

Presidential Address
Third Session of the 40th Synod of the Diocese of Gippsland
Saturday 25 May, 2024

Again, a very warm welcome to the Third Session of the 40th Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Gippsland. We rejoice in the presence of our Metropolitan and Archbishop, The Most Revd Dr Philip Freier, and Mrs Joy Freier, at last night's Synod Eucharist, tonight's Synod Dinner, and during Reconciliation Week ahead, when among other things, His Grace will meet with and address staff and students of our two Anglican schools.

In its centenary year we are grateful for the hospitality of Gippsland Grammar, and – in its 140th year – that of our Cathedral, both on Gunaikurnai Country; here the traditional lands of the Brayakaulung, to whose Elders and all First Nations People present we pay our respects.

Our Rachel is now a Year 8 student at this campus, and you can see our house from the oval. She waits for the last bell to ring and then runs around the block, arriving fashionably late every morning!

Given where we are meeting, it's fitting that we have a focus on chaplaincy after lunch today in a session on mission and ministry. Sunday's Eucharist will feature two Gippsland Grammar students recently awarded the Dean's music scholarships, highlighting the living connection between our two venues this weekend.

When I was interviewed for this role a little over six years ago, Val Jones – a lay member of the Election Board – asked the first question: 'tell us about a time when you really stuffed up', she said. There was a long pause – only because there were so many examples to choose from – and then we had a good conversation about what we learn from our failures.

I mention this for two reasons. First, because this Session marks Val's retirement as a long-serving member of our peak governing bodies: Synod, Bishop-in-Council, and Executive Committee. For all that, perhaps her greatest contribution has been as the inaugural Chair of our Safe Ministry Authority. Val, we salute you!

The second reason is the importance of learning from our mistakes.

The great temptation in any Presidential Address, and for Synods generally, is to be self-congratulating – to take favourable stock of all that we've done in the last 12 months. There's a place for such an inventory, and we'll get to that as our business unfolds. But let me first hold up to our collective self a less flattering mirror.

We've learned a hard lesson during and since the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, and if you've not yet read Bishop Jeffrey Driver's book, *Grey Spaces: Searching Out the Church in the Shadows of Abuse*,¹ I commend it to you. The cost borne by victim-survivors, of course, is far greater than the pain and shame we've been going through as an organisation.

So too for the First Peoples of this land our slow learning as a nation and a Church is costly.

As you may have read this month in *The Gippsland Anglican*, on Tuesday 28 May His Grace the Archbishop will re-dedicate the historic church of St John at Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust.

¹ Eugene, OR: Cascade; 2022.

This is a good news story, and – in the bleak context of Victoria’s colonial history – Lake Tyers shines some light, thanks to the godliness of Mission founder and long-term manager John Bulmer.²

The Anglican Province of Victoria has been coming to grips with this complex legacy in recent months as we’ve engaged with the Yoorrook Justice Commission, through a substantial written submission just before Easter, and at a live hearing on 1 May, in which Bishop Genieve Blackwell and I represented the Province alongside Uniting Church and Roman Catholic colleagues. You can view that panel hearing – almost four hours of combined testimony – online.³

Through the focused lens of the Commission, the five Victorian dioceses were invited to reflect more deeply on how the Anglican Church has been complicit in, and benefited from, the violence inherent in the so-called ‘doctrine of discovery’ – a teaching recently repudiated by the Vatican – and its outworking in the self-serving mythology of *terra nullius*.

For Gippsland Anglicans, it is simply a fact that our schools and churches, Rectories, Bishopscourt, and parish halls are built on land of which Aboriginal people were dispossessed.

Not only were they dispossessed, they were forcibly relocated: systematically separated from family, culture, and language by the policies of the state – policies enacted on Church of England mission stations across Victoria, including at Lake Tyers, by our ecclesial forebears.

Not only were they stripped of their identity and spiritual connection to the land, they were killed by those we politely call ‘settlers’ in more than 15 massacres in Gippsland alone.⁴ Others died on missions and reserves far from their ancestors, marking the start of what we would now describe as Aboriginal deaths in custody.

The 1857 census reveals that in the 23 years since 1834, the Indigenous population of the greater Port Phillip area declined by 85% through disease from contact with gold miners and pastoralists, and through frontier conflict, falling from around 12,000 to under 2,000.

How can we even begin to come to terms with this?

As with the earlier Royal Commission, we have to start by listening to the lived experience of victim-survivors, and the stories of their parents and grandparents.

And we have to tell the truth.

At present we allocate 1.5% of proceeds from land sales to Aboriginal Ministry in this Diocese. In the light of our history – and the ongoing harms and structural disadvantage arising from it – is that anywhere near adequate?

Do we duly acknowledge our First Nations peoples when we gather on their sovereign and unceded lands to worship the God who commanded us not to steal?

² For further reflection on this tension see ‘From the Bishop’, *The Gippsland Anglican*, May 2024, pp 2-3. https://www.gippslandanglicans.org.au/assets/00TGA/2024/TGA_May_24FINAL.pdf

³ <https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au/video/land-sky-waters-hearings-1-may-2024-church-representatives/>

⁴ Non-indigenous people also lost their lives in the frontier conflicts of the mid-nineteenth century. Research, including that conducted by the University of Newcastle, suggests a ratio of around one to fifty, and even greater in Gippsland in the decade between 1840 and 1850.

Alongside our various honour boards, do visitors to our Anglican centres see any permanent recognition of the unbroken connection to Country of local Elders?

By the time we convene our 41st Synod, may we have faced into these questions more squarely.

As we continue to learn, painfully slowly, what the gospel imperative of Reconciliation looks like in this space – ‘reconciling where there is injustice or injury’, as our Diocesan Vision puts it – we are deeply indebted to Canon Aunty Phyllis Andy and The Revd Kathy Dalton for their grace, patience, and generosity.

In researching archival material for our submission to this Royal Commission it was heartening to find over 100 articles published in *The Gippsland Anglican* from the past ten years reflecting on these issues or reporting on Reconciliation activities.

One such activity to come is on Sunday 23 June, when we have arranged for an online diocesan screening of the documentary, *Warrigal Creek*, relating to one of the more infamous Gippsland massacre sites (without using any visually graphic material). I hope parishes will take up that opportunity and encourage worshippers to stay on after morning services for shared viewing and conversation.

Another mistake from which we have been slow to learn – and its costliness is potentially greater than we can imagine, for it lies largely in the future – has to do with how we have colonised planet Earth.

At our first Session in 2022, we resolved ‘That this Synod makes action on climate change a major focus for the Diocese of Gippsland over the coming three-year cycle of Synod.’ It is, therefore, also a key theme of this Address.

The report from ACTinG that we’ll attend to today shows some real progress against the five specific commitments of this motion,⁵ which echoed similar resolutions at General Synod a few weeks earlier in that same year.

On Holy Saturday, before the Great Easter Vigil, Leanne and I took the kids to see the BBC Earth exhibition; good material for theological reflection in that void between the cross and empty tomb.

At the end of the extraordinary visual presentation of creation’s plenitude and diversity, David Attenborough’s beguilingly calm narration pulled no punches: humanity has simply overrun the planet, he said.

‘Epiphanies seem to be random, but they are not. They build over time until the last little bit of information is gathered, and the picture comes fully into focus.’ So writes Br Jim Woodrum, SSJE.

That’s exactly how Dr Joëlle Gergis sees climate change happening: gradually, then suddenly.

On the Feast of the Epiphany I finished reading her book, *Humanity’s Moment: A Climate Scientist’s Case for Hope*. Gergis is one of a handful of Australian scientists to have been selected as a lead author on the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) *Sixth Assessment Report*.

⁵ <https://www.gippslandanglicans.org.au/acting/standing-up-for-climate-change>

This IPCC Report was released in February 2022, just before our First Session, and described by UN Secretary-General António Guterres as a 'code red for humanity'.

Gergis' book joined the dots for me – science, ethics, economics, and politics – such that the picture building over time in my mind came more fully into focus.

Written during a global pandemic which proves that humankind can unite to change how we live – globally, almost overnight – Gergis' confronting work is (as its subtitle suggests) ultimately hopeful. Hopeful, that is, in the sense described by American writer and activist Rebecca Solnit:

not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky . . . hope should shove you out the door . . . [T]o hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable. (Cited in Gergis, 232)

This resonates with a biblical understanding of hope, made manifest and fully focussed in the one by whom and through whom and for whom all things were created (see Col 1:16-17, John 1:3, 1 Cor 8:6, Heb 2:10), whose new creation beckons, calling us forward from God's future (Rev 21:5). People sometimes ask me, where's Jesus in all this church-talk of climate action? He's at the very centre of it, for all that exists is his.

'If our planet were a child', Gergis reflects, 'there would be a moral outcry of disgust and rage.' (Gergis, 175) And yet, of course, the creator of all that is and ever shall be is revealed to us precisely in the form of a vulnerable child – *el niño* – who came to his own and his own knew him not.

There are some hard facts we must face, for the truth will set us free, free to act from hope.

With 1.2 degrees of global warming since pre-industrial times already exceeded, and associated climate change locked in for generations to come, we are – even now – seeing the tip of an iceberg, albeit a rapidly melting one.

The latest modelling of the IPCC identifies a 'tipping point' somewhere beyond 1.5 degrees of warming (the 'best case scenario' of the 2015 Paris Agreement) whereby ice-sheet disintegration, changes to deep ocean currents, and moisture-laden warmer atmosphere all interact to create a 'cascading effect', magnifying incremental rises in sea levels and the frequency and severity of extreme weather events including floods, storm surges, heatwaves, and bushfires.

Children born today are likely to live through more of these events by a factor of seven-fold compared with Baby Boomers.

Pacific islands, including in the Torres Strait, are suffering from the salination of agricultural lands and contamination of drinking water from ocean flooding. Add to this the impact on vital tourism industries and the displacement of Indigenous Peoples – now a significant factor in the global refugee crisis according to the UN.

Alongside the grim scientific evidence and the growing impact of climate change, Gergis highlights opportunities for Australia as the sunniest continent on Earth, with the highest renewable energy potential *per capita*, to become the 'battery of the world', using technology that already exists and is always evolving, fostering new industries in the process, especially in regions like Gippsland that have relied more on resource extraction.

When I speak or write about these things, sometimes the question comes: ‘Why is the church focusing on “political” issues?’

My answer varies:

- because, no less than war in Ukraine or Gaza, this is an emerging humanitarian crisis driven by entrenched geopolitical interests;
- because these are matters of social justice for developing nations now, and for all future generations;
- because, like the scourge of gender-based violence in our communities, we have cause to repent of what we walk past;
- because we have a biblical imperative to care for God’s good creation;

– all of which draw on the same theological principle: that we cannot separate the spiritual from the material any more than Jesus did, or the prophets before him; nor indeed our First Nations Peoples, in their wisdom.

We are challenged and strengthened in our response to that 2022 motion by the Communion Forest initiative, by the interest of both the Anglican Communion Environmental Network (ACEN) and Iona in the work of The Abbey, and by the efforts of our ACTinG group to encourage and equip us.

These three things come together in a Season of Creation launch planned for September 1st this year – a Sunday – that we urge every Parish and ministry centre to engage with.

Worship is to some extent a political act. It is a public commitment to that polity Jesus called the kingdom of God; to a vision of God’s future coming to meet us here and now.

So let us be shoved out the doors of our churches in hope, ‘acting for the good of Earth and all creatures’, in the words of our Diocesan Vision.

Speaking of our Diocesan Vision, is it 2024 already? I think there was a typo on the front of the brochure and it was meant to read 2021 – 2025!

It is pleasing to see copies displayed at back of churches and posters on noticeboards – perhaps you just dig them out when the bishop is coming, I don’t know – but the Vision does appear in pew bulletins and parish papers and profiles, and it continues to scaffold ministry and mission at the local and diocesan level, in larger and smaller ways.

There’s an old saying to do with not fixing something that isn’t broken, and coming out of the COVID years it feels like this framework is still gaining some traction. So let’s not tear up the old ones please come 1 January 2025!

Do let’s engage in a process of refreshing this Vision between now and the First Session of the 41st Synod next year, so that we can retain the best of this as it captures the aspirations of Gippsland Anglicans, and sharpen it up to speak as concretely as possible into our life and work for the period 2025 – 2030.

How, for example, might it inform the proposed review of diocesan legislation in our papers?

What shape that work of refreshing the Vision might take we’re not yet sure, though we will look to engage with clergy and laity as we did in various ways in 2020, as narrated in the longer version of the document.

Mention of these colleagues gives me an opportunity to thank every single person here in holy orders for your partnership in ordained ministry – including our generous locum clergy, about whom we'll hear a bit more shortly – along with our faithful Lay Readers and lay leaders who drive the work of governance around the diocese and in our schools, agencies, and parishes.

We are blessed to have in the Registry a small and dedicated team – all but the Registrar employed part-time – who do a lot with a little in an ever more complex operating environment. None more so, until recently, than Annette Hollonds, who I've invited here this morning so that we can show our appreciation for her 20-plus years of unstinting service as Finance Officer and all round trouble-shooter.

Annette has, in many ways, been the face and the voice of the Registry for as long as most of us can remember. She always gave above and beyond, seeing her work first and foremost as a ministry. Annette, we are deeply grateful for your professionalism and skill set, and even more so for your pastoral heart and grace under pressure. Every blessing on your retirement, and please accept this gift with our heartfelt gratitude and affection.

Most of what one might say about the rich array of ministry activities around the Diocese these last twelve months will be featured in our agenda, and I don't want to steal the thunder of others, or rehearse what is in your papers. Just a few things, then, to highlight in the home stretch of this Address.

Not only have we welcomed the Induction, or the announcement, of four new Incumbents from outside the Diocese since our Second Session, including from interstate and overseas, but Gippsland Anglicans keep putting up their hands for ministry, lay and ordained.

We will hear in our Reports from the Ministry Development Program (MDP) officially launched this time last year, whose first cohort have just completed their work, overlapping with a new intake of seven people across six different parishes.

Both Deacons ordained in February – our first multiple ordination in a number of years – were MDP participants, and this will be an important pre-ordination training pathway for us in an environment where there is little capacity to offer post-ordination curacies. Last year Synod asked the MDP Committee to generate a governance model, and a draft of this is in your papers.

With a steady number of people entering discernment, and aspirants and ordinands continuing to move through 'The Journey',⁶ our Vocations Group and Examining Chaplains are kept busy under Graham Knott's leadership as Ministry Development Officer.

Supporting people in ministry is every bit as important as identifying and nurturing vocations, and our Ministry Wellbeing and Development protocols were formally launched at March's Christ Eucharist by MWD Coordinator, Tim Gaden. Tim serves in this role one day a week reporting to the Working Group set up in response to a Synod motion in 2022, adopting the General Synod protocols from that same year.

Professional Supervision for licensed clergy will be an expectation come 1 October, and six sessions per year will be subsidized, with the Diocese, the ministry centre, and the individual each contributing one-third of the cost. This is money well spent, as our people are our greatest gift and strength, and we must do all we can to enable their flourishing.

⁶ https://www.gippslandanglicans.org.au/assets/OrdinationTheJourney_2020.pdf

Bishop-in-Council is pleased to be presenting another surplus budget to Synod, and a set of consolidated accounts from last year also in surplus. With the help of the Registrar, his team, and the Finance Committee, we have now strung a couple of these together.

Cost of living pressures continue to rise, however, and constant vigilance is required if our stewardship of the temporal resources entrusted to us is to provide for present and future ministry needs. We will hear more about this, and some strategic approaches being explored by Bishop-in-Council, when the Registrar presents that report.

Tonight you will be drinking wine bottled for The Abbey, with every glass helping to raise funds, so please do enjoy yourself – responsibly of course! We will hear today from Abbey Director, Cath Connelly, of some exciting plans for this special place in the hearts of Gippsland Anglicans, which goes from strength to strength financially and programmatically.

Archbishop Philip will visit The Abbey *en route* to Lake Tyers on Tuesday and has kindly agreed to support a capital appeal for refurbishing the A-Frame as part of a larger master plan, and I'm not sure we can reach the total needed just by drinking wine!

Those who've been around a while will be waiting for me to talk about sex, and the state of the wider Anglican Church – neither of which I need to do this year, which is great a relief to us all!

Instead we will hear tomorrow about our Anglican friends in Gahini, and from the Anglican Board of Mission as it approaches a significant anniversary.

Perhaps the most important thing that happened at our national Bishops Conference in March was a pre-launch of 'Hope25' – a nationwide evangelism project developed by the Mission and Ministry Commission of General Synod, officially launched at Pentecost last Sunday.

Our Diocese was ably represented at the February workshop by Susan Liersch and Jack Beamish – one of the Younger Anglicans who addressed us last year in Warragul – and we'll hear more about this from Jack and Susan this afternoon.

At these gatherings, as well as recognising the contribution to our life and work of the living saints, which is each and all of you, we pause to remember with thanksgiving those whose earthly race is run and now worship at the open table of the holy, blessed and undivided Trinity, including: Len Chatfield, Michelle Chidgey, Canon Gordon Cooper, Lindsay Francis, The Revd Jack Goodridge, Helen Langres, Yvonne McPherson, Iain Miller, David Murray, Bert Rance, and Ross Smith.

May these, and all God's holy ones, with the saints and heroes of own lives and stories, rest in peace and rise in glory.

And may we be inspired by their example to enter this day, and every day, with grace and courage: committed in Christ, connecting in service, and creative in Spirit.

+Richard, Gippsland