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Learning for Life 202

Australian Lutherans and social justice: scripture, tradition and experience

Tom Brennen*

Introduction

Australian Lutherans do not often use the term 'social justice' or speak loudly about such work. A quick search of the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA/NZ) website reveals few hits for the phrase 'social justice'.

Yet Australian Lutherans have a rich history of concerted engagement with social justice and have heeded the ancient call, 'to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Mic 6:8).¹ Consider the following statement from Bishop John Henderson:

[T]he gospel message doesn't stop at the church door. It is for all the world. Jesus calls us to a different way of thinking... As we learn to trust in our heavenly Father's generous love and care for us, the more free and generous we become, doing what is right for our neighbours in need, and acting as Christ to them.²

Nevertheless, the lack of an explicit and public focus on and understanding of social justice places the church at risk of missing opportunities to inspire the people of God in service and to participate as a vital force for good in Australian society. Our country is increasingly interested in issues of justice and we do well to engage in these, adding a Christian voice informed by our rich Lutheran theology, to give a Christ-centred focus to this vital work.

This paper seeks to define social justice and explore how social justice in the LCA/NZ today can be informed by scripture, by the words and actions of Martin Luther and by our experience as Lutherans in Australia. This paper then suggests further areas of exploration relevant for us as Australian Lutherans.

A more enunciated and widely understood definition of social justice and action within the LCA/NZ will empower us to enhance and celebrate the work underway, and responsibly critique and plan ongoing action in keeping with God's mandate.

Defining social justice

While the term 'social justice' is relatively new, discussion of justice, fairness and care for the disadvantaged has occurred across cultures, religions and epochs. The term 'social justice' finds its roots in the political sphere, having entered common usage as a name for

* The author expresses appreciation to Mr Andrew Jaensch, Dr Ken Albinger and Dr Christine Lockwood for their feedback on early drafts on this paper. The author extends special thanks to Dr Mark Worthing for providing valuable guidance during the finalisation of this paper.

1 All scriptural quotations used in this article are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the bible.

2 John Henderson, 'Refugee week 2019,' 19 June 2019, accessed 23 August 2020, <https://www.lca.org.au/refugee-week-2019/>.

collective protest against perceived capitalist exploitation of labour and as a call to improve the living conditions of all humanity.³

The term is linked with core concerns of:

- Fair distribution of resources
- Equal access to opportunities and rights (equity)
- Fair systems of law and procedural transparency and fairness
- The protection of vulnerable and disadvantaged people

If social justice is misunderstood as humanity saving itself through perfect action, then one could understand that Christians, and Lutherans in particular, may reject the concept outright. Indeed, some Lutheran theologians have argued that the 'gospel has absolutely nothing to do with outward existence but only with eternal life... It is not the vocation of Jesus Christ or the gospel to change the orders of secular life and establish them anew.'⁴

Social justice within a Christian framework, however, is not about humanity saving itself. It is instead an outworking of the Christian faith inspired by our own salvation. Donahue expresses the concept of social justice as a 'concern for a community where all people can experience equal dignity as sons and daughters of God, with special attention to the sufferings of powerless and vulnerable people.'⁵

Dorr further clarifies:

The mere fact that some people are more wealthy than others is not, in itself, social injustice. But the existence of gross poverty alongside conspicuous wealth is morally unacceptable. The fact that in our world millions of people do not have the basic necessities in life while others live in luxury is a basic injustice: it infringes the most fundamental human right of all—the right to life. The Christian tradition maintains that the goods of the Earth are there for the welfare of all the Earth's inhabitants...⁶

In 1986, African Lutherans met in Harare, Zimbabwe, for a conference which explored the topic 'The Lutheran Heritage and the Black Experience in Africa and North America'. The outcome of this conference was a rich, vibrant and highly relevant document for the discussion of social justice in Lutheran circles.

This document⁷ argues that social justice is about ensuring that 'God's excluded people

3 United Nations, *Social Justice in an Open World: The Role of the United Nations* (New York, NY: United Nations, 2006), 10.

4 Karl H. Hertz, ed., *Two Kingdoms and One World: A Sourcebook in Christian Social Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1976), 85.

5 John R. Donahue, 'The bible and social justice: "Learn to do right! Seek justice" (Isa 1:17 NIV),' in *Scripture: An Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation*, ed. Michael Gorman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005): 239.

6 Donal Dorr, *The Social Justice Agenda: Justice, Ecology, Power and the Church* (Melbourne, VIC: Collins Dove, 1991), 8.

7 James K. Echols and Albert Pero Jr., *A Message from Harare by Black Lutherans*, ed. Simon S. Maimela (Conference of International Black Lutherans at the University of Zimbabwe 1986, undated pamphlet, apparently 1987).

are full participants at the table of grace.⁸ 'Grace', in this context, is used to signify the sharing of God's gifts, both physical and spiritual, with all of humanity. We must not merely ensure all are welcome to worship our Lord; we must also ensure that all may partake in all of God's physical gifts to humanity.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer forcefully emphasises a social justice defined as being for all humanity and an obligation of the church in his essay 'The church and the Jewish question' published in the context of the Nazi regime in 1930s Germany:

The church has an unconditional obligation toward the victims of any societal order, even if they do not belong to the Christian community. 'Let us work for the good of all.' These are both ways in which the church, in its freedom, conducts itself in the interest of a free state. In times when the laws are changing, the church may under no circumstances neglect either of these duties. The third possibility is not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself.⁹

Social justice, within a Christian framework, ensures the equity of both resource and opportunity access for all of God's people, regardless of race, colour, religion or gender. This work is pursued not only to reduce suffering but to rid the world of oppressive systems which cause such suffering.

Let us consider how this concept is influenced by scripture, by tradition and by our experience of being Australian Lutherans.

Scripture

'Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.' (Isa 1:17)

The prophet Isaiah is one of many Old Testament prophets who raise social justice concerns. These concerns are then picked up by Jesus and continue to be a theme in the New Testament epistles.

Dominik Markl suggests that there are three themes of Old Testament social justice teaching:

- Freedom from oppression
- Judicial justice in love
- The judgement of economic abuse¹⁰

We observe these themes through the rescue of Israel from slavery in Exodus, the establishment of God's law as seen in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and God's judgment

8 Richard J. Perry Jr., 'African American Lutheran ethical action: the will to build,' in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen Bloomquist and John Stumme (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 79.

9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'The church and the Jewish question,' in *Berlin: 1932–1933*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English, vol. 12, ed. Carsten Nicolaisen, Ernst-Albert Scharffenorth and Larry L. Rasmussen, translated by Isabel Best and David Higgins, with supplementary material translated by Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 353.

10 Dominik Markl, 'Social justice in the bible,' *Thinking Faith*, 14 October 2011, accessed 23 August 2020, https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20111014_1.htm.

against those who abuse the weak, as proclaimed by the prophet Amos.

In calling Moses to lead his people, God declared:

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them... (Ex 3:7–9)

Foundational to the entire Biblical narrative is the image of God rescuing His people from oppression. This narrative is seen again and again when God reminds His people, 'remember when you were slaves in Egypt,' with this phrase being used four times in Deuteronomy alone (Deut 5:15, 15:15, 16:12, 24:18).

It is fascinating to see that when God gives His people an instruction to consider the poor, He bookends it with reminders of Israel's history of being slaves:

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this. (Deut 24:18–22)

Concern for the slave continues to be a theme throughout Israel's history. Once God's people are free, God is determined to set them up as a nation that does not repeat the oppressive errors of the Egyptians. We see this right from the beginning of the Israelite nation, as God calls them to care not just for themselves, but also for 'the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow' (Deut 10:18).

When God calls His people out of slavery to worship Him at Mt Sinai and receive His law, He sets the judicial foundations for them to live in a manner different to the surrounding nations, and in stark contrast to the land they had left behind. The Decalogue itself is introduced to the people with a reminder of their past oppression: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.' (Ex 20:2)

Schwarz writes,

It was Sinai that invested in [the Israelites] an understanding of their mission in the world. Jewish existence was to be based on bringing...righteousness and justice to all God's children... The Torah's teachings about acting with compassion, protecting the stranger in one's midst, and pursuing peace and truth shaped the Jewish notion of how one should live in the world. Sinai consciousness is at the root of the Jewish understanding that to live true to the covenant that God established with the Jewish

people at Sinai is to live a life of social responsibility.¹¹

The Decalogue forms part of the Mitzvot, the 613 commandments to the Jewish nation coming from the Hebrew Bible. The Mitzvot enshrine the judicial fairness that God sought for His people. Consider Leviticus 19:15, 'You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour,' and Leviticus 24:22, 'You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the Lord your God.' God is greatly concerned with His people acting in a just manner. Further, Deuteronomy 16:20 states 'Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.' Linking justice and social responsibility, we read elsewhere 'Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.' (Deut 27:19)

Despite the clear directives of God, His people continued to stray from His law and His path. As a result, the prophets rose with their consistent theme calling for Israel to repent of their ways and to do justice. The prophet Amos speaks to a prosperous Israel which has forgotten God's justice and failed to remember their own rescue from oppression, suffering and slavery. Amos proclaims:

They sell...the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way...they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge; and in the house of their God they drink wine bought with fines they imposed. (Amos 2:6-8)

The Israelites 'do not know how to do right' (Amos 3:10), 'turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground' (Amos 5:7), and 'take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate' (Amos 5:12).

It is Israel's failure to worship God sincerely and follow His laws which bring injustice to the land and reduce Israel to a defeated and conquered nation. They forgot what it was to live in slavery. They forgot God's law.

Speaking to the Israelite nation, now oppressed at the hands of the Romans, Jesus' ministry has a dual focus. Primarily, Jesus announces the underserved grace and forgiveness of God. This grace and mercy is purchased with His suffering and death. Secondly, Jesus ministers as the Great Prophet who calls the nation of Israel to repent for failing to heed God's call to care for the outcast and the downtrodden.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19–31) we see Jesus as a great social justice teacher, teaching the Old Testament themes of judicial fairness, freedom from oppression, and judgement of economic abuse. For the rich man's crime of failing to meet Lazarus' physical needs, he suffers eternal judgement. When seeking mercy for his brothers still alive, Jesus' response is, 'They have Moses and the prophets. They should listen to them' (Lk 16:29). God's people have the example of the past, yet sadly, they do not heed God's call, and their economic abuse and the resulting oppression of the poor

11 Sidney Schwarz, 'Can social justice save the American Jewish soul?', in *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice*, ed. Or N. Rose, Jo E.G. Kaiser and Margie Klein (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), 4–5.

are judged.

Speaking to the call to care for the stranger, Jesus critiques the Jewish nation and by extension, all followers of Christ, who like the goats, will be judged when the Son of Man comes for failing to feed the hungry, to quench the thirst of the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to care for the sick and to visit those imprisoned. Driving home his point Jesus proclaims, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me' (Mt 25:45).

Jesus critiques the very Israelites whom the prophets before him had critiqued for following 'the letter of the law' but not the intention of the law. Jesus' response to those, who were amazed that he did not wash his hands as ceremonially required is sharp and critical:

Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You fools! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also?... But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practised, without neglecting the others. (Lk 11:39–40, 43–44)

Jesus upholds the two essential principles of the godly life: love of God and love of the neighbour. This is made clear when he summarised the Mitzvot thus:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Mt 22:37–40)

Knowing the narrow definition of 'neighbour' in the Jewish nation, Jesus further elaborates with the story of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37), embarrassing his Jewish listeners by having the Israelite actors in the narrative ignore a man in need, while the despised Samaritan, the enemy of the Jewish people, does the very thing that the Jewish people should do.

Engel and Dyrness claim Jesus' mission was 'to extend the kingdom by infiltrating all segments of society with preference given to the poor, and allowing no dichotomy between evangelism and social transformation.'¹² Jesus' ministry is dual without separation—something we must always hold in balance. To see Jesus' words as having solely a 'horizontal' and earthbound impact may underplay the most vital work he performed, the 'vertical' and salvific work which was placing us back in right relationship with God. Jesus is not either saviour or social justice advocate—he is both. Both must be preached and practised, knowing that only the work of Christ as saviour continues on into eternity.

This dual focus is one that we see in the work and example of Martin Luther, which we now turn our attention to.

¹² James F. Engel and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 8.

Tradition

As love and support are given you, you, in turn, must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow...all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray...¹³ (Martin Luther)

A popular refrain suggests that Luther's supposed silence on social justice indicates he had little interest in social reform. Luther's focus was reforming the church, not society, so the argument goes. Can one read Luther's works, which contain many statements similar to the one above, and hold that he was only interested in church reform? Revisionist scholars such as Carter Lindberg have suggested that Luther did indeed have a concern for the poor and oppressed. His desire to reform the church and protect the gospel was driven by a desire to address the injustices present in society that had been created and perpetuated by the church.

Lindberg's book, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor*, questions the long-held thesis that Luther offers little of value to a discussion of social ethics and practice. Lindberg argues:

To dismiss Luther's contributions to social ethics in general and to the development of early modern social welfare...has become a deficit in the contemporary life of the church... He was neither the first nor the only medieval thinker to struggle with relating the gospel to social justice...but Luther does provide a clear model not only for the theological application of faith to society but more importantly, for the focus in scripture of that theology.¹⁴

Lindberg is not alone in seeking to recalibrate Luther scholarship in this area. Hillerbrand adds: 'Really? Christ has nothing to do with how Christians relate our faith to our daily lives, to our vocations, our professions? What principles should inform the body politic? Surely Luther did not mean that.'¹⁵

One should not argue that Luther's prime desire was a reformation of society. Unequivocally, Luther's first thought was for the correction of the teachings of his beloved church. However, with the physical burden lumped upon society which had a clear material impact, one should see that Luther's concern for the spiritual health for his people was also linked to their physical health and social conditions. We cannot read Luther's encouragement to 'fight, work and pray' for the needy as a narrow instruction to ensure they have access to the spiritual grace of God and not the practical blessing provided by Christ's followers meeting the needs of the poor, downtrodden and oppressed.

Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* is a formal academic dialogue but it was prompted by his

13 Martin Luther, 'The blessed sacrament of the holy and true body of Christ, and the brotherhoods (1519),' trans. Jeremiah Schindel, *Luther's works vol. 35: Word and sacrament I*, ed. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1960), 54.

14 Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 161.

15 Hans J. Hillerbrand, "'Christ has nothing to do with politics': Martin Luther and the societal order," in *Encounters with Luther: New Directions for Critical Studies*, ed. Kirsil I. Stjerna and Brooks Schramm (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2016), 207.

pastoral heart and concern for believers in Wittenberg. The preacher Tetzl's tactic of using the threat of hell under papal authority was a misuse of power against a disempowered and mostly illiterate populace. We see Luther's concern with practices such as this expressed further in his reflections on the fourth, ninth and tenth commandments from the *Large Catechism*:

For to steal is nothing else than to acquire someone else's property by unjust means. These few words include taking advantage of our neighbours in any sort of dealings that result in loss to them... In short, thievery is the most common craft and largest on earth. The same fate will befall those who turn the free public market into nothing but a carrion pit and a robber's den. The poor are defrauded every day, and new burdens and higher prices are imposed. (LC 224,228,240; Tappert: 394)

[You] must learn that God does not want you to deprive your neighbours of anything that is theirs so that they suffer loss while you satisfy your greed... [W]e are commanded not to desire to harm our neighbours, nor to assist in doing harm not to give occasion for it. Instead, we are glad to let them have what is theirs and to promote and protect whatever may be profitable and serviceable to them, just as we wish others would do so for us. (LC 307,310; Tappert: 406)

We see here both a proactive and responsive approach to social ethics in Luther's thinking. He encourages us to be mindful of our motivation before acting, while also enabling us to care for those that have been harmed by the action.

For Luther, proactive social action was the God-given responsibility of those in power. As he writes in a commentary on Psalm 82, 'For so to help a man that he does not need to become a beggar is just as much of a good work and a virtue and an alms as to give to a man and to help a man who has already become a beggar.'¹⁶ In commenting about the practice of a prince washing the feet of a poor person, he suggests that while this is a good work worthy of praise, when a prince takes this to the next level, such as setting up a hospital, that is a divine act. Luther here anticipates Bonhoeffer's call to not only care for the poor but to attack the systems that create the poor.

A survey of Luther's life shows practical engagement in social justice action. Faced with the bubonic plague of 1527, Luther remained in Wittenberg with his pregnant wife Katie (Käthe) to open his home to the sick and ailing. While many fled, Luther wrote 'Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry...must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death. We have a command from Christ. "A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep but the hireling sees the world coming and flees (Jn 10:11)".'¹⁷

Following this theme of Luther disregarding his own safety to call out for justice and provide care, Worthing highlights Luther's concern for the oppression caused by domestic

16 Martin Luther, 'Psalm 82,' trans. C. Jacobs, *Luther's works vol. 13: Selected psalms II*, ed. Jaroslav Pelican (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 54.

17 Martin Luther, 'Whether one may flee from a deadly plague,' trans. Carl Schindler, *Luther's works vol. 43: Devotional writings*, ed. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1968), 121.

violence; even when this required him to condemn community leaders publicly, risking the wrath of the rich and influential. When Luther discovered that a leader was both committing adultery and beating his wife, he excluded the leader from communion. When this leader once again repeated this behaviour Luther responded by excluding him once more.¹⁸

An advocate of education of the masses, Luther's concern for education had significant impacts on the lives of the poor. Key reforms such as compulsory education ('it is the duty of the temporal authority to compel its subjects to keep their children in school'¹⁹), extending compulsory education to girls²⁰ and encouraging society to provide financially for the education of the poor ('If the father is poor, the resources of the church should be used to assist'²¹) paved the way for a more literate, just and mobile society.

Speaking in response to the Peasants' Revolt, Luther made sure to consider how one goes about addressing injustice in society. Rising up against oppressive powers in a way that would further injure and oppress the poor, is not aligned with God's call to the Christian. He wrote:

I am opposed to those who rise in insurrection, no matter how just their cause, because there can be no insurrection without hurting the innocent and shedding their blood... 'Thou shalt follow justly after that which is just (Deut 16:20).²²

As Lindberg summarises, 'Luther had the boldness to address structural sources of injustice and to advocate legislative redress of them because his social ethics were rooted in the worship and proclamation of the community.'²³ His social justice actions were an extension of his Christian faith lived in the context of community.

Luther has much encouragement for us as Australian Lutherans to involve ourselves in the practice of social justice. Furthermore, passion for our faith and direct experience of oppression, are pivotal to the events which brought Lutherans to Australia.

Experience

'We are [emigrating] since I and my fellow believers are not allowed to practice our religion freely.'²⁴ (Unnamed emigrant)

18 Mark Worthing, *Martin Luther: A Wild Boar in the Lord's Vineyard* (Northcote, VIC: Morning Star Publishing, 2017), 87.

19 Martin Luther, 'A sermon on keeping children in school,' trans. Charles Jacobs, rev. Robert Schultz, *Luther's works vol. 46: The Christian in Society 3*, ed. Robert Schultz (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967), 256.

20 Martin Luther, 'Fraternal agreement on the common chest of the entire assembly at Leisnig,' trans. Walther Brandt, *Luther's works: The Christian in society 2*, vol. 45, ed. Walther Brandt (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1961), 188.

21 Luther, 'A sermon on keeping children in school,' 257.

22 Martin Luther, 'A sincere admonition by Martin Luther to all Christians to guard against insurrection and rebellion,' trans. W. Lambert, rev. Walther Brandt, *Luther's works: The Christian in society 2*, vol. 45, ed. Walther Brandt (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1961), 263.

23 Lindberg, *Beyond Charity*, 162–163.

24 Quoted by Wilhelm Iwan, *Because of their Beliefs: Emigration from Prussia to Australia*, trans. and ed. with additional material by David Schubert (Highgate, SA: H. Schubert, 1995), 82.

The first Lutherans in Australia were drawn to their new homeland in part due to persecution. As dissenting Lutherans in mid-19th-century Prussia they risked imprisonment, poverty and economic disadvantage.

When King Friedrich Wilhelm III desired to bring his Calvinist and Lutheran subjects into a united church through the use of a common prayer book, Prussian Lutherans objected. As a result, some Lutherans were labelled as separatists and disturbers of the peace. Both the police and the military were called in to suppress them. An 1834 proclamation legislated fines for religious services, Sunday school teaching and pastoral visits led by dissenting pastors. Goods were seized from the dissenters, leaving many in poverty, while others were arrested and thrown in prison.²⁵

Eventually, Wilhelm III's campaign against the dissenting Lutherans succeeded. He ensured that all dissenting pastors were removed from their roles, lying in jail or, as in the case of one of the key fathers of the LCA/NZ, Daniel Fritzsche, on the run and tending to their scattered flocks in defiance of the law.

At an 1835 synod, many Lutherans concluded that emigration was needed to bring an end to the matter, but the state refused to allow the necessary paperwork for emigration. In 1838, when the first group of emigrants eventually left the region, on a barge down the river Oder, they were accompanied by frequent public abuse, ridicule and even rock-throwing from those on the riverbanks. While it would be naïve to argue that the first Lutherans emigrants did not also consider economic prospects, oppression and social injustice were their primary drivers for emigration. These first Lutheran immigrants to South Australia flourished and were joined by many more believers. Many of these later emigrants were admittedly more motivated by economic prospects than religious oppression and injustice. Still, the idea of a persecuted community seeking religious freedom was already well-ingrained into the consciousness of early Lutheran migrants.

Before the arrival of the first Lutheran immigrants, missionaries Christian Teichelmann and Clamor Schurmann commenced work in the fledgling South Australian colony. These original missionaries were sent by the same church that the soon to arrive immigrants were fleeing. Teichelmann and Schurmann had a dual task. Firstly, to reach Aboriginal hearts with the gospel in their own language and establish an Aboriginal Christian church. Secondly, much as they were able, they were, in Christian love, to stand by and assist Aboriginal people in their temporal needs. Lockwood highlights that their tasks were not defined in terms of 'civilising' or Europeanising Aboriginal people.²⁶

It appears that these early Lutheran missionaries were the first Lutherans in Australia to critique oppressive power structures. They rejected the South Australian government's desire to 'civilise' the Indigenous people and 'amalgamate' them into the colony as workers, which meant taking away their land, breaking up their communities, suppressing their languages and culture and separating children from their parents. The missionaries

²⁵ Iwan, *Because of their Beliefs*, 8.

²⁶ Christine J. Lockwood, *The Two Kingdoms: Lutheran Missionaries and the British Civilising Mission in Early South Australia* (PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA, 2014), 247.

'protested against colonial injustice and policies that showed no respect for the rights and unique God-given identity of Aboriginal peoples.²⁷ This approach brought them into tension with both the colonial powers and the majority of settlers.

In contrast to the dominant view at the time:

[The Lutheran] missionaries refused to accept Aboriginal extinction was inevitable or divinely ordained. They laid blame for such a sentence squarely at the human door of colonial exploitation and neglect. They warned that colonial policies robbing Aboriginal people of sufficient land to support their families and community life would lead to the extermination of a proud and independent people.²⁸

The ongoing work of the LCA/NZ with Indigenous Australians has been a constant theme in our history. It points to evident adherence to God's call for justice for all, regardless of language, creed and colour.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the Australian Lutheran community came under persecution themselves. The use of the German language in our churches, schools and communities, caused us to come under suspicion from authorities. In the early stages of the First World War, South Australia passed an Act of Parliament closing forty-nine Lutheran schools with calls for the same to occur in Victoria narrowly defeated. Lutheran churches were vandalised and were targets of arson. Worship services in the German language were banned, German townships were renamed, and 4,500 Germans were interned during the war, including Lutheran leaders and pastors.

Many of the first Lutherans to come to Australia had been disadvantaged in their homeland on account of their faith while their Australian born children and grandchildren were disadvantaged due to their German heritage. Australian Lutherans know what it is to be powerless in the face of oppression and to cry out for justice. Our experience as Lutherans in Australia is one of escaping oppression, being oppressed and seeking to avoid oppressing others. This must inspire us and inform us as we do social justice.

Concluding remarks

[We envision a] world where all people live in just societies, where we are all empowered to achieve our full potential, uphold our rights and the rights of others for a life with peace and dignity; and where we are all inspired to remember, welcome and support those who suffer from poverty and injustice...

We add our voice to those of the unheard and the excluded, together crying out for justice so that we can all live in just and sustainable communities.

[W]e express our solidarity with people who suffer from poverty and marginalisation through advocacy for justice— aspiring to speak out with courage and enabling others to speak out and be heard.

²⁷ Lockwood, *The Two Kingdoms*, 252.

²⁸ Lockwood, *The Two Kingdoms*, 250.

Particular effort is taken to ensure that those who are marginalised by age, gender, disability, ethnicity, social class, religion, political opinion or other characteristics are included.²⁹

Australian Lutheran World Service

About us

Australian Lutherans have not often used the term 'social justice' but our organisations, as exemplified by the above quote, and our people have been engaging in this work since the first years of immigration. The scriptures and our tradition bring great encouragement to this duty. To be an Australian Lutheran should mean to be a Christian concerned with social justice. However, our lack of a broad, robust and consistent public voice may open us to Bonhoeffer's critique that we 'bind up the wounds of the victims' but do not seek to 'seize the wheel' and publicly challenge the systems that create and perpetuate social injustice. There is a danger that in being quiet in this space, we miss opportunities to encourage the faith of our people and connect to a contemporary society which has a growing concern for social justice.

We must reflect continually on God's call to act on injustice. How is this embedded in our church? Are our programs simply alleviating the suffering, or are we firmly and strategically working to remove systems and practices of oppression and injustice? Are we doing everything we can in our churches, schools and affiliated organisations to heed God's call to challenge injustice?

The LCA/NZ has several thoughtful and vibrant documents which inform our social justice practices but which are often unknown to our people. Examples from our Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions (DSTO) include *The involvement of the church in social and political problems* (DSTO, H11), *One loving God: two hands—saving and caring* (DSTO, H47), *Human rights* (DSTO, H1) and *The two kingdoms and social ethics* (DSTO, I11). Documents from the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions (CSBQ) include *Poverty* (CSBQ, 1993) and *Food and hunger* (CSBQ, 2009). These documents would be of great value if communicated more widely to stimulate discussion, critique and action. This will further be enhanced through considering the specific impact of our Lutheran theology in questions of social justice.

Increased research, conversation and critique will push us forward to ensure we continue to heed God's call to his people. Lutherans in Australia, as a smaller denomination, are sometimes reticent to speak loudly about issues of social justice and to share what individuals, congregations and organisations are doing to address these issues. Let us revisit our approach and enhance our commitment to the clear call God issued to us as expressed in scripture and seen through our tradition and honed by our Australian experience. May Australian Lutherans be a leading force to 'let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5:24).

²⁹ Australian Lutheran World Service, 'About us', accessed 23/08/2020, <https://www.alws.org.au/about-us/#about-3>.