

Presidential Address

to

SYNOD

2019

Bishop's Charge to Synod 2019

TBA is the abbreviation for 'To Be Advised'. As I sat in the darkness of QF 64 from Johannesburg to Sydney I began to think about and write my Charge to Synod and all that needs 'to be advised.'

This Charge is brought to you by the letters TBA and I begin with those matters that need **To Be Appreciated.**

Colossians exhorts Christians to live in gratitude and so I begin. Thanks be to God! Praise be to Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Everything we have and don't have is the gift of God who works all things together for good for those who love Him.

I begin with a list of griefs that give way to joy in Christ's resurrection.

Stephen Millar was a friend, a partner in the Gospel and his absence from church, Diocesan Council and from his seat beside me at this Synod is an absence we all grieve while rejoicing that he is now at home with the Lord. To our dear sister in Christ, Wendy, we again offer our condolences.

We miss also Bill Howarth, who served as Chaplain at TAS for twenty years and later in parish ministry, particularly at St Mary's, West Armidale.

Perhaps not so well known we can add:

Lindsay Whybrow, who served BCA for many years and went to his rest from his church family in Uralla;

Bishop Tony Nichols, father of Elizabeth Parker and retired Bishop of the Diocese of the North West;

and the loss of many great saints from our churches in the last twelve months.

All will be greatly missed but all of them have left us with a legacy of godliness and a challenge to walk as followers of Christ.

2019 has its usual thanksgiving, beginning with the staff of the Registry. I want to thank Paul Chapman, Sam Brennan, and Miriam Newall for the administrative ministries they conduct on behalf of us all.

I rejoice that Christopher Pears has settled into the Registrar's position. Apart from the move from the paper-smothered, desk-operating Ron Perry, to the digitised, clear desk of Christopher Pears nothing much has changed. Christopher has quickly settled into the role and maintained a happy and cooperative working relationship with all staff and I am personally thankful for the friendship we are growing to enjoy.

For my assistant Geoff Hearne and his wife Catherine, Janene and I daily thank God for their friendship and partnership in the Gospel. Geoff and Catherine are those kind of ministry workers who are the unsung heroes of our church and I want to acknowledge them publicly and honour their contribution. 2019 has confronted Geoff and me with some very difficult ministry matters and as iron sharpens iron Geoff's wisdom and support have been invaluable.

As those appointed to Synod you may well be aware that it is not easy to find clergy to serve in our Diocese and easy to lose clergy to other Dioceses. The decline in those training for ministry and increasing competition with other Dioceses for clergy puts pressure on our capacity to meet ministry needs.

Attachments, isolation, finances, prospects, children's educations are among the factors that impact decisions for ministry in this Diocese. Mindful of these realities I want to praise the clergy who have given themselves to serve in this Diocese. We enjoy the ministry of some extraordinary men and women who at personal sacrifice under God seek to disciple God's people and proclaim the saving Gospel of the Lord Jesus to the lost. They enjoy my admiration and affection and I thank them all for their partnership in the Gospel, as I do for our laity.

Everyone understands the plight facing our communities as the drought has become the worst in our history. To make matters worse, fire has ravaged a number of areas in the Diocese. I want to commend the resolve of our farming communities, both in town and on the land and I am thankful that this Synod will provide us with opportunity to pray for all who are struggling. I also want to express our gratitude to the many who have donated support and for those organisations like Anglicare and Anglican Aid who have helped. At this point of time we have received for distribution \$251,377.50 in drought relief.

I have no idea why God has allowed such difficult times to beset us but I do know that it is an opportunity for all of us to consider our relationship with God, repent of our sins and seek His mercy. Our brothers and sisters in Christ who persevere in serving Christ under adversity are a great witness to me and I remain humbled by their example.

Equally, these days are days of great opportunity for us to take the Gospel of comfort to the people of our Diocese and I look forward to 2020 as we focus on our Evangelistic task.

Again I must give thanks for a number of financial contributions from our mission partners toward the mission of this Diocese:

one donor who has asked to remain anonymous has given \$100,000. over two years to the appointment of George Ferguson to the Barwon Special District churches (i.e. Walgett and Collarenebri);

Anglicare has made a contribution to the Tamworth Hospital Chaplain; and BCA continues its support for a number of ministries.

As I mention BCA, I offer continuing appreciation to the Rev. David Rogers-Smith. I also wish to welcome formally to BCA its new CEO, the Rev. Greg Harris and offer our thanksgiving to the departing CEO, now Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn, Mark Short.

Our world, our communities, neighbours, friends and families need **To Be Advised** that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour and that hope springs eternal in Him. The Commission for Evangelism will speak to this during our Synod but I will take this opportunity to quote Charles Spurgeon, who said “Every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter.” He said “...the best argument of all *for our mission* is to be found in the wounds of Jesus. You want to honour Him, you desire to put many crowns upon His head, and this you can best do by winning souls for Him. These are the spoils that He covets, these are the trophies for which He fights, these are the jewels that shall be His best adornment.”

In respect to the wider ministry of this Diocese and its partnership we have much to be thankful for. I will leave comment on such ministries to those presenting reports during this session of Synod.

Core to my, and our, gratitude for this denomination is a commitment to **Truth Built Anglicanism**.

Anglicans stand in the great tradition of the Reformers and enjoy the fruits of such notables as Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer's Prayer Book remains a discipleship resource expounding in its Creeds, the Articles of Religion, its liturgies and Collects, the doctrines and teachings of the Scriptures for the Christian Church. Thankfully these things are enshrined in the Fundamental Declarations of our denomination.

It is firstly to the Scriptures as God's Word given and secondly to our formularies that Christian Anglicans are gratefully committed. Every clergyman ordained in the Anglican Church of Australia is asked to give assent to these things - 'assent' meaning that they believe these things. It is from these foundations that we gratefully receive from the Reformers the reminder of the unchanging Solas – by grace alone, by faith alone, by the Bible alone, by Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.

Any departure from God's Word and all doctrines proved thereby would be a departure from the Christian faith, resulting in a sect that must be called to repentance.

This moment of gratitude might seem a tiresome repetition of what you already believe but it must not be taken for granted. The current reality for global Anglicanism has reached crisis point as some retain the title Anglican but depart from Christendom via a **Truth Broken Anglicanism**.

The Anglican Church of New Zealand is a case in point. In 2018 it gave permission for same-sex marriages and blessings to be conducted. To faithful Anglicans in New Zealand

this was a bridge too far, forcing them to separate and establish a new Anglican Church under the care of Gafcon (Global Anglican Future Conference): The Church of Confessing Anglicans Aotearoa/New Zealand.

I, with the Dean, Chris Brennan, will be attending the consecration of the Rev. Jay Behan in October as a sign of our support for this new Diocese of faithful Anglicans. I will not, however, do this with the blessing of many of the Australian Bishops. I do not believe the Primate will be supportive of my attendance. I mean him no offence by going and I pray for him to show strong leadership. He is a declared conservative on matters of human sexuality but I recognise that he is in an unenviable position as the conservative leader of our National Church and we all should pray for him.

As many of you may know, the movement known as Gafcon is a modern attempt at reformation and one that this Diocese has aligned itself with. It is not a movement away from Anglicanism but a movement for its reformation. It would be a mistake to see this movement as an evangelical one as it includes genuine Anglo-Catholics and Charismatics who are committed to the authority of the Bible. Gafcon began in 2008 with a reiteration of what Anglicans around the world believe, expressed in The Jerusalem Declaration which I commend to your reading.

Such is the crisis of unbelief in our denomination and the move away from the Scriptures that many of the world's Bishops, including myself and other evangelical Bishops around the nation, have refused to attend Lambeth, traditionally the key meeting for global Anglican leaders. This is due to Canterbury's unwillingness to recognise many faithful Anglicans while offering invitations to Bishops who

are completely out of step with the Word of God. Far from a call to repentance, Lambeth's invitation is to conversation. Conversation sounds respectable but it is a conversation that for many years has proven only to highlight disrespect of the Word of God.

Prior to Lambeth 2020, those Gafcon Bishops not attending Lambeth will gather in Kigali, Rwanda. I am planning to attend.

This crisis is in part due to issues related to human sexuality. I say in part because the confusion surrounding human sexuality is only symptomatic of a more deeply rooted problem which centres around the Word of God as the sole authority on faith and practice.

The seriousness of this touches upon the Lordship of Christ, the nature of sin, repentance and faith and their eternal implications.

The recent series of essays prepared for our 2020 General Synod by the Doctrine Commission (*Marriage, Same-Sex Marriage and the Anglican Church: Essays from the Doctrine Commission*) highlights the issues and indicates the potential for a very turbulent future for our national church.

This Address does not offer sufficient time to deal with the issues in full. In essence the divide focuses on the relationship between the Bible, tradition and reason.

The error is in letting tradition and reason have authority equal to, or over, the Bible. The argument from my perspective is an easy one. How can tradition and reason, which are marked by our fallen humanity, be matched against the authority of God's given Word?

As I understand the arguments, this can only happen if you no longer accept the Bible as God's Word. I have written a response to the Doctrine Commission's book of essays. My response has been published in the Spring edition of the EFAC magazine *Essentials*, should you wish to explore the matter further.

Put simply, the Bible is given by God and governs and corrects tradition and reason. When the alternative is taken, permissions are offered to accommodate people's sin rather than a call to repentance and the security of God's saving grace. Such permission will have horrific eternal consequences.

Let me try to piece this all together by way of example. At the Grafton Diocesan Synod 2019 a motion was passed which indicated the larger portion of that Diocese's clergy voted against their own ordination vows. In the past month, while I was in Africa, the Bishop of Wangaratta Diocese, John Parkes, in fellowship with the larger part of his Diocese, voted 67-18 for the 'Blessing of Persons Married According to the Marriage Act 1961 Regulations 2019'. This sounds innocuous but as reported in the media was deliberately designed to permit the blessings of same-sex unions.

Bishop Parkes signalled at the Bishops' conference 2019 that he would, prior to his retirement, disregard the fellowship of the Bishops, their protocols and the National Church - using his impending retirement, in my view irresponsibly, as an opportunity to advance a cause foreign to the Word of God.

Since that Synod I have written to Bishop Parkes noting my disappointment and declaring myself personally out of Christian fellowship with him and the Diocese of Wangaratta.

I noted with him that I no longer feel bound to any of the protocols in relation to the Diocese of Wangaratta as I no longer see them as in fellowship with the rest of the Anglican Church. I also noted my pastoral concern for him and those of his Diocese who voted in the affirmative. Romans 1 makes clear that those who encourage or commend what is morally wrong will come under the same condemnation, something I pray they avoid. I expect that Bishop Parkes and the majority of his Synod would consider my actions inflammatory and foolish.

Bishop Parkes has responded to me as I expected and has noted that the Primate has now put the matter before the Appellate Tribunal and I should wait for the outcome before commenting. I will of course wait on the Tribunal's response but I will remain committed to God's Word before I accept the opinions of human councils. I believe the Wangaratta Diocese to be apostate and that they need to repent. I have not responded on behalf of this Diocese as it is for this Synod to decide what approach it will take in response. I will of course respond on behalf of this Diocese if it so determines.

The courageous actions of our brothers and sisters around the world offer us no excuses when it comes to a **Timely Brave Anglicanism** that is Christian.

In Uganda and across Africa, at significant financial cost, they have taken a stand. Closer to home our Christian brothers and sisters in New Zealand have taken their stand, suffering the loss of property and the challenges of building afresh. Even closer, 18 people in the Wangaratta Diocese and many in the Grafton Diocese stood and said 'No' to those advancing their unbiblical and godless agendas.

I am not a prophet who can, with any confidence, predict the future. For most of my Anglican ministry a battle for the truth has been brewing as increasingly the divide between a permissive church and one ruled by the living God grows deeper. One cannot predict the outcomes of General Synod or the behaviours of Bishops like John Parkes but one can prepare to take a stand on the rock that does not move irrespective of the cost, should such a decision be required.

What would that decision look like? It would be an acknowledgment that others who depart from the Word of God are no longer Anglican. It would not mean we cease to be Anglican or that we do not respect those of other traditions who remain faithful to the Bible's truth.

It may mean we become a different Anglican Church enjoying a different Anglican Communion, as might be represented by the Gafcon movement.

There is nothing new here. A mark of the Christian and Church life is a consistent commitment to reform. To be Christian is to live in a constant state of reform, revised and corrected by the Word of God and repentant of sin.

Equally, beyond the issues facing the Church, we are to be agents of reform in our society, preaching the Gospel of redemption while being socially responsible citizens, fighting on issues such as **The Battle Abortion**.

I admit at age 61, I recently went to my first protest rally outside State Parliament. The noise of my voice among others was heard by our political leaders as we said 'No' to abortion and urged our politicians to do the same. I know that many of you voiced your objections as well and I am so proud to have the privilege of being your Bishop. It needs to be said publicly

that our local State members have been a total disappointment on this issue and I believe alternatives should be looked for when we approach the next election. Should the bill to legalise abortion be passed, you can expect that it will be followed by a similar bill concerning euthanasia. I encourage our clergy to prepare all God's people to meet the challenges ahead.

Martin Niemöller was a Lutheran Pastor and contemporary of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and offers this lesson on silence and inaction from the days of a Nazi dictator: "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me."

While in South Africa, the country once cursed by Apartheid, I was reminded by a brother in Christ that alongside the great commission is the command to love my neighbour. It is hardly loving to see evil and not do something about it.

Speaking in Uganda I was reminded that a revival was born through martyrs who would not give in to evil. In the Apartheid museum in South Africa I was reminded that Mandela lost 27 years of his life in prison to end an evil. In Wangaratta I was reminded that 18 people said 'No' to evil. And as I read my Bible I am reminded that in Israel my hero, Jesus Christ, lost His life to end evil. But what is it to be reminded and remain personally unmoved by the evil we encounter? - to be slow to act and to excuse our inaction with a sense of "What could I do to change things?" We could at least start by praying.

In the crowd of anti-abortion protestors one sign read, 'Adoption not Abortion'. It was a great sign. That sign was more than just a protest of 'No'; it was a call for us all to exercise our responsibility to the unborn.

That sign got me to thinking about my TBAs and a different but **Truly Blessed Adoption**.

It remains a mystery to me why God didn't abort humanity. We are more trouble than we are worth, yet God chose to go the distance with us. He chose to adopt us. He paid the ultimate purchase price to give us life and declare us to be His beloved children. He made His home in us by the Holy Spirit and promised us an inheritance that will never spoil or fade and I can think of nothing more important **To Be Announced**. It is the responsibility of the adopted to do this.

There is much before us in this Synod and other speeches to be given. While the matters in this speech and others are significant, it is my hope that you will hear in all of them an exhortation. Wherever the Gospel and its implications are challenged, the Gospel has **To Be Announced**. If like the Colossians you want to live in gratitude, the Gospel has **To Be Announced**. If a lost people are to be saved from a future in hell, the Gospel has **To Be Announced**.

If you understand these things, then you will know you have **To Be Announcing** the Christ we serve.

Messages often finish with the letters TBA and so does this Charge. Our world needs **To Be Advised**. The question is whether we will commit **To Being Advisors**.

Rick Lewers

Bishop

Anglican Diocese of Armidale