



The combined churches' choir at the Tanunda union celebrations on Reformation Day in 1966.

MILESTONES TO UNION

BY LOIS ZWECK

This year the Lutheran Church of Australia celebrates the 50th anniversary of union – the culmination of decades of work to overcome deep divisions.

Setting the scene

'And now the Valley rings again with songs of thanks and praise as Lutherans from all parts of Australasia gather to unite in the formation of the Lutheran Church of Australia; an event that is truly unique in the history of any church.'

The venue chosen for the celebration of union on Reformation Day in 1966 was Tanunda in the Barossa, the valley 'steeped in history of the Lutheran Church. It is from here more than from any other place that the pioneer covered-wagons moved out to new settlements in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. From here too began the epic mission journeys to the Lake Hope area on the Cooper's Creek and to Hermannsburg on the Finke River in the Northern Territory. Here Synods were made and unmade in the hectic days of schism and disunity after the first rift of 1846 between Pastors Kavel and Fritzsche'.

2016 is a great cause for celebration for Lutherans in Australia, for it is 50 years since the formation of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA). The beginnings of our church go back to May 1839, with a constituting convention held under a gum tree in Glen Osmond, South Australia, and attended by the heads of the 150 households who had migrated from Prussia with Pastor Kavel as religious refugees a few months earlier.

The arrival of Pastor Fritzsche with a further 250 Prussian Lutherans appeared to consolidate the new church, but the collaborative efforts of the pioneering years rested on brittle foundations, which led to a division within the first decade. They were to remain divided for 120 years to come. While united by their rejection of the Prussian State church and their resolve to emigrate, the first migrants were drawn from scattered clusters of dissenting laity that had sprung up independently across neighbouring parishes and were soon robbed of pastoral leadership and theological guidance by the exile or imprisonment of their pastors. The tragicomic scenes of dissension and rival worship services described by Captain Hahn on board the Zebra give a foretaste of underlying tensions.

Different understandings – evident already in Prussia – of Revelation's passages regarding the end times need not have caused division, although they caused conflict among the laity. But when Kavel's protestations against certain articles of the Lutheran Confessions were countered by Fritzsche's invitation to the four Dresden missionaries to attend the 1846 Synod at Bethany, the stage was set for a confrontation on questions of church governance and the definition of who was entitled to be considered Lutheran. The synod broke up amid the wrangling over these issues before the long-anticipated question of the millennium was even raised.

By August 1846 the original contingents had been joined by one shipload of German settlers each year since 1844, but the total number of Lutherans throughout the land could hardly have reached 2000. As the trickle of migrant ships swelled into a steady stream bringing thousands more German settlers to South Australia, the Lutherans among the newcomers too settled on one side or the other of the established fault line. New pastors cemented the rift or founded unaligned congregations, and new conflicts arose, splitting the church still further.

As the German shipping companies extended their activities to the eastern states, settlers from Scandinavia as well as far-flung German states – drawn by gold rushes or colonial schemes – established churches and church bodies independently in Victoria and Queensland.

The most variegated collection of Lutheran congregations, that in Queensland, for decades resisted all attempts at closer integration, only to form two separate but parallel synods in 1885. The first and largest of them, the United German and Scandinavian Lutheran Synod in Queensland (UGSLSQ) soon belied its name as the Scandinavian pastors opted instead for independence.

In Victoria on the other hand a German convert from Roman Catholicism who had trained as a Presbyterian minister in Sydney – Matthias Goethe – accepted a call to head a Lutheran congregation in Melbourne and in

1856 established the Victoria Synod on a rather different basis from the confessionalism of the South Australian synods.

Since the arrival of Pastor Herlitz, its able and influential long-serving president, the synod drew most of its pastors from the Basel Mission Institute, which was proudly non-confessional and did not distinguish between Lutheran and Reformed in its teaching or practice. That was to prove a stumbling block for decades in the synod's dealings with the confessional synods who owed their very existence to their rejection of such a stance.

At the height of fragmentation in 1914, Lutherans in Australia and New Zealand comprised ten synods, as well as a handful of independent parishes. In the heyday of independent ministry in the later 19th century, there were more South Australian pastors outside the established synods than within them.

Over the course of the 120 years since 1846, repeated attempts were made to heal the rifts and unite the scattered strands through discussion of the disputed doctrines and their interface with church practice, but they remained by and large fruitless or even counter-productive. The reports of these conferences make sad reading: the intensity of debate sharpened tongues,

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1898: Pastors Conference of the United German and Scandinavian Lutheran Synod in Queensland: (back) pastors G Heuer, J F Holtermann, -- , J Koehnke (Secretary of Synod), C W C Prenzler; (front) --, J C Pedersen (Superintendent for Danish section of Synod), J G Goessling, E Becker, A Suelmann (Superintendent - General of Synod), --. The Synod soon belied its name as the Scandinavian pastors opted instead for independence.

explanations of the impasse crystallised into recrimination and self-justification, and disappointed hopes left a residue of bitterness.

There were at the same time, however, instances of cooperation and solidarity indicating a sense of cohesion buried beneath the fragmentation, ranging from reciprocal attendance at funerals and celebrations to joint approaches to government on educational issues or the consequences of war-time hostility. Once in every generation, it seems, the search for unity surfaced in a new and hopeful form. Despite the high hopes and ambitious aims, the ultimate goal of 'One faith, one church, one Lord' proved elusive, but the achievements of these quests were significant milestones along the path to union in the LCA.

Church as Mission: Confessional Union 1864–1874

It was Pastor Meischel of the Adelaide Bethlehem congregation, a recent arrival serving on his fourth continent after mission ministry in Africa and India, who issued the clarion call that brought the two South Australian synods together to conduct Aboriginal mission:

'The Lutheran church has the solemn calling ... to arise and let its light shine; ... it is its sacred duty to first unite all its forces and apply them conscientiously to help the heathen nation in whose land it lives to come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ ... for mission is and remains the work of faith commanded to the church by God.'

The call was answered not only by Meischel's colleagues in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in Australia (ELSA) – the aging and frail Pastor Fritzsche with his three graduates Hensel, Oster and Stempel supplemented by the Dresden missionaries and another former Leipzig missionary in India, E D Appelt – but also by Kavel's successors at Langmeil and Light Pass, J C Auricht and G J Rechner. The laity of both synods too responded with enthusiasm at joint mission festivals, and resolved to conjointly conduct mission among the Aboriginal people of central Australia in collaboration with Louis Harms of the Hermannsburg Mission Society in Germany.

Harms' wariness at dealing with a doctrinally divided alliance/ partnership prompted the formation from 22 to 25 June 1864 of a 'Confessional Union', on the foundation of the mutual commitment to the Lutheran Confessions, between the Langmeil—Light Pass Synod (later Immanuel) and the ELSA, with mutual apologies for the disputes and conflicts of the past and the hope that further discussions on this new basis would lead to a full synodical union.

The commissioning of the missionaries and their departure from Langmeil for Cooper's Creek was a momentous celebration unlike any other in the church's history. Despite the frustrations and disappointments, both in the work of the mission and in the search for full unity, the two synods for ten years maintained their bond as a *missionirende Kirche*, a 'missionising' church

that existed in fact only at the regular meetings of the combined ministries and congregational delegates (one per 50 communicants) at mission synods, which set the guidelines for the work of the joint Mission Board and its missionaries.

Before the Confessional Union collapsed in 1874 it had advanced to the brink of unification, when the Langmeil–Light Pass Synod – in search of pastors from a German seminary – decided on an alliance with the stronger Victoria Synod with its links to Basel. The Immanuel Synod dissolved that alliance after only ten years – again over the Lutheran/Reformed issue – but in the process created a further split in South Australia, with the Basel pastors in the Immanuel Synod on the Old Basis refusing to retract their former allegiance.

So this first whole-hearted attempt at unity ultimately unravelled amid acrimony. But the church as a whole had in the process achieved significant gains. It had become a matter of course for pastors of the two synods to exchange pulpits for special celebrations, and there is evidence too of a greater spirit of openness towards independent Lutheran pastors and clergy of English denominations. During the ten years of union, the jointly edited *Kirchen und Missions Zeitung* (Church and Mission News) had been established to inform South Australian Lutherans of the work of the mission and the churches, as well as providing devotional and doctrinal material.

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A step towards unity: the departure from Langmeil near Tanunda, South Australia, of the mission party bound for Cooper's Creek. It was a momentous celebration unlike any other in the church's history, when Homann, Gössling, Vogelsang and Jaeschke were farewelled by pastors, church members and others. Afterward this send-off, despite frustrations and disappointments, both in the work of the mission and in the search for full unity, the two synods for ten years maintained their bond as a 'missionising' church.

As the bond of unity frayed, ELSA set up its own paper, the *Kirchenbote*. The South Australian church had for its first 35 years been unable to create or maintain a church paper, a vital source of church life: now it had two papers that were to survive until the transition to the English *Australian Lutheran* and the *Lutheran Herald* shortly before and after the First World War.

Nor did the end of the 'missionising church' mean the end of Aboriginal mission in the Centre. Under an agreement between the synods, the mission resources were divided proportionally and ELSA went on to establish the second mission station projected by the combined synods – Hermannsburg on the Finke River – while the smaller Immanuel Synod retained Killalpaninna. The ten years of the Confessional Union had effected a profound and abiding change in the nature of Australian Lutheranism.

Amalgamated instead of federated: UELCA and 'the great mission idea' 1921

The unification of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia, the most crucial milestone for the ultimate union of the LCA, began modestly enough. In 1910 pastors Leidig and Löhe from Immanuel Synod made a visit to Queensland to confer with the pastors of the UGSLSQ, following a request from the Queenslanders.

After reaching agreement on doctrinal questions, they resolved on a *Kirchenbund*, a federation, 'in obedience to God's command to be one', and confident of the benefits this would bring. Pastor Leidig, who relied on the support of German Lutheran diaspora funds for his home mission initiatives in Western Australia and Tasmania, expressed the Immanuel position:

'What a good impression such a unification would make, not only in Australia but above all in Germany ... where a request for support always evoked the response: "Why don't you in Australia unite?" If we do so now, demolishing the fences on our side that divide the Lutheran church in Australia from one another, that will cause joy in our former fatherland, and the means for support would flow more abundantly.'

The isolated Queensland synod hoped Immanuel could help solve their most pressing problem: the supply of pastors for vacant parishes, preparatory training at Immanuel College for young men to go on to study in Germany, and young theologians fluent in English as well as German. Three Australian sons of Missionary Georg Reuther were indeed being trained at Neuendettelsau at that moment, and all three soon took up posts in Queensland and served with vigour and distinction.

One step forward in Queensland was however soon countered in 1912 by one step back, as five pastors with their parishes, in search of greater security and support, seceded from the other Queensland synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Queensland (ELSQ), to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australasia, directly affiliated with the Prussian State Church. This was the very church from which the founding fathers of Australian Lutheranism had separated so dramatically decades before. The outbreak of war soon

ended that affiliation, with its pastors interned and those without Australian citizenship deported to Germany at the end of the war.

The war, with all its traumas for Lutherans in particular, in the end provided the strongest stimulus for the ultimate breakthrough, the formation not simply of a broader church federation, but the full amalgamation of the UELCA.

When the interrupted negotiations between the *Kirchenbund* and the General Synod (comprised of the Victoria Synod, Immanuel on the Old Basis, and the ELSQ) were resumed after the war, the participants faced a radically new situation. Immanuel Synod had long shown great zeal for unity, but now the altered circumstances added urgency to the search for resolution. On the eve of war, at the 75th anniversary of Australian Lutheranism in November 1913, Leidig had preached powerfully:

‘When we contemplate the history of these 75 years, we are amazed that this church still exists here. That is hardly thanks to its members. They have instead done as much as possible to dig its grave through their internal disunity ... We faithfully foster our fellowship with the Lutheran Church in our old homeland. It would be a great misfortune if our church were to be torn loose from its lively collaboration with the Lutheran Church in the old homeland. A terrible desolation would ensue ... Everything that lightens and brightens our hearts, strengthens our faith and makes our spirit fruitful ... was given to us by God through the church of our homeland. Foster fellowship with the church in Germany or soon you will lack the necessary depth, and your ship will run aground.’ (Hebart, VELKA p210)

Within months that nurturing bond was broken by the war. The ban on immigration from Germany meant that all synods apart from ELSA were cut off from their various sources of new pastors for the unforeseeable future; and the war had also made it clear that the future of the church had to be bilingual.

In April 1920 the Victoria Synod held what was to be its last synod, resolving to join the *Kirchenbund* with the statements:

‘We stand absolutely and squarely upon the creed of our Evangelical Lutheran Church.’
‘We declare, being fully convinced, “Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran ministers, and Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants”.’

As obvious as they may sound, those statements represented a reversal of the policy and practice that had prevailed in the Victoria Synod and its allied synods for six decades. But where would they now find those Lutheran pastors? (*Kirchenbund* article, CMN 7.12.1920 p 395)

A combined Pastors Conference of the enlarged *Kirchenbund* in October 1920 found what may also seem the obvious answer – but it was a solution that demanded synodical solidarity: ‘Conference unanimously gives expression to the conviction that the training of candidates for the ministry should be undertaken in Australia’. That insight was echoed at the subsequent 1921 synod:

'Up till now we have had things easy. When there were vacant pastors' offices we turned to the mother church in Germany, who supplied us with shepherds. It is not able to do this any more. The war has changed it. We find that we now have to do things ourselves. We must place our children in the service of the Church. We cannot avoid that necessity any longer.' (Löhe 1921 Synod Report 39)

'From Germany we cannot get any pastors; we need those who are proficient in the English language, without English it cannot be done any more. The most important thing is that the young men here know that the Lord tells people not only in Germany but also here that he can use them to proclaim the Word of the cross. We must do this work.'

But an even more urgent question drove home the need for one truly united church: saving the Lutheran missions in New Guinea. There, too, the ramifications of the war had created a completely new situation. In the opening campaign of the war, Australian forces had taken control of the German colonies in New Guinea, and it was clear that no German church body would be allowed to continue mission work there. Even Australian Lutherans, with their German connections, were regarded warily, but as none of the English denominations in Australia were eager to undertake the task, a joint venture by American and Australian Lutherans was proposed. Dr Richter from the Iowa Synod came to confer with the Australian government, and attended preliminary discussions of the various Australian Lutheran synods. He urged full amalgamation as the prerequisite for such a demanding undertaking, and as preparations were made for the convention that would link all the synods throughout Australia apart from ELSA, the consensus matured that a federation would not suffice.

On 8 March 1921 the first meeting of 33 ministers and 280 lay delegates of the UELCA began with the resolutions 'that the various synods of the *Kirchenbund* be amalgamated instead of federated' under the name of United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia. The first business of the new church was the unanimous decision to take over the mission work in New Guinea in company with the Iowa Synod, 'and to keep, guard and manage it'.

Dr Richter responded: 'It is the great mission idea which has moved people's hearts to an amalgamation' (ibid p35).

The Pilgrim reported on 15 March 1921 (p42):

'March 8, 1921, will always remain a red-letter day in the history of our Lutheran Church in Australia. We now rejoice, and in looking back, marvel at what the Lord has done. We now see how He has been leading us all these years towards this one great goal, the Unity of those that are of one Faith and one Spirit.'

The first issue of the newly united UELCA church paper, the *Lutheran Herald* appeared in the same month, and the first editorial read:

'We are now united, but why? Surely not to march along separate roads and follow our own goal as hitherto, but to join hands in order to solve the

great problems common to each side, for instance: Training of young men for the ministry and the mission-field; reconstruction of the work in our own midst, so as to gradually do away with the overlapping of parishes, the waste of time and labor.'

The *Kirchenbund* initiative, begun in 1910 'in the hope that in time to come they would be able to bring about unity and harmony throughout the whole Lutheran Church in Australia', had achieved a good deal of its goal, uniting the most disparate and far-flung church bodies in the land. The one remaining task was however the most difficult of all: to heal the initial rift of 1846.

With the creation of the UELCA, the church now comprised two synods virtually equal in numbers – UELCA with 58 parishes and 12,710 communicants; ELSA with 58 parishes and 11,325 communicants – but with very different cultures and circumstances.

Since 1876 ELSA had sent pastoral students to America and since 1881 had drawn pastors and theology professors from there. The training of pastors in Australia had begun at Concordia in Murtoa in 1893, and since 1905 a stable bilingual theological program at Concordia in Adelaide had graduated 40 pastors. An English-language church paper, the *Australian Lutheran*, and a full 300-page English liturgy book had appeared already before the war, as part of a deliberate introduction of English for the sake of Lutherans who no longer knew or wanted German, as well as for outreach to the non-German community.

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1949: ELCA and UELCA pastors meet in Nundah, Queensland, to discuss their differences.

Beside the increasing flow of English publications from America, ELSA had its own publishing house, which in 1922 produced a first full-length Australian Lutheran hymnal in English, with the landmark publication of the tune version following in 1925. Koonibba Mission on the West Coast of South Australia had come through the war unscathed, and the ELSA was actively and ultimately successfully lobbying the government to repeal the Act which had closed church schools in South Australia. (Its first post-war schools opened at Eudunda in 1925 and at South Kilkerran in 1926.)

ELSA's formation of the Lutheran Laymen's League also in 1921 laid a firm foundation for home mission outreach through utilising the savings of church members to fund low- or no-interest loans for capital works – a boon which today reaps benefits that could hardly have been imagined at the time.

At the first UELCA convention, President J P Loehe expressed his hope that current moves – an invitation from the Concordia Faculty to informal talks on disputed doctrinal issues – might lead to unity there too. But despite repeated initiatives and significant collaboration on other fronts, no real progress was achieved. The approach of South Australia's centenary prompted the two synods to revisit and refurbish the iconic but derelict site of their mutual beginning at Klemzig, South Australia. A combined 4000-strong rally in August 1936, under the auspices of the German-Australian Centenary Committee, saw the South Australian governor unveil a monument to the 'Lutheran Pilgrim Fathers' who had come 'seeking religious freedom' in the new British colony (*FoLA Journal* 18, 2008). The centenary of the church two years later coincided with the *Kristallnacht* pogrom against the Jews of Germany, which again called forth a united front as presidents Stolz and Janzow offered assistance to German Jews seeking refuge in Australia.

When talks finally began in earnest with the establishment of the Intersynodical Committee in 1941, the agenda of disputed issues had expanded far beyond the original disagreements as every further split, every alliance forged or broken over the decades of the widening cultural gap, had generated fresh divergence. With dogged persistence the committee whittled away the obstacles, and after a decade was able to announce substantive consensus on ten theses in December 1951, amid high hopes that union could be achieved within a year.

Union anticipated, 1952

The co-existence of two or even three churches of different synods in one locality did not necessarily mean discord or rivalry. Cooperation at a local congregation level could include a combined cemetery, for example, or shared attendance at the church school or youth activities. Anticipation of union raised congregational collaboration to a new level, including the erection of a joint church building for separate worship services.

On 22 November 1952 the *Maryborough Chronicle* reported, with touches of journalistic inaccuracy:

'BAY LUTHERANS TO OPEN CHURCH. The dedication and opening of the new Lutheran Church at Torquay tomorrow will be an historical event in the annals of the church ... inasmuch as it will be the second combined Lutheran Church to be opened in Queensland. The first was opened at Redcliffe on October 9 last.

For more than 100 years the Lutherans have had two branches in Australia – the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia. Only minor differences of doctrine and practice have kept the people divided. In recent years, however, negotiations have been carried on with a view to uniting the two branches and some success has been achieved.

Some time ago, representatives of the two branches met in South Australia and arrived at a basis of union on all matters relating to doctrine ... If they are accepted by the General Synod amalgamation of the two branches will take place. It is hoped that this will be accomplished next year. The laymen of the church are essentially the people who decide for or against amalgamation.

The two branches in Queensland have already shown their interest in erecting and opening the Redcliffe church.'

The UELCA St James congregation at Pialba had placed the request for a combined church at Torquay before the Bethlehem ELCA congregation, where it 'was met with a whole hearted response'. Two services were held for the dedication: one in the morning conducted by UELCA, and an ELCA mission service in the afternoon where Pastor Noack preached, expressing joy at how far union negotiations had progressed to enable congregations to build such a combined church.

At Coonalpyn, South Australia, the ELCA Bethlehem and the UELCA Immanuel congregations had a joint youth fellowship from 1941. They built a church together in 1952 with the name 'Coonalpyn Lutheran Church', the congregations officially merging in 1967 as Redeemer congregation. At Bordertown, a church was built in 1954; reflections in the 1980s were that 'some families attended all services, or almost all services, regardless of the congregations and Pastor then gathering for worship. In many respects the joint erection of the church and joint services helped to draw the members of both former Churches closer together long before the merger was to take place.'

And sadly, it was indeed long before that promised merger took place, after a decade-long impasse over questions of affiliation and fellowship with other churches.

The Document of Union, 1965

The breakthrough began with the drafting of a 'common theology of cooperation and fellowship' (*For Faith and Freedom* p201) by the faculties of Immanuel and Concordia Seminaries. By January 1965 a draft document of union grounded in that theological basis was ready to be presented to the two

churches in separate conventions. The preamble in turn formed the basis of the preamble of the constitution of the LCA in 1966:

By the grace of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit we, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia, and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia, have been led together in the confession and unity of the one faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and of the one doctrine of His holy Gospel. We accept this unity as an unmerited gift of our God, in sincere repentance for what lies behind us since our fathers went their divided ways, and in humble gratitude for all that God in His mercy has worked through each of us in the years since 1846. He has kept us and blessed us and for this we magnify His holy name.

We believe that the union between our churches is His holy will for us at this time. Therefore we ... give each other the solemn pledge to unite together for the joint proclamation of the Gospel and the common administration of the sacraments, in token of which we declare severally and jointly our acceptance of the following Document of Union.'

The doctrinal basis comprised the acceptance 'without reservation of the Holy Scriptures ... as the only infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine and life'; the recognition 'as a true exposition of the Word of God and as our own confession' of the three Ecumenical Creeds and the Lutheran Symbols of the Book of Concord; and the acceptance of the Theses of Agreement 'as the expression of the common consent of our two Churches'.

Two statements on the nature of the Christian Church and the Lutheran understanding of church fellowship laid the foundation for the acceptance of the document at the ELCA Synod in April, the UELCA in October and the momentous reciprocal declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship, in Adelaide on the First Sunday of Advent 1965, accompanied by thanksgiving celebrations throughout the land:

'We uphold the distinction between the one, holy, Christian Church and the visible, organised, Churches. We believe that the one, holy, Christian Church is present in those visible Churches where the marks of the Church are to be found, that is, where the Gospel of Christ is purely taught and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution.'

'We believe that true Christians are found in every denomination in which to a greater or lesser degree the marks of the one, holy, Christian Church are present, in spite of existing errors, and we rejoice in the unity of the Spirit that binds all true believers to their one Lord. Nevertheless, according to the Word of God and our Lutheran Confessions, church fellowship, that is, mutual recognition as brethren, altar and pulpit fellowship and resultant cooperation in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the right administration of the Sacraments.'