

## 2025 President's Address to Synod

I usually begin my address to the meeting of the Synod with an acknowledgement of country, which is fine, except it's just me who makes it. This morning, instead, I will begin with a prayer, to which I hope you will be able to say 'amen'.

Our Lord and loving heavenly Father, we acknowledge that you are Creator, Owner and Sustainer of all that is. We acknowledge that in your sovereign providence, you gave custodianship of the land upon which we meet to the Kurna people of the Adelaide plains. We acknowledge with sorrow the painful history between the Aboriginal people and the later settlers of this land, and we gratefully acknowledge that you have called many Indigenous brothers and sisters into your kingdom and service, in your church and in our nation. We pray that you may continue to work among us the reconciliation that is the gift of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Welcome to the first session of the forty-sixth Synod of the Diocese of Adelaide, and a special welcome to those who are new to the experience of the Synod meeting together.

I am among the growing number of people who enjoy the meeting of synod, and I hope you, who are here for the first time, will find this weekend encouraging, and of course, I hope the same for the veterans.

As I thought and prayed about what I might cover in my address this year, I felt a bit like the third speaker on the negative side of a debate. The third speaker on the negative side cannot introduce any new arguments. The third speaker can only rebut the opposition's arguments and reinforce their own team's arguments.

With two weeks to go until I lay up the pastoral staff, I certainly don't think it's fair to drop any new strategic gems which may become millstones around the neck of the 11<sup>th</sup> bishop of Adelaide. I also don't think there are arguments I need to rebut, but there are important things to highlight.

In my address to the synod meeting last year, I devoted a significant amount of time to exploring Synodality. Synodality is a clumsy word that describes a rich and agile concept. Synodality describes a culture. A way of being together. A purpose.

The word synod comes from two Greek words: *syn*, which means together, and *hodos*, which means road. When the two are put together, we have *synod*, together on the road.

The idea of *synhodos* or synod, as a decision-making gathering in the church, is very old, with the practice of disciples of Jesus gathering together to discern the leading of Jesus going back, for instance, to the Council of Jerusalem described in Acts chapter 15.

That council or synod dealt with a question which we know from Saint Paul's letters was a big one for the early church, as Gentiles became followers of Jesus, and that question

was, to what degree and which of the Jewish religious laws the Christians and especially Gentile Christians, needed to follow and observe.

The word synod and the concept of synodality are important because they express a culture that is greater than a meeting. Jesus calls us to follow him. His first disciples literally followed him wherever he led them. We continue to follow Jesus' lead, guided by Him, being taught and led into all truth by Him, and as His original disciples did, doing the ministry Jesus sends us to do. The spirit of Christ is with us, guiding, leading, and inspiring us.

For the past 140 years, the Diocese of Adelaide has employed an essentially parliamentary process in discerning the will of the Lord for the Diocese. But as Pope Francis said at the opening of the Synod on Synodality for the Roman Catholic church on October 9, 2021, "The Synod is not a parliament, the Synod is not an inquiry into opinions; the Synod is an ecclesial moment, and the protagonist of the Synod is the Holy Spirit. If there is no Spirit, there will be no Synod."

Without the Holy Spirit, we cannot be on the road together. Without the Holy Spirit, we cannot discern the mind of Christ for Christ's mission in this Diocese.

While we individually discern God's leading, that discernment is most particularly evident when we are together. We are the body of Christ. Together we are the body of Christ.

We are together on the road of discipleship. Together seeking the leading of Jesus. Together seeking the leading and guidance of the head of the church for the ministry and mission of the church.

This discernment process is wider than an annual meeting like this, and involves a bigger group than we two hundred or so people. Parish councils, annual vestry meetings, prayer and bible study groups, and Diocesan Council for instance, are all involved in this process of discernment for the life of the church.

Just as there was at the Council of Jerusalem, there can be disagreement about directions and decisions. 'No small dissension' and 'much debate' are the phrases used to describe the discussions at Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15, so we shouldn't be surprised if we experience something similar as we together seek to discern the leading of the Lord of the church.

But despite or perhaps within that dissension and debate, the leading of the Spirit was discerned there in Jerusalem, and is discerned today, as we continue together on the road of discipleship. I think it's true to say we are synod, the church is synod, and our culture is synodality.

We need to keep on building that culture and seeing ourselves as together on the road of discipleship. Being dynamically led into all truth by Jesus, the head of the church, through the Holy Spirit.

The feedback from last year's meeting of the Synod, and especially spending time in conversation around tables, was very positive. The whole plan is to try to express our synodality, that is being on the road together as disciples of Jesus, learning from Jesus, and being guided by Jesus. Finding in our discussions the way the Spirit might be leading. The meeting of the synod, as I said a moment ago, is not the only way we express synodality, but it is a significant opportunity.

I made the comment last year that making decisions using the Westminster parliamentary system is not the only way we can discern the leading of the Lord for the diocese, so this year we are going to further experiment. We will do that in two ways.

First of all, by having two discussion topics today, but also by using the provisions of the standing orders to confer together as we consider motions before us. We won't conference for every motion, but where I see differing views or a need for greater clarity in a matter under consideration, I will use Section 34 of the Standing Orders Ordinance to put the synod into conference in table groups.

Feedback from this year's process will, of course, be considered in the planning for the 2026 annual synod gathering.

### **Vision**

I think we, as a Diocese, continue to derive great benefit from the Diocesan Vision statement and four strategic priorities. This doesn't mean, of course, that they can't be reviewed or renewed; however, they remain valuable at present.

The vision statement is: *Adelaide Anglicans flourishing and united in God's love*. With four strategic pillars: 1. Growing in Discipleship and Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ; 2. Connecting in and with Communities; 3. Advocating and working for Social Justice; 4. Caring for Creation and Each Other.

I would like to highlight four key elements of our life together that reflect our shared vision. There are many more than these four, but I think these have been and are significant.

The first is clergy well-being.

We have made very significant decisions over the past few years to create a framework for improved clergy well-being. Those decisions include:

- raising the level of stipends so that now the Adelaide stipend is at around the mid-point of stipends in the Anglican church of Australia instead of being at the lower end;
- making a free and confidential telephone counselling and support service available to clergy, stipendiary lay ministers and their immediate families;
- encouraging full-time stipendiary clergy to take two days each week where possible, for rest and recreation;

- and introducing compulsory professional supervision, ministry development and ministry reviews.

The ministry development and ministry review processes continue to be developed, but are certainly heading in a very positive direction. These three, supervision, reviews and ongoing ministry development were recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and are already contributing to clergy well-being. I would like to acknowledge the work and effort of Kat Pugh, our Ministry Wellbeing Coordinator, for much of this significant work.

The second element of our life together, which reflects our vision, is lay ministry education. We have had a long-standing focus on pre-ordination training and formation for individuals exploring and preparing for ordination. This continues to be important. But at least 98% of the members of the Diocese are not ordained, nor are they preparing to be.

All the baptised are called to share the ministry of Christ and need formation and education to do that. It has been beneficial that we have been able to incorporate lay ministry education into the life of St Barnabas College in a more intentional way over the past couple of years. The Community of Learning is continuing to develop, and one of the most positive developments this year has been the introduction of the Archbishop's Certificate. Several of the units have been so popular that they have had to be repeated.

So far this year, the units have been:

- The Lay Leaders Toolbox with 25 students from 13 parishes.
- Handling the Bible, 46 students from 21 parishes.
- Understanding Pastoral Care, 40 students from 18 parishes.
- Enriching Spirituality-finding God in our everyday lives, 35 students from 17 parishes.

Later this year, we will have Praying with the Psalms with already 18 students enrolled, and next February, Listening for God, and there are already 16 people enrolled in this course.

This is really positive and is already making a difference. I sense a hunger among the people of the Diocese to learn more about the faith and to minister and serve the mission of God. This is God moving among us, and we must continue to respond to this movement by further developing our offerings and opportunities for ministry education for the whole people of God.

I want to acknowledge Dr Joan Riley, the principal of St Barnabas, and Caralyn Lammas, the Learning Programs co-ordinator, and all who have helped develop and teach the units. This is really positive.

The third element of our life is the emergence of lay forums for the diocese. Clergy gatherings have been happening in the Diocese since well before I became the bishop, and a couple of years ago, a suggestion from the clergy was to hold clergy forums as

well as clergy gatherings. Clergy forums are opportunities for clergy of the diocese to gather, without the bishops, to talk about whatever they want to talk about. I think the clergy forums are a good idea, and they have been well supported.

Since I have been the bishop, we have held lay leader gatherings at four or five locations once a year. Those gatherings have been opportunities for me and the secretary of synod to communicate with lay leaders about things we believe are important for them to know, and to provide an opportunity for lay leaders to discuss with us any issues they wish to raise. The lay leader gatherings have been well-supported over the years, so Joe and I have continued to offer them.

Last year, the Diocesan Council established a subcommittee called DC Connect, and it was from this subcommittee that the idea of lay forums originated. These are gatherings of lay leaders who come together to talk about what they want to talk about, and especially look at ways to work together for more effective mission. Like the clergy forums, I don't attend the lay forums.

Three lay forums have been held this year, and they have been well supported. There is energy among the lay people to do things differently and work together. One of the strategic pillars is working together, and the lay forums are a good way to facilitate this. The lay forums are a good example of a great idea originating from the people of the Diocese for the benefit of the people of the Diocese. I want to thank the members of DC Connect and particularly Anne Nadge for this development.

The fourth element of our life together is Hope25. Hope25 was a national evangelism project that began on Ash Wednesday this year and concluded at Pentecost. An extensive collection of resources was gathered on the Hope25 website, and many parishes in the Diocese organised Hope25 events, preparing people to express their hope in Jesus, and connecting with the community in ways that expressed that hope.

St Barnabas College started the year off with a festival of hope in theology and the arts, which was really worthwhile. Feedback across the national church indicates that the theme of Hope has been very appropriate in our current context. Our first strategic priority is growing in discipleship and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, and Hope25 was a significant effort to help us to do that more effectively in our context. I am grateful to Archdeacon Andrea McDougall, who was the convenor of the Hope25 task group, plus, of course, the members of that group.

### **Context**

Speaking of context, context is really important for us as disciples of Jesus. Jesus ministered in a particular context. He spoke and taught in a particular time and situation and culture. The gospel must always be expressed in a culture, in a context. It needs to be incarnated.

Part of our context in 2025 is a popular culture in Australia that constantly mocks Christianity and does not believe that Christianity and Christians are good. In 2025 it's

ok in Australia to mock Christians and Christianity. Not so other religions, but Christianity is fair game.

In 2007 the journalist Christopher Hitchens wrote a book called 'God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything'. This was part of a push at the time, not just to argue against the tenets of religious belief, but to say that religion was bad. Bad for individuals and bad for the community.

Hitchens' argument was very influential, and along with fundamentalist atheists like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, it impacted a generation with this view and contributed to an increasing detachment, especially of young people, from the Christian faith.

As we consider culture and context, it is essential to remember that, according to the most recent census, nearly half of Australian adults, given the anonymous opportunity to state or not state their religious affiliation, identified as Christians. It is a minority, but a large minority. But despite that significant support, Christianity is under pressure.

In this changed environment, which has developed in Australia over most of our lifetimes, it is very easy to lose confidence in the general applicability of the Christian faith to all people. In the face of a community that increasingly derides Christianity, it is easy to withdraw. To be silent. To turn Christianity, which is at its heart an evangelistic movement, into a private and internal set of beliefs. To focus our church activity on those who are already believers, rather than on those who are not yet believers.

Earlier this year, Dr Ruth Powell, Director of Research for NCLS, that's National Church Life Survey, presented at the Provincial Clergy conference. She highlighted research which not only indicates that Hitchens was wrong to argue that religion generally and Christianity in particular was bad, but also that he was very wrong. Christianity and the practice of Christianity and belonging to church communities is good. Good for individuals and good for our society.

Drawing on the Australian Community Survey, Dr Powell told us that Church attendance is significantly positively related to higher social cohesion in terms of belonging, participation, social justice, equity and acceptance. Church attenders are more likely than all Australians to be volunteers through formal organisations, and also more engaged on an informal level. People of faith who actively practice their faith tend to have higher levels of well-being compared to those who do not.

This echoes the results of longitudinal studies related to the subject of human flourishing. The results of these longitudinal studies have shown an overwhelmingly positive correlation between belonging to a faith community and actively participating in religious services, and a raft of positive health indicators or predictors. These include better mental health, such as lower rates of depression, longer life expectancy, increased social support, and higher engagement in the wider community.

Faith and the practice of faith in a church community is good for us, and its good for the wider community. Of course, there can be abuses. Christianity, the scriptures, and the church can be used to manipulate and cause harm. But practised well, the Christian faith is clearly beneficial for individuals and the community.

It's worth bearing in mind that even though popular culture mocks and derides Christianity and the church, many Australians actually have a different view. The Australian Community Survey of 2024 found that 41% of Australians agreed that religion is good for society. That's not the message we tend to hear, so it's good to bear that in mind as we consider how to continue offering and living the good news that is Jesus Christ.

So, given that this is our context, how might we live?

Five things are important.

First, it's easy to believe the popular message that derides Christianity and, in response, lose confidence and withdraw. But that's not the way forward. Journalist Greg Sheridan in his recent book *How Christians Can Succeed Today*, quotes Bishop Robert Barron, Roman Catholic bishop of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester and founder of Word on Fire ministries, who says that in the face of our current culture, 'the lesson is you declare Christ is risen in season and out, when it's popular and when it's not. You declare Christ risen from the dead; some people will take it some wont. Some people will love you, some will throw stones at you. You look around for the seeds of the word. There are signs of the gospel in every culture, even secular culture, even in pagan societies' (p211).

Second, in our current culture, Christian unity is important. Jesus, our Lord, certainly knew the destructive impact disunity has on the witness of the church. He was so aware that he prayed for the unity of his disciples and those who would become his disciples on the night before he was executed. John chapter 17 is an extensive prayer for unity.

In our current context, we mustn't give people more reasons to discount our message. After all, who would want to join a community that was busily tearing itself apart or publicly criticising its own members? Unity doesn't mean we always agree. Unity means we stick together, we don't pull each other down, and we work for each other's good.

Third, we must strive to live the faith with integrity. Words are one thing, actions are much more powerful. We need to walk the walk, not just talk the talk to, as much as we can, live holy, loving, Christ-centred lives.

Fourth, live the faith with vigour and commitment. Greg Sheridan in his book says: 'Our culture is becoming more pagan, yet it will be more open to vigorous religious traditions and movements'.(p24).

Vigorous religious traditions and movements, not half-hearted, lukewarm commitment and a personal cost-free church. We need to live the Christian faith like we mean it.

Sheridan again, this time talking about why the early Christians were successful in getting their message across and re-shaping the Graeco-Roman world, says: 'Christianity as a mild paganism, sometimes called moralistic therapeutic deism, will not excite the real Christians and not convert the real pagans. The radical love of God, the message of God's love for humanity, the radical love of their fellow human beings, and the sheer Jesus-centred cultural weirdness of the early Christians were the keys to their success' (p38). We need to live our faith like we mean it.

Fifth, to be outward-looking and welcoming, expecting God to act. God continues to draw people to faith. Certainly, people are not flocking to church as they did in the 1950s, but those years were an unusual blip in Australian modern history.

One of the trends that people are noticing in Western societies across the world is that younger people are starting to come to church in surprising numbers, especially young men. Who knows whether it will last or what it might turn into, but it is happening. Another trend is that across the western world, Cathedral congregations are growing—certainly ours is.

Again, what's going on is hard to say. What we can say is that prayer is really important. As is a focus on faithful preaching and teaching the Christian faith. Creating a welcoming culture and looking for people to welcome is important. The task of helping Christians to share the Christian hope that is within them is critically important. Reaching out with the love of God to those in need must continue to be emphasised. And all of this undergirded by an expectation that God's mission of reconciliation hasn't finished, and God continues to work through the church.

There is more to be done, and I must say I am sensing a growing hunger for learning and enthusiasm, especially among the lay people of the Diocese, to get in and share God's mission. There is an energy, and that's really wonderful.

### **Conclusion**

Nearly nine years ago, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 2016, the synod of the Diocese elected me to be the 10<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Adelaide. Mitre ten. I am glad the synod invited me and I am glad I said yes. I want to thank the synod for the privilege of serving as the bishop of Adelaide. To those whom I have offended or disappointed, I ask for your forgiveness. For those with a prayer list, I ask for your continuing prayers for Lynn and me. Thank you for your fellowship in the gospel. We have done good things together.

I want to thank the members of the three Diocesan Councils with whom I have worked. The archdeacons and area deans who have extended my episcopal ministry. I also want to thank Bishop Tim, Bishop Chris, and Bishop Sophie for your ministry, support, and encouragement. I am also very grateful to Joe Thorp for his ministry as Secretary of Synod and Bishops Registrar, and especially Joe, your support and wise advice to me. I also want to thank Philip Adams, the chancellor, for your wise counsel across a wide variety of matters.

I thank the staff of the Bishop's office and the Synod office, and St Barnabas College. The lay leaders of the Diocese and the clergy.

Be assured of my prayers for the election of the 11<sup>th</sup> bishop of Adelaide, and the ministry of the Diocese into the future.

I might borrow a prayer from the letter to the Ephesians to finish. This is my prayer for the people of the diocese of Adelaide, together on the way:

I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, <sup>17</sup> and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. <sup>18</sup> I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3.16-19).

I pray that prayer because, as God answers it, the overflow of joy from a greater knowing of God will see the mission of God lived out more and more completely. And that would be a source of life in all its fullness for many.

Thanks for listening.