

Synod Report 2019

In 2019, total Synod membership is 827, of which 500 are lay parish representatives, 257 are rectors and the remainder are representatives (clergy or lay) from a range of Sydney Anglican institutions and other appointments. Only 20% of all membership is female, heavily weighted by no female rectors, but even amongst the laity, female representation is only 29%! The average maximum attendance at a Synod session over the last few years is just over 600. A total of 454 pages of papers were circulated before Synod this year and the daily business sheets were around 32 pages each. Being across the business of Synod, let alone making an intervention, is not for the fainthearted.

Synod's Bible studies (Rev Matthew Yeo) this year were on "Humility," drawing from a range of Old and New Testament texts.

The whole "Proceedings of Synod 2019" is at:

https://www.sds.asn.au/sites/default/files/2019%20Synod%20Proceedings.full.pdf?doc_id=NDM4Njk=

[A summary version for Parishes is at:](https://www.sds.asn.au/sites/default/files/ParishCircular.Synod%20Summary%20and%20Resolutions.2019.pdf?doc_id=NDM4NzU=)

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All page references below are to **pages in the full Proceedings.**

SELECTION OF SYNOD TOPICS 2019

1. The Doctrine of Marriage and the President's Report to Synod

I do not intend to cover the President's report (commences page 4) as it has received sufficient commentary in the press nationally and internationally. Suffice to say, despite the assertion that "please leave" was directed at Bishops/Dioceses who affirm same sex marriages, this does not stand up to a **literal** reading of the text – the paragraph clearly asked "people" to leave.

A ten point resolution on the **Doctrine of Marriage** (pages 62-63), in summary, reaffirmed male/female marriage as the doctrine of scripture and of the Anglican Church, and declared that blessings or affirmations of same-sex marriage are contrary to scripture and that Sydney is in a state of impaired fellowship with any diocese that, or bishop or other minister who, has allowed or participated in the blessing or solemnisation of a same sex marriage. The motion continued by seeking that that the Archbishop decline any request to exercise ministry in the Diocese of Sydney from any bishop or other minister who has unrepentantly allowed or participated in such blessings or marriages

and asked the Standing Committee to consider not providing financial support, directly or indirectly, to any Anglican diocese or body which has acted, or has allowed others to act, contrary to the Church's doctrine of marriage".

Dean Kanishka Raffel said in support: "If we abandon God's Word we have nothing to offer the world.....My heaviness of heart is because the motion before you addresses not a departure from God's word in the laws of the land but a departure from God's word that is being promoted by Bishops and Synods in our Church.....There is one God and Father of us all, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism - but Bishops and Synods in our church nationally, risk rending the fabric of our fellowship by promoting a theology of marriage that is contrary to Scripture."ⁱ

As Rev Andrew Sempell highlighted, when interviewed by the SMH, Sydney Diocese is firmly putting it out there that they are the true Anglican church. In other words, unlike many of the GAFCON aligned groups around the world which have left their Dioceses (many losing their properties) to be formally part of the "Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans", Sydney Diocese is determined to establish its credentials, in order to both remain (with all huge wealth of Sydney Diocese, property and income), while being part of the GAFCON group. I recall Rev. Dr Peter Jensen saying about GAFCON several years ago that this is the new reformation we must have. This is not about Sydney "leaving" to invent a new version of Anglicanism. Others must depart; Sydney holds to the "truth".

2. Motion to Defer General Synod Assessments

The intention of this motion was to begin to starve (my words) General Synod by deferring payments of Sydney Diocese's levies, starting with any remaining dues for 2019, and all levies in 2020. General Synod covers many expenses on behalf of Dioceses, including travel to and holding of meetings, and centralised payments on behalf of all (eg the redress scheme for victims of abuse). So, the idea is: let's withhold our dollars owing until the Australian Anglican Church agrees to Sydney's doctrine of marriage. The debate on this matter left one feeling very sickened. As the indomitable Prof Bernard Stuart (St George's, Paddington) pointed out in no uncertain terms, this was one of the grubbiest proposals in his well over 20 years in Synod, stooping to the level of the worst behaviours of big corporates, and even had some parallels with a certain President trying to "bribe" (by withholding) another country.

An amendment, put forward by two Synod members, who are part of the inner circle, recommended that this proposal be delayed to allow Synod to further consider it next year. It was argued by the amendment mover, clearly annoyed,

that Synod had not received any papers on the matter - no analysis of the impact of this decision on the national church, highlighting the redress scheme as an example, and as such an irresponsible motion. During the debate, the words of one speaker were: "It might be time for a shot across the bows, but it is not time to blow up the ship". The matter was put to secret ballot; the amended motion passed, with 80 percent in favour. Next instalment, next year.

3. Human Sexuality Pastoral Guidelines

Last year, Synod was presented with a report from the Doctrine Commission on Marriage, but we did not have time to consider its related Guidelines for Pastoral Care by churches. That Report was the basis for the wording of the resolution summarised in (1) above and placed strong emphasis on the sinfulness of any sex outside of the male/female marriage bond. Maybe the best way to summarise the stance taken in Guidelines to Churches, considered at this Synod, is to quote one sentence from the draft guidelines: "Remember same-sex attraction, same-sex sexual temptation and same-sex sexual activity are different. Experiencing a disposition to a certain sin is not the same as struggling with temptation or succumbing to sin." I think you can guess from these words the nature of advice, counsel and support churches should offer "same sex attracted". And may a "same-sex attracted" person be in a position of leadership in parish activities? Here the answer lies with the word "celibacy".

Synod agreed that the Guidelines, as amended, (p.211), should be provided to all staff and others involved in pastoral care in parishes but concern, expressed in debate, about insensitivities in wording resulted with a request to Standing Committee to seek input from parishes to help with further refinement.

4. Gender Identity

This set of papers arrived out to Synod members late, just in the week before Synod. These papers were badly prepared, and sufficiently extreme in content, in places, that we, "stole parishes", were not the only ones critical. The papers consisted of a Doctrinal Statement on Gender Identity, and two Annexures, being Pastoral Guidelines for Churches, Schools and Organisations and a further one, being more specific Guidance for Parishes. This is a very sensitive issue for our schools given the press caning some Anglican Heads of Schools had received late last year for a letter they wrote to parents, drafted for them by the Diocese, and drawn from principles in the earlier 2018 draft document. One school head in Synod scathingly commented that "we know how to deal with these issues" which I took to be his way of saying the Diocesan attempt at guidelines fell way short!

Long debate ensued, well into the second last night. The summary position in the papers is that we are all male and female, made in the likeness of God, and the paper's attempt to face up to gender confusion, dysphoria and intersex realities was clumsy in the extreme, and downright painful for those for whom this is reality. The papers blamed these "problems" on "the Fall". My contribution was to read out a letter that had been handed to me by a person who naturally wished to remain anonymous (and not someone from my parish); the letter was a heart rending account of life's experiences, concluding with a plea for greater love, compassion and understanding and begging that the Church not ask a person to "de-transition" (as the papers recommended).

The drafters re-worked them overnight and we debated further on the last day. The essential content did not change but language was softened and a little more understanding was shown. If ever there was a subject to bring out the hard line and rigid interpretation of scriptures, it is this one. To give a flavour only, I quote from the overnight attempt at revisions, from the Annexure guiding parishes under the heading "Christians who have already Transitioned": "The person should be welcome to continue to attend church but may not be able to participate fully in the life of the congregation". Susan Hooke asked for clarification – what may they do apart from making cups of tea? The embarrassed answer was along the lines that it is a matter for parishes (rector and parish council), noting that leadership roles might be of much concern. Another courageous lay rep asked what pronoun does the Diocese advise churches to use; more embarrassment. Cheap shots? No. Brief interjections that shine a light on the knots the Diocese ties itself up in when starting with fundamentalist thinking.

Again, we did not finish the debate. The last Annexure providing guidance to parishes remains incomplete and parishes have been invited to comment further. However, the Gender Identity Doctrine Statement as amended, and the first Annexure were passed. Further, it was resolved that the Doctrine Statement, representing our "doctrines, tenets, beliefs and teachings" with respect to gender identity, would be cross-referenced into our Property Use Policy, providing further clarification for restrictions on activities, being in turn useful in relation to the proposed Religious Discrimination legislation (see point 6 below).

This subject of understanding gender identity issues, along with the Doctrine of Marriage (point 1. above) on same sex relationships, are the heart of Sydney Diocese's (and GAFCON's) dispute with the Anglican Communion. Anyone attempting to throw new light and understandings in this century on these matters is dismissed as a revisionist, aka liberal, which in turns mean not Bible-

based, non-evangelical and ultimately non-Anglican. I often ponder why this subject is the “make and break” one for Sydney? Why is the role of women not? Of course, as I have noted in other forums, there is no agreement in GAFCON about Headship (complementarian) theology. This topic of gender and marriage is where a bigger the power base lies world-wide?

5. Statement of Faith

A few years ago, Synod decided that, in order to ensure that individuals who are in significant positions of leadership (eg membership of Boards such as Anglicare’s) are aligned in their beliefs to Sydney Anglicans, they would be required to sign a statement of faith. This was determined to be the Apostle’s Creed plus three additional points being, in summary: the canonical Scriptures are the supreme authority on all matters of faith and conduct; reconciliation with God is through Christ’s death and resurrection alone; and we are justified by faith alone. This requirement was incorporated into the Diocese’s Governance Policy.

This year, Synod reinforced this faith statement by adding in the main thrust in the Doctrine of Marriage. The following additional words, new 4th point, were approved for inclusion in the Governance Policy’s statement:

“that this faith produces obedience in accordance with God’s word, including sexual faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman, and abstinence in all other circumstances.”

This amended statement of faith was then also incorporated into the Diocese’s Property Use Policy as part of defining what activities may or may not take place in our church property. (Fortunately, at a separate time in Synod, the Property Use Policy was also amended to correct the impression, against which Fr Daniel Dries spoke last year, that non-Christians are not welcome on our property.)

A question was asked (Q. 19, p. 25) about whether there exists legal advice on whether a statement of faith could be used to determine an organisation’s doctrines. The answer was that, yes, lengthy legal advice had been received, and it is subject to legal privilege (ie not available to Synod), but the answer implied that consideration of the advice led to unspecified “draft motions” being brought to Synod.

There was also a serious attempt to incorporate the full amended statement of faith into the Synod Membership Ordinance, requiring that all lay representatives sign this statement to be eligible to be a Synod member. That move was defeated, the arguments against including that Synod lay reps.

(according to the relevant Ordinance) are required to be “communicant members of the Anglican Church”, and that the choice of representatives is entirely the prerogative of each parish which knows its parishioners and must be trusted to elect appropriate people.

6. Draft Religious Discrimination Bill

The significance of the strengthening of the Statement of Faith in both the Property and the Governance Policies is the clear intention to shore up Sydney Anglican Diocese’s position not only in any debates about the future of the Anglican Communion (who is in and who is out) but also for the battle ahead around the drafting of the Religious Discrimination Bill, and any actions we might face when the legislation is finally enacted. Clear “faith statements” in appropriate Diocesan documents may provide their defence against, say, discrimination claims relating to same sex marriage issues. The Diocese is critical of the Commonwealth’s Exposure Draft of the Bill, emphasising three points of concern as part of a broader resolution (14/19, p.55):

- i) the exclusion of bodies such as Anglicare Sydney and Anglican Youthworks from the definition of ‘religious bodies’ because of fees charges for goods and services
- ii) the requirement that schools and other religious bodies would have to employ only Christian staff, and not be allowed to merely preference the employment of Christian staff,
- iii) the undefined term “vilify” undercuts the protection that the Bill gives to statements of belief.

7. The Church of Confessing Anglicans Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Synod passed a resolution giving thanks for the formation of the “biblically faithful” Church of Confessing Anglicans Aotearoa / New Zealand, formed by 12 parishes leaving the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia because of their General Synod’s resolution that authorises bishops to allow clergy in New Zealand to bless same-sex relationships. The Bishop-elect Jay Behan, Christchurch, NZ was present in Synod; there followed a time of prayer and laying on of hands by a group of our own Bishops/clergy who intended to be present at the Consecration in NZ.

8. Ministry of Women

My motion, encouraging Rectors to consider having suitably qualified female clergy (ie Deacons if Sydney locals) preach to mixed congregations, despite being the second received by the Secretariat when the first call went out in late

August, was not debated due to lack of time. There are currently three practices in Sydney that I am aware of: women preach to mixed congregations; women may be interviewed by their male Rector who is controlling the flow of “conversation”; or women preach to women and children only. I and my seconder, Paula Turner (St Luke’s Mosman), will be back next year. An amendment is planned by “complementarians”, which seeks to water our motion down to a very generalised statement about women’s ministries.

We did welcome a motion (9/19 p.54), passed without debate, that celebrated the 30th anniversary of women being ordained as Deacons in Sydney and celebrating their many and various contributions to the Diocese in that role.

9. Divorce and Remarriage

Last year we succeeded with a resolution which sought the Archbishop’s approval that people divorced on the grounds of domestic abuse could be remarried in our church. After 9 months, the Archbishop wrote out endorsing this matter with some degree of equivocation, essentially providing for those regional Bishops with objections to follow their consciences on the matter. While not ideal, it does not prevent people in the situation approaching a different Bishop, through a clergyman. Our motion this year, simply welcoming the Archbishop’s letter, passed without debate.

You may recall, that I reported last year that we included as a debating point the fact that the Diocese has been waiting for 34 years for a paper on the matter from our Doctrine Commission. That paper, “The Implications of Domestic Abuse for Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage” (see page 134 onwards) finally emerged this year and was duly noted by Synod, fortunately without debate being re-opened (so the Archbishop’s letter mentioned above still stands). It is an interesting paper, 18 ½ pages of close type, wading through Old and New Testament texts, and ending with much equivocation, being very doubtful about divorce and remarriage in these circumstances, but strongly in favour of the value of singleness.....

10. Other Matters of Interest

- We must never get discouraged – small wins each year. Last year an excellent motion was brought to Synod recommending **greater representation of women on boards and committees**, but we warned the promoters we would speak against their supporting paper, while agreeing with the outcome. The paper managed to be deeply insulting (women are good at “discussion hubs”) while also being downright dangerous (failing to note the legal responsibilities of Board members and

skill levels needed, which of course many women have). The paper was quietly dropped from the agenda and this year's much improved revised paper, with the same recommendations, was accepted by Synod, without debate.

- Synod's attention was drawn to the **decline in ordinations** to priesthood (presbyters) in Sydney, which is accompanied by decline in Moore College enrolments, and for those enrolled, a decline in continuation right through to ordination. The decline in enrolments has been continuous since a high point in 2006. By resolution (2/19 p. 52), ways to encourage greater participation were agreed, including exploring "apprenticeships". Tempting as it might seem, no – this was not the year to put up the challenge about women in the priesthood.
- The prize for the most innovative resolution this year went to 52.19 (p. 68) which called on all parishes **to pray once a quarter** for our clergy.....

Conclusion

Synod ended with a farewell to our Archbishop, who, while in office until sometime next year, was chairing his last Synod. Like others, I felt deeply conflicted at this time. He is an excellent, fair chairperson; I have personally found him unfailingly gracious and supportive in my contacts with him both in and outside Synod. How tragic is the current turn of events which will probably forever mark out this Synod in Anglican Church history.

The Anglicans Together support network are a wonderful group to have there in Synod – praying for each other; having dinner together. We respectfully acknowledge that there will be differing views on all these matters amongst our aligned parishes, and between individual members, but we hold firm to our watchword: "Unity in Diversity".

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ⁱ Quote from Sydney Anglicans website, 18 October 2019