

General Synod: Let this be a mission of healing

Presidentâ??s Address to the 18th General Synod, 9 May 2022 by The Most Reverend Geoffrey Smith Archbishop of Adelaide and Primate of Australia.

Well, here we are! I did think I should perhaps write several different opening paragraphs for this address to cover possible eventualities this morning. But I thought, â??no, have faithâ??!

We have done the first couple of pieces of business and since we now have the Participation Canon in place, we are all able to be present, whether here in the room or on-line. Welcome everyone to General Synod 18.

The fact that we needed to pass that bill prompts me to thank Anne Hywood and the staff of the General Synod office. Just getting to the point of being able to hold a General Synod after two unsuccessful attempts due to Covid 19, and dealing with a constantly changing situation, has been a tremendous effort and very taxing, so thanks to you Anne and your team.

I want to thank the organisers of the opening worship last evening, and those who are presenting the Bible reflections at morning prayer this week.

These are significant contributions to the process of our deliberation as we seek to discern the mind of God in the matters before us, so thank you.

The Context in which we meet

General Synod always meets in a context, a time in history and amidst lived realities. As always, the context for this meeting of the General Synod is multifaceted.

Covid 19

Most prominent is the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic. The past two years have been very challenging and, for some, a very damaging time in Australia and across the world.

Quite apart from the illness directly or indirectly leading to more than half a billion cases and up to 15 million deaths (WHO-May 6), Covid 19 has disrupted lives, business, relationships and economies, and its impact is likely to be seen for many years.

Right across Australia we are now early in the â??living with Covidâ?? stage and for many businesses, including Anglican schools and Anglicare, this has been the hardest time since the earliest outbreaks. Restrictions have eased but staff shortages due to close contacts and infection have made life very difficult for many. We have a semblance of normality because everything is open again but scratch the surface and life is far from normal.

While things in Australia have been relatively good, many people in Australia have watched with great concern the suffering of family and friends overseas. Multicultural Australia means we are not immune from the tragedies which affect communities away from this country.

There have been positives associated with Covid for the church in Australia â?? for instance a much wider exploration of on-line options, and a realization that actually the church can pivot quickly when it needs too. There has also been a negative impact for the church in Australia.

We have seen attendance numbers drop, and in many cases calls for assistance rise. People who are concerned for their health have been reluctant to re-join in-person gatherings, and the constant need to go to â??plan Bâ?? or reschedule or cancel has been very wearing. There has been a loss of momentum in terms of strategic activity, and we are just trying to get done what needs to be done as best we can.

There is a feeling of tiredness in the wider community, and a general short temperedness and this is, in my experience, also reflected in the church.

The Primate addresses the 18th General Synod being held on the Gold Coast.

Along with the ongoing impacts of Covid more broadly I am aware that there is anxiety here this week about possible infections associated with this meeting. After all, 250 people from all over the country meeting together for a week. Thatâ??s got potential! So, I suspect there is underlying anxiety amongst us. As part of the organising for this week a Covid plan has been developed and I hope that members will follow it to help us get through this week and stay healthy.

Covid and its impact is part of the context in which we live and minister and is part of the context in which we meet this week.

While in many ways the response to the pandemic in Australia and our experience of the pandemic has been very good, especially in comparison to other counties, one negative has been the rise of a focus on the independence of the states in Australia.

With the exception of sport, and the usual light-hearted rivalries, we have been used to Australia operating very much as a nation. The embracing of the Australian constitution and the formation of the federation in 1901 saw very different colonies unite to form the Australia we know.

The panic caused by the pandemic has unfortunately brought to the surface colonial attitudes with state premiers pitting themselves against each other competing for resources, criticising each other and closing the borders ostensibly to protect â??their peopleâ??.

The almost universal re-election of state premiers during the pandemic has demonstrated that this approach has been very popular with voters. Closing state borders replaced acting for the good of the nation. The reality is the states of Australia need each other.

The narrow and self-focussed attitudes which surfaced during the pandemic are unhealthy for everyone. We need to reclaim our sense of nation and embrace the bigger picture of the good of all for the good of all, no matter where we live.

The Cost of Living

Covid 19 is just part of our context as we meet. Last week the Reserve Bank raised interest rates for the first time in more than eleven years. A generation of borrowers have not known the anxiety of rising interest rates affecting their mortgages and therefore their lifestyles.

House prices have gone through the roof, as have rents, and this along with a shortage of housing and a rising cost of living is causing significant anxiety in the community.

The timing of the federal election and the style of contemporary Australian politics means these issues, which are concerning for many, are being weaponized for electoral advantage, further contributing to anxiety in the community.

Our Culture
Another part of our context is the polarisation in our community. Rational measured debate and discussion on all sorts of issues is often replaced by outrage. We are enthusiastic to choose our side and claim moral superiority. We are encouraged to believe that options are only black or white. No grey. No nuances. And we are encouraged to choose one option or another. To try to take the middle ground or admit we are not sure of the answer in any debate is derided as weak and muddle headed. Australians, more and more, seem to have forgotten or lost the art of disagreeing well. We donâ??t live well with difference.

This is part of the air we breathe as an Australian nation. And we breathe that air as the church as well.

Amendment to the Marriage Act

Another significant part of our context as we meet is the change to the Marriage Act which took place in December 2017 so that as far as the law is concerned marriage is defined as being between two people, not necessarily a man and a woman as it had been since 2004.

When General Synod 17 met in September 2017 the start of the polling process to hear the opinion of Australians about a possible change in the Marriage Act was immanent, with the ballot papers mailed out just days after the synod concluded.

When the results were announced on November 15, sixty-one per cent of eligible Australians had responded â??yesâ?? to the question-should the law be changed to allow same sex couples to marry? The Marriage Act was duly amended and passed into law on December 8, 2017.

We havenâ??t been able to meet as the General Synod since the Marriage Act was amended so this meeting is our first opportunity to respond to that change.

Of course, there have been a number of responses, including by the synod of the Diocese of Wangaratta, which in 2019 passed a regulation authorising a liturgy to provide a church blessing for couples who are married under the Marriage Act. The then-Primate Archbishop Philip Freier referred this regulation to the Appellate Tribunal as did forty-one members of the General Synod.

In summary, the determination and opinion of the Appellate Tribunal published on November 11, 2020, is, and I quote:
â??Wangaratta Dioceseâ??s proposed service for the blessing of persons married in accordance with the Marriage Act does not entail the solemnisation of marriage; is authorised by the Canon Concerning Services 1992, and is not inconsistent with the Fundamental Declarations and Ruling Principles of the Constitution of the Churchâ??.

As part of its reasons the Tribunal said, â??it is not the Appellate Tribunalâ??s role to attempt the often-impossible task of settling doctrinal, let alone factional, disputes within the ACAâ?? (7). The reasons also include this: â??General Synod is the place to draw disciplinary or liturgical lines if it is the will of the church to have uniformity in this particular matter or in the matter of what may or may not be blessed in worshipâ?? (226).

As part of my response to the Tribunalsâ?? determination I called for restraint until the question of our response to the change in the Marriage Act or the Tribunalâ??s decision could be considered by General Synod, and on the whole that has happened, which puts us in a better place to have the discussion this week.

I think it is right to say there is a fair head of steam about this topic, and so I do hope we can have the discussion in a way that is grace-filled and shines a good light on us as followers of Jesus and particularly the gospel we proclaim.

The conversation we will have is important to those who view the change in the Marriage Act and the determination of the Appellate Tribunal with concern. The conversation we will have is also important for those who view the change in the Marriage Act and the determination of the Appellate Tribunal positively. I hope we will be mindful of each other here, and also mindful of those who are not here but will be listening to what we say and the way we say it.

There is no doubt that there are a variety of opinions on this matter and one of our challenges is how we live with that difference. That challenge is unlikely to be solved by debates, or who has the numbers, but will be an important conversation following this synod.

The Safety of Children and Vulnerable People

Also, part of our context is our ongoing commitment to the safety of children and vulnerable people. The community rightly expects the church to have a very high standard of care to protect children and

vulnerable people, and a high standard when we are responding to those who are victims or survivors.

In response to the terrible failures highlighted by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse the seventeenth General Synod passed a raft of legislation to ensure and improve our practice and make public our commitment to accountability in this area. This legislation or its equivalent has been adopted across the church by twenty-two of the twenty-three Dioceses, and the twenty-third diocese will be considering the legislation at its synod later this year. The very broad adoption of these measures is excellent and very important.

A further significant development which is part of our reality is the National Redress Scheme which began its operation on 1 July 2018. It is good to note that all of the dioceses, 150 out of 155 Anglican schools and many organisations which have connections with the Anglican church have signed up to the scheme.

The National Redress Scheme was an important recommendation of the Royal Commission and widespread membership of it is a significant sign of our commitment to deal well with people who have suffered abuse in the context of the Anglican Church of Australia.

It is important to note that there has been significant financial cost to some dioceses and schools as a result of determinations by the scheme, and also through civil litigation brought by victims/survivors. Dealing with the past comes at a cost to the present and the future but is a process of justice and truth telling which will hopefully bring at least some help to those who have suffered and their families.

Climate Change

The reality of climate change is also part of the context in which we meet. Climate change is happening and is impacting Australia with all kinds of social and economic effects. It is impacting much more the poor and vulnerable around the world. People in rich countries like Australia are more likely to be able to ride out the effects of climate change and adapt to the changes climate change brings, but the poor will suffer as the climate changes.

As Christians we have a God-given responsibility to care for the environment; a responsibility we have not always embraced. The young people of our community are especially anxious about the future, their future, and we continue to struggle with our response.

The First Nations People of Australia

A further facet of our context is the place of Australiaâ??s First Nations People in our nation. The Statement from the Heart was issued in 2017 calling for: â??the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitutionâ??.

Five years later that voice has not yet been established and little progress has been made. The reconciliation with, and proper recognition of, the first peoples of our nation remains unfinished business and is an unhealthy aspect of Australia. As part of the Christian Church, we hear Jesusâ?? words in Matthew 5.23 and 24: â??So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your giftâ??.

Well, our First Nations brothers and sisters do have something against the nation. Those of us who are not First Nations people need to hear that and act for reconciliation.

Domestic and Family Violence

Another significant part of our context is the blight of family and domestic violence in our community. The rate of violence and abuse is tragic and brings great harm to individuals and families.

The research projects undertaken in response to a resolution passed by General Synod 17 laid bare the reality that the Anglican Church is not exempt from this tragedy. People from our churches have been involved and impacted.

There are three things to take very seriously. First, there is significant pain in the community as individuals and families suffer from this abuse. Second, the problem is complex and not easy to address. And third, we have an important contribution to make, ensuring that our church communities are safe and respond well to those who are caught up in family and domestic violence.

2021 Census

The first results from the 2021 census are due to be released next month and I donâ??t think anyone will be surprised if there is a further decline in the percentage of Australians who claim to be Christians. This is an established trend and is part of contemporary Australia. This trend says a number of things to us but among them is the need and opportunity for us to be focussed on evangelism so that Australians have the opportunity to hear of Godâ??s love and be invited to share the abundant life Jesus offers.

International Context

The context in which we meet as General Synod is not only local. Today, right now, as I speak, Russian forces continue their effort to subdue and occupy parts of Ukraine. Innocent people are being killed and injured. Infrastructure is being destroyed that will take years and billions of dollars to rebuild. An absolute and total waste!

Images of tanks and artillery bring back chilling memories of the carnage of World War 2 where ego-driven nationalist leaders inflicted senseless and pointless destruction on millions of people. The invasion of Ukraine has been a significant blow to confidence in human progress as we have realised that we donâ??t seem to have learnt anything about stopping the stupidity of avarice and ego and the awful cost of war.

The fighting in Ukraine is not the only conflict of course. We are aware of the tragedy of Afghanistan, Myanmar, South Sudan, and Tigray just to name a few. Armed conflict continues to cause death and injury, poverty, and homelessness.

I havenâ??t attempted to try to list the whole of the context in which we meet. But even this brief survey points to many challenges for our community, our nation, our world and therefore us. We are part of this context, and we are called to minister within it. There is aching pain and injustice, cruelty and hunger, anxiety, and disaster. Itâ??s not all gloom and doom of course but for many people life is hard.

In that context the church is called to live out its mission. Godâ??s mission in our Context

There are a number of ways of describing the mission of the church. The five marks of mission are helpful. Some might say fulfilling the great commission of Matthew 28 is the mission of the church, or another description, which reflects chapter 20 of Johnâ??s gospel, is to carry and out and continue the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth.

I came across what I think is a very rich description of the mission of the church in a book called *Imagining Mission with John V Taylor* by Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross (2020). This book is a reflection on writings by John Taylor during his years as secretary of CMS in England.

Baker and Ross ask their readers to imagine the church and to â??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. Church is Godâ??s people participating in that liberation, a communion in mission. Church is Christâ??s body prolonging the logic of the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in the worldâ?? (p3).

Baker and Ross suggest that mission is a longing to see all things renewed â?? our relationship with God and with one another, with our environment and species, with our societies, our world, and our cosmos. It is the healing and redemption of all things under the lordship of Christ. (p49).

I realise and acknowledge that the General Synod is actually a very small part of the ministry of the Anglican Church of Australia. There is a very small budget, a tiny staff. Most decisions of the Synod carry no real weight unless some part of the church chooses to give it.

Most of the ministry action happens in Dioceses, in parishes, Anglican schools and agencies like Anglicare. But General Synod is as good as weâ??ve got for a national expression of our church.

Faced with our context because thatâ??s where we are ministering as Jesusâ?? Church, and meeting as the General Synod, I wonder how might our debate and our energy be influenced if we thought of ourselves as participating with God in the healing and redemption of all things under the Lordship of Christ?

Maybe we would put our tribalism, our factions, our striving for control and influence and power aside and have our focus on the mission to which we are called as disciples of Christ? Co-operating with God in the healing of all things â?? the world, its people, the planet itself. Conducting ourselves both here and when we leave in a way that contributed to that healing. Making decisions here which might lead to a further healing. Making decisions in a way that pointed to the possibility of healing.

Itâ??s clear that the work of healing is urgently needed. There is a lot of dis-ease about. Our task is urgent and clear. The opportunity is great. The question is: will we participate, will we co-operate with God in the course of this week, even given the limitations that are part of General Synod?

As we continue our time together this week, Iâ??d like to suggest a few things which might mark our time together, including our debates. According to an article in *The Melbourne Anglican* last week, about 40 per cent of members are here for the first time. Thatâ??s a fairly high proportion Iâ??d say of people who havenâ??t been to General Synod before. If you havenâ??t been to General Synod before Iâ??ll bet youâ??ve heard lots about these meetings, and Iâ??ll bet much what youâ??ve heard isnâ??t appealing. But it doesnâ??t have to be that way. Itâ??s up to each of us.

I do wonder whether the healing that Baker and Ross talk about needs to include us, here at General Synod. Here there are struggles for power and influence, struggles to shape the church in the way particular tribes want it to be shaped, but there are also wounds that need healing.

In the course of the past year I read John Davisâ?? book *Australian Anglicans and Their Constitution* (1994). Davis makes clear that tribalism and the seeking of power and influence over the shape and style of the church is not new. The problem is that along the way there have been hurts and insults, rashly spoken words, maybe dodgy deals, so today we have all this baggage, all this weight of disappointment and disillusionment and distrust which influences the way we relate to each other.

Jesus said: So, when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your giftâ??.

The text doesnâ??t say â??if you have something against your brother or sisterâ??, but if you remember, if you are aware that your brother or sister has something against you, reconcile with them.

It seems an odd thing to be talking about the need for reconciliation in an organisation that majors in reconciliation but I think thatâ??s what we need. We need to apologise to each other for the hurts that have been inflicted in the course of the competition which has marked our national church life. There is need for repentance for the times when our church has reflected self-interest and tribalism dressed up in theology or scripture.

The people of our church and the mission of God need us to be better than we often are when we meet as General Synod. We have the opportunity to demonstrate something good in our meeting. We have the opportunity to demonstrate that we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism. We have the opportunity to demonstrate what itâ??s like to be Christians together. We have the opportunity to model disagreeing well, living with difference, appreciating nuance rather than polarity. We have the opportunity love each other as Christ loved us.

The people of the church need us to be that. The wider community need us to model that as a viable alternative. To co-operate with God in the healing of all things we need to be that. It is a scandal to the faithful and the unfaithful that meetings of General Synod have the reputation of being something youâ??d rather not be at. We can change that.

So, what might be important to help this?

First, prayer. If we are engaged in the mission of God, we need to be well-connected to God and led by God. John V Taylor in his book *The Go Between God* (1972) says: â??The chief actor in the historic mission of the Christian church is the Holy Spirit. He is the director of the whole enterprise.

â??The mission consists of the things that he is doing in the world. In a special way it consists of the light that he is focussing upon Jesus Christâ?? (p3).

Taylor again says: â??We often speak of the Holy Spirit as the source of power. But in fact, he enables us not by making us supernaturally strong but by opening our eyesâ?? (p.19).

Iâ??d urge us to pray a lot during General Synod. Take the opportunity of the daily eucharist and morning and evening prayer and make other opportunities to pray. Listen for the voice of Jesus in prayer, in scripture, and in each other.

If we are going to share in the ministry of Christ we need to be guided by, and have our eyes opened by the Spirit and prayer is critical for that.

Second, it may be that in the course of this synod God somehow prompts us to be aware that someone here has something against us. If that is the case, make the opportunity to attempt to reconcile with them. None of us is perfect. We will hurt and fail and disappoint each other. But reconciliation is a gift of the gospel and integral to following Jesus.

Third, lets conduct ourselves in a way that commends the gospel of Godâ??s love to each other and especially to those who will read about or hear of the events of this meeting.

Fourth, letâ??s think the best of each other. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. Christ died for each of us. We are linked to each other in him. You donâ??t need me to rehearse Pauls words in 1 Corinthians 12. We need each other. We depend on each other to share in the mission of God. I am sure that every member of General Synod is committed to Christ and serving Christs mission. We wouldnâ??t be here if we werenâ??t. The tricky thing is that what that means in practice can be different among different people, but letâ??s think the best of each other, and look for the best in each other as we journey through this week.

And finally, can you do me a favour and donâ??t quote my address in support of your argument either positively or negatively. Thatâ??s not its purpose.

We are in this place and in our context. May the Lord guide us to share in the mission of the healing of all things-the world, its people, and the planet itself in the small way we can this week.

Many people are praying for us. Letâ??s help them think their effort is worthwhile.

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