



The Synod of the Diocese of The Murray
of the Anglican Church of Australia Inc.

Administrator's address to Synod 2024

Welcome, everyone, to the first annual session of the 19th Triennial Synod of the Diocese of The Murray.

As we gather here in Mount Gambier, we acknowledge that we meet on the land of the Boandik people, respecting their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationship with the land. We acknowledge the impact European settlement had and continues to have on the first peoples of this land and we continue to seek and pray for reconciliation.

Mount Gambier is the largest city in the Murray Diocese. We come here from regions over 8 hours' drive away. Our Diocese has a broad and diverse geographical and demographic area as our mission field.

Synod 2024 has got off to a good start this evening with worship at Christ Church and I thank the parish for hosting us. Thanks also to Archdeacon David McDougall for preaching and all those who assisted and participated in the service this evening.

Annual Synod is a good opportunity to acknowledge the past and look forward to the new. In preparation for this address, I re-read the Synod addresses of the last few Bishops of the Murray. There were many big things that happened, many reflections and plans put forward and much encouragement made. The last twelve months in our Diocese have had their own developments.

Reflection on where we are as a Diocese.

I remember when I was invited to come back to the Diocese of the Murray from Willochra in 2017, when there were 16.5 full time equivalent stipended clergy performing as office holders in over 50 churches around the diocese. At that time the annual Synod returns also showed that there were 56,326 acts of communion in the diocese in that year.

Over the past few years we have moved on from the complications of the Covid 19 pandemic, the experience of which required us to adapt to new ways of being church and new ways to have our meetings. Though it feels like the church community has recovered from the pandemic, we have incorporated some learnings through being church with the doors closed. We now normalise zoom meetings for DC which has in some ways tamed the tyranny and cost of distance. We have adapted our giving in many of our parishes to electronic giving and if we think on it, there have been a lot of other local changes that have been adopted that we now take for granted. Looking back, would anyone of us have



thought that a diocese could survive such an extended period of having its churches closed, but we did.

At Synod last year, we amended our ordinances and constitution to allow for the ordination of women to the priesthood. In this last year three women were ordained to the priesthood. This year I was able to license another female priest and invite bishop Denise into the Diocese to confirm candidates, a positive development for our diocese as we minister into the future.

As we look at the big picture for our Christian mission in Australia, all our parishes, our dioceses, our denominations, in fact all of Christendom have seen a lot of changes in the participation of their surrounding populations regarding regular worship. National statistics tell us that less than half the population of Australia identify as Christian, and in South Australia only 7% of the population are identifying as Anglicans. In the Murray Diocese one or two of the churches have grown numerically, a number are stable, but the overall picture is of ageing congregations, declining attendance and merging parishes. We are also not the only denomination with the difficulty in finding clergy. When examining how the Murray Diocese has been travelling in this environment, I have cited the latest statistical returns for Synod 2024 and compared them with 2017. Our parishes have provided stipends for a total of 9.6 full time equivalent clergy to minister in the Diocese, a reduction of 42% in the last 6 years. According to our Synod returns we have a total of 36,516 acts of communion in 2023, a reduction of 33% in 6 years. There have also been reductions of 80% in confirmations, 50% in baptisms, 70% in marriages, 82% in Sunday School students and an 8% increase in funerals in our Diocese over the same timeframe.

The aforementioned changes correlate with declining parish incomes. Unfortunately due to inflation and infrastructure maintenance we have increasing costs of doing church. There are also fewer people able to perform the ministry functions that we have developed over the centuries. I do not believe however that I am telling us all something new, but just simply verbalising our lived experiences of being church in 2024.

One way of responding to these logistical pressures is to reduce the costs of doing church, and simplify the way we do it to be more efficient. Though it is important for us to look at the logistical functions of church and getting the processes streamlined, this is not going to address the elephant in the room.

Reflecting on the ministry of the Diocese.

Jesus announced in his ministry 'The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent of your sins and believe the Good News. Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commandments I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you to the end of the age'.

The apostle Paul's letters and Luke's Acts of the Apostles have shown us how the early church responded to this calling. The Anglican Church has been putting into operation this calling for hundreds of years by being a primary locus around which the village or country town, the parish or suburb functions. The Anglican Church was able to build a multi-generational understanding of Christian beliefs, practices and rhythms for everyday life.

With this methodology the church was able to imbed the Christian Church's mission within the hearts and minds of the community in which it was situated.

The church was able to bring the Gospel message into the community with the celebrating of new life in infant baptism, mothers surviving the danger of childbirth with the churching of women, the adolescent rite of passage with confirmation, the public status of relationships with marriage, and the thanksgiving of a life and the processing of grief with funeral and burial liturgies.

Today we the church need to remind ourselves that these institutional functions were intentional missional actions, not the purpose and reason of church. Changes in the functions of community within western society have resulted in few people in society these days availing themselves of the liturgies provided by the church. The church's institutional functions are now becoming superfluous in the minds of the non-churched populations. The only exception perhaps is the booking of church weddings as a romantic nod to the past, instead of a lifelong promise before God and God's people.

The church was trusted historically as being a place of safety; unfortunately that trust has been abused. The welcoming nature of church was exploited as a weakness, allowing abusers to prey on the vulnerable within its walls. The revelations of abuse have challenged society's trust in the church as an institution worthy of patronising.

We the church still talk about God's gift of eternal life and leading people to salvation through repentance from sin and turning to Christ. The difficulty we now face with this most central part of our mission is that most of society today is multi-generationally unchurched. The majority of society now has no familiarity with the narratives of the Christian faith or any of its basic tenets. Though there is a sense of spirituality in today's populations, there is an absence of belief in God, there is even a rejection of eternal life as part of the human condition and thus, that sin has any relevance. Society's new paradigm of reality leaves us in a position that when sharing the Good News, we firstly need to convince people that God exists, then that eternal life is a thing that we have and should want and where heaven and hell are possible outcomes. If we get to that point, we then have the hurdle of convincing people that sin is a problem that needs to be addressed and is dealt with through turning to Christ. Yes, a difficult mission, but possible through the work of the Spirit of God.

What is the Mission of the Diocese?

Most of the Diocese's property assets centre on the structures of parish church life which are no longer the nexus around which society has functioned now for some time. Parish and individual church attendance is shrinking and its adherents are ageing. Many of our buildings may no longer be fit for purpose and there are concerns about the logistical and economic situation in which we find ourselves. However, let us not be despondent or without hope as we stare this broader reality in the face. The situation we find ourselves in does not negate the fact that our very mission and purpose is to share the Good News until Christ returns. This is the Lord's church and our task is to participate in the mission we have been called to at our baptism and confirmation as best we can.

Certainly we pray that Christ will come soon. However, we have to prepare and organise the church so that it will be able to continue that mission for however long that takes. When we

make our preparations and focus on our mission, we must prioritise sharing the Good News, that the Kingdom of God is at hand. We cannot be distracted with keeping the doors open, or protecting our bit of property, or keeping doing what is comfortable and routine for us, simply so that it is around long enough for our own burials.

Last year our Diocese chose to send our DC on a three day Future Vision Workshop, praying for God's guidance in how we could assist our parishes in their local mission and ministry. When we met we brought with us a large amount of data and resources to guide us.

During this workshop we asked ourselves if the structures of our Diocese, both at the macro (Diocesan) and micro (Parish) levels were appropriate for the 21st Century. Did our Constitution which enumerates much of our structures need to be modified to assist us in being the church of God in the future? To what degree is our physical infrastructure fit for purpose in the 21st century?

We ultimately acknowledged that the reality is that parishes are the engine rooms of local mission and that we as DC could share a missional vision of the church. However, neither a Diocesan Bishop, the Synod nor the Diocesan Council can direct the parishes of the Diocese to run missional activities to any great degree. There may be a feeling sometimes that the Bishop or church office runs the show, but that's not the way things actually operate. No-one can make parishioners do anything; they choose how and where they invest their time. Local vision for mission is the key.

There are some things that we have done as a Synod that effect all our parishes, like the changes enabling the ordination of women priests, but the missional action really is with the individuals and parishes. The fine balance between what could be called a congregational organisation, and the episcopal one, is simply how our Anglican polity does things. The Anglican church expresses this in the voting power of laity at our synods, our diocesan council and our parish councils. We are an episcopal denomination and we are all called to minister and share in the mission of Christ through our baptism. Our prayer book reminds us that 'Our Lord Jesus Christ summons us all to obedience and discipleship. In baptism we are called to be a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God, to make Christ known in the world' (APBA p 793). The great commission in Matthew's Gospel reminds us that our mission is a grass roots one from the ground up.

As faithful Anglicans we are currently focusing on how we can diligently preserve the church traditions and parish buildings. We do this respecting those who have gone before in the faith as well as to preserve the parish way of life that we have felt safe and supported within all our lives. To a large degree this is all we have known. We seem to have barely enough human resources for pastoral support of the aged in our midst. Simply merging parishes as we have been doing now for decades, allows for short term relief but only results in the delay of decay. I encourage us to honour our pastoral obligations as we look forward to the simplicity of feeling safe in the embrace of our baptism and its calling. The alternative is we may be viewed by society as a group of quaint historical and ageing religious clubs.

What is the Future Vision of the Diocese?

As a Diocese our ultimate future vision is still the missional goal of helping our people to grow deeply in their faith, to share their faith and to make disciples. It is still our future

vision to minister to multi generations where we can and to make connections with our community.

It is our future vision that when we feel that we don't have the financial or human resources to fulfil our mission, then we collaborate between churches, parishes, dioceses, provinces and at national/international levels. Along this theme, in the Murray Diocese we are developing a mission project along the Murray River as part of the national church mission project called Hope25. It is very important for our future vision that we collaborate wherever there are synergies and play to our strengths in our local context. This methodology extends beyond mission to the national environment of increasing compliance requirements. We have decreasing personnel capacity making it harder for small organisations like parishes and local dioceses to meet these obligations, therefore collaboration is essential. Examples of areas where we are already putting this strategy into practice include Episcopal and Professional Standards, safe ministry clearances and training, provincial clergy conferences, professional supervision and the parish accounting system.

The changing status and purpose of the parish church from being a nexus around which society functioned has deconstructed the unwritten social contract between the church and broader society. Though there are segments of the population who occasionally avail themselves of the liturgies of marriage and funeral, these liturgies on the whole have reduced to a 'user pays' product. We must not use our limited resources to reclaim or curate a sense of status and importance, but to explore a future vision of church.

The current and future vision for the parishes' involvement in community includes parishes making available their buildings to community and council programs as locations of meetings. In our diocese one parish church in the southern suburbs is rebuilding their entire church infrastructure in consultation with the council to that very end. Where we do not have the building resources but have human resources, we can support the existing community and council programs by volunteering in ones that have synergies with the church's mission as outreach. If we have both building and human resources then we can do both. Anglican Community Care is an organisation that has grown out of such a missional vision in this Diocese. Let's explore such synergies between the parish church and its surroundings. We however, need to be aware that if we do not address our current social contract status, we may lose at some point rates and taxes exemptions by councils and income tax exemptions by the government. I would love to see part of our future vision for the church to develop new social contracts with the broader society in which there are synergies with our missional priorities.

We have a future vision to continue to provide spiritual nourishment for those inside and outside the church. We have a vision to continue to provide this ministry of nourishment in sacrament, prayer, liturgy, bible study, youth activities, retreats on the river, eco spirituality retreats, and Christian mindfulness walks. Supporting this broad vision, the Diocesan Council has invited The Society of the Sacred Mission and Adventure Connect to come and develop a retreat centre, as well as activities for disadvantaged youth within the Diocese. The local chapter of TSSF, an Anglican Franciscan order, is growing within the Diocese providing eco spirituality retreats, quiet days and mindfulness walks along the river. These retreats and activities are amongst other things tailored to addressing the basic obstacle to sharing the Good News of Jesus in Australia, which is helping the unchurched majority to discover that GOD IS.

Our Future Vision must centre on our imperative to continue sharing the gospel, the truth of the existence of God, of eternal life, repentance and salvation. Our future vision must involve working through all the difficulties that have been identified here this evening and carry out our mission until Jesus returns. We are therefore obliged to curate our church resources with the assumption of mission for the long haul. The resources bequeathed to us by the faithful who have gone before must not be squandered on our immediate needs and wants, but be available to ensure the future sharing of the Good News of Jesus beyond the term of our natural lives, if Jesus does not come back before.

Thanks

On behalf of the 2024 Synod, I would like to thank the Registrar, the Assistant Registrar, and the FAI committee for all their work this year and in the preparation of Synod, the DC for the enormous number of meetings that they have needed to attend and issues they diligently deliberated over. I wish to thank all the small group facilitators for their work preparing their presentations for the sessions on Saturday. Also I thank all the people who have helped in the preparing of Synod for the work that they are doing.

Let us never forget that Christ is risen and his Spirit is with us until the end of the age. May we move forward with our Diocesan vision to continue to seek to know him and follow his missional calling that resonates in our hearts until he returns.