



Presidential Address to Synod 2018

President's Address to the 143rd Session of the Synod of the Diocese of Rockhampton

Introduction

Sisters and brothers in Christ, welcome to the 143rd session of the Synod of the Diocese of Rockhampton. As we gather in the presence of God, I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land upon which we stand. As we continue to learn to live together on these ancestral lands, we acknowledge and pay our respects to their elders, past and present, and we pray that God will unite us all in a knowledge of his Son, in whom all things were created, in heaven and on earth, whether visible or invisible – all things have been created through him and for him.

This is now my fourth Synod with you and a shade over three years since we began to articulate our vision in terms of 'Loving God and loving others'. It has been a great joy to see many people taking this on board and seeking to engage their communities in mission. It has been hard work and there is much still to be done – changing culture takes a lot of time and energy. I remind you, paraphrasing the words of the Apostle Paul, our only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given us - the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace. (Acts 20:24) Christian life and ministry is not a sprint to the finishing line. It's an endurance race, a race with obstacles and challenges, and so we need to focus on the goal of proclaiming God's good news, of seeing God's kingdom come.

Just over a week ago now, many people around the Diocese were involved in our stand at Beef Week. I was so impressed by the response of people to our presence at Beef Week, and all the work that went into the videos prepared by our parishes and agencies, that I have decided to show them tonight. These short film clips show, far better than my words, how people across the Diocese are seeking to live the mission of loving God and loving others.

Before we do that however I want to make a brief comment on two other matters.

Safe Ministry

First, in reference to Safe Ministry, I want to say that our mission of loving God and loving others must also be seen in the way we respond to those who have suffered because of historical abuse. The Royal Commission into Institutional Sexual Abuse of Children has ended, and many recommendations have been made. At General Synod last year legislation was passed to help make the church a safer space for children and all who are vulnerable.

Later in this Synod we will be dealing with a number of motions that were passed unanimously at General Synod in 2017. I expect that this Synod will pass all of the General Synod Canons before it and ensure that all of the provisions that will affect our Diocese are put into place. May we be a safe place for children and all who are vulnerable.

I also want to ask for your help in getting the message out across the Diocese about Safe Ministry training and screening. It has now been three years since we began to implement a new training and screening regime for all church workers both paid and volunteer. While the response overall has been exceptionally positive, there are still a few misunderstandings that need to be cleared up. So please, when you return to your parishes, let people know what happened at Synod, present a report and help us to clarify the situation.

Let me tell you a story. Roughly 30 years ago an 11 year old boy was befriended by his parish priest. This relationship led to a period of sexual abuse that lasted for a number of years until the Parish priest moved to another diocese. So, to those who say it doesn't happen here, or that nothing like this happens in their parish/diocese, I say it did, it has, and it could happen again and that I will do everything in my power to try and ensure that it never happens again. Loving God and loving others means protecting the weak and the vulnerable and we must do everything in our power to make our churches and their ministries safe. Please ensure that everyone in your Parish or ministry unit who holds a church worker position, paid or volunteer, takes part in Safe Ministry training, keeps their training up to date, completes all screening requirements and keeps their Blue Cards current.

I have been asked a few times recently about Blue Cards. The comments are usually along the lines of 'I have an exemption, I have a Blue Card with another organisation', and, for some, 'I'm only on parish council I don't need one'.

First, let me point out that the rules concerning Blue Cards are administered by the State Government and they are clear. If you have an exemption because you are a teacher or if you hold a Blue Card with another organisation, you are required under the Queensland Government's Blue Card legislation to link your exemption or your Blue Card, to the Diocese of Rockhampton. This must be done via the correct form found on the diocesan website and forwarded to the diocesan office for submission. Trust me when I say if you try and do it any other way it will not work.

Second, the diocese has been very clear, for some time now, about who is to hold a Blue Card. In May 2015 Bishop-in-Council resolved that all Wardens and Parish Council members should have a current Blue Card. This is in line with a number of other Dioceses around Australia. If you are nominating for a position or have been elected to a position it is imperative that you apply immediately for a Blue Card. A failure to obtain a Blue Card will result in your being stood down from your position until such time as the matter is rectified. This is also true if you allow your Blue Card to lapse so please ensure you keep your Blue Card current.

The Rev Jan Robinson has worked very hard over the last three years making sure our training, screening and Blue Card record keeping processes meet the highest standards. It has been a difficult task in an area of constant change so what has been achieved, on very limited resources is a credit to Jan's leadership in this area. If you have any questions about applying for, or the renewal of, your Blue Card please speak to Jan or to Barb Smith in plenty of time to ensure your card remains current.

Regional and Remote Ministry

My second major theme for tonight is regional and remote ministry. There are few places that have the combination of very small communities and the isolation found in Australia. The tyranny of distance places a significant strain on resources and our ability to minister in these communities. If it were not for organisations like Bush Church Aid many Anglican communities in outback Australia would be without ordained clergy.

There are also a number of significant demographic and sociological changes that are taking place in Regional and Remote communities across the world.

Brad Roth in his book “God’s Country: Faith, Hope and the Future of the Rural Church” noted that rural places, in today’s world are devalued, even despised and that rural pastors and lay leaders often experience burnout and despair, while rural congregations become overshadowed by a diminished sense of significance and self-worth. The reason for this devaluation he says is the current trend in our world to measure success and importance in terms of bigness – big cities are better than small villages, big corporations are better than small business and big churches are better than small ones, and so on.

It is true to say that churches, in many places, have bought in to this narrative of bigness as a measure of success, bigger churches, more programmes, more staff, are better, more successful. Yet, this is not the message of the gospel.

Stories of seeds dying to come to new life, of mustard seeds becoming great trees, of making disciples, of pruning and new growth are stories that take time. We are too impatient, we have bought into the world of immediacy, we want it now! So, when our desires for success are not met, when small is the norm, and slow change is part of daily life, we begin to view ourselves as unsuccessful. When this happens it “erodes our sense of worth, our sense of self, and it drives us into the arms of escapism and apathy.” We can’t be bothered, everything becomes too hard and we begin to dream what life might be like someplace else.

Roth claims the antidote to this negativity, this looking for success in bigness, comes as we begin to rediscover and name the surprising, beautiful, and creative ways that God is present in our communities. To remember that our human vocation, our calling, is found when we abide in God, when we praise God where we live and move and have our being - which, incidentally, is the only place that anyone has ever praised God.

There are many challenges to ministry in the Diocese of Rockhampton, we are small in number, we have limited resources, vast distances and lots of small communities - ministry will likely always be difficult and small. It's vital that we remain focused on our mission of loving God and loving others. Now I want to share with you how this is happening across the Diocese. In many places, in lots of different ways we are a people seeking to rediscover, to name the beautiful and creative ways God is present across our diocese. We may not be very successful by the standards of this world, but take heart, God is doing great things in our midst. People are growing in faith, loving God and loving others.