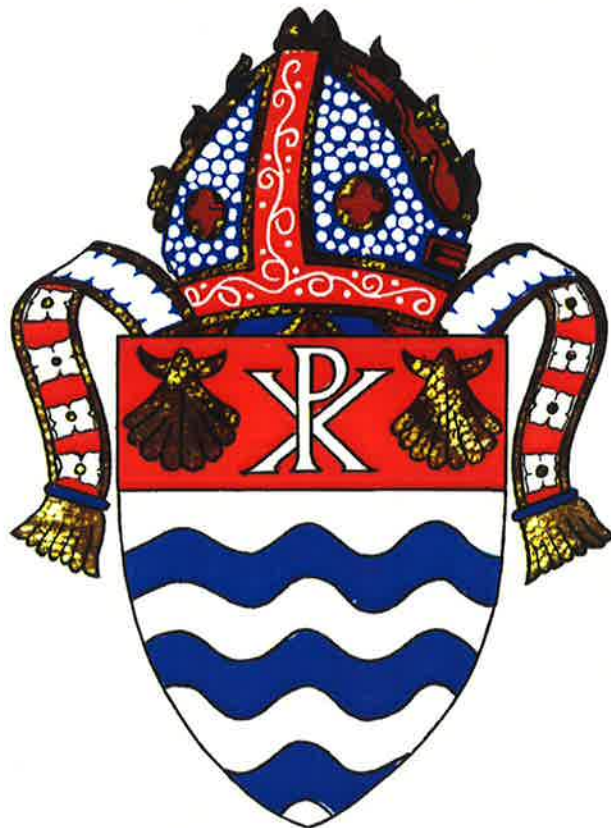


PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS
TO THE THIRD SESSION OF THE
35TH SYNOD OF THE DIOCESE OF
GRAFTON
FRIDAY 17 JUNE 2016



Bishop Sarah Macneil
Anglican Diocese of Grafton

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OF THE 35TH SYNOD OF THE DIOCESE OF
GRAFTON

Grafton, Friday 17 June 2016

(Delivered in the context of the sermon at the Synod Eucharist)

Jesus said, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.' (John 15:5)

May I speak in the name of God, abundant, generous and compassionate. Amen.

When we gather together in worship at the start of each session of Synod, as we are gathered here tonight, we are expressing some very profound things about God and about ourselves.

Who we are as Anglicans

We are saying that we are, above all, people who find our identity in Christ. All that we do, all that we say, is based in our worship of the triune God. Some of the discussions and decisions of the next few days will seem to be about very practical rather than spiritual matters. But everything is located within a framework of prayer, everything is offered to God.

We are also saying that we are people of deep Biblical faith – we may disagree about how to interpret the scriptures and about how the authority of the scriptures should be understood, but the Old and New Testaments are absolutely central to our identity. Anglican liturgy is deeply scriptural. Our worship tonight is based on A Prayer Book for Australia, which came out in 1995, but if you use any of the Anglican prayer books, from 1662, 1978 or 1995, you will be praying the Bible.

Both Word and sacrament are vitally important – in both Word and sacrament God works in us and through both of them God works in us. As we hear Scripture read and expounded and as we share in the bread and wine, so we are present to God and open to God's Spirit.

We are episcopally led and synodically governed. The whole people of God, clergy and laity, are the church and there is a mutuality of responsibility for the life of the church that is reflected in our liturgical life and in the relationship between the Bishop and the Synod, and the Rector of a parish and the parish council.

As a separate denomination our origins are in the bitter disputes of the English Reformations, triggered by Henry VIII's repudiation of Rome's authority and the theological and governance wrangling which followed. Elizabeth I's desire for the nation to be 'godly and quietly governed' and for a national church within which her people could worship, despite differences of point of view, was understandable. Nearly 500 years later we are still a broad church, diverse and yet united.

A Worldwide Communion

We are also members of a worldwide communion of churches which are daughter churches of the Church of England. There are 85 million Anglicans in over 165 countries. We have much history that we share with other Anglicans but there is also much that is our own. And so we are a culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse denomination. Even within Australia there are Chinese Anglican congregations, Korean Anglican congregations, Tongan Anglican congregations, and Maori Anglican congregations, to name but four.

It has been my great privilege over the last few years to see the Anglican Communion in action close up through my membership of the Anglican Consultative Council. At our meeting in Lusaka, Zambia, earlier this year I was again reminded of the impact Anglicans are having in places of conflict, deprivation and suffering. In South Sudan, Burundi, Pakistan, South Korea, Burma Myanmar

and many other places, Anglicans are actively working for peace, often at great personal cost. In this they are supported by other Anglicans in other parts of the world through bilateral or multilateral partnerships and through prayer. The vine is bearing great fruit – fruit of peace, love, compassion, courage and generosity.

In all our diversity, with all the frustrations and tensions of the Anglican Communion, we are an extraordinary example of making diversity work, of genuinely attempting to respond to Jesus' prayer that we all might be one. (John 17:11)

During the meeting, Bishop Eraste Bigirimana, the Bishop of Bujumbura Diocese in Burundi, shared with me the difficulties facing the church in Burundi as the country again descends into violence and civil unrest. He has proposed that our Diocese become partners with the Diocese of Bujumbura, to build relationships and for mutual prayer support. Bishop-in-Council has wholeheartedly endorsed the proposal and appointed a small group to work with me in fleshing it out more fully.

Unity in Diversity, Diversity in Unity

The diversity we have inherited is both a strength and a source of tension. At several points in our history Australian Anglicans have wondered whether we have reached the tolerable limits of that diversity. In recent history both the remarriage of divorcees in church and the ordination of women have been issues which have sorely tested our unity. Now the questions which surround same sex unions are calling us to discussion, prayer and debate. We have started that process in our Diocese over the last year and there are, on the Synod paper, some motions designed to further resource us.

There is an added poignancy to our discussion for we meet in the aftermath of the gay night club shootings in Orlando, Florida, last weekend. Although we may differ in our views on same sex unions, as Christians we unite in the condemnation of homophobic violence and join in

solidarity and love with those who are most directly affected: the survivors and the bereaved.

This then is who we are – we are followers of Jesus Christ, the people of God, members of the Anglican Diocese of Grafton and of the Anglican Church of Australia. We are the branches and Jesus is the vine. What fruit are we bearing? Jesus said, 'Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.' What is the fruit of our discipleship?

The Fruit of the Vine

Each one of us can sit with that question at a personal level. It should also be said that sometimes we do not see the fruit of our faithfulness. Tonight, however, I would like to talk a little about the fruit that I see, as I travel around our Diocese.

We live, as I have often said, in rapidly changing times and the church we see in 20 years time will be very different from the church of 20 years ago. Robin Greenwood, an English practical theologian and author, who will be leading our Ministry School in August, has highlighted some developments in the UK which resonate with our experience in Australia. He writes (in summary):

- our churches are having to find a new place in society – on the edge
- the faith we profess is mocked as irrelevant
- church membership is declining, especially among younger generations
- there's an increasing sense that religion does not have a role in shaping the way society works ¹

Here on the north coast of NSW we are also part of wider social change. In March this year the NSW Government released the Draft North Coast Regional Plan which highlighted the shifting demographics of our region.

¹ R. Greenwood, *Sharing God's Blessing*, SPCK, 2016, p.9

Over the last decade, almost 60 per cent of the region's population growth has taken place in the local government areas of Port Macquarie-Hastings, Coffs Harbour and Tweed.² Together, these three local government areas support 43 per cent of the region's population.³ Although the local government areas covered by the Plan extend slightly beyond our Diocesan borders, it is clear that there is a strong push towards the coast and that the inland regional centres will decline in importance. The Plan notes that by 2036, the North Coast will need to accommodate an additional 97,000 people⁴ and that two thirds of this growth will occur in the three regional cities identified in the Plan: Tweed, Coffs Harbour and Port Macquarie-Hastings.⁵

We need to care for the present but also look to the future. I see this happening across our Diocese as ministry units engage with mission and ministry. The worldwide Anglican Communion has identified 5 marks of mission and they provide a useful lens for us to look through as we reflect on what is happening across the Diocese.

The Five Marks of Mission: 1. Proclaim the Good News

The first over-arching mark of mission is that we proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. This is our fundamental task and purpose. In Jesus Christ the Kingdom of God has come near, it is at hand (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15, Luke 4:18, Luke 7:22) We, his followers today, have been blessed by those who have gone before us and have been part of our faith journeys; by those who have proclaimed the good news of the kingdom to us. It is our turn to proclaim the good news now and there are many signs of

² Draft North Coast Regional Plan, p.37
(<http://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/~media/Files/DPE/Plans-and-policies/draft-north-coast-regional-plan-2016.ashx>)

³ ibid

⁴ op cit p. 5

⁵ op cit, p. 35

hope as we seek to speak God's truth in our communities and draw people to faith.

The Five Marks of Mission: 2. Teach, baptise and nurture new believers

The second mark of mission is that we teach, baptize and nurture new believers. This happens in a huge variety of ways. It is unusual in today's society for people to come to a church looking for teaching, although it does still happen from time to time. In general, however, we need to reach out beyond our own church community. In many of our parishes there are outreach activities designed for exactly this. When you invite someone to a Pilgrim course, or an Alpha course; when confirmation classes are offered or when your parish decides to take part in LYCiG (Leading your Church into Growth), this is what you are doing.

We also nurture people in faith through worship as week by week they hear the Scriptures, pray and share in the sacraments. Alternative forms of worship and the pastoral services such as baptisms, weddings and funerals are valuable connecting points.

Our schools are actively involved on the cutting edge of this work: through their Christian education programs and through the work of the Chaplains. Almost 4000 students are studying in our schools. As well as the academic and extra-curricular work that they do, they learn about the Christian faith and about Anglicanism. The seeds of their spiritual life are being sown and nurtured. While many will not, at this stage of their lives, make public commitments of faith, it is a particular joy to be involved in baptisms and confirmations at our schools.

Many parishes and parish clergy are also involved in SRE in our public schools, teaching children who may have no other contact with members of the church.

When we connect with young families and children through playgroups, Messy Church, Kids Church, Mainly Music, and

similar initiatives, we are teaching, baptizing and nurturing new believers.

It may start slowly and grow, like the Beach Babes and River Babes playgroups in the Parish of Maclean. From a standing start, with virtually no children attending, both groups are now full, and two weekends ago one of the toddlers was baptized. Kids Church at Wardell is flourishing, reaching local families who have not previously been part of the Parish. Messy Church is doing well in a number of parishes and Alstonville has now extended it to Messy Extra.

The Five Marks of Mission: 3. Meet Human need Through Loving Service

These activities are not just about teaching, baptizing and nurturing, they are also responses to need in our communities: a need for belonging, for connection to God. In this way they are examples of the third Mark of Mission, which is to respond to human need through loving service.

Throughout the Diocese, in parishes and through Anglicare North Coast, we are meeting human need through loving service. The pastoral care we offer through our parishes is an expression and outflowing of God's abundant love. Many ministry units have particular projects which meet needs in their own areas: visiting programs for the housebound or people in aged care facilities; hospital visiting; support for people living with mental illness or with histories of substance abuse. There will be many others of which I am unaware – all of them faithful and loving response to the needs of your communities.

Anglicare North Coast offers financial counselling services, community housing, services for migrants, disaster recovery services (used a fortnight ago in Lismore), as well as emergency assistance.

We have Op Shops and soup kitchens. Hospital chaplaincy reaches out with loving care, often to those who have no

contact with church. MU has seen the increase in dementia in our society and the lack of information available. Their response has been to meet this need by running a series of seminars to inform people about dementia.

The Five Marks of Mission: 4. Transform Unjust Structures, Challenge Violence, Pursue Peace and Reconciliation

The Fourth Mark of Mission is to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation. These are both corporate and individual challenges to us. As individuals we can act as advocates for the marginalized and, by the way in which we live in the world, reject violence. This extends to the ways in which we live together in our homes. The frightening statistics on family violence in Australia remind us that violence is not just about war, and terrorist attacks. One of the motions coming to our Synod addresses this scourge and seeks to find ways of equipping the Church to offer support, education, hospitality and wholeness for those affected by abusive relationships.

At the corporate level, we have been active participants in Anglicare Australia's advocacy efforts. For example, Anglicare North Coast provides information for the annual Rental Affordability Snapshot. This Synod has also asked for a Working Group on Refugees and Asylum Seekers to be established. This Working Group has now started its work and will be reporting regularly to Bishop-in-Council with a report coming to Synod 2017. There is a motion before us inviting a person seeking asylum to speak with us tomorrow about his experiences.

The Five Marks of Mission: 5. Strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation, Renew the Life of the Earth

The Fifth Mark of Mission focuses on the environment. We are to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth. This Diocese has a long history of being very involved locally and at national

level in environmental issues. In 2015 the Synod passed a broad-ranging motion concerning disinvestment from heavily polluting industries (R45/2015). The Diocesan Environment Committee is rebuilding its presence within the Diocese and will continue its work of providing information through the North Coast Anglican and networking with other Christian environmental organisations.

These are just a few of the many ways in which we are bearing fruit, the fruit that grows and flourishes on the branches of the vine which is Jesus Christ. In him is our strength and hope, our salvation and our life. The vine flourishes and bears fruit despite the particular challenges of the times in which we live. This is always true and is true today.

A Challenge We Face Today

One of those challenges which is particularly acute for us now is that of responding to historical cases of abuse. Many people have been deeply shocked and distressed by the revelations of abuse, particularly of children, within churches and church institutions. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has offered a place where thousands of people can tell their stories of abuse. Often they have carried their suffering and pain in silence for decades.

This Diocese has, over the last few years, sought to respond compassionately and honestly to those who have come forward and reported abuse, particularly sexual abuse, within the church. Although the backlog of claims from the North Coast Children's Home has now been dealt with, occasional claims still occur, both from the Home and from other ministry units.

The nature of these matters is such that we will never be able to say it is all over: victims often do not disclose their abuse for many years. We simply do not know the scale and extent of historical abuse. We do know that both clergy and lay leaders have been abusers. Our understanding of these matters as a society has evolved

very rapidly and we are much more aware of the risks and also of the long term effects on victims. We now have in place extensive screening, as many of you know, and there is psychological testing of all ordination candidates, which includes a psychosexual component. The safe church policies we have adopted are designed to keep all vulnerable people safe and to deter potential abusers.

There has been a significant financial effect on the Diocese. The current financial situation is that to March 2016 the Diocese has spent \$2,207,578.00 in settling professional standards claims.

A small number of properties, which had been identified by parishes as surplus to their requirements and offered to the Bishop's Appeal, remain to be sold. We expect the maximum that can be generated by these sales to be considerably less than \$2 million.

The loans now total \$2,237,500.00 and the annual interest cost is approximately \$120,000.00. This interest component has a clear negative effect on attempts to balance the Diocesan budget. There are, moreover, no reserves on which to draw in case of any further financial shock or to fund new initiatives.

It is also possible that, in response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, there will be a requirement to top up payments already made under the existing Pastoral Care and Assistance Scheme.

In dealing with this situation the Bishop-in-Council asked me to form two groups: a Financial Viability Group to propose responses to the immediate financial needs of the Diocese, and a Structural Options Group to look proactively into the future and identify options for the longer term structure and resourcing of the Diocese.

The Financial Viability Group has identified an immediate need for \$3 million in order to repay the loans and leave a small amount in reserve to respond to any further unplanned costs (eg further abuse settlements) in the

short term. The Group believes, however, that a further figure of approximately \$5 million is needed to provide financial security into the future.

Bishop-in-Council has agreed to follow a three-fold strategy: to trim costs, sell more assets and once again to encourage donations from individuals. I will be talking more about this tomorrow during the session on finances immediately after lunch.

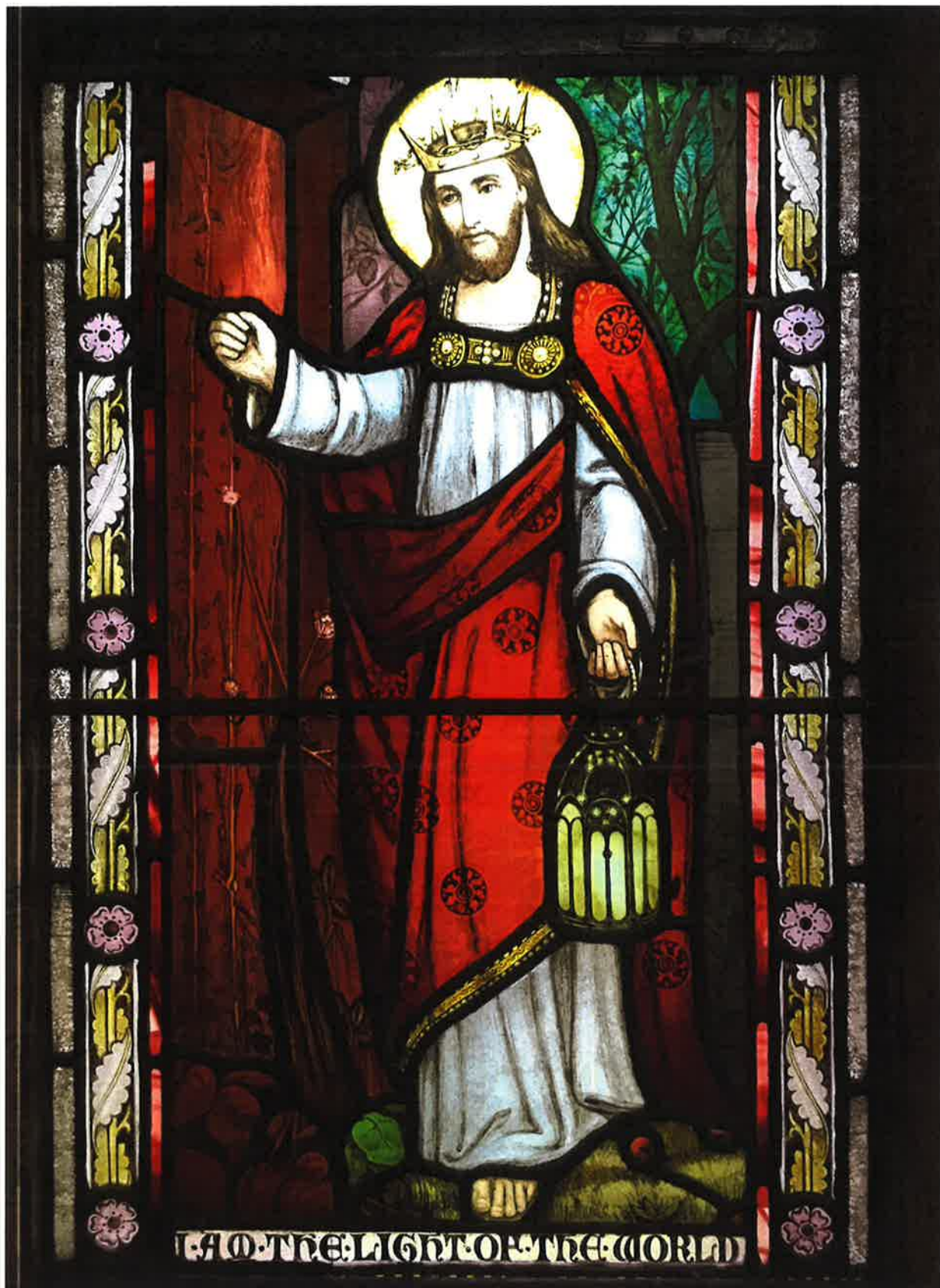
This immediate challenge to us should not cause us to lose heart. Although it comes hard on the heels of the financial crisis precipitated by CVAS, it is not beyond our capacity. What we are doing is making good, as much as we are able, the wrongs of the past. We are being true to God's calling on us to be bearers of hope and new life. And in being true to God's calling, there will be innumerable and unexpected blessings. This is all part of these times of transition as we follow where God is calling the church.

Conclusion

The English artist Holman Hunt painted a much copied picture of Jesus, holding a lamp and knocking at an overgrown door. The door has no handle – it must be opened from the inside. There is a version of it here in the Cathedral. The painting is called 'The Light of the World' and refers to Revelation 3:20 'Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.'

The lamp that Jesus holds is not casting a huge light, it is not a searchlight, nor one of the Daymaker lights being used on the Pacific Highway upgrade. It offers just enough light for us to see a few steps forward. But if we are in the company of Jesus Christ, we can be confident in where we are heading.

May we abide in Christ, and running with perseverance the race that is set before us, bear much fruit in his name. Amen.



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