

THE GROWTH OF JACOB'S LADDER CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AS A PART OF THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA, SOUTH AUSTRALIA DISTRICT.

It is almost too soon to be attempting to write a short history and evaluation of the birth and growth of Jacob's Ladder and of the agony of its coming to terms with the Lutheran Church of which it is a part. This is especially so since the issues involved are still running hot and since it is to be written by one who is as intimately involved in the discussions as I am. The issues are many and complex, and their interpretation has varied considerably. I do not believe that truth is to be found by some sort of middle of the road compromise, but only by conscientiously seeking it out under the lordship of Jesus and through the power and insight that only His Spirit can give.

Jacob's Ladder had its beginnings as a coffee lounge in September, 1970, in the premises still occupied on the second floor of 102 Gawler Place in Adelaide. Its early beginnings lay in a desire to foster fellowship amongst young Lutherans in the city, but through the influence of the Dorian Society, Jacob's Ladder opened as a ministry to non-Christian young people. Until the end of 1973 it was staffed and run by volunteers and administered by a management committee which was responsible to the Metro South Zone of the Lutheran Youth of South Australia. The ministry grew so that by the end of 1972 the management committee saw a clear need for a full-time missionary to lead the work. Consequently a request for such a person was made to the District Church Council. After much discussion it was decided to call a Pastor together with the St. Stephen's congregation. The Lord led Pastor Doug. Kuhl (at that time in Swan Hill, Victoria) to accept the call, and he was installed early in January, 1974. At the same time we were offered the rest of the top floor of the building we were in, thus doubling the floor area we had at our disposal.

During 1974 the ministry of Jacob's Ladder exploded. Initially the movement was slower - the area of the coffee house itself was enlarged and the additional rest of the floor was used for offices and a Drop-in Centre. Training nights for workers were established and the ministry began to creep further out into the city. March saw us become the headquarters for Kairos '74, a nation-wide "Jesus People" happening in conjunction with the Adelaide Festival of Arts. In the space of two short weeks Jacob's Ladder was transformed. We were confronted by thirty new converts whom we had to nurture. We had another 80 positive contacts, and we had become known to a great number of people in Adelaide and beyond. Our coffee house was packed to capacity (up to 150 people) each night. A steady stream of people began to come to the centre during the week for counselling, friendship or other help.

To meet these needs the existing small band of workers was cemented closer together and the formation of a community began in earnest. The pressure of such a ministry is intense, and in order to survive we needed to be a group of people who were deeply committed to the Lord

and to each other. Those who had recently been converted needed to be part of such a community if they were to withstand the pressures to return to the street.

The structure that was suitable for running the coffee lounge of a few months before was already out of date. Jacob's Ladder as such was to be directed by a management committee elected by Metro South Zone; Doug. Kuhl's work was to be guided and led by the Youth Ministry Committee of the St. Stephen's congregation, and there was already a community of people who were bearing the heat of the day in the ministry and so quite rightly felt that they should be involved in the decisions that were made. The monthly meetings of the management committee were largely spent catching up on the previous month's activities and more and more basic decisions were made at the grass roots level. Doug. Kuhl very soon found that he had more than enough work at Jacob's Ladder to fill his day, and so fulfilling his responsibilities at St. Stephen's became more and more difficult. Consequently after much discussion Doug. resigned his call and undertook to work full time at Jacob's Ladder, which he has been doing ever since.

During this time the District got directly involved at the request of Metro South Zone and organised meetings of all interested parties to work out the issues involved. Doug's resignation meant that he was now technically "without a call", though he was Pastor to the Community at Jacob's Ladder during all this time. Many hours were spent at meetings. Since there were now three different committees and the Jacob's Ladder Community involved, the same points were talked through many times. The pressure of the continuing ministry at Jacob's Ladder and our general slackness in administration caused much frustration to those who desired written reports and statements concerning the work. We were doing and saying things that were not in keeping with the current practice of the church and so natural suspicions arose. Since we were learning and working through issues as we went, our statements and explanations were not always as clear as they might have been.

Sensitive feelings were aroused as people were threatened by our different approach. Since we steadfastly refused to follow some of the guidelines established within the church for such a ministry, we were disagreeing with the way the church does things and therefore judging the brethren. Some criticism was of course implied for we were sifting through the general trends in our church and discarding some of them, but such criticism is vital to the health of a body like the LCA. God was doing something in Jacob's Ladder and both we and the rest of the LCA had to come to terms with it.

Within the community changes were continuing to occur. There was a shift from a special ministry which was task-orientated to the development of a community which was "complete" in the sense that it was concerned with all that is involved in being a Christian. Weekly worship celebrations were held as well as teaching and nurture programmes. The regular celebrations of the Lord's Supper was yet to come, not because it wasn't desired - it was. But it was delayed so as not to

cause offense to other brothers and sisters in the church. The few occasions when it was celebrated caused a considerable stream of protest.

The Lord was also doing a work in the lives of many individuals within the community. Many who had been Christians for a long time were coming to know the Lord in a way they never thought possible previously. Jesus is real and very much alive. His forgiveness is sure. He means what He says in His Word and He keeps His promises, even those that we think ought to have an "escape clause". He has truly sent His Holy Spirit to us to be our consellor and to empower us to share His Word with others. He gives gifts to His people so that they can minister to their brothers and sisters and so build them up in the faith. Therein lies the quiet and subtle renewal that the Lord was working in our lives. For many (though not for all) it was an instantaneous awakening. In the quiet of a prayer cell a person is praying, when the Lord comes upon that one, revealing Himself personally and baptising him with His love. Sometimes a new language of praise to God flows from his lips. Brothers and sisters gather around another and pray for her, laying on hands and asking the Lord to come and bless her and He does. Still another comes to a growing realisation of God within his life over a period of months and years as the Lord breaks down his resistance. It is the Lord who acts. We pray in obedience, but it is the Lord who freely answers. He is Lord and we His servants.

Slowly the new life of individuals begins to be expressed in the worship of the community. Someone quietly sobs as he is released from a burden of guilt that he has carried for many years. Someone is healed, a steady stream of people is converted and the community finds that its worship times are gradually getting longer as its desire to worship God grows. We're still growing. God has lots to teach us and lots more to do through us. We've only experienced a small part of the worship and praise, the life and faith that He would lead us into. We sin much and are disobedient often. The Lord has had to lead us to repent as our worship has tended towards the mere repetition of a new form; but somehow, through it all, the Lord has slowly led us towards His goal.

I'm not saying that this isn't happening elsewhere in the church, nor am I commenting on the worship and life of the church generally but just seeking to portray what the Lord has led the Jacob's Ladder community through.

Back to early 1975. The existing committees had largely died, become inoperable and ceased to operate, and Jacob's Ladder administered itself internally. If 1974 was the year of expansion, then 1975 was the year of consolidation. During 1974 the Kerux Apostles motor-cycle club had been formed, the first community-nurture houses had been established, two extra full-time workers had been employed, a resource centre and library had been established, training and teaching programmes had begun and the community had been restructured as a community with its own elders and internal management arrangements.

1975 saw the growth and consolidation of these ministries. Through them and the coffee house we reached further out to where people were than ever before. Pubs and fun parlors, bikie parties and the street were our home and the people who went there our friends. We found that we were feeling more at home among the people to whom we were ministering than with those who were members of the more 'straight' society. Our full time staff grew to five. We invited new converts and others in need to come and live with us and be nurtured in the faith or simply to receive shelter and be given the opportunity to see first hand what a relationship with Jesus is all about. Many came through: greasy bikies and Hare Krishna's, orphans and those from upper middle class homes.

In an effort to resolve the issues involved between Jacob's Ladder and the rest of the LCA, President Clem Koch of the South Australia District formed two committees. The first, the "President's Committee for Pastoral Consultation" comprising three Pastors of the church to meet with Doug. Kuhl, to be a sounding board for him and to iron out any theological issues which may be involved. Later this was broadened to include the elders of Jacob's Ladder and to deal also with the question of the form of the ministry. The other was the "Interim Management Committee" comprising five representatives elected by Jacob's Ladder and five appointed by the district.

The Interim Management Committee was a stop-gap measure to restrain the horse from bolting further while the issues of who was responsible were being thrashed out. We discovered the meaning of the words "fait accompli" as the Jacob's Ladder Community continued to move ahead. By this time, rightly or wrongly, we largely saw that Committee as an unnecessary millstone around our necks. Some compromises were worked out. Community houses would be rented in the name of individuals rather than Jacob's Ladder so that if something went wrong the good name of the church wouldn't be tarnished. Slowly other things we were doing began to find acceptance. Our submerging of ourselves in the culture of the people we were ministering to was more understood. Over all Jacob's Ladder was quite capable of administering its own affairs and being responsible for spending its own dollars and cents.

The President's Committee for Pastoral Consultation on the other hand was the best thing which happened in the long string of committees we dealt with. At last "whose fault is it that we're in the mess we're in" was a thing of the past and real issues could be dealt with. Our theological orthodoxy was challenged and we felt a bit defensive, but real progress was made. We had also received wise counsel to be very careful about what we put down on paper. A slip can be used against you. Combined with our general lack of time to write reports let alone theological treatises, that led to much frustration for the patient men who met with us. After our orthodoxy received general acceptance, the issues were still complex. A community must have a confession, and our members came from every denominational background and home. We who knew the Confessions were firmly convinced that the Book of Concord of 1580 was a true ecumenical document, understanding itself to speak for

the whole church on earth, and so accepting it posed no problems. But most of our community had never heard of it, and we couldn't violate them by dumping a whole truck load of confessions on them unprepared. So we began to teach from them directly. The content was already well known, for we had been teaching that all along, but now we had to come to at least some of the documents and specifically to key theological issues such as sacraments. The Apostles and Nicene Creeds were officially adopted and the other content found acceptance until a point was reached (early 1976) when we as a community could say that we accepted the Book of Concord as our confession.

In spite of the slow progress, many still found the meetings frustrating. We wrote papers and made presentations on issues ranging from the Gifts of the Spirit to Righteousness. Doug. had technically been without a call for more than 12 months and so pressure was being put on the relevant authorities to do something. The issue of Charismatic Renewal loomed large and tags of Pentecostalism, enthusiasm, emotionalism were easy to apply. The church gossip lines had a hay day and more pressure was placed on those responsible to find a solution. 1975 drew to a close without a clear answer.

If 1974 was the year of expansion, and 1975 the year of consolidation, then the early parts of 1976 were the time of progress. Pastor Daniel Overduin helped prepare a constitution which was acceptable to the community, and, after minor alterations, to the constitutions committee of the district. Thus we have applied to the South Australia district of the LCA for admission to the district as a congregation. With that step, the structural and organisational difficulties were overcome, and the respective committees reported to the President that they felt their task was completed. We will soon be in the position to officially issue a call to our Pastor and so end that abnormality.

Of course the issues continue to be raised. 1976 has also seen the establishing of the Lutheran Spiritual Renewal, a group distinct from Jacob's Ladder but never-the-less closely involved with it. The May 1976 issue of Jacob's Letter is causing quite a reaction. Some of what it says is unfortunate, lots of it is open to debate. But such debate is vital for the life of the Church. We have a duty to raise issues, and if necessary to query what our church is saying and doing. Our heritage does not make us immune from error. Indeed it provides some of our greatest temptations. And so we will continue to address our church. For the Lord is calling His Church to be renewed. He is bestowing on it a deeper love for Himself and a deeper love among brothers. He is giving a renewed desire to study His Word and to grow and mature in the faith. He is filling His people with a new joy and a new peace. He is empowering them and sending them out to be His witnesses in the world. He is giving a new discernment of real problems that His people might minister to real needs. He is speaking His Word to His people, encouraging and rebuking them. He is healing the sick and performing miracles. He is giving new languages to some of His people with which to praise Him. The Lord in His goodness gives good gifts to His children. Praise the Lord.

Steen Olsen.