

President's Address

To the 36th Synod of the Diocese of Grafton

Saturday 22 June 2019

Together with the Synod Sermon from Friday 21 June (page 11)

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Mission

My trusty Oxford English Dictionary tells me that mission is an *intensive course of preaching, services and other religious activities organised to stimulate interest in the Christian faith*. In the Latin, *missio* means “sending”. The Latin term *missio Dei* “mission of God” captures the full depth and power of what mission is: it belongs to God and is God’s work. Mission flows from the heart of God. Paul Avis writes that *Missio Dei* speaks of the overflowing of the love of God’s being and nature into God’s purposeful activity in the world.¹ We each, as individuals and communities, cooperate with God in this mission in various ways. The Anglican Communion’s Five Marks of Mission are a practical guide to mission’s holistic and integral nature but are not a final and complete statement on mission. Mission is not a program, but a divine transforming love in which we are swept up.² Mission is exciting, even breathtaking. So mission is something we give thanks for and participate in with grateful hearts! Rowan Williams writes that mission is not complicated: it is the active presence of Christ coming through in our actions and relationships.³

As we are invited and drawn into God’s work of mission, we realise that our actions and relationships are part of this outpouring of God’s transforming love for the world. It is here that we encounter our sense of vocation. Bishop Tim Harris of Adelaide reminds us that both personally as Baptised Christians and as church communities we are called to be a light to the world, an extended family on mission together.⁴ That we are a people with a mission to cooperate with God’s transforming love and grace is evidenced in many places in the scriptures. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus reads from Isaiah 61 in the Synagogue – a message announcing the time of God’s grace. He has come to proclaim the freedom that heralds God’s transforming love. The life and ministry of Christ involves healing, wholeness and reconciliation – all part of God’s movement of love and grace towards the world. Our vocation then is to be fellow workers with God (1 Cor 3:9) – the human capacity for freedom implies responsibility. Recent Anglican-Orthodox dialogue⁵ affirms that our “chief glory” in responding to God’s calling as fellow-workers with God in his mission includes protecting the dignity of all

¹ Paul Avis, *A Ministry Shaped Mission*, 2005, p.5

² Rowan Williams, ‘Foreword’, in Cathy Ross, ed., *Life-Widening Mission: Global Perspectives from the Anglican Communion*. Oxford: Regnum Books 2012, p.ix

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Tim Harris, The Mission of God, in *Liberated by God’s Grace: Anglican-Lutheran Reflections*. p.11

⁵ International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue, The Buffalo Statement. *In the Image and Likeness of God: A Hope-Filled Anthropology*, Anglican Communion Office, 2015, p.14

life, caring for the created order and aspiring to holiness. Mission reaches its goal in all things being drawn into Christ (Eph 1:10).

In summary then, and with reference to agreed Anglican understandings of mission, mission is God's movement of love toward the world, God's way of loving and saving the world. Baptised Christians and church communities are instruments for mission and have been called to participate in mission together with God.⁶ As his partners in mission we are learning to be present to God, to society, to one another and to our deepest selves in a place where God dwells. So our role in this is to be missionary disciples, revolutionaries in the power of Baptism.⁷

Mission in Grafton

How are we living out this mission in the Diocese of Grafton? It has been a real privilege for me to join you as Bishop since my installation in September 2018, to serve alongside you and to get to know the various ministry units of the diocese. I have been made very welcome in parishes, schools, Anglicare NC and in other settings. I have been impressed with the level of commitment of clergy and other licensed ministers, staff and volunteers. I look forward to sharing in these ongoing ministries in the years ahead. There is a long and distinguished history of mission in the diocese, commencing in 1842 with The Rev'd John McConnell and other pioneer lay people and clergy. Their early work is continued today through the commitment and dedication of many who are cooperating with God in his movement of transforming love toward the world that we call mission. The Mission and Ministry Overview 2018 captures the hopes and vision of Anglicans in Grafton Diocese for how this mission can be lived out now and in the future. It envisages a restructure of the diocese and a proposal for this is currently being developed. After being discussed at Bishop in Council it will be presented at a special meeting in November this year.

When I first arrived I offered to spend a weekday in any ministry unit to which I was invited. I've enjoyed sitting in on staff meetings, Bible Studies, SRE Classes, weekday services, Prayer meetings, joining parishioners for coffee, walking around the town with the Rector and so on. Another way that I have become familiar with mission is through Parish Profiles for vacant parishes seeking a new Rector. These profiles say a lot about the kind of church they are and what they

⁶ The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference 1998, *Transformation and Renewal*. Harrisburg, PA: Moorehouse, 1999, p.8

⁷ Robin Greenwood, *Pioneer Churches*. 2016, p.13, p.18.

want to become. I have enjoyed meeting people and getting to know communities, hearing the stories of individuals, church communities, schools and agencies.

All this has given me some insights, perhaps even the beginnings of an understanding, of some of the issues we face in cooperating with God in his mission in this Diocese. In some places it's clear that the church community has confidence that it has something to share. In these communities the Good News is shared with passion, confidence and love. They are invitational and even magnetic. There is a culture of following up every opportunity to engage with individuals, with different demographics and groups, and to intentionally make connections. In Parish Profiles this is reflected in an invitational tone that is confident that there is something to offer a new priest. However, in other places this confidence is not present, and while they might receive a warm welcome, newcomers might be left wondering why they would want to become involved other than to help support the existing programs and structures.

Like many, I am disheartened that the church appears to have lost some of the respect and standing that it formerly had in the community. This loss of confidence can have implications for how we see ourselves and can negatively impact on our mission if we allow it to. Also adding to disillusionment can be increasing age profiles of congregations, reducing numbers, an inability to replace key leaders and workers with a new generation of disciples, and a lack of clergy offering to take on vacant parishes. In this vein Greenwood writes that churches are easily distracted from their truest identity and purpose by falling numbers, rising damp, too few clergy, old hymns, new hymns, disputes about who is right and who is welcome.⁸ I don't pretend to have all the answers. However, none of these contextual factors should distract us from the importance of a deep personal faith commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ. If we have this, and we truly believe in him, then we should be convinced that we have something precious to share, and equally convinced that people might want to be part of it.

There are many voices that call for, and strategies that can assist with, the renewal of the church's commitment and capacity for communicating the Gospel with passion, persuasion, inspiration and conviction⁹ but unless we each

⁸ Robin Greenwood, *Being Church: The Formation of Christian Community*, SPCK, 2013

⁹ Robin Greenwood, 2016, p.8

have a passionate personal faith they will lead to nothing. As I said above, mission is God's transforming love in which we are swept up. If we have a passionate personal commitment to Christ, mission is exciting and even breathtaking. Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est!

Statistics

In Grafton Diocese we have seen a decline in church attendance over a number of years. Total attendance on an Average Sunday in our Diocese was 3,305 in 2006. By 2011 it was only 2,370. The same period saw a decline in the number of Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals. Most Australian Dioceses have seen a similar decline.¹⁰ As a further example of this decline, a typical parish in our diocese (Casino) had a total church attendance¹¹ in 2018 of 8,109. Thirty-five years earlier, in 1983, that figure was 10,129. For South Grafton the 2018 figure was 5,583 versus 7,943 in 1983.

The Anglican Church of Australia has been engaged in a conversation about its growth and decline since the early 1990s.¹² As Robin Greenwood warns, Anglican habits of mind are being seriously dislodged from complacency.¹³ The changes that confront us are serious and they're not going to disappear so we need to respond in a well thought-out, strategic way. The issues we face are also faced by other rural dioceses. A report on rural ministry commissioned by the Australian Bishops at their 2018 meeting¹⁴ shows that we are all struggling with a significant demographic shift away from rural communities that has taken place over at least the last forty years, aging and inadequate church properties, shortage of clergy prepared to serve in rural areas, older age profile of congregations, smaller congregations and the ever increasing demands of compliance. All this needs to be considered in our restructure proposal.

On my recent visit to the Anglican Communion Office in London I learnt that the average Anglican is a woman, aged 32 who lives in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is vastly different from our Australian Anglican demographic profile. A similar picture was reflected in the bishops attending the recent Canterbury Bishops' Course. Of the thirty bishops present, only eight of us were from Western

¹⁰ *Report of the Viability and Structures Task Force*, General Synod 2014, p.8-031.

¹¹ Total number of people attending all services including Sunday and weekday Eucharists, Morning and Evening Prayer, Baptisms, Marriages and Funerals

¹² Wayne Brighton, *Pioneering Ministry in Australia Today*, p.1

¹³ Robin Greenwood, 2016, p.8

¹⁴ *A Survey of Anglican Ministry in Rural and Remote Australia*. Prepared by the Task Group of the 2018 National Bishops Conference Canberra, 2019

English speaking countries. The rest were from Africa and Asia. While they made up more than 2/3 of the attendees, the African and Asian bishops were vastly under-represented because of the cost of attending the event and the difficulty of obtaining visas. A Sri Lankan Bishop on the course told me that he has consecrated 10 new churches since becoming bishop six months earlier. In the same period, I had deconsecrated two.

Yet despite reducing church attendances, there are signs of hope that there is still room for the Christian message and even a continuing respect for the church as an institution. A suspicion of organised religion, or of a religious account of God, does not necessarily mean that people have given up on the idea of God altogether. In the recent YouGov survey of 1,660 people in Britain,¹⁵ while 19% of people said they don't believe in God, almost half of those believe in a universal spirit or power behind the universe. This means they are not atheists in the strict sense. A particularly encouraging statistic comes from McCrindle research in Australia into local neighbourhood facilities and services. When asked whether churches were beneficial for their neighbourhood, 88% of respondents (excluding regular church attenders) said they were beneficial.¹⁶ Another source of encouragement that people often overlook is that parental confidence in Independent Schools, most of which (84%) are operated by religious organisations (25% of them are Anglican) continues to grow. In 1980, 22.3% of children were being educated in an Independent School. By 2000 the percentage had increased to 30.8% and last year it was 34.4%.¹⁷ Amongst other things this indicates that there is still a level of trust in the community towards the Christian church. Why would you entrust your child to a school run by the church if you did not have a decent amount of respect and confidence in the church as an institution? After all, most Australians (65%) realise that "the Media and the Press negatively affect perceptions of the church."¹⁸ All this should give us continuing hope and purpose in our evangelism. In the 2018 Australian Community Survey¹⁹ of 1,200 people, 30% of those who described themselves as not practising any religion said they were open to an invitation to attend church from a family member or close friend. Of those who described themselves as Christian but not currently attending church, 27% were open to

¹⁵ YouGov Survey, *The Times*, 2018.

¹⁶ A 2013 survey of 1,129 non-church attenders accessed at mccrindle.com.au.

¹⁷ Independent Schools Association of Australia, 2019 Snapshot.

¹⁸ McCrindle.

¹⁹ Australian Community Survey 2018, NCLS.

such an invitation. This is another sign of hope that the Christian message will be heard.

Confident Discipleship

Sometimes those who do have a personal faith commitment don't feel confident in making it known, least of all with a non-Christian. Not surprisingly this is a common problem amongst Anglicans! In this regard it was refreshing, on my recent visit to the United Kingdom, to find that Canterbury Diocese has recently launched a simple approach to help with this, entitled *Changing Conversations*. It consists of just two questions that we can share within our church communities to help us get used to talking about our faith commitment with others: How has knowing Jesus changed your life? How can you and I help each other to be seven day a week disciples? In a similar vein the Australian evangelist John Dickson asks people to identify one person whom they personally know who is a person of faith. He then asked the question, would the world be a better or a worse place without that person? He tells the story of a young Gen Y man who was a committed atheist. When asked this question he was overwhelmed and made a commitment to Jesus that night. It turns out that his aunty had been a lovely Christian woman and he couldn't conceive how the world could possibly be a better place without her. In this regard I was glad that we were able to participate recently in the worldwide wave of prayer known as Thy Kingdom Come. This initiative challenges us to think of five people who currently do not know Jesus and then to pray that they might come to know him.

Given the failures of the church in the past as well as the challenges we face, do we dare to even envisage a future for the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Grafton? Yet I firmly believe that Christianity has something to offer and that the church is here to stay. I'm glad that we're facing up to the church's past failings but in order to live out God's mission of transforming love we need to regain our sense of confidence that we have something to share and we need to learn how to share it graciously yet with confidence.

Diocesan Leadership

As I have stated elsewhere, I am immensely grateful to The Venerable Gail Hagon for her long and fruitful ministry as Diocesan Archdeacon and Ministry Development Officer. The Diocese was able to give thanks and celebrate with Archdeacon Gail in December as she stepped down from this responsibility.

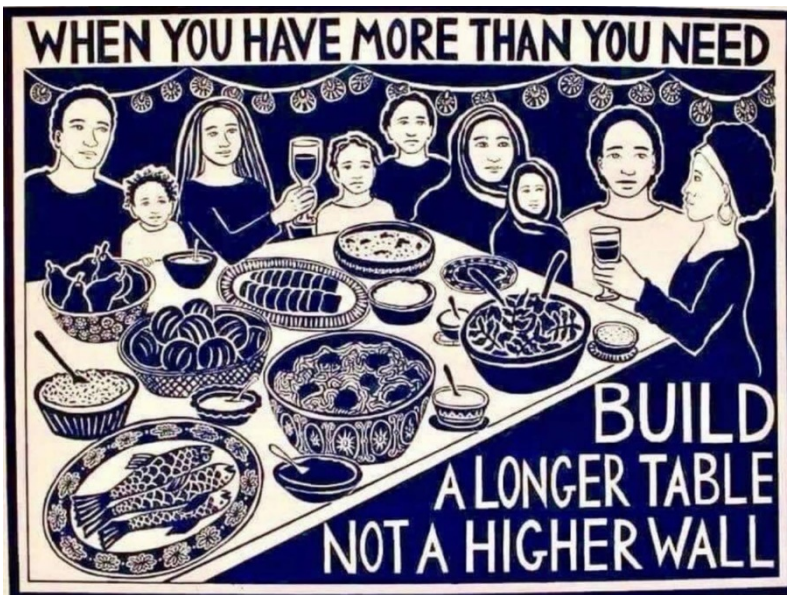
After a period of leave Gail became Special Assistant to the Bishop. In both capacities she has been a much valued colleague and source of wise counsel for me as a new bishop. I am also grateful to Mr Chris Nelson who so ably serves as Registrar of the Diocese and who is systematically addressing a number of complex governance issues. This includes the enormous body of work that surrounded joining the National Redress Scheme, continuing to improve and stabilise diocesan finances, ensuring best practice in a number of areas including financial management, Human Resource management and strategic management of property and investments, responding to recent changes in the regulatory environment in which Anglican Funds Grafton Diocese (AFGD) operates and establishing a partnership with Anglican Funds South Australia (AFSA), overseeing the sale of St Cuthberts Retirement Living and contributing to the improved governance of Anglicare North Coast. The Registrar and I are supported by a gifted team at the Bishop's Registry whose dedication and professionalism serve the diocese well. A particular area of concern to all of us has been Professional Standards and in this regard we have been well served by Director of Professional Standards, Amanda Hickey and the Professional Standards Committee.

When I commenced as Bishop I made it clear that I wanted to foster a collaborative model of leadership by intentionally involving the Senior Clergy Team (including Regional Archdeacons, MSOs, the Dean) in diocesan leadership. With Archdeacon Gail stepping down this also became practical and timely because this wider group could share the senior leadership of the diocese. I appreciate the collegiality, time commitment and advice of The Ven. Matthew Jones, The Ven. Stuart Webb, The Very Rev'd Dr Greg Jenks, Canon Matthew Smedley, The Rev'd Lyn Bullard, The Rev'd Ross Duncan and The Rev'd Christian Ford who have been willing to come on this journey with me as we explore new territory together.

Finally, since becoming bishop I have spoken out on a number of Social Justice matters, including a statement calling for #KidsOffNauru (the related social media post *reproduced below* from around this time received a remarkable 159 shares and a reach of 12K), a statement (in response to the Christchurch attack) expressing concern at the rise of racial intolerance, a statement welcoming the Prime Minister's Apology to Survivors of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse, a statement (in response to a debate about gender issues in Anglican Schools in Sydney) released in consultation with the Principals of each of our schools, that

our schools affirm the dignity and worth of all people, aspiring to be inclusive, open and responsive to diverse needs and abilities and that we foster compassionate and respectful relationships within a safe, disciplined, caring Christian learning community, and a statement urging high profile role models to speak the truth in love. Each of these is available on the Diocesan Website. Admittedly, each has been *reactive* rather than *proactive*, and the wording is not always quite right, but nevertheless each has been my attempt to contribute in the public square on these important issues of social justice.

The Rt Rev'd Dr Murray Harvey
22 June 2019



Sermon Preached at the Synod Eucharist

Christ Church Cathedral, Grafton, 21 June 2019

The Rt. Rev'd Dr Murray Harvey



The latest version of the popular film *Mary Poppins* is entitled *Mary Poppins Returns*.¹ The Banks family is in financial trouble. The children, Annabel and John, decide to help out by selling a precious family heirloom, a Royal Doulton bowl belonging to their mother. However, the bowl becomes accidentally broken. So Mary Poppins and the children visit her cousin, Topsy, who repairs such things.

As they open the door to Topsy's place, the house turns around and around until they all find themselves seated on the ceiling. In a song, Topsy declares herself unable to function, let alone to help fix their precious bowl. As we might guess from her name (Topsy), this is a regular occurrence at Topsy's house. Every second Wednesday, from 9am until noon, Topsy's life turns upside down: she doesn't know "her up from her down, her east from her west, her topsy from her bottomsy!" She sings:

*Fast is slow, low is high, stop is go and that is why
Every second Wednesday is a hurdle
From 8 to 9, all is well
Then I roll over on my shell
And all because the world is turning turtle.*

*Day is night, dog is cat, black is white, thin is fat
That is why I'm loosening up my girdle
I cannot help this charming troop
Don't mock me, 'cause I'm in the soup
And why? Because the world is turning turtle*

*Oh, woe is me, I'm as opposite as I can be
I long for Thursdays when the world is drab.*²

As I reflect on Topsy's experience, I think it is remarkably similar to our own experience of being the church in a post-Christendom world. Our Anglican Church institution, our structures, our processes, our way of being present in communities, doesn't seem to make sense any more. Some things that worked for generations, aren't working so well. Through our institutional church eyes, we are having trouble perceiving the world around us. Perhaps some examples might help illustrate my point, remembering that the news isn't all bad, it's just difficult to make sense of.

Even if we do well at attracting newcomers and including them in the life of our local church community: the rosters may still have lots of gaps because the new people have a different view of the church, of *commitment* and *belonging*.

Maybe we've got 400 hundred Facebook followers, but only 25 people in church on Sunday!

Other things are topsy turvy too. Together with lower levels of *trust* in institutions generally, statistics show that society's level of trust in the church has dropped, yet independent schools, most of which (over 80%) are run by the mainline churches, have strong and ever-increasing enrolments, and healthy levels of parental confidence.

We have some lovely church *buildings* scattered all over the country, yet many of these are out of step with what younger generations are looking for in a gathering space for worship, learning or socialising.

Even if we set the buildings to one side, *attitudes* are hard to make sense of. In a recent survey³ of attitudes, non-church attenders were asked why they don't attend church? 47% said because it was irrelevant to their lives. Fair enough. But in the same survey, respondents were also asked: are churches beneficial in my neighbourhood? 88% said yes! This is good news, but what does it mean?

In another survey⁴, of the 19% of people who said they don't believe in God, half of them said they do believe in "a universal spirit or power behind the universe" What is this statistic? Where did that come from? What does it mean?

I could go on with more illustrations but I think you know what I mean: our Anglican mindset has its roots firmly in an era when society was a very different place. But this Christendom model, as a way of understanding the world, has long since faded into the sunset. As a church, we are faithfully trying to see how our established way of being can engage with a society that has undergone seismic shifts over the last few decades. There are glimmers of hope, as the statistics suggest, but what on earth do they mean and how can we make sense of them?



I wonder, what does this mean for you, and for your church community? How have these seismic changes affected you? Maybe, like me, you feel like Topsy and the children: our world has turned upside down and we're struggling to find our perspective. While we're disoriented, we can't properly get our bearings or function effectively.

In our scripture readings tonight, we hear of Paul's experience on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22). Tonight we heard the first account of this event, but there are two other accounts, later in Acts (22:3-21; 26:2-23). While he sought letters from the religious authorities to enable him to persecute, it's clear that the initiative was Saul's - the motivation for this mission stemming from his own deep passion and hatred. By his own later admission, he saw this as **his mission** (22:4-5; 26:9-12).

To say that this encounter on the Road to Damascus disoriented Paul or Saul, is an understatement. He fell to the ground (9:4), couldn't see (9:9), he needed to be led (9:8; 22:11) and for three days neither ate nor drank (9:9). Ananias ministered to him and restored his sight (9:10-19).

Like Topsy's world, Saul's world was turned upside down and he lost all perspective. It was a disorienting experience, but one that led to the finding of a new perspective and a new way of understanding the world and of his place in it. It was no longer to be his own mission of hate, but **God's mission** of love. Initially he was not able to make sense of this Damascus Road experience, but as he reflected on it he began to use words that reveal that he eventually saw it in vocational terms. It was not only a conversion to the way of Christ, but a *call to participate in God's mission*. In Paul's case, this involved a specific task: an apostleship to the gentiles. Paul later described it as an act of God's grace (1 Cor 15:1-11).



Predictably, in the *Mary Poppins Returns* movie, Mary Poppins is having nothing of this disorientation! Her advice to Topsy is that if life insists on turning everything upside down, then she should stand on her head and adopt a new perspective. As Mary Poppins says,

*When you change the view from where you stood;
The things you view will change for good*

With this change of perspective, everything makes sense, Topsy is able to function again, and the family heirloom bowl is fixed, to the great relief of the children. "I never thought of things that way" (sings Topsy) "now Wednesdays are my favourite day!"

From what perspective should we look at things? Paul found his new perspective, his re-orientation, in adopting God's new mission for his life and living out God's call for him. Rather than pursuing his own mission, he re-oriented himself to God's mission.

What is our call, our vocation, in this strange new landscape that we find ourselves? How can we make sense of it? Like Paul, we have to accept that God is somehow in this strange new landscape, this experience that we find so disorientating. What is he calling us to? In his ongoing revelation, what new perspective and insights does he have for us? How can we use the gifts that he has given us (individually and collectively) to join in his mission?

The Ministry and Mission Overview (MMO) is Grafton Diocese's way of somehow getting our heads around this new landscape. It has already challenged us to look at new ways of being the church. This will involve much consultation over the coming months as we look at more specific plans, but let's approach all of this with an openness to God's call.

Gracious God, give us wisdom to perceive you, intellect to understand you, diligence to seek you, patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you and a life to proclaim you, through the power of the spirit of the Lord Jesus. Amen.
(*St Benedict*)

MA Harvey 7.vi. 2019

Notes.

1. Walt Disney Pictures, 2018
2. *Turning Turtle* Song from *Mary Poppins Returns*
3. mccrindle.com.au, 2013
4. YouGov 2018



