

A RESPONSE TO ARCHBISHOP GLENN DAVIES' PRESIDENTIAL CHARGE TO THE 2019 DIOCESAN SYNOD

Please Leave Us!

Last Monday the Archbishop of Sydney, Dr Glenn Davies, gave his Presidential Charge to the Diocesan Synod. Some of it was controversial and, in my view, ill-advised. The speech was based on what was considered the rightness of a Sydney Diocesan view on sexuality and the wrongness of all those who disagree with it. Yet, there are several views on this matter, as the recent book *Marriage, Same-sex Marriage and the Anglican Church*, produced by the Anglican Doctrine Commission, demonstrates. The key passage in the Archbishop's speech was the following:

*"The General Synod must make a clear statement about the teaching of the Bible on the sanctity of sex within the marriage bond of a man and a woman, so that marriage is held in honour among all and the marriage bed is not defiled (Hebrews 13:4). **My own view is that if people wish to change the doctrine of our Church, they should start a new church or join a church more aligned to their views – but do not ruin the Anglican Church by abandoning the plain teaching of Scripture. Please leave us. We have far too much work to do in evangelising Australia to be distracted by the constant pressure to change our doctrine in order to satisfy the lusts and pleasures of the world.**" (G Davies, Synod Charge 2019)*

This 'leave' sentiment was also present in the Archbishop's 2018 Presidential Charge when he encouraged members of the Anglican Church in New Zealand to leave that church in protest at their General Synod giving approval for the blessing of married couples who are of the same sex. He said:

*"Since the report coming to their General Synod had recognised that there would be those who would dissent from its recommendations, the Church should therefore deal graciously with those who could not accept any foreshadowed changes to the Canons. I suggested that the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia should therefore **allow those clergy and churches who could not stay in the Church, to leave and start a new, parallel Anglican Church, and to do so with their property.**" (G Davies, Synod Charge 2018)*

The Archbishop has directed similar exhortations for people to leave the Anglican Church in the United States, Canada and Scotland; encouraging them to join a breakaway church under the umbrella of the Global Anglican Futures Conference (GAFCON). The difference in the current situation is that rather than encouraging those of his own persuasion to leave the Anglican Church of Australia, the Archbishop is telling those who disagree with him to leave. It is a reversal of what has happened in other places and an attempt to claim that the Diocese of Sydney represents the 'true church' and that those who disagree are 'heretical' and do not properly belong.

Moreover, the call for people to leave the church gives the impression that the solution to conflict is to disengage from those with whom there is disagreement and place a partition between the parties. Hence, if there is something happening with which you disagree or there are people of whom you disapprove, the solution is to leave and join another church or create your own. It is a matter of giving priority to ideas and practices over relationships, which goes on to suggest that if you don't believe or do the 'right things' then you should either remove yourself or be expelled. Interestingly, reformed ideology seems to give rise to such divisive behaviour as has been exhibited in the history of many protestant churches over the past four hundred years; but is it Godly?

A Church Divided Will Always be Defeated

St Paul wrote to the Corinthian church:

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” (1 Corinthians 1:10)

Many years ago, when I was in ministry in Grafton, I noted that there were three Presbyterian denominations in town; the Presbyterian Church of Australia, the Free Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, and the Free Presbyterian Kirk of Scotland. Each had a small congregation, none of them engaged with each other, and only one of them engaged with the other churches in town for matters of shared ministry. Each congregation was based on the Westminster Confession of faith, reformed in theology, presbyterian in government, and evangelical in operation; yet because of history and culture, small issues of theology and large doses of desire for power and control, they could not be unified or work together. There are similar stories in many other places.

The idea of leaving as a resolution to conflict and forming another church tends to lead to a series of weak and self-obsessed churches that are divided and disconnected from the wider community, convinced of the rightness of their cause, proud of their purity, self-satisfied in their theology, but achieving little (if anything) for those outside their doors or for the Kingdom of God.

My concern is that it seems that the Archbishop of Sydney is offering a similar position for the Anglican Church in Australia – if you don't agree with us over the doctrine of marriage then leave. It is an idiosyncratic stance and seems to have little resonance with the words of Jesus, *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11: 28-30).

The position of 'agree or leave' seems to lack compassion, grace and winsomeness. Instead, it promotes tribalism, legalism, power and control – a heavy burden for people to bear. Yet, perhaps one that makes it easier for people to leave.

What Should the Church Look Like?

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12: 12-13)

The early church was a movement that had **diversity both in organisation and practice**; unique on the one hand, but a mixture of influences principally from Judaism, but also from Greek philosophy, Greco-Roman paganism, and a number of 'mystery' religions on the other. It did not have a singular form, nor was there an ideal structure upon which each community was based - that structure emerged later along with the statements of faith. Baptism, however, was the sign of becoming part of the church and a way of being welcomed into God's family. While the Eucharist became the sign of participation in the life of the church and the exercise of personal membership of it.

Diversity within the church resonates with St Paul's 'body image' in 1 Corinthians. It also sits comfortably within the 'mixed economy' model of church presented by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, ('Making the mixed economy work' - 6 May 11). Diversity is good for the church because it allows many people to participate in it and belong to it.

The church is meant to 'be' **the body of Christ** in the world, acting in Christ's name to 'do' those things that bring justice and righteousness. Sadly, 'being' and 'doing' often end in conflict if one dominates the other. Rather, we are meant to be a little bit of both – the church is meant to both 'be' and 'do'; one cannot exist without the other. We seek to reflect this in the St James' Church Mission Statement: '*...to be a transformational community built on the love of God and worked out in the ministries of **word, sacrament and incarnation***'.

The church is also meant to be **prayerful** (that is, be in communication with God), while pursuing those things about which it prays. In other words, we should not pray for the poor if we are not going to be generous, we should not pray for peace if we are not going to condemn conflict and violence, we should not pray for refugees if we are not going to show hospitality to them, and so on. We should therefore not claim to be 'the church' if we are not going to be a means of bringing God's grace and salvation into the lives of others. Telling people to leave the church mitigates against this position.

Unfortunately, the church has not always been a means of grace and salvation. Sectarianism, child-abuse, domestic violence, and mistreatment of minority groups (such as LGBTIQ+ people) has brought condemnation upon it. More recently, some churches have sought legislative privilege to protect their interests, be it tolerance for some peculiar beliefs such as 'male headship' or exemptions from discrimination laws. In this way, the church presents itself as an institution that wants to receive grace from the community rather than give it – a matter of law over grace. This seems to be where we have ended up in the matter of same-sex marriage. But it doesn't have to stay this way - there can still be good news through repentance and reconciliation.

Churches often describe themselves as 'communities', but this is a false assertion. A community is not something created by the will of a group of individuals but rather a context in which humanity lives and operates. It therefore includes all people, both the likeable and unlikable, the good and the bad, the saint and the sinner. We belong to a community because we live in it rather than because we subscribe to a set of idea or beliefs about it. Community can be likened to citizenship (or possibly family) – which is a state of being connected to each other politically, culturally and situationally.

In contrast, institutional churches operate like **religious clubs** by emphasising membership through conformity to particular beliefs and the exhibiting of particular behaviours. On the one hand, they seek to include people (and sometimes say they are open to all), but on the other hand they often seek to exclude people who do not believe or do the right things. Of course, the narrower the definition of membership the more exclusive the church can become.

In this respect, the churches often reflect the spirit of our age by being tribal, competitive, materialist and discriminatory. They therefore fail to connect with many people, intentionally exclude others, and lack the diversity and openness expected of a healthy organisation. This is perhaps one reason why less than 10% of Sydney's population attend church regularly – trying to live in a conflicted situation is not pleasant.

The Problem with Sydney

The Synod of the Diocese of Sydney calls for division within the church ostensibly over the matter of the blessing of same-sex civil unions, which the Synod has declared sinful. There has, however, been a long history of discomfort between the 'conservatives' in the Diocese of Sydney and the 'progressives' in other parts of the Anglican Church of Australia, which includes other issues such as the authority of the General Synod, approved liturgies, and the ministry of women.

On this occasion, some people have asked 'Why doesn't the Diocese (or parts of it) leave the Church as it has encouraged others to do around the world?' But it is not that easy because of the trust property and other assets involved. It is a legal minefield on the one hand and the Diocese will not wish to leave its wealth behind on the other.

The debates in Synod over the motions concerning the *Doctrine of Marriage*, the *Deferral of General Synod Assessments* and *Fellowship with Anglicans Outside the Diocese* confirmed my views of the current fractiousness in the church. One person talked of a future split in the church and of the need for the Diocese to prepare for it. Another successfully argued for the deferral of withholding of assessments to the General Synod for one year pending a review, but said: "...that now was the time to send a warning shot over the bow of the General Synod, but not yet the time to destroy the ship".

Moreover, all is not well in the pews in Sydney. People are leaving this diocese in the same way as they have in other places. Between 2007 and 2017 the average number of Anglicans attending church on Sunday in the Sydney Diocese fell from 55,490 to 53,345. This may not look like a large figure until seen as a percentage of population. It then becomes a drop from 1.265% to 1% - a 20% decrease overall. I understand that the attendance figure for 2018 (which is not yet finalised) is worse, being well under 50,000 and translates to around 0.9% of the population. One may well ask what happened in the past 12 months to generate this outcome?

Exhorting people to leave the church because of disagreement is high-handed and counter-productive, especially in an organisation that is both declining and under a moral cloud because of past abuse and poor behaviour. Moreover, the marginalisation of LGBTIQ+ people by making them a topic for debate seems cruel. Science has helped us understand that being gay is natural and part of the human condition; it is not a choice. LGBTIQ+ Christians who seek to live authentic lives based on faithfulness, integrity, respect and love should be welcomed and supported by the church, whether in a relationship or not.

I therefore implore people not to leave the church but rather to become part of a fellowship of believers who show hospitality, compassion and love, regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, or religion.

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Rector of St James

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