

**PRESIDENT'S REPORT
FOR THE 2019 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

Reflection – Culture Wars in the Church

The term 'culture war' emerged in the United States in the 1990's to describe the conflict between conservative and liberal views of the world. The debate concentrated on the status of one particular narrative about the world over another and flowed on into matters of teaching history and the humanities, the creation of public policy, and the operation of the law under the dominant narrative.

In Australia we had a variant of this term called 'history wars', a term coined by Prime Minister John Howard and used with respect to his criticism of a 'black armband' (or negative) view of Australian history. Howard took a contrasting view to his predecessor Paul Keating, which also revealed it to be an argument between the left and right of politics. Such tensions find parallels in the tensions between monarchy and republic, European and Asian immigration, the nature of British settlement and Aboriginal rights, the Australian Flag, and even the symbolic roles of Gallipoli versus Kokoda.

Reflecting these intellectual conflicts, the media (and more specifically particular journalists and shock-jocks) have taken on roles as advocates for the opposing political ideologies, thereby fighting ongoing battles on behalf of their particular constituencies. Increasingly many media commentators have become less interested in reporting news and more in presenting a 'point of view' to their followers. Unsurprisingly, there are similar conservative/liberal tensions within the church, as witnessed through the narratives of the various religious sectional interests and their spokespersons.

Historically, conflicting narratives about the nature of truth and the legitimation of power are constants. Often, they have led to war or civil strife, such as the European Thirty Years War. This is because it is understood that those who control the narrative also get to define the truth and therefore hold power. When a narrative is challenged, the power and interests of those attached to it are also challenged. Religions, in their desire to legitimise social structures and maintain status, have often been caught up in such conflicts, usually to their shame. Nevertheless, the power to define the nature of reality remains of primary interest to human society and narratives are often used to express this.

Because the business of theology is linked to narrative and definition it needs to be understood that it is also not value-free. A way of identifying this is to look at who benefits from a particular theology or in which direction the power shifts. For example, the concepts of a 'chosen race' or 'holy remnant' suggest that one group has a privileged status with God to the exclusion of others. From this can flow a political narrative of superiority, prejudice and condemnation of those who are seen as 'not belonging'. A good example of this was the apartheid narrative of South Africa, which was supported by the Dutch Reformed Church and the Church of England in South Africa, among others.

Another theological narrative is about God's ordering of the universe and society. Here, it is argued, that when God created the world it was done within a natural order or hierarchy, both in heaven and on earth. What is important for humanity (conveniently being created in the image of God and therefore sitting atop the natural order), is to live according to these natural laws by reflecting this Godly hierarchy in society. Some are therefore born to rule while others are born to be slaves. Likewise, men are to be the head of the household and women are to submit and serve. People, it is argued, should therefore accept their station in life and not try to change these things!

Narratives are therefore powerful, yet they still need to be developed and maintained. Religious groups often maintain their positions through theologies that are exclusive and internally legitimised; which is to say that they support the truth and superiority of their position for the benefit of their followers and do not accept any criticism made by outsiders. Some describe such behaviour as 'tribal', although 'cultic' might be a better term.

As religion is no longer a binding force in the western world, a problem for the Christian churches and other religious groups in our own time and place is that they have lost control of their narratives in the context of the wider society. While people have disengaged from the churches (and the churches have disengaged from them), less members of the public are associated with the Christian narrative. What has emerged is a new narrative about religion that describes it as abusive, controlling, arrogant, ignorant and evasive of accountability. It is a very negative description maintained by the academy, in politics and the media, usually to the exclusion of the church!

One response from church groups is to reshape themselves to look more like the society around them, often becoming success driven, materialistic, narcissistic, and consumerist. On the other hand, churches sometimes choose to separate themselves from the world by becoming more inward looking, exclusive and divisive. Neither response is particularly attractive and neither seems to communicate the gospel effectively to our world, as the continuing decline in numbers demonstrate.

Another temptation in this situation is to emphasise trivialities such as personal piety, theological and ecclesiological differences, and individualistic morality, rather than the bigger issues of common faith, equitable relationships, a credible epistemology, and corporate morality. While the churches obsess upon their internal controls, piety and institutional beliefs, and maintain exclusive and self-referential narratives, they have little to offer society in general and will fail to bring their own views into the marketplace of ideas. This is the death of prophecy and the death of mission.

The Anglican Church in Australia appears to be living in just such a death spiral; being at war with itself and displaying all its tribalism, gracelessness and self-centredness for all the world to see. Our Diocese of Sydney and the GAFCON organisation have become major protagonists in this conflict and it is anticipated that the fight will go on for some time, with schism being a possible conclusion. Indeed, GAFCON and its Jerusalem Statement has become a means to try and undermine the historically unifying forces of the Anglican Communion, such as the Lambeth Quadrilateral and the Instruments of Communion. It seeks to make Anglicanism a confessional church (similar to the Reformed and Presbyterian churches), while at the same time creating a more centralised governance to enable the disciplining and exclusion of those who do not conform to accepted orthodoxy (similar to the Roman Catholic Church). This is a shift from a relational to an ideological basis for the unity of the church.

At some stage in the future, we Anglicans in Sydney may well have to make a decision as to whether we remain part of the Anglican Communion or join a breakaway movement, as has been seen in North America, South America, and parts of Africa. I think that this will be a sad day for the body of Christ in general and for the Anglicanism in particular, but it will be nothing new in a fragmented world.

As we fight over who is in control, who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong, while trying to outdo one another in 'piety', the world moves on having consigned the church to the dustbin of history. This is because, according to Jesus, Christian mission is not about worldly power, but about service through love. It is also about recognition of human brokenness and the need for God in our lives, which brings forgiveness, healing and salvation. In this respect, Christ gives us freedom; but it is a religious freedom that enables us to engage and act, not to play either the bully or the victim.

Executive Committee

The role of the Executive Committee is 'to promote the objects of Anglicans Together, and control and manage its activities in accordance with the Constitution'. Four meetings of the Executive Committee were held in the past year. Its membership was as follows:

President:	The Rev'd Andrew Sempell
Vice President:	Susan Hooke
Secretary:	Carolyn Lawes
Treasurer & Public Officer:	Wesley Fairhall
Members Elected:	The Rev'd Michael Armstrong Lyn Bannerman (Synod Coord) The Rev'd Philip Bradford (Membership Sec) The Rev'd Dr Max Wood
Members Co-opted:	Moya Holle (Communications Coord) Caroline Bowyer Marius Barnsley

I thank the members of the Committee for their ongoing commitment to the ministry of Anglicans Together over this past year and especially those who have supported me over the past six years. I especially thank the Secretary, Carolyn Lawes, who is also finishing her term in office at this meeting.

2019 Annual Dinner

The 2019 Annual dinner was held on Tuesday 19 March at the City Tattersalls Club. The speaker this year was The Most Reverend Dr Philip Freier, Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia and Archbishop of Melbourne. His topic was '*Holding to the Common Good in a Divided World*'. He wrote: "We are the Church for the whole world – this is God's choice, not ours. This is critical to how we engage in community service. There is a tension between sectarianism and the common good, between tribalism and the whole of community. Jesus' mandate in the Sermon on the Mount, is a mandate of service to the whole world."

Communications

Newsletter. I thank Moya Holle for her ongoing work producing the Anglicans Together Newsletter three times a year.

Website. I also thank Dr Colin Bannerman for maintaining our website

Networking

The St James' Institute. The Executive has met several times with Christopher Waterhouse, Director of the St James' Institute, and looked at activities that can be co-sponsored by both groups.

This year, the two organisations will conduct a joint seminar on Church Renewal. This will happen on Saturday 28 September from 10am to 4pm and will be led by Jim Brown, It will be based on his book *Living Well in the Presence of God*. Other future activities include a seminar on experiences in ordination selection and training, and a debate on complementarianism.

Christians for Biblical Equality. On 7 March 2019, Dr Kevin Giles latest book, What the Bible Actually Teaches About Women, was launched in Sydney with the support of Anglicans Together, which collected donations and distributed copies of the book to key personnel in the Diocese of Sydney.

Strategic Plan

In 2018, Anglicans Together instituted a new Strategic Plan. It can be found at Attachment A. The plan affirms the vision of seeing the Diocese of Sydney accept more diverse expressions of Anglicanism within its bounds and taking a more open and equal place in the life of the wider Anglican Communion so that the whole church may grow and thrive.

The Strategic Plan will provide an ongoing basis, vision and set of activities for Anglicans Together over the next five years. I commend it to all members.

Conclusion

2019 concludes six years of my being President of Anglicans Together. It has been a challenging time for the church both internally, because of division and threats of schism, and externally as the Australian community changes and the church finds itself heading more to the margins of the intellectual, cultural and spiritual life of society. We have interesting times ahead of us, and sadly most of the problems we face are of our own making.

At some stage in the future I believe that Anglicans Together, and other organisations similar to it, will have an important part to play in the renewing of a broken church. The scope will be bigger than denominations, national churches, dioceses, synods, and the other internal structures that seem to dominate our time and energy. Instead, there will need to be a growing conversation about Christianity and its capacity to overcome its divisions in theology, structures and social policies that have fuelled sectarianism, tribalism, obscurantism, and exclusivism for much of its history.

These could be exciting times if only we could reframe the good news of Jesus in a way that speaks to all people, rather than to those 'elect' who are committed to tight definitions of the Christian faith that tend to exclude rather than include people. Jesus changed the world by drawing people away from the institutional obsessions of power, control and status, and instead directed them toward acts of self-sacrifice, grace, hospitality and thankfulness; thereby reflecting the nature of God in our humanity and binding us to that which is life-giving.

I have enjoyed being President of Anglicans Together and participating in its activities. I especially thank all who have served on our leadership teams over the years and pray that God will continue to bless those who lead in the future.

The Reverend Andrew Sempell
President, Anglicans Together

29 August 2019

Attachments:

A. Brief: Anglicans Together Strategic Plan 2018

ANGLICANS TOGETHER

STRATEGIC PLAN 2018

1. Where are we now?

Our Formation:

- Anglicans Together (AT) was formed in 1992 in response to emerging trends towards a conservative mono-culture in the Diocese of Sydney.
- Our purpose was to promote inclusiveness within the Diocese, while still embracing unity.
- We saw our role, among other things, as creating lines of communication and providing forums for different viewpoints to be expressed in the Diocese.

Changes in the Diocese and our Response:

- Over the last 25 years the Diocese has become more mono-cultural. Clergy see it as increasingly unsafe to be seen to disagree with the 'Diocesan authorities'.
- We have, to some extent, withdrawn, as part of this cultural change, and have become less of a lobby group and more a "network of parishes that do not reflect the majority".
- While we have taken a step back –we are still providing vital fellowship and network to several parishes who would otherwise feel isolated from the Diocesan power structures.
- At the same time, the Diocese has taken a step back from many of the traditional activities it undertook. This is increasingly leaving a vacuum for someone else to fill.

Decision Point for the Anglican Communion:

- The broader Anglican Church of Australia and the global Anglican Communion are facing tough decisions over the next few years about its identity and who belongs and who might be excluded.
- Our local situation is tied to this national church debate.

2. Where do we want to be?

Our Vision:

The Sydney Diocese becomes accepting of:

- diverse expressions of Anglicanism within its bounds, and
- its place in the wider Anglican Communion so that parishes may thrive and grow in all their diversity.

Our Approach:

We will focus our actions in three self-reinforcing domains:

- (i) Supporting inclusion,
- (ii) Being vocal and visible, and
- (iii) Creating connections both within the Diocese and with the wider Communion.

3. What do we need to do to get there?

Delivering on our Three Domains:

- **Supporting inclusion by –**
 - resourcing parishes who differ from the mainstream,
 - networking these parishes, and
 - driving structural changes in the Diocese to support minority parishes (such as changes to nomination process).
- **Providing visibility by –**
 - being a voice and modelling good disagreement in the Diocese,
 - symbolic actions,
 - synod visibility, and
 - meeting with the Archbishop.
- **Creating connections by –**
 - bringing in national and international perspectives and connections into the Diocese –both from worldwide Anglicanism and from other Christian denominations, and
 - helping parishes to realise that they are valued members of the Anglican Communion.

4. What do we now do over the next five years?

- **Supporting Inclusion:**
 - (i) Start to build networks and momentum by having an event and sending a personal invitation to the rector of each minority parish (and extend it to two lay leaders). The event should have a headline speaker. And it should have a workshop session at the end: presenting AT's new vision; and commencing a consultation process with these parishes as to what AT can do to support them,
 - (ii) Develop a strategy to change the nomination requirements for parishes to make it easier for them to nominate rectors who are less in the diocesan mould, and
 - (iii) Commence a youth network amongst our parishes.
- **Providing Visibility:**
 - (i) Developing a Synod strategy,
 - (ii) Reviewing our communications strategy,
 - (iii) Having an annual meeting with the Archbishop, and
 - (iv) Developing a "subversive voice" with young people.
- **Creating Connections:**
 - (i) Using the Anglicans Together newsletter as a platform for wider Anglican Communion,
 - (ii) Collaborate with the St James Institute to hold co-presented events,
 - (iii) Interaction with the Primate and bishops, and
 - (iv) Engage with Trinity College, Melbourne and the University of Divinity.