecumenical movement was sweeping Australia with an emphasis on unity in organisation without unity in doctrine. A group of conservative Lutherans stepped away from the Lutheran merger process to begin a confessional Lutheran Church body in 1966. Unfortunately, after five years, the group split due to the concerns of those who became the core of the ELSA over creeping legalism. Several faithful Lutheran pastors from North America served the remnant for short periods of time, bringing encouragement and strengthening of faith and practice.

At the end of the 1980's a graduate from the ELS seminary, Daniel Schroeder arrived in Brisbane. Together with key lay leaders in 1992, he was able to gather the scattered remnant into a new synod which resurrected the name of a conservative Australian Lutheran Church of the nineteenth century, the *Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia (ELSA)*. At various times, the synod has served people from the states of South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. Pastor Schroeder returned to the USA in 1994.

A well known conservative Lutheran Church leader once observed that conservative Lutherans are by nature schismatic. By that he meant that those who take difficult stands for the truth of the Word of God in a world that seeks good feelings and harmony above truth, are people who hold strong beliefs and must take firm stands. Unfortunately, some do not learn which beliefs are Biblical and which are personal, and being used to taking stands allows personal beliefs to become divisive. Since the early days of the 1960's questions of doctrine and practice have been raised within the history of the groups that formed the synod, causing several divisions. Some, such as the legalism mentioned above were clearly doctrinal. Others were misunderstandings/miscommunications. As a synod we thank God that during the past twelve years the ELSA has enjoyed accord, peace and complete doctrinal agreement with a Biblical evangelical practice.

Currently, the focus of the ELSA is in Queensland where we serve members and associates (served, but not yet members) from the Gold Coast (just north of the New South Wales Border), to the Whitsunday Island region in Central Queensland and the mining districts to the North and West. From the most southern to the most north-western, it is a distance of 1527 kilometres (almost 1,000 miles and 18 hours by car). The synod's home congregation is located in the Fraser Coast city of Maryborough, Queensland with regular preaching stations in the Queensland capital city of Brisbane and the Central Coast Sugar City, Mackay.

The emphasis of the synod today is evangelical outreach to the unchurched. The key programme of outreach of the synod is a religious education programme that is presented to approximately 350 children, public school students in grades 1-7.

Our internal emphasis is the spiritual growth of our members. Our members are served both in person and through electronics. Services with sermons as well as Bible Classes are provided on a weekly basis. Our pastor makes 8-10 trips to the Mackay region each year (9 hours each way), and with the addition of a mining based family in the Brisbane area (4 hours each way), the trips will now be fortnightly Saturday day trips, to match the 7 days in, 7 days out mine schedule.

Developing members -

4 youths are currently in confirmation class (all in the Mackay region) with one to be confirmed before Christmas and three maybe this year or maybe next year. For those with children who can attend weekly classes, think what it is like for children who go to school five days each week, and then attend confirmation classes from 8am-4pm on the weekends the pastor visits in addition to

Sunday School and worship services on Saturday night. If it is a long weekend, then there are three or four straight days of class.

While we have not been able to add many adult confirmands in recent years, we have an effective Bible Class system that has allowed our members to grow in faith and service. Currently, one of the groups is working through the book of Romans. Another group just finished a study of Messianic Prophecies. A third group is working through "building better marriages". Recent subjects have included a revised form of the course Growing Kids God's Way, a study of Ephesians, and Old Testament Bible History. Our groups have been structured so that not only do we have the Bible Study materials, but group members feel free to bring their concerns and the groups are not only study groups but Christian support groups.

Pastoral Training

At this time we do not feel we should train pastors in Australia because that would fall to one person and thus the education would be limited. The training path for the last two pastoral candidates was Bethany Seminary of the ELS. Timothy Hartwig and Bradley Kerkow both now serve ELS congregations in the United States.

The synod is currently served by one pastor, Peter Prange. A major challenge is to increase our resources in order to be able to call another pastor. Our pastor is kept very busy with the school outreach and with his travel to other locations. A difficulty for our pastor is the lack of opportunities for pastoral conferences and other means of support and growth. In that sense, little has changed since the difficulties of the 1970's as related by the history of the ELSA written by WELS pastor, Ken Fisher.

However, at least one member felt "(our pastor) badly needed another pastor to confide in and discuss his problems with." Soon he found it necessary to start a shared-time ministry by going door-to-door selling World Books. In time his wife joined him in this. By necessity his ministry became a "holding operation." There seemed to be constant pressure upon him. (The pastor) was isolated, taxed, and began to have recurring bouts with ill-health. Periodically he would spend several days at a time in the hospital. He worked tirelessly from 1971 until March, 1977, when he felt compelled to resign for health and other reasons. (The Pastor) and his family soon returned to America.

As one person recalls, "We didn't experience much growth in numbers although we did experience growth in faith.

While our pastor has not experienced the personal problems mentioned, he and his wife have had to earn outside income to support the ministry among us, which obviously uses up time and energy that could be directed into ministry.

Advice Sought

Over the years, depending on the talents available we have tried a number of different outreach approaches, often involving outreach to youth. While we have seen the benefits for individuals, the programmes have never resulted in adults joining Adult Information Classes or joining the church. We would be glad to hear about the efforts being made by our brothers and sisters in similarly secularised cultures. In general, most of the people we encounter have a religion – "sport." Many Australians live for sport, and are both active in sports and supportive of many professional and amateur sports teams.

While historically the synod has been faithful to Scriptural teaching, it is during the last 15 years that the name Evangelical has been deserved. While we continue to stress faithfulness in doctrine, we are pleased that the Gospel is both understood and is effective in the lives of our members and those we serve.

Church Body Statistics – Slightly increased since last report

Adult Communicants served:	42
Total Adults served	48 – includes adults who have not yet become members but who are

served at remote locations, or who are served locally, but have not yet committed to membership

Total souls served	79
Established Congregations:	1
Preaching Stations:	2
Pastors	1
Current Church Body President:	Mr. Terry O'Brien (serving since 1992)

Contact Information

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