

Presidential Address to Synod 2021

President's Address to the 147th Session of the Synod of the Diocese of Rockhampton

Dear Colleagues in Christ,

Introduction

I am delighted to present my inaugural Presidential Charge as your Bishop. It is a privilege to lead our Diocesan family, a privilege which is both an honour and overwhelming. This year has demonstrated to me (again) that God provides and will continue to do so.

Before I commenced my appointment, I sought counsel from the wise heads at my disposal. The consistent message was to use the first year patiently and thoughtfully, seeing what is there and getting to know the landscape. This has been my intention for 2021. Accordingly, I have spent this year with eyes wide open, observing as far as possible without critique, judgment or change, acquainting myself with the Diocese.

This address therefore will loosely adopt the thematic rhetorical question "What have I seen so far?"

Identity

The initial specific question then becomes "What have I seen about our identity?" This is a good question. To answer this, I specifically looked not so much to the people, landscape or buildings but to our constituent documents. Our Diocese was created by the passing of the Diocese of Rockhampton Constitution Canon on 29 June 1893. This Constitution declares that we are a branch of the Church of England, (now the Anglican Church of Australia) and as such we have certain distinguishing features. We receive the Canonical Scriptures as inspired and authoritative; likewise, we are bound by the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine articles to define our identity.

This is obvious and non-controversial. Our identity thus far is beyond dispute and all members of this Synod have affirmed the parameters of our identity by means of the Synodical Declaration. What may be not so readily apparent is the "civic" dimension of our identity. Our internal constitution was ratified by the Queensland State Government in 1895 which gave legal identity to the Corporation of the Synod of the Diocese of Rockhampton. The Anglican Church of Australia Act 1895 (Qld) provides for the management of the property and affairs of the Diocese. This imprimatur is for our Synod to exercise the powers of the state in running the Diocese.

It is fair to say that the State has delegated this role, under law, to us gathered here at Synod. To this extent, what we do, say and resolve bears the authority of the State Government. We have before us, at Synod and beyond, an important job to discharge. To all gathered, your very presence and engagement here is of critical importance.

Furthermore, as leaders of a Church founded by Christ and the Apostles, our manner of life, speech and action must be fitting to this identity. Our activity derives from Christ's mission charge to make disciples, to reach our community with the momentous news of Jesus; the εὐαγγέλιον of Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection. What we do and how we do it matters.

Is there a greater privilege, responsibility or challenge?

I have seen that our Diocesan identity is a momentous one; an identity that through my effort and attitude I intend to honour. I expect everyone throughout the Diocese to do likewise.

So much for what I have seen about our constitutional identity. What about outside the confines of my study, the Diocese at large? Good question!

What have I seen to encourage?

The short answer is many, many things.

The Welcome and Acceptance afforded to me and my family.

What an amazing blessing to be called to such a fantastic place to do God's work: Every day I am struck by the beauty of our landscape and the drama of our location. I relish the outback vistas, coral reefs, verdant rainforest and towering peaks. I relish the fact that I and my family have been called to live in a place as privileged as Rockhampton. This is a wonderful setting in which to conduct an episcopal ministry, a fact I remind my Southern Bound colleagues at every opportunity.

I have seen my family step up to the plate. Moving is hard, harder with teenagers, harder still with settled teenagers and really hard leaving children a continent away, COVID or not. My wife Virginia has left a fulfilling career, significant church and community involvement, and been required to start anew. This is a sacrifice which I am awed by and grateful for. I do not take lightly the support of my family. I see and benefit from this support daily.

Additionally, I have seen the warmth and enthusiasm of the welcome we have received. So many put in so much thought and consideration to our arrival and settling in. We bought a house sight unseen. We saw the outstanding efforts of the commissioning and construction team in preparing our place for our (and our canines') arrival. This reckless leap of faith seems to have paid off.

Head Office

I have seen the unstinting support from my head office colleagues. The efforts of Barb, Tara, Jen in the office with the addition of the flying squad consultants, John Barnes and Louise Bulman have been a great encouragement. The team working together is a beautiful sight. I am grateful for their patience with the new guy in giving me the lay of the land. It is no exaggeration that Synod and just about everything else would not happen without them.

Commissioning

My retreat, consecration and installation were an unexpected bonus. I had no knowledge or expectation for these events, other than that they were necessary administrative steps before the real work began. However, the real-life experience of Bishop Alf so generously shared on my retreat; the Consecration with the amount of goodwill from Archbishop Phillip and Dean Peter Catt, not to mention all the Brisbane Diocesan support staff both delighted and humbled this slightly overawed rookie bishop. To complete the experience was the appearance of all our clergy in appropriate liturgical finery for the Australian Church to see. This act of grace had more positive effect than you realise. Similar observations are in order for the installation, where the Cathedral community had its chance to shine. All very conspicuous signs of moment and goodwill.

Faithful Service

Since my arrival, we have seen the departure of those called to minister elsewhere. Our thanks go out to ADn Tom Henderson-Brooks, Revd Capt Graeme Liersch and Revd Matt Taylor. To them and their wives we say thank you and Godspeed in your new ministry callings. Please uphold these ministers and their ministries in your prayers.

Chancellor

On the converse, we have seen God's provision of a new Chancellor. Andrew Rankin was kind enough to accept my invitation to become my legal advisor on 20 September 2021, a worthy successor to the redoubtable Margo Purcell. Andrew engaged with the issues that we face with courage and spirit; already he has provided significant assistance and clarity in resolving a number of thorny questions. We now formally welcome Andrew to our Diocesan Family.

Ministry

Most encouragingly, I have seen first-hand the faithful and dedicated ministry around this vast, varied and picturesque diocese. I have seen well-structured, thoughtful church services; I have seen faithfulness of attendance and enthusiasm for the mission of our Diocese. I am appreciating the commitment of clergy, many of whom have travelled far from family and loved ones to serve

our congregations. I have been able to observe and listen and am gaining insight and appreciation for the individual ministry contexts. Without our dedicated clergy, this Diocese has no mission and no ministry. Again, please uphold our clergy in your prayers. As I see the week in and week out commitment and dedication, I am very grateful for this crucial contribution.

I have seen much to encourage, for that I am profoundly grateful. However, nice as encouragement may be, I am also a realist. ADn Tom in his *welcome* after the election Synod last year wryly described my appointment as a “hospital pass.” I took that as hyperbole if not friendly fire, this sentiment I neither endorse nor heeded. That said, I do get where he is coming from. I have seen challenges that lie ahead for the Diocese.

What challenges have I seen?

As part of the observation process, I must be honest. Whilst I have had much to encourage, it is indisputable that there are real challenges facing our Diocese. Having played and watched both rugby codes, I know exactly the implications of a “hospital pass.” Given these implications, I would respectfully disagree with this tag as a *complete* characterisation of my Episcopacy, although I am realistic as to what lies ahead. We face significant existential challenges.

Notice announcement

Please folks, picture this. The Bishop is there participating in the service, everyone on their best behaviour. The service has been fluent, thoughtful, warm and reverent. Happy days. Then, the leader goes off script to deliver the notices, just as we are thinking about morning tea and the bubble bursts. An ambush into the realm of uncertain, inaccurate, dithering confusion. Please abide by the three rules of public speaking – prepare, prepare, prepare. This has been a bewildering and incongruous feature of our services. I have seen this too often for my taste.

Insecurity and uncertainty about our identity and mission.

It is no accident that I started with a statement about our identity and mission. Our identity is one of dignity, our task one of momentous importance. Unfortunately, I see a loss of this sense of identity. I have seen gossip, propagating ill-informed, thoughtless comment; malcontent, manifesting in criticism, complaint and despair; factionalism, both within congregations and the us/them mentality of Parish v Diocese; indifference, in commitment to both Parish and Diocesan structures. These behaviours are inconsistent with a thriving Diocese. I do not want to see them anymore, these stop now.

Internal operational financing

That we have financial issues is manifest. That we are unwilling to face them in a cohesive, corporate manner is potentially our undoing. Much of our financial situation is outside our control, I am peaceful with this fact and will address this shortly. Whilever I see parishioners content with a gold-coin donation as sufficient, I am struck by the basic misunderstanding and lack of appreciation of grace and divine generosity. Any lack of considered, generous, sacrificial giving is inconsistent with a thriving diocese. The money is there, it's just in the wrong bank accounts. Accordingly, I want to see this Synod asking probing and intelligent questions about budgets and finance, taking responsibility for the management of our God-given resources.

External financial threats

My predecessor warned that he could well be the last Bishop of Rockhampton. Thankfully this fear was not realised. However, we face stern external threats to our financial viability in the form of historical abuse claims. The redress claims we are managing with careful asset management and sales; much of the credit goes to ADn John Barnes in this regard. However, it is completely foreseeable that the Common Law PIPA claims will exhaust our resources to provide compensation. I am concerned that Plaintiff Law firms are under the misconception that the Diocese has unlimited funds in this regard.

External mission opportunities

I see both opportunities and challenges with our involvement in reaching various communities. Currently we have contact with Gladstone Seafarers Centre, AnglicareCQ and CQU chaplaincy to name a few. It has become legally necessary, in the view of Bishop in Council, for the Diocese to cease institutional involvement with GSC for three reasons. Their current core business of transport is outside our expertise of ministry, the Qld Dept of Fair Trading has determined that the current Diocesan involvement is non-compliant and an impediment to constitutional reform, and the potential liability from additional PIPA claims over the assets of GSC, posing an unconscionable risk for further involvement. This precaution precludes neither any institutional involvement in the future or continued informal participation.

AnglicareCQ is seeking to enhance its relationship with the Diocese, and we will be exploring ministry opportunities in this arena as they arise. Likewise, I was invited to and gladly accepted involvement in chaplaincy at Capricorn College CQU, an institution with strong historical links with the Diocese. This chaplaincy work involves my whole family – such fun!

I note the developing Diocesan awareness of mission, through the agencies of ABM, BCA and CMS. The challenge of reaching the world for Jesus is one that we face with relish.

Prayerlessness

Perhaps the most serious challenge we face is lack of an obvious prayer culture. With all the concern about parish and Diocesan finances, I am yet to see, hear of or be invited to a prayer meeting regarding these challenges. You do not have because ...?? (James 4:2-3) Without prayer, we go nowhere. There's a challenge for all of us.

I readily acknowledge that these observations are perspectival and situational. I am prepared to accept that I view the world through a particular prism that is not omniscient. However, I am pretty confident that I have outlined the more serious challenges I have seen facing our Diocesan family. Challenges that will need to be met if we are to have a future. That said, what of the future?

What do I want to see?

We have looked at things I have seen, both encouraging and challenging.

I now want to face the future. I want to see a few things in the next little while.

If this year 2021 was the year of watching and observation, 2022 will be a year of consultation and discourse, listening and thinking. I am deliberately restraining this process. Making bold plans on insufficient observation and inadequate consultation is not a recipe for success in my experience. However, if we are to move forward, we need to have cogent and comprehensive answers to a few sequential questions. Observations are a necessary first step to appropriate action, but they are insufficient without dialogue and discussion. I see the following questions as necessary and cumulative.

Who are we right now? Not just as individuals but who are we as a corporate entity. What are the values we share, what are our common desires and aspirations?

Where are we right now? This raises sometimes uncomfortable questions of competence and operations. We need a frank and transparent look at how we are operating, what we do well that can be fostered, what we need to do better that can be nurtured. This process takes the nature of an operational audit. A clear snapshot of our location and characteristics.

The next question is **Where do we want to go?** What is our vision for the future? As a church facing significant external threats and pressures as well as our own internal limitations or weaknesses, our threshold goal is to survive. This statement is bland and axiomatic.

However, we can do more than just *survive*; under God, we can and should *thrive*. So, what will this look like? I am aware that this question has aroused people's curiosity from before my arrival. I maintain that currently any pronouncement on this score on my part is both premature and unhelpful.

However, I want a few things for the future. I want a Diocese without the distraction and discouragement of financial insecurity and free from the crushing effects of financial pressure. I want vibrant Anglican communities of living faith, fully engaged with their communities throughout our Diocese. Each town of about 2,000 and above should have a permanent, sustainable resident clergy, full time or part time, sufficient to service the attendant congregations. Each ministry community needs a stable, consistent regular attendance of 1% of the surrounding community within a ½ hour radius. Each ministry community is committed to the spiritual, emotional and financial support of the ministry team. These are but preliminary thoughts you will understand.

Of course, if that's where we want to go, the next question becomes **How will we get there?**

Simple. *Commitment.*

Financial commitment, sacrificial giving to fund our way, without recourse to external fund raising.

Spiritual commitment, based on intentional prayer, fellowship and growth in godliness.

Leadership commitment, a well-supported, trained, resourced and confident clergy with appropriate lay contributions operating within a clear and well-defined institutional structure. This is obviously a diagrammatic vision, with many components and details necessarily omitted, but I believe that this is a snapshot worth committing to.

Despite my natural inclinations, I have resisted the temptation to issue forth with stirring and detailed Churchillian visions for the future. I have kept my dreams and aspirations under wraps until I can dream and aspire with more knowledge and authority. For the moment, I can affirm two immediate goals. Firstly, that we survive and glorify God, and secondly that we thrive and glorify God.

As part of this ongoing process, I will seek consultation and discourse as we under God, together face the future of our ministry and mission. My aim is to present Synod 2022 with an action plan that clearly delineates our mission, vision, responsibilities and aspirations as a Diocesan family.

Conclusion

The fact is that I did not come just to look and observe. This is a necessary starting point, but by no means an end point. I have seen many encouraging things, balanced by and with many challenges. However, it is my firm conviction that under God, we have a future that is bright and worth looking forward to.

Do prayerfully and faithfully join with me in this adventure to which we have been called.

I commend and commit our Diocesan mission and ministry to your prayers, your aspirations and your efforts.



+ Peter
Rockhampton

Right Reverend Peter Grice
Bishop of Rockhampton