

SYDNEY SYNOD 2003
REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS

Michael Horsburgh

Synod 2003 met in the Wesley Centre on 13, 14, 15, 20 and 21 October. In what is now the practice, the opening worship was held in the theatre after the Presidential Address. Eucharist is no longer celebrated in connection with the synod. I have earlier commented on the way in which the synod has been converted into a rally for the Diocesan Mission. This process has continued and little formal debate was held in the first three days. Overall the proceedings revealed how quickly the deconstruction of Anglicanism is proceeding in the diocese. I had predicted this in the article I wrote for *The Bulletin* before the archbishop's election but I had not anticipated the speed with which my prediction would come true.

The Presidential Address

The archbishop's address, which he delivered with consummate skill, may be found at

<http://www.anglicanmedia.com.au/index.php/article/articleview/1079/1/25>.

In it the archbishop revealed much about the ecclesiology that now drives the diocese. For the archbishop the diocese consists of 'fellowships, congregations and churches'. We might be tempted to think that these terms are rather loose similes for parishes. Fellowships seem to be groups of likeminded persons that meet in their own right, for example, in a workplace or between members of the same occupation. Congregations seem to be subunits of churches, much as our different eucharists are on Sundays. The critical term is, however, 'church'. This is used exclusively for local assemblies, not for anything larger. The archbishop said, "I love the Diocese of Sydney, though I do not imagine that we should call it 'the church', or the bride of Christ. Rather it is a network of churches and Christian organisations intended to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ and to support the churches." The preferred term for the Anglican Church is 'our denomination'. For him the use of 'church' to describe such a body is purely popular and theologically incorrect. Such a view casts doubt on the validity of the office of bishop as an order in the church. Indeed, it casts doubt on the validity of ordination itself as an act of any body or person beyond a local congregation. This means that the ecclesiology is now explicitly congregational. The polity may remain Anglican, but only in a purely functional way.

The address had other functions. It began with an account of marriage and family designed to present a world in which sexuality is tightly determined and exclusively heterosexual. This familial analogy was then transferred to the church to bolster this perception further. Thus, when the address arrived at a discussion of the Anglican Communion, the stage was set for an exclusivist approach.

The Anglican Communion

The debate on the Anglican Communion was the final act of the synod, having waited the statement from the Primates' meeting. The debate, which originally had three motions, concentrated on the first, which was about issues arising from events in North America. That motion, marked up to show its final form was:

6.2 Anglican Communion

Synod reaffirms its commitment to the authority of Scripture and recognises that the Anglican Communion has traditionally maintained its adherence to that authority and that of the 39 articles of religion. It notes the departure from biblical authority in the actions of –

- (a) the Synod of the Diocese of New Westminster by agreeing to bless same sex unions, and
- (b) the Diocese of New Hampshire, endorsed by the Convention of the Episcopal Church of the United States of America, in electing ~~a practising homosexual as a bishop~~ as a bishop a person engaged in homosexual activity.

Synod therefore dissociates itself from ~~such~~ these actions which are contrary to biblical teaching, and as an expression of Christian love and fellowship calls on those involved to repent, and to reverse their decisions.

Synod also commends our Archbishop for his public comments on these issues and for standing with other leaders of like mind in their desire to maintain the truths of Scripture.

(Bishop Glenn Davies/Dr Laurie Scandrett)

I moved an amendment intended to redirect the synod away from criticism towards mutual tolerance. For this reason I had the first opposing call in the debate. Anxious to show concern for tolerance of difference, the archbishop took the unprecedented and unexpected step of securing extra time for me before I began to speak. For this I am grateful to him. My amendment (which was not accepted) was:

Delete all the words after “Synod” and insert the following:

“notes with deep distress the current disputes within the Anglican Communion. It endorses the ongoing search for appropriate responses to changing views on sexuality. It calls on all the Provinces of the Communion to continue in fellowship with each other and to respect the integrity of decisions made by others after prayerful consideration within their own cultures and environments.”

(Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh)

My speech follows. I was able to deliver all of it except for some abbreviation at the end.

Mr President, I oppose this motion in its entirety. My amendment sets out the kind of response I think this synod should make. Why I think that will become apparent as I speak about the motion itself. At the outset I wish to say clearly and firmly that, even if I were the only person in this synod to vote against this motion, it would not go forward in my name. I decline to be associated with the prevailing views of this diocese about sexuality and to endorse its actions.

This motion is based on the false assertion that the current debate in the Anglican Communion is about the authority of scripture. It is not. It is fundamentally about the meaning and interpretation of scripture, not its authority. I have looked carefully for any indication that either the synod of the Diocese of New Westminster or the convention of the Diocese of New Hampshire has rejected the authority of scripture. I have found none in their public statements. At best the motion's assertion about the nature of the debate is a failure of analysis. At worst it is an *ad hominem* argument designed to invalidate other Christians by presenting them as apostate.

The fundamental issue in this debate is whether homosexuality exists. This is a question of anthropology or, to a lesser degree, science. If anything is clear, it is that, in the anthropology of the Bible, homosexuality as such does not exist. Homosexual behaviour is identified, but as the perverted behaviour of persons who are essentially heterosexual. The best evidence for this is in the famous episode in Sodom, recorded in Genesis 19. In this episode, sexual assault is used to degrade strangers. That Lot offered his daughters to be degraded as substitutes for the strangers confirms this view. The biblical statements about homosexuality are all dependent on this assumption. It is also the case that this is the assumption of many traditional societies in the modern world. Such an assumption leads to the statements of some African Primates that homosexuality does not exist in their cultures and has been imported from the West, a patently false view. Modern knowledge concludes that homosexuality does exist. It is for this reason that there is now a dispute about the meaning and interpretation of scripture.

Your Presidential Address to this synod, Mr President, was dangerously ambiguous on this matter. You began by constructing a heterosexual world of family and marriage in which homosexuality has no intrinsic place. Later in your address, however, you drew the distinction between homosexuality itself and homosexual behaviour, a distinction that depends on the existence of homosexuality.

As a Christian I am obliged to accept the teaching of the Bible, and I do. I am not obliged to accept the science, medicine, culture or anthropology of the Bible and, where appropriate, I do not. In that case the teaching of the Bible about homosexuality must be reinterpreted in the light of new knowledge. This process is not novel. The clearest example is the case of slavery, a practice accepted in both the Old and New Testaments and based on a flawed view of the status of persons as property, a view not unrelated to the patriarchy of those times.

If homosexuality exists, the distinction between homosexuality and homosexual behaviour is also no longer tenable. As a heterosexual person I make no distinction between my identity and my behaviour. If I restrain my behaviour, and I do, it is in the light of such matters as respect for others, fidelity, commitment. But I do not deny my basic needs for sexual intimacy. Yet, it seems, that is what is required of homosexuals. This also must be reviewed. Moreover, the false distinction between sexuality and sexual behaviour colludes with our society's unhealthy obsession with genitalia as the principle component of sexuality.

I also note that, whereas the issue in traditional societies is the very existence of homosexuality itself, the issue in our societies is now rather one of morality. This makes the concerns of the so-called South participants essentially different from the concerns of the North participants, including this diocese. For this reason the alliance between this diocese and its South allies is questionable.

I turn now to the North American actors, New Westminster and New Hampshire. I am a frequent visitor to the north-eastern United States. My son and his family live in Boston. I worship regularly in churches where the reconsideration to which I have referred is taking place. I find those people to be faithful, committed and involved Christians and I decline to be disassociated from them. More to the point, I note that their situation is exactly the same as ours. In their own context they seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the decisions they must take. If I were a member of the Synod of New Westminster, I cannot say whether I would have voted for the motion to bless same sex unions. I do not know the context. I do know that I would not have voted against it on principle. If I were an elector in New Hampshire, I do not know whether I would have voted for Gene Robinson. I do know that I would not have voted against him on principle.

It is for this reason that I decline to enter into judgement on the considered decisions of others who struggle with the same issues as I do. I cannot call them to repent, that is not my task. I do seek to join them in continuing to struggle for an approach to sexuality that is both true to biblical principles and consistent with our knowledge of sexuality. This is a question much wider than the present unhealthy concentration on homosexuality.

I turn now to consider the essential tragedies of this motion. There are two, at least, and they involve some unacknowledged people. In the first tragedy are the members of this diocese who are homosexual and who seek to live in committed and faithful same sex relationships. There are such people and I know some of them. These people experience the stance of this diocese as rejection and violence. They deserve better.

The second tragedy is, without doubt, in this very synod hall. I refer now to those members of this synod who have homosexual children and grandchildren, whom they love and support with all their persons. Yet, in public, they are urged to act contrary to the deepest calls of their hearts and condemn what they experience. And what do they do? They divide themselves, living in tension and duality. How do I know this? I know it because some of them have told me.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that I cannot endorse the activities of the archbishop in this matter, nor support his international interventions. My amendment is consistent with what I have said. But, whatever the outcome of my amendment, I repeat, even if I am the only person in this synod to vote against this motion, it shall not go forward in my name.

The synod passed the motion and has committed itself to the most conservative position in the debates in the Communion. There was no surprise in this.

The synod also passed the following motion of support to orthodox persons overseas:

Greetings to biblically orthodox Clergy and Laity in the Diocese of New Westminster and in ECUSA

Synod sends Christian greetings to the Rev David Short, to the congregation of St John's Shaughnessy, and to the other clergy and laity of the Diocese of New Westminster who have stood firm on the teaching of scripture concerning human sexuality.

We commit ourselves to pray for your witness to the truth, for the deepening of your fellowship in the proclamation of the gospel and for your continued confidence in our Father's sovereign purposes.

Synod also supports the proposal that members of the Diocese of New Westminster who cannot in conscience accept the Episcopal leadership of Bishop Ingham should have access to alternative Episcopal ministry.

Synod also expresses its support for those sections of ECUSA who are struggling to preserve biblical standards in their denomination and encourages them to stand firm in the face of pressure to conform to policies that are contrary to biblical teaching.

It is important to note in this motion the support for alternative episcopal oversight.

Debate on the following motion was adjourned for want of time.

6.3 Commitment to the Authority of Scripture (1)

Noting that the second Fundamental Declaration in the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia states –

2. This Church receives all the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as being the ultimate rule and standard of faith given by inspiration of God and containing all things necessary for salvation.

and that the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion passed the following Resolution I.10 -

This Conference -

(a) commends to the Church the subsection report on human sexuality;

(b) in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman in lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage;

(c) recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ;

(d) while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture, calls on all our people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuals, violence within marriage and any trivialisation and commercialisation of sex;

(e) cannot advise the legitimising or blessing of same sex unions nor ordaining those involved in same gender unions;

(f) requests the Primates and the ACC to establish a means of monitoring the work done on the subject of human sexuality in the Communion and to share statements and resources among us;

(g) notes the significance of the Kuala Lumpur Statement on Human Sexuality and the concerns expressed in resolutions IV.26, V.1, V.10, V.23 and V.35 on the authority of Scripture in matters of marriage and sexuality and asks the Primates and the ACC to include them in their monitoring process.

Synod -

(a) confirms its unqualified support for and endorsement of Resolution I.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference, and

(b) urges all Bishops of the Anglican Communion, in view of the teaching of Scripture, to neither ordain, nor propose for consecration, those involved in same gender unions.

Synod further requests the Diocesan Secretary communicate a copy of this resolution to the Archbishop of Canterbury and all other Bishops of the Anglican Communion.

(Dr Laurie Scandrett/the Rev Alan Stewart)

This following motion was withdrawn.

6.4 Commitment to the Authority of Scripture (2)

Synod, noting both the text of the second Fundamental Declaration in the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia and the text of Resolution I.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Bishops of the entire Anglican Communion, requests that all other Australian Diocesan Synods -

(a) reaffirm, by resolution, their commitment to the authority of Scripture, and

(b) affirm, by resolution, their unqualified support for and endorsement of 1998 Lambeth Conference Resolution I.10,

(c) communicate their response to the requests in (a) and (b) to the Diocesan Secretary by Friday 24 September 2004.

(Dr Laurie Scandrett)

The mover quoted part of the following from my pre-synod reflections to St James' parish as justification for its withdrawal:

A third motion asks all the Australian diocesan synods to [endorse the relevant Lambeth conference resolution] and to report to Sydney that they have done so by 24 September 2004. Why those synods should hold themselves accountable to Sydney remains to be revealed. The implied threat is that failure will bring the wrath of Sydney on them. The diocese wishes to enforce its position both within Australia as well as outside.

Lay and diaconal presidency at the Eucharist

An ordinance to repeal section 10 of the 1662 *Act of Uniformity* was presented to the synod. This ordinance, which passed, purports to remove a legal impediment to the introduction of lay and diaconal presidency. The legal members of the synod who spoke cast doubts on its effectiveness. It awaits further legislation to regulate the practice. In response to a question I asked the archbishop said that he had already consulted a number of bishops in the Communion with variable but largely negative responses. He is committed to more detailed consultations with the bishops of the Province of New South Wales. I spoke in the debate. In my opinion the Standing Committee's decision to send this ordinance to the synod showed a level of contempt for the intelligence and integrity of the synod. I reflect this opinion in the way I chose to characterise the process. Some members of the synod detected my approach and greeted its opening with hisses. I gave this speech without notes or written text. What follows is a reconstruction of the speech not its actual text.

Mr President, would you buy a use car from John Woodhouse [the promoter of the ordinance]? Perhaps you would. After all he seems a nice fellow and is neatly dressed. He has been trying to sell this car to the synod for a number of years and has nearly succeeded. Rule Number 1 for buying used cars: never buy a used car out of sympathy for the salesman.

Rule number 2 for buying use cars is: never buy a used car without first seeing the guarantee. You should never buy a used car without seeing a guarantee and you should certainly never pay any money under such circumstances. This ordinance comes with absolutely no guarantee that it will work. It purports to repeal part of the *Act of Uniformity* of 1662 in this diocese. There is no guarantee either that it will do so or that, if it does so, it will make lay and diaconal presidency legal. You can tell that there is no guarantee by the fact that, even if this ordinance is passed, clause 3 says that it will not come into operation until the Archbishop-in-Council is satisfied that it will work. [A legal member of the synod] has just made a speech to that effect, saying that the ordinance will do nothing. That is to say, we are being asked to buy the car now, without a guarantee and with no knowledge when the car will be delivered.

Rule number 3 for buying a used car is first to check the vehicle and see that it has all its parts. This car was designed to have two sets of wheels. The front wheels were to repeal the *Act of Uniformity*, the rear wheels were to authorise lay and diaconal presidency. What we have here are the front wheels. The question arises as to whether there are any rear wheels and when they will arrive. Earlier in the debate the distinction was made between 'decriminalisation' and 'legalisation', suggesting a two stage process. I am not convinced about this distinction. Consider this proposition. If a thing is legal, who needs an ordinance to authorise it? You might have an ordinance to regulate its use, but you need nothing to authorise it. Will there ever be another ordinance or will lay and diaconal presidency just happen?

So, Mr President, you should never buy a used car without a guarantee and when parts of it are missing. You would not buy a used car on that basis, nor should you buy this ordinance.

The text of the Ordinance is at the end of this report.

Freemasonry

A bizarre interlude in the synod was a debate on a motion confirming that Freemasonry is incompatible with Christianity and calling on Anglicans and Anglican organisations to disassociate themselves from it. This view was endorsed by the synod in 1988. The motion was brought to the synod by the Rector of Lithgow, where there has been conflict over the issue. Why it should have come now remains a mystery, as is the origin of the Lithgow troubles. More seriously, the motion shows a willingness in the synod to resolve pastoral issues by formal methods, hardly a recommended solution. The key to its adoption by the synod lies in its identification of incompatibility with Christianity, an identification that taps into the diocese's exclusivist tendencies.

Ministry

The Dean led a discussion about ministry based on the need for several thousand new ministers in the next nine years. This figure is extrapolated from conceptions of how many small groups the Mission will need. He floated the idea of a new order of clergy called 'minister', ordained and with clerical titles and privileges. It sounded to me like a permanent diaconate but is clearly different in the planners' minds. If nothing else demonstrates the deconstruction of Anglicanism, this does. This presentation showed the error of developing policy based on ideology rather than reality.

Property

Another presentation concerned the need to purchase property in new housing developments. Presented as a vital part of the Mission, this activity has actually been a part of the diocese since the expansion of the metropolitan area began after World War II. Having been presented with a short version of a very large report, the synod members were invited to talk among themselves and produce ideas about funding the minimum \$91 million needed. From the subsequent oral presentations it seems that the ideas were, as might have been expected, random. This exercise is nothing more than an attempt to cast a consultative veneer over the increasing centralisation of power in the diocese.

What is slavery?

In my speech to the synod about the Anglican Communion I commented on how the church had reconsidered the matter of slavery, a practice not opposed in either testament. Canon James McPherson made the same point. In a quite bizarre contribution to the debate, the Dean of Sydney said that the Bible opposed slave-trading but not slavery. He referred to a text to support this view but I did not catch the reference. If slavery means the ownership of another person, slave-trading cannot logically be opposed, since the possession of property includes the right to dispose of or trade in that property. How the Dean could then make his statement was beyond me.

It turned out, however, that the Dean thought that slavery is equivalent to imprisonment. He included prisoners of war, criminals and debtors in the definition of slaves. He may have been referring to the fact that, in the ancient world, many people became slaves as a result of war, crime or debt. He went on, however, to assert that modern criminals undergoing imprisonment were slaves and that we, as well as the Bible, supported slavery on that basis.

This amazing argument stretches the common meaning of both imprisonment and slavery to an absurd degree. In our society imprisonment asserts a right to detain a person under certain conditions. It does not assert an ownership of the person of the criminal. Indeed, many of our policies are designed to ensure that such an ownership is not asserted. The basis of the Dean's argument remains a mystery. It certainly opened a more novel interpretation of the biblical text than even I had ever entertained.

A theology of disability

In one of the presentations about the Mission, a minister from a suburban parish was questioned about his work. He recounted how, after a child had been baptised, he had been diagnosed with what seemed from the description to be a significant developmental disability. The mother, who had been on the margins of the congregation, then began to come to church more regularly. After some conversation the reason was determined. The minister said that he had reassured the woman that her son would be perfect in heaven. This hope, he said, had converted her and she was now a member of the congregation.

I was greatly disturbed by this story. It reveals a singular lack of any appropriate theology that encompasses disability. If we are to be saved from our sin, is it sin that caused the disability? If we are to be perfect in heaven, is the perfect person to be us or some other person who we never were on earth? What does perfection mean in that context? Is this a cult of perfection in temporal terms? Is our Lord in heaven with his wounds or healed from them? How is our vulnerability to be part of our eternal life? These and other questions are raised by this story, apart from the pastoral consequences of the approach and the theology of the nature of heaven itself. The story was commented on favourably by subsequent speakers. Is this a theology for mission in Sydney?

Censuring the Dean

One of the most unfortunate incidents in the synod was a failed attempt to censure the Dean for a statement published in his weekly notices for 12 October 2003. The Dean had said: "For a long time there was a common ministry [in the Anglican Church] but the ordination of women to the priesthood and the consecration of women . . . means there is no longer a commonly respected and received ministry." For a newspaper report of the incident, see:

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/10/15/1065917482898.html>

The motion was the sole initiative of its mover, who interpreted the Dean's comments to mean that the ordination of women had degraded the ministry. Such a conclusion was, she claimed, demeaning to women. As the Dean's defenders were quick to point out, however, he had simply made a statement of fact.

Of more interest is the process by which the matter was brought to debate. The notice was given at the beginning of the business on 15 October and was unlikely at that time ever to have come to debate. A number of motions higher on the business paper were not reached by the end of the synod. Shortly after the notice was given the Dean asked to have the debate brought on as a matter of urgency. This was agreed to and caught the mover by surprise. She suddenly found herself speaking and without much support from the synod.

The reality of the situation is that a number of people in the synod continue to support the ordination of women and this motion arose out of the frustration the mover felt. Some of the speakers who supported the Dean recognised the emotion of her speech but suggested that this was an inappropriate way to present it. While they were correct in saying this, they overlooked the fact that the synod has resolved not to discuss the ordination of women any more. Thus those frustrated by the intransigence of the diocesan position have no recourse at all. It is hardly surprising then that this matter bubbles up in the wrong places. Not only that, the possibility of change in the opinion of the laity in particular is never again to be tested.

Overall, however, this was an unfortunate incident and did nothing to help the cause of liberalisation in the diocese.

On being a false prophet

Several of the speakers in the debate on the Anglican Communion referred to words of Jesus about false prophets and the dangers they pose. One of them spoke about ‘honest liberals’, who, he said, ‘stood up for what they didn’t believe’. By implication, other so-called liberals who profess some adherence to the Bible were ‘dishonest liberals’. As the principal speaker against the motion under debate and as a person who said that he accepted the authority of the Bible but not certain interpretations of it, I must certainly have been included amongst the false prophets and dishonest liberals. I tell you this so that you may be warned. You should certainly regard my statements with circumspection, if not outright hostility.

Conclusion

I want to thank all of you who continue to encourage and support me by your words, actions and prayers. The situation in the Diocese of Sydney is rapidly deteriorating. The regime is openly ideological and rapidly centralising its power. In fact, a major reconstruction of regionalism is under way. Far from being units with discretion to act locally, the regions have become functional divisions implementing centrally determined plans. The room for difference is rapidly shrinking.

Act of Uniformity (Section 10) Repeal Ordinance 2003

No 49, 2003

Long Title

An Ordinance to repeal section 10 of the Act of Uniformity of 1662 (14 Car. 2, c. 4) insofar as it continues to have force in the Diocese as part of any consensual compact.

Preamble

Whereas it is expedient to remove any impediment to the administration of Holy Communion by deacons or lay persons that exists by virtue of Section 10 of the Act of Uniformity of 1662 in so far as it continues to have force in this Diocese.

The Synod of the Diocese of Sydney Ordains as follows.

1. Name

This Ordinance is the Act of Uniformity (Section 10) Repeal Ordinance 2003.

2. Repeal

(1) Section 10 of the Act of Uniformity of 1662 (14 Car. 2, c.4), insofar as it continues to have force in this Diocese as part of any consensual compact, is repealed.

(2) For the purposes of clause 2(1), the provisions of the Act of Uniformity of 1662 are those set out in the version of the Act published in the 2nd Edition of Halsbury’s Statutes, Volume 7, pages 583ff.

3. Commencement

(1) Subject to clause 3(2), this Ordinance commences on the date of assent.

(2) Clause 2 commences on a date to be determined by the Archbishop-in-Council.

4. This Ordinance shall not be construed as having any effect on the application or non-application of any other provision of the said Act of Uniformity on the laws of this Diocese.