

Presidential Address to the First Session of the 41st Synod of the Diocese of Gippsland

Friday 16 May 2025

A very warm welcome to the First Session of the 41st Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Gippsland. A particular welcome to those of you who are representing your ministry centres for the first time, or who are returning to Synod after some time away from this forum. Thank you all for being here. I'm sure there are many other things you could be doing in these days, and yet you have chosen this. May our gathering be a blessing to us, that we may be a blessing to others.

We have been graciously welcomed to Country by The Revd Kathy Dalton, with Canon Auntie Phyllis Andy, and tomorrow night we will be joined by The Venerable Canon Uncle Glenn Loughrey, Archdeacon for First Nations Recognition, Treaty, and Reconciliation in the Anglican Province of Victoria. We look forward to their leading of us in worship on Sunday, and to engaging afterwards in a panel discussion about their ministries, and how we can make our churches and communities culturally safe places; making room for those who were forced to make room for non-indigenous peoples.

We are grateful to the Synod Arrangements Committee for their careful and prayerful work in preparing the way for us, and to the Cathedral and Gippsland Grammar for their hospitality.

Our two fine Anglican Schools now stretch across six campuses from Drouin to Bairnsdale, bringing some 3,000 young people and some 500 staff members into regular contact with the Gospel through chapel services and assemblies and religious education.

As parents, Leanne and I have graduated from the primary years to the secondary ones, with both Nicholas and Rachel now at Garnsey Campus, to which they can walk the short distance to and from Bishops court – at least, in theory!

We rejoice with Bishop Greg Bennet and our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in Gippsland and around the world on the election of Pope Leo XIV, and pray for him ahead of Sunday's Inauguration service. His predecessor, Francis, of blessed memory, addressed a gathering of Roman Catholic educators in January of this year thus:

You are called to develop and transmit a new culture, a new culture, based on the encounter between generations, on inclusion, on the discernment of the true, the good and the beautiful; a culture of responsibility, both personal and collective, to face global challenges such as the environmental, social and economic crises, and the great challenge of peace. At school you can 'imagine peace', that is, lay the foundations for a more just and fraternal world, with the contribution of all disciplines and the creativity of children and young people.

[As cited in the papers for the Diocesan Assembly, Catholic Diocese of Sale, February 2025]

A high calling indeed, and we must never lose sight of the contribution made to our outreach by our teachers and our chaplains – school, university, prison, hospital, police, ambulance, and ADF – as we were reminded in last year's panel discussion.

Our parishes continue to be vibrant centres of formation in faith and discipleship, where people of all ages and stages of their Christian walk are being raised up for baptismal ministry. This year's diocesan Discernment Group has around ten people actively asking what God might be calling them to do and be in the church – the biggest group in my seven years with you, and the largest that Ministry Development Officer, Graham Knott, can remember.

Add to that around half a dozen in MDP (our Ministry Development Program), from as many parishes, and I can look forward to signing more licences for Lay Readers and clergy in the years ahead – a privilege that remains one of my chief joys as bishop.

Speaking to the World Meeting of Priests exactly twelve months ago, Pope Francis also touched on the heart of the vocation of parish ministry. 'Parish communities,' he said, 'increasingly need to become places from which the baptized set out as missionary disciples and to which they return, full of joy, in order to share the wonders worked by the Lord through their witness.'

[As cited in the papers for the Diocesan Assembly, Catholic Diocese of Sale, February 2025]

Recent research undertaken by McCrindle, the National Church Life Survey, and the national Hope25 team, suggests that across more than 10,000 Christian congregations around Australia, people of faith experience stronger social cohesion, greater civic engagement, and higher levels of wellbeing.

Four out of ten Australians would have attended church at Easter if invited by a close friend or family member. Anecdotally, Easter services at Anglican churches around the country have been well supported; perhaps we did a good job of asking! Some demographics – including 15 to 24-year-olds, and those recently widowed or separated – are turning to Christianity in good numbers, despite a decline in ‘rusted on’ affiliation.

As I move around our beautiful region I see and hear signs of this in our churches. I see people who were not in church last time I visited that centre. I see more young people in church (and you’ll appreciate that as I anticipate receiving a Seniors Card in the mail I’m recalibrating my definition of ‘young’).

I see people putting their hand up for ministry, and for Bible study, and for rites of passage; committed in Christ. I see clergy and lay leaders working together, attending to their local context, and trying new ways to connect in service. I see a willingness to hold tradition lightly – which, as you’ve heard me say before, is the church’s technical term for ‘change’ – so as to be authentically Anglican in our breadth and diversity, yet always as a pilgrim people, creative in spirit. I see The Abbey breaking new ground, making room in its programs and its facilities.

In all of this there is great cause for optimism. As one of the Cardinals in the film *Conclave* bravely ventured, ‘The Church is what we do next.’

Yes, there are challenges. There are cultural headwinds, compliance headaches, and resourcing issues; our church workers experience fatigue, and in some cases burnout; our ministry centres are not immune from conflict, and clergy and lay leaders can sometimes find themselves having to deal with aggressive or threatening behaviour.

At one level, this is to be expected, because if we are doing our job the community in church on a Sunday or during the week will be a real slice of the community beyond our buildings where we know such things are commonplace.

At the same time, our faith communities aspire to model something different, and I fully appreciate that responding to the complex needs that people can present with is a major cause of stress for our clergy and lay leaders. We need to continue developing strategies and policies that make our churches safe places for all, and safe workplaces for employees and volunteers alike.

We’ve been doing some work around these issues at recent Clergy Conferences, and that will continue in June, alongside a gentle refresh of the diocesan vision. The progress we’re making in the Ministry Wellbeing and Development space is also helping to equip our people to meet the demands of ministry in our time and place.

‘Subsidiarity’ refers to how the centre of an organisation can support its work at the edges – in our case the local church, where the missional action is – by taking point centrally on those things which would be burdensome locally, and maximising decision-making and initiative at the local level. The recent transformation of the Registry team has increased our capacity as a Diocese to operate by this principle.

I say ‘transformation’ as – even with some welcome continuity – the Chapter House is experiencing new life.

The second half of last year was a little unsettling, as – for a range of good and timely reasons – we farewelled from the Registry staff team Annette Hollonds, Richard Connelly, Kevin Broughton, Libby Willems, and TGA Editor Sally Woollett – talented and generous servants of the Diocese, each and all.

For a little while there, we were getting through a fair bit of sticky tape holding things together, thanks largely to Kate Campbell and Dave Perryman, with Tim Gibson in the archives and Jan Down back at *The Gippsland Anglican* desk for a time, and I would pay high tribute to those colleagues in particular for their unstinting dedication.

Heraclitus famously said that you can't step in the same river twice, but I don't think Heraclitus had met Brian Norris! Brian returned as Acting Registrar in November and his sure and steady hand helped to chart a course into the new year. I think he has really enjoyed being back – and he would be the first to say that after five years in priestly ministry he's in quite a different place – sporting a freshly minted Bachelor of Theology degree – congratulations Brian, and maybe Heraclitus was right after all!

And then in an avalanche of divine providence, Holy Spirit blew four wonderful people our way in Rae Riley (Registrar), Joe Gormally (Finance Officer), Jules Lanham (Clearance Officer), and Krista Mountford (Development Officer and *TGA* Editor). At the same time, Anglicare Victoria engaged Wendy Mawoyo to work with us in Parish Partnerships.

Under Rae's leadership, and with Brian continuing as part-time Deputy Registrar for a season, the Registry Office is working hard to respond to your needs – both as they arise and as we can anticipate them – in order to best serve you.

Again, there are challenges for us. Having clawed back somewhat from a long-term deficit position – thanks largely to the performance of our investment corpus and a significant grant for Aboriginal Ministry – Bishop-in-Council finds itself unable to present a surplus budget to Synod this year, or for the foreseeable future. A Budget Working Group has been established to address this concern.

The transition to the OSCA platform for safe ministry clearances is arduous, notwithstanding the best efforts of the team at Kooyoora and our Safe Ministry Authority, and the highly relational approach of Jules Lanham. It will be great when we get there – transferable clearances between dioceses, five-yearly renewals, less trawling back through one's life story once in the system – but getting there is hard work for everyone, and – frankly – expensive.

Insurance costs and other financial burdens on parishes continue to rise, even as we make every effort to keep parish contributions among the lowest in Victoria.

One of my mantras is 'get the best people around you and the rest follows.' I am confident that we have the right people in the right places for the moment we're in.

Getting the right people in the right places requires an investment in our mission that we make gladly, knowing that 'nickel-and-diming' ourselves to the point where too few are doing too much is a false economy, with its own high costs for individuals and for the organisation as a whole.

On that score let me acknowledge the incredibly faithful and fruitful work of the existing Diocesan Staff team in Graham Knott, Lyndon Phillips, Keren Terpstra, and – until recently Sue Jacka – supported by the Registrar and now buoyed and enriched by the inclusion of a new Archdeacon and three new Regional Deans in John Webster, Fran Grimes, Daniel Gebert, and Sue Newcombe.

Of course, the energy and skills brought to these ministries by Registry and Diocesan Staff, so that others might be well supported in their ministries, is matched by scores of volunteers at every level of our life and work, for whose generosity we could not be more thankful.

In a recent pastoral letter our Primate quotes Cathy Ross and Jonny Baker from their book on mission: 'Imagine that church is not the point of church? Rather, church exists to participate in the healing of all things – the world, its people, the planet itself'. [*Imagining Mission with John V Taylor*]

Thank you for your participation in the work of governance – not for the church's sake, but rather that we might release the gifts of all the baptised in the service of God's healing mission to the world in Christ.

Just a fortnight ago we learned that the Primate and Archbishop of Adelaide, The Most Reverend Geoff Smith, will be retiring from both offices later this year. A year ago we had the chance to thank and farewell our outgoing Archbishop, Philip Freier, and Joy Freier. Next weekend the Melbourne Synod meets to elect a new Archbishop, and we hold that gathering in our thoughts and prayers. Electing an Archbishop clearly takes a lot longer than electing a Pope! The role of Metropolitan is an important one for regional dioceses given how closely the ecclesial Province of Victoria cooperates, and we look forward to an early opportunity to welcome our new Archbishop to Gippsland.

Bearing in mind Archbishop Jeremy Greaves was Installed in Brisbane 18 months ago, we are witnessing some significant renewal taking place among those five bishops in our Church who carry that additional responsibility.

At the Bishops' Conference in March-April of this year we were all presented with a 'baggy purple', bearing the number of our election, akin to Australian cricketers whose cap reveals the order of their selection. This was the idea of Bishop Paul Barker, who also initiated the bishops' Hope25 study book, which is probably of greater service to the church!

I mention this only to make the point that between my number – 321 – and the number of our newest bishop, Scott Lowrey, a Gippslander – 345 – stand 24 consecrations; that's half of the College of Bishops turned over since 2018. The face of leadership in our Church is changing, with more women in episcopal ministry, and greater diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, and cultural background, and this change is accelerating.

The same diversification is at the heart of the Nairobi-Cairo proposals published by IASCUFO – the Inter Anglican Standing Commission on Unity Faith and Order – in December, as reported in *The Gippsland Anglican* in February – another expression of 'making room' in our historically male and 'anglo' structures within the worldwide Communion. This work was the focus of the meeting of IASCUFO in Cairo at the end of 2023, which was my first on that Commission.

The Nairobi-Cairo proposals start from the premise that in our post-colonial context the leadership of the Communion should look like the Communion. To this end, they make a number of suggestions as to how the presidency at Anglican Communion meetings might be shared with the Archbishop of Canterbury by Regional Primates. They explore how membership of bodies like the ACC (the Anglican Consultative Council) might be reconfigured to achieve maximal representation, both geographically and in terms of lay voices: our own recovery of synodality, as it were, on a global scale.

Of at least equal import, if taken up by the ACC next year in Belfast, is a proposed description of the Anglican Communion which adapts the classic Lambeth Conference definition of 1930 that it might better accommodate our current theological differences. Significantly, the proposed revision does not refer to being 'in communion with the See of Canterbury'. Instead, it lists 'historic connection with the See of Canterbury' as one of four binding characteristics of the Anglican fellowship of Churches.

For Churches or dioceses that have declared themselves not to be in communion with Canterbury or the Church of England in light of recent developments, or experience that communion as impaired, this re-working of the 1930 statement provides room for disagreement over the presenting issues, and enables us to walk together – *syn hodos* – to the highest degree possible. That said, our own constitution as a national Church enshrines communion with the Church of England as one of our 'Ruling Principles', and constitutional changes in the Anglican Church of Australia are rare.

IASCUFO published the Nairobi-Cairo Proposals in Advent to allow time for Anglicans around the Communion to engage with them and provide feedback before their reception is formally considered by ACC in the middle of next year. I commend them to you for your reflection at a personal and parish level. If nothing else, their 44 pages offer a crash course in Anglican ecclesiology, and may double as a cure for insomnia!

<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/526999/Nairobi-Cairo-Proposals-Advent-2024.pdf>

Twelve months on from the Yoorrook Justice Commission hearing at which Bishop Genieve Blackwell and I appeared on behalf of the Anglican Province of Victoria, the evidence provided to by Anglican, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches – both written and oral – has been focussed mainly in the media through a land justice lens.

Having shared at the hearing our diocesan policy at the time of distributing 1.5% of proceeds from land sales to Aboriginal Ministry, I wrote in February's *TGA* of the moral and theological imperative to lift this figure above a level that I could only describe in my testimony that day as 'woefully inadequate'.

You'll recall that Bishop-in-Council retains 20% of the funds generated by the sale of land held in trust, with the vast bulk of that, 18.5%, having been put aside to meet redress obligations and the remaining 1.5% supporting Aboriginal Ministry.

At its February meeting, Council adopted a recommendation to raise this figure from 1.5% to 7%, around one-third of the 20% retained, with a further 7% (or one-third) to be applied to redress claims (a reduction of the previous allocation) and the remaining 6% being directed to replenishing the Gippsland Ministry Fund.

This change has no material impact on the disbursement of land sale proceeds to parishes, which remains at 80%. It does however bring our attempts as a Diocese to offer some reparation for the injuries caused by our colonial history into parity with those caused by historic abuse.

Bishop-in-Council's resolution also provides for proceeds of land sales to be directed to First Nations organisations outside of our ongoing commitment to funding Aboriginal ministry – such as the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages – cognisant of the loss of language, culture, and connection to Country as a result of the policies of segregation and assimilation in which our Church was an agent of the state in places such as Lake Tyers.

Whilst the uplift from 1.5% to 7% is a step in the right direction, it is no cause for self-congratulation. We have a long way to go on this journey, and the recommendations of the Commission will be an important reference point as we continue to seek more just outcomes for First Nations peoples following on from the necessary and painful prior step of truth-telling.

Turning to the business before us this weekend, it is pleasing to see seven wide-ranging motions from members of Synod in our papers. Doing justice to all these will require some discipline as we move through the agenda, for which I thank you in advance. Apart from a motion on Hope25, to be taken with that Order of the Day, we're not expecting a raft of new business, and please be aware that motions not already in our papers may end up being referred to Bishop-in-Council as we approach the tummy-rumbling, brain-numbing 1pm deadline on Sunday. I promised the Lay Secretary that I would say that, and so have now fulfilled all righteousness!

Speaking of the Lay Secretary – also our organist this evening – we've already sung a hymn that she composed with Glenda Edebohls at a hymn-writing workshop in March, and we'll experience two more such offerings on Sunday morning; just one of a host of Hope25 activities undertaken or underway around the Diocese – and tomorrow after lunch we'll spend an hour telling and celebrating some of those stories.

At the recent Bishops Conference we were asked to bring a poster highlighting some of the Hope25 activities in our dioceses, and I was quietly proud of what I was able to share from Gippsland Anglicans for 'show and tell', including a Camino booklet; not that it's a competition, of course! Yet how good that we might spur each other on in proclaiming the Gospel – the hope we have in Christ – including by gathering around the scriptures together in that Lenten Study, an exercise set to be repeated next year.

Surely that's what Synod is really all about: walking together as God's pilgrim people, spurring each other on in that proclamation – contextually in our diverse ministry settings and collectively as a diocesan household – for the glory of God, which is the healing of all things.

+Richard Gippsland