

**PRESIDENT'S REPORT
FOR THE 2016 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

General

In a recent article for St James' Parish Connections I wrote the following:

"Up to the 1950's a majority of Australians not only identified themselves as Christian (around 90% of the population) but were also regular church attenders (around 45%). By 2011 this had fallen to around 61% and 10% respectively. It may be lower again by now. Interestingly, while the number of people identifying as Christian has dropped by around 30% the participation rate has dropped by a staggering 75%! More particularly, around 2.5% of the population (both in Sydney and elsewhere) currently attends an Anglican church regularly. This puts the Christian churches in a very marginal position with respect to the wider community and suggests that their engagement with both the community in general and their own constituencies needs to change dramatically.

A problem for the Anglican Church (among others) is that it spends much of its time talking to itself. Over the years it has increasingly become more self-interested, self-obsessed, self-referential, and therefore disconnected from the wider community. We may think we have something important to say, but the 97% who are not engaged with us have long moved on and lost interest. Moreover, we have become defensive and obscurantist, seeking to look after 'our own' and retain our social privilege on the one hand and 'laying down the law' to the wider community on the other. It is an unsustainable position and we [the church] seem to be incapable of reform".

In recent years a number of commentators have written about this phenomenon and speculated on its causes. These include Roy Williams' *Post-God Nation*, Hugh Mackay's *Beyond Belief*, and more recently Keith Mascord's *Faith Without Fear*. Some of the responses to the decline of the church are wistful, some are critical, some are filled with doom and gloom. Of course the decline is not new, and was being written about back in the 1970s and 80s.

The decline has been expected, but the church seems to have been powerless to address it. Now we struggle to be heard in the public domain because we are no longer politically significant, and more sinisterly we are being seen by a growing number of people as the cause of social dysfunction and the source of moral bankruptcy. The standing of the church in Australian society has never been lower and our leaders seem to be struggling to find a way forward that is creative, community engaging, and forward-thinking. We can no longer say let's keep on doing what we have always done and flourish, neither can we be arrogant and say it is only the 'faithful remnant' who remain.

It strikes me that a feature of radical change in the church is that it tends to come from marginal groups and individuals rather than from power blocs such as synods and bishops. It is usually a 'bottom up' approach that arises as a 'movement' rather than through a formal structure. The early church itself, monasticism, the Reformation, Evangelicalism, and Tractarianism all began as fringe movements in the church rather than from the centre of power. Unsurprisingly, those in power are usually more wedded to maintaining the status quo than to change. Our challenge then is it be a movement, seeking to renew the church; and more particularly seek greater diversity, transparency and grace in the activities of the Diocese of Sydney.

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:	Wesley Fairhall
Members Elected:	Lyn Bannerman (Synod Coord) Caroline Bowyer
Member Co-opted:	The Rev'd Philip Bradford (Membership Sec) Moya Holle (Communications Coord)

I thank the members of the Committee for their ongoing commitment to the ministry of Anglicans Together over this past year.

2015 Sydney Diocesan Synod

The principal matters dealt with by the 2015 Synod were:

- Support for the SRE programme in state schools,
- Affirmation of 'traditional' marriage,
- Adoption of a new Authorised Lay Ministry Ordinance, and
- Adoption of a new Policy on Dealing with Allegations of Unacceptable Behaviour.

A new Large Receipts Policy was not adopted, but the Standing Committee is looking at other ways of dealing with its needs in this regard.

2016 Annual Dinner

Over 100 people from fourteen parishes gathered at the City Tattersall's Club, for our annual get together, and to hear Professor Marion Maddox address the intriguing topic: 'The Past, Pleasures and Prospects of Liberal Christianity'. Professor Maddox is a leading authority on the intersection of religion and politics in Australia and has taught in universities in Australia and New Zealand. She is currently a Professor at Macquarie University in the Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations.

As demonstrated by the comments and questions after her speech, Professor Maddox provided a fascinating insight into the roots of liberal Christianity, giving those who attended a challenging background and context to consider the teasing question of 'what will happen next' in liberal and conservative theologies.

Communications

Newsletter. Moya Holle continues to do a great job producing the Anglicans Together Newsletter three times a year. I express our thanks to Moya for her great effort in this regard.

Website. I also thank Dr Colin Bannerman for the ongoing development and maintenance of our website, and encourage members of Anglicans Together to look at it regularly.

Networking

During the past year, Anglicans Together has maintained a positive networking relationship with the following organisations:

- St James' Institute
- NSW Ecumenical Council, and
- MOW Watch.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning, these are challenging times; but the church has faced similar ones over the course of its history. In our particular context there are three broad areas that could be considered in response to our circumstances; these being the encouragement of:

- Ecclesial, practical and theological diversity that allows for adaptability and participation,
- Healthy and positive relationships built on trust and integrity, and
- Openness to the pressing concerns of the community.

More specifically, I suggest that we (the Diocese of Sydney) need to address the following:

1. Review and clarify of the role and ministry of women in the Diocese, especially with respect to ordained leadership, preaching and family life. In some parishes women are banned from preaching, and the inclusion of the term 'submission' by a wife to her husband in the diocesan marriage vows has been most damaging for the mission of the church in general.
2. Review the Role of Moore College and look at the extent it is prepared to provide broad-based training in theology, pastoralia, liturgy, spiritual development, and mission that is helpful for the whole Diocese and not just a section of it (even if it is the majority).
3. Address the disconnection between the church and the wider community, and understand the way that this is damaging the church's mission. In recent years, the church in Australia has regularly lost in its political engagements, often because it has focussed on issues in a heavy-handed way, or failed to communicate effectively, or turned second and third order theological issues into primary ones.
4. Accept the need for a diversity of structure, ministry and practice that will help the Diocese to adapt to change on the one hand, and allow for the participation of a greater number of people on the other.
5. Develop an understanding of what is the desired culture in the Diocese and consider the dominant stories, symbols, behaviours, and modes of leadership that might be used to achieve this.

The Reverend Andrew Sempell
President, Anglicans Together

25 September 2016