

Presidential Address to Synod, 13 November 2020 (online)

2020 and beyond: Resilience, Recovery, Renewal

The Synod Service begins...

Greetings to all Synod members in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! Welcome to this Second Session of the 39th Synod of our Diocese, and especially to some new faces; along with other members of our Diocesan family who may be watching this service online (<https://youtu.be/KM-M7f7jMCK>).

In a year when our Synod has been pushed from May to November, and from a face to face gathering to a zoomathon, we are conscious of many such changes to the rhythms and practices we have known, in the church and in the world.

Among those is the rescheduling of NAIDOC Week from its usual mid-year observance to this week, partly in recognition of the vulnerability of our First Nations people during COVID.

We we log in from many places across Gippsland, and beyond, on lands of which several peoples are the original custodians: here in Sale, where this service was recorded, the Brayakaulung clan of the GunaiKurnai peoples; in the western reaches of the Diocese the Boonwurrung/Bunurong people of the Kulin Nations; and in the far east and alpine regions the Bidawal and Ngarigo/Monero peoples.

We pay our respects to their elders – past and present and coming to be – and we commit ourselves to the ministry of Reconciliation, which is at the very heart of the Gospel.

One expression of that resolve is our support of two Indigenous priests. With the fund established to maintain these part-time stipends depleted, this practical expression of Reconciliation falls back on diocesan resources that remain under pressure, and tomorrow we must face up to a deficit interim budget.

Yet we cannot address a gap in our finances, and ignore the health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, or the deficit of over half of all First Nations languages since European settlement, or the discrepancy between incarceration rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the rest of the population.

This is not a commitment we can walk away from, any more than we can from other mission initiatives of the Diocese that go to the heart of our share in God's reconciling mission to the world in Christ, such as:

- Anglicare Parish Partnerships Grants that enable new ways of connecting with local communities;
- Our governance and other contributions to education in Anglican Schools as places of spiritual and ethical formation;
- Providing affordable housing to the over 55s (which will include me in a fortnight!) who live at Clifton Waters Village and Botterill Court, where occupancy rates are back above 90%;
- Supporting fire-affected communities through our bushfire response;
- Retaining a part-time Abbey Priest dedicated to hospitality, spirituality, and the environment at that ministry centre;

- Publishing *The Gippsland Anglican*, which is the source of most of the images used here, and reaches well over 1000 readers each month with news and theological reflection, featuring for a third year running in the Australasian Religious Press Association awards;
- Contributing to prison chaplaincy in partnership with Anglican Criminal Justice Ministry; and
- Funding the work of Professional Standards – not only in meeting our responsibilities with respect to redress for past abuses and rebuilding that trust deficit, but also in building resilience and enabling best practice for our clergy and lay workers of today and tomorrow through professional supervision.

These are just some of the outreach activities that you help to support in so many ways.

And yet our ministry is not not only to this generation but to future ones, and so we must ensure their work may also be resourced, by being good stewards of what has been entrusted to us. This means making some hard choices.

The ecumenical chaplaincy at the Gippsland Campus of Federation University, which we have been subsidising in recent years, is an example of something that – regrettably – we must now leave to others.

Likewise our financial responsibility for the ‘fresh expression’ of church that is Café 123 has recently ended – though not our involvement in the evolution of this much-loved social enterprise into a new form under a multi-lateral partnership. We will hear more about this tomorrow.

As I flagged at the first Session of this Synod 18 months ago (and it wouldn’t surprise me if you can’t remember a thing that was said back then given all which has happened since!), one of the ways to tap the wells of good good will in our communities, such as we’ve seen in the 123 story this year, is through partnerships, including philanthropic ones.

The Bishop-in-Council report to be presented tomorrow refers to a new Draft Strategic Financial Plan, the first pillar of which involves the appointment of a Diocesan Development Officer to grow our existing partnerships and explore new ones. In recent months we have partnered with others, including in local government, to apply for three significant grants relating to building connectivity through new technologies, to bushfire recovery, and to food security.

We have also partnered with Bush Church Aid to commission Jude and Andy Benton as BCA Field Staff, ensuring Jude can minister in a full-time capacity at Croajingolong through until at least 2024.

We will need to do more and more in this space if we are to attract external funding for our mission as one pathway to sustainability.

To that end, it has been encouraging to see local print, radio, and television media take an increasing interest in the work of the Diocese and to partner with us in telling some ‘good news’ stories. It is to some of those stories I will turn in the next instalment of this address.

The Synod Service continues...

Bushfires come with the territory, quite literally, of parts of regional and rural Australia. That said, nothing could have really prepared us for the events leading up to and into the new year. The sheer scale and ferocity of last summer's fires shocked the nation and the world, and we were held in the hearts of faith communities from Perth to Brisbane, Rwanda to New Zealand, Texas to South Yarra, and everywhere in between.

I spent as much time as possible in the Eastern Region from Epiphany through to the middle of Lent, where in Omeo on 22 March we first got the news that churches would need to close for gathered worship on account of the pandemic.

The tireless, costly, and fruitful ministry of our clergy and lay people, including a number of VCC Emergency Chaplains from within and beyond the Diocese, was an absolute privilege to behold in the aftermath of the fires, and I want to pay tribute to the Diocesan Staff team – that is, your Archdeacons, Regional Deans, the Dean of our Cathedral, Registrar, and Parish Partnerships Coordinator – who met weekly or fortnightly throughout that crisis to help plot a course through it, drawing on external expertise, and keeping in contact with local leaders to provide support and encouragement.

Archdeacon Brenda Burney, with Regional Dean Lyndon Phillips, exercised superb leadership; Bevil Lunson's team at Orbost was incredible in offering first resort relief; Laurie Baker did some exceptional pastoral work in Tambo; and Jude Benton's ministry at Croajingolong has become emblematic of how the church can be present in such emergencies to bring comfort, and hope.

Those I have named would be the first to say that our bushfire response has been, and continues to be, one big team effort, with so many people contributing in various ways, all of which have made a difference.

Further to my comments around partnership and philanthropy, the transformative factor here has been the response when we reached out to the wider community in our first tentative attempts at using online platforms.

Since early January, the diocesan Emergency Relief Fund has received over \$354,000 and the gifts continue to come in. Of that amount, just over \$252,000 has been acquitted. Bushfires and other natural disasters draw a strong humanitarian response that we might not expect to match in other appeals.

Yet we see what can be achieved when we have a compelling story to tell, and we find a way to tell it. Two Anglican schools from outside this Diocese used the YouTube interview Jude and I did in chapel services, each then contributing thousands of dollars raised by students, staff, and families.

This kind of solidarity from organisations and individuals has enabled us to distribute front line aid to households who have lost property, stock, and livelihoods; to support the fire-affected parishes and The Abbey, whose towns were evacuated, churches emptied out, summer seasons lost, and were faced with the added burden of caring for those most directly affected.

A significant donation from the Provincial Disaster Relief Fund in January was specifically for the purpose of employing a part-time Bushfire Response Coordinator.

The Revd Cathy Turnbull, born in Tambo Upper and a former parishioner at Bruthen, was one of the first to contact me with an offer of support, having discovered her calling to become a distinctive Deacon in the course of the community work she did following the Black Saturday fires.

By the end of January Cathy had got herself a job, on secondment from her Parish in Melbourne. Her report is in the Synod papers, and we will hear a brief presentation from Cathy tomorrow morning.

Recently, the Anglican Relief and Development Fund Australia more than matched this grant, and so I'm pleased to say Cathy will again work with us part-time in 2021 in a new role as a 'Missional Deacon to the Eastern Region'.

When in Gippsland, Cathy will be based at Nowa Nowa, giving us a presence there. Working with Brenda and the eastern clergy, Cathy will continue our bushfire recovery ministry, which is far from finished having been hampered by COVID, with a particular focus on the more remote communities and households who continue the rebuilding process, and whose pastoral and spiritual needs are great. Cathy will also work on collating the experience gained this year, and developing our capacity for fire-preparedness and response.

This extra-parochial position is fully funded, and is an example of the creative appointments we need to be open to making alongside the more familiar parish structure, if we are to be sufficiently agile in a rapidly changing ministry context.

I look forward to commissioning Cathy in the new year – along with a number of others we've not been able to induct since March.

The son of an ophthalmologist, I liked the idea of 20-20 being the year of perfect vision. Between the smoke haze and the 'fog' of COVID it hasn't quite turned out that way. And yet there is much that we have seen; more on which in a moment.

The Synod Service continues...

I'm thinking of writing a book: *Things they didn't teach me at theological college*. Chapter 1: 'What to do in a global pandemic'.

In fairness, none of us saw this coming either. Which is not to say we haven't had pandemics before, as Bishop Arthur Pain's 1919 account of the Spanish flu's uncannily similar impact reminds us. You can read about that in the October *Gippsland Anglican*, or view Dean Susanna's talk on the website.

If the over-used word 'unprecedented' sheds any lights on this year, perhaps it has to do with a reality-check (for our generation in the West at least) to that implicit worldview wherein human beings are assumed to be at the centre, and sufficiently in control of our surroundings as to be able to predict and manage most things life throws at us.

Such hubris has been legitimized by anthropocentric interpretations of the first creation story in Genesis: readings neither we nor the creation itself can afford.

Of necessity we have dramatically reduced air traffic around the planet, only to find that it still turns, and perhaps breathes more easily as a consequence.

Of necessity we have made some changes to the way we go about being church, only to find that we're still doing it, and perhaps more intentionally as a consequence.

What I most want to say in reflecting on this experience, is 'thank you'!

Thank you to our faithful clergy, Lay Readers, and Op Shop coordinators, who have stayed the course in and out of various stages of restrictions, finding ways to maintain the bonds of fellowship, to offer worship, to facilitate meaning-making, to reach out to the most vulnerable and isolated.

Thank you to clergy and lay workers who have made great personal financial sacrifices during the winter months as we sought to drastically reduce our operating costs when churches and Op Shops were closed.

Thank you to everyone who has pored over endless *Ad Clerums* and weekly email updates in order to try and understand what each new round of restrictions has meant for our life and work.

Thank you to the newly formed Executive Committee of Bishop-in-Council, which has met weekly or fortnightly since its inception in April, providing wise counsel, strategic direction, and financial oversight.

Thank you to colleagues on the Diocesan Staff team, who in the midst of our bushfire response doubled down and rallied together to think and pray through the short and long term implications of COVID – liturgically, pastorally, and missionally.

Thank you to the Cathedral Parish for hosting 33 consecutive weeks of recorded worship, and counting. Thank you to the Registrar, to Christine Morris, and others who have filmed and edited these and the associated Fireside Chats, and to the many clergy and lay people who have participated so willingly in these offerings.

Thank you to everyone on our Boards and Committees who has gone square-eyed peering into the zoom mirror in order to keep the important work of governance and forward planning going, and to connect for prayer, study, and mutual support.

Thank you – each and all – for being willing to have a go at doing Synod this way: an example of your creativity, your unflagging dedication, and your good grace and humour in what has been an extraordinarily difficult period for our Diocese, and the people we serve.

It's too soon to say what lasting impacts the coronavirus may have, but it's not too soon to be listening for what God is calling us to do and be in this moment. In fact, some of the conversations started at Synod in May last year have suddenly become much more urgent for us as a Diocese and as a Church.

For that reason, we determined not to postpone the work of vision renewal to an easier time, but rather to begin that process in the midst of this experience, and to engage as many people as we can in this missional project.

Those of you able to access one of the pre-Synod briefings, or to view a recording on YouTube, will have a sense of the process so far. We'll do some more work on this in small groups tomorrow, and I know that many of you have been reflecting on the questions raised in those briefings.

Jim Connelly observed in one of them that the value is as much in the journey as in the destination, and we want everyone to be part of that journey, so that the renewed vision is one that speaks to us and about us, as both mirror and lamp, helping us to tell our story – our part in the Gospel story – in our context.

There will be changes ahead, we know that, even if we don't yet know what sort. But that's ok, because the Church has a technical term for change: we call it 'tradition'.

As Picasso famously said, 'Tradition is having a baby; it is not wearing your father's hat!' Which is to say living traditions embrace continuity and change as complementary forces, rather than seeing them as competing ones.

We of all people must not fear change, for we follow him who changed everything by his living and dying, by responding to his calling in his particular time and place; and yet whose role in the new creation calls us back to the vision of Eden; and whose Church is grafted on to the gracious promises first made to Israel.

As Tony Wicking said at one of our other zoom sessions recently, we don't want to throw the baby out with the bath water, but we might want to change the bath water!

And so we prepare ourselves once again to watch and wait for the baby who changes everything in order to bring us back to our true selves: the Christ child, who calls us with Nathaniel out from under the safe canopies of our fig trees, to come and see.

The Synod Service continues...

And so we draw near to the end of our worship, with thanks to all who have helped to lead it by way of readings and prayers and musical offerings.

The challenges of 2020 have not prevented a number of people taking up or renewing ministries in Gippsland. Others have discerned a call to serve elsewhere, have recently retired, or are preparing for that great adventure!

- Graham Knott was appointed Vicar General, following Edie Ashley's retirement from parish ministry a year ago after 13 years at Paynesville;
- Edie was licensed the same day as Abbey Priest – the first such appointment under clergy retirement legislation we passed last year, with Nikolai Blaskow licensed as Associate Chaplain at Gippsland Grammar and Ken Parker as Priest in Charge at Bunyip under the same provisions.
- Rich Lanham resigned as Chaplain of Gippsland Grammar and Diocesan Youth Officer last year;
- Brenda Burney and Jo White joined the Diocesan Staff Team as Archdeacon of the Eastern Region and Regional Dean of the Southern Region respectively;
- Dean Spalding moved in February from being Rector of Drouin to Associate Chaplain and classroom teacher at St Paul's Anglican Grammar School.

- Philip Kissick retired as Rector of Tambo Parish earlier this year.
- Laurie Baker (with Heather) has been a pastoral presence there since January, with Brian Norris appointed in May as long term locum having been ordained Priest in August last year.
- Ben Johnson began as Priest-in-Charge of Mirboo North in March, the same month Churches of Christ Minister Peter Carter resigned from Churchill.
- In April, Jenny and Tony Wicking were appointed to the Parish of Yarram as Priests-in-Charge: our first joint incumbency, and another married clergy team to add to Susanna and Nikolai at the Cathedral, and Graeme and Susan Liersch who we'll welcome to Wonthaggi/Inverloch in January, having farewelled Graeme Peters from there in September last year.
- Bishop Jeffrey Driver was licensed as Priest-in-Charge at Paynesville in May.
- Belinda Seabrook was deaconed in February and will be ordained priest in a fortnight.
- The preacher at that service will be Canon David Head, Regional Dean of the Western Region, who will retire as Rector of Morwell this month; David was made a Canon of St Paul's Cathedral with Philip Muston and has made a tremendous contribution to the Diocese; we will miss him.
- As we shall his fellow clerical Canon, Jeff Richardson, who retires after just over a decade at Traralgon, and has also served the Diocese faithfully and well.
- So too Dr John Batt, who retired in September as Rector of Neerim South, and Dr Graham Toohill, who resigned his licence as Deacon at Leongatha in May.
- I have signed 13 new Lay Reader's licenses since the last Session of this Synod; such a delight.
- And shortly we will hear a vote of thanks to Rowena Armstrong who retires as our Chancellor in February after 30 years of outstanding service.

On the strength of all of that, we're blessed to have just one vacancy at present, with two cooperating parishes awaiting Uniting Church appointments. As always, we are deeply grateful for the locum ministry of our wonderful 'retired' clergy: surely a misnomer if ever there was one!

Others of our number have taken their place in the new Jerusalem – such a traumatic year in which to suffer further grief and loss and to have our funeral ministry so constrained. I'm conscious of: Miriam Stackhouse; Fr Fred Morrey; Rene Paterson; Joan Singleton; The Revd Ken Campbell; The Revd Graeme Walker; Dick Donchi; Leonie Pryde; Mollie Burney; The Revd Keith Edwards; Hazel Carne; Fred Becker; The Revd John Grace; Max White; Alby Drew, and The Revd Derek Garton.

If there is someone on your mind or heart from your ministry setting who served on Synod or had a significant role in the Diocese and has died since May last year, please feel free to add their name via the 'Chat' function and we'll be sure they are added to the record of these proceedings.

And in this week of Remembrance Day we give thanks for all Defence Force personnel from this Diocese who gave their lives in the service of others.

May light perpetual shine upon them.

This year would have been a very different experience without the collegiality we enjoy, and which – like the privilege of being able to gather for worship – we must never take for granted.

On your behalf, I thank the Registrar. This is Richard's first Synod in that position, and there is no handbook for how to run one online.

He has been instrumental in helping us adapt to the digital space, among many other things, ably supported by the small and hard-working team at the Registry, including Dave Perryman, Annette Hollonds, Kate Campbell, Jill Wood, and Tim Gibson: professionals for whom their work is also vocational.

And so it is for all of us: lay or ordained, paid or unpaid, stipendiary or volunteer, we do what we do because of the calling, the vocation, mapped over us in baptism; a life-long calling, from which there is no retirement; nor is there any greater service to which we might devote ourselves than of him who calls us, and abides with us, and loves us utterly, come what may.

The great Remembrance Day hymn 'Abide with me' includes the line: 'Change and decay in all around I see, O thou who changest not abide with me.' Change we do indeed see in so much that surrounds us. But let's not confuse change with decay; let us rather think of change as the means of renewal. I see enormous changes taking place in our Diocese, and I am filled with hope and with expectation.

Yes, some things feel urgent, and the love of Christ urges us on; but urgency no more equates with speed than does change with decay. We will be purposeful, but not rushed; resolute, but not anxious; returning perhaps to some of the slower and deeper rhythms this year has set before us in a kind of extended Holy Saturday.

To conclude where I began, Christian Indigenous Elder Miriam Rose invites us to *Dadirri*, which means "inner, deep listening, and quiet, still awareness. 'Everyone's got it', she says. 'It's just that they haven't [all] found it.'¹

Dadirri [she explains] recognises that deep spring inside us . . . Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait. We do not try to hurry things up . . . When twilight comes, we prepare for the night. At dawn we rise with the sun . . . There is nothing more important than what we are attending to . . . We wait on God, too. His time is the right time.²

In that spirit, I invite you to use this closing prayer often between now and our final session of this 39th Synod in May, as we renew our diocesan vision together:

O God,
your Son taught us to pray that your Kingdom would come, and your will be done on earth:
kindle in our hearts that just and gentle rule;
stir up in our churches the courage to proclaim your love;
renew in us the same mind that was in him, who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.
Be thou our vision, O God; quicken us with your grace, and call us into your future;
show us your purpose for this Diocese of Gippsland,
so that we may share in your mission to the world in Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Synod Service concludes...

¹ As cited by Julia Baird, *Phosphorescence: on awe, wonder, & things that sustain you when the world goes dark* (Sydney: Fourth Estate; 2020), 72-74

² *Phosphorescence*, 73-74

Addendum:

Extract from a statement read by +Richard during the Saturday morning session, 14 November

Before we move into our program as advertised, I would just like to take a moment to add some comments further to the *Ad Clerum* email I sent on Wednesday evening, following the publication of the Appellate Tribunal's opinion that afternoon.

The Tribunal was responding to two matters referred to it by the then Primate, Archbishop Philip Freier, and by some members of General Synod, last year.

The current Primate, Archbishop Geoffrey Smith, has made a statement which you can find on the General Synod website: <https://anglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ACA-Primate-statement-Appellate-Tribunal-11-November-2020-1.pdf>

I commend that to you, and share the following excerpts from it:

The Anglican Church's highest legal authority, the Appellate Tribunal, [has] released a 5-1 majority opinion that a service of blessing for civil marriages authorised by the Synod of the Diocese of Wangaratta last year is valid. The service encompasses all marriages authorised under the *Marriage Act 1961* including those between same-sex couples . . . [The second matter referred to the Tribunal] concerned an ordinance the Synod of the Diocese of Newcastle drafted in 2019 removing the possibility of disciplinary action taken against a member of the clergy married under the Marriage Act to a member of the same sex or who blessed – or declined to bless – a same sex marriage.

In this matter the Tribunal found (and here I'm citing the 5-1 majority opinion itself) that 'The Synod of the Diocese of Newcastle has authority to amend its own diocesan clergy discipline regime in relation to clergy who bless or are party to a same-sex marriage', adding that the means for determining offences 'created by the Constitution . . . or by any Canon of the General Synod that is in force in the Diocese' would remain.

What does this all mean for our Diocese and for our Church?

It is important to note that we are not talking here about Anglican clergy solemnizing or officiating at same sex marriages.

These questions relate to the blessing of existing Civil Marriages (including potentially of same sex couples under recent changes to the Commonwealth Marriage Act), and to any disciplinary action that might be taken with respect to clergy who agree or decline to conduct such a blessing, and who may themselves be married to a person of the same gender under the law of the land.

It is also important to note that neither Wangaratta or Newcastle have acted on their respective legislation, either prior to the Appellate Tribunal completing its work or in the days since.

The House of Bishops met on zoom on Thursday, and are meeting again at the end of next week to further discuss the implications of the Tribunal's judgments.

There is a strong commitment among the bishops to work through the various questions raised together, and to preserve the unity of the Anglican Church of Australia, tested though it is around these issues.

Within this Diocese, as within the wider Church and the Appellate tribunal itself, there is a diversity of views, all held with integrity with charity towards those with whom we may differ.

Some of us will welcome this development; some of us will find it distressing; many of us may be more than a little confused.

We need time to digest what is a very thorough report (almost 160 tightly-argued pages between the two opinions).

All of us must take the time to listen to one another as we seek a way forward together.

The Appellate Tribunal's opinion is part of a wider, ongoing conversation in the life of our Church, in which General Synod has a role, and the Synods of each Diocese have a role.

My own views are no doubt well known to you. As you will also know from my Presidential Address last year, I am committed to a quality of conversation in which all voices are heard and respected, including those who identify as LGBTQI.

There are significant matters of conscience involved here.

I can assure you that while I am your bishop, and however this plays out, the individual conscience of our clergy and lay people will be honoured within a culture of inclusion; which is to say, we will aim to be true to our Anglican ethos.

No doubt these matters will come before us in some form when we meet next year for the Third Session of this 39th Synod. We cannot deal with them 'on the run' today, and it would be imprudent, precipitous, and unhelpful to attempt to do so.

We must however use the months between now and then wisely and well, so that our interactions might glorify God and build up the ever-wounded and risen body of Christ.

In the meantime I invite you to a prayerful and purposeful patience:

- pray for the Primate and the bishops of our national communion;
- pray for the Dioceses of Wangaratta and Newcastle and their clergy and people;
- pray for the members of the Appellate Tribunal;
- pray for all Anglicans, lay and ordained, encouraged and concerned, hopeful and anxious;
- pray for those in our community who are same sex attracted, and for whom these issues are existential;
- pray for the guidance of Holy Spirit, who inspires the Church today no less than the saints of old, to whose teaching and example we seek to do justice in our time and place and turn.