



**ADDRESS**

**by**

**The Most Reverend Dr Phillip Aspinall AC**

**Archbishop of Brisbane**

**to the**

**Second Session of the 80th Synod**

**of the**

**Diocese of Brisbane**

**Saturday 25th June 2022**



# ADDRESS

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Welcome to the Second Session of the 80<sup>th</sup> Synod of the Diocese of Brisbane.

## **18<sup>th</sup> General Synod**

We meet in the immediate wake of the 18<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia which met on the Gold Coast in the second week of May.

### ***Participation Canon***

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic it was difficult to organise the General Synod. It was re-scheduled twice and also had to be relocated, resulting in the loss of substantial deposits paid for the original venue.

Special arrangements were made to enable those in isolation or prevented from attending by government requirements to participate virtually. A 'Participation Canon' was passed at the beginning of the Synod and some ten people participated via zoom. It worked reasonably well and a number of virtual attenders contributed to debates in the Synod hall.

One member contracted COVID during the General Synod and had to isolate while continuing to participate virtually. A handful of members reported positive tests in the days following the synod.

Building on this experience, the Synod decided to develop arrangements to enable greater participation in future General Synods, online and in-person, by people facing particular obstacles including disability, disease or illness, other medical conditions or injuries. It seems that hybrid arrangements will continue to be made and greater attention given to physical accessibility in venues.

## ***Elections***

Throughout the General Synod, voting on bills and motions as well as election ballots were carried out electronically, delivering virtually immediate accurate results. Some minor glitches in accessing the two digital platforms were easily resolved.

Tim Reid was re-elected lay secretary which gives him an ex officio seat on Standing Committee until the next General Synod.

Debra Mullins was re-elected to Standing Committee. Debra was also elected to the Appellate Tribunal. Her extensive work on Standing Committee and its Executive, in chairing the national Church Law Commission and in drafting much of the legislation that came before the General Synod was widely recognised and appreciated.

In mentioning Justice Mullins, I take this opportunity to congratulate her publicly on her appointment last month as President of the Queensland Court of Appeal. This is a very significant role in the administration of justice in Queensland and reflects the respect and esteem in which Justice Mullins is held by the legal fraternity. I am also very grateful that Justice Mullins will continue as my Chancellor, notwithstanding her onerous new responsibilities.

Brisbane representatives contributed to the work of the General Synod in various ways beyond the normal run of debates and reports. Dr Ruth Kerr fulfilled an arduous role on the Minutes Committee. The Rev'd Lynda Johnson, at her first General Synod, led one of the daily biblical reflections. Unenviably Lynda was allocated 1 Cor 6.1-11, one of the highly contested passages referred to in human sexuality debates. In an emotionally charged context Lynda reflected with grace and insight. Lynda was also elected to the Standing Committee and subsequently to the Executive of Standing Committee.

### ***Child Safety***

A plethora of diverse child safety compliance, audit and reporting regulations are emerging in Australian states and territories, in response to recommendations of the Royal

Commission and various state-level inquiries. In addition, the Church has adopted a national framework of requirements, as recommended by the Royal Commission. This multiplication of regimes has led to concerns about undue complexity, duplication and administrative burden. The General Synod initiated a process to review, streamline and as far as possible avoid duplication in the multiple regimes. That may lead to amendments to Church legislation down the track.

The national Safe Ministry Commission was charged to continue developing measures and resources to implement the Child Sexual Abuse Royal Commission's recommendations. Synod passed a Canon requiring the compulsory suspension of a Bishop against whom is made a plausible allegation of child sexual abuse, while the matter is addressed. That Canon implements a Royal Commission recommendation and will come before us for adoption in this session.

A second Canon will also be before us concerning complaints against Diocesan Bishops. The national Episcopal Standards Commission has experienced that some complainants have not made use of processes available to them at the diocesan level and have instead gone straight to the ESC with matters that really should be dealt with elsewhere. This second Canon addresses this problem and allows the ESC to exercise discretion in either taking on a matter or referring it elsewhere when appropriate.

The General Synod had quite a broad legislative agenda. Our own legal committee has advised Diocesan Council that only these two Canons need to be dealt with by Synod this year. Others will come before us in due course.

### ***Climate Change***

General Synod passed two comprehensive resolutions on climate change: one addressed to the Church; the other addressed to Australian governments, both commending specific actions. The first challenges the Church to recognise the theological imperatives to act and the fundamental issues of justice involved. It proposes clear targets concerning carbon emissions. The call to Australian governments urges them to recognise that the greatest impacts of climate change are already affecting disproportionately the poor and, in particular, small island communities in the Pacific and our own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

A further resolution noted that, while Australia is not planning to build further coal-fired power stations, many other countries plan to build, in total, thousands more such plants. The General Synod expressed dismay at this situation and called on Standing Committee to communicate widely a call to cease and desist.

### ***Social Issues***

Among other social issues addressed by the synod were the difficulties faced by those relying solely on 'Jobseeker' payments, which are below the poverty line; adequate funding of aged and disability care and the NDIS; federal, state and territory-based gambling reform; suicide among Australian Defence Force veterans; Defence Force chaplaincy, and balancing

anti-discrimination protections and religious freedoms. A resolution upheld the Church's traditional view opposing euthanasia and voluntary assisted dying legislation.

### ***Ecumenical***

Several ecumenical guests attended the General Synod. Next year in Rome, the Roman Catholic Church is convening an international Synod on synodality. In preparation Roman Catholic observers are attending the synods of sister churches to observe how they go about things and to glean learnings. Three Roman Catholic observers attended parts of our General Synod.

A representative from the Lutheran Church of Australia also attended and addressed the Synod as it considered and finally adopted 'Perspectives on Mission', a third addendum to the Common Ground agreement first adopted in 2004.

The head of Churches of Christ in Australia was represented by the Rev'd John Gilmour, who is also currently President of the National Council of Churches in Australia.

### ***National Anglican Family Violence Project***

At diocesan level we have already considered some of the outcomes of the Anglican Church's family violence research projects. This was the first time the General Synod had opportunity to do so. The General Synod recognised, as have we, the salutary outcomes of that research: the Church has allowed family violence to go largely unaddressed and the prevalence of intimate partner violence among Anglicans is as high, if not higher, than in the community at large. We have important and urgent work to do in preventing such violence



and in developing pastoral responses to it. The General Synod adopted the Ten Commitments for Prevention and Response to Domestic and Family Violence in the Anglican Church of Australia and called on diocesan synods to do so as well, if they haven't already. A 'Families and Culture Commission' was created to follow through and coordinate this work with a budget approaching \$600,000 between now and 2025. This is a substantial commitment made by the General Synod which will lead to increases in assessments on dioceses, though it is hoped philanthropic support may be secured.

A further resolution called on the new Families and Culture Commission to collaborate with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council to implement two five-year Federal Government plans to tackle family violence in Aboriginal and Islander communities.

### ***Viability of Regional Dioceses***

General Synod acknowledged the financial strains under which regional, rural and isolated dioceses are operating. The combined impacts of sexual abuse redress payments, sharply increasing insurance premiums and the costs of implementing mandated compliance, audit and reporting processes are considerable. A resolution urges metropolitan dioceses to lend greater support to all dioceses in their province, especially with respect to policies and procedures, administration, registry functions, insurance, safe ministry training and audits, redress and ensuring the Church's continued presence in regional and rural areas. This is easier said than done. In fact how this might be done has been discussed for over a decade among bishops, registrars and finance people in the Province of Queensland. Brisbane does provide support to the other dioceses of the province in some areas of professional

standards services. However it is also true that dioceses carefully guard their own identity and autonomy. Nevertheless we must see what further steps can be taken. There is a very real possibility that a number of regional dioceses will be unsustainable going forward.

### ***Ukraine***

A comprehensive General Synod resolution deplored Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its war crimes and crimes against humanity; expressed support for the people of Ukraine; called upon Orthodox churches in Russia and Ukraine to oppose the war and its tragic consequences and commended Christians who have protested the invasion and war.

### ***Age of Criminal Responsibility***

A resolution supported raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 years and communicating this view to Australia's Attorneys General. This has important implications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and well as children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

### ***30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Ordination of Women***

A resolution noted that 2022 marks the 30th anniversary of the ordination of women as priests in the Anglican Church of Australia and acknowledged the important contribution of ordained women.

## ***Same sex marriage and blessings***

Of course, the hot-button issue of the General Synod concerned same-sex marriage and the blessing of such marriages. Let me emphasise from the outset that by the phrase ‘same sex marriage’ I mean marriage between two persons of the same sex. I make that explicit because I’m aware of the sensitivities involved. I hope people will understand that I am simply embracing an economy of words in that phrase and have no wish to imply by it a qualified or lesser form of marriage.

Many anticipated the General Synod with some fear and apprehension because of heightened tensions over same-sex marriage in both Church and society in recent years.

In 2017 the Australian *Marriage Act 1961* was amended to define ‘marriage’ as ‘the union of 2 people to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life’. Previously ‘marriage’ was defined as being between ‘one man and one woman’. This change made lawful in Australia the marriage of two persons of the same sex. This did not, however, mean such marriages could be solemnised in the Anglican Church because in our authorised marriage services marriage continues to be understood to be between one man and one woman.

Following that amendment to the Marriage Act, in 2019, the Synod of Wangaratta Diocese passed a regulation concerning liturgical blessing for two persons married in accordance with the *Marriage Act 1961*. The regulation provided that no minister could be compelled to conduct such a service if to do so would offend the minister’s conscience, but where a minister consented to do so the regulation required the use of a specified form of service

and no other. Given the amended Marriage Act, this applied both to marriages of a man and a woman and also to marriages between two persons of the same sex.

In the wake of this action in Wangaratta the Primate referred two questions to the Appellate Tribunal asking, first, whether the regulation made by Wangaratta Synod was consistent with the Fundamental Declarations and Ruling Principles in our Constitution and, secondly, whether the regulation was validly made under the *Canon Concerning Services 1992*.

In a closely argued and lengthy determination published in November 2020, by a majority of five to one, the Appellate Tribunal ruled that ‘Wangaratta Diocese’s proposed service for the blessing of persons married in accordance with the *Marriage Act* does not entail the solemnisation of marriage, is authorised by the *Canon Concerning Services 1992*; and is not inconsistent with the Fundamental Declarations and Ruling Principles of the Constitution of the Church.’ In other words it was lawful in the Church.

This determination evoked strong reactions in various parts of the Church – some very much in favour of proceeding with such blessings and some strenuously against. In the face of deep conflict the Primate urged restraint in acting on the Tribunal’s decision until the General Synod had an opportunity to consider questions raised by the ruling. As we know, the delay in General Synod meeting added to growing tensions and anxieties. The Primate’s request was, however, largely respected.

Against this background, the General Synod was asked to endorse two statements submitted by the Standing Committee of Sydney Diocese.

Statement 1 was entitled 'Marriage as the union of a man and a woman'. After a lengthy, passionate and respectful debate a call for a vote by Houses saw the statement agreed to by a substantial majority in the House of Laity (63-47) and the House of Clergy (70-39) and narrowly defeated in the House of Bishops (10-12). Requiring a majority in favour in all three Houses to pass, the statement was defeated.

Some expressed deep consternation, even incredulity and alarm over this outcome. When the statement was lost, immediately the mover, the Archbishop of Sydney, sought leave to make a 'personal statement' to the General Synod. He described the situation of the Anglican Church of Australia as 'perilous'. The Synod agreed to adjourn forthwith for an extended lunchbreak. Feelings were running high.

Some members of the General Synod inferred, wrongly in my view, that the majority of the House of Bishops who voted against making the statement were unwilling to uphold the Church's traditional teaching on marriage and even that they had abandoned that teaching. In my view such an inference is incorrect and unsustainable, though it has been repeatedly asserted in media reports and other communications since the Synod.

There could be many reasons why a majority of members of the House of Bishops voted against the statement. I think it likely that some Bishops objected to the final clause in the

proposed statement that ‘Any rite that purports to bless a same sex marriage is not in accordance with the teaching of Christ and the faith, ritual, ceremonial and/or discipline of this Church.’ That assertion relies on a disputed interpretation of Matthew 19.4-5 cited earlier in the statement and appears to be tantamount to contradicting the authoritative determination of the Appellate Tribunal, and even attempting to overturn it. It is likely, in my view, that a significant number of Bishops would have been deeply troubled by the prospect of perceptions of disrespecting the Constitutional authority of the Appellate Tribunal in this way.

Wider concerns were likely to have been in play too. I expect that some Bishops were dissatisfied, even resentful, at the process by which the proposed statement came to General Synod. If it was thought necessary, or even expedient, for the Anglican Church of Australia to make a statement about marriage in the light of the amendment to the Marriage Act, then a reasonable expectation would have been that a broadly representative group would collaborate to draft a statement that would be likely to win the support of the breadth of the Church. To my knowledge that did not happen. As I understand it, the Sydney Standing Committee submitted the proposed statement to the General Synod, more or less as a fait accompli, take it or leave it. I’m sure some Bishops felt alienated by and even angry about this process. It’s not the way the national Church has been accustomed to working, in my experience.

A third reason Bishops might have declined to make the statement was referred to several times during the debate. A number of what appeared to be reasonable, fact-based

amendments were proposed in attempts to provide a fuller, more nuanced account of marriage as it currently stands in church and society. While one such amendment was agreed to, others were rejected by proponents of the statements. I would not be at all surprised if some Bishops concluded that rejection of such nuancing amendments was unhelpful and unreasonable and led them to reject the statement overall.

Finally, as was also made clear in the debate, there were concerns that making such a statement at this time, would be singularly unhelpful to the Church's mission and pastoral endeavours in Australian society. This brought into view the wider social context of the Anglican Church in Australia, to which I will turn in a moment.

The General Synod later considered a motion, from the opposite perspective, which, among other things, proposed firm support for civil same sex marriage, sought to declare it to be a moral good, an enrichment of the Christian understanding of marriage and consistent with the scriptures, the creeds and Anglican tradition. That such a motion was moved was quite remarkable in itself. It would have been virtually unthinkable even 20 years ago. The proponents set out comprehensively what they saw as the biblical, theological and spiritual grounds for such an endorsement. Again, the debate was respectful and thoughtful. The motion was defeated 95 to 145. However, the fact that 40% of the General Synod voted in favour shows how much and how quickly the ground has shifted both in wider society and in the Church.

### ***The wider context***

Behind these General Synod decisions lies an extensive backdrop which I know was on the minds of many Bishops and others as the Synod met.

We are all well aware of the increased marginalisation of the Church in Australian society over the last 50 years and its acceleration over the last 20. It is commonplace now to acknowledge this. The scandal of churches' failures to act with decency, transparency, integrity and compassion in the face of sexual abuse has amplified the loss of trust that was already well under way.

In his book 'Post-God Nation' Roy Williams describes how religion fell off the radar in Australia to the point now where buildings are being sold off; congregations are elderly and dying out; baptisms, weddings, and funerals are now happening outside churches, in the main. Christianity is seen as implausible, undesirable or irrelevant.

In 2016 Greg Sheridan, columnist for The Australian, himself a devout Roman Catholic, said 'The churches cannot recognise and come to grips with their strategic circumstances. They behave as though they still represent a living social consensus' but can't recognise or accept that they don't. He wrote:

Across the past 120 years, the Christian churches in Europe and Australia have lost every significant, long-term battle about social norms and legal measures to underpin them.



Consider just a few: birth control, no-fault divorce, abortion, Sunday trading, blasphemy, film and television standards, same-sex adoption and soon [he was writing in 2016] same-sex marriage, and no doubt euthanasia and much else.

The wider cultural movements around marriage, human sexuality and gender have re-energised culture and identity conflicts for Anglicans. They have played out in the international Anglican Communion (leading to break away churches and realignments in ecclesial communion relationships). They have played out nationally in the references to the Appellate Tribunal around church blessings of same sex-marriages, in an announcement by GAFCON Australia that it has created a so-called 'extra provincial diocese' beyond any provisions in our Constitution to do so and invoking the supposed authority of groups that have no standing under our Constitution. They have played out in relation to our schools and community service organisations and affected the way the wider community perceives the Anglican Church.

In 2017, there were audible gasps around the country when Sydney Diocese donated \$1 million to the 'No' campaign in the national plebiscite on marriage equality.

Twelve months later, towards the end of 2018, the Ruddock Inquiry reported on Freedom of Religion and Belief in Australia. Before the report was made public there were leaks and speculation in the media about churches losing exemptions under anti-discrimination legislation.

The heads of 34 Sydney Anglican schools signed an open letter to all members of Australian parliaments, defending the existing exemptions, which they wanted retained, at least until new positive protections for religious freedoms were in place. These heads wanted protections that would enable them to discriminate in employment matters on the basis of some characteristics otherwise protected at law including matters related to gender identity and sexual orientation. The letter argued that faith-based schools should continue to be free to employ adherents of the faith. And in any case, these heads insisted, there was little evidence that Anglican schools had expelled gay students or dismissed gay staff.

Of course, in the public space this sounded like some church leaders and school heads were defending their right to discriminate against LGBT staff and possibly even students. There was strong push back in the media.

Within days ‘more than 1,000 current and former students had written to their principals asking them to give up “the right to discriminate” against LGBT students and teachers.’ (The Guardian, 1 Nov 2018). ‘The students said the heads’ letter itself sent the message that being gay was wrong.’ One student said ‘she felt “incredibly sad” when she saw that her principal had signed’ the letter and argued that while it might not lead to gay students being expelled, it would lead to gay students being bullied and victimised at school for being gay and to gay students feeling unsafe at school.

There was widespread and angry criticism. Within a week, two of the 34 heads who had signed the original letter apologised to students for the “incongruous” logic in it and that it

had been badly expressed. Why, the students asked, did they want the power to discriminate if they didn't intend to use it? One school council chair also apologised. One head said that the original letter was signed in response to a request from Sydney Diocese, implying that they had been leant on, but none of the heads went so far as to revoke their support for the original letter, despite being called on to do so. Some Sydney heads had refused to sign the letter and said so publicly. Students from two schools organised street protests.

Nor was all this contained in Sydney. Some school staff in this diocese were worried that the Sydney heads' letter represented the position of the whole Anglican Church including Brisbane. I was urged to, and did, write to our schools to assure staff that I didn't anticipate any change in our approach to the operation of our schools. I explained that within the Anglican Church there's a wide spectrum of understanding of human sexuality and gender and that differences of outlook didn't detract from the need to ensure our schools are safe, respectful, inclusive places for all our staff and students. Some other bishops, including the Archbishop of Perth and the Bishop of Newcastle, followed suit in communicating with their schools.

In 2019, when the Synod of Wangaratta passed its regulation concerning blessing civil marriages, including same-sex civil marriages, the then Archbishop of Sydney responded almost immediately in his 2019 address to the Sydney Synod. He said:

if people wish to change the doctrine of our Church, they should start a new church or join a church more aligned to their views – but do not ruin the Anglican Church by

abandoning the plain teaching of Scripture. Please leave us. We have far too much work to do in evangelising Australia to be distracted by the constant pressure to change our doctrine in order to satisfy the lusts and pleasures of the world.

Around the world where Anglican churches have moved to allow same-sex marriage or even to bless same sex relationships outside marriage there have been break away groups dissociating themselves from such actions and looking to relate to bishops other than their own lawfully appointed bishops.

Bishops opposed to supporting same sex blessings or marriage have been eager to step into these situations and consecrate bishops to minister to these breakaway groups.

In 2019 when the Anglican Church in New Zealand decided to allow each diocese in New Zealand to choose to have a liturgy to bless same sex relationships - note they didn't change their law about marriage - about 12 parishes in New Zealand decided they couldn't live with the national church's decision and broke away to form the Church of Confessing Anglicans. Six Australian bishops eagerly participated in the consecration of a bishop for that breakaway Church. On what authority no-one is very clear.

That action deeply affected the relationship between the Anglican Church in Australia and the Anglican Church in New Zealand. For years the practice has been for a New Zealand bishop to attend the Australian national bishops meeting and vice versa. In 2020 the then Archbishop of Sydney requested the then Primate to withdraw the invitation, because if

New Zealand bishops attended then some Australian bishops would refuse to attend their own bishops meeting. The then Primate declined to withdraw the invitation so the then Archbishop of Sydney took it upon himself to telephone the New Zealand bishop invited by the Primate and told him that if he attended the Australian meeting a number of Australian bishops would withdraw. The New Zealand bishop, not wanting to become a cause for division in Australia, decided he wouldn't come after all. A second New Zealand woman bishop also withdrew, saying she would not feel safe coming alone.

The latest chapter in this saga was played out in the media just days before the General Synod met. Again disbelief and anger, within and beyond Sydney, were evoked by media reports that principals and board members of Anglican schools in Sydney are being required to sign a statement that includes these words: 'our faith produces obedience in accordance with God's word, including sexual faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman, and abstinence in all other circumstances.'

Freedom to require people to sign such agreements in employment and other circumstances is key to the debates about protecting religious freedoms. Many Anglicans do not want the Church and its schools and other organisations discriminating against LGBTI students, employees and volunteers, or those in heterosexual de facto relationships for that matter. Some question whether to do so is contrary to anti-discrimination legislation. Striking a balance between religious freedoms and anti-discrimination protections will not be easy. It is likely to lead to legal actions such as the one currently before the NSW Anti-

Discrimination Tribunal over the sacking of an organist in Armidale Diocese because he had contracted a civil marriage with a person of the same sex.

## **Persisting differences with deep roots**

These strongly felt differences among Anglicans have very deep roots. The current focal points are human sexuality, gender and marriage, but there have been others over the years. On another day it would be worthwhile to dig up those roots in the hotly contested different Anglican identities as they emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Suffice to say, for now, that the debates and tensions that emerged in 16<sup>th</sup> century are still very much alive and with us.

Different emphases on the authority and interpretation of the scriptures, the place of reason, science and changing social contexts and the importance of heritage, antiquity and tradition all contribute to different sorts of Anglicanism today.

In large part they are responsible for the sharp and deeply felt differences that have arisen in our own generation about human sexuality and same-sex marriage and relationships, among other issues.

On the one hand there is an approach which insists on a single, narrow interpretation of the scriptures which must be authoritative for everyone and hence if you don't see it this way then 'please leave us.' Or if your bishop doesn't see things this way, or if you even suspect that, then we'll provide another bishop to look after you.

On the other hand there is another approach which allows for more exploration, a broader range of possibilities in shifting contexts, a tendency towards including rather than excluding. Yes, different views might seem contradictory, which makes for messiness, but this broader approach is willing to live with tensions while pursuing a deeper, broader grasp of the truth in which apparent paradoxes may ultimately be resolved. It is comprehensive for the sake of embracing the complexity and nuances of truth rather than 'anything goes' for the sake of cheap institutional peace.

It's against this backdrop that this diocese has adopted 'comprehensive Anglican identity and purpose' as a key focus area. We want to articulate, embrace and foster this comprehensive approach to Anglicanism. As I explained last year, Comprehensive Anglicanism tries to live with paradox and ambiguity by affirming the truth present in various perspectives which are in tension with one another. It tries to ensure that all the voices and perspectives are at the table and heard empathetically even though that means living with tensions, apparent contradictions and paradoxes. The instinct is to include diverse views in the belief that God's spirit will lead us more fully into the larger truth in which ultimately differences will be resolved.

This comprehensive approach is underpinned by particular spiritual dispositions, dispositions of the heart and soul. It's difficult to remain engaged with those with whom you differ. It requires a maturity to maintain respect, openness to the truth of their insights, preparedness to disagree and to stay in relationship.

There must be humility. Participants must remain open to the possibility that others with whom they differ may have grasped something of the truth which they themselves are yet to see. In other words, I may learn something from you of which I am not yet aware. In this way, even though we disagree, I am invited to see you as a gift from God who can be a channel of grace to me, enabling me to grow in understanding, truth and godliness. In this way I am to treasure you as a means of grace, rather than merely tolerate you or worse still, seek to convert or exclude you.

Unfortunately, to my mind, this kind of outlook failed to prevail at the recent General Synod. That failure is clearly reflected in the election results. With the single exception of Debra Mullins every clergy and lay member elected to the new Standing Committee comes from a decidedly evangelical perspective. Similarly every person elected to the Primate Election Board comes from that same perspective.

Other more catholic, liberal and comprehensive perspectives may be brought to Standing Committee by the three elected diocesan Bishops and some of the ex officio metropolitans. However, despite appeals for a degree of generosity to include some of these other voices on the Standing Committee Executive only one such Bishop was elected and that only because the current rules require there to be at least one bishop.

These and other indicators suggest to me that nurturing our vision of comprehensive Anglicanism in the life of the Church has never been more important nor more at risk.



## Thinking about sexuality and marriage today

Clearly the recent General Synod did not resolve for us once and for all contentious issues around sexuality and marriage. Notwithstanding that many hoped it would, that was an unrealistic expectation.

One thing is certain. The Australian landscape has changed. Same-sex marriage is a reality in our society provided for by Australian law. So the church has no choice but to consider how it will respond to this altered context. That response will require careful and nuanced theological thought and revisiting the scriptures to examine whether our traditional understandings stand up in light of scrutiny today. Theology (what we understand marriage to be), exegesis (what we understand the scriptural texts to mean), hermeneutics (how we apply theological and exegetical insights in today's circumstances) and ethics (what we understand God's moral expectations of us to be), all require careful, responsible, prayerful thought. This thinking can't be divorced from the pastoral and missional realities we face. It is simply a fact that a significant majority of Australians (some 62%) and by implication a significant number of Anglicans (at least 40% if the General Synod is anything to go by) support marriage equality. It's also evident that today's younger generations just cannot understand why the church is still arguing about this issue when society at large has made its decisions and moved on.

How then might we proceed?

I have been helped in thinking through these issues by Dr William Loader who has devoted virtually all his working life to researching and publishing on the scriptures and in particular

the New Testament on issues of sexuality. A brief outline some of his thinking and conclusions might help.

In every generation one task of theology is to apply reason to correlate the revelation in the scriptures with advancing knowledge and discovery, and reflection on human experience. This is underpinned by the conviction that ultimately all truth is coherent because ultimately all truth comes from God. So what has been revealed in the scriptures and what we discover in all fields of enquiry fits together.

The scriptural writings that touch on sex and sexuality are based on two presuppositions. First, all human beings are made either male or female, without confusion or ambiguity. And, secondly, all human beings are heterosexual.

Based on these two presuppositions all same sex sexual activity is seen as sinful perversion of reality. It is contrary to nature; contrary to the way God created things and contrary to what God requires by way of ethical behaviour. Consequently whenever biblical texts touch on it, the biblical authors consistently treat same sex sexual activity negatively.

Today, though, there appears to be significant evidence that a small proportion of people are not unambiguously and exclusively either male or female. And there appears to be evidence that a small proportion of people is innately same-sex attracted.

In other words, advancing knowledge and discovery seem to indicate that creation, as we observe it today, is more diverse and nuanced than the biblical authors allowed. The world is more complex than previously thought. 'Everyone is either male or female' and 'everyone is heterosexual' doesn't do justice to the world as we know it today.

Loader points out that this should neither surprise us nor alarm us. And to acknowledge this is neither to lack faith nor to fail to treat the scriptures seriously. Rather it is to acknowledge that what the biblical writers presupposed about all sorts of things has needed revisiting in the face of advancing knowledge and discovery. For example in relation to cosmogony, we no longer believe the world is 6,000 years old; in relation to cosmology, we no longer picture the world as a huge disc that sits on pillars surrounded by a dome with holes in it through which stars shine; in medicine we don't usually attribute sickness to demons; reproductive biology doesn't continue to see women solely as bearing the male seed and contributing nothing genetically substantive to a foetus; and we generally differ in what we assume today about imminent eschatology, marriage and divorce, the inferiority of women to men, about slaves and much else.

Now Loader points out that we have three basic options in relation to issues of sex and sexuality:

Option 1 is to say the biblical authors are correct in their presuppositions, despite significant evidence today to the contrary, and the moral rules based on the biblical rationale continue

to be prescriptive for us. This is a choice for intellectual dissonance and incoherence in the face of advancing knowledge and discovery.

Option 2 is to acknowledge that the presuppositions of the biblical authors no longer stand but that moral rules are still moral rules and are still binding on us. This means denying same-sex attracted people the possibility of responsible expression of their innate sexuality even though the biblical rationale for those moral rules no longer stands. This seems unjust and even cruel, says Loader.

The third option is to say the biblical presuppositions no longer stand therefore the moral rules based on those presuppositions and rationale no longer must be regarded as prescriptive and we have the responsibility to revisit in our own generation questions about what responsible, holy, life-giving sexual expression looks like today consistent with abiding biblical values of justice, compassion and love.

Loader (p.15) points out that in the scriptures themselves there are precedents –

for applying the biblical principle of love and care in relation to biblical commands and the assumptions of biblical writers which are no longer seen as valid, applicable or sufficiently comprehensive. Jesus prioritised love over other requirements, for instance, “The sabbath was made for people not people for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27) and [Jesus] met with stiff resistance from the pious who found this intolerable (Mark 2:1 – 3:6). In the early church in New Testament times there was intense struggle

between those who argued for setting circumcision aside and those who insisted on upholding all biblical commands, including circumcision of Gentiles.

The Church in more recent centuries has had to adjust similarly to departing from some biblical prohibitions, not out of lack of faith, but in view of the biblical principle of love and the model of taking new situations and knowledge into account. The result has been changed approaches to slavery, women (their status and roles, including leadership in the church), and to provisions forbidding divorce, remarriage, and remaining married after adultery and much more.

## **Conclusion**

To my mind this kind of approach to ethical reflection is consistent with the kind of comprehensive Anglican identity and purpose we have embraced and committed ourselves to articulate and foster in this diocese. I hope that approach will be evident as we tackle the business before us in this Synod. It should be ably assisted by the 'Talking Circles' exercise that is proposed.

I hurry to remind you, however, that this approach does not seek to exclude voices that come from other perspectives and are based on some different convictions. There is a place at the table for all who love God, who see God's fullness revealed in Jesus Christ, who open their minds and hearts and lives to the Spirit, who study the scriptures with care and insight and who work in the world to see the values of the kingdom embodied. May we give all that we can to that mission.

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