

The Thirty-fourth Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Ballarat



Presidential Address

The Right Rev'd Garry Weatherill
Bishop of Ballarat

2023

Welcome to the First session of the 34th Synod of the Diocese of Ballarat

Some of you have been to many Synods. For some, this is a new experience. Everyone is welcome. The old adage that Anglicans are episcopally led, but synodically governed is lived out in our experience of Synods. Most of us take this way of operating for granted. But this year our Roman Catholic friends around the world are experiencing something of a revival in Synodical government, and at an international level they are having a Synod on synodality! At the other extreme, some Baptist congregations are withdrawing from the Baptist Union because of congregational theological and Biblical arguments. When Synod seems to be moving at a snail's pace, or when financial arguments reach a crescendo, remember what a gift the Synod is to us as a church. A decision-making body where the Bishop, the Clergy and the Laity all have an important voice in moving forward honours all members of the Church and shares authority in a remarkably democratic way.

From 1994 until 2003 the Synod of the Diocese met under the presidency of Bishop David Silk. Tomorrow at the midday Eucharist we will give thanks for his life as our Bishop and his many years of service to Christ's Church, as a deacon, a priest and a bishop in the Anglican Church, and then more recently his 12 years as a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. May he rest in peace, and rise in glory.

Recognising Four Contributions

It is a great joy to welcome two new Canons in our diocesan life at this Synod.

While Canons in our diocese do not exercise any governance role in the Cathedral, the appointment of Canons is one way in which the Bishop recognises exceptional service and commitment to our common life.

Kate Schnerring is known and loved around the diocese for her passion for those in need of practical and emotional support. In her work with Anglicare Ballarat and with Anglicare Victoria, Kate has shown in many ways the pragmatic response to a world where need is always present. She is a great communicator and advocate for Anglicare's work, and she

inspires many by her clear faith and unwavering conviction that we can all make a difference in the lives of others. These characteristics are also evident in her administrative work for Anglican Criminal Justice Ministry around the state. Along with Fr Rob Ferguson, Kate enables ministry to those who are in prison. This work with some of the lost, last, least and lowly people in our state, demonstrates our belief that what we do for the least, we do for Jesus. I have appointed Kate as the Mother Esther Canon (usually held by the Canon Theologian) because of the close links between the work of Mother Esther, founder of the Community of the Holy Name and its strong commitment to social justice, and Kate's passion to be alongside the same groups of people in contemporary society.

The Reverend Robyn Shackell was one of the first two women ordained as Priest in our Diocese. She had served her local community at Warrnambool and the wider Diocesan family for many years as a Deacon and as a layperson. Except for her time as an ITIM chaplain, Robyn has never been paid for her work in the Church, even though she has degrees in psychology and theology. In the last decade, Robyn has made an outstanding contribution to diocesan life through gathering and chairing meetings of the Ministry Development Committee. This important "ginger" group, plans and implements opportunities for ongoing lay and clerical education and faith development. If you have experienced any training days or online Bible Study or Lenten groups or Advent Studies or the Bible Reading Challenge, you have benefitted from Robyn's belief that faith is for growing and deepening. She is admitted as the Aidan of Lindisfarne Canon, a connection which recognises her love of the Celtic traditions within Christianity and expresses her love for God in the created order all around.

Tomorrow we will honour Alice Knight for her work with ABM for mission both here and overseas. The Chair of ABM in Victoria will be with us just before Mass tomorrow to present Alice with a Coaldrake Award. This is ABM's highest honour and is awarded to former missionaries and to those who have made an outstanding contribution towards an understanding of and support for mission here in Australia. Alice's annual ABM luncheons at her home at Linton are famous for their abundance of food, flowers and mission zeal. But she has also worked

with ABM's Partnership Committee, with the national ABM Auxiliary, including in leadership roles, and fostering local interest in and support for ABM's Projects for more than twenty years. And this is only one aspect of Alice's extraordinary commitment to God and God's creation.

We also honour and gives thanks to God for more than 40 years service to the legal and governance life of the Diocese by Mr David Fawell, who this week concluded his last Property and Finance Committee meeting. David has been Official Principal, Diocesan Solicitor, a Synodsmen and on Bishop-in-Council, and Property and Finance at various times for most of his adult life. His insight and advice, even last Tuesday, has always been of the highest calibre as well he has been a faithful Parish member, most recently at St Peter's Ballarat.

These four, bringing their best offerings to the service of God and his Church, are not unusual. Our Diocese has been and is blessed with many fine faithful women and men who have a real passion for God and God's people. How blessed we are.

150th Anniversary

The Diocese was created in 1875 as the first regional diocese in Victoria to be separated from the Diocese of Melbourne. And so in 2025 we will celebrate our 150th anniversary. I have just begun to think about how we might celebrate most appropriately. Perhaps we might add to the "Golden See" history of our diocese. Perhaps we might reconnect more significantly with our sister Diocese - Aipo Rongo in PNG. Perhaps we might engage in Reconciliation with the First Nations people in our area, particularly in the South West where relationships between the Church and the original inhabitants have not always been respectful or happy. Perhaps there is a project in your local church community or area which might be the focus for our thanksgiving for 150 years of our diocese. Please do not feel shy about making suggestions or offering to serve on a 150 committee.

The Business before us

There is nothing particularly difficult in terms of legislation at this Synod, although we will sorely miss the advice and guidance of our Advocate, Sally Macarthur Clyde who is absent because of some forthcoming surgery.

Changes to the way in which we deal with legislation will streamline and simplify our processes so that they are less “parliamentary” and meeting procedure will be more “natural” and familiar to Synod members.

Changes to the way in which the Diocese deals with property sales and distribution are before the Synod so that we will be more flexible in responding to civil and redress scheme payments for past abusive behaviours. The proposal will empower Bishop in Council, under certain circumstances, to make decisions about the sale of assets without any other approvals. This is normal in many dioceses, including in the Diocese of Melbourne. It is a protection so that if the Diocese is found to be insolvent, lawyers and others from outside the Diocese will not be able to tell us what assets they will seize. This is exactly what happened ten years ago in the Diocese of Bathurst.

Contemporary Issues

The last two weeks in our Press have been dominated by the resounding defeat of The Voice Referendum and the appalling stories coming from the Middle East about the horrific confrontation between Hamas and the Israeli government.

As many of you know, I was a strong supporter of the Yes campaign in the Referendum. However, the failure to achieve a majority of Yes votes in a single State made it quite clear that the majority of Australians were not just ambivalent, but unambiguously against the Proposals. No doubt there will be much written and spoken about the result.

My biggest concern now is how best we should approach the self-evident disadvantage with which many people live in our indigenous population. The Church has a particularly tricky role to play in calling for reconciliation because so many church or para church organisations were responsible for the structural disadvantage that led to the

destruction of indigenous cultural, political and social relationships in colonial and post-colonial Australia.

It seems to me that an important first step will be to listen carefully to what indigenous Australians want to do now that Constitutional recognition is unlikely.

There seems some good sense in keeping silent for a time so that initial angry or triumphalist sentiments are kept in check.

For us Christians there is always an important aspect to change that we might call a religious time perspective. The Scriptures speaks of *chronos* – ongoing time but also of *kairos*, the right or appropriate time. Perhaps those of us who long for a quicker resolution of inequities in our national life need to accept that our perception of *chronos* cannot come before *kairos*. Or to quote Vincent Lingiari in the song *From little things, big things grow*: “We know how to wait.”

The Middle East

On Wednesday we received reports that the Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza had been blown up. This is the old English Hospital, heavily supported by ABM and Australian Anglicans. It is not yet clear how many patients and doctors have been killed and there are reports that over a thousand Palestinians were sheltering there. The violence of the Hamas organisation has been met with even more violence from the State of Israel. The unpredictable blockades which have characterised the Israeli treatment of Gaza for decades have turned into a total blockade of water, electricity, food, medical supplies and fuel. Humanitarian aid is waiting unused on the wrong side of the Israeli border. It is ironic and shocking to consider how closely this persecution of Palestinians resembles the National Socialist blockades of the Warsaw Ghetto during WW11. Such situations always bring out the worst and the most heroic in human nature.

There are few things that we can say with certainty about this conflict, but Christians should be clear about some important points.

- The contemporary State of Israel should not be confused with the Israel of the Scriptures. Remember that Israel is first, the new name for Jacob when he wrestles with God, and his descendants are Israel, not the land itself.
- The State of Israel is not a religious state, but a secular society based on racial identity(Jewish), not religious observance(Judaism). There are many practising Jews in Israel, who do not support this aggressive and conservative National government.
- The Palestinians are not all Muslims. In fact, Palestinian Christians make up a significant proportion of the people in Gaza.
- Just as during The Troubles in Northern Ireland, loosely used pseudo-religious language masked the essentially political and land ownership rage in the population, so too in the current conflict in the Middle East, we need to avoid easy mischaracterisation of so-called religious causes of the conflict.
- The involvement of major world powers in “taking sides” in this conflict is very dangerous.

So what can we do?

First we are obliged to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, both as a contemporary city but also as the emblematic City of God.

Second we must not make easy judgements based on the manipulation of the media to which we are constantly subject. Understanding and assessment takes time.

Third, once hostilities have reduced we can be generous in monetary support for those seeking to rebuild their homes and their lives. We know the power of trauma to destabilise and debilitate across generations, so our prayer, sympathy and compassion will need to be sustained and for those on both sides of this awful conflict.

Parish Life

As you know, I believe that parish life is at the heart of our Diocese and that we should be able to see the Five Marks of Mission in some form in every local congregation. When I began ministry as a Bishop in Willochra, I spoke everywhere about three things

- Be a community with some ministry, not just people clustered around minister.
- Do the things you can do; let go of the things you can't do.
- Work hard in the Church, but leave the growth and the worry to God.

I am even more convinced that these three principles should inform our parish communities today. I am delighted every time a congregation shows new signs of leadership and growth. A couple of months ago I was suddenly free on a Sunday and I offered to go to a parish where the priest had been away for some time. My offer was declined "because the lay team had already organised the worship on that day, and my presence would be disrespectful to those who had already prepared worship." I was initially grumpy, but on reflection saw a great maturity in that congregation that was to be encouraged and celebrated.

This diocese has always had a good supply of faithful, hardworking clergy. But often it is in times of interregnum or clerical illness that we can see lay leadership flourish and grow. This is not to deny the gift that a parish priest can be, but it is a reminder that all God's people are called to take ministry opportunities when they appear. I am immensely grateful to our clergy team for their fine leadership. Without a large band of retired priests it would be difficult to offer sacramental ministry as widely as we can, but we must not forget the importance of raising up local women and men who might be called to ordination to serve in their local communities.

The Rev'd Dr Mark Garner has brought some excellent Biblical teaching which he offers both face to face and by Zoom. Learning about the faith through his seminars, through Bible Studies, the June Bible reading Challenge and the other opportunities for growth in faith and understanding are vital to the health of our congregations.

Our national Church has suggested some outlines for clergy and lay leader accountability, support and further education. These matters will be a focus for the Ministry Development Committee and for me over the next twelve months. We have trialled such matters a couple of times since I became your Bishop, but I hope that by next Synod, every priest and many lay leaders will be in reflective supervision relationships as we seek to build stronger and more resilient leadership in our Church and support our leaders more effectively.

Registry Movements

From Christmas this year, our Registrar for the last ten years, Mr Peter Jarvis will take extended Long Service leave. He will finish on Christmas Eve and not return until the end of June. His desire for a long break means that he will receive LSL payments at a 50% rate.

The Chair of Property and Finance, Mr Mike Robins and I have met with and agreed to a half time contract position to cover this period with a former Registrar from the Bendigo Diocese who now lives in Ballarat. She will commence at the end of January and continue as Acting Registrar until the return of the Registrar. The other two permanent positions in the Registry will continue during this six month period.

Church closures

One of the saddest parts of my job is to preside at the deconsecration of a church. This year there have been two such services, both in the West of the Diocese at Spring Creek and at Macarthur. Both churches were attractive wooden buildings in quite good condition, although needing some painting and easy maintenance.

Spring Creek has no local township and there was no real congregation left. Ironically about 40 people turned up for the deconsecration and one person remained outside crying all through the service because of the loss of her little church. She also told me that she hadn't been at services for the last 15 years.

The town of Macarthur has been in decline since the late 1960's. Only five regular churchgoers remained and they did not want to look after the fabric of the church building. Locally grown ecumenical worship in the town meant that really there was too much church plant. Again, the deconsecration was well attended and I received some criticism from people present that the Church was abandoning their town.

Different dioceses have different processes for the closure of a church. I have always held and practiced the view that as long as a congregation wishes to worship and keep its church open, the Diocese will assist as much as possible in helping that aspiration to be fulfilled. In neither of the dioceses where I have served as Bishop has any congregation been forced to close. The Diocese only moves to closure, deconsecration and sale, when the local community no longer wants to keep the church operating as a place of regular worship.

Sometimes it is difficult to dispose of church furnishings and ornaments following a deconsecration. In general, good stained glass should be relocated as should, plate and other portable items. Things that have been given in memory of individuals or families are the property of the local church and because they have been given – often to the glory of God and in loving memory of... should not be given back to donors or donor families as "keepsakes". Rather new homes where the gift can continue to enhance worship should be found for such items.

My work beyond the Diocese

Every Diocesan Bishop is expected to participate in the life of the National Church in some way. Since I am now the second longest serving Diocesan in the country, I have had a good share of many of those extra diocesan tasks. Currently I serve in these ways-

The Standing Committee of General Synod which meets twice a year to offer leadership to the National Church in those years when the General Synod does not meet (next General Synod will be in August 2026).

The Executive of the Standing Committee of General Synod which meets about three times a year to prepare for and advise the Standing Committee.

I Chair the Advisory Council for Anglican Religious Life in Australia (ACARLA). This group meets for two days each January to oversee the experience of vowed Religious Life in Australia. During each year there is ongoing contact with those religious communities seeking recognition and with those that are in decline.

I am currently convening a small working group of the Executive of Standing Committee as we seek to consult with and find new models for indigenous episcopal leadership in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

While all these responsibilities are not focussed on the Diocese, each group is important and impacts on our Diocese. My Participation is also a way in which the Diocese of Ballarat probably has more influence in the National Church than it would normally have.

The Abbey at Camperdown

The death of Dom Placid Lawson OSB just after Christmas in 2022 was a significant moment in the life of the Benedictine Abbey of Our Lady and St Mark. Now there is only one Professed member resident at the Abbey, and we are waiting on God to discern how best to move forward. Sr Raphael is currently on Leave, on retreat at New Norcia, and visiting her mother house, Malling Abbey in the UK, and having some holiday time.

The Abbey is being well cared for by the local parish, and Fr Matthew has been a tower of strength even while dealing with his own significant health issues. The Oblates have also come to a new appreciation of their role in the ongoing life of the Abbey. It is a place that is well loved in the Diocese and a place of solace, recollection and peace for many.

Much will depend on the vision of Sr Raphael when she returns. There are many possibilities, and I hope that the Abbey will remain a place of Benedictine witness – particularly to the stability which is so much at the heart of the Benedictine way.

City on a Hill

Last year I signalled that I had been talking with the City on a Hill organisation (an Anglican grouping of contemporary clergy and lay leaders with a passion for planting new churches) and that there would be an ordained Anglican priest coming to plant a new church in Ballarat. Well that has all happened and the City on a Hill congregation has been meeting here in Ballarat for nearly 6 months now. Under the leadership of the Rev'd Ben Hewitt the congregation has grown from an initial handful into a regular meeting of over 40 adults and many children. They have not yet found a permanent home although they have met mainly in the Eastwood Centre.

As I indicated last year, there are some theological areas where City on a Hill and I disagree, but that's pretty normal for Anglicans. Ben is a full member of the Synod and as his congregation grows and settles, I anticipate that lay representatives of that congregation will take their place in the Synod. I hope that during coffee and meal breaks you will introduce yourself to Ben – you will find him a warm and engaging person, happy to share his hopes and dreams.

In a time when many of our congregations are ageing and growing smaller, it is great to have the enthusiasm and encouragement of City on a Hill in our midst.

The Communion Forest

Following the Lambeth Conference last year, the Archbishop of Canterbury challenged the whole Communion to a more theological and practical response to deforestation around the globe. This idea, and some of the excellent resources produced in other parts of the Communion have encouraged our Ministry Development Committee to focus our education and formation work on promoting the Communion Forest and its ideals over the next year.

Some great things have happened already. Many parishes have picked up the idea of giving trees or shrubs to people at important moments like Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage and Funerals and inviting individuals not only to plant these trees or shrubs, but to nurture them as a symbol of nurturing faith as well. In some parts of the Communion these are

known as Sacrament Plantings! One of our clergy, on retirement, presented each parishioner with a little callistemon plant as a commitment to future growth and sustainability.

In a collaboration between parishioners and the Grammar School, students screen printed Communion Forest logos, which have been sewn onto shopping bags as an invitation to use less plastic in our daily shopping. Last wet weekend, there was a Forest picnic at the Ballarat Botanic Gardens and an opportunity to learn about the wonderful trees in the gardens, including the great sequoias.

All these different local initiatives, and others yet to be thought of, are part of a deliberate consciousness raising exercise for us to cooperate with our fellow Anglicans across the globe in preserving, protecting, repairing and resourcing the created order we have received and which we will pass to future generations.

The lead spokesperson for this work across the Communion is the Rev'd Canon Rachel Mash, a priest from the Province of South Africa. She is visiting the diocese next week and will speak on Monday night at the Grammar School Chapel at 7pm. She will be at a "sundowner gathering" in Warrnambool on Tuesday evening, and she will speak at the Cathedral before and at the midday mass next Wednesday. This is a great opportunity to learn more about the "Forest" and to discover new ways for your local community to take a lead in conservation, protection, repairing and planning environmental work with a theological background.

Professional Standards.

At the end of last year Claire Sargent retired as our Director of Professional Standards. She had served the Diocese well for more than twenty years during a time of rapid change and intense focus on clerical and lay abuse. Typically, Claire offered to help us find a suitable replacement. There was some pressure on me to join the Kooyoora Group established by the Diocese of Melbourne, but it is my belief that we have faster, more personalised responses, less bureaucracy and clearer and fairer outcomes to complaints if we continue to employ our own Director of Professional Standards.

Michael Iacovino is a psychologist with vast experience in the Roman Catholic Church, and he is a fine successor to Claire. I hope that he will be with us tomorrow and that you will make yourself known to him. I am very pleased with his appointment.

The National Redress Scheme has continued to bring a steady stream of people seeking redress, but more troubling is an increase in the numbers of people seeking civil legal settlements. So far, Property and Finance and Bishop in Council have been able to deal with these cases well. I particularly wish to thank our Registrar who carries much of the burden and the worry of this work.

Concluding Remarks

I want to thank the Registry staff, Cheryl, John and Peter for their tireless hard work and good humour. We are blessed to be served by such faithful people.

Property and Finance, under the Chairmanship of Mike Robins is a vital part of our governance structures.

The Ministry Development Committee, chaired by the Rev'd Robyn Shackell achieves a great deal in the areas of education and development.

The Dean and the Cathedral community are always very supportive of me, and I am very grateful for their care.

I particularly want to mention Jill Gale, Diocesan President of Mothers' Union, who assists me with the care of my elderly mother. She is an unobtrusive angel!

We are very well served by our two Archdeacons. Michael O'Brien is wise and thoughtful and has a wicked sense of humour. Scott Lowrey is rarely stressed by Church life. His calm and supportive approach to practical as well as ideological matters is exactly what any Bishop longs for in a Vicar General. It is great to have two such gifted and trustworthy people in leadership roles.

Our Chancellor is always ready to assist me with legal and other conundrums. His measured and careful advice is not just a precious gift to me, but also to the Diocese. I am delighted that we have grown to be friends as well as colleagues over the last 12 years.

I am sorry that our Advocate is not with us, but I want to thank her for all her work, especially convening the Acts Review Committee.

The Grammar School remains a source of great energy and joy for me. I recently met a friend for a drink in a bar in Adelaide. The barman smiled at me and said, Hello Bishop Garry. You're away from home! He was a former Grammar student! The evangelical challenges of the School are enormous and I relish my interactions with both Staff and students.

I got a Smart Television some months ago. I have not yet become addicted to the vast range of offerings on Streaming services. But I have really enjoyed a wickedly named series about a group of people who live in the appropriately named Schitts Creek. The leading characters are a strange family – dysfunctional parents and their two adult children. Their neighbours are reasonably unattractive personalities too. But as the series has progressed I have been enthralled by the way that in the midst of family turmoil, ego driven ambition, financial disaster, seriously bad behaviour and nostalgia for a distant and impossible past, there is still redemption. Almost in spite of themselves, this motley bunch of people cannot resist the power of love to interrupt their preoccupations and their selfishness. Even when they are most resistant, love interrupts their inward gaze and offers hope and new possibilities. By the grace of God we do not live in Schitts Creek. But there are times when we behave badly, when our hope is low, when we lose our way. Perhaps it is particularly then that we need to be interrupted by love, so that we can remember that we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. Thanks be to God.

Garry Weatherill

October 2023.

