



2018

Synod Charge

Formed for God

The Rt Rev'd Dr Matt Brain
Bishop of Bendigo

Second Session
of the
Fortieth Synod

*Almighty and everliving God,
give wisdom and understanding,
to the members of the Synod of this Diocese.
Teach us in all things to seek first your honour and glory.
May we perceive what is right, have courage to pursue it
and grace to accomplish it,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

As we gather for the second session of the 40th Synod of the Diocese of Bendigo it is important that we thank God for the fruitful ministry of Bishop Andrew and Jan Curnow. Together they have been a pivotal and life-giving part of the Diocese. Under God we have much to thank them for. Their desire to see flourishing, transformative communities of faith throughout the whole of the Diocese has been matched by a skilful and strategic plan for how we can work together and the patient willingness to be an encouraging presence in many lives. With Rachael I am grateful to be following in their footsteps.

The reports that you will read and hear at Synod are the fruit of the labours of the time and dedication of those who serve us all by sitting on the various governance and leadership bodies of the Diocese. We have many able and enthusiastic leaders who give freely of their time and talent to serve us all. God has blessed us with an incredible mix of people who bring both technical capacity to oversee what is an increasingly complex organisational world, and warm hearts which desire life and health in each of our parishes and congregations. I am very glad to be able to work alongside those who serve you on Bishop in Council, the Diocesan Executive and the Finance Committee, as well as the boards of our welfare entities.

One of the significant fruits of Bishop Andrew's leadership is the skilled and dedicated registry team and senior clergy leadership. It has been an utter joy to get to know those who serve you tirelessly, and believe me they do! God promises to equip us as a church through the gifts that we all bring. The patient and skilled way that Naomi Fountain our Registrar/General Manager and the whole Registry team serve us belies the many demands that they must navigate each day. They are truly God's gift to us. Similarly, I am blessed to have a fine senior clergy team, both Archdeacons, Ministry Development Officer, Dean and Rural Deans. Together with Naomi and Ian Dallas our Chancellor they have been of inestimable value to me as I have sought to understand the various needs and desires of your parishes. Much of what we consider and plan for at this Synod is only possible because of the heavy lifting done by these servant leaders.

I want to extend a particular welcome to those who are attending Synod for the first time, perhaps as a reserve called into action for the regular representative, or due to a recent ordination. In some ways Synod is a strange beast. Churches have not always used synods as part of their leadership structures. Even today, the way that we in Australia 'do' synod is not always the same as in other places. Synod as it has developed in Australia provides a check in

governance to a monarchical bishop. Now isn't that a genuinely Aussie idea! We get a hint of this in the very name. Synod literally means 'together on the way' (in Greek). Together we – Bishop, clergy and laity – gather to check our progress as disciples of Jesus through the hearing of reports, and then set the parameters for the next leg of our journey. It is the opportunity to hear how we have sought to organise our lives together and then review whether the way we have organised ourselves is good stewardship of the resources God has entrusted to us.

Being God's people in changing times

As we seek to be God's people in this corner of God's world we are faced with a number of challenges. Some of these are a reflection of the fact that in following Jesus we are called to walk to the beat of his drum. This will at times cause us to have different priorities and values than the society within which we live. Other challenges come as a reflection of the changing times we live in.

As Bishop Andrew has pointed out before, we no longer live in an environment that broadly shares a Christian heritage, a world of 'Christendom'. Rather it is now more normal for people to not identify as Christian. This means that the willingness to call the church to account for failure is higher (which is a good thing). It also means that patterns of church attendance have changed and this brings pressure on our capacity to provide ministry. Finally, it results in a change in the place we stand or sit in public life. I will briefly touch on each of these challenges.

I am glad that one consequence of the times we live in is that people are now more willing to speak of the different sorts of abuse that have been suffered at the hands of those who represented the church in some way. I am glad that this is so for two reasons. First it is my prayer, and I hope yours, that hope and healing may be given to survivors. This is unlikely to occur whilst ever justice is not done on those responsible for their hurt. Second, we as people who profess to be made holy in Christ cannot flourish as we cling to material self-interest and ignore the evil done in our name. To live into our calling requires that we also participate in justice and right living now even if, especially if, it is costly.

As we seek to respond to the legacy of abuse that is ours, one of our primary tasks is to patiently re-present the body of Christ (for this is what the church should be) as a trust worthy place. I am very pleased with the leadership that our Diocese has played in the establishment of Kooyoora Limited as an 'arms-length' professional standards agency. Bishop Andrew and our Chancellor, Ian Dallas, are to be recognised for the actions that they have taken to open up our processes to external scrutiny. You can say with good heart that those who put their hand up to minister or hold office within one of the churches of the Diocese are checked and are subject to independently managed disciplinary standards. This includes me.

You can also say with good heart that we are being diligent in training those who lead our churches, both lay and ordained leaders, in safe ministry practices. Indeed we are reaching a new milestone for the Diocese as we begin to roll out refresher workshops. Many of the Royal Commission's recommendations relate to practices that change the culture of organisations from ignorance and secrecy to awareness and transparency. As we are now into the 'second-wave' of training we as an institution are active in enabling our people, old and young, clergy and lay, powerful and vulnerable, to recognise and call out abuse. This has to be a good thing for our future.

One area in which this diocese has also been proactive is in provisioning to meet claims for redress for abuse that will arise. I am proud of the way that our parishes have accepted the diocesan provisioning that will enable us to develop a redress fund reserve. While costly this is both appropriate in meeting our debt to those who have been hurt and a tangible act showing that our hope is in God's provision not our own horde. You will have heard

commentary in the media about the Commonwealth Government Redress Scheme which is due to be launched in only a few days. While this is not exactly the same as what the Royal Commission envisaged when recommending a national, equitable scheme, it is one that we must be prepared to be part of. It will suit the needs of some people who have been abused in Anglican institutions, and we must be prepared to accept the claims of those for whom it meets their needs. It will not however be suitable for all. In the near future I will be acting to bring the parameters for a scheme managed by Kooyoora before Bishop in Council. This will be the second string to our bow. It will meet the needs of others who are prepared to deal more closely with us as an institution. I have had experience working with a similar scheme in the Diocese of Canberra & Goulburn and have found that the outcomes for those who are prepared to deal with the institution which harmed them have been good. The third and final way that we must be prepared to meet survivors of abuse is by being 'model litigants'. That is for those who choose, as is their right, to go to law to find redress it is incumbent upon us to be focused on their needs and right claims rather than institutional priorities. We must be prepared to negotiate in good faith and not hide behind legal defence to avoid liability.

If being trust-worthy before a watching world is a bedrock value, the fruit is that thriving, worshipping communities grow wherever people gather in our diocese. Our vision is that

We will transform society through the gospel of Jesus Christ by building healthy mission-shaped faith communities

This is a great vision and high calling. We have something (someone) which only we can give those around about us – Jesus. This calling and our great treasure has not changed. What has changed and is under constant pressure is the way we organise ourselves to be able to live out a life of worship, witness and welcome. The era within which we live has quite helpfully exposed the difference between the parish, which is an administrative or organisational entity, and a worshipping community or congregation, which is a group of people responding to each other as they respond to God. It is my experience that God is present and active in worshipping communities throughout our diocese. It has been a joy and delight to visit your congregations and share in mission and ministry with you. You are a good thing and God's co-workers selected by him to show out his work in the world. But it is also true that sustaining our holding structures, parishes, is not always easy. To be sure, it can be downright hard. Especially if one lives at a distance from a town.

Over the coming years we will need to work together to use our inherited resources wisely. God has made us stewards of many resources. Some of these can be spent easily, some of these are tied up in land and buildings, some are intangible because they are the very persons God has made us to be. So as we seek to be healthy mission-shaped faith communities we will constantly have to ask which of our resources need to be marshalled as bread for journey, and which have become lead in the saddle bags. Which need to be used as we have become used to using them, and which must be used differently to promote health and life.

While choices surrounding the way we organise ourselves and provide for ministry can be at times very difficult they are only an expression of the larger call upon any and every Christian. In a world that is constantly offering up choices for the way we spend our time, talent and

treasure the challenge for us as we plan for and enact ministry is to keep the main thing the main thing. As I have said we have the one thing, the one person, to offer that no one else can and that is Jesus. It is as people see, hear, understand and grasp hold of Jesus through our life and witness that their lives and the communities they live in will be transformed. Indeed was it not Jesus who came to bring life and life to the full.

This leads to what I think is one of the most difficult challenges for us to face. Difficult not because it is financially costly, nor because it requires us to wade through governance processes, but because it requires us to be both humble and confident at the same time. We cannot assume that our family, friends, neighbours, workmates, and fellow community members will understand or value what it means to be a Christian. For many Australians they have no lived experience of the church (or it is from long, long ago) and do not share an even basic understanding of the story we cling to. Their allegiances and values are held elsewhere and it is a mistake to assume that because the church plays such a pivotal role in our own lives that it should do so in theirs. The reason that this is important is because it helps us to understand the tone with which we must speak to those around us. If we are to be effective in communicating the great news of Jesus to others we must be winsome witnesses to him rather than crying petulantly from the sidelines.

There is something attractive in a settled confidence. This is different from harsh arrogance. Rather quiet appreciation of one's position, irrespective of external demands, is inherently settled and 'homely'. Contrary to many contemporary exemplars of brash power some of the most settled and confident people I have observed are also the most self-effacing. I think of Lorraine who, in spite of ill health and declining capacity, continued to be the one to whom a flow of townsfolk came for council, conversations and care. Lorraine stood out among her peers and her calmness was made possible (by her own estimation) because she trusted in Jesus' sufficiency. We could say that Lorraine even trumped presidents in her capacity to weather the storms of life. She certainly trumped them in her attractiveness. Friends, the quality of our Christian witness will be directly related to our confidence that Jesus is capable of providing a beautiful, complete, sufficient life. And because our confidence can only come because of Jesus' sufficiency it sets us free from the temptation to pride and hubris.

The wonderful thing about confidence in Jesus and in the beauty and sufficiency of Jesus' way is that it gives a settled enjoyment of who we are. We have just explored a number of challenging and difficult matters that will need to be navigated all over the next while. We will need to grow and change as we sail these waters. So in this context the temptation will be for us to become strident in our claims and short of patience with each other and those we interact with outside the church. We will seek to hoard resources and look for quick fixes, be they administrative and organisational or programmatic. If we are honest, we are a funny mob lacking many of the attributes and power so prized in today's world. Yet we possess a promise that while we may lack much, God has gifted us with exactly what he needs us to have to be his people, in his place, in his time. It is my dream that as we work together to 'transform society through the gospel of Jesus Christ' we will lean confidently on what God has made us to be, and find joy in discovering new gifts as evidence of God's life-giving provision.

From God, For God, To God, In God

The underlying theme of this charge, and I believe God's call upon us and his Church in general at this time, is finding satisfaction in who God is and how God forms and shapes us. Accordingly, I will conclude this, my first Synod Charge, with four prepositions; From, For, To and In. As our primary school teachers taught us, the prepositions are often the most important words in a sentence as they tell us what relationship we have with the sentences object. Today I want us to be reminded of how our relationship with God forms and shapes us. It is our constitution, our manifest.

1. From – not a church with a mission but a mission with a church

The very first words of Scripture on record, the fundamental starting point for our existence; "In the beginning God..." (Gen 1:1). A distinctive characteristic of a Judeo-Christian world is its insistence that we generate from God. While able to think, act, make decisions and consider life, we are not self-existent. What is true of humanity in general is also true of God's church. The church proceeds from God. It was called out by the Father. It was given power and life by the infusion of the Spirit. It was given its marching orders by the Son. It is, we are, a mission with a church rather than a church with a mission. We exist as the incarnate Body of Christ given the awesome privilege of becoming co-workers with God. Our task is to uncover God's plans and enjoy them.

2. For – we exist to bring God glory...and find that we are fulfilled best when we do

It follows that as we proceed from God we are then for God. That is, we exist to bring God glory. This is a high call and one that raises the temperature on who we are and what we do. To grasp hold of this as our reason for being does then require a displacement of ourselves from the central seat in the hierarchies of our hearts and minds. This can be a confronting reality we have to live into. All of us have been schooled by a world that scoffs at the idea that anyone of use lives to bring another glory. Indeed our own hearts would wish to hold that seat. Yet being people who proceed from God we not only function best when following God's way, we also find a fulfilment and enabled presence unavailable anywhere else when we do bring God glory. It is like our hearts sing the song they were made to sing. And what's more, we are given the gift of doing this in harmony.

3. To – our activity now and destination desired is 'God-ward'...

One of the greatest challenges we face, and this is not unique to us and our age, is staying focused in the midst of a distracting world. God did not simply 'send us out' from God's self to make our own way. We do not simply serve God for God's pleasure alone. We proceed from and for God and are to be drawn to God as well. Thus God is the focus of our activity now and our desired destination. In other words, we are to be people who are 'restless until we find our rest in the Almighty Lord'. We should yearn contemplation and our places and action must be ones that both anticipate God's Kingdom and are made as an expression of the world redeemed by Jesus. Let us leave behind enough evidence for all to know clearly that we are concerned with God's Kingdom and not ours.

4. *In – where is our power? Where is our satisfaction...?*

So this leaves me to the conclusion. Where are we to find our power? Where are we to find the resources, energy, courage, wisdom and grace to live into our mission, our call? Paul's primary description of a Christian is not a name, rather it is a position or a status. A Christian is 'in Christ'. That is, they derive their power, their life, their satisfaction, their blessing, their joy, their cues and their motive force not only from but by being made one in Jesus Christ who once was dead but now is alive. As we join together this weekend in Synod and as we disperse across our diocese, it is my hope that in the challenging times and the easy, in the bad times and the good, people will look at us and say, "ah, when I look at that mob I see Jesus".

*God our Creator,
when you speak there is light and life,
Fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we may listen to one another,
speak the truth in love, and bear much fruit
in the service of your kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.***
