



Bishop's Synod  
Address  
2024

## **Welcome**

It's great to be together again as brothers and sisters in Christ representing parishes from all over the Armidale Diocese. The longer I am in this job as Bishop, the more I have come to appreciate what a remarkable diocese this is. The fruit of faithful ministry by godly clergy and laity over the last six decades is everywhere. In all 34 parishes around the diocese the authority of the Scriptures is upheld, the gospel is clearly preached, and the result is seen as men, women and children trust in Jesus as Saviour and strive to live with him as Lord.

### **1. The times we live in and the challenges that presents**

Living with Jesus as Lord, in accordance with God's word, has become increasingly challenging over the past decade. Steve McAlpine in his excellent book, "Being the Bad Guys" sums up the challenge well. "Western secularism and Biblical Christianity have diametrically opposed views on many areas of sexual ethics and gender identity. That's because Western culture sees accepting it's take on these things as fundamental to human identity, freedom, and flourishing - and so it is the territory in which Christians are most often seen as the bad guys, where biblical ethics are not merely seen as laughable or outdated or repressed, but as shameful, harmful and repressive. Our views are not merely seen as wrong but dangerous." Carl Trueman, in his very helpful book called "Strange New World", explains how our society got to where it now is. He suggests that our culture is one of "expressive individualism" where each person is encouraged to give expression to their individual inner lives, rather than seeing ourselves as embedded in communities and

bound by natural and supernatural laws. Authenticity to inner feelings, rather than adherence to transcendent truths has become the norm.

Increasingly, we are pressured as Christians to reshape our message to conform with a culture that says “you do you”, “if it feels right, it is right”, “my truth is truth”. Such thinking represents the rise and triumph of the modern self and is on a serious collision course with Biblical Christian faith.

Increasingly, Christians are coming under fire in secular workplaces. I was speaking to a godly Christian woman recently who works in a public school. They had a Wear it Purple Day which was about promoting inclusiveness. These have been championed and promoted by the LGBTQIA+ lobby through the education system, through media, through the legal system and the corporate world as well. Those who dare not to comply are labelled bigoted, or hateful and sometimes punished by being side-lined from promotion or even losing their jobs. The Christian woman I was speaking to said that she would not be told what to wear and didn't show up in purple, thankfully there were no repercussions... this time. Students in schools feel the pressure on Wear it Purple Days too. Also, through social media and peer group trends, they are branded as not just different, but somehow strange if they don't go with the flow.

Of course, the challenge we face comes not just from secular society but also from those in the wider Anglican Communion who have chosen to embrace compromise with our culture on

matters concerning human sexuality. Over the past year the Church of England has been a case in point:

- In January 2023, Archbishop Welby said that he was “extremely joyful” at proposals to allow clergy to offer God’s blessing to same sex couples who have legally married, but then said he would not perform such blessings himself for the sake of unity in the global Anglican church that he heads.
- In February 2023, the General Synod of the Church of England passed a motion supporting LGBTQI+ people, marriages, and changes to forms of service to allow for the blessing of same sex marriages.
- In early November 2023, the Archbishop described himself as “totally and unequivocally committed to the goal of a radical new Christian inclusion that embraced LGBTQIA+ people.”
- In December 2023, the Archbishop of Canterbury circulated “A Selection of readings and prayers of thanksgiving, dedication and asking for God’s blessing for same sex couples [that] can be used in Church of England services for the first time from Sunday December 17<sup>th</sup> following approval from the House of Bishops.”

Now, all of these decisions represent an abdication of leadership responsibility by Archbishop Justin Welby as the head of the worldwide Anglican Communion. He along with 36 out of 43 bishops have led the Church of England to bless what the Bible clearly says is sin. As a result, the Church of England has now turned away from the clear teaching of the Scriptures on matters concerning human sexuality. We need to pray for great wisdom

for conservative Anglican ministers and their congregations at this time. I heard the Reverend Charlie Skrine, who is the Rector of All Souls Langham Place in London, speak at a recent EFAC (Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion) gathering down in Sydney. He said that as a result of the decision taken by Church of England bishops in recent months, his church, which is one of the largest evangelical Anglican churches in the UK, is in serious turmoil. One third of his people think they should leave the Church of England, another third are think they should stay and be the influence that brings the church back to a position that upholds biblical authority, and the final third aren't sure what they should think or do. As I heard him speak, I felt so sad for him and other evangelical Anglicans in the UK. Please do pray for wisdom for them in days to come.

Thankfully, the constitution of the Anglican church of Australia ensures that we have no direct connection to the Church of England. Our constitution also ensures that all 23 Anglican Dioceses around Australia are essentially autonomous, which means no decision by the General Synod of the ACA is binding on our diocese. That being said, the decisions being taken in the wider Anglican Communion do have some effect on the Anglican Church of Australia. That the mother church has gone down this track emboldens liberal bishops in the Anglican Church of Australia to be more strident in their progressive stand. At the moment in the Anglican church of Australia, the General Synod is 60% conservative on matters concerning human sexuality. However, the house of bishops is split 50-50 on this issue. Such a situation makes dynamics at bishop's gatherings quite tense.

*Please pray that God will protect the Anglican Church of Australia from heading down the same track as the Church of England. Pray that He will put in place godly bishops who uphold the primary authority of the Scriptures in all matters of Christian life and doctrine.*

Closer to home, this year we have had internal attacks from a small group of theologically liberal attendees at one of the branch churches of the Cathedral in Armidale. In February, Anglican ministers all over our diocese, and Anglican bishops all over Australia received a flyer by email advertising a book which was to be launched on 9<sup>th</sup> April at the University of New England in Armidale. It is entitled *Darkness: The Conversion of Anglican Armidale 1960-2019*. The book suggests that over the past 60 years, the Diocese of Armidale has become a dark place. Implying that the gospel work done by evangelicals like John Chapman, Bishop Clive Kerle, and Bishop Peter Chiswell was somehow bad not good. In this book the author has sought to give voice to many people who were not happy about the changes that have taken place in the Armidale Diocese over the past 60 years. The book was launched as advertised. I have now read the book. It is quite a tome at over 800 pages long, and the picture on the cover looks somewhat ominous. My assessment is that it is boldly revisionist, and presents a very negative view of any who seek to uphold the Scriptures as the primary authority when it comes to matters of Christian life and doctrine. It also paints anyone who upholds and preaches the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement as narrow, harsh and out of step with what it means to be truly Anglican! The book accuses them of weaponizing the pulpit for speaking of the biblical themes of sin,

judgment, heaven, hell, and the need for salvation through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

At the time of the book launch, I wrote a brief response to “Darkness ...” and posted it on our Diocesan website. In the response I suggested that the presuppositions that underpin the argument of the book are basically flawed. The truth of the matter is that the primary authority of the Scriptures, and the centrality of penal substitutionary atonement through the death of Jesus, are foundational doctrines in the Anglican Church of Australia both historically and currently. Our fundamental declarations and ruling principles make this crystal clear. Yet many want to muddy the waters and redefine what it means to be Anglican.

Now as an author, the Professor who wrote this book is free to talk to whoever he can find and draw from their opinions whatever conclusions he likes. But if his presuppositions about what it means to be Anglican are wrong, his conclusions will also be wrong. There is of course another far more positive side to the Armidale Diocese transition story. The fruit of godly evangelical ministry in the Armidale Diocese over the last six decades is in reality not dark at all. Thriving Anglican churches both large and small all over the Armidale Diocese today are testimony to the effect of faithful Bible teaching over many years, which has, by the power of the Holy Spirit, had ongoing transformative affect in the lives of many.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I have no doubt that in days to come we will face further public criticism with regard to the way we teach the Bible and seek to apply it faithfully to God’s people.

But of course, none of this should surprise us. In chapter 17 of the gospel of John, Jesus prayed for his disciples. Knowing that He was soon to be taken up from this world after his death and resurrection Jesus prayed, “Holy Father protect them in your name that you have given me that they may be one” (John 17:11). Jesus knew that his followers would come under fire in a world that rejected him first and so he prays for their protection. “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world. I am not asking that you take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” (John 17:14-17). I don’t know about you, but I find that prayer very comforting. It reminds us that following Jesus will not always be easy. We will be hated by the world, but God has not forsaken us. He has given us his word, and his Holy Spirit, and by them His sanctifying work in us continues to make us more like him. As we seek to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all Jesus has commanded, he will be with us always even to the end of the age.

## **2. Getting on with the task at hand**

With this assurance we simply get on with the task of introducing all people to Jesus and helping them home to heaven. To that end, there have been some encouraging developments over the past nine months.



In the February/March edition of The Link, I shared my vision for three things I would love to see happen in the year ahead. They included, the completion of the Coledale Frontyard Church Project, finding a person to take up the role of Armidale Diocesan Deacon for Women, and the establishment of rural theological training in Tamworth.

### **a) The Coledale Frontyard Church Project**

With regard to the Coledale project, the construction certificate was finally issued by the Tamworth Regional Council in July. This has been a long time coming, indeed the version of plans finally approved was version number 14! Construction of an all-weather gathering place for church in Coledale is now well under way. God willing it will be completed by mid-October. I look forward to seeing what might come next in the work of making and growing disciples of Christ in that part of Tamworth.

*Pray for the smooth completion of the Coledale Frontyard Church project, and for wisdom and perseverance for Jum Naden and his team in the work of making and growing disciples of Christ in Coledale.*

### **b) Armidale Diocesan Deacon for Women**

With regard to the second, I have now written a Bishop's Position Paper on the Role of Women in the Diocese of Armidale. This paper has sought to explore the way Christian men and women can partner together in ministry, to grow and build Christ's church in accordance with the Scriptures. The position paper was presented at the Archdeacons' meeting on Monday 9<sup>th</sup> September, and the Diocesan Council meeting on

Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> September, and today it is being distributed to all Synod members as well. I know you will appreciate that this is a topic that generates a variety of positions that fall along a spectrum, with strongly egalitarian at one end, and strongly complementarian at the other. I know that even within our largely conservative complementarian clergy team, individuals will land at different points on the spectrum, and the same will be true of the laity as well. While I don't expect to achieve consensus with my position paper, I believe I can at least achieve clarity. The Bishop's position paper also seeks to respond to the 2023 Synod request for the Bishop, and Diocesan Council, to employ an Archdeacon for Women. The paper makes clear that there are wonderful opportunities for the fruitful partnership of women and men in gospel ministry in the Diocese of Armidale. In order to explore these opportunities further, I believe that it would be of great benefit to have a suitably qualified and experienced woman ordained as the Armidale Diocesan Deacon for Women.

While I have no problem theologically with ordaining a woman as deacon to do that job, there may be confusion in a diocese as small as ours if they were to be called an "Archdeacon for Women". The role of archdeacon under our current ordinances, carries with it a degree of delegated authority from the bishop over other clergy within a deanery area. And while the role of an Archdeacon for Women could be defined differently to that of male archdeacons through a change to the ordinance, the perception I think would remain. That being said, I think if the title were Armidale Diocesan Deacon for Women, it would be valuable for that person to attend archdeacons' meetings to

ensure we have a woman's voice in the think-tank that seeks to support and promote good gospel work in parishes across our diocese.

The report presented to Synod last year by the Diocesan Women's Ministry Working Group, identified a number of areas that such a person could work on to help us move forward in the training of women for ministry in churches, and the support of women already employed in ministry by parishes. To explore this exciting possibility further, I have, in consultation with Kara Hartley from the Sydney Diocese and others in our own diocese, drafted a job description for the Armidale Diocesan Deacon for Women. Since March, I have also managed to have discussions with a very suitable candidate for the proposed position. This person has indicated her availability and willingness to take up the role should it be established.

The good news is that the Archdeacons, Vicar General and I, as a leadership team, are in agreement as to the importance of this position and the suitability of the woman I have spoken to. The next steps will be to finalise a job description and remuneration package, and work out which Diocesan bucket the money will come from at the next Diocesan Council meeting towards the end of November. My prayer is that an announcement can be made in early December with regard to the new appointment of an Armidale Diocesan Deacon for Women, employed half-time, to start in January 2025.

*Please pray for wisdom as we seek the best way to support and promote the ministry of women in partnership with men in our diocese, that together we might grow in*

*Christlike maturity to the glory of God and the good of His church.*

**c) The establishment of rural theological training in Tamworth**

With regard to the third thing that I said I'd like to see happen this year, discussions have been held with Moore Theological College to explore the possibility of offering "Theological Training in the Armidale Diocese." Initially, this would offer lay people the opportunity of enrolling in the Moore College Diploma of Biblical Theology via a blended delivery mode on the ground in Tamworth. Now some may be thinking "Who is this qualification for?" and "What will it equip lay-people to do?" By way of background, the Moore College Diploma of Biblical Theology aims to train and equip:

- Lay people who have ministry responsibility and help run churches, and missions.
- Teachers working in Christian mission work both in Australia and abroad.
- General Lay people seeking to deepen their understanding of God's promises in the Bible.
- Lay people for volunteer work in their local churches and communities including Bible Study leaders, Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders and lay preachers.

In the past we have encouraged lay people to do theological study in our diocese through TEE (Theological Education by Extension), and PTC (Preliminary Theological Certificate) courses. The DBT (Diploma of Biblical theology) via blended delivery mode presents a fresh opportunity for lay people to skill

up locally to serve. The great thing about this option is that instead of just accessing DBT lectures and notes online, the blended delivery mode includes face to face interaction with teachers through two intensive group learning sessions of three days per semester in Tamworth. Also, instead of assessments being done by exam or essay, they would be done through the practical delivery of a Bible Study, or other ministry task, which would be videoed then reviewed with a verbal assessment over a zoom session with the unit teacher. In this way, we hope to make the study more accessible to those who may not have done tertiary study before. The Moore Diploma of Biblical Theology qualification will be the same as the one offered online, it's just the delivery mode and assessment method that will differ.

We are looking to launch the first local study cohort of the Moore Diploma of Biblical Theology in the first half of 2025. We are hoping to have 10 students in that first cohort. Contact the Bishop's Secretary, Emily Speed at the Diocesan Registry Office (02 67724491 or [office@armidaleanglicandiocese.com](mailto:office@armidaleanglicandiocese.com)) for more information.

In all of this, my hope and prayer is that we will see many keen Christian lay people from the Armidale Diocese get equipped to serve in local church ministries, community chaplaincies and even global mission activities. Should this local theological training initiative be well received and bear fruit, it may be the first step in establishing a theological training campus in North West NSW that potentially could offer higher level qualifications for those seeking to become rural clergy in years to come.

*Pray that God will draw together the first cohort of up to 10 keen lay people to launch the Moore Diploma of Biblical Theology in 2025. Pray also that He will grant us wisdom and strength to explore further theological training possibilities in our diocese in years to come.*

### **3. Workers for the harvest**

Now of course, all of this ties in with the vision of raising up workers for the harvest. I have a prayer card that I use often in my quiet times with the heading, ‘Workers for the Harvest – Armidale Diocese’. Next, it has written out at the top Matthew 9:37-38, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. <sup>38</sup> Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” And so, I pray in the light of that verse. Then on the card there are thanks points for harvest workers God has recently raised up:

- Armidale Hospital and Aged Care Chaplain, and Diocesan Trainer - Dave Freeman.
- Curate in charge for Wee Waa - Caleb Torrence
- Curate for Inverell - Cameron Maxworthy
- Curate for Narrabri - Trace Akankunda
- Curate for South Tamworth - Adrian Cheung
- Diocesan Youth Encourager for 2025 - Nathan Tuckwell.

God has been kind in raising up all of these people.

But then on my prayer card is listed all the positions that still need gospel harvest workers:

- Chaplain for TAS, male
- Curate for Lightning Ridge

- Curate for Gunnedah
- Anglicare Community Chaplain for Coledale
- Lay Locum for Nundle.
- Lay Locum or Curate for Baradine

And so, the task of recruitment goes on, prayer-provision, prayer => provision.

The flow on to other dioceses continues as well. This is in line with our training and sending vision, whereby we seek to keep all 12 curacy positions filled, so that we can send well trained country ministers to rural positions around Australia and into the global mission field.

In 2023, we sent out Ben Connelly and his family from Narrabri to Cowra in the Bathurst Diocese. At the start of this year, we sent Dave Thomson and his family from Moree to Dongara in the Diocese of North West Australia. Next year, David Piper and his family will move from Gunnedah to a BCA post in the Rockhampton Diocese. (Just where I believe will be announced tomorrow). Now, I'm not sure if we will export any other gospel workers from our diocese next year... (if you know, please tell me as soon as possible as I'll need to find replacements).

Though I do know that after their curacy at Narrabri, Trace and Maddie Akankunda are planning to move to Rukengiri in Uganda to serve alongside Andy and Margie Newman who are there with CMS. All these clergy movements are answers to prayer as well. As I stand back from it all I can see God's hand at work, and am encouraged to continue to pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.

*Thank God for the legacy of decades of biblically faithful ministry in our diocese from fine clergy and committed lay people. Pray that we can continue to recruit, mobilise, train and send godly gospel workers into the Lord's harvest, both here and wherever they are most needed.*

#### **4. Gospel worker care and training**

Meanwhile, the task of caring for clergy and the congregations entrusted to them is ongoing. We have been blessed for many years now with good structures for the support of clergy. At our most recent Clergy Conference in June, I sensed that morale was good. Here is a photo taken at the end of that 4 day gathering at Keepit Dam. It's not all the clergy team, as some had already departed, but it's most. At every conference we get excellent speakers. This year it was the Reverend Dr Mark Earngrey from Moore College, who incidentally wrote a fine response to the Darkness book I mentioned earlier (that response is also on the diocesan website if you are interested). In October, we will have the Reverend Dr Rob Smith from SMBC at the Sector Conferences, and again I'm sure it will be a real shot in the arm for our clergy team.

It is important to care well for the team through conferences, training days and deanery group gatherings. In fact, it is our duty of care. The final report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse Child Abuse was released on the 15<sup>th</sup> December 2017. That report "recommended" that all church denominations should have three levels of care in place for their clergy to ensure that they



were supported and kept accountable. The first was professional development, which we already had in place through the conferences and training just described. The second was professional supervision which involved 8-10 sessions per year for every clergyman with a suitably qualified supervisor. The purposes being RESTORATIVE - to help the clergy debrief on the work, FORMATIVE - to help the clergyman think about how to move forward in the work, and NORMATIVE - to keep the clergyman accountable according to our Faithfulness in Service Code of conduct. Professional Supervision was made mandatory for all ordained clergy in our diocese at our 2022 synod meeting, and the recent two year review of the programme indicated that most clergy appreciated the new level of support.

The third level of care “recommended” by the Royal Commission was clergy review. Now while some clergy and parish councils will appreciate the value of this more than others, the reality is that the Royal Commission’s “recommendation” concerning this third level of support for clergy, is actually an expectation. All Anglican dioceses around the country will be expected to implement clergy review much the same as we were expected to implement Professional Supervision. Now, the diocesan leadership team is currently exploring ways to deliver on this level of support. At Archdeacons’ meeting earlier this month, we considered a preliminary proposal by the Centre for Ministry Development (CMD) in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. They have developed the capacity to offer 360-degree reviews for clergy at

a very reasonable cost. CMD have a very capable and experienced team and can also offer Parish Reviews if requested.

Archdeacon Ian Millican will say more about Clergy Review in his Safe Ministry Report. The next step will be to discuss the matter with the clergy team at the Sector Conferences mid next month (21-25<sup>th</sup> October). Then, recommendations on the way forward will be brought to the Diocesan Council meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> November, following another Archdeacons' meeting the day before. My hope is that this new level of support will be of great benefit, both to the clergy and also to the parishes in helping us to keep thinking proactively about how to persevere in our mission "to introduce all people to Jesus and help them home to heaven".

*Thank God for the great work that is already happening in parishes to further that mission, and pray for wisdom as we seek to explore the options for clergy and parish review, and then implement the ones that are most helpful.*

## **5. Introducing all people to Jesus in the year ahead**

We do need to keep thinking proactively about how we can stay on the front foot with our mission both as parishes and as a diocese. Introducing all people to Jesus and helping them home to heaven is about making and growing disciples of Christ, and this is the task at hand for the church according to Jesus as we look forward to his return, (Matthew 28:16-20). To that end, next year Anglican Churches right across Australia will be encouraged to get involved with Hope25.

Hope25 seeks to empower Australian Anglican parishes and communities in an intentional season of sharing hope in Jesus between Easter and Pentecost in 2025. This is an initiative of the Anglican Church Australia. The Standing Committee of General Synod identified Evangelism as one of its strategic priorities before the next General Synod meeting. They requested the Mission and Ministry Commission to plan a season of Parish-based evangelism in 2025. Hope25 – Hope in an Uncertain World is that project.

Now I realise that sharing the hope we have in Jesus with those who don't yet know Him is the air we breathe here in this diocese. So some might say, "Why do we need to get on board with Hope25 given that it's what we are already doing?" But I would say, "What a great opportunity to put evangelism front and centre for a season." I would say, "Let's get on board with this Australia wide Anglican gospel initiative and come up with some parish based evangelistic events to make the most of the opportunity."

Scott Dunlop will be talking some more about this in his Commission for Evangelism and Mission report. But I just want to say, as your Bishop, that I fully support the Hope25 initiative, and would be glad to help parishes in any way I can during that season of heightened evangelistic activity from Easter to Pentecost next year.

*Please pray that the Lord will empower us by his Spirit to persevere in sharing the good news of Jesus with those who don't yet know him. Pray that He will give us ideas and enthusiasm to make the most of the Hope25 evangelistic*

*season, that many more people might be introduced to Jesus and helped home to heaven.*

### **Conclusion: Thank You**

In conclusion, I'd like to thank the excellent team at the Diocesan Registry who have worked so hard to pull this Synod weekend together:

Bishop's Secretary – Emily Speed,

Registrar – Christopher Pears,

Bishop's Assistant – Ian Millican,

our Finance Team – Sam Brennan and Caleb Dobos,

and most recently, our Diocesan Trainer – Dave Freeman.

They're a great team, and I'm very thankful to God for each of them.

And thank you all, both clergy and laity for making yourself available for Synod this weekend here in Armidale. God has richly blessed us with healthy congregations, large and small, right across our diocese. In every parish I visit I see capable, godly people, serving together to build Christ's kingdom as we look forward to his return. It is very encouraging. Let's stick at it together for His glory alone.

*And now, as we begin the business of this Synod, may the Lord grant us wisdom, love and strength to serve Him well over the next couple of days. Amen.*