

Theological Integrity

Neither Independent nor Denominationalist

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How we organise our financial affairs as a diocese might, at first glance, seem as far removed from theology as you could imagine. Theological principles often appear curiously abstract, while budgets, income and expenditure are as concrete as it gets. But I suspect I don't really need to convince many of you here this morning that true theology, the knowledge of God as it arises from the Scriptures and is centred on our Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation he has won for us, is not detached from real life but, on the contrary is what real life is all about. Our theology shapes how we think and how we live. It always will. It's just a matter of whether your theology comes from the Bible or not. And if it doesn't the proper term is 'idolatry'.

So it ought not to come as a surprise that there are theological principles which should inform our decision making about diocesan finances. We could go through a whole list of them, of course. Honesty, accountability, and open-handed generosity stand out, all arising from what God has told us about the way we should relate to each other and to him in the light of the gospel. On the negative side, we ought to avoid greed, selfishness, the use of money to provide for ourselves at the expense of others or even providing for others but in a way that conspicuously draws attention to ourselves, or hoarding money in the vain hope that it will provide us with security for the future. We could talk about wise stewardship of our resources which always remain God's

gifts to us. However, I want to focus attention much more narrowly on who we are together, as churches, as a fellowship or network of churches.

The key to what I want to say is that whatever financial principles we come up with should reflect who we are. They should reflect our fundamental commitments as evangelical Christians networked together in this strange entity we call the diocese of Sydney. What we believe about ourselves and how we are related to each other, to diocesan figures and structures, and to wider institutions such as the Anglican Church of Australia ought to be reflected in the final form of any principles and priorities document.

So three principles which should be reflected in any statement of our financial priorities:

Firstly, **the priority of the local congregations of God's people.** Properly speaking, each local congregation is 'the church'. The people of God gathered by God's Spirit in one place around God's word to hear and to pray, to serve each other and to encourage each other, living out the same concern for the lost that led Jesus to Jerusalem and to the cross, these gatherings spread throughout our diocese lie at the centre of God's purposes in the world. They are not the only place God's purposes are being worked out. The front line of mission is long and diverse, taking in school chaplaincies, university ministry, hospital ministry, prison ministry, theological education, even the distinctive ministry opportunities of cathedrals and bishops and archbishops! All the front line and one part of the front line should not be played off against another. And yet there is a priority to the local congregation of God's people because it is this group that bears all the promises of God in the New Testament given to 'the church'. That dignity is not given to

larger institutional structures. The Anglican Communion is not, strictly speaking, the church. The Anglican Church of Australia is not strictly speaking the church. Neither of these actually gather in the way a local congregation does. And neither, really, is the diocese. None of these are themselves congregations as such. When they are at their best and working well they are support structures and adjuncts to the local congregation. If we really believe that, then it needs to be reflected in our documents, both in terms of revenue and expenditure. We ought to do all we can together to resource the work being done in the parishes and to keep the spotlight there.

Secondly, **the reality of our wider relationships and the responsibilities which they generate.** If the first principle is taken in isolation then we could end up thinking of ourselves as members of independent churches, concerned only for what we are immediately involved in at the local congregation level. We would reject any suggestion that we have responsibilities, even financial responsibilities, that reach beyond the local congregation. But we are not independent churches. We exist in a wider fellowship, and a properly ordered network in which there is both accountability and the encouragement. Our diocese is a particular expression of our commitment to work together rather than in splendid isolation. Many of the resources which we share have been provided by other members of the family. I will go to church tomorrow and we will meet in a building none of us built or paid for. We will be served by a minister we did not train. Our kid's church will use material prepared by others. (Just how far does the 'user pays' system go?) We do what we do as local congregations very largely on the legacy of previous generations of Sydney Anglicans, who gave generously not so that each of us might go off and do our own thing, but so that together we might reach this city and the world for Christ.

And together we are able to do things which no one congregation would be able to do for themselves. Our theological college, organisations such as Anglicare with its varied ministries of compassion, training and nurturing the faith of our children and youth through the various activities of Youthworks, the public ministry of our bishops, mechanisms for recruiting, training and sending out missionaries around the globe — none of this is done by ‘them out there’, it’s all done by us. It’s the product of this network of relationships which prosecutes the ministry of the gospel in this city and beyond. And so our financial priorities need to account for these wider responsibilities as well. We share what the Lord has given us rather than place walls around it so that we can keep it for ourselves. We are not simply individuals or independent groups all doing our own thing and we need to be willing to play our part in resourcing the common ministries of our diocese.

Thirdly, **our concern lies with people and ministry rather than institutions for their own sake.** Another way of saying that might be to say that the gospel trumps Anglicanism ever time. I am a conscientious Anglican. I assented to the Thirty-nine Articles when I was ordained and I didn’t have my fingers crossed behind my back. I am firmly convinced that our Anglican heritage is something worth fighting for. The legacy of Cranmer, Grindal, Whitfield, Simeon, Ryle and Stott, not to mention Barker, Mowll, Loane, Robinson and Knox, is not something to be surrendered lightly. And standing up for that legacy is all the more important at the moment when it is being betrayed on a monumental scale by churches and leaders all around the world and even in this country. Yet our energies and resources should not be diverted from gospel initiatives in order to prop up an ailing institution. The first call on our diocesan resources should not be Anglican Essentials but mission initiatives. We live in a city where millions do not know Christ

and are lost. They're so lost they don't even know they're lost. Giving priority to institutional subscriptions in that climate seems madness. Of course we have certain obligations borne out of legal and constitutional realities. I am not suggesting we should renege on them. Yet they cannot have priority. People and ministry must take a higher place.

The final Statement of Funding Principles and Priorities for 2012–2015 for the diocese of Sydney needs to be very recognisably a document of the diocese of Sydney. It needs to embody our theology drawn from the Scriptures. It needs to reflect who we see ourselves to be and what we see our mission to be. That will undoubtedly mean much more than I have been able to mention here. But I want to emphasise that it must certainly not be less. The priority of the local congregation, the reality of our wider relationships and responsibilities, and our concern for people and ministry over institutions for their own sake — these principles need to shape our decisions and the structure of the document in which those decisions are communicated. And I should make clear that I am convinced that these principles are important to those who are working on this document for us. But let's make sure the document is recognisably ours. That's what I mean by theological integrity.