

ANGLICANS TOGETHER DINNER  
St Alban's Epping, 7<sup>th</sup> August, 2002

*'Planting Churches on the Central Coast'*

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Let me begin by saying that all Christians and all Anglicans in particular should endorse evangelism and church planting. I greatly admire the diocese of Sydney for the importance it has always placed on evangelism and I wish I could see the same enthusiasm in dioceses of a more 'catholic' tradition. During the 'decade of evangelism' many catholic minded bishops and theologians rightly made the point that evangelism is not the exclusive prerogative of evangelicals. But in 'catholic' dioceses, the practice has rarely lived up to the rhetoric. However, there are encouraging signs of energy and outreach. In Newcastle we are particularly grateful for the enthusiastic evangelism which has come from *Cursillo*. Nevertheless the diocese of Sydney leads the way in the Australian Church when it comes to evangelism and for this it must be commended.

Some of the clergy in my region shrink from the jargon of 'church planting' but whatever label you give it, the importance of starting new parishes and ministries cannot be denied, especially in dioceses in the Australian Church declining in numbers and growing in age. Here it must be remembered that the diocese of Newcastle and the diocese of Sydney and all the other Australian dioceses came to be as they are through 'church planting,' or as we Anglicans more commonly say, by 'starting new parishes.' In new suburban areas in every Australian city church plants commonly take part, and all agree this is a good thing. In the diocese of Melbourne, the Synod last year approved a 20/20 vision statement that committed the diocese to planting 20 new parishes by the year 2020. With the population set to explode on the Central Coast from its present figure of 293,000 to 312,600 by 2006, the diocese of Newcastle cannot afford to sit light to the challenge to plant new parishes and begin new ministries. The Central Coast is part of the horizontal sprawl taking in Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong - '*NewSydWol*' as it is known - a great conurbation comprising three quarters of the population of N.S.W.

In the Central Coast region there are many independent Pentecostal and Evangelical groups who are busy planting churches. Some of their efforts come to nothing, many plateau with a membership of about 30 and a few become thriving mega churches. A 'pastors network', consisting of mainly Pentecostal and evangelical pastors and ministers, has been formed to pray for evangelistic and church planting opportunities on the Central Coast and to uphold those involved in this task.



As a diocese we are keen to 'plant a new parish' in the north of the Central Coast and an initial trial at doing this began in February this year but did not succeed. It failed for several reasons – a lack of knowledge on how to start a new church, a lack of suitably gifted leadership, a lack of finance and a lack of a reasonably sized young core group. The Rev'd Mark Watson will briefly say something later about the struggle and also some of the good things that have come out of his six months work in the area. I am not particularly concerned about the fact that we have had to call a stop to the work. That is *par for the course* for most who are seriously involved in church planting. But I am concerned that it be only a temporary halt until we can find a secure financial base for this ministry and a suitably gifted leader for what is an incredibly difficult task. Few, if any, of our theological colleges equip people for this urgent need in the church.

So whatever else I say do not think that I am opposed to evangelism or church planting as such. Archbishop Jensen's stirring challenge at the 'Deep Impact' rally in August last year to reach 10% of the population with the gospel in the next decade ensures that evangelism and church planting will remain an ongoing priority in the diocese of Sydney. I only wish all in the diocese of which I am a part could embrace such a vision for growth.

Having said this however, let no one think that I support Anglicans "planting" new parishes in a diocese without the consent and blessing of the bishop as we have experienced in the diocese of Newcastle and has taken place in the diocese of Bathurst and Adelaide – in each case by Sydney evangelicals with the imprimatur of the leaders of the diocese of Sydney. I know that most of the men who have pioneered these plants have renounced their Anglican orders, but the explicit support by the leaders of the diocese of Sydney and their theological training in an Anglican theological college, cannot be ignored.

What are my reasons for rejecting this policy?

Firstly, behind this whole approach lies a judgmental attitude to other Christians.

Sometimes we are told explicitly, always it is implied, 'you mainstream Anglicans are not true Christians' or, as it is more commonly said, 'Biblical Christians'. There seems to be no appreciation of the doctrine of sin that effects every person and every Christian. It is as if Sydney Christians are somehow different to all other Christians, they are the close friends of God who know his mind perfectly without any clouding by sin and the rest of us are spiritually blind. This self righteous attitude which we have all experienced would seem to stand in direct conflict with the primary precept in the Christian ethic – 'love one another as I have loved you', and it would seem to be a rejection of Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount 'judge not lest you be judged'



Behind this attitude to other Anglicans lies a sectarian mentality which thinks that somehow a pure church is possible. Official Anglican teaching places great stress on the duty of the church to preserve orthodoxy and confess the faith accurately but at the same time Anglicans have usually refused to define the church exhaustively in terms of doctrinal truth. They maintain that such an understanding of the church is to be rejected because firstly it suggests that Christians can be absolutely certain that they are right and other Christians are wrong and secondly because it overlooks the sin or imperfection that continues in the life of the believer. (perfect Christians are in very short supply). The sectarian vision does not take the reality of the Christian life seriously enough. The New Testament indicates that believing people are part of the church, even when they are straying from the gospel not only doctrinally but also morally. Paul addressed his first epistle to the Corinthians – ‘to the church of God in Corinth’ and then spends most of the letter speaking of their imperfections and failures. As we read the letter we discover how divided, self-centred, irreverent and compromised many members of that church were. Nevertheless, Paul addresses them as the church in Corinth.

Anglican ecclesiology accepts that we are all pilgrims at different stages on the king’s highway. There are no first grade or second grade Christians. To say this in no way condones direct disobedience to God, or under-achievement, or spiritual mediocrity in the Christian life. We should all strive to be better disciples and constantly ask the Holy Spirit to help us in this quest. As a World Council of Churches document has put it, ‘the call to conversion should begin with the repentance of those who do the calling, who issue the invitation.’

The Anglican liturgy expects that God’s people will have an appetite for the truth of God in the scriptures and a yearning to walk close with God in their lives. Nevertheless, the mixed nature of our Church, which I have argued is a thoroughly biblical view of the church, should impart a certain breadth of mind and courtesy to our communal life. It excludes the kind of judgmental attitudes that lead to separatism (no contact with other traditions in the church); confrontationalism (contact, but only to put others right) and triumphalism (we run the church and we will see to your demise). I suggest these things are all implied in the planting of new churches by Anglicans in our diocese apart from the blessing and invitation of our bishop. They are acts which lack charity.

Secondly behind the judgmental approach lies the view that only Moore College trained men ‘preach the Gospel’.

Time and time again we are told the issue is preaching the Gospel. Only men from Moore, and only men from Moore who have the imprimatur of the key leaders in Sydney, preach the Gospel. Churches need to be started wherever the Gospel is not preached, as is the case in the diocese of Newcastle, we are told.



This is an equally judgmental and hurtful assertion. True we could be doing much better in evangelism but to say no one in the diocese of Newcastle preaches the gospel seems to me to be a bit unfair to say the least. I certainly want to preach the gospel – the good news about Jesus Christ - to the people of the Central Coast, as I would think all of our clergy would, notwithstanding the fact that some may do it better than others. To claim or to imply that only Sydney evangelicals preach the Gospel is in all truth unfair and untrue. This claim not only devalues the ministry of every other Anglican but also the mainstream evangelical tradition as represented by John Stott and most English Anglican evangelicals, the Baptists, the Pentecostals and, the evangelization work of the Roman Catholic Church.

This claim makes us ask, what is this Gospel Moore men preach? Is it the gospel we find enunciated in the first letter of John which links a concern for orthodoxy with an equal concern for orthopraxy? Is it about a Jesus who wants to change people making them concerned for the poor and the dispossessed of the earth? Some times when we hear the Moore College Gospel preached we who believe that the Gospel not only calls for right belief but also right action wonder if this is really the Gospel revealed in Jesus Christ? I am reminded of the maxim which says, ‘whoever preaches half the gospel is as much a heretic as the person who preaches the other half’! It is my humble belief that if we respected one another and worked together instead of in competition, we would have much to teach each other. Evangelicals could learn from Anglican catholics dimensions to the Gospel they forget, and catholics could learn from evangelicals dimensions to the gospel they forget.

My second reason therefore for opposing the planting of churches by Sydney Anglican evangelicals in the diocese of Newcastle is that it is based on the premise that all truth resides in Sydney evangelicalism.

Thirdly, behind this whole approach lies a rejection of the Anglican diocesan parish system that has served us well for hundreds of years and extends back into the earliest centuries.

To make this point and the ones to follow I must explain Sydney ecclesiology which is unique to this diocese. This is helpfully explained in Dr. Kevin Giles book, *What on Earth is the Church*. This ecclesiology dominates in Sydney having been taught at Moore College for many years but as far as *I know* virtually no theologian, not even an evangelical theologian, anywhere else in the world, has endorsed this ecclesiology. It is an ecclesiology which entails the following ideas:

- i) The word *ekklesia* (*church*) means assembly, nothing more and nothing less.



- ii) The only place where Christians assemble on earth is local congregations, so nothing on earth other than a local assembly of Christians can be called church. Article 20 is quoted in support. This states that the ‘the visible church of Christ is a *congregation* of faithful men....’ However Kevin points out that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century ‘congregation’ did not refer to a local church but to the whole church. This means that the article in fact in no way supports congregationalism.
- iii) The only other place Christians can be thought of as assembling is in heaven in a spiritual sense. All universal uses of *ekklesia* refer to this heavenly assembly. On this premise the totality of Christians on earth are not the universal church and no denominational body can be called church.

Given this ecclesiology we should not be surprised that diocesan boundaries count for very little. On this view there is no reason why individual evangelists and/or pastors cannot go anywhere and start a church. The diocese is only a human construct and ordination only a ‘man made’ ritual.

In reply Giles argues, and Sydney have made no attempt to rebut him, that:

- i) The word *ekklesia* (church) in its more developed theological usage in the New Testament means far more than assembly. It implies the idea ‘community’. One only has to look at the well-known verse, ‘And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my *ekklesia*/church.’ (Matt.16:18) to see that the word *ekklesia* can mean far more than assembly. In these words Jesus was not speaking of building a local assembly in Jerusalem or of building a church in heaven. He was speaking of gathering a worldwide community on earth of those who confessed Jesus as the Christ. It must be on earth for in heaven the gates of Hades (the forces of evil) will not be present.
- ii) You cannot construct theology by doing word studies. He draws on the important seminal distinction made several years ago by Professor James Barr between words and concepts. There is a great difference between asking how the New Testament uses the word *ekklesia* and asking how the New Testament understands the church concept. If we limit our attention to one word we may well miss the thought of the writers concerned. Thus it is noted that the Gospel of John and the first letter of Peter have a theologically developed understanding of the Christian community but they do not use the word *ekklesia*. The concept is present but not the word.

In response to the Sydney ecclesiology which is grounded on this untenable understanding of the word *ekklesia* and word based theology, following Kevin, I would want to argue that the church on earth is always more than the local church. It is first of all the world-wide community of all who confess Jesus Christ. It is then secondly communities of Christians in given geographical areas such as Sydney and Newcastle. In the Anglican Church these areas are designated a diocese. Over the diocese there is a bishop, the chief shepherd or pastor of that location. Such superintendence or oversight (*episkope*) over many congregations finds its origins in the leadership of Peter and Paul in the early church. Peter was set over the Jewish churches and Paul over the Gentile churches. If these foundational apostles could think of the Christian community on earth in wider terms than the local congregation then it is surely permissible for Christians united together by a common heritage and confession to endorse the idea of a national and regional church under a bishop. In Paul's epistles it is clear that he believed he had authority over individual churches and it is on this basis that most churches have established models of episcopal superintendence – even if they do not use this term.

Thus in opposition to Sydney ecclesiology I would want to argue that Jesus Christ is well served by the diocesan structures and that the local church/congregation is more than simply an aggregation of believers, it is the body of Christ in any one place and representative of the whole body of Christ, the people of God in the world. No Christian is simply a lone ranger who can do as he/she likes without responsibilities to other Christians. As Kevin Giles wisely comments about denominational forms, they 'should not be given ultimate theological validation by theologians in any age, or categorically rejected. What is needed is an historically aware ecclesiology that speaks of the possibilities and the pitfalls of church life as it is manifested at any given time - a theology that neither completely denies the theological validity of the sociological form of the church, nor endorses it without any theological critique'.<sup>1</sup> For all who like myself accept this 'provisional ecclesiology', church planting in a diocese by Anglicans (ordained or not) against the wishes of the bishop destroys the diocesan system

Fourthly, behind this approach lies an inadequate theology of the local church.

For Anglicans the parish is far more than an aggregation of believers who are having their spiritual needs met in a trendy service. It is the body of Christ in that place. It is a community of people united to Christ and to one another in a bond of love and service. It embraces the elderly and the young, the unemployed and the overemployed, men and women, those who like modern music and those who don't, those who believe everything and those who believe with difficulty.

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<sup>1</sup> K.Giles, *What on Earth in the Church?* Dove, 1995, p.208.

What is more for Anglicans it is a eucharistic community. It is in this community that the bread and the wine become through faith the body and blood of Christ given for our salvation. In this celebration Anglicans believe Christ is really present. In the celebration of the eucharist most Anglicans believe an episcopally ordained priest should preside. Lone ranger planted churches without episcopal oversight cannot do this. In mainstream Anglican theology, evangelical and catholic, the eucharist is not just an optional extra to be celebrated or not, it is the one service commanded by Christ. All too often in Sydney theology the eucharist is subordinated to the preaching the gospel and seen almost as a casual thing to which people may drop in as they might do for a cup of coffee with a friend. There is little thought that in this event we are recalling in the most vivid and powerful way the death of Christ for our salvation.

Fifthly behind this approach to church planting lies a devaluing of Anglicanism

If you asked me what kind of Church plant we need on the Central Coast I would say in the first place that it would be unashamedly Anglican. Someone may object 'that does not tell us very much'. As some wag has put it, 'you can go through the ecumenical movement without leaving the Anglican Church!' Allan Jones has remarked, 'the glory of the Anglican Church is that, in the end, everyone will be Anglican! It's a tragedy is that no one will know!'

Jokes aside, I do not think that we should over emphasise our Anglican allegiance but neither do I think we should be ashamed of it or deny it. I am still proud to be an Anglican and I think the Anglican Church in all its variation has much to offer to a world seeking spiritual reality. I particularly like the oft quoted words of Evelyn Underhill, 'the Anglican Church may not be the city of God but she is certainly a respectable suburb thereof'! I do not believe the time has yet come to throw off our Anglican commitments. We have much to learn from other Christian Churches, especially when it comes to evangelism and church planting, but we also have things to give to other churches. We may find ourselves from time to time annoyed and frustrated by our Anglican way of doing things but as Karl Rahner once said, 'there are realities which we understand only when we love them. The church is one of these.'

Soon after I arrived on the Central Coast I invited the Rector of Cherrybrook, the Rev'd Steve Pivetta and one of his key lay people to share with some of our clergy their experience of planting a church in a Community Centre. They wrestled with the question as to whether they should call themselves Anglicans. They came to the conclusion that in the context of the religious supermarket mentality, the term 'Anglican' actually carried some credibility! That was at the beginning of 2001.

Whether that is still so in the light of the negative publicity the church has received in recent months is open to debate. But for me, Anglican allegiance is much more than a question of marketability. It is a matter of theological conviction.



To conclude, yes we should be as Anglican Christians committed to evangelism and church planting but to evangelism and church planting that is Christ honouring, charitable, co-operative, and within the bounds of historic Anglican ecclesiology. This recognises diocesan boundaries, the oversight of the local Bishop and the communal nature of the local parish or church where the eucharist is celebrated by a minister in fellowship with the bishop of that region.