

Tue 1 July 2014



The 16th General Synod has convened in Adelaide. It is the national parliament of the Anglican Church as representatives from the 23 dioceses meet together to pray, share and discuss matters affecting our common life.

The day began with prayer which was quickly followed by the Primate's address. Contrary to expectations, this was no swansong or walk down memory lane as Archbishop Phillip Aspinall counts down the sleeps to the end of his term.

Rather, it was a stirring presidential-like state of the church address that was sweeping in its scope and sobering in its content. For what was on display was not the strength or glory of Anglicanism but its weakness and shame.

The shame is our past blindness and neglect towards those who suffered abuse from clergy and church workers.

Archbishop Phillip spoke at length about how our church has 'focussed on both preventing abuse from occurring and responding to allegations and instances of abuse in the best possible way'.

The church has developed over 15 resources, guidelines and packages to help leaders improve their pastoral care practices and care for those abused. In his view, the Royal Commission is 'an opportunity for the Church to review its policies and procedures to protect children and to check that we are doing all we can in this area'.

The Royal Commission's work has exposed the Church's great weakness namely that Australian Anglicans are a disparate lot, despite the shingle out the front. With 23 dioceses our approaches, measures, rules and mechanisms and capacity for dealing with victims are varied, inconsistent and potentially unfair.

Of course, these challenges have long been evident to Anglican leaders nationally. The difference between dioceses in terms of their financial capacity, organisational depth and parish health is reaching crisis point. Risks are high, exposure is growing and the national organisation 'requires urgent attention now'.

16 years the national Constitution Review Commission warned that economics rather than theology would determine the church's future if key problems were not addressed. Theological differences often hinder cooperation between dioceses. Power is so decentralised that the central agencies are not merely weak but 'a toothless tiger, expensive to run, but can basically only plan and advise'. Those who make the decisions are not necessarily representative of the church as a whole.

As a church, we struggle with balancing freedom and diversity, locality and catholicity, unity and diversity. In the Primate's view, 'local autonomy has trumped substantial endeavours to express

our belonging together, to act together to provide mutual support, to plan and organise mission sensibly and to allocate resources where they are needed'. It is easier to assert our independence than to express communion that involves dying for one another.

So is it time for the church nationally to reconsider the constitutional picture?

Of course, the change required in the church is not just structural but also spiritual and missional. None of these things can happen in isolation. They all need to work together. We need spiritual vitality to engage boldly in mission supported by the right organisation frameworks.

The time has come for church leaders to choose between two difficult options.

We either chose to do nothing and keep muddling along until someone sleepwalks into bankruptcy and change is forced upon us. Or will we be courageous and chose to find strength in our weakness, finding ways to use our diversity and commitment to freedom to help each other with God's mission?

Thankfully, the Synod has put in place over 25 small groups to help us meet together, talk and pray about our hopes, fears and potential for transformation that lie ahead of us all.

The question in today's group was, what are your highest hopes for ministry and mission of the Anglican Church of Australia to our nation? What would be your answer? **The bible studies are available for download.**

After lunch, the rest of the day was given to debating some legal matters and motions.

The bill for a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission passed. In the past, NATSIAC hadn't the resources or the direction to achieve much. Hopefully, the new bill will change this by giving it some definite responsibilities and the funding to make things happen.

A bill about marriage for the removal of requirements that one person in a couple be baptised failed once again. It needed a two-thirds majority in each house. It won the house of laity 110 to 79 but lost with the narrowest margin in the house of clergy 114 to 72. The debate moved around many issues from the theology of marriage, the history of the rite in the church and the tension between missional engagement and the preservation of identity. Doing nothing moved ahead one nil.

This evening, a resolution about the Anglican Communion Covenant was debated. What looked like a warm and fuzzy motion that expressed a broad commitment to the Anglican Communion as well as openness towards further dialogue got the punters going.

Some wanted to signal to the Communion that our engagement comes with some strong constitutional limitations. Added to this, people were tired of the whole process and wanted the Communion to pursue a different pathway that wasn't so centralised and controlling. All that failed and the original somewhat sleepy motion was passed.

A motion about diocesan policies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ministry stirred people too. The motion aimed to draw attention to area where developing indigenous ministry was difficult, where commitment was inadequate and involvement needed further improvement. There was some debate about adding an additional clause asking dioceses to develop mission plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Synod expressed a strong desire to develop and enhance our partnership with indigenous people. It was a good note to finish on.

By Reverend **Wayne Brighton**