

**Presidential Address to the 2nd Session of the 41st Synod of the Diocese of Gippsland
16 May 2026**

The love of Christ urges us on. (2 Cor 5:14a)

This verse from St Paul's Second Letter to the church in Corinth has always been a favourite of mine, and I'm hoping that over the next 30 minutes it might become a favourite of yours also. It opened the second lesson at my Consecration service, read by my dear, late brother, Peter.

Biblical scholars would ask whether this is a subjective or an objective genitive: is it Christ's love for us that compels us, or our love for Christ?

Personally, I like the ambiguity, and see it as both / and, rather than either / or. Christ's love for us, and for all whose flesh he took, urges us on; and, in turn, our love for Christ in that self-emptying urges us on. Because, as Paul continues, 'we are convinced that one has died for all . . . that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised.' (2 Cor 5:15)

Mind you, I am one who has a high tolerance for ambiguity, for the grey areas. I think that's why I'm an Anglican. At its best, I would argue, Anglicanism has a comprehensive theological worldview which allows space for people to move, and question, and differ, while remaining in eucharistic fellowship – in communion – under the one canopy.

Alas, the Anglican Communion – some 85 million people across 42 autonomous and interdependent Provinces in 165 countries – is showing signs of becoming less comprehensive, more rigid, and – as a consequence – more brittle. I could talk about this at length, with an IASCUFO¹ hat on, but you may be relieved to know I'm not going to, for two reasons.

First, I don't wish to give any credence to the idea that there is some alternate or parallel form of the Anglican Communion apart from that connected with the historic See of Canterbury, to which our Province of Australia is constitutionally bound.

As we celebrate 30 years of women's priestly ministry in the Diocese this year, and at this Synod, we rejoice in the recent Installation of the Rt Revd and Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mullally DBE, as the 106th Archbishop of Canterbury and the first woman to hold that Office.

Next month Archbishop Sarah will preside over a meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) – comprised of laity, clergy, and bishops from all Provinces – to consider, among other things, IASCUFO's Nairobi-Cairo Proposals, which are offered into a longer conversation about sustaining unity as we navigate our differences.

And second, I want us to focus this weekend on what is happening at the local level: in the Diocese of Gippsland and its 30 parishes, two schools, and various chaplaincies; in our agencies and other partner organisations; and in the communities we serve.

That said, allow me a brief comment on the bigger picture. We live in an increasingly binary, polarizing world in which it is easy to 'cancel' those we disagree with, and to act out of fear and suspicion toward that which we don't understand, or is not part of our own lived experience.

This is not – or at least has not been – the Anglican way.

¹ The Inter-Anglican Standing Commission on Unity Faith and Order

Let us not catch our culture's 'either / or', 'in or out, 'us and them' way of thinking; for we see all too clearly in our global geo-politic, and our own 'splinterising' society, where that leads, to the point where the federal government needs to commit \$600M to social cohesion in this week's budget.

Let us, rather, model something distinctive; let us dare to speak of both / and; let us demonstrate that ambiguity, uncertainty, and openness are not signs of moral failure, or doctrinal weakness, but rather of humility – even repentance – in the face of God's ongoing revelation in the book of Scripture and the book of Nature, read coherently, as having the same author, and from the particular vantage point of our time and place.

The opposite of faith is not doubt; it's certainty. No less than the political certainties of administrations that would lead us into war; no less than the economic certainties of market forces that enable some to over-reach to the ecological peril of all – no less than these, the church's certainties in its own rectitude have resulted in institutional failings with which we're all too familiar, and a trust deficit that we are struggling to restore.

Which is why I am keen to focus on what is happening on the ground, at the local level: on what you are doing in your ministry centres to build trust, and to create safe spaces where people's lives can be healed and transformed by the love of Christ, which urges us on. We will zoom in on this as we engage with a panel discussion around examples of community connection happening primarily outside of worship and of the worship space.

Our reporting to synod this year also brings that lens. As well as the reports from established ministries that you have in your papers – reports prepared with great care, that we commend to your attention, including from Mothers' Union in its 150th year – we will be hearing from the various Working Groups which have been formed in response to Synod motions from last year, and previous years, whose written reports are appended to the Bishop-in-Council report. This is work that you have commissioned, and it's important that we devote time in this Session to sharing progress made on those fronts.

These new Working Groups are populated by skilled and dedicated Gippsland Anglicans – lay and ordained – who have a heart for the ministries of evangelistic outreach, creation care, Safe Ministry, responding to family violence (with Mothers' Union), women's ministry, good governance, optimizing communications, and financial stewardship.

2027 marks the 125th anniversary of the Diocese of Gippsland (and of Bendigo and Wangaratta) as regional dioceses were birthed from the Diocese of Melbourne, and what a joy it was to formally welcome our Archbishop and Metropolitan, The Most Revd Dr Ric Thorpe, and Mrs Louie Thorpe, at last night's Synod Eucharist.

Such longevity in terms of European connection with this region is, of course, but a blip in the context of the world's oldest continuous cultures which have been on Country for tens of thousands of years. This weekend we pay our respects to elders past and present of the Brayakaulung – and acknowledge the Gunai Kurnai, Bidawal, Boonwurrung and Ngarigo / Monero peoples on whose land we live and serve.

We cannot observe such an anniversary without recognizing the deeply problematic colonial history of which we have been a part, and committing ourselves to repairing past injustice, and to better outcomes for First Nations peoples.

As Paul reminds us in that same passage, the love of Christ urges us on to reconciliation, that foundational gospel ministry which is entrusted to those reconciled to God in him (2 Cor 5:18).

All the more so, then, as we approach this milestone, it behooves us to reflect, give thanks, celebrate, and press ahead with our share of God's mission to the world in Christ. To that end, the Diocesan Vision has been given a little tweak – a freshen up – which I hope will encourage us over the next 18 months or so both to tell the stories of our history, and to dream dreams of our future under God's good providence.

Gippsland Anglicans

Committed – Connecting – Creative

Towards 125 years of service to the region: 1902 – 2027 and beyond

The love of Christ urges us on

What might the love of Christ be urging us on to do and be?

Here are just a few thoughts under each of those three familiar words that have distilled our aspirations these last five years: committed, connecting, creative.

Committed

The love of Christ urges us on as those who are committed in baptism as ministers of his Gospel, lay and ordained, to build up his body and come to full maturity as members of it. Our own discipleship is and will always be the most compelling witness to our crucified and risen Lord and his kingdom of justice and grace.

Following on from Hope25, and emboldened by a motion from this Synod, our Diocesan Outreach team has developed a Strategic Plan for keeping 'discipling' – our own and others' – at the centre of all that we do.

As we'll hear, this takes many different shapes – as it should if we are paying attention to our setting: preparation for baptism and confirmation, parish study groups, Alpha courses, EFM [Exploring Faith Matters, for which Gippsland now holds the Australian Licence thanks to some grant funding], Discernment Group, MDP [Ministry Development Program], Lay Reader seminars – anything and everything that forms our people in faith and baptismal ministry, and empowers them to give an account of the hope that is within us.

It's exciting to have three new deacons on the clergy list this year, and – with six parishes now seeking new Incumbents – we need to keep raising up leaders to work alongside our seasoned lay and ordained ministers.

Under the leadership of our Vicar General, the Vocations Group and Examining Chaplains are working hard in that space. Let us not imagine, however, that it's as simple as finding 30 priests for 30 parishes.

For it's what the people of God do – and who they are – Monday through Saturday which makes Sunday (or whenever it is we gather for eucharistic fellowship) so important for equipping, feeding, and sending out disciples to help make disciples.

That is our core business, and if we forget that then we are just another community organization or self-help group, however worthy. No, we are committed in Christ, whose love urges us on to kindle hearts and minds on fire with love for him.

I have no program to deliver for fulfilling that primary vocation; no formula, beyond the church's daily rhythm of prayer and searching the Scriptures, our fellowship and sacramental life. Which is not to say that courses, tools, and strategies for outreach aren't useful and important, such as Vision 36.

What I can assure you, is that the principle of subsidiarity applies – a Roman Catholic social teaching which argues that the centre of an organization only exists to serve and support the work which happens at the edges, on the ground.

You are the local experts, and the role of your bishop, along with Bishop-in-Council and the Registry Office, is to release you into local initiative, and local decision-making, by removing as many of the barriers to that as possible.

It's why we have invested in a diocesan Clearance Officer, for example. And it's why the Governance Committee is looking to streamline the Parish Administration Act, because good administration is good ministry.

I trust that, in the Registry team you see a commitment to service, and on your behalf I want to acknowledge full-timers Rae Riley and Joe Gormally, part-timers Dave Perryman, Wendy Eastgate, Krista Mountford, Jules Lanham and Tim Gibson, along with our erstwhile colleagues Brian Norris and Kate Campbell who have helped us to move into a new season at the Chapter House.

One of my mantras is 'give permission and get out of the way.' If I or we can do that more effectively, if we can better serve your ministry in that sense of subsidiarity, please let us know, so that we might set you free to do what only you can do in your communities.

Connecting

The love of Christ urges us on to reach out in partnership with our ecumenical brothers and sisters, with our Anglican schools and agencies, and with all of good will, to meet the needs of those Christ came to heal and save.

One of the things that emerged from last year's Clergy Conference was the benefit of collaboration, and the desire for more of it.

We're delighted therefore by the appointment of Sarah Gover, one of our recent ordinands, to Gippsland's Parish Partnerships position at Anglicare Victoria. To have a permanent deacon in this outward-facing diaconal role makes perfect sense: someone who walks in the shoes of her ordained colleagues, who can champion the work of Anglicare in the Diocese, and interpret the Diocese back to what is a secular organization, albeit one with good Anglican DNA.

In the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, Anglicare's auspicing of a grant awarded by the Department of Families Fairness & Housing (DFFH) to the Parish of Wonthaggi / Inverloch shows us what's possible when we connect in service. As does the Emergency Relief work happening out of St Mary's Morwell, also supported by government funding acquitted by Anglicare.

May's edition of *The Gippsland Anglican* reports on the commissioning of Marinus and Hannah van Meerton as Bush Church Aid Ministry Trainees at San Remo in the Parish of Bass / Phillip Island. Marinus is an ordination candidate who has come across to us from Melbourne, exploring ministry in a regional context.

BCA's ongoing support at Croajingolong means that, at either end of the Diocese, we are engaged in partnership with this agency that has long history in Gippsland, to supply ministry in places that might otherwise struggle to harness the opportunity of growth, or to meet the needs of a more remote community.

Speaking of *TGA*, good communication is essential to our capacity to connect. When first published as *The Church News*, what we know as *TGA* cost tuppence to buy. I'm not sure what tuppence bought in 1904, apart from a copy of *TGA*! Most of our readers enjoy it freely, courtesy of a discounted parish subscription – just \$2.25 per copy, less than one third of the Recommended Retail Price (\$7.95).

Producing and distributing *TGA* now costs us \$8,500 per edition, or \$93,000 per year, after advertising revenue and subscriptions. Synod asked us to look into that, and to generate a Communications Strategy for how we might best connect with one another 'internally', as Gippsland Anglicans, and 'externally' as those who have good news to share in the public square. No better recent example of that perhaps than ABC Gippsland's report on the Parish of Avon.²

The Working Group set up for this purpose has taken careful stock of existing communication pathways, and brings a recommendation for your endorsement, namely that we reduce the number of editions of *TGA* from eleven to six per year, and that we reinvest some of the savings from that in a dedicated Communications Officer at 0.7, to diversify and coordinate our communications platforms.

Veterans of Synod will know that I am a staunch supporter and advocate of *TGA*. Our flagship, high quality print publication is one of the last of its kind, and provides an increasingly rare forum for what might be called 'slow journalism', as unpacked by *TGA*'s mission statement. That said, we believe *TGA* can continue to fulfil its longstanding purpose in a bi-monthly cycle.

This is most definitely not the 'thin end of the wedge'. It is, rather, an attempt to ensure that our proper investment in the connecting ministry of communications enables us to reach as many people as possible, as effectively as possible.

Creative

The love of Christ urges us on to listen for Holy Spirit, who leads us into the truth that is the living Christ; truth that is always ahead of us, as our risen and ascended Lord goes before us.

We are called to be creative in the same Spirit who hovered over the choppy waters of Genesis; that same life-giving breath breathed into the first Adam as was breathed out from the new Adam on the cross to create the community of the Church: mother behold your son; son behold your mother.

² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-04-11/priest-travels-gippsland-for-services-shrinking-congregations/106542342>

And just as blessed Mary told the stewards at Cana's wedding, 'do whatever he tells you', so we must be attentive to what his Spirit is saying to the churches today, in Gippsland.

That means taking some godly risks, holding lightly to existing structures, and having a good theology of failure. Ministry in our diverse and complex settings demands that new things be tried and trialled – like the monthly Family Services rotating around parishes in the Valley which are starting to gain traction – knowing full well that some of our experiments will need to fall to the ground.

With Jude Benton taking up a new position in Adelaide, Bevil Lunson's farewell a fortnight ago after 20 years of innovative service in Orbost, and plans for a service in August to celebrate Thelma Langshaw's remarkable ministry in Omeo, the far east of the Diocese starts to look a little sparse in terms of ordained leadership.

What a gift, therefore, to have not only a newly minted Deacon in Mallacoota, but an itinerant permanent Deacon in Sue Newcombe who, as Associate Regional Dean of the Eastern Region is able to respond to emerging needs in these and other places.

As was the case after the 2019-2020 bushfires when Cathy Turnbull was a Missional Deacon in those parts, Sue's role encourages us to think a bit more expansively than 30 priests for 30 parishes.

And it's in that spirit that we pay tribute to all of the clergy who minister as locums – whether 'permanently' like Brian Norris in Tambo; or seasonally, in between Incumbents, like David Atkinson, Sallyanne Hart, Phil Muston and David Head, Brenda Burney, Anne Perryman and Janet Wallis; or occasionally, like many others, to provide continuity of ministry during holiday or illness – remembering also those of that number recently departed.

On the back of the Locum Ministry Working Group's recommendations we are finding new ways to honour and support this cohort, including through regular gatherings for worship and fellowship in different parts of the Diocese.

The Diocesan Staff team – our Archdeacons and Regional Deans, the Dean and Registrar – is closely engaged in helping to address some of these pastoral leadership challenges, and provides valuable strategic and missional advice to the Trusts Corporation on property issues.

Warm and robust collegiality around executive and governance tables, with those stipended and volunteers alike, makes it easier to be creative in spirit, and we are grateful to all who give so generously of their time and expertise.

In Cath Connelly's report you'll read about plans for the refreshing of tired facilities at The Abbey, including the iconic A-frame which is exactly the same age as me, and is starting to look like it! My Senior's card arrived in the mail yesterday!

The Bishop-in-Council Report explains how a number of Trusts which connect directly or indirectly with The Abbey's mission have been consolidated to support the early stages of this significant project, for which we are actively seeking philanthropic support.

As one of a very few remaining Anglican retreat houses, The Abbey serves a vital role as a centre for hospitality, spirituality, and the environment, open to all. We must invest in it, as in other points of difference that express a church with soft edges, and porous boundaries, a culture of radical inclusion, an economy of grace.

In closing . . .

Drawing these threads together, we might say at this middle Session of the 41st Synod that the indices at the local level appear strong. This year's National Church Life Survey will give us some solid data, and we encourage all parishes to take part in that at no cost.

Challenges remain; we know that. Anecdotally, I see gentle numerical growth, demographic diversity, strong community engagement, and deepening discipleship.

This ought give us the courage and confidence as we approach our 125th year, to keep going on paths both familiar and new, urged on by the love of Christ.

If I could offer the Diocese one gift for that anniversary, might it be the possibility of appointing and consecrating an assistant bishop?

It has been some 60 years since the Synod of this Diocese adopted General Synod legislation enabling such a provision. Perhaps the time is right to enact it.

Whilst I have no concrete proposal to set before you, nor a candidate, Bishop-in-Council and the Diocesan Staff team have given me their blessing to explore a possible structure for such an appointment – mindful that bishops can be very expensive! – and to bring that back to Council later in the year, whose prerogative under that legislation it would be to endorse it or otherwise.

I plan to do that – not because this would meet my needs, although of course it might free me up to do more of the things I should be doing, and less of those that someone else could do as well or better – but because, in my eighth year in the role, I have prayerfully discerned and tested with others a growing sense that the Diocese needs to strengthen and broaden pastoral leadership at this moment in our journey.

Ten of 23 dioceses in Australia now have one or more assistant bishops, including all five metropolitan dioceses, and five regional dioceses. So, whilst it's not quite yet the rule, it is far from the exception.

I flag this possibility with you today, so that you might join me in praying about it, and that together we might watch this space. If nothing else, you'll remember at least one thing from this Address!

Or perhaps two: the love of Christ urges us on – committed, connecting, creative – towards 125 years of service to the region, and beyond.

+Richard Gippsland