

Presidential Address to the Second Session of the 40th Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Gippsland

Saturday 20 May 2023; St Paul's Anglican Grammar School, Warragul

Synodality

Again, a very warm welcome to this Second Session of the 40th Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Gippsland.

I'm grateful to local Kurnai Elder, Aunty Cheryl Drayton, for welcoming us to Country last night. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather, and pay respects to their Elders past and present, and to all First Nations people present.

As we approach National Reconciliation Week may we be a voice for the generations.

I was hoping my fifth Presidential Address would be the first one in which I didn't have to talk about sex, but I'm afraid the unholy trinity of sex, politics, and – yes, even religion – all feature. Perhaps over dinner tonight we can enjoy more polite conversation!

Yet, as we were reminded by Br Tony Clark, FMS, our preacher last night, Synod is not a forum for avoiding hard conversations. Yes, our dialogue must be respectful; but it ought not shy away from topics that challenge us, and over which we are likely to disagree.

The Greek word *sunodia*, from which we get our word 'synod' (meaning 'together on the way') occurs just once in the New Testament, in Luke's story of Jesus going missing in Jerusalem as a twelve-year-old: '[they] supposed him to be in the caravan [*sunodia*] and went a day's journey; and they began looking for him among their relatives.' (2:44, NASB 1995)

This year our caravan of pilgrims, our *sunodia*, moves to Warragul and Drouin. Hopefully we won't lose anyone along the way, especially Jesus!

One of my first theology teachers, John Honner, describes the church as 'a caravan of solidarity, guided by Christ.' A synodical church, he writes, echoing Pope Francis, is a

listening [church] in which everyone has something to learn . . . Synodality is not [] the same as democracy, because the minority voice might be the voice of the Holy Spirit. Nor does synodality mean making compromises . . . Rather, it may mean embracing several views, within agreed boundaries. It may require everyone to leave their boats behind, striving to come to a new place together.¹

May that be our intention, and our experience, this weekend.

Having gathered at St Anne's campus of Gippsland Grammar in 2019, 2021, and 2022, and been online in 2020, it is good to meet at the Warragul campus of St Paul's Anglican Grammar School. We thank Principal and Synod member, Cameron Herbert, for St Paul's hospitality, along with the Parishes of Drouin and Warragul, their clergy and lay leaders.

It was my pleasure to bless the site of a new campus of St Paul's in Drouin earlier this year. When that site is developed we will have Anglican School campuses in Bairnsdale, Sale, Traralgon, Warragul and Drouin, covering 200km across the centre of Gippsland, educating close to 3,000 students and employing some 500 staff, all under an Anglican canopy.

¹ <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/cathedrals-and-caravans>, sighted 3 May, 2023.

2021 Census data

This part of Gippsland is growing rapidly. Let's hope some Anglicans are moving in! From Census data we know that in 1961 Gippsland boasted just over 64,000 Anglicans, being 34% of a total population of around 190,000. In 2021 we claimed almost 39,000 Anglicans, being 11% of about 350,000 people in the region; one of only two Victorian dioceses in which that percentage is holding in double figures. That's quite a slide in just fifty years. Even so, oh to have 39,000 people in our churches each week!

Progress on last year's Synod motions

Gippsland Anglicans are *Committed in Christ, Connecting in Service, Creative in Spirit*.

Over the next day and half we will reflect on some indicators of how we are expressing that Vision, including work undertaken on the Synod motions adopted when we last met eleven months ago.

Ministry

Several of these come together under the theme of ministry – *ministry exercised by all the baptised* – as our Vision puts it.

I'm constantly inspired by the many and varied examples of baptismal ministry in our parishes, schools, and ministry centres, and by the children and adults who present for baptism and for confirmation, which continues to be one of my chief joys.

Another is seeing people explore and test a vocation to ordained ministry. Since June, our Vocations Panel (now strengthened by four Examining Chaplains) has invited five people to attend a Provincial Selection Conference. Several of these have been participants in the Ministry Development Program, or MDP – an exciting initiative that will be shared with us after lunch today. In that context I'm delighted to announce that MDP has just produced its first ordination candidate: Denise Martin from Mirboo North.

Such pathways for new candidates are hugely important given that in the last year alone, five of our Incumbents have retired. God bless our generous Locums and Lay Readers!

Alongside raising up ministry locally, and calling clergy from elsewhere, it is imperative that we care for and resource the clergy and other licensed persons already in ministry here.

Last year, Synod adopted the General Synod protocols around Ministry Wellbeing and Development, which opened up a five-year window for us to implement a framework for Professional Supervision, Professional Development, and regular Ministry Appraisal for our wonderful Gippsland priests and deacons.

Good progress has been made on this front, as you'll have seen in the Bishop-in-Council report. Like anything worth doing – mandated or otherwise – we will need to invest time and money into rolling out these wellbeing supports in the months ahead, starting with Professional Supervision, which already has widespread uptake in the Diocese.

Ministry is a tough gig, and clergy need safe spaces to work with skilled practitioners. We see the impacts of burnout on the health of individuals and communities, and we have a responsibility to mitigate those, and to promote the flourishing of our people.

Family Violence

May is Domestic and Family Violence Prevention month in Victoria. At our First Session, The Revd Tracy Lauersen led us through some resolutions from last year's General Synod, including the Ten Commitments for prevention and response to Family Violence in our Church, and the establishment of a new General Synod Families and Culture Commission.

It was announced in April that Tracy has been appointed National Program Manager for that Commission – a role for which she is uniquely prepared and equipped. As sad as we are to lose her from Warragul, we are pleased that Tracy will continue to be licensed here in Gippsland, thus keeping us connected with her and with the vital work of this Commission.

Progress in this space has been more modest in the last 11 months, though a working group on Family Violence is emerging.

Research confirms that exposure to family violence directly correlates with the ongoing impact of child maltreatment,² and considerable energy has gone into implementing the new Victorian Child Safe Standards, as reflected in the small but significant amendment to the Parish Administration Act before us, also responding to a 2022 Synod motion.

Climate Change

The inaugural report of ACTinG (Acting on Climate Together in Gippsland), highlights some of the ways in which last year's Synod motion prioritising action on climate change has been furthered. Our National Church Life Survey results show that 93% of respondents agree that Christians have a responsibility to actively care for the environment, and it is pleasing to see real engagement with ACTinG's wide range of offerings.

The Abbey helps to drive our Vision commitment to *act for the good of earth and all creatures*. Newly appointed Director, Dr Cath Connelly, is bringing fresh ideas and energy to this beloved Centre for Spirituality, Hospitality and the Environment. We're also in the process of making it easier for parishes to access a tax-deductible facility for donations to sustainability projects through Anglican Earthcare Gippsland (AEG).

Budget

Speaking of sustainability, our capacity to subsidise these and other initiatives, including *The Gippsland Anglican* in its popular new format, hinges on restoring the diocesan budget to surplus on a consistent basis.

In 2019, Synod committed Bishop-in-Council to deliver a surplus budget by 30 September 2023. I'm pleased to say that we are able to present such a budget today, and I congratulate the Registrar, his team, and members of Finance Committee on achieving this five-year strategic objective.

As he and Meg Knight will explain, however, one swallow doth not a summer make! Even with the successful implementation of a new investment income policy, which is likely to deliver better than expected results for the current financial year also, we remain far too reliant on returns from that investment revenue stream.

Bishop-in-Council is exploring ways of addressing this structural deficit for the longer term, and we are thankful for the philanthropic support received since appointing our Diocesan Development Officer, Libby Willems – not least the substantial 'Deadly Spirit' grant for Aboriginal Ministry.

² <https://www.acms.au/>

2022 NCLS data

Data from last year's National Church Life Survey (NCLS) continues to be analysed at the local level and by our friends at NCLS, thanks to some 700 participants across the Diocese from 50 individual churches in almost every parish – a great team effort.

The average age of our respondents was 72, and 70% of those are retired, making them the busiest people I know! Twenty years ago the average age of respondents was 62.

Fully one quarter of respondents were new to their church community within the last five years, some of these having moved between churches in that time.

Let me share a few key findings under the three headings of our Vision.

Committed in Christ

Gippsland Anglicans are grounded in Christ. We engage with the Church's living traditions as intentional inclusive communities where all are welcome, respected, safe, and valued.

The data on what our people value in their church life reflects this aspiration:

- sharing in Holy Communion was the highest at 60%, with worship overall featuring prominently, alongside building community. Of course, the two are closely related, as captured in our Vision language: *worship that unites and inspires*.
- And 68% of respondents either always or usually experience inspiration during worship, a big jump from 15 years ago; we'll give Holy Spirit the credit for that one!
- Our Vision aspires to *growth in believing and belonging*, and over 80% experienced some growth in faith over the previous year; one-third reporting significant growth.
- 93% have a strong sense of belonging, with more than half involved in small groups.
- 72% feel comfortable talking about their faith, and 75% of people either did, or would be willing to, invite friends or relatives to a church service, which suggests great confidence in what they will encounter.
- Around 90% reported having well developed policies in the areas of child safety and safety more generally, which is reassuring.

Connecting in Service

Gippsland Anglicans share in Christ's mission. We hold fast to the vision of human flourishing Jesus called 'the Kingdom of God' and we reach out in partnership with good news for all.

NCLS did not gather information about our diocesan partner organisations such as Anglicare, which features in our Reports. Again, however, at the local level, several findings align with our Vision:

- Two-thirds of respondents are involved in community groups outside church, and almost half take part in church activities that have an outreach component.
- 13% of people would like to be more involved, with a further 6% unsure and only 2% looking to do less, which runs counter to the narrative of declining volunteerism.
- About half of respondents felt that worship challenged them to take action, though that figure increases when the question was applied directly to their church leaders.
- Over half of our respondents had participated in some form of advocacy for justice.
- 75% of our churches had a commitment to mission in developing countries, and we'll hear one example of that in the Newton College PNG report.
- Not surprisingly, almost 100% had engaged in informal acts of service for others.

Creative in Spirit

Gippsland Anglicans are open to Christ's leading. We seek to respond to changing needs and new understandings, to be faithful and imaginative in bearing stories of hope for our time and place.

Some of the data relating to this piece of the Vision also resonates.

- 68% of respondents agreed that their church was ready to try something new. Here I wondered whether our forms had been mixed up with some other denomination! Yet it's exactly what you called for in the Vision renewal process.
- Almost 60% were aware of and committed to their local church's vision, which is a good number, significantly higher than a decade ago. With confidence that the vision can be achieved also on the rise, this is something local leaders can really work with.
- About 60% agree that our leaders encourage the use of our people's gifts and skills to some extent, so perhaps there's more scope for that as we try these new things.
- Whilst almost 80% agreed that those of all ages are encouraged to be involved at church, fewer than half are satisfied with the offerings for those under 18, so there's still plenty to do in that space.
- The use of technology for hosting a range of activities, having spiked with Covid, has settled at a much higher level – up to one-third of study groups are now hybrid or online.
- And 20% of respondents report being more involved since the pandemic, which says a lot about the creative things you all did during lockdowns.

This very brief snapshot from the host of figures collated in our diocesan profile offers plenty of encouragement. It also sets out some obvious challenges. Overall, in terms of what we say we're on about, the results stack up pretty well. I hope you will take heart from this, and I know that many parishes are using their local data to inform missional thinking and planning, which is the purpose of the whole exercise.

The Kigali Commitment

If there is some cause for optimism locally, there are some grave concerns globally. Last month the Global Anglican Future Conference – Gafcon – met in Kigali, Rwanda, next door to our sister Diocese of Gahini. Members of Gafcon were joined by leaders of the Global South Fellowship of Anglican Churches (GSFA).

The Kigali Commitment, published on 21 April, states that because of the Church of England's General Synod resolution enabling the blessing of same-sex couples, the Primates affiliated with Gafcon and GSFA 'can no longer recognise the Archbishop of Canterbury as an instrument of Communion.' Nor is there 'confidence that the other instruments of Communion . . . (the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Primates' Meetings) are able to provide a godly way forward.'³

The statement calls for repentance, and an urgent 'resetting and reordering of the Communion'. This is strong language, and the implications are unsettling.

In his response the Archbishop of Canterbury, while acknowledging the provisional nature of our church structures, stressed that 'Continuing to walk together . . . is not just the best way to share Christ's love with a world in need: it is also how the world will know that Jesus Christ is sent by the Father who calls us to love one another, even as we disagree.'⁴

³ For the full text, see: <https://www.gafcon.org/news/gafcon-iv-the-kigali-commitment>

⁴ <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/lambeth-palace-statement-gafcon-iv-kigali-commitment>

Quite aside from the presenting issue, we're clearly at a crossroad here in terms of how we understand ourselves as a Church.

The Kigali Commitment claims 'that "communion" between churches and Christians must be based on doctrine (Jerusalem Declaration #13; GSFA Covenant 2.1.6). Anglican identity is defined by this and not by recognition from the See of Canterbury.'

That runs counter to the definition of the Anglican Communion at the Lambeth Conference of 1930 as: 'a fellowship, within the one holy catholic and apostolic church, of those duly constituted dioceses [and] provinces . . . in communion with the see of Canterbury.'⁵

A fellowship, note, in communion with the see of Canterbury; not in communion with Justin Welby, who happens to be the 105th Archbishop thereof, but with his office, and with the historic and symbolic heart of Anglicanism. This is a relational understanding of our communion, as distinct from a doctrinal or confessional one.⁶

The Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia echoes this definition in its Ruling Principles at section 6: 'This Church will remain and be in communion with the Church of England in England and with churches in communion therewith so long as communion is consistent with the Fundamental Declarations contained in this Constitution.'⁷

My mother thought Justin Welby could do no wrong. She read everything he ever wrote, listened to every interview he ever gave, and bombarded his office with so many letters that when I went to Lambeth last year his staff remembered her. She even had his photo up in her room, which was slightly off-putting, especially as she didn't have one of me!

Clearly, not everyone feels that way about Archbishop Welby.

Yet being an Anglican has little to do with liking or approving of the current Archbishop of Canterbury, or of the way he leads his General Synod, or of the resolutions made by that autonomous Province, any more than being a Gippsland Anglican has to do with agreeing with me, or with what this Synod resolves. Being an Anglican is about being in a long-term relationship – a web of long-term relationships – 'even as we disagree'.

⁵ Resolution 49.

⁶ The Kigali Commitment references the Jerusalem Declaration, which emerged from the first Gafcon gathering there in 2008. The Jerusalem Declaration has the hallmarks of an historic confession of faith, such as those which are definitive for many Reformed and Lutheran Churches – the Westminster Confession or the Heidelberg Catechism, for example. The preamble introducing the Jerusalem Declaration ends with these words: '... solemnly declaring the following tenets of orthodoxy which underpin our Anglican identity.' Fourteen statements of belief and commitment are then listed: <https://www.gafcon.org/jerusalem-2018/key-documents/jerusalem-declaration> Anglicanism is not a 'confessional' tradition in this sense. Section 4 of the Constitution refers to the Anglican Church of Australia as being derived from the Church of England, and hence retaining the doctrine 'embodied' in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), the Ordinal, and the Thirty-nine Articles, whilst having authority to make statements as to faith and to order its worship in keeping with the Fundamental Declarations; all of which underscores the Anglican principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* – the law of prayer (worship) is the law of belief. Thus the BCP and the Articles are the 'authorised standard of worship and doctrine' from which 'principle(s) of doctrine' are derived, without being in and of themselves confessional statements.

⁷ Those Fundamental Declarations refer to the Christian Faith as professed from earliest times as set forth in the Nicene and Apostles' Creed, to the canonical scriptures, to the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and to the three-fold order of ministry. Some would argue that because a number of provinces, including our own, have opened a way for the blessing of same-sex unions, the communion is no longer consistent with those Fundamental Declarations when it comes to the Scriptures as 'the ultimate rule and standard of faith'. The Appellate Tribunal Opinion of 2021 determined that the use of the Canon Concerning Services (1992) for this purpose is not contrary to the Constitution. See <https://anglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/AT-Wangaratta-formatted-11112020FINAL.pdf>

So, we have a choice. We can act out an ecclesial version of ‘cancel culture’ and walk away from each other. Or we can keep trying to answer our Lord’s prayer for unity; keep celebrating the diversity by which we serve the world God loves in 42 interdependent Provinces, across 165 countries, through many cultures and languages, in vastly differing contexts – *diversity received as a gift of creation*, in the words of our Vision.

In that spirit I’ve been corresponding with Bishop Manasseh in Gahini, to recognise the divergent positions of our respective Provinces and assure him of our ongoing commitment to our Companion Diocese relationship in the bonds of affection; a commitment he has graciously reciprocated.

Where the impetus to pull to the edges is strong, let us hold the centre: that open, broad, inclusive space, which the 1968 Lambeth Conference called ‘Anglican comprehensiveness’, and described as:

an attitude of mind which Anglicans have learned from the [] controversies of their history . . . Comprehensiveness demands agreement on fundamentals, while tolerating disagreement on matters in which Christians may differ . . . [C]omprehensiveness is not compromise. Nor is it to bargain one truth for another . . . Rather it implies that the apprehension of truth is a growing thing: we only gradually succeed in ‘knowing the truth’ . . . [W]e believe that in leading us into the truth the Holy Spirit may have some surprises in store for us.⁸

The Voice

If ever a people had cause to call others to repent, it is the First Peoples of this land. Instead, the Statement from the Heart reaches out with grace, as expressed in the prayer recently composed by NATSIAC (the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council), which begins:

God who listens, open our hearts to hear the gentle invitation of those without a voice; placeless and dispossessed of all that was theirs, instead of anger, revenge or blame, they offer in their open hand absurd generosity, an act of transformational forgiveness from the centre of their being to ours ...

Redemption is an act of absurd generosity: the Creator of all being bound in time and place by human flesh to absorb the anger, revenge, and blame of humankind – an act of transformational forgiveness from the centre of God’s being to ours.

In the forthcoming referendum, we are being invited to participate in the redemption of this nation’s original sin, and the creation of a new chapter in our history in keeping with the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us (2 Cor 5:18-19).

The Statement from Heart concludes: ‘In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.’ Is saying ‘yes’ to that invitation risky? Some would have us believe so. Yet creation and redemption are risky enterprises.

In 2016, our Synod adopted a motion on Constitutional Recognition put forward by The Revd Sathi Anthony, seconded by Archdeacon Emeritus Philip Muston, which read:

That this Synod urges the Federal Government to work with Aboriginal communities to ensure the recognition, without delay, in the Australian Constitution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as Australia’s First People to be presented to and agreed by the Australian people at referendum.

Seven years on, such a moment is before us.

⁸ *The Lambeth Conference, 1968: Resolutions and Reports* (London: SPCK, 1968), 140-141.

Anticipating today's motion in this regard, Canon Aunty Phyllis Andy and The Revd Kathy Dalton will join me in co-hosting a webinar featuring Wiradjuri man, Canon Associate Professor Glenn Loughrey, during NAIDOC Week in July. Details are on the website. I urge Synod members to attend.

Readers of *The Gippsland Anglican* will be in no doubt about my own views. I hope you will read many views, hear many voices on this topic, including each other's here. Read what Indigenous leaders have to say – opinions that differ, as we should expect. Above all, read the Statement from the Heart; and then read your own heart. Listen for the voice of Holy Spirit in you, and in the churches, and in the stirring of a nation's conscience.

It is not my place – nor anyone's – to tell you how to vote. Suffice to say that as Christians, let it not be fear that drives us. Rather, let it be our openness to absurd generosity, to transformational forgiveness from the heart of God, and the heart of this land.

Remembering Lives of Service

Since we last met, some of those who embodied this spirit of generosity now worship in the nearer presence of that infinite compassion. You will think of those faithful departed near and dear to you, and to your households of faith. As a Diocese, we give thanks for the lives of: Bill Adams, Betty Albert, Mary Anderson, Patricia Biggs, Gil Cann, Beverley Cook OAM, Amy Davis, Roger Doyle, Spencer Eakins, Joy Edney, John Guy OAM, John Kinrade, Beverley Littlejohn, Nicky Moffat, Joan Mooney, Lorna Moule, Anker Otterson, Jim Rennick, and James White.

May they, with all we name in our hearts, find rest from their labours.

Younger Anglicans

We're enriched by the presence of some Younger Anglicans at Synod. They will lead our worship at Drouin this evening, and are invited to reflect back to us tomorrow something of what they have observed in our proceedings today. I wonder whether, to return to some words of John Honner, they will see that our being a synodical Church is 'an attitude, a readiness to listen . . . [and] that how we inhabit an organizational structure is more important than the structure itself.'

Acknowledgements

In closing, let me acknowledge the hard, careful and prayerful work of all those who have prepared for our worship, our meeting, and our fellowship – including Registry staff; our Archdeacons, Dean and Regional Deans; local hosts; and members of our governing bodies.

Two of our number, Mrs Beth Delzoppo, OAM, and the Hon Robert Fordham, AM, have been exemplars of the servant leadership in governance that releases others of us to get on with ministry. Last month Beth stepped back from Bishop-in-Council after some 30 years on that body, most of which she shared with John, and happy 68th anniversary to you both!

Robert remains on Bishop-in-Council, but has relinquished his roles as a founding Director of the Diocesan Corporation, a founding member of the Executive Committee of Bishop-in-Council, and a founding Trustee of the Cathedral Music Foundation.

Each continues to give of their time and skills in other ways, not least in their parishes, and so if you are moved to respond to this address with applause, let it be for Beth and Robert and for the hundreds of people like yourselves who offer their gifts so freely and willingly.

Thank you, each and every one, for all you bring to this company – this *sunodia* – of pilgrims, this caravan of solidarity guided by Christ. May our journeying together honour him, and serve the good of his people, as we wait again and still on Holy Spirit's animating and guiding breath.