

CONSERVATIVE LUTHERANS STAND ALONE:  
TWO AUSTRALIAN CONGREGATIONS

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TWO AUSTRALIAN CONGREGATIONS

In Australia today there are two small groups of Christians who are in doctrinal fellowship with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Is such a statement surprising? We in the WELS hear much about our brothers in Africa and Japan, in Brazil and Columbia, but nothing about our English speaking brothers in Australia. This paper, then, is meant to fill the void. There are Lutherans from a background similar to ours in the WELS. They too have stood their ground against the spread of liberalism. They too need pastors to lead them. "For over five years we have been like sheep without a shepherd. During this time we have gained a small membership increase (three adults have completed confirmation, two are presently undergoing instruction and two are likely to commence shortly. Such instruction has been undertaken by lay-members with the valuable assistance of the Grace Lutheran Church tape ministry). However, the devil continues to be active and many controversies have fractured our unity of faith and purpose and five families have progressively left our fellowship. We have found it very difficult to resolve these situations without a spiritual leader." This was written by Mr. Selwyn J. Winter, a concerned layman in Queensland, Australia in a letter to President Mischke dated May 29, 1982. It is my hope that through this paper more people might learn about our brothers on the other side of the globe so that they too may once again enjoy the blessing of

having a conservative pastor in their midst to preach the Word and to administer the sacraments.

#### BACKGROUND

The first English settlement was established in Sidney in 1788. After that it wasn't long before Australia became a target for the Dresden Mission Society. In 1838, Pastors Clamor Wilhelm Schurmann and Christian Gottlob Teichmann arrived to serve the Aborigines initially (Schoell, 1). They held their first service on Australian soil on November 4, 1838 (Koch, 27). At this same time another group of about 200 German immigrants arrived in Adelaide, South Australia in November 1838, and established Australia's first Lutheran congregation in December of the same year. Pastor August Kavel was their leader. He and his followers had left Germany for a much different reason than Schurmann and Teichmann. Rather than having the purpose of sharing their religion with others, Kavel and his group sought to preserve their religion from attack. King Friedrich Wilhelm III has stripped them of their right to worship when he declared his Prussian Union combining Lutherans and Reformed. Because Kavel refused to agree to such unionistic practices, he had to resign in 1835. Kavel described Australia as a place of "full religious liberty, so that public and private divine services, the administration of the sacraments, church organization, church discipline and marriage are granted to the Lutheran church in complete independence of the state or any other denomination"

(Traeger, 5). A Baptist business man, George Fife Angus, the president of the South Australia Company, paid for their five month voyage and offered them a land lease (Traeger, 5).

Three years later another group of German immigrants arrived under the leadership of Pastor Gotthard Daniel Fritzsche. At first there was Lutheran unity, but by 1846, a clash between Kavel and Fritzsche had divided the Australian Lutherans (Schoell, 2). Kavel's group eventually gained strong ties with the American Lutheran Church through the Iowa Synod by way of the Neuendettelsau Missionary Society. They named themselves the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia. On the other hand, Fritzsche's group eventually gained strong conservative ties with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and with the WELS. They named themselves the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia.

After remaining separate for over 100 years, these two separate churches adopted the "Thesis of Agreement" in 1956, which was vague enough that both churches could hold differing views and yet outwardly agree. One glaring problem with this document was its failure to assert the factual correctness of every statement of Scripture. A little leaven leavens the whole loaf. And so it was with the more conservative ELCA. In a letter to the WELS after our break with the LCMS, the representatives in the ELCA wrote, "We believe that your 'unit concept' and your interpretation and application of Romans 16:17,18, which we cannot accept, have also helped to bring about the present schism" (Proceedings, 39). On March 15, 1965, the ELCA in convention declared altar and pulpit fellowship with the

UELCA.

"Where were the conservatives?" one might ask. At first they felt that their conservative stand could be preserved throughout the merger and that they could actually move the UELCA to become less liberal. They believed, "If the doctrinal basis contained in the Document of Union is adhered to faithfully, a new church should come into being standing four-square upon the Word of God and the confessions of our dearly beloved Lutheran Church" (Schoell, 12). Yet there was a small group of ELCA pastors who fought the "Thesis of Agreement" from the start. Most notable was Kurt Marquart, a professor in Queensland. But when the actual union came to a vote, a group of church officials convinced these dissenters that the only way they could effectively work for a more confessional church was from the inside (Dudley). In Tanunda, South Australia on October 29 through November 2, 1966, only one pastor refused to vote in favor of the merger of the two church bodies. That was Pastor Kleinig, who had been consulting with President O. J. Naumann.

This merger resulted in a new church body called the Lutheran Church of Australia. It was anything but conservative. Right away officials closed the ELCA's more conservative seminary keeping the UELCA's more liberal seminary open in Adelaide. They did place two conservative professors on Adelaide's faculty, but in positions which had very little bearing on the students' theological development. Their liberalism can be seen in a statement from a letter of Dr. Sasse to President O. J. Naumann dated April 20, 1980. "I am not quite happy with your new

confession ("This We Believe"). We must all try to solve such exegetical problems as presented by Genesis 1-3 in such a way that we do not contradict the established facts of the universe (I do not speak of theories and hypothesis, but of facts). Otherwise we excommunicate the younger generation of congregations." On April 20, 1980, the WELS Committee on Inter-Church Relations summarized the LCA's errors. 1. They have a non-scriptural distinction between joint prayer and prayer fellowship. 2. They restrict church fellowship to a joint use of the means of grace. 3. They believe that a consensus on the doctrinal content of the Book Of Concord is the only requirement for Lutheran unity. 4. They identify the local congregation as the only divinely instituted form of the church. 5. They identify the pastorate of the local congregation as the only divinely instituted form of the public ministry. 6. They place a seemingly undue emphasis upon the servant form of the Word of God. 7. They refuse to insist upon a literal six day creation and allow room for some form of evolution. 8. They are unclear in certain eschatological statements, leaving room for certain millennial teachings (Schoell, 18).

#### BEGINNINGS

It was from this liberal church body that Pastor Kleinig stood apart and gathered together a small band of Lutherans who also wanted to keep confessional Lutheranism alive. Immediately, Pastor Kleinig began training Australian laymen for the ministry.

He also began contacting pastors in the United States to find enough shepherds to take care of the confessional Lutherans around him. One of the men he contacted in the United States was a Springfield graduate named Keith Hunter. In the early 1970's Pastor Hunter moved to Australia. Between he and Kleinig they served many preaching stations throughout eastern Queensland. Both of these men eventually joined the Lutheran Church of the Reformation, a U.S. group which had broken off from the LCMS and become very legalistic. Being all alone can be dangerous. Pastor Kleinig too became very legalistic making certain adiaphora a matter of conscience. For example he said that women could not wear pants to church and that men's hair had to be cut above the collar. The congregation asked Pastor Kleinig to resign and Pastor Hunter took over. But Pastor Hunter poisoned the people's minds against the WELS by making caricatures of the WELS especially over concerning "Church and Ministry" and then beating them down. When Pastor Hunter left for medical reasons in March 1977, he left a group of conservative Lutherans centered around Brisbane and Maryborough, Queensland (Dudley). This group took the name Faith Evangelical Lutheran Parish. This is the northern most congregation of confessional Australian Lutherans.

The second congregation of confessional Australian Lutherans 1200 miles to the south came into being in a totally different way. In the early 1970's Dr. Al Schoenauer, a professor at a university in Portland, Oregon was asked to be a visiting professor at a university in southern Australia. Before he and his family traveled to Australia, he went to the WELS seeking

taped services and Bible classes with which he and his family might worship and study while they were so far from a WELS congregation. WELS responded that they could provide taped services, but no Bible classes were available on tape (Dudley). Not long after this Al Schoenauer attended a service and Bible class at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hillsboro, Oregon. There he asked Pastor Thomas Dudley if he could supply him and his family with the tapes they needed. Pastor Dudley agreed.

In Australia Al Schoenauer enrolled his children in Concordia Lutheran College in Adelaide (In Australia a college is the equivalent of a high school). The religion which they taught at this school was offensive. For example, they taught that Abraham was the first man who realized that there had to be one God, so he set out in pursuit of this God and eventually became the first monotheist. Al Schoenauer took his complaint to the school's administration, but they were ambivalent to everything he said. So in 1973, he began writing letters to The Lutheran, the LCA's official magazine. Through these letters other conservatives came into contact with him. They asked about his worship. Al Schoenauer shared his tapes from Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church. Within six months Pastor Dudley was known by conservative Lutherans in all parts of Australia. In 1976, a small group of Australians visited Pastor Dudley in Oregon and asked him to come to Australia. One of these conservative men, Mr. Norm Pfitzner, even offered to pay for Pastor Dudley's trip and also advertised his arrival in many newspapers. When Pastor Dudley arrived in 1977, he spent three weeks meeting every night



with concerned pastors and laymen. The message he told the people was "Laymen will receive the ministry they demand. It is up to the laymen to ask the church to change. It is their God given responsibility" (Dudley). From these contacts, a group of concerned, confessional Lutherans gathered into a congregation calling themselves Grace Lutheran Church. They asked Pastor Dudley to find a pastor for them and while he was searching, they asked to be considered as members of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hillsboro, Oregon. Their congregation centered in Elizabeth, South Australia.

#### BACKBONE

Pastor Dudley hoped that his contacts with concerned, conservative LCA pastors would lead some to take a stand as Pastor Kleinig had. But many felt that their proper place to witness their conservative stance was in the LCA, at least until they were kicked out. Others were afraid of repercussions and asked that they remain anonymous. Pastor Bruce W. Adams of the LCA in a letter to Pastor Armin Keibel dated October 4, 1986, is an example of such an attitude. "After much deep reflection on issues you spoke to me about on the matter of WELS, I wish to make this plea to you in Christ. Please do not quote me personally to your officials as condoning any intention by your synod to consider opening a mission here in Australia. (This would be a matter for our officials and an honest discussion with our church leaders in Adelaide. I have no official position in

the LCA, beyond being one of the pastors within the church). It is my growing conviction that as an evangelical and conservative within the LCA I must minister in the ministry of my church and witness to our historic faith in that church. I do not want anything whatever to jeopardize my ministry here in Moorabbin or in the wider church. At my age and stage in life I wish to pastor my people here and finish my days within the LCA. Moreover, the issue of fellowship is one which I would not be happy with as you outlined it whilst staying with us."

Even though all the conservative LCA clergy lacked the fortitude to stand up against their synod, the two congregations in northern and southern Australia showed their strong backbone of doctrine. In the north the people had been led to hate the WELS. But after Pastor Dudley taught them what the WELS believed on his second trip to Australia in 1978, they decided to agree with the WELS even at the expense of splitting the congregation. In a letter from Murry N. Priebbenow, the secretary of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Parish, to President O. J. Naumann, dated August 6, 1978, this northern group of conservative Lutherans requested the official WELS position on: 1. Holy Scriptures; 2. Confessions in the Book of Concord (1580); 3. Brief Statement of the LCMS in 1932 and This We Believe of the WELS, in addition to other things. All this they did in hopes of establishing fellowship with the WELS. In a letter dated May 29, 1982, from S. J. Winter to President Mischke, Faith Evangelical Lutheran Parish said, "Thus, since we agree completely with you in matters of doctrine and practice, we herewith offer you the hand of

fellowship." The conservatives to the south were in fellowship with the WELS through Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hillsboro, Oregon, an independent church directly in doctrinal fellowship with WELS.

#### BROTHERHOOD

The Lutherans in these two congregations are very dedicated to their Lord. Such dedication is also felt by the pastor. More than in the United States, they hold their pastor in a place of high honor. To them the pastor stands next to God. In Elizabeth, South Australia, an elderly lady, about 60 years old, was on top of a tall ladder painting in their newly purchased church. Pastor Dudley took the paint brush away from her and took over painting for her. This shocked the people. They were appalled that a pastor would demean himself to do physical labor (Dudley).

Among the brotherhood of believers in the south, there is Walter (Wally) Wohlers, a learned man, who took it upon himself to write President Mischke on January 31, 1984, pleading for a spiritual leader. There is also Norman Hanson, a printer, who published his own conservative Lutheran newspaper, The Reporter, and mailed it all over Australia. All of this he did even though he lived 100 miles away from the nearest gathering of believers. Also in the south there is Norman Pfitzner, who paid for Dudley's first trip to Australia and later visited President O. J. Naumann and Pastor Theodore A. Sauer, the WELS Executive Secretary of the

Board for World Missions before Pastor Tomhave, to speak of their desire to stay together with others who shared a conservative Lutheran position like the WELS taught. At one point in time Mr. Pfitzner carried taped services to four different preaching stations.

Dedicated Lutherans also live in the north. Take George Burkert for example. Even though he lives isolated by great distance from others in Queensland, he has been receiving tapes since 1976, he is an official member of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Parish, and he sent his two daughters to Oregon to receive confirmation instruction from Pastor Dudley. Also in the north is Selwyn J. Winter, a young bank executive, who worked hard to keep the congregation together during the absence of a pastor. And then there is Noel Priebbenow, an owner of a major bus company in Maryborough, who invited and made it possible for Pastor Dudley to visit the conservatives in Brisbane in 1978.

#### PLEAS

When Pastor Dudley returned to Australia on his second trip in 1978, the conservative Lutherans in the south asked Dudley to find them a pastor. Pastor Dudley offered to pay for half of the pastor's salary if the people in the south would pay for the rest. Before Pastor Dudley returned to Oregon, they had saved two years worth of salary. (One man in this group offered personally to pay for Dudley to stay).

Shortly after Pastor Dudley returned from Australia, on July

15, 1978, he wrote to President O. J. Naumann asking for a call list. "We cannot turn our backs upon people who ask for the Word of God, and who have no other orthodox church to which to turn. Therefore at the direction of the congregation we are asking you for a call list of men qualified for an evangelistic-type ministry in Australia. The man would be called as a pastor of Grace Lutheran of Hillsboro, and the congregation would be responsible for such things as salary, insurance, pension, etc. He would be asked to serve the congregation as a mission worker in South Australia. The members there are incorporating in order to make it possible to meet all necessary legal requirements." On August 4, 1978, President O. J. Naumann responded, "I have arranged for a meeting of our Praesidium for next week and hope to be able to give you a reply to your suggestion after that meeting." President O. J. Naumann wrote Pastor Dudley again on August 22, 1978, saying that he had discussed his request with the two synod vice-presidents. All agreed that it would have to involve more than just the Council of Presidents. It would also have to involve the Board for World Missions and the Commission on Inter-Church Relations. In a letter dated October 4, 1978, Pastor Dudley explained the Australian situation further to President Naumann in order to help the committees decide. "The congregation which has been served by Queensland. Rather it is made up of individuals in the South Australia area who have applied for membership in our congregation and have been served by our tape ministry program for more than three years. It is centered in Naarcoorte, S.A. and serves members in South

Australia, Western New South Wales, and Victoria. It has 40 souls, 20 communicants, and more are interested. There are many more now being served by the tape ministry who are ready to join when we have a man present to serve them. Grace congregation wants to serve people who are members of Grace even though they live on the other side of the world. In this sense, the man who goes is not a foreign missionary, but a pastor of our congregation serving our members. As the Australian congregation grows, we will release these members to form a sister congregation. The pastor will remain a servant of Grace until such a time as God calls him to another service. We are in doctrinal fellowship with Wisconsin. We have supported your missionary programs with our dollars and prayers and will continue to do so in the future. We did not look for this opportunity, but rather God gave it to us. Any congregations which will be established will be in doctrinal agreement with the WELS." On October 18-19, 1978, the Board for World Missions met, and after discussion unanimously adopted the resolution not to supply a call list because of the inadvisability of the procedure of the call. The reasons they gave included: 1. a shortage of pastors in the synod; 2. the inadvisability of sending less than three men into a foreign country; 3. the similarity of Pastor Dudley's request to the one which they had received from Brazil; and 4. the Board for Home Mission's rules concerning daughter congregations.

Pastor Dudley then turned to President Orvick of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod for a call list. They complied. One

of the men on the call list was serving in Mt. Vernon, Washington at the time, so Pastor Dudley flew up to speak to him informally. In the course of their conversation the issue of church and ministry came up and the pastor in Washington said that the ELS had no formal position on church and ministry (Dudley). This soured Pastor Dudley's opinion of the ELS.

Until 1982, Grace continued to call various pastors in the WELS without a call list and without anyone accepting their call. On May 29, 1982, Faith Evangelical Lutheran Parish, the northern congregation, wrote directly to President Mischke stating their agreement with WELS doctrine and practice, extending their hand of fellowship, and asking for a call list. Mr. Selwyn J. Winter wrote the letter. On June 28-29, 1982, the CICR considered their request. They referred it to the Interim Committee who met on August 4, 1982. That same day President Mischke wrote back requesting more information about the congregation. There was no reply from Australia. Why? From September 1982, to September 1983, Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hillsboro, Oregon sent Pastor Dudley to search throughout Australia to find pastors for the two congregations from among the conservative LCA pastors who were ready to take a confessional stand. But none were to be found.

#### PASTORS

When Pastor Dudley returned to Oregon in 1983, his congregation was expanding its school and looking for a minister

of education. In their search they met Bill Mack, a graduate of Faith Seminary in Tacoma, Washington (a small seminary for a conservative group which broke from the ALC). Bill Mack did not agree at that time with Pastor Dudley's conservative view of fellowship, but the two kept in contact. Bill Mack then took some summer courses at Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis and was accepted by colloquy into the LCMS. He received a call to George, Washington. There he saw the problems in the LCMS and accused the president of his district of loose fellowship principles. While this was happening, Dudley suggested his name to the northern congregation, who then called him. Pastor Mack accepted and served in Brisbane for two and a half years from 1984 to 1986 (Dudley).

In 1985, Pastor Dudley learned that Pastor Daniel L. Sabrowsky had recently left the ministry in the WELS. He was still preaching, so Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hillsboro called him to serve Australia's southern congregation. He too accepted and served there from 1985 to 1987 (Dudley).

#### PROBLEMS

Pastor Mack did some very good work in Faith Evangelical Lutheran Parish. His theology was good too even though he used some charismatic expressions like "Praise the Lord!" and "Alleluia, Amen!" Nevertheless, his people accepted him well. But his wife just couldn't adjust to life in Australia. Discontent with compensation also played a part (\$30,000.00/ year



+ \$5,000.00/ year as a car allowance) (Dudley). He wrote to President Orvick and was accepted into the ministry of the ELS, but the ELS refused to call him back to the United States because of the moving expenses (Dudley). He printed a blind add in the paper in Klamath Falls, Oregon and the ELS congregation there called him back to the states. He still serves Christ Lutheran Church (ELS) in Klamath Falls, Oregon.

When Pastor Sabrowsky arrived in Adelaide, South Australia, he had 30 communicant members. In expectation of one day receiving a pastor they had purchased a church with a separate Sunday School building. They had also saved up \$30,000.00. One of the men in the congregation had spent 10 years canvassing the entire area of Adelaide for LCA. The people were poised to reach out to the community. But Pastor Sabrowsky chose to channel his talents into a half hour weekly radio program rather than knocking on doors. This destroyed the people's evangelism enthusiasm. Within three years half of the congregation left and their cash reserve was spent. On top of that, Pastor Sabrowsky and the president of the congregation had a falling out. Their differences became irreconcilable and the president of the congregations resigned also. Pastor Sabrowsky then accused Pastor Dudley of false doctrine concerning divorce and remarriage in hopes that Pastor Dudley would pull him out of Adelaide. Pastor Sabrowsky's charges of false doctrine proved to be false and Pastor Dudley arranged for a check of \$10,000.00 to pay for Pastor Sabrowsky to move him and his family back to the United States (Dudley). Pastor Sabrowsky is currently serving Christ

Lutheran Church (ELS) in Santa Rosa, California.

PRESENT

Pastor Dan Schroeder, a 1988 graduate of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, arrived in northern Australia on March 7, 1989, to serve Faith Evangelical Lutheran Parish in the name of the ELS. He is living at Redeemer which is in Killangur, a northern suburb of Brisbane. Redeemer owns its own property, has 20-22 communicants and has 20 children in their Sunday School program. Pastor Schroeder also serves St. Paul's in Maryborough 150 miles to the north on alternate Sundays. St. Paul's is in the process of purchasing property, has 11 communicants, and has 10 children in their Sunday School program. There is a great potential for growth. In April 1989, President Orvick visited Faith Evangelical Lutheran Parish and stated that the ELS has a desire to take over this mission in northern Australia on a permanent basis (Dudley). This coming fall Faith Evangelical Lutheran Parish will be sending a man named Mark Tuffin to study at Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary. Two others expect to follow him in the years to come.

The conservative Lutherans in the south, Grace Lutheran Church, is currently being served by video and audio tapes from Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hillsboro, Oregon. The property in Adelaide has been sold because the congregation there has all but dissolved. However, 6-7 communicants regularly meet in Keith, South Australia to watch taped services. They have

just started a Sunday School. And when Pastor Dudley was there in April 1989, 23-24 people showed up to worship. There is also a group in Colleraine, just outside Hamilton, Victoria, which has had a Sunday School running for 10 years. Currently they have 15 children in their Sunday School program. The people in both locations are willing to do evangelism work, but find it hard without a pastor. The ELS has no intention at this time of taking on the congregation to the south as a mission (Dudley).

#### PLANS?

Will Australia be the next world mission field of the WELS? It is hard to say. If the WELS should so choose to go into Australia, they will find a country of 16.5 million people, 85% of whom are absent from church any given Sunday morning (Lutheran Sentinel, 7). They will also find the LCA with 115,000 members spread throughout 430 congregations and many primary and secondary schools. They will not find much confessional Lutheranism though, not even among the LCMS representatives who trade classrooms with the LCA (Traeger, 6). But they will find souls who do not have the Gospel as they need it for their eternal salvation. Australian people may be very independent and hard to evangelize, but because of that they will be all the more thankful that WELS came to share the true Gospel with them.

Will the WELS expand into Australia to serve God's people there? Time will tell. Until then we pray with the conservative Lutherans in Australia that the Lord would send workers to

harvest the ripe Australian fields.

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Wanted: *particulars of services rendered*  
Wants: *amounts due to him*  
- *amounts due to him*