

ELSA Update for CELC (2005)

Time, finances and distance considerations have prevented a physical presence of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia from most of the gatherings of the CELC. Probably most of you do not know much about us. However we have learned of many of our sister synods, and you have served as an inspiration for us, especially our Swedish brethren who had to struggle through a time of doctrinal controversy and schism, but have emerged to faithfully serve our Lord. We are thankful for the support we have received from members of the CELC, especially the ELS and the WELS who have provided us with encouragement, workers and other help.

The name Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia is an old name that was never incorporated. The first synod to use the name incorporated later as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia. Our name was chosen to indicate our ties to the faithful Lutherans who immigrated to Australia and boldly proclaimed the Gospel and the other truths of Scripture.

During the late 1950's and early 60's, as the ecumenical movement swept across the world, churches in Australia began to merge. The largest merger produced the Uniting Church. The movement did not draw in the Lutherans, but the two major Lutheran synods in Australia decided to merge in 1965 despite ongoing doctrinal differences that had kept them apart for 120 years, since the founding immigrations of 1838-1946. Unionism was a central issue. Other issues included millennialism, and liberalism in general.

There was, however, a small group of concerned laymen who did not think that doctrine should be compromised for the sake of size and organisational unity. They found in one Queensland LCA pastor, F.G. Kleinig, a man who agreed with them and became a rallying point. He in turn received encouragement from WELS President, Oscar Naumann.

On March 20, 1966, a small group of 50 people who refused to go into the merger, gathered to discuss the future. On May 29, 1966 they would gather again for the constituting convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Reformation (E.L.C.R.). Pastor Kleinig was joined by LC-MS Springfield graduate Keith Hunter in 1967. Pastor Hunter had joined the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation after graduation in 1966. For several years the synod prospered and grew rather rapidly.

Pastor Kleinig was a dedicated minister and very zealous for the truth. It was claimed that his sermons were thorough, Law-Gospel centred and powerfully delivered even though they often ran over an hour. But he appears to have grown rather dictatorial and impatient with age. By this time he was not a young man either. The isolation and the mounting pressures apparently took their toll upon him. He began to exhibit signs of legalism and eventually matters came to a head when it became the doctrine of the church that women must wear head coverings in church. As time went on things like the proper length of hair were also set.

Some of the key founders of the ELCR refused to accept the new legalistic trend. Together with Pastor Hunter 51 souls left the ELCR in 1971 and formed Faith Evangelical Lutheran Parish. They had given up everything in 1965 and now again they lost their church property and fellowship. Pastor Hunter served for six years, until health problems and a personal scandal forced his resignation. Before resigning he had distributed the LCR attack on the WELS doctrine of Church and Ministry produced by Pastor Ken Miller. Thus WELS was viewed with suspicion.

Meanwhile Pastor Tom Dudley of Oregon had left the LC-MS and was associated with the Federation for Authentic Lutheranism (FAL). When several congregations of the FAL joined the ELS and the rest merged into the WELS, Pastor Dudley and the congregation he served, Faith Hillsboro, remained independent. In looking for world mission work they came into contact with concerned Lutherans in South Australia and Victoria. On a visit to Queensland Pastor Dudley was able to clear up the misconceptions created by the Miller attack.

Primarily using lay reading services and sermons from sound sources the lay leaders held the church together for a decade until the 1989 arrival of Pastor Dan Schroeder in Queensland. Two pastors, Tom Mack in Queensland and Dan Sabrowsky in Victoria/South Australia had served briefly during the 80's, but for various reasons returned to the United States, Pastor Mack for personal reasons, Pastor Sabrowsky due to false charges made against him that were corrected years later. Meanwhile Pastor Dudley suffered a fatal heart attack and Australia was suddenly without Pastoral leadership. Pastor Schroeder was soon assisted by WELS Mequon students who served a second year of vicarage.

With strong lay leaders both in the South (now renamed Prince of Peace) and in Queensland (Our Redeemer Brisbane and St. Paul Maryborough), the two groups formed the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia in 1992. Pastor Schroeder served the dual parish and preaching stations in Queensland, after several years the vicars served primarily in the South.

Despite the best attempts of Pastor Schroeder an underlying legalism still existed in the ELSA. While rejecting the open legalism of the "hat issue", the people struggled with a subtle legalism that tended to obscure the living Gospel. A young man who had joined the church during the brief ministry of Pastor Mack, Mark Tuffin, decided to study for the postoral ministry. During his student years at Bethany – Mankato, he and Pastor Schroeder had a number of conflicts over doctrinal points. Pastor Schroeder had come to Bethany from the WELS, while Pastor Tuffin had a Roman Catholic background.

In 1994 Pastor Schroeder decided to take a call to the USA, in his words, "under pressure from the ELS World Mission Board." Today he no longer serves in the pastoral ministry. Upon graduation Pastor Tuffin had received a call to Prince of Peace, but after appeals from the Chairman of the ELS World Mission Board, family and others, his home parish in Brisbane also extended him a call, which he accepted. The matter was viewed as controversial by some, for Pastor Schroeder had been the called pastor of the dual parish of which Brisbane was one half.

With Pastor Schroeder leaving, Maryborough called Pastor Peter Prange serving in the WELS. Pastor Prange was the first full-time pastor serving within the ELSA with previous experience. Unlike the other men who had come either directly or almost directly from seminary training, he arrived in Australia with 25 years experience. Almost immediately some of us noticed something different about his ministry. I remember my wife coming home from visiting family in Maryborough one weekend and being very excited. We soon discovered in his preaching and Bible studies the brightness of the Gospel. It was a breath of fresh air. Soon we began to notice how the attitudes of family and others became more evangelical.

But again trouble was brewing. It seems Satan does not rest easily. Pastor Tuffin seemed to become more legalistic. He also began to openly question the WELS and its teachings. He

began to find agreement with some of the LCA people in the area and caused a problem when he used members of the LCA to sing in services. When the matter was to be discussed by the Doctrinal Committee of which he was a member, he refused to attend and then resigned from the committee. Tensions began to arise in the congregation eventuating in a number of families leaving. When Pastor Tuffin attacked those who left in a public letter the officers of the synod tried to meet with him. He refused and was suspended. He and the congregation then resigned from the synod. They also encouraged Prince of Peace to resign from the ELSA. The vicar programme was withdrawn by the request of the ELSA in agreement with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Today Prince of Peace congregation no longer exists. While Pastor Tuffin claimed that the troubles of the ELSA were all matters of personality, he demonstrated that we was never truly with us when he resigned his membership in the ELS and now is a member of the LCA, having rejected our doctrine of church and ministry (including fellowship). At this time the ELSA is meeting with Our Redeemer in hopes of a reconciliation.

The ELSA had grown for a number of years when it was blessed with several dedicated workers. By 1999 the number was 130. Today the synod is back to a subsistence, or maintenance mode. Pastor Prange serves a group of small congregations and preaching stations that is 1200 kilometres long, stretching from the Southern border with New South Wales (the Gold Coast) to Central Queensland and the Great Barrier Reef. Many of the members are single and in many cases only one spouse is a member of the church.

Over the years there were a number of very active in house programmes for children, reaching nearly a 100 served in the early 90's, and reaching again at 80 in the later 90's, but those programmes no longer continue due to "competition" from other denominations with more funding. We still put on a Religious Education programme in the state schools – serving 12 classes of between 25 and 30 children each. Pastor Prange has developed a two year course based on stories from the Old Testament one year and from the New Testament the other year. We are hoping to produce the course for others to use.

We are excited for we have had a WELS teacher volunteer to come to Australia for a year. We are currently working on the immigration situation. His presence would allow a number of programmes to continue development and would be a great aid for the public ministry.

Today the ELSA serves -

Mackay preaching station – 13 souls – 7 communicants (5 families)
Rockhampton preaching station – 4 souls – 1 Communicant (1 family)
Maryborough – 41 souls – 24 Communicants (18 families)
Gympie preaching station – 7 souls – 6 Communicants (4 families)
Brisbane preaching station – 14 souls – 11 Communicants (8 families)

79 souls – 49 Communicants – 36 families.