

Presidential Address
to the Third Session of the 39th Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Gippsland

Saturday 15 May 2021

We gather on lands of which the Gunaikurnai people have been custodians for tens of thousands of years, and we put the almost 120 years of our Diocese into that longer perspective of handing on the great stories, and acting for the good of earth and all creatures.

Here in Sale we acknowledge especially the Brayakaulung clan, their elders – past, present, and emerging – and all First Nations people present. As we approach Sorry Day, and Reconciliation Week, we attend to the Gospel ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us, including by owning the truth of our history.

I've already used two words or phrases from the renewed diocesan vision, a boat we gently pushed out during last night's Eucharist.

If you missed that 'soft launch' it will be on the website within a few days, and I encourage you to view or review it, and to share it with your Parish Councils and other governing bodies – and with your people as the materials roll out.

That vision provides a framework for this address, and I hope it will be a point of reference for our life and work as a Diocese and in every centre of Anglican ministry across Gippsland through to 2024.

Again, welcome to this Third and final Session of our 39th Synod, surely one of the more 'interesting' in our history, in the sense of the old proverb.

My first synod in the Diocese two years ago came after an 18-month interlude, and then we had to wait another 18 months before convening online last November.

In that virtual forum we reflected on the enormous challenges encountered through drought and bushfire and pandemic, and on the resilience, courage, and generosity shown by our clergy and people in so many ways.

Just six months later, we meet again and for the last time as this body. Even so, as we've seen, there are a number attending in person for the first time.

Despite having been in the role since July 2019, this is Richard Connelly's first face to face synod as Registrar. It is Roger Blythman's first as our Chancellor, commissioned for that ministry last night. It is only my second regular synod as your bishop.

But for the welcome return of Brian Norris as Chair of Committees, the front table would have far less collective experience than some other tables in the hall!

This Session sees us once again in election mode, and considering draft legislation and important resolutions. May we choose wisely, may we listen actively, and may we discern prayerfully.

Some of those elections are to fill positions vacated by The Hon. John Delzoppo, for whom this is synod session number 50! John, I think you should raise the bat!

The support from the Registry Office in preparing for this meeting has again been tremendous, and I join the Registrar in thanking Annette Hollonds, Kate Campbell, David Perryman and Tim Gibson, who juggle many things between them with grace and skill, and the willing volunteers who work with them, including those who serve on various governing bodies, with agendas that seem ever longer and more complex.

We enjoy the hospitality of our Cathedral Parish this weekend, both for worship and fellowship, and we're grateful as always to the Dean and her team.

Our renewed vision for the next four years is both descriptive and aspirational – a mirror and a lamp – in its three ‘tag lines’ for Gippsland Anglicans:

- Committed in Christ
- Connecting in Service
- Creative in Spirit

I’m sure you’ve all memorized that overnight, and yes, there will be a test later!

Roman Catholic Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, writes:

The Christ Mystery [is] the indwelling of the Divine Presence in everyone and everything . . . in Him every kind of life has meaning and has an influence on every other kind of life.¹

Those familiar with Rohr’s thinking will know that is not some exclusivist or colonising claim for the truths of Christianity over against other world religions.

From within the riches of our own tradition Rohr speaks this good news of radical inclusion – ‘a cosmic notion of the Christ’, he says, that ‘competes with and excludes no one, but includes everyone and everything’.²

This is akin to the realization Peter’s companions come to in last Sunday’s reading from Acts chapter 10, when the Holy Spirit is poured out ‘even on the Gentiles’ – unthinkable for those early followers of the Way emerging from Judaism.

For our identity to be grounded in Christ, it must embody the diversity which reflects that gospel of inclusion: diversity received as a gift of creation itself, understanding better now what our First Nations People seem always to have known and respected, namely how critical biodiversity is to the earth’s flourishing.

In Tuesday’s federal budget – a hopeful one for rural and regional Australia in several respects – we welcome a \$32million lift in promoting on-farm biodiversity. We lamented the threat to biodiversity in the bushfires of 2019 and 2020. And yet we are often slow to embrace the God-given diversity of our own human condition.

One of the resolutions before us today from Bishop-in-Council relates to an interpretive preamble to Section 7 of our Code of Conduct, *Faithfulness in Service*, to the effect that those who would serve as church workers will not be deemed to be in breach of the Code only because (and I would underscore that word ‘only’) only because they are not in a relationship that constitutes marriage as provided for in Anglican rites.

This is not a kind of ‘wooden horse’ for the blessing of same sex civil marriages; a subject to which I will return. This is about two things: coherence between our policies and our practices; and not putting unnecessary barriers before people who are seeking to serve.

As Peter says to his astounded Jewish-Christian friends in that passage from Acts, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’

Whilst this resolution is not about baptism *per se*, it is about baptismal ministry. For years, we have been asking an ever-growing list of people to sign up to *Faithfulness in Service* as a condition of being cleared as a church worker.

And for years, we have been expecting people who are in faithful, committed relationships that either do not constitute marriage, or do not correspond with our church’s doctrine of marriage, either to sign this with their fingers crossed, or to walk away.

Why should their conscience bear that burden?

¹ All citations from Rohr’s *The Universal Christ* are those of Patrick Boland in *Every Thing is Sacred: 40 Practices and Reflections on The Universal Christ* (London: SPCK, 2021).

² As cited in Boland, *Every Thing is Sacred*, 25.

Since 2017 this list includes those legally married to someone of the same gender. And until such time as we can bless such unions, any claim that we recognize them as marriages in a Code of Conduct lacks integrity.

The helpful background paper prepared by our Diocesan Solicitor, Viv Braham, whose contribution to so much of our legislation over more than two decades we gratefully acknowledge, explains the rationale for this resolution.

As Viv points out, we are not looking alter the text of *Faithfulness in Service*. We are seeking to clarify how two clauses in Section 7 will be applied in this Diocese when it comes to safe ministry clearances or alleged misconduct. Several other dioceses have made comparable amendments.

This Synod must form its own mind. My counsel is that a fit-for-purpose code of conduct would not exclude people only on the basis of a narrow interpretation of 'singleness', or an understanding of marriage that differs from that in our law.

When we introduced this resolution at the pre-Synod briefings last October, some of you were concerned about expectations that might apply to clergy in particular. *Faithfulness in Service* (§1) clearly states that, 'The personal behaviour and practices of pastoral ministry required of clergy . . . of the Anglican Church of Australia are specified in the Holy Scriptures as well as in its Constitution, canons, ordinances, the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal.'

Here again we see the importance of that word 'only'. This Code of Conduct is not the only standard of behaviour to which clergy are accountable. It does however provide a consistent set of expectations for all who perform a role with the church's actual or apparent authority – lay and ordained, voluntary or stipendiary.

To be committed in Christ is to commit to the ministry of all the baptised, and to remove obstacles to growth in belonging and believing, mindful as Rohr says of the influence we have, for good or ill, on every other life which has meaning in him.

The transparency of such a resolution is entirely in keeping with our commitment to safe ministry, which is also stated clearly in the renewed vision.

Like many here, I am often asked why we have to fill out forms and attend training sessions and submit to screening checks – especially those of more senior years who have been faithfully and safely volunteering all their lives.

Part of an answer from Synod's perspective has to do with me sitting earlier this week with a survivor of abuse that took place in this Diocese. I listened to her, prayed with her (at her request), and I apologized to her for our betrayal of trust – ours in the sense that we are structurally complicit in the systemic breach of a duty of care.

That was the third time in fewer than three years I have had the opportunity to meet in person with a survivor as the face of the organization that has so failed them. I doubt it will be the last. And for each of these people I have met, there are others who, understandably, do not seek such a personal response.

So, while these cases of abuse might be 'historic', their legacy is far from being behind us, and the journey of culture change from 'compliance mode' towards seeking best practice is ever before us. As Rohr says, 'obedience is usually about cleaning up; love is about waking up.'³ We've done some much-needed cleaning up; now we need to open up to how the love of Christ would reshape us.

Unless our credibility in this regard is restored, our efforts at connecting in service are built on sand, and we have little authenticity when speaking into the big questions of our day – including speaking up for those without a voice.

³ As cited in Boland, *Every Thing is Sacred*, 77.

This year we were audited by General Synod on the Safe Ministry to Children Canon. We welcomed that process, keen to benchmark, to improve protocols, and to shift our mindset, so that – as far as in us lies – this never happens in our Diocese again.

On a much more temporal frame of audit, when we come to consider our finances we will note that the vast proportion of last year's deficit can be attributed to redress payments as a result of civil claims, as is the case in the current year. In my time alone, roughly a million dollars that might have been directed towards missional activities and ministry has been disbursed in making reparation and meeting legal costs and Professional Standards expenses – as is appropriate if we are serious about reconciling where there is injustice or injury.

If therefore as a member of Synod you are asked why we need to do all this safe ministry stuff, please join me in giving an account of the hope that is within us: not least so we can say to everyone out there – hand on heart – 'here is the standard and consistency you can expect from Gippsland Anglicans'.

You will recall that our November Synod was the weekend following the release of the Appellate Tribunal's Opinion on the matters referred to it last year, finding (by a five to one majority) the use of The Canon for Services to provide a liturgy for the blessing of civil marriages, including same-sex civil marriages, to be consistent with our Constitution.

On the Saturday morning of that Session I made a short statement,⁴ and it seems timely to offer some further comments, for this goes to our capacity for building up communities of care and trust.

The bishops have met several times since the Appellate Tribunal released its Report and are to meet again in a fortnight to continue what has been a charitable if challenging conversation.

For better or worse, General Synod has not been able to meet as planned last year or this; indeed it has not met since the Marriage Act was amended in 2017. There is consensus that General Synod is an important and appropriate forum for engaging with these issues, and plans are underway for a meeting mid-next year.

Notwithstanding the Tribunal's Opinion, restraint is being widely exercised. In the interests of unity, and of holding a space in which dialogue can be had with all of the sensitivity and respect it demands, I continue to call us to prayerful patience. This means that, as things stand, if a priest in this Diocese seeks my permission to bless a same-sex civil marriage under The Canon for Services, I will not authorize such a liturgy.

On a personal level that grieves me – both from a theological and a missional perspective, and I recognise the pain and frustration members of the LGBTQIA+ community and others will be feeling, along with those of you here and in our churches who find the prospect of blessing same-sex unions problematic for equally principled reasons.

So, in asking us to bear the open-endedness of this moment for a little longer, let me add that restraint applies in all directions, and that unity is not to be prized at any cost – that kind of 'peace where there is no peace', as Jeremiah puts it (6:14).

I say this mindful of Jesus' prayer for unity, which is our gospel text for tomorrow.

Our essential unity in him is given to us in baptism – a gift that must be treasured, hence the restraint. At the same time, such a gift must not be instrumentalized, whereby those who would act in good conscience, and in keeping with the Constitution as it has been interpreted to us, are not held solely responsible for any structural disunity which may follow. For the sort of unity to which Christ calls us – of the kind he has with the Father – is not a coercive unity, or one built upon fear or mistrust.

4

See the diocesan website:
www.gippsanglican.org.au/assets/Presidential_Address_to_Synod_13_November_2020_online.pdf

Richard Rohr suggests we 'see oneness [when we] *look out from oneness*, instead of labelling everything as . . . in or out,'⁵ reminding us that 'Jesus came to show us how to be human much more than how to be spiritual.'⁶

For a significant minority of people, to be human is to be same-sex attracted, or to be gender non-binary, or to be one or more of a host of identity markers that as a Church we seem to be ranking above our primary identity 'in Christ', in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gal 3:28).

For me, these are not salvation issues, though I recognize that for others they are, and I respect that view. As I see it, if we attend to the Book of Nature, and if we read it alongside and coherently with the Book of Scripture, understanding God to be in some sense the 'author' of both sources of revelation, then we are not dealing here with unrepentant sin that cannot be blessed, as has been argued.

We are dealing – and let us never lose sight of this – we are dealing with people's reality, which involves listening to people's lived experience. For how can we connect if we do not first listen and look – preferably outwards, from a sense of oneness? Only then can we presume to speak, and reconcile, and act. And that means we need to have those voices in rooms like this.

The 40th Synod of this Diocese will have to address these matters in ways the 39th Synod has not. I am committed to you, in Christ, to doing so in such a way as includes all voices, and preserves the unity of this household.

In the six months since we last met we have had two ordinations, three inductions and two commissionings; six people have entered discernment, several new Lay Reader licenses have been issued, and four people – lay and ordained – have been accredited as Mentors for the EFM theological education and reflection program.

These are among the many signs of Gippsland Anglicans being open to Christ's leading. We will hear more of this in the Bishop-in-Council Report, and in the reports from various diocesan outreach initiatives and mission partners. We will also be treated to a story of hope from each region during our reflective worship this evening.

In the absence of a suitable candidate for the Diocesan Development Officer role, Campbell Bairstow continues to consult for us, generously and effectively, exploring opportunities to collaborate on small and large projects.

One example that has arisen since Cathy Turnbull prepared her report as Missional Deacon to the Eastern Region is a piece of research currently underway with Beyond Blue, redesigning mental health resources for remote and regional areas following critical incidents. This large organization sought us out to partner with them on the strength of our bushfire response and our capacity to keep connecting during COVID. The collaboration attracts a financial contribution towards Cathy's ministry, and feeds into our ongoing reflection on what disruption has to teach us.

Disruption from the pandemic continues to be experienced beyond our shores. We are mindful of the terrible situation in India, and also of our nearest neighbours in Papua New Guinea where, as our diocesan missionary to Newton Theological College, Bishop Jeffrey Driver is helping that Church to build capacity. By trying some new ideas, and with the generous support of many, positive change is occurring in the lives of students there and the College's accreditation process is moving forward.

Such readiness to try new things is no guarantee of success. Nor should we define success simply in terms of what works, or goes on indefinitely. We know that the pace of change is increasing: what works today may not be effective in five years; just as what worked ten years ago may not bear fruit today.

⁵ As cited in Boland, *Every Thing is Sacred*, 25, original emphasis.

⁶ As cited in Boland, *Every Thing is Sacred*, 50.

Two of our more creative ministries in *Anam Cara* and Café 123 have come to a change of season. In each case their ending is a good news story. I'll let Kate Campbell, explain why that is for *Anam Cara* in presenting their report. For 123, the necessary closure of the café opened up a public discussion around how such a social enterprise might live on in new ways. This has drawn people together across churches, local government, and service organisations to co-operate and think expansively about future possibilities.

That sort of engagement with local communities is being replicated across the Diocese, as is clear from recent grant applications reviewed by The Anglicare Parish Partnerships Steering Committee – projects which show how parishes and ministry centres are creative in spirit, with careful and prayerful attention to context.

The Council of Anglicare Victoria also met recently, and we heard directly from some of the young people whose lives had been transformed by the truly relational and bespoke programs that helped them emerge from foster care with a sense of independence and dignity.

In our vision renewal process the importance of children and young people to our life and work came through again and again, often with a tinge of regret at their relative absence from our churches.

Forging new pathways for meaningful and culturally sensitive relationships with local schools isn't easy in the current environment, but we see it happening through strategic appointments and some good old ministry practices of bridge-building, visible presence, and meeting people where they are. Not everything needs re-inventing!

Alongside Christian schools like Kairos, our two Anglican schools in Gippsland are effective centres for the empowerment of children and young people. The opportunity to gently form hundreds of children (and their families) in Christian character and an Anglican ethos is precious, and we are blessed to have Principals and senior staff who are themselves devout Anglicans, well supported by chaplains, lay and ordained.

There is a huge body of work to be done in this demographic space, as we know just by looking around the hall. Yet we take great heart from these school reports, along with Alisha Moyle's in her role with younger people across the Diocese, just as I am encouraged by the frequent privilege of confirming children and young adults.

Again, those with ears to hear will have noticed that I have used quite a few words and phrases from our renewed vision during this address. I think I'm up to 19, and will award a chocolate bar to anyone who has clocked five or more! What might be the thing, or things, that stand out for you from this statement of identity and aspiration, which you might use as mirror and lamp in your setting to energise new or existing ministries, holding fast, and reaching out? That's 20!

Let me acknowledge here the Diocesan Staff and Executive teams for their input into the drafting, along with former *TGA* Editor Jan Down, among others.

The hope of those of us involved in distilling and shaping what is your work, is that – in the same way – we would see it being woven through everything we are, and do, and seek to become: whether it be the work of governance, tea-towel ministries, or at the pointy end of evangelism, such that – as Richard Rohr would say – 'all is anointed';⁷ all is offered up for that vision of human flourishing Jesus called the Kingdom of God. 21!

In the six months since we last met we have also been saddened by the loss of a number from our diocesan family whose lives of grace and service have embodied such a vision. We think especially today of: Rod Burney, Fay Woodward, Betty Milner, Jock Gibson, Christine Makin, Gwen Matheson, and others we name in our hearts or with our lips. May they rest in peace, and rise in glory.

I also need to let members of Synod know that Bishop Arthur Jones is gravely ill, and is expected to move into palliative care in coming days.

⁷ As cited in Boland, *Every Thing is Sacred*, 25.

Last year was a very tough time for all of us. Coming out of that it would be easy to expect too much of ourselves too soon. I'm conscious of people here, and some not with us, who are carrying heavy burdens, and may be traveling a bit rough. Fatigue is prevalent, and real.

This time together is an opportunity to care for each other, and to encourage one another. Whatever else we do today and tomorrow, let us do that for the ever-wounded and risen body of Christ.

We meet in Ascensiontide, those last 11 days of Easter between the return of the Beloved to the Father's embrace, and the outpouring of the disrupting and renewing Spirit. It's a time of in-betweenness, a liminal space we might say, a threshold. Perhaps our experience of being in between paradigms as a Church echoes that of those disciples in the first Ascensiontide?

The Archbishop of Canterbury calls us in these days between Ascension and Pentecost to pray with Anglicans the world over, 'Thy Kingdom Come'.

May the quality of our life together be the truth of our prayer; and may the depth of our prayer make us truly a kingdom people: Committed in Christ to a radically inclusive church, Connecting in Service of the world God loves, and Creative in Spirit as we live now into the promise of God's loving, just, and gentle rule.

+Richard