



# Anglican Church of Australia

**THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS  
to the  
Seventeenth General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia  
Monday 4 September 2017**

**The Most Reverend Dr Philip L. Freier  
Primate of Australia**

*Acknowledgement*

Let me first acknowledge the Gubi Gubi people, the traditional owners of this land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Welcome to this 17<sup>th</sup> General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia.

I commence with these words of prayer from the *Wontulp Bi-Buya Indigenous Theology Working Group*

*Holy Father, God of Love,  
You are the Creator of all things.*

*We acknowledge the pain and shame of our history  
and the sufferings of Our peoples,  
and we ask your forgiveness.  
We thank you for the survival of Indigenous cultures*

*Our hope is in you because you gave your Son Jesus  
to reconcile the world to you.  
We pray for your strength and grace to forgive, accept and love one  
another, as you love us and forgive and accept us in the sacrifice of your  
Son.*

*Give us the courage to accept the realities of our history so that we may  
build a better future for our Nation.  
Teach us to respect all cultures.  
Teach us to care for our land and waters.  
Help us to share justly the resources of this land. Help us to bring about  
spiritual and social change to improve the quality of life for all groups in  
our communities, especially the disadvantaged.  
Help young people to find true dignity and self-esteem by your Spirit.*

*May your power and love be the foundations on which we build our  
families,  
our communities and our Nation, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

“The pain and shame of our history”

We commenced our time together yesterday with an act of worship in the presence of almighty God under whose judgment we stand in our gathering as the members of this 17<sup>th</sup> General Synod. Our worship took us to the place of lamentation for our failures. It called us to own our personal responsibility in walking the redemptive path of restoration and healing for all that has been harmed by human sin and all whose lives continue to be affected by this failure. It also called us to a corporate responsibility for harm that has happened in the Church's name.

This synod has many matters before it but none can be more urgent than the three measures on our agenda concerning child protection and our response to survivors of childhood sexual abuse. The Safe Ministry to Children Bill set in place consistent and high standards for child safety in our church for all children who are part of our life and activity. The Redress Bill enables us to participate in the Commonwealth Redress Scheme for people who have experienced child sexual abuse in the church and within our institutions. The Episcopal Standards Bill widens the scope and rigour of accountability for the members of the House of Bishops in the area of their responsibility for child safety. Taken together they are brought to you by the Standing Committee of the 16<sup>th</sup> General Synod as coherent measures to respond to the failures that have been exposed by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Let us make our own the apology to the survivors of child sexual abuse that was given by the General Synod in 2004 and most recently by the General Secretary of the General Synod Office at the Royal Commission Public Hearing in March of this year. The General Synod apology from 2004 is salutary:

*That this General Synod and we as members of it acknowledge with deep regret and repentance the past failings of the Church and its members. On behalf of the whole Anglican Church in this country we apologise unreservedly to those who have been harmed by sexual abuse perpetrated by people holding positions of power and trust in the Church. We apologise for the shameful way we actively worked against and discouraged those who came to us and reported abuse. We are ashamed to acknowledge that we only took notice when the survivors of abuse became a threat to us. We apologise and ask forgiveness for the Church's failure at many levels to listen to and acknowledge the plight of those who have been abused, to take adequate steps to assist them, and to prevent abuse from happening or recurring. We commit the Church to listen to survivors of abuse to respond with compassion to all those who have been harmed, both to those who have come forward and to those who may choose to do so in the future, and to deal appropriately, transparently and fairly with those accused of abuse and negligence.*

*(Moved by Bishop John Harrower - 4 October 2004)*

Lamentation is a proper response to the pain and shame of our failures. Whether in Jeremiah, Lamentations, Job or the Book of Psalms, a similar emotional and devotional sequence from predicament to hope is evidenced. Central to Biblical lamentation is the conviction that God is trustworthy and faithful, showing mercy in the deliverance of Israel from oppression, and is the God who shows the divine purpose in human history. True to his self-revealing character, God is true to his

word, a word that has all the power necessary to accomplish God's promise. The passion narrative gathers up, in the words of our Saviour, the whole salvation history of Israel as a new beginning is inaugurated for the whole creation.

Developing the theological tradition of lament will give us a different perspective. For many in cultures like ours, radical personal autonomy is highly valued. This enshrines high individualism and low commitment to a responsibility for things that go beyond the immediate and the personal. It is no wonder that confidence in many aspects of how we organise society, from politics to institutions, are at an all-time low. Without a sense of our involvement in something bigger, and the responsibilities that this participation carries, assumed virtues like the common good seem alien or antiquated. Lament takes us from this restricted sense of self to a larger one that is framed by the great moments of salvation history; creation, redemption and the consummation of all things in Christ.

Lamentation, rightly understood, brings us to the place where we own the responsibility of the Church for all of our history, the true history, in both its positive and negative impacts. It is in this way, by truth telling and standing under the judgement of God, that we learn together and can find ways of still celebrating the good as we continue to right the harm of the evil. St John's Gospel is very clear about the liberating power of truth - in fact John 8.32 "The truth will set you free", is the motto of the Anglican Communion.

As unfamiliar as it is in a world imagined as only the consequence of human ingenuity we are continually confronted by the enormity of human sin. You undoubtedly know how this develops - in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer it is a corruption of real and effective spiritual power into a shadowy and ineffective version of the real thing. It is he says, ineffective grace, 'without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.' Such a world is the area of our torment as we are locked us into a world where humanity - in all of its greatness as well as its failings - becomes magnified to be all that there is to reality. No wonder this hellish state does not nurture the soul or feed our need for hope, no wonder that there is so much despair in the world.

It is truly a lamentable state of affairs. Without God's redeeming love in Christ we are captured in a cruel space without the hope of salvation. Lamentation is our proper response. It is a path that we walk knowing the truth of our personal and corporate failure, the reality of God's judgement and the deliverance that is freely given in Christ.

## **RECONCILIATION**

A continuing lamentable state of affairs is the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in our nation. The statistics of disadvantage are well known, as is the difficulty many Australians have in embracing the moral responsibility for dispossession and its social and spiritual effects.

The long-awaited final report of the Referendum Council appointed to advise the Prime Minister was delivered on 30 June 2017. This was the latest stage in a process that dates at least from the failure of the 1999 referendum. That referendum asked two questions and both were rejected: one on the republic and the other on a preamble to the Constitution. The proposed preamble included the

words, ‘Honouring Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, the nation’s first people, for their deep kinship with their lands and for the ancient and continuing cultures which enrich the life of our country’. After the 2010 election, Prime Minister Julia Gillard promised a referendum on constitutional recognition for Indigenous people before the 2013 election, but this did not take place. Tony Abbott took to the 2013 election, which he won, a commitment to release a draft proposal for constitutional change within a year of taking office, but once again matters became bogged down. The highly symbolic date of 27 May 2017, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 referendum that gave the Commonwealth powers to make laws that were specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, was another missed opportunity.

The ‘Uluru Statement from the Heart’ has confirmed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want any constitutional change to confer on the Commonwealth real ‘agreement-making’ powers with the First Nations people of Australia. This is controversial and will need strong bipartisan commitment to gain the public’s confidence. The recent experience of the way the plebiscite about same-sex marriage became a wedge rather than a unifying issue does not fill me with confidence that our politicians can unite over constitutional recognition. Even so, it is essential that any apparent difficulties are not permitted to allow this important reform to drift indefinitely.

The ‘Uluru Statement from the Heart’ contains its own powerful words of lament. I was deeply moved by this paragraph, “Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not innately a criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.”

In the times of deepest trouble and where their faith was most tested our Christian brothers and sisters have always praised God. Whether in prison (Acts 16.25) or on their way to death in the cruel spectacles of the ancient world or in our present day, the disciples of Jesus Christ have joined with the community of all believers in singing ‘psalms and hymns and spiritual songs’ (Ephesians 5.19). I pay tribute to the members of NATSIAC who are amongst us at this General Synod and to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Anglicans across the country. Their faithfulness in the face of many discouragements is a powerful witness of hope that comes from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

A theology of lament also links us better to the times and people whose lives and discipleship offer us the example of ‘the race that has been run with perseverance’ (after Hebrews 12.1).

We build our own lives as Christians on the life and witness of all those who in their day and circumstances shared and lived our common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

## ROYAL COMMISSION INTO INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Since the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was established in 2013 the Anglican Church of Australia has been involved in its work in many ways. We have engaged with the Royal Commission's work at both practical and spiritual levels. I am grateful for the continued work of the Royal Commission and its officers. Like me you have no doubt been appalled by the stories of abuse and the process failure that has so often followed. I continue to be impressed by the courage of all who have come forward to speak. Our Christian faith acknowledges that, in life, the good and the bad are mixed together. Our faith calls us to look to a future where the pain of this life is gathered through the redemptive work of Christ and transformed to wholeness. Meanwhile we need to be attentive to the opportunities for improving our own practice and especially our response to any who have suffered through the misconduct of clergy or church workers. My prayers are with all those who have suffered from abuse, wherever it has occurred.

The Commission has already made a number of important recommendations to Government. We have discussed these recommendations at a range of forums and have been well served by our Royal Commission Working Group under the able and dedicated leadership of Mr Garth Blake, SC. We have a responsibility to act, to review and to improve.

## EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia - or assisted dying, as its advocates prefer to call it - has again been hotly debated around Australia. I recognise that among us there are those who hold passionate alternate views. The right to choose has dominated ethical discussion in the West in the past 50 years, and in general free choice is a good thing for us. But not, I believe, in the choice to shorten our life.

Christians should not fear death, but we may well fear the process of dying, which involves pain, vulnerability and humiliation over a long period. So I understand and acknowledge that. But I cannot in good conscience support the state intervening to end lives via assisted suicide.

My reasons for this take more time to set out than is possible here. I set them out in summary in July this year when I joined six other Melbourne bishops in writing an open letter to the Premier of Victoria, Mr Daniel Andrews, about our concerns for proposed legislation in the Victorian Parliament.

We pointed out that human dignity is honoured in living life, not in taking it. It is right to seek to eliminate pain, but the ethical decisions in this desire always fall under the proscription of the sixth Commandment, "you shall not murder". Euthanasia and assisted suicide risk abandoning those who are in greatest need, who deserve our care and support.

## CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change remains one of the most urgent and intransigent issues facing the church and, indeed, the world. Australia, one of the highest per capita carbon-emitters, is already affected. We've seen double the amount of record hot days over the past 50 years, an increase in the frequency and intensity of weather events, a rising sea level and further danger to our fragile coral reef and marine eco-systems. The short political cycle works against an intelligent long-term approach. At every international meeting of Anglicans that I have attended, climate change is cited as a great evil whether from Sudan or Bangladesh or the Pacific. Two years ago I joined South African Primate Thabo Makgoba in publishing an opinion article in the Age and Sydney Morning Herald challenging the world's political leaders before the Paris climate accord. I also joined other Australian religious leaders in pleading with the Government to commit to stronger cuts in carbon emissions.

The Christian position here is clear: we have a moral imperative to care for all of God's creation and the most vulnerable. In response to God's gift of life, we must act to protect our earth, our environment and our fellow humans. Climate change is also a social concern and a justice concern, as well as a political and economic concern.

## REFUGEES

Refugee policy is another area about which many politicians would like the churches to remain silent. But it should be a matter of conscience for all Australians that we have kept asylum-seekers in deliberately callous conditions. Here many of them have suffered trauma and stress, especially defenceless children.

I am deeply concerned about the recent announcement by the Immigration Minister that welfare services will be cut to around 100 asylum seekers who were brought here for medical treatment. This is just the latest in a series of decisions to place vulnerable people in even more exposed conditions.

Of course, it is the responsibility of governments to control national borders. But as Christians - or simply as people - our most urgent response must come from our common humanity and empathy. It is tragic for these vulnerable people that political parties have hardened refugee resettlement policy and tragic for these few people to be treated in this way.

As with climate change, the political debate and economic factors have allowed ethical questions to go unasked, let alone answered. For example, Australia and other nations often admit wealthy immigrants without asking how they acquired their wealth - provided they don't come by boat!

Anglican churches do a huge amount at the grassroots level to help and care for refugees, and I am grateful for that. How much better for us to decide these matters based on a compassion that arises from our shared humanity? We do well to remember St Paul's exhortation in the Bible, 'not to grow weary of doing good'.

## **POVERTY IN AUSTRALIA**

2.5 million Australians live in poverty, and around the world, more than a billion people are desperately poor. In Australia, a quarter of those in poverty, or more than 600,000, are children. Let those numbers sink in. In a country as prosperous as ours, almost 15% of our population are facing financial stress just trying to survive.

The implications of this are more than simply not having enough money. According to the research, those experiencing poverty are locked out of the choices and opportunities afforded to others in our society. For these people, poverty means insecurity, powerlessness, exclusion, and susceptibility to violence. For many it means little exposure to the ministry of the church and the opportunity to hear the Gospel.

I am thankful to our Anglican Agencies, represented through Anglicare Australia, and our parishes.

## **SAME-SEX MARRIAGE**

Even though the matter is before the High Court of Australia this week, it is likely that Australians will soon be given the opportunity to vote on changing Australia's marriage law to include same-sex marriage. I have encouraged all Anglicans to exercise their democratic right and to participate in the postal plebiscite. Although not legally binding, I believe that Parliament will be better informed about Australians' views by this means.

Anglicans, like other Australians, have a wide range of opinions on same-sex marriage, supporting or opposing it for a variety of reasons in accordance with their conscience and their understanding of the principles and issues. I do not presume to advise others how they should vote, though I myself intend to vote "no".

I think Anglicans are capable of a respectful discussion without vilifying our opponents and respecting that each side's position can be principled and considered. Kindness in our speech should be the hallmark of our engagement in difficult issues. For me, the most disturbing part of the recent discussion has been the assumption that Australians are incapable of discussing this matter with civility. It is unfortunate that this rhetoric, that we are well accustomed to in party political debate, has been applied to a large part of the electorate who reasonably expected to share a direct role in the decision. Stereotyping public opinion ahead of an argument being advanced is divisive and destructive of public discourse.

If same-sex marriage becomes law, the Church will of course need to accept that it is part of the landscape. Politicians on all sides have affirmed that we can still stand for and offer holy matrimony between a man and a woman as a sacred ordinance given by God, while accepting that the state has endorsed a wider view of marriage. The doctrine of the Book of Common Prayer remains unchanged, that marriage is between a man and a woman, under God, forsaking all others until death parts them. I do not believe that the Anglican Church in Australia is likely to revise its doctrine of marriage.

The Church also understands the desire of two people to express their commitment of love and self-sacrifice to each other. Christians have not always shown the respect or perspective they should. It is undeniably true that LGBTQI people have felt judged and rejected, even ostracised, inside the Church and that we must be more attentive to pastoral sensitivity.

## **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Domestic violence is an evil that is too often hidden, and to our shame it is hidden also in church families. There have been suggestions in the media that Christian teaching can exacerbate the likelihood of violence, but there is no Christian teaching that endorses or supports domestic violence. Earlier this year, I appeared on ABC TV's The Drum and read out an apology by the Rev'd Daryl McCullough, parish priest at West Wyalong in Bathurst Diocese. He wrote: "As a priest in the Church of God, I am truly and deeply sorry if you or anyone you love has been the victim of abuse and found the church complicit in making that abuse worse. If you are one of my parishioners, know that I will listen, I will believe you and I will not dismiss you. I will do everything I can to support you and I will never tell you to just go home and put up with it." I fully endorse these remarks and would like those remarks to represent all of us. Motions on our business paper address this traumatic and tragic issue.

## **OUR GENERAL SYNOD 2017**

Preparations for this 17<sup>th</sup> General Synod began in November 2015 with the selection of our meeting venue. The General Synod Standing Committee scheduled an additional meeting in February this year to settle the legislative agenda and appointed the Executive Committee of Standing Committee to oversee the synod arrangements.

At this point I need to comment on a procedural matter that means we will be asked to admit onto the agenda the redress measure by a 75% majority in each of the three houses. When the General Synod Standing Committee met in May 2017 it was confident it could finalise legislation by the usual circular resolution procedure. 75% approval is needed to pass a resolution and the absence of some members overseas meant this was not reached. At this General Synod you will be asked to support a bill to amend Rule II to revise the Standing Committee's circular resolution process to provide a more reliable process in the future. I urge synod members to support the motion to bring the Redress Bill onto our agenda.

Along with Archbishops Aspinall and Davies and at the time Archbishop-elect Smith and other senior leaders, I participated in the Royal Commission's Public Hearing into Case Study 52 - the 'wrap up' hearing relating to the Anglican Church. The Commissioners questioned several panels about a wide range of the church's life and work. This included current policies and procedures in relation to child protection, cultural factors that may have contributed to the occurrence of child sexual abuse at Anglican institutions, and the response of the Anglican Church authorities. A number of members of this General Synod contributed as panel members as well as others who had expert knowledge in their area.

The Commissioners were very clear in stressing the community expectation that we must achieve uniform and consistent national standards of child safety throughout the diversity of our church and related organisations. I made the commitment that this would be addressed in legislation at this General Synod and several important matters are on our agenda as we meet over the next days.

I thank the Metropolitans for hosting provincial meetings in preparation for General Synod. Meetings were held in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane in July and August, involving more than 140 members of this General Synod along with other members of diocesan leadership. An extra Bishops' meeting was held on 23 August to allow discussion of any points of difference. I hope we are now well informed about the three important responses that we need to make in the areas of child safety, redress and episcopal standards.

There are a number of important motions on the notice paper and undoubtedly others to be added in the call for notices of motion. Please familiarise yourself with the Standing Orders and give some space for us all to grow in familiarity as we settle into, what are for many, new meeting rules. As you might expect the range of Synod motions reflects a variety of topical issues in our national conversation as well as those that are more relevant to the internal life of the church. Respectful debate which hears and understands the diversity of views that other synod members hold is both the aim of our Standing Orders and the lived history of earlier synods. I encourage each of us to appropriately express our views on the many matters before us, but also to listen attentively to those views that are not our own. In my experience that always offers an opportunity for learning.

## **THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF MODERN AUSTRALIA**

One hundred years ago more people lived in rural and remote Australia than lived in our capital cities. In 2017 the situation has vastly changed, as you all know.

The rural dioceses in the Anglican Church of Australia largely reflect Australia's demographic patterns of a century ago. Over this period, and particularly in the last 50 years, rural and regional Australia has changed significantly, largely driven by economics, water policies, climate change and technology. Farms are significantly bigger, the rural workforce has declined and many towns and small communities across rural and regional Australia are in decline. Populations in mining towns have come and gone.

We are just about the most urbanised country in the world. Some 82% of Australia's population lives in major metropolitan regions and within 50kms of the coast.

The population decline in many parts of rural and regional Australia is impacting significantly on the Church and particularly the Anglican Church which for over 200 years has built a presence right across this land.

The recent Census has shown that Anglicans now make up 13% of the population whereas in 1966 we were 34%. This decline is reflected in many rural and regional churches and congregations and presents significant challenges to dioceses. Less than half of these rural churches are served by full time ministry. Many rural

dioceses are finding it increasingly difficult to sustain stipendiary ministry and to serve their present congregations.

While some regional cities are growing much of this growth is from people moving from outlying rural areas.

Rural and regional ministry has always faced challenges from the tyranny of distance, the availability of clergy and the lack of resources. Now, population decline has vastly increased that challenge and for the first time in over a century the continued ministry presence in many rural areas is under question.

The other side of this population equation has been the growth of our biggest urban centres. In the decade between June 2006 and June 2016 the number of people living in Australia's capital cities has risen by 2.9 million people. Brisbane and Perth grew by about a half a million and Sydney and Melbourne by more than three quarters of a million people. In percentage terms this is over 25% growth across our major centres of population. I think that it is evident that this growth has stretched each diocese where it has occurred and means that planting churches in these growing communities remains a very high priority. I am grateful for the General Synod Ministry Commission for facilitating a conversation between church planters in Melbourne during 2016. We need a vision for ministry to our cities as well as the physical and human resources to complete it.

## CONCLUSION

There are many things that I have spoken about in this address that give no cause for pride or satisfaction. Indeed, I suggested lament as the appropriate response to our failure to protect children. I encouraged you to frame your response to a range of issues in the shape of this ancient response to the dual realities of human failure and God's sovereignty and providence. John 16.20 tells us that our lamentation will often be at odds with the world, with its desire to get on and not look at the hard and contradictory facts of our human existence. "You will weep and mourn but the world will rejoice." Let us spend the time to hold these painful realities closely in our attention, to hold our lamentation before the Lord Jesus Christ who is the measure of all things. And holding lament in commitment to journey on, we trust in the Lord's hands alone for pain to be resolved and joy to emerge in its place. Our Saviour's journey through the desolation of the cross and the tomb are sure signs that this is no light thing. As hard and troubling as the journey is we are always held in the truth of Resurrection as we await the coming of the new heavens and new earth where there is 'no more death or crying or pain' (Revelation 21.4). This is our hope, this is our future. May we walk towards it together in these next days at Maroochydore.

Grace and peace in Christ Jesus.

*+Philip*